

Chapter 2

Student Engagement for Student Success: Pre-commencement Strategies via KickStart

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Abstract Australia's large and diverse student cohort challenges our universities to provide innovative and integrated ways of supporting students at an appropriate scale. In response, we developed an initiative called KickStart to help students become more engaged with their unit (i.e. subject) content and feel better prepared and motivated at a critical stage of their studies. This paper investigates student uptake and perceptions of this online initiative, the delivery of which commenced 2 weeks before the start of the semester. A student survey (n = 1165) delivered evidence for a high student uptake. In addition, students reported that KickStart provided them with a useful start and helped them to understand learning outcomes. This initiative highlights the value of providing students with online resources and activities tailored to the unit content in the lead-up to the semester.

Keywords Motivation · Preparation · Student engagement

Introduction

The landscape of higher education has shifted dramatically over the past two decades. Student satisfaction, retention, and success have become key drivers for major strategic initiatives undertaken by Higher Education institutions (HEIs). Policy changes in Australia with the aim of widening participation in higher education have led to a large and diverse student cohort in universities (Bradley et al. 2008; Devlin and O'Shea 2011). Within this cohort a wide range of student backgrounds can be found, differing in their reasons for studying, their level of academic preparedness and ability to cope with university study. As a result, optimising the student experience at a “whole-of-cohort” level has become of

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particular importance to HEIs in order to provide this changing demographic of students with the best possible chance of progressing successfully through their studies. The beginning of their learning journey is as a critical phase and many activities with and for students focus on supporting their transition to and orientation at university. Social, physical, and academic resources assist students in their transition to tertiary studies (Cohen et al. 2012).

There are of course many factors that may influence a student's successful progression through their studies. Among these, student engagement—that is the student's involvement in educationally purposeful activities—has long been recognised as a critical factor for student success (Goodsell et al. 1992; Kahu 2013; Krause 2011; Krause and Coates 2008; Kuh et al. 2008; Nelson et al. 2012a; Thomas 2012; Tinto 2010). Furthermore, motivation and preparation for learning contribute positively to student success (Gilbreath et al. 2011; Krause 2011; Kuh et al. 2011; Ramsden 1997). An analysis of two decades of first-year student experience surveys has shown that while overall student satisfaction with teaching has increased significantly, 30 % of students report difficulties getting motivated and coping with studying (Baik et al. 2015). Thus, this is an area in need of intervention. There is a wide range of pre-semester programs that aim to help prepare students for their studies; these are generally delivered in the form of workshops (run over several days, sometimes weeks) relating to increasing skills in language, writing, academic literacy, or technology, to name just a few, or to prepare students to study abroad. The challenge for institutions is, as Nelson et al. (2012b) have rightly observed, to “integrate such efforts into regular teaching and learning practices” (p. 83) in a whole-of-cohort approach. In the context of having to deliver initiatives at a scale appropriate to very large student numbers, achieving this is a particular challenge.

The initiative reported in this chapter is located within the context of designing and improving orientation and transition strategies for a large student cohort. In particular, it addresses a perceived gap that exists at the level of the teaching unit and unit content, with a particular focus on student engagement, preparation, and motivation. At the institution where this research was conducted, students can normally access two unit-specific resources prior to the beginning of the semester: firstly, an entry in the University handbook which is a formal, government-compliant resource consisting of a brief summary and information regarding the relevant degree and specialisation; secondly, a more detailed unit outline which, according to institutional policy, needs to be made available to students at least 1 week prior to the beginning of the semester. Both of these documents are characterised by their formal language and brevity of information. As a result, students often do not engage with the actual content of their unit before the first day of the semester, which is a time that can be overwhelming and stressful for students. In response to this, an innovative program, KickStart, was created and piloted. The aim of the initiative was to help students be better prepared; to have a useful and positive start to their studies, to engage them with the subject matter early, and to help them build connections between their previous knowledge and the subject. The preparation of the KickStart packages involves the unit convenor, careful

consideration of the unit learning objectives and a clear engagement with the unit topic. The resources created are aimed at the cohort as a whole rather than only a specific group. They are based on the particular unit content and tightly integrated into the unit delivery as part of the online component of each unit.

KickStart packages contain videos, the course outline, readings, relevant games, and quizzes. They are developed collaboratively with the unit convenor. The unit content and learning outcomes inform the design and content. The packages target the cohort as a whole, link tightly to the unit content, and integrate fully into the unit delivery through the unit's online component. Seery and Donnelly (2012) support this approach of integration rather than additional provision of face-to-face content. This paper investigates student uptake and perceptions of KickStart in the Faculty of Business and Economics at Macquarie University, based on the results of a survey we administered to the participating students.

Methodology

Context and Design of the Study

Our study investigates student uptake of the KickStart project during the pilot phase as well as their experience of and attitudes towards this pre-semester initiative. The study took place at the business school of a mid-size university (approximately 39,000 students) in Australia. Most of the units (subjects) in this school are delivered face-to-face; however, all units have an online presence using Moodle, a Learning Management System (LMS).

For the pilot phase, KickStart packages were developed for two units offered by the Faculty which have large student enrolments: Global Business (BU200) and Financial Maths (FIN100). FIN100 is a first-year unit which had 1090 student enrolments in Semester 1, 2014. BU200 is a second year unit and had 465 student enrolments in that same semester. The KickStart packages became available for these cohorts 2 weeks prior to the beginning of the semester. Students who had enrolled in either of the units were sent an email to their student account as well as an SMS alerting them to the availability of the KickStart content.

Resources and Activities Created for KickStart Units

Materials developed for KickStart consisted of a mix of resources and activities. The course lecturer and the authors of this paper jointly developed the KickStart packages.

Unit Introduction video: Students are more confident and motivated in their academic pursuits when they perceive faculty members as approachable, respectful,

and available outside of the classroom (Komarraju et al. 2010). The introductory videos (up to 2–2½ min long) allow the convenor to introduce the subject matter and themselves. The convenors were encouraged to relate the unit content to students' previous knowledge. The videos highlight to students that they already possess skills, assumptions, and experiences that relate to their chosen unit of study. An extract from the script for the KickStart introduction to the unit on Global Business demonstrates this approach:

We are surrounded by the influences of international businesses. From the car that you drive, the pens that you use to the university that you attend ... Have you ever stopped and wondered about the international businesses that are behind the drinks that you drink, the phones that you phone ... Chances are they are products produced internationally ... Indeed, more firms than ever are internationalising.

Expert video: In this video an industry expert briefly discusses the significance of the unit for future employability.

Many of the companies that our students will work for are global companies. Students immediately become more employable once they have an understanding of global business.

Student's view video: A past student of the unit speaks about their experience of the unit. This peer-to-peer video includes tips on how to get the most out of the unit.

To succeed in this unit you really need to do your research. Going into detail, not just answering the question but also do an analysis of the issues behind the question, understanding why certain issues are occurring, the history behind certain countries – these things will really set you apart from the crowd.

Prerequisite skills: Some units require students to have specific knowledge of topics either previously covered in another unit or more generally, such as mathematics. These activities allow students to review their knowledge in advance.

Games: These games are purposely designed and relevant to the unit content. For example, the Logo Game is a simple question-and-answer game. It challenges students to draw on their knowledge as consumers to identify business logos from global companies. In the confirmation of their answer, students receive additional information on how this relates to content taught later on in the unit.

Readings: Providing the Readings list gives students the opportunity to get organised early. Where possible, a small percentage of the textbook was made available to allow students to have access to the materials during the first 2 weeks of the semester.

Data Collection

We distributed a paper-based survey during the third week of the semester. It was taken to all 20 tutorial groups of BU200 (455 students were present, that is, the sample size was 97 % of the total population) and, due to resource restrictions, to 26 of the 41 tutorial groups of FIN100 (710 students were present, that is, the

sample size was 65 % of the total population). As a result, the survey was administered to 71.2 % of the total number of students studying the two units. The response rates were very high for both: for BU200 the response rate was 83 % and for the FIN100 sample the response rate was 96 %. The key questions that this study explored were:

1. What was the student uptake of KickStart?
2. Which KickStart components did students work through; and which did they find beneficial?
3. What was the general student feedback on the KickStart initiative? Did the KickStart initiative prepare them for the unit learning?

The survey consisted of three sections and incorporated both quantitative and qualitative responses. The first section of the survey investigated the effectiveness of our communications about KickStart. The second section asked students to indicate perceived benefits they considered they had gained from the KickStart package; components they had viewed or worked through; ones they found useful; and ones they would like to see in future iterations of KickStart. The third section included an option for open comments where participants had the opportunity to provide general feedback and suggestions for the future.

Findings and Discussion

Student Uptake of KickStart

The student uptake of this initiative was measured in two ways, firstly through anonymised and aggregated log data gathered from the LMS; and secondly, through self-reports by students. Evaluation of the LMS data showed that, on average, half of all the enrolled students in each unit viewed or worked through at least part of the KickStart resources before the first week of lectures (i.e. Week 1).

The percentages in Table 2.1 show that 780 students across both units engaged with the unit content at some level *before* the first day of the semester. Almost the entire cohort of FIN100 had accessed the KickStart resources by the end of Week 1, while two-thirds of the BUS200 cohort of second year students had accessed the package by then. The students were unfamiliar with KickStart and many were students new to the University. The high and consistent uptake of the initiative across both units is a good indicator of the success of the project.

Table 2.1 Students’ interactions with KickStart

	FIN100 (n = 1090) (%)	BU200 (n = 455) (%)
Before Week 1	49	52
By end of Week 1	47	11
After Week 1	4	37

Table 2.2 Students' reasons for not accessing KickStart before semester start

		FIN100 (n = 119) (%)	BU200 (n = 65) (%)
Cat 01	Did not know it was available	20	29
Cat 02	Did not know what KickStart was, didn't know it was necessary/useful	27	14
Cat 03	Couldn't or wouldn't engage before semester	30	36
Cat 04	Found it without receiving prior notification	10	19
Cat 05	Didn't access due to technical issues	4	0
Cat 06	Repeating or not 1st year, didn't think it was necessary	9	2

Survey respondents who reported that the KickStart message had not prompted them to access the unit online were able to leave a comment about that choice. The responses were divided into categories through a process of open coding in a non-hierarchical manner (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Grounded codes emerged from their answers which informed the creation of six categories.

A closer look at those reasons in Table 2.2 reveals the that on average, only one-third of all those respondents who indicated that they chose not to access KickStart before the semester did so because they would not or could not do so (Cat 03):

Was still in holiday mode so wasn't interested in checking. I also hate maths so was even less inclined to check. However! I probably should have looking back at it. (FIN100)

Busy with work. (FIN100)

I was on holidays. (BU200)

I wasn't worried about uni at the time. (BU200)

In summary, the results indicate that most of the students were interested in engaging with the unit content before the beginning of the semester. Only a small percentage indicated that they would prefer not to spend time on university-related activities during the semester break.

Opinions on Components of KickStart

The following discussion considers only those respondents who accessed KickStart resources and activities. As a result, 259 out of 377 (68.7 % of the total) received responses for BU200 were considered; and 432 out of 681 (63.4 % of the total) responses were considered for FIN100. These responses form the basis of the analysis in Table 2.3.

The results in Table 2.3 indicate that the Unit Guide was by far the most frequently viewed KickStart resource, followed by the *Unit Introduction* video.

Table 2.3 KickStart resources worked through/found useful

	FIN100 viewed/worked through (%)	FIN100 found useful (%)	BU200 viewed/worked through (%)	BU200 found useful (%)
Unit intro video	55	68	67	78
Unit guide video	N/A	N/A	63	58
Unit guide	81	78	83	91
Logo game	N/A	N/A	57	44
Student’s view video	26	50	28	60
Readings	N/A	N/A	37	66
Expert view	N/A	N/A	19	54
Unit study tips	48	80	N/A	N/A
Video example (Buying a car)	27	46	N/A	N/A

However, when examining which resources students found most useful, students in the first-year unit found the Unit Study Tips most useful (although only half the students had viewed those tips). These results suggest that both the Unit Guide and Unit Study Tips are prime areas to focus on when developing materials for initiatives like KickStart.

Perceived Student Benefits of KickStart and Their Link to KickStart Components

The students were asked to indicate which benefits they considered they had gained through the KickStart package (“The KickStart package helped me to ... [tick as appropriate]”). Table 2.4 shows the results for this question.

Both student cohorts indicated that the two main benefits of the KickStart package were to “better understand the unit objectives” and to “have a useful start to my studies in this unit”. We then explored the linkages between benefits and KickStart components. A total of 12 binary regressions were performed to

Table 2.4 Perceived benefits of KickStart

	FIN100 (%)	BU200 (%)
Better understand the unit objectives	59	65
Feel confident about taking this unit	27	32
Relate the unit subject material to real-life situations	12	19
Confirm my decisions about taking this unit	16	30
Feel part of the unit community	10	12
Have a useful start to my studies in this unit	50	54

determine the relationship between each of the dependent variables (perceived benefits) and the independent variables (KickStart components). A binary regression was fitted to the data to test the likelihood of receiving one of the perceived benefits, depending on which KickStart components students had accessed. The regression models were statistically significant as Table 2.5 shows.

The results of the binary regression analysis presented in Table 2.5 indicate that the *Unit Introduction* video in particular was a strong predictor of helping students to better understand the learning objectives. In the first-year unit, both the unit guide and the study tips provided students with a useful start. BU200 students who had watched the *Expert’s view* video were 25 times more likely to select the benefit “Relate the subject to real-life situations”. Students in FIN100 were 1.6 times more likely to do so if they had watched the *Buying a Car* video. These results provide some evidence towards the need for investing time and effort into creating these type of resources.

Table 2.5 Binary regression analysis

Perceived benefit	Unit	Predictor	Chi-square	Nagelkerke R square	B	S.E.	Wald	Odds ratio
Better understand the learning outcomes	FIN100	Introductory video***	25.79***	7.8	−0.91	0.22	16.99	1.49
	BU200	Introductory video***	25.07***	12.7	1.10	0.31	12.27	19.91
Feel confident about taking this unit	FIN100	Buying a car video*	25.79**	8.4	−0.64	0.28	5.16	1.69
	BU200	Expert view’s video*	18.34*	9.6	0.81	0.40	4.12	9.39
Relate the subject to real-life situations	FIN100	Buying a car video*	41.75***	17.7	−0.81	0.39	4.32	1.56
	BU200	Expert view’s video*	30.69***	18.1	1.17	0.47	6.22	24.91
Confirm my decision of taking this unit	BU200	Introductory video*	28.90***	15.0	0.86	0.38	5.26	10.67
		Readings*			0.77	0.30	6.48	8.75
Feel part of the community	BU200	Student’s view video*	23.14*	16.7	1.18	0.53	4.86	25.50
		Expert view’s video*			1.08	0.54	3.95	18.75
Have a useful start to my study	FIN100	Unit guide***	38.07***	11.2	−1.18	0.27	18.69	1.36
		Unit study tips*			−0.55	0.21	6.94	1.78
	BU200	Unit introductory video**	30.70***	14.9	1.04	0.31	11.47	16.94

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2.6 Student feedback on KickStart

		FIN100 (n = 126)	BU200 (n = 106)
Cat 01	Suggestions for improvements and further plans	57	38
Cat 02	Positive comments	66	76
Cat 03	Negative comments	3	4

Student Feedback on the KickStart Initiative

At the end of the survey, students had the opportunity to leave a comment to the following open-ended question: “Do you have other suggestions for inclusions in the KickStart program or any general comments about it?” Nearly a third of the students (29.8 %) from the first-year unit FIN100 provided comments, and an even larger proportion of BU200 students (40.9 %) gave feedback. Three categories of comments from both groups emerged from the analysis, as per Table 2.6.

Students overwhelmingly perceived the initiative as positive and negative comments were extremely rare. Those students who did respond negatively suggested that it was either “boring” or “not needed”. A closer analysis of the students’ comments provides insight into how students experienced this initiative. In the beginning, we outlined that engagement, preparation, and motivation are critical factors for student success. An analysis of what students had to say in this final section of the survey highlights the real potential of KickStart for enhancing the student experience in these three areas.

Engagement

The findings suggest that students perceived the initiative as “fun” and “engaging”, and that KickStart helped them “to engage early in the course”. It is valuable to note that the while researchers did not use the words “engage” or “engagement” in the survey, students chose this wording frequently in their feedback.

- I think it was cool. Really good to get information about the subject early on. Good for planning assessments and engaging with the unit. (BU200)
- I think it was well structured and organised, as well as being fun and engaging for undertaking a new unfamiliar unit. (BU200)
- The KickStart program was a great introduction to the unit and made me interested in the subject. (FIN100)
- A good clear opening to the subject. Always helps to see how a subject relates to life before you start it. (FIN100)

Students appreciated the initiative and the fact that the resources were not only relevant and timely but also “cool” and “fun”. The videos fulfilled their intended

purpose of engaging them with the subject matter (“made me interested”) and helped them to connect the subject to their previous experiences (“helps to see how a subject relates to life”).

Preparation

The feedback from students demonstrates the importance they place on feeling prepared, and how the KickStart material helped them to get ready for the start of the semester.

It was well-presented and presented information well. More information for students to get a head start on work may be beneficial. (BU200)

Effective way for students to get a head start on the unit and prepare for it. (FIN100)

It was helpful in being able to understand what was expected and some helpful ways to be successful in this course. (FIN100)

I thought it was great. It really helped me get involved and ready for the unit and completely bypass the slow getting back into phase. Thank you. (FIN100)

The last comment deserves further exploration in future research. Can KickStart packages also help continuing students to have a better start when returning from the mid-semester break?

Motivation

One of the purposes of KickStart was to motivate students and help them to feel less overwhelmed and anxious. In order not to lead students’ opinions, these words were not used throughout the survey or in the KickStart resources themselves. It is for that reason that the comments provided by students in the general feedback section are particularly encouraging.

Thought it was great and very encouraging to start the unit. (FIN100)

Thought it was very helpful and made starting the semester less overwhelming. (FIN100)

The introduction through KickStart made me enthusiastic and eager to participate in the unit. (BU200)

I thought it was very clever and excited me to begin the unit. It is a different technique and I thought the mixture of humour and content was great. (BU200)

Overwhelmingly, the students’ responses to, and the uptake of, the KickStart initiative were positive. This study supports our assumption that students are interested in engaging with their unit of study in preparation for the semester prior to the first week. The results show that the use of introductory videos by convenors can assist students to better understand the learning outcomes of the unit, and

provide them with a useful start to their studies. The outcomes from our study indicate that such a program can help students to build connections between their prior knowledge and the course content, allowing them to contextualise the learning outcomes. Our initiative provides an example of a successful technological intervention that creates connections with students in an environment where solutions at a large scale are imperative due to the size of student cohorts. The use of an online space through well-designed videos, resources, and activities builds a first, tentative connections with students—something that, based on the findings of the survey and the comments, made a positive impact on students.

Conclusion and Future Research

This paper expands the research on the student experience and satisfaction with a focus on student engagement with unit content, preparation, and motivation prior to the teaching period. The project addresses a gap that currently exists in many transition and orientation activities—at the unit content level. The findings from the pilot study are encouraging. They demonstrate that the initiative can increase student engagement and motivation and improve students' sense of preparedness. The KickStart pilot phase has further shown that access to pre-commencement material has the potential to provide opportunities for student engagement with the subject matter and learning objectives in a timely fashion. The resources required to develop such packages are not excessive, and staff can draw on existing materials for future iterations of the same unit. The results of the study indicate that the KickStart initiative can meet student needs and concerns at the early stage of the semester. The results further show that this kind of initiative can be integrated into the day-to-day practices of teaching and be delivered at scale to large student cohorts without loss of quality. The initiative has since been rolled out across all faculties of the University. Predominantly, first-year unit convenors have engaged with this project and have included it as a regular component of their unit offering. Through collaboration with the Learning and Teaching Centre of the University, a universal design for KickStart has been developed and an improved communication strategy has been implemented in order to ensure that students are aware of the availability of KickStart before the start of the semester. Further evaluations, including in-depth focus group interviews, are under way.

In the future, we intend to develop a mid-semester package to help students maintain focus; and an end-of-semester package that concludes this part of their learning journey and helps to prepare them for the next. We believe that KickStart has further potential to assist students to reflect on their role as self-managing learners. Prerequisite quizzes (“are you ready” checks) can help students feel better prepared and are not time consuming to create. These aspects will be expanded on in the pilot of the initiative and researched accordingly.

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