Dr Kate Westberg is Senior Lecturer and Director of Teaching and Learning in the School of Economics, Finance and Marketing. Kate shares her thoughts regarding student engagement.

What factors do you find prevent students from engaging with a particular subject?
A range of issues can affect student engagement, some within the control of the lecturer and some not. For example, out of the lecturer’s control:

• Something in a student’s personal life may be a distraction.
• Nature of the course itself - is it directly related to their chosen discipline of study or is it something they have to do for their degree?
• A lack of preparation on the part of the student can limit their ability to participate and therefore be engaged.

In terms of factors that can be controlled by the lecturer, students may not engage for the following reasons:

• Lack of enthusiasm by the lecturer
• Content overload – no time to digest or consider in depth
• Material too challenging…or not challenging enough
• A lack of opportunity for interaction (to ask questions or participate in discussion)
• A lack of examples, or ‘stories’, included with content to show the relevance or application of the material
• One way communication from lecturer that promotes passive listening and learning
• Learning environment not conducive (physical layout, dynamics of class)

What steps do you take in planning and delivering your courses to make your teaching more engaging for students?
I try to address the above ‘controllable’ issues. I try to teach courses that I’m interested in and that fit with my background, so that I can use my experience to demonstrate the concepts or theories we discuss and speak with some enthusiasm for the topic.

I try to create ‘pause points’ in my lectures and promote more active learning by involving the students. For example, I might ask a question for students to consider and respond – or to simply jot down in their notes…or to discuss with their neighbour. I may ask students for examples of the concept we’ve just discussed, or show a short video clip or seek information from a website… even a short in-class exercise. There are a range of possibilities that can be used to ‘break up’ content, allow students to interact with the material – or even just change the pace to recapture attention.
Guest speakers from industry are also a valuable way to enrich the course content and provide students with another perspective on the material.

In tutorials, I will re-arrange the furniture if it is not conducive to discussion. I try and give some of the responsibility of running at least a part of the session to a group of students. If students are doing presentations or facilitating a discussion, I include peer assessment – either all class members, or a group of selected students, are asked to anonymously complete a feedback form. And of course, structuring tutorials to help students work through the material that they need to undertake the assessment is important.

In terms of planning the course, it is critical that students understand the relevance of the material, how it fits in with what they've been studying and what they will end up doing in their careers. With regard to assessment, I try and structure the assessment so that it demonstrates the relevance of the material as well as ideally capturing the interest of the students. For example, in one of the marketing courses I take, students focus on an individual company and tackle various marketing-related concepts (discussed in the lecture and their reading) in relation to that company and their environment. I try to choose companies that have been started by young entrepreneurs and those that feature products that students can relate to i.e. nudie juice, Bloom (cosmetics), Peter Alexander, Bluebottle Beer, Carman's Fine Foods, Mambo (surf wear) etc…

If the students are immediately interested by the company and the personalities behind the brand, it makes it easier for them to engage with the theory and its application. Industry contacts are also another useful source of assessment ideas.

**How do you deal with students who have difficulty engaging with your teaching, despite the efforts you have just described?**

It depends. If it’s a particular individual, or small group of individuals, I might try and speak to them at the break or end of the class – if appropriate. Some students may find this a bit intimidating. Sometimes I’ll speak to other students that I have gotten to know well and ask them for their views. If it seems to be an issue with a larger group, then asking the class to take a minute to write down some (anonymous) feedback on the class may be helpful.

For new lecturers, you may want to consider discussing the class with a more experienced colleague and perhaps asking him or her to sit in on your class. It would also be useful to ask colleagues to sit in on their classes and watch how they engage with their students.

It is important to realise that sometimes, despite our best efforts, some students may not want to be engaged!

**What advice would you offer to other teachers and lecturers?**

I think that everyone has their own style and personality— and each course suits different strategies for engaging students. It’s good for students to be exposed to a range of different lecturers and different ways of presenting and structuring classes. Teaching staff should feel free to trial different approaches and structures and to assess the ability of those strategies to engage students.