

Semesterisation: The downfall of a great system? A case study

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Abstract

The vulnerable part of open distance learning (ODL) is usually viewed as systemic, that is, the misalignment of processes and procedures. For example, ODL fails when marked assignments and tutorial letters with examination guidance do not reach the students in time to help them prepare for the examinations.

This article critically reflects on the views of lecturers in the College of Education at University of South Africa (Unisa) regarding the adoption and implementation of the semester system. The specific aims of the research were to:

- *Compare the advantages and disadvantages of a semester system with a year system in the training of teachers in an ODL institution;*
- *Investigate whether lecturers' workload increases in a semester system;*
- *Look at the quality of teaching regarding feedback and study material in terms of notional hours.*

The Systems Theory was used as the theoretical background to this research. The focus group consisted of lecturers from the College of

Education. The data for this study were collected by means of a literature study, questionnaires and interviews. As respondents, lecturers answered open and closed-ended questions, and indicated their experiences of semesterisation.

Key words: Mixed method, open distance learning, semester system, systems theory, Unisa, viewpoints of lecturers

Introduction

There is a great deal of literature on effective university teaching, but little on effective open distance learning (ODL) university teaching. Accordingly, this study aims to contribute to ODL teaching and learning, with specific focus on the semester system. As an ODL institution, the University of South Africa (Unisa) offers various undergraduate educational degrees to prospective teachers, with the lecturers involved in training student-teachers continuously striving to improve their teaching approach to training and teaching practice. Recently, there has been much controversy regarding the implementation of the semester system in undergraduate courses at Unisa.

Since 2009, when the semester system was implemented in the College of Education, it has become evident that most of the lecturers, from junior to senior level, are unable to cope with the influx of student queries, the increase in student numbers and the demands placed on them by the shorter timeframes and closer deadlines. Subsequently, lecturers have complained that management is implementing the semester system without consulting the lecturers concerned. After interviewing colleagues from other universities (new appointments), it has also become apparent that lecturers cannot cope with the increased workload.

A mixed method was used to investigate the effectiveness of the semester system for teacher training. The data were collected, comparisons drawn, and generalisations made. The article researches certain conclusions and makes a number of recommendations.

Theoretical framework

The Systems' Theory approach

This research is predicated on a general systems' theory approach. Systems theory originates from Bertalanffy's General System Theory

(GST). A systems' view is a worldview based on the discipline of systematic inquiry. In the most general sense, system means a configuration of parts connected and joined together by a web of relationships. A system is a group of interrelated, interdependent and interacting activities that form a coherent whole. If any of the parts or activities in the system seems weakened or misaligned, the system makes necessary adjustments to achieve its goals more effectively.

For example, if students don not receive feedback on their assignments before they write exams, the system is not effective. One of the dominant goals of a system is that it is driven by a survival motive, and a feels need for stability (which ties in with the survival motive). A system is designed to be self-maintaining, and in this process of self-maintenance, a system generates creative forces within itself that enable it to alter circumstances; in short, the system cannot remain healthy if it precludes the possibility of change (Cain, 1999:15).

One of the biggest breakthroughs in how people understand and guide change in organisations is based on systems' theory and systems' thinking. Furthermore, context is a key concept within general systems' theory. For example, who are our students and where are they situated, that is, what does our student profile look like? The focus is on the interactive processes of which the individual is a part. In systems' theory, the relationship between organisations and their environments is recognised as the first source of complexity and interdependence.

An open system is any distinct entity that takes in resources from its environment, processes them in some way, and produces output. It involves inputs, processes, outputs, goals, assessment and learning. The question is: How effective do students learn? Or, are we only interested in examination pass rates? Such a system depends on its environment, and on interactions between its component parts or subsystems. The focus is on relationships and patterns of interaction between sub-systems and their environments within the organisation. Also important are the relationships and reciprocal influences between the organisation and the environment outside its formal "boundary". Healthy open systems constantly exchanging feedback with their environments (feedback from lecturers to students), analysing that feedback, adjusting their internal systems as needed, in order to achieve the system's goals, and then transmitting necessary information back to the environment.

In brief, open systems have porous boundaries through which useful feedback can readily be exchanged and understood.

The external environment includes a wide variety of needs and influences that could affect the organization, but which the organisation cannot directly control. These influences may be political, economic, ecological, societal or technological. Systems have several defining characteristics:

- **Every system has a purpose within a larger system.** For example, the purpose of the re-orientation in a school/college is to generate new product ideas and features for the system – the allocation of notional hours and credits to modules.
- **All of a system's parts must be present for the system to carry out its purpose in the best possible way.** For example, the school/college of people, equipment, and processes. If any one of these components is removed, the system can then no longer function – A weak infrastructure, late study material, and/or poor feedback cause it to fail.
- **A system's parts must be arranged in a specific way for the system to carry out its purpose.** For example, if the school/college implements a revised curriculum before a team of experts has planned and organised the content, the school/college would probably find it difficult to achieve its purpose. Questions could arise around study material that is changed from a year model to a semester model, but credits and notional hours might stay the same.
- **Systems change in response to feedback.** The word “feedback” plays a central role in systems thinking. Feedback is information that returns to its original transmitter and thus influences that transmitter's subsequent actions. For example, all new changes in a school/college system have to be evaluated – especially where change has simply taken place without proper stakeholder consultation, such as the input of lectures. Feedback that leads to changes that enhance the success of that school/college, and that enable it to achieve its set goals is important. Students would normally receive feedback on assignments after they have written the examinations.
- **Systems maintain their stability by making adjustments based on feedback.** For example, adjustments supported by

feedback need to be respected – management should treat feedback from lecturers as being significant (Cain, 1999:15).

In the system under discussion (the semester system), lecturers have to deal with a vastly increased workload. In our current IPMS evaluation, lecturers are expected to spend their time, according to the following formula:

Research (including publishing of articles):	40%
Community engagement:	10%
Tuition (teaching and learning):	40%
Personal development:	10%

According to lecturers' work allocation, lecturers receive \pm 1 600 hours per annum to do all the above. The following study sets out to prove that there is just not enough time in a semester system for the lecturer to do what is expected of him/her.

Conceptual framework

The semester system in an ODL context

For the purpose of the discussion that follows, we need to begin by briefly revisiting the concept of ODL. Effectively, ODL university teaching is all about effective study packages, tutorials, feedback and discussions, online or face-to-face. The global, postmodern educational paradigm shift from provision thinking to student-centred thinking has led to a sharp increase in the popularity of the “open learning” concept. According to this perspective of learning, the learner decides, among other things, on the following (Mackintosh, Waghid & Van Niekerk, 1997:166-169): To learn or not to learn; what to learn; how to learn; where to learn; when to learn; the pace of learning; who to go to for assistance; how to evaluate what has been learned; and what to do next.

The name “ODL institution” seems to be challenging, as this description implies an institution that optimally accommodates distance students' choice as far as learning is concerned. Unisa (2008:1) defines ODL as follows:

[ODL is] a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational, and communication distance between students and the institution, students and academics, students and courseware, and students and peers. Open distance learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centredness, supporting students, and constructing learning programmes – with the expectation that students can, in fact, succeed (UNISA, 2008:1).

A significant ethical concern comes to the fore here. Educational institutions (like religious institutions) operate specifically in the realm of values and morality, and are thus specifically obliged to practise rigorous self-reflection and uncompromising honesty about real institutional identity in order to avoid (in the case of educational institutions) false expectations of the institution on the part of learners and society. Even if Unisa were to succeed in overcoming the current enormous challenge of successfully aligning all the different processes, systems and procedures (Prinsloo, 2011) in the interests of optimal service delivery, the idea of Unisa ever reaching the stage of “student choice in content, time, place, pace of learning, method of instruction and nature of assessment” seems delusional for many practical, societal and economic reasons.

An open university has the following four key functions (Tait, 2008:7; Gaskell, 2008:83), and Unisa answers to each of them: building capacity, providing opportunities and social justice for individuals, changing the higher education system, and nation-building.

The main idea that one has to understand about open distance learning (ODL) is that all systems have to integrate to support the academic enterprise and the student. One of the biggest problems for distance education, particularly in our context as a developing country, is overcoming transactional distance. The transactional gap exists between students and the institution, between students and lecturers/tutors, between students and courseware, and between student and student.

Transactional distance is the cognitive space between learning, peers, teachers and content in a distance education setting (Moore, 1993). With an enrolment of nearly 360 000 students, UNISA faces unique and formidable challenges.

In a study done by Ranko-Ramaili and Nieman (2012:8), it was highlighted that one of the main challenges was to answer the question: What are the barriers or challenges to effective teaching in an ODL institution? It was

found that these challenges are “the constraints set by the administrative system: for instance, turnaround times and the semester system. One relevant question remains: Should an institution, such as Unisa that aims to be an “ODL institution” make use of a semester system?

The semester system

An academic term is a division of an academic year, the time during which a school, college or university holds classes. These divisions are called “terms”. A semester system divides the academic year into two terms, roughly 15 to 18 weeks each (Wikipedia, 2011).

According to Bidani (2010:1), there has been much controversy over the implementation of the semester system to the undergraduate and postgraduate courses at Delhi University. The protesting Delhi University (DU) Teachers Association has complained that the vice-chancellor, Deepak Pental, is implementing the semester system in DU without consultation with the teachers concerned; and that he is in effect implementing it arbitrarily. Bidani (2010:1) indicates that the semester system is a system that has been used rather successfully in professional courses like the BBA, the BBACom and Journalism taught at the undergraduate level at some universities across the country – but not in education courses. This study pointed out that the semester system had some very serious problems, such as the operationalisation of this system. Moreover, because of the packed schedule of the semester, the exams might be pushed ahead by quite a bit – with the result that there would be very little time to revise any subject properly; and this might lead to marks coming down.

The implementation of a semester system in colleges without planning, adequate infrastructure, faculty, funds and awareness has resulted in mere confusion, a financial burden for students, and further delays in results. Lack of planning and poor coordination among different organisations associated with education have already resulted in a burden, rather than a solution. "In the semester system, what has been done in the state is mere chopping the curriculum into two without even giving it a second thought" (Mehta, 2012:1).

Other problems include the lack of infrastructure, a shortage of staff, a lack of regular staff or even heads in university departments, as well as working days being reduced by huge numbers owing to examinations, results, admissions and vacations.

According to Manisundaram (in Krishnamoorthy, 2012:1), the first vice-chancellor of Bharathidasan University, the semester system concept, which was borrowed from American universities, has failed in India. In the American system, it is workable because the valuation process is an entirely internal affair. When it comes to implementing the same system in affiliating universities, the load on students and teachers becomes enormous, said Prof. Manisundara. As he has stated, for one hundred years until the semester system was introduced, the annual system had been a success.

Saikai (2009:2–4) specifies that, like economy and culture, education is another aspect that has been adversely affected by the modern globalised world. If we talk about India, the education system is changing fast; and it still requires many years, in order to become fully equipped with modern amenities. The semester system, meanwhile, is one of the demands of the globalised world; and surprisingly, apart from the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), the University of Hyderabad and the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, no institute has managed to successfully apply the semester system in India.

Recently, however, the universities in India are trying to implement this system to meet the demands of the new world; nevertheless, it would appear that such efforts have been fruitless.

Even for British universities, there would seem to be difficulties with semesterisation. According to Collins (2011:1), the semester system holds certain disadvantages - both for universities and students. Most of the universities introduced the semester system to accommodate the modular degree; and this was difficult for both academics and students.

Semesterisation at Unisa

According to Unisa's website, the institution will be implementing a semester system as part of its ODL-tuition model. Accordingly, a student would be able to register for the recommended maximum of five 12-credit semester modules in January/February, and write exams on these modules in May/June. Then, in May/June, a student could register for the next recommended maximum of five 12-credit modules, and write exams on them during October/November - for a total of ten 12-credit modules per year of study.

In a year system, students in the Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), for example, complete ten 12-credit modules during the year. As a result of the limitations on the number of modules in the semester system,

the researchers would find it difficult to see any reason for management deciding to change from a very successful year system to a semester system. If the university's motive is to propagate education in the quest for knowledge, and preparing self-reflective students, then why use a semester system?

Semester system: advantages and disadvantages

We understand that a university runs on finances; and every student means a state subsidy. In short, the more students enrolled, the more the money. This also means that student throughput is very important. At the same time, we need to bear in mind that a semester system would have a great impact on issues such as deadlines, learning, feedback to students, study material, communication systems, and so forth. The main concern to be addressed is, in fact, an ethical and moral one. Could students really obtain what they are expected to obtain from their studies, namely, information and knowledge, or are they simply obtaining degrees? Are we really in the business of developing students and teaching them to learn, and be lifelong learners, or are we in the business of education just for the money - especially if we are training future teachers?

The semester system undoubtedly has many advantages, which could be summarised as follows:

1. The system would reduce the burden on the students because they write examinations twice a year, rather than once a year.
2. Owing to internal evaluation through seminars, home assignments and such like, study would be more about the subject concerned; and this would make students more aware of the subject they are studying.
3. Semesterisation allows greater freedom and scope for designing and delivering a variety of courses that the students can pick from flexibly - in order to enhance the quality of their learning and their career options.
4. For the teacher, this would be beneficial because half-yearly evaluation of students would enable the teachers to know their students better, and to re-evaluate their teaching aptitude if needed; that is, more flexibility in teaching could be obtained by this method.
5. In this system, students get a chance to prepare themselves within a short period of time, because examinations are held at more frequent intervals.

6. In this system, students are kept engaged for maximum time; and thus, they get less time to spend on unnecessary activities.
7. The system maintains discipline in its working procedure.
8. Under this system, the students would be more focused, and absenteeism would be better controlled.
9. Students would not have to wait until the end of the year to write an examination.
10. The semester system promotes inter-disciplinary education (Saikai, 2009:2).
11. It gives students time to clear the syllabus and get a more complete knowledge of the subject (Mande, 2012).

Apart from the advantages, this system also has some disadvantages:

1. As far as the current structure of higher education is concerned, this system would not yield a fruitful result. Although the current teacher-student ratio is 1:18 (in India), (at UNISA 1:2000-5000!), this is just an average. In rural areas particularly, the infrastructure is just too poor to start such a system.
2. This system would impose a heavy burden on the teachers, as well as on the students.
3. Half-yearly evaluation would leave less time for teachers to concentrate on teaching.
4. As such, more pressure on the teaching staff would affect the teaching skills of the teachers.
5. Students would also suffer adverse effects. An increased burden in the form of internal assessment would discourage the youth from entering higher education.
6. Students would not get enough time for extracurricular activities, which would adversely affect the route to personality development. It might also negatively affect their mental health, as well as their interest in their study (Saikai, 2009:3).
7. The biggest disadvantage of the semester system is that there is very limited time. The schedule is very busy.
8. Although students are unable to carry all the subjects to the end of the year, they remain very busy throughout the year. In the case of absence caused by illness, or any other reason, it is very difficult for the student to make up the lost time in the syllabus.
9. The semester system concentrates on the completing of the syllabus, while ignoring complete knowledge. Students are unable get such

complete knowledge and information, owing to the limited time available (Mande, 2012).

The points discussed above clearly show that the semester system has both merits and demerits. But what happened when Unisa changed from a year system to a semester system in terms of study material?

Curriculum implications – notional hours and credits

The BEd and PGCE programmes in the College of Education consist of 12 credit modules. This implies that each of these modules has 120 notional hours in which to teach, learn and write exams. The instruction/teaching period actually stretches from mid-February (after registration is completed) to the end of April, when examinations begin. This leaves about ten weeks for instruction, study and learning, as well as compiling and submitting assignments and portfolios.

If a student has to do two assignments, then the first assignment must be handed in during March, and the second assignment in April (when examinations begin). During this period, lecturers must mark, hand the assignments out to external markers, give constructive feedback, and then send assignments back to the assignment section to enter marks. Taking away about two weeks for examination preparation, this leaves the student with approximately eight weeks for studying – provided that all study material has been received within the first week after registration.

However, in reality, hundreds of students do not receive their study material in time to complete the first assignment. Module ETH202P is a case in point: more than 50 students complained that they did not receive their study material in time; and not unreasonably, asked for an extension. However, they could not be granted an extension because of the policy that the first assignment is compulsory and leads to the student being allowed to write the examination.

In this case, students were advised to send in the assignment even if they did not answer any of the questions (in which case they received a mark of 0%). However, doing this at least allowed them admission to the examination.

Assignments and the role of feedback

In the past few years of visiting Unisa student teachers at various schools in Mpumalanga, the Northern Province, Gauteng and the Western Cape, the researchers experienced considerable frustration about follow-up and student feedback – especially those students who needed more attention in terms of teaching practice. For example, some were unsure about how to prepare their lessons; and many did not know exactly what is expected of them in presenting a lesson.

It is not the task of the school to help these student teachers; it remains the responsibility of the lecturer who is responsible for the particular module.

It has become clear that feedback and/or some form of follow-up are both essential to the learning process, and to the development of teachers. Students, in general need reassurance that they are “doing it right”: in this case, they need to be reassured that they are effective teachers. However, feedback and follow-up – whether oral or in writing – are currently ineffective. (About 10% of students receive a visit from a lecturer or tutor during teaching practice. This is in line with the HEQC requirements that lecturers must visit at least 10% of their students.)

It is said that feedback is the lifeblood of teaching and learning. Feedback may be defined as the two-way communication between teachers and learners, a process that provides information on how effectively a task has been carried out, and to what extent the set objectives have been achieved. Such communication helps teachers to identify problem areas and to design strategies that solve such problems (or that prevent them from recurring).

Good feedback should be immediate or direct, regular and explanatory, rather than judgmental; and it should also be concise and clear.

Verbal feedback fulfils the requirement of immediacy, whereas written feedback is appropriate for explanatory comments that could be used to supplement verbal feedback to large classes. Lecturers and students should continually ask themselves whether they are doing enough to create adequate feedback opportunities. Do they adapt their teaching practice, as a result of the information they receive? Or, do they simply continue, period after period, to present uninspired lessons to bored learners?

The Trial Audit Panel (TAP) (2007:42) found very limited evidence of student feedback on course materials and tuition, and recommended

that new courses and new programmes include student feedback when they are first presented. The TAP (2007:42) also pointed out the importance of self-assessment and assessment questions, and referred to the support students receive (or do not receive):

In ODL, the importance of feedback to students cannot be over-emphasised, and generic feedback to all students must be supplemented by personalised and specific feedback. We understand some large courses have had to resort to computer-based assessment, which can be very helpful, provided that up-to-date software is used to provide students with good quality feedback (TAP, 2007:43, 27).

Feedback on compulsory, and other assignments that students must send in for their year mark and to gain admission to the examination, is almost non-existent. For example, in modules ETH202P (with over 3 000 students per semester); EDDHODJ (with 2 500 students per semester) and EDAHOD5 (with 2 700 students per semester) most Assignment 02s (also compulsory) were received by the primary lecturers for marking – only after the students had already written their examination papers. In the case of EDT202P, EDDHODJ and EDAHOD5, about 800 - 900 assignments were received and marked after the examination took place. The examination guidelines for the students were based on Assignment 01 (multiple-choice questions) and Assignment 02 (those which were submitted in time) and were marked.

In 2010, a general extension was given to students to submit assignments. In most of the modules, the marked assignments were received by the students only after they had already written the examination paper.

Now the main question that arises is whether Unisa is ready to implement this system, or not. Does the infrastructure stand out as one of the constraints? Finally, is it a need or a choice? The following section will shed light on these questions.

Research design and data collection

The researchers used a mixed method approach, based on a phenomenological research design to obtain an understanding of lecturers' views on teacher training in the semester system. According to the principle of mixed research, "researchers should collect multiple data using different strategies, approaches, and methods – in such a way that the resulting mixture or combination is likely to result in complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004:18). A literature review, document analysis,

questionnaires and interviews were used.

Purposeful sampling was used to select information-rich participants. All the participants were from the School of Education at Unisa. The sample provided maximum variation in that lecturers with extensive lecturing experience (most between 13 and 20 years) participated in this research study. Different cultural groups and both genders were involved. The sample of 50 was identified from a list of lecturers who are involved in teacher training.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with some of the participants, who did not complete the questionnaire. Section A consisted of biographical information, and Section B contained open-ended and closed-ended questions on the following topics:

- Timeframe of modules (including lecturing, marking and feedback);
- Advantages/disadvantages of year modules and semester modules;
- Study material and administrative support;
- Workload;
- Notional learning hours.

Participants were asked to make recommendations after each section. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were tape-recorded. The data were then analysed and categorised. The same questions were used in the questionnaire.

The research adhered to all the necessary ethical guidelines. As far as trustworthiness is concerned, various tactics were used to guard against the possibility of any bias entering the research. These included mechanically recording interviews and transcribing them verbatim, and the use of multiple researchers.

The findings are presented in the next section.

Findings and discussion

Section A: Biographical information

The participants were mainly male (60% males and 40% females). The participants were mature; and all were more than 40 years old. Most of the participants were either senior lecturers or full professors. The majority of the participants had more than 13 years of teaching experience. Almost all the participants had a doctoral qualification.

The following three sections (themes) are directly linked to the theoretical framework. The connections are indicated in brackets.

Section B: Student numbers, timeframes and study material

(All of the system's parts must be present for the system to carry out its purpose in the best possible way)

The participants were asked how many modules they were teaching and how many students they had per module. All the participants taught more than two modules with **student numbers** of between 210 and 6 000 per module per semester. Some of the participants taught up to eight modules (8 000 students per semester). All the participants indicated that they prefer **year** modules rather than semester modules. Some of the reasons given were as follows:

Firstly, year modules give students time to learn the content of the module and to acquire the relevant knowledge – 14 weeks is too short a time to learn at university level, especially via distance education. Secondly, the year system allows the lecturer to provide students with valuable knowledge, rather than concentrating solely on exam-related content. The semester system also deprives lecturers of time to plan for research. In the **timeframe** of a year system, students at least have the opportunity of receiving documents before it is too late.

Semester modules, on the other hand, do not allow time for relevant tuition, meaningful learning, or student support. One female respondent made the following comment:

In my opinion, the semester system was implemented exclusively for financial reasons and certainly not in the interest of students gaining knowledge and skills appropriate to the workplace.

The semester system makes strenuous demands on the lecturer; and yet it fails to produce a knowledgeable student. It also makes it difficult to fit in teaching practice and making personal visits to students.

In a semester, lecturers are unable to do formative assessment properly.

I teach Mathematics and Mathematics teaching usually causes problems to students. They are not all on the same level of knowledge, and need more time and exposure to the content knowledge.

Recommendation made by respondents: Unisa needs to revert to the year system.

Participants were asked to indicate the advantages/disadvantages of year modules and semester modules in terms of the timespan available for submitting assignments and examination papers, as well as the marking thereof.

Advantages of year modules (according to respondents)

The advantage of a year system is that one set and mark assignments and examinations papers once or twice a year, and has time to do other valuable work.

Work can be done properly.

Have “quiet time” during August/September do research.

According to a male respondent:

The critical issue should be the quality of tuition that can be provided; the opportunity for meaningful learning and application of skills acquired; and graduation achieved by the learner on completion of the programme.

It provides more time for students to engage with the study material.

Students have more time to get hold of the prescribed book (this is usually a problem).

Another respondent said: I can guide them through the study material with more assignments.

Proper feedback can be provided.

I only have to complete one set of tut letters and examination papers, which provide more time in between for other academic activities.

Disadvantages of year modules (according to respondents)

None mentioned.

Advantages of semester modules

None mentioned.

Disadvantages of semester modules

Respondents cited a long list of disadvantages:

Work is congested: eight modules need to be co-ordinated at the same time, and this translates to 16 documents in English and Afrikaans. Proofreading 16 documents in a very limited time to meet a deadline *is the most horrible thing that one can do appropriately.*

More so, May and June are the most congested months, where three things are required, namely: the marking of examination papers for Semester 1, setting of examination papers question papers for October/November, and preparing Tutorial Letters 101 for the following year.

In a semester module, there is no time for students to learn properly (to do deep learning).

Students who are enrolled for both year modules (e.g. teaching practice and subject didactics) have to do assignments for year modules, while at the same time, writing the examination for semester modules.

I honestly do not know how it will be possible to fit 1 MCQ assignment and 2 substantial essay type assignments into six months, plus writing an examination and conducting discussion classes prior to writing the final examination.

It takes "forever" to get the material out to the students, so that they still have time to do the assignments, get the feedback, and attend discussion classes, as well as to prepare for the exams. With semester modules, one already needs to submit the exam

paper before the first assignments have been marked. No time is provided for reflection on current tuition practices.

Main recommendations made by respondents:

- Unisa should revert to the year system.
- All subjects should be year modules, in order to provide students with more time to familiarise themselves with the content.
- If communication with students is to be at all meaningful, year modules are required.
- Unisa is an ODL institution; taking as its model a residential university that runs on semesterisation requires a large number of staff on the ground who can work together harmoniously.
- Do away with the semester modules. I get many complaints from students about semester modules. They feel that everything is going too fast, and that they don't have time to do their work properly, and don't get feedback in time to prepare for their examinations.

Section C: Feedback to students and tutorial letters

(Systems change in response to feedback, and systems maintain their stability by making adjustments based on this feedback)

Participants also had to give comments on the time available for lecturing, marking and **feedback**; and highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of a year system versus a semester system.

Advantages of year modules

Assignments are distributed more evenly throughout the year. Students can engage with the material on a regular basis if there are more assignments.

Marking and formative assessment can be done in time and returned to the student. There is time for comprehensive feedback.

Seeing that a year module is spread over nine months, students can answer at least one assignment before the exam paper is set and Tutorial Letters 101 for the next year must be in. This provides the opportunity of first determining the clarity and feasibility of some questions before repeating the same focus; never in exact the same words though, in either the examination paper or in the next year's 101. Yes, a year module provides for realistic periods

of time for: a) Students' engaging in the content before having to submit their assignments, and b) Marking and providing feedback to students.

Disadvantages of year modules

None.

Advantages of semester modules

No advantages mentioned.

Disadvantages of semester modules

There is no time to give proper feedback to students in a semester module. Nor, is there time to monitor the quality of work done by external markers. Students often complain that they get their marked assignments back after the examination. Lecturers cannot wait until all assignments have been marked to give feedback on general mistakes made in the assignments, because the tutorial letter with general feedback and examination guidelines must be sent out before all the assignments have been marked.

Generally speaking, in a semester system, students do not get feedback from assignments simply because of time limitations. For instance, Assignment 02 is usually due around 10 April; marking takes up to the end of April; and semester examinations start at the beginning of May. However, Unisa's policy dictates that tutorial letters with examination guidance to students must be dispatched six weeks before the examination starts.

Key recommendations made by respondents

Structure the assignment submission dates in such a way that one assignment is submitted before the examination paper needs to be set and before having to decide on the activities for Tutorial Letter 101 of the following year. This would enable the lecturer to set questions in an informed way, to set questions that are clear and fair, and to set questions that the student can feasibly answer. Do not make the date for submission of the first assignment too early in the academic year, and the date for submission of the last assignment too late in the year.

This, of course, applies to the two essay-types assignments that our students have to submit.

The first assignment is a MCQ assignment serving the only purpose of providing students access to the examination which, I believe, applies to most of the modules at UNISA.

Section D: Workload and notional learning hours

(Every system has a purpose within a larger system, and a system's parts must be arranged in a specific way for the system to carry out its purpose)

Advantages of year modules

- Lecturers have more time to engage with students on myUNISA, for example, and to take part in discussion forums.
- More time for meaningful engagement with external markers.
- Problems can be discussed in time and solved.
- Markers can distribute their time and marking better to slot in with their own programme.

As the primary lecturer of a module of 4 500 students, it is wonderful to have support in the form of external markers. However, all queries, enquiries, requests, dealing with F1 concessions, managing myUNISA, arranging for discussion classes, and the like come down on the primary lecturer as the accountable lecturer. This results in a massive workload.

Disadvantages of year modules

None.

Advantages of semester modules

None.

Disadvantages of semester modules

It's congested in a semester, leading to low research output and slow rate of communicating with M&D students.

There is no time to reflect on students' achievements in the assignments, and to incorporate this information into future assignments and examinations. The information could be used to inform assignments/examinations a year on – but, by that time, the study guide or prescribed books might have changed; so the experience gained from the assignments/exams has no worthwhile application value.

I have 2 000 hours. I have contract markers; but they are changed and added every year, which makes my task even worse because I have to train and re-train every year.

I have to carry the assignments from the post room to my office, count them, distribute them, etc. which is time-consuming. Workload has increased – it is double now and student enquiries are much more.

Respondents' main recommendations

I need consistency in my markers; and their contract must allow for more marking than is the situation at present.

Adding more markers is not the solution for quality assurance – consistency is of greater importance.

A pertinent and fair official spread of workload responsibilities amongst all lecturers involved in the same module.

Admin support to help with counting out assignments and examination scripts to external markers might lighten my task.

Bring back year-long modules.

Need for a colleague whom I can groom into M & D programme coordination, so the work doesn't have to stop when I am absent; so that my research activities do not suffer.

Taking into account your work as a lecturer, if you had a choice, would you prefer semester modules or year modules? Please justify your preference by giving at least three (3) reasons for your choice.

All the respondents preferred year modules for the following reasons:

- More time available for proper formative assessment.
- More time to give students feedback.
- Can allow students to redo assignments if they did not perform well initially.
- Students get time to do their work properly.
- Lecturers have more time for research.
- A learning process takes time and, within an ODL environment in which hard copy study material remains relevant, sending out study material is far more feasible in a yearly schedule.
- A year gives lecturers the opportunity for reflection in terms of improving the questions they set (this is because students' answers to questions give lecturers an idea of what "works" and what does not).
- Better and more accountable tuition practices.
- Meaningful learning occurs.
- Students and lecturers can be held accountable for their involvement in the learning experience in their individual roles – as students and teachers.
- It will reduce the administration burden, and make it possible to distribute tutorial letters, exams papers, and other forms of communication more evenly throughout the year.
- Correspondence with students is easier, and occurs at a more appropriate pace.
- The number of assignments can be increased, and assignment quality and feedback can be vastly improved.

Conclusion and recommendations

The terms "open learning" and "distance education" represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training,

freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. To this effect, we need training and retraining of the personnel involved in the ODL system before Unisa can claim it is an ODL institution. It is clear from the research that, as far as the lecturers are concerned, semesterisation has proved to be a failure in almost every respect.

Some serious thinking on the matter of providing quality education in a decent manner has to be done. The findings show that Unisa needs to find innovative ways to solve the problem of semesterisation – or this system may well prove to be the downfall of a once-great institution. After careful consideration of all the facts and feedback available to us, our recommendations are as follows:

A committee (which needs to include academics) needs to be appointed with a view to reassessing semesterisation, and with a view to:

- Finding innovative ways to improve the system
- Finding out how students can obtain more benefit from the system
- Evaluating the feasibility of semesterisation in the College of Education
- Listening carefully to the voices of the lecturers
- Including academics in decision-making
- Decreasing lecturers' workload
- Implementing ways of providing students with more effective feedback
- Changing the majority (or all) of the modules back to being year modules

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