

Restructuring of the Academic Year for Campus-based undergraduate programmes – A Consultation Paper

Introduction

At their July meetings, the Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Committee (VCAC) and the Academic Policy Committee (APC) approved the principle of restructuring the academic year for campus-based undergraduate programmes. This is proposed to be implemented for October 2016, alongside the rebalancing of the credit hours and the standardisation of module sizes and assessment loads. At this stage there are several key points for consideration and so this is being opened up for consultation across the University.

We have written two consultation papers: this one deals with proposals to restructure the academic year, and the other deals with proposals to standardise modules. Both will be circulated to all staff at the same time and prior to a period of consultation and discussion during September and October. A description and timetable for consultation appears below.

Rationale

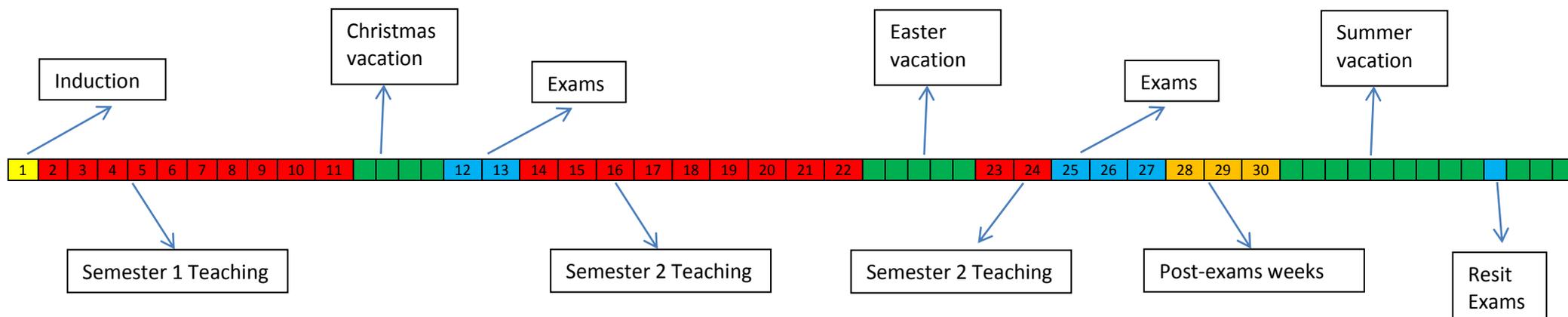
The current structure of the academic year was established when modularisation and semesters were imposed on top of a three term system. As such it has a number of aspects that may not be considered desirable from both pedagogic and operational perspectives. These include the following:

- Although the academic year is nominally of 30 weeks duration, the majority of undergraduate students are only taught for 20, or at most 22 weeks a year. This is difficult to justify academically or in terms of value for money.
- The 2nd semester is split, typically with 9 teaching weeks, then a 5 week break over Easter, followed by two more teaching weeks before the exams. This is clearly not an ideal approach for delivering modules.
- The teaching delivery is compressed, particularly in semester 2 when departments try to avoid teaching after the Easter vacation. This can contribute to the problems experienced in timetabling the main stock of teaching rooms because departments try to cram all their teaching sessions in before Easter. There is also compression of laboratory availability for lab-based subjects.
- The three weeks following the summer exams, although nominally part of the academic year, are only used to a very limited extent and many students leave almost as soon as their exams are completed. Increasing numbers of universities are either placing the exams at the very end of the teaching period or are using these periods for other activities e.g. career planning or skills preparation for the next year.
- UoL students are among the last to finish their academic year, which potentially has an impact on their availability for the employment market.

This paper reflects the outcomes of initial discussions involving the Heads of Colleges, College Academic Directors, Directors of Administration, the Director of Residential and Commercial Services, the President and President-Elect of the Students' Union, the Academic Registrar, the PVC (Students) and representatives from the Registry. The proposals have further been endorsed by VCAC and APC.

Current Pattern for 2016-17

This plan sets out the structure of the academic year in 2016-17, assuming that the current model was still in operation. The 52 weeks of the year are illustrated with the numbered weeks referring to the weeks of the academic year beginning from day 1 of term 1 (the autumn term)



Academic Year 2016-17

Term 1	3 rd Oct – 16 th Dec	Semester 1	3 rd Oct – 27 th Jan
Term 2	16 th Jan – 31 st March	Semester 2	30 th Jan – 30 th June
Term 3	8 th May – 30 th June		

Academic Year = 30 weeks (note the resit week is not included in the academic year)

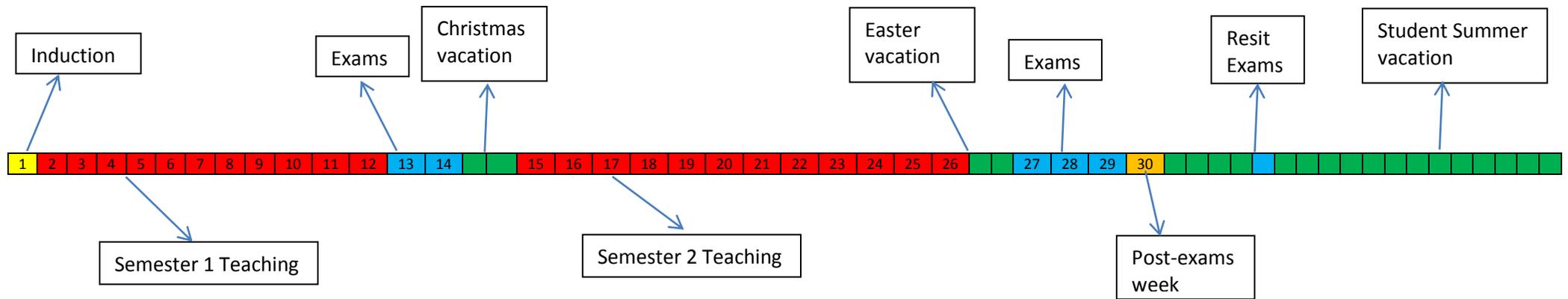
Teaching Period typically 20-22 weeks – based on current patterns, including induction for yr 1.

Semester 1 = 11 weeks, including 1 week induction for yr 1, plus 2 weeks exams

Semester 2 = 11 weeks, split by Easter vacation into 9 + 2, plus 3 weeks exams plus 3 weeks post-exam period.

Vacations: Christmas – 4 weeks, Easter – 5 weeks, Summer – 13 weeks (with 1 week resits)

Possible Model for 2016-17



In calendar terms for 2016-7:

Term 1 19th Sept – 23rd Dec

Term 2 9th Jan – 31st March

Term 3 17th April-12th May

Resits 12th June

Academic Year = 30 weeks

Semester 1 19th Sept – 23rd Dec

Semester 2 9th Jan – 12th May

Teaching Period 24 weeks (including induction for year 1)

Semester 1 = 12 teaching weeks, including 1 week induction for yr 1, plus 2 weeks exams (before Christmas vacation)

Semester 2 = 12 teaching weeks, plus 3 weeks exams (after Easter vacation) plus 1 week post-exam period.

Vacations: Christmas – 2 weeks, Easter – 2 weeks, Summer – 19 weeks

In 2016-7, the year might look like this to a student enrolled in an on-campus undergraduate programme:

Week	Monday	Activity
1	September 19	Semester 1, Week 1 (including induction)
2	September 26	Semester 1, Week 2
3	October 3	Semester 1, Week 3
4	October 10	Semester 1, Week 4
5	October 17	Semester 1, Week 5
6	October 24	Semester 1, Week 6
7	October 31	Semester 1, Week 7
8	November 7	Semester 1, Week 8
9	November 14	Semester 1, Week 9
10	November 21	Semester 1, Week 10
11	November 28	Semester 1, Week 11
12	December 5	Semester 1, Week 12
13	December 12	Semester 1 exams
14	December 19	Semester 1 exams
15	December 26	Christmas vacation
16	January 2	Christmas vacation
17	January 9	Semester 2, Week 1
18	January 16	Semester 2, Week 2
19	January 23	Semester 2, Week 3
20	January 30	Semester 2, Week 4
21	February 6	Semester 2, Week 5
22	February 13	Semester 2, Week 6
23	February 20	Semester 2, Week 7
24	February 27	Semester 2, Week 8
25	March 6	Semester 2, Week 9
26	March 13	Semester 2, Week 10

27	March 20	Semester 2, Week 11
28	March 27	Semester 2, Week 12
29	April 3	Easter vacation
30	April 10	Easter vacation (Good Friday is April 14, Easter Monday is April 17)
31	April 17	Semester 2 exams
32	April 24	Semester 2 exams
33	May 1	Semester 2 exams
34	May 8	Post-exam week
35	May 15	Summer vacation
36	May 22	Summer vacation
37	May 29	Summer vacation
38	June 5	Summer vacation
39	June 12	Resit week
40	June 19	Summer vacation
41	June 26	Summer vacation
42	July 3	Summer vacation
43	July 10	Summer vacation
44	July 17	Summer vacation
45	July 24	Summer vacation
46	July 31	Summer vacation
47	August 7	Summer vacation
48	August 14	Summer vacation
49	August 21	Summer vacation
50	August 28	Summer vacation
51	September 4	Summer vacation
52	September 11	Summer vacation

Key points

This model :

- increases the core teaching period to 24 weeks per year, enabling some increased leeway in timetabling;
- removes the split in the second semester and removes the artificial compression of the second semester, which should help alleviate some of the timetabling issues ;
- gives a much earlier end to the core teaching year;
- could reduce the time pressure on marking and examining by increasing the period between the examinations and Congregation (it would, of course, also be possible to make Congregation earlier);
- enables the resit week to be brought much earlier: as well as potential pedagogic benefits, the inclusion of resits for finalists at this time could allow such students to graduate with their year group. Furthermore, course-termination appeals could be held well before the start of the academic year, so those students whose appeals were upheld could return to study at the start of term; currently such students often do not know of the outcome of their appeal until two weeks of term have elapsed.

Consultation

Three consultation workshops will be held to consider key questions and issues arising from this proposal. Two workshops—on **Wednesday September 24**, 1pm-2pm in the Peter Williams Lecture Theatre and **Wednesday October 15**, 4pm-5pm, in Ken Edwards Lecture Theatre 1—focus on academic and professional staff based in the colleges, and a third—on **Friday October 3**, 12.30pm-2pm, in Ken Edwards Lecture Theatre 1—focuses on staff in Corporate Services. The proposal will also be discussed by the academic committees and management boards in each of the four colleges and by the Student Union. In addition, this proposal—and proposals to standardise the hours, credits and assessment loads of modules—will be placed on a dedicated webpage, with staff invited to send it comments, questions and suggestions over a one month period from September 24 to October 24. There will also be a web survey among current students. The final proposal, including final recommendations based on the consultations, will be discussed at the meeting of the University Senate on Wednesday November 12.

Key questions and issues for discussion during the consultation period

1. Should first semester examinations be held before or after Christmas? There are advantages and disadvantages either way and both models exist across the sector. Another way of thinking about it would be to as far as possible adopt other assessment structures in the first semester: there are strong cases for measures to vary the assessment diet, such as reducing the overall level of summative

assessment and including lower stakes in-course tests in place of some exams to provide more on-going performance feedback to the students.

2. The shorter Easter vacation, particularly if reduced to two weeks, would affect those programmes that have fieldwork scheduled in that vacation. However, there is an argument that these should be brought into the scheduled teaching time rather than being held in vacations, and the longer academic year would make this easier. How much of an issue would this be?
3. What are the implications of a shorter Easter break? The long weekend for Easter itself will have a limited impact on teaching schedules, but the relaxation of the overall teaching period should allow this to be incorporated without significant effect. There will be some years in which the Easter weekend falls outside the Easter vacation, and there will be some years in which the Easter weekend will affect exams. This does not appear to be viewed as a major problem in other universities: the common approach is simply to treat Easter itself as a long weekend.
4. Is a whole week for induction desirable? A number of universities where this has been the norm are now moving away from that model. Should we have a 2 or 3 day induction period in a week 0 before the start of the teaching term?
5. Bringing the start of the academic year earlier will reduce the lead time for handling admissions and registration: what issues does this raise and how will they be managed?
6. What are the implications for management of the student residences? One outcome is that a shorter academic year could be financially beneficial for the residences, allowing a longer, clear period in the summer for conference trade, but the reduction of the Easter break may also affect some of that trade.
7. For the University, the much longer summer break provides a number of opportunities, which we would encourage colleagues to consider. By bringing forward examinations, resits and Congregation, it would be possible to create a longer and more explicit 'research summer'. It would also be possible to allocate more teaching to the summer; many distance learning programmes are already taught during the summer months, and there would be more opportunity to develop summer schools or other special purpose programmes. This would allow a more intensive use of the teaching estate, as well as the student residences. What other changes would colleagues like to see raised and evaluated as part of this discussion?

Implementation

The extent of the work involved in revising programmes and modules for a new academic structure will become clear once we know the outcomes of the consultations around this proposal to change the academic year and proposals to standardise modules in terms of hours, credits and

assessment loads. The final proposal and recommendations to Senate can then incorporate a sense of this work, and how it will be planned and resourced to ensure that departments are given a clear window and sufficient support. In many cases departments will also be working on major, joint and minor pathways, so it will be important to plan the work carefully. With a proposal to implement these changes in October, 2016, most of the development work and revalidations will need to take place during 2015. These issues are discussed in greater detail in the companion consultation paper on standardising modules.

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