

An analysis of student and faculty attitudes to intensive teaching

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ABSTRACT

The Graduate School of Management at Macquarie University has been offering post-graduate courses by an intensive (five day), or 'block' format, and also by a more traditional weekly format for over ten years. The format is so successful that it has been copied by most business schools in Australia for their local and/or offshore programs. However block teaching has received very little attention in the academic literature. This paper reviews the research findings on intensive teaching, analyses student and staff reactions to block teaching, and identifies perceived advantages and disadvantages of the format. Implications for block scheduling and for actions to address perceived disadvantages of the block method are addressed.

KEYWORDS

Block/intensive teaching, time-shortened courses.

INTRODUCTION

Intensive or 'block' courses have become increasingly common in higher education, partly in response to an increased number of older, part-time students who are said to prefer an intensive timetable to a traditional semester format (Daniel 2000). Within Australia, most business schools use some form of intensive course for post-graduate students, within Australia and/or when teaching courses in Asia. By 1999, there were 581 offshore programs offered by Australian universities (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee 2000), mostly taught using a block system. Intensive, short duration courses have particular advantages for offshore teaching, since they allow faculty to fly in, and teach a full course in an intense burst (Clark and Clark 2000). There have been a number of studies evaluating the educational outcomes of intensive courses (see, for example, Scott and Conrad 1991). However there has been very little evaluation of the reasons underlying student choice of intensive courses, or student reactions to multiple block courses. For example no studies have analysed what students see as subject specific advantages or disadvantages of block subjects, despite early suggestions that certain courses were less popular with students in intensive format (Grant 2000). Similarly, despite growing use of block courses, particularly by Australian

universities in Asia, there has been very limited analysis of how students' attitudes to blocks change as they become more experienced with the format. Answers to these questions may help universities to predict demand for block and/or traditional courses, to better prepare students for block courses, and also to assist in managing student expectations of these courses.

TRADITIONAL VERSUS BLOCK COURSES

'Traditional' courses usually follow a pattern where students meet a number of times per week over a semester (Jonas, Weimer and Herzer 2001). However there is substantial diversity in what is described as 'intensive', or 'non-traditional' course schedules in the literature. Courses which have been describe as 'non-traditional' or 'intensive' in the literature include variations such as five successive full days (Grant 2000), six days (Clark and Clark 2000) or three hours a day for 18 days (Gose 1995). Other authors have described less intensive, but non-traditional, formats such as weekly classes of nearly three hours (Henebry 1997) or four hours a week for five to ten weeks (Jonas, Weimer and Herzer 2001).

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES IN TRADITIONAL VERSUS BLOCK COURSES

Educational outcomes of block courses have typically been compared with traditional courses by comparing student results on course assessment, and/or student satisfaction. This method is always confounded by the fact that students choose the format, so any difference in results cannot be separated from any bias caused by self-selection. Random assignment of students has been suggested by Daniel (2000), in order to allow better evaluation of intensive courses. However random assignment would be unacceptable to most universities and students, given the normal practice of allowing students to choose between available alternatives. Moreover, student choice of format allows students to select the schedule that they believe will best suit their learning style. Nevertheless, most studies have suggested that intensive courses result in equivalent, or better, learning experiences on a range of measures of interaction, student commitment, and academic performance (Scott 1994; Henebry 1997; Daniel 2000; Grant 2000). Isolated studies have reported lower results in intensive summer courses (e.g. Petrowsky 1996), however this is inconsistent with the bulk of the findings on intensive courses (for a review, see Daniel 2000). Given the complexities of assessing educational outcomes, and the general findings that block students perform at least as well as students in traditional formats, this paper does not attempt to compare student performance in the two formats. Instead, it looks at faculty and student perceptions of blocks, which, whether correct or not, are likely to influence supply of, and demand for, block units.

BLOCK COURSES AT MGSM

Macquarie Graduate School of Management (MGSM) appears to have been the first institution to offer MBA block courses in Australia, starting this format in 1991. The format has been so successful that it has been copied by most MBA schools in the country, but the flexibility of delivery options offered by a combination of block and weekly classes is still considered to be one of the key differentiators of the MGSM program (Trinca 2002).

The school operates on a ten-week term, with the most common format being a four-hour weekly class for ten weeks. Most of these classes are taught at night, to suit the school's primarily part-time students, but some weekly day classes are also offered. The most common alternative is the five-day block format, which constitutes approximately 40% of classes at the Sydney campus, and all

classes held at offshore campuses in Hong Kong and Singapore. The most common format for a block class in Sydney is composed of full day (eight hour) classes on a successive Friday, Saturday, Sunday, followed by a free weekend, then full days on the following Saturday and Sunday. A small number of blocks follow different patterns, e.g. five successive days, or one day a week for five weeks, and offshore blocks use a mixture of evenings and full days, but the predominant feature of blocks is full-day weekend teaching.

Student work in a block course is not confined to the one or two weeks of classes. As with the weekly format, students receive course materials at the start of term, and would usually have two to three weeks to complete pre-course reading and course preparation before the block classes start. Following the completion of the block classes, students have several weeks to complete post-course assignments and to prepare for an examination. During both the pre- and post-course periods there may be contact with the academic in person or by email, and student group meetings to work on group assignments.

At the Sydney campus, most courses offered as part of the MBA program are offered by both block and weekly format, so students can usually select whichever format they prefer. It is theoretically possible to complete the course using only weekly classes, though this would limit the student's choice of subjects. One compulsory subject on the MBA is only offered by weekly class, and another only by block (due to the presenting academics' choice), but it is possible to complete the MBA doing all but one subject in a block or weekly format. In practice, most students take a mix of block and weekly subjects, providing a valuable opportunity to assess the factors that influence student demand for block courses, and to assess how evaluations of blocks change as students become more experienced with the format.

DATA COLLECTION

In this pilot study, faculty attitudes to block teaching were obtained by face-to-face interviews, and student opinions were obtained by survey. Sixty three students undertaking a weekly course were surveyed about their attitudes to block and weekly teaching, achieving 62 responses, for a response rate of 98.4%. Quantitative data was obtained about the number of block and weekly courses they had taken, and their preference for block or weekly classes.

FACULTY ATTITUDES TO BLOCKS

Block courses are generally popular with faculty, with most preferring to do a substantial proportion or all of their teaching by blocks. Arguments given in favour of blocks include advantages for the students, and for the academics. Blocks are seen to often result in 'better student concentration on the material' since students can immerse themselves in the course for a few days, rather than rushing to class, potentially tired and distracted after work. Students were believed by one academic to be 'better prepared' for blocks, since they receive the reading material some weeks in advance of the block, and the intense block format is seen as forcing students to read in advance. Blocks were said by one to result in 'higher quality assignments and projects', since students have several weeks to complete assignments after the end of classes, meaning that course material can be better reflected in assignments.

Blocks are also seen to have personal advantages for academics, allowing teaching time to be compressed into a short (albeit high intensity) interval, allowing longer periods to concentrate on

research. Weekend teaching is also seen to provide flexibility, allowing time during the week to pursue family or personal responsibilities, or to allow weekday leisure time. Block courses also have advantages for staffing, allowing the use of interstate and overseas academics to teach classes.

Consistent with previous research (Scott and Conrad 1991), some academics expressed concerns about the learning outcomes for students. In contrast, however, when asked about their personal experience with block classes, all those interviewed thought that the actual quality of student results was equivalent, or better, in block classes. Several suggested that the value of blocks depends on allowing students to choose their preferred format, due to a belief that there are students who perform better in blocks, or in weekly classes respectively. Block teaching was also suggested to present a potential problem for new faculty and/or for new courses. Since the nature of a block requires planning and preparation of nearly all material before the class starts, there is very little opportunity to substantially adjust the material in response to student feedback or reactions, so the format is seen to be most effective for established courses and experienced faculty.

STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TO BLOCKS

Most of the students were early in their courses, with 22 (34.5%) having taken at least one block course, (a range from one to eight). Students were asked if they would have chosen to take the same course in a block format if it had been available. The results were strongly significant, depending on the student's experience of blocks ($p < 0.001$). Of students who had taken a block, 58.1% stated that they would have taken the course by block by preference. Of students who had not taken a block, only 5% said that they would prefer to take the course by block. Predicting willingness to take a block course in an ordinal logistic regression showed that taking one block course was a significant predictor of preference ($p < 0.002$). However after allowing for whether students had taken one block course, there was no extra increase in explanatory power by allowing for extra blocks taken ($p = 0.727$). This suggests that the results are not biased by students with a strong preferences for blocks (who would be expected to have taken more block courses), since experience with only one block resulted in a significant increase in willingness to take a block course. In contrast to past suggestions within the literature, older students were not significantly more likely to prefer a block course ($p > 0.1$). There was a weak trend for students who are working full or part-time to prefer blocks ($p = 0.059$). It appears to be work situation, rather than age per se, which is associated with increased demand for blocks.

Qualitative responses revealed substantial reservations concerning block courses by many students who had not taken one. Students who had not attended blocks recognised the advantages of completing classes in a shorter duration but were worried whether blocks provided enough time to reflect on material e.g. "I do not feel I would learn as effectively in a block". Reservations about blocks were strongest for courses which were seen as particularly difficult, quantitative, or where the student had no background. "Weekly courses are important for subjects that introduce a totally new subject to a student." "I would be more comfortable doing a block in a subject I was familiar with." Given that student preferences for blocks rise after experiencing a block, it would seem that reservations reflect perceptions of uncertainty, rather than necessarily reflecting actual pedagogical issues. Despite reservations about their ability to learn in blocks, many of these students commented that having the choice between blocks and weekly classes was important.

The advantages of blocks were clearly seen as centring on convenience. Blocks were seen as being good to combine with weekly classes within a term in order to complete the course faster. "I would prefer block classes when studying two subjects per term." Different students saw the different

formats as providing valuable flexibility in the face of work commitments. Some preferred blocks because of work commitments, "If I have a lot of work travel I would prefer blocks." Others preferred weekly classes "Due to work commitments and job, doing study weekly is preferable". The importance of structuring a block well was also noted e.g. "The lecturer must structure well to cover ground in (a) block course". One student (who hadn't done a block class) was strongly opposed to block classes: "I do not think MBA level class should be offered as a block at all."

DISCUSSION

Both the quantitative and qualitative results suggest some important, and previously unidentified, barriers to block teaching. Students who had not taken blocks appeared apprehensive about the format, and were significantly more likely to choose a weekly course. In particular, students expressed reservations about quantitative subjects in block form. This feeling was exacerbated when the course material was seen as complex, technical, and/or where the student had no experience. This perception may be presenting a barrier to students enrolling in block courses, or at institutions where block teaching is a common form of teaching. In contrast, when students had experienced even one block course, their stated willingness to study in a block format increased significantly. Given the popularity of block courses among faculty, and the frequency of block courses, identifying and addressing student concerns about block teaching could be an important measure in making the format more attractive to potential students.

Block courses are clearly seen as convenient for both faculty and students, in allowing a time-compressed method of study. It is interesting that both groups expressed reservations about the learning in block classes, just as previous researchers have identified similar concerns by faculty at other institutions, despite almost consistent research findings that students on block courses perform as well as, or better than, students on traditional courses. It is possible that these results are despite, rather than because of, the block format. Students may study harder to cope with the time pressure of a block, or students may select blocks in their areas of expertise, and select weekly classes when they lack confidence, resulting in a systematic advantage in favour of blocks. Because students self-select block courses in almost all cases, it will probably never be possible to establish whether blocks provide an equal learning environment. Because of their advantages for universities, faculty and students, blocks will undoubtedly continue. However this suggests that universities should clearly address student concerns about blocks. There appear to be two areas where student and faculty preparation for blocks could be improved.

Firstly, block teaching is challenging for new courses and for new academics, since it offers little or no real ability to adapt material for the audience once the course has started. This is not a problem for well-established courses and for teachers who are experienced in the course. However it can present substantial problems for new courses and for new teachers. The importance of preparation for block courses suggests that new courses should not be taught by block until student reaction has been established. Experience with weekly teaching will not guarantee success in a block course, but will facilitate adequate preparation, and is likely to increase the chances that the block format will be successful. Secondly, if universities believe that block courses are equal to traditional formats in educational outcomes, there should be a serious effort to evaluate the belief, by systematic comparison of students' grades. Such a study will never be definitive, but if it supports the previous research on blocks, then students can be confidently told that block teaching is consistent with equivalent performance on assessment criteria.

LIMITATIONS

This study involved only a small number of students and faculty, and did not control for subject specific experience. For example, given student concerns about quantitative subjects in block format, it would be useful to see if these perceptions are different among students who have taken such subjects by block. Further research is planned to investigate which subjects are thought in advance to be most suitable/unsuitable for block teaching and the extent to which these perceptions change after experience of the block.

CONCLUSION

Block teaching is likely to remain as a substantial part of the offering of Australian post-graduate education, due to its attractions for students, faculty and universities. However this study identified substantial student reservations about the format, particularly among students who had not experienced it. The fact that these reservations were much less likely to be expressed by students who had studied by block suggests that they are perceived, rather than actual, disadvantages of the format, yet these perceptions may still be limiting acceptance of the format by many students. Identifying, and addressing these concerns may help to allay student concerns about block teaching, and increase use of the format.

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