

Dear UWAASA Members,

The restructuring of the academic calendar was on the agenda for the Academic Board meeting last Wednesday, 21 June 2017 and we write to give our members a report of what occurred. We are moved to do this in light of a number of concerns raised about the meeting by academic board members who felt that the process of consultation at UWA, including the debate at Academic Board, was problematic. This account is long, but we would be grateful if you would take the time to read it to the end. UWA is a public institution of great value and its success relies on the continued engagement of its academic staff and students.

The proposal for the formalisation of Summer School and the move from 13 to 12 week semesters was explained by the acting DVCE Grady Venville (GV), who took about the first 25 minutes of the hour set aside by the Chair for discussion to outline the history of the proposal, its iterations, the 'consultation' process and the amendments that have been made in light of some of the feedback received. (All of this is in the appendix to the agenda available on the UWA Intranet to UWA staff.) GV explained that the main driver for the changes was recent survey feedback received from students that they liked the 'flexibility' UWA offered and wanted more. The summer term and the shorter semesters were put forward as a way to offer more flexible study options to improve student satisfaction. Further justification was given that, in having a 13 week semester, UWA was out of step with many other comparable universities both nationally and internationally (12 weeks being the mode of the data provided in the agenda, though not by a great margin.) GV spent some time articulating the opportunities that might result from a more formal summer term. Questions were invited and there was a wider discussion on the challenges posed by the summer term. A range of issues were raised including staffing during summer, impact on facilities, impact on staff research time, impact of intensive mode units on student satisfaction. The point was made that UWA already has a summer term (and many other non-standard teaching periods) and the proposal with respect to summer term was little more than a name change. This characterisation was accepted by GV and by the Chair of Academic Board.

The discussion moved to the proposal to shorten semesters from 13 to 12 weeks (notably this is not necessarily linked to the Summer term) but was linked to "earlier graduations" and to some future, 3-week winter term (deferred for planned implementation in 2019). The President of the UWA Branch of the NTEU pointed out the several requests he had made for a clear Business Case for the plan. There was an expression of concern about the Faculty of Science having unanimously agreed not to support the move to 12 weeks semesters. GV and the VC Dawn Freshwater (DF) noted that in light of the concerns from the Faculty of Science, the timeline for implementation of the change had been pushed out from Semester 1 2018 to Semester 2 2018 in the revised proposal under discussion, and that this gave academics a one year lead time to reduce the teaching weeks for their units. GV noted that there was 'a little bit of work to do'. [Hard to deny. Approximately 3500 units will need to be revised, so this might be considered a *significant* amount of work by an already overburdened academic staff, especially in the wake of a recent restructure and redundancy round]. GV and DF pointed out that one year was ample time to 'contact other academics in universities who teach their units in 12 weeks and find out how they do it'. [This in a university where a one-year lead-time is the absolute minimum for the introduction of major change to a single unit.] It was not obvious that the ability of UWA academics to ask 'colleagues in other institutions how they do it' was the concern at issue.

Members pointed out that the reduction in teaching weeks posed particular problems for language and creative units, and science units where labs are part of the curriculum, especially in light of that fact that that unit hours would remain at 150. Members pointed out that the reduction in semester length would necessarily mean a reduction in content and an attendant reduction in quality of education. Although, “no change in what constitutes a full student workload” is one of the organizing principles of the proposed change, GV reminded members that content is no longer a focus of education in in the contemporary university. Units are about process and outcomes, not content. DF amplified this position, reminding members that in an era where ‘content’ can be accessed by anyone on the Internet, we should be focusing on the unique UWA experience as the point of difference for our teaching. DVCC&E Kent Anderson recounted his ‘favourite’ experience teaching an intensive mode unit which involved a trip to Japan and further amplified the point that UWA education is about experiences, not content. [Old fashioned members, who still believe that students actually need to learn some things in order to be considered educated in a field, were heard to mutter sceptically. Others murmured that not many units can be taught like that.]

The Chair pointed out that the discussion had nearly taken up an hour and moved to put the proposal to a vote, at which point it was noted that the Guild President had not yet offered his view. Guild President, Nevin Jayawardena (NJ), then reported that the student representative body had unanimously voted not to support the original proposal to reduce the semester length, and voted again not to support the revised proposal under discussion. The student representative body was specifically opposed to the reduction in teaching weeks from 13 to 12, on a range of grounds, most significantly in respect to student well-being, in that the reduction in semester length with no reduction in student load meant increasing pressure on students -- many of whom are already struggling to balance a range of activities and responsibilities. He argued that the student body did not support the proposal, even though the rationale of the proposal was for student satisfaction.

The Chair again moved to close the discussion and vote on the proposal at which point the President of UWAASA Ray Da Silva Rosa pointed out that he felt that an important discussion was being cut short, that many members had further issues that deserved ventilation, and that, because the issue was of real importance to the academic community, it should be allowed a more prolonged and robust discussion. The Chair acknowledged that not all those who had put their hand up had had an opportunity to speak but pointed out that an hour has been devoted to the discussion already. Members asked that the proposal be broken down and each principle be voted on separately. A member, admitting great reluctance and sadness, asked that the second principle be dealt with as a secret ballot because several members had expressed concern about their superiors being made aware of their preferences.

Principles 1, 3 and 4 were all approved (4 with a slight revision to the wording to refer to all staff, not just research intensive staff) by show of hands.

Principle 2 was approved by ballot. The ballot numbers were: 29 NO, 36 YES, and 5 ABSTAIN. Notably, the chamber included 69 or 70 voting members including at least 9 (voting) members of the executive and 2 executive officers (the latter of whom we assume did not vote). We therefore cannot recommend that the vote be taken as expressive of anything approaching unanimous staff support. Nor does it have the support of the student representative body.

	That the name of the current “Summer Session” be amended to read as “UWA Summer School” effective immediately.
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Principle 1: PASSED BY SHOW OF HANDS	
Principle 2: PASSED 36 TO 29	That standard Semester teaching periods be reduced from 13 active weeks to 12 active weeks from Semester 2, 2018.
Principle 3: PASSED BY SHOW OF HANDS	(a) That the UWA Summer School (non-standard) teaching period be set for no more than 6 active weeks plus 1 week for examination, and recognising that some Summer School units may be taught for a shorter period in an intensive mode. (b) That the period in which the Summer School is offered is any time from early December to early February each year.
Principle 4: PASSED BY SHOW OF HANDS	(a) There is no change to the definition of what constitutes a 'full time' load for a student; and (b) The emergent calendar does not result in unintended consequences of reducing course options for particular groups of students (e.g. those who may be unable to attend a summer semester).
	(c) The University is committed to ensuring that research staff members have adequate opportunity to focus their time on their core research activities.

We are concerned that large scale changes that impact on every teaching academic and on all students are decided with what appears to be disregard of the lack of academic consensus and student support. The full Science Faculty forum was unanimous in its lack of support for the proposed changes in active teaching weeks, the student representative body expressed unanimous lack of support for the proposal, the vast majority of those who were able to express an opinion were concerned at the changes, and yet it was allotted barely 45 minutes of actual debate. We suggest that it would have been worthwhile and collegial for the Executive to have delayed the Board vote and engaged in more and deeper discussion prior to making final decisions.

On a broader level, we are concerned that the Academic Board, comprised of every Level E professor by default, as well as by approximately 60 sub-E level elected academic representatives and 20 professional staff did not fill the assembly room.

We seek our members' suggestions and directions for how UWAASA and academics more broadly can be encouraged to engage in a meaningful and effective way on these matters of fundamental interest to all.

(The above account was written by an Academic Board member as their best recollection of what occurred. If readers believe there are factual errors, please let UWA ASA know and we will correct them.)