

## Review of the Academic Year Structure

### Summary

Senate is responsible for overseeing the structure of the academic year. The last major review of the academic year was undertaken in 2009 and implemented from 2010/11, building upon the recommendations of the Review of Undergraduate Education. In particular that review incorporated a summer graduation for undergraduate students, reflective learning weeks and the opportunity to better use the summer term. Elements of the academic year were subsequently reviewed further and changes made for 2011/12 and for the period 2012/13 – 2015/16 to address feedback received on the implementation of the revised structure.

It is now planned to carry out a full review of the current academic year structure during 2018-19, with a view to agreeing term dates for 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23. Views have been sought from Associate Deans (Education), Educational Quality Committee and the Operations Board to inform the recommendations made to Senate on priorities for the review. The purpose of the paper is to obtain agreement from Senate on concerns with the current structure that should be prioritised for consideration during the review.

Three actions required

### Recommendation

Senate is asked:

- to **consider** the proposed issues and concerns and **agree** priorities for the review
- to **note** the proposed timescales for the review

**Publication: Open**

## **Review of the Academic Year Structure**

### **Background**

The last major review of the academic year was undertaken in 2009 and implemented from 2010/11. Elements of the academic year were subsequently reviewed further and changes made for 2011/12 and for the period 2012/13 – 2015/16 to address feedback received on the implementation of the revised structure. This included consideration of timing of graduation ceremonies, exam scheduling, and how programmes were using the Summer term and reflective learning weeks.

Senate approved the proposed dates for 2018/19 and 2019/20<sup>1</sup> in March 2017 on the basis of the previous structure. However, it was agreed that there was a need for a more detailed review for future years.

This paper makes recommendations to Senate on concerns with the current structure that should be prioritised for consideration during the review. Views have been sought from Associate Deans (Education), Educational Quality Committee and the Operations Board to inform the recommendations.

It is planned that Senate will be asked to approve term dates for 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23 following completion of the review. It is proposed that dates are then agreed on a rolling basis annually so that dates are always in place for at least three years ahead.

An initial review of structures in place at some other institutions has been undertaken and is presented in Appendix 1. This initial review has not considered the context within which structures elsewhere are operating, e.g. balance between undergraduate and postgraduate, and full and part time provision. This would be explored further during the review.

### **Current structure of the academic year (agreed by Senate in earlier reviews)**

Key features of the current structure include:

- Eleven weeks of teaching in the Autumn and Spring terms (incorporating reflective learning).
- Four week holidays between Autumn and Spring terms and between Spring and Summer terms.
- Two week assessment period in January and four week assessment period in May.
- Shorter Summer term, incorporating the four week assessment period and a further four weeks.
- Time allocated to formal examinations and the time allocated to student learning is balanced.
- July graduation for undergraduate students.
- A minimum of three days between the opening of the University after the Christmas break and the commencement of the January examination period.
- Single academic year across all programmes, except where clinical or other placement activity or professional body regulation dictate otherwise.
- No specific revision weeks but ensuring sufficient vacation and overall contact/elapsed time for learning, including revision, as in other universities.

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[https://www.city.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/348559/Item\\_13\\_Academic\\_Calendar\\_Senate\\_15\\_03\\_17.pdf](https://www.city.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/348559/Item_13_Academic_Calendar_Senate_15_03_17.pdf)

## **Recommended priorities for the review**

The structure of the academic year needs to balance educational and student experience considerations with operational and logistical concerns. This creates some challenges and tensions as addressing concerns about one aspect of the academic year, may have a knock-on effect and lead to issues with another part of the structure. As there are likely to be some trade-offs in what the structure of the academic year can deliver, prioritisation of issues that the review should seek to address is required.

A number of potential areas for consideration during the review have been identified from feedback that has been received on the current structure. Following consultation with Associate Deans (Education), Educational Quality Committee and the Operations Board about these in August-September 2018, it is recommended that the areas below are prioritised. Overall, Educational Quality Committee agreed that the focus during the review should be on issues relating to the student experience.

### **1. Summer assessment period and graduation timing (see also recommendation 2)**

There is a currently quite a short time between the summer assessment period, assessment boards, marks being released, and summer graduation. In 2017/18, the last assessment board was Friday 4<sup>th</sup> July with a print deadline for the graduation programme of Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> July.

Feedback from students indicates that they would like more time between receiving their results and graduation, so that they have adequate time to make arrangements for graduation and the summer vacation. For example, there is currently very little time for family members to organise travel and accommodation for graduation attendance.

It is recommended that the review should consider whether summer graduation could take place later in the summer. Based on feedback received, options to be explored would include moving it to as little as 1-2 weeks later or to after the resit period, i.e. in September.

Timing of summer graduation would be considered in conjunction with point 2 below (shorter spring vacation), which could create more space after the assessment period without moving graduation later.

### **2. Spring vacation period**

Many other institutions have a spring vacation of 2 weeks. During the last major review of City's structure, the Christmas and Easter vacation periods were increased from three weeks to four weeks to address some concerns regarding the perceived short periods of time for holiday and revision.

It is recommended that this should be revisited and that the review should consider whether the length of the spring vacation could be reduced whilst still meeting the needs of students. This would create the potential to adjust other components of the academic year and alleviate pressures elsewhere, e.g. those set out under point 1 above.

Some feedback received suggests that there are challenges with timetabling in the weeks around the Easter bank holiday weekend and that consideration could also be given to aligning the spring vacation with Easter. However, this would mean that the timing of the vacation period would need to change from year to year in line with Easter, and this may mean a break part way through the spring teaching period in some years. It is recommended that positioning of the spring vacation period should be explored alongside its length.

### 3. **January graduation**

Holding graduation ceremonies in January after graduating Tier 4 students' visas expire affects the ability of many Tier 4 students to attend. Students on postgraduate programmes that do not follow the standard academic year (e.g. January entry) currently have to wait several months to graduate. Visa expiry is also an issue for Tier 4 students graduating from these programmes.

It is recommended that the timing of graduation generally should be considered during the review.

### 4. **January examination period (see also recommendation 5)**

The number of centrally-managed exams means that there is significant pressure on the examination timetable, particularly during the 2 week examination period in January. This affects our ability to provide all students with appropriate exam timetables that accord with best practice. It also has potential to affect student learning, stress and satisfaction. With the agreement of student representatives, and the Students' Union, Cass has had an arrangement since 2015 to hold exams in the first week after the Christmas vacation, i.e. one week before the main exam period, to accommodate the number of exams.

It is recommended that the review explore whether the January examination period should be lengthened for all programmes.

Views were sought during the initial consultation in August-September 2018 on whether consideration should be given to whether we retain a January examination period at all. Feedback received was that there were strong pedagogical reasons to have a mid-year exam assessment point. It is therefore not recommended that the review considers removing the January examination period. If we retain this position we should be mindful that examinations continue to precede the NSS season (likely soon to extend to all undergraduate students).

### 5. **Number of invigilated exams**

Some undergraduate programmes reduced the volume of assessment as part of the review of assessment strategies during 2017/18. As noted above, the volume of exams creates significant pressure on exam timetables and consideration could be given to whether there is scope for significant further reduction in exams.

Views were mixed and some concerns were expressed during the initial consultation in August-September about requiring programme teams to revisit assessment strategies that had already been reviewed very recently and should have sound educational rationales. However,

Educational Quality Committee agreed that it would be useful to explore whether there should be an institutional limit placed on the number of invigilated exams that a student would be able to sit within an assessment period. It was also agreed that institutional limits on assessment overall should be explored. It is recommended that this forms a component of the review noting that if limits were to be introduced, reconsideration of assessment strategies would subsequently need to be undertaken.

**6. Use of Summer term and reflective learning (reading) weeks (see also recommendation 7)**

There is variable use by programmes of the Summer term as well as reflective learning weeks. We therefore need to consider how these components feature in the academic year structure in the future, including in a value for money context. Clarifying the educational rationale for these and potentially changing our approach as a result may provide additional scope for changes to other parts of the academic year to better meet the needs of students. It is recommended that this is explored during the review in conjunction with point 7 on timing of reflective learning weeks.

**7. Timing of reflective learning weeks**

There is an action within the Athena Swan action plan to investigate the feasibility of aligning reading/reflecting learning weeks with school half term dates to support staff and students who have childcare responsibilities. The scope for alignment is dependent on when half term dates fall (noting half-term varies within London boroughs as well as between surrounding counties) as well as how programmes make use of reflective learning weeks. Senate has previously noted that this would form part of a review of the academic year.

**8. Structure for taught postgraduate programmes**

Educational Quality Committee noted that the academic year structure is focused on undergraduate provision. The Committee recommended that the review considers whether this places unnecessary constraints on taught postgraduate provision and whether greater flexibility might be possible.

**9. Variations to the Academic Year**

There is currently no formal means by which a School can request to do something outside of the standard Academic Year. At present, a request is made to Timetabling and if it can be accommodated it goes ahead. This limits institutional oversight of the impact of variations to the academic year and the ability to provide accurate information to students and applicants. It is recommended that variations to the academic year are approved by Senate alongside the standard academic year dates in the future.

The way in which we deliver our programmes is dependent on two constructs. The first is the academic year which there is a commitment to review. The second element is the credit framework against which our programmes are designed. Senate has approved an 8 module x 15 credit structure for the majority of our programmes. Alternative models that exist within the sector include 6 modules x 20 credits and 4 modules x 30 credits. Reviewing what we are aiming to achieve from our credit framework as well as our academic year, could open up greater possibilities about how we could best deliver our programmes from both operational and pedagogical perspectives. The

obvious examples are that a 20 or 30 based structure provides the opportunity for greater depth of learning, as well as fewer modules to operationally fit into a crowded institution-wide timetable.

Initial views were sought on whether there was appetite for a substantial review in the medium term of the credit structure of programmes. Views on this option were mixed and there was a general concern that the appetite from programme teams to undertake this work would be limited. Members of Educational Quality Committee also considered that increasing module credit sizes would not necessarily have an intended outcome of reducing the number of assessments, as programme teams would not engage with significant redesign work.

Senate is asked to consider whether the suggestion of a substantial review of the credit framework should be pursued further during the next phase of the review.

### Proposed Timescale for the Review

Action:		Date:
Determining priorities for the review and components of the structure that should be fixed at this point, i.e. not up for review	Operations Board	August 18
	ADE Forum	August 18 (by circulation)
	Educational Quality Committee	September 18
	Senate	October 18
Review / consultation with stakeholders including students Sector research		October 18 – March 19
Updates presented to EQC		November 18
Updates presented to Senate		December 18
Formal Consultation with BoS on proposed structure		January 19 – March 19
Updates presented to EQC/Operations Board		April 19
Final approval by Senate		May 19

### Recommendation

Senate is asked to:

- **Consider** the proposed issues and concerns and **agree** priorities for the review
- **Note** the proposed timescales for the review

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October 2018

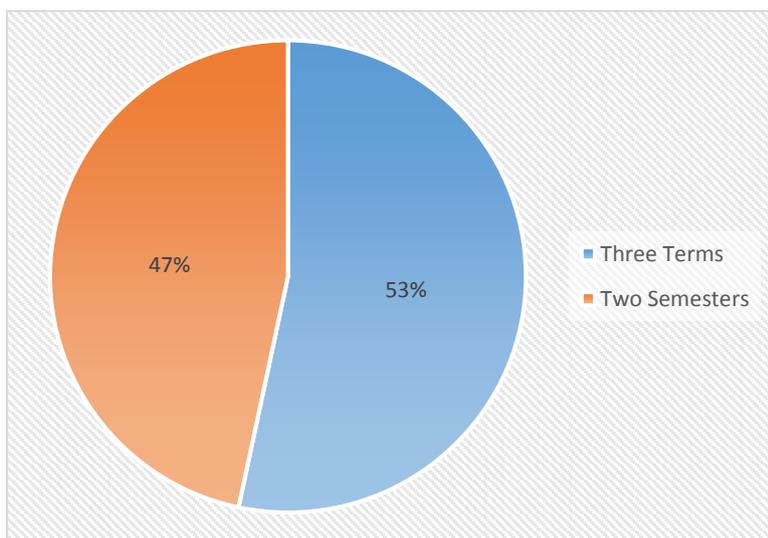
# Appendix 1

## HIGHER EDUCATION ACADEMIC STRUCTURES 2018-2019 SECTOR RESEARCH

In preparation for a review of the Academic Year Structure initial sector research around 2018-2019 Term Dates / Exam Periods and Graduation dates took place in August 2018.

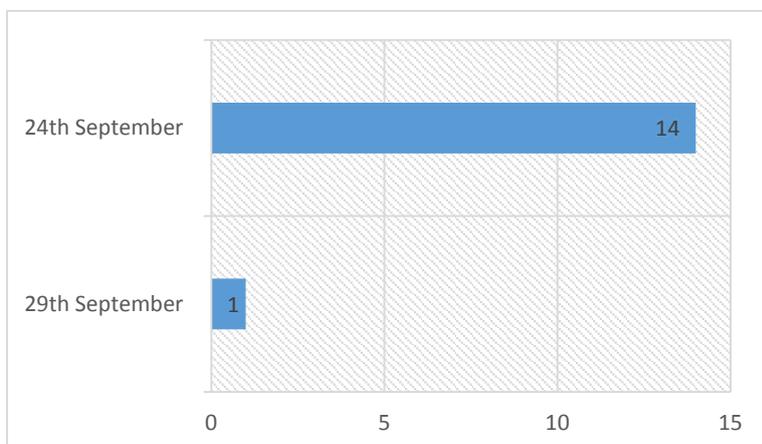
**15 local / London Group Universities were used in the research and a summary of the key results is as follows:**

### TERMS VS SEMESTERS



**City operates on a Three Term academic structure.** 53% of local and London Group Universities also operate within the same three term structure. Typically Universities with a 2 Semester structure deliver their teaching in the Autumn and Spring terms and the Summer term is used for assessment and exams only.

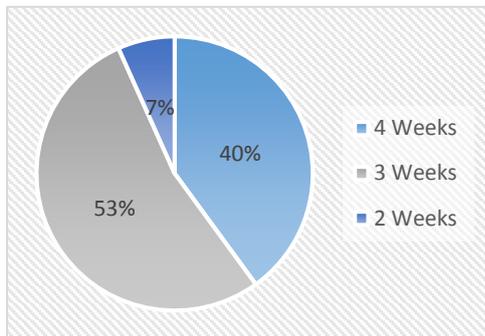
### TERM 1 / SEMESTER 1 TEACHING START DATES



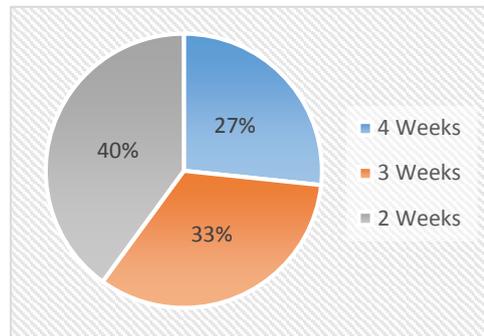
**Term 1 at City begins with Induction week from the 17<sup>th</sup> -21<sup>st</sup> September. Teaching then commences for the Autumn Term on the 24<sup>th</sup> September.** 93.4% of local and London Group Universities have the same Induction / Welcome week and commence teaching on the same date.

## STUDENT VACATION LENGTHS

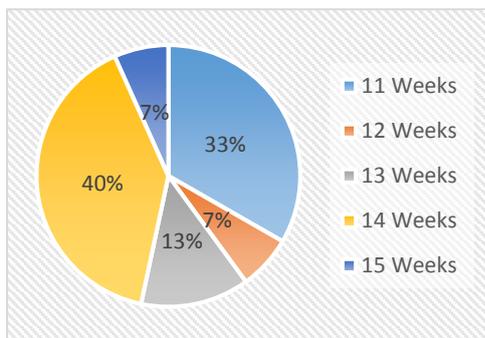
### Winter



### Spring



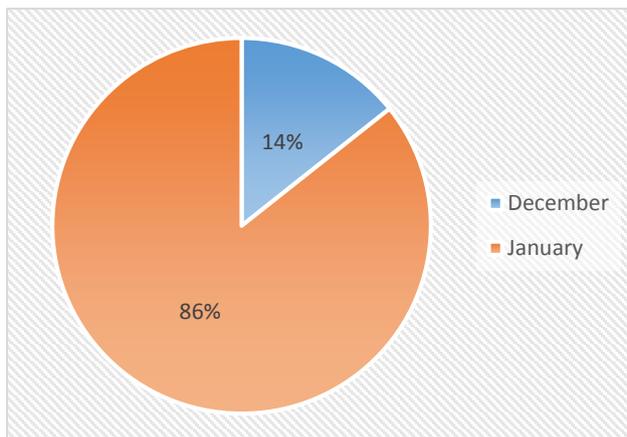
### Summer



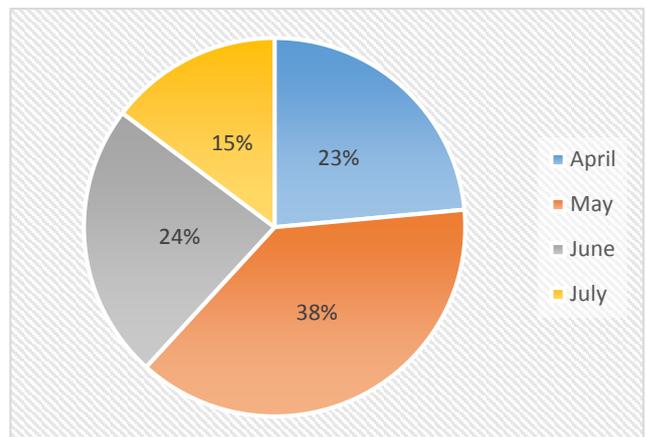
**City has a winter vacation of 4 weeks, a spring vacation of 4 weeks and a summer vacation of 12-15 weeks depending on summer activity.** 67% of local and London Group Universities have the same vacation lengths for students during summer break, 40% have the same winter break (with 60% having a shorter break) and 73% have a shorter spring vacation by reducing the number of weeks to 2 or 3.

## EXAMS / ASSESSMENT PERIODS

### Winter



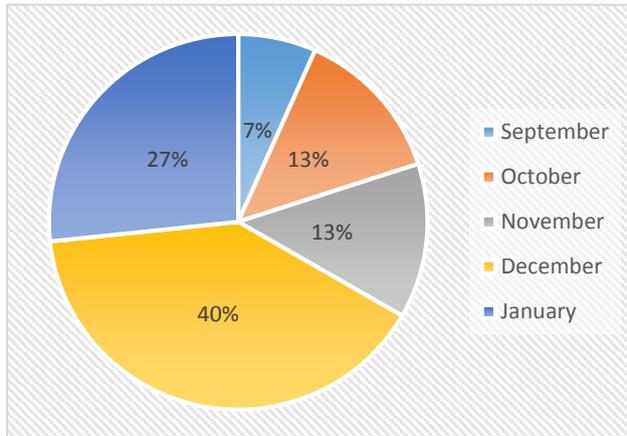
### Summer



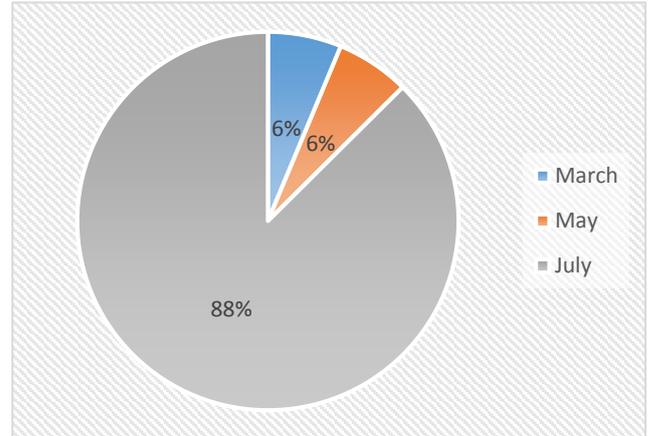
**City holds the majority of Exams during January & May although there are exceptions to this and some examinations take place throughout the year.** 86% of the local and London Group Universities within the research also have their winter examination / assessment period taking place in the January. The summer examination period is more varied, 38% also have examinations / assessments taking place in May however the 47% of universities that run on a 2 Semester academic year structure will run all of their examination / assessment periods from April –July.

## GRADUATION

### Winter



### Summer



**City has a winter Graduation in January and a summer Graduation in July.** 88% of the local and London Group Universities within the research have a Summer Graduation in July with 12% bringing the Graduation forward to March & May. The Winter Graduation period is however more varied with 67% having a December - January Graduation period and 33% having their Winter Graduation from September – November.

**Appendix 1- Data for Academic Year 2018/2019:**

Name of University	Start of Autumn Term	End of Autumn Term	Vacation Period	Start of Spring Term	End of Spring Term	Vacation Period	Start of Summer Term	End of Summer Term	Vacation Period	Exam Assessment Periods	Graduation
City University of London ( <i>Not included in the results presented above</i> )	24th September	7th December	4 Weeks	7th January	5th April	4 Weeks	6th May	31st May / 21st June	12-15 Weeks	January & May	January July
Goldsmiths University of London	24th September	14th December	4 Weeks	14th January	29th March	4 Weeks	29th April	21st June	13 Weeks		December July
Queen Mary University of London	24th September	14th December	3 Weeks	7th January	29th March	3 Weeks	23rd April	7th June	14 Weeks	April - June	December July
Kings College London	24th September	14th December	4 Weeks	14th January	29th March	4 Weeks	29th April	31st May / 16th August	5-15 Weeks	April - July	January July
London Metropolitan University	24th September	14th December	3 Weeks	7th January	12th April	2 Weeks	29th April	7th June	14 Weeks	January & May	December July
The University of East London	24th September	21st December	2 Weeks	7th January	12th April	2 Weeks	29th April	5th July	11 Weeks	April - July	July
University of Roehampton London	24th September	14th December	3 Weeks	7th January	12th April	2 Weeks	29th April	7th June	14 Weeks	April - June	January July

Name of University	Start of Autumn Term	End of Autumn Term	Vacation Period	Start of Spring Term	End of Spring Term	Vacation Period	Start of Summer Term	End of Summer Term	Vacation Period	Exam Assessment Periods	Graduation
University College London	24th September	7th December	4 Weeks	7th January	22nd March	2 Weeks	8th April	14th June / 15th July	9-14 Weeks	April - July	December July
Brunel University	24th September	14th December	4 Weeks	14th January	5th April	3 Weeks	29th April	5th July	11 Weeks	December - January & May	July September
Kingston University	24th September	14th December	3 Weeks	7th January	5th April	3 Weeks	29th April	21st June	13 Weeks	April - June	January July
University of Westminster, London	24th September	14th December	3 Weeks	7th January	12th April	2 Weeks	29th April	5th July	11 Weeks	April - July	November July
London South Bank University	24th September	14th December	3 Weeks	7th January	5th April	3 Weeks	29th April	7th June	14 Weeks	April - June	October November
St Mary's University	24th September	14th December	3 Weeks	7th January	12th April	2 Weeks	29th April	5th July	11 Weeks	January & May	March July
Royal Holloway University of London	24th September	14th December	4 Weeks	14th January	29th March	4 Weeks	29th April	14th June	14 Weeks	January & May	December July
Imperial College London	29th September	14th December	3 Weeks	7th January	25th March	4 Weeks	29th April	28th June	12 Weeks	January & May	October May
Anglia Ruskin University, London	24th September	14th December	4 weeks	7th January	5th April	3 Weeks	29th April	5th July	11 Weeks	January & July	December July