Students' Experiences of Assessment Load Between 'Long and Thin' and Short Immersive Modules

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Purpose

In 2022, De Montfort University (DMU) implemented block teaching across the institution. Its ambitions focussed around enhancing the student experience through sequential learning, regular assessment, improved study life balance and progression and retention (Allman et al. 2024).

This institutional move to block teaching gave an opportunity to redesign the curriculum and reconsider assessment. In linear 'long and thin' modules teaching and assessment is typically spread across the year where assessment can often culminate towards the end of the academic year. In short immersive block modules assessment is typically contained within the module. At DMU our seven week blocks typically comprise of six teaching weeks with assessment in the seventh week.

This case study considers students experience of managing assessment loads in 'long and thin' linear modules and short and immersive modules in two programmes, BA Architecture & BSc Architectural Technology. The programmes introduced block teaching to existing as well as new students for both year 1 & 2 students simultaneously in 2023/24. Therefore, students who had commenced in 2022/23 were in the distinct position where they had experience of both linear and block teaching, and the assessment pattern linked to those types of delivery which made for an interesting case study.

Background

Academic failure is a significant reason for a student prematurely exiting their course. Ajjawi et al's (2019) research identified that *'academic failure increased the likelihood of course attrition by 4.2 times*'. Their findings supported the link between workload stress and its contribution to academic failure and highlighted the challenge of students managing competing demands. The 2022 UKES survey (2023) noted a larger proportion of students were working and caring for others than previously. The average number of hours has now increased significantly, to 14.5 hours per week among students who work (Neves, J. et al 2024). Balancing these pressures alongside study where assessments can often fall to the end of the year is an importance factor in supporting student retention. The impact is significant with the Student Academic Experience Survey (2023) reporting 28% of those surveyed considered leaving University because of assessment workload pressures.

Academic failure can mask a pattern of non-engagement through the non-submission of one or more assessment components. Where a student has nil engagement in assessment this is illustrated in their overall module mark, however partial engagement, where only elements of assessment are completed, tend to mask this non submission through the aggregation of marks which results in lower levels of student achievement. Supporting students to engage in all assessment is important in maximising the likelihood of academic success, hence engagement with assessment is a key part of this case study.

Description

In 2023/24 block delivery was introduced to several courses with more complex Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) requirements including BA Architecture & BSc Architectural Technology. The linear first-year curriculum for BA Architecture originally comprised three 30 credit yearlong modules & two 15 credit semester-based modules. In block mode this changed to four 30 credit sequential blocks. BSc Architectural Technology's linear first year originally comprised three 30 credit and two 15 credit modules all year long. In block mode this was changed to four 30 credit sequential blocks.

Students experience of managing assessment loads across their 'long and thin' linear modules and short and immersive modules were explored through two focus groups. The groups were formed of students who had commenced study in a linear pattern then changed to a revised curriculum with a block delivery pattern in their second year of study. One for each programme. Students were asked a range of questions which included the types and distribution of assessments in linear versus block, the volume of assessment and their assessment experience.

The professional requirements of these programmes meant there needed to be relatively consistent assessment practices which supported this comparative approach across delivery formats. The pattern of block delivery in year 2 though does have a slightly different block structure to year 1 with two pairs of modules in parallel across 14 weeks for BA Architecture whereas Architectural Technology has a mix of sequential modules for blocks 1 & 2 with blocks 3 & 4 delivered in parallel. These 'exceptions' were permitted in very specific circumstances where PSRB and subject specific requirements made this necessary. This is a limitation of the focus group approach.

To review student engagement with assessment, module component submissions were compared between year 1 linear modules and year 1 block modules. To identify the proportion of students who failed to submit one or more assessment components and to identify if assessment in block had improved engagement and attainment.

Outcomes of activity

Across both focus groups students reported that the volume and type of assessment had remained very similar, albeit with an incremental change aligned to the level of study.

'Not much has changed, same amount of work it's just the time scale has changed' (*Architecture focus group participant)*

The majority of BA Architecture focus group participants welcomed the reduction in the number of modules. Likewise, students in Architectural Technology also liked the narrower focus which came from studying fewer modules at a time. Students recognised this had impacted the available time to do their work, however it also had helped support their learning.

'The linear model kind of gave more time for you to hand in your proposal for your project. But with block teaching now. You have to come up with everything over the seven weeks'. (Architectural Technology focus group participant)

'I think we now we have time to learn….. last year we had only time to finish our work instead of learn throughout the process'. (Architecture focus group participant)

They noted block modules had spread deadlines and avoided pinch points around holiday periods.

'I feel like you actually get a break, for example at Christmas...' (Architectural Technology focus group participant)

.'.I feel like it's the same amount of volume of work. But yeah, again it goes back to the deadlines falling around the same time. So you'd feel that pressure of OK. I've got so much to get out in the short amount of time. Whereas now even if it's like one submission each month, it's like I've got one thing to hand in, even though it may be the same amount of work, the volume feels less'. (Architectural Technology focus group participant)

There was an interesting split in the Architecture focus group where three out of the five students felt the change to block had benefitted their ability to manage their assessment load, whereas two out of the five felt the linear approach better suited their study and preferred having longer to do their work.

... I was coming to uni as a first year...you have all these different sporting communities, but I didn't really get a chance to because there wasn't enough time. So like I felt left out. I can't do this, but I really wish I did whereas this year. Like, again, it's down to personal time management for me. I think it worked great. Greater because like I've still got these days where I'm in ….I've still got independent learning, but I can actually go out and do these like curriculum activities. So I picked up doing skiing and rugby and like golf and dance and all that sort of stuff. (Architecture focus group participant)

This is really interesting because I've had the exact opposite of all these things, Same but I found I had a lot more time to myself last year in this time absolutely up to my eyebrows 24/7. (Architecture focus group participant)

Whereas in the Architectural Technology focus group participants had more consistent views

You can have more of an outside structure if you are working, for example with block learning. (Architectural Technology focus group participant)

When it comes to your social life, you definitely have more time for yourself (Architectural Technology focus group participant)

This concurs with an early institutional survey which found 92 per cent of students felt that the new block teaching model supported their study/life balance (De Montfort University 2024)

A review of assessment participation data reviewed assessment engagement at first attempt. This compared first year student submissions in linear and block curriculum modes in each programme, to create a more like for like comparison. In both programmes the number of partial/non submissions across modules within the level reduced (on average from 15 to 13% for Architecture and from 25 to 13% for Architectural Technology) in block delivery versus linear delivery. The average pass rate across

first year modules also increased from 77 to 80% for Architecture and 68% to 77% for Architectural Technology.

Whilst this is based on just two programmes, results this indicates a positive trajectory in engagement in assessment and attainment as a result of the introduction of block modules.

Next Steps

Continuing to evaluate students' experiences with and engagement in assessment is key to supporting student retention and attainment and supporting a sticky course ethos. We are continuing to engage with our wider student cohorts around their assessment experience to improve outcomes and their student experience.

Exploring students' engagement in assessment can help to show where failure is due to engagement as opposed to ability. Further analysis will be conducted in wider populations to explore any patterns in engagement, to see if the improvement in assessment engagement in this case is mirrored in other programmes and cohorts.

Further Resources

Ajjawi, R., Dracup, M., Zacharias, N., Bennett, S., & Boud, D. (2019). Persisting students' explanations of and emotional responses to academic failure. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *39*(2), 185–199. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1664999

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New online toolkit will help universities implement block teaching structure (2024) Available at: https://www.dmu.ac.uk/about-dmu/news/2024/april/new-online-toolkit-will-help-universities-implement-block-teaching-structure.aspx (Accessed: 7 February 2025)