



Health Students' Experiences in an Innovative University Teaching Model: The Good, the Bad, the Challenging

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Abstract

While universities worldwide transitioned online for necessity, many now continue blended or online programs due to growing interest. Higher education is also exploring innovative intensive learning and teaching models. One example is the Southern Cross Model (SCM), promoting focused learning using six-week terms combining immersive teaching, active learning, and guided learning to encourage autonomy and promote community. An anonymous online survey explored international and domestic health students' experience of the SCM, identifying current satisfaction with and self-confidence in learning and subjective perception of the SCM. A total 105 students completed the survey, 69.5% domestic (n=73) and 30.5% international (n=32). Overall, domestic students reported higher learning satisfaction and self-confidence than their international student peers. Additionally, an analysis of open-ended survey questions exploring student experience revealed all students acknowledged the intensity and challenge of the SCM. However, for international students this was coupled with feeling overwhelmed and isolated, while domestic students reported the SCM provided enhanced motivation and engagement. These findings emphasise student experiences in intensive teaching pedagogies should be evaluated beyond academic performance, providing a foundation for tailored support programs supporting all students to thrive in new educational approaches within and beyond the classroom.

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Practitioner Notes

1. Immersive learning approaches may support academic performance across student cohorts, but groups like international students may experience lower learning confidence and satisfaction.
2. When integrating immersive models of teaching, universities are encouraged to provide student training around how to learn in these models, especially related to key aspects like time management.
3. While domestic students reported immersive learning was overall motivating and efficient, many international students felt isolated and overwhelmed.
4. When implementing learning models like immersive teaching, consideration should be given to students' overall wellbeing and ensure care is taken to monitor and support this beyond academic wellbeing.
5. Targeted support strategies may be needed to address distinct learner needs in immersive teaching approaches.

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Keywords

Block teaching; active learning; immersive courses; higher education; international students

Introduction and Literature Review

The landscape of higher education has changed significantly in recent years, strongly influenced by the mandate of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within Australia, there was a 31.7% increase from 2018 to 2024 in student enrolment in online or blended university courses (Department of Education, Skills, and Employment, 2019), while a 2023 report revealed two-thirds of United States universities were adding online programs (Garret et al., 2023). Alongside online and blended learning models, many universities are undertaking significant re-designs in their curriculum and pedagogy, introducing different models of teaching. This is resulting in a small but growing global shift from traditional teaching models to innovative block and immersive¹ teaching and learning modes in an effort to enhance student experience and meet rapidly-changing learner needs (Davies, 2006; Dixon & Makin, 2024; Dixon & O’Gorman, 2019; Harvey et al., 2017). In alignment with wider literature, block models refer to formats typically seeing students completing one unit/subject at a time in a three to four week ‘block’ (Davies, 2006; Tatum, 2010). Conversely, other immersive and intensive/compressed approaches typically span six to eight weeks and involve students taking concurrent units/subjects (Konjarski et al., 2023). Here, the term ‘immersive block model’ will be used in alignment with Goode et al. (2024) to refer to delivery modes enrolling students in more condensed, active learning experiences than traditional semester or trimester models.

A 2024 Special Issue of the *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice* presented 10 papers showcasing the diversity of approaches and range of ideas and issues associated with these approaches worldwide (Solomonides et al., 2024). Block and immersive models have been adopted for a range of reasons, including to enhance student learning, experience, and engagement (Dempsey Willis & Vieira Braga, 2024; Hayward, 2023); to address changes in student demographics (Davies, 2006); and to address retention issues and enhance ‘core’ skills such as self-efficacy (Burton & Nesbit, 2008). Overall, research has shown that immersive modes of teaching, when designed carefully, can achieve the same, or even greater, academic success and course satisfaction than traditional modes of teaching (Kucsera & Zimmaro, 2010; Zhang & Cetinich, 2022). However, care must be given to address factors that are core to such success and may be challenged by these different pedagogical approaches, including belonging (Long & McLaren, 2024), engagement (Dempsey Willis & Vieira Braga, 2024), and academic staff ‘buy-in’ (Turner et al., 2024).

Context of the Study

Recently, Southern Cross University (SCU) in Australia has fully transitioned to an immersive block teaching and learning model, delivered as six-week terms, referred to as the ‘Southern Cross Model’ (SCM). This model is integrated across the university, adopted by all study levels (i.e., undergraduate and postgraduate) and across all programs. Following an investigation of new methods of teaching that enhance student retention and success, Roche et al. (2022) identified that different forms of ‘block’ teaching had positive outcomes at other universities and identified three central elements of successful learning at university. These elements included focused learning based on immersive teaching, active learning to enhance student engagement, and guided learning using curated content to encourage greater student autonomy and promote an active learning community. Findings were then used to construct the SCM, aiming to foster active learning, provide flexibility, and encourage student collaboration, both through interactive

learning activities and authentic, interlinked assessments (Goode et al., 2022a; Goode et al., 2022b; Roche et al., 2022; Zhang & Cetinich, 2022). Figure 1 (Roche et al., 2024) provides a visual of the SCM structure, where interactive, media-rich online modules are complemented by live weekly, interactive classes across the six-week term. Additionally, the SCM provides an option of studying one or two units per term, enabling students the option to study part-time, an approach missing from traditional block models where students do a single unit at a time.

Figure 1

Structure of the Southern Cross Model (Roche et al., 2024)



Student Learning and Experience

Showcasing the foundational elements central to the SCM, the design of other block and immersive model university courses increasingly prioritises a student-centred approach to enhance engagement and interaction with the unit content, as well as their instructors and fellow peers. This more immersive and interactive way of teaching promotes active learning (Zhang & Cetinich, 2022), a learning approach that supports active interact with content (e.g., discussion, problem-solving, reflection) to construct meaning, compared to passive consumption of information (Biggs, 1999; Michael, 2006). Active learning approaches central to block and immersive learning models move away from the teacher-centred approach where 'sage-on-stage' style lectures (Roche et al., 2022) were the norm and offer more flexible and engaging styles of learning (Zhang & Cetinich, 2022). For example, results from studies on the SCM showed that immersive teaching modes and student-centred approaches positively impacted academic performance (Goode et al., 2023), as well as reduced psychological distress (Nieuwoudt, 2023). Compared to the previously-employed traditional model, the SCM also demonstrated higher overall unit and teaching satisfaction (Goode et al., 2023). Scott (2003) also found that, overall, block and immersive model teaching can provide a more focused and engaging student

experience, whereby students develop a deeper relationship with the learning material. Increased motivation, concentration, commitment, and enthusiasm have also been demonstrated in immersive modes due to the shorter time frame in which tasks need to be completed (Davies, 2006; Kucsera & Zimmaro, 2010). Furthermore, relationships among students and teachers have also been strengthened due to the extended class times and collaborative environment (Male, 2020).

However, block and immersive learning models also have notable potential disadvantages that must be considered. For example, research by Davies (2006) found no significant difference in student learning outcomes in block versus traditional methods, while Dixon and O'Gorman (2019) actually found block teaching negatively impacted student attendance and, as a result, affected deep learning. Lee and Horsfall (2010) also found that both students and staff had concerns regarding workload expectations and timing of assessment tasks due to the compressed nature of the teaching mode, resulting in superficial coverage of content and cramming for exams and assessments (Davies, 2006; Harwood et al., 2018). Immersive model learning may also pose challenges to students with disabilities or international students completing a degree that is not in their native language, as these students may need more time to understand the content thoroughly and are at risk of falling behind (Male, 2020). Within Australia alone, international students are reported as around 30% of enrolments overall, with numbers often much higher depending on the specific program of study and university (Skromanis et al., 2018). As such, as more universities explore immersive and block model approaches to learning, greater research is needed to examine how such transitions may impact various student groups, including international students.

The way forward in education is being demonstrated to be a student-centred learning approach, where the onus for success lies with the student to demonstrate active learning, self-driven engagement, and collaboration with their peers and teachers (Joseph & Hartwig, 2020; Lin & Scherz, 2014). However, students' learning backgrounds may make this a very challenging transition if students are coming from a teacher-directed approach, for example in many Asian cultures where the learning is often passive and the teacher is their primary focus (Joseph & Hartwig, 2020). Lin and Scherz (2014) argue that student-centred approaches are a powerful way for students from non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB) to deepen their learning experience and improve their language and academic skills, and can enhance the social and cultural dynamics shared among all students. While such approaches may help NESB students better conceptualise the material, the challenges of transitioning to this approach must be recognised and addressed. Haverila et al. (2020) discuss how international students can find adapting to a new university culture difficult due to the unfamiliar environment and potential language barriers they face, which needs to be considered as university block teaching approaches may present limited 'transition time' for these students. Samarawickrema and Cleary (2021) and Lin and Scherz (2014) agree with these adapting challenges, with NESB students reporting feeling demotivated and anxious, and struggling to grasp the underlying conceptual frameworks of their disciplines. In addition, Bennett et al. (2015) contend that on top of language barriers and unfamiliar learning approaches, international students also experience homesickness and the loss of emotional support structures offered by friends and family, which can detrimentally affect well-being and further hinder their learning experience.

Further, students' beliefs about their ability to do well and how prepared they feel for their studies may also impact their learning experience, and be reflected in their satisfaction with and self-confidence in learning. These attitudes and beliefs about oneself, or self-concepts, are interrelated with self-confidence and self-efficacy and are core constructs of Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986). These tend to guide university students through their academic and social experiences and underpin how they approach their studies (Sander & Sanders, 2006). Central to SCT is self-efficacy theory, which is guided by one's perception they will not only be able to produce a behaviour but also feel prepared and believe they can carry out the behaviour (Sanders & Sanders, 2006). These beliefs can influence certain intrinsic mechanisms, such as motivation, cognitive processes, decision-making, and affective states (Wentzel & Wigfield, 2009). The SCM and how students interact with this method can be viewed through this theoretical framework in terms of their beliefs about their academic ability, the experiences they have with the model, and the support structures they have in place. Within the SCM, it is possible that certain student groups, such as international students, will face challenges regarding their satisfaction with the model and their academic self-confidence as it is an unfamiliar way of learning, compounded by the additional factors discussed previously. While research is limited exploring student self-belief and confidence in block and immersive teaching models, Machumu et al. (2018) found that in a blended learning environment, self-efficacy was a crucial attribute in achieving students' desired learning outcomes.

The aforementioned challenges, alongside considerations around learning self-efficacy, highlight the importance of effective teaching strategies that not only address language and cultural barriers but also support students' overall well-being and self-belief. In this context, evaluating the efficacy of a new teaching pedagogy requires consideration of key factors such as student satisfaction, self-confidence in learning, and student experience. Student satisfaction refers to a positive short-term attitude towards students' experiences in an educational context (Qayyum et al., 2023), which is critical for engagement, performance, and overall study-work-life balance. Findings from studies on student satisfaction towards immersive learning modes (e.g., Harwood et al., 2018; Ho & Polonsky, 2015) indicate that students find subjects more stimulating and produce similar results regarding performance and satisfaction compared to traditional teaching methods, although with no direct focus on international compared to domestic students. Similarly, student-centred and self-regulated learning has been positively correlated with satisfaction, leading to improved learning and student involvement (Eamoraphan et al., 2014; Leong et al., 2020). Furthermore, Neill (2005) defines self-confidence as an individual's beliefs regarding their self-worth and likelihood of success. It is primarily viewed as a combination of self-efficacy and self-esteem, which are essential to academic success (Jones & Kim, 2020). Research has shown that students in immersive learning modes develop increased confidence due to greater focus when only studying one or two units at a time (Goode et al., 2022), which may even be true for international students (Zhang & Cetinich, 2022), although literature around block teaching methods is contradictory. For example, Dixon and O'Gorman (2019) found teachers reported block teaching negatively impacted undergraduate Tourism Management students' attendance, and therefore deeper learning, while an article reviewing a four-week block model (Male, 2020) reported, while student attendance and performance demonstrated overall improvements, for

students needing more time to learn (e.g., international students, those with disabilities) a block model could be overwhelming and result in rapidly falling behind.

Study Aim

Given the mixed and limited findings throughout the literature related to student satisfaction (e.g., Harwood et al, 2018; Vlachopoulos et al., 2019) and self-confidence (e.g., Goode et al., 2022; Murff, 2005; Zhang & Cetinich, 2022) in immersive learning, particularly for domestic compared to international students, more research is needed to understand the student experience within expanding and novel learning modes. These more immersive and block approaches may also be able to combat the continued challenges of student retention and engagement, fostering improvement in both relative to levels apparent within traditional modes of teaching (Kucsera & Zimmaro, 2010; Zhang & Cetinich, 2022). However, further research into the student-related impacts of these emerging learning approaches is warranted. It is vital that greater awareness is given to the issues impacting both domestic and international students (Joseph & Hartwig, 2020; Lin & Scherz, 2014), which requires a sound understanding of experiences in both student cohorts undertaking immersive teaching modes like the SCM. As such, the research questions this exploratory study addressed centred on health students' experience of an innovative, immersive block university teaching model, the SCM. Specifically, this looked at comparing domestic and international students' current satisfaction and self-confidence in learning, alongside subjective perceptions of the model.

Method

Design and Participants

This exploratory, observational study used a convergent mixed-method approach to examine student satisfaction and self-confidence with the SCM, analysing quantitative survey outcomes alongside qualitative open-ended survey responses. All data was collected through a survey with open- and closed-ended questions to capture both quantitative and qualitative data. Students 18 years of age or older enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs within the Faculty of Health at SCU were eligible to participate. Individuals were invited to participate via an emailed information sheet and survey link, sent by Faculty administration to all Health students. International health students were also directly approached by the SCU International (Office) team via an invitation email, to maximise response rate from this cohort through broad and targeted recruitment strategies. Members of the research team then requested colleagues from individual programs follow up with program- and unit-specific emails and/or online learning platform (Blackboard) and in-class announcements. Ethical approval was provided by SCU's Human Research Ethics Committee (Ref No: 2023/046).

Data Collection

The survey was designed using Qualtrics software (Qualtrics, Utah, USA), with an online link created for dissemination. Survey questions were modelled off previously conducted research on the international student experience in the SCM (Zhang & Cetinich, 2022), resulting in a survey that took participants approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. Initial survey dissemination occurred as outlined above, with follow-up distributions repeated across the academic year, over a nine-month duration to allow for variation in university calendars, mid-year enrolments, and holidays. Due to the anonymous nature of the survey and overlapping distribution methods (e.g.,

students might receive a survey link in multiple units, or within a unit and directly from International team), overall number of invited participants and response rate could not be determined.

Measures

The survey was designed to capture personal and study-related information from respondents. Demographics collected included age range, gender, nationality, enrolment-related variables, first-year status, and if they were first in family to attend university. The constructs of satisfaction and confidence were measured using a modified version of the Student Satisfaction and Self-Confidence Scale (Jeffries & Rizzolo, 2006). This scale has two subscales: satisfaction and self-confidence. Consistent with the original scale, self-confidence was measured across five items and satisfaction with learning was determined across eight items. Students were asked to respond to each item on a five-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Example items from this scale include: "The units provided me with a variety of learning materials and activities to promote my learning in the curriculum" (satisfaction item) and "I am confident that I am mastering the content of my units" (self-confidence item). While the original scale was developed for use in simulation activities, it has been used to look at learning satisfaction and self-confidence in other learning settings, such as following a 12-week multi-disciplinary teaching model (Liu & Hou, 2021). The reliability of the scale has been reported in multiple studies and reveals high reliability with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.94 for the satisfaction subscale and 0.87 for the self-confidence subscale (Unver et al., 2023). The modification made in this study was that the wording was adapted to ensure it related to the SCM (e.g., use of 'units'), with a copy of these modified scales included in Appendix 1. The Cronbach's alpha for the subscales in this paper were satisfaction (0.95) and self-confidence (0.90), indicating excellent reliability.

Finally, the survey concluded with three open-ended questions, where students were provided with text boxes to answer questions about what they enjoyed and what they disliked about the SCM, as well as what advice they would give to students commencing in the SCM. Of note is that these questions were only included in the final recruitment round for the survey, added as a study amendment to provide preliminary data on opportunities for SCM learning and engagement support areas and feasibility around whether students engaged in responding to questions like these in a survey.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis was used for demographics (e.g., gender, age range, enrolment status) and closed-ended questions. For learning satisfaction and self-confidence in learning, once the data were cleaned, assumptions for an independent samples t-test were checked. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated a significant deviation from normality in both student satisfaction scores ($D = 0.250$, $p < .001$) and self-confidence ($D = 0.873$, $p < .001$), suggesting that nonparametric statistical methods were appropriate for data analysis. Therefore, the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U-Test was selected as the best analysis to compare domestic compared to international students' scores in relation to learning satisfaction and self-confidence in learning. Analyses were completed using IBM SPSS software, Version 29.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY).

To further explore the differences in student experience in the SCM between the domestic and international cohort, thematic analysis of the three open-ended questions was conducted.

The open-ended question responses were imported into an Excel Document and analysed using inductive thematic analysis using the six-step approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The reflections were separated into domestic (n=9) and international (n=16) cohorts for analysis. Following an initial familiarisation with the data, each reviewer independently coded the data. Themes were then sought, reviewed, and defined, then discussed in a research team meeting. This was followed with a further refinement by the two researchers until consensus was gained. There was no limitation placed on the number of themes established for each group of students. Integration of the quantitative data and the qualitative responses occurred during interpretation where qualitative themes were used to contextualise and explain the quantitative patterns. This approach enabled insight into the outcomes of study and simultaneous exploration of their meaning to participants.

Results

Participants

A total of 105 students completed the survey and provided enough information to be included in primary analyses. Overall, data were captured from 69.5% domestic (n=73) and 30.5% international students (n=32), of whom 81.9% identified as female, 16.2% as male, and 1.9% preferred not to disclose. See Table 1 for additional participant characteristics.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics (N = 105)

Characteristic	n (%)
Cohort	
Domestic	73 (69.5)
International	32 (30.5)
Gender	
Female	86 (81.9)
Male	17 (16.2)
Prefer not to say	2 (1.9)
Age range (years)	
18 - 24	39 (37.1)
25 - 34	31 (29.5)
35 or older	34 (32.4)
Missing	1 (1.0)
Study Load*	
Full-time	90 (85.7)
Part-time	15 (14.3)
First Year Status	
Yes	91 (86.7)
No	14 (13.3)
First-in-Family Status	
Yes	41 (39.0)
No	63 (60.0)
Unsure	1 (1.0)

*Full-time load in the SCM is 2 units per term, part-time is 1 unit per term

Learning Satisfaction and Self-Confidence

Mann-Whitney U-Tests were conducted to understand whether student satisfaction and self-confidence in learning differed between domestic and international students enrolled in the SCM. The results indicate that there was a statistically significant difference between domestic ($Mdn = 25.00$, $n = 73$) and international students ($Mdn = 20.50$, $n = 32$) in terms of their satisfaction with the SCM, with domestic students reporting significantly greater levels of satisfaction ($U = 701.50$, $z = -3.46$, $p < .001$), with a moderate effect size, $r = .34$ (Cohen, 1988). Domestic students ($Mdn = 36.00$) also had significantly higher levels of self-confidence than international students ($Mdn = 32.00$), $U = 862.00$, $z = -2.15$, $p = .032$), with a small effect size, $r = .21$ (Cohen, 1988).

Perception of the Southern Cross Model

Twenty-five responses were provided in response to the survey's qualitative questions around likes, dislikes, and advice for fellow students relating to the SCM. Table 2 provides descriptive characteristics of these respondents. To indicate which participant provided a quote below, they are identified by 'Dom (Domestic)' or 'Int (International)' and a number.

Table 2

Characteristics of students providing qualitative data (N = 25)

Characteristic	n (%)
Cohort	
Domestic	9 (36.0)
International	16 (64.0)
Gender	
Female	19 (76.0)
Male	5 (20.0)
Prefer not to say	1 (4.0)
Age range (years)	
18 - 24	5 (20.0)
25 - 34	17 (68.0)
35 or older	3 (12.0)
Study Load*	
Full-time	23 (92.0)
Part-time	2 (8.0)
First Year Status	
Yes	18 (72.0)
No	7 (28.0)
First-in-Family Status	
Yes	9 (36.0)
No	16 (64.0)

*Full-time load in the SCM is 2 units per term, part-time is 1 unit per term

Domestic Student Experience

Analysis of domestic students' qualitative feedback suggests this cohort's experience of the SCM was overall positive. Domestic students felt the six-week terms promoted a more focused,

engaging, and motivating approach to learning, while also fostering a sense of progress and accomplishment. Overall, three themes emerged related to domestic students' experience of the SCM: focused and efficient learning; engagement and motivation; and achievability and accomplishment.

This cohort reported that a six-week term structure allowed for a concentrated focus on fewer units (a maximum of two per term), supporting better time management for balancing study with work and other commitments to foster focused and efficient learning. The shorter terms were seen as fast-paced but more manageable than the traditional 12-week semester, helping students stay focused on their studies, finding they could "focus all time and energy on the singular [unit] rather than multiple courses across a semester in addition to working full-time and other commitments" (Dom1, part-time student so in one unit per term). A student doing a full-time load of two units also reported enjoying that the SCM provided "the ability to focus on two units at a time and not get overwhelmed with learning" (Dom5).

Domestic students also reported that the SCM supported engagement and motivation. Students felt its fast-paced nature, although intense, kept them engaged. They felt the structure of the terms, with two units at a time and often two or three assessments across the six weeks (per unit), helped them to avoid procrastination, as well as maintain motivation across the teaching term by creating a sense of urgency. This encouraged students in "getting it done and being able to stay motivated as the light at the end of the tunnel is closer" (Dom7). Domestic students also recognised that the model balances intense periods of focus with regular study breaks. One respondent reflected on this balance, stating: "Knowing I have to push hard for 6 weeks, then I get two weeks to re-centre and re-focus before starting all over again" (Dom6), demonstrated students found the shorter duration of terms as motivation to remain engaged in the learning process.

Finally, the shorter, more focused terms supported a sense of achievability and accomplishment. One domestic student reported, "It makes learning goals more achievable because they are closer. Nothing drags out, you get in and get it done" (Dom8). Completing units across a six-week timeframe compared to more traditional 12- to 13- week terms appeared to help students feel they would 'make it'. There was also a clearer sense of accomplishment after each term, with a student highlighting: "You feel and see results of getting your subjects done faster" (Dom9).

International Student Experience

The themes emerging from the international cohort were less positive towards the SCM. Further, this cohort provided insights beyond the academic and learning experience of the model. The following two themes emerged: overwhelmed; and assessment pressure. International students reported feeling overwhelmed and stressed learning in the six-week terms, suggesting challenges in keeping up. Individuals reported the rapid pace of the six-week model, especially when trying to balance multiple assessments, work, and personal commitments, was intense (e.g., "Sometimes I feel like it's going too fast" [Int9]). Additionally, some students were overwhelmed with trying to adjust, feeling constantly behind and struggled to keep up with the content and assessment deadlines, reporting "No time to...plan your study time" (Int3) and feeling "always 1-2 week behind the class schedule" (Int1).

Further, students reported assessment pressure, with the limited time between assessments, typically due only two to three weeks apart, perceived as challenging. Some students felt they had not yet absorbed the content before having to submit the assessment: “I was asked to submit an assignment on week 2 when I have not known much about the unit content” (Int1). Contributing to this was a sense that sacrifices were required around overall learning, whereby “In the end of the term, to catch up with the class, I have to skip lots of unit contents and study simply to pass the class” (Int1). The “study load” (Int4) and rapid pace forced students to focus on submitting assessments to pass, instead of deeply engaging with the learning and content in full.

Shared Experiences and Advice

Emerging as both a positive and negative of the SCM, from both cohorts, was a theme related to interaction and personal connection. Some students perceived the learning model as impersonal, with “no time to interact” (Int3) with either their peers or university academics leading the unit. One domestic student highlighted that “there is very little interactions other than words written on a screen and posted” (Dom2), finding the SCM’s approach to learning and teaching “very impersonal and very neglectful of student needs, requirements and expectations” (Dom2). Conversely, other students viewed this as a strength of the model, with timetabled weekly live sessions (online or on-campus depending on the program of study) that supported “interacting with friends” (Int4). Additionally, some students found interaction and support from staff was strong in the model, finding the “faculty is very supportive and engaged in student learning” (Dom4) and “staff are always considerate” (Dom5) and left students “feel[ing] energised and encouraged after speaking with them” (Int1).

Finally, both cohorts provided feedback on ways to enhance experience in the SCM, with overall advice centred around preparation and self-prioritisation. Preparation areas emphasised included developing time management skills to support investing in both learning and activities outside of university, taking actions like starting assessments early, writing down due dates, and prioritising tasks. This was showcased in the following student’s advice: “Make sure you complete your learning materials prior to the tutorial each week. Make sure you sit down and dedicate time to study / complete materials” (Dom1). Overall, preparing for each term was emphasised, beyond just the academic side, as reflected by a comment from one international student: “You have to be physically, mentally, emotionally, and most importantly, financially ready to commit to this degree” (Int1). Another student encouraged fellow students to not “be hard on yourself” (Dom6).

In summary (Figure 2), both international and domestic students provided mixed feedback on their experience in the SCM. However, the international cohort highlighted more challenges within and beyond the learning experience. Both groups suggested fellow students should ensure they not only plan and manage academic engagement in the SCM, but ensure they look after and are kind to themselves as well.

Figure 2

Themes Related to Student Experience in the Southern Cross Model



Discussion

This study highlights notable differences in satisfaction and self-confidence between domestic and international students at the tertiary level. The quantitative results indicate that domestic students reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction and self-confidence compared to their international counterparts. Additionally, qualitative data revealed that domestic students exhibited a more focused and efficient approach to learning, alongside greater engagement, motivation, and a sense of achievement. These findings underscore the varying experiences of student groups in higher education, emphasising the need for targeted support and monitoring strategies to enhance international students' academic and personal development. This was further highlighted by qualitative findings, with a more positive, engaging overall experience in the SCM reported by the domestic cohort while international students primarily found the model overwhelming.

Analyses revealed both student satisfaction and self-confidence in learning significantly differed between domestic and international students enrolled in the SCM. Specifically, domestic students (n=73) reported significantly greater levels of satisfaction than international students (n=32), with a moderate effect size ($r = .34$; Cohen, 1988). Domestic students also reported significantly higher levels of self-confidence than international students, with a small effect size ($r = .21$; Cohen, 1988). There are limited studies for direct comparison in this field, particularly those comparing international and domestic students, with most research looking at international students in isolation and/or a focus on academic performance. Goode and colleagues (2024) compared international student learning satisfaction between students studying in SCM and those completing units prior to the university's transition to immersive block terms. They found change in learning satisfaction, measured using retrospective data from anonymous end of term unit

surveys, depended on area of study (e.g., declined in science students, increased in business students). However, on average international students saw improved academic success, regardless of study area, emphasising the importance of measuring more than academic variables to better understand student experience. Also focused on academic success, Samarawickrema and Cleary (2021) looked at student pass rates over a three-year period enrolled in a block-model program of one unit per four-week block, finding international student rates improved from 67% to 83% (domestic students improved from 76% to 88%). However, this study did not report on any student-reported factors such as actual confidence or satisfaction with learning, only reporting on pass rates. Future research should examine if academic variables, such as pass rate, correlate with student perception of the learning experience, particularly with preliminary research such as that by Goode et al (2024) suggesting otherwise. While objective academic performance is an important measure, deeper learning and overall engagement has more person-centred, subjective aspects that should be considered and monitored. Student performance on assessments across the term can provide one indication of learning, but as highlighted by this study, additional check-ins are warranted, particularly around students' feelings of preparedness, ability to fully engage, and sense of connection and support. This is particularly true in cohorts like international students where there already may exist barriers to learning (e.g., language difficulties, adjustment to a new way to learning and teaching) (Haverila et al., 2020; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021).

Joseph and Hartwig (2020) explained the differences between a Western way of learning and other cultures and how an international student may struggle with transitioning between different teaching styles, which could help in understanding why international students have lower levels of these constructs. Moreover, vicarious experiences, central to self-efficacy, can play a significant role, whereby domestic students may have more readily available peer support or role models with whom they share the same linguistic features and cultural values. This aligns with the work of Haverila et al. (2020), discussing the challenges international students face when adjusting to a new university culture, language barriers and an intimidating environment. Bennett et al. (2015) argue that many international students experience language barriers and unfamiliar pedagogy and tend to experience the loss of social and familial support structures, which subsequently affects their mental health, leading to increased anxiety and loss of motivation (Lin & Scherz, 2014; Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). Due to this lack of support and incongruence, Male (2020) believes that this puts international students at an increased risk of falling behind, which can ultimately diminish their self-confidence and satisfaction with learning, as demonstrated in this study. Indeed, this was apparent in the feedback from the current study. While domestic students found the fast pace of the six-week terms motivating and helpful in keeping them engaged, international students felt overwhelmed and constantly behind in the SCM. They emphasised the need to prepare for terms physically, mentally, and emotionally, as well as develop strong time management skills. Such feedback aligns with previous research about block teaching models, including in international students, where there was a perception that the fast pace of such learning models can be difficult and time management is essential to success (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021; Zhang & Cetinich, 2022). When employing an immersive teaching mode, universities should review what support is offered and evaluate impact of these services, such as time management skill workshops and sessions on supporting learning self-efficacy. For example, international student orientations

could include additional sessions around how to learn in immersive teaching models, with integrated research evaluating the impact of such activities on variables including satisfaction with and self-confidence in learning and wellbeing. This would help identify opportunities for further support, as well as ensure resources are making an impact, not simply adding more things to an already overflowing plate.

Given the detrimental impact struggling to keep up and being overwhelmed can have upon students' wellbeing, learning experience, and engagement (Lee & Horsfall, 2010; Male et al., 2018), it is imperative further efforts are made to support students, both international and domestic, in developing strategies and social connections to handle the intense learning approach typical of immersive and block teaching models. This was highlighted by feedback from both cohorts, emphasising preparation and self-prioritisation as key to success in the SCM. Failure to provide such support could negatively impact student learning, experience, and potentially even overall wellbeing, as showcased in this research: "Since I started this degree...I have not felt replenished but always been working and worried. Due to the busy schedule, I do not have personal life with my family, friends, and myself" (Int1). Students could potentially interpret these negative emotions as inadequacy, which in turn could drive a decline in self-efficacy. Expanding upon this, the qualitative findings from this study further emphasised the potential impact - and importance - of support and connection upon international students' experience. A key theme identified in the overall student feedback related to interaction and personal connection provided by the model. Although some international students reported enjoying the SCM in part due to the opportunities for connection and engagement with peers it provided, there was an overall negative experience reported by multiple international students who felt interaction was limited in this learning approach. This is further supported by Zhang and Cetinich (2022), whose research was conducted when the SCM was first implemented and reported a strong sense of disconnection when learning within the model. However, this may in part have been due to the students in this study having started their degree in a 'traditional' teaching model with longer terms and then transitioning into the block mode. Feelings of connection are known to positively impact the university experience (Kift, 2015), particularly in immersive modes of teaching (Male et al., 2016), with positive interpersonal relationships enhancing individuals' enthusiasm for learning (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020), ultimately driving sustainable learning success and self-confidence. As such, more research is needed to increase understanding of the context of connection for international students, investigating their perception of their changed landscape and challenges they face (e.g., personal, educational, political as per revised policies), to design user-centred strategies to enhance their experience within and beyond the classroom. While this exploratory project provided a single time-point in a relatively small sample, this and previous research on international students' learning challenges highlights the need to investigate student experience and wellbeing further in new teaching models, ideally over multiple time-points with larger samples.

Limitations and Future Research

Interpretation of these findings must take into consideration existing limitations. We highlight four points that are valuable for the consideration of the results in this paper. Firstly, the majority of respondents were first-year students, also adjusting to university in general. However, this may also have provided a better reflection of learning within the SCM, as they were not trying to

transition from previous years at university learning in a different structure. Future research is needed, if the opportunity arises, to monitor new students and compare them against current students transitioning into new learning models. Secondly, only 30% of the cohort participating in this study identified themselves as international students, and participant numbers were a small proportion of the total enrolled student population of the Health faculty. A large number of respondents were also female (81.9%) and first years (86.7%), which may limit the generalisability of these findings. Also, due to recruitment methods used, it also could not be determined overall response rate, a consideration in future study. However, this research was intended to be exploratory in nature and provide guidance for future study and student support and engagement initiatives. Additionally, the university where this research was conducted has a cohort of 25% international students overall (SCU Management Information System, 2024), so this study actually captured a representative balance of international compared to domestic students. No information was collected on what country international students were from, which would be of value in future research given literature suggests certain cultures may employ different approaches to learning (e.g., a more passive, teacher-centred approach in Asian cultures [Joseph & Hartwig, 2020]). Follow-up research in immersive and block learning and teaching models should aim to capture representative samples of the student population where possible to expand generalisability.. Thirdly, as this study enabled students to remain anonymous it is possible that students with particularly strong views – in either direction, may have self-selected to participate in the study. However, this may have also enhanced the openness and overall engagement of participants (e.g., Ong & Weiss, 2000), which future research should consider in study design. Finally, a limited number of students provided responses to the qualitative questions, which were positioned at the end of the survey and only included in the final recruitment round. In future surveys, such questions could be placed earlier and included for all participants, with more in-depth insights of students' experience in immersive models potentially captured through interviews and/or focus groups.

The current study provides a valuable platform from which future research can be launched to capture responses from students across other faculties and input from students across all year levels and potentially to explore change over time. This future research is pertinent, given students, both new and current, have a much greater awareness of the immersive teaching approach, and the academics responsible for the delivery of the SCM have more experience with each passing term. Beyond the SCM, research into immersive and block model teaching approaches should seek to capture the academic experience, but also overall student engagement and wellbeing to ensure a focus on the whole student experience. This should include students from diverse backgrounds, such as international, first-in-family, mature-age, or registered with diversity and inclusion, as these individuals may already present with additional learning and engagement challenges.

Conclusion

Findings from the current research highlight a need to continue exploring and supporting students, particularly international students, in their ability to engage with and learn in new and emerging approaches to teaching. From a university level, this is essential to ensure a positive student experience and develop confident, competent graduates. Information gained from this research not only provides valuable learning opportunities around ways to enhance both

preparation for and engagement in the SCM, for all students, but also identifies directions for further research. More broadly, these findings shed light on important issues and challenges that all universities could face if converting to an immersive teaching pedagogy. This research showcases the impact of immersive models on student experience should be examined, not only related to academics but also personal wellbeing. Doing so may provide valuable insight into areas and directions for support provision, to ensure all students adequately adjust and succeed in new approaches to education.

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Appendix 1: Modified Student Satisfaction and Self-Confidence Scale

Please answer the following questions in relation to how **satisfied** you are with your current learning in the Southern Cross Model.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
The teaching methods used in my units were helpful and effective. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The units provided me with a variety of learning materials and activities to promote my learning in the curriculum. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoyed how my instructors taught the units. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The teaching materials used in my units were motivating and helped me to learn. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The way my instructor(s) taught the units were suitable to the way I learn. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please answer the following questions in relation to how **confident** you feel in your current learning in the Southern Cross Model.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
I am confident that I am mastering the content of my units. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am confident that my units cover critical content necessary for the mastery of the unit learning outcomes. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am confident that I am developing the skills and obtaining the required knowledge from my units to perform necessary tasks in an academic or professional setting. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My instructors used helpful resources to teach the unit content. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is my responsibility as the student to learn what I need to know from the units I am currently enrolled in. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I know how to get help when I do not understand the concepts covered in the units. (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I know how to use the unit materials to learn critical aspects of the curriculum. (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is the instructor's responsibility to tell me what I need to learn of the content during class time. (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>