

Briefing Paper

The University's Flexible Academic Programming Project and UMSU's Response



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Background

In response to a request from the Provost, in October 2015 the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Educational Innovation, Professor Gregor Kennedy, presented a project outline to the Academic Programs Committee to deliver Flexible Academic Programming ("FlexAP"). The rationale for the project is the premise that the higher education sector in Australia has shifted from a 'modest' to a 'mass' participation system, and more students from diverse backgrounds are entering the system. In this context, the University of Melbourne, as well as other universities around Australia, will need to find ways to:

- educate a greater number of students from increasingly diverse backgrounds, who are looking for more flexibility as they fit their study around other commitments and interests; and
- optimise resources and infrastructure; that is, ensure that in its teaching, learning and assessment practices the University is making the best possible use of the expertise of its staff and the considerable infrastructure it already manages and utilises.¹

This Project Outline was presented to the Academic Programs Committee in October 2015, however it remains unclear what, if any, actions have been formally endorsed by the University in response to this. UMSU is currently aware that central Human Resources of the University has advised that University management intends to bring major changes to the next round of Enterprise Bargaining commencing in 2017. However, the specific processes involved in the roll out of the project at large, including whether this includes sufficient time for a bona fide opportunity for consultation, remains unclear.

This will require UMSU to take a proactive position to communicate to the University its views in relation to the broad processes envisaged in the Project Outline in order to ensure the interests of both students and their representative organisations are considered in any proposed changes.

Project Aims

The FlexAP aims to determine how academic programs at the University can 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.²

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

² Ibid.

Project Coordination

The project comprises eight Workstreams of 4-6 members, each reflecting a specific issue identified as requiring targeted investigation. Each Workstream is discussed below. A Coordination Committee comprising the leaders of each Workstream will be chaired by Professor Kennedy and report to the Provost. Academic Board will receive regular updates through the Provost's Report. This Committee will meet bimonthly and track the project's progress and review areas of overlap between the Workstreams. At this stage it has been expressed that the University does not wish a student representative to form part of this Committee. There has also been no discussion regarding an UMSU organisational representative on this Committee.

Professor Kennedy notes that he envisions that students will be consulted as the project progresses. However, the role of student representatives in this context reflects participation in the governance of the project and should not be conflated with a robust consultation process.

Recommendation

UMSU requests the inclusion of a student representative on the Coordination Committee to enable student participation in the broader governance of the project.

Governance and Consultation

As noted above, there is a critical distinction between student participation in the governance of the project and any consultation with stakeholders at large.

Student representatives from UMSU and the GSA currently sit on project Workstreams as part of the governance of the project, however it remains unclear whether a broader consultation process with all relevant stakeholders will be conducted prior to implementation of any proposed change.

Recommendation

Student representatives participating in the governance of the project advocate for robust consultation with key stakeholders over the life of the project and prior to the finalisation of proposals.

Project Deliverables

The language used in the proposal and terms of reference for the Workstreams characterises them as investigative groups, with each team focussed on research, investigation and review. These Workstreams are not empowered to make decisions, but form part of a research phase in identified areas to inform a broader proposal. There is considerable overlap across the Workstreams, so the Coordination Committee's role will be crucial in managing the competing interests and differing priorities that may arise in each Workstream. There are no terms of reference that have been made available for this Committee and no clear timeline communicated in relation to formation of a proposal.

Each Workstream has been set the task of drafting its own terms of reference and setting specific objectives, activities, milestones and deliverables. The specific output from these, as well as the output from the Coordination Committee, remains unclear.

Recommendation

UMSU requests clarity on the terms of reference for the Coordination Committee.

Recommendation

UMSU seeks the inclusion of project deliverables and a timeline for project delivery and stakeholder consultation in the terms of reference for each Workstream and the Coordination Committee.

FlexAP Workstreams

The eight Workstreams are focused on:

1. **Curriculum Structure and Approach ***
Reviewing the pedagogical approaches to address above aims and consider the role of lectures in future programs.
2. **Curriculum Sharing**
Investigating the sharing and re-use of curriculum materials across subjects and programs within and across faculties. Identify opportunities for/barriers of sharing expertise and curriculum.
3. **University Timetabling ***
Determine strategies to improve, but also investigate the implications of extending hours of teaching beyond current standard hours.
4. **Semester Structure**
Investigate risks/benefits of adopting alternative semesters structures (trimesters, quarters) for both project aims and impacts on staff and students.
5. **Optimising Physical Infrastructure**
Review current booking practices and audit teaching and learning spaces throughout entire calendar year to identify opportunities to address project aims.
6. **Harnessing Virtual Infrastructure ***
Review curriculum and educational technology to determine whether it meets current and future pedagogical needs. Identify immediate practical steps to enhance technology-based teaching, learning and assessment.
7. **Large Undergraduate Classes ***
Investigate, develop and implement practical solutions for difficulties posed by teaching and assessing large undergraduate classes.
8. **Academic Workforce**
Advise on how to negotiate appropriate workforce categorisations of teaching staff, role of sessional and seasonal staff, performance measurement and review, and leadership in teaching, learning and assessment in light of project aims.

In this context a clear distinction should be made between student participation in the *governance* of the project and broad *consultation* with students. The University has a record of conflating these two steps, as demonstrated in the current Student Precinct Working Group.

Four 'priority' Workstreams (indicated by * above) have already commenced discussions. The membership of the four remaining Workstreams, including the nomination of student representatives, is yet to be determined but it is anticipated that these will commence in April 2016.

While membership of these Workstreams is indicated to include interested staff from university services, academic divisions and chancellery as well as students, the Workstreams are not structured to consider or incorporate the non-academic impacts of the project.

Issues for UMSU

Students

The scope of the investigations undertaken through these Workstreams has the potential to identify areas that may form the basis of proposals for significant change in the University. Implications of such potential changes could mean changes to the structure and teaching of degrees that impact upon current and future students.

Examples of potential changes include:

- being able to (or being required to) enrol in additional teaching periods in the year;

- an increased focus on electronic communication, teaching and assessment rather than face-to-face contact or on-campus activities;
- an extension of hours available for teaching and assessment, including possible classes or assessments on weekends; and ultimately
- the possibility of a campus that “never closes.”

Setting aside the subjective assessment of whether particular outcomes may be positive or negative, the broad scope and evidence-based methodology guiding the Workstreams seems to provide an open opportunity to bring about informed change that has the potential to benefit student life and the education experience at the University.

UMSU

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. On this basis, any changes to academic programming may have significant implications for UMSU’s capacity to deliver its core functions. As all student representative activities and functions undertaken in each of the Divisions of UMSU are based on, or driven by, the academic calendar, there is significant potential that UMSU will be required to respond and adapt to any change proposed as a result of this project.

Potential areas of impact for UMSU could include changes to the nature and patterns of student attendance on campus, such as a significant increase in foot traffic due to an increase in teaching periods per year, and/or a significant decrease in foot traffic due to focus on virtual contact.

Consequently, UMSU will need to respond to an increased demand for online activity or access to services and support; ultimately providing amenities and services at times that students expect and need them over significantly extended periods. Assuming the role of student representatives in the governance of the project is largely to represent student interests in the conduct of the project, there is no clear method by which the organisational impacts on UMSU will be represented to the University. Accordingly UMSU will need to initiate discussion with the University to establish how organisational impacts will be addressed.

Recommendation

UMSU seeks the inclusion of consideration of the impact on student organisations and services as part of the terms of reference of each relevant Workstream and the Coordination Committee.

Recommendation

UMSU student representatives on FlexAP Workstreams and the Coordination Committee 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.

The Education (Academic) Officers are responsible for consolidating these reports and providing advice and information to Students’ Council.

Summary of Recommendations

This project will have broad and ongoing implications for the student body and UMSU, and it is hoped that the current collaborative relationship with the University through these processes will continue. The main recommendations at this stage are:

1. UMSU requests the inclusion of a student representative on the Coordination Committee to enable student participation in the broader governance of the project.
2. UMSU should pursue the following issues in the Workstreams and Coordination Committee:
 - a. Clarity on the terms of reference for the Coordination Committee and inclusion of project deliverables and timelines in these terms.
 - b. Inclusion of project deliverables and timelines in the terms of reference for each Workstream.
 - c. Inclusion of consideration of the impact on student organisations and services as part of the terms of reference of each relevant Workstream and the Coordination Committee.
3. Student representatives participating in the governance of the project should pursue the following issues in the Workstreams and Coordination Committee:
 - a. Advocate for robust consultation with key stakeholders over the life of the project and prior to the finalisation of proposals.
 - 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 the abovementioned reports and providing advice and information to Students’ Council.