

Start@Uni: Equity-focused toolkits for university success.

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Abstract

Transitioning to university is challenging for all students but can be overwhelming for those unfamiliar with the academic conventions and expectations of university. The Start@Uni project, a cross-institutional initiative between the University of New South Wales (UNSW), the University of Sydney (USyd,) and the University of Newcastle (UoN), aims to support the academic transition from high school to university for students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Start@Uni comprises two digital resources: a student-facing toolkit to prepare students for transitioning to university and a teacher-facing toolkit to support teachers of first-year students in developing inclusive teaching practices to support students in their transition to university.

Rationale

Students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds may lack the same access to educational resources and opportunities as their privileged peers, leaving them less prepared to meet university expectations and academic requirements (Nallaya, Hobson & Ulpen, 2022). In addition, these students may have limited access to necessary economic, social, and cultural resources, making it challenging to succeed in higher education (Bok, 2010). Start@Uni is a project developed in partnership between UNSW, USYD, and UoN, which aims to support students from equity backgrounds transitioning to university.

To ensure equity, universities must adapt their academic culture to fit the needs of students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds through social inclusion instead of expecting them to conform to existing institutional requirements (Gale & Mills, 2013; Naylor & Mifsud, 2020). As such, a critical factor in universities adapting to students' needs is equipping teachers with inclusive pedagogy knowledge. Teachers at university often lack awareness and understanding of the diversity in their classrooms and the unique learning needs of equity students, which can lead to non-inclusive dialogue in the classroom, inflexibility with assessment, and privileging specific communication styles or ways of knowing (Naylor & Mifsud, 2020). The Start@Uni teacher toolkit aims to enhance teachers' capacity to understand diverse learning needs and value students' existing knowledge. This approach, based on a strengths-based philosophy, makes teachers more approachable, fosters positive relationships with students (Pearce & Down, 2011), and promotes student inclusion, motivation, and academic/personal growth (Guzzardo, Khosla, Adams, Toosi & Taylor, 2021).

The Start@Uni student toolkit is designed to help students transition to university study. It supports students with understanding the university learning environment, helps with the initial stages of developing students' academic literacies, and provides a sense of how to build academic self-efficacy. Using the toolkit, students can adapt more quickly to university life and develop better reading, interpretation, critical evaluation, and communication skills. This will help them feel more confident participating and contributing to the academic community and increase their chances of academic progress (Klarare, Rydeman, Kneck, Sparen, Winnberg & Bisholt, 2022; Nallaya et al., 2022).

Approach/Method

The project is characterised by co-design through consultation with students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. It uses a *students as partners* approach to ensure the toolkits are informed by the transition experiences of students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. The same groups will be consulted for post-development refining. University networks were also consulted on the content of the toolkits. In addition, Start@Uni innovatively redirects duplicated efforts and costs among universities by collaboratively creating a non-branded resource suite that can be shared broadly across schools and multiple metropolitan universities.

Questions for audience discussion

In developing resources to help equity cohorts transition from high school to university:

1. How can we best prepare educationally disadvantaged students to transition from high school to a metropolitan university successfully?
2. How can we best support first-year university teachers to recognise their responsibility for enacting and encouraging inclusive teaching practices?
3. How might you promote these toolkits to students and teachers to engage their interest?
4. What barriers could you foresee in implementing these toolkits?

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