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Victoria University's innovative block teaching has proved to be extremely effective in improving results for students learning STEM subjects – science, technology, engineering and maths.

A new report from VU's Mitchell Institute says there was a 41 per cent reduction in the failure rate of first-year students in STEM disciplines after block teaching was introduced.

The failure rate fell from 22.4 per cent for first-year students in 2017 to 13.2 per cent in 2019. The improvement was even more pronounced for students with a non-English-speaking background (whose failure rate dropped by 45.6 per cent) and students with low socio-economic status (whose failure rate fell by 46.4 per cent).

In the block teaching system – which began for first-year students at VU in 2018 and now has been extended to the whole university – students study one unit at a time intensively for four



Shoemaker

weeks before moving on to the next unit, completing eight units in a year. In contrast, at most universities students study four units concurrently in half-year blocks.

In another important change, VU's block teaching system also abolished the distinction between lectures and tutorials. At VU students learn in interactive classes of about 30 and are able to apply their learning to activities and group work as they go.

A key finding of the report, titled *Equity Through Complexity: Inside the 'Black Box' of the Block Model*, was that the improvements were not due only to the rearranged timetable but also

because of the skill of the teachers and the interactive learning.

"It was the quality of the teaching and the relationships between the staff and the students which was making a difference," said Jen Jackson, one of the report's authors.

Dr Jackson, who is the Mitchell Institute's education policy lead, said VU's experience with block teaching was a "wake-up call" to other universities. "It shows you can do university differently and get really great results," she said.

Federal Department of Education 2020 student data released this week also shows the clear improvement in outcomes. VU's first-year dropout rate fell from 20.17 per cent in 2017 to 14.68 per cent in 2019.

VU vice-chancellor Adam Shoemaker said the Mitchell paper showed that block teaching offered "an opportunity for students to be supported and nurtured, leading to improved academic performance – with those from diverse backgrounds having the greatest benefit".