

## Executive Summary of Business for Senate



Title	<b>Report of the Senate Working Group on the Structure of the Academic Year</b>
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Type	Proposals, for discussion and decision
Date	16 <sup>th</sup> March 2011
Summary	Following the December meeting of Senate, at which a number of key decisions were taken in relation to restructuring the Academic Year and credit simplification, for 2012 implementation, a Working Group was established to consider more fully and consult on: the timings of the mid-year assessment and marking period and the main end-of-year assessment period, and the length of Christmas and Easter vacations.
Essential Reading	This paper seeks to cover the essential issues. However, the Group's recommendations follow an extensive consultation exercise. The consultation paper, and responses can be accessed via the Sussex Direct Committee Directory: 2011 SOTAY Consultation.
Risk Analysis	Specific risks arising in the proposals are regarded as medium-level, although the overall planning and implementation of the new academic year structure will need careful risk management.
Resource Implications	As previously demonstrated, restructuring the Academic Year and simplifying the credit structures is intended to result in a rationalisation of the overall number of courses offered within the curriculum (although NOT a reduction in curriculum content) and a streamlining of associated assessment events. However, the implementation and change-management phase (minimally, March 2011 – Oct 2012) requires appropriate investment.
Consultation	In addition to a student questionnaire, the following have been included in the consultation process:  Schools and Departments, Teaching and Learning Committees (School and University), USSU, a disability interest focus group, the Student Experience Forum, the Equalities and Diversity Forum, and a student parents focus group.
Recommendation	<b>Senate is asked to APPROVE the recommendations</b>

**Introduction**

1. At its last meeting Senate agreed the following for implementation from 2012-13:
  - a standardised and simplified credit structures of 15 and 30 credits should be introduced for all year 1 and 2 courses;
  - that this structure be delivered through two symmetrical 12 week teaching blocks;
  - that a 2 week teaching free period be set aside for assessment and marking between the two teaching periods;
  - that courses entirely taught in the first teaching block should normally, but not necessarily, be assessed by the end of the first assessment period; and
  - that the academic year be started one week earlier than at present to enable delivery of a 12 week uninterrupted teaching block before Christmas.

*a. Excerpt from Senate minutes – meeting of 8/12/10  
(S/226/M)*

2. In addition to deciding these fundamental points, Senate agreed to the establishment of a Working Group led by PVC for Teaching and Learning, Prof Clare Mackie, to look at the exact structure of this new year in respect of the timing of the mid-year assessment and marking period, the main end-of-year assessment period, and the Christmas and Easter vacations, all of which can be achieved in a number of ways. The Working Group was asked to consider, and to consult on, three specific proposals, as detailed below. The terms of reference and membership of the Working Group are attached as **Annex A**.

**Consultation**

3. The Group has consulted widely. Consultation has included Schools and Departments, Teaching and Learning Committees (School and University), a disability interest focus group, the Student Experience Forum, the Equalities and Diversity Forum, and a student parents focus group. In addition an on-line questionnaire, targeted for all non-finalist undergraduates, was made available for all (but one day) of February. This questionnaire was not targeted on postgraduates, given that the proposals are specific to the undergraduate year; or to finalists, in order not to detract from the NSS. All students were however free to respond. However, there are implications for delivery of PGT over 12 months and TLC has agreed to undertake further consultation on this once the UG term dates have been finalised. The pattern of PGT study does not need to map strictly onto the UG dates, and there would seem to be positive benefits in some 'staggering' of when things like induction happen for different groups. However we also need to remain mindful of the issue that PGT programmes should deliver a minimum 12 month duration for visa purposes.

The consultation paper used to consult with TLCs, and with Schools and Departments together with the responses to this and to the student consultation are available through Sussex Direct. The Group has sought to reflect consultation responses in its recommendations, as will be illustrated below. However, unsurprisingly given the complexity

of the issues and the differing disciplinary perspectives, none of the proposals consulted on attracted unanimity, and whilst the Group believes that its recommendations reflect a majority view on the consultation it recognises that its role necessarily goes beyond a simple numeric analysis of the responses.

### Equality Considerations

4. An initial Equality Impact Assessment was undertaken in December and has been revised to include the outcomes of recent consultations with equalities groups. The outcomes of these consultations by the Working Group, and adjustments made, is attached as **Annex B**. The Group recognises that the University will continue to take account of equalities issues as detailed implementation on the new structure of the academic year moves forward. TLC has committed to the establishment of a small Equality Analysis group, to include USSU and staff representation, to monitor and review detailed changes, including further engagement with target groups as appropriate.

### The Timing of the Mid-Year Assessment Period

5. The Group was asked to address the following proposal that:

*a five week 'teaching free period' should be allowed over Christmas to incorporate a 3 week vacation and timing of the 2 week mid-year 'teaching free period.'*

6. The Group consulted on two options: A two week non-teaching period for assessment and marking after the Christmas student vacation of three weeks; and a split non-teaching period with one week either side of Christmas. A further option of a two week assessment and marking period before the Christmas break was ruled out as requiring too early a start of the autumn term.
7. A table showing the academic year structure is attached as **Annex C**; these options are shown in columns B and C for 2012-13. The majority of schools, and a majority of departments, favoured the option of a two week assessment and marking period after Christmas. At its meeting of 23 February, Teaching and Learning Committee similarly expressed a preference for the post Christmas assessment period.
8. The results of the student questionnaire were less straightforward. 438 students completed the survey. The questionnaire used a 5 point Likert scale<sup>1</sup>; and two questions were asked, seeking a view on each option respectively. On both questions a majority of respondents disagreed. The size of the majority was relatively small (48% against 44% for the split assessment period, and 50% against 43% for the two week period after Christmas (in both cases the balance to 100% is due to respondents recording neither agree or disagree). Taking into account the relatively small size of the number of respondents (around 7% of the total number of non-finalist undergraduates), and its overall marginal disagreement with either option, the Group felt that the student vote was split on this point.
9. A preference for the post Christmas assessment and marking period was expressed by the disability interest focus group. No preference was expressed by the Equalities and Diversity Forum.
10. In arriving at a recommendation on this issue, the Group believes that there is still some confusion on aspects of the change agreed in adopting a mid-year assessment period

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<sup>1</sup> Running 'strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree'.

around the distinction between all assessment methods and exam-type assessment. Whilst it is intended that exam-type assessments<sup>2</sup> must be held within the formal assessment periods, there is no requirement that formal submissions or other coursework assessments must be limited to those periods. This is particularly important when thinking about coursework submission dates. Clearly what remains fundamental is to achieve a pedagogically appropriate pattern of assessment (which will necessarily involve ensuring that the pattern of assessment is achievable for students). The Group recommends that this point is prominently embedded in the communications strand of the implementation work for the new academic year structure.

11. The Group believes that overall the post Christmas assessment and marking is the better option. It provides a simpler approach and avoids the complexities arising in deciding the extent to which Schools might be given flexibility to adopt differing approaches under the split assessment period model. Following on from this point the Group believes that it provides a better basis to maintain the University's heritage of inter-disciplinarity. A practical example of this relates the position of joint majors students, who might face exams in both weeks of a split assessment period. This approach may also be more favourable to international students travelling over Christmas as it allows for a longer Christmas break. However, it was recognised that this option did not allow for exam-type assessment of half-year visiting and exchange students in the first term and recommended that TLC should seek to formalise arrangements for such assessments.
12. The Group has also considered the timing of the Christmas student vacation period. It has received strong representation through its student members, and through consultation with students, that the Christmas vacation period should remain as 4 weeks. It is also conscious that this point was expressed strongly in previous consultations with students. It believes that this is achievable on the basis of an early finish in week 12 of the new autumn term coupled with a late start in the first week of the mid-year assessment and marking period.

*The Group recommends that the mid-year non-teaching period for assessment and marking should be held after Christmas; that this period should start on the Wednesday in the first week after Christmas and run to the Saturday for written assessments that require detailed feedback to be prepared during the marking week but that in-person MCQ and presentation assessments be allowed to run to the Friday of the following week. For 2012-13 this would mean starting on Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> January, and finishing on Friday 18<sup>th</sup> January; with the Spring teaching term commencing on Monday 21<sup>st</sup> January. The autumn term would start towards the end of freshers' week and should finish on Wednesday 12 December, to allow delivery of 12 weeks of teaching and permit a staggered 4 week break over Christmas.*

### **Freshers' Induction Week**

13. In considering the option of an assessment and marking period split into one week either side of Christmas, the Group raised the possibility of merging the Fresher's induction week (week 0) into teaching week 1, by allowing for introductory, discipline-specific teaching to begin in week 0. Such an approach would be made necessary by the earlier start to the teaching year contingent on the split assessment and marking period model. Members of the Group also saw intrinsic pedagogic benefits in such a merging.

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<sup>2</sup> Subject to the ongoing work of the Portfolio Review which will reflect on the use of assessment in the new programme structures.

14. This option was consulted on, and attracted majority support amongst schools and departments. There was also majority support in the responses to the student survey, although there are particular reservations about the impact on students with disabilities, who support arrangements are put in place in week 0, and for international students, who traditionally arrive later.
15. The post-Christmas assessment and marking period model recommended above does not require the merger of week 0 and week 1; and there are also significant logistical challenges (and work) involved in effecting such a merger. Moreover the Group has identified no immediate consensus of support for such a change. The Group therefore wishes to make a recommendation, and to commend further work on the arrangements for student induction to Teaching and Learning Committee and to the Students Union. To minimise the impact on Faculty research time it was agreed that resit boards should be scheduled for the start of week zero with discipline specific teaching commencing on the Thursday and Friday to balance the early finish on the Wednesday prior to the Christmas vacation.

***The Group recommends**, that introductory (non-assessed) discipline specific teaching events should be timetabled for the Thursday and Friday of the Freshers' induction week (week 0). This days compensate for the early finish on Wednesday of week 12 of the autumn teaching term – however, it is important that in planning the delivery of teaching on these days Schools allow for a proper integration with the organisation of the Freshers' induction events.*

#### **The Easter Public Holidays and the Spring 'teaching free period'**

16. The Group was ask to address the following proposal that:

*The second twelve week teaching block should be taught uninterrupted other than by a week to cover public holidays; and*

*An additional three-week 'teaching free period' should be allowed in Spring immediately after the second teaching block.*

17. A clear majority of those schools and departments that responded supported these proposals for a second 12 week teaching block; and they were also supported by Teaching and Learning Committee – although there was some minority support for a shorter break between the end of the teaching term and the assessment and marking period with a view to shortening the overall teaching year. The proposal also attracted a majority of support from the respondents to the on-line student questionnaire. Concerns were expressed about the fact that this option raises difficulties for those with caring responsibilities linked to the school holidays, and there were also some concerns raised at the disability interest focus group about the possibility of some disabled students having to remain on campus due to the shortness of the break and facing some isolation as a result. The Group recognises these issues, and in making its recommendation trusts that Schools and Support Units will be able to bear this issue in mind and to allow flexibility in the leave arrangements so as not to exacerbate the issue for those staff with child-caring, or related responsibilities over the Easter period.

***The Group recommends** that the second twelve week teaching term should be taught uninterrupted other than by a one mid-week to mid-week non-teaching period to accommodate the Public and University Easter holidays. For 2012-13 this would mean that teaching would finish on Wednesday 27 March, and recommence on Thursday 4 April. Following the teaching term, a three week student vacation would run from 22 April to 10 May. In those years when the Easter public holidays*

*do not fall during the Spring (second) teaching term, the break between the teaching term and the end of year assessment and marking period would be 4 weeks (as illustrated in for 2013-14 in annex C).*

## **Other Issues**

18. The Group is particularly conscious of two issues:

That further detail on the handling of assessment will need to be worked through in implementing the new academic year structure, and this work will run in tandem with the changes emerging from the Portfolio Review. In itself the new 15/30 credit structure is expected to reduce the number of courses by 100 such that there is a real prospect of a reduction in the number of assessment events, and perhaps therefore in the number of exam-type assessment events.

That in making its recommendations the Group has left the overall length of the teaching (and assessment) year unchanged. There are good reasons for this – and for at least one school there remain arguments for a longer teaching year. The Group is aware of the demands of Research.

The Group believes there may be scope to tie these two issues together in the future and to look at whether the time devoted to the assessment periods might be reduced to allow some additional time for other activities, particularly research. Although this needs to be balanced by students wishes to retain the longer assessment period to avoid exams being scheduled too close together.

***The Group recommends*** that in overseeing the detailed implementation of the new academic year structure, management should explore any scope to reduce the time devoted to the assessment weeks (without prejudice to appropriate and timely feedback to students) so as to secure additional time for Research. The Group also recommends that these issues be highlighted in reporting progress to Teaching and Learning Committee.

Prof Clare Mackie, PVC (Teaching and Learning)  
Peter Clements, Special Projects Manager  
March 2011

## APPENDIX A

### SENATE WORKING GROUP ON STRUCTURE OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR (SPRING 2011)

#### Terms of Reference

The terms of reference for the Group are to consider recommendations 6, 7 and 8, from the Senate paper S/226/4, Mid-Year Assessment and the Structure of the Academic Year, namely that:

“6. A five week 'teaching free period' should be allowed over Christmas to incorporate a 3 week vacation and a 2 week mid-year 'teaching free period' immediately prior to the start of the second teaching block.

7. The second twelve week teaching block should be taught uninterrupted other than by a week to cover public and University holidays.

8. An additional three week 'teaching free period' should be allowed in Spring immediately after the second teaching block.”

To consult on these as appropriate and to provide recommendations to Senate at its week 10 meeting in the Spring term.

#### Membership

Prof Clare Mackie (PVC Teaching and Learning) (Chair)  
 Prof Pete Clifton (Head of School – Psychology)  
 Brenda Giddey (Student Support)  
 Jo Goodman (USSU – Welfare Officer)  
 Cath Holmstrom (DoSS – ESW)  
 Dr Beena Khurana (Senator – Psychology)  
 Prof Luke Martell (Senator – LPS)  
 Prof Michael Morris (Senator – HAHP)  
 Camilla Palleson (Senate Student Rep – Social Sciences)  
 Owen Richards (Academic Registrar)  
 Carl Salton-Cox (Senate Student Rep – Humanities)  
 Cameron Tait (USSU – President)  
 Lita Wallis (USSU – Education Officer)  
 Peter Clements (Secretary)

## APPENDIX B

## Outcomes of Consultation with Equalities Groups

KEY EQUALITIES GROUPING	QUANTITATIVE EVIDENCE	QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE	COMMENTS AND ADJUSTMENTS
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Student Survey has been disaggregated for those over and under 21</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A separate Freshers' induction week, but including some introductory academic events, are seen as desirable for mature students and this model has been retained pending further review.</li> </ul>
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Student Survey has been disaggregated on the basis of gender</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Equalities and Diversity Forum discussion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some differences in the student responses and preferences when considered on basis of gender – e.g. male students expressed marginal preference for retaining separate Freshers' week. But evidence not unequivocal, and no obvious case for adjustment.</li> </ul>
Disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A subset of responses to the Student Survey for those declaring a disability has been extracted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disability interest focus group</li> <li>Equalities and Diversity Forum (EDF) discussion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A consideration in not merging weeks 0 and 1 has been the need to maintain time to secure support arrangements for disabled students (in line with EDF comments, and subset of student survey responses).</li> <li>The mid-year assessment period provides better scope to meet the needs of some students with disabilities by securing improved scope for reasonable adjustments to be made (including the reduction of in-class tests) and by spreading the formal assessment load more evenly</li> <li>The 12-week teaching period may impact on some students with disabilities. However, this may be mitigated by the use of reasonable adjustments.</li> </ul>
Ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A subset of the responses to the Student Survey for those declaring membership of a non-white ethnic group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Equalities and Diversity Forum discussion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The recommendation to retain a 4 week break at Christmas is intended to facilitate easier, and cheaper international student travel.</li> <li>Student survey responses in line with those for all respondents.</li> </ul>

OTHER INTEREST GROUPS	QUANTITATIVE EVIDENCE	QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE	ADJUSTMENTS
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A subset of the responses to the Student Survey for those with childcare responsibilities was derived (although the sample size is small at 24.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student parents focus group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A majority of students with childcare responsibilities favoured the post Christmas assessment period on the student survey.</li> <li>Similarly the subset of the survey data showed support for merging the Freshers' induction week with week 1 teaching; although the student parents focus group seemed to take the opposite position.</li> </ul>
International Students			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The recommendation to retain a 4 week break at Christmas is intended to facilitate easier, and cheaper international student travel</li> <li>A consideration in not merging weeks 0 and 1 has been the late arrival of international students</li> </ul>

