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Start With The End In Mind: Experiences Of Accelerated Course Completion By Pre-Service Teachers And Educators

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Abstract: In response to changes government funding and policies over the past five years, the Australian tertiary sector has entered an increasingly competitive climate. This has forced many universities to become more strategic in attracting increased numbers of PSTs. Providing accelerated learning opportunities for PSTs is viewed as one way to gain greater market share. Accelerated learning programs are one of the fastest growing transformations in Australian higher education over the past five years. There is limited research that investigates the effectiveness of accelerated programs and the ways in which PSTs experience them. This preliminary study investigates the experiences of pre-service teachers and educators, via a purpose built instrument, of an accelerated learning program in Australia. The study found that PSTs were strongly motivated by such factors as early course competition and greater study plan flexibility. This study contributes to the emerging field of accelerated learning design in the tertiary sector.

Introduction

The first decade of the 21st century was witness to some significant changes in the tertiary education sector in Australia. The Bradley (2008) and Cutler (2008) reviews recommended an agenda of growth, improvement in access and standards-based regulation. These broad changes have consequently triggered changes in each university's governance, focus, purpose and educational structures. Market drivers have never been as notable as they are at present in the tertiary education sector in Australia and these have had a number of effects on the manner in which tertiary education is delivered. At the coalface, academic educators have had to grapple with new paradigms for tertiary education delivery, such as intensive delivery modes and providing the flexibility for accelerated course completion and depletion. This paradigm shift has not only been driven by educational development but market demands, including the impact of the Global Financial Crisis and changing student demands and expectations.

Such developments in the tertiary sector in Australia have led to changes in the academic teaching year structure at the University of Canberra. The standard two-semester structure has been maintained but the break between semesters has been lengthened in order to create an additional teaching period, known as Winter Term (WT). The reasoning behind the introduction of the teaching period was to provide greater flexibility around timetabling, repeating units, employment, family commitments and accelerated course completion. In this paper's study, accelerated course completion is fulfilling all course requirements for a four-year bachelor degree in three and a half years in alignment with the Australian Quality

Framework and relevant teacher accreditation authorities. The University of Canberra conducted a preliminary evaluation of the pilot WT (University of Canberra, 2010). As a result of analysis, a number of recommendations were made, including improvements to marketing, induction, training and communication (University of Canberra 2010).

One of the primary concerns in the initial stages of designing WT units was a lack of clarity around the characteristics of the pre-service teachers (PSTs) who would elect to study in this period. Due to the removal of restrictions on the number of units a student could study in WT and prerequisites for undertaking higher-level units, there was no baseline data on the experience or number of PSTs to expect in each unit was available. The freeing up of timetable restrictions for the practicum components of the course also impacted this flexibility in the study plans. This meant that PSTs negotiated their own practicum dates with their placement schools so that it would fit within their personal study timetable. All of these changes lead to a level of autonomy for the PSTs to arrange their own timetables and as such the motivations for studying in WT may have been varied. This combination of changes caused a large number of assumptions to be made by the academic educators (including the authors), due to the lack of any previous paradigm to base their decision on.

The study in this paper employed a mixed methods approach, using an online quantitative pretest (N=208) and postest (N=114) survey and focus group interviews (N=11). The study focused on the experiences of WT at a Faculty level in the response to recommendations made in the University's evaluation report. In 2012, a large number of units were offered in WT in teacher education courses at the University of Canberra and many of the previous restrictions on study load limits and enrolment were relaxed or removed. The outcome of these changes meant that any student, regardless of their year of study could enrol in a WT unit. The academic educators involved in unit design and delivery during WT found themselves in a unique and challenging situation. They were designing learning experiences to be delivered in a new intensive mode, to PSTs in various stages of their degrees. The academic educators were attempting this without a clear idea of the number of the number of enrolments or the PSTs expectations of studying in WT.

Consequently the academic educators found themselves making a large number of assumptions in such areas as the level of theoretical and practical teaching experience the cohorts would have, their motivations for undertaking WT, the pressures and expectations on study workload and how that balanced with commitments outside their study. As the number of assumptions grew, the group of academic educators recognised the need to undertake a mixed methods research project during WT 2012. This project aimed to establish demographic profiles of the student body, capture their expectations and experiences of WT and use the results to inform the academic educators' impressions of the teaching period from the PST's perspectives. The data would also inform future developments and improvements, both on an educational and administrative level, within the WT construct.

Literature Review

Traditional modes of course delivery in higher education may no longer be adequate for the expectations of PSTs. This takes into account a changing profile of the typical student and more specifically the PSTs around whom this study was conducted. The typical higher education student of the 21st Century is no longer straight out of high school, seeking to pursue a life-long career in teaching. The character and composition of PSTs are changing, with higher numbers of mature-age students entering the higher education arena alongside life-long learners (*In 2011, around three in five (59%) students were aged between 15 and 24 years, while 41% of students were aged 25-64 years*) (ABS, 2011). The identification of this

changing profile has been highlighted in the literature (Davies & Pablo, 2006; Lee & Horsfall, 2010; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010) providing a snapshot of the 21st Century student as one requiring flexibility while striving to balance work, study and home life. An Australian review of university student engagement and satisfaction with learning and teaching, conducted by Scott (2008), draws attention to the higher number of fulltime PSTs who are also working and expecting "flexible, responsive and cost-effective study modes" (p.6). Flexible learning options in the form of condensed, intensive, accelerated teaching formats are one way offered as a response to changing times (Davies, 2006; Kasworm, 2003; Wlodkowski, 2003). Findings from the afore mentioned researchers set the stage for a body of work recommending alternate study modes, including accelerated learning designs and accelerated course completion.

Accelerated learning programs are generally referred to across the literature in higher education settings as 'compressed' (Lutes & Davies, 2012), 'time compressed' (Hyun, Kretovics & Crowe, 2006), 'block mode' (Davies, 2006), 'condensed' (Scott, 2003) or 'intensive' (Davies & Pablo, 2006) modes of study. They are also referred to as 'Winter Term' at University of Canberra and 'Summer Sessions' (Crowe, Hyun & Kretovics, 2005) in some overseas universities. Accelerated programs of study can vary between subjects and institutions (Davies, 2006) and inconsistencies in definitions of accelerated learning are noted by Lee & Horsfall (2010). The purposes of accelerated learning programs can also vary between universities, such as an extension of the academic calendar for financial benefits to the university, student demand for flexibility or increasing compatibility with overseas university calendars (Daniel, 2000; Davies, 2006; Wlodkowski, 2003). For the purpose of this paper 'accelerated learning' will be used to encompass the diversity of terminology across the literature.

Interest in the field of accelerated learning programs is illustrated by a diversity of studies presented since the start of the 21st century. These studies have looked at various aspects of teaching and learning in higher education settings as part of a comparative analysis between accelerated and traditional modes of study. Across the field three areas of focus become apparent. These are the theories of adult learning and how they impact on the individual in an accelerated learning program; the specific adaptions to content and pedagogy that have been found to be effective in accelerated learning programs and the distinct attitudes of students and teaching staff in this context.

Adult learners

A case study by Kasworm (2003) identified the experiences attracting adult learners to an accelerated degree program, their "external requirements and internal needs" (p.24). These were then conceptualised as a triangulated model involving "adult identity-work world, adult action and adult competence" (p.24). Kasworm's findings highlighted the importance of structure, relationships, identity and tensions. The structures and relationships needed to be supportive, the adult student identity needed to include motivation, dedication and responsibility and there were paradoxical tensions between inconsistent beliefs about learning in accelerated modes of study. Adult learning theory underpins the success of accelerated learning programs and Swenson (2003) notes " adult learners (need) to be actively involved in their own learning, which involves collaboration with others, makes use of their greater life and work experience …" (p.92).

Lutes & Davies (2012) noted specific students were attracted to accelerated programs because they perceived it to being a lighter workload than the traditional mode of study. However, the workload rigour (workload rigour defined as a similar workload, covering the

same content as the semester long equivalent) as defined by these researchers was found to be slightly higher in traditional modes of study. In some cases a heavier workload was reported in accelerated study mode but this factor depended on the subject being taught and the teacher. Adding to the theme of workload, Lee & Horsfall (2010) undertook a comparative study looking at both faculty and student experiences of accelerated learning programs within the same course. The study found that students' perceived their accelerated study would be easier than in a traditional mode of delivery, when in reality they found it to be more time consuming than anticipated. Staff were also challenged by delivering the accelerated programs, especially when teaching all year and involved with research and administrative tasks at the same time.

Adapting content and pedagogy

The themes of academic rigour (academic rigour defined as a learning processes requiring high order thinking and the performance of meeting or exceeding expected outcomes (Crowe, Hyun & Kretovics, 2005)), learning outcomes (Anastasi, 2007; Davies, 2005; Hyun, Kretovics & Crowe, 2006; Wlodkowski, 2003) and best practice (Kops, 2009) intertwined in the literature with similar findings. In a study by Crowe, Hyun & Kretovics (2005) it was found that academic rigour and learning outcomes need not be compromised by accelerated learning programs and assessments and reading requirements need to be adjusted to take into account the mode of delivery. This study also found that consultation with experienced faculty members was essential. Kops (2009) presented best practice guidelines to restructure the content and processes in order to fit into reduced time frames. Recommendations were made for experienced teachers with "a good grasp of content and the processes of teaching …" (p.7) to teach accelerated programs, taking an 'outcome-based' rather than 'content delivery' approach. Lee & Horsfall (2010) also found that positive outcomes were possible if adaptions were made for the accelerated learning mode. This was subject to content-adaption as well as other pedagogical approaches. Learning designs such as active learning techniques, assessment timing, sufficient and timely feedback, and clear communication with students about the commitment involved in accelerated courses were advocated. The literature supports the view that quality outcomes (Davies & Pablo, 2005; Swenson, 2003; Wlodkowski, 2003) is connected to best practices (Kops, 2009; Swenson, 2003), assessment practices (Swenson, 2003; Walvoord, 2003), and learning outcomes (Davies & Pablo, 2006). Swenson (2003) examined the effectiveness of accelerated learning programs and found that "student learning is the major test of a program's quality" (p.83) despite the mode of study. In contrast to Swenson (2003), Wlodkowski (2003) notes "the issue of quality in education is a conundrum … with conflicting values, standards and criteria of public and scholar alike" (p.4). Wlodkowski puts forward the barometers of quality, applied to accelerated learning programs, to include student learning, student and teacher attitudes.

Learning and attitudes

The themes of learning and attitudes continue to intertwine with research into the instructional and classroom attributes that are needed for high-quality accelerated programs (Martin & Culver, 2009; Scott, 2003). Teacher characteristics, teaching methods, the classroom environment and evaluation were considered key attributes in a study conducted by Scott (2003). Students determined that for a high-quality learning experience in

accelerated mode of study, the essential teacher characteristics included enthusiasm, good level of knowledge, experience and communication. A variety of engaging and creative teaching and learning strategies were also noted, where depth rather than breadth of learning was preferred to avoid information overload. A classroom environment that was supportive, relaxed and comfortable also contributed as a high quality attribute in this study. The conclusion was that accelerated learning programs were highly beneficial when attention was given to these attributes (Conrad, 1996; Scott, 2003; Wlodkowski, 2003).

Two Australian University Reports (Davies & Pablo, 2006; University of Canberra, 2010), on their accelerated learning programs, drew similar conclusions regarding this mode of study. These studies found that effective accelerated learning programs rely on a coordinated and strategic approach. Additionally, internal, external and organisational factors influence the outcomes of accelerated modes of study and need to be considered (Hyun, Kretovics & Crowe, 2006; Lee & Horsfall, 2010). Specifically, the study conducted by Hyun et al. (2006) highlighted administrative policies that need to limit the number of courses students could undertake at any one time. While findings from studies conducted by Lee & Horsfall (2010) revealed that internal organisational and administrative challenges, as well as management issues, impacted on allocation of classes, student results, course completion and hiring contract teaching staff.

In summary, accelerated programs challenge traditional thinking on the time factor of learning, with obstacles and barriers to be overcome (Husson & Kennedy, 2003). The literature shown here illustrates both overlapping and distinct themes, and numerous tensions in the field. These tensions are grounded in the research that has critiqued substance versus rigour (Crowe, Hyun & Kretovics, 2005; Davies, 2006; Wlodkowski, 2003); workload versus rigour (Lee & Horsfall, 2010; Lutes & Davies, 2012); the conundrum of quality (Wlodkowksi 2003) and assumptions made that the same learning outcomes can be achieved with a modified pedagogical approach (Guertler, 2008; 2010; Kops, 2009; Scott, 2003). It is evident from the literature there is an absence of consistent terminology and a shared conceptual understanding of the accelerated mode of study. The study reported in this paper contributes to the discourse surrounding accelerated learning programs in the tertiary context.

Method

The research design employed in this study was a mixed methods approach with a purpose designed pre and post-test online survey instrument. In addition, pre and post focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews with participants were undertaken with PSTs, academic educators and professional support staff. This approach allowed for *thick description* (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and for the research to be a *situated activity*, locating the observers in the natural setting of WT, in order to interpret the phenomena and experiences of participants (Denzin & Lincoln 2003). The validity of this study was highlighted through the *triangulation* that occurred by using multiple data collection techniques to reinforce the study conclusions (Angrosino, 2007; Davies, 2007).

A pre and post test survey was utilised to gauge base line data and information which allowed a comparative analysis of data collected at the beginning and conclusion of WT. The online survey was accessible on the University's online learning platform *Moodle*. PSTs were invited to respond to an anonymous pre and post survey about their participation WT. The survey instrument included 33 Likert-scale questions and open response questions (Appendix 1). The survey also collected demographic information, course information, patterns of study, delivery mode and WT expectations, learning experiences and invited further comment. There were 208 respondents to the pre-test survey (46% response rate) and 114 respondents

to the post-test survey (26% response rate). To ensure quality and openness of responses, a paired survey design was not appropriate for this study (De Vaus, 2002). The high participation rate in the pre-test was notable, indicating a willingness for participants to share their expectations of WT. However, the post-test response rate was notably reduced and anecdotally, students indicated that the workload at the end of the WT impacted on their capacity to engage with the post-test. It is also possible that students experienced survey overload at this point, due to multiple unit satisfaction surveys occurring at the same time.

The focus group and individual interview sessions were audio digital recorded, transcribed and analysed via multiple readings. A thematic analysis of the open-ended survey response and the focus group transcripts was conducted (Gibson & Brown, 2009; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Some of the themes that emerged from the analysis were common across the groups, while others were particular to the participant's context. Commonalities were identified (Gibson and Brown, 2009) across the groups and by using a systematic process of coding, aggregated themes were revealed within the data. These included the expectations held by the PSTs, the reality of the experiences when compared to their expectations and the personal aspects that informed both the experiences and realities. This hints to the concept of conceived and perceived spaces as highlighted by Lefebvre (1991) and Merrifield and Lefebvre (2000). This notion is worthy of future exploration as it may bring greater clarity to the discourse surround accelerated learning in the tertiary context.

The particular themes for the academic educators were timely preparation and planning; supportive and effective leadership and on-going and rigorous evaluation. While the support staff also highlighted the timely preparation and planning theme, they also discussed the need to be responsive to the administrative challenges of the accelerated learning delivery model. PSTs were focused on individual choices of study pathways afforded to them by the WT.

A total of [10] academic educators and [2] support staff participated in the interviews and focus groups, [6] academic staff and [2] support staff participated in the interviews prior to WT commencing, and [4] academic staff and [2] support staff participated in interviews post-WT. These were conducted in focus groups, individual interviews and paired interviews.

PSTs were purposely excluded from participating in the pre-interview phase of the qualitative data collection so not to compromise them as PSTs in the units not yet studied. There were ethical concerns for the power imbalance between lecturers and continuing students (Dunne, Pryor and Yates, 2005; Ryen, 2002). Conversely, the survey allowed PSTs to comment anonymously about their expectations of the WT learning to come. However in the post-interview phases, a number of PSTs indicated that they would be willing to participate in the one-on-one interviews in the post-test phase. It was believed that this small group [number] were able to provide a representative view of the WT experience and could be used as case studies.

Analysis of Results

Due to the lack of previous data or experience on the type of PSTs who would elect to study in WT, it was important to understand the cohort as a whole (Table 1) and this was achieved by creating demographic profile groups (Denscombe, 2007). Using inductive analysis, categorises and patterns primarily immerged from the data, rather than being imposed on them prior to collection (McMillan and Schumacher, 2006). This included their expectations, realities and personal aspects for studying in WT and the study/work and life drivers that lead to that choice. This would then add greater richness to any comparison of their expectations and experiences of WT. From this base of understanding four areas of

interest emerged; expectations, motivations and delivery mode preference to study in WT in the future. These findings were analysed further by comparing responses from participants who had studied in WT previously (in 2010 or 2011) and those who were undertaking a WT unit for the first time in 2012.

Number of participants (pretest)	208		
Age	Less than 20 (20%)		26 - 30 years (12%)
	21 - 25 years (51%)		31+ years (17%)
Gender	Female (89%)		Male (11%)
Indigenous background	Indigenous (1%)		Non-Indigenous (99%)
Language other than English at home	Yes (4%)		No (96%)
Parents level of university education	Mother (24%)		Both (20%)
	Father (16%)		None (45%)
Paid employment in the last week	Less than 3 hrs (16%)		More than 15 hrs (29%)
	Less than 10 hrs (24%)		Full time (13%)
	Lesson than 15 hrs (19%)		
Number of children	1 (31%)	2 (31%)	3 + (36%)
Hours as primary carer of children	10 hrs (6%)	20 hrs (13%)	30 hrs + (81%)
Access to computer/internet at home	Yes (100%)		No (0%)
Have you studied in winter term before	Yes (58%)		No (42%)
Education course being studied	Undergraduate Primary (57%)		Undergraduate Early Childhood (26%)
	Graduate Entry (Primary) (11%)		Other (8%)
Study load	Full time (90%)		Part time (10%)
Year of study	1st year (16%)		3rd year (30%)
	2nd year (21%)		4th year (33%)
Domestic or International students	Domestic (97%)		International (2%)

Table 1: Demographic data of study participants

Demographic Profile of PSTs

From the demographic data (Table 1), three groups were identified from the demographic information for the purposes of analysis; the *typical* student, the student who was also a *parent* and the student who was *male*. The second group (parent) was of interest as one of the advertised advantages of WT (University of Canberra, 2010) was the flexibility to accommodate care-giving responsibilities. The third group (male) and although they were a minority within the cohort, this group was included to explore if gender was a variable in the data. Each group was given a short description to capture their demographic characteristics, expectations, motivations and experiences.

The "Typical" Student

The profile of the "typical" student is a female aged between 21- 25, who in her 3rd or 4th study year and worked more than 15 hours per week at the time of responding to this survey. She enrolled in two units, is studying full time and has study in WT previously. She is non-Indigenous, has parents who have not studied at university and she has no children. She is studying primary school education and enrolled in the WT units in order to complete her degree sooner. She prefers face-to-face teaching and expected WT to be challenging, rewarding and not easy.

From this description it is interesting to note that almost one third (all female) of the survey group worked more than 15 hours in the week prior to taking the survey and that her primary motivation for undertaking this type of study was to complete her degree sooner. As over 50% of the units offered in WT were final year units this finding aligns with the advertised advantages of WT by the University. It is also interesting to note that even though she has studied in WT before she believes strongly that it will be a challenging, difficult and rewarding experience, and would do it again if she had the opportunity.

Student Who is a Parent

The student who is also a female parent is over 31 years of age with two or more children and is the primary carer. She worked less than 3 hours a week or more than 15 hours at the beginning of WT but adjusted her hours of work downwards by the end of WT. She has studied WT before, prefers blended learning and wants to complete her degree as soon as possible. She expects WT to be challenging, rewarding, not easy and reported that it was more difficult than she expected.

It is interesting to note that a large proportion of the PSTs were primary care givers for their children and their work commitments varied through WT. Again their motivation is to complete their degree sooner and this may be driven by greater economic factors than the typical student. At the conclusion of WT PSTs who were also parents indicated that their experience was more difficult than expected and the data revealed that this was due to a combination of balancing of study, work and caring responsibilities.

Student Who is Male

The student who is male is aged between between 21 – 30 years of age worked less than 3 hours or more than 15 hours the week he responded to the survey but reduced his hours towards the end of WT. He has no children and is studying Primary teaching in a full-time capacity. He has not studied WT before and expects it to be challenging and rewarding. He took on WT to complete his degree sooner and make more efficient use of the calendar year and intends studying in Semester 2. He prefers the face-to-face mode of teaching.
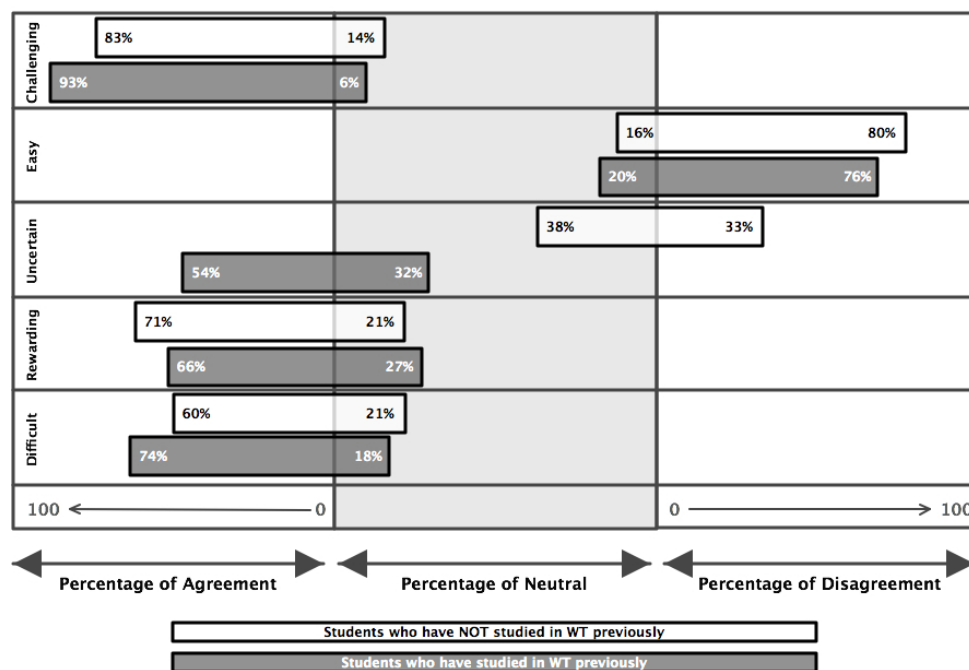
Within the larger group of respondents, 21% of the PSTs were male. His work commitments during WT varied more significantly, with more than half of the male participants reducing their working hours during WT. He wants to both complete his degree sooner and use the calendar year more effectively, but agrees it will be a challenging and rewarding experience. Enrolment in WT unit was open to all PSTs in the education degrees, however the units on offer were categorised as Level 3 or 4 units. This level category indicated that the unit was of an advanced unit and should be undertaken in either the student's third or fourth year of tertiary study. The unit conveners designed the content, learning experience, teaching strategies and assessment items according to these levels. Due to the lack of restriction on enrolment a significant number of survey responders were in Year 1 (11.5%) or 2 (20.2%) of their degrees gaining entry into Level 3 and 4 units. This policy resulted in several unforeseen developments during WT and was captured as part of the student through focus group interviews with academic and administration staff and will be examined in a future paper.

Expectations

In the pre-test, participants were asked to indicate the type of experiences they were expecting from WT 2012. The results indicated that the participant group had strong expectations, with a high percentage of ratings in either the Agree or Disagree ranges (Figure 1). The results showed that the participants believed WT would be a challenging experience, and this brings forward questions of what the participants believe contributed to making studying in WT a challenging experience. Could the indication of a challenging experience relate to the content of the unit, the conceptual thinking or the practical elements of the unit,

or is influenced by the responsibilities outside of the study program from balancing employment and family commitments?

It was also interesting to note that the participants highlighted that the experience, while academically and personally challenging, was expected to be both rewarding and difficult. This was supported by the strong expectation that WT would not be easy. Again this brings into question the influences upon which the participants based this expectation. It may be that participants connected that a rewarding experience is obtained through experiencing challenge, which should be difficult. It is not clear from these results what the participants based their expectations on but it is a question worthy of further investigation.

Note: Not all participants included a response in this section

Figure 1: Expectations of WT 2012

There was also a notable level of responses in the Neutral range, which was not the case in other sections of the survey using the five point Likert scale. This may indicate a notable level of uncertainty and this may be due to a number of factors. In the focus group interviews a number of organisational issues were highlighted. Participants indicated that information prior to the enrolment period in WT was conflicting, unclear and scarce and the timetable was confusing, difficult to manage and clashes arose when PSTs studied across Level 3 and 4 units. It is possible that the participant's expectations were influence by some structural and organisation factors and this confusion could contribute to student's lack of clarity on what to expect in studying in WT.

The qualitative comments supported the quantitative data and indicted that the PSTs expected a mixture of rewarding and challenging experiences in WT. The nature of the comments appeared to be highly dependent on the motivation for studying in WT and the number of units undertaken. The opportunity to study just one unit in isolation was of great value to some participants.

> "I am excited about winter term. My experiences from last year (when I was only doing 1 unit in WT) was that I much prefer to study ONE subject over a SHORT amount of time, than study FOUR subject over a LONG period. It's good to be able to just concentrate on one subject and one assessment and then move onto the rest, rather than having to juggle lots of different assignments and subjects." (Participant 30) (Capitalization of words in text indicated by participant)

Some participants expected WT to be an intense period of learning and would need to alter their usual study patterns and habits.

"I expect it will be intense and that I will have to stay on the ball throughout the term, not do my usual last minute cramming." (Participant 68)

An interesting expectation of the WT period was that it would lead to higher than normal levels of stress and that consequently expectations of assessment standards during such a period should be viewed differently to other study periods.

"I expect that as this is the first time we have ever done 4 subjects in winter that it will be challenging and extremely stressful. I also expect that our convenors and tutors will take this into account when marking." (Participant 161)

This level of uncertainty could indicate a variety of expectations from participants entering into WT and this may have accounted for a significant level of anxiety and frustration voiced by the PSTs to both administration and academic educators as WT progressed. Lack of alignment between what the PSTs expected to experience, based on information disseminated before WT, and what the academic educators were able to delivery considering the preparation time, leadership and their own expertise or lack thereof, may have had an impact on the experience that the PSTs ultimately had in WT.

In order to ascertain the possible factors that informed the PSTs, participants were asked to indicate how similar they believed their experience in a regular semester would be to the WT period (Table 2).

	Studied previously			Not studied previously		
	Similar assessment	Similar learning experiences	Similar combination of f2f and online	Similar assessment	Similar learning experiences	Similar combination of f2f and online
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	47	52	53	43	48	55
Neutral	22	25	24	36	30	24
Disagree	31	23	23	21	22	21

Table 2: Expectations of similar experiences between WT and the previous semester

The results showed that close to half of the participants, regardless of whether they had studied in WT previously, believed that their experiences of assessment and learning in WT would be similar to those in the previous semester. This was a misperception as the structure of WT 2012 was markedly different from previous iterations of WT. Another third indicated a neutrality or uncertainty about these areas. This may point to a lack of differentiation between the delivery modes used in WT and semester units, leading to uncertainty concerning what to expect. This could arise from either a lack of explicit explanation to the PSTs on the differences in delivery or a lack of expertise by the academic educators in adapting units to different delivery modes. This aspect of the study deserves future analysis, as does a more wide-ranging comparison between the pre and posttest expectations.

Motivations

An examination of the motivations for undertaking study in WT yielded clear findings. Regardless of their experience of studying in WT previously, participants indicated that they chose to study in WT for one or more of the following reasons; to make effective use of the calendar year, to start teaching sooner, to spread the study load and complete their degree sooner (Figure 2). The ability to make effective use of the calendar year was not necessarily related to completing the degree sooner, as some participants indicated that the

ability to spread eight units across three periods, rather than two, made it possible for them to study a full time load. Although there were only limited qualitative comments to this section, the benefits to family life, ability to undertake more paid work and ability to complete their degree sooner came to the fore.
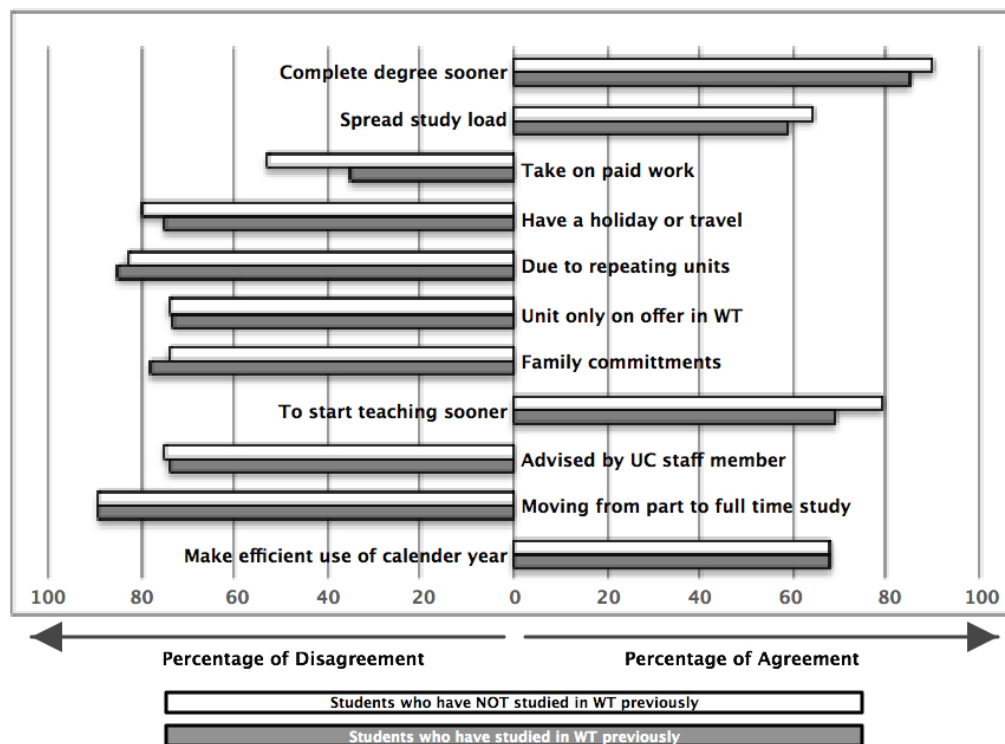

Figure 2: Motivations for studying in WT 2012

The results of this section also challenged some preconceived notions expressed by the academic educators. The participants indicated that family commitments were not a motivating factor, and there was some anecdotal evidence during the semester that studying in WT caused greater financial strain for the PSTs with higher costs of childcare and parental partners taking leave from their paid work in order to care for the children during WT. Similarly it was assumed that PSTs who had failed a unit would take the opportunity to repeat it in WT, however the participants indicated this was not the case and anecdotally staff indicated that PSTs who were generally higher academic performers felt they could cope with the additional challenges of studying in WT. Both of these areas deserve further investigation to gain a more accurate understanding of the complex motivations behind electing to study outside of the traditional course format.

Preferred Delivery Mode

The results relating to the preferred delivery mode for units yielded clear trends as well as and a number of questions (Table 3). It was noted that the preferred delivery mode did not change markedly for any group after experiencing the WT period, indicating that the preferred delivery mode was not altered by the participants' experiences in different types of units.

The preferred delivery mode for almost all groups was face to face, except for those PSTs who were also parents. For this group it appeared that the mode preference was dependent on external contextual factors. Survey comments such as *"I learn better face to face but due to family the flexibility helps from online"* (Participant 185) and *"I find face to*

face tutorials useful but cannot always make it to lectures due to family commitments" (Participant 19) and *"I can complete uni commitments when my children are at school or have gone to bed" (Participant 208)* captured the factors that influenced their preference.

	All Participants	Studied WT previously	Not studied in WT previously	Parents	Male
Face to Face	55%	54%	56%	33%	55%
Blended	40%	41%	37%	68%	23%
Intensive	19%	20%	17%	21%	11%

Table 3: Preferred delivery mode

The preference for face-to-face delivery mode was influenced by a number of factors; PSTs believed it was important to be able to ask questions and discuss the material directly with their lecturer and peers as well as feeling more connected with their studies and the University through face-to-face contact. Flexibility was highlighted and as this is a signature theme of the University, the ability to attend face to face classes and either get support from online material or completing exercises online was a favoured option. The balance of study, work and life commitments featured strongly but this did not negate the inclusion of face to face contact, indeed a combination of online and face to face was the preferred option highlighted in the survey comments.

During the administration of the survey and data analysis it became clear that the participants' understanding of what is meant by blended and intensive modes may have been markedly different. Similarly some PSTs may have experienced units that contained the same material and learning experiences, but just delivered in a shorter time frame. This was due a design requirement that units delivered in WT must be delivered again in Semester 2, and therefore needed to be fundamentally the same as WT. Due to this lack of definition and style of unit delivery the participants' responses could only be considered a guide and further research needs to be undertake to ascertain the parameters that participants use to support their preferences.

It was also clear that blended learning was preferred above intensive mode but this may have been due to familiarity with blended learning through previous units at the University and a lack of experience with intensive learning units. Again the benefits of the ability to balance various aspects of the student's life lead to some student favouring the accelerated learning option, possibly due to external contextual reasons such as learning preference.

> *Face to face allows time to speak with teachers if you have queries. I agree that having online content makes completing uni work at home easier but being able to communicate with peers and staff is good. As I do not have a lot of free time caring for children and working I would rather spend one or two days of condensed uni than spread over weeks. (Participant 161)*

Studying in WT in the future

The offering of units in WT will occur in the foreseeable future at the University, and therefore it was important to understand if both the expectations and experiences of PSTs during the 2012 WT may influence their decision to undertake units in WT in the future. The quantitative data showed a notable level of willingness to undertake WT units in the future (68.8%) across the whole group. A significantly higher proportion in the group of PSTs who were also parents indicated that they would study in WT in the future (84.2%). It could be

deduced that the WT format was viewed more favourably by PSTs with significant caring responsibilities and the alternate timetable options was seen as beneficial considering pressures on time outside of their study.

The qualitative feedback was limited, with not all participants providing feedback, but the comments showed some extremes of experience during WT. Some PSTs found the alternate modes of delivery exciting and beneficial to their entire tertiary learning experience.

> *I LOVED WINTER TERM! More intensive courses should be given. This was highly stimulating and so many friendships were made during the intensive classes. It really added to my over all University experience, I just wish it had happened earlier in my degree! (Participant 39)*

Other PSTs focused on the assessment aspects of WT, with the condensed time period and lack of co-ordination between the units and this appeared to cause personal and academic issues. These issues affected their performance levels not only in WT but in the following semester, which began a week after WT had officially finished. It should also be noted that the practicum component of the courses has also been freed from timetabling constraints, meaning that PSTs negotiate their own practicum dates with their schools to where it fits best within their personal study timetable. This may mean that PSTs can undertake a full time study load in Semester 1, complete three weeks of practicum between Semester 1 and the start of WT, complete WT the week before Semester 2 begins and then undertake a full study load in Semester 2. This would amount to 32 weeks of consecutive study. As the following indicates there were concerning mental health and wellbeing.

> *As my units did not correlate, I completed 10 assessments over 9 weeks. Consequently my mental health has taken a hard hit and I have entered semester two extremely tired …I have had no time to rest on top of prac teaching as well. (Participant 88)*

Another participant commented on the impact of overall results.

> *As a result of Winter Term I am now only studying 2 units this semester. 4 subjects over Winter Term was too many and I wouldn't do it again. As a result my marks were affected negatively. (Participant 98)*

This participant highlighted the hectic nature of assessment.

> *Winter term was challenging as there was a least one assignment due each week. I expected it to be more hectic because I had been told previously that it was an intensive term but this has recently changed. This is not to say that it was easier, I was pretty exhausted afterwards. It was especially challenging that there was 4 assessment pieces in the final week of winter term, which has never been the case in Semester 1. This was alot to ask when we had been studying and submitting assessment with no break and constantly throughout Winter term. (Participant 35)*

These results point to several complex issues that need to be considered in more depth. It is evident from the comments that WT was indeed a challenging and difficult experience. For some it was rewarding but despite the hardships that WT created both personally and academically, two-thirds of the PSTs indicated that the benefits, such as the opportunity to complete their course sooner and use the calendar year more effectively, may have been worth the significant pressures they experienced. This could be an indicator of the financial and career pressures that PSTs are under at present or an expectation that completing a Bachelors degree in less than four years is a significant selling point for the University. This study provided a basis for understanding the experiences, expectations and motivations behind undertaking study in WT 2012. It also possesses many more questions about the development and management, both structurally and educationally, of new initiatives in the tertiary sector.

As noted previously, the increased flexibility in program delivery and accelerated learning programs that are on offer to PSTs has become one of the fastest growing transformations in higher education over recent years. With this transformation the demands on academic educators and professional support staff has become more apparent. By including PSTs, academic educators and support staff in this study these groups have been given the opportunity to share their experiences of accelerated program delivery as participants and consumers at the unit level. A number of themes emerged from the analysis of the data.

Discussion

The study was able to bring staff together as study participants and as researchers, which unintentionally created a collaborative research community within the Faculty. A direct outcome of this was a greater understanding and contextualisation of the experiences and expectations of PSTs, academic educators and professional staff. The triangulation of participant responses revealed a number of themes, these included: stronger
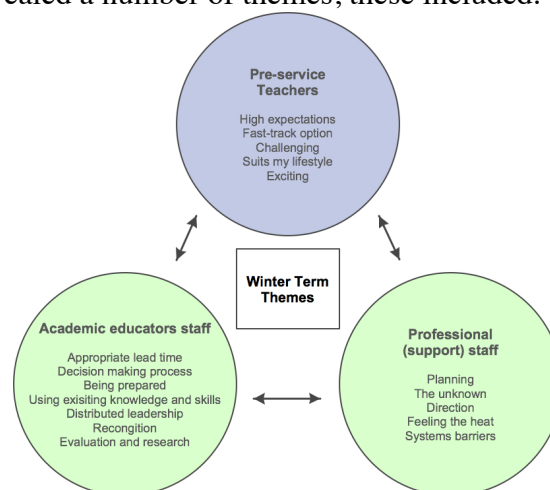

Figure 3: Emerging themes

As shown in Figure 3 the expectations and experiences of WT had connecting perspectives from PST, academic (teaching) staff and professional (support) staff. Nevertheless there were particular perspectives that participant groups held as core beliefs and understandings. There is a tendency in the development of accelerated learning programs to focus or prioritise the needs of only one participant group, rather than viewing program development more holistically. A greater holistic focus on the shared perspectives could improve accelerated learning program outcomes for all involved.

PSTs had high expectations and were aware of the study requirements and expectations from academic staff. At the same time, participants expected "that our convenors and tutors will take this [stress] into account when marking" (Participant 161), there was the perception that due to the intensive delivery mode assessment standards may be softened. They viewed WT as a fast-track option, a *means-to-an-end*, in that they were willing to take the change to overload their study in this period so as to course complete sooner. Many of the PSTs accepted that study in WT would be challenging and if they failed they could repeat the unit in second semester, rather than a year later. PSTs also reported that studying in WT suited their lifestyle it was seen as a way to manage the responsibilities of life, work and their studies. The majority of PSTs felt excited and were keen to engage in WT as something different, that they had not experienced before.

Many of the academic staff reported the need for appropriate lead in time to prepare for the WT. They believed it was important that academic educators and professional staff were made more aware of new program initiatives sooner consequently allowing appropriate preparation time and pre-empt possible barriers such as staffing, timetabling and resourcing. They suggested that there should be greater inclusion of staff in the decision making process, in particular program design. The academic staff teaching in WT viewed being prepared sooner ensured progress to a cycle of responding rather than reacting to issues, conversely being aware of the drivers and possible barriers to program delivery was seen as important. They also believed that using existing knowledge and skills of academic educators was the key to success of WT. Utilising the existing strengths and talents of people within the faculty, particularly in developing and designing programs was seen as positive, however they saw a need to engage in training and development program if there are gaps in the skills set and knowledge base. Another important factor highlighted by the academic staff was the concept of distributed leadership. They believed that academic educators should be given more opportunity to lead and manage the process collectively, rather than top-down approach. A number of academic educators suggested that there was a need for more recognition of staff working in research teams alongside their teaching responsibilities in WT, and that recognition could be through formal and informal processes. The majority of academic staff teaching in WT were involved in evaluation and research. Therefore, they engaged in research led teaching; evaluated new programs and initiatives through a formalised research project to gather data to inform the teaching in WT the following year.

Many of the professional support staff believed that greater planning was required. Administration support for units was strained and on reflection required more planning and resources than originally anticipated. Staff were unsure of what to expect as they had not experienced the WT delivery prior, there was a sense of the unknown. The need for more direction was discussed within the professional staff, they believed they did not have a full grasp of the program. The professional staff reported that they had to deal with more anxious, stressed and irritated PSTs than usual. Many times they believed they were feeling the heat, of PSTs that did not have a clear understanding of the expectations and demands of studying in the WT. The professional support staff also discussed some of the systems barriers they experienced. These systemic issues were identified as greater ICT support, timetabling, room allocation, staffing and communication with academic educators and PSTs.

Administration of these programs presented a number of challenges for professional support staff and systems. As courses and units are delivered intensively the stresses and pressures experienced by PSTs and academic educators are equally intensified. Professional support staff are often the individuals who are confronted with the tensions surrounding these teaching periods. Some professional support staff lack the appropriate skills, knowledge or training required to deal with these demands and this in turn places those individuals under stress and pressure. Those courses offered in the accelerated study format require detailed collaborative planning, modified pedagogy and adequate resourcing. Those responsible for development and management of these courses need to be mindful of the assumptions made by PSTs and staff about this delivery format. For example, PSTs believing they cannot be failed because for the delivery mode and that they will be given extra learning support from academic educators to get them through is an assumption that impacted on the support staff. Additionally, academic educators belief that teaching intensively is less demanding than teaching in a standard delivery mode of a semester also created concerns.

The findings from this research project have shown the benefits and challenges of alternate types of course and unit delivery. An unintended outcome of this project was the realisation of how important it is for the participants to be provided the opportunity to have input and take responsibility for their experiences which in turn enriched the overall learning

outcomes of PSTs. The benefits for academic educators are similar. As participants were able to reflect upon their teaching approaches this allowed them to enhance and develop future teaching practices, working in teams more effectively and developing professionally.

Conclusion

The findings of this study correlate with the research literature that accelerated learning opportunities for PSTs in tertiary education have taken a foot hold in many courses across Australia. It seems a *Pandora's Box* has been opened and its impact has begun to be understood through studies such as this one. Even though these opportunities to study outside the standard semesters are not compulsory they are viewed by many in the tertiary education sector as providing PSTs with greater flexibility and control of their courses. The dominant discourse that prevails is one of shortening the length of the degree by taking more units of study in a year or lessening the study load by spreading study across three or four teaching periods in a year. Additionally, some courses allow mid-year entry, which places greater demands on the student to accelerate study to catch up with course offerings.

What was once seen as a method for those PSTs needing to repeat units of study due to failure is now seen as a marketing tool to attract more PSTs to courses in universities that are now in the open market. The accelerated course completion promise is not always attainable for many PSTs as the impact of this approach can be both positive and negative for the individual. Studying in this mode can be viewed by PSTs as beneficial and worthwhile. Conversely for those PSTs that tend to struggle with the demands of studying in a standard semester delivery pattern faced greater challenges in the condensed delivery format of WT, for many they fail a unit of study and then required to study it again at a later date. Universities need to be mindful of the support needs of these PSTs and the impact this has on long term planning required for successful accelerated course completion programs now and into the future.

Implications and future directions

There are many possibilities, challenges and directions in supporting PSTs to course complete sooner. These include attracting more PSTs to courses, having the human capital to manage the pressures of accelerated course delivery and the reconfiguration of course offerings that meet the demand from the market. It is necessary to view the possible future considerations and directions from a number of levels.

Unit level

This study has shown those units that are offered intensively required particular reconfiguration to meet the needs of those PSTs engaged in accelerated learning. Units must maintain rigour, academic standards and relevance for PSTs regardless of delivery method. Those managing and teaching in these units need more support in the development of the unit content and pedagogy. They require an understanding of how PSTs engage with content particularly when it delivered intensively. The pedagogy in these units needs to be flexible, responsive and engaging for PSTs. The use of online learning is a key tool in achieving quality learning in these units. The academic educators at the unit level requires adequate

time to reflect on their delivery and management of the unit as a means to ensure improved unit satisfaction and learning outcomes.

Program/Course Level

At a program level it is necessary that planning for accelerated course completion pathways be reviewed in light of market demands and overall student experience and standards. Performing evaluative research alongside course delivery is essential in achieving quality learning experiences for PSTs. Staff that are teaching in these programs need to be given the opportunity to participate in the development and design of the overall program. Professional support staff also need to be part of the input process in the development and implementation of these programs.

Faculty Level

At the faculty level there needs to be reviews of staff workload and wellbeing in these programs. There should be a planned and co-ordinated approach to professional development and training for the staff involved in these programs. It is important for staff to feel that they are equipped to teach effectively in this mode and that they are able to balance teaching and research demands outside of WT. At this level management of professional support staff are key to the success of the delivery of these programs in this mode. They need to be provided with good leadership and direction.

University Level

At the overall university level a number of systems and policy implications require attention. These include staffing, training, assessment, timetabling, resource management ICT support and quality control. The university needs to have clear cycles of review of these programs to ascertain viability, effectiveness and market demand.

The findings from this study can be used to inform teaching approaches, policy and procedures, timetabling principles and resourcing requirements that will ensure quality learning experiences and outcomes as well as sustainable staffing practices. The study has shown with a clear and shared understanding of the drivers and barriers of accelerated course completion from the outset, to start with the end in mind will increase the success and sustainability of these programs and at the same time ensures quality learning experiences for our PSTs.

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Appendix 1: Example Survey Questions and Scales

Demographic information		
Age	Language other than English	Number of children
Gender	Parents university level	Primary carer responsibility in hours
Indigenous background	Paid work hours in the last week	Computer access at home
Course information		
Course type	Domestic or International student	Planning to study in Semester 2
Study pattern	Studied in WT before	Number of units being studied
Year of degree	First time studying in WT	Name of units being studied
Reasons for studying in WT (four point Likert scale – Strongly agree to Strongly disagree) *		
I have chosen to study in winter term …	… to complete my degree sooner? … to spread my study load across the academic year? … so that I can take on more paid work? … so I can have a holiday and travel? … because I am repeating a unit(s)? … because this unit is only on offer at this time?	… because of family commitments? … so I can start working as a teacher sooner? … because a UC member of staff member advised me to do so? … to move from part time to full time study? … to make more efficient use of the calendar year?
Delivery mode in WT (four point scale – no, to a small degree, to a larger degree, yes) *		
Did the timetabling of the unit influence the selection of unit that you studied? Please explain your answer? (open response) *Scale: no, to a small degree, to a larger degree, yes*	Generally, what type of delivery mode do you prefer? Please explain why you prefer this option? (open response) *Options:* • *Standard face-to-face delivery each week* • *Standard blended delivery including face-to-face and online experiences* • *Completely online delivery* • *Intensive delivery e.g. delivery in a condensed timetable*	
Expectations of WT (five point Likert scale – Strongly agree to Strongly disagree) *		
I expect winter term to be challenging I expect winter term to be easy I am uncertain about what to expect from winter term I expect winter term to be rewarding I expect winter term to be difficult	I expect the assessment in winter term to be a similar experience to Semester 1 I expect the learning experience to be similar to Semester 1 I expect the combination of online and face-to-face learning to be similar to Semester 1 Do you have any other comments about your expectations of winter term? (open response)	

* *Note: The same questions were asked in the pre and posttest, although past tense was used in the posttest*