

The Structure of the Academic Year: National and International Practice

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1 Introduction

This report draws upon a number of surveys and other sources of information to provide a summary of the ways in which the academic year is structured in the United Kingdom and abroad. It focuses on the use of semesters, terms and other divisions of the year, and starts by looking briefly at how these words are used. The report then describes current practice in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and some changes that are taking place. A less detailed description of practice in Scotland, Europe, North America and Australasia follows. Finally, some conclusions are drawn.

2 Usage of key words

Describing the various ways in which the academic year may be structured is complicated by the fact that the key words, particularly 'semester' and 'term', do not always carry precisely the same meaning; this has implications for the interpretation of survey results.

Quarter: A quarter, used in the USA, is a continuous period of the academic year (for example Fall Quarter, Winter Quarter, Spring Quarter, Summer Quarter). Delivery takes place through modules (which may be referred to as courses) and which are assessed at the end of the quarter. Sometimes three quarters are used for delivery and sometimes four quarters are used.

Term: A term is generally understood to be a largely continuous period encompassing teaching related activities. Usually there are three terms in a year (for example Autumn Term, Spring Term, Summer Term), each about three months long and separated by vacations. A term may or may not include a period of assessment.

Semester: A semester, which literally means six months, is usually used to describe two periods of academic activity in a year, commonly about four months each (for example Semester 1, Semester 2). Delivery takes place through modules (which may be referred to as courses) which are one semester long and which are assessed at the end of the semester. Sometimes semesters are essentially continuous and separated by vacations, like terms. Alternatively, semesters may include vacations and

sometimes, as in the UK, co-exist with terms. Sometimes a third semester is introduced in the summer period. Where the three semesters are of equal length they may be referred to as trimesters.

Year long delivery: Year long delivery refers to situations where modules (or courses) run over a single period of the year (for example from October to May) and are assessed at the end of the period. It usually occurs in conjunction with terms (and the usage of the word 'term' is sometimes meant to imply it!); it is possible to superimpose year long delivery across two semesters.

Various: 'Various' is used in this report to characterise institutions or countries in which the academic year is organised in more than one way.

3 England, Wales and Northern Ireland

In the early 1990's most Universities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland operated a system of year long delivery (Baldwin and McInnis 2002). The most comprehensive picture of practice over the last five years is probably provided by the surveys on credit practice conducted by Johnson and Walsh (2000) on behalf of the Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer, and by Johnson (2004) on behalf of the England, Wales and Northern Ireland Credit Forum. 93 institutions responded in 1999 (a 62% response rate); 100 institutions responded in 2003 (a 67% response rate). Results for the periods of delivery of modules are shown in Table 1. (NB, the totals responding do not match the totals in the table suggesting that some institutions were placed in more than one category!)

		terms	semesters	year long	various	total
1999	Number	10	56	14	20	100
	%	10	56	14	20	100
2003	Number	11	53	23	24	111
	%	10	48	21	22	100

Table 1: Periods of delivery of modules for institutions in EWNl, adapted from Johnson (2004) who includes data from Johnson and Walsh (2000)

The figures for 1999 indicate that during the 1990's a major shift in the organisation of the academic year took place and, under the influence of modularisation, many universities semesterised. This is consistent with the results of another survey (Turnbull 2000) which was also carried out in 1999: 28 institutions responded, 61% reported that they had fully modular structure and 61% operated semester-based module delivery. Whilst semesters still clearly continue to be the most common period of delivery, Johnson (2004) noted that there was a shift away from semesters with the biggest swing being towards delivery over the full academic year. This is supported by a survey

on the structure of the academic year carried out by in 2003 by Heriot-Watt University (Patterson and King 2004) which identified five institutions which were moving from semesters to year long delivery (Buckingham University College, De Montfort, Glamorgan, Liverpool John Moores and Plymouth) and one institution moving from terms to semesters (Oxford Brookes). Most recently Lipsett (2004) painted a similar picture mentioning five universities (Brunel, De Montfort, Glamorgan, Huddersfield, Plymouth) shifting away from semesters. The reasons given for these changes were that a semester was too short a period of time for learning to be properly assimilated, semesters resulted in summative assessment, especially examinations, occurring too often, ie twice a year instead of once, and this was felt to have a detrimental affect on retention, particularly for first year undergraduates (Johnson 2004; Lipsett 2004; Patterson and King 2004). Both De Montfort and Glamorgan report that retention has now improved (Lipsett 2004).

Having made these remarks about a move away from semesterisation towards year long delivery there may be a temptation to exaggerate this trend: Table 1 also shows an increase in the proportion of institutions using a variety of periods of delivery and that this remains the second most popular category, marginally more so than year long delivery. Comments reported by Johnson (2004) with respect to institutions in which the academic year is organised in various ways include reference to delivery over terms, semesters and years but also to 'short fat units (5 weeks)'.

There is no explicit information in these surveys as to the length of semesters. However, perusal of a number of webs sites indicates that two semesters of 15 weeks each, running from late September to late January and late January to early June, respectively, may be a common pattern.

Another factor of relevance is the size of modules, measured in credits. Johnson (2004) notes many institutions state they have a standard size for their modules but that this really means that they have standard sizes (eg half, whole, double and triple modules). The survey does not give details on the actual sizes though Turnbull (2000) provides some information: 96% had standard undergraduate credit values, 44% used multiples of 10 credits, 19% used multiples of 20 credits, 75% had a standard postgraduate size, 38% use multiples of 10 credits, 24% use multiples of 5 credits, 24 use multiples of 15 credits. However, Johnson (2004) reports, based on the comments made by respondents, that there appears to be a shift away from smaller modules towards larger ones especially within first year undergraduate programmes.

4 Scotland

Patterson and King (2004) investigated practice at all fourteen Scottish Universities: as Table 2 shows the academic year in Scotland is now almost exclusively organised in terms of semesters (in fact, since this survey was carried out the only university that was still using terms, Heriot Watt itself, has also moved to semesters.)

		terms	semesters	year long	various	total
2003	before xmas	1	3	0	0	4
	after xmas	0	10	0	0	10
	all	1	13	0	0	14
	%	7	93	0	0	100

Table 2: Periods of delivery and location of examinations in Scottish Universities, adapted from Patterson and King (2004)

The table also provides information on the location of examinations. Three Universities start the first semester earlier enough to complete it, ie teaching and assessment, before Christmas, sometimes referred to as the 'Stirling model'; the remaining semesterised universities hold examinations after Christmas, thus retaining terms alongside semesters.

5 Europe

Tables 3, 4 and 5 show the results of three surveys that have been carried out (Kirstein 1999; Haug and Tauch 2001; Patterson and King 2004). The surveys identify the individual countries and the tables report the dominant pattern.

		terms	semesters	year long	various	total
NK	Number	0	11	1	5	17
	%	0	65	6	29	100

Table 3: Periods of delivery in EU/EEA countries (excluding EWNI&S), adapted from Kirstein (1999)

		terms	semesters	year long	various	total
NK	Number	0	20	0	0	20
	%	0	100	0	0	100

Table 4: Periods of delivery in Central, Eastern and South Eastern European countries, Cyprus, Malta and Switzerland, adapted from Haug and Tauch (2001)

		terms	semesters	year long	various	total
2003	Number	1	12	0	0	13
	%	8	92	0	0	100

Table 5: Periods of delivery in European countries (excluding EWNI&S), adapted from Patterson and King (2004)

Overall, it is clear that semesters are the principle means by which the academic year is organised in Europe. Table 3 suggests there may have been more variation within EU/EAA countries. However, comparing the information from Tables 3 and 5 on a country by country basis indicates that Europe seems to be standardising on semesters: Belgium, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands appear to have shifted from a variety of patterns to a semesterised pattern.

Kirstein (1999), and Haug and Tauch (2001) provide information on the timing of semesters: typically the first semester runs from September or October to January or February and the second semester from February or March to May, June or July. Haug and Tauch (2001) report that semesters are frequently 15 weeks in length although sometimes longer.

6 North America

The World Education Service (2004) in their education overview of the USA state ‘the norm for a full-time student is two semesters of fifteen to eighteen weeks each per academic year, but many institutions follow differing patterns. Some, for example, adopt a trimester system, which divides the academic year into three segments of fifteen to sixteen weeks, while others adopt a quarter system, with the school year divided into four eleven-week segments. In the latter two systems, the student normally does not attend school the entire year, but two out of three trimesters or three out of four quarters’. Patterson and King (2004) report a similar picture and indicate that there is considerable variety.

It has been hard to find quantitative information on institutions in the United States. Baldwin and McInnis (2002) report that the majority of Universities within the USA use two 15 week semesters and that approximately 25% of them use three 10 week quarters (citing a reference which the report does not give). Taresen (2003) says that 20% of Universities in the USA use quarters but that the number is falling. This comment is telling – over the last decade or more there has been a move from quarters towards semesters (AU 1997) or trimesters. This move from quarters to semesters has something in common with the interest in EWNI in moving from semesters to year long delivery: in both cases the length of the module is increased and some similar advantages and disadvantages can be identified.

Baldwin and McInnis (2002) report that whilst in the past American universities have had enrolments during the fourth summer quarter or third summer semester the teaching period has been shorter, the number of courses offered has been less and the number of students enrolling has been less, but that over the last few years activity in the summer has increased. However, they (ibid) seem sceptical of a move towards genuine trimesters pointing out that this was tried and failed in the 1970's.

Examinations are held at the end of each semester although in comparison to the UK, there is more emphasis in the USA on continuous assessment through class tests and less emphasis on examinations (UL 2004).

Patterson and King (2004) report that in Canada three terms and, more commonly, two semesters or sessions (some on a term-time structure) operate.

7 Australasia

Baldwin and McInnis (2002), in their report on the organisation of the academic year commissioned by the Australian Government, describe the structure of the academic year in Australian Universities as changing. Whilst two semesters remains the standard pattern, enrolments in the summer period are growing rapidly and some institutions are considering moving towards a trimester system. In a similar vein, Patterson and King (2004) report that in both Australia and New Zealand the year is structured in terms of two semesters with an optional third summer semester so that students can complete their degree more quickly.

The academic year, as set by the Australian Vice Chancellor's Committee, starts on the nearest Monday to 1 March in any year (RMIT 1997). At the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, for example, the first semester lasts 19 weeks and the second 18 weeks (ibid).

8 Conclusions

From the information presented above the following general conclusions have been drawn:

- Some of the words used to describe academic structures are ambiguous and the results of surveys undertaken should be interpreted with care.
- Globally, the substantial majority of Higher Education provision surveyed is organised on the basis of semesters, and the proportion is increasing.
- In a great many countries semesters are standard and where they are not they are likely to predominate.
- In England, Wales and Northern Ireland semesters appear to predominate but the use of a variety structures and of year long delivery are relatively common. Semesterisation took place during the 1990s and recently there has been an interest in moving back towards year long delivery and in larger module sizes.

- In the USA there has been a shift in the last decade from quarters to semesters which now clearly predominate.
- Globally, there seems to be increased interest in trimesters.
- There is some consistency in the timing of semesters in the northern hemisphere: the academic year normally starts in September or October with the first semester in Europe usually continuing after Christmas; 15 week semesters are common although some are longer.

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