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PAPER

An intensive block approach to teaching academic skills through a discipline: the effect on student connections, experiences, and outcomes as students transition to HE

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ABSTRACT

Supporting students in their transition to university is challenging. Helping them feel connected to peers, staff, and their subject, while developing essential academic skills, is crucial. Block teaching has been shown not only to enhance retention and outcomes but also to build confidence and support the transition to university life. This study explores the impact of a two-week intensive block teaching approach for first-year Geography and Environment students at the University of Chester. Introduced in 2022, the module serves as an extended induction, focusing on academic skills and integration. Over three years, 127 students participated, with evidence showing improved understanding of higher education, stronger academic skills, and better peer connections. Outcomes included 100% pass rates, high average marks, and a 10% increase in continuation rates from year 1 to 2. We argue that discipline-based, well-organised block teaching can support skill development, boost confidence, and aid university transition.

KEYWORDS: block teaching, intensive teaching, academic skills, transition to university, discipline-based approach.

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Introduction: transitioning to university, intensive teaching, and academic skills

Supporting students' transition to university remains challenging in higher education, with issues surrounding retention, performance, and student satisfaction, particularly in the first year (Beer & Lawson, 2017; Willans & Seary, 2018). In undergraduate programmes in Geography and Environment (G&E), these challenges were evident in difficulties maintaining momentum and interest, as well as challenges in connecting learning across modules, providing timely feedback, and scheduling assessments to avoid crunch points. McCluskey et al. (2019, p. 1) highlight that addressing these issues requires an approach that 'deliberately focuses on students' pedagogical, transition, and work/life balance needs'. Key considerations include: 1) understanding essential academic skills for early university success; 2) offering opportunities for students to connect with peers and tutors; and 3) managing these early on to promote academic and social development, fostering a sense of belonging. Our research led us to investigate immersive block teaching as one way to 'respond to student achievement issues and changing student learning preferences' (Roche et al., 2024, p. 12). Immersive block models usually deliver one subject at a time for short periods (e.g., two to six weeks) (Roche et al., 2024; Turner et al., 2021). This contrasted significantly with the six 20-credit, 24-week modules our first-year students were simultaneously undertaking. We review evidence that intensive teaching can improve retention, performance, and student satisfaction.

Retention

Helping new students feel connected to staff, other students, the university, and their subject is key to successful transition (Chow & Healey, 2008; Countryman & Zinck, 2013). Peer relationships enhance adjustment, with stronger peer attachment correlating with higher levels of adjustment and a greater sense of student attachment to their university (Maunder, 2018). A sense of belonging correlates with enjoyment and motivation (Kelly et al., 2024). Immersive block teaching improves engagement, attendance, and retention (Daniel, 2000; Davies, 2006; Hare, 2019), fostering meaningful connections. However, some studies have observed a decline in attendance over the entire course, meaning attendance starts well but drops during the academic year, which can reduce learning (Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020).

Performance

Student success in higher education improves with the effective acquisition of academic skills. Research has focused on the perception that students arrive at university with a skills deficit (Leese, 2010; Thompson et al., 2021; Wingate, 2007). Lea and Street (1998) and Wingate (2015) argue that this results from a mismatch between school and university systems, not student deficits. Universities should bridge this gap through skills development. Lowe and Cook (2003) argue that this gap widens due to students' unrealistic expectations of higher education, including unawareness of reduced contact hours and more independent learning. This culture shock, if left unaddressed, can significantly affect retention and progression (Thomas, 2012). To help students bridge this gap, Wingate (2007, 2015) suggests teaching these skills within an embedded developmental model. This approach should ensure that the skills are: 1) embedded within the discipline's curriculum; 2) progressively increase in complexity, leading towards skill development relevant for that discipline; and 3) that responsibility is shared between academics and support services like academic advisers.

Russell (2002) advocates that academic skills in a discipline should be systematically scaffolded, especially for first-year undergraduates. Similarly, Gronchi (2025) and Kift (2009) demonstrate that a first-year curriculum focused on academic practices has a positive impact on students' HE journey when centred around essential academic skills in a 'transition pedagogy'. Justice et al. (2009) found that skills-related information enhances student learning when integrated into practical course content.

Immersive teaching supports student learning and success in HE, with evidence of improved academic outcomes (e.g., halved failure rates, increased pass rates, and higher level outcomes) (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022; Daniel, 2000; Davies, 2006; Hare, 2019; Scott & Conrad, 1992; Sheldon & Durdella, 2009; Turner et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2023). It also reduces deferral applications (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022). Compared with traditional modes, intensive teaching maintains or improves retention (Daniel, 2000; Davies, 2006; Kucsera & Zimmaro, 2010; Sheldon & Durdella, 2009). However, improvements in student success were strongest in the first year, indicating early delivery benefits for students transitioning into higher education (Wilson et al., 2023).

Student satisfaction

Student satisfaction with intensive teaching varies. Some studies show students prefer intensive modules, especially when balancing other demands (Burton & Nesbit, 2008; Helfand, 2016; Lee & Horsfall, 2010; Walsh et al., 2019). Others find satisfaction lower than in previous models (Wilson et al., 2023), but it remained generally high. Loton et al. (2022) suggest lower satisfaction may stem from workload perceptions. Students perceive more value in intensive modules compared with traditional teaching (Helfand, 2016), influenced by how the delivery aligned with their commitments and prior studies. Roche et al. (2024) state that immersive block models work best with active learning, as traditional methods may not yield high satisfaction or outcomes.

Immersive teaching offers many benefits, especially for non-traditional students (Loton et al., 2020; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002; Winchester et al., 2021). It helps build peer and tutor relationships, develop academic skills, and support success. A discipline-based, well-organised block teaching approach can further help students gain skills and confidence, and transition smoothly to university.

Intervention and method

In 2020-21, the team redesigned the first-year curriculum after reviewing evidence, adopting a 'sandwich' model with an intensive module at the start, four long modules concurrently, and another intensive module at the end of the year. This article focuses on the impact of the first intensive module, 'Changing the World'.

Intervention

'Changing the World' was designed as an extended induction to university. The title aligned to the programme ethos of supporting students to become change agents. Developed by G&E and Academic Skills (ASk), it aimed to help students transition into university, build skills, develop confidence, and gain an understanding of how to promote meaningful social and environmental change. The module had three aims:

1. Provide students with a clear and supported transition into university.
2. Introduce students to core skills for application in all their future studies.
3. Enable students to meet and get to know others on their course.

The module's first 50% of the assessment was delivered through seminars, workshops, practical activities, and independent tasks over two weeks. All material was pre-recorded, allowing students to review or catch up. The remaining 50% involved assessed Tutorials expanding on the 'changing the world' theme, running alongside the other four modules. This article evaluates the two-week intensive block. This was split into two elements, each running for one week: Skills for Change, and the Change Lab.

Week 1: Skills for Change

This week focused on core academic skills to 'change' the world. It employed a discipline-based approach, embedding skills into the geographical curriculum to demonstrate their practical applications. Skills covered included assignment planning, information literacy, reading, note-taking, academic integrity, referencing, and writing. Students had to submit a 500-word 'writing and referencing exercise' applying these skills to the prompt: 'Explain how geography could change the world for the better'. The brief was shared during the induction week by their Personal Academic Tutor (PAT), who provides advice and monitors their students' progress. The brief was explained and questions addressed, so students knew their task before the first 'Changing the World' session. Throughout the week, sessions were held to support the development of submissions, with a 16:00 Friday deadline. PATs marked the work, awarding 10% for submission, regardless of merit. Feedback was provided approximately 10 days later in a one-on-one meeting, which also allowed PATs and students to discuss the latter's adjustment to university.

Week 2: Change Lab

This week centred on a 'living laboratory', where students examined real-world local issues, providing an authentic setting to investigate, identify problems, and suggest solutions (Hossain et al., 2019). Living labs foster discovery, experience, and innovation. Activities occur in real-time, exposing students to various variables (Rogers et al., 2021). This provides authentic learning opportunities to enhance knowledge and skills, such as teamwork and experiential learning. The 'Change Lab' week centred on students working in groups to research local sustainability issues and propose solutions. Supervised by specialists in human geography, physical geography, or hazards, they also received tutorials on teamwork, argumentation, and presentation. They shared their proposals in 10-minute group

presentations to tutors and stakeholders, including senior managers such as the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. This stakeholder presence ensured that ideas could influence institutional change, highlighting that proposals could have a tangible impact in the real world. This project was graded on merit, worth 40%, marked by the supervising tutor and another assessor, with grades returned within a week.

By the end of Week 2, all first-year students have completed 50% of the module, and by Week 3, they have received feedback on two assignments. The module is reviewed annually. After the two-week block has ended, we meet with a volunteer student from the module to review feedback from the entire class and discuss developments within the module. Each year, we have made various changes, including adjustments to the specific content, the level of interactivity in sessions, and the session order, among others, but the two-week structure remains unchanged.

Evaluation method

We first implemented this block module in the 2022/23 academic year with 44 students. The module has now run for three years, involving a total of 127 students. The students were predominantly 18–21 years (99.2%); of mixed gender (53.4% male, 44.3% female; 2.3% non-binary); declared disability (20.6%); domestic (98.5%); predominantly white ethnicity (91.6%) ; and first in their family to attend university (34.1%) . Each year, all participating students were invited to complete a questionnaire about their experiences of the module at the end of the second week. Over the three years, 71 participants responded (56% response rate). The Department Ethics Committee approved the questionnaire used in this study. The Likert-scale responses were analysed to assess the degree of student agreement. NVivo was used to code the qualitative responses for themes. To contextualise the impact of this module, we have also incorporated information about outcomes, including submission rates, assignment results, and continuation rates, compared with a previous iteration of the module with two similar assignments (a writing and referencing exercise and a group presentation). These findings are combined with the questionnaire data to assess the intervention's impact. This mixed-methods approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the data through a pragmatist lens (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Such an approach is warranted in educational research where the complexity of teaching and learning should be explored in depth (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). A Shapiro-Wilks test was conducted on the annual marks for the

presentation, confirming that the data were normally distributed. Consequently, an independent samples t-test was performed to determine if the intervention improved student presentation scores. Although the staff experience was not formally examined, the authors, who conducted the majority of the module teaching and managed all organisational aspects, include their reflections to provide a holistic view of the intervention.

Findings and outcomes

This section reports the module's outcomes on attendance, assessment, and continuation, then analyses students' perceptions of its impact on them, their academic skills, and their views on intensive teaching.

Outcomes

The outcomes indicate that this delivery approach was effective. Over the three years, the module maintained a 100% pass rate on both assignments at first attempt (although a few students had to be assessed later due to late starts or illness). In previous iterations of the module, which included a writing and referencing exercise and a presentation, the average failure rate over the previous three years was 5.6% for the writing and referencing exercise, and 6.5% for the presentation, primarily due to non-submission.

The group presentation consistently received high marks in the previous iteration of the skills module over three years (Table 1). The average score for this assignment across these years was 69.1%. This high average persisted after the introduction of the new block module, with a three-year average of 68.2%. There was no significant difference between these averages. However, if we account for the number of non-submissions, where students officially received zero before the intervention, the average for the three years prior to the intervention drops by 7.9%. The 100% submission rate for both assignments meant that the overall average, including zeros, was 7.0% higher after the intervention. An independent samples t-test was conducted to assess the impact of the intervention on student presentation scores. The results showed that the post-intervention scores (Mean = 68.2, SD = 5.69) were statistically significantly higher than the pre-intervention scores (Mean = 61.2, SD = 22.88), $t(116.4) = -3.05$, $p = .003$. The intervention resulted in an average increase of 6.96 points, indicating a small-to-medium effect (Cohen's $d = 0.43$). Therefore, when considering non-submission scores, the intervention had a small but significant effect on overall assessment scores, with the post-

intervention overall score increasing by approximately 7 points. This therefore demonstrates the importance of the intervention on submission rates and overall attainment score of the module.

Table 1. Average group presentation marks.

	Year	Excluding zeroes for non-submissions	Including zeroes for non-submissions
Pre-intervention	2019/20	67.6%	61.6%
	2020/21	67.1%	59.9%
	2021/22	72.9%	65.9%
	Average	**69.1%**	**61.2%**
Post-intervention	2022/23	69.5%	69.5%
	2023/24	67.0%	67.0%
	2024/25	70.2%	70.2%
	Average	**68.2%**	**68.2%**

The attendance rate for the 'Changing the World' module over three years was higher than that of other modules each year (Table 2). The university operates a 'check-in' system via an app to monitor attendance. Whilst students are strongly encouraged to check themselves in, various factors mean this may not be a perfectly accurate record of student attendance (e.g., forgetting to check in, technical system errors, especially at the beginning of the academic year, timetabling idiosyncrasies in which sessions are optional but recorded as 'attendance required'). However, assuming these inaccuracies are consistent across all modules, the data still provides a basis for comparison. Over three years, the module achieved an 80% attendance rate, which was 7% higher than the average of other modules and, on average, 9% higher than the overall attendance rate for all modules in the same year.

Table 2. Attendance rate in comparison with other modules.

Module	Year – 2022/23	Year – 2023/24	Year – 2024/25	Average for module
Module A	76%	73%	70%	73%
Module B	63%	63%	76%	67%
Module C	76%	78%	66%	73%
Changing the World	78%	75%	88%	80%
Module E	72%	68%	69%	69%
Module F	50%	61%	73%	61%
Average for year	**69%**	**70%**	**74%**	**71%**
Difference between 'Changing the World' and overall year average	9%	5%	14%	9%

Each year, a Change Lab project has evolved beyond just the presentation. In 2022/23, the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Student Experience asked one group to share their ideas on sustainable transport with the local council, which was working on a similar project at the time. In 2023/24, one group worked to develop a sensory garden by meeting with stakeholders to turn its ideas into reality. In 2024/25, the University Sustainability Unit asked one group to present their 10-year plan for enhancing biodiversity on campus to the group currently working on this across the university. These examples were well received at open days and align with the 'change agents' and 'citizen student' narratives of the subject area and the wider university.

Overall, the retention rate between the first and second years of the degree increased by more than 10%. Before the intervention, the average continuation rate over the previous three years was 82.7%. After the intervention, during the following three years, the continuation rate rose to 93.1%. The Associate Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences attributed the high continuation rates to our approach to block delivery, although it is important to recognise that this change may also be influenced by broader changes across the first-year delivery and the sandwich model approach (as outlined above), rather than solely this specific module.

Student perspectives on the impact of the block

Questionnaires asked students the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate that, after completing the two-week block, 92% of participants (n= 66) were excited about their university studies, and 91.5% (n= 65) felt they understood what was expected of them at university. There was no significant difference between cohorts.

Figure 1. 'Having completed this two-week block, I'm excited about my university studies'.

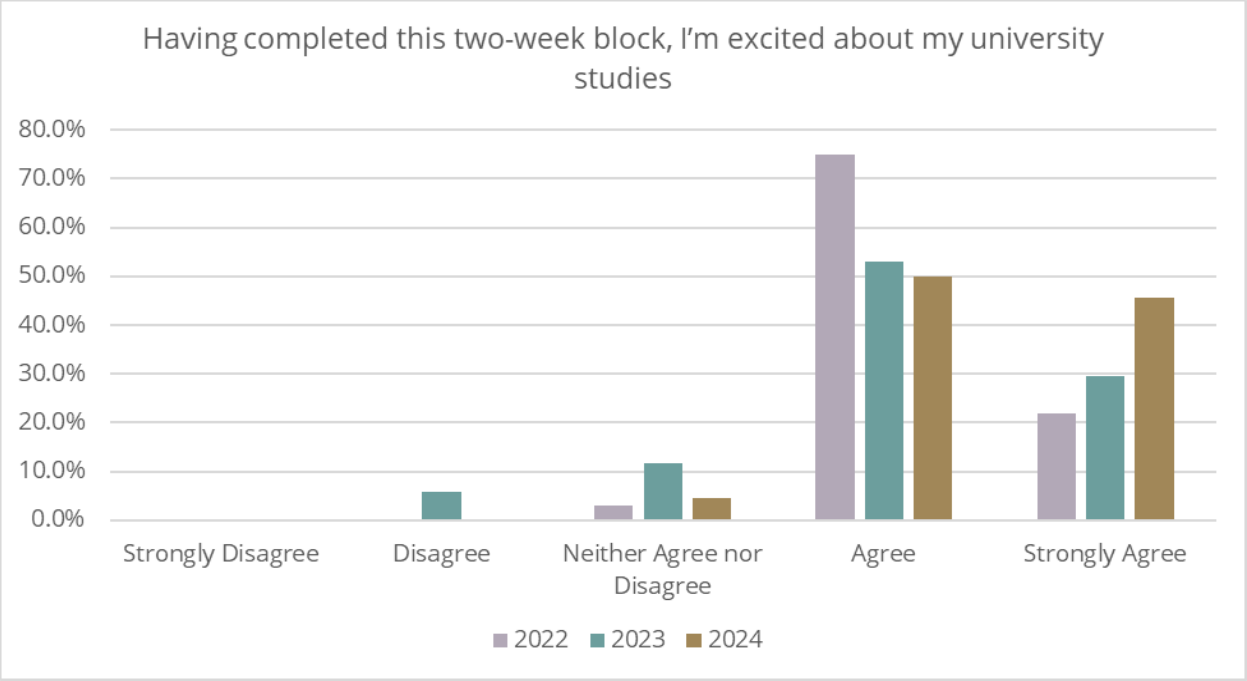


Figure 2. 'This two-week block has increased my understanding of what is expected of me at university'.

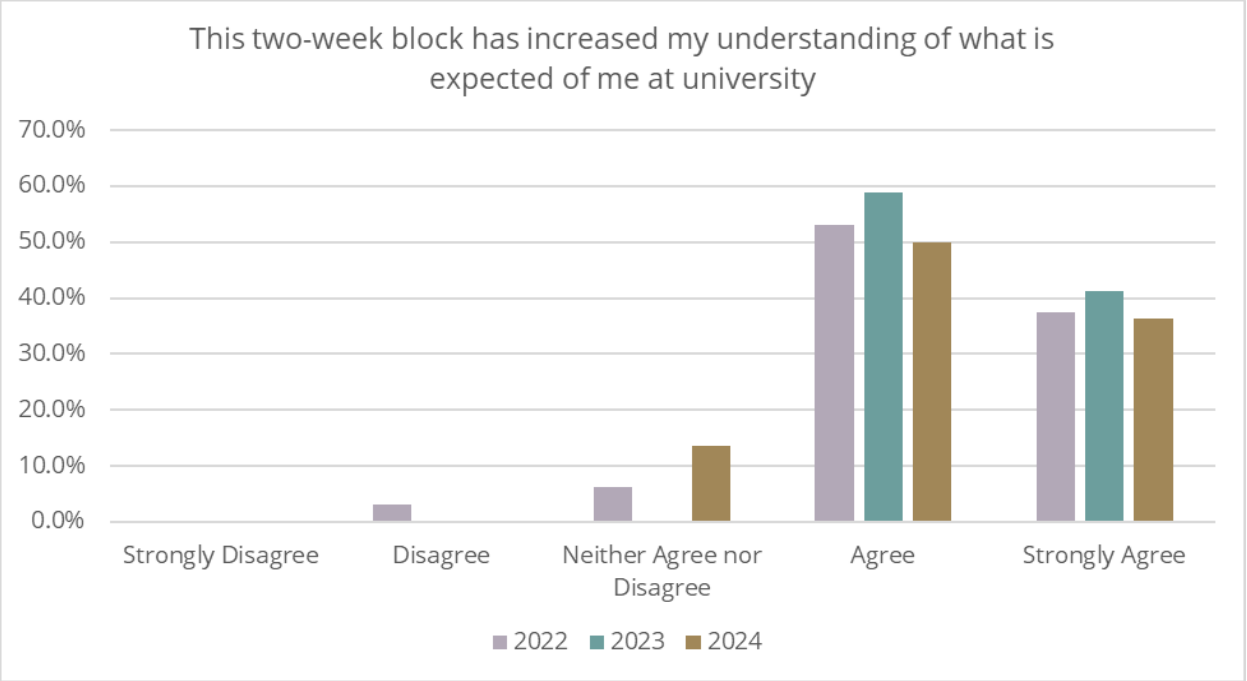


Figure 3. 'Having completed this two-week block, I'm nervous about my university studies'.

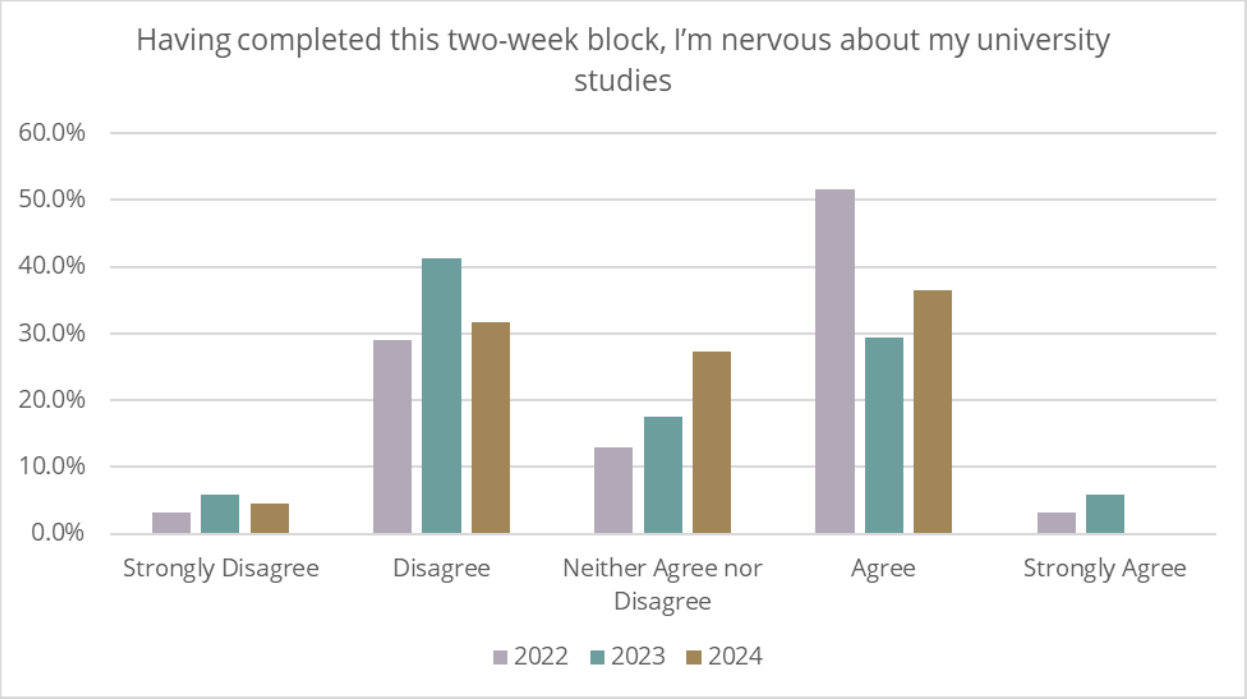
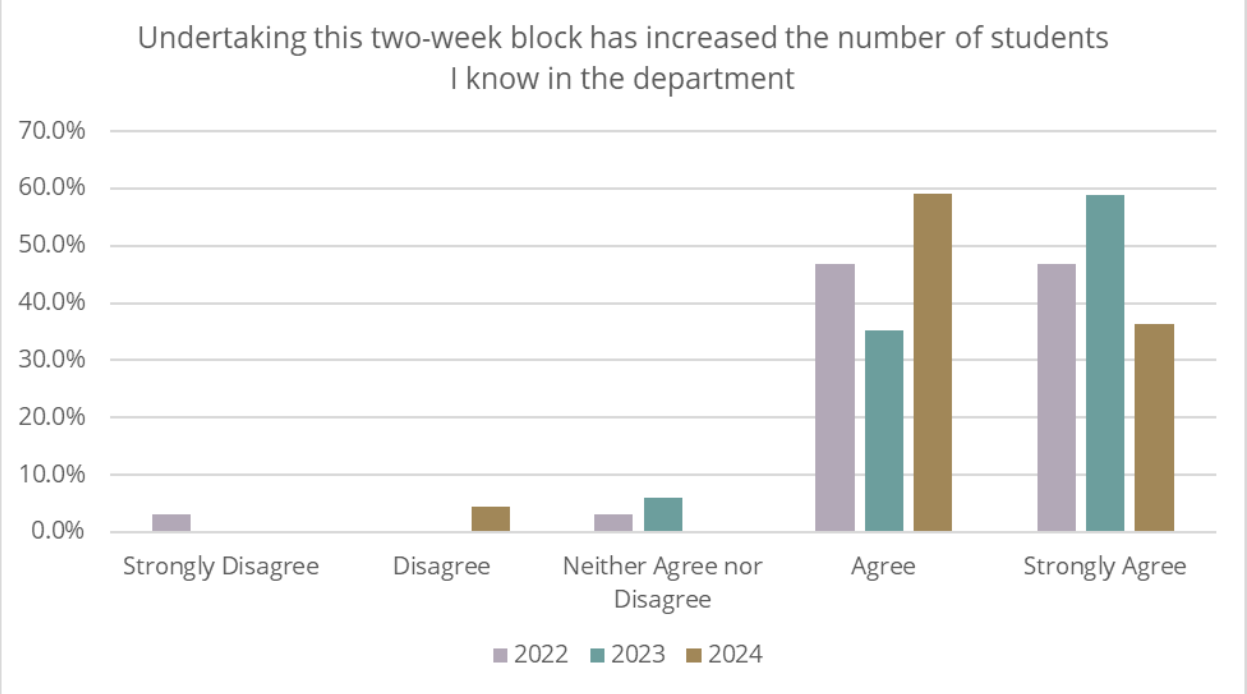


Figure 4. 'Undertaking this two-week block has increased the number of students I know in the department'.



Unfortunately, 43% (31 participants) either agreed or strongly agreed that they were nervous about their studies (Figure 3). This could be for several reasons, including that having acquired a better understanding of what is expected of them at university, they felt anxious about their ability to meet these expectations. When the students completed the questionnaire (at the

end of week 2), they had not received any summative feedback on their assignments, meaning they had no confirmation that they were meeting higher education expectations. As Chapman (2017, p. 112) argues, the first assessment can be understood 'as "a rite of passage" on the journey of "belonging"' for all students.

Finally, 94% (67 participants) agreed that by undertaking the block, they now knew more students (Figure 4). This positive response appeared to relate to the Change Lab week. When asked what they found most useful about this week, the most common response from 52% of respondents (37 participants) related to group work and/or meeting people.

Student experience of the block: benefits

When asked about the benefits of being taught in an intensive two-week block, the most common themes in participants' responses related to how the experience had prepared them for university (17 participants, 23.9%), how they received necessary information that could be applied to their future studies quickly (14 participants, 19.7%), and how they had met more people (12 participants, 16.9%).

As Thompson (2021) discussed, one of the main barriers to successful student transitions is a lack of clarity about expectations in higher education. This structured delivery allowed students to feel more prepared for university because the block delivery 'was a great introduction to university life and set out what is expected' (Respondent 62), and it provided practical advice, such as 'being taught how the course works and preparation for future assignments' (Respondent 4).

Some participants echoed the findings of Ambler et al. (2021) and appreciated how the block teaching got them back into studying and prepared them for the rest of the course by giving them a clear routine and structure, as one student outlines: '[The schedule] meant I had somewhere to be, [it] gave the days some structure, met people and started to understand what was expected' (Respondent 69). This was echoed by another student who also alluded to the schedule, 'making sure I get in every day on time and having good time management skills' (Respondent 41). The design of the course, as indicated by one student, can help bridge the summer gap, as it 'help[ed] me get back into full-time education' (Respondent 71).

Participants further commented that the concentrated approach to the module meant that 'vital info is given fast' (Respondent 7) and that, 'I was allowed to learn and consolidate a lot of

new skills very quickly' (Respondent 39). Some students suggested that the concentrated delivery, with no other modules running concurrently, helped them to concentrate. 'I think it is very positive as it keeps you engaged within the weeks. Instead of it being all spread out and may forget specific subjects' (Respondent 25). This helped students to 'concentrate solely on uni work' (Respondent 16), which enabled them 'to focus on one task at once and [for it to] have your full attention' (Respondent 17). The intensive approach enabled students to focus on the content and adjust to university without the distraction of multiple new modules occurring concurrently.

Despite the discipline-based approach adopted, some students felt that the content was not sufficiently subject-specific and were looking forward to getting into the 'real' geography. However, they recognised that academic skills were essential and 'getting the essentials out of the way is useful' (Respondent 27), as 'you get to the actual geography content faster than if it took longer' (Respondent 49). This creates a tension when designing a scaffolded module focused on academic skills. While it is important, as evidenced by Wingate (2007, 2015) and Justice et al. (2009), to embed academic skills within course content, some students may still view these skills as separate. This might be due to their preconceived expectations of the course, and despite efforts to include academic skills, some students may not yet recognise the benefits of these skills for their studies. Nonetheless, some participants acknowledged that they had completed a significant part of one module by the end of their first two weeks at university, as one student recalls, 'knowing that the module is basically complete after these two weeks' (Respondent 44). This knowledge may help students to feel that they are making progress and succeeding at university in a relatively short period of time.

The third dominant theme related to 'getting to know tutors and staff quickly' (Respondent 23), and many students indicated that the block delivery helped them 'to find friends on the course' (Respondent 26). Some students suggested that the nature of the teaching on the block, i.e. the group work, was critical in providing structured opportunities for them to be able to make friends, as one student commented that 'getting to sit with and getting to know the people on my course [and to] be able to interact with them in social and group activities was also benefiting' (Respondent 30). This was supported by another student who highlights that it 'allows us to make friends without having the ability to shy away and make it harder for ourselves in the long run' (Respondent 58). These findings are important because a sense of

belonging and community for first-year students can often be a key factor in retention and progression (Severiens & Schmidt, 2009).

Student experience of the block: challenges

When asked about the disadvantages of being taught in an intensive two-week block, the most common criticisms from participants related to it being tiring (26 participants, 36.6%) and sometimes overwhelming (12 participants, 16.9%). The points around tiredness related to a range of different concerns, from having what was perceived as early starts, 'having to get up early every day' (Respondent 27) (all sessions started at 10am), to finding it challenging because of the other things participants had going on in the initial period when they started at university, with comments such as 'intensive schedule to fit in with social activities to help settle in' (Respondent 43). This was compounded for students who also had other University commitments, as 'it was hard to stay motivated when I had full days every day with new societies on top of that' (Respondent 67).

One participant (Respondent 31) nicely summed this up:

> [It] has been quite a lot, however, not so much the fault of the timetable, there have been many breaks and time away. Just it clashes with the stressful period when everyone is trying to learn how to be independent and settle into Chester still.

However, two respondents recognised that whilst they were tired, they felt that this was worthwhile, concurring that there was, 'less time to adjust to new schedule, but it's worth it' (Respondent 12).

The participants who commented that the block was overwhelming at times related to the feeling that there was a 'lot of information to take in over a short amount of time' (Respondent 39). This could be a potential problem of information retention, as one student argues, 'I am not going to remember all the information' (Respondent 20). This also poses a challenge as one participant noted that they 'missed two days in week 2 so I had to catch up quickly' (Respondent 29). Pre-recording all the content sessions supported these concerns.

Overall, the participants seemed to find the module intense but appreciated the opportunity to grasp core academic skills early on. They felt more prepared for university and believed they had received the chance to get to know more people.

Discussion and reflections

In this section, we return to the three challenges of the first-year experience: retention, performance, and student satisfaction (Beer & Lawson, 2017; McCluskey et al., 2019; Willans & Seary, 2018). Following others, our research findings have demonstrated that this approach to teaching new students leads to increased student engagement and attendance (e.g., Daniel, 2000; Davies, 2006), improved assessment performance (e.g., Roche et al., 2024), and contributed to better retention (e.g., Hare, 2019). The higher engagement and attendance compared with other modules may be because this is the first module that students experience at university. As Dixon and O'Gorman (2020) found, attendance rates declined over the year. This could explain the lower attendance for the other block module delivered at the end of the academic year (Module F). However, it also supports the evidence that student success in block teaching was greater in the first year and that this approach may be beneficial for students transitioning into higher education (Wilson et al., 2023).

The strong performance of students on the module supports Roche et al.'s (2024) argument that the effectiveness of block teaching may be explained by cognitive load theory. This proposes that human cognitive processing is limited, and that when students are engaged with multiple tasks, such as simultaneous modules with competing commitments and assessments, they may become overloaded, which can lead to lower cognitive performance (Sweller, 1988). This, therefore, supports students in performing well academically.

The 100% submission rate for both assignments over three years improved pass rates, as students rarely fail a first-year assignment if they submit it. The writing and referencing exercise, which awarded 10% simply for submitting a complete piece of work, made it riskier not to submit than to do so. Anecdotal evidence from speaking to students suggests that the group assignment likely motivated students to feel a sense of responsibility to one another, as failing to engage would let their peers down early in the course, when they are still forming social connections. These outcomes support Buck and Tyrrell's (2022) findings that the number of deferral applications decreased compared with the previous version of the module.

Additionally, the active mode of delivery provided scheduled daily support from tutors, allowing students to receive consistent feedback on their work throughout the two weeks. This supported the development of academic skills while also providing an engaging way of

learning, albeit sometimes intense and tiring. As Roche et al. (2024) recognised, immersive teaching is most effective when designed with active learning pedagogies. The tutor-supervised Change Lab projects were particularly popular, often because they provided students with the opportunity to get to know one another early in their university experience through meaningful interactions. The positive response of students to this supports Maunder's (2018, p. 756) findings regarding the importance of 'social relationships in institutional belonging, and the importance of nurturing peer relationships'.

All this likely contributed to the 10% rise in retention rates. All students completed half of a module at the end of these two weeks, and most had made new friends. This helped students build confidence in their academic abilities and develop a sense of belonging through their social connections (Kelly et al., 2024). However, we recognise that this was just one module at the start of the academic year, and there may be other factors supporting this change that occurred later in the programme.

Overall, student feedback on their experience with block teaching indicated that they benefited from the approach. However, some expressed concern about its intensity, suggesting that the workload over a short period was tiring and could feel overwhelming. This aligns with other findings regarding student perceptions of reasonable workloads on a course (Loton et al., 2022).

Reflections

Ruth (Academic Lead)

Block teaching requires a different approach from a traditional lecture format. While it demands thorough planning and high organisation (all sessions are prepared and pre-recorded before the block starts), dedicating intensive, focused time to the same subject with a class surprisingly feels like less work over the year. The block approach reduces the cognitive load on me and my students (Roche et al., 2024), since I find it takes more bandwidth to revisit a module over several weeks. The intensive sessions with new first-year students help us get to know each other and lay a solid foundation for our ongoing relationship throughout the course.

Anthony (Academic Skills Lead)

As part of the ASk Team, we continually work to engage academic staff in embedding essential skills into the subject curriculum. We often deliver content during induction, which is easily lost amid the extensive information students receive and often students do not make the connection between what I say and how it relates to their course. The block approach has enabled active learning of academic skills within the subject content by working with a lecturer, making the discipline-specific content more tangible for students. Working as a united team also serves to build a relationship between the ASk team and the students, so that they know where they can get support for academic skills and that we already know what is expected from them on their course.

Conclusion

Overall, we argue that adopting a discipline-based approach to teaching academic skills through block teaching, when organised effectively, has the potential to support students in developing academic skills, increasing their confidence, and transitioning to university. This article has demonstrated that student retention and performance improved through this method, and that students, while expressing some concerns about perceived workload, were generally satisfied with the approach.

Our experience aligns with the existing literature on the benefits of block teaching, while also recognising its effectiveness in developing learners' academic skills. Although this research did not analyse staff perspectives on the module, we, as the module organisers and core teachers, have offered our reflections on the block teaching approach. We recognise this as a limitation of this study. Further research should investigate the effectiveness of this type of delivery, including the staff perspective, across various module types and at different stages of the course.

Interest in block teaching is increasing as more universities explore alternative approaches to improve retention, enhance performance, boost student satisfaction, and, more recently, optimise delivery efficiencies. Overall, our students described it as a 'very good 2 weeks, a great way to learn how to study effectively at Uni' (Respondent 12) and 'a great way to prepare us with everything we needed to know before starting any other modules' (Respondent 13).

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Disclosure statement

The authors used the following generative AI tools in the preparation of this manuscript: Grammarly. The tasks performed by Grammarly were limited to checking grammar, spelling, punctuation, and stylistic errors, as well as to consider suggestions for improving clarity, conciseness, and tone. The authors have complied with the journal's principles of AI use.

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