

## MEMORANDUM

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FROM	Fiona Beals, VUWSA Education Organiser, on behalf of Seamus Brady, VUWSA President
TO	Ishbel Guilliard
DATE	24 February 2011
SUBJECT	Proposed changes to entry in second year Law

Thank you for the opportunity for comment on the proposal to restrict entry into the LLB to a student's second year of study. Over the last seven days, the Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association (VUWSA) has been in contact with the Victoria University of Wellington Law Students' Society (VUWLSS) and current Faculty Delegates on the Faculty of Law Academic Board.

We would like to table the following comments for consideration. In particular, we would request that:

- Clear and widespread consultation occur with students enrolled in the LLB programme to see what the implications of these changes would be for them on the current student culture within Law, the ways in which the relationship between students and VUWLSS would be affected and the implications on how the programme at Victoria is viewed by students as a result of these changes;
- Information is provided to VUWSA and VUWLSS as to how other universities have responded to the current pressures of Government policy on course/programme completion;
- And that the University, as a whole, looks beyond changes to specific programmes and looks at a coordinated way to manage the first year which would take into consideration the long-term 'pipeline' effects of entry into professional programmes after the first year and a potential clustering of students within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

The following expands upon our comments and provides some discussion as to our rationale for each. Please note, as a principle, we are in support of looking at the management of the

first year within any degree programme. However, we are aware that no students were consulted in the Faculty stages of developing this proposal. We are also aware that this proposal might set a 'reactive' precedent in other faculties wishing to limit enrolments into a programme through looking at the needs of the programme itself rather than the broader educational needs of students.

We would like to see the proposal from Law be considered more as a 'proactive' way of allowing students to step into a course of study and, as such, this document should be used to open discussions within the University community about the first year in general. Such discussions should include wide consultation and engagement with the student body.

### **Clear and widespread consultation**

VUWSA and VUWLSS believe that there is a strong need for greater consultation amongst the students currently enrolled in the LLB. Whilst both VUWSA and VUWLSS recognise that the proposed changes are a direct result to Government policy around the funding of tertiary education, we are concerned that putting through these changes without a strong understanding of the impacts that they will have on students may have unforeseen negative implications on the student experience and student culture of the Law School.

We would appreciate more time before this proposal is accepted in general. This way we will be able to confirm that the position we take reflects that of the wider student body within the LLB programme. Already we have a mixture of students who see more benefits in Option One and we have students who prefer the Tabled Option (Two). We do realise that this might not be possible. However, this does not mean that consultation cannot occur after any changes are put into place. Student consultation in the first Trimester 2011 and first Trimester 2012 could be used to put into place systems which will ensure that students still feel supported by the Faculty of Law and by VUWLSS within first year LAWS papers. VUWLSS and VUWSA would be keen to support and, if needed, co-ordinate this.

Consultation with students could also help in the communications aspect of the proposed changes. VUWSA is aware from the Academic Programme Review survey it did of students in 2010 that there is a general feeling, especially amongst first year students, that communications within the Law programme could be improved. We are concerned that even though part of the rationale for the fast-tracking of these changes is 'communication', whatever communications strategy is adopted must actually meet the needs of current and prospective students. Furthermore, for students in first year LAWS papers, communication needs to clearly guide them into the LLB or their proposed alternative programme of study.

Finally, within all this, we are concerned about the impact on the concept of being a Law student at Victoria. Not only in relation to our respective associations but in relation to the marketability of Law at Victoria to prospective students; whilst, other Universities such as Otago and Auckland have similar controls on first year enrolment and second year entry, it is clear that despite the fact that students may not be formally enrolled in the Law Programme, they are still seen as Law students. Any consultation should look at the impact of this change on the student 'identity' and experience.

## **What is currently happening at other Universities**

VUWLSS and VUWSA would like to see how Victoria sees the changes proposed to the LLB degree sit alongside other comparable degrees offered at New Zealand Universities. We are aware that at two universities the LLB has similar restrictions into second year. The key difference between what seems to be offered and what is proposed at Victoria concerns whether the student is considered a Law student in the first or second year of study. Whilst, our general observations may need to be corrected (we can only go on what is communicated on the websites of these respective Universities), it seems that these universities have met both requirements – the ability to limit second year enrolment and reduce the impact on programme completion and the ability for students to be able to see themselves as first-year Law students.

As the University is probably aware, the University of Auckland has a four year/part degree. Students are required to enrolment in a conjoint degree in the first year. In order to get to the second year they have to pass the first part of the Law degree. At second year they are able to drop their conjoint degree. If they fail part one Law they can continue with their conjoint degree. Whilst it is not clear from the detail we can access as to whether students who don't continue through to part two are considered as failing to complete a programme, the way the programme is structured appears to suggest that each year is considered a separate step leading to the next step. Even though the programme is limited to conjoint degree students – a first year Law student at Auckland is a Law student.

Again the University is probably aware of the structure at Otago. The calendar on the website does not give a full overview of the structure of the programme. However, it does stress that full admission into Law only occurs in Year Two. Hence, first year Law students enter into the Law Programme in their second year of study.

Currently at Victoria, under the VUWLSS Constitution, all students enrolled in law papers (whether or not enrolled in the degree) are automatically members of VUWLSS. However, the fact that students would not be enrolled as law students in their first year is still likely to cause confusion. Furthermore, it may negatively impact on attendance at VUWLSS social and educational events, the use of VUWLSS advocacy and advice, and therefore the sense of being a 'real' law student. This would occur at a time where VUWLSS is trying to appeal and cater to younger students through things like the first year mentoring and the second year camp (that occurs in the first weeks of second year for new second year students). In effect, it would impact the whole of the first-year experience for students in a way that would not see students integrated into the academic community (which includes both students and academics) within the Law Faculty.

It may appear to be no 'big deal' but being a first year Law student at Victoria does carry a particular identity, association and, for most, pride with it. It is obvious that in changes to programmes in other New Zealand universities, universities have tried to find a compromise so that students can hold that identity in the first year and step into the full programme in the second. We realise that moving towards a Conjoint option like that offered in Otago will be an impossibility if the conjoint option for first year students is removed. However, perhaps given that in one Academic Board meeting we will be looking at two proposals to change the pathway options available to students in the first year (this one and the one for conjoint

degrees), we should be looking at the over all first year experience for students – how we can enhance this and how we can actually engage with the reality of first year study for students.

### **The first-year academic experience**

In the 2010, the New Zealand Union of Students' Association's student Income and Expenditure Survey (Colmar Brunton, 2011) surveyed 2,869 students studying at New Zealand universities and polytechnics. Part of the survey looked at the choices students made about the institutions, courses and programmes of study. These choices shed some light around why students come to a university. The three reasons that guide student decisions in enrolment are: the courses offered by an institution (32%), the institution's reputation (23%) and the location of the institution (20%). Compared to polytechnic students, university students are more likely to be swayed by the university's reputation and location.

VUWSA has not had time to survey students in the LLB programme to see whether these findings relate to the choice of Law at Victoria; however, our Academic Programme Review survey did confirm that the 'atmosphere' of the Law Faculty and the Victoria reputation as having a high-quality learning experience were aspects within the current programme that enhanced the learning experience. We need to ensure that prospective students still have the sense that they are 'coming to Victoria to study Law' and be part of the academic community of the Law Faculty. Just the reality that students will not experience Law as a home faculty in their first year could have ongoing ramifications for how students feel going through to second and third year. This could heighten the alienation that some first year students already feel with most first year papers being taught from Kelburn. It could also affect the ways in which students who have stepped into the programme treat first-year students and include them in the overall student experience. This could have ramifications for their experiences with VUWLSS.

Furthermore, surveyed students were more likely to choose university courses based on interest (31%) than polytechnic students (28%). Whilst, this finding indicates that just under a third of university students choose base on interest, the survey also indicated that students drop out of, and change programmes of study, due to interest. We realise that the current TEU funding situation does not take interest into account as a factor for non-competition; however, given that students often enrol in a major and swap in the first year, it could timely for the university to consider the following:

- Having students enrol interest in a programme of study offered by a faculty – this faculty becomes the home faculty for students and offers course advice for entry into 2<sup>nd</sup> year programmes;
- Students complete the first year requirements and apply to be considered for a major (full entry into a programme of study) in the second year.

Such a method may decrease the swapping between programmes but also increase programme completion. It would also ensure that students still have a home faculty but that FHSS is not overburdened as the home faculty for all qualifications.

Finally, VUWSA, as the official representative body of all Victoria students, we are concerned with the longterm 'pipeline' effects this may have on the student experience at Victoria. Particularly within FHSS and FCA; we are aware that in order to control the entrance of

students into their qualification and the completion of these qualifications that these faculties may have to cap courses and overload the workload of course advisors and administrators which will negatively impact upon student learning experience. In particular, FHSS is already (in student opinion) an 'under resourced' faculty so expecting more of this Faculty can only make the academic experience more stressful for students and staff. We are further concerned that potential non-completion statistics transferred over to FHSS may lead further limitations on the resources provided and even the closing of programmes of study.

As the representative body of students, we are very concerned about how Law as a course of study will be perceived as 'greater value' than other courses. Expecting all students to meet an agreeable threshold of attainment in order to continue with studies should be an expectation within all programmes. Having a more flexible first year when every student steps into full admission into a programme of study in the second year may reduce the chances that the University, in the future, adopts draconian measures of locking students into a qualification in the enrolment period in order to meet the TEU criteria.

Finally, this final point, which we request be tabled for serious discussion, would not take away the culture of being a 'Law', 'Arts', 'Science', 'Engineering', 'Architecture', 'Design' student (we have omitted Education for logical purposes – students do not become Education students until the second year of study or the Grad Dip level). Students would, by the nature of enrolling in a home Faculty, be a student of the discipline and faculty. They only step into the major/s of their subject area in the second year.

Again we thank you for this opportunity and welcome further discussion into this decision and the others which will inevitably flow on from it. In the future, whatever procedure is adopted, both VUWSA and VUWLSS would like to see better funding for educational experiences of students in Law (as we do in all faculties). We are, overall, concerned with the ways in which this proposal would be implemented and the potential far-ranging effects for all students at Victoria. Whilst we know that this is, in the greatest part, related to Government funding and policy, we would encourage the tertiary sector, as a whole, to advocate for the educational needs of their students. As we have pointed out locking students into programmes in the first year does not suit all students. The nature of university disciplines and study means that many secondary school subjects (and pedagogical approaches) do not flow on to tertiary equivalents. Already there is an increasing body of international research which suggests that funding may be better targeted at attainment of level of qualification than the completion of a programme of study.

Colmar Brunton (2011). *Student income and expenditure survey 2010*. Wellington: Colmar Brunton.