

Raising the academic success of students from equity backgrounds in higher education through immersive scheduling

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Abstract

In 2021, a regional Australian university transformed its academic delivery model. Twelve-week trimesters were replaced with 6-week terms, and an active learning pedagogical framework was implemented across the institution. This presentation reports on the impact of this new model – a form of immersive scheduling or block delivery – on the academic success and satisfaction of students from key equity groups: low socio-economic status, non-English speaking background, Indigenous, registered with a disability, regional/remote, and first-in-family. Student grades ($N = 30,108$) and unit feedback responses ($N = 8,896$) were analysed across two years of immersive delivery and compared with results from the traditional model. Results from inferential statistical tests indicate that the immersive model had a significant positive impact on equity students' academic outcomes, with particularly strong gains observed for Indigenous students and students registered with a disability.

Background and rationale

In 2021, a new academic delivery model was introduced across a regional, public Australian university with higher proportions of students from equity backgrounds compared to metropolitan universities (Roche et al., 2022). The new academic model, known as the Southern Cross Model (SCM), is a form of “immersive scheduling” (Turner et al., 2021) – similar to block models – which seeks to improve students' academic success and retention through more focused and engaging learning experiences. The SCM allows students to complete up to a maximum of two units over 6-week terms and encompasses a distinct approach to pedagogy, including active learning through online modules and scheduled classes, and authentic, interlinked assessments.

While not new to higher education (HE), reporting on the implementation of immersive models in institutions serving large proportions of students from equity backgrounds is relatively rare. In one such example, an Australian metropolitan university reported particularly pronounced gains in academic performance for non-English speaking background (NESB) and low socio-economic status (LSES) students compared to other student groups in a 4-week block model (Loton et al., 2022). Meanwhile, an earlier study at the authors' institution revealed significant gains in academic success for undergraduate and pathway cohorts in a 6-week immersive model (Goode et al., 2023), but did not identify impacts on equity students.

Qualitative accounts suggest that students in pathways programs, which typically enrol high proportions of students from equity groups, value the added focus and flexibility of immersive models (Goode et al., 2022). However, research into undergraduate cohorts has not revealed significant changes in satisfaction for equity groups studying in immersive models (Loton et al., 2022). Building on this existing work, this research explores the question: What difference

has a 6-week immersive, active learning model made to the academic performance and satisfaction of undergraduate students from equity backgrounds at an Australian university?

Methodology and results

Student performance ($N = 30,108$) and satisfaction ($N = 8,896$) data were collected from matched-pairs of units offered across nearly two years of immersive delivery (Terms 1–4 in 2021 and 2022) and one year of traditional trimester delivery (Sessions 1–2, 2019). The data were separated into six cohorts: LSES, NESB, Indigenous, registered with a disability, regional/remote, and first-in-family. For each of these groups, chi-square tests were conducted to compare academic performance, overall unit satisfaction and overall teaching satisfaction across the two models, as well as with a control group that stayed in the traditional model.

The results evidence that immersive scheduling combined with active learning pedagogy can heighten academic outcomes for students from equity backgrounds in HE. Particularly strong gains were observed for Indigenous students and students registered with a disability. The audience will be invited to discuss the findings in light of their own experiences of innovations in pedagogy to support equity student success in HE.

Questions for discussion

1. What opportunities do you think immersive models hold for increasing the participation and success for students from equity backgrounds in HE?
2. How do you think a more focused curriculum could assist students from equity backgrounds in your context?
3. How do you think an active learning pedagogy could be operationalised to support students from equity backgrounds in your context?

References

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