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Block Teaching at Manchester Met: Developing an agile and flexible Assessments and Feedback Strategy during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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[Please note this case study focuses mostly on experiences from one department in the triple accredited Business School and should not be used as a generic example for the whole university]

Overview

Shortly after the academic year 2019/20 finished and we found ourselves in the middle of a worldwide pandemic with no end in sight, the decision was made at institutional level that all undergraduate and postgraduate taught courses would be delivered in blocks during 2020/21 (some courses were awarded exceptions, but they will not be discussed in this case study).

Ultimately, these pandemic induced changes to assessment and feedback practices resulted in better student outcomes. This case study will walk you through two phases which each represent one academic year of teaching in blocks.

From an assessment point of view the 30 credit units posed a dilemma and challenge as they were traditionally set up with two separate assessments e.g., a report and an exam over a 12-week period. Phased submissions over the 12 weeks then allowed the assessments to be scaffolded and completion of the second assessment would rely on work being achieved in the first assessment. The move to six-week teaching blocks for a unit meant the fundamental relationship between the assessment and teaching delivery needed revisioning.

Phase 1: Moment of Crisis and Impetus for Change

Academic Year 2020/21

As briefly mentioned above, in summer 2020, the decision was made at an institutional level that for the coming year all teaching was to be delivered in blocks. The decision was influenced by the uncertain future we were facing during a worldwide pandemic. The block model approved consisted of six weeks of teaching delivery followed by an assessment week, allowing for two blocks fitting into each term. Due to the size of different units on the programmes, students would either study one unit (30 credits) or two units (15 credits each) in each block. During the first year of delivery, there was also the additional constraints of

having to follow a blended learning model (consisting of asynchronous and synchronous online sessions as well as face to face classes).

There was a clear commitment to continue to deliver a first-class student experience whilst needing to be agile and responsive due to the fast-changing external environment.

‘Fleet of foot’ – Making it work!

Once the delivery pattern was confirmed in June 2020, the work began on re-positioning existing units. There was a clear awareness that there was a need for agility and flexibility to accommodate any governmental guidance.

Shortly after the decision was made, a review of all unit assessments was implemented on programme level, led by the Department’s Education lead who worked with Programme leaders to reconstruct curriculum and assessment design.

Another level of complexity was added since new programmes were launching at both level 4 (first year undergraduate) and 7 (postgraduate taught). It needs to be noted that prior to this institutional change, postgraduate taught programmes in the Business School had been delivered in five-week blocks for several years already and this is reflected in the lack of changes that needed to be made to assessments at this level.

There were clear lines of support and communication on all levels. Educational leaders within the department would frequently take part in faculty meetings, briefings and training that outlined the institutional policies and requirement. There was ongoing support from the University Teaching Academy (UTA) at Manchester Met which pulled in good practice from lecturers who already had worked on block teaching in previous years.

In addition, on a department level, one to one meetings with Programme and Unit leaders were implemented to give everyone the chance to voice their ideas. Through these meetings, several department principles for assessment (re)design were agreed. One of the biggest complexities turned out to be one of the biggest advantages, since new programmes were starting, we were able to start with a blank slate and did not need to redevelop any existing units (L4 and L7) to fit the block format.

For the assessment strategy to fit block teaching as well as remaining agile and flexible to any internal or external changes, the following key principles were agreed:

- Limit the number of assessment submission points – quality of engagement not quantity.
- Use assessment points as a means of transitioning students into higher education at level 4 and level 7 through bitesize quizzes and activities.
- Retain groupwork whilst revisioning how it could be supported through both blended learning and online learning models.
- Retain exams but moved to online only (timed released) and include a variety of approaches.
- Internal/External Moderation and approval of assessment briefs – ‘just in time’ for each block (deadlines were staggered throughout the year).

Additional step changes to a holistic whole programme approach were also put into action:

- To protect the integrity of the mapping to programme learning outcomes as required by accrediting bodies a whole programme approach to assessment amendments was taken.
- No changes were off the table, the qualifier was the ability for non-structural changes to best support the unit delivery over six weeks – changes to learning outcomes, assessment type etc.

Changes within the parameters to facilitate a better assessment strategy for block delivery:**Agility:**

- Changes to exam type – all moved to online exams.
- Differing use of groupwork – used groupwork as learning experience but individual written assessment or a group presentation remained.
- Removal of fieldtrips – for examples reflections upon own tourist experience of Manchester.
- Mentoring and assessment centre – all moved online.

Dynamic and responsive:

- Allowing staff the agency to reflect and request changes during the academic year – avoiding the ‘university won’t let us’ refrain.
- Reflection and choice as we moved from one block to the next so real time changes rather than the next academic year – repeated units across the blocks.
- Students focused upon businesses that offered virtual experiences.

At the department level, a new education leadership role was created to support the Education lead with the accumulated issues related to assessments. It was a pivotal role that was needed to retain momentum, inspire creativity in staff and provide reassurance and support. The creation of the role also supported a clearly articulated strategic approach to assessments and a formal assessment strategy as well as clear feedback guidance was created and provided within the first few months, so delivering a more organised approach to the second year of block teaching, which was confirmed during spring 2021.

Phase 2: Consolidation, Reflection and Empowering Unit Leaders**Academic Year 2021/22**

The second, and as we know now, final year of block delivery for both undergraduate and postgraduate taught students, once again brought changes that needed to be addressed within the assessment and feedback strategy.

Firstly, at institutional level, while block delivery would continue for another year, an early decision was made that there would no longer be a blended model of delivery (beyond the use of Virtual Learning Environments) as all sessions (lectures and seminars) were to be delivered in person. That again, meant that several changes needed to be made both at curriculum and assessment level.

In addition to one-to-one meetings with all unit leaders to discuss required or wanted changes, the educational leaders also created a range of workshops that focused on creativity

and good practice – the Teaching and Learning Exchange TALE sessions are still ongoing and showcase a range of assessment, feedback, and curriculum related topics.

All these changes led to unit leaders becoming more empowered and having more freedom to develop their own authentic assessment design that facilitates and fosters innovation and creativity.

Eventually, the positive outcomes of these changes initially implemented due to a change to block delivery have remained steadfast, even after another institutional change to semester delivery.

Assessment design and delivery focused outcomes:

- Assessments became less burdensome.
- Development of authentic assessments - flexibility and the focus on skill development.
- Unit leaders empowered to reflect in real time and request changes within stated parameters.
- More iterative and real response to the student experience of assessments
- Avoiding assessment bunching
- Student choice was brought in as an initiative on a few units.
- Assessment brief moderation and sign off moved to three points throughout the academic year.

Evaluation of changes:

Student satisfaction with assessment and feedback in the department has consistently been strong, as indicated by the NSS. Recent internal surveys have shown this category receiving the highest satisfaction rating in the Business School.

Positive outcomes for students: Improvement of BAME vs white gap in positive continuation from level 4 to 5.

The streamlining of curriculum and assessments leads to less resource burden – rationalisation of courses from 37 in the department to 15 by 2023/24 and 178 units in 2021/22 reduced to 137 by 2023/24.

Final Reflections and Recommendations

Even if the decision to change to block delivery is not driven by a worldwide pandemic, it is crucial to consult academics at every level to ensure a whole programme approach to assessment and feedback that is suited for block delivery. While this case study showcases what worked for one department at Manchester Met, it does not guarantee that it would succeed at other institutions, however, it shows key principles that can be followed by anyone.

Top Tips for changes to Assessment and Feedback strategies when changing delivery patterns:

- There is always time to take stock, pause and reflect.
- Block delivery allows for a staggered approach to assessment design and in year amendments responding to current affairs and student needs and performance so not all assessments need approving en-masse prior to start of the academic year.

- Assessments can be a powerful mechanism for supporting students through block delivery.
- Clear consistent guidance to unit leaders on a programme level approach to assessment design.
- Do not be afraid to be innovative and creative – in times of crisis and change it is almost a better time to affect change.

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