



Block Teaching

Introduction

The standard approach to the delivery of a full-time course of study at Heriot-Watt University comprises 14 weeks of teaching, learning and assessment, with students studying for 4 courses at any one time. Teaching activities are uniformly spread throughout the first 12 weeks (except Consolidation Week in Week 6), typically with 3 or 4 hours of staff/student contact per week. There is a 2-week Assessment and Exam Diet in Weeks 13 and 14 in each semester. This approach is defined in this policy as “conventional teaching” or “conventional learning”.

Block Teaching is an immersive approach to learning and teaching whereby lectures, tutorials and other forms of teaching are provided in an intensive block, sometimes as short as 1 week, and student learning is compressed, typically with students studying only one course at a time.

Categories of Block Teaching

In this policy, Block Teaching refers to any teaching arrangement where the teaching is compressed into a period of 6 weeks or less. This policy differentiates between two forms of block teaching:

Category 1: A ‘true’ block teaching model: the course has been designed specifically for block delivery in terms of the curriculum teaching, learning and assessment, reflecting established, evidence-based pedagogies and appropriate to the student profile. Approval by the University Studies Committees as part of the academic approval of a new programme.

Typically, this format has been used for postgraduate taught programmes and undergraduate Graduate Apprenticeship programmes where students are already in employment. The intensive format also facilitates interdisciplinary projects or industry-based projects.

Category 2: ‘Conversion’ of an on-campus delivery model, adapted for another environment (in-company training programmes; a partnership arrangement). Approval by the University Studies Committee is required for all “conversion” types of block teaching.

The second category applies to those cases where a course has been designed for delivery by conventional methods but, for particular reasons, is being delivered as a block to students. This approach may be introduced as a temporary measure; for example, where campus-based staff are travelling to deliver teaching on a partnership programme during the establishment phase of the partnership.

The “conversion approach” requires considerable redesign; a compression of the standard delivery model (“lift and shift”) into a short time frame will result, as demonstrated by student feedback, in a poor experience for students: insufficient time to consolidate learning; fatigue for both staff and students; lack of access to ongoing support; little opportunity for formative feedback.

Following discussion at the then Quality and Standards Committee (the University Committee for Quality and Standards from 1 August 2017), it was agreed that the University should have a formal policy to cover courses where the conventional mode of delivery had been adapted for block teaching to ensure that students receive an appropriate learning and teaching experience, and that the University has proper oversight of the methods of teaching.

The following policy is designed to apply to Category 2 types of block teaching, namely where block teaching has been introduced to replace a “conventional” on-campus format for primarily practical purposes¹.

In addition to the policy itself, a “guidelines” section has been included.

Policy Statement

Policy

1. Any course to be delivered as a block (both Category 1 and Category 2) must be approved by the University Studies Committee following approval by the School Studies Committee. The case to the University Studies Committee should explain:
 - i. why the block approach is being proposed;
 - ii. how the course has been designed to allow the students to learn and to succeed using this approach, including periods of study before and after the block of teaching;
 - iii. the support that will be provided if staff are not on location for the full semester, including the use of the VLE;
 - iv. the nature and timing of the assessment activities.
2. Courses delivered by conventional methods which are intended to be delivered at another location (eg a partner institution) or indeed at the same campus (eg Graduate Apprenticeship provision) by block methods must be approved by the University Studies Committee and the differences in the course design must be explained and justified. The proposal must address the issues in point 1.
3. Where block teaching is adopted for only part of the programme, then the blocks should, wherever possible, be at the start of the semester so that students have time to contact staff before any end of semester assessment.
4. If examination forms part of the assessment method on a block delivery course, then the exam must be held at the end of the semester in the scheduled Assessment and Examinations Diet, even if the teaching activities are delivered as shorter blocks and conclude earlier in the semester. Any changes in assessment arrangements related to block delivery require approval from the School Studies Committee.

In cases where block teaching has to be used as an emergency measure, for example, to cover for staff illness or as a temporary measure, for example, in the initial phases of a partnership, approval of the University Studies Committee is not required; however, the Chair of the University Studies Committee should be informed. Approval by the School Studies Committee is required for emergency and temporary uses of block teaching. In either case, Schools should ensure that students are properly supported, as outlined in the guidelines below.

Guidelines for Course Design

These guidelines apply when courses with standard approaches to teaching are going to be delivered additionally as a block or are being redesigned permanently to a block format, ie the Category 2 “conversion” model of block teaching. Typically, there will be a block of time for teaching followed by a block of time for independent student learning. The Learning and Teaching Academy and Learning and Teaching Enhancement Services can advise and support Schools in offering block teaching to ensure that students are provided with an appropriate learning experience.

1. It is recommended that formal teaching should not normally exceed 6 hours in any one day and should not normally exceed 25 hours in any one 5-day period. Proposals to exceed this recommended minimum should be considered by the University Studies Committee.

¹ For Category 1 cases, the “true” block teaching model, where a course has been designed and developed specifically around this method of delivery for pedagogic reasons and reflects differences in the profile and needs of students, proposals still require approval of the University Studies Committees. Category 1 proposals should address the four areas (i-iv) in bullet point 1 of the Policy.

2. Formal teaching periods should include specific sessions for students to consolidate their learning and ask questions and to receive formative feedback.
3. No member of staff should deliver more than 25 hours as one block of teaching in any one 5-day period.
4. Students should have a member of staff available, particularly during the period immediately following the teaching block, who is able to answer to answer academic and generic questions related to the course during the independent study period. Email contact is not sufficient.
5. Course design must be structured in such a way as to allow students to complete 150 notional hours of learning associated with each course.
6. There should be structured learning before the teaching block so that students are prepared for the intensive teaching and structured learning activities after the teaching block where students can consolidate their learning.
7. The block teaching sessions should include problem-based learning sessions where students have an opportunity to reflect on their learning.
8. As per the University requirements for all courses, block teaching courses should also incorporate the following:
 - Formative assessment during the course
 - Informative feedback during the course
 - Provision of learning support during the assessment period
 - Skills development
 - Minimum presence on Canvas ([see VLE Baseline](#))

In addition to the requirements under point 1 of the Policy, the proposal made to the University Studies Committee must address the above eight points, so that it is clear how the “150 notional hours of learning” for each course are accommodated and how the proposal meets the specified guidelines.

If the block teaching proposal requires a staff member to travel to deliver the taught part of a course, the case being made to the University Studies Committee must provide specific details of how support is provided locally to address points 4 and 6.

Approved by: Quality & Standards Committee, June 2012; Senate Business Committee, July 2012; revised for factual accuracy, May 2019.
Revised version: Learning and Teaching Academic Operations Committee, 22 January 2025.