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Does a block teaching curriculum structure enable an agile response to emergencies?

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Abstract: *There are few studies that report on how HE institutions can prepare for an emergency move towards online teaching and learning. One approach is the reorganisation of the standard curriculum delivery model in way that would allow for greater flexibility in teaching and learning given restricted access to campus spaces. This paper presents a unique critical case study based on the experiences of implementing a block teaching curriculum structure at a large Northwest University that enabled changing modes of delivery between face-to-face and online in response to externally imposed constraints of social distancing. Reflections examine the 'emergency' nature of the curriculum change and its subsequent impact on the experience reported by 500 academic staff members and through an analysis of university reports and key communications. Information was analysed using a Soft Systems Methodology approach and in particular problem structuring techniques. This paper identifies a number of challenges in making 'emergency curriculum delivery changes' whilst also reflecting on positive outcomes for staff and recommendations for future practice.*

Paper: Does a block teaching curriculum structure enable an agile response to emergencies?

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Much has already been written about how, in general, Higher Education can adapt to external crises such as COVID-19 which has had an impact on HE Institutions globally. University leaders have learned that, in the event of an emergency, making programmes pandemic-proof (and, for that matter, resilient to any future catastrophes which could severely impair standard teaching delivery) is invaluable. Most of the existing literature on how HEIs might make preparations for a response to crises such as COVID-19 is, naturally, fairly recent. Literature focuses primarily on the how online methods can be used as an effective alternative to face-to-face classroom learning instead of looking at the wider picture of how the curriculum structure may be reformed to be sufficiently agile to provide an effective response to mitigating external factors, which limit on-campus teaching.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic there has been surprisingly little research into how HEIs are to facilitate an online switch in response to a crisis such as COVID-19. There have been some studies evaluating how well some HE institutions were able to design online versions of their courses, but they lack the key component of 'emergency' contingency planning and fail to evaluate HE's general readiness to make a temporary online 'switch' as necessitated by events (Cutri *et al*, 2020). The pandemic has highlighted the need for case study analysis to inform how HEIs can best implement

this kind of online switch.

In September 2021, the authors were responsible for supporting an institutional move to block teaching with the facility to switch rapidly between face-to-face and online teaching. This change was prompted by the limitations of potential social distancing scenarios and the desire to ensure that learners had the best possible learning experience despite restrictions. Block Teaching, in which a single course is delivered in a compressed period of time has long served educators as a useful alternative to teaching within the longer, traditional course timespan (Davies, 2006.) The model complemented a mixed delivery using both asynchronous and synchronous approaches, and in our case was structured into four, six weeks blocks with one assessment week after each block.

The inquiry is in the process of collating the experiences of academic teaching staff directly involved in moving to a new curriculum structure that enables switching between modes of delivery. The analysis adopts a problem structuring inquiry techniques used in Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) to identify “the main entities, structures and viewpoints in the situation, the processes going on, the current recognised issues and any potential ones” (Checkland and Poulter, 2006). In this case, the problematical situation being the change to a block teaching curriculum structure and delivery modes across a large northwest HEI. In line with SSM, information is being collected and analysed from a wide range of sources that to date, include a questionnaire of closed and open questions (n=501, 30% of teaching population), analysis of internal communications, and reflections on social and political dimensions.

Implementing a block teaching schedule has a number benefits for any university, which finds itself in a situation like the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the benefits of breaking down a curriculum into blocks is that it affords it greater overall agility in the event of disruptions to standard teaching and learning arrangements. This also compliments a mixed learning approach, which, has (post pandemic), become a prominent feature across HEI’s nationally.

The information examined so far reveals that block teaching has also presented a number of challenges for staff, and the move to online delivery at the same time has, in some cases, exasperated this. distinguishing . Challenges have been particularly identified in relation to learner engagement and building learning communities. Despite these challenges, initial findings have highlighted an overwhelming sense of creativity, professional development and innovation, and significant increases in team working between staff to overcome these difficulties from staff across a range of subject disciplines.

The outcomes of this case study provides insight into how a block delivery curriculum model can facilitate making an ‘emergency’ move between online and face-to-face teaching. In addition, findings have also been analysed to provide key recommendations for guiding institutions in making similar changes. This paper predominantly reflects on the use of soft systems methodology to provide an institutional case study of practice, highlighting key outcomes that could enhance the work of other institutions in moving to a block curriculum.

References: References

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