Review of the Academic Year – Overview of Proposals and Consultation Process

1. Aim of the document

The University is currently conducting a review of the structure of the academic year to determine whether any changes could be made to better meet the needs of students and staff. As part of this review, it is consulting staff and students on a possible alternative model which would involve extending Semester One into January. Any agreed changes would not be implemented until 2018/19 at the earliest.

This document provides further information on this proposed structure, highlights some key implications of the proposed structure, and sets out the timeline for the review process.

2. Background

The shape of the academic year drives all the activities that are undertaken by the University. At its meeting on 27 January 2016, the Senate Learning and Teaching Committee agreed to establish a task group to review the University’s academic year structure.

3. Options considered by the Task Group

The task group considered the following options:

- Start semester one a week earlier
- A three term model
- Extend Semester One into January

The Task Group discounted the first option as it would have significant disadvantages for the transition of new students who would need to arrive much sooner than for many other Universities. It would also put the University at a disadvantage for recruitment (particularly for international students), and logistical factors associated with the Edinburgh Festival would make it very challenging and expensive, if not impossible, to implement. The Task Group also discounted the second option, as any potential benefits for the staff and student experience would be modest and would not justify the considerable disruption involved in moving to this model.

The Task does however consider that the third model, Extending Semester One into January, has considerable merits. It is therefore consulting staff and students on this model.

4. Proposed Academic Year Structure

A visual representation of the Extending Semester One into January model is located at the end of the document. While the proposed structure has been overlaid on the 2016/17 calendar, any changes would not be implemented until 2018/19 at the earliest.

The key features of this proposed structure for the academic year are:

- Welcome Week and Semester 1 start one week later than at present;
- 11 weeks of teaching in Semester 1 inclusive of one week at the end for revision and consolidation. This is a week in which Schools provide structured and timetabled teaching activities to assist students to reflect on what they have learned on their courses and to prepare for examinations / assessments;
- Semester 1 courses would be examined in mid to late January, following a revision week;
• The Semester 1 examination diet remains two weeks long (12 examination days). This is long enough to ensure that all semester 1 courses can be examined in semester 1;
• 11 weeks of teaching in Semester 2 starting at the beginning of February, inclusive of one week at the end for revision and consolidation (as in Semester 1, the revision and consolidation week will include formal teaching);
• A one-week break after 6 weeks of teaching in both Semester 1 and Semester 2;
• Semester 2 examinations would be held at the beginning of May following a revision week, as at present;
• The Semester 2 examination diet is reduced to 3 weeks, which is sufficient to examine all semester 2 courses and all year long courses;
• Graduations would take place in late June / early July as at present;
• The proposed structure would not apply to programmes that already have opt-outs from the University’s current academic year structure, for example undergraduate Medicine, Education and Veterinary Medicine.

5. Implications of Proposed Structure

The following points outline the implications of the proposed structure:

Pros:

• Moving examinations from December to January would free up time in Semester 1 to start Welcome Week and Semester One teaching later than at present;
• Starting Welcome Week later will make aspects of admissions, pre-arrival and induction smoother, particularly for new first year undergraduate students who often do not receive their school examination results until August or who are recruited late in the admissions cycle (e.g. via Clearing & Adjustment routes) and for new international students who require visa clearance before entering the UK;
• Starting Welcome Week later would also give academic staff more opportunities to conduct research or attend conferences during September;
• A mid-term in each semester would make the semesters less pressured for both staff and students;
• Moving examinations from December to January would further reduce the pressure on students by allowing a reasonable period for revision prior to Semester 1 examinations. For students new to the UK (and international PGT in particular) there would be more time to adapt and acclimatise before sitting exams;
• Examinations in January would make it easier to provide students with feedback on their coursework before they sit examinations;
• Staff will no longer have to mark examination scripts over Christmas and New Year

Cons:

• Staff may need to mark examination scripts for the Semester 1 exam diet at the same time as teaching for Semester 2;
• There may be additional costs incurred if the Library and other services need to remain open over Christmas and/or New Year to support students preparing for exams.
• The current two weeks of Spring vacation would be replaced with teaching weeks, reducing the scope for staff to take annual leave at that time of year and (on the basis that some student use spring holidays for revision) reducing available revision time for students before the Semester 2 examination;
• There will no longer be space for Innovative Learning Week in Semester 2;
• Visiting undergraduate students who are at the university for Semester 1 only would not be able to remain in Edinburgh during January for examinations, meaning that staff may need to set them alternative assessments in order to assess these students during Semester 1.
• Students who have few or no exams in the Semester 1 exam diet would experience a substantial gap between the end of teaching in Semester 1 and the beginning of teaching in Semester 2.
6. Timeline

Following a consultation with students and staff during April / May 2016 on the proposed academic year structure, the Task Group will review findings of the consultation. The Task Group will submit its final report to Learning and Teaching Committee for consideration at its meeting on 21 September 2016. It will then be reported to the meeting of the University’s Senate on 28 September 2016 and (if appropriate) a relevant University Court meeting.

Gavin Douglas
Deputy Secretary (Student Experience)
The University of Edinburgh
April 2016
Proposed academic year from 2018

Semester 1:
- September: 6 weeks of teaching, a mid-term break, another 5 weeks of teaching
- October: 3 week Winter Vacation
- November: Last week of Semester 1 teaching is consolidation
- December: New Semester 1 revision week and 2 weeks of exams in January
- January: Semester 2 starts late January / early February
- February: 6 weeks of teaching, a mid-term break, another 5 weeks of teaching
- March: Last week of Semester 2 teaching is consolidation
- April: 1 week of revision, 3 weeks of exams
- May: Any Semester 1 exams moved to January
- June: Semester 3 during the summer (Postgraduate courses only)
- July: All Semester 1 courses could be examined at end of Semester 1
- August: 3 week Winter Vacation

Notes
- More information: www.ed.ac.uk/academic-services/projects/review-of-the-academic-year
- Consolidation: A week of taught activities to help with revision and consolidation of new material.
- Outline Only: Specific dates to be confirmed.