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Academic voices delivering intensive teaching in higher education: 'What is really key' for block model delivery?

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ABSTRACT

This research addresses a significant literature gap by investigating academic perceptions of delivering intensive teaching in higher education, contextualised to Victoria University's (VU) Block Model[®]. Through semi-structured interviews with nine participants, qualitative data was gathered to examine the benefits and challenges of block model delivery. Thematic data analysis revealed three interrelated themes. Firstly, the intensive and focused elements of the design were perceived to impact student and staff experiences, apparent as demanding in preparation time yet beneficial for fostering active and in-depth learning. Secondly, reciprocal relationship building with teachers and students and between students was facilitated in the delivery mode, providing repeated interactions and opportunities for meaningful connections. Lastly, assessment practices were observed to shape learner-centred delivery towards a formative assessment programme, emphasising assessment for learning. Drawing upon current findings and literature, this paper highlights the complex dynamics inherent in intensive teaching and its potential for enhancing pedagogical practices in higher education.

KEYWORDS

Block model; intensive teaching; academics' experiences; tertiary education

Introduction

Intensive teaching is gaining prominence in tertiary education worldwide (Ambler et al., 2021; Davies, 2006). Intensive delivery formats and terminology vary considerably (Burton & Nesbit, 2008), including time-shortened courses (Daniel, 2000), block courses (Burton & Nesbit, 2008), VU Block Model[®] (Loton et al., 2022), and compressed courses (Kops, 2014). This diversity highlights the various approaches internationally (see for e.g. Konjarski et al., 2023), with intensive delivery modes emphasising condensed, concentrated bursts of time (Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020; Samarawickrema et al., 2020), contrasting with traditional courses meeting once weekly throughout a semester. In this paper, block model delivery refers to focusing on one unit of study at a time, allowing students full immersion in the content without competing units.

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International interest in intensive delivery modes has strengthened due to the fact that students are often studying part-time, balancing the demands of work, family life and study, and typically do not find traditional courses convenient or attractive (Davies, 2006). There is an increased number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, first in family or non-traditional learners attending university (Goode et al., 2023; Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021), hence the need for the sector to rethink teaching and learning practices and models in order to retain students and ensure engagement and attainment (Dixon & O’Gorman, 2020). The preference of part-time and/or working students for more flexible modes of delivery means that intensive teaching has become increasingly common (Burton & Nesbit, 2008; Chau et al., 2023). Intensive delivery modes are one approach that, ‘may offer a better fit with students’ learning needs’ (Harvey et al., 2017, p. 316).

Much of the literature compares traditional teaching with intensive teaching. Most studies report that students perform equally well or better in intensive teaching (Austin & Gustafson, 2006; Daniel, 2000; Davies, 2006). For instance, research revealed that intensive teaching led to similar, or clear improvements in a range of measures of interaction, student commitment, and academic performance (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022; Daniel, 2000; McCluskey et al., 2019). Yet, limitations in this research body include small sample sizes, limited consideration of other achievement and demographic factors influencing student performance, and constraints in how studies measure learning (Austin & Gustafson, 2006; Buck & Tyrrell, 2022). There is a need for more empirical studies focusing on intensive teaching, particularly in understanding academic perceptions of teaching in intensive ways.

While previous research has focused on student reception of intensive teaching, little attention has been given to its impact on the educators themselves (Burton & Nesbit, 2008; Grant, 2001; Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021; Winchester et al., 2021). Studies indicate that academics new to intensive teaching require adequate preparation due to its demanding nature, including intensive pre-teaching preparation such as developing lectures, materials and organising logistics (Grant, 2001). While intensive teaching enhances time management skills among academics (Dixon & O’Gorman, 2020), challenges include constraints of time for providing effective feedback following assessments (Sewagegn & Diale, 2021). Intensive teaching, which involves small group interactive workshops replacing large lectures, requires academics to implement active learning practices (Chau et al., 2023). However, there is a significant gap in understanding academics’ perceptions and values towards these pedagogical methods (Dixon & O’Gorman, 2020; Grant, 2001; Sewagegn & Diale, 2021). This study addresses this need by examining academics’ experiences in intensive higher education programmes within the field of education at Victoria University (VU).

The VU Block Model®

In 2018, as part of a first year educational reform agenda, VU introduced the VU Block Model®, replacing the conventional 12-week semesterized lecture format with an immersive, one-course-at-a-time approach, aiming to enhance student engagement, satisfaction, academic outcomes, retention rates, and promote lifelong learning (McCluskey et al., 2020). Considering its success, the entire institution transitioned to intensive delivery in the years following. The rationale for the delivery shift to block mode was driven by the

desire to 'reform the commencing student experience' (Ambler et al., 2021, p. 534) and increase opportunities for success by reducing the complexity of study (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). The fixed timetable offers students greater flexibility and accommodates their complex lives such as work and family responsibilities (Muscat & Thomas, 2023).

The VU Block Model® is characterised by an approach to learning and teaching that collapses the traditional lecture style deliveries of passive transmission of knowledge and instead views the student as an active co-creator in learning and knowledge creation (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). Learning experiences are 'student-centered, active, and engaging' underpinned by a social constructivist view of learning (McCluskey et al., 2019, p. 10). The small class sizes allow for participatory learning and teaching approaches with the specific application of pedagogies of engagement and active learning.

Early implementation evidence indicates that VU Block Model® has heightened student engagement, performance and satisfaction (Loton et al., 2022; McCluskey et al., 2019, 2020; Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). While it is encouraging to see a growing body of literature examining student outcomes, retention, and attrition within the context of block teaching, it is important to acknowledge that there are other influential variables that warrant exploration. Factors like academic performance, demographic characteristics, and personal motivations may interplay with the observed outcomes. Moreover, the empirical foundation supporting pedagogical underpinnings of this delivery mode is still evolving and developing to provide a further robust framework for institutions. In addition to student-centred focused research, it is worth noting that there is minimal research examining the experience of university educators' perspectives of block teaching (Muscat & Thomas, 2023). Oraison et al. (2023) note the primary challenges of staff workload, assessment evaluation and feedback turn around, and iterative updating of the Learning Management System, highlighting the need for further research to understand academics' experiences and perspectives in teaching block mode deliveries, to progress best practices (Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020) and provide the basis for further research and refinement of block mode learning and teaching.

This research addresses the question: What are higher education educators' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of block mode delivery? This study aims to explore academics' viewpoints, focusing specifically on the VU Block Model®, as a distinct form of intensive teaching environment, as the context for this investigation.

Method

This research employed a qualitative approach situated within social constructivist views (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were used to delve into academic participants' perspectives and experiences of teaching in the VU Block Model®. The research sought to investigate individuals involved at the 'ground level' of implementation and instruction of the model – views underrepresented in the literature.

Sample

An invitation email was sent to 31 academic staff teaching in the education discipline. These academics plan, teach and assess in the Initial Teacher Education courses at VU. Most participants had between 5 and more than 20 years of experience teaching in higher

education, in both traditional semester and block model formats, with the exception of one participant who had taught only in VU's Block Model® for one year. To maintain confidentiality, specific details about individuals have intentionally been omitted as these participants are from a small department at the university.

Ethical approval was granted by Victoria University Low Risk Human Ethics Committee (HRE23–060). To mitigate potential risks to participation, the research objectives were thoroughly explained to participants, including their rights to withdraw from the study and the procedures in place to maintain confidentiality. Written consent was obtained from all participants.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews, 30–50 minutes in duration, were conducted over the Zoom videoconference platform and voice recorded with participants' permission. Acknowledging data collection limitations, videoconferencing was chosen for its convenience and benefits for research participation (Gray et al., 2020). Questions pertaining to participants' experience in VU's Block Model® teaching, the alignment with pedagogical values, strategies for student engagement, examples of successful learning experiences, and challenges faced and addressed were asked.

Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis methods outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022) that incorporated rigorous and systematic procedures were implemented. After familiarisation reading, utilising both inductive and deductive orientations, researchers independently created open codes on two participant transcriptions, then met to discuss initial ideas and relationships between codes. This process was repeated with other transcriptions, refining codes collaboratively. The research team regularly met to systematically organise and re-organise codes into meaningful themes. Once consensus was reached, three researchers conducted inter-rater reliability to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the coding process by cross-checking independently coded transcripts. Themes are presented in the findings below.

Findings

Data analysis revealed interconnected themes that centred on the benefits and challenges of the intense and focused elements of VU's Block Model®, relational aspects of teaching, and assessment. These themes were woven together by the overarching structural framework of how time was managed and utilised within the higher education delivery model.

Intensive and focused

The facets of intensive and focused learning and teaching were closely interconnected and interrelated. This concept of intensity manifested in several ways, with academics discussing the necessary concentrated effort and engagement as required

from both educators and learners during a 'block' or unit, and equally across the semester. Whilst the term 'intensity' implied a high level of consistent workload or pressure for some, the data also revealed nuances in how academics perceived and experienced this intensity as demanding yet also beneficial on the learning experiences for students.

According to the academics, the functional aspect of singularly focusing on one unit at a time offered valuable opportunities for in-depth exploration of intricate content, devoid of any concurrent distractions from other competing topics or assessments. Nonetheless, the dichotomous nature of this approach necessitated thoughtful consideration to ensure that students effectively established meaningful interconnections between the concepts learned across various units:

I do like [VU's Block Model ®] in many ways, because I think depth is always so important. And when you have too many things you're focusing on, I wonder. . . thinking wise, how much are the students able to really dive into something. But I think the thing that is then important to do in the block model is the connection aspect, because that's also how you get the depth not just by focusing on that one particular thing only, but by making connections across [units]. (P3)

The benefit of intense focus for academics included efficient use of their instructional and preparation time. Through being able to focus on one unit at a time themselves, the continuity and sustained focus on a single unit enhanced the sustained attention and preparation of that unit:

... it's more focused. So rather than preparing for four subjects, four different things, and then, you know, you get a bit you get a bit lost in that, I think ... (P9)

Conversely, the perceived time allocated for preparation posed a challenge for some, particularly for a less experienced academic:

The preparation for yourself is very intense. (P2)

The institutional wide adoption of VU's Block Model® created possibilities of unit redesign, allowing for the redevelopment of course curriculum to optimise and refresh learning experiences. One academic articulated their belief that the adoption of this model led to more profound learning outcomes, potentially attributable to the synergistic interplay of purposeful design and deliberate efforts invested in the course redevelopment process:

I feel that we can really build on [the curriculum] and really deliver it to the quality we hope it to be. And I feel that the two-hour [class] every week was more like skimming. And so, we can go a little bit deeper. . . I don't know if that's actually block itself, or whether it's just because that's how we, we shifted. (P9)

Three academics articulated the focused nature of the model associated with the phenomenon of co-creating knowledge, which represented a movement from the traditional role of the lecturer as the sole source of information. Instead, emphasising a shift towards students playing an active role in learning:

... I guess that [co-creation of learning] happens more in block. . .than it did in the in the in the other ways, mainly because you do have a quite intense time. Where the squishing in of the intensity of the three or four weeks does make that that sort of ... happen, I think, more effectively than it did in the 12 weeks. (P6)

The challenge posed by the intensity of classes was attributed to perceived time constraints. Although the duration of Block classes was longer, academic reflections turned to the time intervals between successive sessions. A few academics ($n = 3$) suggested that the compressed nature of the scheduling led to a reduction in academic rigour. One academic accredited less rigour to *'the intensity and the lack of time between the between classes to digest anything'* (P1). The inadequacy of the time available for students to engage in pre-class tasks and consolidation study between consecutive classes was seen as challenging:

... in the block model is obviously much more intense and focused. And so, it's completely... changed my thinking around, okay, what is really key? Obviously, now in the lesson, I'm seeing them only in two days' time... are they going to have time to digest that, apply it, you know, make connections to other things? Or are we going to have to spend a bit more time unpacking it and helping them to digest it? (P3)

The theme of intensity also interplayed with student circumstances within their block model study. A few academics discussed the student cohort with additional responsibilities, such as work, childcare or other commitments requiring them to manage multiple demands together with their studies:

...I think there is the flexibility that's needed to understand that it's not just intensity in the university, the students also have intensity in terms of trying to juggle work around times, and their children around times. (P5)

Academics experienced intensive and focused elements of learning and teaching within VU's Block Model[®]. This intensity emerged from heightened perceptions of effort expended by students and academics, spanning across and within academic units. Notably, compressed elements of time prompted thoughts regarding limited time between classes for both student and academic preparation. Nevertheless, the specialised structure of this delivery approach facilitated opportunities for in-depth exploration of content, thereby affording avenues for active learning experiences and a transition towards pedagogical practices centred around learner-oriented approaches.

Reciprocal relationship building with and between students

Eight academics spoke about relational aspects of fostering connections with their students as important to enhancing learning. This was considered important in any delivery mode (semester or block) but considered more easily to facilitate within VU's Block Model[®] due to more frequent interactions together:

we're talking nine hours a week. So, I guess that increased time together does allow that to take place. (P5)

The benefit of the more frequent interactions and increased time together is the opportunity to rapidly build teacher-student relationships. Building relationships involved establishing meaningful teacher-student connections to allow academics to get to know students on a personal level to foster rapport and respect. Additionally, academics discussed building relationships through tailoring their teaching to the needs of their students:

...you do get to know the students a lot better, because you see them all the time...you know what challenges they might have or what they might thrive in, that sort of thing. (P5)

This was also highlighted by academics with repeated interaction with students across multiple blocks:

I feel that the good thing is now with [teaching them across two blocks], I can create a better relationship with the students. And I feel that I'm in a better opportunity to scaffold them. (P2)

Academics reported that the opportunity to establish strong relationships with students within VU's Block Model® also had a positive impact in terms of the quality of teaching and the development of more formative assessment, the latter of which enhances students' understanding of where they are in their learning:

I actually find that the quality of teaching is better... you can, you know, create a great rapport with most students... you can get their nuances... therefore, you can, you know, adapt your pedagogy while you're teaching. (P9)

The importance of building peer relationships and networking was also highlighted by academics ($n = 3$). Opportunities for students to develop strong connections with each other, deep meaningful discussions and feeling a sense of community and belonging within the class was crucial:

... [students] really got to know each other, they loved coming to class, to connect with each other, and they loved the discussions. (P7)

One academic acknowledged the consequence of their commitment to creating this sense of belonging through being approachable. Due to their open-door policy, their workload was increased due to their perceived teaching responsibilities and obligations:

... my constant focus is that it's a safe classroom, where there's a sense of belonging, and they can contact me whenever they like about anything they like, but as a result, they do [participant laughs]. And what that means is that there's a lot of cognitive load around duty of care and that sort of stuff that comes with the intensity of the Block Model. (P4)

Conversely to the views of most, one academic expressed concern about the reduced time they had to establish meaningful connections with students in the intense mode, where the interaction with students is only for short periods and this becomes challenging to even remember students' names throughout the unit duration:

But now as we go into the block model, I see [my] students for three weeks, I'm lucky if I've learned their name for the whole class. That's the reality... So, that relationship building is not as good. It's not the same quality as we had before. (P8)

Assessment shaping learner-centred delivery

Academics' discussions of VU's Block Model® delivery shifted towards focusing on various aspects of assessment. Several academics ($n = 4$) highlighted that the structure of VU's Block Model® was crucial to shaping the assessment methods and overall assessment strategies adopted by academics in developing assessment programmes. They noted that the VU Block Model® structure has led to an increased emphasis on assessment.

The VU Block Model's® structure necessitates tight deadlines for students to complete their assessments. As students are required to complete assessments almost every week, or in some cases, every week, frequent assessments place heightened academic demands on both students and academics:

I think the actual block model dictates what we can do, how we can assess, because it all has to be turned around [quickly] ... (P7)

You're constantly thinking about assessments, and the students are constantly thinking about assessments as well... because they've always got an assessment coming up. (P8)

Students require time to prepare for and complete assessments, while academics are likewise compelled to allocate sufficient time to evaluate and provide feedback to these assessments regularly. As a result, assessments were restructured and redesigned to accommodate these requirements. Academics perceived this redesign through a multifaceted lens, acknowledging both positive and negative aspects. Some academics highlighted the positive aspects of the redesign, which presented opportunities to move away from conventional assessment methods, such as traditional lengthy essays. They connected with the opportunity to embrace more dynamic and participatory learning approaches, include elements of differentiation, and implement authentic assessments:

[The assessment is] not just a piece of academic research they have to do, which they're never going to refer to again, it's something which is directly relevant. All three of [the assessments] are directly relevant to what they're going to be doing ... I think authenticity is really important. (P8)

One academic emphasised the shift towards a more formative approach to assessment design, where assessments are viewed not merely as evaluative measures but also as integral components of the learning process, as with 'assessment as learning' designs:

...I think we've moved away from that [summative assessment] in a big way in the units that we have now. So that what we do is, we make, you know, 'assessment as learning'. And so that everything is leading towards the assessment tasks. (P6)

Many academics ($n = 7$) discussed this strong linkage between assessments and learning in the class. Notably, one academic asserted their near inseparability, as an intentional element of design, which serves as a motivating factor for students to attend class regularly:

I make a very strong connection between the assessments and the learning in class, they are almost inseparable, and that kind of motivates students to come to class because otherwise they don't. What I've noticed in the block mode that was different than the teaching in semester mode is that the tension [is] almost completely diverted to assessments. (P1)

Assessment is prioritised as key markers of progress and learning, serving as pivotal checkpoints that occur more frequently and with shorter intervals between them in the delivery model.

The majority of the academics ($n = 6$) highlighted the considerable challenges involved in providing timely and comprehensive feedback to students within the block model timeline. For some, the constraints imposed by the shortened duration of the unit make it difficult to respond promptly to students' inquiries and concerns. For others, the limitations on available time also made it difficult to provide extensive feedback, which created

tensions with their teaching philosophies and deepened the sense of intensity in the delivery:

It's so hard to get responses back to students . . . So, feedback is hard. . . but feedback is always hard. . . And in the end, some of them are indifferent to the feedback anyway. All they want is a mark. (P6)

One academic was particularly concerned about the effectiveness of the evaluation and feedback process, suggesting the condensed timeframe may compromise the quality and consistency of evaluation:

we don't have the time for due diligence in terms of marking things and we accept mediocrity a little bit too easily in terms of some of the assessments that are provided.(P4)

Two academics were concerned that the assessment redesign had reduced the cognitive complexity and academic rigour of assessment tasks. Despite these views, three other academics advocated for the opportunities for scaffolded support in assessment due to the longer class durations. According to their viewpoint, the extended period permitted them to dedicate more time to address student inquiries, foster class discussions, and implement activities that progressively supported and guided student learning, ultimately leading towards improved performance in assessments.

Discussion and conclusion

This study delves into the experiences of teaching academics engaged in an intensive delivery mode who are underrepresented in the research literature related to the efficacy of intensive delivery approaches (e.g. Ajayan & Balasubramanian, 2021; Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020; Oraison et al., 2023). The experiences of teaching in the intensive mode centred around key dimensions of the intense and focused nature of learning and teaching, relational aspects of teaching, and assessment, highlighting both opportunities and challenges.

Intensive teaching modes offer both possibilities and potential benefits, as well as certain obstacles. The inherent structure of this delivery mode involves engaging with a single sequential unit within a condensed time frame, which encourages immersive exploration of content. This focused approach cultivates an environment conducive to in-depth, enriching and active learning experiences (Male et al., 2016). This pedagogical shift towards intensified and focused learning experiences aligns with the trajectory of learner-centred education (Biggs & Tang, 2011). The academics discussed how the block structure enabled the creation of chances for thorough content exploration. This, in turn, provided pathways for engaging learning encounters and a shift towards teaching methods focused on the needs of the learners. According to the academics in this study, the combination of the intense and compressed structural elements of VU Block Model® gives functional design opportunities for dynamic learning experiences for these improved learning experiences to occur. Similarly, Daniel (2000) also proposed that student learning strategies within intensive modes of delivery undergo a shift towards more collaborative discussions, which was suggested to increase student motivation. Conversely, certain academics in this research also noted the dichotomous nature of design providing potential challenges for students to successfully link acquired concepts

across different units, highlighting concerns about content retention (Beudels et al., 2021).

The perceived intensiveness inherent in VU's Block Model[®] has generated concerns among some academics in this research regarding time constraints, leading to the observation that students may have insufficient opportunities for in-depth academic exploration. This perception has been linked to a perceived reduction in academic rigour (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022). It is noteworthy that previous research on intensive modes of delivery has suggested that the quality of education need not necessarily suffer due to the condensed format (e.g. Austin & Gustafson, 2006; Beudels et al., 2021; Daniel, 2000). Consequently, it appears that academics are primarily highlighting challenges related to the intervals between classes rather than the actual classroom hours. This perspective may offer insights into the importance of prioritising pedagogical techniques, alongside the need to review scheduling policies within institutional frameworks.

The current study established how relational approaches to learning and teaching are enhanced in block delivery. Academics in this research described how the immersive nature of block delivery strengthened students' sense of belonging. Extensive research has explored students' sense of belonging, describing the dynamic interplay between perceptions of environment and social interactions (Ahn & Davis, 2019), and emotional and behavioural engagement (Gillen O'Neel, 2021). Pedler et al. (2021) found that a strong sense of belonging promotes higher levels of academic engagement, increased motivation, and self-confidence. The VU Block Model[®] structure, facilitated through regular and extended classroom interactions and small class sizes, enabled students to establish strong social connections with peers and academic staff. Thus, this delivery mode enhances social bonding which creates connectedness, reducing feelings of isolation. These findings are consistent with Samarawickrema and Cleary's (2021) research on VU Block Model[®] whereby they articulate 'the "relentless welcome" experienced when commencing each Block, encouraged repeated commitment, further promoting engagement with study for all students' (p. 20). Gillen-O'Neel (2021) suggests a positive correlation between a strong sense of belonging and student retention. When students feel valued, included, and accepted they are more likely to engage and persist in their academic studies. A strong sense of belonging is attributed to enhanced attrition rates particularly for first year students and with student cohorts from disadvantaged backgrounds, first in family students, and NESB students (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). This is a salient point when considering VU's nontraditional student cohort.

In addition, academics in this research reported how the reciprocity in student-teacher relationships allowed for greater trust between teacher and student which in turn promoted dialogic classroom teaching. Findings of this research suggest student learning approaches shift towards more collaborative discussions (Daniel, 2000). Dialogic classroom interactions reduce teacher dominated classroom talk and promote more horizontal lines of communication involving learner to learner and learner to teacher dialogue. Syme et al. (2021) emphasise a correlation between dialogic approaches and critical thinking suggesting teachers and students 'engage in dialogue and work together to critique the world [and] co-create new understandings' (p. 3). Pedagogically, this affords a shift as the teacher becomes a facilitator or guide, removing the one-way dissemination of information to a dynamic exchange of knowledge and co-creation of ideas. The pedagogical focus is on promoting peer-to-peer

learning, encouraging active participation, and fostering a sense of shared responsibility for the learning process which are key pedagogical attributes underpinning immersive delivery.

The adoption of the intensive mode of delivery has been perceived by academics in this research as pivotal to shaping the assessment methods adopted in their programmes. This transition extends beyond the traditional forms of past assessment practices, towards more learner-centred and participatory assessment frameworks. It aligns with a broader trend in higher education, shifting from a mere evaluative perspective, known as 'assessment of learning', to actively supporting and enhancing the learning process, referred to as 'assessment for learning' and 'assessment as learning' (Torrance, 2007), which are extensively well researched (Schellekens et al., 2021). As posed by one academic in this research, 'assessment as learning' is focused on aligning assessment to learning, with the student developing their self-monitoring and self-regulation in assessment (Earl, 2014). This emphasis on student growth embraces assessment that is 'designed to focus students on learning' (Boud & Dochy, 2010, p. 2). Academics in this research highlighted their intentional assessment design, aimed to engage students in the learning process, fostering dynamic and active learning approaches that boost student motivation. These approaches included prioritising experiential, formative assessment design over summative, as well as applied, authentic assessment contexts.

The perception of assessment as a form of valuable educational currency, as perceived by some academics in this research, extends beyond intensive modes of delivery. Recognising the role of assessment in driving student learning (Bearman et al., 2016), existing literature underscores how assessment design can shape students' learning approaches and influence the quality and depth of learning through the adoption of surface or deep approaches (e.g. Boud, 1995; Boud & Molloy, 2013; Gibbs, 2006). Assessment can influence the allocation of students' time and effort, directing attention towards aspects emphasised for assessment purposes, and consequently determining students' learning direction and processes (Boud & Molloy, 2013). This 'backwash effect' of assessment determines and directs student learning, not necessarily by the curriculum's learning sequence (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Therefore, assessment practices in higher education can be a pivotal element of learning and teaching in any delivery mode.

The assessment framework of weekly evaluations was perceived by academics in this research to place increased demands on both students and academics, with Oraison et al. (2023) academics primarily concerned about the faster evaluation pace compared to traditional accustomed assessment programmes. The student demographic remains exceptionally diverse (Norton et al., 2018), including at VU (McCluskey et al., 2020), with additional responsibilities that they must manage concurrently with their academic commitments.

Academics in this research expressed concerns akin to those articulated in the existing literature, wherein escalating workloads have the potential to compromise the quality of feedback they provide (Bailey & Garner, 2010). As intensive modes can lead to increased costs without sufficient investment in institutional operation (Ho & Polonsky, 2009), recognising academics' perspectives on workload is important to consider as overwhelming work demands can impact other areas of their work (Hemer, 2014), possibly culminating in burnout (Sabagh et al., 2018). Therefore, supporting academics with appropriate systems and techniques within this rapid assessment programme is essential.

This research addresses a gap in intensive teaching research, emphasising academics' perspectives in delivering such approaches in higher education. Academics highlighted the focused nature of learning as a means for engaging learners, while expressing concerns about time constraints. Academics suggested that relational aspects of teaching were strengthened, and although the assessment programme offered continuous feedback opportunities, they experienced challenges due to the tight turnaround times. This research highlights the need for further exploration of academics' views and practices on supporting high quality learning and teaching in intense and block modes of delivery. Future studies could employ multiple data sources, such as observations of teaching practice, for a comprehensive understanding of these experiences. Additionally, expanding to examine multidisciplinary practices offers insights into distinct discipline needs and impacts on foundational content. Ultimately, this research advocates for a more nuanced understanding of academics' experiences in shaping effective learning and teaching practices within intense and block modes of delivery.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Melissah Thomas is a research fellow in the Institute for Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities (ISILC) and a senior lecturer in Education at Victoria University. Her research interests centre around pedagogy, curriculum and assessment in higher and teacher education, and social justice.

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