

# The University of Western Australia

## REVIEW OF COURSE STRUCTURES

### BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

During 2007/08, the University of Western Australia ('UWA') is undertaking a Review of Course Structures that aims to ensure UWA provides the best possible student learning experience within a coherent framework. The Review will be a consultative process, which seeks input and comment from both within and beyond the University community.

This Paper outlines the scope and process of the Review. It is intended to be read with the Course Structures Review Discussion Paper, which sets out in detail the full range of issues to be considered by the Review. A copy of the Discussion Paper can be obtained from [www.coursestructuresreview.uwa.edu.au](http://www.coursestructuresreview.uwa.edu.au)

#### 1. Background

The UWA Course Structures Review takes place in the context of global pressures that are prompting a re-evaluation of higher education around the world. These pressures include rapidly developing international interconnectedness and growing interdependence of world markets; advances in science and technology; and the advent of the 'knowledge economy'. The 21<sup>st</sup> century graduate will emerge into a world of global forces and rapid change, operating in an economy and society based on the creation, evaluation and trade of knowledge. Whether working locally, nationally or overseas, graduates will be functioning in an environment of global competition, where business of all kinds needs to be internationally competitive.

In this context, it is not surprising that leading institutions around the world are re-examining the content and delivery of tertiary courses. There has been a renewed focus on the appropriate balance between general and specialist education, and on the range of skills and attributes that graduates should receive as part of their university experience. Some of the graduate qualities identified as important by many tertiary institutions, and by business groups, include interpersonal and communication skills, problem-solving and critical and creative thinking skills, an understanding of cultural diversity and of the social and ethical dimensions of an issue, a regard for human rights and the environment, capacity to work in teams and aptitude for lifelong learning.

#### 2. Key Issues

Among the major questions that will be considered by the Review are:

- *What knowledge, skills or attributes should every UWA graduate have, and how should they be taught?*

- *Should students be required to undertake specific units in the context of their course which are specifically designed to improve cultural competency, critical literacy, experiential learning etc?*
- *What balance should be struck between general and specialist studies, in order to best equip graduates to navigate an environment in which a number of career changes may be expected and in which versatility as well as content knowledge will be crucial?*
- *Should UWA degrees include a general first year, and in what would such a first year consist?*
- *Should students be required to take a number of units outside of their 'home' faculty, to ensure appropriate breadth?*
- *What skills and knowledge do employers expect graduates to learn through undergraduate studies, and what do they expect them to learn as part of post-graduate studies or other professional or vocational development?*
- *Should research activities by students be embedded in all UWA teaching and learning, including undergraduate studies, and how should this be done?*

A full list of the questions raised by the Review is attached to this Paper.

### **3. Trends in leading universities locally and internationally**

Some approaches for the structure of tertiary courses locally and internationally include:

- The Bologna Process

The Bologna Process follows on from the Bologna Declaration, a voluntary agreement aimed at promoting consistency of student outcomes, staff and student mobility, and recognition of qualifications across European universities. 'Bologna' style studies will generally consist of a three year general Bachelors degree, a two years Masters and a three year Ph D.

- North American 'liberal arts' degree

A general four year degree that covers a range of studies. A more specialist, professional degree – for instance, law or medicine – is typically not commenced until the first degree is completed. Harvard University, which has just completed a review of general education, is recommending a curriculum in which students undertake studies in equal measure in the areas of aesthetic and interpretative understanding, culture and belief, empirical reasoning, ethical reasoning, science of living systems, science of the physical universe, societies of the world, and the United States in the world.

- The 'Melbourne Model'

The University of Melbourne has just instituted a major reform of its degree structure, shifting to a generalist undergraduate education that leads into

professional postgraduate courses. Students will complete a three year general degree before moving into a two year postgraduate professional degree (eg in law, medicine).

- Fudan University

Fudan University in Shanghai has introduced a requirement that all students complete a general, and residential, first year of liberal education, before moving on to more specific studies.

- Other examples

Other changes made at universities internationally include curriculum reviews at Stanford University and Amherst College in the United States, which have both recognised, among other things, the importance of community-based learning. In addition, the National University of Singapore has announced a focus on research projects for undergraduate students.

#### **4. Review Process and Submissions**

The Review began with the release of the 'Course Structures Review Discussion Paper' in December 2006. A copy of the Discussion Paper can be found at: <http://www.coursestructuresreview.uwa.edu.au>. Comments are invited on that paper, or in response to this paper, until 30 April 2007. You can submit your response by email to [coursereview@uwa.edu.au](mailto:coursereview@uwa.edu.au) or by post to:

*Ms Ambelin Kwaymullina  
Project Officer  
Course Structures Review  
University Secretariat (M456)  
University of Western Australia  
Crawley WA 6009  
Australia*

After consideration of the responses to the Discussion Paper and other relevant information, an 'Issues and Options' paper will be prepared and released for comment in about September. It will be circulated both within and beyond the University community. The final stage of the Review will be preparation of a 'Final Report and Proposals' paper in about April 2008, which will be circulated for discussion, and sent to the appropriate University bodies for consideration and implementation of the agreed changes.

There will also be forums held during the course of the Review to promote discussion and debate on issues raised by the Review. Details of the forums will be published on the Review website.

#### **5. Further Information**

Further information about the Review can be found by visiting the Course Structures Review website at <http://www.coursestructuresreview.uwa.edu.au> or by contacting Ambelin Kwaymullina, Project Officer, Course Structures Review by phone on (+ 61 8) 6488 1719 or email at [ambelin.kwaymullina@uwa.edu.au](mailto:ambelin.kwaymullina@uwa.edu.au)

## **Summary of questions within Discussion Paper**

### **i Course structures in relation to the University's goals, priorities and mission**

1. How satisfactorily do courses currently align with UWA's priorities and principles, and what processes in future may best ensure that these principles are expressed in our course structures?
2. In what ways might course structures be used to address imbalances in load determined as undesirable with reference to the University's strategic directions?

### **ii Course structures and their relationship to national and international trends**

3. To what extent, and in what areas, should UWA aspire to compatibility with international models such as Bologna, and how would such compatibility sit alongside our internal priorities, principles and institutional mission?

### **iii The impact of course structures upon the student learning experience and the acquisition of graduate attributes**

4. How can UWA further develop its course structures to respond to changing demography and demand?
5. In what manner might UWA drive student expectations via its course structures, to produce excellent learning outcomes for its students in coming years?
6. To what extent should UWA aim to loosen its existing prerequisites, to equip students via bridging courses in order to diversify intake into (currently) prerequisite-rich courses?
7. To what extent should UWA recognise industry-based experience, as well as or instead of, academic achievement, as an entry qualification for postgraduate coursework?
8. Is it appropriate for students to undertake a combination of two professional degrees, or would a combination of one professional and one general degree better equip our students and align with the University's Educational Principles?
9. To best equip our graduates to navigate an environment in which a number of career changes may be expected and in which versatility as well as content knowledge will be crucial, what balance should be struck between generalist and specialist study within undergraduate degrees?
10. UWA's Operational Priorities Plan 2006-2008 specifies a growth in practicum units as a specific goal: how might this be achieved?
11. Should UWA degrees include a general first year, and in what would such a first year consist?
12. Should generalist education precede a professional degree – or should a generalist degree be offered concurrently with a professional qualification?
13. Should students be required to take a number of units outside of their 'home' faculty, to ensure appropriate breadth?
14. Should students be required to undertake specific units in the context of their course, which are specifically designed to improve cultural competency, critical literacy, experiential learning, etc.?
15. Should all degree courses offer capstone experiences?

16. How should honours be conceptualised: as preparation for a research degree, or as something additional to conventional research preparation?
17. Does honours adequately equip our students or higher degree research?
18. How should honours be positioned within combined degree courses, to best meet the requirements of students and the priorities of the University?
19. What guidelines may be generated to ensure that UWA's postgraduate coursework offerings are of an appropriate standard, particularly in view of the trend to recognise postgraduate coursework as qualifying students for postgraduate higher degree research?
20. At what stage, and in what manner, may such elements (study "extra" to specific course content) be more effectively embedded within courses themselves? Should credit points be attached to such study?

#### **iv The efficiency and effectiveness of course delivery, existing course structures, nomenclature and aspects of administration**

21. Should the University impose a standard range of points values for its degrees and diplomas, and if so, at what levels of study?
22. How should the University respond to competing imperatives of systemic accessibility, and individual demand?
23. How can the University structure its courses to minimise student transfer, without detriment to the student learning experience?
24. Should UWA develop a university-wide definition of 'major', 'minor' and 'programme'?
25. Should UWA define a policy relating to named and general degrees?
26. Is it better to have one course with several programmes, or several courses?
27. How should UWA characterise its regional and offshore course offerings in relation to course offerings at Crawley campus?
28. Is study through Continuing Education at UWA Extension positioned most effectively in relation to UWA degree study?
29. Relative to its size and mission, does UWA offer an appropriate number of units?
30. Relative to its size and mission, to what level/number of collaborative courses should UWA aspire?
31. Is the current approach to unit and course approval an effective and appropriate approval process?
32. Should UWA reconsider the extent and organisation of a third semester, in response to student demand?
33. What effect might such rescheduling have upon course structures at UWA?
34. What is the impact of timetabling arrangements upon the flexibility, responsiveness, and efficient delivery of our course offerings?
35. Should the University develop standards for professional doctorates, to determine the circumstances under which exception to the General Rule on research may be permitted and also provide for articulation from coursework Master's degrees?
36. Should UWA develop up-to-date and relevant nomenclature to classify the various forms of doctoral study available?