2. SPECIAL CONSIDERATION

A discussion paper prepared by the Guild was circulated with the agenda.

It was noted that this matter had been previously referred to Academic Council by the FLPS but that the matter had been put on hold due to the submission of this discussion paper.

A/Prof Jane Long had asked that this discussion paper be distributed to the FAO/SubDean group for their comment before submission to the Assessment Standing Committee which will be meeting at the end of August.

Members felt that the timeline for feedback, ie before the Assessment Standing Committee meeting at the end of August was not sufficient to allow a considered response to this complex matter. Trudi assured members that this was not the only opportunity for input that this group would have. She asked for a preliminary response in order to inform the deliberations of the Assessment Standing Committee. Some members mentioned that they would like to seek input from their faculty prior to commenting.

It was noted that the document is an attempt to create more equity across the University with the application of extensions etc. It was also suggested that due to the tight timeline for responses from the FAOs to the Assessment Standing Committee, that their responses could run in parallel with the ASC and the information from both be passed on to the Teaching and Learning Committee.

There was general discussion during which the following points were raised:

• How many applications for 'special consideration' were received - what was the extent of the problem?
• There may be good reason for diversity across (and within) the faculties as well as between individual students presenting with individual problems.
• In general are we too accepting of the face-value of a medical certificate?
• Students don’t understand the process and some rort the system while others do not use it when they should.
• Concern about cut-off dates for extensions to assessment deadlines; it was mentioned that any extensions to assessment deadlines should be received before the HECS dates.
• It was suggested that it would be a good idea that faculties retain some ownership in that they should have the option to consider applications on their individual merit.
• It was suggested that faculties provide feedback re the policy itself.
• Standard template letters could be developed in relation to Recommendation 8.
• 5.2 of the paper overlaps with the recent review of the subdeans. It was pointed out that although the titles are different the functions undertaken by these people are similar and there is not as much diversity as there might seem at first glance.

Members were asked to send further comments (following consultation with colleagues in their faculties/areas to Trudi McGlade).
Comments from Dr Jane Emberson, Academic Student Adviser, Faculty of Life and Physical Sciences:

As agreed at the recent meeting of sub-deans & FAOs, people need to have time to consider the paper prepared by Clare Hannell and Gina Barron on special consideration; it's not appropriate to expect quick responses. I note that the header says "May 2006", but it wasn't distributed till 3rd August, and many of us have had much too much work to give it serious thought. Below I make a few initial comments.

I agree very strongly with the comment made at the meeting on the importance of academic teaching staff in the process of special consideration. They are the ones who actually grapple with the complications of extensions, discretionary marking, special arrangements, setting & marking deferred exams, etc. etc. If a working party is set up to review special consideration, as recommended in the paper (recommendation 1), then academic teaching staff must be included. It would be a major failing to omit them.

The paper refers to a “reference group to look at reasonable accommodation and mental health promotions” (p.6). I attended some meetings of this group last year, as almost the only representative of faculty or academic staff. It was, in my view, a fundamental weakness of that group, too, that no academic teaching staff were included -- again, the staff who would actually be involved in trying to make "reasonable accommodation" in academic courses for students with mental health issues. I put that view more than once to Janet Renner, who had convened the group, arguing that there should be an absolute minimum of two members of teaching staff, including one whose discipline involved laboratory work.

My other main comment on the current report is that it does not appear to acknowledge the very wide range of grounds on which students seek special consideration, ranging from the very serious to the rather trivial. One of the aspects of equity, which we must try to uphold, is not giving excessive concessions to students on rather trivial grounds, bearing in mind that many students make no such requests. The report seems to be aiming at a "standardisation" of outcomes (see, for example, pp.16-17), whereas faculties and teaching staff strive to do what is appropriate in the individual case.

On the question of "retrospective consideration", this Faculty has already put forward a proposal, which was strongly supported by the sub-deans'/FAOs' group, that the University should set a time-limit for seeking special consideration. Students should not be given the expectation that final results ratified by a Board of Examiners are open to change retrospectively on submission of a medical certificate, etc.; gross inequities could result, apart from the unworkability of a system in which no result could ever be seen as final. Setting a time-limit would in no way restrict the process for amending results that are found to be incorrect, nor the right of students to appeal against results on grounds of unfairness. Moreover, special consideration would still be able to be sought with regard to further outcomes, e.g. sanctions for unsatisfactory progress. And everyone acknowledges that there is always scope for exceptions in truly exceptional circumstances.

I hope that this Faculty's Teaching & Learning Committee will consider the document and make its own comments, perhaps also circulating it more widely for discussion.

Comments from Mr Harvey Von Bergheim, Manager, Student Administration:

5.1 APPLICATION FORMS

• Alternative Exam Arrangement

Students indicate when re-enrolling/enrolling whether they have a disability. The Disability Officer contacts the student/students for documentation. Student completes Alternative Examination Recommendation Form, which is then forwarded to the Sub-Dean/Faculty/Adviser after assessing by the Disability Officer.
5.3 NOTIFICATION OF OUTCOME

- All faculties write to students who are granted deferred exams, informing them of the exam period.
- Students who have registered with the Disability Office are informed that when the exam timetable is published, that they may view their personal timetable via student connect.

Comments from the Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Visual Arts:

ALVA Response to “Special Consideration at UWA: Discussion Paper” 
15th August 2006
Prepared by Kate Hislop (Associate Dean) and Jacqueline Flowers (FAO)

In General:

ALVA is happy to support Recommendation 1 that the Assessment Standing Committee establish a working party to review special consideration and develop policy, however we feel that some of the recommendations contained in the report are not appropriate to be included in the terms of reference for this working party.

Overall, ALVA supports consistency across the university in terms of access to, and the process for, special consideration. However, we are strongly of the belief that Faculties need to be able to retain discretion in the outcome of any special consideration application. In many instances, the way the consideration is applied is linked closely to the discipline / degree in which the student is enrolled, and it is not always appropriate to mandate outcomes under these circumstances. We believe that students are better served by a system that allows flexibility and discretion to be applied by the decision maker, so long as the process is clear, transparent and equitable. We are also of the view that the processes of special consideration presently undertaken by the faculties appear relatively consistent, apart from the variations in nomenclature of the decision maker which is the subject of another current university review. It would seem reasonable that the development of a central university policy adopt a bottom-up rather than top-down approach in recognition of the fact that the faculties generally have similar attitudes and approaches to special consideration. We support modifications to existing practices where it will improve processes with regard to equity and access for students, and where it may achieve the desired consistency without compromising the need for faculty-specific responses and discretion.

Recommendation 2 “Review and clarify terminology and definition in regards to reasonable accommodations/adjustments provided to students”:

We are unsure what concerns the Guild has with current terminology / definitions, and are satisfied that all appropriate outcomes are currently available to students. Not sure of the necessity of this recommendation, however happy for it to be included in the business of the working party if it will assist with policy development.

Recommendation 3 “Review existing University rules and policy in the development of a special consideration policy” and Recommendation 4 “Consider any faculty specific rules and policy to ensure consistency with University rules and policy”

ALVA is happy to support the development of a UWA policy regarding special consideration. Any policy should take into consideration points of similarity in current Faculty practice and should incorporate current practices as much as practicable. Any policy should ingrain the concept of discretion at the Faculty level in applying outcomes. Faculties need to be extensively consulted regarding any new policy.

Recommendation 5 “Consider the variety of extension request processes currently available at UWA...”:
ALVA feels that in the vast majority of cases extension requests are outside the purview of the special consideration process. In the main, extensions are an issue to do with the assessment of a unit and are the responsibility of the school to manage as they prefer, so long as equity is maintained within each unit and ideally within the school. In cases where the outcome of a special consideration request is an extension of an assessment deadline this can be fed back down to a school without issue. Whilst we understand the concerns that the UWA Guild has with the proliferation of extension policies, we again feel that there are significant differences between disciplines for good reason and that this is not an issue that needs to be resolved at a University wide level. There may be some advantage to schools being aware of other practices throughout the University and being asked to ensure that they apply a fair and equitable process, but this does not need to be the subject of a University wide policy and this would indeed be detrimental both to students and staff. In addition, if requests for extensions to deadlines were to utilise the special consideration form which is sent to Student Admin for entry into Callista, this would mean a substantial increase in workload for Admin staff. In the experience of ALVA, the number of requests for extensions outweighs requests for all other forms of special consideration numerous times over.

Recommendation 6 “Review the current Special Consideration form”.

ALVA understands that a review of the current form has already been proposed by Student Administration, we would support the Guild being involved in this process. Any review of the current form should wait until any new policy is developed.

Recommendation 7 “Consider the issue of differing titles/positions of staff managing Special Consideration applications”:

The differing nomenclature used to describe what is essentially the old 'sub-dean' position is already underway through the Sub-Dean review. In all cases (possibly with the exception of Education) it is this position that is managing special consideration cases within each Faculty. As such we do not believe it is appropriate for any working party to separately consider this issue which is already the subject of a thorough review.

Recommendation 8 “Consider the issue of notification to students…”

Any Uni wide policy on special consideration should include the process of notification to students, including time limits, timeframe for a response, notification of the outcome, and explanation of a denied application (including appeal process).

Recommendation 9 “Consider who are acceptable report providers and incorporates this in policy…”

Looking at the working paper, we feel that the definition of an acceptable report provider and the contact Faculties have with such providers is already pretty consistent across the University. Again, this should be included in the development of any policy document.

Recommendation 10 “Consider the procedures currently in place across the Faculties to assist with standardisation and consistency for students and the role of support person/advocate in the processing of applications”:

Again, looking at the discussion paper, there is already much consistency in regards to the process for students to apply for special consideration (fill in a form and have an interview with the sub-dean). ALVA supports embedding in any policy the role of a support person / advocate in the process.

Recommendation 11 “Consider outcomes possible through an application for Special Consideration…”

5.6.1 – supplementary assessment. The belief of the Guild that there is inconsistency in the awarding of supplementary assessment as an outcome of special consideration appears to
be misguided. If a student is awarded consideration for an assessment item in or for a unit to be marked with discretion, and the outcome of such marking then makes a student eligible for supplementary assessment, the supp is not an outcome of special consideration – the mark was the outcome of the consideration, gaining that mark then allows normal university rules to be applied in awarding a supplementary assessment. There is no inconsistency here.

5.6.2 – marking with discretion. ALVA would support the provision of guidelines to assist with determining appropriate addition of marks for students who have been granted special consideration. We would suggest that the person who approves the special consideration application should also be responsible for recommending a particular % addition to the unit coordinator / marker to ensure consistency and equity.

**Recommendation 12 “Define issues of evidence and confidentiality in policy development...”**

ALVA does not see a problem with current records management practices in terms of maintaining confidentiality. Current University policy already states levels of confidentiality required for different types of student records and this should be sufficient.

The Faculty feels that it is difficult to define and mandate types of evidence which are acceptable for applications for consideration. We can provide students with examples of the types of evidence they may need, but special consideration is granted for all sorts of circumstances that students find themselves in and we would not support the limiting of circumstances in which special consideration can be applied. Again, the circumstances in which consideration may be appropriate differ greatly between disciplines, degrees and faculties and we need to retain the discretion to accept what evidence we believe is appropriate for a particular circumstance.

**Recommendation 13 “Consider and define retrospective Special Consideration and the circumstances in which it can be applied”**

ALVA feels that the decision maker should have discretion to apply retrospective consideration where appropriate, perhaps up to a maximum period of 12 months (consistent with the time limit for lodging a formal request for grievance resolution). Retrospective applications after this time may be considered at the discretion of the decision maker but only where the student can supply evidence of exceptional mitigating circumstances that prevented them from lodging a retrospective application for consideration within the stipulated time.

**Recommendation 14 “Develop in policy any guidelines regarding limitations that can be applied to applications for special consideration”**

6.3.1 Number – Where students have a chronic or ongoing situation ALVA encourages students to learn to manage their situation in order that continual applications for consideration become unnecessary. We view special consideration to be mostly for ‘crisis’ or unusual situations. However, in some cases, students do need continued support and this may take the form of repeated requests for special consideration – in most cases students in this situation will also be registered with the disability office. This is something that needs to be considered on a case by case basis.

6.3.2 Adjustments - In general ALVA does not approve combinations of outcomes on a special consideration request (i.e. extension and discretionary marking), however in some cases it is appropriate. Again, this needs to be considered on a case by case basis with faculties exercising their discretion. Guiding principle should be one outcome per unit.

6.3.3 Time limit – Any deadline for an application for special consideration should be able to be applied with discretion by the faculty. In some cases it is not possible for students to apply within a certain time frame, however any policy should encourage students to apply at the time the difficulty arises. The faculty would support a process whereby students who are
applying ‘late’ or retrospectively would need to provide evidence as to why they were unable to apply during the normal timeframe.

Recommendation 15 “Steps to improve the knowledge and understanding among staff as to the factors impacting on decision making…”

ALVA would support the training of relevant decision makers on the issues associated with providing equitable service to students, including knowledge of the relevant acts.

Comments from the Faculty of Education:

EXTRACT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF
THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION
HELD FRIDAY, 11 AUGUST 2006

5. SPECIAL CONSIDERATION AT UWA

A discussion paper prepared by the Guild, Special Consideration at UWA, was discussed at the meeting of the FAO/Subdeans’ Group held on 4 August 2006. This paper had been referred to that Group by the Acting Deputy Vice Chancellor (Education) for input prior to consideration by the Assessment Standing Committee.

It was noted that the Guild has expressed concerns over the inconsistency between Faculties for Special Consideration.

Members discussed the paper in which the following points were made:

- The inconsistency between Faculties created problems especially for student enrolled in combined degrees.
- Members would like to have guidelines to follow. These guidelines would include time-limits for accepting requests for Special Consideration, including time-limits for accepting request for retrospective Special Consideration.
- Members would like Faculty time-limits for requests for Special Consideration to be specific in the Rules.
- The Faculty of Education would align their practices with those approved by Academic Council.
- The faculty would like to have further input into any recommendations made to Academic Council.

Compiled by Trudi McGlade
19 September 2006