Review of the Academic Year Structure

It is 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.

The purpose of the paper is seek views from Educational Quality Committee on those issues and concerns with the current structure that the review should seek to address. A proposed timescale for the review is set out at the end of the paper.

Associate Deans (Education) and the Operations Board were asked to provide comments on an earlier version of this paper during August 2018. Feedback received has been reflected in this paper. The feedback received so far indicate that the review should consider whether the time between the summer assessment period and graduation could be increased by making the summer graduation slightly later.

Views provided by Educational Quality Committee will inform recommendations made to Senate at its next meeting in October 2018 on the scope of the review.

Recommendation

Educational Quality Committee is asked to:

- Consider the proposed issues and concerns and identify priorities for the review
- Consider the proposed timescales consider the report and recommendations

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. Issues considered further included timing of graduation ceremonies, exam scheduling and how programmes were using the Summer term and reflective learning weeks.

In March 2017 the proposed dates for 2018-19 and 2019-20 were approved by Senate on the basis of the previous structure although it was agreed that there was a need for a more detailed review for future years. The approved dates can be found at https://www.city.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/348559/Item_13_Academic_Calendar_Senate_15_03_17.pdf

It is planned that following a review of the current structure during 2018-19, term dates for 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23 will be agreed. 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.

Associate Deans (Education) and the Operations Board were asked to provide comments on an earlier version of this paper during August 2018.

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.

Potential areas to be considered during the review
The structure of the academic year needs to balance educational and student experience considerations with operational and logistical concerns, which creates some challenges and tensions. Currently, there is no clear rationale as to why the academic year is structured in the way that it is.

The review will need to establish at an early stage, those features of the academic year that should not be changed (e.g. whether we retain summer UG graduation), and the appetite for more substantial review of the design of our programmes, as these place constraints on the overall shape of the academic year.
The following are areas that we may want to consider during the review. These have been identified from feedback that has been received on the current structure.

1. **Number of exams:** The increasing number of examinations, especially for the centrally-managed examinations in January, means that the available period of time is not sufficient and affects our ability to provide all students with appropriate exam schedules.

   January exam period: UG Cass has an agreement with the Exams Office that a significant number of their core module January exams are held in the first week back after the Christmas break, i.e. one week before the main examination period. This was set up since 2015 with the agreement of all parties involved including student reps and the Students’ Union to alleviate the pressure of a very intense two week exam period. From the Central Exams Office perspective this works well as it would simply not be feasible to fit these in the two weeks along-side the other increasing exams.

   Summer Exam Period: Although the summer exam period is officially 4 weeks Cass PG have 2 weeks prior to this, MBA are around April time, Study Abroad are November and April and Nursing are ongoing throughout the year. Effectively, this means that the summer exam period is at least 6 weeks.

   Some UG programmes reduced the volume of assessment as part of the review of assessment strategies during 2017/18 but consideration could be given to whether there is scope for significant further reduction in the number of exams.

2. **January exam period:** Related to point 1, consideration could be given to whether we retain a January exam period. The initial research of structures at 15 institutions mainly based in London shows that many of those institutions do not have a January exam period. If we were to move away from this, Spring term teaching could commence earlier. To enable this, the design of programmes using the January exam period would require some review.

3. **Summer assessment period and graduation timing:** Currently, there is a short time between exams, assessment boards and marks being released, and summer graduation. In this academic year the last assessment board was Friday 4th July and the print deadline for the graduation programmes was the Tuesday 9th so colleagues had to work over the weekend to get the programme finalised.

   Students complain about the close proximity between knowing their results and knowing if they could come to graduation. This causes issues with people buying flights/accommodation for their family, for example.

   Consideration could be given to whether there is scope to either tweak the timings to create more space prior to graduation, or to move away from summer graduations altogether.

Feedback received during August from the Operations Board and some Associate Deans (Education) suggests that the review should consider whether summer graduation could take
place later in the summer, possibly after the resit period. Consideration would need to be given to the availability of academic staff given that leave is often concentrated in August and availability of an appropriate venue if the timing was to change.

4. **Spring vacation period:** Many other institutions have a spring vacation of 2 weeks. If we were to reduce the length of the spring vacation, this would create the potential to adjust other components of the academic year alleviating some of the pressures noted under point 3.

Feedback from an Associate Dean indicates 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 the timing of the vacation period would need to change from year to year in line with Easter.

5. **January graduation:** Holding graduation ceremonies in January after graduating students’ Tier 4 visas expire has been highlighted as an issue.

Feedback from the Operations Board suggested that the timing of graduation should also be considered for students whose programmes do not follow the standard academic year, e.g. January starters.

6. **Use of Summer term and reflective learning (reading) weeks:** There is variable use by programmes of the Summer term and reflective learning weeks. It may be useful to consider how these components feature in the academic year structure in the future. 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.

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 as well as how programmes make use of reflective learning weeks.

8. **Number of modules and assessments:** Consideration could be given in the medium term to a revised credit framework for programmes to alleviate pressures within the structure of the academic year. Moving to modules which are multiples of 20 credits rather than 15 would significantly reduce the number of modules to be timetabled and assessed (e.g. 6 fewer modules for a UG programme which currently has a structure of 8 x 15 credits per year). An overall reduction in the number of modules we offer could result in other benefits and efficiencies. For example, a substantial reduction in the number of assessments arising from fewer modules could free up time for markers to focus on quality of feedback within the turnaround times for marking.

There were mixed views from Associate Deans and the Operations Board for undertaking such a review and concerns that the appetite from programme teams to undertake this work would be limited despite the potential benefits.
9. **Variations to the Academic Year:** There is currently no formal means by which a department can request to do something outside of the standard Academic Year. At present, they usually tell Timetabling and if the request 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.

One Associate Dean has expressed concern on behalf of their School that areas above suggest that the review is largely being driven by administrative issues rather than pedagogical concerns which should be the focus.

There was also feedback from Associate Deans that the teaching and examination timetables should be published much earlier. The publication of the timetables are dependent on the timing of other processes including programme amendments and module selection rather than the academic year structure, so this is not an issue that would be addressed during this review. However, work being undertaken as part of the Personalised Timetables project may have the potential to enable earlier publication of timetables in the future.

**Proposed Timescales:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determining priorities for the review and components of the structure that should be fixed at this point, i.e. not up for review</td>
<td>Operations Board</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ADE Forum</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Educational Quality Committee</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Senate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Review / consultation with stakeholders including students sector research</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Updates presented to EQC</td>
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<td>Updates presented to Senate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Formal Consultation with BoS on proposed structure</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Updates presented to EQC/Operations Board</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Final approval by Senate</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendation**

Educational Quality Committee is asked to:
- **Consider** the proposed issues and concerns and **identify** priorities for the review
- **Consider** the proposed timescales

Alison Edridge
Assistant Director (Quality and Academic Development)

Georgia Moustaka
Quality and Standards Officer

Student and Academic Services
September 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 (excluding City) were used in the research (Appendix 1) 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 17th-21st September. Teaching then commences for the Autumn Term on the 24th 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

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

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.
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:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of University</th>
<th>Start of Autumn Term</th>
<th>End of Autumn Term</th>
<th>Vacation Period</th>
<th>Start of Spring Term</th>
<th>End of Spring Term</th>
<th>Vacation Period</th>
<th>Start of Summer Term</th>
<th>End of Summer Term</th>
<th>Vacation Period</th>
<th>Exam Assessment Periods</th>
<th>Graduation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City University of London <em>(Not included in the data)</em></td>
<td>24th September</td>
<td>7th December</td>
<td>4 Weeks</td>
<td>7th January</td>
<td>5th April</td>
<td>4 Weeks</td>
<td>6th May</td>
<td>31st May / 21st June</td>
<td>12-15 Weeks</td>
<td>January &amp; May</td>
<td>January July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldsmiths University of London</td>
<td>24th September</td>
<td>14th December</td>
<td>4 Weeks</td>
<td>14th January</td>
<td>29th March</td>
<td>4 Weeks</td>
<td>29th April</td>
<td>21st June</td>
<td>13 Weeks</td>
<td>April - June</td>
<td>December July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen Mary University of London</td>
<td>24th September</td>
<td>14th December</td>
<td>3 Weeks</td>
<td>7th January</td>
<td>29th March</td>
<td>3 Weeks</td>
<td>23rd April</td>
<td>7th June</td>
<td>14 Weeks</td>
<td>April - June</td>
<td>December July</td>
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<td>Kings College London</td>
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<td>14th December</td>
<td>4 Weeks</td>
<td>14th January</td>
<td>29th March</td>
<td>4 Weeks</td>
<td>29th April</td>
<td>31st May / 16th August</td>
<td>5-15 Weeks</td>
<td>April - July</td>
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<td>7th June</td>
<td>14 Weeks</td>
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<td>7th January</td>
<td>12th April</td>
<td>2 Weeks</td>
<td>29th April</td>
<td>5th July</td>
<td>11 Weeks</td>
<td>April - July</td>
<td>July</td>
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<td>April - June</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name of University</td>
<td>Start of Autumn Term</td>
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