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Giving Australian First-in-Family Students a Kick Start to University

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Abstract

Australian university students who are the first in their family to attend university are more likely to encounter challenges in their transition to university, and programs to support students are important for success and retention. Fifteen first-in-family (FiF) students participated in an Australian-first pilot orientation program. Program students had better engagement (attendance and study hours) and higher grades compared to a control group. There were no group differences in self-efficacy, program participants had steady social support over time while the control group experienced a decline across semester 1. Qualitative findings indicate that participants felt confident about their transition and did not report academic challenges. They had made connections and felt supported. Commute times were the most common adjustment reported.

Keywords: First-in-family students; first generation students; transition to university; university orientation; academic engagement.

Introduction and Literature Review

The transition to university is a challenging experience for many students, as they navigate their way through unfamiliar academic contexts and take on greater responsibilities. This transition can be particularly challenging for first-in-family (FiF) students, who are individuals for whom neither of their parents have obtained a bachelor's degree (also referred to as first generation students). This cohort comprises approximately half of students worldwide and Australia is in the middle range with 51% of students (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). However, FiF is inconsistently measured at the time of enrolment and often over 10% of students do not answer the question, plus some Australian universities have much larger proportions, so the number of FiF students has been estimated to be as high as 70% of students at some institutions (; O'Shea et al., 2021). The current study focuses on how Kick Start (Victoria University, 2023), a unique university orientation, can contribute to student outcomes through building social capital and academic self-efficacy.

Studies, both nationally and international, have shown that FiF students often start their university life with more challenges compared to their non-FiF peers (or continuing generation students). They are much more likely to come from diverse backgrounds including having low socio-economic status, come from regional or remote areas of Australia, have Indigenous backgrounds and/or are of mature age (Patfield et al., 2021). FiF students have not grown up with the familiarity of academic expectations, academic preparedness, and unfortunately the system benefits students who have a family background in higher education (O'Shea, 2015). King et al. (2015) found that FiF students reported that the first few weeks were the most difficult, as they navigated unfamiliar buildings, deciphered enrolment and administration processes, adjusted to new academic demands and experienced social isolation. Other research found FiF students took longer to adjust to university standards such as lecturer expectations or assessment requirements. (Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). Literature from the past 20 years has found



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that these factors contribute to poorer retention of FiF students (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

Social and Cultural Capital Theory

Education systems that privilege students from certain backgrounds has been framed using having social and cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986). Social and cultural capital are the connections and relationships, shared values and understandings in society that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and work together to thrive. Young people whose parents have been to university grow up with a sense of familiarity and have access to people with personal experience and resources to understand how to navigate higher education; this has been described as “hot knowledge (King, et al., 2015). In their transition to university, FiF students tend to rely on “cold information” – formal sources like websites and Open Day tours. This contributes to a meaningful gap in aspirations, self-efficacy, and interpersonal skills that universities assume new students possess. There is substantial literature that links academic experience and success with social and cultural capital theory (Kim et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2015). Soria and Stebleton (2012) attributed the lower rates of completion and retention in FiF students to lower levels of social capital, influencing engagement and academic success, as these students do not acquire this social capital from their parents. As FiF students lack direct access to persons with knowledge and awareness about universities, they are susceptible to experiencing their university as foreign and isolating. This unfamiliarity can lead to fear and reduced confidence (Kim et al., 2020). Unfortunately, university systems may assume that students possess a certain level of understanding and comfort when transitioning, which unfairly benefits students who come from university-educated families.

Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice (2008) advocated for programs that reinforced the bonds students and faculty had with the wider university environment as one of the pillars of retention and completion policies. Furthermore, they emphasise that the first semester of tertiary studies is critical in order into embrace university campus life and ultimately long-term retention. Interventions for FiF students by many researchers have focused on building social capital and have demonstrated successful academic outcomes (Cerezo & Whirter, 2012; Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Moschetti et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2017) Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) argue that effective programs should not only assist FiF students’ transitions but also ensure integration into the academic community to nullify the marginality experienced by FiF students. For students with lower social capital and less familiarity with university systems, their social integration into university is perhaps even more crucial to their transition (Almeida et al., 2019).

Academic Self-Efficacy

In an academic context, self-efficacy refers to students’ confidence in themselves and their ability to successfully achieve academic outcomes and persist when confronted with challenges and failures and this is often a consistent predictor of academic achievement (Metcalf & Wiener, 2018; Talsma et al., 2018). Students with high self-efficacy tend to work harder, cope better with challenges, spend more effort towards rewarding goals, and persevere even if the tasks they face are difficult, thus leading to higher academic success (Metcalf & Wiener 2018).

Many FiF programs that aim to improve academic self-efficacy focus on specific academic skills such as writing or numeracy, as well as boosting confidence more generally (Ward, 2013). A framework centred upon the theory of academic self-efficacy may offer university programs insight into important mechanisms for the development of successful interventions. With their lack of university knowledge and the unfamiliar university environment, FiF students experience fewer positive achievements early on, thus reducing their confidence and self-efficacy (Metcalf & Wiener, 2018). However, little research has investigated the association between academic self-efficacy and the transitions of FiF students in the Australian context.

VU Kick Start

The FiF interventions described here are mostly US-based, and the literature includes little understanding of other higher education contexts. Despite the significant numbers of FiF students, Australia has lagged behind other countries in recognising FiF students and providing equity programs in higher education (Patfield et al., 2021). The current study aimed to address this dramatic gap and contribute to the international context of FiF programs. At Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne, Australia, where this program was delivered, over half of first year undergraduates identify as being FiF (Jackson et al., 2022), and VU consistently has one of the highest percentages of FiF students in Australia (Good Universities Guide, 2023).

The aim of Kick Start was to improve the transition to university through addressing the social and cultural capital gap and by empowering FiF students to create formal and informal support networks, build their social capital, and increase their academic self-efficacy to positively impact their academic experience and outcomes. Table 1 outlines the session content and key outcomes.

Table 1*Summary of Kick Start Session Content and Outcomes*

Session 1	Session 2	Session 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small group ice breaker. • Ensure access to Wi-Fi, student email, online learning system. • Intro. to developing a university support network. • Guest speakers from VU's academic support program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effectively manage time. • Increase academic self-confidence and commitment to study. • Utilise active learning strategies and motivation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss identity and emerging identity as a university student. • Guest speaker on how to join clubs and get involved in extracurricular activities. • Last preparations to get ready for class (timetable, locate classrooms, etc). • End with pizza lunch.
Outcomes: Increase preparedness, and to prompt forming close social networks (social capital)	Outcome: Increase academic self-efficacy	Outcomes: Promote connection to university, peer connections, familiarity with campus

Kick Start sessions were designed to have the same feel of a VU Block Model class and were delivered in small groups of around 20 students with active learning, discussions, group activities, guest speakers, and utilising the online learning system (Victoria University, 2023). This format built familiarity that students could use to develop self-efficacy when they attended their semester classes. The program was delivered one week before the start of the semester, over three days and for two hours each day, which is a similar schedule to a normal class.

Method

A mixed-method approach was chosen to evaluate the pilot Kick Start program. Quantitative measures assessed differences between a randomly assigned program and control group from pre-test to follow-up. Qualitative interviews allowed for more detailed information about the experience of starting university and how the program impacted transition.

Participants

The current study includes data from 41 participants who completed two time points (15 who participated in Kick Start and 26 control participants). The age range of participants was between 17-44 years of age ($m = 18.5$ years). 69% were female, 78% were born in Australia, and about half were employed at least part-time.

Six Kick Start participants were interviewed about their experiences starting university and their experiences in the program. All had completed their first semester of classes and were continuing study in semester 2 and were the traditional university-age for first-year students ($M = 18.5$ years). See Table 2 for details about the interview participants.

Table 2*Demographics of Interview Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Discipline	
Jess	female	19	Law	Australian-Scottish
Max	male	18	Biomedical science	Indian, born overseas
Liz	female	18	Psychology	Australian-European
Olivia	female	18	Psychology	Australian
Beth	female	19	Psychology	Australian
Nick	female	19	Education	Australian

Procedure

This research was reviewed and approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (HRE18-211). Participants received a statement detailing the nature of the research, confidentiality, and were informed they could stop participating at any time.

All FiF students commencing a bachelor's degree in 2019 were sent an email a few weeks prior to commencement of their first class. The email described the Kick Start program and the criteria for inclusion indicating that they were FiF. Students who met the criteria were invited to express their interest to participate via an online sign-up page that provided further information about the program and a pre-test survey (Time 1). Seventy-four students completed the survey and then a random number generator (Furey, 2019) selected 40 students to participate in program. The remaining 34 students acted as 'controls' and did not participate in the program. Of the 40 students selected, 15 did not attend and were subsequently removed, leaving 25 who attended the program (10 of these students had incomplete data and were therefore not included in analysis).

Students from both groups were invited by email to complete an online post-test at the end of their first semester of studies (Time 2). Participants who did not respond received one follow-up email and also a subsequent phone call reminder. Despite these efforts, the overall response rate for the second survey was 69% (60% for program group, and 76% for control). Data from 41 participants' (15 program and 26 control participants) who completed the two time points were retained for analysis. It was not deemed relevant to provide the control group with the program at the conclusion of data collection, as Kick Start focused on the first few weeks of university.

Additionally, Kick Start participants were contacted in the middle of the academic year about volunteering to be interviewed. Interviews were designed to obtain a robust description and interpretation of the data and gain a greater understanding of the student experience of the program interweaving qualitative and quantitative data in such a way that research issues are meaningfully explained. Seven students replied to one of the two emails about the interviews; all but one completed an interview. In order to encourage the students to feel more comfortable sharing their experiences, the interviews were conducted by a research assistant who was not involved with the Kick Start program. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Survey Measures

The pre-test (Time 1) included demographic information (gender, age, country of birth, area of study, parent's highest education level). Additionally, the post-test (Time 2) asked students to estimate approximately how many hours each week they studied outside of class for each of their four blocks, how many classes they attended on campus, and whether they had utilised university learning resources. Students also self-reported their grades for each unit of study completed in semester 1 and grade point averages were calculated ($80\% > = 4$, $70-79\% = 3$, $60-69\% = 2$, $50-59\% = 1$, and $<50\% = 0$). Missing grades were omitted from the averages. Other measures were repeated at both time points.

Social Support

The 8-item COPE Inventory assess different ways students responded to stress such as "I talk to someone about how I feel" (Carver et al., 1989). Responses ranged from 1 (I usually don't do this at all) to 4 (I usually do this a lot). The reliability for the study was strong at Time 1 and Time 2 ($\alpha = 0.90$ for both times), which is consistent with previous literature (Chao, 2011).

Academic Self-Efficacy

The 5-item Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire was developed to measure participants' performance expectations and confidence in their ability to accomplish tasks related to academic work (Pintrich et al., 1993). For example: "I'm certain I will understand the most difficult material presented in the readings for my course" with responses from 1 (Not at all true of me) to 7 (Very true of me). The scale demonstrated strong reliability ($\alpha = 0.87$) (Holland et al., 2018). For the present study, the scale had strong reliability at Time 1 ($\alpha = 0.80$) and Time 2 ($\alpha = 0.84$).

Statistical Analysis

SPSS version 26 was used for data cleansing and data analysis. Two independent sample t-tests were conducted to determine any pre-test differences between program and control participants for social support and academic self-efficacy. Results show that at pre-test, the difference between program and control participants' level of social support was statistically significant, $t(39) = -2.56$, $p = .02$, with a large effect size, $\eta^2 = 0.14$. Due to the pre-test differences, the present study utilised a one-way analysis of variance (ANCOVA) to investigate social support at post-test, with two paired-samples t-tests conducted as post-hoc analysis. There was no statistically significant pre-test difference between program and control participants' level of academic self-efficacy, $t(39) = 0.10$, $p = .93$. A mixed between-within subjects analysis of variance (SPANOVA) was used to examine differences between program and control participants on academic self-efficacy.

Interview Data Analysis

The interviews were analysed using systematic thematic analysis (Barun & Clarke, 2006). The data analysis took an inductive approach, allowing the data to drive the themes, rather than seeking data to answer specific questions. The topic of this research meant the analysis took a relatively semantic approach to identifying themes, rather than latent.

First, the transcripts were read several times to become familiar with the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Next, a line-by-line inductive analysis of each interview was completed using QSR NVivo software. Codes were assigned for every clearly identifiable section of data, giving equal weight to all data. Third, the codes were analysed to first identify codes that could be combined due to similarity or because the names were similar. Patterns and potential themes were also identified and the themes were then refined and re-examined. Reviewing the associated codes and quotes was also completed to ensure there was data to support the themes. In the final stage, the themes were fully defined and named. Some themes fit as secondary themes within broader primary themes.

Results

Table 3 presents descriptives for key variables. Both social support and academic self-efficacy scores increased at post-test for the program group while the control group scores decreased at post-test on both measures.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Social Support and Academic Self-Efficacy at Pre- and Post-Test

Variable	Program		Control	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Social Support				
Pre-test	19.47	5.41	23.73	4.99
Post-test	20.80	6.43	20.96	6.55
Academic Self-efficacy				
Pre-test	26.27	4.17	26.38	3.61
Post-test	28.27	3.79	25.96	4.89

Note. $n = 15$ Program, $n = 26$ Control

Social Support

An ANCOVA was run to determine the effect of the Kick Start program on post-test scores of social support while controlling for pre-test social support scores. All assumptions were satisfied and after adjusting for pre-test social support scores, there was a significant difference in social support scores between the program and control group at post-test, $F(1,38) = 5.05$, $p = .03$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.12$. Post-hoc analysis was performed with a Bonferroni adjustment. Post-test scores on social support were significantly greater for participants in the program compared to the control group ($M_{diff} = 3.66$, 99% CI [0.76, 8.07], $p = .03$).

Academic Self-Efficacy

A SPANOVA was run to examine the effect of the program on participants' levels of academic self-efficacy. All other assumptions were satisfied. There was no statistically significant interaction between Kick Start and time on academic self-efficacy, $F(1,39) = 2.78$, $p = .10$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.066$. There was no statistically significant difference in academic self-efficacy at pre- and post-test $F(1,39) = 1.18$, $p = .29$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.029$. There was no statistically significant difference in academic self-efficacy between the program and control groups, $F(1,39) = 0.91$, $p = .35$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.023$. Therefore, the program and control groups did not differ in levels of academic self-efficacy comparing pre-test to post-test.

Student Engagement and Outcomes

A Welsch t -test was run to determine if there were differences in mean grades between the program and control group. Mean grade scores for both groups were normally distributed, however the assumption of homogeneity of variances was violated, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances ($p = .04$). The Kick Start group reported significantly higher mean grade point averages ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.51$) compared to the control group ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.22$), $t(34.93) = 2.62$, $p = .01$ (two-tailed). The mean difference in grades was, 0.73, 99% [-0.03 to 1.49], and represented a large-effect size $\eta^2 = 0.15$. Table 4

displays additional measures of academic engagement for the two groups. Low sample sizes and counts of 0 made it impossible to complete statistical non-parametric comparisons, but for a pilot study these descriptives provided evidence of a positive impact of the program.

Table 4

Kick Start and Control Group Semester 1 Academic Performance and Engagement

	Kick Start (N = 15)	Control (N = 26)
Passed 4 semester 1 units	93%	68%
Studied more than 10 hours per week	53%	31%
Reported failing at least 1 unit	0	19%
% of high attendance (students attending 10 or 11 out of 11 sessions for all 4 blocks)	93%	81%
% of low attendance (students attending 4 or fewer out of 11 sessions for all 4 blocks)	0	9%
Used the tutoring or academic support	66%	76%

Interview Findings

The interview analysis found two primary summaries representing two phases that the Kick Start students experienced: 1) *transition*, and 2) *being at university*. Two themes related to each of these domains further describe the students' experiences with university and Kick Start.

Transition

Students in Kick Start saw coming to university as taking a *different* path compared to their parents and other members in their families. Olivia explained how she felt about university:

All of my family has sort of worked in labour force before that and it was just really me to go to university, and go a bit further than what they did, go to further education and start a new path.

Beth said she was motivated to continue after completing high school:

I did not want to be a dropkick. Because in my suburb there are a lot of people who kind of do nothing. It is known as one of the areas where everyone is on Centrelink [welfare] and stuff, and I do not want to be one of those people.

After the first few months of university, there was confidence among the students interviewed that they were on the right path. The students felt this path they were on suited them better and they identified better with it. They noted that the place they were leaving behind lacked the social and cultural capital, and they were going to university to seek "more." The students were more likely to credit their own motivations and desires to go to university, while their families had a minor role or no influence. Beth had a typical response: "They [my family] really wanted me to come but they did not mind where I went and what I studied, as long as I was doing something."

Distance from Campus and Commuting

All the participants were living at home with one or both parents and siblings (if any). Five participants discussed their long commutes, and all used public transport. The commute times for one way ranged from 1.5 to 2 hours for these five participants. This is not an uncommon pattern for university students in Melbourne. Nick did not hesitate to say that travelling was the biggest challenge when he started university: "It is two hours each way and it is just brutal. Like you get here and you are already exhausted." However, a couple of students mentioned that attending Kick Start on campus had helped them with this adjustment, requiring them to do a "practice run" of their commute the week before they had to do it for class.

Olivia said about Kick Start:

I really liked having the opportunity to be forced to come to uni three days, three hours and I had to find my way through public transport, and it gave me a sort of way to learn the public transport and the best way to get here without the fear of if being wrong, ...[being] late to my first class.

The time involved is an important thing students had to learn to balance, and for most, it was a change from commuting to local high schools.

Having the Answers

The participants commented on how Kick Start did put them ahead of other students when it came to knowing about campus. Beth expressed: “It was helpful during the Kick Start program because that helped me with a lot of questions that I would probably have had, like how to get around, connect to wifi and things like that.” Olivia also mentioned she liked being a source of information for other students:

Beginning it was really good because I had lots of information that others did not, it was really good to help others and give them tips... but that was really good to have that base knowledge to help others at that time.

Being at University

Importance of Support

All students said the teaching staff were generally supportive and approachable (with just a few exceptions). Many had positive experiences emailing questions and getting feedback. Liz commented: “I learnt that I need to only to focus on my work and not procrastinate, and if I need help there is always support.” Olivia said: “[The teaching staff] are really good, most of them on getting back on emails. A lot of them are really good if you ask for help so they provide help or show you where should get help.” Seeking support from staff was part of the Kick Start program, although it didn’t come up as an active strategy learnt from the program.

Peer connections were also important. Most students had made friends or acquaintances at university while some students relied on existing connections with friends from high school. Jess said:

I made a friend through the Kick Start program but then I had just through classes I made more friends... also other ones that I am not as close with like can still go to for help or anything if we are in the same class.

Feeling Settled

Overall, participants all reported being comfortable, confident, and happy at university. Jess commented: “I was expecting to be more full-on, but it is more laid back.” Similarly, Nick explained: “I did not expect people to be, I guess, as friendly ... here is so relaxed, everyone has a cheerful smile. I guess it is more friendly and welcoming.” None expressed that they felt they did not fit in. The participants interviewed had all come straight from high school and were very positive about the transition. “I enjoy it, everyone is very friendly. It is not like high school” noted Max.

In addition, they were also comfortable with academic expectations – there were no reported feelings of struggling to adjust to the academic demands. Max felt that it was about right: “I was expecting the workload be a bit harder the first year of uni. But it is nice getting into the field of uni slowly. It is nice.” Some felt they had improved in skills like group work, communication, understanding assessments, but in general they did not feel they were unprepared for academic demands to begin with.

Discussion

The survey and interview analysis provide evidence of several positive elements of the program, as well as non-significant findings. Together this evidence provides valuable insights for further developing Kick Start and informing other FiF interventions, and provides evidence for programs aimed at retention. Qualitative data provided more context and a comprehensive understanding of the student experience. In addition, the interview answers that were student-centred identifying themes that may inform future research.

Analysis showed that academic engagement and grades were higher for the Kick Start group. The descriptive findings indicated that students in Kick Start studied more hours, had better attendance, passed more classes, and failed fewer classes compared to the control group. The low sample size and cell counts meant statistical non-parametric analysis was not possible, so the group differences must be interpreted with caution, but the range of findings taken together give strength to a trend of better engagement. The students who were interviewed concurred with feelings of higher engagement, seen in their comfort with the academic demands and good attendance. In addition, it is interesting that a key theme from the interviews found that commute times and distance was a significant challenge. Despite the time commitment of commuting, the Kick Start students did attend classes at higher rates.

Students who attended Kick Start had higher average grades compared to the control students for the semester. This finding is consistent with Schwartz et al., (2018), which showed that students who participated in an outreach pre-university program reported significantly higher GPAs than their peers who did not participate in the program.

Kick Start had greater improvements in social support compared to the control group. After controlling for initial pre-test differences, the Kick Start group reported significantly greater scores on social support post-test compared to the control group. The Kick Start students' social support scores were stable from pre- to post-test, whereas students in the control group showed a statistically significant decrease. This indicates that the program likely did help the participants build their support network. Interviews also showed that program students did build and utilise their support networks. This is encouraging, as FiF students are less likely to have access to crucial experiences, therefore increasing their social integration in university can have a positive impact on their transition (Almeida et al., 2019). A similar social capital intervention for FiF students in the US also found program participants increased in their networks and support, which contributed to academic outcomes (Schwartz et al., 2017).

Having information is very important to feeling confident and comfortable, and previous studies of FiF students indicate many feel uninformed (King et al., 2015). None of the students interviewed expressed discomfort or mentioned lack of information, so Kick Start might have had a buffering or compensating effect which is a positive finding. This is encouraging, as previous research indicates FiF students, even some who have been studying for years, can feel out of place and like imposters (King et al., 2015; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018).

The prediction that participants in Kick Start would increase their academic self-efficacy compared to the control group was not supported. Although the program showed improvements in academic self-efficacy from pre- to post-test and the control group reported decreases from pre- to post-test, the difference between the groups was not statistically significant. However, a medium-sized effect was observed, as per the partial eta squared value for this analysis (Lakens 2003). Metcalf and Wiener (2018) similarly found no improvement in academic self-efficacy in their FiF bridging program. However, these findings are inconsistent with other pre-university programs demonstrating improved perceived academic self-efficacy beliefs among FiF students. (Dory et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2018; Strayhorn (2018)). The program content and context of the research varies greatly in duration, student cohort, university location, and how long the program has been operating, which makes comparisons difficult to determine.

Further possible explanations for the insignificant differences in academic self-efficacy may be due to the VU "block model" of teaching which students take one class at a time, in small classes and engaging learning strategies. Research has found there is more personal support from teachers, the classroom is a collaborative and active environment, and grades and retention have improved (McCluskey et al., 2019; Kelly & Lock, 2019; Jackson et al., 2022). Because both program and control participants experienced this mode of learning, it is likely that these students gained self-efficacy and adjusted well to the demands of university.

Limitations and Implications

Overall, the results from this pilot have provided important information for FiF programs in general and for Kick Start specifically. These are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5*Suggestions for Future FiF Programs*

Finding or issue	Suggestion
Commute experience was important. Gaining familiarity with buildings and services and information	When possible, deliver the program on campus. Include discussion in the program about tips and tricks to reduce the burden of commuting.
Self-efficacy did not significantly increase.	Review the program content for ways to improve. Program retention Utilise peer FiF mentors to deliver some content, make program more relatable.
Kick Start students had good knowledge about university services.	Spend time familiarising students with campus Wi-Fi, the university online learning platform, and student services
Study hours and attendance were strong.	Keep program content about time management. Explore how study hours and attendance are related to academic self-efficacy.
Participants reported they connected and made friends during Kick Start.	Keep program groups small to allow for personal interactions. Multi-day program also provides more time for peer connections.

It is important to note that this was a pilot study. Because this study was experimental and longitudinal in design, we were able to compare the group differences over a semester in order to test the program's impact. However, as a small pilot it is reasonable to expect little to no statistical differences after its initial inception. The data were drawn from a relatively small sample of participants at a single university. As participants self-select in volunteering the findings are restricted to an unspecified degree by a form of selection bias, limiting generalisability. In addition, there were no interviews for the control group which could have provided the experiences of FiF students who started university without Kick Start. Further studies may consider comparing qualitative data from students who do and do not participate in programs can provide insights into how to provide useful services and programs.

Kick Start was developed and delivered specifically to FiF students to help them transition into their first year of university, a first in Australia. This study suggests that an intervention or program in the transition period, that is focused on increasing confidence in students, and empowering students to create formal and informal networks does, to some degree, give them a head start in university. The present findings may also provide universities and academic staff with valuable information about buffering the disadvantages that FiF students encounter enabling them to have a successful transition.

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