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Assessment Timing in Intensive MSc Engineering Modules: Implications for Cognitive Load and Learning

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Abstract

Intensive delivery formats are used in some postgraduate engineering programs to support timetable coordination, modular flexibility, and resource efficiency. One such format involves delivering MSc modules over short, concentrated periods, often within four-week blocks, where teaching and assessment take place within the same timeframe. While this structure offers organizational advantages, it also raises important pedagogical questions regarding the timing of assessment and its influence on student learning. This study explores how assessment timing in intensive MSc engineering modules may shape student workload, learning behaviour, and engagement. In many block-taught modules, summative assessment tasks are released at the beginning of the teaching period, with submission deadlines aligned with the final stages of instruction. Within a four-week structure, this creates a situation where students are expected to engage with new and often complex material while also working towards assessment deadlines. This overlap may increase the overall mental effort required from students, as they balance attending teaching sessions, understanding new concepts, and completing assessed work within a limited timeframe. It is also suggested that early release of assessment tasks may influence student attention, encouraging more selective engagement with teaching content based on perceived relevance to assessment. This study reflects on these issues and outlines initial considerations for designing assessment timing in intensive MSc engineering modules, with the aim of supporting more balanced learning experiences.

Keywords: Assessment timing; Block teaching; template; Cognitive load; MSc engineering education; Student learning