June 8, 2012
Winthrop Professor Bill Louden,
Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor
UWA

Dear Bill,

Clarification of University Policies

The Standing Working Party (SWP) of the Board of Coursework Studies (BCS) met yesterday to consider, inter alia, proposed additions to the rules for the Master of Professional Engineering and a submission from the School of Physics concerning a generic degree.

The Working Party takes the view that its primary role is to ensure that submissions align with Academic Council endorsed policies, and where they do not to suggest to faculties how alignment could be achieved while preserving the faculty’s course intentions. Where there is no policy, or where there is ambiguity in relation to policies, the SWP is of the view that it does not have the authority to recommend approval or otherwise but rather should refer the matter(s) to the BCS for clarification. In some cases this may lead to the fine tuning of existing policies, in other cases to the determination of new policies.

At yesterday’s meeting two matters arose which I consider should be referred to the BCS for clarification and consideration.

The first of these concerns proposed Rule 9 of the Master of Professional Engineering. This course had previously been assessed by the Standing Working Party and a recommendation had been made that the BSC approve the course subject to some minor changes. However, the Faculty has now sought the addition of Rule 9 which concerns a unit to be entitled ‘Professional Practicum’. The original proposed wording to Rule 9 stated:

‘9. (1) Students are required to complete at least 12 weeks’ practical experience in a suitable engineering environment as approved by the Faculty.

(2) Students are required to make their own arrangements for practical experience.

(3) The Faculty may, on written application by a student and on production of satisfactory evidence, accept work completed by the student prior to acceptance into the course as fulfilling the requirements of Rules 9 (1).

(4) Students must submit a report on work completed for the practical experience required under Rule 9 (1) or on work accepted by the Faculty under Rule 9 (3) and a Certificate of Practical Work Performed.

(5) In exceptional circumstances, the Faculty may vary the requirements for practical experience if satisfied that such practical experience cannot be obtained or undertaken.’

Before the matter being submitted to the Standing Working Party informal discussions were held with the Faculty concerning:
a) The need for this to be an approved practicum unit.

b) Whether or not it was acceptable that students, rather than faculty, be responsible for arranging a compulsory component of the course.

c) The proposed zero points load for a 12 week experience.

d) The seeming contradiction between 9 (1) and 9 (5).

In response the Faculty has:

a) submitted a unit proposal (GENG5000 Professional Practicum) and has inserted this unit in 9 (1) together with the following footnote: “Students do not enroll in the professional practicum units. Upon successful completion, the appropriate unit is added to their enrolment and the result released together with the results for the other enrolled units for the semester”;

b) added a footnote to 9 (2) which reads "To facilitate their efforts, students should seek advice from members of the Faculty and register with the Careers Centre"; and

c) excised Rule 9 (5).

In the SWP's discussions it became evident that there are different practices around the university concerning practicums and clinical work. Though the norm is for faculties to make the arrangements for practical experience, this is not universally the case. Further, though most faculties give credit points for such practicums, again this not universal. The Engineering rules, for example, seem to have been modeled on, or replicate, those of Architecture where students are required to make their own arrangements and receive zero points for the unit. In this situation, and because of professional association requirements, students may be paid for the period of the practicum. Since there may be times when firms are not willing to take students on for experience because of the associated costs it was necessary to include a rule giving the Faculty some discretion in such cases (for example, waiving or adjusting the practicum requirements, or substituting other work for the practicum).

The SWP believes that this is a matter that needs clarification if it is to effectively process this and future applications. We would ask the BCS to consider the matter, specifically the following issues:

1. Can students be given responsibility for arranging required components of the course or should this be a faculty responsibility?
2. Should required practicum units be assigned points (rather than a zero load)?
3. Under what conditions can the requirement for a practicum be waived?

The second policy matter concerns articulation from honours courses to master's degrees. It is commonly understood that honours units can contribute up to 50% of a master's course. However, to date master's rules have not included honours as articulating courses, nor have they included honours as exit awards. The submission from the School of Physics would propose a different approach. The relevant rules are:

**Articulation**

3. The Bachelor of Science with honours in Physics and the Graduate Diploma in Physics articulates (sic) with this course.

**Award of Graduate Diploma in Physics**

9. A student who withdraws from the course before completing the course requirements but after completing 24 points of coursework and 24 points of dissertation units (including research proposal) may apply to be awarded the Graduate Diploma in Physics or honours in Physics, subject to Faculty Approval.

In common with other sections of the university the SWP is cognizant of some of the anomalies that arise out of treating honours as an undergraduate qualification and yet according it similar status to a graduate diploma in terms of credit towards a relevant master's degree. However, the SWP has taken the view that the mention of honours in the above proposed rules was out of line with practice to date and may not be warranted. In particular, it did not necessarily appear appropriate to award an undergraduate qualification on the basis of an enrolment in a master's degree. Enrolling from an honours course to a master's course might be considered a new and separate enrolment and was not the same as the articulation between a graduate diploma and a master's degree.
This matter would have rested there except that Sylvia Lang, in her capacity as University Academic Secretary, queried whether or not the above was an appropriate interpretation of the university’s approach to articulation, an approach which is yet to be formally put into a policy. She has pointed out Resolution 38 of Academic Council (May 2012) which reads:

‘RESOLVED – 38

to approve the following recommendations relating to articulation of honours into the master’s by coursework or by coursework and dissertation:

1. That credit should only be given in cases where the Honours course contributes to development in the discipline of the Master’s course and provides an appropriate foundation for units in the Master’s course;
2. (a) That the requirements for admission rules to courses be clear, transparent and easily understood; and
   (b) That faculties maintain a register indicating how admission criteria which provide for discretion are operationalised;
3. That where lower and higher courses prescribe similar admission requirements, consideration ought to be given to enrolling students into the highest qualification with the opportunity for exit provisions;
4. That lower qualifications be used as enabling courses for admission into higher courses;
5. That the grades awarded in the fourth year of studies must be taken into account when determining eligibility for a Master’s award with distinction;
6. That the maximum credit towards a Master’s course that can be provided for any Honours course is 50%; and
7. That credit for the coursework and thesis components of Honours courses towards the requirements of Master’s courses (by coursework or by coursework and dissertation) must be given in accordance with the following:
   (a) Credit can only be given where the content of the fourth-year coursework and dissertation are directly related to content of the articulating Master’s course;
   (b) If articulation is to a Master’s course by coursework, both the fourth-year coursework and dissertation components attract full credit (48 points) in a 96-point degree;
   (c) If articulation is to a Master’s degree by coursework and dissertation, both the fourth-year coursework and dissertation components attract full credit in a 96-point degree provided that at least 50% of the course is undertaken at Level 5; and
   (d) The Honours dissertation, if credited towards the Master’s degree may constitute the dissertation component of the master’s degree in full or in part.’

As the principal author of the above I do not see it as suggesting (a) that there is direct articulation from an Honours course or that (b) the award of a honours degree is an appropriate exit award from a master’s degree, even in situations where the content of the Graduate Diploma and the Honours year are very similar if not identical. The word ‘articulation’ is referred to in 7 (a) and (b) but this was intended to draw attention to possible upward course progression (with appropriate credits) rather than the direct transfer to another course as is normal in articulating from a graduate diploma to a master’s degree.

In view of the uncertainty concerning this issue, the SWP would appreciate guidance from the BCS.

Many thanks for your consideration.

D. H. Plowman,
Chair, Standing Working Party