

ACADEMIC BOARD – MEETING 5/04 (24 JUNE 2004)

WORKING GROUP ON ASSESSMENT PARAMETERS AND COURSE WORKLOADS

REPORT

1. Terms of Reference

The Working Group examined student workloads and assessment parameters with the aim of producing a set of guidelines that would assist staff and course coordinators in developing subjects and courses with balanced workloads as well as descriptions that informed students more clearly about the time commitment needed for their studies.

The working group focused on the following five questions/issues.

- What constitutes a 12.5 (25, 50) credit point subject? Can the balance between direct class contact time and outside study expected be more clearly described to provide better guidance to students?
- Are courses balanced across all subjects in terms of total time commitment expected in the course versus understanding the time commitment for individual subjects? Is this important for double degree students?
- Is assessment balanced across courses rather than being described in individual subjects? Does the sum of all assessment per subject add up to the advice provided to students about the workload in the course?
- Is the belief that no examinations are held during Swot Vac accurate? It is proposed that no examinations or assessment be held during Swot Vac.
- There are increasingly large numbers of students seeking alternative exam arrangements. This has a significant impact on examination security. The working group will review current practice and propose a best practice policy for exam security that allows flexibility for students where necessary whilst maintaining the integrity of the assessment process.

The Working Group coordinated its activities with those of the TALQAC Working Group on Assessment and used much of the analysis and data collected by the TALQAC Working Group in their deliberations. The Working Group also sought input on these issues from Faculties.

2. What constitutes a 12.5 (25, 50) credit point subject? Can the balance between direct class contact time and outside study expected be more clearly described to provide better guidance to students?

In 1996 when APC discussed the change to a common point structure for the undergraduate degree the principle agreed upon was that a 12.5 subject should occupy 25% of the semester workload. While this principle still applies with the rapid increase in the number of students in combined degrees in recent years it has become obvious that there is a significant variance in subject workloads across Faculties.

APC recently requested that all Faculties include in subject descriptions the total time commitment to study. Some faculties have provided more detailed statements than others. For example the Faculty of Arts has developed a set of guidelines for time commitment that is broken down by type of subject (i.e. standard arts subject or language acquisition subject) and level (first year, second and third year, fourth year and postgraduate). Time commitment

is broken down into contact hours, class preparation and reading and assessment-related tasks. In addition it is clear that in a number of Faculties there is also a significant amount of time spent by students in laboratories, studios etc doing required work but unsupervised. These more detailed time commitment statements provide students with very clear advice as to workloads for the semester. Faculties should provide a complete statement of the time commitment to study broken down into contact hours per semester, non-contact in class hours, class preparation and additional reading and assessment-related tasks.

Recommendation 1: For every subject the contact hours and total time commitment to study per semester should be included in the Handbook entry for those subjects by 2006.

3. Are courses balanced across all subjects in terms of total time commitment expected in the course versus understanding the time commitment for individual subjects? Is this important for double degree students?

There is a great deal of diversity across faculties in terms of time commitment to study per 12.5 subject. This diversity is to be expected. However feedback from students enrolled in combined degrees suggests that there is a need to place limits on this diversity to ensure that 12.5 subjects are approximately 25% of a student's workload in a semester, independent of the programs for which students are enrolled. In the Faculty of Economics and Commerce the standard time commitment for a 12.5 subject is 108 hours, in the Faculty of Arts the time commitment in first year is 96 hours per 12.5 subject and in second and third years it is 102 hours, in the Faculty of Engineering the standard time commitment per 12.5 subject is 144 hours. For Veterinary Science this was more complex with contact time and time commitment varying by year in the program with final year Veterinary Science students having almost 39 hours per week of class contact plus additional out of class commitments.

Recommendation 2: That the total time commitment to study for a 12.5 point subject be in the range of 120 hours \pm 24 hours.

Some faculties have very clear guidelines for subject workload and assessment. A good example of a clear set of guidelines is that provided by the Faculty of Education and reproduced in Appendix A. Such guidelines ensure consistency and clarity within each faculty.

Recommendation 3: That every faculty develop a set of guidelines that describe subjects workloads and assessment parameters.

4. Is assessment balanced across courses rather than being described in individual subjects? Does the sum of all assessment per subject add up to the advice provided to students about the workload in the course?

A review of assessment parameters in the Undergraduate Handbook indicates that there is a great deal of diversity in terms of the amount and type of assessment required for a standard 12.5 point subject. The number of subjects that have the weights and for exams the duration also varies dramatically from Faculty to Faculty (see Table 1). The length of exams also varies greatly when reported (see Table 2).

Table 1: Number of written exams in subjects worth 12.5 credit points for which percentage of marks and duration provided, by faculty and by year, and the percentage of all subjects for which this information has been provided.

FACULTY	1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year	*TOTAL	** % of subjects
Arch, Building, & Planning	3	3	10	16	43.2
Arts	1	0	0	1	0.6
Economics & Commerce	14	35	63	112	100
Education	1	2	3	6	25.9
Engineering	9	8	14	31	27.5
ILFR	17	46	46	109	100
Law	3	1	21	25	82.8
Medicine, Dent, & Health Sc	8	6	10	24	68.4
Music	3	3	4	10	84.6
Science	28	40	62	130	50.1
Veterinary Science	0	0	0	0	0.0
	87	144	233	464	

* This shows the number of examinations worth 12.5 credit points, not the number of subjects. There are 24 subjects that include more than one examination among the assessment tasks.

** This column shows the subjects with written examinations for which the percentage of marks and the duration have been provided. Included in the total are another 32 subjects worth 6.5, 25, or 37.5 credit points, with examinations for which the relevant information was also available.

Table 2: Percentage of marks and duration of written examinations for subjects worth 12.5 credit points, all faculties and all years.

	Hrs not given	1hr	1.5hrs	2hrs	2.5hrs	3hrs	TOTAL
10%	4						4
15%	1						1
20%	1	4				1	6
25%		1		6			7
30%	2	2	1	13		1	19
35%		1	2	2			5
40%	3	2	3	33		10	51
45%			1	2			3
50%			7	40	1	41	89
55%			1	3			4
60%	1			59		35	95
65%				4		12	16
70%	1			28	1	33	63

75%				6	1	10	17
80%				15	6	37	58
85%					2	6	8
90%					2	1	3
100%	1			1	1	12	15
TOTAL	14	10	15	212	14	199	464

A common rule of thumb used by faculties is to equate each hour of examination with 1,000 words of assessment. Using this rule Faculties such as the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Arts have developed clear guidelines as to assessment parameters. Recommendation 3 above would require all faculties to develop similar guidelines. Also consistent with the TALQAC Report on Assessment Faculties should include in the handbook the weight of each piece of assessment and for examinations the duration of those examinations. This has been the policy of the Academic Programs Committee for new subjects for some time now.

Recommendation 4: That by 2006 all subject descriptions in the Undergraduate Handbook should include the weight of each piece of assessment and the duration of any examination.

5. Is the belief that no examinations are held during Swot Vac accurate? It is proposed that no examinations or assessment be held during Swot Vac.

Student feedback clearly indicates the belief that SWOT Vac should be free of any examination and significant assessment tasks. As well discussion at the Academic Policy Forum and feedback from Faculties indicates that any policy should be flexible and allow from some assessment to occur over the SWOT Vac period. Most Faculties however are in agreement with the general notion that no examinations should occur over SWOT Vac.

Recommendation 5: No examination should be scheduled for either the final week of the semester or SWOT Vac. It is also recommended that no assessment task should be due in the SWOT Vac period. The dates for all assessment tasks that are not scheduled in the examination period should be communicated to students at the beginning of the subject.

6. There are increasingly large numbers of students seeking alternative exam arrangements. This has a significant impact on examination security. The working group will review current practice and propose a best practice policy for exam security that allows flexibility for students where necessary whilst maintaining the integrity of the assessment process.

There are increasingly large numbers of students seeking alternative examination arrangements either through Faculties or through Student Administration. A number of Faculties noted that this was a particular problem with exchange students. In particular there is concern over students taking an exam at other than the scheduled time and only being required to sign a statutory declaration asserting they have not acted inappropriately. Most Faculties were in favour of eliminating this possible pathway as it was felt it provided no guarantee of examination security.

Recommendation 6: When a student is offered alternative arrangements for the sitting of an examination the department must:

- (1) Unless the department is certain that the content of the examination paper is completely secure a separate but equivalent paper should be written**
- (2) If the student is unable to present for the examination in Melbourne and has been given permission to make alternative arrangements by the relevant faculty they should be asked to make appropriate arrangements to sit the examination elsewhere at a time that will ensure the security of the examination is maintained and with invigilation by a person acceptable to the Faculty**
- (3) Granting of special examinations should adhere to the principles outlined in Faculty regulations and University policy.**

A statutory declaration is not to be viewed as guaranteeing the complete security of an examination.

A review of the processes by which such arrangements are made may also be in order. Lecturers in charge of subjects would need to be informed about such arrangements early enough to have in place alternative examinations or other mechanisms approved by the Faculty that guarantee with complete certainty the security of the examination.

APC Working Group on Assessment Parameters and Course Workloads

Professor G Marchant, Deputy Dean, Faculty of Economics and Commerce (Chair)
Associate Professor S Baker, Head, School of Art, Victorian College of the Arts
Professor H Watson, Department of Mechanical and Manufacturing Engineering
Ms G Webb, Deputy Head, School of Physiotherapy
Professor R Slocombe, Faculty of Veterinary Science

Appendix A

The Faculty of Education

Guidelines for Coursework Assessment and Workloads

Course Type	Subject Points	Contact Hours	Total Hours	Assessment
Undergraduate	6.25	18	60	Written assignments totalling 2000 words
Undergraduate	12.5	36	120	2 hour examination plus assignments totalling 2000 words or Written assignments totalling 4000 words
Postgraduate	6.25	12	60	Written assignments totalling 2000 words
Postgraduate	12.5	18 – 24	120	Written assignment(s) totalling 4000 words
Postgraduate	25.0	36	240	Written assignment(s) totalling 8000 words