

Strategies for student success and wellbeing in accelerated online learning: A case study from JCU's Master of Nursing

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Abstract

Block teaching continues to challenge traditional semester- and trimester-based models and presents some specific design and teaching challenges. In the seven years since launching the accelerated online Master of Nursing, we've learned valuable lessons about designing and teaching in the online block mode and for the distinctive needs, motivations, and study patterns of our cohort. Common challenges include complexity and cognitive load, perceived isolation through lack of engagement, and effort and workload caused by the short duration. Through intentional and iterative learning design, based on feedback from students and faculty, we have developed a program that promotes deeper learning and engagement, encourages connection and belonging, and provides flexibility to support the specific needs of our cohort. This presentation discusses the practical strategies we use to scaffold student success and wellbeing in this challenging modality.

Proposal

Rationale/Background

Australian higher education is witnessing a shift towards block mode teaching, challenging the traditional semester- and trimester-based systems. This approach involves students focusing on one subject at a time in intensive, typically four- or six-week blocks, in either face-to-face, online, or blended modes. While offering potential benefits, block mode also presents unique challenges for students and faculty. Research generally shows that block teaching can be at least as effective as semester- and trimester-based modes in terms of academic performance and student satisfaction—and potentially out-performs traditional modalities in some instances (Goode et al., 2024; Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). This includes the fields of healthcare and nursing (Edward et al., 2024; Harwood et al., 2018; Irvine et al., 2020). However, this success is dependent on overcoming some specific challenges, including “the complexity and cognitive load of accelerated programs” (Irvine et al., 2020, p. 402). Students can find that the accelerated pace makes workload management and the effective use of time extremely difficult (Kuiper et al., 2015). Additionally, for the online block mode, there are further challenges around perceived isolation through lack of engagement with teachers and peers (Australian Government: Department of Education, 2024; Roddy et al., 2017). Intentional design and teaching strategies are powerful measures to address the challenges associated with the online block mode, with the aim of promoting student success and wellbeing in this challenging modality.

Approaches/Method

This case study explores the design and teaching strategies used to deliver an online accelerated Master of Nursing (Online) program at James Cook University (JCU). In the seven years since the launch of this program, we have learned a great deal about our cohort of busy working professionals and what is needed to support student success in online block modes.

Understanding distinctive needs, motivations, and study patterns, as well as the specific challenges students face is essential to effectively supporting students through their challenges.

This presentation discusses practical strategies for promoting deeper learning and cognitive engagement by adapting teaching methods to foster active learning and authentic assessment; encouraging connection and belonging by providing ongoing support and feedback to students in a way that is timely and impactful within the accelerated timeframe; and providing flexibility to support the specific needs and preferences of busy working professionals in managing their time and workload. Clear links to recommendations from the Australian Universities Accord – Final Report will thread through the presentation (Australian Government: Department of Education, 2024).

Questions for audience discussion

1. How do we realise the full benefits of block teaching and accelerated online learning?
2. As academic and professional staff, what can you do in these formats to maximise engagement and learning?
3. What support strategies do you, or could you, implement at your institution to address the pressures on teaching staff and students, and the possible risk of burnout?

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