Date: 17 February 2012
To: Dr Kabilan Krishnasamy, Executive Officer, Board of Coursework Studies
Re: STREAMS? PATHWAYS? SPECIALISATIONS?

I’d be grateful if you could include this memo as a late agenda item for the Board of Coursework Studies meeting on 23 February. It concerns terminology for referring to sub-sets of units within majors.

In publicity material explaining new course structures, some disciplines have recently used or tried to use terms that lack official status. In particular there has been an intention to introduce the words ‘stream’ and/or ‘pathway’ and/or ‘specialisation’ into the descriptions of some science majors in the undergraduate course guide and similar publications. Under pressure from these disciplines and from time constraints, the team producing the online handbook did use these words in a few contexts.

It is highly undesirable that faculties and disciplines should be allowed to improvise terms that were never intended to form part of the approved terminology for NC2012. One of the original objectives of the Review of Course Structures was to standardise and simplify course-related nomenclature and definitions.

The Publications Unit, facing an imminent deadline, recently sought urgent advice from me on the acceptability of ‘stream’ and/or ‘pathway’ and/or ‘specialisation’ in the content details for three science majors – biomedical, environmental, and engineering. I advised that the best solution would be to remove such terms from the descriptive text altogether. The relevant information remained, in my view, perfectly clear without them. For example:

- Part of the Unit Sequence summary for Engineering Science, under the heading Level 3 Options, stated that students should ‘select one of the following streams: Pathway A – Mechanical Stream…’ (etc.). I pointed out that with at least equal clarity it could simply read ‘Select one of the following: A – Mechanical Engineering … B. – Chemical Engineering…” etc.

- Similarly I remarked that, for Environmental Science, the statement ‘Students specialising in the Biology stream should take…’ ought to be trimmed to ‘Students specialising in Biology should take…”

The Publications Editor was happy with this advice.

However, there may occasionally be cases where the use of a generic noun to designate a subset of units within a major is unavoidable. For consistency in any such cases, I believe the University should prescribe the term “specialisation”, because this is already part of the approved New Courses terminology, and is virtually self-explanatory.

I therefore request:

1. That the Board of Coursework Studies approve the following definition for inclusion in the Glossary:

   “Specialisation: designates a particular discipline chosen from within a wider field of study (e.g. History within Arts, or Chemical Engineering within Engineering). It is usually applied to the chosen disciplinary focus of an
honours or postgraduate course (e.g. as a distinctive variant within a generic master’s course), but in a few cases may refer to a set of specialised units within an undergraduate course major.”

2. That the Board of Coursework Studies endorse the principle of avoiding wherever possible any proliferation of technical terms beyond those approved in the NC2012 Glossary, and advise Boards of Studies and Academic Council accordingly.

Attachment B