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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Redesign for immersive block teaching: Academic practices in high-performing Southern Cross Model units

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This study examines how academics redesigned traditionally structured units for the Southern Cross Model, an immersive six-week block format. Written responses from educators who taught high-performing units consistently were analysed using inductive, reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes were identified. First, academics prioritised core learning by focusing on content, reducing busywork, and managing cognitive load, while retaining optional extensions. Second, they created a clear progression through constructive alignment, explicit weekly pathways, and strong signposting of assessments and learning activities. Third, they shifted toward student-led teaching by moving foundational content online and repurposing synchronous time for supervised practice, feedback, and authentic tasks. These findings suggest that effective block delivery requires more than compression of the existing curriculum. Rather, it depends on deliberate redesign of scope, sequencing, and teaching practices to support student success in immersive learning environments.

Keywords: block teaching, immersive learning, curriculum redesign, learning design, scaffolding

Introduction

In 2020, Southern Cross University (SCU) initiated a whole-of-institution redesign of curriculum delivery through the Southern Cross Model (SCM), an immersive block approach in which most units are taught in six-week blocks with assessment positioned at key points across the term (Goode et al., 2023). Immersive block models typically reduce the number of concurrent units and compress teaching periods compared with traditional 12 to 15-week semesters or trimesters, with the intention of increasing student focus, engagement, and timely progression (Goode et al., 2024). SCU is further shaped by its hybrid teaching approach, which delivers programs face-to-face and online where appropriate, underscoring the importance of designing learning that is sustainable for students and staff across modalities (Goode et al., 2022).

The SCM is part of a broader sector change to intensive and block delivery. Victoria University's Block Model, for example, organises study into sequential four-week blocks and has been associated with improved pass rates for equity cohorts in early institutional evaluations and subsequent analyses (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). Beyond Australia, block and blended variants have been trialled to support attainment and engagement, including in the United Kingdom where "block and blend" pilots have been linked to changes in student engagement and achievement patterns (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022). Across the different implementations, the evidence base suggests that focused learning can support academic achievement, though effects on satisfaction can be mixed and may vary by discipline and implementation quality (Loton et al., 2022; Turner et al., 2021).

Pedagogically, immersive blocks are often justified by aligned, active-learning designs that prioritise participation and feedback cycles. Constructive alignment emphasises coherence between learning outcomes, learning activities, and assessment, providing a framework for intentional redesign when time is compressed (Biggs, 1996). Active learning is consistently associated with improved learning outcomes across many higher education settings, compared with didactic delivery (Freeman et al., 2014). It is suggested that one key mechanism for "why blocks work" includes reduced split attention from studying fewer units at once, clearer weekly rhythms for assessment and feedback, and stronger learning relationships created through repeated contact in a short period (Goode et al., 2023; Richmond et al., 2015). Evidence from SCU also suggests that design features that support online engagement, such as interactive modules and structured synchronous participation, can contribute to achievement in immersive delivery (Goode et al., 2022).

Despite growing outcome-focused literature on student achievement and experience in the block model, the "how" of academic redesign remains comparatively under-examined, particularly within the SCM, where staff may be expected to deliver increased contact time and assessment within six weeks. Studies of academic perspectives in immersive models reveal that staff adoption, discipline, and redesign capacity can influence whether compressed delivery yields genuine innovation or merely compliance (Turner et al., 2024). Building on this gap, the present study investigates what academics did when converting traditionally structured units into the SCM. Using purposeful convenience sampling of high-achieving units within the SCM, this study examines staff perceptions and practices during transformation to answer the research question: What themes characterise academic approaches to transforming traditional higher education teaching into immersive block models?

Methods

Data source

The dataset comprised written responses to one open-ended prompt: "What strategies did you apply to redesign the curriculum for focused, guided, and active learning in the Southern Cross Model?" This was a subset of a larger study examining educators' perspectives from highly successful units in the SCM. A total of 19 participants responded to the survey. Participants were invited via email to complete the qualitative survey with ethics approval (2022/054). At SCU, a unit evaluation must achieve "green" status for both Success Rate and Student Satisfaction Rate to be accorded as "no action required." Further, for inclusion, the unit must have been green in at least three offers since the SCM was initiated (Table 1) with the same educators.

Table 1
Green status descriptors

Metric Description	Success Rate	Satisfaction Rate
Undergraduate (Coursework only) Postgraduate (Coursework only)	Greater than or equal to 80%	Greater than or equal to 80%
Enabling Success	Greater than or equal to 60%	

Analysis

Data were analysed using inductive, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). No formal theoretical lens was applied; rather, the research question guided the analysis. Analysis was conducted by a single analyst (ZQ), which is appropriate within qualitative thematic analysis when the researcher's interpretive role is acknowledged, and the analytic process is clearly described (Kogen, 2024). The analyst is part of the research team; however, they were brought into the project only to collect and analyse the data. They were not part of the team for the survey design. Responses were read repeatedly for familiarisation, then coded inductively using concise labels that stayed close to participants' wording. Codes were iteratively reviewed and grouped into candidate themes, which were checked against the full dataset before being refined into final themes. Microsoft Excel was used to manually sort the data.

Table 2
Green status descriptors

Code	Theme
C1: Condense/trim to core C2: Reduce overload / remove busywork C3: Core vs extra	Theme 1: Core vs extra
C4: Constructive alignment C5: Make the weekly pathway obvious C6: Online prep content	Theme 2: Clear and specific progression
C7: Hybrid deliver C8: Class time used for help + practice (coaching) C9: Feedback/checks/participation loops	Theme 3: Student-led teaching

Findings

Across responses, academics described "converting" a standard unit into a block unit as a practical redesign job: reducing what students must cognitively carry, making the pathway obvious, and changing how teaching time is used so students can keep moving within a short, immersive block. Rather than presenting block conversion as a single technique, participants described a set of interconnected decisions about scope, sequencing, and delivery that, together, made the unit workable within six weeks.

Theme 1: Core vs extra

A consistent starting point was simplifying the unit design so it could realistically be completed within the block. Academics described deliberately cutting back to essentials, "Condensing the material to cover the most important content" (C1). This streamlining was also framed as a workload and cognitive load strategy, where redesign meant tightening structure so the "workload was manageable…reduced cognitive overload… removed… busywork" (C2). Importantly, conversion was not only about cutting but also about layering and ensuring that synchronous activity was purposeful and engaging. Academics described keeping fundamentals clearly in view while providing optional depth for those who wanted it: "fundamentals…required to pass. Extra depth made available" (C3). In other words, the unit was reshaped into a "core pathway" that most students could complete successfully, with extension material placed around the edges rather than competing with essential learning.

Theme 2: Clear and specific progression

Once the scope was reduced and layered, academics described making the unit's progression highly explicit so students could navigate the unit efficiently. Participants highlighted constructive alignment work as a key conversion practice: "reviewed the unit outcomes…mapped this out…link…readings…assessments… modules, workshops and tutorials" (C4). This mapping functioned as a design backbone, helping staff decide what to include each week and ensuring activities were purposeful. Alongside this, academics emphasised building a very clear week-by-week pathway for students using signposting and assessment clarity (C5): "A week-to-week map…sign posting…clear assessment briefs and rubrics." In the context of the block, these design choices were described as necessary to reduce uncertainty and prevent students from losing time figuring out what matters. In effect, the unit was converted into a guided sequence where the next step is clear, and the reason for each step is visible.

Theme 3: Student-led teaching

The third theme captured how teaching practices shifted once the unit structure and pathway were rebuilt. Academics described moving key content online, for example, providing "text…key concepts and recorded videos" (C6) so students could arrive at workshops/tutorials/labs ready to apply that knowledge. They also described designing the unit so online and class components were experienced as one integrated system rather than two separate parts (C7): it was "not…online…and 'in classes'…combined." With this structure in place, face-to-face or synchronous time was re-purposed. Instead of primarily delivering content, academics described using workshops to provide targeted support: "reading the room…adapting explanations…adjusting the pace…selecting activities" (C8). Block conversion, therefore, involved changing what "class time" is to aid students through tasks and support progress. This supportive model was reinforced through built-in checking and feedback loops (C9), such as "short quiz…enabled Q&A and consolidation…peer-review activities." These mechanisms provided regular signals about understanding and performance, which is particularly valuable when there is limited time to recover from confusion. Finally, many participants described that "student-led" work in the block was anchored in authentic practice tasks. A clear example was using "authentic, case-based scenarios" that "positions students as the [industry professional]" (C10) so that students are practising role-based reasoning and decision-making, not only learning topics. In these accounts, authenticity was the kind of learning work students were coached to undertake within the flipped, feedback-rich structure.

Discussion

These findings indicate that converting a standard unit into the Southern Cross Model block format is not merely compressing a 12- or 13-week semester into six weeks. Instead, academics described a purposeful redesign process that makes learning achievable within an intensive sequence. In SCU research on the immersive block model, implementation is consistently described as both a scheduling and pedagogical shift, with students benefiting from focus and structure but also facing challenges related to pace and rapid assessment turnover (Goode et al., 2024).

Theme 1, core versus extra, highlights content prioritisation as key. Academics described trimming to essentials and removing busywork to manage workload and cognitive overload. This aligns with contemporary work integrating cognitive load theory and motivation, which emphasises that reducing unnecessary load and providing clear structure supports engagement and achievement (Evans et al., 2024). In block conditions, this suggests that "coverage" becomes a design trade-off, with conversion relying on making the pass standard explicit while offering optional extension rather than treating all content as equally required. Theme 2, clear and specific progression, reflects strong attention to mapping outcomes, learning activities, and assessment into a visible weekly pathway. Recent constructive alignment scholarship also frames alignment as supporting transparency and coherence by clarifying how tasks and assessments connect to outcomes (Pereira et al., 2024).

Theme 3, student-led teaching, captures a shift in where learning work occurs. Academics described moving foundational input into online preparation and repurposing class time for application, clarification, and practice. This is consistent with recent flipped classroom synthesis, which notes that flipped designs depend on a deliberate link between pre-class preparation and active, supported in-class learning (Baig & Yadegaridehkordi, 2023). In block delivery, this pairing appears especially important because it enables class time to operate as supportive practice rather than content delivery.

Across responses, staff also described frequent checks and feedback loops, such as short quizzes, peer review, and consolidation activities. A recent systematic review of formative assessment and feedback in graduate studies reinforces that timely, embedded, and improvement-oriented formative feedback supports learning (Solis Trujillo et al., 2025). Finally, when academics framed learning through authentic, practice-facing cases and tasks, this aligns with recent evidence that authentic assessment can support employability-oriented capabilities when criteria and support are clear (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2024). For academics converting units, the findings support a practical conversion pattern: (a) define core learning and what should be extension; (b) publish an explicit weekly pathway tightly tied to assessment; and, (c) design a preparation-to-practice sequence where class time is used for coached application and feedback. For learning design and leaders, the work implies that block conversion support should prioritise time and tools for alignment mapping, assessment redesign, and reusable templates that standardise signposting and feedback cycles across units.

Conclusions

This study examined how academics converted traditionally structured units into Southern Cross University's Southern Cross Model. Analysis of educators' redesign reflections showed that effective conversion depends on a coherent set of design decisions rather than simple compression. First, academics prioritised a core learning pathway by trimming content, removing busywork, and managing cognitive load, while still offering optional extension for students seeking extra depth. Second, they made progression highly explicit through constructive alignment, mapping outcomes, activities, and assessments into a transparent week-by-week sequence with clear signposting, briefs, and rubrics. Third, teaching shifted toward student-led learning: foundational input was moved online, hybrid components were integrated, and synchronous time was repurposed for coached practice, timely checks, peer review, and feedback cycles anchored in authentic tasks. Together, these themes suggest practical guidance for institutions scaling block delivery: support academics with time and tools for alignment mapping, assessment redesign, and templates that standardise navigation and formative feedback.

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