

# What's in an academic calendar?

*Every university should get to decide for itself which academic calendar to follow*

MM SHAHIDUL HASSAN

**B**ANGLADESH started with only four public universities and now has a total of 38 public universities and 92 private universities. The Annual Education Survey 2016 of Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) reveals that the total number of students at universities was 823,302 in 2016. The total tertiary enrolment in 2026 is expected to reach 4.6 million, according to an estimate made by the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has made remarkable gains over the past two decades by ensuring access of youth of all classes of the society to tertiary education. The government is keen to ensure that universities are providing higher education of international standard. UGC, the statutory apex body in the field of higher education in Bangladesh, is reviewing the teaching styles, curricula and also the academic calendars used by public and private universities.

Interestingly, all public universities use the two-semester system and private universities use

the trimester system. Private universities in Bangladesh have adopted the idea of trimester from universities in the US. UGC is working to decide which calendar is appropriate for education programmes in Bangladesh.

The majority of institutions in the US use the two-semester system with an optional summer session. One semester keeps students in the institution for about 16 weeks that include 15 weeks of studies plus a week for exams. Semester scheduling allocates shorter class periods (50 minutes), but longer term breaks—and also a shorter summer session for those who opt to take it.

There is no such summer session in public universities in Bangladesh. One trimester has 14 weeks that include 13 weeks for classes and one week of exams. The result is longer class periods and shorter term. Though the total class week for a course is shorter, the curriculum is designed to meet the minimum requirements for learning, and the associated minimum standards are maintained. Naturally, the total credit requirement for a programme in trimester becomes higher than that of the semester system. Whether

all private universities follow these requirements or not is probably what UGC should be focusing on rather than dictating rules on how long the semester should be.

The trimester system allows students more flexibility in scheduling classes and gives an opportunity to really understand

them on an intimate level. A full-time trimester student will generally take three or four courses per term, which will amount to 24 courses in two years. Semester students take four or five courses per semester and in the first two years, students take 20 courses. As a result, trimester students have more time for projects in junior and senior years. I know some people complain that in the trimester system students cannot get "too deep" into the material. This is partially true. Increasing lecture hours and applying interactive teaching, e.g. student-centred teaching, may help students to learn in depth. The biggest advantage of semesters is that they make life easier on administration and faculty, and save them money.

Private universities in Bangladesh have developed their facilities to take a certain number of students per term. If they are now asked to move from trimester to the two-semester system, they will take more students in a single semester in order to yield the same revenue. The class size will then increase resulting in degradation of learning quality. With a trimester academic year, teachers work with few students a day

allowing for more time to work with individual students.

The trimester system presumably yields higher revenues given a fixed time. For one academic year, students pay their fees thrice under the trimester system. This may be better for enabling the university to have more revenues to invest, not only in faculty and staff salaries, but also in infrastructures and facilities. Private universities are paying for and maintaining their buildings and grounds 12 months a year, but if private universities are made to move to the semester system, they will use the infrastructures fully a little more than half the year. Private universities will also end up burdening students of low- and middle-income families who will have to pay more tuition fees in a semester.

There are both positive and negative impacts of each academic calendar in terms of efficiency, academic quality, and student/faculty interaction. But it should be the universities themselves that should get to decide which academic calendar to use based on what they think works best for them.

MM Shahidul Hassan, PhD, is the Vice-Chancellor of East West University. Email: [vc@ewu.edu](mailto:vc@ewu.edu)

