

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.

This article was presented at the 2017 STARS Conference in Adelaide, Australia in July 2017 and selected for publication in *Student Success* Volume 8, Issue 2.

Access published article at <https://studentsuccessjournal.org/article/view/379>