

Local Government Association - Independent Commission on the Organisation of the School Year

Response from the Further Education Development Agency

Introduction

1. FEDEA is the national development agency for post-16 learning, carrying out research and development and national programmes to support effective management and quality in delivery. Our response reflects our particular interest in the impact of the school pattern of delivery on the work of colleges and other providers of post-16 education and training.

Impact on patterns of delivery of other post-16 providers

2. It must be recognised, in considering how school patterns need to be developed, that the school year will have a significant impact on the functioning of colleges and other providers offering provision for 16-19s and for other learners. Currently, although colleges do have a longer day and much more flexible holiday periods, in practice the 16-19 year olds on academic programmes still tend to operate a 'school' day. This can be seen in their timetabling both on a daily basis – they often do not like to stay after 4.00 pm and rarely wish to attend evening classes. They take school holidays even though the college term may be different, as that is what they are used to - and their friends still at school do have an influence.
3. Consequently it has been very difficult for Further Education colleges to move away from the traditional 3-term year because of the school and university year pattern.

Patterns in post-16 further education colleges

4. General Further Education colleges have embraced an alternative system in that they have a greater number of hours per week and are open all year. The lecturers' holidays are not planned around the long summer break and most colleges will schedule a maximum of 4 weeks together in the summer for any one member of staff. This does not apply equally to Sixth Form colleges that, in the main, follow a school pattern.
5. However, as a result of the impact of the school pattern of provision, courses delivered at other times of day or year are often for adults, day-release, employers training etc. and not primarily targeted at the 14-19 age group. The pattern of the school year has also had an impact on provision for adult learners, particularly for parents of young children who need provision to fit

with the school day and terms in order to cover the childcare arrangements. Access courses are often run from 9.30 am to 3.00 pm to accommodate taking and collecting children. In addition, 'reading weeks' replace official half terms where staff are expected to be in college but students often are not.

6. This creates severe timetabling, rooming and resourcing problems as so many students need to be accommodated in the middle period of the day while classrooms are under-utilised before 9.30 and after 4.00.
7. If the school pattern of provision were to be extended it would be to the advantage of colleges that are trying to develop more flexible programmes of delivery in response to widening participation, lifelong learning and local skills development but which constantly have to be mindful of the childcare needs of their students.

Patterns for 14 -19 learners

8. We suggest that the pattern of provision for those in the 14-19 phase of learning does not need to be the same as that for full-time compulsory age learners studying the national curriculum up to and including Key Stage 3. However for young adults we suggest that a more extended day and year should certainly be available. This would:
 - Enable greater flexibility in the delivery of the curriculum at both Key Stage 4 and post-16
 - Allow more extensive use of premises
 - Help to remove the pressures on colleges to conform to the same pattern as schools pre-16.
9. Any change of term length will need to take into account the greater emphasis on examinations in the new curriculum, particularly at advanced level, and the need to meet requirements for progression to higher education, employment or further training. The term length must therefore be sufficient to ensure enough teaching time as well as testing time. Extended and more flexible arrangements should support this.
10. The pattern for 14 -19 provision will need to recognise that many students at this age work alongside study. Greater spread of options for delivery in this phase would accommodate patterns of earning and learning.

Pre-14 patterns

11. For learners following the national curriculum, we recognise the importance of broadly common patterns between different providers, making transfer and

family arrangements easier where there are siblings at different stages at the same time.

12. Generally, it appears to be the case that shorter breaks at more frequent intervals are better for learning continuity. Some younger school students get bored with the long summer breaks. However, if one looks at other European countries the majority still operate with an extended summer break and this does not appear to disadvantage the students. We would therefore urge that research be undertaken to ascertain the impact of the pattern and length of terms on the learning of different age groups. Findings would need to be considered in relation to social, cultural and indeed climatic considerations.

13. We suggest that changes to the pattern pre-14 will need to be:

- Replicable across the providers pre-14 (6) and co-ordinated at a local level
 - making planning for all stakeholders easier
 - encouraging maximisation of the flexibilities of the national curriculum and rationalisation of local provision
- Supported by an infrastructure that can accommodate young people's leisure periods adequately so as not to hinder parents' working patterns
- Developed taking into account the workload on teachers. A longer working day with free periods for marking and preparation would be preferable to the current situation where teachers only have very limited time for this during the school day. This would bring teaching in secondary and tertiary sectors more on a par.

Length of the school day

14. There has been much discussion about the length of the school day. The short school day in England is a feature of state education, not of the independent sector. The argument that younger people cannot cope with a longer day is not borne out by the experience of the independent sector. Here a common school day would appear to be from 8 am to 6 pm for all ages from 7, but incorporating a wide range of academic and non-academic activities, reasonable break periods and including a focus on homework.

15. We believe that day-long organisation encompassing varied activities and supported independent study is a desirable model to be explored. This could:

- Enhance use of school buildings
- Enable longer opening for community use of buildings and adult education and training
- Promote equal opportunities by ensuring that support with homework is available for all children, not just those whose parents feel able to do so.
- Support those parents wishing to work by providing an extended day for their children.

16. We note that the government has recently announced its intention to establish an entitlement to regular out of school hours study support. We welcome this initiative and feel that it could improve educational attainment in disadvantaged communities. We believe that if introduction is to be phased, it should be targeted at disadvantaged communities in the first instance.

Implementation of changes

17. A decision to change patterns of the school year will need to be managed carefully, and should include:

- Introduction of evaluative pilots
- Consultation and agreement on local patterns within a specified framework
- Effective marketing of any change to learners, parents and employers – it cannot be introduced as a fait accompli as this is likely to impact negatively on the anticipated advantages to be gained from the changes.