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Achieving success in post-graduate studies: A qualitative exploration of staff experiences transitioning from traditional to block mode delivery in an Australian university

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ABSTRACT

Responding to student demand for flexibility in the delivery of classes as well as the potential barriers and enabling factors supporting student success, universities have introduced distinctive educational models, including replacing the standard 12-week, sequential delivery of units of study with 4- or 8-week blocks of one or two units at a time (Block Model). Most Block Model delivery and evaluation has been at the undergraduate level. The aim of this study was to investigate, via individual interviews, university staff experiences of teaching the Block Model at the postgraduate level. Staff affirmed that the Block Model resulted in high levels of engagement in teaching and learning; effective learning management systems; and up-to-date, engaging, and problem-based module design. However, staff also recognised the timetabling of units for students who were employed or had family commitments, and the cognitive burden carried by time-poor staff.

KEYWORDS

Post-graduate studies; graduate studies; block module; block model; academic achievement; Australia

Introduction

The traditional model of university provision is multiple units taught simultaneously over a large number of weeks, such as a 12-week semester. Responding to identified barriers and enablers to student success, and student demand for flexibility in course delivery, a handful of universities around the world have introduced what are variously referred to as intensive, short term, accelerated, abbreviated, summer or block models. In these models, students typically enrol in only one or two units at a time, which are taught over a shorter period. The traditional model consists of teacher-led learning in which students listen to lectures and receive instruction during class time, and then work on assignments and homework outside of class. The new Block Model adopts a 'flipped classroom' approach whereby the teacher facilitates and guides the learning process rather than leads, and the learning conducted during and outside of class time is reversed or 'flipped' (Mccluskey et al., 2020). Although it is possible to adopt a 'flipped classroom' approach within

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a traditional model, the Block Model explicitly incorporates this approach. The pedagogical emphasis of flipped classrooms is active participation, critical thinking, and self-directed learning. Students take ownership of their learning process, becoming active collaborators rather than passive recipients of information (Bruggeman et al., 2021; Mccluskey et al., 2020). In this paper, we will refer to this new model as 'Block Model' and the units within as 'Block Modules'.

The first university to adopt the Block Model was Colorado College in the United States in 1970. Since then, other universities in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Sweden, and Africa have followed. Victoria University (VU), located in the western suburbs of Melbourne, Australia, was the first Australian university to implement the Block Model at scale, replacing semester-length lectures and tutorials with successive 4-week blocks of 1-unit each. VU began implementing the Block Model with first year undergraduate studies in 2018, rolling the model out to other year levels and courses, including postgraduate studies, in the following years. Other Australian Universities have transitioned, or are transitioning to, the Block Model structure, mostly at the undergraduate level. These include the Southern Cross University and Murdoch University, which introduced Block Modules in 2021 and 2022, respectively, and which will have Block Modules across all undergraduate courses by 2023 (Dodd, 2020).

The Block Model has been found to be informed by 'a rigorous base of theory, evidence and reflection' (Jackson et al., 2020), p. 2). Comparisons of traditional versus Block Model approaches have mostly found the Block Model to have better student outcomes. Kucsera and Zimmaro (2010), for example, used student evaluations of teaching to compare the effectiveness of Block Model and traditional courses in a large public university in the southwest United States. They concluded that course effectiveness was rated more highly by students and staff participating in the Block Model when compared to the traditional model. Other studies have highlighted the potential of the Block Model to accommodate more in depth exploration of topics (Kitchenham, 2011; Kucsera & Zimmaro, 2010), enhanced teacher-student relationships (Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020), efficient integration of technology (Kitchenham, 2011; McLoughlin & Lee, 2007), and flexible timetabling for students (Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020).

An emerging body of research on the Block Model indicates many positives and many challenges of this structure and approach, at least at the undergraduate level. Positives include improvement in student retention and success, especially for traditionally underrepresented students (Jackson et al., 2020; Loton et al., 2020); improved quality of teaching; and conscious design of units to include direction to students on how to further deepen their studies and engage in problem solving and collaborative learning (Mccluskey et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2021). Additional positives of the Block Model include enculturating students into opportunities to better organise their workload and approach to study and to develop essential self-regulation skills (Turner et al., 2021), improved quality of the relationships between students and tutors (Harkin & Nerantzi, 2021), and improved attendance and student perceptions of their own engagement (Harkin & Nerantzi, 2021). Identified positives also include additional social interaction offered during intensive delivery leading to the formation of peer learning communities and associated heightened attainment (Pham et al., 2019), more effective teaching, and the activation of existing teaching expertise and a space in which expertise is

developed (Jackson et al., 2020). Scaffolding of learning experiences and appropriate skill development, key to the design of Block Modules, were also highlighted in the literature as intrinsic pedagogy that facilitated the integration of skills within blended learning (Bunney, 2017; Kitchenham, 2011; McLoughlin & Lee, 2007).

The above identified positives of the Block Model have been found by scholars (Mgqwashu, 2023; Race et al., 2022) as intrinsic to decolonising a curriculum, with the Block Model involving module designers in critically examining and re-evaluating educational content, structures, and methodologies to address and rectify the historical biases, Eurocentrism, and colonial perspectives that may be embedded in the curriculum. The result is the creation of a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable educational experience.

Challenges of the Block Model identified in the literature include lack of significant performance increases amongst older students; staff workload increases that required careful organisation, adequate preparation, and varied teaching approaches (Oraison et al., 2020; Sewagegn & Diale, 2019); and student concerns regarding the workload and difficulty in covering 12 weeks' worth of content in 4 weeks (Loton et al., 2020; Lutes & Davies, 2018). Other identified challenges of the Block Model included decrease in time students spent studying outside of class time, students needing to juggle caring responsibilities struggling to complete the tight assessment requirements (Jackson et al., 2020), and inadequate time for students to revise papers or for instructors to provide feedback on assessments (Lutes & Davies, 2018). Additional challenges included reduction in marked assessments and inadequate time for instructors to prepare new materials and adapt to the new teaching and learning environments (Harkin & Nerantzi, 2021).

Thus far, few universities have implemented Block Modules at the post-graduate level. As a result, almost all existing research on the Block Model has examined its implementation at the undergraduate level. In Australia, research on the Block Model has largely focused on just the first year of undergraduate studies. It is unknown whether the positives and challenges identified with this model at the undergraduate level (Kitchenham, 2011; Matheos & Cleveland-Innes, 2018; Oraison et al., 2020) are also true at the post-graduate level. Of particular interest is whether the Block Model affords post-graduate students the specialised focus and depth required to achieve the specialised skills, knowledge, and expertise that build on the knowledge acquired at the undergraduate level.

In 2021, VU began introducing the Block Model into some of its post-graduate courses. In 2023, the Block Model was delivered in 54 post-graduate courses across six disciplines. In most cases, courses consisted of single units taught over 4 weeks, although in some courses the structure was two units taught over 8 weeks. The traditional model for post-graduate courses at VU was four units taught over 12 weeks.

This research is the first study we are aware of to examine the Block Model at the post-graduate level at a university[1]. The aim of this study was to understand, from the perspective of staff at an Australian university, the positives and challenges they perceived in transitioning from a traditional model to a Block Model, and the ways in which they attempted to optimise this transition. This research will contribute to our understanding of the Block Model and help inform other universities that may be contemplating shifting their post-graduate courses from a traditional model to a Block Model.

Table 1. Participants by course(s) taught and organisation/role.

Participant	Course(s) taught	Organisation/role
P1	Master's of Public Health	Curriculum Designer, Sessional Academic/First Year College
P2	Public Health and Global Nutrition	College of health and Biomedicine
P3	International Community Development	College of Arts and Education
P4	Psychology, Clinical Services	College of health and Biomedicine
P5	Master's of Digital Media	College of Arts and Education
P6	Master's of Clinical Exercise Science in Rehabilitation	College of Sports and Exercise Science
P7	Master's of Business	College of Business and Engineering
P8	Master's of Business	College of Business and Engineering
P9	Master's in Osteopathy	College of Health and Biomedicine
P10	Master's in Osteopathy	College of Health and Biomedicine
P11	Master's of Teaching	College of Arts and Education
P12	Master's of Public Health	College of Health and Biomedicine

Materials and methods

Following ethics approval (HRE19–101), author DT and AM, a member of the Project Group, individually approached staff who had recent experience teaching a 4-week Block post-graduate course. Potential participants were invited to a 30-minute, one-on-one ZOOM conversation. These sessions were held from February through September 2022.

A key consideration for this study was that both interviewers were researchers who also engaged in designing and delivering Block units of study within the University, albeit within Colleges/departments different from those of the participants. Therefore, both had a priori knowledge of the organisation in which the research was being conducted and so contended with methodological issues of identity and the situated knowledge possessed as a result of their positions. As Fleming (2018) cautions, 'insider' researchers need to ensure robust monitoring of the research so as to protect the anonymity of participants and protect against any premature conclusions that may come from an overfamiliarity with the research context. This 'robust monitoring' was achieved through regular meetings with two research colleagues who acted as 'outsiders' to the data and design, who provided objective feedback on the thematic analysis. In addition, analyses were conducted by authors DT and NV, the latter of whom is a research-only staff member and thus has no experience with Block Model instruction.

This study used semi-structured individual interviews that asked participants to reflect on their experiences of the postgraduate Block Model. Questions focused on the benefits or affordances of the Model, challenges of the Model and ways to optimise the model. Data were recorded and transcribed. QSR NVivo 10 software was used to conduct the analyses. A deductive thematic analysis was first performed to code data into the three pre-identified themes of 'benefits', 'challenges' and 'ways to optimise'. This was followed by an inductive analysis within each of these themes (Rubin & Babbie, 2009).

The approach to data analysis was iterative, based on a common set of principles: transcribing the interviews; immersing oneself within the data to gain detailed insights into the phenomena being explored; developing a data coding system; and linking codes or units of data to form overarching categories or

themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In total, 12 staff participated in the study, representing a wide variety of courses and disciplines (Table 1).

Results

Three overarching themes were identified: *Block Model and the student experience, Block model and the staff experience*, and *Optimising the Block Model*. Participant quotes appear in italics.

Block model and the student experience

Participants were keen to impress that they believed the Block Model offered multiple positives for students, particularly resulting from its pedagogical shift to the 'flipped classroom' with its focus on active learning and student-led engagement. One participant described the flipped classroom as a progressive shift from students '*sitting in a lecture, listening and hopefully learning*' to students *'really making the content their own . . . actively seeking(ing) answers and not just listen(ing)'. (P8)* This shift was perceived to lead to graduates with *'much stronger degrees, in terms of being work ready'*. (*P9)* Participants noted that the teaching and learning approaches that helped students' successful achievement of post-graduate studies included reshaping unit content and activities to include material presented in short, discreet capsules of learning, tailoring activities to students' backgrounds. '*I can build my content around [my students' background]*' to provide *'the most relevant content [that students] actually need'. (P1)* A few participants remarked that the Block Model's emphasis on problem-solving and collaborative learning optimised the learning culture and explicitly fostered a democratic and equal relationship with students, thus *'treat[ing] the students as experts' (P5)*.

Several participants commented that the Block Model's intense focus on one unit at a time allowed for deeper and more concentrated learning than with the traditional model. As one participant stated: *'we're not saying, OK, what did we do last week, and let's have recap, it's back where we were the night before. So, it probably gives people that opportunity to do a deeper dive'. (P5)* However, this view was contested by other staff who opined that the Block Model resulted in a shallower level of learning. These staff argued that *'the Block Model doesn't allow [students] to go out and do that little bit extra to find out things that are probably just slightly outside exactly what we're teaching them'. (P10)* Nor was it thought to suit those learners who needed time to go away and think about the content. *'[Students] don't have the time to go away and do the readings and the consolidation of learning'. (P1)* Other staff were concerned with the increased cognitive burden on students to remain focused and engaged for long periods. *'[I]n a postgrad, because we're just expecting a higher level of output and engagement, actively, from students in the classroom, which is harder to get from then when they've been in class for six hours'. (P9)*

Participants credited the Block Model with affording them greater efficiency in the use of class time, which they felt benefited students. *'[Staff are] not saying "OK, what did we do last week, and let's have a recap". (P5)* Participants also felt that the VU Block Model structure of three sessions, 3 days per week resulted in increased opportunities for students to forge closer relationships with each other. *"[Students] create more bonds*

amongst themselves because they see each other for more hours a week and the group work is more intense". (P8) As one participant noted, this quick bonding was also beneficial to the student-staff relationships and to teaching approaches, since staff were more able to *"pick up on [students"] personalities and the way that they behave or if they were willing to contribute in class' (P11)* and to tailor classes to more suit the students.

Scaffolding, the approach of systematically building on students' experiences and knowledge as they are learning new skills, was also named as a key positive of Block Model pedagogy. Participants viewed scaffolding as an important way in which explicit links were made between current and previous units. As one participant stated, the Block Model allows for *'design units to talk to each other'. (P12)*. Alongside scaffolding were the participants' conscious plan to optimise the Block Model by scheduling the heaviest cognitive load towards the start of the Block so that students *'reflect and think critically' (P1)* from the outset. Likewise, creating clear structures and expectations, prerequisite pre-class activities, and easily navigated learning spaces were ways in which participants optimised the Block Model. Another positive of the Block Model for students identified by participants was the revised approach to assessments required. Several participants offered a view that the quick assessment feedback, within 2 days of assessment submission, increased student engagement. *'[B]ecause they submitted the assignment, they remember that it's fresh, they've just done it. They come to the next class, they already can see their marks, they can see their feedback, and often it's Part A of the next assessment'(P7)*.

While participants expressed mostly positive views regarding the impact of the Block Model on students, some negative impacts were identified. Many participants commented on the structure and timetabling challenges for students enrolled in the Block Model. Several participants noted the accentuated negative impact on study completions if students missed Block modules: *'if somebody gets sick, teacher or student, the wheels tend to fall off a little bit and it's hard to put them back on or get the results in on time'. (P5)* This concern was heightened for part-time students:*'once the block is finished, that's it. Then if you do it part time, then the stuff that you missed, you won't see that stuff until next year, because you have to re-enrol'. (P8)* The same difficulty was noted for students who tried to accommodate part-time studies with family commitments: *'you can do it part time, you do one block on, one block off and they went, oh what am I meant to do with my job and the kids?. . . and who's one of the biggest losers in this? Women' (P3)* or, in the case international students, tried to meet visa study requirements while juggling work requirements.

Block model and the staff experience

Whereas most comments about the impact of the Block Model on students were positive, many of the comments about the impact of the Block Model on staff were negative. In particular, participants discussed the increased time burden of the Block Model. One participant, for example, noted that *'teaching-focused staff, [they] struggle a little bit with the intensity of block teaching'(P6)*. Another mentioned fatigue. *'Staff who're teaching the block are pretty used to being exhausted all the time'. (P3*) Other participants mentioned the workload. *'[T]he workload was just way too high for staff'*. (P1) The combination of these factors caused one participant to caution that *'the potential for staff] burnout is quite high'. (P2)*

While participants noted that students appreciated the quick turnaround and feedback on assessments, as discussed above, they also stated that the quick turnaround came at a cost. A majority of staff were firm in the view that the quick turnaround time imposed an unrealistic burden in terms of workload, time, and benchmarking to professional requirements. '*[T]echnically, you're meant to give [each assessment] half an hour [to mark]. We're only lucky that our student numbers are down, but how do you mark half an hour at A.Q.F. 9[2]?'(P1*). One participant questioned the time-saving strategy they were provided for marking assessments of using only a rubric without additional comments, feeling that such an approach did a disservice to students and did not provide them with the individual feedback they deserved.

Most of the positive comments regarding the Block Model and staff experience focused on having a more predictable schedule with greater blocks of time for non-teaching activities. One participant stated,'*I quite like being able to do smaller, intensive teaching periods, then get a bit more breaks to do other things' (P6)*. Another participant noted the greater opportunity to nominate working days. *'[The timetable gave me] predictability' (P7*).

All staff agreed that the reshaping of units to suit Block Mode required time, team support, and resources. Some staff praised the design team, which they saw as integral to the unit design, and commented that the design team was *'innovative' (P2)*, *'valuable' (P8)* and *'knew the discipline'. (P9)* Of particular importance during the design stage was the presence of teaching staff who had previous experience with the Block Model, and the input of industry partners, which ensured that unit content was industry relevant, up to date, and *'incorporated the most important practical components into the units'. (P6)* Staff similarly praised VU's offerings of professional development modules, meetings, and workshops, which provided them with the confidence and skill to plan and deliver Block Modules. The minority of staff who were critical were those who felt that the design team's inflexibility and unwillingness to respond to the iterative process of design was unhelpful and was presenting staff with a *'huge, long list of things that are wrong, and that you need[ed] to change'. (P1)*

Optimising the block model

Participants were invited to suggest changes that would improve the Block Model. Several of the suggested improvements related to the inflexibility of the Block Model, whereby missing one or two days of a Block could result in a student failing the unit, or where missing one Block meant the student had to wait a full year before being able to take it again. Suggestions to address this issue included offering units as a *'summer break catch up'. (P6)* Offering elective units was also suggested; however, it was recognised that the logistics of doing so was bounded by the size of the course, '*unless you've got a massive course, where you're doing massive deliveries of the same thing' (P3).*

While participants mostly made general comments rather that outline specific actions regarding how to reshape teaching and learning approaches to optimise the Block Model, several suggested that a focus on how to better support struggling students, including working parents, students starting their first block, and international students, would help students achieve success in post-graduate studies with the Block Model. For example, participants noted that it appeared that VU assumed that post-graduate students had

one, rather than many, commitments that needed juggling and that this multiple commitment challenged students' ongoing participation in the post-graduate course. *'[P]eople holding down, job, a few kids, they're, they're exhausted. So just some sort of acknowledgement in planning that there's different cohorts would be great' (P5*). Similarly, participants suggested that more attention be given to international students' transition to studies during the first block module, since *'international students need to learn so much about the Australian educational system . . . . referencing conventions, or different types of assignments' (P8).*

Participants also expressed views on how to improve the Block Model for staff. The most popular suggestions included *'slightly decreas[ing] assessment or marking workload' (P1), "load sharing (P7)"* and having more time to *"be more creative in the way that we [create links between units] P2*" Other suggestions included providing compulsory training in the Block Model for new staff, including sessional staff, covering "*the Block Model, but also best practice teaching strategies. And depending on their role, if they're designing curriculum, it should be in curriculum design, and scaffolding" (P10)*. Additional suggestions included improved focus on staff health and wellbeing, and greater flexibility for instructors in unit content and delivery. "*[A]llowing us to have a bit of free say, I guess, in what goes into the units, as the people teaching it" (P6*). Another suggestion was the ability to audit others' Block sessions. One participant suggested *'a couple of sessions with someone who had done it, and were feeling quite confident, you know, in that delivery' (P8*).

Discussion

This study set out to understand how staff at an Australian university experienced the transition from traditional to Block Mode delivery at the post-graduate level. Its ultimate aim was to improve the success of post-graduate studies by exploring, from a staff perspective, the positives, challenges, and ways to optimise teaching and learning within the Block Model, a relatively new educational model of intensive mode learning. The findings were located within the staff participants' individual experiences and the context of lives lived in many realities. It is also important to note that the university that is the focus of this study has a particular mission to enrol disadvantaged and university first-in-family students who might otherwise not have access to postgraduate studies, and thus the findings should be interpreted within this context.

Most Block Model delivery around the world has been at the undergraduate level, and thus most Block Model research has focused on undergraduate courses. The single exception we found was a study by Kwan et al. (2022), which examined student perceptions of the Block Model for post-graduate certificate courses at a private tertiary educational institution catering principally to international students in Australia. Ours is the first study we are aware of that examines implementation of the Block Model in post-graduate courses at a comprehensive university.

Many of the findings broadly agree with findings from studies examining implementation of the Block Model at the undergraduate level. Staff were generally enthusiastic about the Block Model as affording both staff and students a structure underpinned by empowering pedagogy. Negative experiences described by staff were mostly a consequence of the disconnect between this pedagogy and the lived realities that staff and students navigated within an intensive teaching mode structure. However, some

findings differed from those in prior research, and several additional issues – both positive and negative – were identified. Additional research will be important to understand whether these differences are due to the different requirements of undergraduate versus postgraduate teaching and learning, or an anomaly of this particular university or study participants.

Confirming prior research on the Block Model at the undergraduate level, this study found that the Block Model was generally believed to lead to more engaged teaching and learning as compared with the traditional model (Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020; Dziuban et al., 2011), and that the 'one subject-one module' format provided students with a continuous learning opportunity (Mccluskey et al., 2020). This study also affirmed that the Block Model structure of having one instructor deliver the entire Block Module enhanced student-teacher relationships and was effective in reducing student anxiety and building student confidence (Bunney, 2017; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Also, confirming prior research was the finding that the pedagogical underpinnings of the Block Model, which include the 'flipped classroom' and student-centric focus, were seen to enhance student learning and outcomes as well as student agency and competency. A well-designed and accessible learning management system that supported students' continuous learning opportunities was seen as critical to the success of the Model (Bunney, 2017; Madi et al., 2019). However, participants noted it was important that this technology be embedded in the scaffolding of support for learning and instruction, rather than as an end in itself. Thus, for example, staff in this study spoke of the importance of structuring activities with '*short capsules of learning'(P3)*, in which instructors prepared video clips, for example, that summarised content for student to access prior to a Block session.

The mixed finding regarding whether the Block Model results in deeper or shallower student learning mirrors mixed findings in the extant literature. However, this issue is perhaps more crucial at the post-graduate level. Previous studies examining the Block Model at the undergraduate level found that some teaching staff felt that restricting the learning content to what was manageable within intensive teaching blocks potentially compromises the depth of learning required of students (Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020; Lutes & Davies, 2018). For post graduate students, who are expected to develop high levels of problem-solving skills and expertise, the Block Model would need to ensure that any restriction of content does not compromise the required depth of knowledge required and expected. The finding that staff believed the cognitive burden on students with the Block Model was intense was also found in the undergraduate Block Model literature (Harkin & Nerantzi, 2021). This prior research has also noted concerns regarding the impact of the Block Model on international students. As stated by Matheson and Sutcliffe (2017) and Wang and Li (2008), international students undertaking studies within a Block Model are required to engage not only with a new educational structure built around active learning, collaborative student and teacher engagement, and experiential activities, but also with a new culture and language. The Block Model must therefore mitigate these additional hurdles if the Block Model pedagogy is to optimise student learning for all students.

Other findings corroborated by prior evidence from research at the undergraduate level include Block timetables sometimes being incompatible with students' other commitments (Czaplinski et al., 2017), and student absences exacerbating risk of failure and disengagement from the study because of the volume of content students miss (Dixon &

O'Gorman, 2020; Turner et al., 2021). Designing timetables that suit working professionals is particularly important for post-graduate students. This may include offering flexible class schedules, including evening and weekend classes, to accommodate students with work commitments, and providing more online courses to allow students to access lectures and course material remotely.

Not discussed in prior research on the impact of the Block Model on students were findings that the Block Model allowed staff to better tailor course content and delivery. Reflecting research on decolonising the curriculum (Mgqwashu, 2023; Race et al., 2022), Block Modules' design incorporated students' individual backgrounds, resulting in more collaborative and participatory learning experiences, a more equal relationship between staff and students, more efficient use of class time, and stronger bonds between students. Future research is needed to determine whether these additional identified positives of the Block Model for students are specific to post-graduate studies or are also true at the undergraduate level.

In terms of impact of the Block Model on staff, prior research on the Block Model in undergraduate courses confirms our finding that the Block Model was seen as providing staff with more predictable schedules and blocks of time for non-teaching activities, and reiterates the important role of professional development made available for staff to redesign units of study in line with Block Module pedagogy (Mccluskey et al., 2020; McLoughlin & Lee, 2007). Whereas prior studies found that staff reported valuable support from the Block Module design teams (Mccluskey et al., 2020), our study found more mixed results, with some staff feeling the design team was inflexible and unsupportive. Given the central role of the design team in the success of the design and redesign of Block Modules, future research may want to further explore what factors are important for successful and supportive design teams.

The concern identified in this study regarding the time and cognitive burden on staff to implement the Model is also reflected in the undergraduate Block Model literature, which identifies these issues as potentially negatively impacting on staff wellbeing (Czaplinski et al., 2017). Previously identified burdens include the increased workload that accompanies the design and redesign of Block Modules (Oraison et al., 2020); the pressures of having to design and redesign curriculum within a short time frame (Bunney, 2017; Lutes & Davies, 2018); having to quickly turn around assessments and provide students with in-depth feedback and feeling 'rushed' when delivering content within time-restricted modules (Czaplinski et al., 2017; Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020). An additional finding not reported in prior research was the increased cognitive burden on instructors to design or redesign Block Modules when still engaged in teaching and learning or when attempting to maintain their research activity during the intensive delivery of Block Modules. Critical in post-graduat teaching, but less so at the undergraduate level, is the expectation that staff stay abreast of current and emerging research (Ho & Kember, 2018). Additional findings not previously discussed in the literature include the difficulty that Course Chairs or Convenors of Block Modules had in finding staff to cover staff absences, given the intensity of teaching time.

The findings regarding staff suggestions for improving delivery of the Block Model are largely absent from the extent literature and deserve more attention. These suggestions were largely structural in nature and would necessitate the university's willingness and ability to offer students more predictable and consistent timetables and 'catch up units', and more

elective units during the Summer and Winter Blocks. Suggested ways to improve the Block Model for staff included mechanisms that would decrease the assessment and marking load; greater flexibility in content and delivery; design teams that were more supportive and cognisant of staff perceptions and wisdom; and compulsory training in the underpinning pedagogy, design, and delivery of Block Modules for new staff. Staff believed that if these suggestions were implemented, staff wellbeing would improve. Future research might further explore these themes with both students and staff at other universities and at both the undergraduate and post-graduate levels to understand the extent to which they hold across institutions and level.

As with any study, this one had strengths and limitations. A major strength was the ability to interview staff currently transitioning from a traditional model to a Block Model, rather than having to rely on memory of that transition and comparison between models. A limitation was that the interviewers were also teaching staff at the university with their own experiences teaching the Block Model. However, this limitation was also arguably a strength in that this 'insider' knowledge allowed the interviewers to probe responses in ways that someone outside of the system may not have been able to. In addition, the second author on this paper, who did not conduct any interviews but did collaborate in the coding and analysis, is a research-only staff member and thus had no experience teaching in the Block Model.

In conclusion, this study adds to the growing literature on the implementation of the Block Model in tertiary institutions. In particular, it examines staff perceptions of the positives and negatives of the Block Model for post-graduate studies, as well as how to optimise its implementation. Overall, many of the findings mirror those identified in prior studies of undergraduate courses. Some, however, are new. It will be important to understand whether additional research at the post-graduate level corroborates these findings. In particular, further investigation regarding the impact of the Block Model on depth of learning and cognitive load for both students and staff are needed before giving the green light to rolling out the Block Model for postgraduate courses.

Notes

1. Kwan et al. (2022) report on student experiences of the Block Model at an Australian private tertiary institution that offers a limited breadth of courses targeted mainly to international students.
2. AQF refers to The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), the national policy for regulated qualifications in Australian education and training. AQF 9 is Master's degree level.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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