

Revolutionizing first year: an innovative block model to improve student engagement and success

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In 2018 Victoria University is implementing an innovative university-wide approach to all first year units with the primary aims of enhancing student engagement, success and the overall student experience. This model has been adopted and adapted from Higher Education institutions in the U.S. and Canada, who are consistently rated in the top 5% for engagement and retention. Rather than juggling multiple units with competing demands and deadlines, students undertake one unit at a time, with a dedicated educator, over a four week block. Units have been unpacked and redesigned by multi-disciplinary teams into the block format. Students engage in small group active, immersive, enquiry-based learning in workshops and labs, providing them with deeper learning experiences and stronger social connections. This model also provides academics with the freedom to teach students in a creative and pragmatic way.

The results have been very overwhelmingly positive with 88% of first year students positive about their learning experience and a 5.7% increase in student retention compared with 2017. The pass rates have also improved significantly across most subjects. In traditionally difficult Human Physiology units in which the fail rate has been consistently high for many years, the block model has resulted in a 10-33% improvement in pass rates depending on the cohort.

In Human Physiology taught to 6 different cohorts, the fail rate was 47.7% in 2017 (n = 398 students) and has been reduced to 14% using the block model (n = 397 students). Higher level grades have remained consistent, with a similar percentage of high distinctions awarded between 'traditional model' and block model for the same unit (2016 to 2018 all between 3.3 - 7.2%).

In an Anatomy and Physiology unit taught to between 500-600 Nursing students, the fail rate dropped from 40% in 2017 to 17% in 2018 with more students moving up a grade. In both years the assessment was identical with the only difference being the block mode of delivery.