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Differentiation through innovation in the contemporary higher education environment: The case of the 'Victoria University Block Model®'

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Differentiation through innovation in the contemporary higher education environment: The case of the 'Victoria University Block Model'[®]

Kathy Tangelakis ^a, Cuong Huu Hoang ^b, Elizabeth Knight ^c, Peter Hurley^c, Jennifer Jackson^c and Melinda Hildebrandt^c

^aInstitute for Sustainable Industries & Liveable Cities, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia; ^bCentre for International Research on Education Systems, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia; ^cThe Mitchell Institute for Education and Health Policy, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT

In recent years, universities in Australia have been facing enormous challenges from an increasingly competitive market and tight funding budgets. Against this backdrop, the pandemic has worsened the financial situations of many universities, propelling them out of their inertia and making unprecedented changes to survive. This study presents a successful attempt at pedagogic innovation from Victoria University (VU), Australia, to differentiate itself from the crowded market and better cater to students' learning by centring their needs. The study reports on the qualitative data and on the perceptions and reflections of VU leaders, teaching staff and students, on the pedagogic endeavour the 'VU Block Model'[®], after two years of implementation. The findings indicate that by putting student experience at the core and wrapping around an organisational context that puts teaching first, a university can differentiate itself from the market and meet the demands of economic growth and competition.



KEYWORDS

Block model; student experience; innovation; pedagogic innovation; Australian universities

Introduction

For decades, universities in Australia have been competing fiercely for the international market, research funding and domestic enrolments. The marketisation of higher education as well as its accompanying managerialism mechanisms create an environment where stronger universities are likely to benefit most from the market (Hood, 1991) while smaller universities are generally known for their dire financial situation (Hurley, 2022; Hurley et al., 2021).

Against this backdrop, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the financial problems of universities, propelling them into a unique era of rapid innovation to survive. Despite being at the forefront of intellectual and technological advancement, there has been a dearth of innovation in how Australian universities function as higher education

CONTACT Kathy Tangelakis  Kathy.Tangelakis@vu.edu.au  First Year College and Institute for Sustainable Industries & Liveable Cities, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne VIC 8001, Australia

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institutions. According to Davis (2017), Australian universities (pre-pandemic) did not feel the need for innovation. This is possibly because their model has successfully attracted a significant number of students, including a substantial influx of international students, whose financial contributions have been critical for the viability of many universities (Hurley, 2022; Hurley et al., 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted a severe blow to the Australian economy, particularly due to the significant loss of income from international education that many institutions relied upon heavily. As the student market undergoes further changes (e.g. being less dependent on revenue from international students), Australian universities are actively considering strategies to expand their reach to a more diverse domestic student demographic. Additionally, the unprecedented pandemic forced universities to change and adapt rapidly to online learning delivery and cater for various demands associated with building new learning platforms for students.

Under the financial pressure, introducing new programmes or dropping programmes appears to be a common practice employed by universities (Hewitt-Dundas & Roper, 2016). Another option was to choose to innovate their approach and apply a new pedagogic innovation to teaching and learning – which is what Victoria University (VU), Melbourne, Australia, did.

This study builds on previous research (Loton et al., 2020; McCluskey et al., 2019) and explores one of the most innovative endeavours from VU – the VU Block Model[®] (described later). The research concentrates on how the innovation, introduced in 2018, has enabled one university to differentiate itself in an increasingly competitive market within its financial capacity. More importantly, during this innovation implementation, the university could still maintain excellence in meeting students' specific needs and facilitating their academics in their work. The innovation that occurred at VU was a response to a clear need to improve its outcomes for students, given even greater urgency by financial necessity before the pandemic, but that proved valuable during the disruption of the pandemic.

Innovations in the marketised higher education sector and block learning

Guided by a marketised system, higher education providers are expected to act as entrepreneurs while being constrained by performative factors such as audits, inspections and various assurance measures (Newman, 2001). The marketisation of higher education positions students as 'credential' consumers (Polkinghorne et al., 2017) and universities as providers who compete in various areas such as cost, branding, career opportunities, amenities etc., to attract their prospective 'consumers'. The discourse of higher education's purpose has therefore long shifted from benefiting society, to individual gain and cost (Lynch, 2006). According to Atkinson (2015), the marketisation process changes the nature of the teaching practice, requiring academics and students to meet the demand of economic growth and competition. In such competitive student/customer-led environments, universities and academics often find themselves driven by targets and statistical data, rather than learning and teaching activities (Ball, 2021). However, Partington (2021) discusses that marketisation can provide universities and academics with the opportunities to illustrate their commitments to student-centeredness and inclusivity.

In various pedagogic innovations to teaching and learning, block learning is an approach that involves students focusing on one subject at a time for an intensive period

of time, typically two to four weeks. This contrasts with the traditional semester system, where students juggle multiple subjects simultaneously usually over two 12-week semesters. Previous research on block learning/block models at universities has shown promising results in terms of student engagement, achievement, and flexibility as well as student retention. A study conducted by Buck and Tyrrell (2022) at a UK university which implemented a block-and-blend delivery approach suggested that this approach positively impacts student attainment, reduces deferral applications, and enhances student engagement. Another notable example is earlier research on the VU Block Model[®] which shows improved grades and support for all students, including high achievers (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). Further research at VU has focused on the impact of block learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted its potential to improve accessibility and student engagement (Klein et al., 2019).

On the other hand, critics of block models have raised several concerns. One criticism is that the linear structure of block learning, where students focus on one subject at a time, may not adequately prepare them for the complexity and multitasking required in real-world scenarios (McKie, 2022). Critics argue that this approach may limit students' ability to make connections across different subjects and hinder their overall understanding and critical thinking skills (Lodge, 2018). Additionally, some question the sustainability of block models, suggesting that the intensity and workload of concentrated learning may lead to burnout and decreased retention rates (Male, 2020). The struggle to adapt to the pace of learning and an intensive schedule are especially common to those with additional commitments or learning disabilities. Concerns are also raised about well-being of teaching staff when the compressed timeframe can put undue pressure on teaching staff, potentially leading to decreased teaching quality (McKie, 2022). However, while there are critics of block learning, a growing body of research suggests the many benefits and positive outcomes associated with this approach (Klein et al., 2019; McKie, 2022). Therefore, developing and refining our understanding of the advantages and challenges associated with this approach is valuable, not only for the research community, but also for university leaders, educators, and policymakers.

Context – the VU block Model[®]

VU, located in Melbourne, Australia, had approximately 20,000 undergraduate enrolments in 2019 and is considered a relatively small university. It obtained its university status in 1990 when Australia's binary system of universities and technical colleges was merged (Williams, 1992). One of only six 'dual sector' universities in Australia VU offers both vocational education and training (VET) through its VU Polytechnic and higher education. Its establishment Act requires VU to serve the West of Melbourne, a vast outer suburban region with a rich industrial history, which sets it apart from other Australian universities by catering to a specific geographical community. Despite its low profile, VU has been developing a unique identity beyond its public image.

As discussed, the financial crisis for Australian universities generated by COVID-19 is likely to make more institutions willing to push through inertia and try new ideas. Different from others, VU decided to change the market offer through pedagogic innovation – known as the 'VU Block Model[®]– here after 'VU BM'. The VU BM was implemented for first-year students at VU in 2018, allowing them

to focus on one subject at a time in intensive four-week blocks, as opposed to the traditional semester-long system. Three-hour workshops on three days per week with the same peers and facilitator, and small classes (up to 35 students) immersed in active learning, have replaced lectures and tutorials. Assessments are spread out across the 4 weeks of the Block, and exams have been removed. Thus, students focus on assessments for one subject completed within the Block (including resits if possible), as compared to the competing requirements for 4 subjects in the traditional mode, where most assessments are generally due at the tail-end of the semester, followed by multiple exams. VU is the first Australian university to adopt this model, which has since been expanded to second and third-year subjects, across all undergraduate degrees, as well as postgraduate degrees. VU has assisted academics in creating the VU BM curriculum by establishing a specialised Connected Learning unit. This unit consists of professional staff dedicated to supporting academics in curriculum development and pedagogy. Additionally, VU has integrated clear guidance on learning strategies into the curriculum, leveraging insights from the Advancement for Individual Determination (AVID) program at VU and implementing a targeted and immersive professional learning programme to enhance the skills of academic staff.

The VU BM was developed using research-informed practices, drawing on pedagogical theories such as transition pedagogy (Kift, 2015), constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003), and connected curriculum (Fung, 2017). In addition, Helfand's reinvention of the traditional university structure at Quest University in Canada influenced the structural innovation of the VU BM (Helfand, 2013).

VU's implementation of the BM was part of a broader organisational transformation aimed at enhancing student satisfaction, retention, and overall success. The most notable change accompanying the BM was the establishment of VU First Year College[®] (FYC), a dedicated multi-disciplinary College catering to first-year students from all undergraduate programmes and facilitating their smooth transition from high school or work into university life. This study will also examine the degree to which the FYC, and other concurrent organisational changes, influenced the VU BM's effectiveness.

VU's promotional material credits the introduction of the BM with the significant increase in pass rates for first-year subjects. According to the VU website, first-year pass rates now stand at 87%, representing a 13% improvement over the traditional model (Victoria University, 2020). An examination of the overall progress made in student retention and outcomes for first-year Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) students within the BM framework indicated that fail grades declined by 9.2% points from the pre-Block (Davis, 2017) to post-Block (Klein et al., 2019) cohorts. Previous research (Howe et al., 2019; McCluskey et al., 2019) indicate that the VU BM innovation has the potential to promote equity in higher education beyond the advancements observed in retention and overall outcomes.

To explore the BM at VU in the context of increasing marketisation in the Australian higher education sector, this study aims to delve deeper into the success and future potential of the VU BM by examining the model's effectiveness at VU and identifying insights that can contribute to university innovation.

Methodology

To answer the *why* question on the success that the BM had achieved, a qualitative method was employed, to obtain insights into the research question from VU leaders, staff, and students. The process involved three distinct phases. Seven 1–1 in-depth interviewed VU leaders (approximately 60 minutes each) were conducted by a member of the research team. After the initial phase, these leaders assisted in recruiting teaching staff for the second phase. Ten participants participated in focus groups of three to four first-year teaching staff, plus one 1–1 interview where a participant could not attend at the scheduled time. Interviews were conducted via videoconference for approximately 60 minutes each by the same researcher. The teaching staff and a student questionnaire then helped to identify ten students for the third phase (who all completed the consent form to participate in a focus group). Of the 10 students, four students were currently in first year; five were in the second year; and one was in the fourth but had completed first-year BM subjects in 2018. Interviews were conducted by a member of the research team with a deep understanding of the teaching and learning process. Ethics approval was obtained from VU's Human Research Ethics Committee.

To minimise the potential limitations of focus groups and bias in interview, participants were encouraged to freely express their perspectives on the success of the VU BM. Researchers posed follow-up questions to delve into emerging themes, aligning with the ethos of mutual benefit in action research. Both interviews and focus groups were intentionally crafted to stimulate reflection rather than merely extract information.

By utilising a three-stage collection procedure, this study was able to comprehensively examine the VU BM in first-year STEM from multiple connected perspectives. The focus was on academics and students from STEM subjects because STEM subjects are promising avenues for innovative, student-centred learning to develop vital skills such as creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving that are crucial for success in many STEM fields (Timms et al., 2018).

The interview transcripts were analysed using a deductive approach, while remaining receptive to new and intriguing findings, as outlined by Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019). The analysis paid particular attention to diverse perspectives, going beyond deterministic hypotheses to unpack the complexity within each hypothesis from various viewpoints. The approach involves coding of qualitative data to highlight differences rather than emphasising unified themes.

Findings

The findings are organised to reflect the emerging themes on how each group of stakeholders contributed to the implementation of BM at VU with perspectives from leaders, teaching staff and students presented where relevant.

The university: Creating a supportive context

According to Devlin (2013), successful efforts to enhance outcomes for students are likely to be facilitated by an organisational context that aligns with university strategies and structures. In the case of VU, the BM took place within a multi-

faceted process of organisational transformation that aimed to improve student satisfaction, retention, and success. The establishment of the FYC, a college of purposely selected multidisciplinary teaching staff, mostly from within the institution, and with a passion for enhancing the first-year student experience (McCluskey et al., 2019), was the most notable change that occurred alongside the VU BM. All leaders and teaching staff at VU unanimously concurred in interviews that the implementation of the FYC in tandem with the VU BM was crucial to the success of both initiatives:

It's the First Year College that has actually provided the infrastructure and the culture that has enabled the [BM] to be successful. [L3]

Another major element of the change was the Connected Learning team, a unit employing about 20 students and staff as 'learning designers', to help teaching staff adopt the BM curriculum and pedagogy [L3]. There was an element of serendipity to this winning combination, of being 'in the right place at the right time', resulting in 'the convergence of a number of things that were happening that have eventually got us to where we are now' [L1].

The interrelationships between teaching staff beyond the classroom played a role in driving the changes within the classroom, underscoring the interdependence of the FYC and BM reforms. The interdisciplinary community of practice was viewed positively by all FYC academics.

I mean, [before First Year College], we were just doing our little Science bit, and I wouldn't even talk to people in Bio Med, so not even thinking of going further out, to Arts and Law and Business and things like that, and I have interactions with all those people these days. [A7]

There were additional factors that propelled innovation at the institutional level. VU leaders were forthcoming about the financial challenges the university had encountered, partly because of elevated rates of first-year student attrition.

We were at that stage several millions of dollars in deficit – this very significant failure rate in the first year. And our backs were to the wall, we didn't think incremental improvement was what we needed. In fact, what we probably needed was something a little bit more revolutionary, rather than evolutionary [L1]

It was difficult to pursue innovation within a financially-constrained environment, and resources had to be redirected from other strategic projects to support the BM design [L1]. A leader commented that the BM and the FYC were still operating 'on the smell of oily rag' (a very small amount/minimum of money) [L3], and that they could achieve even greater success with more resources. However, the interviews suggested that financial constraints were viewed mainly as practical challenges rather than sources of frustration. In fact, one leader rebuked colleagues who allowed financial constraints to limit their ambitions for VU [L5]. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the VU BM was attracting more enrolments by offering multiple entry points throughout the year.

The students: Taking initiatives in their learning

Navigating studying time

The amount of time devoted to learning is a critical determinant of academic success. With the diversification of the student population in Australian universities, more students are dealing with intricate demands on their time, such as work, family obligations, and community or athletic pursuits. VU has a significant proportion of 'non-traditional' students, such as those who are mature-age, first-in-family and/or from non-English speaking backgrounds, and they may face difficulties organising their schedules to accommodate their studies. Previous research conducted by VU on the BM has indicated that the four-week intensive format 'acknowledges, values, and adjusts to the complexity of student lives', rendering the first-year experience 'manageable' and 'predictable' (McCluskey et al., 2019, p. 14). The BM's most apparent alteration is the restructuring of time, as explained by one of the leaders:

One of the best, most cost-effective things you can do in terms of improving the atmosphere of students is getting them to spend time on tasks and time on the right things. [L1]

Accordingly, the issue of poor time management in universities does not necessarily originate from students' shortcomings, as often implied by the emphasis on 'time management' skills. Instead, it stems from how universities structure their learning. When students are burdened with multiple simultaneous assessments, they tend to resort to memorisation or 'regurgitation' of content just to survive. However, if the learning experience is focused, purposeful, and continuous, they will engage with the content more meaningfully [L1].

During most interviews, the topic of time use mainly revolved around completing 'one subject at a time' [L6], rather than the organisation of time within classes (which is discussed later in relation to curriculum and assessment). All the students interviewed highlighted this as a significant advantage:

Because I can compare it to my other studies at VU, which wasn't in the BM, I just feel like it's so much – not lighter, I would say with a workload, but you can focus on one subject at a time which looks like a bit of a relief. [S10]

Some students highlighted the difference between the VU BM and their Year 12 experience in school, with one student revealing that the pressure of studying multiple subjects concurrently was the reason for not completing high school [S7]. One leader noted that this was especially beneficial for subjects like engineering and physics, by enabling students to master theory before they were asked to apply it [L2].

Conducting subjects sequentially rather than concurrently offered practical advantages in addition to cognitive benefits. According to a FYC academic, the conventional semester model was considered extremely inefficient:

With one unit at a time, you're not trying to be pulled three different ways, where – in the old model – you might have the first eight or nine weeks where there is really nothing to do, and then suddenly all hell breaks loose for the three weeks when you're trying to rush and do four or five things at the same time. [A7]

Conversely, the demands for out-of-class work could be significant, as the rigour of the VU BM often necessitates learning to be undertaken independently. Typically, academics refrained from assigning tasks during class that could be completed outside of it, to optimise in-class learning. As one instructor observed 'it gives them an extra push, that they realise they have to do some preparation before coming to class'.

On the other hand, the overall impression of BM was one of productive but relentless activity. This emerged in further comments from students, about the demands of their workloads:

Some of the more intensive subjects, it can be a bit hard to keep up with some of the assessments, especially if you have some weak points. So math is definitely one of my weak points . . . , I struggled on that one. [S1]

The workload for students in STEM units exhibits considerable variation. When discussing the second-year courses under the new 'Blocked' structure, a leader highlighted the distinction between subjects that are 'content-heavy' and those that are more manageable. Although differing workloads across subjects are not a new concern, the concentration of subjects may intensify these variations. In particular, missing a class in a 'content-heavy' subject can significantly compromise a student's ability to catch up [L5]. This is balanced with comprehensive and highly-structured content and resources available on the learning management system and personalised support from one dedicated teacher (see below).

Monitoring their own learning progress

The curriculum is designed with a focus on student-centred approach, anchoring on a deliberate approach to assessment within the block. This approach acknowledged that the content that is assessed is a crucial factor in influencing the students' learning preferences [L1]. Consequently, the transition away from exams was made.

STEM has traditionally been examination based. And the idea is that you remember lots of facts and you regurgitate them. And I think that with very few exceptions, we've removed exams out of our STEM units. [L2]

Instead of high-pressure exams, students were given assessment tasks that required them to apply STEM knowledge and skills, such as oral or laboratory-based assessments. This approach was seen 'closer to the sorts of work they would do in a workplace, rather than the pressurised one-on-one exam' [L2]. One academic in the FYC implemented smaller in-class tests and a problem project to alleviate the anxiety that some students experienced, 'some students would have a nervous breakdown because they were having a test or an exam' [A4]. The assessment cycle in the BM program has also been changed. With the rapid four-week block, students receive results for their first subject earlier, which allows them to see their progress immediately. This has been especially helpful for students who were previously unsuccessful or who had doubts about their abilities.

When I saw my marks come through and they were the unexpected high marks, it was very motivating 'cause it gave me that confidence, it's possible, you can do it, so just keep it up, keep up the work, keep doing what you're doing. [S1]

According to a FYC academic, this element contributes to strengthening students' perseverance and retention, ultimately promoting their personal welfare:

I think resilience is a thing we see with a lot of the students, and I think that the ones that would normally struggle because of the length of time [in Semester model]; and the greatest thing that happens, I think, is that most of our students pass Block 1, they get a little bit of confidence. They go 'I can do this'. [A4]

However, his FYC colleague responded to this with a word of caution, that 'students who should not have passed Block 1 did', and 'thought they knew more than they did' [A2]. A comparable tension arises during the transition to the second year. One leader mentioned being vigilant, observing closely for students entering second-year STEM subjects without adequate preparation, yet, up to this point, no issues of concern had been identified.

The BM allows for authentic and creative evaluation methods. As an example, a biomedical student recounted their experience with a creative, participatory assessment:

I remember the zombie apocalypse – I was actually surprised after I saw the descriptions, instructions 'cause it was a first assessment that I've ever seen like first sort of kind of thing, and at first I was like, 'Hmm, why are we doing this?' But after I did that, like now I can strongly say that I understand about the immune system really well compared to others. So, yeah, I loved that part. [S9]

Several students identified assessment as a strong point of the BM program, citing the availability of frequent, varied chances to exhibit their comprehension instead of 'having to worry about end-of-semester exams and having to think about something you learnt 10 weeks ago' [S8]. Furthermore, more regular evaluation had an impact on students' behaviours and attitudes.

It's a really quick paced unit. There are 14 assessment tasks. There's no time to muck around... So I believe we've been able to get into the mindset, get into the work ethic, and hey, if you want to do good in this unit, you need to attend to some stuff, and you can't spend 12 weeks thinking about it. You've got to think about it right away. [A11]

Whilst the number of assessment tasks (formative and summative) vary between subjects (and 14 assessments is atypical), the frequent assessment aligns with the Block's commitment to enhancing the use of time for learning, staying 'on task' and fostering connections between learners and educators. Both academics and students expressed a shared desire for timely and precise reciprocal feedback, reinforcing the foundation of the pedagogical relationship as a collaboration between co-learners.

The academic: Mediating between their new teaching program and students

Engaging curriculum that builds skills for learning

The VU BM curriculum is not solely structured around time management but prioritises student-centred and inquiry-based learning. An academic recounted utilising small-group inquiry projects to achieve this goal.

[Groups] can choose anything that covers something in that unit's topic. And we get very wide things. So in this Block, we got people doing anything from new viruses to bushfires, ecology, biosphere through to predator prey interactions, the rise of allergies and things. They can tailor some of their learning to what they're focused on, and that seems to keep them engaged and involved. [A7]

The student-centred curriculum model is heavily centred around the altered dynamics between teaching staff and students, with students being viewed as active participants in the learning process. This approach does not imply that academics take a backseat, as noted by a student who observed that the absence of lectures did not provide an excuse for teaching staff to be inactive. Instead, 'really good teachers' utilised this opportunity to cover all aspects of learning, such as visual aids and encouraging students to converse with their peers [S7].

The emphasis on prioritising students was facilitated by the decrease in the quantity of some first-year subjects/units, consolidating similar topics instructed across multiple programmes (e.g. Research methods) into interdisciplinary subjects/units. Consequently, teaching staff were compelled to concentrate on the needs of the students they were instructing, rather than just the course material:

So, therefore, the academics ... have to think, 'well, who's in this class' ... getting the academics to actually understand the students, and the students' perspective, and thinking of different ways of actually engaging that student in learning this discipline or this content or this theory required a different way of thinking. [L3]

According to an interviewed participant [L5], blending students from distinct STEM programmes into interdisciplinary courses also fosters collaborative inquiry by enabling students to examine topics from diverse perspectives. This was an unforeseen advantage of this approach.

These paradigm shifts paved the way for a multitude of daily curriculum innovations. One leader remarked on the presence of 'incredibly innovative' curriculum where students were taken off-site to engage in authentic learning experiences, a possibility afforded by the BM structure [L6]. There was a consensus that the BM encouraged experimentation and allowed instructors to better respond to student interests and iterate improvements across consecutive Blocks.

Prioritising strong relationships that enhance teaching and learning

The small size of Block classes, with up to 35 students, contributed to strengthening the bond between teaching staff and students. Some academics even compared this positively to the lecture-style teaching in first-year university programmes.

I think that's another difference in our Block and small classes, with students who have been to other universities who say 'I never got to talk to anybody. You'd have to sit there in silence'. And ... the teacher was just miles away. You'd never actually get close to them. [A2]

One student said positively that the close relationships were 'like high school', creating 'a good feeling' in classes and around the university [S3]. Another observed 'the professor knowing you inside out is very important because they would understand your circumstances' [S6].

Another related theme was the upsurge in help-seeking behaviours, as academics leveraged their close relationships with students to address their learning needs in a timely manner. Many students appreciated the responsiveness of academics to their requests for help, with some academics arriving early or staying late to offer extra support. The fact that students openly discussed receiving help suggests that seeking help was normalised and destigmatised:

All we have to do is reach out and ask for help. And in terms of that, yes, the response was amazing 'cause like all the professors that I reached out for help, they were like fully into trying to help me a lot. I don't mind admitting that I need help. I received a lot of help including feedback for assignments. [S9]

The visibility of individual student needs, which may not be as apparent in traditional university lectures with large class sizes, also contributed to the increase in help-seeking behaviours. These needs could stem from inherent learning challenges or from personal circumstances affecting students' lives. According to some academics, building close relationships with teaching staff enabled some students to ask for help and avoid missing important assessments due to adverse events.

In conclusion, the reinforcement of relationships wasn't merely a consequence of smaller, intensive classes within the BM; rather, it serves as the primary mechanism fostering improved learning. The robust bond between faculty and students is also grounded in a proclivity for strengths-based pedagogy, a dimension that the VU BM has effectively triggered.

Discussion and recommendations

The study reveals that the BM at VU, which restructures semesters into four-week single-subject blocks, appears deceptively simple but harbours multiple layers of complexity. The success of the model in improving retention and success rates stems from a combination of factors that operate within classes and at the institutional level. The findings show that the VU BM success comes not only from the Model itself but also from the complex surrounding contextual factors and the organisational change that was required. The innovation was found to be aligned with the strategies and structures of the university (e.g. the establishment of the FYC supporting the BM). Success is also thanks to the synchrony of endeavours from students, academic staff, and the university. By putting student experience at the core and wrapping around an organisational context that put teaching first, VU could contest the competitive market (and neoliberal discourses at large).

The success of the VU BM has provided a concrete example of how small universities can escape and stand out from the fiercely competitive Higher Education market of the neoliberalism era which requires academics and students to meet the demand of economic growth and competition (Atkinson, 2015). Ball (2021) further argues that universities and lecturers often find themselves driven by targets and statistical data rather than learning and teaching activities. However, this study shows that by placing students at the heart of the innovation and associating the new modes of teaching with new ideas of the university, small universities can not only better cater to student need and improve their

performance but also possibly facilitate their economic growth. Whilst smaller class sizes can result in greater staffing costs, these were somewhat off-set by overall improvements in student progression and retention rates and significant numbers of students entering at multiple entry points.

We argue that it is important to contextualise notions of dehumanising concentration on students as just numbers and as Ball (2021) suggests, the process VU went through facilitates a way where teaching and learning activities come back into focus through innovation.

As some critics have pointed out, there are limitations to the BM. The intensive structure places high demands on staff workloads, especially in delivering assessment results in an extremely short timeframe (Konjarski et al., 2019). To balance the intense nature of the BM on both staff and students, a free teaching week, after every two blocks, has been added to the university timetable. As suggested in the comments, small classes and one dedicated teacher for the entire Block, provides opportunities to provide timely personalised support for students, and particularly those deemed 'at risk'.

This study has important implications for how universities can innovate and adapt to challenging circumstances, and how such innovation can positively impact student success, rather than just institutional survival. This lesson is especially crucial in the post-COVID context, as Australian universities must undergo a 'strategic reset' to secure a sustainable future, requiring significant reconsideration of purpose, strategy, culture, and business models (Betts, 2020, p. 1). Even before the pandemic, improving outcomes for equity group students was not just a matter of social justice but also a financial necessity (Naylor & Mifsud, 2019). In today's world, no university can afford to neglect the needs of its diverse student body.

While this was a significant and disruptive change to the usual practices of the university, it enabled productive disruption where all settled normal practices were stirred up and looked at again. In a massified system with constrained market it is important that universities do not 'sit on their laurels' nor cheapen their offer but instead look inwards into their own practices and reflect on possible, even difficult, change. We found through the insights of the students, academics and leaders that this can be presented as an example of how institutions using innovation teaching methods can fit the needs of their student populations.

Despite the attempt to have a thorough investigation on the reasons explaining how the VU BM works, the teaching staff participants were limited to those teaching STEM subjects. Further study should be conducted with a more comprehensive group and possibly cover more longitudinal data where possible. Though the VU BM has been implemented for more than four years, it is still at a nascent stage of innovation.

This research offers a glimmer of hope for small universities that aspire to foster innovation. The recommendations of this study are geared towards higher education policymakers and emphasise the need to create an enabling environment for innovative practices to thrive. The VU BM, in conjunction with other innovative approaches, can contribute to the success of students from diverse backgrounds in Australia.

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Notes on contributors

Kathy Tangalakis, Kathy's career focus has been on enhancing the first-year student learning experience and outcomes for diverse student cohorts. Her contribution to learning and teaching has been recognised internationally, nationally and institutionally. Kathy is currently researching how Victoria University's innovative Block Model has impacted on commencing student outcomes in STEM.

Cuong Huu Hoang, Sam Hoang is a Research Officer in the Centre for International Research on Education Systems (CIREs) at Victoria University. Sam has nearly 10 years of experience conducting research projects across all sectors of education.

Elizabeth Knight, Lizzie holds an Honorary Senior Research Fellow position at Victoria University's Mitchell Institute. Her key area of interest is equity of access to and in tertiary education, the provision of institutional information and support for transition into post-school education.

Peter Hurley is the Associate Professor and director of Mitchell Institute. He has expertise in tertiary education policy and international education systems. He has worked in various research and management roles in the vocational and higher education sectors. Email: peter.hurley@vu.edu.au

Dr Jen Jackson is an Adjunct Associate Professor of Education Policy at VU and former Education Policy Lead for the Mitchell Institute. Dr Jackson has previously worked in early childhood policy and regulation and completed her PhD on early childhood workforce development. Email: jennifer.jackson@vu.edu.au

Melinda Hildebrandt has expertise in tertiary education policy. She has worked in various advisory and management roles in the higher education sector. She has a particular interest in access and equity in education and disability advocacy. Email: melinda.hildebrandt@vu.edu.au

ORCID

Kathy Tangalakis  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5735-326X>

Cuong Huu Hoang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3131-3803>

Elizabeth Knight  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6596-6525>

Ethical approval

The study obtained ethical approval from Victoria University.

Consent

All participants provided their consent to participate in the study.

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