



VU's block teaching proves a winner but teachers bridle at workload

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COMMENT



It's a landmark time at Melbourne's Victoria University. Its block teaching model, piloted successfully last year for first-year students doing bachelor degrees, has been extended to second-year students. On Monday this week, 2019 classes got under way.

Instead of attending conventional lectures, in which the student is automatically at a distance from the lecturer, this year's second-year students find themselves in small classes of about 30.

For most of them (those who had done first-year units last year) it was a familiar experience. Instead of doing several different

subjects at once, they and their peers are studying one subject intensively for four weeks, before moving on to another one.

Next year Victoria University is expected to press on and introduce block teaching to third year. It is hard to overestimate the significance of this move. It is shifting the pedagogical approach of the entire institution away from the conventional way university classes are taught in Australia. It is creating something genuinely new which is squarely aimed at the needs of students.

In block teaching, students have to be active; they can't get away with passivity. They also get to know their teacher and their peers. Each week they have three classes of three hours in which they apply and reinforce what they learn through discussion and various activities. It is seminar-style teaching. They get to ask questions, and they are challenged by their instructors.

The other key feature of block teaching is that for the four-week

duration of each unit, that particular subject is the only thing they study, so they can give it their full attention. At the end of the four weeks, all the assignments and tests for that subject are over and they move on to the next subject.

A normal course load has eight such units in a year.

Last year, when block mode was introduced to first-year classes, it proved a resounding success. Fewer students dropped out, grades went up and pass rates improved. Importantly, the biggest percentage point gain in pass rates went to students from a poor background, and Victoria University has many of those.

But with the university now extending this innovative method of teaching more widely, sticking points are emerging.

One is a cultural and workplace change issue. Last year, more than two-thirds of the staff teaching the block mode classes were junior academics, now known as academic teaching scholars. For many, it was their

first permanent academic job, delivering them from the uncertain life of a casual lecturer or tutor.

They were asked to teach 14 blocks a year. This is less than the 16 blocks they could have been asked to teach as junior academics under the existing enterprise bargaining agreement.

But now, as block teaching extends to second-year classes, more staff are required to teach in block mode. This means many more of the university's more senior academics, people who have long taught in the traditional mode, are switching to block teaching.

The university has asked them to extend their teaching hours. Last year the more senior staff (now known as academic research and teaching staff) who taught in block mode did a maximum of 10 blocks in the year.

Now, under the university's proposed new enterprise bargaining agreement, the more senior level staff will be asked to teach 12 blocks. But these extra hours have proved to be one of the major ob-

stacles to winning staff approval for the new enterprise agreement that is on the table. It has now been rejected twice in votes by staff.

The National Tertiary Education Union's Victoria University president Stuart Martin says the union is not opposed to block mode teaching.

"We want it to work and work really well because students benefit," he says. But there is a kicker: "As long as you resource it properly to the enterprise bargaining agreement requirements and the needs of the students."

Victoria University vice-chancellor Peter Dawkins says he wants the agreement passed because it is designed to facilitate block teaching.

"The new agreement builds in the block as a central concept," he says.

And it doesn't privilege one group of teaching staff with a lighter load than another group. "We didn't want a two-class teaching system," says Dawkins.

At the moment, the university

wants the more senior teaching staff to teach 396 hours a year (maximum) compared with the current 336 a year.

Under the current agreement, junior level teaching staff could be asked to teach as much as 540 hours a year. Their maximum would also come down to 396 hours a year under the proposed agreement.

The NTEU says that 396 teaching hours a year is way above the standard for university teaching.

But there is another useful comparison that can be made — with teachers in senior high school who teach material reasonably comparable to what VU teaches to first-year students, and in similar-sized classes.

High school teachers teach more hours, have fewer non-teaching weeks and have duty-of-care responsibilities for students. In an age when education is thought of as a continuum, that discrepancy is worth thinking about.