

Academic Year

The structure of the academic year in the UK

In contrast to a calendar year, in most European countries an academic year begins with the start of autumn and ends the following spring. This is because it follows the medieval agricultural pattern of the year in northern Europe, in which July and August were when able-bodied young people were needed on the farms.

Describing and explaining the structure of the academic year in UK higher education is complicated by the fact that the key words used, particularly, for example, 'semester' and 'term', are not always defined in the same way by different higher education institutions. As a consequence, they do not always carry precisely the same meaning. As with many elements of UK universities, there are differing practices that use confusingly similar terminology.

For the purposes of this guide, the interpretation of key words will follow the usually accepted meanings. The important point is - you need to check with your colleagues which structure of the academic year, with appropriate dates, applies to you and your organisation.

What is a semester?

An academic year of approximately 30 -32 weeks contains 2 semesters and 3 terms. A semester, which literally means 'six months', is usually used to describe two periods of academic related activity in a year. Semesters are actually about four months long and are referred to as Semester 1 and Semester 2.

What is a term?

A term is generally understood to be a largely continuous period of teaching related activities. Usually there are three terms in a year - for example Autumn, Spring and Summer. Each term is about three months long and separated by holidays. A term may or may not include a period of assessment. Terms, along with holidays and examination periods, exist within the structure of the semesters. That is a characteristic structure of the academic year in UK higher education.

However, over the last 15 years, a considerable amount of time and effort has been spent on attempting to determine the best way to deliver HE curricula. As a result, individual institutions often have their own methods for organising the structure of their academic year.

Diversity and variations to the structure of the academic year

Learning and teaching is delivered within Semesters through 'modules', 'units' or 'courses' which are often assessed at the end of the semester. In some universities semesters are essentially continuous and separated by vacations, just like terms. Occasionally, a third semester is introduced in the summer period. Where three semesters are of equal length they may be referred to as trimesters.

Many universities run 10-week Autumn, Spring and Summer terms, though some use different names or a specific semester system, with the new semester beginning halfway through the second term. Other universities run terms which are uneven in length, with the autumn term usually the longest.

Even within individual institutions, practice can vary from year to year to accommodate factors such as the changing date of Easter. Some universities also have a 'reading week' in which no teaching takes place. At other universities reading weeks are not uniform and may be in different weeks in different faculties, departments, modules or even seminar groups. Some reading weeks only cover seminars whilst lectures continue; others stop both for the week.



An exception to most practices

An exception to the many variations in the structure of the academic year, is the Open University. Most of its undergraduate courses do not coincide with the structure of the academic year used by universities in Britain and elsewhere. Instead, they largely coincide with the calendar year - in other words, they typically start in February, with examinations in the autumn.

Further information

Rivlin, C (2004) undertook surveys and wrote a detailed report on '[The Structure of the Academic year: National and International Practice](#)'. Within the report there are many details about other attempts to research the changing patterns of the academic year over the last 10 =15 years.