Blocked out: reflections on the potential of intensive modes of teaching to enhance post-COVID-19 graduate employability in large-scale educational settings

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores the potential that block teaching offers to enhance employability in the context of large-scale classes. It suggests that block teaching, with its condensed structure, necessitates curriculum innovation, fosters participatory learning and peer-to-peer networking, and has been shown to increase student focus and enhance engagement and attainment, especially amongst diverse learners. As these are the same challenges that large-scale teaching faces, it is proposed that intensive modes of delivery could be scaled up in a way that may help to mitigate such problems as cohorts in business schools continue to increase in size.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on secondary research and provides an overview of literature that looks at block teaching, followed by that which explores the challenges of large-scale teaching contexts. It compares and contrasts the gaps in both to suggest a way that they could be combined.

Findings – The paper provides key insights into changes in the contemporary landscape of teaching within UK business schools, which have seen increasingly large cohorts and draws out the key strengths of intensive modes of delivery, which include helping students to time manage effectively, encouraging curriculum innovation and the creation of participatory learning opportunities as well as providing closer personal relationships between students and staff. Outlining some of the well-documented issues that can arise when teaching larger cohorts, the paper suggests that scaling up blocked delivery may offer a new way help to overcome them.

Research limitations/implications – Because of the chosen research approach, the research results are subject to generalisation. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to test the proposed propositions in large-scale teaching scenarios.

Practical implications – This paper includes implications for the development of innovative modes of teaching in the context of large cohorts, an experience that is increasingly common amongst British business schools and beyond.

Originality/value – This paper brings together two bodies of literature for the first time – that of intensive modes of teaching and that focuses on large-scale teaching contexts – for the first time to show how the former may help to overcome some of the key issues arising in the latter.

Keywords Block teaching, Employability, Intensive delivery, Large-scale, Post-COVID-19

Paper type Viewpoint

1. Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic fades into memory, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the higher education sector faces greater challenges than perhaps at any other point in recent history (Ewing, 2021). Across the globe, these challenges stem from a wider range of sources

than ever before, too. In particular, it is becoming clearer that the responses of universities to COVID-19 perpetuated, and in some cases accelerated, significant changes that were becoming increasingly evident before the pandemic (Bassett-Dubsky, 2021). These have centred in particular on the ability of institutions to meet the changing needs, aspirations and expectations of undergraduate students (Bassett-Dubsky, 2021). As a result, there is increased pressure on (especially undergraduate) degree programmes to demonstrate that they offer "value for money" (Crew and Märtins, 2023). This "value for money" has also come to be measured in a singular way, that is, solely through perceived levels of post-graduate employability (Babalola and Kolawole, 2021). This idea exploded during the pandemic as provision shifted online, adding even more weight to a long-standing "consumerist" mindset amongst students (Ewing, 2021).

It is a mindset that has in turn tended to assert educational achievement as a "right" whilst placing added importance on obtaining a degree primarily as a direct pathway to employment (Pigden and Jegede, 2020). This is perhaps heightened further in relation to programmes run in business schools, which tend to be seen as much more vocational than other disciplines. This escalating emphasis on the employability outcomes of undergraduate degrees is set to intensify further due to post-pandemic changes in working patterns, coupled with a greater acknowledgement of the reality of multi-vocational (as opposed to unilinear) career pathways (Author A). It means that universities are, as a result, increasingly tasked with ensuring graduates leave their instructions with the range of skills required to adapt to a job market that increasingly values flexibility (Babalola and Kolawole, 2021).

To try to meet this challenge, there has been an increased emphasis on integrating "employability skills" into the curriculum (Groves *et al.*, 2018). It is a trend set to increase, with an ongoing rise in student numbers (MacGregor, 2022). To take one example, that of the UK, according to data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the period between 1992 (when the university sector expanded to include former Polytechnics) and 2018 witnessed an almost doubling of students enrolling in university degree programmes, rising from 984,000 to 1.87 m (ONS, 2018). This growth persisted even during the COVID-19 era, surpassing expectations (Bolton, 2022). Home student applications increased by 2.1% in 2020 and 5.1% the following year, with a record 750,000 applications for full-time undergraduate places submitted through UCAS in 2021, of which 560,000 were accepted (Bolton, 2022).

A recent report published by the Toronto-based *Higher Education Strategy Associates* (*HESA*) – one of the most comprehensive of its kind ever undertaken – revealed that in 2022, global student numbers passed 200m (MacGregor, 2022). There is little doubt that business schools, therefore, find themselves at an important crossroads (MacGregor, 2022). As a response, this opinion piece begins by outlining the difficulties posed by the increase in large-scale teaching contexts that the rise in student numbers has precipitated, before moving to reflect on the strengths of intensive modes or "blocked" teaching. It is then suggested that block teaching, as an innovative form of delivery, can offer a way to help business management programmes adapt to the twin challenges of large-scale teaching and an increased emphasis on employability.

2. Assessing the key challenges posed by large-scale teaching contexts

As outlined above, in business schools today, the increase in student numbers has led to the creation of substantial undergraduate cohorts, which are, as a result, often comprised of students with diverse educational backgrounds, experiences and varying levels of prior knowledge (Jaeck *et al.*, 2023). This has placed additional pressure not only on teaching staff but also has increased the need for universities to provide a much wider range of additional support services (Remenick, 2019). Perhaps even more notably, the admission of increasingly diverse student cohorts has long been disproportionately experienced by business schools in

less well-established institutions (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002). Such institutions have, through the years, attracted much higher numbers of both "non-traditional" and previously underrepresented groups of learners. Inevitably, the more diverse the student body, the greater the variety of learning needs that business schools must address as a result (Remenick, 2019).

This diversity presents a considerable challenge to teaching staff in being able to deliver content that is suitably pitched for all students. This is not least because it makes accommodating distinct learning needs whilst ensuring a consistent learning experience much more complex (Boulocher-Passet *et al.*, 2016). Being able to maintain a standard level of teaching excellence and aligning teaching approaches with programme objectives can also be complicated further when multiple lecturers are involved. As cohorts increase in size, in other words, and more staff become involved in delivery, it can lead to a lack of personalisation in teaching because providing individualised attention through offering one-to-one direct feedback, tailored support and addressing the unique needs of each learner becomes logistically more challenging (Liu *et al.*, 2022). This lack of personalisation can, in turn, have repercussions on student engagement, motivation and the overall quality of the learning experience (Liu *et al.*, 2022).

This can be compounded further because another issue associated with large-scale teaching contexts is the extent to which it can make creating opportunities for interactivity more difficult (Petrović and Pale, 2021). This is because large cohorts can mean that opportunities for student engagement, class discussions and interactive activities are constrained. Research has shown that decreased participation can impact the development of critical thinking skills and the practical application of learned concepts, negatively influencing attainment (Brown *et al.*, 2019). This is an important point, not least because effective assessment and timely feedback are fundamental elements of the learning process (Boud and Molloy, 2013). In large-scale teaching contexts, the sheer volume of assessments and the grading processes that follow can overwhelm teaching staff, which can then, in turn, result in delays in providing feedback, affecting students' ability to understand and apply concepts properly as they progress on to the next piece of work (Lu *et al.*, 2023; Wood and Henderson, 2010). Taken together, this can make giving students the tools and opportunities to practically apply the theory and concepts necessary to succeed in the world of work more difficult at a time when employability skills are more important than ever before (Stephen and Fru, 2023).

3. Focusing on employability

There is little doubt that working practices following the COVID-19 pandemic have included an emphasis on digital tools and hybridity (Stephen and Fru, 2023). At the same time, students have become increasingly concerned about their future careers as the post-COVID-19, post-graduate job market becomes increasingly competitive (Haekal *et al.*, 2021). Employers expect graduates to enter the workplace with a specific set of skills, including the ability to communicate and collaborate online (Gill, 2020). To ensure that students are able to compete, business schools have to ensure that the curriculum is set up to facilitate learning that is transferable to this new landscape (Muscat and Thomas, 2023). To ensure this, institutions need to continually assess and reassess the types of high-impact approaches available. This has included the implementation of learning communities, research projects and community-based experiences to enhance student employability skills in the most up-to-date way (Stephen and Fru, 2023).

To address these challenges, universities are beginning to place increasing importance on ensuring ongoing professional development for teaching staff. This is alongside a commitment to the expansion of student support services, which can play a crucial role in

mitigating the kinds of issues posed by the need to integrate student employability skills within large-scale teaching contexts (Bouchey *et al.*, 2021; Lauridsen, 2017). At the same time, business schools have begun to place much greater emphasis on the integration of innovative pedagogical approaches into their curricula (Bryant, 2023; Petrović and Pale, 2021). In particular, technological solutions offered by the expansion of access to VR, AR and generative AI have begun to be leveraged to create more personalised learning experiences, from virtual business simulations and using principles of co-design, to online internships and digital storytelling, enhancing engagement and promoting interaction within large cohorts (Allen *et al.*, 2021; Bryant, 2023; Petrović and Pale, 2021; Wilson *et al.*, 2021). It is within this context that the consideration of switching to blocked or intensive modes of teaching is gaining popularity too.

4. Blocked or intensive modes of teaching

A trailblazer in adopting intensive courses was Colorado College in the USA, which initiated the practice of teaching all modules on all courses in an intensive format 25 years ago (Roche *et al.*, 2024). Nonetheless, it is worth noting that nontraditional delivery methods have been in use within certain institutions for many years, and this has included the implementation of time-shortened courses; Colorado remains a global exception (Author A). Where intensive or "block-taught" modules are implemented, they tend to be delivered in a diverse range of formats, ranging from entire modules taught across "five successive full days" to those conducted for "three hours a day over 18 days" (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p. 5). Despite the variety of methods, the common thread in this approach is that "an equal number of class hours is delivered in more concentrated bursts" rather than being undertaken once or twice weekly over an extended period of time (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p. 5. See: Huber *et al.*, 2022). Although, across the majority of UK universities, traditional delivery methods for undergraduate courses following the format of lectures and/or seminars conducted once or twice weekly for each module throughout a term or semester have, for the most part, remained as standard, as mentioned above, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increasing focus on intensive modes of delivery (Goode *et al.*, 2024; Huber *et al.*, 2022).

As block teaching grows in popularity, more research is emerging too, and that which has sought to compare block teaching formats with more traditional semester or year-long delivery modes suggests that time-shortened modules exhibit at least similar, if not improved, levels of attainment and long-term knowledge retention (Kucsera and Zimmaro, 2010). It has also been demonstrated that, in some cases, intensive formats enable enhanced staff–student interaction, fostering in-depth discussion and a continuous learning experience. This, in turn, allows students to "connect and synthesise ideas more efficiently," thereby encouraging deep and active learning styles (Daniel, 2000, p. 299. See: Goode *et al.*, 2024; Chau *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, block teaching appears to provide a systemic approach to address some of the challenges encountered when facilitating learning within the increasingly diverse student body, which is, as outlined above, an increasingly common phenomenon across higher education institutions, globally (MacGregor, 2022).

Significantly, some recent studies indicate that block teaching promotes effective time management and planning amongst students by reducing the number of classes they need to focus on at any given time, which has, in turn, been demonstrated to positively impact levels of student engagement (Goode *et al.*, 2024). This aspect is particularly noteworthy in the context of research that shows that low student engagement adversely affects learning outcomes, student attainment and subsequently, broader retention (Kuh *et al.*, 2008; Roche *et al.*, 2024). Despite the long-standing traditional format mentioned earlier, previous research suggests that there is minimal evidence supporting a fixed relationship between time and learning. In fact, the learning experience in these intensively delivered examples has been

shown to be of comparable quality to that in a more extended format (Kops, 2014, p. 2; Roche *et al.*, 2024).

In addition, many students have actively expressed a preference for intensive delivery, particularly those students who require greater flexibility (Chau *et al.*, 2023; Thomas *et al.*, 2021). Students who are "older, those studying part-time, and those who are working" seem to especially benefit from the time-shortened format (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p. 6). However, this comes with an important caveat: research into the impacts of block teaching is starting to suggest that its successful implementation may be reliant on certain conditions, particularly concerning the subject area (Goode *et al.*, 2024). While intensive teaching has demonstrated success in various contexts within the humanities (Grant, 2001) and within business schools in marketing-related disciplines (Scott, 1995, 1996), in other areas of study, the outcomes are mixed. This is particularly true in disciplines where students have less knowledge of the subject being taught and less experience with the block teaching format itself (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, pp. 5, 15). Perhaps equally important but less explored is the potential impact of accelerated modules on lecturers (Cleary *et al.*, 2023). Even if students prefer intensive delivery, staff members sometimes have very different opinions and experiences.

5. Block mode teaching and impact on staff

There is little doubt that intensive delivery poses its own challenges and imposes distinct requirements on teaching staff (Testa and Van Dyke, 2024). Some lecturers have expressed reservations, for example, because they feel that block teaching is educationally "inferior" and gives precedence to convenience or economic motivations over genuine learning (Cleary *et al.*, 2023). This is particularly the case on programmes where there is a widespread acceptance of the idea that more time is essential for absorbing the necessary information, such as the natural sciences (Author A). However, it might also be a consequence of the fact that in many places, courses with condensed timelines have their origins in adult education – in institutions that are "not home to traditional research-led academics" and that are "therefore perceived as being inferior" (Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003, p. 94).

Lecturers have also suggested that condensed modules intensify their workloads and can complicate the management of their time, requiring them to plan the entire course outside the academic year, thereby encroaching upon valuable research time (Kops, 2014, p. 8). It has also been argued that intensive delivery may lead to fatigue amongst faculty members, affecting preparation and, importantly, the delivery of courses (Author A). This is a crucial consideration because, for block teaching to be effective, it is essential that staff employ various teaching methods to actively engage students. This helps to establish a positive learning environment under time constraints that may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable. Tutors must pay particular attention to and "closely monitor courses and learning outcomes" (Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003, p. 95).

This implies that the mode and method of assessment are pivotal and may need adjustment to better align with an accelerated timeframe. This may include, for example, shorter and more frequent assignments whilst still acknowledging the diverse learning needs of students (Chau *et al.*, 2023). With minimal margin for error in block-taught modules, ensuring a high quality of teaching is paramount. Nonetheless, the fact remains that the majority of available research indicates that the impact of block teaching is advantageous. With its often positive effects on student retention and attainment, especially amongst diverse and marginalised groups, there is little doubt that a focus on blocked delivery is here to stay (Samarawickrema and Cleary, 2021). Less certain is the impact that block teaching can have in large-scale teaching contexts, but as will be explored below, the potential is that it can offer a new way to approach some of the challenges that teaching increasingly large cohorts can bring.

6. Scaling-up intensive delivery

The challenges posed by large-scale teaching contexts in business schools have become more urgent to consider as the convergence of factors referred to above has not only seen cohorts increase in size but, as they have done so have become ever more diverse (Jaeck *et al.*, 2023). Where then, can block teaching fit in? In its most basic form, block teaching – *of necessity* – creates a platform to experiment with diverse instructional methods. This allows teaching staff to adapt to the evolving needs of learners and industry precisely because it offers a departure from traditional semester-long structures (Roche *et al.*, 2024). The change in delivery format itself, in other words, can act as a prompt that allows business schools to explore a diverse range of teaching styles in a large-scale teaching context, where they might otherwise be resistant to experimentation (Tang *et al.*, 2022).

In facilitating the exploration of different teaching styles, block teaching can subsequently cater to diverse learning preferences, which is often a difficulty in large-scale teaching contexts. In doing so, it enhances the student learning experience, which has been shown to improve overall engagement (Ambler *et al.*, 2021). This is not the least because the nature of block teaching introduces an element of flexibility. This can be particularly beneficial for students for whom this is a requirement due to external factors, such as caring, familial or work commitments, which a time-shortened format can more easily accommodate than more conventional large-scale formats might (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002).

This kind of flexibility can also be important when taking account of the varying levels of learner motivation and prior knowledge that are intrinsic to large-scale teaching contexts (Burton and Nesbit, 2008; Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003). It can potentially do so, particularly because, as recent research suggests, the concentrated nature of block teaching facilitates the integration of active, collaborative, experiential and applied pedagogies (Slevin, 2021). Aligned with the understanding that these pedagogies contribute to deeper learning, block teaching provides a structured approach to incorporating critical thinking and the application of knowledge in a way that is particularly applicable to work-based or "real world" scenarios, an aim that is increasingly important given the contemporary necessity for business schools to enhance graduate employability (Buck *et al.*, 2023).

At the same time, by condensing class hours into more focused periods, block teaching may contribute to averting burnout by efficiently managing the learning experience (Author A). It allows for focused efforts during specific periods, potentially reducing the stress associated with continuous, long-term engagement (Oraison *et al.*, 2023). This is not least because shifting towards intensive delivery necessitates a reevaluation of workload models. Acknowledging the unique demands and potential benefits of block teaching in workload models can lead to more effective planning and support for teaching staff, helping them to avoid burnout too (Oraison *et al.*, 2023). In addition, block teaching not only has the potential to foster a more engaging and active learning experience, but to do so in a way that can help mitigate issues like social isolation and promote a sense of belonging amongst larger cohorts (Buck and Tyrrell, 2022).

Concentrating delivery can achieve this because its successful implementation depends on peer networking. This directly aligns with findings which show that students find large lectures more inspiring when they include the facilitation of peer-to-peer interactions (Tyrrell and Shalavin, 2022). Enabling better-quality interpersonal connections is easier in the context of block teaching because the concentrated periods of time spent working together allow for a more focused, immersive approach (Goode *et al.*, 2024). The extended duration of block teaching can potentially, therefore, allow pace for in-depth discussions, feedback sessions and collaborative projects, enhancing the development and application of transferable employability skills in a comprehensive and impactful manner (Roche *et al.*, 2024).

7. Conclusion

There is little doubt that, as universities across the globe are still trying to come to terms with the impacts of restrictions implemented in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, the relationships between students and higher education institutions have undergone meaningful changes (Bassett-Dubsky, 2021). In particular, there has been a significant rise in the number of students accepted into undergraduate degree programmes, and as a result, institutions have been pushed to reconsider how they can meet the needs of an increasingly diverse range of students (McGregor, 2022). Curriculum innovation has become ever more prominent as they have attempted to do so, and one particular method that has gained in popularity in recent years and saw increased adoption during the COVID-19 era is "blocked" or intensive modes of teaching (Nerantzi and Chatzidamianos, 2020). Yet despite this increase in its use, there has been little investigation to date into how this might be "scaled-up" to take account of the large-scale teaching context – a context which in and of itself, can create very specific challenges.

It is widely held, for instance, that teaching large groups makes creating a sense of personalisation in the classroom much harder, meaning that catering to a variety of learning needs can be overlooked (Ambler *et al.*, 2021). Interactivity in the form of facilitating participatory moments in the classroom is also made more difficult at scale, and maintaining consistency amongst cohorts that are large enough to necessitate multiple teaching staff can be equally hard to ensure (Babcock *et al.*, 2012). Staff and students can also find the experience of large-scale teaching contexts overwhelming, not least when it comes to assessments (Wood and Henderson, 2010). Although business schools are placing more emphasis on the pedagogical development of teaching staff, expanding the support services available to students as well as exploring the use of technology to help mitigate some of these issues, there has been little exploration to date of how block teaching might also be used in this way too (Allen *et al.*, 2021; Bouchey *et al.*, 2021; Lauridsen, 2017; Saunders and Gale, 2012).

Research shows that block teaching can enhance levels of student engagement, not least because of the reduction of classes that students have to focus on at any one time (Daniels, 2000; Davies, 2006). This can also help students and teaching staff to avoid burnout, and it has been shown to be particularly important for students who have other commitments and so need more flexibility (Burton and Nesbit, 2008, p. 6. See: Oraison *et al.*, 2023; Scott and Conrad, 1992). The shift in the structure of delivery also necessitates the exploration of innovative forms of teaching practice, which can help teaching staff provide interactive learning experiences in a way that can help students who have distinct learning needs (Buck *et al.*, 2023; Slevin, 2021). In addition, because block teaching functions at its best when it integrates peer-to-peer interaction, intensive modes of delivery can also help to overcome the kinds of social isolation that can occur within a large-scale teaching context (Buck and Tyrell, 2022; Tyrrell and Shalavin, 2022). Future research that focuses on the integration between block teaching, co-design principles and the use of advanced technology such as generative AI would be particularly insightful. This kind of research, which considers the strategic implementation of block teaching in this way, may offer a means through which universities can potentially address the challenges associated with enhancing post-pandemic employability skills within large-scale teaching contexts to create a more dynamic and effective learning environment.

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