

## **ACADEMIC BOARD – MEETING 6/03 (24 JULY 2003)**

### **Report of Working Group on Examinations**

#### **1. Composition and Meetings of Working Group**

The Working Group comprised Professor D Holm (Convenor), Professor P Taylor, Professor H Watson and Mr R E Hillbrich. The Working Group met on two occasions: 19 March 2003 and 19 May 2003.

#### **2. Objectives**

The Working Group was asked to review the examination process to achieve the following objectives:

- (i) a shorter examination period;
- (ii) a full week available to students for swot-vac;
- (iii) more time available to staff for marking; and
- (iv) no disruptions to candidates within any examination session caused by cohorts leaving early.

#### **3. Background**

The Academic Programs Committee appointed the Group to investigate the feasibility of conducting 2-hour and 3-hour examinations in separate periods and other measures to achieve the objectives set out in 2 (above).

The objectives were determined because of complaints received from academic staff and students relating to current examination practices. The major complaint from academic staff was that there was insufficient time for marking. Faculty staff and student advisers complained that there was insufficient time to process results, conduct unsatisfactory progress hearings, and conduct the pastoral care aspects of successful academic administration.

Students complained that there was less than one week available for swot-vac and, more frequently, that the examination timetable did not separate examinations of different length and that, consequently, students' concentration within an examination was disrupted as different cohorts of students finished shorter examinations and left the venue.

#### **4. Simulations**

The Working Group reviewed a series of simulations of the timetabling software using data from Semester 2, 2001. The simulations provided for examinations to be separated into separate groups of 2-hour and 3-hour examinations, with the 2-hour block using a 3 sessions per day format and the 3-hour block using a 2 sessions per day format.

The simulations scheduled 662 examinations, of which 373 were 2 hours or less and 289 were over 2 hours. By population, these examinations comprise 32,979 and 27,981 candidates respectively.

The simulations assumed a full week swot-vac and aimed to minimise clashes and the incidence of back-to-back examinations. 2-hour examinations were timetabled commencing on the Monday and ending on the Saturday – 18 sessions in all. Three-hour examinations were scheduled for the second period; initially six days in length, but extended by one day when it became clear that 7 days (14 sessions) were required to accommodate the 3-hour examinations.

The 2-hour examination simulations demonstrated that a reasonable spread of examinations was achievable. Complete removal of any incidence of back-to-back examinations could be achieved at

the cost of an increase (from 10 to 27), in the number of clashes. Further improvement was possible if the 2-hour examination period was extended by one day to run from Monday to Monday, but the improvement was only marginal at the cost of one full day.

Within the 2-hour block, venue capacities are only half utilised overall as a consequence of the effort to spread examinations out as much as possible to minimise proximity results (i.e. consecutive examinations).

## **5. Issues**

### **5.1 Common Content Subjects**

The simulations pointed to 15 common-content subject pairings that have one examination on either side of the 2-hour threshold. As part of the simulations, these pairings were scheduled with the group of 3-hour examinations. This situation would give rise to disruption within the venue, given that some students would be leaving early, and the Working Group believes that such disruption should be avoided.

Discussions are taking place with the five faculties affected to seek alternatives to the need to schedule different length examinations in one venue at one time. The Working Group recommends that common-content subject pairings not be accommodated and that alternative arrangements be put in place.

### **5.2 Standardisation of Length of Examinations**

The Working Group noted the incidence of examinations of different length that will need to be accommodated within a single session. These examinations generate disruption to candidates and should be avoided.

The Working Group subscribes to the view that examinations be standardised to 2-hour and 3-hour examinations. If departments wish to conduct examinations of intermediate duration, these should be conducted internally by the department concerned.

### **5.3 Timing of Examinations**

Given the number of 2-hour and 3-hour examinations and the candidates affected for each type of examination, the Working Group's initial recommendation was that 2-hour examinations be held in the first part of the examination period and 3-hour examinations in the second part. A period longer than one week may be necessary should there be an increase in the number of 2-hour examinations, and the timetable should be given the flexibility to cope with such an increase.

Discussion in Academic Programs Committee indicated that this format would result in "bunching" of examinations for faculties or departments. That is, the majority of examinations in a department are either 2-hour or 3-hour which would result in a rush of examinations should the Working Group's preferred structure proceed. It was proposed that 2-hour and 3-hour examinations be held on alternate days.

Our timetabling software can only schedule examinations regardless of length, so in our simulations it was necessary to first identify 2-hour and 3-hour examinations and then schedule them as separate blocks. A manual exercise will be conducted to schedule 2-hour and 3-hour examinations on alternate days. As a consequence of the limitations of the software, no guarantee can be given that students will not experience contiguous examinations over two days; that is, an afternoon/evening examination followed by a morning examination.

Two-hour examinations will be held as follows:

Reading Time:	9:15am	12:45pm	4:15pm
Writing Commences:	9:30am	1:00pm	4:30pm
Exam Concludes:	11:30am	3:00pm	6:30pm

Three-hour examinations will be held with commencement times of 9:30 am and 2:15 pm in accordance with current provisions of Statute 12.2.10.R1. The Group recommends amendment of Part C, section 13 of S.12.2.10.R1 to provide for the conduct of 2-hour examinations as set out above.

The starting time of morning examinations, whether of 2-hours or 3-hours duration, is proposed at 9:15am to minimise the potential for confusion about starting times and the potential for public transport difficulties for students travelling from outlying areas.

The Working Group is mindful of the fact that the schedule for 2-hour examinations will, during Winter, result in students leaving the examination venue after dark. Security concerns are reduced to some extent by the fact that students are leaving en masse, but many students will travel individually to separate destinations and may be at some risk at the other end of their journey. However, the Working Group believes that travel from examinations is not unduly dangerous and that the savings in time afforded by the new schedule warrant its introduction.

#### **5.4 Saturday Examinations**

Originally, the Working Group recommended that examinations be conducted on Saturdays in order to shorten the length of the examination period. As an off-set, the Group also proposed that a full week be available for swot-vac (currently 4 working days and 3 working days in Semesters 1 and 2, respectively). After extensive discussion in Academic Programs Committee, this recommendation has been withdrawn.

Student representatives argued that students would prefer a whole weekend break from examinations and a shorter swot-vac in lieu of examinations on Saturdays.

Consequently, the Working Group recommends that examinations start on the Thursday of swot-vac.

#### **5.5 Special Requests**

The current examination timetable is compromised to a significant degree by special requests and the scheduling of large classes early in the examination period. Given the shorter examination period under the proposed arrangements and the separate scheduling of 2-hour and 3-hour examinations, special requests cannot be accommodated. The Working Group recommends, therefore, that special requests not be permitted.

#### **5.6 Timetabling of Subjects with Large Enrolments**

The timetable is currently prepared by loading large subjects into the first part of the examination period. Our view, following discussion at Academic Programs Committee, is that this practice should continue, with large subjects loaded into the first 8–9 days of the examination period. It should be noted, however, that by continuing this practice, it may not be possible to achieve the same gains in timetabling as achieved in the simulations (there were no constraints permitted in the simulations). Our suggestion, therefore, is that the situation be reviewed after the new timetable has been put into operation. The extra four marking days under the proposed arrangements will in any case allow more time for marking in these subjects.

#### **5.7 Financial Implications**

The scale of savings in the costs of hiring of the external venue that were envisaged originally cannot now be realised in view of the decision to abandon the recommendation relating to Saturday examinations. Other costs of supervision and administration have yet to be assessed. The Working Group proposes that Administrative Committee be asked to review the financial implications of this proposal.

## **5.8 Implementation**

The Working Group's recommendation is that the revised timetabling of examinations be implemented for 2004. Departments will need to review their assessment requirements for 2004 to implement changes in time for the 2004 academic year and publication in the 2004 Handbooks. The Undergraduate Handbook is due for publication on-line on 24 November 2003, with final proofing completed by 21 November.

In addition, for students, the Student Diary is the hardcopy source of Statute 12.2.10.R1 and the examination rules. Editing of the Student Diary commenced on 30 April 2003, with a deadline of 27 June. Amendments to S12.2.10.R1 will require approval by Council before the closure of copy for the Diary in September.

The Working Group proposes that implementation of the revised timetable come up to the Academic Programs Committee for review in 2005.

## **6. Recommendations**

- 6.1** That, from 2004, the University schedule 2-hour and 3-hour examinations separately on alternate days and that Statute 12.2.10.R1.Part C, section 13 be amended to include provision for three 2-hour sessions in a day.
- 6.2** That all examinations supervised centrally be of either 2-hour or 3-hour duration and that any examinations of intermediate duration be conducted by departments.
- 6.3** That common-content subject pairings involving examinations of different length not be accommodated within a single examination session.
- 6.4** That swot-vac run from Monday to Wednesday and that examinations commence on Thursdays.
- 6.5** That special requests not be accommodated.
- 6.6** That scheduling of large classes at the beginning of each examination period be continued for an interim period.
- 6.7** That Administrative Committee be asked to review the financial implications of these proposals.
- 6.8** That Academic Programs Committee be asked to review the implementation of these proposals in 2005.

### **6.9 Achievement Against Objectives**

Adoption of the above recommendations will achieve the following:

- (i) It is not possible to gain a full week for swot-vac.
- (ii) Simulations indicate that the examination period will conclude 4 days earlier than at present.

- (iii) Subject to faculty deadlines for the submission of results, academic staff will have up to 4 days extra for marking.
- (iv) All examinations in a venue will be of the same length on any day and time; consequently, students will not be disrupted in a venue by cohorts leaving the examination earlier.

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