MODIFYING PREREQUISITES FOR STUDENTS IN TRANSITION

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Senior Academic Reviewer | First draft           | January 2012         | Sylvia Lang  
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<tr>
<td>Bill Louden, Senior DVC</td>
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<td>7 Feb 2012</td>
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<td>Chair, Board of Coursework Studies</td>
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Background

Much work has been done to inform staff members about transition arrangements for students who enrolled before 2012, and to ensure that those students are provided with options and support during the completion of their current degree or elected transition to a New Courses degree. Documents relevant to transition arrangements have been accessible to all staff at http://www.newcourses2012.uwa.edu.au/staff/student-transition (If the page doesn’t open when you click on the link, paste the URL into your browser)

There is also a University Policy on Transition Arrangements relating to the introduction of new undergraduate degree courses:

Many of the transitional arrangements need no attention from Boards of Studies. Faculties are responsible for (among other things) phasing in and phasing out the units they teach, assessing periodically the suitability of their transition plans, and identifying particular students who should be provided with individual advice, guidance and a tailored study plan.

Nevertheless it is important (1) that Boards of Studies, when any transition-related matters come to their attention, should view them as consistently as possible, and (2) that Faculties should administer their transitional arrangements in keeping with the relevant University Policy, with agreed principles of fairness and transparency, and with respect for the academic integrity of units and majors that have been designed and approved in the context of New Courses 2012.

Prerequisite issues

One area of potential difficulty is the need to manage equitably any situations where a student enrolled in a pre-2012 course wishes to (or must) take a new advanced-level unit for which the approved prerequisites have not previously been available.

Such situations are most likely to arise where Faculties decided to switch over to new Level 2 and Level 3 units in 2012. The Senior DVC issued a memo in late 2010 making it clear that there was no obligation to put a complete suite of new units in place for this year and that Schools thinking of doing so should consider carefully various practical implications, including "whether a new unit can safely replace an existing unit, particularly if different prerequisites might mean a risk of students being left stranded without a pathway to complete their major."

In recent weeks, Boards of Studies have received from Faculties two kinds of requests to modify prerequisites through the “fast-track” approval process. One kind argues that a particular alternative unit or units would provide a student with equivalent or almost equivalent knowledge and skills; the other kind wants to waive specific prerequisites completely or in favour of general requirements (such as x points of study at Level 1 or Level 2).

It is difficult to see how a prerequisite could be waived altogether (or replaced by very general requirements such as x points of study at level y) without placing students at a disadvantage and causing problems for those teaching the unit. Boards have insisted that the integrity of NC2012 units, with their differentiated learning outcomes at each level of study, makes it highly undesirable that students with very diverse and incommensurate kinds of preparation should be taught together – whether they are taking that unit as part of a major or not.
Proposals to recognise specified alternative prerequisites may be less problematic, but only if these proposed substitute units can equip students with knowledge and skills that are equivalent or nearly equivalent to the previously approved prerequisites.

The basic principle of minimising disadvantage to students during the transitional period means that we must allow reasonable substitute units to be counted in some cases. But there are two ways of doing this:

1. The relevant discipline, through its Faculty, presents to the Board of Studies a cogent argument for recognising particular alternative units whose learning outcomes are demonstrably similar to those of existing approved prerequisites; **OR**

2. The Faculty gives Special Approval through ordinary case-by-case administrative processes for individuals to count X in lieu of a standard prerequisite, rather than seek to widen unduly the general range of approved substitutions.

Several disciplines have been seeking fast-track approval for particular proposals based on a very liberal interpretation of Method 1, which can pose problems. Method 2 usually has practical advantages, though it needs to be governed consistently and transparently by certain principles.

**Administrative implications and guiding principles**

What does this mean for the Boards of Studies, for those who are processing fast-track requests to modify prerequisites on behalf of the Boards, and for Sub-Deans and others who need to determine special student cases at the Faculty level?

The Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor, as Chair of the Board of Coursework Studies, advises that for students in transition the following points should guide decisions:

- A Board of Studies should not approve alternative units as substitutes for approved prerequisites unless they demonstrably lead to similar learning outcomes.

- If a student in transition has not completed an approved unit prerequisite, the Faculty should consider using case-by-case Special Approval administrative processes to resolve the difficulty rather than seek to widen unduly the general range of approved substitutions.

- Special Approvals should only be granted after each case has been carefully considered in relation to the Transition Arrangements policy, and these further principles:
  
  a) The integrity of NC2012 units is not normally separable from their place within a particular disciplinary progression;

  b) There is potential disadvantage to students and teachers if those enrolled in a unit have disparate backgrounds.