Building a Picture of the Block Model: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

Intensive Modes of Delivery (IMD) and the Block Model (BM) are gaining traction in higher education as examples of innovative pedagogical approaches, with institutions worldwide implementing these approaches and reporting success. A growing body of literature examines the teaching and learning designs, student outcomes and experiences associated with these models. This paper presents a scoping literature review to provide a broad understanding of the literature underlying IMD and BM, as well as the teaching, learning and design elements involved. At the time of this research, no recent scoping review has explored the IMD and BM literature. Using online databases, 138 sources published between January 2000 and June 2024 were identified. The majority of studies came from Australia (62%), followed by USA (17%) and the UK (9%). These sources primarily focused on student engagement with intensive formats (77%), teaching practices (32%), and course design (33%). Benefits (93%) and challenges (69%) were highlighted, with studies reporting improved student outcomes (62%) and concerns connected to the student experience (28%). However, contradictory findings on student satisfaction, preferences, workload perceptions, and institutional delivery approaches were found. While the literature points to enhanced engagement and academic achievement for students, further research—particularly on high-impact pedagogies and longitudinal studies on content retention—is needed to better understand these delivery modes.

Keywords

Intensive delivery modes; block model; scoping review; immersive delivery; innovation

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Introduction

In recent years there has been growing interest in innovative pedagogical approaches in higher education. Among these, the Intensive Mode of Delivery (IMD) and Block Mode (BM) have emerged as noteworthy alternatives to traditional methods. Originating from the need to provide more flexible and focused learning experiences (Heist & Taylor, 1979), these alternative approaches are characterised by concentrated and immersive learning experiences over short, intensive periods of teaching and learning. Terms such as compressed, intensive and time-shortened are often used to describe these approaches (Davies, 2006), though nuanced differences in design and implementation warrant further exploration.

IMD and BM models have gained popularity due to the increased diversity of students and the changing needs of contemporary students. The rise of non-traditional university students—those who traditionally would not undertake further study but are now engaging in tertiary education—has played a significant role (Good, Syme et al., 2021). These students may be First-in-Family (FIF), come from non-English-speaking or low Socioeconomic Status (SES) backgrounds, or be mature-age students returning to study later in life (McCluskey et al., 2019b). Additionally, students' lives have become increasingly complex, as they juggle rising living costs, family, and work responsibilities. The COVID-19 pandemic, which facilitated remote learning, has led students to seek greater flexibility from universities. IMD and BM meet this need by offering flexible structures that support students managing complex responsibilities (Male, Baillie, Hancock, Leggoe, MacNish, & Crispin, 2016).

These immersive and condensed models restructure the traditional academic calendar into shorter, more intensive periods of study, where students typically focus on one subject per designated time period. The model has been implemented in various forms across institutions worldwide, with notable examples including Colorado College in the USA (Heist & Taylor, 1979), Victoria University in Australia (McCluskey et al., 2019b), and University of Suffolk in the UK (Buck & Tyrell, 2021). IMD and BM have demonstrated ~~to~~ that they can improve academic performance due to the focused nature of the courses (e.g., Klein, Kelly, et al., 2019; Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021), enhance the active learning experiences (Goode et al., 2023; Ramsay, 2011; Tripodi et al., 2020; Winchester et al., 2021), increase dialogic discussions (Muscat & Thomas, 2023) and heighten relational connections (Long & McLaren, 2024; Thomas et al., 2024).

Despite the expanding literature base, studies indicate that these delivery models are implemented in various ways across different educational settings. At the time of this research, there is currently no recent scoping review that examines IMD and BM, highlighting a significant gap in the literature, with the last known review conducted by Daniel (2000). This scoping review aims to systematically examine the existing literature pertaining to teaching and learning contexts of IMD and BM. By mapping the landscape of research in this domain, this scoping review seeks to provide an overview of intensive modes of delivery to create a picture of how these varied ways are discussed in the literature.

A scoping study was chosen to capture all relevant literature on IMD and BM, irrespective of study design, focusing on broad coverage rather than limiting to peer reviewed or empirical research (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The aim was to map the fundamental concepts that underpin IMD and BM (Mays et al., 2005), including how they are described and experienced

in practice. This approach prioritised understanding the broader system surrounding IMD and BM teaching and learning (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The following section outlines the scoping method applied in this research.

Method

To enhance the reliability of the findings, this study followed the PRISMA extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) as recommended by Tricco et al. (2018) and Peters et al. (2020). The detailed method description below supports replication, aligning with the principles of repeatability (Mays et al., 2005).

The method followed the five staged scoping review advice outlined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005, p. 22):

Stage 1: identifying the research question

Stage 2: identifying relevant studies

Stage 3: study selection

Stage 4: charting the data

Stage 5: collating, summarising and reporting the results

The intention of this scoping review was to advance understandings of practice in block and intensive-mode pedagogy, education and research, a goal shared by the International Block and Intensive Learning and Teaching Association (IBILTA, 2024).

Identifying the Research Question

The two aims of this scoping literature review were to understand the conceptual framework of BM and to critically understand the literature surrounding IMD and BM teaching and learning. Specifically, the research sought to understand the nuanced differences between the BM delivery method and other intensive models of teaching and learning to clarify these key concepts.

This was driven by the following research questions:

1) How have researchers conceptualised and defined IMD and BM?
2) What are the findings of the existing research on IMD and BM?

The following section details the process employed to conduct this scoping literature review.

Identifying Relevant Studies

As with systematic literature reviews, to ensure sensitivity and specificity (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006), keywords were developed through consultation with a College Librarian. The following search string was developed and used across databases:

(“Block Mode*” OR “Block format” OR “Block scheduling” OR “intensive mode of delivery” OR “intensive mode” OR “accelerated schedul*” OR “immersive scheduling”) AND (“higher education” OR college OR university OR “post-secondary” OR post-secondary OR undergraduate OR postgraduate) AND (teaching OR learning OR instruction OR education OR design)

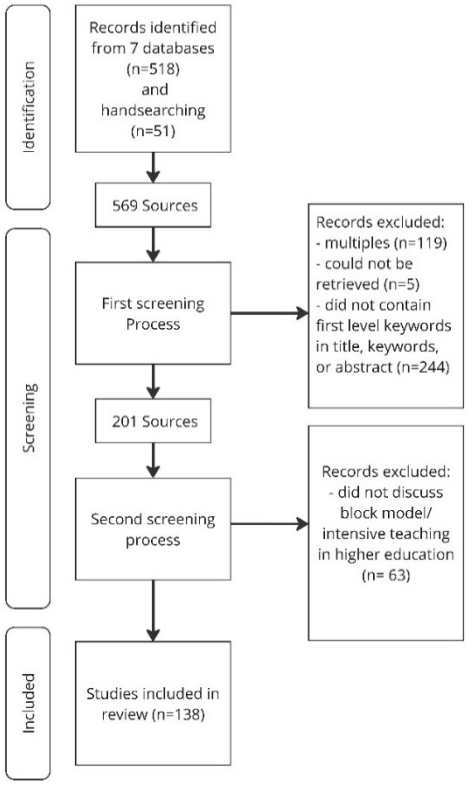
Searches were also restricted to English only publications. The search of seven databases (ERIC, Scopus, Education Research Complete, A+ Education, SAGE Journals, Wiley Online and Proquest Dissertations & Theses Global) was conducted in July 2024. Further identification of sources was undertaken using manual searching through reference lists (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

Selection

Sources were limited to those published in January 2000 to June 2024, on the basis that Daniel (2000) had completed an earlier review of the literature surrounding shortened courses. As each individual database was searched, a screening process was adopted to include sources that contained the first level keywords in either the title, keywords or abstract. Sources were only included from higher education contexts, with literature on primary and secondary school contexts excluded. Manuscripts discussing accelerated courses, where students complete their degree in a shorter timeframe, were also excluded from the sources (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Search and selection scoping review process



Charting the data

The data charted (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) addressed the research questions, including general study information and details on the alternative teaching and learning approaches. All researchers collected data on author(s), publication year, location, classification of source, discipline, methods and results, participants, delivery modes, and characteristics of

teaching/learning described (see https://osf.io/hw5eg for extractor template). Thematic analysis summarised findings into the broad categories of benefits and challenges (Braun & Clarke, 2021), with subthemes emerging from generated codes. The following section presents the results from the last stage of collating and summarising the scoping review results (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

Findings

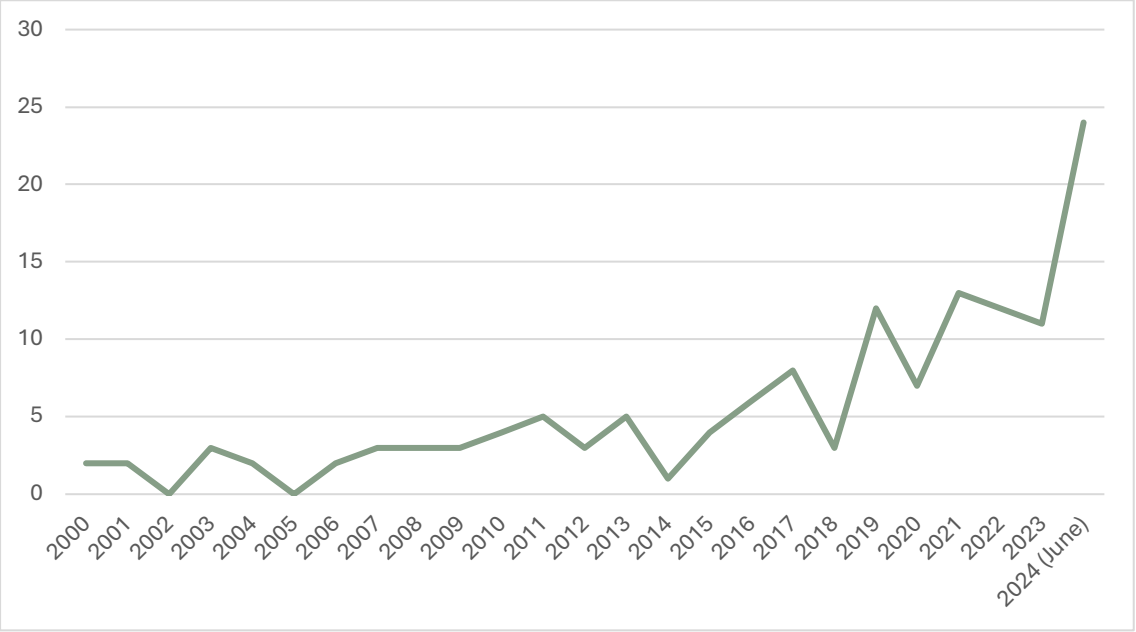
To present the wide view of research pertaining to IMD and BM in higher education, this overview covers publication trends, methods, definitions, studies on teaching, learning, and design, as well as the reported benefits and challenges of their implementation.

Context

Most of the sources were journal articles (n = 99), with 73 percent of these published in Quartile 1 (n = 31) and Quartile 2 (n = 41) in the field of education (SCImago, n.d.). Twenty sources were from conference proceedings, six books or book chapters, ten grey literature articles, and three PhD dissertations. More than half of the total sources were published from 2019 (n = 79, Figure 2), with a growing rate of publications in 2024.

Figure 2

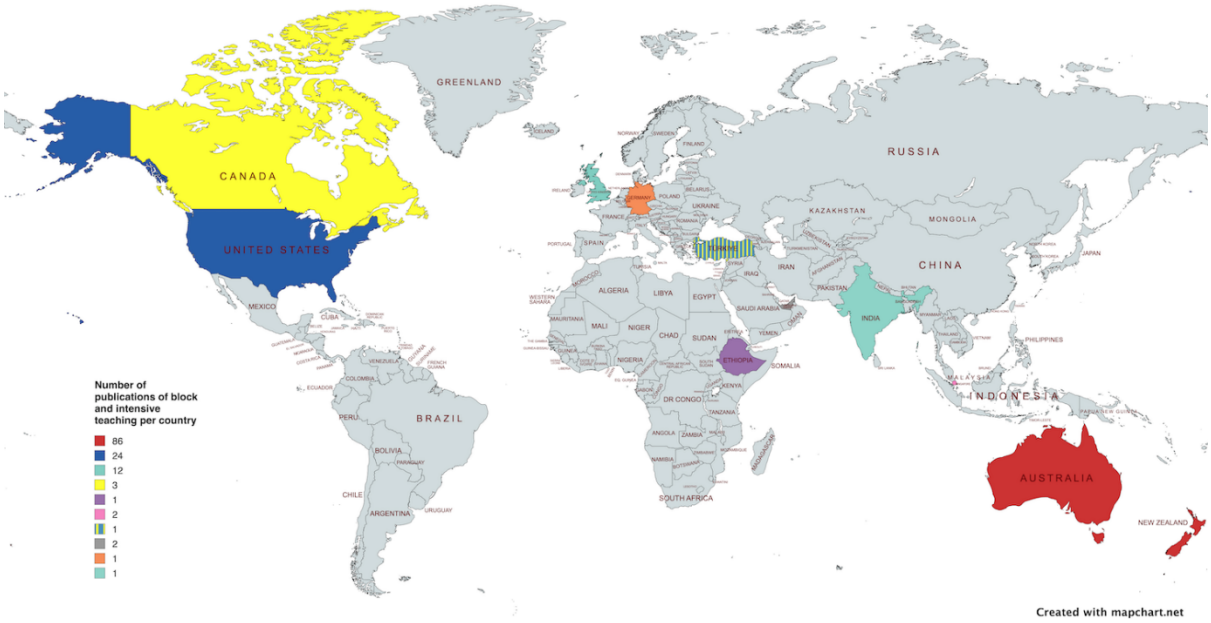
Block and Intensive Teaching Number of Publications from January 2000 to June 2024



Eighty-six publications originated from Australia (Figure 3; Appendix A), primarily from Victoria University and Southern Cross University, attributed to the adoption of IMD and BM delivery at both institutions through university-wide implementation. The United States and the United Kingdom contribute 25 and 12 publications, respectively. Key USA contributors included Colorado College, Randolf College, Bringham Young University and University of Montana Western, whilst in the United Kingdom, the University of Suffolk, Manchester Metropolitan University, and the University of Bath were prominent.

Figure 3

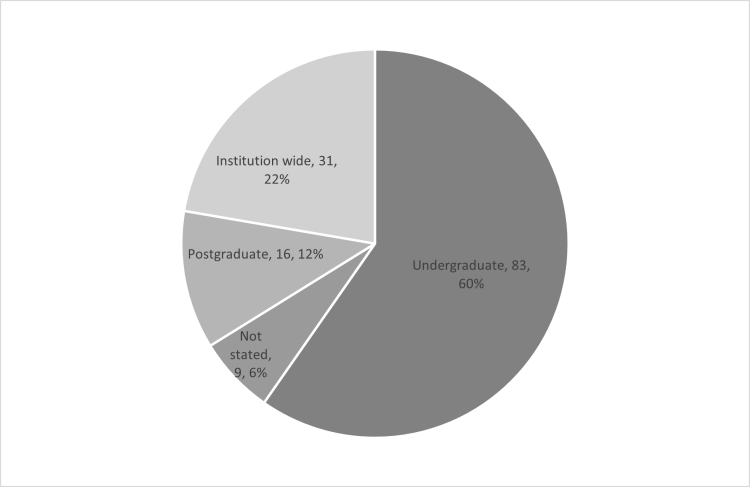
Number of Publications of Block and Intensive Teaching Per Country



The distribution of articles discussing intensive teaching across different educational levels reveals a clear focus on undergraduate courses (n = 83). In contrast, 16 sources discuss postgraduate and 30 sources address institution-wide courses (Figure 4).

Figure 4

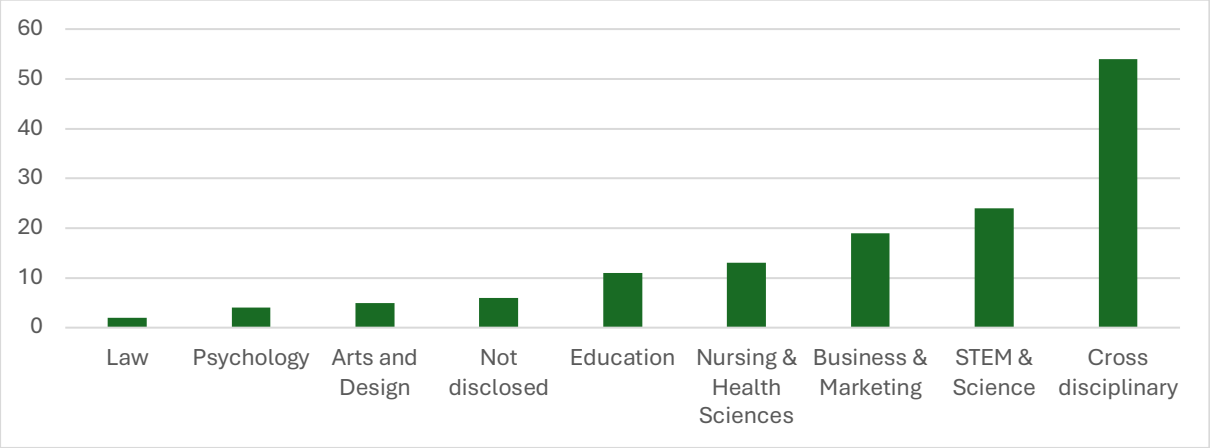
Distribution of Articles Discussing Undergraduate, Postgraduate, and Institution-Wide Courses



The distribution of research across different academic disciplines shows notable variation (Figure 5). The largest category is cross-disciplinary studies, with 54 articles focusing on practices spanning multiple fields. Within specific disciplines, STEM and Science subjects had the greatest representation (n = 24), followed by Business and Marketing fields (n = 19).

Figure 5

Distribution of Sources Across Different Academic Disciplines



Research Methods

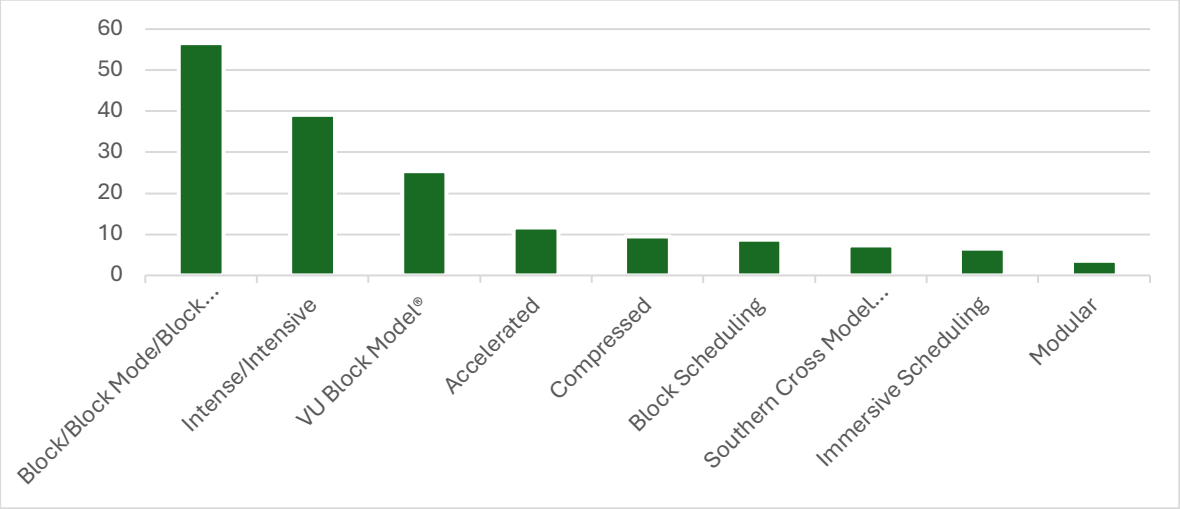
The research on IMD and BM employs various methods, with mixed methods being the most common (n = 57, 41.3%). Quantitative approaches appeared in 32 sources (23.2%), followed by qualitative methods in 26 articles (18.8%). Other formats included case studies (n = 8), discussion pieces (n = 7), and editorials (n= 2). Most studies included students as the largest sample group, with 78 papers examining student perceptions, experiences, or outcomes. Educators' experiences received less attention, with 19 focusing solely on staff and 20 involving both staff and students.

How Intensive Delivery Mode is Described

The analysis of terminology used to describe IMD and BM revealed diverse approaches (Figure 6). The most frequently used term, accounting for 56.5% of the 137 sources, was derivatives of Block, including Block Mode and Block Model, followed by Intensive (n = 54, 39.1%). Less common terms including Modular (n = 5, 3.6%) and Compressed (n = 13, 9.4%) were also represented.

Figure 6

Distribution of Sources by Term Used to Describe Teaching and Learning Mode/s



Some articles employed multiple terms to describe the immersive models. The use of terminology was also closely tied to the specific institutional contexts. For example, the “VU Block Model®” at Victoria University and the "Southern Cross Model (SCM)" at Southern Cross University reflect localised adaptations of intensive teaching.

Block Mode/Model is most commonly described as studying one unit at a time, typically within a condensed time frame of 4 to 6 weeks. Some variations blend in-person and independent learning, such as Asmar et al. (2011) describing the delivery as "short, intensive residential periods (blocks) on campus, with extensive period of study off campus" (p. 3). At Colorado College, students engage in “approximately 4 to 5 hours of class work outside of the 3-hour class period” (Broady & Rader, 2024, p. 25). Quest University offers a longer version, with students attending class for three hours daily, five days a week, over 24 days, and dedicating an additional five hours daily to independent study (Helfand, 2013). Other variations include BM classes on the weekend (Pridham & O’Mallon, 2008), and semester-long units with initial 5-day block sessions (Campbell et al., 2007). However, the SCM articulates a 6-week model where students can take up to 2 units simultaneously (Roche et al., 2022).

Many sources that described Intense or Intensive deliveries also referred to Block Mode or Block Model (n = 22, 41.5%). However, when the term intensive appeared independently, it described a variety of short-term offerings, such as one-week courses (Schmid et al., 2012), programs delivered during study breaks (Papadopoulos & Easdown, 2022; Smith, 2019), or compressed courses lasting 5 to 8 weeks (Harvey et al., 2017)—mirroring features found in BM. The term Immersive scheduling was often used to describe the delivery mode alongside other terms, such as Block Model, VU Block Model®, and Block Scheduling. Notably, research on the SCM specifically refers to the approach as an immersive model (Roche et al., 2022, 2024).

Research on Characteristics of Teaching, Learning and/or Design

Sources on IMD and BM overwhelmingly focused on student learning, with 105 articles examining student engagement, outcomes, and learning experiences. Of these, 75 focused exclusively on student learning. Contrastingly, 45 sources explored teaching practices,

examining instructional strategies, pedagogical adjustments, and academics. Forty-six sources centred on design, discussing the structure and planning of intensive courses. Twenty-one articles integrated all three aspects—teaching, learning and design—offering a holistic exploration on the interaction of these components in IMD and BM.

Eight sources focused on the interplay between teaching, learning and design through student samples. For instance, Harkin and Nerantzi (2021), Grant (2001), and Slevin (2021) investigated how pedagogy shapes student experience, while Turner et al. (2021) and Goode, Roche, Wilson and McKenzie (2024) analysed large datasets of over 3000 and 6613 students, respectively, to explore these relationships further. Research with educator samples were limited. Kuiper et al. (2015) studied five expert teachers, and Fyfield and Czaplinski (2017) and Murray et al. (2020) incorporated both educator and student perspectives, providing a dual lens on the interaction between teaching practices, student learning and course design.

Active learning emerged as a key teaching method, often involving problem solving, critical and creative thinking activities (Chau et al., 2023). Although the intensive delivery modes have been described as maximising active learning opportunities (Ramsay, 2011), with scholars emphasising the essential role of active learning in IMD and BM (Scott, 2003), the implementation is not without challenges (Sewagegn and Diale, 2021; Turner et al., 2024), especially in large classes (Daniels, 2009). Despite these challenges, academics recognise active learning as important for enhancing student learning outcomes in IMD and BM (Testa & Van Dyke, 2024).

Benefits of IMD and BM

The majority of the sources (n = 129) highlighted the benefits of IMD and BM delivery. From this body of literature, four major themes were identified. Themes included discussions on improved academic performance and outcomes, practical governance and scheduling enhancements.

Improved Student Outcomes

Among the examined sources, 86 highlighted improved student outcomes with IMD and BM, including higher grades, satisfaction, retention, and engagement. Konjarski et al. (2023) found that, despite variations in delivery, IMD and BM consistently boosted student satisfaction. Their cross-institutional research found that student engagement was markedly improved, which had a flow on effect to student retention, academic results and student satisfaction. Mishra and Nargundkar (2015) reported higher engagement among Business students in IMD compared to a 10-week semester, while Scrivener et al. (2015) linked blocked courses to improved graduation rates.

A trend of increased student satisfaction across IMD and BM studies has been noticed (Goode, Roche, Wilson and McKenzie, 2024; Richmond et al., 2015; Winchester et al., 2021). Improved attendance and engagement in face-to-face classes has also been noted (Dempsey Willis & Vieira Braga, 2024; Fyfield & Czaplinski, 2017). Flexibility emerged as a key driver of satisfaction (Bevilacqua et al., 2022). However, not all findings were consistent. Gauci et al. (2023) reported reduced student satisfaction in blended block units. Additionally, Whillier and Lystad (2013) found no difference in satisfaction between traditional and IMD units – except in laboratory practical sessions, where students preferred intensive sessions. Student

perceptions of workload emerged as another factor influencing satisfaction (Goode, Roche, Wilson, & McKenzie, 2024; Lee & Horsfall, 2010). Burton and Nesbit (2008a; 2008b) found students preferred IMD and BM after gaining experience with them, while Nieuwoudt and Stimpson (2021) reported no perceived differences in time pressure between block and traditional formats. Interestingly, Karaksha et al. (2013) noted that students with lower grade averages preferred the intensive mode.

IMD and BM have shown positive outcomes for disadvantaged undergraduate students (Dempsey, 2023; Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021; Winchester et al., 2021), non-traditional students (McCluskey et al., 2019a), international students (Goode, Roche, Wilson, Zhang, et al., 2024), and repeating students (Klein, Kelly, et al., 2019). A large-scale analysis by Goode, Syme, et al. (2024), which examined 6,613 grades, revealed statistically significant improvements in student success rates within the immersive model, attributed to manageable workloads, enriched curricula, and dialogic interactions. Additionally, Austin and Gustafson (2006) reported that 4-week units showed the most improvement among courses of various lengths. However, Vlachopoulos et al. (2019) found no significant difference in outcomes between IMD and semester deliveries.

Improved student retention is also discussed in the literature. Various studies consistently report higher retention rates in these settings (Backer & Kato, 2017; Edward et al., 2024; Jackson et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2011, Johnson et al., 2011; Konjarski et al., 2023; McCluskey et al., 2019a). However, the effect is not uniform across all circumstances, with Artis and Overton (2010) reporting that the BM had only a small impact on student retention, suggesting that the impact may vary depending on course contexts.

Stronger Student-Centred Focus

IMD and BM is highlighted as effective to enhance student engagement and the overall learning experience, for a more student-centred approach. Students reported increased satisfaction, describing the experience as more engaging and less stressful than traditional models (Walsh et al., 2019). IMD and BM promotes efficient use of study time (Kuiper et al., 2015), that prioritises the needs and experiences of students (Finger & Penney, 2001; Ho & Polonsky, 2007; 2009). Students described SCM as an effective way to learn due to the emphasis on active participation, enhanced focus, engagement and deeper learning (Zhang & Cetinich, 2022).

The adoption of these models has prompted pedagogical changes that favour inclusivity and practical assessment approaches (Mitchell & Brodmerkel, 2021; Monto, 2018; Turner et al., 2024). IMD and BM have been shown to provide supportive environments as students transition into university learning (Ambler et al., 2021; Loton et al., 2022; McCluskey et al., 2019b). Additionally, students have reported improvements in mental health and well-being and find that IMD and BM support a better work-life balance (Allman, 2024). Staff members have also reported a greater ability to "know students better," contributing to a more personalised learning experience (Turner et al., 2024, p. 10). Intensive models are focused on "high-quality pedagogy" (Lodge & Ashford-Rowe, 2024, p. 4) and the use of better instructional approaches (Seamon, 2004). Additionally, Hatton & Weitzel (2013) reported that the model assisted in monitoring students with health, personal, social, or other issues, thereby providing a more responsive and supportive educational environment.

A sense of belonging is another key theme in the IMD and BM literature, emphasising the importance of building a learning community (Johnson & Ulseth, 2010; Ramsay, 2011). Small class sizes and an interactive environment were characteristics of some IMD and BM formats (Konjarski et al., 2023; Kucsera & Zimmaro, 2010), which created more opportunities for students to ask questions and engage in peer and collaborative learning (Crispin et al., 2016). These interactions further enhanced peer-to-peer relational connections (Baillie & Male, 2019; Male, Baillie, Hancock, Leggoe, MacNish, & Crispin, 2016; Newell & van Antwerpen, 2024). Co-collaboration (Roddy et al., 2017) and co-creation practices (Newell & van Antwerpen, 2024) were also discussed in the IMD and BM literature as enhancing student understanding of concepts.

Practical Governance, Scheduling and Extra-Curricular Activities

IMD and BM offer several practical advantages in terms of governance, scheduling, and the facilitation of extra-curricular activities. Flexibility is a key aspect discussed in the literature (Male, Baillie, Hancock, Leggoe, MacNish, & Crispin, 2016; McCarthy & Parker, 2004). Bevilacqua et al. (2022) surveyed 274 students who indicated that the IMD and BM provided them flexibility. The format allows educators to adapt their teaching methods and course structures more easily, enabling them to tailor their approaches to meet student needs (Nguyen et al., 2022). During the COVID-19 restrictions, the flexibility of IMD and BM was discussed as particularly advantageous, allowing institutions to pivot quickly to online or blended learning formats without compromising the quality of education (Cleary et al., 2023; Nerantzi & Chatzidamianos, 2020; Rajaraman et al., 2024; Samarawickrema, Cleary, Loton, et al., 2023; Werth et al., 2020). However, educators have noted the IMD and BM can be inflexible if students miss one or two classes (Testa & Van Dyke, 2024), as the intensive schedule means that missing even a short period of instruction can have an impact on momentum. Additionally, part-time study in IMD and BM can be challenging (Samarawickrema et al., 2024).

Focusing on one unit at a time has been raised in the literature to assist with time management for students (Colclasure et al., 2018; Goode et al., 2024; Herrmann & Berry, 2016), and allowing for time for extra-curricular activities (Vuran & Altunalan, 2024). Importantly, IMD and BM have been recognised as addressing some of the specific needs of Indigenous Australian students, allowing students to maintain employment responsibilities and fulfill family and community obligations whilst pursuing their studies (Asmar et al., 2011; DiGregorio et al., 2000; Page et al., 2007), noting that digital access can also be an issue for remote and rural communities (Lockwood et al., 2009).

Transforming Teaching

Forty-four sources examined various aspects of teaching in IMD and BM formats. In particular, the structure has been discussed as influencing aspects of teaching, fostering a dynamic and student-centred learning environment (Muscat & Thomas, 2023). One transformative aspect of teaching within this format is the adoption of active learning and engagement strategies, a shift from traditional lecture-based formats. According to Goode et al. (2021), immersive models are most effective when carefully and purposefully designed using active learning pedagogy (Goode et al., 2022). Testa and Van Dyke (2024) reported that the focus on active learning within a flipped classroom structure enhanced the student experience from the academic's perspective. Additionally, a pedagogical shift towards depth over breadth in course content has

also been discussed in the literature (Scott, 2003). However, academics have also suggested that students require more time to assimilate content and apply critical thinking skills than is afforded by IMD and BM timetables (Lutes & Davies, 2013; 2018).

Eleven articles discussed benefits and/or opportunities with the assessment program in IMD and BM, with two of these sources also discussing the inherent challenges. Scott (2003) noted that IMD and BM requires different assessment types due to the intensive program structure. Sewagegn and Diale (2021) outline the importance of various types of assessments implemented in a continuous way. Adeyeye et al. (2011) outline formative assessment practices, offering students regular appraisal of their competencies, further supporting their learning and development in IMD and BM contexts. A key theme from the literature is the importance of scaffolding in assessments. Chau et al. (2023) emphasised the value of assessment being scaffolded with timely feedback, which supports student learning by providing immediate insights into progress and guiding development. Similarly, Samarawickrema et al. (2024) highlighted that scaffolded assessments build student understanding gradually, in a connected way across the assessment program.

Scaffolding in IMD and BM extends beyond assessments to include the structuring of learning activities. Testa and Van Dyke (2024) noted that scaffolded activities in a flipped classroom in BM facilitated incremental learning and better assessment preparation, supported by video-based materials (Tripodi et al., 2024). This scaffolding approach was found to enhance student engagement and performance by reducing cognitive load (Buck & Tyrell, 2021). Formative assessment also plays a role, with continuous feedback and smaller tasks providing opportunities for improvement (Adeyeye et al., 2011; Vieira Braga et al., 2024). Sequencing of assessments is vital, with students expressing greater satisfaction with immersive delivery (Goode et al., 2024), particularly in terms of learning clarity and skills development.

Challenges of IMD and BM

Research has identified that successful implementation of IMD and BM delivery can present complex systemic challenges. The literature explicitly discusses factors that impact education stakeholders including teachers, faculty staff, students, and the institution. Ninety-six sources explicitly discussed the challenges of implementing and facilitating IMD and BM, with many sources focused on ‘student experience’ difficulties (n = 39). Notably fewer studies explicitly addressed the experience of academic teaching staff and faculty (n = 25) and challenges at institutional level (n = 8).

Research studies addressing student challenges (n=39) found that IMD and BM delivery can present a risk to academic achievement, knowledge retention, and place pressure on students to keep up with the pace of delivery (Mitchell & Brodmerkel, 2021; Zhang & Cetinich, 2022). Researchers highlighted the problem of student fatigue (Murray et al., 2020), a common theme in the literature tracing back to Daniel (2000). Lutes (2014) noted that students needed more time for the assimilation of learning content, skills practice and critical thinking and reflection, to achieve deeper understandings. Impacts on student well-being were also reported (Colclasure et al., 2018). Research studies (n = 4) signified that students who are disadvantaged, have a disability, or additional responsibilities may find BM more difficult than their peers (Samarawickrema et al., 2020).

Many challenges facing students in IMD and BM mirrored challenges for teachers. Of the 26 studies that addressed issues for teaching staff, common themes included workload and fatigue. Educators experienced increased assessment and feedback workloads related to rapid turnaround times and struggled to balance teaching and research (Huber et al., 2022; Oraison et al., 2020; 2023), although the impact on research output remains unclear.

The success of IMD and BM varied according to discipline area, and whether online, in-person, undergraduate or postgraduate. Research suggests that some courses may be more suited to traditional delivery formats taken in-person as a traditional semester. Kwan et al. (2022) found higher satisfaction with the delivery mode among postgraduate students than undergraduate students. Goode et al. (2024) found that science and engineering students reported reduced satisfaction in the delivery mode, whilst this was not the case for other academic disciplines.

Challenges at institutional level (n = 8) included the burden of updating existing infrastructure with LMS to suit a change of delivery mode, compressing course content into shorter time frames, administration costs, and staffing availability for varying academic roles. Eason et al. (2023) emphasised challenges with accreditation and assessment requirements, scheduling across multiple disciplines, requiring coordination and administrative support. Fyfield and Czaplinski (2017) found that successful implementation can rely on a microculture or interdisciplinary team of specialists, situating some institutions in a stronger position than others.

Summary Discussion

The following discussion responds to the original research questions focused on conceptualisation of IMD and BM, and the findings of existing research. Findings reveal inconsistency in the IMD and BM teaching and learning terminology, with variability in delivery models implementation. Whilst most studies describe the delivery model as being ‘intensive’ often involving a one unit at a time with a singular focus, few studies (e.g., Goode et al., 2022; Roche et al., 2022) referred to students studying two units at a time. Although descriptions of block model implementation were inconsistent, most studies made explicit or implicit reference to the immersive nature of the delivery being a distinguishing factor. Hence, we propose that the term “immersive” may be more appropriate when discussing IMD and BM, as it better defines the delivery and serves to distinguish it from other delivery modes.

The varied descriptions and wide-ranging implementation reflect the flexibility of the teaching model. While often described as time-shortened and condensed, consistent in the literature are the opportunities for courses to be radically redesigned, highlighting the flexible nature of IMD and BM. Opportunities are created for hybrid, flipped-classroom, and other institutional variations to accommodate the needs of students, with a focus on learning and achievement outcomes. Due to the flexibility afforded, a key distinguishing feature of IMD and BM models is a student-focused approach specifically tailored to the needs of the student cohort.

Elements identified as contributing to the success of the IMD and BM models include institutional supports and targeted student retention programs (Scrivener et al., 2015) and increased support for FIF, low SES, and diverse student cohorts (Goode et al., 2021; Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). Additionally, careful planning was identified as a critical factor for success (Trinh, et al. 2022). However, Dixon and O'Gorman's (2020) study, noted

that academic planning often felt rushed in block mode. Although the elements of success were identified, Korr et al. (2012) reject a one-size-fits-all approach suitable for all contexts, as success depends on context, individual needs of students, faculty staff, programs and institutional factors. Therefore, the implementation of IMD and BM requires thoughtful design, governance, and adaptation to institutional contexts (Solomonides et al., 2024).

A range of contradictory findings were evidenced in the literature. For example, Richmond et al. (2015) suggests that block delivery improved student satisfaction whilst Colclasure et al. (2018) found the delivery mode negatively impacts on this measure. Asmar et al.'s (2011) research of Indigenous Australian students found students were able to main community, family and employment responsibilities, while Samarawickrema et al. (2020) found that students with additional responsibilities found BM challenging.

Several factors may explain the conflicting findings with much of the existing research underpinned by small-scale studies; the number of academic participants across studies varies widely, from just three academics (Rajaraman et al., 2024) to 278 instructors (Sewagegn & Boitumelo, 2021). The limited scope of these studies reduces the generalisability, contributing to variability in results. Considering the innovation uptake is relatively new, more empirical research is needed on the long-term impacts of IMD and BM on student outcomes and institutional effectiveness. Current literature often focuses on case studies or short-term evaluations, highlighting a gap in comprehensive, longitudinal studies.

Many studies have small sample sizes and primarily focus on student experiences. Comparisons between traditional semesters and IMD/BM often contain uncontrolled variables, such as student achievement and course satisfaction. While Goode et al. (2023) used control groups, many other studies lacked this feature, and confounding variables—like different lecturers and student cohorts—remain an issue. Additionally, studies conducted during COVID-19 may be influenced by the shift to online learning, but many do not distinguish between online and in-person delivery, complicating findings. Quantitative methods dominate, favouring student evaluations that reduce complex ideas to simplistic categories, while qualitative research, which provides deeper insights, remains under-utilised. Despite decades of IMD/BM research, larger institutions are not extensively researching or adopting these models, and there is a lack of longitudinal studies to measure long-term outcomes, both for students and academic staff. Lastly, researchers often focus on their own university programs, limiting the generalisability of findings.

The literature demonstrates increasing interest in the modified delivery programs to offer flexibility and innovation with the potential to improve academic outcomes. The majority of sources in the review focused on students. Therefore, understanding the implications of design and delivery from those who are teaching and planning is essential to bring new understandings to contribute to accreditation requirements. The perspectives of stakeholders including academics and administrators, can identify areas for improvement and enhance the effectiveness of the model. A comprehensive understanding will help to refine the delivery approach and ensure its long-term sustainability by addressing the diverse needs and expectations of all stakeholders involved.

Limitations of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to present the scope of research available to understand the varied implementations of intensive delivery modes in higher education. However, a systematic review of the literature could take place to provide a structured synthesis of empirical existing research evidence on academic outcomes, student satisfaction, teacher workload, and the implications for institutions. This paper has been guided by the descriptions of the delivery modes in the articles and includes the subjectivities from research in the field. Furthermore, reviewing the findings of doctoral dissertations involves subjectivity in summarising the large projects into key ideas. While we embedded measures to enhance trustworthiness and rigor in our methodological approach, as qualitative researchers, our analysis and summary of key findings in the literature may be influenced by our positions as academics who teach in IMD and BM delivery formats at an institution featured in the review.

Future Research and Continued Exploration

As universities seek to enhance the student experience, future research should focus on improving instructional quality and pedagogy in IMD and BM, particularly in developing assessments that suit the condensed structure. There is a need to explore the experiences of diverse student groups, including those with disabilities and from marginalised backgrounds, and to better understand the perspectives of academics and professional staff. Research on professional accreditation, contextual variability in IMD and BM adoption, and institutional engagement will help identify whether program-based delivery models can offer transferable solutions across diverse educational contexts.

Conclusion

The literature in this scoping review highlights the value of IMD and BM in engaging learners and improving academic achievement, with benefits for students with disabilities, carers, first in family learners, and Indigenous students. While publications on these models have grown since 2019, especially in 2024, research on faculty perspectives, long-term learning gains, and the impact on student well-being remains limited. Many studies lack control over variables, particularly in online iterations introduced during and post-pandemic. Pedagogical affordances of IMD and BM cannot be generalised without further clarification and examination of the delivery modes (i.e., online, in-person, hybrid). As Allison (2024) and Tangalakis et al. (2024) argue, effective implementation of IMD and BM requires more than repackaging the traditional mode - it demands purposefully designed pedagogies tailored to the unique potential of these delivery modes.

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