

Student's Experience in Online Intensive Mode (IM) Units at The Faculty of Business and Economics

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Abstract: The Faculty of Business and Economics (FBE) at Macquarie University conducted a pilot to explore online Intensive Mode (IM) as a delivery option. A project team was assembled to carry out the pilot. The aims were to support academics to introduce pedagogical innovation, address internationalisation, and create new opportunities for students that cannot enrol in full session units due to competing schedules. Additionally, IM units would give students a chance to fast-track their degree and increase flexibility. This paper is a discussion of students' experience undertaking online IM units that will inform on good learning designs.

Keywords: intensive curriculum, intensive mode, online learning, compressed curriculum.

Background information

Intensive mode (IM) refers to various alternatives to the delivery of units; wherein teaching and learning occur over a shorter timeframe than the traditional 13-weeks. These units are designed to provide better access and the opportunity to students who require greater flexibility to balance family, work and study (Curtis, 2000).

A project was initiated in the FBE to pilot online IM units in session 1 and 2, 2015. The IM units were delivered over 5 to 6 weeks and scheduled to allow students to enrol in both intensive as well as traditional-length units. In this regard, the FBE strategically committed to making units more flexible and to develop online learning environments further, using technological tools in meaningful ways to engage future professionals and to prepare them for their role in the 21st century. A set of three units were selected from a group of elective units for the Master of International Business program. The elective units were all from the Marketing and Management discipline. A program approach was taken in the selection of the units that could lead to a modular system environment that will facilitate the sequential offering of IM units.

An additional outcome of the project was the formulation of a model/framework developed using known principles of IM designs for delivering efficient IM units to guide the development process. The model proved to be useful throughout this process however we wanted to seek validation of the model from a student perspective. An online survey was therefore administered and data collected and analysed. This paper presents the model/framework and discusses aspects of its learning designs from the student perspective.

Aims of the study

The aims of this study are two-fold:

- (1) To develop a theoretical model to guide IM delivery of fully online units that ensures student engagement;
- (2) To explore students' experience in IM units designed with this model.

Literature review

Principles or practices in designing IM are known to include providing feedback; positive teacher qualities and classroom environment; instruction and support facilities, interaction, adopting active, personalised, and authentic learning; variety in experience; opportunity for reflection; a combination of formative, staged (complex) and shortened assessments; and content that is focused on depth and outcomes-based. These can be categorised into three design criteria for discussion: assessment approaches, learning and teaching strategies, and student support.

The literature looks at student's perceptions of IM learning as measured by learning outcomes and experience. Ho and Karagiannidis (2007) proposed a model where the effectiveness of learning is dependent on three independent variables of duration of the study, motivation and environment. Grady (2013) found that increasing the quantity of the student-faculty interactions and having the variety of interactions lead to increased student satisfaction with the unit.

Assessment Approaches

Assessment is one of the key elements of unit design. When redesigning assessments for IM known approaches are to shorten (Kretovics, Crowe & Hyun 2005; Lee & Horsfall, 2010; McLeod, Horn & Haswell, 2005; Peca, 1996) and/or create staged assessment with duration (Halliday, O'Donoghue, Klump & Thompson, 2014; Kops, 2014). Shortened assessment caters for an accelerated timeline and staged assessment facilitates sophisticated and meaningful assessment design. Including formative assessment, (Rienties, Rehm & Dijkstra, 2005; Scott, 2003) ensure students receive regular feedback to be aware of their progress in the unit. Adopting an active learning design (Lee & Horsfall, 2010; Swenson, 2003) promotes a student-centred model for learning. It is popular for online units as it requires students to work on tasks rather than be information gathering. One of the trickier elements to designing IM is facilitating reflection mostly due to the shortened timeframe for consideration. Swenson (2003) offers small group discussions and journal keeping as a way forward and designing content to be digestible chunks as suggested in a set of guidelines developed by University of Canterbury (Sampson, Brogt & Comer, 2011).

Learning and Teaching Strategies

One of the first things to consider for IM units is reconfiguring the unit schedule including aligning assessment due dates (Lee & Horsfall, 2010). In addition, Daniel (2000) recommended both curriculum and instructional approaches to be modified in the interest of facilitating different learner profiles. Variety (Hativa & Birenbaum, 2000; Ho & Karagiannidis, 2007; Kops, 2014; Kreber, 1999; Scott, 1994) is a learning and teaching strategy that is often mentioned for IM delivery. Variety can be achieved in pace and form of content delivery and using different activities to name a few. In addition to using varied approaches to content is using content that is personalised (Serdyukov, 2008), aligned to learning outcomes (Kops, 2012; Serdyukov, 2008) and focused on depth (Scott, 2003). This leads to the final point addressing use of resources in IM delivery. Several articles describe resource suitability for IM delivery in terms of form (e.g. video or print), purpose (e.g. additional material), and volume. Resources should also be selected and delivered bearing in mind the time and pace, variety and the student profile (ref here).

Student Support

Student-preparedness can impact engagement. By being mindful of the limited timeframe providing more instruction is more, ensuring all materials for learning are readily available (to ensure time is not wasted in searching), and giving and eliciting feedback are strategies for supporting students (University of Canterbury, 2011). Providing students with early access to content is a way to give students a head start (Peca, 1996). Teacher qualities are one of the paramount requirements for delivering IM (Scott, 2003). Students have rated experience of learning regarding the classroom environment and interaction. A relaxed environment (Scott, 2003), fostering close relationships (Lee & Horsfall, 2010) and more interaction with peers and their teacher (Grady, 2013) is regarded favourable.

Challenges

Two concerns that relate to student experience of undertaking IM units: (1) perception of diluted academic rigour and; (2) conversely the stress of workload involved. Recent research has found that students regarded intensive mode units as a shortcut and do less work than they would in a typical session's unit (Welsh, 2012). A secondary concern students report is fatigue toward the end of the unit. It is well-known that fatigue undermines learning and performance (Kahol et al., 2008).

Materials and methods

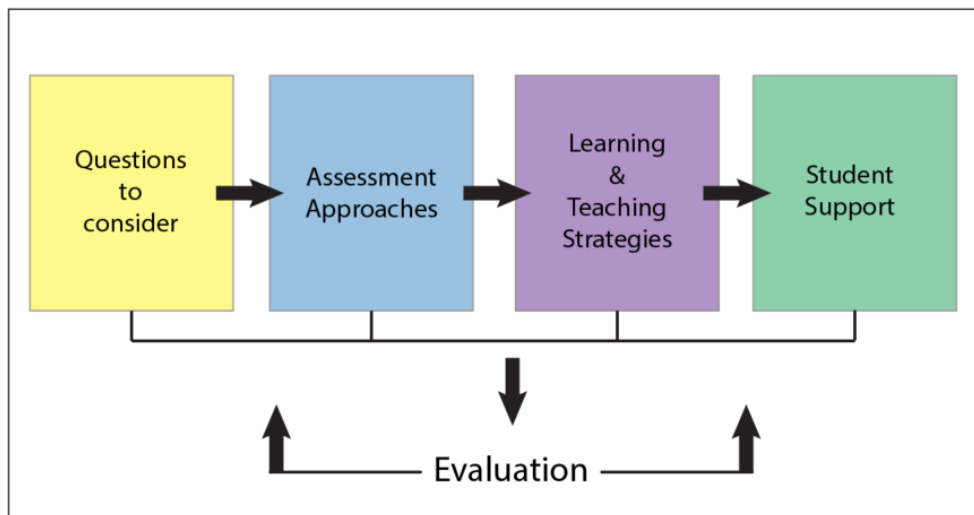
This study used a 'mixed methods' design approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), using both quantitative and qualitative data at each stage of the research process within a single study to understand a research problem more completely (Creswell, 2002). We used online surveys to gauge demographics and students' experience on IM delivery mode. The questionnaire contained Likert scale questions and open-ended questions to assess in-depth understanding of student's experiences. We combined the data collected and presented in the Results and Discussion section of this paper.

Theoretical Framework

The challenges of IM units pointed to the need to ensure learning designs supports, rather than undermines student learning opportunities and outcomes. To address these challenges, the model presented in this paper: (1) creates new learning opportunities; (2) adapts learning activities to a variety of timeframes; (3) preserves engaging parts of the unit; (4) alleviates issues that students struggled with in traditional units; (5) adapts the curriculum to enable students to have the time to reflect/consolidate material/ideas in-between tasks/face to face session, and; (6) considers alternative ways to engage students.

A Model for Online Intensive Mode Delivery (MOIMD) was developed to be used across the units. The model was used to guide academics in adopting innovative learning designs that deliver quality learning experience for students. The model is made of five components: (1) Design questions; (2) Assessment approaches; (3) Learning and Teaching strategies; (4) Student support and; (5) Evaluation. (Diagram 1).

Diagram 1: A Model for Online Intensive Mode Delivery (MOIMD)



Design Questions

The design questions listed below helped inform the model development:

1. How can we compress the unit from 13 weeks to 6 weeks without losing academic rigour and learning experience?
2. What will the student cohort look like? i.e. enrolment numbers, work experience and background, learning skills, etc.
3. What does it take to deliver the unit in a fast-paced environment?
4. What are the critical learning outcomes of the unit?
5. What academic issues do students currently struggle within the unit? Will these be compounded with intensive mode?
6. Can the existing curriculum be adapted to enable students to reflect and consolidate material/ideas in-between tasks/face to face sessions?
7. How can learning activities be adjusted to accommodate a variety of timeframes?
8. What are the alternative ways to engage students? Are there other ways to present activities and assessments within the unit (such as using group projects instead of individual projects, podcasts to supplement lectures and so on)?

These questions were discussed with unit convenors before conceptualising the learning design.

Assessment Approaches

Three assessment approaches: (1) Shortened and scaffolded assessment (Lee & Horsfall, 2010); (2) Formative assessment (Scott, 2003). The unit designs followed this model and constituted of a combination of individual case study, class participation, final exam, group case study, individual research presentation, report, self-reflection, seminar paper & peer critique.

Learning and Teaching Strategies

Nine learning & teaching strategies: (1) Active learning; (2) Reflection; (3) Variety of teaching methods; (4) Customised schedules; (5) Contextual content; (6) Outcomes-based learning; (7) Depth of content; (8) Resources that support the criteria mentioned above. The unit designs delivered on-demand activities and resources using: references, web articles, videos, and topical quizzes. Social learning is at the centre of the unit design facilitated by synchronous webinars, weekly discussion, and peer-learning processes.

Student Support Strategies

Six student support strategies: (1) Clear learning pathway; (2) Feedback mechanisms; (3) Positive teacher qualities; (4) Supportive Environment; (5) Interaction; (6) Early access. The unit designs focused mainly on interaction and giving opportunities for students to communicate with each other and learn through peer-learning. This was achieved using discussion forums and webinar software. The content was organised to form a logical sequence that aligned with the class schedule. The other crucial element was supportive and responsive teacher interactions.

Units included in the study

Table 1 below outlines the name of units, number of students enrolled in each unit and the number of students who completed the survey.

Table 1: Units that participate in pilot study

Intensive Mode Units	Completed Survey	Student Cohort	Sample size (%)
MKTG802 Marketing Communications (4CP)	1	4	25%
MKTG804 E-Business Marketing (4CP)	4	7	57%
MKTG811 Brand Management (4CP)	1	5	20%
TOTAL	6	16	38%

Survey questions

Qualtrics survey was used to build the survey questions that covered:

Table 2: Demographics questions

	Question
Q1	What is your gender?
Q2	What is your age?
Q3	Are you a local or International student?
Q4	Are you studying part-time or full-time?
Q5	Employment status? Full-time, part-time, casual or unemployed?

Table 3: Student's experience questions

	Question
Q6	The time allowed for completing assignments was adequate
Q7	The work requirements of this unit are appropriately spaced over the semester
Q8	I could navigate easily around the unit website
Q9	The teaching staff on this unit were available for help if I needed it
Q10	The flexibility provided through online delivery was important for me
Q11	I was motivated to work hard in this unit
Q12	I was made to feel that I was a valuable member of the class
Q13	I was comfortable with using online discussions to express my opinions

Open ended questions:

Q14: What were the most positive aspects of this unit?

Q15: What aspects of this unit could be improved?

Results and discussion

Demographics

Eighty-six percent of the surveyed students were male and fourteen percent female. Their ages were: from 18-24, 29%; from 25-34, 43%; and, from 35-44, 28%. Additionally, 71% were local students and 29% from overseas. We identified it would be important to add a question to gather information to see if students have experience in the field before enrolling in the IM units.

Student experience

Student's experience survey questions (Q6-Q13) is presented in *Table 4*. Interestingly, the data does not follow a normal distribution and participants agree and strongly agree with their responses to the survey questions. Participants frequently thought the time allowed for completing assignments was adequate (83% strongly agree and 17% agree) although one student suggested moving the due date of an assignment from 5:00 PM on Friday to midnight. Regarding workload (Q7), students thought it was reasonable. Navigability of the unit was good (Q8) measured by 67% of students strongly agree and 33% agree. Regarding teaching support (Q9), all the students agreed that the unit convenors were available during the unit. Qualitative content also confirms student's perception and it will be discussed further in this paper.

Regarding flexibility of the online delivery (Q10), was pointed to be important for the students (83% strongly agree, and 17% agree). Qualitative comments from the participants also reinforced this. In terms of motivation (Q11), participants were agreed that they were motivated to work hard on the unit. This can be explained since it was a postgraduate unit and students are more independent learners. The strategy to create social presence inside iLearn (Learning Management System), seems to be effective as participants were agreed they felt to be a valuable member of the class (Q12).

The results are overly positive, and this can be explained with different scenarios: (1) Enrolled students may be high achievers and tried to advance their studies with IM delivery units; (2) Students at a master level are expected to be more engaged, to have study strategies, and to be more independent learners; (3) Students may have life experience in the area and to be more confident with the content and ways to engage with it. These results are not in agreement with previous research conducted by Welsh (2012). The study was undertaken in 44 engineering students and they believed that IM requires less time for completion, encourage less reading and result in less learning but can earn them higher grades. The difference could be explained by undergraduate vs. master's level, levels of self-regulation (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011) and motivational factors (Elliot & Dweck, 2013).

Open ended questions

Two simple, straight-forward open-ended questions were designed to capture additional information from participants. For the first question: *What were the most positive aspects of this unit?* All the students gave us their opinions and covered areas such flexibility, teacher presence/quality, learning design, content and other matters, here what the students expressed:

Flexibility, teacher presence/quality:

"Flexibility to study and listen/re-listen to lectures at my pace. I found the lecturer to be understanding and easy to reach when required."

"Lecturer is very actively help us."

"Excellent engagement between lecturer and class despite being a virtual classroom."

"Fortunately the teacher delivered the material to us all with precision and full of her knowledge and experience."

Table 4: Student’s experience results

Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	StDev
Q6	0	0	0	17% (1)	83% (5)	0.52
Q7	0	0	0	83% (5)	17% (1)	0.41
Q8	0	0	0	33% (2)	67% (4)	0.52
Q9	0	0	0	17% (1)	83% (5)	0.41
Q10	0	0	0	17% (1)	83% (5)	0.41
Q11	0	0	0	50% (3)	50% (3)	0.55
Q12	0	0	0	17% (1)	83% (5)	0.42
Q13	0	0	0	17% (1)	83% (5)	0.42

Learning Design:

“Great use of technology (Collaborate) to present the seminars and example. Putting a face to a person is far better than a voice recording!”

“The assessments were intense but rewarding as it challenged critical and analytical thinking in the students”

“Being intensive, the brain is filled with e-Marketing concepts!

“The fact that it relates to our real-life experiences”.

Content:

“MKTG 811 is very useful to the future's working position because I can use branding strategy to help the company to attract potential consumers and I really feel that I acquired many new knowledge after studying it”

“The rich content offered in the subject provided substance and pushed a lot of information into my head. The detail in each module was exhaustive (complimentary)”

Other topics:

“I wasn't able access Collaborate session online but playing them back was just as good” (Technology issue).

“The course matches its moniker of being intensive!”(Schedule).

For the question: *What aspects of this unit could be improved?* only three students contribute with suggestions on how to improve IM units:

“Perhaps submission times could be extended to midnight of Friday? This semester, all my allocated group members and I work full time and found that submission time of 5:00 PM on a Friday to be a challenge” (Schedule).

“The video streaming via blackboard collaborate was not very user-friendly”. Unlike the YouTube videos where you can get the video to start at any point within the video, the blackboard collaborate video could not do this, so it would always start from the beginning again” (Technical issue).

“The group assignment, since it was online maybe encouraging people to use a collaborative tool to communicate or get them to share the email address? I found it frustrating in trying to contact my team member. The wiki was attempted, but it seems like the group member wasn't aware? Fortunately, we were both collectively productive” (Learning Design).

Limitations of the study

The IM units were not widely promoted, so we had only 16 enrolled students within the three units. The overall sample size was six students (38%) (Table1) and can be considered suboptimal for a small group of students. The survey questions were not comprehensively structured to gain an in-depth understanding of student's views. For example, we need to consider in demographic section, a question to give us an idea if the students are currently working in the field as this may make them more comfortable and confident with the IM units.

Regardless questions about functionality of the site, as Macquarie University is promoting Universal Design (UD) across the faculties (Kerr, McAlpine & Grant, 2014). We will need to consider in the future questions such: intuitiveness of the design layout, colour scheme used, contrast between text and background, font type and size, and so on. Q8: I could navigate easily around the unit website, gave us an overall experience but we may require additional information from the students. Especially if these units became large enrolled units, we want to make sure we are giving equal opportunity to all the students.

It will be necessary for the future to add a section to the survey about knowledge construction, questions such: Did the online activities/assessments tested my understanding of the subject area, rather than just my memory? Did the activities improve my knowledge construction? Were the activities effective for developing my critical thinking skills?

Additionally, questions to gather student's attitude towards learning with technology and confidence using the tools will give us a better understanding of how students approach technology for learning. For example, Q13: *I was comfortable with using online discussions to express my opinions*, could reflect they were confident using technology but also could be taken as they have a positive attitude toward technology for learning or both.

Conclusions

Preliminary data from this study is suggesting that FBE master's students had a positive attitude towards IM units that led to a positive learning experience. Due to the small sample size and limitations of the survey questions, we cannot draw a conclusion, and we will run the study in the future involving a large cohort of students, evaluating achievement regarding grades. We identified this was a good start for our Faculty and a good way to engage unit convenors with evidence-based learning design.

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