

## ACADEMIC BOARD – MEETING 11/02 (12 DECEMBER 2002)

### The use of dictionaries in examinations

#### Background

At its seventh meeting for 2002, the Academic Programs Committee agreed to establish a working group to examine current University policies on the use of dictionaries, calculators and other electronic devices in examinations. It was noted that, with the increasing number of our students originating from non-English speaking backgrounds, and technological advances in electronic devices, it was prudent to assess whether or not existing policies are adequate.

Three key principles informed the deliberations of the working group:

- That any policies should succeed in removing disadvantage, without creating an unfair advantage to particular students
- That the implementation of these policies should retain a level of flexibility at departmental level rather than being unnecessarily prescriptive
- That the process(es) of implementation should not cause logistical difficulties for examination invigilators

Feedback on earlier versions of this report was sought from all Faculties, with further comments received during meetings between the President of Academic Board and the Associate Deans of Faculties responsible for coursework programs. The recommendations of the Working Group concerning the use of calculators and other electronic devices in examinations were approved by the Academic Board in 2002. The current document refines the recommendations of the Working Group in relation to the use of dictionaries in examinations.

#### Current Policy

University policy currently permits restricted use of foreign language dictionaries (i.e., native language-English and/or english-native language). The intention of providing access to foreign language dictionaries is to ensure that students, whose native tongue is a language other than English, are able to fully comprehend examination questions. That is, such students have the same opportunities to understand and answer examination questions as those from English speaking backgrounds. Consequently, existing policy does not permit the use of English language (only) dictionaries, nor foreign language dictionaries in examinations related to that language. The example provided illustrating the latter is that German-English dictionaries would not be permitted in examinations relating to German.

Currently, the responsibility of authorising the use of foreign language dictionaries in examinations, and for checking that these are free of hand-written notes, lies with the department concerned, and ultimately, with the subject coordinator.

#### Emerging Difficulties

In discussing the availability of dictionaries in examinations, several issues were raised:

- Why are English language dictionaries excluded? Some foreign language dictionaries fail in cases where no corresponding word exists, and in these cases it is helpful for students, for whom English is a second language, to access the meaning of the word (in English). Evidently, at least some subject coordinators/examiners are unaware that the current policy applies only to foreign language dictionaries, and have permitted students to take English language dictionaries into examinations.
- With the increasing number of students wishing to access foreign language dictionaries during examinations, how can the department/examiners possibly check all dictionaries properly?
- Should electronic dictionaries be permitted?

Regarding the use of English language dictionaries, the Working Group agreed that there would be no means of determining which students came from non-English speaking backgrounds and that this would mean allowing all students access to English language dictionaries. This is undesirable as there is an expectation

that local students have sufficient grasp of the language to understand and respond to examination questions at tertiary level. While the University has similar expectations of students for whom English is not their native language, it is acknowledged that in some circumstances, including examination conditions, words may be ambiguous or less familiar and cause such students additional anxiety. In order to remove potential disadvantage of this kind, it is appropriate to provide a means of translating words between English and their mother tongue rather than offering access to an English language dictionary.

*1) Consequently, the Working Group recommends that English language dictionaries be excluded from all examinations for all students.*

As most, if not all, electronic dictionaries also provide an English language mode of operation, the Working Group concluded that, in light of the above, these should not be permitted in examinations either. In addition, many electronic dictionaries also have the capacity to store information and it may be difficult for staff both to check and delete such data. The exclusion of electronic dictionaries is consistent with the policy, recently approved, disallowing the use of electronic devices (other than the authorised use of calculators) in examinations.

With the growing number of students requesting use of foreign language dictionaries, it is becoming increasingly difficult for departments to ensure that each has been thoroughly checked (e.g., for annotations). Examiners typically use reading time to inspect dictionaries, however with large class sizes, and other queries to address, this is becoming increasingly difficult.

In at least one case in 2001, an examiner had provided approval for the use of dictionaries, but the statement on Authorised Materials read "Dictionaries may be held by invigilators and used in the presence of an invigilator". This was to ensure that no dictionary contained additional information and the process was adopted because the class contained 560 students, 52 of whom brought in their dictionaries. In this particular case, the invigilators (and the examiner!) collected the dictionaries, taking note of the student number and seat number, which took approximately half an hour. During the course of the examination, only 12 requests were made for dictionaries. While most students reclaimed their dictionary at the end of the examination, 5 were left behind. Clearly this process is cumbersome and causes difficulties for the invigilating team.

On the basis of feedback from Faculties three options were considered for handling the growing need for access to foreign language dictionaries in examinations:

1. Allow students to use their own dictionaries, warning them that a random selection will be inspected during reading time
2. Have the University supply a range of foreign language dictionaries that students may request for short periods during the examination
3. Adopt a compromise whereby the University supply a number of specific foreign-language dictionaries (the most common languages) and permit students of other languages to use their own. The latter would be inspected during reading time.

All options are acceptable to Student Administration (at least based on a discussion with Gerry Barretto). In the case of 1, some students in large classes may risk not having their dictionary inspected and attempt to smuggle in unauthorised notes. It was suggested that if this option were made available, Faculties permitting such materials should monitor carefully the level of abuse with a view to revisiting the viability of this option at the end of 2003. It is worth noting that some Faculties, while sympathetic to the needs of students, feel strongly that students should not be permitted to bring into examinations, any dictionary their choice. Many dictionaries now contain technical terms that students would be expected to have learned during the subject. Consequently, restrictions on the specific dictionaries available to students is desirable. Finally, some subject coordinators report that, owing to the large numbers in their classes, they cannot inspect all dictionaries and therefore do not permit their use. This clearly disadvantages some students, but is the consequence of increasing numbers of students from non-English speaking backgrounds and the fact that subject coordinators are held responsible for ensuring dictionaries are free of annotations.

In the case of the second alternative, judging how many of which languages of dictionary should be held in examination venues could be difficult, however at least some subject coordinators, with large classes and high numbers of international students from non-English speaking backgrounds, believe this is not insurmountable. Indeed one suggestion has been that students could indicate, at the beginning of semester, their desire to have access to a foreign language dictionary in the examination, and if so, in what language. This would assist Student Administration in planning for specific examination sessions.

One matter raised by Student Administration in relation to this option is that if students wanted to retain a dictionary (e.g., in the case where essay questions are included in examinations) the number of dictionaries required in the exam venue may become unfeasible. The feedback from Faculties is strongly in favour of only permitting students to use such dictionaries for short periods of time, in the presence of an invigilator. Consequently, the numbers of dictionaries required should not become problematic. As noted in the example above, although 52 students brought foreign-language dictionaries into this particular examination, only 12 requests were made to use them.

The third alternative provides a reasonable compromise between the two options outlined above. By advertising that a number of dictionaries in specific languages would be provided, only those students requiring a dictionary in a different language would need the approval of their subject coordinator to bring one into the examination. This would relieve the burden on those checking dictionaries while allowing all students the access to such information.

*Consequently, the Working Group recommends that:*

- 2. Student Administration purchase and make available when authorised to do so, a publicised range of approved foreign language dictionaries, selected in consultation with Faculties and student representatives.*
- 3. Students requiring foreign language dictionaries in another language must seek the permission of the subject coordinator and make their dictionary available for inspection (i.e., during reading time). Subject coordinators may preclude the use of particular brands if these include technical or other terms that students might reasonably be expected to have learned. It is the responsibility of the student to ensure their dictionary meets the approval of their examiner and that written authorisation is provided by the subject coordinator. The subject coordinator will normally notify the Head of Examiners of this approval.*
- 4. The decision to permit the use, or not, of foreign-language dictionaries in examinations should remain with the subject coordinator. Equity demands that in cases where the use foreign language dictionaries has been authorised, all students should have reasonable access to a dictionary in an appropriate language (via either point 2 or 3 above).*

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