

# Converting courses to compressed mode: the educational developer as facilitator of change

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## Introduction

Recent discussion about the role of academic and educational developers (Gibbs, 2013; Debowksi, 2014), learning and teaching centres, academic development units, or similar offices (Challis, Holt & Palmer S. 2009; Gosling, 2009) reflects the changes that result from a perceived shift from a close focus on the classroom and individual teaching toward such offices and their staff becoming more responsive to wider institutional concerns (Holt, Palmer & Challis, 2011). Institutional concerns can include those pressures generated by internationalisation and by funding and compliance pressures from governments. When universities are funded on a per student basis, more students mean better funding, and the changing nature of the student body has resulted in the desire of students for greater variety of delivery modes. Thus, more flexible course offerings are seen as a way of responding to these demands. One response has been the provision of courses offered in a compressed mode (Davies, 2006; Lee & Horsfall, 2010).

Courses offered in a shortened time frame may also be termed intensive mode or accelerated courses and the terms can be used to cover a variety of forms of delivery (Davies, 2006). The courses in this study were 'time-based' (Lee & Horsfall, 2010), being units of study delivered in a maximum of six weeks, but with the same learning outcomes as their equivalents offered in a twelve week semester. The attractions for students of such compressed courses include the opportunities for students who have previously failed a corresponding longer course the opportunity to catch up and they enable students to "fast-track" their degrees, or reduce their workload for a subsequent study period (Ellis & Sawyer, 2009, p. 35). Strengths include time efficiency and flexibility (Ellis & Sawyer), as well as greater opportunities for collaborative learning and interactivity (Finger & Penney, 2001; Ellis & Sawyer). Weaknesses include the potential for information "overload" if the content is not pedagogically structured or adapted in such a way that it sustains and enhances learning outcomes or if the hours are too long, leading to student and/or lecturer exhaustion (Dean, 2006). These factors may lead to high student attrition rates in intensive mode courses, as well as reluctance from academic staff to continue teaching in intensive mode format in subsequent semesters (Dean, 2006).

Simply delivering the same content in a shorter time will not ensure that student learning will take place and may lead to high student attrition rates in intensive mode courses (Dean, 2006). To be effective, changes must be research-based, aligned with known pedagogies, practical and feasible.

## Method

This paper reports on an empirical investigation which was part of a centrally-situated educational development project on implementing compressed mode courses in a large, research intensive, metropolitan university in Australia. It considers whether the

involvement of academic or educational developers can increase the probability that the resulting courses are pedagogically sound and provide quality teaching and learning experiences.

The university had earlier made a decision to move from offering a limited number of credit-bearing summer school courses, in addition to its two regular semesters, to establishing a third, shortened semester, known as “Session 3”. It had made funds available for academic staff to redesign their units with the help of staff from the learning and teaching centre. This included assistance from instructional designers in designing experiences which engaged the students in active and meaningful learning. The success of the strategy was, however, largely restricted to those units that were funded. Early adopters made good use of the funds but there was limited evidence of the impact of their innovations on other courses which were delivered without substantive change. The university, keen to expand the Session 3 offerings, was aware of the time it would take to adapt all units for effective delivery in a compressed timeframe.

The strategy of using the expertise of central developers was adopted to add value to the university’s strategic initiative by widening the uptake of change. The involvement of the academic developer and the supporting team was the initiative of the Director, Learning and Teaching, who recognised the necessity for leadership in course design to be available to all those developing and delivering units of study in compressed mode. The stages of the project were scoped to include a literature review, the development of extensive pedagogical resources, and interviews with teachers acknowledged as expert in their teaching practice and with students about their perceptions of the compressed courses. Dissemination strategies included making the resources available through the university intranet and a workshop series. Working from within a central unit made it easy to find out which units, and which teachers/coordinators, were acknowledged as providing high quality teaching. Interrogating both scholarly literature, and institutional reports provided information about effective practice as evaluated by researchers, teachers and students and suggested lines of enquiry.

A large number of resources in a variety of formats were developed by the team over the life of the project. As the university is strongly committed to eLearning and requires an online presence for all units, whether offered in online or traditional on-campus mode or a mix of the two, it was decided that a series of web pages on the learning and teaching centre’s web pages would be the most accessible home for the resources. The home page ([http://staff.mq.edu.au/teaching/curriculum\\_assessment/session3/](http://staff.mq.edu.au/teaching/curriculum_assessment/session3/)) featuring items such as the “Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching in Session 3” was designed to highlight the potential benefits of the shortened session for staff and students, as well as policy matters, workload issues and practical matters, including dates and FAQs. Links directed viewers to the six other pages of resources which covered key topics for those teaching Session 3: Planning and Designing, Assessment, Engaging Students, Staff Toolkit, Case Studies and Student Reflections.

Designing the resources overlapped with the other main activities of the project: a series of three workshops; the interviews with teachers acknowledged as expert in their teaching practice; and the visit of an academic from another university to speak

about her research into the delivery of compressed courses that was the impetus for another staff workshop; and a meeting with senior managers at the conclusion of the project at which policy issues about offering compressed courses were discussed. The workshops provided information about teaching in compressed mode, an introduction to the resources and opportunities for discussion among those experienced in teaching in Session 3 and those about to do so for the first time. The experience of the academic developer was relevant for planning and facilitating the workshops by providing the theoretical background for the discussion and pulling together the needs and contributions of staff from different faculties and with varying teaching experiences

## **Findings**

The interviews with the teachers acknowledged for their pedagogical expertise were central to the project. Having these interviews conducted by an academic developer, was critically important for drawing out and identifying the pedagogical significance of their observations. The interviewees' reflections contributed significantly to the advice offered on the webpages for those beginning to plan a compressed unit. They had considered the drawbacks of intensive delivery and worked to eliminate them. They discussed structuring the units for clarity in design and presentation, the need to engage students early, the advantages of a well-sequenced assessment, the need for swift feedback and the problems and benefits of group work. All commented on the nature of the cohorts they were teaching, showing an awareness of their diversity and their particular needs, including, for example, what it was like for the students to study over the summer when they were also working or had family commitments and were studying while others were on holiday. They all reflected on the importance of communicating with students: how to do this, how much it matters, how to manage the time, how to handle problems when students fell behind.

The final set of resources, videoed interviews with students about their perceptions of the compressed courses,

[http://staff.mq.edu.au/teaching/curriculum\\_assessment/session3/student\\_reflections/](http://staff.mq.edu.au/teaching/curriculum_assessment/session3/student_reflections/) were prepared by the undergraduate scholar and the research assistant with expert assistance from web designers. The same six instructional strategies identified in the literature as effective for maintaining and enhancing student engagement in teaching in intensive mode were identified by the students in the interviews: encouraging commitment at the commencement of the unit; assisting students to plan ahead in their learning and assessments; promoting lecturer/student and student/student interaction and collaboration; using technology effectively in synchronous and asynchronous learning environments; varying activities for concentration purposes; and, specific assessment strategies for their involvement. Students confirmed the importance of these elements for their involvement and revealed another, termed in the literature on on-line courses as teacher presence (Northcote, 2010).

## **Discussion**

Analysis by the academic developer of the interviews with the expert teachers about their approaches to teaching in a compressed mode provided corroborating evidence for these elements being critical for successful courses in compressed mode. Again the same elements were evident in the teachers' reflections on their teaching philosophies and practices. The involvement of a developer with educational expertise and experience revealed the congruence between the elements identified in the literature, and by the students and the teachers.

The project enabled the identification of elements critical for success and made possible the establishment of a virtuous cycle in which the findings of research assisted in optimising local pedagogical practice, leading to opportunities for further research and further improvement. The approach adopted in the project provides a case study of the value of utilising centralised educational expertise.

## **Implications**

As well as their concern for quality in course delivery and the student learning experience, more and more educational developers are required to respond to institutional initiatives arising from outside forces. To be effective institutional and cultural change management needs to be strategic and supported by financial and human resources. Involving academic and educational developers when changes in teaching and learning are planned can ensure the change is research-based, aligned with known pedagogies, practical and feasible.

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