

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

### **The use of dictionaries, calculators and other electronic devices 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 the draft version of this report was sought from all Faculties, with further comments received during a meeting between the President of Academic Board and the Associate Deans of Faculties responsible for coursework programs.

#### *Dictionaries*

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, who's 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.

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.

*Consequently, the Working Group holds the view 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.

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 two options appear to be available 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

Both options are acceptable to Student Administration (at least based on a discussion with Gerry Barretto). In the case of point 1, some students in large classes may risk not having their dictionary inspected and attempt to smuggle in unauthorised notes. It has been suggested that if this option is 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, dictionaries of their own 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.

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.

- *Both the working group, and the majority of Faculty submissions providing feedback, favour the provision of specific dictionaries in examinations, for short-term use. The recommendation for the University to provide such dictionaries includes a suggestion that Faculties be involved in their choice in order to eliminate those containing certain technical terms*
- *Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that some Faculties may wish to retain the option of allowing students to use their own foreign language dictionaries, at least for a carefully monitored trial period (during which the extent to which students attempt to bring unauthorised notes into examinations should be assessed).*

### **Calculators and other electronic devices**

The view of the Working Group on the use of calculators in examinations is that the existing policy is appropriate. Currently, two cases are covered by the guidelines. First, where students are *required* to employ the use of calculators, there are clearly detailed notes on what is expected of the department in terms of their broad responsibilities, including that students are properly trained well in advance of the examination. In the second case, where students are permitted (but not required) to use calculators in examinations, departments are responsible in advising the students of this and also of any restrictions in the type of calculators allowed. It is important that subject coordinators appreciate the growing capabilities of calculators, and that they make well-informed decisions when authorising their use. In particular, it may be prudent for coordinators to prescribe specific models of calculators that have limited functionality, excluding, for example, those with the capacity to store complex information. Subject coordinators may also need to be sufficiently familiar with authorised calculators such that they can clear any stored programs and/or text information if necessary.

Some Faculties have noted that it is unreasonable for the University of Melbourne to require students to purchase calculators with less functionality than those authorised for VCE examinations. Strategies employed to reduce the unfair advantage students may seek to gain have been offered in feedback from some subject coordinators. For example, a number have indicated that they set examinations in which all working for complex problems must be shown, and that if students only provide final answers, they cannot pass the exam. Consequently, students gain no advantage in programming their calculators to generate answers alone. This semester however, the Faculty of Science has been required to deal with two cases in which students entered text into their (authorised) graphics calculators. This is effectively equivalent to having a sheet of unauthorised notes available. Of greater concern is anecdotal evidence suggesting that this is widespread across the University in examinations permitting the use of calculators.

The growing capacity for a range of electronic devices to communicate with each other and perform a range of sophisticated functions makes the authorisation of these problematic. The Working Group feels strongly that this is one area in which a decision *not* to evolve policy in line with technology is the most appropriate course of action. While Student Administration has been approached by some students wishing to bring their lap top computers into open book examinations, our recommendation is that such permission should be denied. Examiners have a wide range of alternative forms of assessment open to them, and should be encouraged to explore these rather than risk creating inequities by requesting authorisation of electronic devices other than calculators in examinations.

*The Working Group recommends the informed authorisation of calculators in line with current policy, and the exclusion of all other electronic devices from examinations.*

A/Prof. Janet Hergt (Chair)  
Prof. Leon Stirling  
Ersa Wahyuni  
Darren Ray

2 December 2002

**THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE**

**ACADEMIC BOARD**

**MINUTES OF MEETING 11/02**

A meeting of the Academic Board was held in the Council Chamber on Thursday, 12 December 2002 at 2.15 pm.

**17.3 Use of Dictionaries, Calculators and Other Electronic Devices in Examinations – Working Group Report**

The Board received a report, with one recommendation, from the Use of Dictionaries, Calculators and Other Electronic Devices in Examinations – Working Group and noted that the report would be considered by the Teaching and Learning Quality Assurance Committee in its 2003 review of assessment. The sole recommendation was before the Board for consideration.

The Board adopted the following recommendation in the report of the Use of Dictionaries, Calculators and Other Electronic Devices in Examinations Working Group relating to an amendment to Regulation 12.2.10 R1 (Part B –Examination Rules).

“The Working Group recommends the informed authorisation of calculators in line with current regulation, and the exclusion of all other electronic devices from examinations.”