

FROM	Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association (VUWSA)
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TO	Martin Boswell (VUW Senior Academic Quality Adviser)
DATE	15 July 2015
SUBJECT	Submission on Trimester Three

1. Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposal to create a regular, twelve-week summer trimester. Over the past two weeks, VUWSA have been surveying students to gauge feedback on the proposal. This survey looked at three fundamental areas that are crucial to considering the proposal:

1. The value of Trimester Three
2. The best option to extend Trimester Three
3. The value of the Trimester Two mid-trimester break

We have prepared the following submission from the survey results and subsequent feedback given by the VUWSA Executive and other student leaders. This includes a range of class representatives who have been specifically trained to gather informal feedback from class members, as well as being tasked with obtaining a general perspective of student opinion. We have also gained feedback from the Student Academic Committee, made up of student representatives on various Faculty Boards and representatives from student faculty societies. Students from all seven faculties provided feedback, including both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Despite the relatively short consultation period we received 437 responses to our survey.

From the feedback received by VUWSA, it is recommended that Trimester Three **should not** be extended.

2. The value of Trimester Three

When asked whether Trimester 3 should be extended to twelve-weeks, 65% of respondents either 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'. This contrasts with 13% of respondents who either agreed or strongly agreed.

Students have found little issue with the current 11-week summer trimester. Comments reflect the fact that they are satisfied with the current format and students do not see a need to extend Trimester 3. Respondents believe an extension of Trimester 3 is more detrimental than beneficial to students.

Students in fact prefer the intensity of 5-6 week courses and do not feel Trimester 3 needs to be twelve weeks.

"It would be good to have an equal amount of teaching time to the other semesters but the most common type of summer course I know of are 5-6 week intensive courses so maybe it's not needed."

"I enjoyed doing one course just to keep my brain switched on and to keep working towards the degree however there is not a large range of courses so you can't always rely on the Tri3 papers. It's important to have a work-life balance and breaks are necessary for mental wellbeing."

Students' responses mention that the fast-paced style of the courses are desirable in the sense they are quick, but of high quality;

"The whole idea of Tri 3 is that it is more intensive. I personally suit this style of learning better and get better grades in the courses because of it. I like that it is different."

"12 weeks for very intensive course papers would be too long. They're already stressed enough."

"Majority of those studying in trimester 3 are only doing a single paper, maybe two. So not all that much time is required. For example, I got an A+ in the trimester 3 course despite the shorter study time, do to being able to focus on the one paper"

"The idea of tri 3 papers is that they are more intensive, and so can be done more quickly during semester break."

A lot of students are precluded from studying in Trimester 3 as they need to undertake paid work during this time to live

"Full time study during the first 2 trimesters is stressful enough. Those two weeks gives students time to complete assignments, see family to recuperate, and pick up some much needed money.

"It is already cutting into holiday time and makes it hard for students to work and earn money. Especially when summer is a compulsory part of their degree."

"I need to work full time over this break to afford flatting and general living expenses. Also need a lot of time to do assignments and catch up on work, one week is not enough."

Furthermore, it decreases the time for other academic opportunities, such as full time internships, seminars, and conferences alike.

"Some of us who are indeed going to be studying over tri 3 need some kind of break in between the end of tri 3 and the start of tri 1. It would be a study overload for those who have no option but to continue study over the summer."

Only a small minority (15%) 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that students would benefit from the extension of Trimester 3, however the extension would have to come with other benefits such as extra courses in Trimester 3 and the rearrangement and flexibility of hand in times in Trimester 2, due to the reduction of weeks. It must be noted that the provision of extra courses in Trimester 3 should be done with the view that Trimester 3 (especially with its mid-trimester break being over the Christmas and New Year period) is a distinct trimester, and therefore teaching methods and timing of assessments would need to be altered in such additional courses.

"I believe Tri3 should be extended not only in duration but also in paper offerings. I personally would much rather be able to study over the summer like a full semester and be able to finish my degree faster. I do not however see the point in the extension, if additional extensive paper offerings are not made available during this time."

"If the proposed change were to be implemented, both the workload and corresponding expectations of how much time should be used per paper, should be reduced. I say this as an Architecture student, where the workload is already rather high - and where we are expected to use the entirety of our 'study break' for just that. This is without mentioning any possible hand-ins we may (and have had) during these breaks - which, as a tangent, is absolutely rubbish. However, I must conclude that if students were still able to get a few solid days of rest and relaxation - during what is marketed as a study-break, without the burden of multiple hand-ins, tests, etc. due during the break, or immediately when study resumes, it could be a successful proposal."

3. The best option to extend Trimester Three

Alternatively, should we be unsuccessful in retaining the current length of Trimester 3, we believe that the proposed 'least disruptive option' is in fact the most disruptive to students. **58% respondents said that reducing the mid-trimester break in trimester 2 was either the 'worst' or 'second worst' option.**

Potential other options include:

- Reducing Trimester 1 or 2 exam period
- Reducing the Trimester 1 mid-trimester break. This has some implications, particularly with Science field trips, but could be incorporated with the various public holidays during Trimester 1.

"If it must be extended, perhaps the one week break should be in Tri One due to the abundance of public holidays in this half of the years."
- Extension of Trimester 3 be implemented in conjunction with the offering of more courses in this Trimester. It must be emphasised that these courses (particularly those which are major requirements) should be also offered in either Trimester 1 or 2 to ensure that student do not feel pressured to study in all three trimesters.
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4. The value of the Trimester Two mid-trimester break

It must be emphasised that students do not use the Trimester 2 to take a break from study, but rather take a break for study. **77% of students place "a lot of value" on the two week mid-trimester break.**

"It would put a huge strain on workloads after the break"

"Adds on more stress during the trimester, usually this is a good time for me to catch up on any work or earn some more money to alleviate some of the financial stresses of being a student (i.e. rent.)"

"Less time to work on assignments and such which are due in the first week back, which would result in basically no chance in visiting home or working extra hours."

"Less time to get everything done- working extra hours to save for the next trimester so I don't have to work as much during the trimester, and catching up on uni work. This would be more stressful and leave less time for a healthy break from study!"

Most students use this break to work on assignments, especially those who are completing Honours research dissertations (489s):

"Right after the mid-trimester break is when lecturers set most due dates for assignments, and in my experience one week is never enough to do all assignments – you really need to spend both weeks on them. A reduction to one week would cause serious problems, unless lecturers are prevented from

setting due dates in the first (and maybe even second) week back. Tests are often in the first couple weeks back, which further adds to the workload during the break.”

“Don't want a shorter mid tri 2 break as we need this time to catch up on assignments.”

“The reduction of the trimester 2 break will not be compensated in the trimester's workload and this is a time where study and assignments can be completed without increasing stress. As a 4th year student who utilizes this time I would lose efficiency and become stressed, anxious and no down time results in an un-enjoyable experience.”

“It wouldn't allow me to do the laboratory work I am currently doing in between studying for one of the Vic research groups. It would halt my academic growth largely. The mid-trimester break is also a chance to take a breather from the stress of studying.”

There are also adverse implications on International students who value the mid-trimester break to travel home:

“For those of us who are international students or parents live abroad - one week is not a long enough time to be able to go home. A one week break is unfair on us and not enough time to rest.”

Architecture and Design courses are predominantly assignment-based and often do not have exams, so this is a crucial break to complete these assignments. Reducing the mid-trimester break would therefore create even more disruption for these students:

“The second semester break should not be reduced, for architecture students this is highly valued time to complete internal assessments. This may not be as important for the majority of the university students but 2 weeks without class is critical for design students.”

“This will never benefit domestic students, because staff won't teach the standard courses in the third trimester unless the other trimesters are significantly shortened. All this will do is stress out domestic students and staff for the sake of milking international students.

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Overall, it is felt that any reduction in the mid-trimester break will be adverse on student experience and wellbeing. It does not sit right with the VUW Strategic Plan which seeks to provide a student experience that is second to none.

“There aren't enough students studying over summer to justify impacting all students in the second trimester. Mid-tri break needs to be 2 weeks long to **deal with the workload**”

“More people will be negatively affected by this (students that study in trimester 2) compared to students that will benefit from this (students that study in trimester 3)”

“Mid trimester breaks are necessary to reduce stress and aid studying. They should not be shortened”

5. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, we submit that Trimester Three should not be extended. Students feel that the extension of the Trimester benefits a minority of students, while diminishing the student experience of the majority.

Additionally, students feel that the ‘least-disruptive option’ of reducing the Trimester 2 mid-trimester break is in fact the most disruptive. Further options, such as shortening the Trimester 1 or 2 exam period, should be investigated.

It must further be noted that there has been considerable concern around the limited time period for consultation, particularly because consultation on this proposal opened during the study/exam period and subsequent break. Further consultation should be organised with considerable awareness of students' ability to provide feedback.

All in all, the crux of our submission is to preserve the student experience and wellbeing of all those who attend VUW. If we are to provide a student experience that is second to none, it is crucial that students are not only listened to in this regard, but are also involved in the implementation process of any changes to the academic year.