

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rethinking pathway academic calendars: Leveraging the student voice and experience in an intensive delivery mode

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Abstract

This study investigated the student experience of an established intensive mode of delivery (IMD) at a university-owned pathway provider. It employed a quantitative student survey, followed by semi-structured focus group interviews. The outcomes were twofold: (1) findings from the primary research and (2) reflections on the extent to which the student voice can play a role in such decisions. Informed by this research, and with the student voice as one of several key inputs, the institution took the decision to amend aspects of the existing academic calendar to increase incubation time, revision opportunities, and vacation time. This research also evidenced that, with support and opportunity, pathway students can provide rich insights into a range of matters that impact them. The article makes the case that rigorous decision-making can be achieved with students as partners and through the systematic inclusion of the student voice in a university's operational fabric beyond matters restricted to education.

Keywords intensive mode of delivery (IMD); block teaching; student voice; pathway programs

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Introduction

In many higher education (HE) settings, study periods of 12–15 weeks have been the norm. This is arguably based as much on legacy and convenience as on evidence of such models being the best way to learn. Intensive modes of delivery (IMD) – also referred to as accelerated learning (Włodkowski, 2003), intensive mode (Harvey et al., 2017), block teaching (Dixon & O’Gorman, 2020), the block model (Ambler et al., 2021) or immersive scheduling (Goode et al., 2024b) – have been increasingly adopted as an alternative to traditional, semester-based study periods. In IMDs, students typically enrol in one or two units of study over a shorter period as opposed to taking a greater number of units of study simultaneously over a longer semester, though each IMD setting is unique (Weldon & Konjarski, 2024).

IMDs are not a new concept, originating in small-scale liberal arts colleges in the US in the 1960s (Loton et al., 2022; Weldon & Konjarski, 2024). Various forms of intensive scheduling have been used in the UK (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022; Dixon & O’Gorman, 2020; Turner et al., 2021) and the US (Gilde, 2023; Weldon & Konjarski, 2024). In Australia, IMDs were initially implemented at postgraduate level (Harvey et al., 2017), and later extended to undergraduate offerings (Roche et al., 2022; Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021), as well as HE pathway programs (Goode et al., 2024a). Interestingly, it was not until 2023 that the International Block and Intensive Learning and Teaching Association (IBILTA) was formed along with its companion journal to connect educators and researchers involved in IMDs, suggesting that it is both established and nascent as a legitimate global educational phenomenon.

The proliferation of recent literature on IMDs demonstrates its development from curriculum innovation to a potential for shaping learning experiences and outcomes more generally. Recent research in Australian HE settings highlights the benefits of IMDs compared to traditional modes, including an increased focus on a single subject, opportunities for student interaction and deep learning, and higher levels of academic success (Goode et al., 2023; Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). First-year block models have received particular attention due to the potential to support students' transition into HE (Ambler et al., 2021; Loton et al., 2022).

Disadvantages of IMDs include insufficient time for students to absorb content and receive timely feedback (Thomas et al., 2025). This lack of incubation time has been found to lead to rapid falling behind (Vaughan & Carlson, 1992) and increased levels of stress (Colclasure et al., 2018), while rigorous timetabling and a perceived increase in workloads can contribute to the exhaustion of both staff and students (Loton et al., 2022). While IMD is generally considered an innovative alternative to semester mode, it is argued that it may underestimate developmental learning processes (Lodge & Ashford-Rowe, 2024). There is also inadequate evidence of whether 'massed' versus 'spaced' learning allows sufficient time for distributed learning or changing between topics and activities (Lodge, 2018), and the longer-term effects of such block models are currently unclear.

In Australia, two key examples of IMD implementation at undergraduate level have attracted attention. The Block Model at Victoria University (VU) was introduced in 2018 due to concerns about student outcomes and the institution's very survival (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021; Weldon, 2024). It involved a major change to the mode of delivery to one in which students take one unit of study at a time in four-week blocks. The model initially focused on the first-year experience, though was extended due to its success, involving a systematic overhaul to every aspect of education at the institution by 2023 (Weldon & Konjarski, 2024). The approach was based on a principles-based framework, drawing on a range of educational frameworks and theories including the underpinning desire to involve students in key decisions that impact them. A set of students-as-partners principles were established from the outset (Dempsey, 2024; McCluskey et al., 2021). This block model has been shown to be effective in improving student engagement, retention rates, and academic performance, especially among new-generation learners and identified equity groups (Dempsey, 2023; Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021).

The second IMD of note in Australia is the Southern Cross University (SCU) Model, introduced in 2021 post-pandemic with a view to decreasing student attrition and improving success rates, similar to a key driver at VU (Goode et al., 2023). Like the VU model, it became a whole-of-institution approach following a trial for first-year students. The SCU Model consists of six-week terms with two units per study period and is guided by active learning principles through in-class and online learning. Since its introduction, the University has reported statistically significant improvements in success rates and decreases in absent-fail rates, though with mixed levels of student satisfaction. Strong improvements in student achievement have been reported in particular in the pathway units for non-traditional and equity students (Goode et al., 2023), though there were perceptions of increased workload and lower rates of success of international students (Goode et al., 2024b).

While the potential of IMDs to transform approaches to education while improving student outcomes is increasingly recognised, the literature on their effectiveness remains limited to a small number of research sites and approaches. Most evaluations of IMDs have been based on large-scale quantitative

data derived from unit experience surveys and student grades, often by comparing IMD cohorts with traditional semester-based cohorts (Goode et al., 2024b; Loton et al., 2022; Turner et al., 2021). A handful of studies have used instruments designed specifically to explore students' perceptions of immersive scheduling after its implementation via surveys or interviews (Ambler et al., 2021; Colclasure et al., 2018; Goode et al., 2024c; Zhang & Cetinich, 2022). There is also a growing focus in the literature on student wellbeing (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Baik & Larcombe, 2023). National reports (Australian Government, 2023) acknowledge increased concerns regarding cost-of-living pressures and challenges related to life, work and study balance, all of which interact with HE studies; this literature complements evaluations of IMDs.

Systematic literature reviews (Advance HE, 2023; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Omland, 2025) have highlighted the themes of inclusivity, dialogue, positioning, voice, and cultural change through the democratisation of decision-making. While several key works extend partnership beyond the classroom to quality assurance, policy development, strategic planning and institutional decision-making (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), most literature and frameworks focus on co-creating in matters of education, and operational or governance matters are under-represented (Stevens, 2022). Given the growing focus on incorporating the student voice in HE (Cook-Sather & Matthews, 2023; Godbold et al., 2022), this paper focuses on the inclusion of the student voice in non-academic operational matters such as an academic calendar.

Study setting and rationale

The research site for this study is a pathway college that is fully owned and operated by a university in the top 130 of the QS 2027 rankings (Macquarie University, n.d.), located in an Australian metropolitan city. The College serves as a pathway for students who have not met the academic and/or English requirements to enter their degree directly, and most continue their studies in faculties at the University after completing their pathway studies. The College delivers Foundation Programs (Foundation) and other enabling programs, Undergraduate Certificates (UGCs) and Diplomas, and pre-master's programs. At its inception in 2015, the student profile was predominantly international (around 70%) but has changed over time to be more evenly split between domestic and international students, the latter predominantly from Asia.

In 2015, the University introduced an IMD at its newly established College as a proof of concept via a deliberate and coordinated approach. Unlike the two examples above, the IMD was not borne out of concerns around student outcomes but rather from a desire to investigate the affordances of an IMD in a brand-new entity in which immersive scheduling and active learning pedagogies were designed from the outset. From this perspective, the IMD at the research site is established and mature; all staff are accustomed to developing and delivering content, assessing, and supporting students in this model. This study is, therefore, unique as many others have been published at or after a pilot stage or a limited IMD implementation.

The existing academic calendar comprised six Terms annually, with each study period made up of six weeks of face-to-face learning, followed by a week of revision and exams and a subsequent vacation week for students. A full study load in this model is programmatically designed for two units of study, i.e., subjects, to be taken concurrently. This contrasts with typical practices in Australia of traditional semesters or trimesters where students on a full study load typically undertake four units. It also differs from traditional approaches

in that there is no online/asynchronous component or recorded content to ensure that a cohort is built through face-to-face engagement and active learning rather than lecture-style teaching. The College academic calendar is therefore atypical and of interest, especially as students transition into the University's two-semester structure for the remainder of their HE studies.

Guided active learning at the College was a key consideration, underpinned by in-house teaching and learning philosophy: *Engage, Empower, Evolve* (Humphreys, 2020), though this emerged organically rather than being fully formed from the outset. The IMD is also delivered through classroom facilities designed for flexible class arrangements such as groupwork, and designated learning spaces to complement in-class learning such as a student and a learning hub.

Over time, while the IMD appeared to be working well in many respects and consistent with the philosophy and culture, some concerns over whether the IMD was optimal for the current cohort of students were emerging. After eight years of the original model, and with a change in student profile over time, the leadership team wished to formally investigate the impact of the IMD from the student perspective. Until this point, the College had followed a typical yet arguably tokenistic approach to including the student voice such as student representatives on governance committees, student surveys, and analysis of student outcomes for evaluative purposes. There was interest in investigating the student experience and perceptions of the calendar, which had not been sought at the College's establishment as there had been no students to consult, and this resulted in the overarching research focus.

It should be noted that international students on a student visa in Australia are required to study full-time unless on a formally approved reduced study load. Additionally, the Department of Home Affairs will not issue a student visa for a package offer (i.e., a pathway program followed by the principal course) if there is a gap of more than two months. While domestic students do not have these restrictions, these constraints related to international students had to be prioritised from a compliance perspective during this project.

Methodology

Research aims and questions

The study explored how students in a pathway context experience an IMD. Ethics approval was obtained prior to data collection (Project ID 15476). There were no conflicts of interest to declare. We collected perceptions and experiences of the academic calendar from both current and former students as one component of a broader investigation into the impact of the IMD on students and staff. In designing the study, we were guided by Huber's (2017) six-step framework for evaluating the adoption of learning and teaching innovations.

The research questions (RQs) included three focus areas:

- (1) The current students' views on the College academic calendar: what is working well and what is perceived to be challenging?
- (2) The current students' views on some proposed changes to the academic calendar: how can these changes be best designed to maximise student wellbeing, engagement and success?
- (3) The former students' views on the academic calendar: how do they perceive the transition from the College IMD calendar to the University semester-based one?

Research design

This mixed-methods study collected data using an online survey followed by semi-structured focus group interviews. The questionnaire (Appendix A) was purposefully designed to reflect the RQs of how pathway students experience an IMD and structured around three key elements of the IMD: the number of units per Term, the length of each study period, and the length of the break within/between Terms. The focus group interviews were semi-structured and investigated these themes in more depth along with comments arising from the survey responses (Appendix B).

Participants

Most participants were enrolled in the existing Term structure at the time of the research: Standard Foundation or Intensive Program (SF/IP) as well as Diploma (Dip) or Undergraduate Certificate (UGC). The online survey was administered to all students enrolled (complete enumeration), and 111 completed responses were received. Among respondents, 58% (n = 64) came from the Dip/UGC cohort, and 42% (n = 47) from the SF/IP stream. This means that Diploma/UGC students were slightly under-represented since 64% of the population were studying a Diploma or a UGC. 42% of respondents were domestic students, and 58% international students, meaning that there was marginal over-representation of international students relative to the actual population. The survey findings informed the semi-structured in-depth investigation during the focus group stage, involving seven current and three former students, recruited via convenience sampling. Table 1 shows the details of participants enrolled at the College at the time of the study. Names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Table 1

Focus group participants – enrolled College students

Participants	Student status	Enrolment at the College
Leila	International	Intensive Program
Aisha	International	Diploma
Omar	International	Diploma
Farid	International	Diploma
Priya	Domestic	Diploma
Sana	Domestic	UGC
William	Domestic	Diploma

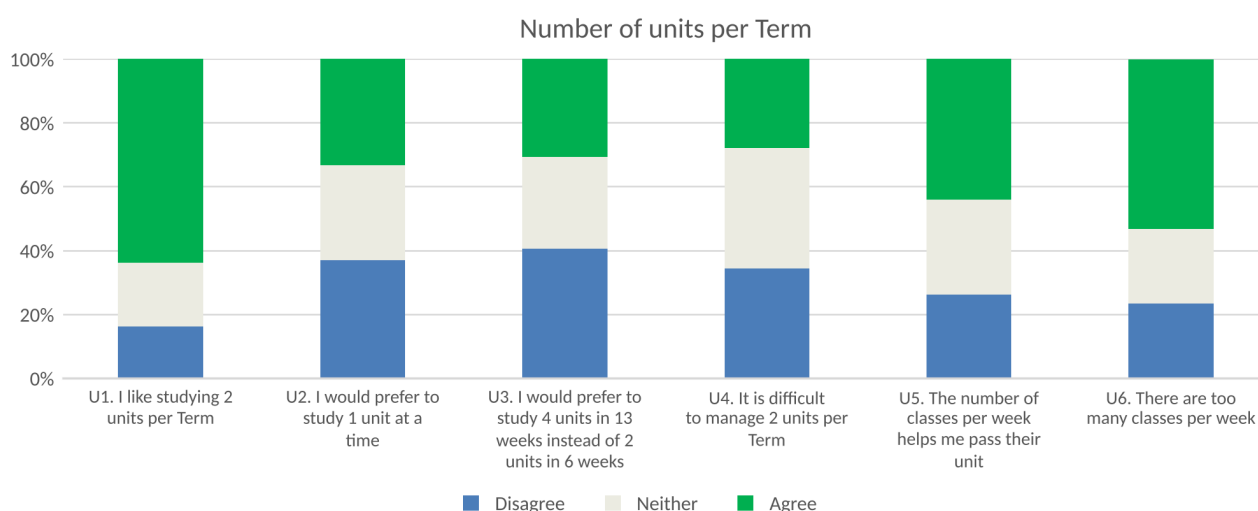
Table 2 provides details of the former students who participated in the focus groups following a mail-out invitation. All had completed their studies at the College in the two semesters preceding the study and had articulated into their bachelor's degree. It was felt that they would remember the College Term structure and would also have experienced adequate time in the semester model. Although participants from this group were difficult to recruit, it was felt that their responses would, nevertheless, contribute and possibly triangulate findings from the survey and other focus groups.

Table 2*Focus group participants – former College students*

Participants	Student status	Program completed at the College
Somsak	International	Intensive Program
Fiona	Domestic	Standard Foundation
Sofia	Domestic	Intensive Program

Data analysis

The survey data were analysed quantitatively using descriptive statistics in IBM SPSS 27 and the results informed the development of the interview protocol. Following Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis (2020), in which themes are actively developed by the researcher, interview transcripts and open-ended questionnaire responses (n=70) were analysed thematically and interpretively using student-centred themes from the IMD literature, including student engagement, managing study load, academic success, and wellbeing. We present the results from the online questionnaire, supported by focus group findings, generated through immersive reading of interview transcripts and thematic coding using NVivo 20. Codes

Figure 1*Responses on questions relating to study load.*

While 44% of current students agreed or strongly agreed that the number of classes per week helped them pass their unit (U5, $M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.080$), the majority (53%, U6, $M = 3.5$, $SD = 1.159$) also stated that there were too many classes per week. The weekly study load was a recurring theme in the interview data, thus supporting the survey results and showing little difference between the Foundation and Diploma streams. As seen in Table 3, at least half of all students agreed with the statement that there are too many classes per week.

and themes generated during qualitative analysis were checked and agreed upon by the researchers. The quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated and reported together (Fetters et al., 2013).

Findings

Student views on the existing academic calendar are reported in three main categories. First, their experiences and perceptions of study workload are discussed, followed by views on the Term length and the amount of learning time. Finally, students' views on alterations to the existing academic calendar structure are presented. Quantitative findings are complemented by the interview data.

Study load

The survey examined students' experience and perceptions of studying two units concurrently each Term. Figure 1 below shows a visual summary of the responses.

Almost two thirds of the respondents (64% selected agree or strongly agree) stated that they enjoyed studying two units per Term, while 16% disagreed and strongly disagreed (question U1). A smaller percentage (33%) stated they would prefer to study just one unit per Term (U2), with 28% reporting difficulty in managing two units (U4).

Table 3*Views on the number of classes per week. Percentage of each group by study program*

U6. There are too many classes per week					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly agree
SFP/IP	2.1%	23.4%	17.0%	31.9%	25.5%
UGC or Diploma	4.7%	17.2%	28.1%	28.1%	21.9%

During the interviews, the study load was sometimes attributed to unit availability each Term. For example, some Diploma students who had diverged from their original pathway were undertaking a combination of two academically

demanding units concurrently, while others had to work around the unit availability while waiting for a unit to be delivered again if they had failed one.

Qualitative survey data indicates a preference for longer contact hours and fewer days on campus (P17 SF/IP), due to other commitments (P53 UGC/Dip) and/or to achieve a better study-life balance: 'Five days of uni is very difficult to attend, [it] is very expensive travel wise, takes a lot of time to commute and [it] is hard to maintain a healthy study to life routine' (P29 UGC/Dip). While the focus group participants were mostly satisfied with the number of classes per week, they also expressed a willingness for online classes, partly to reduce commuting time and public transport fares and partly to study at their own pace.

Open-ended survey responses highlight the wellbeing challenges experienced when managing study load and fast turnover of assessments, especially by Diploma students. Some respondents called for a reduced number of concurrent quizzes and weekly assessments: 'Sometimes the assessment overlaps and it stresses me out' (P62, UGC/Dip). Others mentioned insufficient time for content absorption and revision (P19, UGC/Dip) and perceptions of 'cluttering' at the end-of-Term (P21, UGC/Dip). The comments on assessment overlap are interesting given that programmatic assessment scheduling is in place. In this case, the co-occurring assessments may be an issue experienced by off-pathway students.

Survey results do not reveal a preference among students for a semester-long 13-week study period, which would include four units of study on a full study load (question U3 in Figure 1,

$M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.240$). Approximately one third of respondents (31%) stated they would prefer a semester mode, 41% disagreed, and another 29% were undecided. While current students are unfamiliar with the traditional semester-based mode, one response from a UGC/Dip domestic student is worth noting as it points to the perceived intensity of IMD:

I switched from a Diploma to an UGC, and the main driving factor was that after going through my first College Term, I realised that doing another 3 Terms would be too intensive for me; so I switched to an UGC so that I could articulate into the faculty quicker and switch to the longer 13-week uni sessions sooner (P31 UGC/Dip).

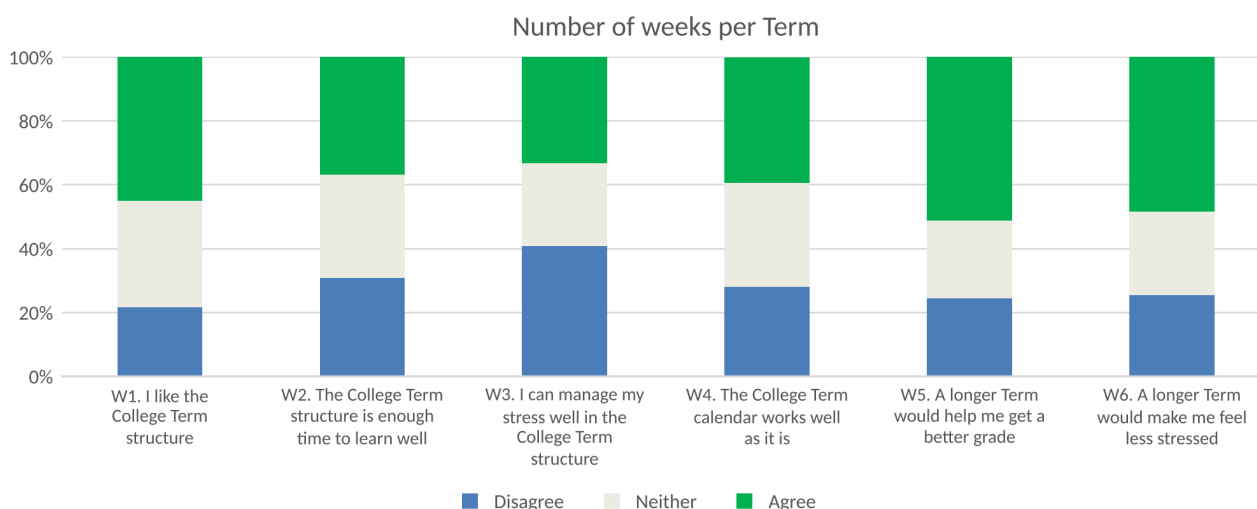
Unlike current students, former College students enrolled in their respective bachelor's courses were able to compare the six-week Terms at the College to 13-week semesters at the University. While noting that the compressed nature of learning in IMD helps maintain focus, they also appreciated the slower semester pace and the time available to absorb new knowledge. An advantage of IMD noted was the daily availability of the College teaching staff, and an opportunity for timely content clarification, as opposed to the University where the distance from the lecturer is greater and clarification opportunities perceived as less frequent.

Term length

The second part of the survey explored students' perceptions of the Term duration. The summary of results can be seen in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

Responses to questions related to Term length



On average, the students favoured the existing Term structure (question W1, $M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.028$). A large proportion of the respondents (45%) stated they liked it, while only 22% did not. Likewise, almost 40% of the respondents believed the existing Term calendar worked well (W4). A third of the respondents (32.4%) were undecided, and another 28% disagreed ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.065$). This finding was further explored in the focus group interviews.

The interview data explain some of the above differences. Former IP students and some current Diploma students recalled or expressed a desire to complete their pathway studies promptly and articulate to faculties. Others appreciated the ability to reduce study load in the SFP, though reduced study load in Foundation Programs is not possible for international students on a student visa.

Quality of learning

Student perceptions of whether the existing Term structure afforded adequate time for learning to occur were divided. As shown in Figure 2 question W2, 37% of respondents found the Term length adequate for learning, 31% disagreed, and 32% were undecided ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.044$). At the same time, most students (51%) believed that a longer Term would help them get a better grade (W5, $M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.134$). One-fifth (21%) of all open-ended survey responses mentioned longer study time and its potential to improve learning pace and student wellbeing. Several respondents expressed a preference for 'spreading the [study] load' (P31, UGC/Dip) rather than 'cramming everything in six weeks' (P84, UGC/Dip).

Interviews explored these suggestions further, with mixed responses. For example, some international Diploma students were against extending the teaching Term to seven weeks. However, they expressed a strong preference for a mid-Term revision break, despite being content with the overall six-week study load. It was believed the pace of instruction left limited time to seek support when required, and for that reason, a mid-Term break with workshops or access to teachers was preferable.

Wellbeing

In addition to academic success, students were asked about managing their wellbeing, which emerged as a key theme. A proportion of the survey respondents (41%) stated they could not manage their stress well within the six-week Term (question W3, Figure 2), the item showing the lowest mean score ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.086$). Almost one half (49%) believed a longer Term would make them feel less stressed (W6, Figure 2). Challenges associated with stress and maintaining student wellbeing were also a common theme in open-ended survey responses and interviews. Many students perceived the Term structure as intense or overwhelming. 'It's complex, whenever other students hear of this calendar and system, they are usually surprised in an unsettling way' (P19, UGC/Dip). Several open-ended survey responses discussed difficulties when balancing study and other responsibilities: 'Last Term I had to come in 5 days a week and I thought that was a bit much for my learning and managing other commitments' (P53 UGC/Dip). In an interview, a full-time Diploma student described a break that coincided with Christmas holidays as an opportunity 'to catch some air and look at the sun' before diving back 'into the clouds' of the rest of the Term. The above findings highlight the intensity of IMD, its potential impact on student wellbeing and a need for ongoing student support.

Questions about managing stress (W3, W6) were cross-tabulated by enrolment type. Tables 4 and 5 below compare responses by domestic and international enrolment when asked about managing stress. Table 4 shows that a slightly larger proportion of international students (45%) than domestic students (34%) reported that they did not manage stress well in the current Term structure.

Table 4
Responses to question on managing stress based on enrolment type

W3. I can manage my stress well in the College Term structure			
	Disagree (1–2)	Neither (3)	Agree (4–5)
Domestic students	34%	27.7%	38.3%
International students	45.3%	25.0%	29.7%

Conversely, while 57% of domestic students believed a longer Term would improve their stress levels, a smaller proportion of international students (42%) agreed (Table 5).

Table 5
Responses to question on longer Term and level of stress

W6. A longer Term would make me feel less stressed			
	Disagree (1–2)	Neither (3)	Agree (4–5)
Domestic students	21.3%	21.3%	57.4%
International students	28.2%	29.7%	42.2%

Qualitative data support the survey findings related to stress management, with one international Diploma student pointing out that their peers are 'more stressed and depressed than domestic students [and] facing more difficulties than the domestic students', resulting in more failing grades. The participant called for 'a retake system or special consideration' (P10, UGC/Dip). It is unclear if the student was aware of the standard process for special consideration and supplementary assessments.

Alternatives to the existing calendar

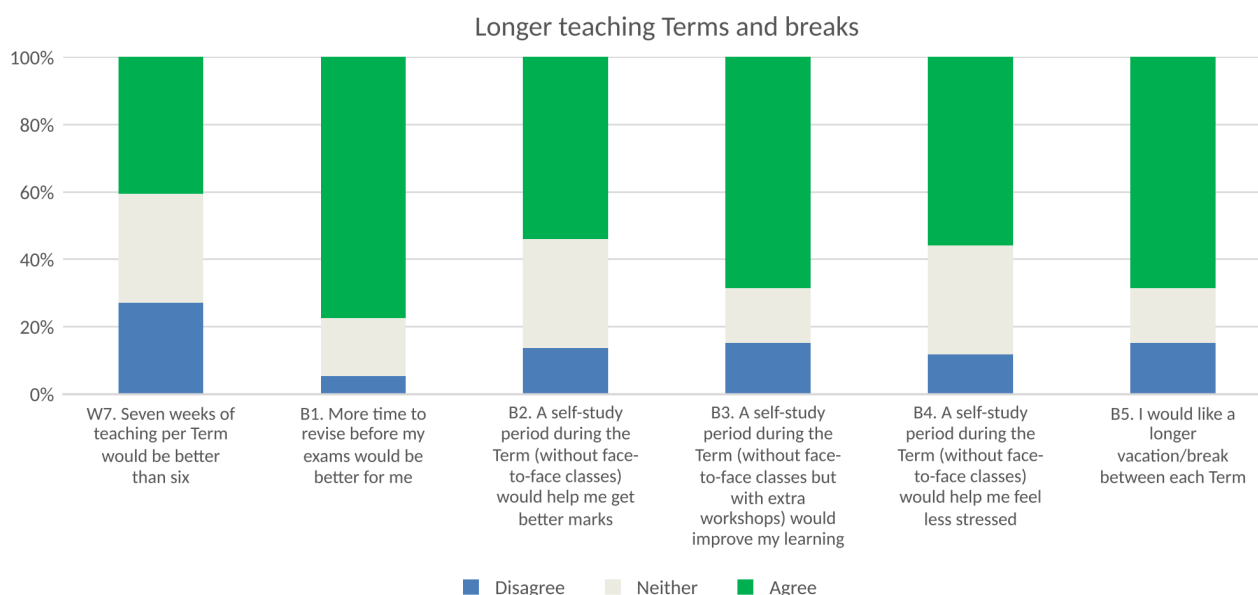
Under the College calendar in place at the time of the study, each six-week teaching period was followed by a one-week period for revision and examinations, and a further one-week vacation. The final section of the questionnaire explored potential alternatives to this model, including extending the teaching period to seven weeks and introducing an additional one-week revision break. The findings related to these options are presented in Figure 3.

When asked whether they would prefer seven weeks of teaching instead of six, a large proportion of survey respondents (41%) agreed, though 27% disagreed (question W7). However, this finding was not generally supported in in-person interviews, where current Diploma students and former IP students did not favour an additional week of teaching. For example, Rami and Bodhi, both Diploma students, believed the workload was appropriate for the six-week Term. The former IP students, including Sofia and Somsak, recalled being focused on finishing their studies in the time allocated so that they could articulate into their bachelor's degrees on time.

However, both the survey and interviews indicated a strong preference for additional study time within and after the Term (questions B1, B2, B3, B4 in Figure 3). An overwhelming majority of survey respondents (77%) indicated they would prefer more revision time after the Term finishes (B1). More than half (B2, 54%) agreed that a one-week self-study period without face-to-face classes would improve their learning, and similarly, 56% (B4) believed it would help them feel less stressed. Most respondents (B3, 68%) believed that extra workshops in an additional one-week study period would help them achieve higher grades. Focus group interviews explored when the extra revision week might be scheduled, with the majority of students preferring a mid-Term break instead of immediately before examinations.

Figure 3

Responses to questions related to longer teaching Terms and breaks



The Term length was also a common theme in open-ended survey responses, with participants expressing a preference for an additional one or two weeks per Term: 'I think the College Term calendar should be extended a bit so that the students will have more time to review what they have studied.' (P35 UGC/Dip). Similarly, most interviewed students favoured a mid-Term study period with online workshops and access to a teacher, but without the necessity to come to campus. However, both students who had completed the Intensive Program expressed a sense of urgency to articulate into their bachelor's degree as soon as possible, and so articulation timelines had to be considered from the end of the College program or course into the next semester.

More than two thirds of survey respondents (68%) stated they would like to have a longer vacation between Terms than the current one week (B5, Figure 3), and this preference was confirmed in open-ended survey responses and interviews. For example, a Diploma student believed more time between Terms would help her rest and be emotionally and mentally ready to study again. Similarly, a former IP student noted the tendency of the one-week break to be 'eaten up' by revision or advance preparation for assignments.

Overall, students reported being satisfied with taking two units per Term and had no strong desire for a standard semester structure. The general consensus was that the current Term structure was tiring, and there were concerns with the intensive nature and pace of education, as well as the lack of time to absorb content, and the stress and anxiety that this engendered, although there was no strong desire for additional teaching weeks. There were also some negative comments about the number of classes per week. Students raised the perennial issue around assessment load, which is arguably more keenly felt in an IMD due to the quicker turnaround of assessment due dates.

In relation to wellbeing, students reported that the current structure contributed to heightened anxiety, particularly due to the limited time available to recover if they became unwell or fell behind. They proposed several modifications to the calendar that would enhance deep learning and provide essential incubation time. Most students agreed that a longer study period would support improved academic performance. Mid-Term breaks, which would offer additional opportunities to

catch up, and longer vacations between Terms were also viewed as highly desirable. Additional revision time received overwhelming support. At the same time, some participants expressed a preference to progress through their studies as quickly as possible, highlighting a tension between efficiency and the conditions needed to promote student success.

Discussion

This study examined the impact of an academic calendar within an Australian pathway HE context by actively prioritising students as partners in an operational decision-making process. It focused on current and former students' views on the College academic calendar, proposed changes, and how former students had experienced the transition from the IMD to a traditional semester model. After the collection and analysis of the student feedback reported here, further input was solicited from other stakeholders, including teaching staff (from a pedagogical perspective) and professional staff (from an operational perspective), finance business partners (from a financial perspective), and senior leaders at the University. Based on the cumulative evidence at the research site, and the case made to the Executive Group at the University, it was agreed to implement multiple changes to the College's IMD calendar. What is of interest is that the students were surveyed first and their input was a key driver for change rather than being tokenistic *post-hoc* consultation to corroborate a decision that had already been made.

The outcomes were therefore twofold: first, the findings generated through the primary research and the institutional decisions taken as a result; and second, reflections on the extent to which student perspectives can meaningfully contribute to operational matters beyond the classroom. In terms of the changes made to the calendar, while the two-unit-per-Term structure would remain, it was agreed that five study periods would replace the existing six annually. Alignment with University semester start dates for three of these five Terms would now be possible, allowing College students to partake in broader University orientation activities to support their commencement as an HE student. Misalignment of term and semester dates had previously precluded this. The reduction in annual study periods would also allow for critical amendments

to the Term length from the original eight weeks to ten, including a mid-Term study break in Week 5 to allow more incubation time and revision opportunities in the middle of the study period, as well as an opportunity to deliver make-up classes due to public holidays and supplementary assessments

Figure 4
Original and amended Term structures

Original Term structure

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8
Teaching weeks						Revision & Exams	Vacation

Amended Term structure

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10
Teaching weeks				Study break	Teaching weeks		Revision & Exams	Vacation	Vacation

The feedback on contact hours per week confirmed the approach already in train to reduce the number of contact hours, and comments on assessment load were noted and addressed. Not all student requests could be actioned, such as reducing the number of weekly scheduled hours for the Foundation Program, due to national compliance reasons (Australian Government, 2021).

The second outcome was the realisation of how critical the student voice had been in this process; indeed, being a key driver for the changes. The literature shows the growth in the role of students as partners, especially in matters related to education but that this is still less common in matters beyond the classroom in non-academic, operational matters (Bovill et al., 2016; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Omland et al., 2025). Reflecting on the reasons for this, it would perhaps be easy to make the claim that pathway students are unable to add value to operational decisions. Pathway students are at the beginning of their HE journeys, for example, with a limited sense of the demands and expectations of studies in their target faculty. Many domestic pathway students do not finish Year 12 and may either be relatively young or, alternatively, returning to study after a significant period away from formal education. Around half of the cohort are international students, many of whom may be unfamiliar with certain Australian educational practices and potentially less accustomed to more consultative, learner-driven approaches. Students are not versed in pedagogical theory, unaware of regulatory constraints, and not ‘experts’ *per se*. There is some truth to such claims yet there is also a danger in undervaluing the student voice. Student cohorts and participation rates in HE have changed immensely, and the literature indicates the current challenges of juggling studies and life commitments, financial and other stressors, most of which were less common when most educators were undergraduates (Baik & Kahu, 2023; Alharbi & Smith, 2018). This raises the question of the relevance of our own knowledge and experience to their current challenges, and the need to involve them actively and meaningfully.

This research aligns with the growing recognition of student voice in HE (Cook-Sather & Matthews, 2023) and indicates that students can indeed provide valuable insights into their educational experiences, including operational matters beyond the classroom. In layman’s terms, students were able to articulate matters related to cognitive load, the impact of massed versus spaced learning on the developmental learning processes, incubation time, and general perceived impacts of

to those entitled to them. Week 8 would allow for additional revision time, followed by extra vacation time for students while also providing staff with more time for marking and results management. The original and amended Term structures are shown in Figure 4 below.

the academic calendar on both their academic success and wellbeing. The findings underscored that legitimate contributions can be made beyond the more typical approaches of using student representatives on committees, *post-hoc* standardised surveys and data analysis, which are often retrospective and/or tokenistic.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. The primary research findings may not be generalisable to other contexts as it is situated in a specific research site, though it provides a useful case study for others interested in undertaking similar investigations. The study reports only on the student voice; it does not report on the beliefs and perceptions obtained from other stakeholders (including teachers, professional staff, central University teams and academic managers), which were collected subsequently on this matter, and which informed the final decision. A larger sample size would have been desirable. It was particularly challenging to recruit former students for the focus groups to ascertain their views. Participation bias is a perennial potential concern with surveys and especially focus groups, as respondents and volunteers may be those with strong views. It should also be noted that this paper does not report on the impact of the implementation of the calendar changes, though there are signs of positive impact on student wellbeing and outcomes, and relief in student and staff workloads, which may be attributable at least in part to the calendar change.

Conclusion

The student voice approach provided rich insights into students’ lived experiences and confirmed the value of involving students in College decisions. This was our first foray into trialling student involvement as a foundational element beyond curriculum matters. The clear and consistent message from students showed that involving them as partners in such decisions can be instructive, and that their voice is, in fact, invaluable.

While this paper does not aim to advocate or validate a specific academic calendar or delivery model *per se*, it makes the case that providers should investigate what works best for their student cohort and context while operating within prevailing regulatory requirements to build learning environments that enable students to flourish. While student

success or wellbeing are not solely dependent on a Term structure, the delivery model was evidently one component that had an impact and had not previously been interrogated.

The implications for practice are that periodic evidence-based problematising and re-evaluation are critical. Rather than ‘set and forget’, assuming that what worked previously will continue to, we should continue to interrogate, refine and amend as needed, using critical reflection and input of all stakeholders—including students—to inform decisions. Critically, this study showed that more rigorous decision-making can be achieved through partnered activity and systemic inclusion of the student voice in the university’s operational fabric. Such inclusion can challenge hierarchical norms and lead to culture change (Matthews et al., 2018).

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Appendix A: Survey instrument

About you

1. How old are you?
 - Under 18
 - 18 years or more
2. What are you studying?
 - Standard Foundation or Intensive Program
 - Undergraduate Certificate or Diploma
3. I am a(n)...
 - Domestic student
 - International student

Units

4. The following questions are about units of study and the number of units you study each Term. As you know, full-time students at the College study 2 units per 6-week Term. How much do you agree or disagree with these statements about the units?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I like studying 2 units per Term.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would prefer to study 1 unit at a time.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would prefer to study 4 units in 13 weeks instead of 2 units in 6 weeks.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It is difficult to manage 2 units per Term.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The number of classes per week helps me pass my unit.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
There are too many classes per week.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Weeks

5. The following questions are about the study weeks within each Term. As you know, each Term at the College consists of 6 weeks of teaching, 1 week of revision and exams, and 1 week of vacation. How much do you agree or disagree with these statements about the weeks of study?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I like the College Term structure.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The College Term structure is enough time to learn well.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I can manage my stress well in the College Term structure.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The College Term calendar works well as it is.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A longer Term would help me get a better grade.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A longer Term would make me feel less stressed.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7 weeks of teaching per Term would be better than 6.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Revision and breaks

6. The following questions are about breaks and revision time. As you know, at the end of each Term, there is 1 week for revision and exams and 1 week of vacation. How much do you agree or disagree with these statements about revision and breaks?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
More time to revise before my exams would be better for me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A self-study period during the Term (without face-to-face classes) would help me get better marks.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A self-study week without face-to-face classes but with extra workshops would improve my learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A self-study period during the Term (without face-to-face classes) would help me feel less stressed.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would like a longer vacation/break between each Term.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Overall comment

Here are some general questions on the College calendar. These questions are optional. If you choose not to answer, please continue to click Next to get to the focus group invitation and the voucher draw.

7. What change would you like to see for the College Term calendar?
8. Do you have any other comments on the College Term calendar?

Appendix B: Semi-structured focus group interview protocol

Current students

Student perceptions and experiences of Term structure

1. How do you find studying two units per term? What are the positives of this timetable? What are the negatives?
2. Currently, there are 6 weeks of teaching each term. What do you think about the length of teaching during the term? Is this enough time for you to study two units? What would you like to change?

Alternatives to current Term structure

3. How do you feel about 7 weeks of teaching instead of 6? Would it affect your success? Would it affect your level of stress in any way?
4. Currently, after the teaching weeks, you have one week for revision and exams and one week for vacation. Does this break between terms suit you? If not, what would you like to change? How do you feel about a week of self-study in the middle of each term?

Comparison to University semester calendar

5. At university, you will study four units at the same time over a longer period of 13 weeks. They are called semesters. There is a two-week break in the middle of each semester, and a longer holiday between semesters. What do you think about studying 4 units at the same time? What are the advantages/disadvantages of the University calendar/timetable?

Other

6. Do you have any other comments about the current College term structure?

Former students

Student perceptions and experiences of Term structure

1. Think about your time at the College. When you studied here, there were 6 weeks of teaching each term. What is your opinion about the length of teaching during the term? What were the positives of this timetable? What were the negatives? Was this enough time for you to study two units? If you could change anything, what would it be?

Alternatives to current Term structure

2. Think about your time at the College. How would you have felt about 7 weeks of teaching instead of 6? What impact would it have on your success? What impact would it have on your level of stress?
3. When you studied at the College, after the teaching weeks, you had one week for revision and exams and one week for vacation. Did this break between terms suit you? If not, what would you like to have changed? How would you have felt about a week of self-study in the middle of each term?

Comparison to University semester calendar

4. Think about your past academic calendar at the College, when you studied two units in shorter terms, and your current study calendar at the University, which is semester-based. How do they compare? When you moved to the University, did you feel prepared for this type of study load? How? Why not?

Other

5. Do you have any other comments about the College term structure?