'Block teaching' – exploring lecturers' perceptions of intensive modes of delivery in the context of undergraduate education

Abstract

This article evaluates a change in the structure of teaching delivery implemented in the first year of an undergraduate Tourism Management degree programme at a university in the North West of England. Moving from traditional semesterised mode, delivery was changed to shortened, time-intensive modules that were delivered one at a time, for two full days (6 hours per day) and over 3 weeks. This move to block teaching was implemented in response to student feedback and concerns regarding student outcomes. Albeit limited, previous research has suggested that such intensive forms of delivery can help improve engagement, attendance and attainment, particularly amongst student cohorts from a diverse range of entry pathways, such as that found on this particular undergraduate programme. However, although it is clear that the efficacy of block teaching relies heavily on – and creates new pressures for –teaching staff, little research has been undertaken to explore those impacts. Here instead, the perceptions of teaching staff were the primary focus. A qualitative approach was taken in the form of an anonymous, online questionnaire, completed by an entire teaching team, following one full year of block teaching. The findings suggest that although most lecturers found that block teaching initially enabled them to manage their time more effectively, as the year progressed, block teaching negatively affected student attendance and as a result, this hampered lecturers' ability to promote deep learning. Fully integrated placement of assessment and use of one intensive module to aid transition was recommended to help overcome these issues.

1. Introduction

In an era of unprecedented and rapid transformation, there is little doubt that the UK tertiary education sector faces a number of challenges, particularly in light of the shifting student demands and needs that these changes have precipitated. The increasing pressures placed on UK universities come from a number of different channels (Hénard and Rosevare, 2012). In particular, although it has been argued that students have long been regarded as the primary customers of a university within the UK, there is little doubt that the higher volume and increasing publicity surrounding tuition fees has placed value for money at the forefront of the higher education conversation (Crawford, 1991; Rowley, 2003). This has in turn, been seen to have led to a particular emphasis on postgraduate employability – undergraduate degrees are increasingly perceived to offer value in other words, based on the level of employability they are seen to provide (Tomlinson, 2008). This has also gone hand in hand with increasingly varied attempts to capture, measure and evaluate student satisfaction. This has occurred both externally via mass questionnaires, such as the National Student Survey, as well as internally through a variety of institutional feedback mechanisms, from modular to programme, as well as departmental to faculty level, thereby reinforcing the idea of the "student as customer" (Douglas et al, 2006, p251; Elliot and Healy, 2001; Giannakis and Bullivant, 2015). As a result, the data collected has become a vital tool of student recruitment and retention (Rowley, 2003).

At the same time, the sheer number of students entering higher education has expanded year-on-year, almost doubling between 1992 and 2016, from 984,000 to 1.87 million (ONS, 2018). In May to July 2016, for example (the most recent data available), approximately one in three people aged 18-24 were in full-time learning, leading to what has been called the "massification" of higher education (ONS, 2018. See: Giannakis and Bullivant, 2015; Hornsby and Osman, 2014). Large numbers of students have benefitted from successful

Widening Participation programmes across the sector, alongside many others who have been able to gain access to further education in new and non-traditional ways (Lane, 2008). As a result, this has placed a new emphasis on teaching staff to be able to accommodate and react to those changes (Burton and Nesbit, 2008; Rowley, 2003). It is a crucial point not least, because as the number of students attending university has increased, so too has the diversity of those students (Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003). Such diversity has been imbalanced across the sector, meaning that certain institutions attract much higher numbers of those who have been termed 'non-traditional' learners, compared to others (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002). This broadened out student body somewhat inevitably arrives with a concomitant variety of disparate learning needs that academic staff and the curriculum they deliver are expected to be able to meet, in order to retain student numbers and ensure their engagement and attainment, despite increasingly limited resources available to do so (Burton and Nesbit, 2008; Rowley, 2003; Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003).

The changing face of the student body has made this more challenging too, in light of recent research, which has demonstrated a passivity amongst (especially first year undergraduates) in the classroom coupled with an expectation that the answers be provided to them ready-made (Cuseo, 2007). This lack of engagement and requisite rejection of deep and active learning, it has been suggested, stems at least in part from students' prior educational experiences (Biggs and Tang, 2007; Jones et al. 2015). As a result of shifts in recent government educational policy and exacerbated by the increasing pressures that schools and colleges themselves are facing, students are increasingly seen in other words, to be arriving at university following educational experiences in which rote or surface style learning has become prioritised as students are 'taught to the test' in order to meet school and/or college attainment targets (Biggs and Tang, 2007; Jones et al. 2015). As a result, many students embarking upon undergraduate degrees at universities – particularly in the first year – may

lack the kind of key skills, such as critical thinking and independent learning, needed to succeed at this level (Jones et al. 2015). In order to overcome the challenges faced, the adaptation and adoption of innovative and flexible forms of teaching practice has become paramount (Davies, 2006).

One increasingly common form of such adaptation has been a shift from more traditional semesterised or year-long course delivery, to the integration of compressed, intensive, "blocked" forms of teaching and learning (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p4; Davies, 2006; Kops, 2014, p2). And yet despite the increasing incorporation of block-teaching into university settings, research to-date is relatively limited in comparison to other innovative approaches to curriculum design and implementation (Burton and Nesbit, 2008; Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003). That which has been undertaken has suggested that an intensive style of delivery has been particularly beneficial to exactly those institutions referred to above, those with high numbers of non-traditional learners (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002). This is not least because this demographic is more likely to include students who may have commitments that prevent full-time residential study, with the practical flexibility compressed modules can allow, thereby enabling a wider cross-section of learners access to further education (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p4; Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003, p95). Other research undertaken in this area has also suggested that intensive delivery results in "equivalent, or better, learning experiences on a range of measures of interaction, student commitment, and academic performance" (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p5; Sheldon and Durdella, 2010; Kucsera and Zimmaro, 2010).

Crucially, however, there is a clear gap in extant literature concerning intensive or 'blocked' delivery; research has typically focused on student reception and reaction, in contexts where they have studied one intensive module only and somewhat overlooked the impact such a

structure has on those tasked with delivering it (Burton and Nesbit, 2008. See: Grant, 2001; Kasworm, 2001). This is an important caveat, particularly because studies that focus on students' reception of intensive teaching formats also tend to do so with the general proviso that academics have a sceptical attitude towards block teaching by default, based on a belief that those academics feel that it substitutes "academic rigour and genuine learning for student convenience" (Daniel, 2000, p298. See: Scott and Conrad, 1992). There is also little doubt that the intensity and faster pace of block taught modules place different demands on lecturers than more traditional teaching formats and the shorter timeframe means that there is "less margin for error" (Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003, p94. See: Kops, 2014, p5). Lecturers subsequently therefore need to adapt their teaching methods and be equipped to react to the distinct challenges that accelerated learning may foster (Brown, 1992; Scott, 1996, Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003).

To be able to do so successfully, however, necessitates a fuller understanding of just what those potential impacts and perceptions of the academics charged with delivering block teaching actually are, which is precisely what this article seeks to explore. Taking a qualitative approach, the aim of this research is then, to explore the opinions, implications and impact on teaching, in relation to student engagement, attainment and retention, amongst lecturers. Data has been gathered from a teaching team on the first year of a Tourism Management undergraduate degree programme at a university in the North West, who have experienced a full academic cycle of (both delivery and evaluation of) block teaching. The hope is that this will provide the basis for further refinement of block teaching, to share good practice, as well as to identify any problems/barriers to the successful implementation of the intensive format and thereby facilitate discussion about how those issues can potentially be overcome.

1.2 Reason for the Intervention

Following a full revalidation of the Tourism Management programme (hereafter 'TM') at this particular institution in the North West in 2016, the decision was taken to trial an intensive form of delivery. This was based on analysis of the course evaluation and a focus group with students who had graduated the previous year (2015), from which two particular issues emerged. Firstly, there was a strong sense that the diversity of entry routes for students on the course meant that levels of both subject-related knowledge and crucially, academic study-skills, varied widely, which presented barriers in relation to learning and engagement necessitated at University level. Secondly, students also made it clear that they often struggled with having to juggle different modules at once – a majority of respondents stated that they would prefer to focus on one subject at a time, with the belief that this would help them to engage with modules more fully and in more depth. Many respondents felt more comfortable with this approach as they felt it mirrored their mode of learning at previous levels of study. This was particularly relevant given the fact that of the incoming cohort of 21 full time students amongst which the block teaching was to be introduced, 18 had come from a route that included studying across a range of FE colleges across the North West, where a more intensive modular approach, it was shown, had been more or less standard. It was subsequently decided to trial a particular form of block teaching, where modules would be delivered one at a time, for two full days (6 hours per day) and over 3 weeks, for the new intake of Level 4 students.

2. What is block teaching?

A pioneer in the implementation of intensive courses was Colorado College in the USA, which began teaching all modules on all courses in an accelerated format twenty-five years

ago (Grant, 2001). Nonetheless, Colorado remains a global outlier and throughout most UK universities, undergraduate courses have traditionally been delivered along similar lines; lectures (and/or) seminars are given once or twice weekly per module, over the course of a term or semester (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p5). Yet although (as described above), recent and relatively dramatic shifts across higher education in the UK have undoubtedly created a drive towards the implementation of innovative teaching styles, in fact, non-traditional modes of delivery have been undertaken in this sector for many years within some institutions, and this has included time-shortened courses (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p5; Grant 2001).

In fact block taught modules in the UK today exist in a wide variety of formats ranging from whole modules taught over "five successive full days" to those taught for "three hours a day over 18 days" (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p5). Despite the range of methods, what ties the approach together is that "an equal number of class hours is delivered in more concentrated bursts" as opposed to being delivered once or twice weekly, over a much longer periods of time (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p5). For the purposes of this article, that which is referred to specifically as 'block teaching' relates to the format of teaching one module at a time, over two full days per week for three weeks per module, that was used within this particular TM programme. This definition and use of the phrase of block teaching, follows the work of both Gose (1995) and Grant (2001), as well as the terminology used within the TM team, amongst whom the research on which this article is based, was undertaken.

2.2 What are the benefits of block teaching?

Albeit limited, research that has sought to compare block teaching formats with more traditional, semester or year-long modes of delivery, suggest that time-shortened modules

show at least similar, or at best a clear improvement, in levels of attainment and long-term knowledge retention (Daniel, 2000, p299; Davies, 2006; Sheldon and Durdella, 2010; Kucsera and Zimmaro, 2010). It has also been shown that in some instances, intensive formats allow for enhanced staff-student interaction, which in turn facilitates in-depth discussion and a "continuous learning experience" that allows students to "connect and synthesise ideas more efficiently", thereby promoting deep and active styles of learning (Daniel, 2000, p299. See: Davies, 2006; Gaubatz, 2003, p3; Scott, 1994; Smith, 1988). Block teaching would therefore seem to offer a systemic means by which to overcome some of the problems faced when seeking to facilitate learning amongst exactly the type of increasingly diverse student body, which is familiar to this specific programme within this particular institution, as outlined above (Davies, 2006; Jones et al, 2015).

Equally importantly, some studies have shown that block teaching encourages students to plan their time more effectively through having a smaller number of classes to concentrate on at any one time, which has subsequently been shown to have positively impacted levels of student engagement (Daniels, 2000; Davies, 2006). This is also a significant point in relation to TM within this particular university, not least because it is a programme that has struggled to maintain adequate levels of student engagement in the recent past, which has negatively impacted both learning outcomes as well as levels of student attainment and subsequently, retention, more broadly (Kuh et al. 2008). Overall, despite the long-standing traditional format outlined above, previous research suggests that there is actually very little to support a "fixed relationship between time and learning" and in fact the learning experience in these intensively delivered examples has been shown to be of comparable quality to that taught in a more long-form format (Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003, p94. See also: Kops, 2014, p2; Kucsera and Zimmaro, 2010; Lee and Mroczka, 2002). In many of the (albeit limited) cases discussed to-date, students have been shown to actively prefer intensive delivery, with

especially those who may need greater flexibility, with students who are "older, those studying part-time and those who are working", particularly benefitting from the time-shortened format (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p6. See: Daniel, 2000; Scott and Conrad, 1992).

Nonetheless, this comes with an important qualification; the limited research so far into the impacts of block teaching has begun to suggest that its successful implementation may be contingent, particularly in relation to subject area (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p5, 15). Whilst intensive teaching has been shown to work in various contexts within the humanities (Grant, 2001) and marketing-related disciplines (Scott, 1994), in other areas of study the picture is mixed, particularly where students have less knowledge both of the subject being taught, and less experience of the block teaching format itself (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p5, 15). As stated above, perhaps equally importantly and as yet little explored, is the potential impact of accelerated modules on lecturers – so that even where students prefer intensive delivery, staff on the other hand, may have very different experiences.

2.3 What are the known impacts of block teaching on staff to-date?

There is little doubt that intensive delivery has its own challenges and places different demands on lecturers (Kops, 2014, p5). In the first instance, some academics have professed misgivings, with a sense that block teaching is "educationally inferior" and prioritises convenience or economic drivers over supposedly *real* learning (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p16. See: Daniel, 2000, p298; Kops, 2014; Scott and Canford, 1992). This is particularly the case in relation to those subjects in which there is a fundamental acceptance of the belief that more time is needed to take in information, such as the natural sciences (Daniel, 2000, p298; Harvey et al., 2017; Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003, p96). But it is also perhaps, a legacy

of the fact that (in the UK at least), time-shortened courses have their foundation in adult education – in institutions, in other words, "not home to traditional research-led academics" which are "therefore seen as being inferior" (Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003, p94). And yet although most of the available research shows that the impact of block teaching on students is at worst minimal and at best beneficial, for lecturers tasked with intensive delivery, the results are less clear (Daniel, 2000, p299; Davies, 2006).

Where the opinions of tutors have been discussed in this previous research, it has most often been as a foil to enhance or enable discussion regarding student response to block teaching (Brown, 1992; Scott, 1996; Watson, 1998). And for the most part, tutors have reported that compressed modules increase workloads and can make managing their own working time more difficult, with planning for the entire course having to take place outside of the academic year, subsequently eating into valuable research time (Kops, 2014, p8). It has also been suggested that intensive delivery can lead to fatigue amongst faculty staff, impacting preparation and crucially, course delivery itself (Tracey et al, 1980). This is an important point, because for block teaching to work, it has been shown to be vital that lecturers are able to use a variety of teaching methods that actively involve students and to create a positive learning environment under a time pressure that they may not be used to or comfortable with (Brown, 1992; Scott, 1996; Watson, 1998). In particular, tutors need to "monitor courses and learning outcomes closely" (Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003 p95).

This suggests that mode and method of assessment, is therefore key, and may need to be altered to fit an accelerated time-frame more fully, incorporating shorter and more frequent assignments, whilst still being able to recognise the diversity of student learning needs (Lee and Mroczka, 2002). With "little margin for error" in block-taught modules, ensuring a high quality of teaching is paramount, and yet the limited research available has shown that there

is actually far more potential for it to be poor (Scott, 1996; Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003 p95). In seeking to add to the research available about the impacts of block teaching, and with this in mind, the research below investigates the impacts of changing the structure of course delivery had on teaching staff. Implicit within this is also an attempt to gauge whether the implementation of block teaching in its first guise on the TM programme at this institution was deemed to be a success in relation to student engagement, attendance and attainment.

3. Methodology

As the emphasis was on capturing the subjective impacts and experiences of block teaching on lecturers, a qualitative approach was taken (Gratton and Jones, 2004; Greener, 2011). Rather than provide specific answers to a set of specific questions that could then be generalised and used to construct the kind of statistical analysis that quantitative data can provide, here a qualitative approach made more sense (Gratton and Jones, 2004; Greener, 2011). This was precisely because as Greener notes, it allows the researcher to "capture more naturalistically what research participants wish to express because they are able to use their own words rather than the categories or tick-boxes that researchers have designed" (Greener, 2011, p3). The small-scale nature of the project, with a maximum of ten possible participants, would have made a focus group a particularly beneficial mode of qualitative enquiry, not least due to the ability of focus groups to facilitate open discussion on a shared experience in a way that one-to-one interviews tend not to do (Gratton and Jones, 2004; Morgan and Kruger, 1998; Nichols and Ojala, 2009). Unfortunately, the time constraints of the project and the fact that the data had to be gathered during the summer period, meant that the

relevant participants were unable to be brought together in the same place, at the same time. A questionnaire was therefore used instead.

Although some basic demographic data was captured to enable rudimentary cross-tabulations to be undertaken where responses suggested this would be insightful, the questionnaire contained five open-ended questions (Bryman, 2012). Open-response questions were used in order to "capture differences in interpretation and understanding" between teaching staff, as well as to highlight any shared commonalities in their experiences of delivering intensive modules (Greener, 2011, p40). The questions aimed to gather not only the lecturers' opinions of the strengths and weaknesses of block teaching, but also in keeping with the research objectives, to try to understand impacts on teaching style/methods used as well as any possible barriers to its implementation. In addition, it was important to try to understand if lecturers' perceptions had changed having undertaken block delivery and a longitudinal aspect to the research would have been ideal, but again, time constraints did not allow this. Instead, a question was included in the questionnaire to try to address this aspect.

As with all forms of social research ethical considerations must be paramount (Bryman, 2012, p120). Here, the nature of the project was deemed to be of limited risk. In brief however, all lecturers who participated in block delivery to TM students were emailed a link to the questionnaire, which could be completed online, thereby ensuring that anonymity could be maintained (Greener, 2013, p51-53). A Participant Information Sheet was provided and it was made clear that whilst participation was voluntary, withdrawal from the research was only possible up until the point at which answers were submitted – anonymity would obviously prevent withdrawal after this point. There was a 90% response rate, with nine out of the ten lecturers approached, having completed the online questionnaire in full. The

responses received were subsequently subjected to a content analysis in which open coding was undertaken and a table constructed, to enable the counting and categorisation of findings (Greener, 2011, p97). Some of the key themes to emerge are illustrated visually, as well as through the use of direct quotations, which are then linked back to the previous research outlined above, in the findings and discussion sections below.

4. Findings – Main Themes

The questionnaire contained five separate open-response questions outlined below. A full coding table was completed and the key themes to arise in answers provided to each question are also displayed below. Interestingly, there was relatively minimal variation in responses and many of the points raised were repeated by multiple participants. This means that although quantitative data has not been gathered, pie charts have been used and subsequently weighted to demonstrate the frequency of the same/similar responses to each question, to offer a visual insight into the findings gathered.

Q1 How did block teaching impact your teaching method/style of delivery?

Insert Figure 1 here

The responses here were relatively evenly split between those who felt that the biggest impact of block teaching was on their planning and preparation for sessions, with those reporting feeling rushed and like they did not have time to prepare properly (Kops, 2014, p8). This group subsequently worried that this negatively affected the students, who lost time needed

for reflection and the kinds of scaffolding needed to promote deep learning (Daniel, 2000, p298; Scott and Conrad, 1992). On the other hand, a similar number of respondents felt that focusing on one module at a time allowed them as well as the students to focus more fully and to create a seamless delivery or "continuous learning experience" (Daniel, 2000, p299). Only one participant responded that the format did not have any noticeable effect on delivery, though this came with the caveat that they had only been involved in a couple of sessions and had they been involved in running an entire module, this would potentially have had a bigger effect.

Q2 As a lecturer, what would you say were the most positive aspects of block teaching?

Insert Figure 2 here

The key positive aspects identified by respondents were the fact that block teaching offered students a "faster sense of accomplishment" and insight into how they were performing and that it was also good for lecturers, as it enabled them to manage their own time more effectively. An interesting point that will be discussed in more detail below, is the use of block taught modules as a transition tool, a way to ease students into university learning, particularly when they have come from an FE/non-traditional background.

Q3 Are there any barriers to the successful implementation of block teaching that you experienced?

Insert Figure 3 here

The main worry in relation to block teaching fell into two parts – firstly the responses related to issues raised with intensive delivery more generally, the potential impact of student absence, due to illness, for example, could exacerbate risk of failure because of the volume of content they would have missed. Participants felt that sometimes they were forced to filter content down to the basic elements and that if block teaching were to be brought in across the board, it would have implications in relation to resourcing. However, there was one issue that was specific to the format used on the TM programme – the fact that the second assessment for each module lagged behind the module it actually related to. In other words, in order to space out assessment deadlines, the second assessment linked to one module, was due to be submitted part way through the next intensive module. Students tended (perhaps unsurprisingly) to do relatively worse in the second assignment.

Q4 Do you feel that your initial perceptions of block teaching have been changed in any way in the course of delivery?

Insert Figure 4 here

Generally, lecturers reported that the block teaching had gone better than they had initially expected it to. Though it had not necessarily had a positive impact in terms of attendance/engagement, staff felt that it was a good transition tool. Overall, participants

would prefer to integrate intensive modules into a mix of other module formats, to help mitigate the potential for increased failure as a result of missing sessions. Interestingly, some respondents worried that a further negative impact was that block teaching would not help students to gain the time management skills they would need for employment.

Q5 Any other comments?

Insert Figure 5 here

In this section, the key themes were repeated from the questions above. Firstly, all participants except one suggested that block teaching had some use, but not as the only form of delivery. Once again, the issue of the lagging assessment was mentioned, as well as the sense that block teaching did not allow adequate time for students to absorb and reflect on the material taught and that it would not enable them to develop the time management skills necessary for entering full time employment.

5. Discussion and Links to Previous Research

Overall, it was clear that lecturers saw some positives in block teaching and were for the most part able to overcome any initial scepticism that they may have felt (Scott and Conrad, 1992). Chiming with previous research, the responses highlighted a sense that allowing students to focus on one subject/module at a time created a "continuous learning experience" (Daniel,

2000, p299. See: Davies, 2006; Gaubatz, 2003, p3; Scott, 1994; Smith, 1988). As Participant 1 suggested:

"In many ways delivering [an entire module] at once seemed to make the delivery more seamless as I could pick up (or a colleague would pick up) on where we left off an hour ago or two-three days ago."

This was definitely seen to be a key benefit to the block teaching format, but another positive aspect identified that has not been outlined in previous literature, was that it gave students a faster sense of accomplishment because completing assignments in a shorter time-frame, offered an insight into their performance sooner than would otherwise have been the case:

"…completing assessments quite early in semester 1…can help give students an indication of how they are performing after just the first few weeks." Participant 3.

It was suggested that this aspect in particular, underpinned the strength of using a blocked form of delivery as a transition tool to aid students' adaptation to studying at university level, especially for those who might be described as having taken a non-traditional route into higher education:

"*It allows students…to focus on one topic area at a time. This can be particularly beneficial to…those who have a BTEC background. As they are generally comfortable with working on one module at a time this can ease the transition into HE.*" Participant 7.

Again, this clearly fits with previous research, which suggests that intensive delivery can be of particular benefit to non-traditional learners, especially those who have a background in FE, where undertaking one subject at a time is standard practice (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p4; Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003, p95). In addition, although there was a clear feeling expressed that planning was negatively impacted and lecturers often felt like their preparation was more "rushed" (Kops, 2014, p8), interestingly and in contrast to previous findings (See: Brown, 1992; Scott, 1996; Watson, 1998), a number of participants suggested that it actually allowed them to manage their own time as lecturers more effectively:

"From a workload standpoint it is ideal because condensed teaching allowed me to open up larger blocks of time for other commitments and projects." Participant 4.

Somewhat ironically, at the same time that lecturers outlined the benefits of intensive delivery on their ability to manage their own commitments, they felt that it had the converse impact on students themselves. Far from learning to manage their own time more effectively (See: Daniels, 2000; Davies, 2006), the respondents felt that students actually ended up *not* developing the kinds of effective time management skills that they felt would be necessary for them after their degrees and as they embarked on full-time employment:

"[Block teaching] allows student to focus on one thing at a time – while this is good for them I do think that this is not preparing them for the world of work." Participant 2.

So although respondents did for the most part feel that focusing on one subject at a time was useful, particularly initially, they would prefer it as part of an overall delivery strategy, rather than being the only format of delivery used. This was not least because a key justification for

the introduction of accelerated courses was to improve levels of engagement and attainment amongst TM students, as previous research suggests (Daniels, 2000; Davies, 2006). However, there was little evidence that it did so and in fact, lecturers argued that although it began well, as the year progressed, block teaching seemed to negatively impact student learning, allowing only time for the basics to be delivered:

"There can be the tendency to filter content to only the 'essential' material that the students are assessed on. This can lead to lack of overall subject knowledge and minimal understanding of the topic concerned." Participant 5.

In actual fact block teaching can be undertaken in a variety of ways (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p5) and in this instance, the failure to improve levels of attainment, attendance and engagement was for the most part understood to be due to the *structure* of block teaching used. Lecturers were concerned about the impact that even a short amount of student absence had on their overall ability to complete modules, due to the volume of content covered (and therefore that could potentially be missed) over even a very short period of time. This was deemed to be exacerbated for students already at a high risk of failure such as a student who had already failed a year at a previous university, for example. In particular, the timing of assessments proved to be particularly problematic:

"...the second assessment is due well after the module has been completed...as the student has moved on, their quality of work is effected [sic] due to the structural nature of the module." Participant 1

It was strongly felt that for block teaching to be implemented successfully, the timing and subsequently the form of assessments would need to be reconsidered to ensure that learning outcomes could be met effectively (Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003 p95).

6. Conclusion

Transformations in the UK higher education sector, such as decreasing staff-to-student ratios and the wider diversity of the student body, has driven the need to adopt innovative teaching practices (Griffiths, 2009). This was particularly the case for the TM programme described above. The majority of students on this undergraduate degree course had taken non-traditional routes into higher education, meaning that their study-skills and subject-related knowledge varied widely, which subsequently presented barriers to engagement and attainment so (Burton and Nesbit, 2008; Rowley, 2003; Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003). In particular, following course evaluation and a focus group undertaken with a previous cohort, students stated that they found it difficult to juggle different modules at the same time. As a result, the TM team introduced a block teaching format. Following its first full year of implementation, it is clear that overall lecturers' experience of accelerated delivery was generally positive, particularly in relation to being able to manage their own time effectively. However, many of the participants questioned felt that the structure of delivery was not without its flaws. Initially, the format was seen to enable students to ease into studying at university level, but as the year progressed, a relatively large proportion of participants suggested that the format negatively impacted learning outcomes, particularly for those students who had missed classes.

Due to the quantity of teaching undertaken on one day, the impact of any absence through illness or other commitments such as working or childcare, was multiplied in a way that it would not have been, had a more traditional mode of delivery been undertaken. Because of the amount of content that could be quite easily missed, lecturers felt pushed towards

delivering material that ended up being filtered to its basic elements with a view to allowing students an opportunity to catch up more easily. In line with previous research, participants also suggested that the mode of assessment was a particular worry (Lee and Mroczka, 2002). Perhaps understandably in hindsight, students were clearly seen to have performed more strongly on assignments undertaken during the module and not as well on the second, which always fell during the module that followed. Going forward then, the two key recommendations to improve delivery were as follows:

1) Change the lagging assignment, so that students are assessed within the module the assignment relates to. This may necessitate the introduction and incorporation of innovative modes of assessment.

2) Rather than running the entire year in a block format, to pilot delivery of the first module of each semester or year in this way, to aid transition both into the university and between levels. This should also help to develop students' time management skills and overcome any difficulties in relation to resourcing.

Taking these steps should help to maximise the benefits that block teaching potentially offers, particular to diverse cohorts with non-traditional learners and to minimise the issues articulated above.

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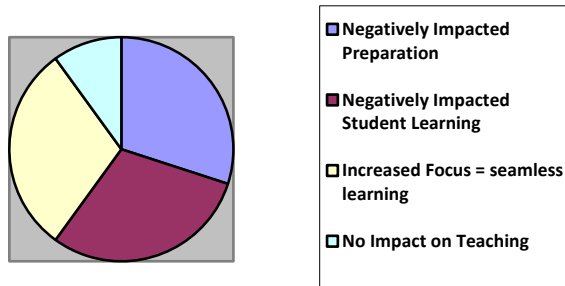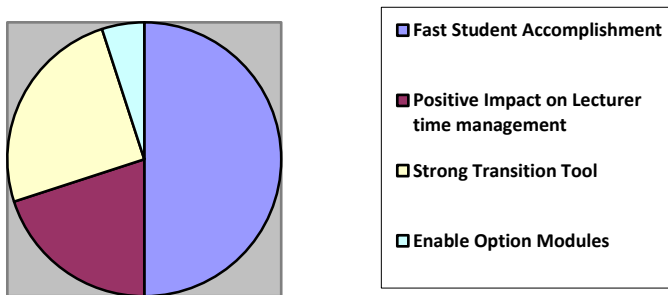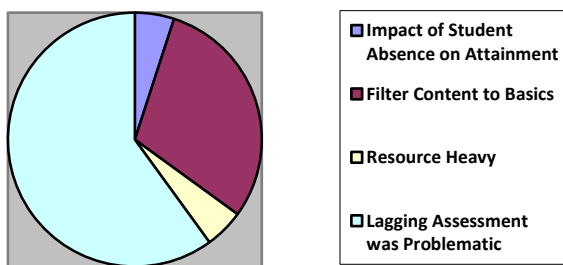
Figure 1

- Negatively Impacted Preparation
- Negatively Impacted Student Learning
- Increased Focus = seamless learning
- No Impact on Teaching

Figure 2

- Fast Student Accomplishment
- Positive Impact on Lecturer time management
- Strong Transition Tool
- Enable Option Modules

Figure 3

- Impact of Student Absence on Attainment
- Filter Content to Basics
- Resource Heavy
- Lagging Assessment was Problematic

Figure 4

- ☐ Better than Expected
- ☐ Increased Risk of Failure
- ☐ Good as One Form of Transition Tool
- ☐ Negates time Management Skills Needed for Employment

Figure 5

- ☐ Negatively Impacts Learning
- ☐ Assessment Issues Are Key
- ☐ Does Not Allow Development of Vital Time Management Skills
- ☐ Useful As Transition Tool