

## Report on the Review of the Structure of the Academic Year

### Background

The new Structure of the Academic Year has now been in place for a complete cycle. A Group (Review of the Structure of the Academic Year Group) was set up by the PVC Education to seek and subsequently review feedback from students, academic and professional staff on the new structure. The review encompassed both Teaching Block 1 (September-December 2013) and Teaching Block 2 (January-July 2014).

The Group consisted of: Professor J Noyes (Chair), Ryan Bird (Education and Representation Officer UBU); Alex Bradbrook (Academic Experience UG Officer, UBU); Professor S Heslop (Academic Director of Graduate Studies); Kit Leighton-Kelly (Deputy Academic Registrar), Professor A Orr-Ewing, C Willmore (Academic Director of Undergraduate Studies), Sorana Vieru (Postgraduate Officer, UBU); Esther Williams (Deputy Academic Registrar).

Feedback covered the implementation of the new structure, its impact on educational delivery (timings of teaching blocks, length of teaching blocks, examination requirements), the impact on research time and activities, and other issues that had arisen (for example the implications for travel arrangements for international students).

### Outcome

The Review demonstrated that there is no ideal solution or consensus within the University in relation to the structure of the academic year. All potential models have their advocates and detractors; all models have advantages and disadvantages. The range of academic year structures across the sector (and indeed within the Russell Group) indicates that there are a number of preferred patterns, depending on the judgements that are brought to bear.

On the basis of the feedback received and considering the various issues that were highlighted, the Group makes one recommendation for consideration by Senate, cognisant that in many ways it believes it to be the 'least worst option', balancing educational, research and people-related considerations.

The Group **RECOMMENDS**:

*That we retain the principle of Teaching Block 1 (TB1) as 12 weeks in length; that we reconfigure TB1 to an 11+1 week pattern; that we model annually the 11+1 pattern to best suit year on year constraints.*

*The primary constraint is that when teaching only 11 weeks before the Winter [Christmas] break means that the '+1' requires restarting teaching around the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, all 11+1 weeks will be taught before the break.*

*Further that there is no alteration to the pattern of TB2 which is modelled as currently.*

This recommendation allows the University to manage and deliver two 12-week teaching blocks, and retain the research time within the structure of the academic year that is the norm for a research intensive university such as Bristol. The Group believes this proposal addresses in principle the fundamental issues and concerns raised about the length of Teaching Block 1, as it shifts the twelfth week into January when the calendar permits. This eliminates 'knock-on'

problems associated with making far-reaching alterations to the entirety of the academic year structure.

This recommendation provides a formal solution, and would have worked in the current academic year (2014/15) and allows flexibility for the future. However modelling for a number of years into the future as represented in the **Annex**, it must be pointed out that *de facto*, no immediate change would appear to take place in the near future due to the way dates fall i.e. the pattern of 11+1 would all be taught before the Winter [Christmas] break to order to avoid a New Year start. While this does not seem to address the issue of fatigue noted by students and staff, the Group discounted the possibility of ameliorating this in any given year by, for example, suggesting a move to a four week Winter [Christmas] Break and reducing the Spring [Easter] vacation. Such solutions would raise other issues and have profound impacts on both educational and research practices.

***In recommending this option we have taken account of the student experience, teaching and research imperatives and the implications for travel for our international students.***

## Appendix 1

## Recommendation, Alternatives and Issues

**Recommendation**

Teaching Block 1 (TB1) remains at 12 weeks – but is reconfigured as 11+1. This is an 11 week teaching block plus one week in December or January. Week 12 would be designated as each discipline requires, this means Schools would be free to use week 12 for revision, workshops, enhancement, teaching, lab classes or other activities. In the event that teaching continues into week 12, programme leaders should ensure there is sufficient time between delivering new content and students being assessed on it.

This model still allows for 24 weeks of teaching in total, with potential for time for revision, intensive lab classes, practical classes, field trips, etc. and weeks set aside for assessment. TB2 remains the same.

We would determine on a year by year basis whether Week 12 occurs before or after the Winter [Christmas] break, in the same way that the Spring [Easter] break is determined flexibly.

- TB1 will continue to start later in September, thereby not scheduling teaching into research time.
- TB1 will break/ finish one week earlier (as requested by students and staff) whenever the pattern of the year allows it.  
*Students/staff have commented they are exhausted at the end of an intensive 12-week teaching block. However if we were to always schedule Week 12 after the Winter [Christmas] break, this would mean in some years it would start on New Year's Day or soon thereafter.*
- Flexibility in scheduling TB1 allows us to retain our current model of a 3 week Winter [Christmas] break. If we 'set' the model as 11 plus 1 with Week 12 always scheduled after the Winter [Christmas] break, other problems arise around the start date for students/staff in relation to the 'final' week of TB1. Given that one of the reasons we have contemplated moving to an earlier December finish is to allow students to travel more easily before Christmas, adopting a new system in which we would be expecting them to travel over New Year to get back to Bristol seems perverse.

Other options considered

- Another possibility was a **4-week Winter [Christmas] break and then reduce the Spring [Easter] break** to 2 weeks only, which still enables a 12 week TB2. This would allow us to always have TB1 as 11-weeks and not return on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> January. However, this raises issues around having reduced time for students to travel /work at the Spring [Easter] break. Importantly it also has an impact on staff research time and commitments as the Easter break from teaching is typically a time that staff attend conferences and undertake other research activities.

- We could simply **set and retain the TB1 12 week term** that we have, despite comments that it is too long and exhausting. This is what many of our competitors do. Many start a week earlier than us and finish a week earlier (Exeter, Newcastle, UCL, Nottingham, Kings, etc.). It should be noted that some universities which start a week earlier in September 2015 are scheduled to recommence on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2016. Others start and finish as we do currently (Liverpool, Sheffield, Queens' Belfast).
- We could set **Teaching Block 1 (TB1) to start one week earlier in September** thus allowing the term to finish one week earlier in December. This model continues to provide 24 weeks of teaching, with potential for revision, lab classes, practical classes, field trips, etc and weeks set aside for assessment. However, it breaks into staff research time in September and would require the timing of Resit examinations to be rescheduled (either moved earlier into August or moved to July). It also compounds the problem by suggesting we return for examinations and TB2 at the very beginning of January, with associated travel issues for international students.
- We could move to **two 11 week Teaching Blocks**. This model would provide **22 weeks** of direct teaching, enhancement/revision /project, fields trips allocated weeks and 2x2 weeks for assessment. This would allow for dedicated weeks for projects, field trips, intensive lab work, etc. However many disciplines comment they could not function with this reduced amount of teaching weeks. It also puts additional pressure on teaching space and some spaces/ labs are already fully utilised.

### Structure of the Academic Year 2015/2018 - DATES SHOWN AS IN ANNEX A1

#### Recommended dates on a year on year model

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Welcome Week/Student Orientation	21-25 September 2015	19-23 September 2016	18-22 September 2017
Start of TB1	28 Sept 2015 (1)	26 Sep 2016 (1)	25 Sep 2017 (1)
Last Day of TB1 Teaching	18 Dec 2015 (12)	16 Dec 2016(12)	15 Dec 2017 (12)
Winter (Christmas) Vacation	21 Dec 2015 to 8 Jan 2016 (3 weeks)	19 Dec 2016 to 6 Jan 2017 (3 weeks)	18 Dec 2017 to 8 Jan 2018 (3 weeks)
January Examinations	11 Jan 2014 to 22 Jan 2016 (2 weeks)	9 Jan to 20 Jan 2017 (2 weeks)	8 Jan to 19 Jan 2018 (2 weeks)
Start of TB2	25 January 2016	23 January 2017	22 January 2018

#### Dates if modelled to a set 11+1 model

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Welcome Week/Student Orientation	21-25 September 2015	19-23 September 2016	18-22 September 2017
Start of TB1	28 Sept 2015 (1)	26 Sep 2016 (1)	25 Sep 2017 (1)
Last Day of TB1 Teaching	11 Dec 2015 (11)	9 Dec 2016 (12)	8 Dec 2017 (12)
Winter (Christmas) Vacation	14 Dec 2015 to 4 Jan 2016 (3 weeks)	12 Dec 2016 to 2* Jan 2017 (3 weeks)	11 Dec 2017 to 1* Jan 2018 (3 weeks)
TB1 week 12	4-8 January 2016 (TB1:Wk12)	2-6 January 2017 (TB1: Wk12)	1-5 January 2018 (TB1:Wk12)
January Examinations	11 Jan 2014 to 22 Jan 2016 (2 weeks)	9 Jan to 20 Jan 2017 (2 weeks)	8 Jan to 19 Jan 2018 (2 weeks)
Start of TB2	25 January 2016	23 January 2017	22 January 2018

\* UK Bank Holiday