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The Library & Learning Commons in the Block

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At the University of Montana Western, the university has adopted the Library & Learning Commons model, which emphasizes connected, collaborative learning in a technology-rich environment. Since the Learning Commons model first appeared in the late 1990s, different universities have adopted this model with varying configurations (Blummer & Kenton, 2017). At UM Western the Library & Learning Commons includes three units: 1) The Library; 2) The Learning Center & Career Services offices; and 3) eLearning.

This relatively new campus initiative has sought to consolidate itself into a single unit under the following mission statement: The Library and Learning Commons embodies UMW's mission by supporting academic experiences, especially outside the classroom. We partner with faculty to foster the skills and knowledge that students need to become lifelong, independent learners so that they achieve academic and career success.

In our presentation, we will describe our work to integrate our individual units and then outline our long-term plans to develop programming, practice, and partnerships among our units and in cooperation with other stakeholders across campus. Our plans will use evidence-based literature, sample cases, and personal communication with staff at existing Library & Learning Commons at other institutions to articulate a plan that promotes students learning (DeFrain & Hong, 2020). A key question we will address is: How does our centralized department best meet the needs of students and help provide them with tools to thrive academically in the context of the block schedule (Holweiss et al., 2024). We expect to do a follow-up presentation in one or two years once we put these plans in practice and can gather assessment data.

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Pedagogy for Student Success in Block Teaching: Insights from Student Experiences in Information Technology Programs

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While evidence suggests improved success and equity outcomes in block teaching models (Roche et al., 2025), results in Information Technology (IT) disciplines remain mixed due to the high cognitive demands of integrating conceptual and practical learning (Mason et al., 2025). This study examines whether sustained improvements under an immersive block model arise from the delivery structure itself or from the pedagogical practices it enables.

The study investigates the impact of the six-week Southern Cross Model across undergraduate and postgraduate IT programs at an Australian university. It examines changes in student success, Grade Point Average (GPA) and satisfaction over three years of block delivery, while exploring how curriculum design and teaching practices influence engagement and learning experiences.

A convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) was employed to analyse data. Quantitative data (2019 vs. 2023 2025) were derived from institutional dashboards to show trends in success rates, GPA, and satisfaction. Qualitative data were collected via focus groups with both under- and post-graduate students and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Student success, GPA and satisfaction improved consistently following the implementation of the block model. Qualitative results revealed three pedagogical mechanisms supporting effective learning: (1) reduced cognitive fragmentation enabling deeper focus and retention, (2) authentic and industry-relevant curriculum increasing motivation, and (3) teacher clarity and timely feedback sustaining learning momentum and engagement. However, conceptually demanding subjects required additional scaffolding to support deeper rather than superficial learning.

The findings suggest that block delivery functions as a pedagogical amplifier with positive outcomes driven by curriculum alignment, authentic assessments and high-quality teaching rather than structural redesign alone. While grounded in IT education, these principles are transferable to other disciplines implementing block or intensive teaching, providing evidence-informed guidance for curriculum design and pedagogical practice that extends beyond the IT context.

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From Adoption to Inquiry: Critical AI Literacy on the Block Plan

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Generative AI has often entered higher education through the language of adoption, efficiency, academic integrity, and technological disruption. For faculty teaching in intensive block models, these frames can feel both urgent and insufficient, especially for instructors who are sceptical of AI use but committed to helping students understand the changing conditions of knowledge, communication, and judgment. This presentation describes an emerging institution-wide effort to connect Critical AI Literacy with Critical Language Inquiry as a developmental framework for block teaching.

The initiative defines language broadly: not only as written or spoken words, but as the systems of meaning-making through which knowledge, identity, authority, and power circulate, including symbolic, visual, and embodied forms such as music notation, computer code, visual composition, gesture, and movement. Within this framework, Critical AI Literacy is not primarily a matter of tool training. It becomes a pedagogical practice through which students and faculty examine how AI mediates meaning, reproduces or obscures values, and changes the work of interpretation across disciplines.

The presentation will focus on two linked practices: portable course modules that faculty can adapt for intensive teaching contexts, and faculty learning communities developed through workshops, reading groups, and reflective course design. Emerging qualitative evidence from faculty conversations, reading group reflections, and early course and module designs suggests that this approach helps participants move beyond the binary of AI adoption versus prohibition. Instead, faculty begin to identify where language, power, mediation, and disciplinary judgment are already central to their courses.

The presentation contributes a transferable model for intensive-mode institutions seeking to respond to generative AI not through technical training alone, but through sustained attention to language, interpretation, faculty development, and student-centred inquiry.

Enhancing the Block: Findings from a Participant Research Workshop

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The researchers hosted a participant-research workshop at IBILTA 2025 that was designed to collaboratively and reflectively address key challenges in block teaching through an action-research approach (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Simms, 2013). This research forms a timely addition to scholarly understanding and sector support as more institutions turn to a block model. An active participant-led exploration (Hu, 2024; Ødegaard et al, 2023) was conducted through individual and group tasks that involved sharing experiences of block teaching. Workshop activities followed the participatory-envisioned process detailed by Chubb and Fouch involving (1) sharing narratives, (2) identifying patterns, and (3) envisioning preferred futures (2026).

Participants recorded their rankings of challenges and benefits of block teaching in a pre-workshop MCQ survey. In the session, they worked in small groups to share their most significant challenge before taking part in a task to create a vision-linked solution. Following the workshop conclusion, a post-workshop survey repeated the ranking task to see if participants' views had shifted in response to the discussion. Materials used in the session (such as sticky-notes and poster presentations) were qualitatively explored by themes relating to student and staff experience.

This interactive workshop will cover the findings of the research, including sharing the solutions that were collectively discussed during the session to enhance staff support, student experience and the overcoming of structural or logistical issues. It will also provide space for participants to contribute their perspectives and suggestions regarding delivering in block. The content of the session will be valuable to other institutions considering a move to intensive or block teaching, while the solutions that participants identified support the sharing of innovation and best practice amongst those already engaged with alternative methods of delivery.

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HIPs Don't Lie: Undergraduate Research in the Humanities

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Used largely by colleges and universities in the U.S., high impact practices (HIPs) have become increasingly popular tools to increase student retention and graduation rates (Kuh, 2008). The University of Montana Western (UMW) uses several HIPs such as learning communities, collaborative assignments, and service learning.

One HIP I use is undergraduate research, but because I teach literature, I have few published pedagogical models to follow. Researchers Kistner, et al. had difficulty finding undergraduate research that isn't STEM-related, but did eventually find that students who participated in undergraduate research in the Humanities made significant gains in critical thinking/problem solving, professionalism/work ethic, and oral/written communication [which] corresponds to three of the four most critical skill areas sought by employers (Kistner et al., 2021).

In this presentation, I will describe the undergraduate research experiences of students in a literature class. While most literature students write essays as a final assessment, my students take an additional step by writing and submitting abstracts of their final essay to a real conference. Providing an authentic audience for their research gives students the same experience as scholars in the field.

A major difference for my students, however, is that they have much less time in which to research and write their essays. While an 18-day block intensifies the undergraduate research experience, it does not prohibit meaningful research. In fact, students have found the research experience to be rewarding because they had an authentic audience outside the classroom. And if HIPs outcomes don't lie, my students will be better situated by this experience for the remainder of their academic careers.

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Real-Time Research: Teaching, Traveling, and Completing a Dissertation Within a Block Model

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Block and intensive teaching models are growing in higher education. These models offer deep focus but also create challenges for faculty who must balance teaching, research, and service. Research on the scholarship of teaching and learning shows that integrating research into practice can strengthen both areas. However, little is written about completing major research projects while teaching full-time in a block system.

This presentation shares the experience of completing a doctoral dissertation while teaching in an intensive 18-day block format. One course was taught at a time for three hours daily. Alongside teaching responsibilities, qualitative research was conducted in district schools located 2.5 hours away. The study focused on teacher preparedness for autism inclusion in general education classrooms.

Data were collected through interviews with practicing teachers. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and analyzed using thematic analysis. Data collection occurred after teaching hours, often requiring late-night transcription and writing. Reflective journaling was also used to connect research insights with classroom practice. Strategies such as structured scheduling, focused writing periods, and integration of research topics into course discussions supported sustainability.

Findings from the study identified key themes related to teacher confidence, training gaps, and the need for ongoing professional development in inclusive practices. Integrating research and teaching strengthened course discussions, increased student engagement with real-world issues, and modelled reflective practice. The block structure supported deep concentration and immediate application of research findings.

This presentation demonstrates how block teaching can foster innovation in research, professional growth, and inclusive education. It contributes practical strategies for sustaining scholarship within intensive formats and advances understanding of how immersive models can enhance teaching, research integration, and student-centered learning.

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Interdisciplinary Integrative Research Projects on the Block (IIR Projects)

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Interdisciplinary integrative research is an important part of a student's experience in college and the block schedule is ideal for creating authentic interdisciplinary integrative research experiences (Thomas & Roberts, 2009). We will highlight an example of a successful interdisciplinary undergraduate research project integrated into the block schedule (Eason et al., 2023), and how giving students the responsibility and autonomy in their research experiences can lead to an interesting dynamic that causes the project to evolve in interesting and unexpected ways. Our interdisciplinary and integrative project was focused on investigating how individual worker behavior of the western harvester ant (*Pogonomyrmex occidentalis*) affects the ecosystem and involved professors from mathematics, environmental science, biology, and business. Professors involved in the project included appropriate level course-based research projects to involve students in authentic practices within the discipline being taught. This follows the mission of the University of Montana Western to involve students in an inquiry-based approach to multidisciplinary research (Hanson & Stultz, 2022; Huber, 2009; Humboldt, 1810).

Our project started simply with conducting pilot studies mapping the spatial pattern of active ant mounds, performing soil transects and ground surveys, and doing soil transects combined with monitoring soil moisture changes around mounds. Due to the intense nature of the block, we turned the autonomy of the project over to the students in our courses, meaning students suggest the new projects, curate and edit papers in the shared journal, and advanced students lead students in entry-level courses. Over the evolution of this interdisciplinary integrative project, students have actively engaged in the project and changed the direction of research in many and unexpected ways. In this workshop we will show how participants can create and maintain their own interdisciplinary research projects on the block schedule, and we will share what our journey has been.

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Fostering Creative Learning: Reimagining Block Teaching for Creative Thinking and Artificial Intelligence

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This presentation explores how intensive scheduling can provide a good basis for teaching creativity in a compressed education format. By integrating creativity pedagogy and artificial intelligence (AI) into the immersive structure of time-shortened scheduling, this approach can increase soft skill development, student engagement, and critical thinking and collaboration (Terry et al., 2008).

There is insufficient pedagogical research on how well AI can support student creative problem-solving within a compressed timetable (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). The future problem-solving approach was chosen for this work due to its focus on several steps of the creative process, including steps to select a problem, evaluate criteria, generate outcomes, rank ideas, and develop an action plan (Torrance & Torrance, 1978) for real-world problems. And, by aiding this problem-solving with tools such as AI, this process becomes even more productive (Urban et al., 2024).

The methodology chosen to assess the effectiveness of this teaching approach was qualitative. To undertake a structured thematic research-analysis, 22 semi-structured in-depth interviews with different instructors and students purposively sampled from local block colleges across different disciplines were conducted (Gray et al., 2007). In addition to the in-depth examination, the interviews were augmented by open-response questions. In this context, the presentation also features a brief, reflective exercise that allows session participants to integrate creative education in the context of AI into their own block course.

Preliminary pedagogical findings of this QDA-software-supported interview-analysis demonstrate that creative education can be successfully applied in a time-intensive setting in an AI context. Creative approaches, such as messy case scenarios, alternative use exercises, and divergent thinking assignments, were identified as the most effective tools.

The findings propose a scalable approach and tools for creative education that engage students and allow them to think critically, collaborate, and develop 21st century learning skills.

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Leveraging Block Scheduling for a Community Engaged Learning Experience

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Community Engaged Learning (CEL) allows students to utilize content knowledge, skills, and abilities to address community needs. Engagement in service-learning has been tied to enhanced attitudes toward learning and school and increased motivation, social skills, and academic performance (Celio et al., 2011; Maxwell et al., 2025). Students participating in CEL displayed higher civic awareness and engagement scores (Guanlao et al., 2025). The block scheduling model of the undergraduate institution is coupled with a focus on experiential learning opportunities, another high impact practice shown to improve learning outcomes (Maxwell et al., 2025).

During the spring semesters of 2025 and 2026 a total of 40 undergraduate Education and Kinesiology students provided approximately 70 local homeschool children ages prekindergarten through high school with weekly educational sessions. The flexibility of the institution's one-course-at-a-time block scheduling model allowed the CEL participation through multiple means including course required structured field experiences, supervised internship experiences, and volunteer service.

A mixed methods approach used an electronic survey of undergraduate student participants at completion of the CEL teaching experience and interviews of faculty and community partners to measure program outcomes. Students reported perceptions on key outcomes of Community Engaged Learning at the conclusion of their teaching experiences. Open-ended questions collected participant perceptions of growth in career readiness skills and personal development. Faculty and community partners noted student growth in teaching skills, appreciation of diverse viewpoints, and appreciation of civic engagement.

The creation of multiple routes for student engagement in the CEL project reflects the promise of block scheduling to allow flexibility for students and faculty to develop unique high impact learning experiences. Faculty were able to embed the CEL field experience opportunity within their courses allowing for guided reflection and self-assessment by students and opportunities to adjust subsequent instructional approaches. Additionally, interdisciplinary collaboration was essential to the development of the learning experience and contributed to the experiential nature of the project. Faculty across programs were able to participate alongside students thanks to the block scheduling model, providing strong examples of community engagement and collaboration.

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Artificial Intelligence in Intensive Learning and Teaching: A Multi-Disciplinary Exploration

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While artificial intelligence (AI) tools are increasingly integrated into semester-long university courses (Lodge et al., 2023), their application in intensive teaching and time-compressed formats remains underexplored (Onal & Kulavuz-Onal, 2024). This research examines how AI enhances both teaching and learning with technology in a time-compressed teaching environment known as a block, across four disciplines: mathematics, economics, business, and education. Consequently, this presentation aligns with the conference theme of enhancing learning, teaching, and student experience.

Instructors designed new assignments for students to engage with AI and then considered the results using the Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework (Koehler & Mishra, 2009) and the research question: In what ways is AI an effective tool for block teaching. After deploying the AI assignments, each instructor analyzed course artifacts, student feedback, and written notes to create narratives guided by the research question. Using a cross-case research design, all instructors conducted thematic analysis across the four cases, prioritizing detailed insights over broad quantitative measurement (Neuman, 2013).

Five key considerations for effective AI integration in block format courses emerged from the interdisciplinary cases: balancing AI capabilities with human expertise to maintain instructional quality; developing AI literacy through embedded training; personalizing learning experiences by leveraging AI's adaptive capabilities; establishing clear guidelines for responsible AI use; and fostering intellectual curiosity about AI's potential and limitations.

This exploratory study advances understanding of technology integration in block learning environments. It offers practical frameworks for faculty considering AI adoption and finds AI generally supportive of learning outcomes. This work extends the TPACK instructional design framework to block courses. These case studies allowed the instructors to enhance their teaching approaches with new technology, while also engaging learners with real-world examples of how AI may support their own learning.

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Transforming Postgraduate Learning Through the Block Model: A Reflective and Experiential Teaching Approach

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Victoria University's transition to the Block Model represents a significant pedagogical shift in Australian higher education, challenging traditional semester-based delivery structures and redefining student engagement. This model, initially implemented in undergraduate programs and later extended to postgraduate courses, is complemented by the adoption of flipped classroom strategies that promote active, student-centred learning (Bishop & Verleger, 2013).

This paper adopts a qualitative, reflective methodology drawing on classroom observation, experiential learning, and the lived teaching experiences of the author. Using a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), it explores how postgraduate students engage with business concepts through immersive, intensive study blocks and participatory classroom environments. The study highlights how structured curriculum design, aligned assessment practices, and interactive teaching strategies foster deeper learning and real-world application of knowledge.

The findings demonstrate that the Block Model, when combined with flipped learning and experiential pedagogies, enhances student engagement, supports cognitive integration of knowledge, and strengthens the development of higher-order thinking skills. These outcomes are consistent with experiential learning theory, which emphasises the role of reflection and active engagement in knowledge construction (Kolb, 1984), as well as constructivist learning principles that position students as active participants in their learning process (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Collectively, the findings suggest that innovative delivery models such as the Block Model can significantly improve student learning experiences and outcomes in postgraduate education.

The integration of these pedagogical principles within the Block Model highlights the value of immersive, student-centred learning environments in enhancing both cognitive and applied learning outcomes. The paper contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning by offering empirically grounded insights into the effectiveness of alternative delivery models in higher education. It provides practical implications for academics seeking to innovate in curriculum design, assessment alignment, and pedagogical practice, particularly in postgraduate contexts where applied and experiential learning are critical to student success.

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Rethinking Pathway Academic Calendars: Leveraging the Student Voice and Experience in an Immersive Block Model

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Immersive Block Models (IBMs) are increasingly adopted across higher education, yet evidence-based approaches to academic calendar design remain underdeveloped. Existing IBM research has largely focused on post-implementation outcomes, with limited attention to how students can act as partners in shaping institutional structures beyond curriculum and pedagogy. This study argues that student-partnered decision-making provides a valuable and underutilised mechanism for designing academic calendars that better balance learning, wellbeing, and operational objectives. By extending student partnership and co-creation principles into institutional planning, the study advances IBM scholarship beyond evaluations of educational outcomes to consider how students can inform strategic operational reform.

Using a mixed-methods design, the study was conducted at an Australian university-owned pathway college operating a mature IBM. An online survey distributed to all enrolled students generated 111 responses exploring perceptions of study load, term length, revision opportunities, and wellbeing. Survey findings informed semi-structured focus groups involving seven current and three former students. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were examined through Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Findings from both strands were integrated through a structured decision-making process linking student evidence directly to institutional calendar review.

Students expressed strong support for studying two units concurrently within an IBM but identified the existing six-week teaching term as cognitively demanding and challenging for wellbeing. More than half indicated that longer study periods or additional revision opportunities would improve academic performance, while almost half reported difficulties managing stress within the current structure. Rather than seeking additional teaching time, participants consistently preferred mid-term study breaks, extended revision periods, and longer inter-term vacations to support learning consolidation, recovery, and transition.

The study demonstrates that students can make substantive contributions to complex operational decisions traditionally reserved for institutional leaders, challenging assumptions about the limits of student participation. We present a replicable model in which institution-wide student feedback, qualitative co-interpretation of findings, and evidence-informed governance processes are systematically integrated to guide calendar redesign. The resulting reforms illustrate how student partnership can be operationalised in practice to achieve changes that are both educationally and organisationally sustainable. By providing a transferable framework for student-partnered institutional decision-making, this study offers actionable guidance for institutions seeking to refine IBM structures while strengthening student voice in higher education governance.

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Universal Design for Teaching: There is No Normal

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This lightening talk explores developing an information technology governance framework, the guidance developed to ensure that technology implementation meets an organization's goals and reflects its values. In 2022, the Montana University System began the process of instituting a single Learning Management System (LMS) across all 16 public institutions overseen by the Commissioner of Higher Education. Of those institutions, only the University of Montana Western follows a block schedule.

In 2024, the UMW staff implementing the new Canvas LMS quickly understood that developers create then executives sell educational technologies without consideration for anything but a traditional semester. Simple issues for other schools, like course availability dates, required thoughtful workarounds. Consequently, staff worked through not just the recommended decision points but also how we needed to adapt the LMS tools for a block schedule. Long-recognized scholarship informs us that technology adoption does not happen in a vacuum; instead, it is shaped by the institutional environment and individual instructor preferences (Reid, 2012). Moreover, research into technology governance in higher education has found that we should ensure that technology integration is both homogeneous and differentiated in a variety of ways (Frogeri et al., 2020; Sengik et al., 2022).

After a long career in higher education as a writing instructor, program coordinator, faculty development center director, and board member promoting Universal Design for Learning (UDL) UMW's instructional designer reached a remarkable conclusion that can assist other block schools in developing a technology governance framework: If UDL seeks to disrupt the idea of normal so that everyone is included in the learning experience (Fornauf & Erickson, 2020), then there will be no Universal Design for Learning until we have Universal Design for Teaching. For instructors to best utilize the technology we provide, then the block schedule must form the foundation of our IT governance plans.

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Enhancing Student Success in First-Year Chemistry through Modular, Scaffolded Learning Design: A Case Study

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The Diploma of Science transitioned from a traditional 13-week semester model to an intensive four-week block model. While block teaching is often considered challenging in STEM due to concerns about conceptual continuity and skill development, this case study examines its effectiveness in first-year chemistry within a deliberately scaffolded curriculum.

The Diploma comprises eight sequenced subjects. CHEM1013 (Essential Organic Chemistry), the fifth subject, builds on prior knowledge while preparing students for subsequent study. Although each subject can be completed independently, six STEM subjects include workshops and practical classes that progressively develop scientific knowledge, laboratory competence, and academic skills.

CHEM1013 was redesigned using a flipped classroom model supported by Pre-Learning Online Materials (PLOMs), active workshops, and practical classes that promoted active learning strategies and collaborative problem-solving (Bishop & Verleger, 2013; Freeman et al., 2014). The redesign was underpinned by constructive alignment, scaffolded assessment, formative feedback, and principles of effective block teaching (Biggs, 1996; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Thomas et al., 2025).

Official university records were analysed using descriptive statistics to compare student performance and engagement across traditional and block delivery. Measures included pass rates, grade distributions, attendance, assessment participation, and completion. Teacher observations and institutional attendance records provided contextual evidence of student engagement.

Subject content, learning outcomes, and practical classes remained consistent across delivery modes, while assessment tasks were redesigned to support the block model. Pass rates increased from 55% (T22025; n=83) in the traditional format to 81% (SB12025; n=108) and 92% (AB12026; n=36) across the first two block offerings. Grade distributions shifted towards higher achievement, while attendance, assessment completion, and workshop participation also improved.

These findings suggest that an intentionally designed, scaffolded block model embedded within a sequenced STEM curriculum can enhance student engagement and academic outcomes. The model provides a transferable framework for intensive STEM curriculum design.

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Modular Block Delivery in a Fully Online Foundation Pathway: A Pilot Study of Engagement and Attainment

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Block and modular modes of delivery have gained increasing recognition as effective pedagogical approaches in higher education, with evidence suggesting they can improve engagement, attendance, and attainment, particularly for students from diverse entry pathways (Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020; Loton et al., 2022). Research also indicates that blended and intensive delivery models can produce comparable or improved student outcomes relative to traditional semester-based formats (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022). However, the application of modular delivery in fully online environments, and specifically within open access foundation pathways programs, remains underexplored (Thomas et al., 2025). Roddy et al. (2017) highlight the distinct challenges and opportunities of intensive online learning environments, noting the critical importance of structured engagement and support. However, few studies have examined how modular block delivery can be operationalised effectively in this context.

Western Sydney University The College, a wholly owned not-for-profit pathway provider offering open access entry to university, piloted an online modular delivery model for a foundational literacy subject across a four-week intensive block. The model comprised two live synchronous sessions designed as reflective activities to guide students through their learning and assessment journey, supported by asynchronous teaching activities conducted primarily through discussion boards. Learning content was delivered via self-paced online modules, providing students with flexibility while maintaining structured engagement and connection.

Evidence was drawn from post-block reports and program evaluation data collected across the four-week delivery period. Quantitative measures included pass rates and weekly engagement rates across the cohort of 40 students.

Results were encouraging, with a pass rate of 94.8% and an average engagement rate of 93% across the four weeks of delivery. These outcomes compare favourably with face-to-face intensive models and suggest that modular delivery translates effectively to an online environment.

This initiative contributes to a growing body of evidence that modular delivery is not only viable but effective in online contexts. As one of the few known examples of a fully online modular delivery model within a foundation pathways program, it offers a replicable and scalable model for pathway providers seeking to expand access and flexibility for open access students without compromising outcomes.

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Teaching the Model by Living it: Transforming Academic Practice Through Professional Learning

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Across higher education, professional learning is often positioned as supportive rather than transformative, resulting in limited change to teaching practice (Ferman, 2002). At Victoria University, the introduction of the VU Block Model, where students engage in one unit at a time in an immersive format, disrupted this approach and required a fundamental shift in pedagogy (Konjarski et al., 2023). Teaching in this context demands high engagement strategies, strong educator and student relationships, and timely, responsive feedback. Research indicates that effective professional learning must be experiential, collaborative, and sustained (Bickerstaff & Cormier, 2015).

This paper examines the design and delivery of the VU Block Model Professional Learning Program, a whole of institution initiative developed to support this shift. The program is underpinned by the principle that educators learn best by experiencing the pedagogy themselves, aligning with experiential and practice based approaches to professional learning (Weldon & Konjarski, 2025). Through a six hour immersive induction and targeted two hour workshops, participants engage in high engagement, student centred learning that mirrors their teaching context. The program also builds community through shared experience, peer exchange, and reflective practice.

A mixed methods approach draws on survey data, workshop evaluations, and longitudinal research. Quantitative data identify patterns in participation and application, while qualitative data are analysed thematically to explore changes in educator confidence, identity, and practice.

Findings show increased educator confidence and a clear shift from content delivery to facilitation, alongside improved student engagement and strong institutional outcomes, including leading Student Experience Survey results. This work offers a scalable, practice based model for professional learning, demonstrating how immersive approaches can drive sustained pedagogical change (Konjarski & C-Scott, 2026).

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Graduate Studies in Block Teaching: Advancing Teaching in the VU Block Model

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At Victoria University, the transition to the VU Block Model highlighted a critical gap between existing academic development and the demands of immersive teaching. The Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Education, while effective in traditional semester-based contexts, did not meet the needs of academics teaching in an immersive model, lacking a focus on block pedagogy, high engagement teaching, and the relational, time compressed nature of learning. In response, the Graduate Certificate and Diploma in Block Teaching were developed as world first qualifications aligned specifically to this context, repositioning teaching as scholarly, practice-based work.

This poster presents the design and implementation of these qualifications as a purpose-built approach to advancing teaching practice. Grounded in principles of constructive alignment, experiential learning, and active engagement (Biggs, 2003; Bickerstaff & Cormier, 2015; Kolb, 2014), the programs require participants to design, implement, and critically evaluate their teaching within their own units. A defining feature is the integration of dialogic and reflective assessment, including viva voce, where educators articulate and defend pedagogical decisions, strengthening both academic rigour and reflective capability.

A mixed methods evaluation draws on participant feedback, enrolment and progression data, and qualitative insights from reflections and surveys. Findings indicate increased pedagogical clarity, confidence, and consistency across disciplines, with educators demonstrating a shift towards high engagement teaching and more intentional, evidence informed practice.

This work offers a scalable model for aligning graduate level professional learning with immersive delivery, demonstrating how structured, practice based qualifications can support sustained pedagogical change and enhance student learning in contemporary higher education.

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Pedagogy Under Pressure: Embedding Real-World Research in Block Teaching

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Block and intensive teaching models are often criticised for limiting opportunities for deep, scaffolded learning, particularly in research training (Burton & Nesbit, 2008; Davies, 2006). However, emerging scholarship challenges this assumption, demonstrating that carefully designed units can successfully embed authentic research within compressed delivery formats. In criminology, for example, grassroots, community-based research conducted beyond the classroom has been shown to support both student learning and meaningful crime prevention and social justice outcomes (Gill et al., 2024). When aligned with real-world contexts, such approaches enhance engagement, collaboration, and the development of applied research capabilities.

This presentation outlines the redesign of two final-year criminology units LCR3901 Crime Research and Methods and LCR3902 Research Project within a four-week block model, with particular emphasis on their community-engaged components. Central to the initiative is a student-led research project conducted in partnership with organisations such as CommUnity+; a community-led early intervention and crime prevention program in Melbourne's West. These partnerships enable students to engage directly with justice, restorative practice, and crime prevention efforts at the grassroots level. Working in cohort-based teams, students contribute to ongoing community initiatives, positioning them not merely as learners but as active researchers addressing real social issues. This collaboration fosters reciprocal value: students gain authentic research experience while community organisations benefit from evidence-informed insights and data-driven support.

Beyond the criminology context, LCR3901 and LCR3902 provide an adaptable exemplar for embedding research into block delivery across disciplines. The model demonstrates how scaffolded, real-world projects can be integrated into intensive formats by combining structured skill development with community or industry partnerships. A mixed-methods evaluation including focus groups, reflective assessments, and staff observations indicates enhanced student engagement, increased research confidence, and stronger connections between theory and practice. These findings suggest that block teaching need not compromise research depth; rather, with intentional design, it can support inclusive, student-centred, and practice-oriented learning. This approach offers a scalable framework for disciplines seeking to integrate authentic research experiences while strengthening community impact.

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Global Cultural Learning and Community Engagement through Hosting an International Festival in Rural Montana

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This presentation explores a student-organized cultural event implemented in EDU 311: Cultures, Diversity, and Ethics in Global Education. Grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) and Gay's Culturally Responsive Teaching (2018), the initiative engaged 15 preservice teachers in planning and implementing a campus- and community-wide International Festival in Dillon, Montana. Students took full responsibility for designing and executing key components, including cultural showcase stations, interactive workshops, and global food experiences, collaborating with campus organizations, local businesses, community partners, and an international partner (a museum in China).

In this rural, predominantly homogeneous region, the project offers future educators a rare opportunity to operationalize concepts of cultural diversity and inclusion in authentic community contexts. The festival serves as a pedagogical bridge, enabling preservice teachers to move beyond theoretical coursework and apply culturally responsive teaching strategies in a real-world and public setting. This experiential project is particularly valuable given that many of these future educators will likely teach in similar rural and culturally homogenous schools, where global awareness and intercultural competence are essential yet often underrepresented in the curriculum.

Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through multiple sources: students' reflective journals, post-event reflections, instructor observations, artifacts generated throughout the project, and semi-structured interviews with international festival shop owners, librarians, and other community stakeholders. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns in students' intercultural learning, professional growth, collaboration, leadership, and application skills. Findings also highlight implementation challenges, including logistical coordination, cultural representation, and cross-sector collaboration.

This model shifts preservice teachers from passive recipients of knowledge to active facilitators of global education, equipping them with practical skills in communication, project management, and culturally responsive pedagogy that are transferable to their future classrooms. This project contributes to teacher education scholarship by offering a reform-oriented approach to teaching multicultural and global education theories in rural contexts and how experiential, student-led and community-engaged initiatives can be used to prepare future educators to create inclusive, globally minded learning environments.

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Learning in One Place at a Time: Block Teaching, Belonging, and Inclusive Practice in Foundation Education

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This poster presents a practice-based, reflective inquiry into block and intensive modes of teaching within a Foundation (Year 0) programme in UK higher education. Framed by neurodiversity-informed and ethics-of-care perspectives, the poster considers curriculum structure not simply as a timetabling model but as a pedagogical and ethical organisation of educational time. Drawing on my experience as a dyslexic educator with hyperacusis, and as a programme lead overseeing a curriculum that combines block and concurrent module delivery, the poster explores how different temporal structures shape student engagement, confidence, and approaches to learning.

Rather than reporting formal empirical data, the work brings lived experience, sustained professional observation, and reflective practice into dialogue with scholarship on student belonging (Thomas, 2012), relationship-rich education (Felten et al., 2023), deep and surface learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011), and inclusive design informed by neurodiversity and disability perspectives (Botha et al., 2024; Wilkinson & Merry, 2024). Particular attention is given to how block teaching can reduce cognitive overload, support continuity of relationships, and create conditions for depth, reflection, and community-building, conditions that appear especially significant for students entering higher education with uneven educational histories, neurodivergent profiles, or low academic confidence.

The poster contrasts observed patterns across semesters in which students move from block-based learning to managing multiple concurrent modules. These observations suggest that concurrent delivery can increase fragmentation, anxiety, and surface-level engagement, while block teaching supports focus, participation, and a stronger sense of belonging. The poster argues that block teaching should be understood not simply as a timetabling model, but as an ethical pedagogical choice that communicates institutional values about time, care, and learning.

By foregrounding the affective and relational dimensions of curriculum structure, this poster contributes to ongoing conversations about inclusive, student-centred learning. It invites educators to consider how structural decisions, rather than learner deficit, shape engagement, persistence, and the student experience in Foundation education and beyond.

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Cognitive Load Optimization – Creating the Provably Most Efficient, Easiest and Fastest Learning Paths and Answering the Question: What is the Role of a Teacher in an AI World

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Education is predominantly based on educational theories such as Constructivism, Cognitive Load Theory, Brain Science, etc., which are well-established and easy to use. However, they are all qualitatively based with subjective guidelines that are open to interpretation that can and do result in wide variations in the quality of learning outcomes.

The US National Science Foundation established the Science of Learning (SoL) agenda with a goal optimized learning for all. Optimization is a quantitative method. SoL centres were established globally.

The Australian Science of Learning Research Centre was a national collaborative network of seven Australian universities and several Australian organisations partnered with international universities. Total Australian funding was \$16 million with international co-contributions the total value of the initiative exceeded \$50 million.

Most SoL centres have ceased operation without solving the optimization problem. The Australian SLRC concluded operation with twelve, qualitative PEN principles Psychology, Education and Neuroscience e.g. PEN principle #11 Find the story behind the facts.

The optimization problem has been solved by parsimony principles creating most efficient, easiest and fastest learning paths seamlessly, pedagogically scalable from school to university and resulting in significant improvements in learning outcomes. However, the development of instructional materials remains time consuming arguably best suited to AI automated tools.

In Magic School AI, the AI is responsible for 80% of the "tedious" work (drafting, formatting), the educator provides the final 20% based on professional judgment. In effect Magic School is a tool, not an educational theory as judgement depends on the skill of the educator guided by qualitative educational theories. Magic School AI can retrospectively employ parsimonious instructional design analysis. However, the output requires specialist knowledge of parsimony. and lacks quantitative results validation. This problem is solved by inputting the optimized learning paths into Magic School i.e. optimised instructional design, AI implemented

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‘It’s Not That Deep’: A Framework for Mitigating Assessment-related Anxiety in Tertiary Classrooms

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Assessment-related anxiety is a persistent and often debilitating barrier to student success, with university students becoming increasingly susceptible to mental health issues that are linked to university-related stressors, including assessment (Pascoe, Hetrick, & Parker, 2020; Knapp et al., 2024). This presentation introduces It’s Not That Deep, a practical, trauma-informed framework for mitigating assessment anxiety in higher education.

This framework has been developed by a neurodivergent academic, based on lived experience throughout her own studies and teaching journey (Vicars, Arantes, & Mihailidis, 2026). The framework integrates three interrelated strategies: the Cut Up the Steak method, which scaffolds assessment tasks into manageable parts; the Fine Tooth Comb method, which promotes transparency through detailed unpacking of rubrics and expectations; and the titular It’s Not That Deep method, which offers students a cognitive reframing tool to counter anxiety spirals. Together, these strategies foster positive learning environments and resilience in tertiary education students; this increases academic motivation, which improves self-efficacy and student learning at university level (Chow & Wong, 2020; Bartimore-Aufflick et al., 2016). This framework cultivates an assessment culture that supports university students to meaningfully engage with assessment, without being paralysed by fear of failure.

This framework aims to support tertiary education students by offering multiple layers of support and fostering self-efficacy in students through cultivating positive learning environments (Chow & Wong, 2020). The framework has been delivered to over 10 separate classes across Diploma, undergraduate, and postgraduate spaces; deliverable content has varied between specialisation studies for Junior & Senior Secondary. Classes have ranged in size between 15-35 students and have consisted of at least two summative assessments which have been delivered to students through the framework. Observation of student’s improved attitudes towards assessment throughout units, as well as an increase in average class scores, suggest the success in the delivery of the framework. Further studies would be implementation within alternate tertiary study spaces outside of Education, to perceive the applicability of the framework in different contexts.

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Critical and Inclusive Storytelling: Engaging Lived Experience in Intensive Social Work Education

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The adoption of neurodiversity-affirming and trauma-informed pedagogies within intensive first-year block teaching models addresses critical gaps in higher education's responsiveness to diverse learner needs. Neurodiversity-affirming approaches recognise the varied cognitive and sensory processing styles of students, promoting flexibility and relational engagement that accommodate neurodivergent learners (Clouder et al., 2020). In block models, characterised by compressed timeframes, such flexibility becomes both more challenging and more essential, as teaching must balance immersion with accessibility and inclusion without overwhelming students.

Trauma-informed pedagogy complements this by foregrounding safety, trust, and empowerment in the classroom, attending carefully to the emotional and psychological impacts of learning environments. Storytelling practices, widely used in social work education to engage with lived experience and epistemic plurality (Hooks, 1994; Nakata, 2007), offer a potent means to enact these approaches.

However, these narrative methods raise ethical tensions, particularly regarding risks of coercive self-disclosure and narrative extraction; issues that are especially salient for neurodivergent and trauma-affected students who may experience vulnerability differently (Adams et al., 2015). Uneven participation observed in block teaching settings underscores the need for trauma-informed safeguards and neurodiversity-sensitive design, including offering non-disclosive participation options and fostering environments where multiple ways of knowing are valued equally.

By integrating neurodiversity-affirming and trauma-informed principles into block pedagogy, educators can better navigate power dynamics and epistemic justice within compressed curricula. This requires iterative curriculum design informed by inclusive, critical, and decolonising frameworks that examine not only participation and accessibility but also the ethical implications of relational storytelling. These approaches contribute to creating socially just and accessible intensive learning environments that honour diverse student identities and experiences.

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Teaching Under Pressure: Pedagogic Judgement in Block-Based Learning

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Block teaching is often framed as a structural innovation; however, research suggests it fundamentally reshapes pedagogic practice by compressing time, feedback cycles, and opportunities for adjustment (Davies, 2006). While intensive teaching models are associated with increased focus and immersion, there remains limited attention to how educators make decisions within these constrained conditions. This presentation addresses that gap by positioning pedagogic judgement as central to effective teaching in block-based contexts, extending the TPACK framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006).

The presentation draws on research on institutional practice from a large-scale implementation of block teaching, examining how educators design, interpret, and intervene within accelerated learning cycles. The research included structured guided learning design, the use of VLE-based engagement analytics, and targeted early-cycle interventions to support student continuation. This work is informed by research on learning analytics and student engagement (Gašević et al., 2015; Siemens, 2013), alongside established perspectives on assessment and feedback as central to learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2007).

A mixed, practice-based approach was adopted. Data sources included engagement analytics (early access patterns within the first three weeks), student feedback (pulse surveys and in-class response tools), module-level outcomes (engagement and continuation indicators), and reflective accounts from teaching staff. Analysis focused on identifying patterns in key decision points when and how educators adjusted teaching, assessment, and support in response to emerging signals. Findings indicate that effectiveness in block teaching is closely tied to the timing and quality of pedagogic decisions, particularly in early-stage intervention and assessment design. Standardised approaches supported consistency but were insufficient for adaptive practice. The presentation contributes a practice-informed framework for pedagogic judgement literacies and argues for a shift toward scenario-based, data-informed professional development. It offers actionable insights for curriculum design and staff development within intensive teaching models.

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Enhancing Student Experience through AI-Generated Podcasts in the Southern Cross Model: A Case Study of a Flexible Microlearning Approach

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Student engagement remains a concern in higher education, particularly in digital and flexible learning environments (De Bruijn-Smolters & Prinsen, 2024). This is evident within the Southern Cross Model (SCM), an immersive block model where compressed timeframes require timely, accessible resources to support learning and assessment preparation (Roche et al., 2024).

This study explores how AI-generated podcasts enhance student experience, support flexible microlearning, and improve engagement within the SCM. Although recognised as flexible tools, podcasts are primarily used as supplementary rather than structured learning approaches (Gunderson & Cumming, 2023).

This exploratory case study was conducted across two hospitality units over four teaching terms. AI-generated podcasts were developed using NotebookLM and implemented in a multi-format design including unit overviews, weekly summaries, and assessment snapshots to support orientation, reinforce key concepts, and guide assessment preparation. The design drew on microlearning principles (Monib et al., 2024).

Data collection is ongoing; to date, an online survey (n = 15) and semi-structured interviews (n = 3) have been analysed using an exploratory thematic approach, with preliminary analysis completed while further data collection continues. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the small interview sample, findings are reported as preliminary insights rather than definitive themes (Yazan, 2015).

Findings indicate improved understanding of key concepts and clearer identification of main ideas. Survey results show that 67% of students reported improved understanding. Assessment preparation and practical examples were among the most frequently identified benefits, selected by 44% of respondents. Interviews highlight the role of podcasts in supporting assessment preparation, with students revisiting episodes and valuing flexibility for on-the-go learning. However, students generally viewed podcasts as a supplementary resource that worked best alongside existing learning materials rather than as a standalone learning tool. In addition, the audio-only format posed accessibility challenges for some students, particularly non-native English speakers who expressed a preference for captions or transcripts to support comprehension.

This study provides preliminary evidence of the potential for AI-generated podcasts to support the creation of structured learning resources adaptable across units. It extends podcasting beyond supplementary use to a structured, multi-format microlearning design in block teaching contexts.

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Health Check: Impact of Block and Blended Delivery on Student Performance and Experience in Undergraduate Health Programs

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Block-and-blended (BBM) model curriculum is associated with improved student engagement, retention, and success (Buck & Tyrell, 2022; Goode et al., 2023), yet weaker outcomes are reported in content-dense disciplines requiring hands-on skills (Mason et al., 2025). In undergraduate health programs, where accreditation standards are required to ensure students develop complex knowledge and clinical skills (AHPRA, 2021), outcomes for BBM delivery are limited.

The Southern Cross Model (SCM) shifted curriculum delivery from a traditional model (TM) of lectures and classroom-based tutorials/labs over 13 weeks to a modified block-and-blended model (BBM). The BBM provided active, guided, and focused learning through online content delivered as self-access materials and workshops, and tutorials, scheduled on-campus or online over 6 weeks (Roche et al., 2022). This research compared undergraduate health students' success and experience studying in a BBM (the SCM) and a TM.

A mixed-methods approach investigated students' academic outcomes, satisfaction, and experience for the TM and BBM. Mean differences (MD) and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were used to compare outcomes between cohorts and within BMM enrolment subgroups (commencing or continuing students). Secondary thematic analysis explored qualitative responses to contextualise quantitative findings on student satisfaction and experience.

BBM students achieved higher success rates (MD = 11.20%; 95% CI: 10.90% to 11.50%) and grade point averages (MD = 0.28; 95% CI: 0.27 to 0.29). Overall, satisfaction rates marginally favoured the TM (MD = 0.63%, 95% CI 0.33% to 0.93). Analysis of student responses on course clarity, workload, and assessment, combined with qualitative responses, provided a nuanced understanding of the student experience and the influence of being a commencing or continuing student when starting study in the BBM.

Practice-based evidence supports BBM delivery to improve academic performance in undergraduate health programs. Student experience is influenced by the delivery model in which they commence their studies.

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Inside the Block: How Academics Bring the VU Block Model to Life

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This presentation reports on a study examining how academics enact the VU Block Model across three disciplines. While existing research on block delivery has predominantly focused on student outcomes, engagement, and retention, far less attention has been directed toward the teaching practices that enable effective implementation (Konjarski et al., 2023). Responding to calls for multi-source, practice focused research (Thomas et al., 2024), this study investigates how academics experience, interpret, and enact teaching within immersive block contexts.

The social constructivist qualitative research design (Creswell & Poth, 2017) combined in class observations of three academics teaching practices within the VU Block Model, post teaching interviews, student surveys (n=39), and end of block student focus groups (n=11). Together, these data sources provided a triangulated context-rich thematic account of teaching practices and student perceptions.

Findings highlight the importance of deliberate scaffolding, purposeful learning sequencing, and sustained teacher presence in supporting student's engagement and focus within block delivery. Academics' explicit articulation of learning intentions, conceptual rationales, and task purposes enhance perceptions of relevance and strengthen real world connections. Structured feedback processes, combined with responsive, in the moment formative feedback were intentionally embedded in academic practice and consistently identified by students as critical to deepening understanding and reinforcing a sense of progress. Key challenges were also identified by academics and students, including managing the demands of compressed delivery periods, sustaining engagement across diverse cohorts, and balancing depth of content with interactive pedagogical approaches.

This research contributes to the enhancement of teaching and learning by offering evidence informed insights into pedagogical practice within immersive block settings. While the findings are situated within a single institutional context, they provide practical guidance for teaching in Block Model formats and for institutions implementing or refining Block Model or other accelerated delivery structures. In doing so, it contributes to broader sector discussions on effective teaching in higher education

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Managing Curriculum Refinement after Implementation of Immersive Block Teaching

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Southern Cross University introduced the Southern Cross Model (SCM) as a whole-of-institution reform to redesign curriculum and delivery through immersive 6-week blocks. The model was intended to strengthen active, guided learning and improve the student experience by focusing students on fewer units at a time. Its design is underpinned by four pillars: curriculum reform, assessment alignment, active learning, and a community of enquiry (Roche et al., 2022; Roche et al., 2024).

This presentation examines curriculum refinement following implementation of immersive block teaching in the Faculty of Health. Using a descriptive case study design (Yin, 2003) and a mixed-methods approach, it analyses unit performance, student satisfaction, and student feedback to understand how iterative refinement shaped outcomes over time.

Under the traditional model, student satisfaction was 75.3%, and success was 82.9%. During early implementation of the SCM, satisfaction declined slightly as students adjusted to a faster pace and greater responsibility for self-directed learning, while staff were also refining units to align with SCM principles. These early challenges informed ongoing curriculum changes. As communication, assessment design, active learning strategies, and community-building were refined in response to feedback, outcomes improved. By 2024, satisfaction had increased to 80.5% and success to 91.7%, and by 2025, success reached 94.3% with satisfaction at 83.5%.

The findings highlight the value of iterative curriculum review and responsive design in intensive teaching contexts. They suggest that stronger expectation-setting, better aligned learning and assessment, and supportive environments for students and staff are central to successful transition and sustained improvement.

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To What Extent are International Students Successful in Australian Universities Intensive Courses

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There is an increasing number of international students coming to Australia, which brings various benefits like fundings and finance; cultural enrichment and diversity; and broader social community to universities (Australian Government, 2025a; Australia Government, 2025b; Reserve Bank of Australia, 2025). This is a good chance for both domestic and international students to share and receive a richer academic and a socio-cultural life.

Along with opportunities, there are undeniable challenges to be affecting the international students, especially Asian ones whose English is a second or a foreign language. With English language proficiency and culture competence being considered at low or moderate level, these students have struggle in understanding the lectures, the unit readings and assessment requirements, which prevent them from success in their intensive courses.

This paper conducted to explore main factors impacting on the success in intensive courses. In-depth interviews were conducted with eight (8) Asian students at the tertiary education level about their perceptions and expectations of the Intensive Educational Foundations unit and Intensive Writing unit. The findings demonstrated that (1) low levels of language proficiency prevent students from understanding the fast pace of teaching, (2) passive learning styles and limited socio-cultural competence let students hesitate to communicate with lecturers and friends, and (3) insufficient support for assessments consultations and feedback let students unconfident in taking exams.

To address these issues, it is suggested for (1) more pair and group work to improve student's English language and cultural competence skills, (2) more support officers/tutors to help students at any time, (3) more drop-in sessions to consult the courses instructions, and (4) more workshops prior and during the courses. The study will be helpful to students, course designers, and educational managers, not only at the researched universities but also in the education sector.

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Start Well Units: The Stepping Stones to Academic Success

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The transition to university is a critical period in students' academic and personal lives, managing autonomy, and developing a sense of belonging (Thompson et al., 2021). Many factors influence a student's successful progression through their first year of studies (Reason et al., 2006) and the benefits of special first-year programs that help transition to higher education are well recognised in the literature (Devlin et al. 2012; Kift et al, 2010; Naylor & Mifsud, 2019). The Start Well program initiative at Victoria University (VU) is an intervention strategy designed to support first-year students during their transition to higher education (HE). The program offers a structured and supportive introduction to academic life and comprises three key components; modules, presentation and a workshop developed to ensure students are well-equipped to navigate their first year of university.

The aim of this research was to improve first year students' engagement in HE and support retention by exploring students' participation in the Start Well program to understand its impact on engagement and student success during the transition to university. The questions guiding the research were: which Start Well components did students attend and complete and which did they find most beneficial; what were students' experiences of the Start Well program, and in what ways did it prepare them for their first year of university. To explore students' experiences of participating in the Start Well program, a mixed-methods approach was employed. It is anticipated that the outcomes of this study will contribute to a framework of ideas that can be used for designing and implementing transition-focused units in other institutions. Insights from the study are also expected to inform institutional policies and curriculum design and provide an empirical foundation for educational administrators and policymakers aiming to improve first-year student outcomes and experiences.

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Optimizing Information Literacy for a Block Model: A Case Study

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Following Southern Cross University's (SCU) transition to an immersive block teaching model (the Southern Cross Model) in 2022, the SCU Library significantly restructured its approach to information literacy (IL) support for undergraduate students. Block teaching models consist of short, intensive and active learning experiences that differ markedly from traditional 12-15 week semester structures (Goode et al., 2024) and require a whole of university approach. At SCU, students complete one or two units over sixweek teaching terms, offering flexibility while accelerating learning and assessment timelines (Wilson et al., 2025).

This shift prompted a key challenge for librarians: determining how to support student's development of information literacy skills, critical in the era of Gen-AI (Marchese & Marchese, 2026), without increasing cognitive load or competing with compressed block schedules. In response to these conditions, the SCU Library redesigned its IL provision to better align with block learning demands and to support students at their point of need. As assessment tasks are introduced early in each block, librarians offered skills-based classes during weeks zero to three of term.

While the literature on academic librarianship and information literacy largely reflects semester-based delivery, best practice for IL support in block models remains underexplored. Existing research highlights the need to bolster one shot instruction through flipped classrooms, embedded librarianship, and improved digital resources (Kish, 2024; Thorpe et al., 2024); however, detailed examples of IL design and implementation within block models are scarce. This case study begins to address this gap by contributing to the development of a best practice framework for IL support in block teaching environments.

This case study documents the SCU Library s transition from unit embedded IL delivery to a skills focused, point of need support model. It outlines the adaptations required to support undergraduate students in a block learning context and identifies the core IL skills prioritised to support early assessment success.

A review of the literature was undertaken to identify evidence of best practice IL provision in block learning models. Qualitative feedback from students and academic staff was also collected to evaluate the effectiveness of the redesigned support model. Student and staff feedback on IL support was gathered through both formal and informal channels. A thematic summary of this feedback is presented.

As universities increasingly adopt block teaching models, evidence-based approaches to library and IL support are needed. This work contributes to emerging scholarship by proposing a developing best practice framework for providing effective, sustainable IL support to undergraduate students in immersive block learning environments.

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More Than a Tool: Undergraduate Tourism Students' Lived Experiences of Co-Creating Knowledge with Generative AI in Project-Based Learning

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Although it is widely known that generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is dominating higher education, there is very little available literature that describes how undergraduate students understand co-creating knowledge with AI as a collaborator, especially amidst context-specific disciplines. In tourism education, and more specifically where project-based learning (PBL) is associated with signature pedagogy, such literature is useful for the development of the curriculum and the ethically appropriate use of AI. PBL is especially useful in this context, as previous literature, in framing AI as merely a tool, has primarily used the quantitative approach in studying this context and has consistently neglected the perspectives of students.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of undergraduate tourism students as knowledge co-creators with GenAI in a PBL context, and this study was informed by Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 125 undergraduate tourism students from four UK universities who had been involved in at least one project-based assignment that involved the use of GenAI, and these 125 students were recruited using criterion-based or purposive sampling. The Paradox of Partnership AI as both extension and inscrutable other'; Epistemic Tension struggle to accept fluent outputs whilst reserving criticism'; The Vulnerability of Not Knowing facing knowledge gaps with anxiety and or shame'; Emergent Identity as AI-Augmented Professional transforming perceived professional identities through AI. Variations in cross-case analysis were found in relation to year of study, specialisation and previous experience with AI.

This research offers Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and AI in tourism the first large qualitative phenomenological study and adds to pedagogy, assessment, academic integrity, and educator frameworks, whilst tourism education continues to focus on constructive employee engagement within ambiguous environments and preparing for partnership, rather than for replacement, with advanced technology.

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Observational Placement for Pre-Service Teachers in the Block Model: An Examination of Student Perceptions of Observational Learning

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Observational practice is widely recognised as a valuable component of teacher education, supporting reflective practice, collaboration and professional learning (Churchill et al., 2024). However, less is known about how pre-service teachers perceive observational placements and whether they recognise these experiences as authentic opportunities for learning. This presentation examines student perceptions of observational placement within two First Year College units delivered in the Block Model.

Using a phenomenographic approach (Hajar, 2021), the presentation investigates the qualitatively different ways pre-service teachers experience and understand observational learning. Data are drawn from student reflections of classroom and library observations and subsequent student discussions following the placement experience.

Preliminary findings indicate that students generally perceive observational placements positively when they are intentionally structured and clearly connected to learning outcomes. Participants identified observation as beneficial for understanding classroom practice, developing reflective skills and adopting an inquiry stance. Students reported that the experience was most valuable when supported by explicit teacher guidance, purposeful reflection, and assessment tasks that required them to apply and analyse their observations. These findings suggest that observational placements can provide meaningful and authentic professional learning opportunities within the Block Model when students are supported to engage actively and critically with practice.

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Redesigning for Block Delivery: How Academics Redesign Units at Southern Cross University

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In 2020, Southern Cross University introduced the Southern Cross Model (SCM), an immersive six-week block approach intended to increase student focus, engagement, and progression. Block delivery is expanding in Australia and internationally. Prior research suggests potential achievement gains, but student satisfaction is variable and sensitive to implementation quality (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). Constructive alignment and active learning provide established rationales for redesigning learning in compressed timeframes (Biggs, 1996).

This study examines how academics redesign traditionally structured units for delivery in the SCM, addressing the limited process-focused literature on block conversion.

Educators from purposively selected high-achieving SCM units (meeting institutional success and satisfaction thresholds across 3 offerings with the same teaching team) provided written responses to one open-ended prompt: What strategies did you apply to redesign the curriculum for focused, guided, and active learning in the SCM Responses were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Three interconnected redesign themes were identified. (1) Core vs extra: educators reduced scope to essential learning, minimised cognitive overload, removed low-value busywork, and provided optional extension resources. (2) Clear and specific progression: staff mapped outcomes, learning activities, and assessments into an explicit week-by-week pathway, supported by consistent signposting, task briefs, and assessment rubrics. (3) Student-led teaching: foundational content was shifted online, and synchronous time was repurposed for coached practice, peer review, and feedback anchored in authentic tasks.

Effective block conversion relies on deliberate design decisions about scope, sequence, and optimal use of teaching time. For institutions scaling immersive delivery, it is important to safeguard academic time and support structured learning design to align mapping, assess changes, and ensure consistent feedback across formats. Outcomes are strongest when redesign is led by collaborative teams including faculty, teaching and learning centres, library, and student support staff.

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Navigating Change: Anxiety, Stress and Student Wellbeing in Times of Institutional Assessment Reform

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The rise of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has accelerated assessment reform in higher education, with increased reliance on secure, high-stakes formats to ensure academic integrity. While necessary, such approaches may heighten student anxiety and stress, adversely affecting wellbeing, engagement, and performance (Stenlund et al., 2018; Von Der Embse et al., 2018). This study addresses the conference theme of Curriculum, Assessment and Feedback by examining how assessment redesign within evolving curricula can balance academic rigour with student wellbeing, across a diverse range of undergraduate disciplines, including Science (Anatomy and Physiology, Biology, Chemistry, and STEM), Education, and Information Technology.

The study aims to: (1) identify assessment formats that reduce anxiety and stress while supporting student wellbeing; (2) examine student wellbeing through institutional data including trends in special consideration applications; and health access plans (3) examine the application of Universal Design for Assessment principles in creating equitable and accessible secure assessments; and (4) determine assessment design principles that support sustainable practice in the era of GenAI.

A mixed methods design will be employed involving undergraduate students enrolled in units pre- and post-assessment reform and academic staff engaged in assessment design. Quantitative data include pre- and post-assessment surveys incorporating validated measures of wellbeing and study mindset (Driscoll, 2004; Nist & Diehl, 1990), institutional analytics comparing academic performance across assessment types, and aggregated data on student support mechanisms. Qualitative data from student and staff focus groups provide insight into lived experiences of assessment during institutional change, analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The study aligns with curriculum adaptation for emerging trends, incorporates stakeholder involvement, and addresses regulation, metrics and measurement through institutional data analysis. Findings will inform evidence-based assessment redesign that integrates secure and flexible approaches while maintaining academic standards and supporting student wellbeing.

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Transforming the Curriculum with Simulations

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Once the domain of the health sciences, simulated learning is gaining acceptance as a valid form of learning in classrooms across a broader range of disciplines. It is argued simulated learning fosters engagement, critical thinking and experimental knowledge in learning environments. Similarly, Kolb's experiential learning theory suggests that students learn by doing.

Two law academics have implemented a teaching practice which uses stimulations to improve the student learning experience in block delivery. The stimulation occurs in a court case and a client and lawyer setting as an active learning strategy which mirrors real-world practice. Such activities give students exposure to the art of writing and verbal communication skills, with real time feedback.

Drawing on Wiggins and McTighe's Backward Curriculum Design principles, the workshop will provide a how to guide on designing simulation learning activities into the curriculum. Participants will be placed into groups and given a guided worksheet to help formulate strategies for either improving existing simulated learning practices or to build such new strategies into classroom engagement.

The workshop will draw on learning activities that have been successfully implemented into two law subjects. It will highlight the learning objectives, the activity and the practical aspects of implementation.

The authors will share their experience of embedding simulations as a learning activity in law subjects which are content heavy subjects. Also, the workshop will provide a step-by-step guide on how simulations can be designed into the curriculum. Overall, the aim is to encourage other academics to create simulated learning experiences to deliver content.

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Designing Authentic Assessment in the Block

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In the digital age of AI, it is becoming increasingly concerning for higher education institutions how do they ensure students have acquired the relevant learning and skills (Arise et al, 2024). These concerns often arise in subjects which are focused on writing skills. As a result, institutions are responding to these concerns by introducing secure assessment tasks.

This presentation will discuss the design of an authentic secure assessment in a law unit which not only mirrors real world practice but allows for cognitive development. Students were presented with a structured AI levels of usage in assessment which provided clear guidelines to students on how and when AI can be used. Also, their final assessment was redesigned as a secure authentic assessment requiring them to prepare a legal document and participate in a case presentation to allow holistic testing of student learning.

The assessment design for this new secure task applied Villarroel et al (2018) three elements of authentic assessment realism, cognitive challenge and evaluative judgement. Rather than just getting students to prepare a legal document which is a form of active learning, this task goes one step further to require students to file the document with the court and make submissions to a hypothetical judge. During the submissions process the judge (the assessor) asks students questions about its admissibility or the validity of the document. Thereby allowing the marker to assess they have prepared the document and understood its contents.

The presentation will provide insights to academics on how to balance the use of AI in assessment and provide clear steps on creating a secure authentic assessment task.

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From Capability to Professional Judgement: Rethinking Pedagogy in Intensive Cyber Security Education

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The adoption of Intensive Block Teaching (IBT) in higher education has been linked to increased engagement and continuity of learning (Dixon & O’Gorman, 2019). However, its effectiveness in developing higher-order capabilities in complex disciplines remains underexplored, particularly in cybersecurity, where simulation and cyber range-based pedagogy are increasingly central to practice (Katsantonis et al., 2023; Lazarov et al., 2025).

This paper examines the design and delivery of an 8-week postgraduate cybersecurity module and proposes a shift from capability-driven instruction towards the intentional development of professional judgement. Drawing on a qualitative, practice-based case study of a single module, the study introduces the Capability–Appreciation–Judgement (CAP-J) model as a conceptual framework for understanding learning progression in cybersecurity education. The findings suggest that IBT can support deep, applied learning when aligned with an integrated pedagogical approach combining simulation-based learning, reflective and collaborative activities, and authentic, industry-informed practice. This aligns with recent evidence that structured cyber range and competition-based environments can strengthen applied skills and learner confidence (Glas et al., 2023; Balon & Baggili, 2023).

A key contribution of the study is the identification of appreciation as a critical intermediary stage. This stage enables learners to interpret context, engage with ethical considerations, and understand the socio-technical nature of cybersecurity. It supports the transition from technical capability to professional judgement, where students demonstrate context-sensitive decision-making and risk evaluation. In doing so, the study extends calls for cybersecurity education to move beyond procedural, tool-based training towards adaptive, learner-responsive curriculum design (Anwar et al., 2023; Yamin et al., 2024).

As a single-module case study, the findings are context-specific and should be read as exploratory and transferable rather than generalisable. Nevertheless, the study argues that professional judgement must be deliberately developed through structured exposure to complexity, uncertainty, and authentic practice.

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Pathways Student Success in Modular Block Mode Delivery at Western Sydney University College

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In an evolving higher education landscape, traditional term-based delivery models, where students study multiple subjects concurrently, are increasingly misaligned with the needs of diverse, open-access pathway cohorts. These challenges are particularly evident for open-access first-year pathway students, where delivery models often fail to accommodate student lifestyles, competing commitments, and preferred study patterns, and where academic support alone falls short without intentional design of the broader learning environment (Jackson et al., 2022; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; McCluskey et al., 2019; Thomas, 2012).

In response, Western Sydney University College implemented a modular block delivery model in 2025 across ten diploma programs and one Undergraduate Preparation Program. The model replaces the former four-subject-at-a-time Extended Diploma model, with sequential, immersive blocks and integrates a flipped learning approach. A consistent timetable, agile teaching delivery, and an embedded Student Success Coach provide structured and holistic support for students.

A mixed-methods evaluation of the first year was undertaken, drawing on institutional success metrics and student and staff feedback. Findings indicate that open-access pathway students achieve stronger outcomes within a modular structure compared with traditional concurrent delivery. Retention remained high across semesters, with strong within-semester persistence and sustained continuation between teaching periods. Academic performance also exceeded institutional targets, with average pass rates consistently above 80% and an average of over 40% of results awarded in the High Distinction and Distinction bands across Autumn and Spring blocks. Student satisfaction with learning design and assessment consistently exceeded 85%. Combined with semester-to-semester retention of 85.6%, in-semester persistence of 95%, and stable academic outcomes, these results produced an 85% transition rate in 2025. The findings indicate that modular block delivery, when intentionally designed around the student experience, enables open-access pathway students not only to succeed academically but also to persist, complete in minimum time, and transition effectively to university study.

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Problematising Assessment in Block Model Higher Education: A Bacchi-Informed Policy Analysis

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The rapid uptake of generative AI (GenAI), including tools such as ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, and Google Gemini, is reshaping assessment in higher education. While these technologies offer opportunities for authentic, AI-integrated learning, they also raise concerns about academic integrity and equity (Bearman et al., 2023). In Australia, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) introduced the Assessment Reform for the Age of Artificial Intelligence framework to guide institutions in balancing innovation with integrity. Within block model delivery at Victoria University (VU), recent assessment policy changes including a mandated proportion of secure assessment aim to ensure graduate competence but may constrain pedagogical innovation.

This study critically examines the impact of VU's current assessment policy compared with its Assessment Refresh framework on student outcomes in a block teaching context. It interrogates how policy settings construct assumptions about academic integrity, knowledge hierarchies, and authorship, and how these influence the design and implementation of AI-integrated assessment.

Using Bacchi's What's the Problem Represented to Be (WPR) framework, the study analysed institutional assessment policies and procedures (Bacchi, 2012). Policy documents were systematically reviewed by researcher pairs using Bacchi's six guiding questions, followed by collaborative thematic analysis to identify dominant problem representations, assumptions, and silences.

Findings indicate that the current policy's emphasis on secure assessment constructs AI primarily as a risk, reinforcing controlled, human-only authorship and limiting innovative assessment design. In contrast, the Assessment Refresh framework signals a shift toward more flexible, authentic, and AI-inclusive practices, with potential to enhance student engagement and real-world skill development in block settings.

This study contributes to emerging scholarship on AI and assessment by demonstrating how policy shapes pedagogical possibilities. It offers evidence-informed recommendations for aligning assessment policy with AI-enabled learning, supporting equitable, authentic, and future-focused student outcomes.

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A Triadic Mentoring Model for Teacher Preparation in Clinical Settings

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Studies of teacher preparation indicate mentoring relationships support novice teachers' development, confidence, and retention (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Other studies show teacher candidates who work with cooperating teachers report greater confidence, stronger teaching skills, and smoother transitions into full-time teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Mentoring by university faculty has also been shown to improve candidates' self-efficacy (Gurvitch & Metzler, 2009). To support these interactions within a block schedule, a clinical teaching program at Montana Western developed a triadic mentoring model involving cooperating teachers, university faculty, and teacher candidates.

Unlike traditional clinical teacher preparation models, this triadic mentoring model is based on the principle of goal alignment, whereby participants pursue their individual professional goals through a shared curricular improvement project. Cooperating teachers serve as instructional leaders who identify authentic classroom challenges. Teacher candidates act as curriculum innovators who address these challenges by applying evidence-based instructional practices. University faculty facilitate the process by supporting the development of participants' pedagogical content knowledge.

This study reports on the initial implementation of the mentoring model. Unstructured interviews were conducted with teacher candidates and cooperating teachers to examine participants' interactions and collaborative practices that led to memorable planning and teaching moments. Data was then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify mentoring outcomes (Polkinghorne, 1995).

Findings indicated that both teacher candidates and cooperating teachers developed greater understanding of teacher adaptability, classroom management, student diversity, and effective instructional practices. Candidates reported increased confidence in refining instruction, responding to classroom challenges, and meeting diverse student needs, while cooperating teachers gained new curricular ideas and subject-specific teaching strategies.

Goal alignment has broad applications for designing programs in many types of clinical settings. In this study, findings suggest that structuring experiences as goal-aligned partnerships focused on authentic curricular problem solving can promote professional learning for both candidates and schoolteachers within a block schedule.

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Supporting University Lecturers in Enhancing Their AI Literacy for Effective Integration of Generative AI in Teaching and Learning

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As higher education increasingly requires students to develop responsible and effective use of generative artificial intelligence (AI), comparatively little attention has been paid to lecturers' preparedness to model and support such practices in their own teaching. This imbalance has created a growing professional development gap, as educators are expected to guide student engagement with emerging technologies while often lacking confidence in their own pedagogical integration.

This paper presents a case from an early childhood education team at Victoria University, examining how the university's Understanding AI: AI Literacy module was embedded into unit assessment design within block and intensive teaching contexts. In guiding students to engage critically with generative AI, lecturers were concurrently required to develop their own AI literacy, creating a learning-while-teaching process.

In response to institutional policy change and evolving assessment expectations, the initiative supported lecturers in moving from uncertainty and constraint to more informed and adaptive professional practice. Key components included assessment redesign, curriculum adaptation, and scaffolded experimentation with digital tools to support diverse learners and inclusive teaching.

A qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design was employed. Data were collected through lecturer reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups ($n = 5$), alongside analysis of assessment artefacts and institutional policy documents. Data were analysed using iterative thematic analysis to examine shifts in professional beliefs, confidence, and pedagogical practice.

Findings indicate a significant enhancement in lecturers' professional capability, reflected in increased confidence, critical understanding, and intentional integration of digital tools in teaching and assessment design. This shift was particularly evident in block teaching contexts, where rapid pedagogical adaptation and iterative refinement were required.

This study contributes a transferable model for supporting professional learning and educator capability development through alignment of institutional policy, curriculum design, and reflective practice. It offers practical insights for strengthening professional practice in rapidly evolving higher education contexts.

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In-Class Engagement as Protective Against Student Stress and Anxiety in the Context of Block-Mode Teaching

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Higher education students experience elevated levels of stress and anxiety, which are associated with poorer academic outcomes. This prevalence has prompted interest in modernised pedagogical approaches such as the Block Model. This mode of teaching is designed to maximize the student experience and is characterised by smaller class sizes, concentrated single-subject study, and increased in-person engagement. Conversely, the compressed nature of block-mode delivery may also pose risks to student wellbeing and is an underexplored area of research.

The aim of the study was to examine perceived stress, anxiety symptoms, and academic characteristics among block-mode students at Victoria University. There were 198 participants that were enrolled into a first-year psychology unit. Participants were measured on stress, anxiety, and academic characteristics at the commencement and the mid-interval of a block period. Independent group comparisons were employed rather than a repeated-measures approach. Correlational analyses were also conducted to examine relationships among variables. Anxiety was positively associated with the number of failing grades students reported and negatively associated with their reported average class attendance.

Critically, independent group comparisons demonstrated significantly lower perceived stress and anxiety at the mid-interval of the block relative to students commencing the block. The significant reduction in stress and anxiety across the block suggests that participation in block-mode teaching may contribute positively to student psychological wellbeing. Students with higher failing grades and poorer attendance may also experience higher anxiety. Altogether, the findings suggest that engagement in block-mode learning serves as a protective function for both wellbeing and academic performance.

This study contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning by providing preliminary evidence for the wellbeing benefits of block-mode delivery. Future research should address the limitations of the current study, including the absence of an end-of-block measurement point and the lack of a comparison group drawn from alternative delivery modes.

Policy, Practice and People: A Case Study of Transforming Assessment for Block Delivery

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To support positive student experiences in block learning, it is increasingly clear that assessment must be purposefully redesigned rather than simply transferred from traditional approaches (Buck et al., 2023; C-Scott & McLaughlin, 2025). Yet, there is limited research on how universities can achieve such redesigns at a whole-of-institution level (Wilson et al., 2025). This presentation speaks to this gap and aligns directly with the theme of Curriculum, Assessment and Feedback, describing how an Australian university transformed its assessment policy and practice for block delivery.

This case study examines assessment reform during Southern Cross University's transition to the Southern Cross Model, a six-week immersive block model. It describes how the university's assessment policy and procedures were repurposed for block delivery and offers academic leaders' perspectives on how that change was co-designed and led. Using a descriptive case study methodology (Yin, 2003), governance and policy documents were reviewed to construct a description of the assessment reform process. Under the guidance of a purposefully created Academic Portfolio Office co-led by the Pro Vice-Chancellors Academic, six university leaders also reflected on their experiences of co-championing the reform via collaborative narrative interviews (Arvay, 2003). These data were analysed thematically using an iterative coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The document review revealed two phases in driving assessment reform: 1) crystallising core principles and embedding these into policy; and 2) translating policy into practice through procedures, professional development, and quality assurance mechanisms. Four themes underpinning effective assessment reform leadership were identified: principles-led reform; whole-of-program assessment; authentic assessment; and assessment for student learning and success. This case study contributes rare insight into how to lead significant change in assessment practice across diverse disciplines. It offers practical guidance for universities seeking sustainable, institution-wide assessment reform for block and intensive learning.

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Secure Assessment in Practice: Student Perspectives from a First-Year Health Curriculum

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Generative AI is reshaping assessment design in higher education, prompting increased interest in secure assessment approaches that emphasise demonstration of learning over product submission (Dawson, 2020). While secure assessment is widely advocated as a response to AI related challenges, there is limited evidence regarding the student experience of this within a health profession curriculum. This study explored how increasing the proportion of secure assessment within first-year units influenced student engagement, preparedness, and assessment outcomes.

This project examined the first three units within a 4.5-year programmatic assessment model delivered in block mode. Secure assessment approaches include invigilated quizzes, multi station practical assessments, and individual verification tasks. Assessment complexity progressively increases throughout the course, culminating in capstone assessments requiring synthesis, clinical reasoning, and demonstration of professional practice. To support preparedness for these later assessments, the proportion of secure assessment and scaffolded learning activities was increased within first-year units in 2026.

A mixed-methods evaluation was conducted across three first-year units (HRE1000, HBO1001, HBO1002). Assessment outcomes from 2024 to 2026 cohorts were compared and learning analytics quantified engagement with scaffolding tasks. Students completed post-assessment Qualtrics surveys comprising Likert-scale and open-ended questions exploring preparedness, assessment fairness, and learning value.

Quantitative and qualitative data showed highly positive student attitudes towards the secure assessment and scaffolded learning tasks, while also identifying opportunities for further development. Increasing secure assessment did not affect unit pass rates and was associated with higher scores in the final secure assessments. Although implementation required additional staff workload, it reduced ongoing staff workload across the unit.

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Lead Author	Lead Author Affiliation	Page
Acevedo-Field	University of Montana Western, United States	1
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Huber	Business Department, University of Montana Western, United States	15
Hurria	Victoria University, Australia	16
Humphreys	Macquarie University College, Macquarie University, Australia	17
Johnson	University of Montana Western, United States	19
Kant	Western Sydney University The College, Australia	20
Koh	Western Sydney University The College, Australia	22
Konjarski	Victoria University, Australia	24
Konjarski	Victoria University, Australia	25
Lau	Victoria University, Australia	26
Li	University of Montana Western, United States	27
Lawton	Southampton Solent University, United Kingdom	28
Maj	Southern Cross University, Australia	30
Mihailidis	CoABLEIT, Victoria University, Australia	32
Mikola	First Year College, Victoria University, Australia	34
Miles	De Montfort University, United Kingdom	35
Moro	The Hotel School Australia Southern Cross University, Australia	36
Munn	Faculty of Health Science, Southern Cross University, Australia	38
Muscat	Victoria University, Australia	40
Naumann	Southern Cross University, Australia	42
Nguyen	The University of Newcastle, Australia	43
Oraison	Victoria University, Australia	44
Parkes	Southern Cross University, Australia	45
Pathirana	British University Vietnam	47
Prawer	First Year College, Victoria University, Australia	49
Quince	Centre for Teaching and Learning, Southern Cross University, Australia	50
Rajaraman	First Year College and ISILC, Victoria University, Australia	51
Raponi	First Year College and ISILC, Victoria University, Australia	52
Raponi	First Year College and ISILC, Victoria University, Australia	53
Rawindaran	University of South Wales, Wales, United Kingdom	54
Roffey	Western Sydney University The College, Australia	56
Sinnayah	First Year College, Victoria University, Australia	57
Stiles	University of Montana Western, United States	59
Sun	Victoria University, Australia	61
Vassallo	First Year College® and Institute for Health and Sport, Victoria University, Australia	63

Wilson	Academic Portfolio Office, Southern Cross University,	64
Wospil	First Year College, Victoria University, Australia	66