Examining International Postgraduate Student Reflections of Intensive and Semester Modes of Delivery

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the impact of the Victoria University Block Model® on international postgraduate students' educational experiences, aiming to understand its influence on student engagement, satisfaction, and academic achievement. Using a phenomenological approach, perceptions of eight international students enrolled in both traditional and Block mode units of study were analysed. Thematic analysis reveals five key themes: Assessment, Academic Engagement and Participation, Information Assimilation Time, Intensive Learning and Teaching, and Personal Mode Preference. The study highlights the significance of assessment structure on stress levels and academic outcomes. Despite the accelerated pace, small class sizes positively impact student engagement. While the VU Block Model® was generally favoured by students, individual preferences varied. The findings provide critical insights into the effects of delivery modes on international postgraduate students' learning experiences, with implications for curriculum design and student engagement enhancement in higher education. Limitations include cohort specificity and small sample size, requiring further investigation.

Practitioner Notes

1. Focusing on one subject at a time enhances international students' academic clarity and engagement.
2. Timely and clear feedback limits stress and supports academic success in intensive learning modes.
3. Smaller class sizes and consistent peer and teacher interactions help foster a stronger sense of belonging.
4. Block mode may contribute to a sense of time pressure without support by flexible structures for students with external commitments.
5. Institutions should provide targeted support for international students to manage the pace and intensity of Block mode learning.

Keywords

Block mode, international postgraduates, student engagement, higher education, academic performance

Introduction

Higher education has adopted a myriad of pedagogical approaches that have evolved over time to adapt to the varied requirements of both international and domestic student stakeholders. One such evolution is the adoption of intensive delivery modes, characterised by fast-tracked, concentrated, and modularised programs, which have gained popularity in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australian higher education sectors (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). Intensive mode delivery, defined as completing teaching and assessment within a shortened time frame compared to the traditional 12-to-16-week semester (Davies, 2006), is noted for its potential to enhance student engagement and deepen learning within a compressed schedule (Austin & Gustafson, 2006; Helfand, 2013). Despite the documented benefits of these intensive delivery models, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the experiences of international postgraduate students within these systems. Given the increasing number of international postgraduate students in higher education, understanding their experiences in an intensive mode of delivery is critical for institutions and educators to ensure equitable learning opportunities, address unique challenges, and implement targeted support strategies that enhance academic success and overall student satisfaction. This study addresses this gap by exploring the perceptions of international postgraduate students regarding unit delivery factors that influence their academic experiences.

Based on the effectiveness of intensive model delivery courses and similar international success precedents (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021), Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne, Australia, decided to redesign all first-year subjects utilising intensive curriculum design (Klein et al., 2019; Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). Initially, the First Year Model was introduced as a form of intensive mode delivery in 2018 in an attempt to improve the quality of student learning outcomes through enhanced educational design and provision of support (McCluskey et al., 2019; Tripodi et al., 2020). In the following years, the entire institution shifted to an intensive mode design titled VU Block Model® delivery. At the institutional level, reference to the format for the intensive delivery would be referred to as Block Mode. Within the VU Block Model®, or Block Mode, students complete one subject at a time in four-week time periods, studying each of their subjects sequentially. This approach differs from the traditional method of studying four subjects concurrently across a 12-week semester, then often followed by a period of summative assessment. It should be noted that the contact time between teachers and learners in Block mode remained similar to the contact time in the traditional semester mode.

While Block mode has demonstrated success in improving student interaction, engagement, and academic performance (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022; McCluskey et al., 2019), international postgraduate students may face unique challenges related to cultural adaptation, academic expectations, and workload management. Their perspectives are essential in evaluating whether Block mode fosters inclusivity and academic success across diverse student demographics. Investigating their experiences can help institutions refine teaching strategies, tailor students support services, and ensure that the benefits of intensive learning models are fully accessible to all students, particularly those adjusting to new educational and cultural environments. However, research specifically addressing the impact of Block mode on international postgraduate students remains limited. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how international postgraduate students engage with Block mode, identifying key challenges, and exploring institutional strategies that support their academic success.

To address the identified gap, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1) How do international postgraduate students perceive the academic and social aspects of learning in the VU Block Model® compared to traditional semester modes?
2) What are the key benefits and challenges experienced by international postgraduate students when studying in Block mode?
3) What recommendations can be made to enhance the lived learning experience of international postgraduate students in intensive delivery modes?

These questions aim to deepen understanding of the lived experiences of international postgraduate students and inform the development of equitable and effective intensive teaching practices.

Literature

Intensive delivery modes, characterised by condensed and focused learning periods (Davies, 2006), are increasingly gaining popularity internationally (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). Some universities in Australia have applied the intensive model to summer schools and accelerated courses in a number of subjects, examples include graduate business and management (Burton & Nesbit, 2008), second-year pharmacology (Karaksha et al., 2013), and undergraduate science (Harvey et al., 2017). More recently, VU and Southern Cross University have pioneered immersive Block mode approaches to support student learning in compressed time frames (Goode et al., 2023; McCluskey et al., 2019). In a similar model adopted at Quest University of Canada, students attended class a minimum of three hours a day, five days a week, and were expected to do five hours of work per day outside of class (Helfand, 2013). Helfand further acknowledged the positive impacts of the new model in stating, "the intensity of student engagement and the depths a class can plumb in this model are stunning" (p. 48).

Research has shown that concentrated and modular learning experiences can lead to notable improvements in academic performance, with students achieving higher grades compared to traditional semester-long formats (Austin & Gustafson, 2006). However, recent studies highlight that while Block mode can enhance student engagement, workload intensity and assessment design must be carefully structured to avoid overwhelming students (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022; Loton et al., 2022). Hodgson and Spours (2014) suggested that modular education delivery should be appreciated for its benefit in imparting knowledge in small chunks structured as a phased approach to learning. They identified a notable increase in the academic achievements of students studying in subjects delivered within shorter time periods, with the academic benefits being maximised in subjects lasting four weeks. Improved grades were shown as strong indicators to explain the positive teaching and learning outcomes of shorter time frame subjects when compared to the academic results reported in traditional length semesters.

Globalisation and continued demand for a premium education have expanded the numbers of students pursuing higher education. International students are playing an important role in contributing to the economy in tuition fees and expenditures for living, and in enhancing global competencies, leadership skills and intellectual improvement. In Australian universities, as the curriculum has internationalised significantly, international students became an integral part of institutional communities (Hellstén & Prescott, 2004). International students are crucial for institution diversity in higher education, and help to cultivate new perspectives, intercultural

awareness and engagement both on campus and in the community (Lee & Rice, 2007). However, the experience of international students in higher education can be significantly shaped by institutional structures and policies, including delivery mode choices. Recent studies emphasise that while international students generally respond positively to Block mode, they face unique challenges in adapting to its pace and intensity (Goode et al., 2023; Loton et al., 2022). Goode et al. (2023) analysed student feedback at Southern Cross University and found that international students benefited from clearer content delivery and structured engagement opportunities, but some struggled with rapid assessment schedule. Similarly, Muscat and Thomas (2023) explored pedagogical strategies in Block mode at VU and found that international students required more scaffolded learning activities to navigate the compressed format effectively.

Student perceptions of their higher education experience can differ significantly across institutions and are shaped by the diverse compositions and unique needs of various student groups (Benckendorff et al., 2009). The "student experience" was defined as "not restricted to the student experience in the classroom but to the total student experience" (Burrows et al., 1992, p. 1), and is influenced by a range of interacting personal attributes, as well as institutional practices (Thomas, 2002). International student experience can be influenced by academic, personal and social factors (Bird, 2017), including the challenges of adapting to different cultural backgrounds and educational systems (Van Horne et al., 2018). According to Astin's (2012) Theory of Student Involvement, the environment is a key factor affecting student experience and is composed of institutional and system elements including type of academic course, policies, instructors, support schemes, infrastructures, and classmates. This perspective underscores the need to examine how international students navigate intensive delivery structures and the institutional supports required to facilitate their learning experience.

Factors influencing student engagement are multifarious (Fredricks et al., 2004). For example, online student experience and retention can be influenced by time management skills, ability to balance the relationship between work, family and study, the sense of belonging, course design, and understanding and support from institutions and teachers (Brown et al., 2015). Redfern (2016) indicated certain academic elements such as study workload and the intricacy of assessment tasks are likely to be major sources of anxiety and stress for international students. Concurrent deadlines and commitments to life outside of college studies can influence the level of student engagement (Muir et al., 2019). International postgraduate students often experience pressure to balance career, family, social life and studies (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). This balance can be more challenging in Block mode, as shorter course durations require accelerated learning and assessment cycles (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022).

Teaching performance is fundamental to international students' evaluation of course satisfaction (Poon, 2019). Additionally, there is a negative correlation between class size and student satisfaction (Douglas et al., 2006). University resources and services are also considered as essential parts affecting student satisfaction (Poon, 2019). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) highlighted the importance of active engagement with course materials and strong connections with teachers and peers as key factors influencing students' academic success. In the Block mode context, Loton et al. (2022) found that satisfaction levels varied by discipline, with business students reporting higher satisfaction than students in arts and education programs, highlighting the need for discipline-specific support mechanisms.

Previous studies have offered valuable insights into enhancing the experience of international postgraduate students. For example, it was suggested by Bird (2017) that staff should adopt particular approaches for teaching and learning, such as ensuring opportunities for peer group interaction, and allowing for active international student participation and engagement. Timely and informative feedback holds particular significance for postgraduate students, as they often perceive it as a tool for self-evaluation (Rogers, 2007). Smyth et al. (2012) found that clearly stated assessment expectations and prompt feedback enhance students' learning experience. Kahu et al. (2014) also emphasised that the role of social support networks in facilitating effective engagement for international students.

The existing literature underscores that Block mode offers several benefits, including enhanced engagement and improved academic outcomes, but also presents challenges, particularly for international students adjusting to its rapid pace. While studies from Victoria University (e.g., McCluskey et al., 2019), Southern Cross University (e.g., Goode et al., 2023), and University of Suffolk (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022) have explored Block mode's effectiveness, research focusing specifically on the experiences of international postgraduate students remains limited. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how international students engage with Block mode, the challenges they face, and the institutional strategies that support their academic success.

Method

The purpose of this study is to explore international postgraduate students' perceptions of the unit of study delivery factors that influence their academic experience. A qualitative approach was used to evaluate participants' comments comparing their experiences in both traditional and Block mode education. The research aims focus on, a) beneficial factors that impacted student engagement, and b) challenges experienced by international postgraduate education students studying in Block mode. The research incorporated a phenomenological methodology, emphasising how the individual exists within the phenomenon as it occurs, rather than on the reflection of the interaction or the subsequent significance attributed to it (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Examining the lived experiences of the participants through a series of interviews supported the consideration of the experiential circumstances of postgraduate international students majoring in teacher education.

Participants

Coordinators of Postgraduate Teacher Education programs were asked for permission to provide an email invitation to students who a) were international students, and b) had completed subjects in both Block and traditional modes. After the approval from course chairs, the invitation email, including an information form, was sent to potential student participants enquiring of their interest to engage in the research. A sample of eight individuals were successfully engaged, supporting the acquisition of sufficient data to meet the overall research aims. All interviewees that agreed to participate were female, reflecting the unique enrolment status of this sample, limiting the population available for recruitment. The participants were undertaking the Master of Teaching program, specialising in either the Primary or Secondary stream. The sample included four participants from India, two from Sri Lanka, one from Malaysia and one from France. The study was conducted with the approval of the VU Ethics Board (HRE21-091). To protect the

confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms have been used throughout. Table 1 presents the pseudonym, country of origin, and program stream of each participant.

Table 1

Participant pseudonyms, country of origin, and program stream

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Country of Origin	Program Stream
1	Nilam	Female	India	Secondary
2	Kajal	Female	India	Secondary
3	Deepal	Female	Sri Lanka	Primary
4	Kiran	Female	Malaysia	Secondary
5	Jesse	Female	Sri Lanka	Secondary
6	Eden	Female	France	Secondary
7	Deva	Female	India	Secondary
8	Shashi	Female	India	Secondary

Data Collection

Participants provided basic demographic information, including their country of origin (Kracker & Pollio, 2003) before sharing further details about their academic experiences via semi-structured interviews with the first author. The interview protocol included open-ended questions to encourage participants to candidly recount their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), particularly in the context of academic engagement, utilisation of the learning management system, and connection to subject content when transitioning from traditional education mode to Block mode.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps for applying thematic analysis were applied. The transcribed data was read and re-read for familiarisation and noting of initial ideas. Data characteristics were coded in a systematic fashion across the data set, which was then gathered and examined into potential themes. Finally, these themes were characterised for a clear definition on each theme.

The first author was the primary researcher and worked to identify different themes based on the transcriptions of all interviewees. To ensure trustworthiness of the data, the research team aligned this phase of analysis with key elements of the interrater reliability procedures presented by Belotto (2018). This process involved analysing two completed participant transcriptions to validate the themes identified by the primary researcher. The research team compared and discussed the outcomes of these thematic analyses. Themes were combined and filtered to generate the most frequent five themes for a complete analysis of all participants, and a consensus regarding the occurrence of themes was achieved by the team.

Results

The intent of the analysis was to identify the contributing factors that influence the learning experience of international students enrolled in the VU Block Model®. Data analysis revealed five major themes reflecting the main perceptions of the eight respondents, including assessment, levels of academic engagement and participation, time required for information assimilation, the intense nature of learning and teaching, and students' personal preference of delivery mode. The following section describes the results associated with each theme.

Assessment

Five of the eight interview participants discussed elements of the assessment program when reflecting on studying in a traditional semester mode. The challenge of studying three or four subjects simultaneously was noted by several participants. First, Kajal and Deepal commented that assignments can be scattered, "across three or four months" (Deepal) in traditional mode, and Jesse indicated, "It can be a struggle when having all the assessments (of three or four units) due in the same week". Nilam indicated that severe anxiety could arise when multiple assignments were due at the same time in traditional mode. Levels of pressure related to completing assignments, "at the last minute" (Jesse) would negatively impact the learning experience. This was described by Shashi, "When doing the 12-week regular semesters, we tend to procrastinate and keep it till the end. In the end, you have that really bad anxiety of completing everything on time and submitting it. I found this better when we're in Block mode." These reflections demonstrated that the sequence of the assessment program is an important factor in learning experiences, highlighting connections to anxiety and the struggle that can arise in a traditional semester mode.

Contrastingly, Shashi pinpointed that having diverse assessment tasks from different subjects in the traditional mode can enhance course interest, and stated that, "we would have two different subjects and can switch between the assessments … one is presentation, and another is writing. We can switch to another one if we are getting a bit bored with one assessment task. It's a kind of mixture and interesting". Two participants indicated there was more focus placed on assessment in Block mode which they felt impacted the learning. Jesse pointed that, "it's more about getting assessments done". Deepal further commented, "in the normal (traditional) mode, we had time to learn the theories ... I think the learning in Block mode was really low compared to the normal mode".

Access to detailed feedback and an improvement in study outcomes were considered important to all participants. Five of whom noted that they have achieved better results in Block mode than that in traditional mode. Three participants considered that it was easier to "achieve a better result" in Block mode. Nilam indicated that results and feedback were received in a shorter time period in Block mode ("the results were given very quickly"), which contributed to better engagement, given "the quick resolutions of doubts". Jesse highlighted the fact that, "I got better results because I was focused". Generally, more than half of all the participants responded that studying in Block mode is easier to achieve higher and consistent academic results compared to their subject outcomes in traditional semester mode. The quick turnaround of feedback was also perceived positively by students and contributes to greater connections to the subject content.

Academic Engagement and Participation

Block mode delivery played an important role in supporting the learning experience of the participants by facilitating focus and academic clarity. Participants noted that their academic results typically improved under Block mode, because "I was just doing one thing at a time … focusing one subject at one time". Nilam further emphasised Block mode as a better learning model, reporting that, "I wasn't trying to do two three things at a time and forgetting what the main focus was. So that way, I would say, it was a good thing". Although it was a little difficult to "push out an assignment every weekend", Kajal expressed that she liked the new Block mode of teaching, remaining "… a lot calmer and in a cooler mind frame" because, "you just have to write down one subject's requirements". Deepal also felt more focused, "because we had one subject to focus on at one time … there was no confusion between the assessments, or between what we were learning two different things".

Deva perceived the weekly assessment structure in Block mode as streamlining the study workload, making it comparatively less hectic. She emphasised the immersive engagement with subject content facilitated by Block mode, attributing it to "your whole emphasis and focus is on one subject". Similarly, Shashi underscored the advantages of Block mode, noting that, "it would help me practice concentration and focus on the classroom" and, "gives you more time for other life activities".

Kajal highlighted the efficacy of Block mode in fostering teacher-student rapport and meeting expectations. She emphasised, "it's one teacher who I have to listen to, one teacher's instructions that I have to remember, one kind of expectation that I have to meet". This streamlined approach, according to Kajal, enables a clearer understanding between teachers and students, facilitating better adherence to instructions and meeting academic expectations.

Half of the participants underscored the impact of class size on engagement, particularly noting the advantages of smaller classes within Block mode. According to Jesse, the smaller setting facilitated easier interaction and communication whereby, "we could easily ask questions, and the lecturer had time to talk to everyone." Similarly, Shashi highlighted the development of strong bonds and enhanced collaboration in Block mode due to continuous interactions and, "meeting the same people again and again fostered a strong bond and made classes more interactive in terms of content and peers". Furthermore, Deepal emphasised the formation of robust relationships in Block mode, attributing it to the continuity of classmates and increased sessions with the lecturer, noting, "having the same people in class for one month ... the engagement was higher in Block mode compared to the normal mode". Overall, staying focused and academic clarity were considered two of the key beneficial factors connected to student engagement and study in Block mode. Many of the participants acknowledged the positive influence of focusing on one assessment and subject at a time.

Information Assimilation Time

Five participants emphasised the benefits of longer timeframes in traditional semester mode for absorbing information and engaging in thorough understanding. Nilam emphasised the value of a more traditional 12-week duration, stating, "you have enough time to engage yourself with the subject over 12 weeks, but in the Block mode, you just have three weeks to finish it off … I think in the sense of connection, the traditional one would outweigh the Block one". Similarly, Kajal

expressed a preference for the extended duration, mentioning, "I tend to feel that in 12 weeks, I will get more knowledge, more content and more information". However, Deepal noted the flexibility of the traditional mode in managing disruptions, saying, "I think in the normal (traditional) mode, I had more time to put towards my studies, with other life work and life commitments … even if one month I muck up, I have three more months to work on it". On the other hand, Jesse suggested that longer periods could foster procrastination.

Overall, these participants acknowledged the longer information assimilation time in traditional mode may enable engagement and reflection of the subject content for better understanding. Participants also highlighted feelings of struggling and rushing due to the competing requirements of parallel subjects and assessment schedules in traditional mode. However, they noted that a longer subject delivery time does not necessarily lead to higher efficiency.

Intensive Learning and Teaching

Block mode as manifested in VU Block Model®, was described as "a bit compressed" but was seen as advantageous for promptly completing subjects. Nilam noted, "you complete one whole subject at once, and then forget about it and then start a new one". This rapid turnover was perceived positively by Nilam as it allowed for quick validation of their studies.

The condensed structure of Block mode led three participants to perceive the teaching pace as fast. Kajal explained, "there's so much content. The teacher can't afford to waste time. So, in the Block mode we didn't really have breaks in between classes … teachers were like, whether somebody answers (the questions) or not, I just have to keep going". This intensity extended to the assessment schedule, as Kiran illustrated, "in the Block mode, I start the lesson. After a week, we need to submit assignments already. It's like bang, bang, bang, and finish it". However, the accelerated learning pace contributed to improved retention of information. Kiran observed, "I can follow up from what I learned the day before the next day. So that I won't forget. I would say compared to traditional mode, the information that I retain from the learning is way better".

Participants held mixed views on the impact of intensity on academic outcomes. Eden mentioned, "there was one subject… where I was running out of time … In the end, I didn't get a really good grade". Yet, Shashi found the intense learning frame beneficial, fostering connections between previous and new concepts, leading to better performance despite the time constraints. The findings highlight the substantial impact of intensive learning and teaching within Block mode on engagement and connection. They reveal a nuanced spectrum encompassing both positive and negative aspects of this education approach.

Personal Mode Preference

Six of the eight participants expressed a distinct preference for the VU Block Model®, contrasting with the two who favoured the traditional delivery mode. The allure of Block mode lay in its focus on one subject at a time. Nilam found this approach instrumental, pushing her "towards a better result" and providing motivation to "complete it, then forget about it, and go to the next one". Deva emphasised the depth of learning when "there is only one subject that you are doing at the time". Conversely, those inclined toward the traditional mode valued aspects related to time management. Deepal favoured it because Block mode "was very intensive". Nilam considered the traditional mode advantageous for managing personal time alongside work commitments, noting that Block mode "really took a toll" on their friends who juggled work and classes.

Non-academic expectations also influenced preferences. Deepal highlighted the advantage of planning tasks around study commitments in the traditional mode, commenting "in the traditional mode I get time to plan, I can somehow figure it out and do it, but in Block mode I have assignments each week". Additionally, Kiran pointed out the repercussions of missing a class in Block mode due to placement commitments. The results indicated some preference for traditional semester learning mode due to the flexibility it offers in planning study tasks and managing life commitments.

The study presented interview data of the key factors influencing international students in the VU Block Model®. Analysis highlighted assessment challenges in traditional semesters versus streamlined focus and quicker feedback in Block mode. Students praised Block mode for increased engagement and clear learning objectives but valued the longer assimilation time in traditional mode. While most favoured Block mode for focused learning, a few preferred the flexibility of a more traditional format. These findings showcase diverse preferences and distinct impacts on student experiences in different delivery modes.

Discussion

The findings from this study reveal interactions between delivery modes, academic workload, assessment and feedback practices, and student engagement, highlighting their collective influence on international postgraduate students' experiences. The sequential structure of the Block mode emerged as a key factor in shaping students' academic focus, enabling deeper engagement with course content. Participants emphasised the advantages of focusing on one subject at a time, linking this structure to improved academic clarity, enhanced information retention, and reduced cognitive overload. These findings echo prior research outlining that intensive delivery formats promote meaningful engagement and sustained learning momentum (Ambler et al., 2021; Burton & Nesbit, 2008).

However, the condensed nature of the Block mode also posed challenges for some students, particularly in the context of illness or other disruptions. One participant noted that missing just two weeks in the Block mode equated to, "the whole subject gone." Illness could have a domino effect on students' ability to maintain learning because of the condensed nature of the Block mode subject (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). These challenges have implications for how institutions design and support intensive programs, to ensure students are not disproportionately disadvantaged by the model's pace.

Results from the current study indicate that the sequencing of subjects and assignment submissions could be considered key factors that influenced international students' study experiences in both traditional and Block delivery modes. The identification of academic workload and intricate assessment tasks as significant stressors aligned with previous research (Redfern, 2016). Participants expressed apprehensions about meeting deadlines for multiple tasks in the traditional mode. Prior studies have indicated that managing competing demands, including concurrent deadlines and commitments outside of university studies, can impact student engagement (Muir et al., 2019). In contrast, participants in this study associated the VU Block Model's® emphasis on prompt feedback with greater confidence in their ability to meet academic expectations. Research by Smyth et al. (2012) underscored that clearly stated assessment expectations and timely feedback contribute to a strengthened learning experience, while delayed feedback can induce anxiety (Welker & Berardino, 2005). The significance of timely and

informative feedback is particularly crucial for postgraduate students, as they commonly view it as a tool for self-evaluation (Rogers, 2007; Winstone et al., 2017). While five participants reported better results under VU Block Model® compared to the previous traditional mode, aligning with research linking assessment timeliness and outcome to student satisfaction (Poon, 2019). Current participants' recognition of the positive value in timely feedback aligns strongly with existing literature and serves as a relevant indicator of the quality of Block delivery.

A recurring theme in the findings was the role of engagement, both within the classroom and beyond, in influencing students' overall experience. Participants highlighted the value of close relationships with lecturers and peers, which were facilitated by the small class sizes and regular interactions characteristic of the Block mode. Engagement within the classroom community profoundly impacts students' ability to focus on learning, thereby influencing short and long-term outcomes and promoting participation (Bond et al., 2020). Students have reported increased satisfaction in Block modes (Konjarski et al., 2023), due to the emphasis on active participation and interactive environments (Zhang & Cetinich, 2022), and increased opportunities for peer-to-peer connections (Newell & van Antwerpen, 2024). This sense of connection with staff and class members fostered a sense of belonging, which prior research has demonstrated as an enhanced factor in the VU Block Model® (Muscat & Thomas, 2023). Recent research also underscores the vital role of a sense of belonging in influencing student engagement in both online (Farrell and Brunton, 2020) and in-person (Pedler et al., 2022) deliveries. However, online learners often encounter difficulties in forming meaningful connections (Thomas et al., 2022), which can negatively impact their willingness to engage and participate. The small class sizes and strong sense of belonging fostered in the Block mode may create an environment that encourages "safe failure," where students feel comfortable making mistakes and learning from them (Lodge & Ashford-Rowe, 2024, p. 5).

Most participants in this study noted the pivotal role of teachers in their engagement. Students greatly value the opportunity to participate in class, ask questions, and resolve doubts with their teachers, which are important factors in student satisfaction (Gibson, 2010). Petruzzellis et al. (2006) proposed that the quality of teaching critically influences student satisfaction, especially for international students. Teaching in smaller classes is also acknowledged to enhance engagement (Poon, 2019). In this study, participants appreciated the small class sizes in the Block mode, which fostered improved interaction and engagement. The accessibility of teachers further supported engagement, as acknowledged by all participants, emphasising the pivotal roles of both teachers and students in the learning process (Gruber et al., 2010). Overall, the findings demonstrated that the combined efforts of teachers and the classroom environment were key factors in supporting students' engagement and satisfaction.

An additional thread running through the findings was the impact (or lack) of family and social support on international students' wellbeing and engagement. Postgraduate students often grapple with the demands of managing multiple roles, balancing careers, family, social life, and studies (Brown et al., 2015; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Participants in the current study also detailed their struggles in managing work, classes, and assignments in the Block mode. Such challenges significantly affect student engagement, encompassing the pressures students face in their lives (Kahu, 2013). Kahu et al. (2014) have suggested that support from family and friends proves vital for international students, providing the necessary space and time for effective learning, which was also evident in the accounts of participants in this study. For example, Jesse highlighted the

emotional toll of being separated from family and how this distance contributed to feelings of disengagement. These findings point to the importance of institutions fostering stronger community connections for international students, regardless of the mode of delivery. Leveraging the features of the Block mode structure provides an opportunity to foster inclusive and supportive learning environments that not only enhance engagement but also address the unique challenges faced by international students.

This study also highlighted tensions between personal learning preferences and the structural features of delivery modes. While most participants preferred the Block mode's focused approach, one participant expressed a preference for the traditional mode due to its perceived flexibility and diversity. McCluskey et al. (2019) indicated that intensive courses are more likely to promote students' enthusiasm for the subject, and students are more likely to approach their future studies with a higher degree of inquiry because students are completely immersed in one subject. Most participants favoured Block mode due to the improved academic results, because of a high level of content focus within a single subject. This is in line with the existing literature that acknowledges that content focus can facilitate engagement across the course (Ho & Polonsky, 2007). The one participant preferring the traditional mode shared that the "very intensive" nature of the Block mode was the contributing factor to the decision and that they preferred completing several subjects at the same time. This type of subject diversity could reflect breadth of academic interest that was identified by Kahu and Nelson (2018). Furthermore, several participants perceived the 12-week model as more conducive to knowledge and information assimilation. Findings by Zhang and Cetinich (2022) also observed the condensed nature of the intensive mode posed challenges in knowledge retention. One participant in the current research attributed their suboptimal performance to these perceived time constraints in the Block mode. However, Bryson and Andres (2020) noted that within intensive modes of teaching and learning, teachers are frequently required to remind and encourage students to ask questions and participate in discussions. This demand for in-class participation and accountability may be the reason as to why some students dislike high-intensity learning.

As highlighted by Lodge and Ashford-Rowe (2024), while intensive deliveries show promise in enhancing student satisfaction and achievement, a deeper understanding of how learning processes are enabled or constrained within Block modes is crucial. Although Block modes can improve focus and clarity by reducing cognitive overload through sequential subject delivery, they also have the potential to increase stress and disengagement if the intensity of learning is not carefully managed (Lodge & Ashford-Rowe, 2024). This is especially significant for international postgraduate students, who often face unique challenges such as linguistic barriers, differences in prior educational experiences, and limited family support, all of which can make the assimilation of knowledge more demanding. To address these challenges, institutions should consider incorporate flexible learning options, iterative assessments, and additional supports to facilitate better engagement and learning outcomes in Block modes.

Conclusion

The discussion uncovered how assessment sequencing impacts the international student experience, with Block mode offering prompt feedback, enhancing outcomes, and aligning with satisfaction research. Juggling multiple roles affects engagement, emphasising the need for support. Classroom dynamics, teacher-student interactions, a sense of belonging and smaller

Block mode classes foster better student engagement and participation. Students favour Block mode for its focused approach, though preferences vary based on intensity and perceived academic results. Participant discussions revealed diverse factors influencing engagement and mode preference, showcasing the complexity of learning experiences.

The VU Block Model® is a new but important intensive delivery model for universities to consider, built to incorporate a deliberate focus on students' pedagogical, transitional, and work/life balance requirements. As noted in the results of the study, there are multiple benefits associated with intensive learning when the focus is on one subject at a time. Overall, participants reinforced a positive perception of their engagement in Block mode, while highlighting the key challenge of intensity of the fast-paced delivery. Given the limitation of a small sample, future research is recommended incorporating a larger sample with different kinds of participants such as lecturers and administrators, the inclusion of multiple discipline areas, and the contrasting of results for subjects delivered both in Block and traditional modes. Additionally, future studies should explore the similarities and differences in engagement between domestic and international students, as well as between international postgraduate and undergraduate students, to provide deeper insights into how different cohorts experience Block mode learning.

Acknowledgements

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