The purpose of this paper is to clarify the main structural features of undergraduate courses within the Future Framework, particularly the relationship between units, levels and majors. Its focus is on matters likely to arise in the process of developing the new courses. It does not attempt to cover every administrative implication.

It considers frequently asked questions about some recommendations of the Review report *Education for Tomorrow’s World*, and provides answers drawn from several sources: the report itself, the subsequent paper “Responses to the Report” (Academic Board 19 November 2008), and discussions since then by working parties (including faculty groups) and the Implementation Committee.

The paper assumes a basic understanding of relevant sections and recommendations of *Education for Tomorrow’s World*. This report is available on the Documents page of the Future Framework website: http://www.futureframework.uwa.edu.au/documents

1. **How rigid is the 2+2+4 unit sequence for constructing a major?**

1.1 **Normal structure and permissible variants**

*Education for Tomorrow’s World* states (p.14) that “a Bachelor degree is to be defined primarily by the requirement to complete at least one major – that is, the following developmental structure within the same disciplinary field: two units at level 1, two at level 2, and four at level 3”. The schematic diagram on p.16 of the report indicates the unit sequence of the major in visual terms. While this is the normal structure, the Board of Coursework Studies may approve exceptions if justified by the nature of the course. The following points indicate a little more flexibility than the 2+2+4 sequence may seem to imply.

1.2 **Flexibility at Level 1**

Currently, students in some fields (e.g. Science and Commerce) do not have to decide on their majors until their second year. For various majors the new structures preserve this flexibility, because a student can take up to 12 units at level 1. Although some of these will be broadening units, there may still be plenty of scope for choosing several foundation units that allow different majors to be pursued. Some of those first-year units can be retrospectively designated as the Level 1 components of the major sequence and others can be designated as “elective” or perhaps (depending on their relationship to the major) “complementary” units.

1.3 **Flexibility at Levels 2-3**

The principle underlying Rec. 7 (b) of the Review report is that differentiation and progression of unit levels is educationally important to ensure developmental learning can occur. However, there is room for some practical flexibility in applying this principle. The paper “Responses to the Report” (Academic Board, Nov. 08) acknowledges that it should be possible – if academically justified – for levels 2 and 3 to be less sharply distinguished.

This could assist students wishing to take two majors. It could also recognise the particular demands of some fields of study: for example, the steady cumulative acquisition of knowledge and skill required for foreign language learning may (arguably) be better suited to a 2+3+3 sequence. The Board of Coursework Studies can reasonably be expected to modify Rec. 7(b) as follows:
The major should normally include two level-2 units and four level-3 units.

In exceptional cases the requirement can be a total of 6 units across level 2 and level 3 – provided that:
1) a persuasive academic justification is given for this;
2) at least three level-3 units from the degree-specific major are included;
3) at least four units within the course as a whole (not necessarily within the degree-specific major) are at level 3.

2. What is the difference between a major and a “degree-specific” major?

The difference is situational, not intrinsic. A major becomes degree-specific when it determines which degree a student’s course belongs to. Many students will complete only a single major, which automatically becomes degree-specific.

In other cases a student may complete two majors (or a double major, if there is a common pair of units at level 1), and will opt to have one of those designated as the degree-specific major. If those two majors are taken from the offerings of two different degrees (e.g. Physics from the BSc list and Music from the BA list), the student’s decision on which will be the degree-specific major then determines which major is the basis for prescribing the complementary units to be undertaken; and it also provides the rationale for the nomenclature of the degree that is awarded (if Physics is the degree-specific major, the student graduates with a BSc).

For each of the new undergraduate degrees there will be a distinct list of majors that are approved as potentially degree-specific majors: one list for the BA, another for the BCom, and so on.

3. How many majors can a School or Faculty offer?

There is no fixed number. In developing proposals, faculties will strike a balance between what is academically desirable and what is financially feasible.

However, unless fewer majors are offered than at present it will be difficult to achieve the goal (Rec. 17) of substantially reducing the total number of units offered.

4. Can any discipline offer two majors?

Rec 7 (f) states “that faculties wishing to expand their specialisation beyond the eight-unit degree-specific major and four complementary units be able to offer a double major, but that it should remain possible for a student to graduate with a single major in any discipline.”

This should not be interpreted as meaning that a single discipline, such as Physics or History or Anatomy, has an automatic right to offer two majors or a double major. (A double major differs from two majors in that the majors share a common level 1 foundation of 2 units.) The relevant Board of Studies would need to be convinced that there is a strong reason for allowing one discipline to offer more than one major in any one degree, and that any inclusion of double or two majors in any degree places no obligations on any student to undertake both majors.

As an example of a persuasive rationale, students in some disciplines may need to be able to incorporate two majors (or a double major) in their course so that they can achieve professional recognition. This could apply to Architecture and Music, for
instance. Note that in both cases students may still elect to undertake only one major if they do not seek professional recognition or accreditation.

- A double major, sharing two level 1 units and therefore comprising 14 units rather than the 16 that two separate majors require, is not merely a coincidental overlapping of two majors. It must be designed and approved as having academic coherence.

5. Can a major comprising the same (or similar) set of units be offered within two or more degrees?

- It is highly unlikely that the relevant degree-based Interim Boards of Studies or the University-level Board of Coursework Studies would allow the same major (“X”) – i.e. with identical unit content – to be offered as a degree-specific major within more than one degree.

- Variant forms of X may be proposed (with correspondingly different names) as degree-specific majors for more than one degree. In such cases there can be an overlap of units, but some differentiation will be requisite: at least four units out of the eight that comprise the degree-specific major would need to be distinctive.

- Offering a somewhat different major in each of two degrees may pose some difficulties if the nature of the discipline to which X belongs imposes tight content constraints (e.g. related to accreditation requirements).

- Further, offering a somewhat different major in each of two degrees may also create resource pressures for the discipline – e.g. extra teaching at the expense of research time. Therefore a cost/benefit analysis should be undertaken carefully.

- It should be remembered that even if X is offered as a degree-specific major only within one degree, it can (and should) be well publicised as an attractive second major – and also a potential source of broadening units – for any students whose degree-specific major is within one of the other degrees.

6. Can units be shared across different majors?

- While some overlap of units within two or more undergraduate majors should not be precluded, the Board of Coursework Studies is unlikely to approve, as a separate major, a cluster of units drawn largely from other majors.

- It is expected that any major would have a distinctive disciplinary rationale underpinned by substantial research expertise and reflected in its own set of units, which should comprise more than half the major. A field of study in which only four (or fewer) units belong distinctively to an envisaged major might be more appropriately restructured as a postgraduate course.

- There should be no objection to one unit at level 2 or level 3 being shared between two majors (in addition to the existing provision for two common level 1 units in a double-major structure). Perhaps a cogent case might even be made, in unusual circumstances, for two units at levels 2 and/or 3 to overlap across two majors.

7. When does a student need to decide which major (or degree) to pursue?

- Many students will already have decided on their major when entering the University, though some may change their minds later. Others will know confidently which degree they want to enrol for but not which major. And a few may feel
uncertain even about their choice of a degree. The new framework can accommodate all such differences.

- It will be necessary to enrol every student in a degree at the outset. This does not preclude the possibility of seeking transfer to a different degree. For example, someone may begin as a BA student, but apply to change to a BCom enrolment. As a consequence, some structural components would become retrospectively reclassified: e.g. units initially taken within a BA might subsequently be counted towards broadening requirements.

- There should be no need for students to sign up irrevocably for a major in their very first semester. A group of first-level units can provide a platform for several possible majors within the same degree and even, possibly, in other degrees, thus preserving the opportunity for a student to consider different directions before committing to one of them: see “Flexibility at Level 1” (above).

- Applying to change one’s choice of major or even of degree will remain possible after embarking on Level 2 units, but is more likely to mean that taking some additional units may be necessary to meet the altered requirements.

8. Can complementary units be prescribed for every major?

- Every discipline offering a major can prescribe up to four specific complementary units if they are necessary adjuncts to the major – but only a student for whom this is the degree-specific major can be compelled to take those as complementary units.

- There is no automatic right to prescribe any complementary units, let alone four. The case for specifying a particular set of complementary units as “necessary adjuncts to the major” must be made to the satisfaction of the relevant Boards.

- If a student is taking the 8-unit sequence as a second major rather than as a degree-specific major, the relevant faculty may still need to impose some prerequisites. In such cases, however, the basic degree structure, including the need for broadening units, cannot be impaired.

9. How are broadening units defined?

- The basic “broadening” requirement (Rec. 9) is that every undergraduate course must include four units taught outside the degree in which the student’s degree-specific major is taught. For example, a BCom student will choose four units from what is offered within the BSc and/or BA and/or BDes. (This simple rule can only be waived in the case of languages other than English: someone studying for a BA degree may count LOTE units towards the broadening requirement if they do not form part of the disciplinary field of the major.)

- At least one of the four broadening units must come from what the report calls Category A. This will be a list approved for the purpose by the Board of Coursework Studies and comprising units that “have as their main focus some aspects of the globalised and culturally diverse environment in which graduates will be living and working”. There is scope for units in this category to cover many different topics, from causes and effects of climate change to biosecurity and public health or the role of religion in international trade.

- The choice of other broadening units is not limited by any content considerations. What the report calls Category B comprises potentially all units that faculties are willing to offer to students from across the University, subject to prerequisites being
met. Contrary to a statement in the Review report, units in this category will not need specific approval from the Board of Coursework Studies to qualify as “broadening”; nor need they be confined to level 1 or level 2. In principle it should be permissible for broadening units to be at any level (and even to include a major sequence – a second major from another degree), if the unit entry requirements are met.

- These simple rules do not pretend to ensure that all students will be experiencing equal breadth. Some will concentrate their choices while others will spread theirs more widely. Some will select broadening units that have a relatively close affinity with their degree-specific major; others will select units utterly different from their home discipline. That is their decision. However, the broadening requirement should at least ensure that every future UWA graduate is acquainted to some extent with more than one kind of knowledge and more than one method of enquiry.

10. Is there any permissible variation to the standard value of a unit?

- Rec. 16 states that the practice of assigning credit point values to units should be discontinued; that a unit (equivalent in value to an existing 6-point unit) be indivisible; that 1 unit be deemed equivalent to 150 hours of student workload per semester; and that 4 units be regarded as normally requiring 1 semester of full-time study.

- Variations may be possible but the integrity of the new course structure assumes that these will be rare exceptions. In the case of “research units” that represent the work done towards theses and dissertations, it is appropriate to give a higher weighted value. Further, some laboratory-based or fieldwork areas may perhaps be able to argue a successful case for the indivisibility of what are at present 12-point units provided (a) such units are able to be completed within a single study period and (b) they are level-3 or level-4 units. However, it will normally be feasible to split a 12-point unit into two separate units, sometimes linked as co-requisites.

- It will not be permissible to offer discrete half-size segments (equivalent to 3 points under current rules) as separate half-units. They can become modules within full units, as the latter do not need to be completely homogeneous in content, pedagogy or assessment.

11. Are there guidelines for embedding communication and research skills?

- Yes. Explanatory details on how to implement Rec. 12 (that every major include at least one unit with an explicit focus on oral and written communication skills) and Rec. 13 (that every major include a demonstrable emphasis on enquiry-based learning and research skill development through direct engagement with the research culture of the relevant discipline) are forthcoming in separate reports by the working parties established for this purpose.

12. Exactly how will Honours courses (including the BPhil) operate?

- A separate report by the Honours and BPhil working party will clarify the new arrangements foreshadowed in Recs 4 and 5.