Southern Cross University

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Lessons learned from institution-wide curriculum reform: New and transitioned student feedback on a higher education immersive block model

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Student perspectives on curriculum reform are an important element for evaluating impact, while generating valuable insights into managing major organisational change. In this paper, we take a novel approach to investigating curriculum reform by exploring a 'transition effect' on student satisfaction during an institution-wide shift to a six-week immersive block model at a public Australian university. The study compared student unit and teaching satisfaction observations (N = 52,017) in the traditional model and the immersive block model over a three-year period for two cohorts of students: those who commenced their program in the new curriculum ('new' students); and those who transitioned to the new curriculum model midway through their program ('transitioned' students). Focus groups were conducted with 69 health and education students (38 new and 31 transitioned students). Satisfaction after the change to the block model was found to be significantly lower for transitioned students compared to new students. However, significant improvements to satisfaction occurred for both groups over time, as the model became more familiar. Students highlighted the importance of engaged teaching, thorough curriculum redesign and careful scheduling of units, placements and practical classes. These findings have implications for how to manage and evaluate whole-of-institution curriculum transformation in higher education.

Keywords: immersive scheduling, block model, student satisfaction, transitions, curriculum reform

Introduction

Major curriculum reform in higher education (HE) institutions can enable valued improvements in student engagement, satisfaction and academic success (Cho et al., 2022; Myers et al., 2015). Yet reform can also be uncertain and challenging – particularly in the early stages of highly complex change that involves upending entrenched ways of understanding and delivering education (Roche et al., 2024). It is therefore critical that institutions implement effective strategies for managing

curriculum change (Pegg, 2013). This paper seeks to provide insights into student perceptions of a major curriculum reform that occurred at a public Australian university from 2021–2023 and, importantly, to highlight lessons learned and effective strategies for implementing a change of this scale. The paper specifically considers a university's transition from traditional semester-based[1] delivery into a new 'immersive block' model of six-week study terms.

Immersive block models – sometimes known simply as 'block', 'intensive', or 'immersive' models (Samarawickrema et al., 2022) – are gaining interest across HE sectors in Australia, the UK and North America (McKie, 2022). These non-traditional forms of delivering learning seek to respond to concerns over student success and engagement and address changing student preferences for more flexible modes of education (Roche et al., 2022; Testa & Van Dyke, 2024). They depart from the traditional form of tertiary learning that involve 12-15 week semesters or trimesters, with students able to study four subjects concurrently, often learning via lectures and summative examinations (Solomonides et al., 2024). The most common form of immersive block learning is a four-week model where students study one subject at a time (Konjarski et al., 2023); however, there are also six and seven week models, which allow students to study two units at a time (Baker et al., 2024; Roche et al., 2024). These models typically involve revising both pedagogy and scheduling (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022; Konjarski et al., 2023; Roche et al., 2024), often representing quite radical change in how HE curricula are delivered (Wilson & Roche, 2022).

Curriculum can be conceptualised in a variety of ways, ranging from a syllabus to a product, a process or a value-oriented praxis (Annala et al., 2015). In this inquiry, curriculum is conceptualised as interactive, dynamic, grounded in lived experience (Pinar, 2004), and occurring across three levels: planned, enacted and experienced (Erickson & Shulz, 1992). The planned curriculum comprises goals and learning outcomes set by the institution; the enacted curriculum is carried out by educators who make professional judgements on content, employ pedagogies and design assessment; and the experienced curriculum is lived and perceived by students (Marsh, 2009; Matthews & Mercer-Mapstone, 2018). Understanding curriculum as a dynamic interplay between what is planned, enacted and experienced allows for the inherent complexity of curriculum transformation (Case & Heydendrych, 2019) and for emergence of a multiplicity of views on its impacts. It also suggests that it is vital to engage students in offering their experiential insights.

This paper explores a possible 'transition effect' on student satisfaction during a period of major

[1] Prior to the introduction of the immersive block model, the university operated an academic calendar with three possible intakes per year, often termed trimesters. However, we refer to these as semesters throughout this paper, reflecting the typical pattern of enrolment whereby most students studied over two 13-week study periods.

curriculum change at an Australian public university. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to compare student unit and teaching satisfaction observations (N = 52,017) in the traditional model and the immersive block model over a three-year period for two cohorts of students: those who commenced their program in the new curriculum ('new' students); and those who transitioned to the new curriculum midway through their program ('transitioned' students). Additionally, the perspectives of 69 students in the university's two largest faculties – health and education – were gathered via focus groups. We explored three overarching questions: 1) are there differences in satisfaction between new and transitioned students after the introduction of an immersive block model? 2) does student satisfaction change after the initial introduction of the new model? and 3) what factors appear to underpin satisfaction responses between new and transitioned students?

Literature review

Large-scale change can be complex and controversial, prompting varying levels of staff endorsement, negotiation, resistance and adoption across an institution (Annala et al., 2023; Roche et al., 2024). Whilst quantitative student outcomes such as academic achievement are commonly tracked in response to curriculum change initiatives (e.g. Loton et al., 2022; Turner et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2023), the potential for differing perceptions among students during a transitional phase has, to date, been underexplored in HE literature.

Several sources have examined student experiences of curriculum reform in health and science programs, emphasising the disorienting and challenging nature of change. Ziring et al. (2022) examined emotions during the introduction of a new medical curriculum, finding that students were more likely than staff to experience feelings of uncertainty, apprehension and a sense of being overwhelmed – and to thus become 'emotionally taxed' by the changes (p. 16). Meanwhile, Hudson et al.'s (2015) four-year study of student outcomes in a psychology course found that student sentiments towards curriculum change 'showed a favourable turn only after an initial plunge' in acceptance (p. 263). They posit that the pilot offerings of the redesigned curriculum diverged from students' 'assumptions, attitudes, expectations and values about how learning should happen' (p. 265) and that longer-term improvements in satisfaction were contingent in part on a cultural change over time among students. Similarly, a four-year study of student attitudes towards a new biology curriculum found that student 'buy-in' of the new curriculum was not immediate but instead increased over time (Shaw et al., 2019). This literature, though sparse, suggests there is much value in considering student satisfaction longitudinally and among different sub-groups to assess the impact of curriculum transformations on their learning experiences.

Transitioning from a traditional semester-based model of learning to an immersive block model is a form of major curriculum change that has attracted recent interest in the HE literature. Prior studies

suggest that immersive block learning can significantly improve student academic achievement and success (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022; Goode et al., 2023; Loton et al., 2022; Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021; Wilson et al. 2024). In an era of widening participation, immersive block models have also been shown to deliver better outcomes for a diverse range of students, including those from underrepresented backgrounds (Roche et al., 2023). However, satisfaction outcomes appear more equivocal (Goode et al., 2023, 2024b; Loton et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2024), with few examples of in-depth qualitative accounts.

A number of studies evidence improvements in student ratings across disciplines such as psychology (Richmond et al., 2015), criminal justice (Hicks, 2014), marketing (Ho & Polonsky, 2009) and neuroanatomy (Whillier & Lystad, 2013). Multi-discipline studies have also yielded positive findings, with a comparison of six and 12-week models at an Australian university concluding that the shorter model enhanced students' perceptions of effort and motivation, while not detracting from the rigour of the units (Lee & Horsfall, 2010). In the pilot year of the model discussed in this paper, improvements were found in five of seven-unit satisfaction indicators and all six teaching satisfaction indicators (Goode et al., 2024a). Qualitative investigations emphasise that heightened focus and motivation, leading to enhanced academic performance, are key benefits students associate with immersive block models (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022; Goode et al., 2022, 2024b, 2024c).

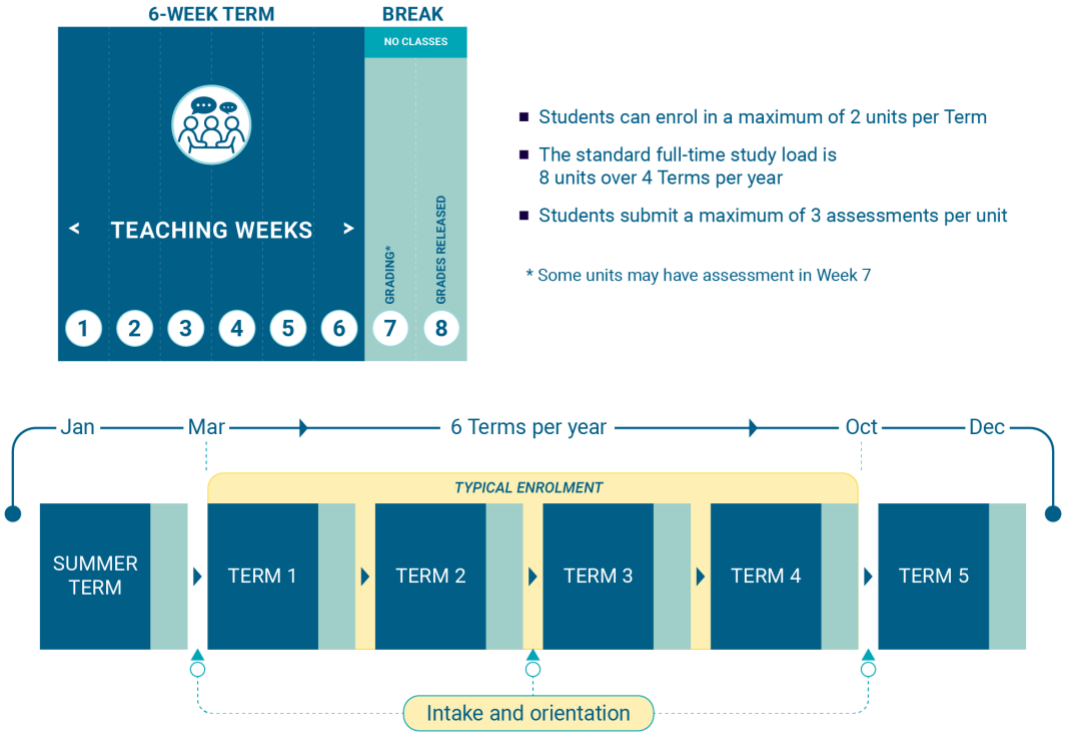
Equivalent levels of satisfaction have been reported elsewhere. Harwood et al.'s (2018) study of graduate health units found no difference between students' satisfaction with units or teaching or their perceptions of intellectual challenge in seven and 15-week models. Studies across institutions also indicate that satisfaction in immersive block models tends to remain high, but with a tendency to skew negatively for some groups (Goode et al., 2023; Loton et al., 2022; Roche et al., 2023), particularly for disciplines such as science and engineering (Goode et al., 2024b; Wilson et al., 2024). Overall, student perspectives on immersive block models are underexplored and needed as part of assessing whether such models are an effective alternative to traditional semester approaches.

The Southern Cross Model

This study is situated at Southern Cross University, a public university with three main campuses on the east coast of Australia. The university serves around 18,000 students across a suite of undergraduate, postgraduate and non-award pathways programs. Around 25% students are international, 43% study online, 40% are regional/remote, and 57% identify as first-in-family to go to university (Southern Cross University, 2024). Up until 2021, the university delivered its programs through a traditional 13-week semester model where a typical full-time student enrolled in four units per semester.

From 2021, the university began moving its programs into a new immersive block model – the Southern Cross Model (SCM) – with the aim of addressing intractable issues with poor student engagement and retention (Roche et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2023). An Academic Design Team with membership from across the university collaboratively developed the SCM, drawing on the pedagogical principles of focused (Biggs, 2014; Sweller, 1988), active (Biggs, 1999; Bonwell & Eison, 1991) and guided (Kirschner et al., 2006) learning (see Roche et al., 2024 for an in-depth discussion of these principles). The model engages students in a maximum of two units over six-week terms. These terms are offered six times per year, with most full-time students enrolling in four terms from March to November and completing the equivalent of eight single-weighted units per year (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Teaching terms in the Southern Cross Model (SCM)



The transformation involved in the SCM extended beyond scheduling adjustments. The model also involved a 'pedagogical reset' across the institution and the implementation of a swathe of policy, process and systems changes to support active, guided and focused learning (Roche et al., 2024). Where once lectures and examinations were common across the institution, these forms of learning and assessment were replaced (except where needed for accreditation requirements) with:

- media-rich, interactive, self-paced and responsive online modules,

- tutorials, workshops and practical classes designed to be interactive and facilitate application, and
- assessment based on principles of authentic, manageable and scaffolded learning (see Wilson et al., 2024).

Following a pilot year of 62 units in the SCM in 2021 (Goode et al., 2023), 533 units from disciplines including education, arts, science and engineering were delivered in the model in 2022 (Wilson et al., 2024). By 2023 all of the university's programs were offered in the SCM, with 323 units from health and law completing the transition.

Methodology

The inquiry followed a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Quantitative and qualitative data collection occurred independently before findings were integrated for interpretation, enabling more nuanced inferences from the overall dataset (Guetterman et al., 2019). The university's Human Research Ethics Committee approved the research (approval number 2022/054).

Quantitative

Quantitative data were collected in the form of undergraduate student responses to the university's unit feedback survey (UFS). The UFS is an anonymous, online survey that is sent to all enrolled students in the final weeks of a teaching period and closes before students' grades are released. UFS responses were uploaded into STATA (17.0) and two questions were isolated for analysis: 'Overall, I am satisfied with this unit' and 'Overall, I am satisfied with the teaching in this unit'. Responses on a 5-point Likert scale were dichotomised into: positive assessment (ratings of 5 strongly agree or 4 agree); and neutral or negative assessment (ratings of 3 average, 2 disagree or 1 strongly disagree).

The study sample was restricted to matched-pairs of units that had been offered in both traditional semesters in 2021 or 2022 (group S) and the immersive six-week block SCM in 2022 or 2023 (group SCM). Each observation was then flagged as belonging to either a new or transitioned student. New students were defined as those who had been issued a student ID in the calendar year in which they were enrolled or had been re-issued an ID after a non-enrolment period of five or more years. All other students were identified as transitioned, meaning that at the time of their UFS response they had transitioned from the semester model to the SCM or were beyond the first year of their studies in the semester model. The SCM group was further separated into the first time a unit was offered in the new model (SCM1) and subsequent offerings (SCM2+).

We investigated the effect of students' status as new, and the effect of initial and subsequent iterations in the immersive block model, by regarding these factors as effect modifiers. To do this we implemented logistic regression models and STATA's (2023) margins command to generate odds ratios and margins comparing outcomes for unit and teaching satisfaction.

Qualitative

Students' perceptions of the immersive block model were gathered via qualitative focus groups. Participation invitations were issued in early-mid October 2023, distributed via unit learning sites. This convenience sampling approach resulted in 69 participants who attended one of nine focus groups in mid-late October: five for health students; and four for education students. The size of each focus group ranged from five to 11 participants, with the average being seven to eight. Efforts were made to restrict each group to either new or transitioned students; however, in some instances new students attended a transitioned group and vice versa. Each group was facilitated online by the lead author, lasted for one hour, and was recorded and transcribed by Zoom. To protect students' privacy, video recordings were removed and participant names were replaced by pseudonyms in the transcripts before analysis commenced. The anonymised transcripts were uploaded to NVivo (14).

The questions guide, developed by the first five authors prior to the focus groups, began with an open-ended question: "Has your experience in the Southern Cross Model been overall positive, or overall negative, and why?". This was followed by a series of more guided questions around focus, engagement, assessment and classes. Although the initial intention was to analyse the entire focus group dataset, the decision was made to focus this inquiry on responses to the initial open question. Similarly to some forms of in-depth narrative interviewing (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997; Wengraf, 2000), this open question was designed to allow participants to draw on their own 'meaning-frames' in sharing their perspectives. This allowed participants to raise personally salient issues, without the facilitator imposing their own topics of interest. Participants were informed at the start of the focus groups that the facilitator was not involved in teaching and learning in their faculties, and that their role in facilitating the groups was primarily to listen to participants' experiences without offering judgement, explanations or solutions. The open question generated rich responses, with all but two of the 69 participants voicing a view. The data achieved saturation and was sufficient to address the third research question.

A classification sheet was developed, capturing each participant's self-nominated enrolment and demographic information. Braun and Clarke's (2006) seminal approach to thematic analysis was used to identify salient 'patterns of meaning' (p. 86). The lead author first read the transcripts iteratively, noting down potential key ideas. Initial codes were assigned in NVivo, and these were refined and merged as the analysis progressed. Through this iterative process, two broad themes appeared as

common to both new and transitioned students, and a range of sub-themes were identified for each group. The remaining authors, except for the sixth author who worked on the quantitative data, then reviewed the qualitative data and thematic groupings. After discussion, the final set of themes, sub-themes and representative transcript excerpts were confirmed by the research team.

Results

Quantitative

Descriptive statistics were generated for new and transitioned student satisfaction (see Table 1). For both new and transitioned students, satisfaction declined in the first offering of a unit in the immersive block model compared to the traditional model, but then increased in subsequent offerings to reach higher levels than before the transition. The results also showed that the first time a unit was offered in the new model, satisfaction was substantially lower for transitioned students than new students. In subsequent offerings, however, differences between these two groups narrowed to become more comparable.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for undergraduate student unit and teaching satisfaction, 2021–2023

		S: Semesters (2021 & 2022)		SCM1: 1st SCM offering (2022 & 2023)		SCM2+: 2nd or later SCM offering (2022 & 2023)	
Satisfaction measure	Cohort	*n*	% positive	*n*	% positive	*n*	% positive
Unit	New	8,443	82.1	4,767	79.2	4,689	84.2
	Transitioned	17,470	79.5	10,033	71.2	6,615	80.9
Teaching	New	8,443	85.8	4,767	83.5	4,689	86.3
	Transitioned	17,470	84.1	10,033	79.7	6,615	84.8

Tables 2 and 3 list outcomes of inferential statistical tests for two stages of the transition to the new model: 1) from the semester model to the first offering in the immersive block model (S-SCM1); and 2) from the first offering in the immersive block model to subsequent offerings (SCM1-SCM2+). Odds ratios of a positive assessment for unit and teaching are presented in Table 2. In the initial stage, the odds of a favourable assessment of units increased by 31.9% for new students compared to transitioned students, and the odds of a favourable assessment of a SCM1 unit dropped by 31.3% relative to S units. In the second stage, improved odds ratios of a positive assessment of units were again observed for new students (42.4% higher than transitioned students). However, in this phase unit satisfaction did not decline but instead increased substantially (by 60.6%) in SCM2+ compared to SCM1. Teaching satisfaction odds ratios, while less pronounced, reveal similar trends in both phases. All results were highly statistically significant.

Table 2. Odds ratios for positive assessment of unit and teaching at two stages of curriculum reform (S to SCM1 and SCM1 to SCM2+)

Phases	Predictor variable	Unit satisfaction		Teaching satisfaction	
		Odds ratio (95% CI)	*p*	Odds ratio (95% CI)	*p*
S-SCM1	New	1.319 (1.252, 1.389)	< .001	1.196 (1.130, 1.266)	< .001
	SCM1	0.687 (0.655, 0.721)	< .001	0.768 (0.728, 0.810)	< .001
SCM1-SCM2+	New	1.424 (1.337, 1.518)	< .001	1.219 (1.137, 1.306)	< .001
	SCM2+	1.606 (1.511, 1.706)	< .001	1.361 (1.273, 1.455)	< .001

Notes. S = semester model. SCM1 = first offering of a unit in the Southern Cross Model. SCM2+ = subsequent offering of a unit in the Southern Cross Model.

Table 3 includes margins for new students' satisfaction compared to transitioned students. In the initial phase, new students had a unit satisfaction rate 4.2% higher than transitioned students in S, which then increased to 5.2% higher in SCM1. In the second stage, new students had a unit satisfaction rate 6.6% higher than transitioned students in SCM1, which fell to 5.0% higher in SCM2+. These trends are once again the same for teaching satisfaction in both stages. *p*-values indicate that new students are consistently more satisfied than transitioned students to a highly statistically significant extent, with the gap widening during the initial transition to the immersive block model and then narrowing in subsequent iterations of immersive block units.

Table 3. Margins for positive assessment of unit and teaching among new students compared to transitioned students at two stages of curriculum reform (S to SCM1 and SCM1 to SCM2+)

Phases	Cohorts	Unit satisfaction		Teaching satisfaction	
		Margin (95% CI)	*p*	Margin (95% CI)	*p*
S-SCM1	S	0.042 (0.035, 0.050)	< .001	0.023 (0.016, 0.030)	< .001
	SCM1	0.052 (0.043, 0.062)	< .001	0.027 (0.019, 0.036)	< .001
SCM1-SCM2+	SCM1	0.066 (0.055, 0.078)	< .001	0.030 (0.020, 0.040)	< .001
	SCM2+	0.050 (0.041, 0.059)	< .001	0.024 (0.016, 0.033)	< .001

Notes. S = semester model. SCM1 = first offering of a unit in the Southern Cross Model. SCM2+ = subsequent offering of a unit in the Southern Cross Model.

Qualitative

Sixty-nine students participated in the focus groups. Their demographics are shown in Table 4. A reasonably even split between new and transitioned students was achieved. The majority of participants were from health, and identified as domestic, undergraduate and full-time students. There was an even mix of online and on-campus learners, with some students studying in mixed-mode.

Table 4. Demographics of focus group participants

Characteristic		Count	%
Transition status	New	38	55.1%
	Transitioned	31	44.9%
Discipline	Health	40	58.0%
	Education	29	42.0%
Residency	Domestic	55	79.7%
	International	14	20.3%
Study level	Undergraduate	51	73.9%
	Postgraduate	18	26.1%
Study load	Full-time	55	79.7%
	Part-time	14	20.3%
Study mode	Online	30	43.5%
	On-campus	30	43.5%
	Mixed	9	13.0%

Corroborating the quantitative data, new students were clearly more satisfied than transitioned students. There was, nonetheless, a mix of sentiments among both groups. Thematic analysis of the transcripts resulted in two broad themes that students highlighted as salient to their sense of satisfaction with the immersive block model: temporal experiences and implications; and transition issues and teaching. These themes are considered below in relation to new and transitioned students.

Temporal experiences and implications: New students

Both new and transitioned students emphasised aspects related to time, and specifically the shorter time frame and what they described as the faster pace of the immersive block model. For most new students, the time and pace associated with the new model were regarded positively. As Natalia (health, new student) commented:

> When I was doing the full 13 weeks [in a previous program], it just got a lot, like towards the end you were so exhausted, especially having so many subjects…. So I prefer the more fast pace, and I feel like I've gotten through this year so much faster.

Those who enjoyed the pace of the model reported heightened focus and motivation. Mateo (education, new student) reflected:

> Being able to focus just on two subjects with that 6-week period means that my thoughts and time is far more narrowed in its focus rather than spreading towards the four subjects over the longer period of time… It's been far more easy to focus my attention.

Meanwhile, Ben (health, new student), stated that the shorter time frame 'inspires you to crack on and just do it', and Mei, an international postgraduate student in education, reflected: 'the 6 weeks mode

keeps me like, okay, we are finishing… we're hitting the goals and [that] really motivates me'. Anya (health, new student) also stated that: 'I think it helps me focus and take in the information I've learned, rather than having a more broad amount of content to try, and then weeks down the track do assignments on'.

Other new students noted that they were able to maintain a suitable balance between study and other aspects of their lives. For example, Hui, a new international postgraduate student studying education, felt that focusing on two units meant that 'I have more time in the week for other work arrangement'. Leila, a new student studying education, described:

> I can kind of say to myself, it's six weeks, you know. I'll manage it around the kids, and once the first assignment's done, you're like straight on to the second one and then you have a two week break to get yourself ready for the next one.

Sentiments among new students were not universally positive. Students such as Bridget (health, new student) and Minh (education, new student) acknowledged feelings of high 'pressure' and 'intensity'. Others emphasised that they wanted 'more in person time' (Olivia, health, new student), particularly for practical components such as labs: 'You know, we're assessed on five or six skills. And we have very short time to master those skills… [we need] more practice time' (Peter, health, new student). However, most new students appeared to find the immersive block model conducive to focus, timely progress and a suitable 'fit' with other commitments.

Temporal experiences and implications: Transitioned students

In contrast, for most transitioned students, experiences were less positive. There was a strong sense of intensity and of a *lack* of time, as Ingrid (education, transitioned student) expressed: 'We're cramming… It's just a gallop. There's no time for consultation, for thinking… and then having to apply to the assessments'. Several students reported heightened stress due to the shorter time frame and workload involved in their units, alongside other commitments. For example, Callie (health, transitioned student) stated:

> I'm so stressed for this assessment, but I've had five days, sometimes seven days, to do the content and do the assessment, and do everything and like live my life as a human and do everything else that I need to do. And I find it difficult.

Some students relayed that their stress was exacerbated in the event of unforeseen circumstances such as illness or bereavement, with the potential for critical impacts on their learning. Shula (health, transitioned student) recalled:

> I had a funeral to go to last term. I was stressing because if I missed one of my lab classes there was no way I could make that up. And that was where I learned how to actually, you know, do an IV line.

Yvette (education, transitioned student) also spoke about the multi-layered impacts of 'falling behind' in the shorter time frame:

> As soon as one thing goes wrong I lose a week, I get so behind, and then I find that I'm working during the break, and so I don't really get a break… And then, of course, you're not at the same pace as your fellow students… and then you sort of lose connection with the tutor as well.

For many of the transitioned students, another prominent implication of the timing and pace of their units was a perception of being focused on assessments 'rather than actually learning and applying things and connecting things' (Alex, health, transitioned student). Mason (health, transitioned student) related: 'You're really just focusing on what you have to do for an assessment. And that's it.'. Similarly, Bianca (health, transitioned student) described their study experience as a 'blur', while Shula (health, transitioned student) felt that:

> There's no time to go deep with the subject material. I feel like we're skimming a lot… You might start the first three weeks engaging in the content, preparing for the tutorials, [but] by the time you get to the halfway mark you're just running out of time.

These experiences led to lower confidence for Charlotte (health, transitioned student): 'You don't have enough time to absorb the content, let alone be confident in what you've learned'.

There was some crossover between the new and transitioned students' experiences, with some transitioned students reporting that the new model was a positive change for them. Jemima (education, transitioned student) found it 'easier to compartmentalise with family and kids', while Carmen (health, transitioned student) reflected: 'I just find it so much easier that there's only two subjects to concentrate on at once… you can get them over and done with, whereas before, with the longer blocks I procrastinated a lot.' Nonetheless, the new and transitioned students clearly differed in their perceptions of time and workload in the shorter model, and what it meant for their learning, wellbeing and overall life balance.

Transition issues and teaching: New students

The second broad theme identified in the focus group data related to the *institution's* transition to the new model, including organisational elements such as unit availabilities and placement schedules, or the way units were redeveloped or delivered.

A dominant sub-theme among new students was the importance of teaching – both unit design and delivery – and how strongly this influenced their experiences: 'Certainly the nature of how the courses are presented and the style and such of the lecturer is a massive factor' (Mateo, education, new student). Inconsistencies appeared to be a prominent source of either satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Participants emphasised that careful consideration of the structure and volume of unit

content for the new model, along with engaged and responsive teaching, were key to positive experiences. Neil's (education, new student) comment captures this sentiment:

> The experiences I've had that have been positive have been based in [the tutor] being really engaging and caring and the structure of the unit being achievable and cut down from the previous 12, 13-week structure. And the negative experiences I've had have been because the content hasn't been cut down correctly, hasn't been organised in an effective way, [and the tutors] have been distant… or you know, just not engaged in the process.

Another key issue that clearly affected students' satisfaction was professional experience placements (also known as work-integrated learning), with students expressing a desire for more flexibility, such as part-time placement options and timely information about placement scheduling. Rachel (health, new student) shared: 'I know other people in my unit that haven't found out what placement they're doing until like two weeks before placement or like haven't even had a placement arranged when they've planned to be doing placement… It's really frustrating'. While these concerns seemed concentrated in health programs such as nursing and social work, these students felt it was a key factor affecting their study experience – and their outside lives – as the institution transitioned.

Transition issues and teaching: Transitioned students

A broader range of themes relating to the institution's shift to a new structure and pedagogy emerged for transitioned students. Numerous participants pointed out the stress involved in the change itself. Libby (health, transitioned student) stated:

> I was so used to studying in that like 12-week structure that it just kind of got like uprooted. And then you kind of have to in the middle of your degree, sort of find a new way to kind of get used to that.

A range of practical issues related to the scheduling of units, placements and practical classes were also raised. Sunny, a transitioned international student in health, pointed out how the transition to the new model had disrupted their and others' study plan for the remainder of their program: 'we had a very stressful time trying to understand the changes and applying them to our course study plan, which has changed it completely'.

For some, they needed to enrol over more terms to maintain their progress as planned, limiting their ability to have breaks from study during the year: 'Starting this new way in my second year I've had to pick up a subject every Summer Term just to finish on time as I would have in the old model' (Jennifer, education, transitioned student).

Students also expressed that they did not feel they had enough time for practical components, particularly in nursing. Gemma (health, transitioned student) commented:

> I feel like trying to learn all the content and then get ready for placement at the same time, and also trying to work part-time and everything, just to try and save up for placement… I just felt so overwhelmed.

Meanwhile, Bianca (health, transitioned student) described practical lab classes as 'really, really rushed', while Meera (health, transitioned student) shared 'you are not confident enough because… you don't have enough time on your practical classes, your lab classes'.

Similarly to the new students, transitioned students also recognised that the institution was undergoing a major shift in pedagogical practice, and that while some units had been adjusted for the new model, others – at least in their initial offering – did not seem sufficiently redesigned. Jennifer (education, transitioned student) described some of her units as 'rushed and scrambled', while Amelie (education, transitioned student) reflected that:

> Six weeks is awesome in the sense of learning: short, sharp, shiny. One subject. [But] I don't feel from a pedagogical standpoint, that some of the lecturers have really changed the subject… It feels like no one wants to give up the 12 weeks, and it's just so intensive and heavy.

However, when units and assessments were designed well for the new model, participants reported much more positive experiences. Libby (health, transitioned student) commented: 'If… the unit is well structured, like you can quite easily like breeze through it', while Amina (education, transitioned student) noted: 'It was very streamlined… the assessments were very tailored, structured, and doable'. International student Sunny (health, transitioned student) also echoed these sentiments about the importance of purposeful redesign for the immersive block model:

> if the tutor arranges the content well, I feel it's okay. But so, for example, I feel one unit I studied… in that unit I feel it's too much, and I don't have enough time to study. And I didn't learn well for that unit.

Overall, while positive experiences were discussed, both new and transitioned students were affected by transitional issues in curriculum redesign and the practicalities of scheduling units, placements, and practical classes.

Discussion

This study explored the impact of a major curriculum change, where traditional 13-week semesters were replaced with a six-week immersive block model across all course offerings at a HE institution. It specifically considered the transition's impact on student satisfaction, comparing perceptions of students who commenced their program in the new model with those who transitioned partway through their degree. The findings have implications that are relevant for leaders involved in facilitating major pedagogical and curriculum change in HE institutions.

Firstly, this study highlights the potential for a short-term transition cost when implementing large-scale, curriculum reform – which we term a 'transition effect' – followed by long-term gain. In both the quantitative and qualitative data, lower levels of satisfaction were evident among students who transitioned from a longer delivery model to the immersive block model. However, the quantitative data demonstrate that transitioned students' satisfaction moved much closer to that of new students after a unit had been offered more than once in the new model. These differences between new and transitioned students' satisfaction, and between units offered once and more than once in the immersive block model, were confirmed to be statistically significant. The analysis thus provides evidence of the transition itself being difficult for some students, and further indicates that the transition effect diminished to become negligible as: 1) the new curriculum was refined by the academics in response to student feedback, and 2) as students adjusted to the new model or moved through the institution to graduation. These findings align with other (rare) examples of student perceptions of curriculum reform over time (Hudson et al., 2015; Shaw et al., 2019).

A key implication is that 'teaching out' students in an existing model may be an alternative strategy for implementing major curriculum change. However, this needs to be considered in light of the volume of students who may be simultaneously needing to engage with a traditional and immersive block model (e.g. students who may be taking units from a lower and a higher level concurrently, part-time students, or those who are repeating units or received recognition of prior learning and have an atypical progression pattern). If students are transitioned from one model to another radically different one, we caution that HE institutions should prepare students well for the transition, as identified by Ziring et al. (2022), be mindful of an initial transition effect that may manifest in student satisfaction metrics, and spend time setting up expectations among students on how to learn within the new model. In this study, dissatisfaction seemed strongest among transitioned students in nursing, a strongly practice-based degree, where there was a perception that time to learn and practice skills was reduced. There is some acknowledgement in the literature that content-heavy or practice-based subjects can be 'harder to do well on the Block model than in other systems' (Konjarski et al., 2023, p. 11). Yet there are multiple instances where practice-based subjects – including those in health disciplines – have resulted in learning outcomes that are just as or more positive than in traditional models (Edward et al., 2024; Harwood et al., 2018; Whillier & Lystad, 2013; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2024).

The lesson learned from this research is not the inherent suitability of disciplines for immersive block models, but rather, that HE institutions seeking to offer professional degrees with practical skills and work-integrated learning components in these models should carefully plan these aspects of students' learning and prepare students for this new way of learning. Student sentiments suggest they are seeking to minimise stresses from uncertainty, administration burdens and heavy workloads in

practice-focused degrees. For curriculum design teams, this means that the scheduling and scaffolding of theoretical and practical learning should be an important focus. For administration and coordination teams, the enrolment and progression implications of scheduling changes should be carefully mapped and mitigated where possible.

It is of note that teaching (understood as both unit design and delivery) was experienced as a key source of satisfaction among new and transitioned students. Student experiences seemed strongly influenced by engaged, responsive and supportive teaching during a term and purposeful curriculum redesign for the six-week period, where content volume was focussed and supported by clear, scaffolded signposting through the material. This resulted in a sense of enhanced focus and motivation conducive to learning and academic progress (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022; Goode et al., 2022, 2024b, 2024c).

A corollary of the strong positive impact of high-quality teaching, was the impact of less engaged or inconsistent teaching. Both new and transitioned students in this study appeared to associate lower satisfaction with a disjuncture between the *planned* and *experienced* curriculum, whereby the pedagogical framework of focused, active and guided learning over immersive terms (Roche et al., 2024) was not always experienced as such by students. Therefore, student satisfaction was mediated by the extent to which the curriculum was *enacted* to achieve the potential benefits of immersive block learning. Specifically, if content volume was not considered appropriate or staff were not perceived as clear, engaged or responsive, students reported feeling overwhelmed and being focused only on assessments. The way time is structured in immersive block learning is a key point of difference relative to more traditional semester-based models, and concerns over workload and students 'falling behind' are consistently mentioned in the literature (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022; Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020; Huber et al., 2022). This study supports the importance of careful attention to students' workload in an immersive block model – that is, designing specifically *for* the time frame of the model rather than condensing material previously offered in a longer model into the shorter format.

Such findings also reinforce the vital role of support, professional learning and change management in university teaching – in particular, how to deliver engaged, active learning – and the importance of bringing both staff and students along on the journey of major curriculum change. For teachers, shifting from a traditional form of teaching in semesters to the expectations of an immersive block new model and active learning pedagogy could be a substantial change. Ongoing academic professional learning and support for continuous improvement is important for successful pedagogical transformations (Hilliger et al., 2022; Levesque-Bristol et al., 2019; Pegg, 2013; Trechsel et al., 2018) as academics negotiate, implement, and teach in new curricula (Annala et al., 2023). Professional learning must support an alignment between the planned and experienced curriculum, and our

findings here emphasise that this is a vital and *ongoing* process. As argued elsewhere (Roche et al., 2024), timely mechanisms for identifying issues, reconsidering approaches and implementing improvements are central to achieving uplift in student satisfaction over time.

Limitations and future directions

There were several limitations to this study. The focus group sentiments were gathered from only two faculties at the university, health and education, with the health sample comprised mostly of nursing and social work students. Given evidence that different cohorts across the institution experienced the change differently (Wilson et al., 2024), future research could seek additional quantitative and qualitative data from a broader range of courses and disciplines (e.g. law, science, engineering) to unpack students' experiences in particular contexts in more depth. We also note that the research provides a snapshot of experiences in the early years of a radical change, and that longitudinal research is needed to provide a fuller picture of the implications of introducing an immersive block model. The single-site focus of this study is also a limitation, and multi-institutional studies could be pursued in future research. Including the perspectives of academics and learning designers, building on those from leaders at this institution (Roche et al., 2024), could also add a further and valuable perspective on major curriculum change.

Conclusion

This paper has provided new insight into students' experiences of a major curriculum change at an Australian university, where all coursework offerings were moved from traditional 13-week semesters into a 6-week immersive block model. The study provides evidence of a 'transition effect' on student satisfaction, where satisfaction initially decreased, particularly for students transitioning from one model to another, and in the first offering of a unit in the new model. This effect diminished in subsequent offerings, with satisfaction 'bouncing back' to exceed earlier outcomes in the traditional model. Thus, while this case of major curriculum reform was not initially a 'magic bullet' for improved student satisfaction, it has *over time* resulted in satisfaction gains.

It is important to acknowledge and learn from the challenges whole-of-institution reform brings. 'Teaching out' students in an existing model may minimise upheaval and initial dissatisfaction, prior to bouncing back. Alternatively, if students are transitioned to a new model, minimising disruptions to study plans appears paramount. Both staff and students – especially transitioned students – should be brought on the journey of curriculum change through timely, clear and tailored communication about the rationale, expectations and impacts. The improvements over time observed in this study also point to the importance of quality assurance and continuous curriculum improvement mechanisms, and of monitoring the impact of major curriculum transformations longitudinally and among different sub-

groups.

In relation to immersive block models specifically, this research suggests that practical learning experiences in professional degrees – both placements and practical classes – should be carefully planned and scheduled to allow students adequate time and support or developing their professional skills and confidence. Students also emphasised the importance of purposeful adjustments to content volume, and student satisfaction appeared to be mediated by the extent to which the immersive block curriculum was enacted to achieve the goals of focused and guided learning (Roche et al., 2024). The learnings outlined in this paper can assist other institutions with managing and evaluating complex and transformative curriculum change and with understanding the challenges and benefits of immersive block learning in HE.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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