Briefing Paper
Summary and Recommendations of the
Flexible Academic Programming project:
Ongoing involvement opportunities for UMSU

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Background

The Flexible Academic Programming (FlexAP) project, originally initiated by the Vice-Chancellor in February 2015, aimed to determine how academic programs at the University could be structured and delivered to:

1. **enhance the quality** of teaching, learning and assessment, and the broader university experience of students at Melbourne;
2. **provide more flexible** study options and choice for different segments of the student body; and
3. make more **effective and efficient use of the University's infrastructure** and resources throughout the entire calendar year.[1]

The project was divided into eight Workstreams: *Curriculum Structure and Approach, Harnessing Virtual Infrastructure, Large Undergraduate Subjects, University Timetabling, Curriculum Sharing, Semester Structure, Optimising Physical Infrastructure and Academic Workforce*. Each of these Workstreams presented Green Papers combining considerations, research and/or findings, as well as recommendations for discussion.

The subsequent *Summary Report*, released in September 2017, consolidated these papers to provide the University a cohesive strategic position in the areas of curriculum structure and development, teaching, learning and assessment approaches, and the organisation of infrastructure to support the University's academic programs.[2]

It is important to note that none of the Workstreams were developed with the capacity to consider or incorporate the non-academic impacts of the project.

When the project was first announced, UMSU took a proactive position to attempt to ensure that the interests of both students and their representative organisations were considered in any proposed changes. While each Workstream included elected student representatives from UMSU and the GSA, the University maintained that it did not wish a student representative, nor an UMSU organisational representative, to form part of the Coordination Committee.

While initially envisioned that students would be consulted as the project progressed, there appeared to remain a conflation of the role of student representatives in their role in student *governance* with the undertaking of a robust and broad *consultation* process with both students and key stakeholders. There has not been a facilitated consultation process that has included all students, nor have any of the processes included UMSU as a key stakeholder, from the perspective of consideration of any impact on UMSU.

However, a window of opportunity currently presents itself for UMSU to seek active engagement with the University in key areas presented by this proposal to present feedback on the implications of the proposed changes on students, as well as the organisation, before specific actions are approved by University Executive and the Academic Board.

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[1] Professor Gregor Kennedy, *Flexible Academic Programming*, Project Outline, Academic Programs Committee 7, 9 October 2015, 1.

[2] *Reshaping Teaching and Learning at the University of Melbourne: Summary Report and Recommendations of the Flexible Academic Programming Project,* Chancellery (Academic & International), 6 October 2017, 2.

FlexAP Recommendations

Chancellery has proposed that the University adopt twelve *Primary Recommendations*, two *Enabling Recommendations*, and has suggested a further three projects that were considered to some degree by the Workstreams, but further work is required to develop recommendations and/or actions as a result.[3]

Primary Recommendations

1. Reduce the proportion of student contact time in lecture formats across all undergraduate programs so that it represents no more than 45% of students' formal contact time by 2020.

2. Review and renew undergraduate subjects with greater than 300 enrolments to ensure they employ curriculum structures and approaches that provide students with active, interactive and engaging learning environments.

3. Adopt the strategic use of video to replace lectures that cover foundational concepts in subjects with greater than 500 students.

4. Initiate whole-of-program assessment reforms, starting in the first year of undergraduate programs, which adopt more diverse approaches to assessment.

5. Adopt an intensive program in the first two weeks of first semester for all undergraduate first year students to support transition, cohort formation and connection.

6. Develop and offer students more intensive subjects at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

7. Develop a suite of signature wholly online subjects that students in campus-based undergraduate and graduate programs can undertake as part of their degree.

8. Significantly increase the number and range of subject offerings in the summer study period, in both undergraduate and graduate programs.

9. Adopt a single centralised system to record all spaces across campus and include all teaching spaces in the University timetabling system.

10. Implement a student preference-based class allocation process by 2020 to improve the student experience and reduce student complaints through improved class management and allocation.

11. Invest significantly in the development of flexible learning spaces on the campuses of the University that can accommodate a range of teaching and learning activities for groups of between 30-90 students.

12. Provide clearer, systematic and recognised opportunities for staff in Teaching Specialist, Teaching Specialist (Periodic) and Academic Specialist roles to foster their contribution to quality improvements and leadership in teaching and learning.

Enabling Recommendations

A. Enhance, align and coordinate professional development opportunities across the University to address the recommendations of the Workstreams of the Flexible Academic Programming Project.

B. Expand the existing Learning and Teaching Initiatives scheme to respond to specific recommendations of Workstreams of the Flexible Academic Programming Project.

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[3] Ibid 3.

Recommendations for Ongoing Projects

Project 1

A working group should be established to investigate real or perceived barriers to engaging in curriculum innovation or reform of teaching, learning and assessment practices as a result of Academic Board policy, Academic Program Committee procedures, and/or local departmental processes, policies and procedures. It is proposed that this project be cosponsored by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) and the President of the Academic Board, and that a working group of the Teaching and Learning Quality Assurance Committee be established to undertake this project.

Project 2

A persistent issue for academic staff and University leaders that was often mentioned during the course of the FlexAP project was the need to employ local quality assurance metrics beyond those derived from the Subject Experience Survey (SES)22. Thus a project is proposed that investigates options and proposes the development of alternative metrics of impact and quality of teaching and learning at the University of Melbourne. It is proposed that this project be led by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic & Undergraduate).

Project 3

There are diverse and distinct levels of maturity in the modelling of academic activities across the departments, schools and faculties of the University. Some academic departments have well resolved academic workforce modelling. A number of faculties have difficulties securing teaching staff; particularly for large subjects. The University should embark on a project to investigate and make explicit the approaches to academic workload modelling that are used across the University with the aim of improving the collective understanding of deployment of staff and time allocated to teaching duties, and ensuring fair workloads and distribution of academic time. It is proposed that this project be sponsored by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic & Undergraduate).

Impacts and Opportunities

The structure and staffing profile of UMSU reflects the organisation's aims to advance the welfare and interests of students, represent students of the University within the University and to the community, and provide amenities and services principally for students and other members of the University community. While the changes proposed largely relate to academic programming, they have the capacity to impact UMSU's capacity to deliver its core functions.

While the recommendations include maintaining the two-semester per year structure, suggestions to significantly increase options for intensive delivery of subjects, particularly in the summer study period, may have the same effect in practice of moving to a trimester model. The proposed new 'summer term' has been identified as an opportunity for students to 'balance' or 'accelerate' their program, which does reflect the principle of providing more flexibility for students. However, this also suggests there may significant changes in the nature and patterns of student attendance on campus, such as significant increases in foot traffic over the summer period.

Conversely, the proposed development of a suite of wholly online subjects for students to choose from, as well as a reduction in student contact time through lecture formats to no more than 45% by 2010, may actually decrease foot traffic, but increase demand on online services and support, extending the UMSU community further into a virtual environment as well.

The proposed two-week intensive program for all first year undergraduate students aims to support the transition to tertiary study, addressing the common difficulties identified in the *Curriculum Structure and Approach* Workstream Green Paper. This may provide an opportunity for UMSU to be part of the formation and delivery of this 'whole-of-University response', to ensure the programs currently delivered by UMSU are featured as an active part of this delivery. This may also provide significant opportunities for promotion and student engagement, as well as potential expansion of programs and services.

Recommendations for UMSU

Projects developed following these recommendations are highly likely to have broad and ongoing implications for the student body and UMSU, and it is hoped that the current collaborative relationship with the University through various processes will continue.

As a result of the above considerations, it is recommended that:

1. UMSU requests the inclusion of a student representative on key decision making groups or ongoing projects established as a result of the FlexAP recommendations. Including:

    a. Actively seeking to be part of the consultations within University Services in relation to the proposed two-week intensive program for all first year undergraduate students (FlexAP Primary Recommendation 5).

    b. Actively seeking participation in the TALQAC Working Group proposed in Project 1.

    c. Actively seeking participation and consultation in relation to Project 2.

2. UMSU initiates discussion with the University to establish how organisational impacts will be addressed, to ensure UMSU is in a position to provide considered feedback to proposed changes, and adapt to any changes implemented in a timely way.

3. Student representatives participating in the governance of any projects affiliated to the recommendations resulting from the FlexAP project should continue to:

    a. Advocate for robust consultation with key stakeholders over the life of the projects and prior to the implementation of any change.

    b. Provide regular reports to relevant Student Advisory Groups ("SAGs") of UMSU and the Student Representative Network to ensure up to date factual information is provided to students and the organisation, and communication channels remain open for timely and informed feedback to be provided.

4. Education (Academic) Officers are responsible for consolidating progress reports and providing advice and information to Students' Council.