Reimagining the education system: Victoria University

How a leading Australian university restructured learning to boost grades and retain students.

Company

Victoria University (VU) is a dual-sector tertiary institution that provides higher education and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) courses to 40,000 students. The University operates various metropolitan and regional campuses which are scattered throughout the state of Victoria in Australia. As a dual-sector University, VU offers students an easy pathway from vocational education to higher education. With a history dating back 1916, VU is ranked in the top two per cent of universities worldwide by Times Higher Education.

AT A GLANCE

Client: Victoria University
Students: 40,000
Employees: 1,950
Industry: Higher Education

Quick Facts:

- Average pass rates increased to 84%
- Average pass rates for non-English speaking backgrounds increased 14%
- Average pass rates for Indigenous Australians increased 19%
- An Australian first, VU can now return grades in two days
- Students who access Brightspace via the app or desktop seven or more times in the first week have a 97 per cent probability of passing a unit
The Challenge

VU aims to reshape the Australian tertiary system by promoting the importance of active, collaborative, engaged and flexible education for all. To deliver education the VU way—its ethos—the University conducted its largest transformation in history, completely reforming the teaching and learning experience.

The University did this by scrapping the traditional semester—whereby students learn four units over two 13-week semesters—to make way for a ‘Block Model’ that teaches students in short bursts, allowing them to focus on one unit over four weeks before moving onto the next. The format was initially introduced to first-year students, however unprecedented buy-in at all levels saw VU accelerate its deployment to every year group.

VU’s transformation makes it the first Australian university to introduce the Block Model.

But it’s one thing to introduce a new model, and another to ensure it adds value to the student experience. When VU mapped its ambitious goals, it recognised it would take more than just some crafty timetabling to make the Block Model work. The University recognised it would not only need to redevelop all the curriculum, but deliver its new-look units as part of a personalised package wrapped into digital services to promote flexible learning.

Having first introduced the D2L Brightspace learning management system (LMS) in 2014, VU already had the foundation on which to build its new model for higher education—it just needed to be fit-for-new-purpose. The University therefore set out to equip students for the changing world of work; one in which graduates are expected to have practical, real-world applicable skills and the ability to manage the pressures of working environments.
Importantly, the Brightspace platform fostered a digital culture in what is historically a face-to-face university. Whereas its former LMS served mostly as a resource pool, students and educators are now proactively engaged with the University and each other through Brightspace. From an operational perspective, Brightspace has enabled VU to automate high volumes of course development and administration work, both simplifying and accelerating the delivery of services.

Once VU established its Block Model transition strategy, it only made sense to extend its use of the Brightspace platform to support the new curricula.

It did this by pairing Learning Designers with Academics to leverage the comprehensive capabilities offered by the Brightspace platform to craft its new units from the ground-up. VU Learning Designers are digital learning experts who assist academics in the development of curricula by providing advice on pedagogy in terms of delivery strategies, and consulting on blended learning trends and how to convert those into outcomes for learners.
“The abundance of tools [Brightspace] provides allowed us to establish a fully-integrated blended learning culture built on customised courses and more meaningful engagements at all touch points.”

Mike Sturmey, Associate Director of Digital Learning Environments, Victoria University

The Results

Michael Sturmey, Associate Director of Digital Learning Environments at VU, said the move to the sequential Block Model of learning could not have been achieved without the Brightspace platform and its comprehensive automation, flexibility and mobile functionality.

“Although VU is traditionally a face-to-face institute, Brightspace turned technology into an integrated component of the learning experience for students, educators and staff. The abundance of tools it provides allowed us to establish a fully-integrated blended learning culture built on customised courses and more meaningful engagements at all touch points.”

“Building the curricula for its Block Model on the Brightspace platform has delivered significant results for VU. According to data collected and analysed by the University, average pass rates increased to 84 per cent within a single semester, reflecting an eight per cent increase under the previous model.

The impact is especially profound among students from non-English speaking backgrounds and Indigenous Australians—these jumped 14 and 19 per cent, respectively, as a result of a system that allows those students to focus on completing one subject rather than inundating them at the risk of becoming yet another attrition metric.

Using automation of the gradebook and integration of the Brightspace platform with other systems, the University has been able to return grades to students in just two days of their final assessment. According to VU, this is an Australian first, and possibly world first. Additionally, students can gauge exactly how they are progressing every four weeks and make decisions around their study based on this almost immediate feedback.”
This is the consequences of a comprehensive curricula delivered in a way that makes sense for each individual learner. Using Brightspace, VU empowered its educators and learning designers with:

- Automation of site creation with copied content from dedicated unit master spaces;
- Support for checklists, rubrics, attendance data, and grades;
- Automatic grades transfer to the student management system; and
- Analytics dashboards to inform unit review.

“Working with D2L has provided a powerful core on which we have fostered a blended learning environment with every block based on collaborative, active learning beyond the teacher-led vacuum model that has historically dominated higher education,” said Sturmey.

In addition to bringing blended learning to VU, the Brightspace platform enabled VU to consolidate a multitude of student services into a single application—the Victoria University App. The app delivers the full experience that Brightspace has enabled, with timetables, maps and a feedback system, giving students a ‘one stop shop’ for all their university needs whether they are on campus or learning remotely. In its first month, the app was downloaded more than 10,000 times and received substantial positive ratings.

As well as keeping students happy, VU identified a direct correlation between engagement with the Brightspace platform and student results; by analysing data extracted by Brightspace’s Data Hub feature, VU found that students who access Brightspace via the app or desktop seven or more times in the first week have a 97 per cent probability of passing a unit. This number diminishes for less frequent users, with those who only use Brightspace once per week having only a 53 per cent chance of passing.

“Victoria University’s shift to Block Model learning reflects the changing demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Today’s economy requires dynamic, accessible education where the focus is on adaptable learning; to remain relevant, access to continued education is essential and approaches to education must be adapted to reach more learners and support their studies to completion. With Brightspace providing a comprehensive and flexible foundation for its shift to a Block Model of teaching, Victoria University has provided its students with a new way to access education, allowing for highly-engaged learning experiences supporting more learners to succeed.”

Mark Yaxley, Director–Australia & New Zealand, D2L
About D2L

D2L is the software leader that makes learning experiences better. The company’s cloud-based platform is easy to use, flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, organisations can personalise the experience for every learner to deliver real results. The company is a world leader in learning analytics: Its platform predicts learner performance so that organisations can take action in real time to keep learners on track. Brightspace is used by learners in higher education, schools, and the enterprise sector, including the Fortune 1000. D2L has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore.

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