Background

This document outlines shared understandings about how appropriate class sizes are determined in the Faculty of Social Sciences, including procedures for establishing and monitoring class sizes. Social Sciences has a long tradition of explicitly having to manage varying class sizes to meet diverse academic programming needs, budgetary realities and enrolment targets. Shared understandings are documented as guidance for Chairs and Director, the Dean’s office, and the Provost’s office.

Class sizes are managed by means of shared norms developed over ten years of practice with strategic enrolment management using internal enrolment targets and based on each unit’s Defined Teaching Capacity (DTC). Class sizes are determined by the academic units under oversight of the Dean’s Office using the following principles and procedures:

Principles

- Units need to set class maxima high enough in aggregate to meet or exceed their enrolment targets, while also offering low-enrolment classes with enriching educational opportunities to enhance the quality of the undergraduate student experience.
- Units must offer courses students need to meet program requirements in a timely manner, and ensure that program requirements can be met within a context of constrained resources.
- Classes should be of an appropriate size for pedagogy and course level, and pedagogy must reflect class size. In the case of lower-level courses, maximum class sizes will be affected by the availability of TA funding for the labs and tutorials required to ensure the quality of the learning experience.
- Class size generally varies inversely with course level; large lecture classes (especially at the 100 and 200 level) are utilized to meet enrolment targets and to provide room to offer lower enrolment upper-level classes. Exceptions (such as low-enrolment classes at the introductory level) can be permitted when needed to achieve goals articulated in the University’s Strategic Plan (eg, improving student engagement and retention) subject to the unit meeting its enrolment targets within its DTC.
- Maximum class sizes depend on the availability of appropriate classrooms. In some cases maxima will be lower than a unit would prefer because of limited access to the small number of large classrooms on campus, particularly at times when student demand is strong.
- Special courses that provide especially enriching experiences and intensive student-faculty interaction consistent with the University’s Strategic Plan can be offered with low enrolment. Examples include field schools, experiential learning, honours seminars and courses in which students work closely with faculty members on research projects.
Undergraduate classes with enrolments less than ten for which teaching workload credit is given are only offered in exceptional circumstances. In such cases the Chair or Director usually is expected to provide a justification in writing to the Associate Dean Academic.

Graduate classes that count as part of a faculty member’s normal teaching responsibilities (normally four courses per year) should meet minimum enrolment expectations for graduate courses. Minimum enrolments for graduate courses are under review given the recent expansion of graduate FTEs in the Faculty. Pending the development of formal Faculty expectations, the Chair or Director normally is expected to provide a justification in writing to the Associate Dean Academic for any graduate course with enrolment less than five for which teaching workload credit is given. Units with larger graduate programs should be aiming closer to enrolments of ten or more.

Units may offer specialized seminar courses in the form of a combined 400 and 500 level course, or 500 and 600 level course, if this is pedagogically appropriate.

The allocation of teaching responsibilities should support equity in allocation of workload associated with teaching among faculty members.

Expectations about class sizes should be flexible in response to changing student demand and the start-up needs of new programs.

Social Sciences currently is more willing to accept low-enrolment classes in the summer term than in the fall and spring terms to meet summer enrolment targets and to make the summer term a more viable option for students. This willingness is subject to budget considerations and summer-term reform at the University level.

Procedures

In practice, class sizes are an integral component of strategic enrolment planning. Consideration of class sizes begins in the annual planning stages, as units prepare their planned offerings for the following academic year. Units are required to identify planned teaching assignments in their DTC forms, and to update those regularly as plans solidify. DTCs are posted on a Sharepoint site, allowing the Dean’s office to see whether a unit is allocating resources in a fashion likely to meet enrolment targets and maintain quality. If necessary, The Dean’s Office discusses class-size issues with Chairs and Director at the planning stage.

Once registration begins, the units (Chairs/Director or staff) and the Dean’s Office (Associate Dean) regularly review enrolment statistics. In cases in which enrolment in a particular course is low relative to the maximum set by the unit, Chairs and Director often initiate consultations with the Associate Dean – a reflection of the shared norms and collegial approach that have developed around these issues in the Faculty. In some cases a low-enrolment course will be cancelled and the faculty member will be re-assigned to teach another course. Usually the alternative course will be offered in the same academic year, but on a small number of occasions a faculty member has carried forward an obligation to teach an additional course in a future academic year. In other cases, the decision is made to offer the course despite low enrolment, often because the course is a required part of a program (e.g., an honours program or a new interdisciplinary program), students require the course to graduate, or the course offers a particularly valuable educational opportunity.
Strategic enrolment planning proceeds as follows:

- The Dean’s office sets enrolment targets for each unit, and calculates the number of sections each unit is authorized to offer.
- The number of sections is based on the unit’s teaching capacity determined by regular faculty positions and historical additional sessional needs. The number of authorized sections is called the Defined Teaching Capacity (DTC). The cost of delivering the Faculty’s DTC must remain within available budget.
- Units have primary responsibility for allocating their teaching sections in order to meet their enrolment targets with high-quality programs.
- As part of this process, units establish their own class maxima for courses at each level, guided by shared Faculty norms and information provided by the Dean’s office, and in consultation with the Dean’s office.
- Units can approach the Dean’s Office for annual variation in DTC including requesting permission to offer additional sections funded out of EMF where waitlists are encountered; waitlists are reviewed by units and the Associate Dean, and initiatives to use EMF can come from both levels.\(^1\)
- Repeated need to access EMF leads to review of historical needs for additional sections that make up base of DTC.
- Where the Faculty loses capacity to deliver additional sections the Dean meets with Chairs and Director to discuss the ramifications and DTCs are adjusted as required.
- Once registration is underway and it appears a class will not meet the minimum enrolment established by the unit, the class normally should be cancelled and the instructor reassigned to teach another class in an area of solid student demand during the same academic year. Such a decision should be made as early as is feasible in the registration cycle. On occasion it may be necessary to cancel a low-enrolment spring-term course and the instructor may be given the option of teaching a replacement class in the following academic year, with that class in addition to the instructor’s teaching responsibilities for that following academic year.

Current practices are well developed and understood. This means that in many years there is no explicit discussion of class maxima between a unit and the Dean’s office unless a problem emerges.

\(^1\) When deciding whether to use EMF in response to waitlists, the Faculty currently moves cautiously because the current registration system tends to exaggerate actual demand (under the present system students can register and waitlist for far more courses than they will eventually take). The problem is scheduled to be fixed before registration begins for 2013, at which time it may be possible to develop more meaningful guidelines for the allocation of EMF and associated class-size expectations.