Psychology proposes retaining its current Honours structure with three coursework units and with the research thesis.

This structure was adopted in 2010 (in place of the previous 50/50 split) after consultation and discussion within the School. A Working Party made up of three academic staff members and two student members, one enrolled in Honours and one who had completed Honours in the previous year, was convened to examine the Honours structure. This group, after consulting widely in the School, recommended that the coursework component be reduced to three units and the research component increased to a weighting equivalent to five units (thus a 37.5%/62.5% coursework/research split). There are three main points to our argument to retain the current structure.

1. A 50/50 split in Psychology would not reflect the distribution of work.

The research thesis in Psychology is based on empirical research that is done in both semesters under supervision. Furthermore, as part of the research thesis unit, students must submit a written research proposal (drawing on the specialist techniques they will use) and apply for ethical clearance for their proposed research. Both of these requirements add significantly to the student work load in this unit.

Honours students engage in a very diverse range of research, requiring specialist skills that range from brain stimulation and recording electrical brain activity to mathematical modelling and to interrogating large and complex data sets with sophisticated multivariate statistical techniques. The diversity of skills required is such that they could not be taught in a single generic ‘research skills’ unit; instead, they must be acquired individually by students in their particular research contexts.

The weighting of the coursework and research components of the Honours program must be flexible enough to accommodate this diversity. There are two aspects to this: a structure with three (rather than four) coursework units firstly gives students the time needed to accomplish the many tasks that make up an Honours project and secondly (and even more importantly) weights assessment appropriately to the real distribution of work and to its importance.

2. A 50/50 split in Psychology would diminish the student experience.

Many students become passionate about their Honours project. This is unsurprising as the project is, after all, the capstone experience of their undergraduate education. Psychology’s proposed structure is implemented with two coursework units in the first semester and one in the second semester. The lighter coursework load in the second semester gives students the time they need to bring it all back home: to integrate the diversity of activities central to their research thesis, including appraising the relevant scientific literature, analyzing, interpreting and presenting their data, preparing their presentation to the School’s annual Honours conference, and – finally! – writing their thesis. A second coursework unit in the second semester necessarily limits the time available for the full engagement with their research thesis and therefore with the culmination of their studies.

3. A 50/50 split in Psychology would not recognize the importance of research.

Two important considerations for retaining Honours in the new course structure were first, that it produced students whose outstanding research skills were recognized widely and second, that a research-intensive Honours year reflected the research-intensive nature of the University. A structure in Psychology that weights research more heavily than coursework is needed to achieve these purposes. Many of our brightest students make remarkable achievements in their Honours projects. Limiting the research project with a 50/50 split will arbitrarily and unnecessarily limit the capacity of our best students to achieve to their highest potential.

The structure which we implemented this year is a considered response to the needs of Honours students in Psychology, following our extensive experience with a structure which split coursework and research equally, and we submit that it must be retained. Although there may be some value in a uniform Honours structure across the University, there is much greater value in a flexibility that accommodates the diversity of the demands of the Honours programs in its different disciplines. The report of the Honours and B.Phil Working Party recommended that:

It [the Honours program] should normally comprise one research thesis unit equivalent to four standard units (i.e. totalling 600 hours workload, undertaken and assessed over two
semesters) plus four standard units (150 hours workload each, undertaken and assessed within a semester).

The use of ‘normally’ in this recommendation recognizes the importance of the many years of experience in the disciplines in fashioning the most suitable Honours structures for their students.