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A Move to Higher Module Credit Weighting to Enhance Student Engagement

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A move to higher module credit weighting to enhance student engagement

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Abstract

Modularisation has supported greater flexibility in curriculum pathways. However, there has been little guidance to staff on the module credit weighting that is optimum to allow for this flexibility without compromising student engagement. Student engagement can include, for example, students’ time and effort (workload), their participation, interest in the subject and their deeper learning. The UCD School of History, with a standard module credit weighting of five ECTS credits, set out to move to 10 credit modules and to redesign for the enhancement of student engagement in their final year. Using a mixed-method approach, over a three-year period student and staff views and experiences of the redesign were explored (n=187 module offerings). The themes identified are explored through the lens of Kahu’s (2013) student engagement framework, with evidence of increased engagement of students and staff satisfaction with the design change.

Key words
ECTS credits; student engagement framework; history; assessment load; student effort; module size.
**Introduction**

The introduction of modularisation in higher education has created great flexibility in learning pathways for students and has allowed institutions to provide opportunities for students to engage in a selection of modules of their choice. It can support freedom of movement across institutions, both nationally and internationally. However, there has been little guidance to staff on the module credit weighting (size) that is optimum to allow for this flexibility without compromising student engagement. Student engagement can include, for example, students' time and effort (workload), their participation, interest in the subject and their deeper learning (Kahu, 2013).

Student workload, a key aspect of student engagement, can be measured by 'student effort hours'. In Europe, the Bologna modularisation process and its associated advice on 'student effort hours' has been a useful guidance for programme teams to give some consistency and some considered thought to the workload for students (including assessment load). However modularisation, in some contexts, has resulted in an unwanted increase in assessment load (Hornby & Laing, 2003; Boud, 2007; Price et al., 2011). Modularisation has been associated with a 'crowded curriculum' (Harvey, Hayes & O'Rourke, 2012) and students 'struggling and juggling' (Tomas & Jessop, 2018). In their 2018 contribution, Tomas and Jessop highlighted that assessment load is a systemic and structural problem, partly due to the segmented structure of the curriculum. The Irish Department of Education and Skills (2011) pointed out that while modularisation has given great flexibility, it has had an unintended consequence: 'Some undergraduate programmes have become fragmented and a course might consist of 12 separate five-credit modules. Such programmes are regarded by students as over-taught and over-assessed.' (p57). In addition, assessment load can impact on
students’ engagement in parallel modules, as staff compete for this engagement, it can create what has been described as an ‘assessment arms race’ for staff (Harland et al., 2015).

Modularisation, therefore, has created more flexible pathways, in particular as there has been more option modules in interdisciplinary and multiple subject degrees. However, one outcome has been the development of small segments or modules to facilitate this. The authors were interested to explore what impact this and other variables had on student engagement.

**Curriculum structure and student effort hours**

In support of student mobility, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), initiated in the 1990s, attempted to give some equivalence across Europe to the structure and amount of learning for units of study. In relation to module size, the starting point was the length of these credits in a semester. These credits can be broken down differently but they should combine to a similar overarching workload:

Workload is an estimation of the time the individual typically needs to complete all learning activities such as lectures, seminars, projects, practical work, work placements and individual study required to achieve the defined learning outcomes in formal learning environments…. one credit corresponds to **25 to 30 hours of work** (European Union, 2015, p10).

In the UK a similar approach is used, titled the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS), but the credit weighting in this case is that one credit represents 10 notional hours of learning (QAA, 2009). Smoluk (2015) highlights that, as long the learning outcomes are comparable, 360 credits (CAT) equates to 180 ECTS credits. However, credit weighting is
only part of the picture as the credit ‘level’ gives an important indicator of the relative complexity and/or depth of learning (QAA, 2009). In Ireland, the ECT system was useful in developing some consistency and transparency of student effort hours; however, there was no standard approach across institutions to determine how the curriculum was structured. For example, some Irish institutions decided to use units of five ECTS credits as their standard module size, whereas other institutions adopted units of six or larger. Similarly, Galvez-Bravo (2016) notes that in the UK typically, but not always, undergraduate modules are ten or 20 CAT credits, with often one piece of assessment per ten credits.

Credit weighting formulas such as these set out some equivalence in student effort hours. However, this does not always translate to the equity of staff and student effort in practice. In addition, credit weighting may have an impact on student engagement and their learning experience.

**Student engagement and learning experience**

Engagement is a complex term. In 2013, Kahu synthesised the literature in this area to present a holistic model which is useful in framing the context, interventions and findings of the current paper. Kahu first presents the *influences* on engagement. Those relevant to this study are structural (i.e. curriculum structure and assessment) and psychosocial influences (i.e. staff support, workload, relationships, identity and student motivation). At the centre of Kahu’s model is student engagement with dimensions related to students’ *affect* (enthusiasm, interest and belonging), their *cognition* (deep learning and self-regulation) and their *behaviour* (time and effort, interaction and participation). Kahu also points out that there are *proximal consequences* of student engagement, such as, student satisfaction.
In a recent case study of one student’s experience of assessment load, this structural influence was associated with disengagement from class time (affect: behaviour, Kahu, 2013). She, and her fellow students, were ‘completely over-assessed to the point where people weren’t actually going to classes... in the last three weeks in one of my lectures six people showed up consistently [out of 50]’ (National Forum, 2019). In 2007, Napier University in Scotland moved their curriculum structure from 15 to 20 credit (10 ECTS credit) modules across the institution in order to offer students the opportunity to study and develop their understanding in greater depth. This supports Kahu’s (2013) cognition concept of student engagement, in particular deep learning. In Napier University’s move to larger modules, staff not only had to consider increasing the module’s size but also increasing its active, collaborative teaching and learning approaches and the opportunities for formative assessment. Kahu describes these as some of the distal consequences of student engagement (2013).

**Student workload and assessment**

Workload is described as a psychosocial influence in Kahu’s model. One simple, but not comprehensive, measure of student workload (influence on engagement), is the number of summative assessments. This is a crude but somewhat useful measure for comparison purposes. This type of information is available to the students usually in advance of the learning in module descriptors and handbooks. A national profile of assessment in Irish higher education (National Forum, 2016) demonstrated that, on average, two typical five ECT credit modules had almost double the number of assessments (n=5.2) as a typical 10 ECT credit module (n=2.8). In principle, modules of equal credit weighting should be equivalent in their workload. Therefore smaller module size, including the assessment load, should be proportionally smaller. This does not seem to be the case.
Similar to the Irish context, as early as 1995, Brown and Saunders noted that modularisation in the UK was also increasing assessment load, with full-time students assessed between 20 and 30 times in any one year. The recent UK study by Tomas and Jessop (2018) also highlight this tendency towards overassessment. Research in other countries also supports this observation, such as the ‘assessment arms race’ in higher education in New Zealand (Harland et al., 2015).

In a 2007 post-modularisation survey of 197 academic staff in the Dublin Institute of Technology, 62.4% of respondents commented that they had changed their approach to assessment. However, 44 % perceived a negative impact on assessment (Harvey et al., 2012); for example, it was noted that ‘basically, we are over-assessing and over-burdening our students over shorter periods of time’ (p47). However, the number of assessments does not necessary equate to the level of effort required from the students. For example, one PhD does not equate with one small weekly laboratory report, as the level and quality required can also impact on assessment load. There is a need to further investigate the design and implementation of module size on students’ engagement – for example, students’ time and effort (workload), their participation, interest in the subject and their deeper learning (Kahu, 2013). This study explores how one discipline in one institutional context evaluated their move from five to ten ECTS credit modules.

The Research Context

Institutional and discipline context

University College Dublin (UCD) in the mid 2000s modularised its full undergraduate and postgraduate curricula. At that time there was a decision to use five ECTS as its typical module size. Alongside this change, the institution also supported the practice of continuous
assessment in addition to an end-of-semester assessment (often an examination). Over the last
decade, there has been a growing recognition that, for a full-time student in one semester, six
five-credit parallel modules has led to assessment overload.

Staff in the UCD School of History had a desire to reduce the assessment load of full-time
students experiencing six five-credit modules in one semester. In addition they wanted to
increase students’ engagement with history as a subject – both in terms of depth and
progression. Staff wanted to create some space for students to have a different experience in
class: for example, to include small group teaching; to have more interaction in class; to
enhance staff and students engagement; and to increase students research skills. Therefore,
the UCD School of History, with research ethics approval from the institution, implemented
a two-year pilot project in final year (year 3) of the degree programme which involved the
delivery of 10-credit option modules in place of the five-credit option modules. The School
set up a group to support the staff training to redesign and support the implementation of the
modules.

\textit{The module design process}

Extensive staff training and planning included workshops on module design, assessment
strategies and new teaching methods. The learning outcomes across all module include those
related to the subject of history, such as:

\begin{itemize}
  \item to understand the historiography;
  \item to present an argument based on understanding of primary sources;
  \item to identify bias in historical argument;
  \item to analyse key historical problems and questions using a variety of sources.
\end{itemize}
The new modules used these and the additional outcomes:

- to design and manage a research project;
- to think critically and creatively about research;
- to give oral presentations and to work in a team.

To meet the basic requirement of 25 credits in history for a joint major degree, students were required to take one five-credit module as a core historiography module, while also choosing two 10-credit modules (from a list of 20) from the options available. Under that basic structure, the following was the original and new design of the modules (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Modules – Original and New Designs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Original</th>
<th>New</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Module size</td>
<td>5 ECTS</td>
<td>10 ECTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of modules:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Semester 1</td>
<td>4 x 5</td>
<td>2 x 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Semester 2</td>
<td>4 x 5</td>
<td>2 x 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student number</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>&lt;17 students**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly structure (x 12 weeks)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 hour Lecture</td>
<td>1 hour Lecture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 hour seminar</td>
<td>2 hour tutorial (small group work)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback approaches</td>
<td>Written feedback on assignment</td>
<td>In-class assessment Written and oral feedback on assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment approaches</td>
<td>Attendance (10%)</td>
<td>Participation (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-semester essay (30%)</td>
<td>Coursework x 2 (40%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examination (60%)</td>
<td>Research project/paper (40%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of assessments = 3*</td>
<td>Total number of assessments = 4*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff per module</td>
<td>One module co-ordinator</td>
<td>One module co-ordinator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*There was a reduction of the assessment amount from 12 assessment components (4 x 5 credits modules x 3 assessments) to 8 (2 x 10 credit modules x 4 assessments) for the same ECTS.

** There were fewer module options, staff taught an additional module, however student numbers were smaller in each module.

The end-of-semester research paper was designed to test the depth of the student’s mastery of the subject by showing that they were able to work critically with primary sources and
modern scholarship. This was performed in different ways but built on work done throughout the semester. For example, for some modules part of the continuous assessment grade was given for the research plan or bibliography.

**Methodology**

**Research questions.**

The aim of the study was to examine staff and student experiences and perceptions of the modules. In particular it aimed to:

1. Explore the extent to which students and staff were satisfied\(^1\) with the design of the 10 as compared to the five credits modules; and

2. Evaluate the benefits and challenges of the 10 credit module design in relation to (a) perceived workload and (b) student engagement

**Sample and research methods**

The study adopted a mixed-methods case-study approach, with the school as the case. A concurrent triangulation design (Creswell et al., 2003) was developed, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques from students and staff. The following three data sources were used.

1) **Routine student feedback on module data (Student feedback data 1 (S1))**

Permission was provided by the head of school to access routine quantitative student module feedback (core questions from the institutional system) for all modules delivered over a three-year period. It was expected that the data available from year 1 of the pilot would provide a

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\(^1\) ‘Satisfied’ is defined as to the cumulative feedback on the multiple student feedback approaches and staff interview questions
comparison as the 10 credit modules were introduced in the following two years. The use of routine aggregate data allowed for the examination of feedback on five (n=98) and 10 credit modules (n=89) and every member of the academic staff of the school consented to the use of this routine quantitative data (See Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Descriptive data for module offerings (using core institutional questions)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Year</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Level** 2</th>
<th>Level** 3</th>
<th>5 Credit</th>
<th>10 Credit</th>
<th>Total Modules</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project year 1</td>
<td>3672</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>28.9%, n = 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project year 2</td>
<td>3088</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>34.2%, n = 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project year 3*</td>
<td>2816</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>36.9%, n = 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>9,576</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>98</strong></td>
<td><strong>89</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong>, n=187</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Semester 1 data only available. **Level is a standard of learning and nearly, but not always, equates to the academic year, i.e. level 3 = 3rd year, which may have some level 2 modules. ***Number registered on the module

These questions were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement.

2) **Student feedback on 10-credit module only (specific open-ended questions)** (Student feedback data 2 (S2))

In addition to the routine data mentioned above, staff in the school of history provided additional quantitative and qualitative data on a sample of 10-credit modules. In total 13 module co-ordinators (MCs) provided this data for 18 modules delivered in year three only of the project (18/44 modules). The data provided included responses to an agreed optional quantitative question on the institutional student feedback survey which stated: *The 10 credit module structure allowed me more time to explore the content in this module (S2Q).*
In relation to the other qualitative data, students also answered two standard open-ended questions: (a) identify up to three aspects of the module that most helped your learning (n = 102 individual student responses, (S2a)), and (b) suggest up to three changes to the module that would enhance your learning (n = 82 individual student responses (S2b)). In addition a number of staff included an extra qualitative question on their feedback survey, which asked c) what, in your experience, were the main advantages of 10-credit modules over five credit modules? (n = 88 individual student responses (S2c)).

3) Module co-ordinator interviews

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight of the 13 MCs to explore their experience and the perceptions of students’ experiences in the modules. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. This paper presents the findings from these three data sources:

- Routine student feedback on institutional core questions for all five (n=98 modules) and 10 credit modules (n=89 modules) (S1)
- Student feedback on 10 credit modules only (Specific quantitative and open-ended questions (n=18 modules) (S2Q, S2a, S2b, S2c)
- MC Interviews (MC) (N=8).

Analysis and Findings

To identify initial codes, a form of content analysis was done on both the staff interview transcripts (MC) and the student open-ended responses (S2), based on Guerin and Hennessy (2002), which were then grouped into themes. Once themes had been identified, sample quotes were selected to reflect the themes. Following that, it was decided to triangulate these qualitative findings with the quantitative data, in order to identify overarching themes and
concepts (Creswell et al., 2003). Four overarching themes were identified: overwhelming positivity; engagement; innovation and workload; and structure and operations. For this paper, the authors have decided to incorporate these findings as they relate to the original key questions and using the lens of Kahu’s (2013) student engagement framework.

**Research Question 1: Students and staff satisfaction with the module design**

The response to the change to a 10-credit module was of ‘overwhelming positivity’, by both staff and students. Looking at this from the student view, a comparison was made of their feedback from five and 10-credit modules. Student responses (S1) on the five core student feedback questions were available for the School’s 187 module offerings in total across the three years. In the first instance, a series of Mann Whitney U Tests were used to compare the module feedback ratings for all five and 10-credit modules. As demonstrated in Table 3, while all modules showed average responses to be positive, significant differences were identified across all questions, with the mean scores for 10-credit modules found to be significantly higher than those for five-credit modules.

The consistent pattern is that, based on the school’s module feedback (S1) responses (with an overall response rate of 30%), 10-credit modules were found to have significantly more positive ratings than other modules. The positive change to 10 credits was also supported in the MC interviews. They noted that it was a very positive experience for the majority of students. Some staff reported a strong sense that performance had also improved (i.e. ‘the student performance was significantly better in the 10 credit. I mean, very significantly better’ (MC1)), with the structuring of assignments, more depth and more feedback contributing to this outcome.
Table 3

Descriptive data and analyses for 5 and 10 credit modules overall (rated 1-5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SMFS Core Question</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>5 Credit Modules</th>
<th>10 Credit Modules</th>
<th>Mann Whitney U Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1 - I have a better understanding of the subject after completing this module</td>
<td>M = 4.54, SD = 0.56, n = 151</td>
<td>M = 4.36, SD = 0.66, n = 85</td>
<td>M = 4.77, SD = 0.27, n = 66</td>
<td>U = 1495.5, p &lt; 0.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2 - The assessments to date were relevant to the work of the module</td>
<td>M = 4.46, SD = 0.58, n = 151</td>
<td>M = 4.29, SD = 0.67, n = 85</td>
<td>M = 4.69, SD = 0.32, n = 66</td>
<td>U = 1556.5, p &lt; 0.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3 - I achieved the learning outcomes for this module</td>
<td>M = 4.33, SD = 0.58, n = 151</td>
<td>M = 4.14, SD = 0.65, n = 85</td>
<td>M = 4.58, SD = 0.35, n = 66</td>
<td>U = 1405.5, p &lt; 0.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4 - The teaching on this module supported my learning</td>
<td>M = 4.44, SD = 0.64, n = 151</td>
<td>M = 4.26, SD = 0.72, n = 85</td>
<td>M = 4.68, SD = 0.42, n = 66</td>
<td>U = 1632.0, p &lt; 0.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5 - Overall I am satisfied with this module</td>
<td>M = 4.38, SD = 0.63, n = 151</td>
<td>M = 4.18, SD = 0.71, n = 85</td>
<td>M = 4.64, SD = 0.36, n = 66</td>
<td>U = 1487.0, p &lt; 0.05*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: M = Mean/average, SD = Standard deviation, n = number of modules with valid ratings.* Significant finding

Interestingly, there was evidence of variation in student experience. There was a sense, by the MCs that the modules were designed to be of benefit to students but that the weighting of the module and the demands of participation might mean that less engaged students or students experiencing difficulties might do worse in these modules. However, in reviewing the responses to the question regarding changes that students would make (S2b), many students commented that they would not make any changes.

Research Question 2: Evaluate the benefits and challenges of the 10-credit module design

MCs reported a more positive experience of engagement and that it was more supportive of students. This theme included comments relating to staff being better able to support students who were experiencing difficulties and to provide more individualised feedback. MCs also felt that students enjoyed the more dynamic experience of engagement in class (which was
associated with smaller groups and more social interaction). Looking at the students’
comments (23/102) made in response to the question on the most helpful aspects of the
module (S2b), a common theme was the nature of engagement and discussion in these
modules.

The final question (S2c) analysed asked students specifically about the advantages of the 10-
credit module structure and a number of key themes were evident here. The single most
common theme related to ‘Activity and Engagement’ in the module (23/88), which included
the way in which group sizes helped students. There was a recurring concept under this
theme of the student developing a deeper understanding and engagement in the disciplinary
knowledge. In the student feedback (S1) the student score was higher for the 10 than the five-
credit module design for having ‘a better understanding of the subject after completing this
module’ (n=151, U = 1495.5, p < 0.05*). Similarly, it was also higher for achieving ‘the
learning outcomes for this module’ (n=151, U = 1405.5, p < 0.05) (See Table 1).

Using a quantitative question designed specifically for the study (S2) (‘The 10 credit module
structure allowed me more time to explore the content in this module’), the range across the
modules was 4.2–5 (Max.5), with a mean of 4.6 (SD = 0.25). This suggests a high level of
agreement with this question. Many of the comments highlighted the sense students had that
the 10-credit modules allowed them to develop a better or deeper understanding of the
material (17/88). It appears that this added understanding may be due to a range of aspects of
the students’ experience of and engagement with the module. However, one student noted the
impact of the structure on their module choice: ‘The disadvantages of 10 credit modules
however meant that there was far less choice involved in what you get to study’.
There was a sense among some MCs that the introduction of these modules was a support with facing the ongoing challenge of over-assessment. MCs highlighted that the 10-credit module system allowed space for staff and students to have more positive experiences through the pacing of assessment and delivery. The issue of workload was picked up in a number of students comments (S2a), generally positively; for example, it ‘meant I had one less module which gave me a smaller timetable and allowed for easier study and you could cope with the workload that was slightly more than a five credit module’.

The change in the design of the assessment also supported MCs to develop more innovative assessment, in particular as the change had removed the traditional examination. This had allowed students to engage in a range of course-work activities, such as in-class discussion, written exercises, and document analyses. In addition they were also assessed on research into their subject. These activities were perceived as more meaningful and more authentic than an examination.

**Discussion and Recommendations**

Kahu (2013) highlights that curriculum structure can have an influence on student engagement. This paper presents how a team of staff in UCD School of History went about redesigning these ‘structural influences’, both from the credit weighting of the module and the nature of the teaching, learning and assessment approaches. An increase from five to 10 ECT credit modules allowed the opportunity for students to have fewer parallel modules, and there was an associated reduction in number of assessments. In addition, there was an opportunity for staff to introduce smaller group tutorials and more authentic assessment in their modules.
As there were multiple changes, it is hard to draw direct correlations to any single change, but there are some indicators that suggest impact. Looking at the findings through the lens of Kahu’s conceptual framework of student engagement, there were some interesting findings. Under her student engagement dimension of cognition, Kahu highlights the concepts of deep learning and self-regulation. The 10-credit modules were noted by both staff and students to promote deeper learning; they allowed students to delve into topics in more depth. They also scored more highly on ‘having a better understanding of the subject’ than the five-credit modules. A key outcome for higher education is to allow students a deeper understanding of topics. The taxonomies that differentiate the potential outcomes for higher education from post-primary or further education articulate that higher education outcomes such as ‘Detailed knowledge and understanding in one or more specialised areas’ (NQAI, 2003, p14). It did appear that this change was allowing student to achieve the intended outcomes for this educational level.

This finding could be explained by the fact that students said they had more time to explore the material. These findings however need to be balanced by the fact that some students maintained that they had less choice in the breadth of history topics, one of the key advantages of a modularised flexible curriculum. This debate of depth and breadth of a curriculum is not new. The idea of a broad curriculum has been advocated over the decades (Shubert, 1986). However, recent advances in scientific knowledge have encouraged the idea of covering fewer topics but in greater depth (Schmidt et al., 2005). In a large American study on introductory science courses in higher education (n=8,310 students, n= 55 institutions), students who had covered at least one major topic in depth, for a month or longer, in their high school were found to earn higher grades in college science than did students who reported no coverage in depth (Schwartz et al., 2008, p1). The authors of this
study also concluded that depth of understanding does require more time. It did appear from the staff feedback on the 10-credit modules that, compared to five-credit modules, extra space and time were created in their design and implementation. One should consider, however, whether it was the module size that has this impact or could it have been the fact that a team of staff also came together to do a more deliberative design (Noonan & O’Neill, 2012). Certainly, from the students’ point of view, there were fewer parallel modules which had facilitated deeper learning.

Under Kahu’s dimension of affect, there was evidence that the students had more enthusiasm and interest in the subject (i.e. history). They indicated that they enjoyed the module and the dynamic interaction in the class: students ‘talked to each other’. The design had facilitated more interactive tutorial time and this seemed to have worked in relation to the original aim of the school to have more contact between students, and between staff and students. This sociability could assist students in their sense of belonging, an important aspect of student engagement (Kahu, 2013).

Larger modules are usually more typical towards the end of the programme than in the early years (National Forum, 2016). However, students in the early years in particular need to develop a sense of belonging and improve their social engagement. Therefore, the development of some large modules, with associated small group work, in the early years of the curriculum may accommodate this opportunity.

Finally, the behaviour dimension of student engagement (Kahu, 2013) highlights students’ time and effort, interaction and participation. Students strongly agreed that the 10-credit modules had allowed them more time, and the MCs indicated that they had improved student
assessment load. One less module had reduced the number of parallel assessments. The staff had also reduced the number of assessments in the 10-credit modules as part of the design. As a consequence, the pace of modules had improved and had reduced what Harvey et al. (2012) describe as the ‘crowded curriculum’. The change had also reduced the ‘struggling and juggling’ (Tomas & Jessop, 2018) often associated with smaller modules. Since this study, UCD has developed a set of institutional principles for programme approaches to assessment, one of which supports the reduction of assessment and the development of some ‘space’ in the curriculum (UCD T&L, 2019).

These three dimensions of student engagement overlap and influence each other. For example, the improved pace of learning, the reduced assessment load and the enhanced sense of social interaction may have improved students’ depth of understanding. Students and staff had significantly higher levels of satisfaction with the 10-credit modules. This is described by Kahu as a ‘proximal consequence’ of student engagement. An important feature of the student engagement framework is that the influences of engagement are ‘bidirectional between engagement and both its immediate antecedents and proximal consequences’ (Kahu, 2013, p767). Engagement leads to engagement.

In summary, this change in module design and increase in its size had a very positive impact on student engagement in its broadest sense. Given the dynamic relationship between the variables that impact on student engagement, no one change can be associated with the success of the 10-credit modules. However, some recommendations for change are:

- use a team approach to a deliberative design of a series of modules;
- support the use of a higher credit weighting in modules to create some space for deeper learning;
- allow time for smaller group work in modules, reducing some lecture time;
- consider where breadth of coverage or depth of learning is the priority; and
- reduce the number of assessments.

This large study was carried out in one discipline: history. However, the study needs to be replicated in other disciplines across different module sizes and varied approaches to engagement. Exploring this change through the lens of Kahu’s (2013) student engagement framework should contribute to a wider understanding of the influences and consequences on student engagement. We hope that it will assist programme teams designing the modular curriculum to pay attention in particular to the decisions surrounding module credit-weighting.

References


