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Student interest as a key driver of engagement for first year students

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Abstract*

Much has been written about the challenges faced by first year students at university. This paper adds to that literature by exploring student interest, known to be associated with persistence and learning. Using data from a qualitative study following 19 students through their first year at a regional Australian university, the paper examines the antecedents and consequences of student interest. Findings show the students' existing individual interests and goals interact with the teaching environment to trigger situational interest. Situational interest then enhances behavioural and cognitive engagement and leads to better learning and grades. Perceived relevance of the learning task is shown to be a particularly important determinant of student interest. Students' emotions, self-efficacy, and their sense of belonging are also important factors in explaining the links between student interest, the teaching environment, and student engagement.

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Introduction

The first year of university is a difficult time for students due to the challenges of adapting to a new learning environment, alongside major changes in their wider lives. Consequently, there is a large body of literature on the first year experience (see Kift, 2015, for example). Using Kahu and Nelson’s (2017) conceptual framework of student engagement (see Figure 1) to understand the student experience, and data from a study following a group of first year Australian students, this paper adds to the first year experience literature by exploring how first year students’ interest in their discipline and in the classroom facilitates engagement during their first year.

Kahu and Nelson’s (2017) framework of student engagement proposes that the student experience occurs in an educational interface—a dynamic place where students live and learn—formed by the interplay between student characteristics and university practices. At the heart of the interface is the student’s engagement—their emotional, cognitive, and behavioural connection to their study. Engagement is widely recognised as

critical for learning and retention (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). As shown in Figure 1, within the educational interface, four important psychosocial constructs mediate the relationship between student, institution, and the student’s engagement: self-efficacy, wellbeing, belonging, and emotion. For example, feedback can lead to higher engagement because it increases the student’s self-efficacy, or a high study and lifeload can inhibit a student’s engagement because of reduced wellbeing.

It is increasingly recognised that students’ emotions are critical: There is an “emotional intensity attached to the experience of learning that is often overlooked” (Askham, 2008, p. 94). Early research on emotion in education focused narrowly on test anxiety, but more recent research explores a wide range of academic emotions associated with learning, instruction, and achievement (Pekrun, 2011). Emotions have powerful effects on student engagement and learning (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). Kahu, Stephens, Leach, and Zepke (2014), exploring the engagement of mature-aged first year students, found that while some emotions are best seen

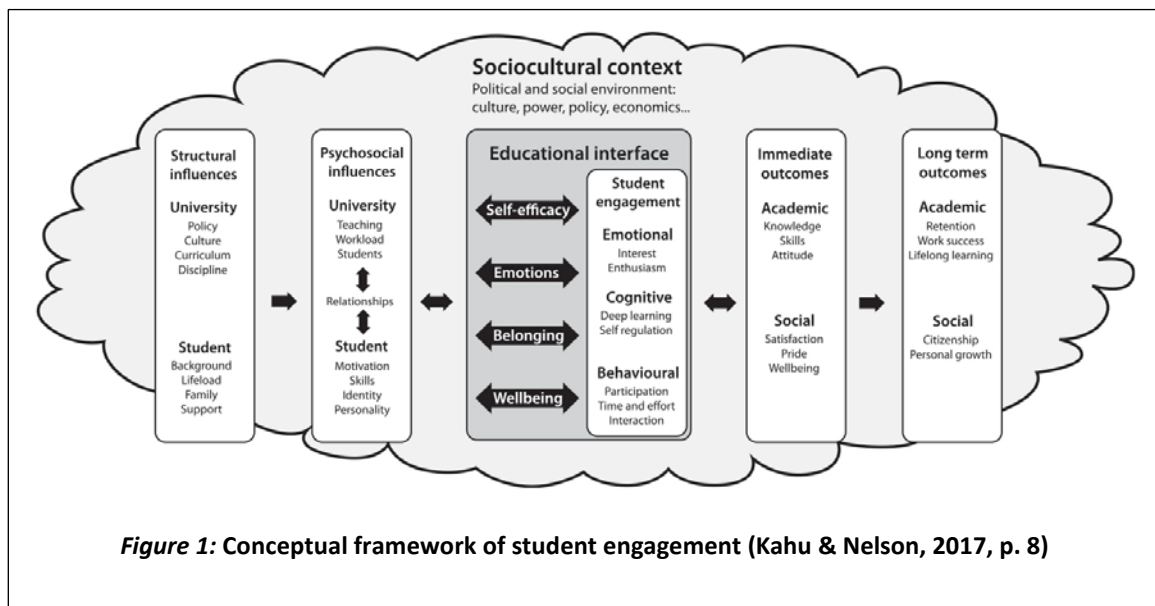


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of student engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2017, p. 8)

as components of engagement, others act as antecedents and outcomes that can inhibit or increase engagement. One emotion of central importance to engagement is interest.

Interest is theorised as both a motivation and an emotion. Drawing on Ainley's (2006) work, we see these as two different but related types of interest. First, trait or individual interest is "a relatively stable evaluative orientation towards certain domains" (p. 393). Individual interest is a characteristic of the student—their pre-existing investment in or attachment to a particular subject area—seen as a relatively stable disposition. In Kahu and Nelson's (2017) framework of student engagement, individual interest is therefore one of the student's psychosocial influences that acts as a motivation. Second, situational interest is an emotion. It is a transitory state: "The focussed attention and immediate feelings triggered by the situation" (p. 394). In the framework, situational interest is the emotional dimension of the student's engagement and triggered in the educational interface as a result of the interplay between the situation and the student.

Both individual and situational interest are associated with enjoyment, persistence, and learning. According to Dewey (1913), interest is essential for pleasurable satisfying learning, and research has confirmed that interest predicts both intrinsic motivation for learning and positive affect (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007). Hidi and Ainley (2002) highlight that children have a built-in joy of discovery and learning. In adolescence, however, learning tasks are increasingly complex and need more concentrated effort and self-discipline, which can erode that joy. This suggests that interest is important and also potentially challenging in the first year in higher education.

The aim of this paper is to add to understandings about the first year experience by exploring this narrow but critical aspect of the student experience. The analysis looks at

both individual interest—the students' pre-existing interests—and situational interest—their transitory interest in their learning. It aims to identify the antecedents and consequences of interest and explore how interest relates to engagement within the educational interface.

Method

The dataset used in this analysis comes from a qualitative longitudinal project following a group of 19 students (12 female) through their first year at a regional Australian university. The research was approved by the university's Human Ethics Committee and the participants chose pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. The students were all Caucasian Australians, aged 17-18 years, and studying full time in a range of disciplines including arts, health, information technology, law, journalism, and business. The students volunteered to participate after receiving an invitation by mail. One student withdrew from the project after the initial interview and a second left her studies mid-way through the semester.

The students were interviewed for approximately one hour just prior to starting their first year at university and then had weekly 15 minute appointments throughout the semester. All the interviews and appointments were conducted by one of the authors who consequently had the opportunity to build a trusting relationship with the students. The initial semi-structured interviews explored the students' motivations and expectations for university, while during the semester trigger questions were used to encourage the students to talk about aspects of their student experience. The project adopted an interpretive approach, aiming to study people in their natural settings in order to "make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed before being thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke,

2006). This paper presents the detailed analysis of the data that was initially coded as *interest*.

Findings

Individual interest

The students' individual interests were the primary influence on their career goals and therefore course choices. The students were keen to study something they liked. This was determined by, for some:

- *a broad interest in a domain such as art or technology*. For instance, Melanie's interest in art was a strong driver of her choice to study graphic design: "I'm just into the arts, and it's just my passion, and I just wouldn't want to do something that I, like, do not like at all"; for others
- *specific past experiences*. Here, their goal was to "do" something specific. Alison went through a court case as a child and for her "just going through that process of, like, how people have helped me, it's always made me want to be a lawyer in the criminal court". Peter had extensive contact with paramedics due to his brother's health and was training to be a paramedic so he could help in future: "I felt that if I go to uni, do paramedic science, I'll be able to help Mum when something goes wrong"; and, for yet again, others
- *their perceived skills*. For Luke, his perception of his skill levels played an important role: "I've always loved computers that's why, I'm no good at anything else I may as well study computers".

As well as having individual interests leading to specific goals, some students expressed a wider interest in learning, acquiring new knowledge and skills. Isaac was at university

for such reasons: "Just a way to further myself, learn a lot more, meet new people, get smarter really. I love to learn so this just seemed right to me". As discussed later, the students had less situational interest in classes and tasks when they could not see the relevance to their future goals. A wider interest in learning has the potential to keep a student engaged across all their classes. In contrast to Isaac, John described himself as "not really that big on school and like learning and stuff. I'm more of 'just do the work' sort of thing". He was studying computer gaming, a hobby of his. However, as the semester progressed, he found university less enjoyable, suggesting that interest is not sufficient: "It's just not really my style of learning, like I'm doing the things I like but like I'm not doing it the way I want to do it".

The strength of the students' interests varied at the start and as the semester progressed. Students such as Tony saw their first year as a trial to see if their choice aligned with their interests and self-concept: "I want to figure out if paramedics is truly right for me". For most students whose initial choices were based on strong interests, their experiences at university strengthened those interests and they increasingly felt they were in the "right course" (Alison). This sense of belonging is discussed later. In week five, Isaac explained he was more interested in his course than when he started: "[I'm] learning more and more about business... so, yeah, I'm a lot more invested in my courses knowing more about them". Isaac's growing interest illustrates the bidirectional arrows in the framework of student engagement (See Figure 1). Individual interest leads to engagement and knowledge, which then leads back to increased interest and motivation.

Students do not necessarily know much about their chosen discipline and, for some, learning about it led to reduced individual interest. For example Sarah was majoring in human resources but said: "The more I find out about HR, the more I am trying to align it with my

goals. It just doesn't fit." Her concerns led her to ask her family: "Am I a good people person and good problem solver? None of them could really answer me yes". As a result, she changed her major. Similarly, Heidi had concerns about studying nursing: "The more I do it the more I think I don't know if I really want to do this. Like I don't know if it's what I thought it was going to be because I kind of just chose it because I had to choose something".

Choosing a course for reasons other than strong interests or clear goals increased the likelihood of the student changing their major. For instance, Karla chose occupational therapy because family members told her it was a good job: "I was like, oh okay, I'll do that". Karla struggled to be interested in her courses and withdrew from all except one part way through the semester. Sarah was the exception in that she chose journalism because of strong interests and clear goals but, as the semester progressed, she became uncomfortable with her choice, increasingly viewing journalism as "unethical". In week eight, she was asked if the course had been what she expected. Her response highlights how her experiences at university had negatively influenced her individual interest in journalism: "No I don't think it is. Yeah. It kind of killed everything I want to do... it's probably gonna be, very unlike what I want it to be. And I think that is kinda upsetting".

How well a student's course aligned with their interests, career, and self-concept was critical to their engagement throughout the semester. This was the lens through which they viewed classes and judged them to be relevant and valuable or "stupid and pointless" (Matthew).

Situational interest

This section explores situational interest, students' emotional engagement with classes or tasks, and identifies three key sets of influences: individual interests and related goals, the teacher's attitudes and emotions, and

the learning activities. A previous paper focussing on these students' expectations prior to starting university, found the students believed university would be better than school because their courses were aligned with their interests and they would therefore be happier and more motivated (Kahu, Nelson, & Picton, 2016):

Sienna: I feel that if I'm doing something that I'm actually passionate about and I'm excited to do, then I'm going to feel better. I'm going to be a bit more excited to come to uni because I'm studying something that I really enjoy.

To some degree this expectation that university would be better than school was met. Situational interest was strong when the task or topic aligned with their individual interests, and was stronger still when it aligned with the students' career goals and so they could see the relevance of the learning. For instance, Sarah preferred her design courses to her electives: "They are actually for my course, for my degree. That just makes it easier to want to be there and to interact". Seeing the topic as important to their goals could trigger situational interest, even with low individual interest and self-efficacy as in Sienna's case:

I just don't particularly like the content. It's hard stuff to learn. This subject is really important, though, because it relates to psychology as well...So, even though I don't really like it, I kind of do.

However, the students expected all of their learning at university to be interesting and therefore enjoyable, and this was not the case. First, as discussed earlier, the discipline was not always what they were expecting which reduced both personal and situational interest. Second, they could not always see the relevance of topics or tasks and this hampered their interest. For example Matthew described one task as "so dumb and so idiotic" because he felt it was not relevant to his future as a journalist: "I write articles, I don't do that

stuff'. At times then, while students still had individual interest in their degree, they were disengaged from the task:

Luke: I've got to learn another language. I mean, another less intuitive, less specialised language that I'm probably not going to use in my life again, apart from right now. God damn it, am I still in high school?

Alongside individual interest and perceived relevance, the other important driver for students' situational interest was the teaching environment with the key features being the approach of the staff and the classroom activities. Staff members' teaching style was critical with humour considered essential along with a clear focus. Sienna sums up the students' ideal teacher: "You've got to be interesting, you've got to be funny, but you've still got to stay on topic and engage". The relationship between staff and students was also important as Sarah explained: "If I like my tutor, I do better in class... because you are more interested". She felt that if the teachers weren't interested in the students, the students wouldn't be interested in them. This idea, that students' attitudes towards a class are a reflection of the teachers', was mentioned by others:

Melanie: Their engagement and passion for the subject as well encourages me to want to go home and study more. Because if they're boring as, I'm going to be like 'Oh okay, it mustn't be that important'. If it's not important to you, then why is it important to me, kind of thing... I'm more keen to do something if my tutor or lecturer is more passionate.

This example highlights how the situational interest triggered by the teaching can motivate students, increase their individual interest in the topic, and increase their engagement both inside and outside of the classroom. Teachers also sends a clear message about the importance of the learning which, as discussed earlier, helps trigger situational interest.

The activities in class—including videos, discussion, and practical tasks—were also seen by students as important for holding their interest. An engaging activity could, to some degree, help compensate for a student's lack of personal interest in the topic:

Sarah: I think they try to do activities that keep our interest spiked... That one was good because we had to get up and do something rather than just look at slides and listen to her talk but otherwise it's just not really appealing.

As well as activities, the broad type of learning was important and depended on the students' preferences. For some, practical tasks and application were more appealing, others found theory more interesting, and others preferred creative activities. The difficulty was that while they chose a degree aligning with that broad preference, courses often included other types of learning as in Melanie's case. She talks about her enjoyment of one class: "It's my release because everything else is really academic based and had a writing component whereas this is like a creative component". Similarly, Tony was studying to be a paramedic and enjoyed the practical learning but still faced a lot of theory which he found less interesting. —

The factors discussed here—alignment with personal interests and goals, passionate informed teaching, and engaging activities—all trigger situational interest, the student's emotional engagement with their study. While the ideal class had all these characteristics, one factor could compensate for another. For instance, high perceived relevance or engaging teaching could override low personal interest in the topic. The analysis shows that situational interest then acts as a motivator and leads to greater behavioural and cognitive engagement. When the students were interested in their courses, they were more motivated to attend and participate in class, and put more time and effort into assessments: "If I really like the subject I try and do well. And like the subjects I

like the most, I get the most out of and do best in" (Sarah).

The students were also more cognitively engaged when they were interested: "Since it's interesting stuff it sort of sticks" (Karla). Equally, a lack of situational interest, for whatever reason, disengaged students: They didn't work as hard, they found it harder to understand the content, they cared less about their grades, and so they were less successful. Felix makes these links clear: "It was just not interesting, so I left it to the last minute and didn't know a thing. Yeah I think I borderline passed". For Matthew, lack of relevance inhibited his interest and led to lower engagement and grades in his "worst" course:

I get the worst grades. It doesn't click with me; I hate media studies so much. Journalism, fantastic, I get distinctions in that. Every assignment I've put in with journalism I've had a distinction but media studies I pass... it goes so far away from journalism that it doesn't just imprint in my mind as an important thing and that shows in my work.

Pathways to engagement

The findings above illustrate the educational interface in action. Situational interest is triggered by the complex interplay between the student's interest and goals and the teaching environment. That emotional engagement then increases behavioural and cognitive engagement and leads to better outcomes. The framework also proposes four psychosocial constructs in the educational interface that act as potential pathways to engagement. These are emotion, self-efficacy, belonging, and wellbeing. This final stage of the analysis looks at how these relate to interest.

The first construct is emotion and the analysis above highlights how important emotions are as a key pathway in this process. The course content aligning with the student's individual interests and/or goals, the passion of the

teacher for the topic, and the classroom activities all lead to positive emotions such as enjoyment, excitement, and happiness. These positive emotions then lead to greater engagement. Similarly, lack of interest can lead to negative emotions that have an inhibiting role. Not seeing the content as important, especially when combined with passive teaching led to boredom, as Peter explains:

Because what we're doing is we sit there and we're like, we're just bored... she spent half the lecture talking about rubbish. She's like 'You don't need to know this for the exam'. And practically the whole lecture theatre just fell asleep. Like she's not just teaching us what we need to know. She's going very off topic.

As well, lack of interest at times triggered stronger emotions such as the frustration clear in Luke's earlier quote: "God damn it, am I still in high school?" For Karla too, perceived irrelevance led to strong negative emotions that reduced her engagement: "Then there's lab, we're looking at atoms and molecules and chemicals. Oh I hate it so much. We're in an actual lab with coats and glasses and I'm like, I'm not going to be doing this for a living".

Anxiety is also a pathway to situational interest. Moderate levels of anxiety are motivating, triggering students to work harder, but anxiety is less likely if a course or task is seen as unimportant or uninteresting. For instance, Elisabeth explained that because of workload she had to "choose which courses I want to do well in and which ones I don't really mind so much". For those, she doesn't care so she doesn't work as hard.

Self-efficacy, the second psychosocial factor, was an important factor alongside individual interests in choosing courses. As the semester progressed, self-efficacy also influenced situational interest: If a student doubted their ability to understand or complete a task, this reduced enjoyment and hampered interest. Luke for instance described his coding class as

his least favourite because he was “terrible at it”, while Felix described his interest in a course as increasing because he was “engaging a lot more and grasping the content”. However, if the work was too easy, students struggled to stay interested in class. While a certain level of self-efficacy is necessary to sustain interest, too much self-efficacy can have the opposite effect and inhibit situational interest as Melanie explains: “I just want to get over this boring stuff at the beginning, It’s all like easy stuff but it’s just time consuming and I’m like, I want more of that intellectual challenge”.

One type of belonging, the third psychosocial factor, is the student’s connection to the course. As the semester progressed, students whose initial interests were strengthened and reinforced by their experiences and who experienced success developed an increasing sense of belonging to the course and to their discipline: “I feel like I belong in the course. I find it very easy to understand and interesting. So, yeah, I feel like I’m in the right course” (Alex). This quote from Alex reflects the complexity of relationships between variables in the educational interface: Interest, belonging, and self-efficacy all occur in tandem and each potentially influences the other.

The final factor, wellbeing, was less clearly linked to interest; however, a few students did mention that stress could inhibit their interest. For example, Sienna explained that she found her courses more interesting after the mid-semester break because she was “less stressed”. Rose’s stress levels increased during the semester and, while she was still interested in her courses, the increasing stress inhibited her engagement: “Because I’ve had so many other things going on that I just haven’t been as focused on it”.

While for analysis purposes, we have examined the four factors separately, the data highlight that these linkages are complex and reciprocal, as shown by the bidirectional arrows in the

framework. Matthew’s explanation of his favourite class shows this interaction well:

It’s weird because I’m always so tired at the start because it’s seven o’clock at night on a Thursday but by the time I walk in and you get the warm welcome from my tutor and you get hello from everyone in the class, you’re just energised and excited. And even though you have to do these stupid style questions, which no one likes but are important, it’s just a fun tutorial. Everything is kept light-hearted and enjoyable, our tutor jokes about a lot, he talks to us as if we are other journalists. He basically acts as our editor and treats us all equally, which is fantastic because it makes you feel like you’re actually doing what you want to do and what you signed up to university to do.

The class is aligned with Matthew’s personal interest in journalism and his future career goals and this creates situational interest. As well, Matthew feels a strong sense of belonging: to his tutor, his fellow students, and importantly his discipline. He feels he is treated with respect and his identity as a journalist is validated: “We are other journalists”. Together these factors override his dislike of a “stupid” task. The links with emotions and wellbeing are also evident. Matthew is tired but the welcoming environment energises him; he feels good and he knows he will enjoy himself. As a result of all these elements, he will be more behaviourally engaged, participate in the activities, and his mind will be sharper and in a better frame for learning. This then is the ideal student experience of the educational interface.

Discussion

Our findings support Thomas’s (2012) contention that a higher education that is relevant to students’ interests and future goals is critical to student success and retention. The analysis emphasises the important role of both individual and situational interest in facilitating student engagement, which then

leads to positive student outcomes (Ainley, 2006; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). In addition, the findings add to our understanding of the functions of interest in three ways. First, while it is well established that the classroom environment and a student's predispositions influence student engagement (for a review see Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), this study aids understanding of *how* that process occurs. The analysis supports the idea that the student experience occurs in an educational interface – the psychosocial space at the intersection of student and institution – the students' engagement was not influenced by *just* their individual interests and goals, or *just* the teaching environment; it was the interaction that mattered. As Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) point out, engagement depends on what teachers and students do together... neither can do it alone" (p. 284). The findings also show specific pathways to student engagement. For instance, the alignment of a course with a student's individual interests and emerging professional identity, along with an informed and passionate teacher triggers situational interest directly and also leads to enjoyment and belonging which further increase engagement.

Second, this study adds depth to our understanding of why and how individual and situational interest are both so critical to the university student experience. Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, and Elliot (2002) found that interest predicted college student majors and combined with external factors to predict outcomes. The current study expands on this by demonstrating that student engagement mediates the link from interest to outcomes – individual interests and goals combine with the teaching environment to trigger situational interest which, in turn, enhances behavioural and cognitive engagement, and thus leads to better learning and grades. The findings align with Hidi and Renninger's (2006) four phases of learner interest: triggered then maintained situational interest followed by emerging and then well-developed individual interest. In the

current study, this flow from situational interest to individual interest is evident, as is the reverse effect – the students' pre-existing individual interests combine with the content and classroom environment to trigger situational interest, particularly when the student understands the importance of what they are learning.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of perceived relevance. Learning is perceived as relevant when there is alignment in the educational interface between the student's goals and emerging professional identity, and the task or content. As has been found in other studies (e.g. Jang, 2008), when students believe what they are doing is important, to their studies and future profession, they are more engaged in class. When they do not, they are often bored or frustrated, less motivated to do well, and so put in less effort. Tanaka and Murayama (2014) also found higher perceptions of utility were associated with higher interest and lower boredom, particularly when combined with high self-efficacy and low task difficulty. This differs from the current study where low task difficulty was reported to lead to boredom and lack of interest in class. That finding does, however, support Rotgans and Schmidt's (2014) work showing situational interest decreased with increased knowledge of the issue. More research is evidently needed to fully understand the complex links between task difficulty, self-efficacy, interest, and boredom.

The findings have implications for practice. For instance, Jones (2009) has proposed a model of student motivation that incorporates many of the pathways to situational interest and student engagement that have been identified in this study. The MUSIC model argues that course design needs to consider five key components: empowerment, usefulness, success, interest, and caring. In particular, the importance of relevance highlights that the institution and staff need to articulate why

students are doing a topic or task. Why is this course compulsory? Why is this theory important to practice? Is this foundational knowledge that will be built on later? At the same time it could be useful to remind students that while interest in what you are doing is desirable, as Dewey (1913) reminds us, life is not always interesting, it is “full of things that are not interesting that have to be faced. Demands are continually made, situations have to be dealt with, which present no features of interest” (p. 3). If we are preparing students for their future roles as workers we would do well to sometimes remind them of this.

Hidi and Ainley (2002) suggest that when a student starts a new subject they need to “evaluate that topic in relation to themselves, their perception of their own abilities and interest” (p. 259). Germeijs and Verchueren (2007) found that students who were less confident in their original career choice, were less committed in their first year of higher education. This was evident in the data where the students who had less clear goals and interests at the start of the year were more likely to make course changes later. Many universities have attempted to address this need by intentionally weaving opportunities for students to explore their abilities and interests throughout the curriculum. Such opportunities include work integrated learning, employability skills development, career development learning and counselling, project based exposure to the world of work and active exploration of the types of careers related to the student’s course of study early in the curriculum. The findings from this study highlight the importance of such initiatives and show that a number of students quickly start to question their choices and so early opportunities to check in with students and discuss these concerns would add value to the student experience.

The findings also reinforce the critical importance of staff themselves being emotionally, behaviourally, and cognitively

engaged in their teaching. Rotgans and Schmidt (2011) explored the links between teacher characteristics and students’ situational interest. Their findings highlight that the teacher’s social congruence, their concern for their students, and their subject matter expertise both create cognitive congruence – an ability to explain concepts and materials to students in a way that students can understand. This cognitive congruence then increases the students’ situational interest. The findings from this study add to this by showing that triggering situational interest by good teaching and aligning the delivery with the students’ needs is important not just because it makes it more enjoyable for students, but because it can also foster belonging and a deeper and more enduring interest in the wider topic.

Finally, institutions, school career advisors, and parents need to give students a broader understanding of the purposes of a higher education. The students in this study were very focussed on the relevance of their learning to their planned job. This is problematic for two reasons. First, that job may not be what they are currently expecting. For example, one Canadian study found that five years after graduation, 35% of graduates were in jobs not closely related to their degree (Boudarbat & Chernoff, 2012). These students will have multiple jobs and careers and one of the functions of a higher education is to develop soft skills such as information literacy and critical thinking that will equip students for the unknown jobs of the future (Bridgstock, 2009). Second, while there is an increasing focus on universities serving the needs of employers, critics have highlighted that this shift risks losing more important goals such as “promoting a love of learning, fostering public debate, and enhancing democratic citizenship” (Roberts, 1999, p. 80) This research was with young first year students at one Australian university and, as shown in the conceptual framework of engagement, sociocultural context is an important influence on all aspects

of the student experience, therefore the experiences of these students may differ from those in other institutions. Nevertheless there is likely much that is shared about the student experience and qualitative work of this nature adds a valuable richness and depth to our understanding. Based on these findings, it would be difficult to overstate the importance of interest in influencing a student's engagement with their studies and subsequent learning and success. But the analysis highlights that the student's individual interest is not enough – the university and staff need to provide a supportive environment where that interest can flourish.

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