

ACADEMIC BOARD MEETING 10/04 – 25 November 2004

Academic Programs Committee

SEMESTERISATION

Background

Following advice from the Academic Registrar and the President of the Academic Board, many Departments and Faculties have moved quickly to semesterise year-long subjects. The process has been facilitated by the Academic Programs Committee which has streamlined its approval processes for changes involving semesterisation. The rapid response from the University community has been necessary because of the narrow time frame in which changes triggered by the Nelson reforms have had to be implemented.

Semesterisation of year-long subjects has so far been realised in one of two major ways:

- full semesterisation, in which a year long subject has been replaced by two or more semester long subjects, each of which is fully assessed; or
- partial semesterisation, in which a single year-long subject is replaced by two semester-long subjects, and the result of the first subject is entered as “withheld” or “continuing” until a final assessment at the end of the second subject [typically the same final mark is then be entered for both subjects]. In some instances, the first subject may have specific hurdle requirements associated with progress to the second.

Fully semesterised subjects fit readily within our standard academic processes governing credit, transfer, progress and leave, whereas the introduction of partially semesterised subjects poses some potential problems for those processes. The purpose of this discussion paper is to consider the ramifications of partially semesterised subjects for considerations of credit and transfer, leave of absence, unsatisfactory progress and our standard quality assurance processes. These considerations lead us to the conclusion that

- full semesterisation should be implemented wherever possible;
- partial semesterisation may provide an optimal academic solution in some circumstances [eg for year-long subjects with mid-year entry, or subjects for which it is desirable to accommodate semester-long periods of leave and/or extension]; but
- there are other circumstances where year-long subjects should be retained on academic grounds.

The essential principle underlying these conclusions is that the structure of a subject should provide the best possible framework for achieving its academic objectives.

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH YEAR-LONG SUBJECTS

There are a number of existing subjects that have been argued to be inherently difficult to convert into a fully semesterised form. Such arguments have been made, for example, in the case of research subjects and subjects involving certain kinds of practical work. As we outline below, we believe that where necessary full-year subjects should be retained. However, it is important to note that year-long subjects pose some new difficulties following the implementation of the Nelson reforms, particularly given rising costs to students and limitations on various student entitlements.

Progress in year-long subjects. Students who fail and are permitted to repeat a year-long subject often delay their course completion by a full year: this can be unduly expensive and

disruptive for students, while also leading to an undesirable build up of student load in a course for subsequent years. In addition, progress concerns may become apparent later in a year-long subject than in a semester-long one: the more regular cycle of assessment in semester-long subjects limits the period over which progress problems can go undetected.¹

Fee- and load-related issues. Students who enrol in a year-long subject may withdraw without penalty at any time prior to the subject census date of 31st May. This not only makes planning of student load extremely difficult but is potentially wasteful of university resources. Furthermore, a student who withdraws from a year-long subject at any time after 31st May will incur the full annual fee for the subject. If the subject is semesterised, the census dates of 31st March and 31st August apply, and the possible disparity between the extent of full engagement in the subject by a student and the subject fee is much less dramatic.

Status of year-long subjects. The standard University credit-point system is based on a single semester subject of 12.5 points. The blue book [Volume 1, page 27] notes that the 12.5 point rule “also applies to full year subject offerings in the few cases where such subjects have been approved”. Full semesterisation where possible is current University policy.

Year-long subjects that begin mid-year. It has been necessary for technical reasons to convert all year-long subjects that commence mid-year into a partially semesterised form [eg the Honours year research project]. These subjects are effectively run as though they are year-long, and it is well-recognised in these cases that the partially semesterised subjects constitute a larger whole.

The more modular course structures associated with fully semesterised subjects offer greater flexibility to both students and departments in handling interruptions to study arising from failure, justified leaves of absence, or opportunities for international exchange. While we know that there are good academic reasons for the year-long status of many of the hundreds of such subjects that we offer, it is not clear that this is universally so. We believe that it would therefore be useful to confirm that all of our year-long subjects are structured in this way for good academic reasons.

PROBLEMS RAISED BY PARTIAL SEMESTERISATION

Progress in partially assessed subjects. In the case of a partially assessed subject, it is possible that a student may fail a component of assessment or fail to complete a hurdle requirement. However, Statute 11.5 [Unsatisfactory Progress] stipulates that unsatisfactory progress procedures can be invoked only when a student has failed to complete a component of assessment for which a “substantial proportion of the total marks for a subject is assigned”.² It would of course be undesirable for decisions about students’ capacity to progress to later subjects to be made on the basis of very limited evidence; however, it is likewise undesirable for students to be permitted to progress to later subjects if there is clear evidence that they are unlikely to succeed. Full assessment of all semesterised subjects is preferable from a progress perspective.

¹ Thus there is an economic as well as an academic imperative for regular assessment tasks that ensure early identification of unsatisfactory academic progress.

² Of course, a similar issue arises for higher degree research subjects, and there the Unsatisfactory Progress process involves issuing a written warning to a student indicating an intention to either terminate or vary enrolment within three months unless evidence of progress can be provided [see Statute 11.5].

Ambiguity of status in partially assessed subjects in case of interruption. A second progress issue relates to the case where a student progresses “successfully” through a partially assessed subject but fails the final assessment in the later subject. If a failing mark is given to both subjects, students who have “successfully” completed the partially assessed subject may be disadvantaged [with adverse financial consequences]. Indeed, there will be no way of distinguishing the academic records of those students who must repeat both subjects on academic grounds from those who may be allowed to repeat only the second [on academic grounds]; rather, these decisions would need to be made on a case-by-case basis using information that is additional to that shown on a student’s transcript. Indeed, this ambiguity is likely to lead to confusion on the part of students about their status.

Credit, transfer and leave of absence. “Withheld” or “continuing” results on students’ academic transcripts may also be a source of confusion to other institutions. [This is particularly important given that selection for postgraduate programs at other institutions may be based on incomplete course results]. Students granted Leave of Absence after a partially semesterised subject and prior to completion of the later subject determining the result will also have an academic transcript in which the extent of progress in the partially semesterised subject is unclear.

Quality of Teaching (QOT) surveys. It has been an important feature of our approach to QOT surveys that QOT feedback to academic staff is delayed until the assessment of a surveyed subject is complete. This delay ensures a transparent and desirable independence of the assessment of the work of students by academic staff and the assessment of the teaching and learning experience in the subject by students. Since there is no simple way of designating partially assessed subjects so that they receive an automatic exemption from the Quality of Teaching survey, it is desirable to minimise the number of partially semesterised subjects.

RECOMMENDATION

As a result of these considerations, it is recommended that:

- All subjects should be fully semesterised where possible [in accordance with existing Academic Board policy], except where academic approval of partially semesterised or year-long status has been obtained from the Academic Programs Committee;
- Partial semesterisation should be used only where it offers a better academic option than full semesterisation or the retention of a year-long subject;
- Faculties should be requested by the Academic Programs Committee to report on the reviews of year-long subjects that they have undertaken in 2004, and to seek endorsement for the year-long status of those subjects that have not received specific approval since the introduction of semesterisation around 1997; and
- Departments should ensure that appropriate processes are in place to monitor students’ academic progress in partially semesterised and full-year subjects.

Pip Pattison
Lachlan Cameron

8th November, 2004
revised 18th November, 2004