Extending the academic year: new opportunities for learning

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General introduction and background

In North America, summer academic provision in universities and colleges is an established phenomenon (Kops, 1993; 1994; 1995). However, in the UK, despite widespread use of university premises for activities such as "summer schools", sub-letting and conferences, the use of the summer period for mainstream teaching of students remains as a novel concept.

The long accepted arrangement is for the academic teaching year to begin in early October and end following examinations (or other forms of assessment) in early June. Traditionally, the October to June period has been divided into three terms although in recent years the two-semester model has become increasingly common. This arrangement utilises the key university teaching infrastructure for no more than two thirds of the year; this degree of under-utilisation would rarely be tolerated in other areas of the public or private economy.

Although the June to September period is utilised by academic staff for professional updating, conference attendance, research, and annual vacation, there is a strong argument for re-examination of the model to determine the practical possibilities for, and implications of, operating universities as teaching institutions for the entire calendar year.

An impetus for the extension of the academic year has come from both the UK Government and the higher education sector. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK are technically autonomous entities but are dependent on significant Government support for their existence. Typically, between one-third and one-half of each institution’s income consists of a “block grant” awarded by the national higher education funding councils while many millions of pounds sterling more come in the shape of state assisted tuition fees for full-time undergraduate students. The UK Government, by virtue of its economic intervention, therefore has a significant degree of influence on the shaping of general policy (Johnes and Taylor, 1990).

For the past couple of decades, the administration of the public sector under both Conservative and Labour governments in the UK has attempted to espouse a more “market driven” ethos with the objective of (at least in theory) increasing efficiency to lessen the burden on the taxpayer (Marsh and Rhodes, 1989). The issue of greater utilisation of resources in HEIs (e.g. summer academic provision) is indicative of this objective.

Among many managers of HEIs there also appears to be a clear interest in exploring the option of reforming the academic year. In 1992, two higher education management groups, the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) (which represents the Universities) and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) (which represents the higher education colleges), in conjunction with the Governmental bodies the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), that of Wales (HEFCW) and the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) commissioned an enquiry chaired by Lord Flowers. The “Flowers Report”, the eventual findings of the committee, was published in November 1993.

Two key recommendations of the Flowers Report (1993) were:
1. The universal “semesterisation” of the UK academic year.
2. The subsequent introduction of a third semester in the period that has traditionally been the summer vacation (June, July, August and September).

Flowers argued that introduction of the third semester would lead to greater efficiency and would increase student throughput by virtue of either “acceleration” of students’ studies...
The principal outcome of adoption of the Flowers (1993) approach may be illustrated with respect to the ‘standard’ university qualification. An honours bachelor degree in England, Wales and Northern Ireland generally requires three years full-time study; utilisation of the summer period could potentially reduce the duration to two years by participation in three semesters per year rather than two per year. Similar acceleration would also apply to the increasing numbers of students who study on a part-time basis. (Scotland operates a four-year degree system and full participation in three semesters per year could reduce this to less than three years.)

As a result of the Flowers (1993) recommendations, a call for bids for funding to run pilot schemes was circulated by the higher education funding bodies to HEIs in the UK. A total of seven applications were successful as follows:

- **In Scotland**: the University of Paisley, University of Stirling and Robert Gordon’s University;
- **In Northern Ireland**: University of Ulster;
- **In England**: New College, University of Southampton (previously the La Sainte Union College of Higher Education), Liverpool John Moores University (which subsequently withdrew) and the University of Luton.

Each institution set out its local strategy for the extension of its academic year. It is the subsequent experience of the University of Luton and its students which provides the basis for this paper.

### The University of Luton and the extended academic year

The University of Luton is England’s newest university having been granted that status in July 1993. University status was achieved by the institution only after extensive peer examination and evaluation of the quality of its educational provision which led to the award of powers to award taught degrees (1991) and research degrees (1993).

In the UK context, the University of Luton is a mid-size university with a student population of around 15,000, of whom around 4,000 are currently studying on a part-time basis. The University operates an institution-wide modular credit scheme (MCS) within which the curriculum is delivered in discrete units (modules) with a full-time student undertaking eight modules per year (four per semester) for three years. For part-time students, the period of study is extended proportionately to the number of modules studied each year. A total of 24 successfully completed modules is necessary for an honours degree. The University is organised into four faculties:

1. Business;
2. Health Care and Social Studies;
3. Humanities; and

In late 1995, the University successfully bid for Government funding to run a pilot scheme to utilise the summer period for teaching, in effect creating a summer or third semester. This pilot scheme operated in the summers of 1996, 1997 and 1998. As with any experimental pilot, the programme has been closely monitored and evaluated with interim findings being reported to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on a yearly basis. A final report was presented to HEFCE in December 1998.

Although as an experimental pilot programme, the Extended Academic Year (EAY) was necessarily limited, the University sought deliberately to include a wide range of academic disciplines and a variety of approaches to course delivery. The overwhelming majority of courses offered as part of the EAY have been totally embedded within the University’s modular credit scheme and participants have accrued academic credit in exactly the same manner as with modules offered in the mainstream academic year. Similarly, the University required that the same Quality Assurance mechanisms (such as use of properly constituted examinations boards and use of external examiners) apply in the EAY as in the other two semesters.

Subject departments which have offered modules in the summer programmes are Law, Engineering, Business and Management, Linguistics, Contemporary History, Mapping Science, Health Care, Computer Science and Information Technology.

Examples of course delivery approaches adopted have included:

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Day-time lectures and seminars over a number of weeks.
• Evening lectures and seminars over a number of weeks.
• Intensive delivery of the entire module within a single week followed by an extended period for completion of assessed work.
• Supported open learning.

In addition, concurrent with the EAY (although not strictly part of it) the University has also piloted the concept of an intensive residential summer school at Masters level which is followed each year by an extended period for completion of assignments which are undertaken remotely from the institution.

The scale of the EAY at the University has been such that no student is a full-time (16 hours or more contact per week) participant. The University designed its EAY provision with particular reference to the needs of those students who are studying on a part-time basis, most of whom live in the locality of Luton and its surrounding area. However, the modules have also been open to appropriately qualified new part-time students, continuing part-time and full-time students, students of other institutions seeking transferable credit and members of the general public (associate students).

The EAY, or “third semester”, has been embedded into the curriculum. Despite the relatively limited range of modules available at present, the programme has been made part of the corporate strategic agenda of the institution and is expected to develop further in future years. The exact nature of expansion in this area will depend upon the HE funding arrangements in coming years.

Evaluation of the EAY

As an experimental pilot programme, the EAY has been subjected to a significant programme of evaluation and monitoring. The evaluation strategy has been characterised by the following features:
• A mix of formative evaluations (fed back to the project management throughout the pilot project to assist in programme development) and summative evaluations to measure the totality of project achievements against targets.
• A multi-dimensional and multi-method approach.
• Involvement of all key stakeholders.

Evaluation exercises have included the following:
1 Reviews of participant profiles and comparison of these with the university’s established student population.
2 Surveys of staff and student views:
   • academic staff (with and without EAY experience);
   • participants in the EAY programme;
   • part-time students;
   • full-time students.
3 Use of the University’s standard student quality perception instruments.
4 Focus groups with EAY participants (to explore issues raised in the survey results).

Profile data

Information gathered on the 1998 participants indicated the following. Participants were:
• Predominantly female (70 per cent of participants, compared with 57 per cent of overall student group).
• Older than the university norms (80 per cent over the age of 26 years, compared with 29 per cent for all students).
• Similar ethnic mix to the University’s norms.
• Local (not national).
• In employment (87 per cent of the EAY cohort).
• Less likely than the University average to have formal academic qualifications on starting their university studies.

From the above summary data it appears that the University has been successful in its objective of utilising the EAY as a means to enhance the opportunities for access to higher education. The University has a clear mission to serve the needs of its local community (which is the largest conurbation in the south-east of England aside from London) and in particular to provide educational opportunity for all whom are in a position to benefit.

Surveys of EAY participating students

Feedback from participating students was gathered using a number of instruments and approaches: the University’s standard Student Perception of Module (SPOM) questionnaire provides information on the operation and management of each module; it collects views on the module content, the performance of the module team and the assessment practice. A five-point Likert scale is used to obtain these data. For each year, the SPOM results indicate that on all factors the students had a more positive view of the modules than the University average for academic year in question. It is suggested that the very positive responses reflect the
enhanced cohesion of the smaller EAY groups with their more favourable staff: student ratios.

An additional questionnaire focused on motivations for study in the summer and other matters of direct relevance to the EAY programme. From the data gathered from this, a number of conclusions could be drawn:

- The EAY participants judged the possibility of completing the degree more rapidly and the opportunity to spread study throughout the year to be the chief attractions of the summer programme.
- Respondents generally found the timing of their modules to be convenient. The preferred timing/mode of study was part-time daytime with part-time evening courses second most popular. EAY participants did not generally favour full-time study and would be unlikely to undertake such. Although the respondents had taken their course over the summer months, the majority would consider part-time study at other times of the year (indeed, many were already studying throughout the year).
- The levels of satisfaction with University service provision were lower (in 1997 only) than the institution would have wished for. However, the University’s special circumstances for 1997 do yield generalisable messages. For example, there was a significant degree of criticism directed at the Learning Resource Centre (library and IT facilities) due to inconvenience caused by reduced opening hours. However, it should be noted that the 1997 EAY coincided with the commissioning of a major extension to the Learning Resource Centre (library plus computing service) which necessitated the closure for two weeks of the main facility. This illustrates the key issue of clashes between the institution’s maintenance and renewals programme and the continuing academic programme. Most major, and much routine, maintenance and reorganisational work is carried out in the summer months and this may – and in 1997 did – create problems for the simultaneous provision of academic courses. In 1996 and 1998 this was not an area of difficulty.

On the whole, the feedback from participating students was very positive. Other than the unavoidable temporary closure of the library and IT facilities, the student experience appears to have been undiminished. In fact, in purely academic terms, it seems to have generally been enhanced: marks on assessments and examinations were in almost all cases higher than the averages in the rest of the academic year in comparable modules.

**Survey of part-time students**

A large-scale postal survey was conducted of all part-time students registered at the University in early 1998. Although the principal emphasis of the questionnaire was on part-time study in general, several of the questions dealt specifically with the issue of the EAY and whether students were interested, what their interest/lack of interest stemmed from and the profile of these students.

Only a very small minority of respondents (9.6 per cent) had personal experience of involvement in the EAY, so overlap with the data collected in the feedback sessions is marginal.

The questions dealing with the EAY centred around three fundamental issues: whether the student was interested in summer study; what the student perceived as the benefits of summer study; what the student perceived as the difficulties in studying in the summer:

- When asked whether they would be interested in summer study, almost exactly two thirds of the respondents indicated that they would be.
- Broken down by faculty the concept appeared to stimulate the most interest in the Business School with 75 per cent of respondents expressing an interest. The percentages of interested students for the other four faculties was as follows: Health Care and Social Studies – 63 per cent; Humanities – 62 per cent; and Science, Technology and Design – 64 per cent.
- A marginally higher proportion of female students expressed an interest in summer study than their male counterparts (68 per cent compared to 63 per cent).
- When asked to express perceived benefits in summer study, by far the most common answer was the “acceleration of studies” with 40 per cent choosing that answer; “to even out the distribution of studies” was the second most popular choice (14.4 per cent) with “maintaining the continuity of study” (12.2 per cent) close behind. Other answers that scored rather lower were “better weather”, “safety of light evenings” and “greater access to resources”.

The concept of the EAY appears to be favourable to the part-time student body. Due to the slower rate of credit accumulation, the duration of a part-time course is necessarily longer than one which is full-time. The
Survey of full-time students
It should be understood that the profile of the part-time student population at the University of Luton (see above) differs greatly from the full-time population. While the great majority of full-time students are under the age of 25, the largest age-group of part-time students is between 31 and 40. It is reasonable to suggest that the general outlook of the respective groups and their attitudes towards their studies may differ somewhat.

In order to permit meaningful comparisons, the same question format as that for the part-time students was used in 1998 in a questionnaire completed by full time students:

- A total of 30 per cent of respondents were aware of the EAY initiative, 70 per cent were not. However, this level of awareness is perhaps higher than might have been expected since the initiative has not been promoted amongst this group of students.
- Just less than half (46 per cent) declared an interest in participating in summer study if such an opportunity arose (compared to 67 per cent of part-time students who expressed such an interest).
- The concept was most popular amongst Humanities students (50 per cent) and least popular amongst Science, Technology and Design students (32 per cent).
- Interest in extending study into the summer months is strongly age related: 32.3 per cent of students under 20 were interested compared with 75 per cent of students over the age of 30. A desire to accelerate the rate of studies and re-enter the workplace sooner rather than later may be the principal factor.
- The principal benefit perceived is the reduction in pressure that would arise from a spreading of the workload into the summer months (31 per cent). The perceived opportunity to use the summer period to “catch up” is also significant (13 per cent). This again would contribute to a reduction in the stress of study for the weaker student. Faster progress per se only appealed to 7 per cent of the overall total.
- Among the difficulties and disadvantages cited were concerns about finances and the need to earn money for subsequent study years stands out above all other factors named by respondents (39 per cent);
- Concern about the need to maintain family links appeared to be an age related negative factor; with the younger respondents (who are most likely to be studying away from home) citing this concern most often.
- By contrast perceived difficulty in respect of child care during school holidays is held by the older students.

The relationship between the age of the students and the interest in summer study should not be understated: the more mature student definitely appears to have a greater urgency in his or her study.

Survey of academic staff
The EAY represents a major shift from the cultural norm in higher education. For academics, the summer has traditionally been a time for updating, research, publication, conference attendance and vacation time (Jarrat Report, 1985). It follows that the introduction of the EAY potentially carries employee relations implications. The authors have therefore undertaken to survey academic staff by means of feedback sessions for the staff involved with the project and a questionnaire survey administered at random to staff. The purpose of these exercises was to gauge the fundamental views on the concept of the EAY as well as ascertaining the more practical and logistical aspects of introducing such an initiative.

(i) Feedback from staff who were involved with EAY
The following points were collected from structured interviews with academic staff involved with the EAY programme:
- Summer 1997 was a difficult time for the University as it was necessary to announce that almost one hundred posts were redundant. This inevitably lowered staff morale and reduced the degree of goodwill towards the institution. For many, the redundancy and restructuring arrangements diverted attention from initiatives such as the EAY programme. Furthermore, since the EAY programme was seen as adding to the workload of the staff involved, there were examples of withdrawal from the initiative. This has not been a problem subsequently.
- There are differences between the respective departments/faculties involved regarding staffing arrangements for EAY modules. For the health care related areas, the third semester has been
incorporated into the staff contracted teaching hours and already the summer is no longer regarded as any different to the other two semesters. For the other faculties, the traditional academic year still prevails and the EAY programme is clearly regarded as additional to the standard workload which should lead to additional remuneration through a second contract.

- Long modules during the summer months were seen as disruptive to family arrangements such as vacations; this is felt particularly strongly if the modules offered fail to recruit a reasonably sized group of students.

- The additional teaching during the summer did not appear to cause difficulties with respect to other academic activity (for instance research or forward preparation) since the staff concerned were usually only teaching on a single module during the summer. (However, it has to be noted that revised arrangements would be necessary if summer semester teaching loads matched those of the mainstream semesters.)

- Transference of existing modules into the EAY programme is not merely a matter of duplication. Different time scales apply to most EAY modules; this is the case whether delivered as a “long” module (over ten weeks rather than the standard 15) or delivered as an intensive course (over perhaps just a single week). The net result is a need to rethink certain of the teaching materials and perhaps the details of the assessments.

- For those who offered an intensive-delivery module, the pressure associated with completion of a module within a single week was thought to have stretched the students. The main issue, though, was the difficulty of providing a meaningful assessment within the time frame. This was resolved by confining course delivery to the single week but allowing students an extended period to reflect on the materials, to undertake additional reading and research ahead of completion of an assigned task later in the year.

- Staff noted that the EAY appeared popular with their students, some of whom requested a greater number of modules and greater choice for the summer months.

(ii) Survey of staff in general
The objective of this staff survey was to determine the views of the University teaching staff in general on the principles and practice of operating the EAY. The method employed was a telephone survey with a representative sample of the University’s academic staff using a structured interview schedule.

Staff were asked about general views on EAY, personal involvement, intended involvement and objections/endorsements to participation. Of those surveyed, 28 per cent had been involved with the EAY, 72 per cent had not.

For the staff who have participated, the interviews indicated that:

- The arrangements were convenient for most staff teaching on the EAY.
- The staff believe that the arrangements were convenient for their students.
- Generally, the staff noted no difficulties for their students.
- Staff noted some difficulties with respect to their work as academics e.g. research output, publication, inter-institutional contact, extra marking and preparation.
- No member of staff identified any significant difficulties with respect to family commitments.
- Most staff recorded that the reduced time scale presented no difficulties with respect to delivery of curriculum or student assessment.
- The EAY initiative was generally recognised to have teething troubles. (This was noted as an observation rather than necessarily a criticism in view of the experimental nature of EAY.) Course marketing and general administration were noted as particular problem areas.
- The EAY was deemed by some to be a good concept able to move the University closer to a year-round operation such as applies in other sectors of the public and private sector economy.
- There are concerns that a significant extension of the EAY would lead to an unwelcome increase in workload and that perhaps it should be a condition of participation that workload is lessened at other times of the year to compensate.

It should be noted that the participation of staff in all three of the EAY’s years of existence was on a voluntary basis and that this may explain the positive nature of the findings in this case.

Of the staff who have not participated in EAY teaching, the interviews indicated that:

1 There will need to be a substantial shift in the institutional culture if EAY is ever to move into the mainstream.

2 Opinion is divided with respect to the students:
- EAY is seen as a benefit (fast-track to employment):
- but may reduce the overall educational experience with the principal concern
being that university is not merely a means of ultimately securing fruitful employment but a time for personal development;
• and may reduce the students’ opportunity for other academic activity (such as preparatory reading) or for earning opportunity (perhaps increasingly necessary as the student support mechanisms in the UK change).

3 Many staff respondents seem to be addressing their negative comments on the student experience within the context of conventional, immediately post-school, 18 year old entrants. As the profile of students shifts to a greater proportion of older, experienced, part-time entrants, these concerns will lessen in importance.

4 There is a common belief that EAY will have a negative impact on research, publishing and scholarly activity in general.

5 There is concern that there is insufficient time in the EAY period to deliver the curriculum adequately.

6 The most junior staff favoured the EAY as an opportunity to boost their earnings but without necessarily supporting the general concept of EAY.

Finally with respect to the staff experience, it should be noted that (in general), those who have volunteered to be involved in the EAY appreciate the benefits and do not appear to have experienced any major difficulties with its operation. By contrast, those who have not been involved remain to be convinced and identify overwhelmingly with the perceived negative aspects. As stated previously this correlates with the fact that teaching in the EAY has been on a voluntary basis and it is reasonable to assume that the staff involved were either sympathetic to the concept or due to personal circumstances were not inconvenienced or benefited in some way. In particular there is a continuing need for University management to allay (if this is possible) the concerns about additional workload if the EAY concept is to show significant expansion.

Concluding comment

The HEI of the UK are very diverse by nature. Although some fundamental characteristics are common to all, a combination of historical and economic, as well as geographical factors ensures that student numbers, staff numbers, subject mix, student profile and, sadly perhaps, various issues of quality can vary greatly from institution to institution. This in turn ensures that the culture and identity of each institution is virtually unique.

It is possible that the EAY may be compatible with some and not others. Even where it appears to be compatible with institutional culture, the implementation of the EAY is a challenging process. Staff resistance and working around the maintenance programme of the institution are only two of a number of obstacles that an institution may encounter.

The concept must also be appropriately packaged and marketed so that it is attractive to students. Although the broad concept has generally been shown to be a popular one, there are further considerations of the type of courses to be run and the most appropriate mode of delivery. Institutions must recognise that the “summer student” may have differing needs from the student from the orthodox academic year (e.g. family/child care commitments).

It is the view of the authors that in the UK, the EAY will show slow but progressive growth over the next decade. Changes to the financing of universities (and their students) together with a more generally changing student population will demand a reform in the accepted practices in many sections of HE. Institutions such as the University of Luton (which has a low unit of resource and a high proportion of mature and part-time students) are likely to be the prime movers in this process. Students should ultimately reap the benefit of the introduction of the EAY but the evidence so far suggests that there is much to be done before the idealised scenarios set out by Flowers (1993) are reached.

References


