

Response from Faculty of Science to 6x6 Proposal

The Faculty acknowledges that the possibility of 6 week modules may be attractive in certain cases, in particular for certain postgraduate coursework programs. There are circumstances in which they could provide students with more flexibility in their programs.

However, the view of the Faculty is that much more detail is needed to address a number of concerns, in particular with undergraduate teaching and staff and student workload. Some of these are itemised below:

1. The proposal does not make clear if there is to be regulation of combinations of offerings. If undergraduate units can be scheduled in any combination of 6 week terms, ie some in terms 1+2 which is closest to current session 1, some in just term 1, some in just term 2, some in terms 2+3 etc, putting together a program will become very confusing for students. Balancing their load so that they end up doing a full time equivalent in each semester will be a considerable challenge, which would raise issues of full time load for students such as international students.
2. Fieldwork is an essential component of a number of disciplines in Science and provides real-world learning experiences. Considerable concern has been expressed by Departments whose students do fieldwork in the mid-semester break of the current session 1 and 2. If students are taking exams in the short break between terms 1 and 2 for example, it would not be possible to schedule compulsory field work during that period.
3. Mid semester breaks are an essential part of external Science teaching, as that is when external students are able to come on campus to do intensive blocks of practical work. The same argument applies as for fieldwork above – this will not be possible if other units they are taking have exams in that period.
4. If the intention of this proposal is to encourage more intensive teaching with shorter blocks, careful pedagogical consideration is needed. There are many subject areas that are not suited to intensive mode delivery, and sufficient time is needed for students to develop and consolidate key quantitative and scientific skills.
5. Technical staff have raised a number of logistical concerns if the intention of this proposal is to move to a larger number of intensive delivery units. Some units need substantial preparation time in advance. Maintenance of laboratories and equipment would be a major issue if there was not downtime when this could be scheduled.

6. There are also logistical concerns about maintenance of teaching spaces, as well as alternative uses of those spaces, as have been outlined by Craig Oliver.
7. Administrative staff are particularly concerned about the difficulty of exam processing in the shorter blocks of time between adjacent terms. Already there are very significant pressures on staff to grade exams within the available timeframes, and administrative staff often have to work overtime to get exam processing done in time. At the moment, there is a 3 week block of time when exams are held, followed by a period for exam marking and processing. Even in option 1, assuming most units remain in a term 1+2 or 4+5 configuration, there is only a 3 week period for all exams to be held, marked and processed. Even if exams are scheduled into the evening to allow them to be squeezed into 2 weeks, [which would not be popular with students], it is not possible that all marking and exam processing could occur in a single week. The outcome of this would be that exam marking and processing would be happening during the following teaching term, with impacts on administrative and academic staff workloads, and sequencing of units with prerequisites. Option 2 would simply not be workable if substantial numbers of units have exams.
8. The proposal alludes to allowing multiple points of entry for students. If this refers to undergraduate programs, there will be an obligation to have sufficient units available for students to enter at eg the start of term 2. This will raise the timetabling issues mentioned above, unless all units are in intensive mode.
9. Even if most undergraduate units remain in a term 1+2 or term 4+5 format, concern has been raised in a number of Departments about the effective loss of a week from teaching semester. Given that there still needs to be room for introductory material and revision in a 12 week semester, the outcome will be loss of time for both practical sessions and lectures. Over the course of a major this is effectively the loss of half a unit, which has implications, in particular for programs with external accreditation.
10. The timelines in options 1 and 2 indicate that there would be poorer alignment of Macquarie breaks with school holidays and University common weeks, when conferences are commonly held. This would have implications for many staff.
11. Workload implications for academic staff need to be elucidated. At the moment, staff are not required to work for more than 2 of the 3 current teaching sessions. How would this translate – no more than 4 out of 6 sessions? Staff are understandably concerned about having time available to write research grants, schedule fieldwork etc, not to mention take leave.

12. The student viewpoint needs to be carefully surveyed. Informal discussions with students have shown mixed views, although many are not in favour. Some students have expressed the view that an undergraduate program consisting largely of short units may lack credibility when applying for postgraduate and PhD programs at other Universities.

Overall, the Faculty believes that it is important that the aim and justification for this proposal is clarified. If it is to allow additional flexibility for postgraduate programs, then perhaps 6 week terms could be made an option for those programs. If on the other hand the intention is to move a significant proportion of undergraduate teaching to intensive 6 week mode, then there needs to be pedagogical justification, surveying of which disciplines would find this workable, consideration of prerequisites and sequencing of knowledge and skills, and the additional administrative load on both academic and professional staff. Such a proposal would involve a large amount of curriculum redesign at a time when staff are still adjusting to the additional demands of the MRes and pressure for increased research output.