

Supporting Online Learning in a Hyperflexible MBA Program. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

This practice report critically examines the approaches in CQUniversity's hyperflexible online Master of Business Administration (Leadership) program, focusing on strategies employed to effectively support student learning. Drawing on contemporary research, the study analyses how flexible course structures, inclusive pedagogical approaches, and adaptive technological integration foster equitable access and lifelong learning opportunities. Flexible course structures are particularly beneficial for non-traditional students, who can find rigid instructional approaches unsuitable or challenging. The report evaluates both strengths and challenges of the hyperflexible model, positioning it as a sustainable alternative to conventional time-bound education. In doing so, it provides insights into how higher education can evolve to better serve diverse and non-traditional student cohorts.

Keywords: Flexibility; self-paced learning; hyperflexible learning; student equity; MBA.

Introduction

This practice report aims to critically review the pedagogical and operational practices underpinning CQUniversity's hyperflexible online Master of Business Administration (Leadership) (MBA[L]) program. Hyperflexible courses are tertiary-accredited, self-paced postgraduate courses where students can enrol and submit assessments at any time (Beer et al., 2023). The innovative model removes the time constraints associated with term-based delivery and expands students' options for engaging with their studies in ways that best suit their individual circumstances (Collis & Moonen, 2011). Comprising 11 discrete units (72 credit points), the MBA(L) can be completed in 12–18 months full time, though students have up to five years to finish the program.

The hyperflexible model of the MBA(L) was developed to address the growing divide between traditional higher education course models and the increasing demand for flexible delivery (UNESCO, 2022), thereby enhancing equitable access to postgraduate qualifications for mature-aged, regional, and remote students (Stone, 2022). Research indicates that online postgraduate students are more likely to be older and employed part time or full time with caring responsibilities (Brabin & Jakimowicz, 2024; Nelson et al., 2017), which limits their ability to access and complete a term-based, on-campus course. However, the hyperflexible model provides these students with the agency to pursue their postgraduate aspirations. This is important for mature-aged students who are typically more motivated and disciplined, which helps them manage the self-regulated, unstructured nature of online learning environments (Garip et al., 2020).

Additionally, online postgraduate students view their identity differently from traditional on-campus students, seeing themselves as technologically enabled and self-sufficient learners (Bearman et al., 2024). A recent study found that postgraduate students are willing to sacrifice synchronous peer support for greater flexibility (Brabin & Jakimowicz, 2024). Understanding



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the significance of these factors is crucial for ensuring that hyperflexible programs meet the evolving needs and preferences of postgraduate students while maintaining learning outcomes and fostering student success.

Why Was It Done? Understanding the Need for the Initiative

The majority of CQUniversity's students are from regional or remote locations (Beer et al., 2023). This equity group has diverse needs and faces numerous structural barriers when accessing and participating in higher education, including geographical isolation, financial constraints, emotional factors, lack of access to support, technological barriers, and sociocultural incongruity (Nelson et al., 2017). While widening participation is essential to address inequities and workforce needs, remote and very remote students remain underrepresented in higher education, with bachelor-degree-and-above attainment at around 16%, compared with 36% in major cities (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2021). In this context, attainment rates refer to the proportion of domestic award-course completions achieved by regional, remote or very remote students.

With an increasing demand for flexibility from mature-aged students (Lockee & Clark-Stallkamp, 2022), further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, universities in Australia have rapidly shifted to online delivery models. However, most online courses still operate on term-based delivery timelines. Defined by its hyperflexibility, the MBA(L) offers genuine and meaningful flexibility by removing term-based delivery and assessment due dates. This provides unique benefits, particularly for those students who may have been excluded from the traditional postgraduate framework (Beer et al., 2023). The notion of hyperflexibility addresses the needs of today's learners by affording them flexibility and autonomy to shape their learning journey, allowing them to decide when and where they learn (Müller et al., 2023). The MBA(L) stands out for its exceptional level of hyperflexibility when benchmarked against flexible postgraduate courses offered by other universities. For example, while Charles Sturt University offers a hyperflexible health management and leadership course (Brabin & Jakimowicz, 2024), assessment submissions remain restricted to a term-based timeline. In contrast, CQUniversity's MBA(L) allows students to finish the course within a five-year completion window, provided each assessment is submitted within 12 months of enrolling into the respective unit.

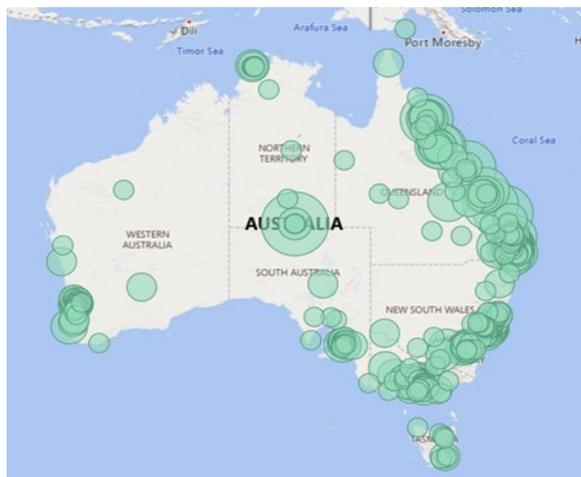
What Was Done: The Initiative Behind the MBA(L)

Developing the MBA(L) allowed a reimagining of higher education with a hyperflexible model that prioritises accessibility, convenience, personalised learning experiences, and innovation. Traditional higher education models (i.e., term-based, on campus) often resist change and are constrained by bureaucratic structures and entrenched practices (Sanford et al., 2020). It has been argued that traditional higher education models are no longer sufficient to meet the evolving expectations of students, educators, and society (Bengu et al., 2020). A hyperflexible model allows the higher education sector to be agile and responsive to the evolving needs of students in our ever-changing society.

The average age of MBA(L) students is 43 years, compared with a university-wide average in postgraduate courses of 28. The youngest student is 24, the oldest is 75, and the students have an average of 24 years of professional and industry experience. A substantial proportion of the students reside in regional and remote areas of Australia (see Figure 1). While highly motivated students may finish the course in as little as six months, the average completion time is 2.9 years, with most students opting to undertake three to four units per year. This reflects the reality that most students balance their studies alongside professional and personal commitments. The MBA(L)'s pedagogy emphasises self-regulated learning, supporting students to work independently and manage their own progress (Dresel et al., 2015). The course is best suited to motivated, self-disciplined learners; however, educators must also adopt strategies distinct from traditional lecture-based teaching (Robinson & Persky, 2020).

Figure 1

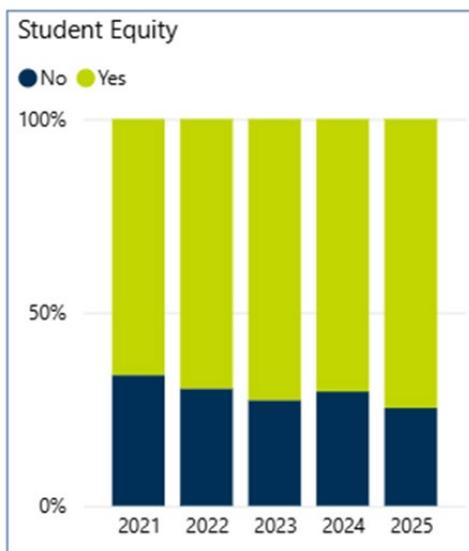
Locations of Students Enrolled in the MBA(L)



Likewise, the course’s hyperflexible design has reduced barriers for equity groups to a postgraduate qualification. Figure 2 shows that most MBA(L) students are from equity cohorts, including regional and remote students, Indigenous students, students with disabilities, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The MBA(L)’s focus on innovative learning and teaching allowed the university to make education more accessible and inclusive, with hyperflexible learning options and support services crucial in achieving this goal.

Figure 2

Student Equity in the MBA(L)



In addition to accessibility, affordability is an important factor in enhancing equality of opportunity in regional communities (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019). The MBA(L) aims to support industry as it addresses workforce shortages and builds future leaders’ capacity in regional areas. The *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* recognises regional universities’ role in delivering local jobs and making significant social and economic contributions to their local communities (Department of Education, 2023). The cost of Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs in Australia increased from 2024 to 2025, with the average course now costing \$64,211 (MBANews, 2025). Priced at \$21,600 in 2025, CQUniversity’s MBA(L) is one of Australia’s most affordable MBAs, an important factor for regional and remote students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

How the MBA(L) Program Was Implemented: Analysis of Practice

A key strength of this course is its innovative approach to hyperflexible learning. The hyperflexible model fosters self-directed learning and enhances the student experience. Additionally, it achieves operational efficiencies, including reduced manual handling through innovative automation and streamlined processes.

The hyperflexible MBA(L) required rethinking traditional approaches to higher education design and delivery. Unlike term-based models, hyperflexible students submit assessments continuously, creating a constant marking stream. To manage this, the MBA(L) team worked with Admissions and Digital Services to develop an automated marker allocation (AMA) system in Moodle. The AMA assigns tasks to markers with relevant expertise, who can accept or decline based on their workload, and provides marking packages with rubrics, guidance, and space for personalised feedback. Moderation features ensure inter-marker reliability and compliance with CQUniversity and Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) policies. Overall, the AMA streamlines coordination; reduces administrative workload; and supports timely, high-quality feedback for students. The MBA(L) employs innovative assessment practices, including the removal of late submission penalties. Consequently, the highly adaptable delivery model eliminates the need for formal extension requests as learners can plan and complete assessments within a framework that accommodates diverse professional and personal commitments.

The Moodle-based learning management system, Be Different, provides a user-friendly interface design and simplified navigation. Be Different is integrated with an intelligent chatbot that provides real-time support with courses, units, and enrolments, guiding new learners and relieving administrative burdens on university staff. A self-progress and feedback mechanism was introduced into the Be Different platform to enhance student engagement with course materials and streamline student feedback processes. This feature enables students to provide detailed feedback on every Be Different page by using emoticons and text-based comments. The course team uses this feedback to guide continuous improvements, ensuring a better learning experience for students.

The enrolment system optimises administrative processes and enhances student convenience by implementing a monthly intake model in place of the conventional term-based structure. Likewise, monthly assessment and course committee meetings are conducted to validate student grades, detail student progression reports, and ensure quality and transparency. These monthly meetings demonstrate how parallel processes were developed to ensure coordination with other university areas and afford ongoing analysis and evaluation of student performance and progression. An innovative, customised Power BI course management dashboard provides administrative and operational support to the course. It helps facilitate various administrative functions such as grade validation, course conferrals, identification of poorly progressing students, the monitoring of marking turnarounds, and marking processes.

In collaboration with CQUniversity's learning designers, the course team develops learning content that is clear, engaging, and supports self-directed learning. This involves chunking or modularising content for better comprehension (Bolliger & Martin, 2021). Each unit offers scaffolded pathways through modules focused on specific concepts. Careful design ensures students build the skills needed for successful independent learning (Robinson & Persky, 2020). To complement written instructions, MBA(L) units include short videos that explain assessment requirements and clarify expectations, an important support for online students who receive fewer prompts and reinforcements (Brown et al., 2023).

A critical weakness of the hyperflexible model is student engagement and progression. There are many examples of students who have not engaged with unit content for long periods, which impacts student progression within and between units. The absence of clearly defined timeframes and submission deadlines may potentially impede academic progression for students without the skills and knowledge to self-regulate their learning (Zimmerman, 2002). Students who have difficulties with self-regulation may face challenges in engaging with online learning materials, which will ultimately impact learning outcomes.

To help overcome this challenge, the course team must maintain oversight of student engagement and progression. To address this, several practices are implemented that emphasise clear guidance, consistent course structure, interactive tasks, regular presence of the course team, and timely feedback (Castro & Tumibay, 2021; Müller et al., 2023). Student performance is closely monitored, with re-engagement encouraged through strategies such as personalised feedback, direct calls to disengaged students, and targeted "nudging" of students who have not logged in for certain periods of time (cf. Brown et al., 2023). To enhance engagement and guide students through their hyperflexible learning journey, the course team hosts two weekly, non-compulsory drop-in sessions via Microsoft Teams, fostering community and connections with peers, mentors, alumni, and industry guest speakers who bridge theory and practice (Phan et al., 2024). These sessions strengthen peer relationships, build

support networks, and motivate academic progression. Engagement is further supported through a monthly newsletter for sharing updates, a closed LinkedIn group for networking and knowledge sharing, and unit-specific Microsoft Teams channels that facilitate flexible discussion and peer learning.

Evaluating the Impact of the MBA(L)

Evaluation indicates that the MBA(L) has had a significant impact on students, improving satisfaction and enhancing equity. Imposing deadlines on students who juggle multiple priorities can inhibit course completion and cause them stress (Beer et al., 2023). Removing assessment submission deadlines has helped students overcome submission phobia (cf. Kennette & Rivers, 2024; Wei, 2023) and led to higher student satisfaction than equivalent term-based delivery. For example, overall MBA(L) course satisfaction was 92% in 2024, compared to the national rating for the quality of entire educational experiences (77%) by postgraduate coursework students in Australia's 2023 Student Experience Survey (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching [QILT], 2024).

Since its launch in 2019, the program has admitted a total of 1,796 students. Admissions into the MBA(L) increased at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, coinciding with the rise of online education as a preferred avenue for professional upskilling. This trend continued in 2021 and 2022, indicating that the pandemic accelerated demand for flexible online learning options. Following this surge, admissions have declined since 2023 but appear to have stabilised in 2024 and show a slight increase in 2025. Likewise, unit enrolments have remained relatively stable. The overall unit enrolments from 2022 (n = 648) to 2024 (n = 483) show a downward trend; however, unit enrolments in 2025 (n = 505) show an increase. This may be in response to improved nudging protocols initiated by the course team.

While the MBA(L) demonstrates effective student retention, ensuring active engagement and satisfactory academic progress presents greater challenges compared to courses with a traditional term-based structure. To address these challenges, several strategies have been implemented, including weekly student support sessions offered year round (except for the Christmas period), the integration of mentors, regular nudging protocols of disengaged students, and investment in infrastructure to enable hyperflexible delivery. The program's success reflects the collaborative efforts of the course team, CQUniversity's learning designers, and Digital Services, underscoring their commitment to delivering equitable, high-quality education for students who require enhanced flexibility, accessibility, and support.

Analysis of completion data indicates a substantial improvement in student success within the MBA(L). Between 2019 and the end of 2021, the program recorded only 29 completions. From 2022, completions increased markedly, reaching 184 by late 2025, a growth of approximately 534% over a relatively short period. This improvement coincides with a series of targeted interventions by the course team, including the redesign of assessment tasks, the strengthening of moderation practices to ensure consistency and quality, and the introduction of regular engagement nudges to support learner persistence. While opportunities for further enhancement remain, these outcomes provide compelling evidence that the program is trending in a positive direction and underscore a sustained commitment to continuous improvement in student achievement.

The hyperflexible model achieves cost efficiency primarily through the elimination of physical infrastructure requirements, such as classrooms, utilities, and campus facilities, thereby reducing overhead expenses. Administrative efficiencies are realised through the absence of timetabling and room allocation, as students progress at their own pace. Furthermore, the model leverages scalability: a single set of high-quality digital learning resources, comprising videos, readings, interactive modules, and knowledge checks, can serve large student cohorts without proportional increases in staffing. Once developed, these resources are reused across multiple offerings with periodic updates, minimising ongoing preparation compared to repeated live lectures. This digital architecture enables near-infinite scalability, where additional enrolments do not necessitate additional physical or human resources. Looking ahead, the integration of artificial intelligence-driven tools and analytics is expected to further streamline student support and operational processes.

The course has received external recognition by being named a finalist for the Australian Financial Review (AFR) Higher Education Awards in the teaching and learning excellence category in 2023. The MBA(L) has also maintained its Tier 1 global status based on the CEO Magazine's 2025 Global MBA Rankings. The CEO Magazine's rankings offer students a dependable standard for evaluating MBA programs. These rankings are determined by factors including quality of faculty, gender parity, delivery methods, and international diversity.

The implementation of the hyperflexible MBA(L) has generally been well received by academic and professional staff, supported by dynamic and robust systems that enable scalable delivery and streamlined assessment processes. Key platforms, such as the AMA and digital learning infrastructure, have facilitated compliance and improved coordination; however, several challenges remain. While the hyperflexible model reduces certain administrative tasks, it simultaneously creates additional workload, particularly in maintaining student engagement and updating resources and assessments. Future research could examine staff perspectives on delivering online learning in hyperflexible programs; for example, a practice report on the reflections of staff who are responsible for delivering such courses.

Workload management can be a concern, as workload calculations have become increasingly complex, incorporating online delivery, diverse assessment types, and digital content development (Ujir et al., 2020). For example, staff workloads and teaching allocations are predicated on term-based delivery models that are incompatible with hyperflexible delivery. Equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL) is a standard unit of measurement by universities for staff workload calculations and is used by the Australian Government for funding calculations. EFTSL is predicated on time-limited study periods, usually terms, and is problematic when study periods are not defined by terms (Thatcher et al., 2020). Given that the EFTSL model is deeply entrenched across university systems and processes, human resources, information technology systems, and teaching allocations, the application of a different measure of student load remains an ongoing challenge for the course team. These friction points highlight the need for ongoing refinement to ensure systems deliver the intended efficiencies without compromising staff well-being or educational quality.

Conclusion

The MBA(L) makes an essential contribution to the Australian higher education sector as an accredited postgraduate qualification for those students struggling with accessibility, equity, and equality of opportunity. Hyperflexible education models align delivery with contemporary learner needs, enabling students to study at their own pace, in their own time, and from any location. By removing structural barriers, this approach widens participation and supports those balancing study with work, family, or other commitments. Traditional modes of delivery, designed around institutional convenience rather than learner needs, might be considered increasingly unsustainable, particularly outside elite universities situated in capital cities. For the broader population, particularly those in regional or remote areas, or from diverse and non-traditional educational backgrounds, time-bound education is no longer fit for purpose. Hyperflexible models recognise that lifelong learning, professional upskilling, and equitable access require systems as dynamic and adaptive as the learners they serve.

Acknowledgements

No funding was received for this project. The authors acknowledge the use of Copilot and Grammarly to improve the clarity and readability of the manuscript.

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Please cite this practice report as:

Pabel, A., Beer, C., Thompson, M., Atkinson, N., Borysova, Y., & MacRae, D. (2026). Supporting online learning in a hyperflexible MBA program: A practice report. *Student Success*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.63608/ssj.3926>

This practice report has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *Student Success*. Please see the Editorial Policies under the 'About' section of the Journal website for further information.

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