



This submission argues against passing section 10 of the Bill which would allow higher education providers to charge Commonwealth supported students full fees for enrolling in summer semester.

Data and background

Dr Gabrielle Baldwin and Professor Craig McInnis (2002) have published a most useful review of *The organisation of the academic year: trends, implications and issues* which includes a review of international practice. They (Baldwin & McInnis, 2002: 5) report –

The norm for summer sessions in the United States, then, is still a shorter term, more intensive teaching, limited course offerings and a student enrolment considerably less than that of the other semesters. One intake a year, in the Fall semester, still seems to be the dominant practice, and higher education enrolment figures from the federal government's Centre for Education Statistics are all based on Fall enrolments.

However, the numbers of enrolments in summer sessions have grown steadily in recent decades. Young and McDougall estimated that, up to 1960, summer session enrolments were approximately one-fourth as large as the ensuing Fall semester enrolments. They also estimated that, by 1991, this figure had increased to a range of 30 to 45 per cent in different institutions. Unfortunately national figures are not collected; these statistics were calculated from sample surveys of institutions.

Baldwin & McInnis (2002: 16-7) report about Australia –

DETYA statistics (2001) show that student load in semesters other than the two 'standard' ones has increased as a percentage of the first semester load from 0.9 per cent in 1994 to 5.6 per cent in 2000.

In 2000, the institutions with the highest enrolments in 'non-standard' semesters, in rank order, were Curtin, the University of Western Sydney, Monash, Central Queensland University, the University of Southern Queensland, and the University of South Australia. DETYA statistics reveal that three universities (Curtin, Monash and the University of Western Sydney) teach in five different 'semesters' in a year, five other universities in four 'semesters' and 25 in three, almost all in the summer. Open Learning Australia runs four terms a year, in a system which does not attempt to mesh with other university timetables.

Despite the rise in enrolments, the impression is still of a piecemeal approach in most cases. Few universities seem to have taken on the summer session as an institutional issue; it is still largely a matter of initiatives taken by departments or faculties.

The table below shows that the proportion of on shore student load in non standard semesters including the summer semester has fallen to 3.95% in 2003 (assuming that the data scopes and definitions are identical to those used by Baldwin & McInnis).

TABLE 1: ON SHORE STUDENT LOAD FOR ALL STUDENTS IN STANDARD SEMESTERS AND NON STANDARD SEMESTERS, 2003

Standard semesters	Non standard semesters	Non standard semesters as % of total load	Total load
503,045	24,409	3.95	618,334

Source: Waugh, James, University Statistics Section, Department of Education Science and Training, students, selected higher education statistics (DEST), table: onshore student load (eftsu) for all students by State, institution, domestic\overseas, and semester, 2003, 20 August 2004.

The present amendment concerns domestic students only, for whom the numbers are even smaller.

TABLE 2: ON SHORE STUDENT LOAD FOR DOMESTIC STUDENTS IN STANDARD SEMESTERS AND NON STANDARD SEMESTERS, 2003

Standard semesters	Non standard semesters	Non standard semesters as % of total load	Total load
485,533	15,513	3.08	503,046

Source: Waugh, James, University Statistics Section, Department of Education Science and Training, students, selected higher education statistics (DEST), table: onshore student load (eftsu) for all students by State, institution, domestic\overseas, and semester, 2003, 20 August 2004.

Rationale for the amendment

It is not clear that the *Higher Education Funding Act 1988* authorises institutions to charge higher education contribution scheme students fees for summer semester enrolments. Nonetheless, universities have done so pursuant to the Commonwealth's *Advice to higher education institutions on fees for ancillary or additional services* (DEST, 2004) –

Charges which may be levied by higher education institutions

Consistent with these principles, the following are cases in which higher education institutions may charge students for goods or services which are ancillary or additional to their course of study.

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2. If goods or services that are an essential component of a course are made readily available at no additional charge by higher education institutions, then institutions may charge students for:

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alternative access to those materials or services—for example, reading material such as anthologies of required readings provided that these texts are also available at no additional charge; and units in non-standard semesters which allow accelerated completion of programmes or which are offered for remedial purposes, provided that such units are also available within normal semester periods on a Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) liable basis.

There is no evidence that the department audits compliance with this advice aside from investigating complaints, and there are at least some instances of institutions charging hecs-liable students for enrolment in elective subjects that are offered only over summer.

The *Higher Education Support Act 2003* restores the Commonwealth's initial position that a hecs-liable student should be charged hecs consistently for all subjects taken in all semesters. As I argue below, there are strong reasons for expanding summer semester enrolments. There are 2 ways in which this may be done. I shall argue below that the better way to is to redistribute the current student load over summer to use buildings, facilities and staff more efficiently. This can be done within current funding arrangements and levels – indeed, it would use current resources more efficiently.

The alternative is to enrol students in summer semester in addition to institutions' current load. This requires additional funding, hence the desire to charge hecs-liable students full fees for summer semester enrolments. Since under this arrangement summer semester generates staff workload above that provided in the standard budget, some teaching staff insist on extra pay for teaching over summer. This establishes the extremely undesirable practice of paying staff who are ostensibly employed for the whole year to teach over summer. The logical implication is that the salary currently paid to full time members of staff is for work from, say, February to November each year. Academic employment only for teaching semesters is common in the US, but this does not seem to be in staff's best interests.

The Bill would continue the current practice of using the summer semester for additional student and staff workload. Yet this approach has failed to increase summer semester student load: summer semester student load fell under the current arrangements from 5.6% in 2000 to 3.95% in 2003. The Bill would establish the summer semester as an anomaly, which is not a good long term policy. The better approach is to establish the summer semester as a standard teaching semester.

Summer semester as a standard teaching semester

There are strong reasons for establishing the summer semester as a standard teaching semester.

1 To give students greater flexibility

While there doesn't seem much demand at present from students to study over summer, this is partly because very few subjects are offered, they are mostly offered for full fees which have to be paid up front, and students are reflecting historical study patterns which will become anachronistic.

2 To use buildings and other capital facilities more fully

Teaching and large areas of student space are mostly unused from early November (start of swot vac) to the end of February (orientation week) each year. While universities take advantage of the virtual absence of teaching over summer to repair, maintain and do minor works on teaching and student space, equipment and facilities, works are done on only a small proportion of the total idle space. Routine maintenance and repair can be scheduled routinely throughout the year and in the break of some 6 weeks between the semester 1 and 2 teaching periods.

3 To employ staff more productively

It is often said that academic staff conduct research in the 3 months from finishing their marking in late November to starting teaching in early March. This is true of some staff, but it is not true of at least 44% of continuing academic staff who do not produce a publication counted by the Department of Education, Science and Training each year. While these staff are presumably engaged usefully, they could be engaged more productively by teaching over summer.

4 To demonstrate cost-effective use of public resources

The widespread public perception that universities are 'on holidays' from November to March each year is as damaging as it is erroneous. This misapprehension is due largely to the lack of classes on campus over summer and would be dispelled by establishing the summer semester as a standard teaching semester.

The summer semester is half the length of each of semester 1 and 2 and so class timetables have to be condensed if subjects of standard weight are transferred to semester 3. There are also transitional costs in changing standard – entrenched – practices. But otherwise there is no reason in principle why a subject should cost more to offer in semester 3 than in either of the other semesters since the same workload is just redistributed differently throughout the year. Staff would replace their current teaching load in semester 1 or 2 with a teaching load in semester 3. Staff who use semester 3 for research would be released in semester 1 or 2 instead. Indeed, there are considerable advantages in taking a standard teaching load over summer. It is more intensive, but it takes half the number of weeks of semester 1 or 2 and thus releases longer research time in a standard semester.

These arguments of principle have not succeeded in increasing summer enrolments. Academic staff like the long summer break, they are disinclined to disturb current work patterns, there are practical problems to overcome, and these together combine to block the implementation of general policies to increase the student load taught over summer.

One solution would be to increase universities' involvement in the allocation of academic staff research time. Universities claim the general position that all academic staff conduct research. However, universities generally claim and have little or no control over any other aspect of an academic staff member's research: what they research, when they research, how they research, or what they do with any results. The allocation of academic staff research time is almost completely left to the discretion of each member of staff. Universities should establish a partnership between the institution and its staff over the allocation of their research time. This would have the complementary effect of increasing universities' ability to establish the summer semester as a standard teaching semester.

Gavin Moodie
21 August 2004

References

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