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SRC Feedback on the Proposed 17 Week Semester

This submission presents the views of the Students' Representative Council (SRC) on the proposed changes to the academic calendar at the University of Sydney. This submission is informed by extensive consultation with the undergraduate student body, as well as the experiences of undergraduate students at other institutions with 17-week semesters. In summary, we identify that a move to 17-week semesters worsens learning quality, adversely impacts student learning conditions and increases staff workloads. Further, we identify two sets of students who would benefit from greater reliance on intensive learning. However, we find that the benefits for these students are relatively restricted and could be achieved with reforms to the existing semester structure.

Quality of learning

We identify that a reduction in the length of the semester compromises the quality of learning that students experience. In the first instance, educators are faced with a trilemma, that requires them to choose between maintaining volumes of assessment, levels of content and their current workloads. In the case that an educator believes that assessment volume and content cannot be diminished, they face greater workload to ensure that content is delivered, assessment turn-around time is maintained, and materials are ready well before the "Zero Week" of learning. It is likely that this burden will be particularly exacerbated for casual staff, whose rate of pay is already disproportionate to the amount of work they are required to do. Noting the recent Senate Inquiry into underpayment at universities, increased workload for staff is to be strongly avoided.

In the alternate case, the same educator does not wish to increase their individual workload. This would require a reduction in either assessment volumes or content. While the pedagogical value of excessive assessment is often dubious, particular disciplines and specific units of study do require high volumes of assessment to assess learning outcomes. In many cases, the representativeness of assessments is likely to decrease, as students are being assessed earlier in the semester and before they have learnt significantly about the area of study. A casual in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences reported that Unit of Study Coordinators had instructed casuals to issue blanket extensions to students and to engage in grade inflation for presentation marks during Semester 2 2020, due to the fear that students would be unable to cope with workloads. More necessary than assessment volume is the content itself. Reductions in content may be at best inconvenient for students, and at worst, significantly diminish their learning outcomes. In highly technical and specialised

fields such as Engineering and Science, it is difficult to determine what knowledge is essential and what knowledge is secondary. A student casual in the Faculty of Engineering reported to the SRC that they had to cut essential course content in Semester 2 2020 due to time constraints, and that this was content that students would require in the workforce.

In each case, the outcomes are suboptimal relative to the current semester structure. In the end, students effectively pay the same amount of money as they would in the 18-week semester but receive either less content, fewer assessments or greater stress for their teachers and themselves (see next section). It is also an unreasonable burden in light of the recent *Job Ready Graduates Bill*, which imposes higher student contributions on a large proportion of incoming students. This is likely to cause immense dissatisfaction, and encourage enrolment in Universities that retain a 18-week semester structure.

Stress and student commitments

We identify that a 17-week semester increases stress for students and worsens their learning conditions. First, the 17-week semester proposal implicitly responds to concerns about learning quality by arguing that substantive content weeks would be left alone. Instead, it argues that introductory and course guidance weeks would be removed and supplemented with efforts to “improve orientation”. This proposal misses the essential function that introductory and course guidance weeks serve for students. They allow students to adjust to the rigours of University and allow them to get settled in their courses before diving head-on into substantive content. This is especially true for first-year students, who often require a few weeks to adjust to the new models of learning and assessment. The SRC consulted with students who began in 2020, and they all suggested that the 17-week semester in Semester 2 was more stressful than any Semester they have experienced thus far. The loss of the introductory week will simply compound the stresses that they already deal with.

Relatedly, we question the extent to which supplementary orientation could be an equal or even sufficient substitute for introductory weeks within a course. In the absence of a clear explanation as to the nature of the planned improvements to orientation, it is especially difficult to judge whether those improvements could be adequate to allow students to transition to university and their courses. Regardless, we believe that a general orientation will never be an appropriate replacement for course-specific guidance. The removal of an introductory week would also prevent students from asking shared questions or experiencing collaborative activities during the introduction to their courses.

Second, an extra week in the Semester allows students an opportunity to catch up with missed content, revise difficult concepts and stay on top of work generally. Students from the Law School pointed to the essential function of “reading weeks” to prevent them from falling irrevocably behind. In other faculties, students highlighted the importance of weeks where tutors only assisted with assessments and did not teach substantive content. In every case, student stress and workload will increase exponentially without an extra week to help them keep up with course content. This is especially true if educators make the decision to keep levels of assessment and content the same. The students who are most likely to be affected are those whose participation in University is already limited by structural disadvantage. These include poor students (especially those with significant work commitments), students from regional areas or areas relatively remote from the University, disabled students, Indigenous students and those with carer or other responsibilities. While special considerations may offer some respite, the system is generally bureaucratic and inflexible, and relies on an incident-based system to provide consideration and may not recognise structural disadvantage. For each of these groups of students, removing a week of semester would drastically worsen their learning experiences.

The consequence of these two effects would be to increase fail rates across the University. At the Australian National University, individual courses saw increasing fail rates after the introduction of 17-week semesters in 2017. Increasing fail rates for students are especially worrying, given the recent *Job Ready Graduates Bill*, which would remove Commonwealth Supported Places for students failing 50% of their courses. Without serious revision of either the Bill or the University’s approach to “fails”, there is a likelihood that students will lose their Commonwealth Support at increasing rates.

Intensive Teaching

The main rationale offered for a 17-week semester is that it would facilitate intensive learning, for example in Summer and Winter School. While we acknowledge the value of intensive learning, we ultimately do not believe that it provides grounds to justify the change. There are two sets of students who predominantly benefit from greater reliance on intensives: students whose progressions are impacted and students who have failed subjects. The experiences of both of these sets of students are important, and we believe they are certainly owed support from the University, but we think that they would be better served by updates to the existing intensive system and the benefits of more intensives are not unreserved. We are unconvinced that a 17-week semester is the best or only option for improving intensives – we would welcome further consultation into options for improving intensives which do not require trade-offs with ordinary semester teaching. Given the risks that a shorter semester would pose to students’ academic success, we argue students who have failed subjects or are dealing with progression issues would be, on net, harmed by the proposal.

Finally, many students complete intensive units in order to complete a remaining degree requirement. For these students, the change would be extremely marginal as results for intensive units are released at the end of the study period (i.e. July or December), so they would not gain any benefits in terms of graduating earlier.

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