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A study of English teachers and students' perception about the differences between annual and semester system of education at postgraduate level in Mardan

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Abstract

This research study tried to seek the perception of English teachers and students' about the differences between *Annual* and *Semester* system in terms of students' learning strategies at postgraduate level.

A public sector university in Mardan (established in February 2009) provided the researchers a population who were new to *Semester* system and who had been seeking education in *Annual* system before joining it. In order to achieve the objective of the study, a questionnaire was distributed among a randomly selected 120 students having experience of both the educational systems, and interviews with 10 teachers were conducted to record their perception towards both systems of education.

The analysis of the data got from both the tools showed that there was found a significant difference between *Annual* and *Semester* system in terms of students learning strategies. In *Annual* system students used to get ample time to master the target subjects, whereas in *Semester* system, the students had to synthesize the subjects and were not only made to undergo rigorous evaluation in terms of both intellectual and emotional growth.

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1. Introduction

Two types of educational systems are prevalent in Pakistan, the *Annual* and *Semester* system. Both systems have their unique characteristics; hence it would be incorrect to label them as good or bad. Educators and higher authorities are always trying to devise new ideas and explore several options for making education as effective as possible in terms of learning outcomes. Outcomes in an academic set up means achievements of overall excellence in terms of standard and result.

The present research is an analysis of field research that we conducted in Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan (AWKUM). The paper aims at seeking M.A English students and their teachers' perception about the differences

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between *Annual* and *Semester* system of education in terms of students' learning strategies at post graduate level in Mardan.

In order to carry out the study the researchers have taken into account the merits that are present in both the educational systems. *Annual* system has been successful system for our education in the past. However, there were many loopholes in this system. This research suggests about the possibilities of comparing the two educational systems as well as finding out which one is better to ensure quality education for M.A English students in order to make them the better professionals.

2. Review of Literature

Educational system all over the world has never been consistent over the years. Innovations in education are constantly occurring with the passage of time. Educationists investigate possibilities to teach text in various feasible manners through advancement and exposure to new ideas, strategies and concepts. According to Tribus (1994), there are innumerable proposals/suggestions in educational system and there are infinite number of good ideas and research results. The target is not just to pick one of them but rather it is to have comprehensive attitude and approach within which to bring to action many good works known to us.

Pakistan had an inherited educational system from the British. This was predominantly based on two years extensive and comprehensive study session followed by an examination that tested memory and comprehensively acquired knowledge. Since independence most of the universities of Pakistan have been operating under the principles and methods of an *Annual* education system, although some of them have switched over to *Semester* system. In Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (Pakistan), University of Peshawar and University of Malakand are running their M.A. English classes under *Annual* system while Hazara University in Mansehra and Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan (AWKUM) are running M.A. English classes under *Semester* system. Gomal University D.I. Khan is operating its M.A. English classes under *Term* system.

Annual system is a traditional method that gives ample chances of two years to understand and grasp concepts, and sit for a comprehensive exam at the end of each year. This exam predominantly is subjective and comprehensive. In many countries, especially in the West the *Annual* system is called Tuition Assistance Programme (TAP). Even in British universities the *Annual* system existed fifty years ago (Malik, et al, 2006). Educationists over the world are not only looking at the *Annual* and *Semester* but there are many other including *quarterly* and *term semester*, and a more recent debate is going on *quarter semester* system. *Annual* system allows the students to explore and mature their talent in fields other than just grasping their curriculum. It also provides an opportunity to students to make deep analysis on subjects and develop reading and writing skills. *Annual* system is a bit monotonous and students became lazy in it.

Semester system divides the academic year into two large blocks called *Semester*. One semester is usually 14-16 weeks long. Examinations are held within five months. Whatever is studied remains afresh in the minds of the students. *Semester* system lays more emphasis on learning rather than teaching. In simple words, it is a learner centred system of education which lays more emphasis on building learning potential of students rather than improving through rigid system of instruction. The course content, learning strategies, learning methodology, and learning process with specific techniques of assessment and evaluation of students are decided on course by course basis. A teacher takes the role more of a facilitator rather than a teacher in its strictest and traditional sense (Jadoon & Jabeen, 2006).

Aggarwal (1997) argues that only that system of education is good which ensures effective learning. The criterion for success is effective learning. So some precautions or some details about the semester system must be informed to students before switching from *annual* to *semester* or from *semester* to *quarter* system. Evaluation is a cyclical process having four phases; preparation, assessment, evaluation and reflection. Assessment and evaluation serves two purposes. It enhances students' education and improves teacher instruction.

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan has been doing a lot in order to help realizing the need of improving educational system and thus to raise the standard of education in the country. There has been a change in overall educational scenario as it was felt that the prevalent educational system is not producing good results in terms of knowledge acquisition of students. As a result National Committee on Examination System (NCES) was constituted in 2003 to go through the effectiveness of the existing system followed in Higher Educational Institutes of Pakistan. It was strongly felt by the committee that an in-depth analysis of educational system is mandatory before any remedial measures are suggested. A Sub-Committee was thus formed to collect data on existing examination processes and practices. This was done with two aims in mind: first to find the inadequacies and malpractices in existing annual examination system across the country, and secondly to suggest comprehensive changes to formulate nationally agreed principles and practices. The members of NCES, in its 3rd meeting held on 1st March 2005, again deliberated on the information collected from various universities and formulated final recommendations. It categorically states that uniformity needs to be brought in educational systems in Pakistan by adopting *Semester* system. The committee asserts:

- Different examination systems i.e. *Annual*, *Semester*, and *Term* are being practiced all over the country. In order to attain uniformity and harmony it was decided that, by Fall 2008, all higher educational institutions will gradually shift towards semester system.
- Course objectives in terms of students' learning outcomes, Table of Specification should be available to all concerned persons including students.
- Choice of questions in examinations, e.g 5 out of 8 questions encourage selective study and should be totally abolished.
- Grace marks in examination to pass candidates should not be allowed in any circumstances by the year 2007. A system of moderation / arbitration; however, must be evolved by then for all institutions by consensus.
- Assessment Tools: use of multiple questions (MCQs) and short essay questions (SEQs) should be encouraged to increase the content validity of question papers. Descriptive questions should preferably do away with except where writing skills, concepts or ability to dialogue need to be evaluated.
- A policy of complete transparency must be adopted in *Semester /Term* system where candidates are guaranteed an opportunity to discuss the marks awarded to them with the concerned teacher.

After thorough considerations the National Committee on Examination System and Quality Assurance in its meeting held on 10th September, 2005, and 29th October, in 2005, respectively, has approved the above recommendations for improvements in examination system of higher educational institutions in Pakistan. The above recommendations were forwarded and placed on the agenda of Commission meeting held on 15th August 2006. Looking through the outcomes of the meeting of HEC it is clear that measures have been taken to introduce in our culture all over the government sector institutions. In many other private and semi private institutions semester system has existed since 2003 and even before.

From the above literature review we have gathered this impression that *Semester* system is quite new in our educational institutes. It was, therefore, felt imperative by the researchers that students and teachers' perception may be incorporated to help analyze the effectiveness of both the systems in terms of students' learning strategies.

3. Research Methodology

Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan (AWKUM), a public sector university (established in February 2009) provided the researchers a population of students and teachers who were new to *Semester* system and who had been seeking and imparting education respectively in *Annual* system before joining it. In order to achieve the objective of the study, a questionnaire, asking the students' perception about the differences they have felt between both the systems especially in terms of their learning strategies, was distributed among a randomly selected sample of 120

students who have got the experience of both the educational systems; and interviews with 10 teachers were also conducted to record their perception towards both systems of education.

4. Findings from Questionnaire

Following main findings were formulated after descriptively analyzing the data got through questionnaire by using SPSS Version 17:

- i. A vast majority of students were of the view that as compared to *Annual* system, the *Semester* system offers students more productive learning environment.
- ii. A vast majority of the students were of the view that as compared to *Annual* system, in *Semester* system close interaction with teachers results in development of different skills of students.
- iii. They view that as compared to *Annual* system, teachers are more active in *Semester* system.
- iv. They were of the view that in *Semester* system presentations add to the confidence of students. Similarly, assignments and frequently given class tests in semester system flourish their reading and writing skills. They do not find such opportunities there in *Annual* system.
- v. The vast majority of the students were of the view that as compared to *Annual* system, *Semester* system restricts students to only grasp their curriculum.
- vi. They were of the view that unlike *Annual* system where students rely on their teachers, the *Semester* system allows students to explore and mature their talent.
- vii. They view *Semester* system to be more competitive than the *Annual* system. It helps them improving their learning skills.
- viii. They view that unlike *Annual* system, the *Semester* system offers more opportunities for the students to have close interaction with their teachers. It helps them improving upon their communication skills.
- ix. They view that unlike *Annual* system, the *Semester* system develops research culture on the campus that helps students to improve their academic writing skills.
- x. However, majority of the students preferred *Annual* system to *Semester* system in terms of assessment as according to them there is subjectivity involved formative as well as summative assessment of the students.
- xi. However, a clear-cut majority of the students preferred *Semester* system to *Annual* system in terms of course content and learning process. According to them in *Annual* system there is limitedness involved in learning objectives regarding an adopted course and monotonousness involved with the teaching-learning process.

5. Findings from Interviews

Most of the teachers have perceived that close interaction develops between teachers and students in *Semester* system which is highly beneficial for students' learning. Such type of interaction lacks in *Annual* system. *Semester* system is learner centred system of education which lays more emphasis on building learning potential of students rather than rigid system of instruction. All the time students are under the supervision of teachers. Students are continuously evaluated on the basis of presentations, quizzes, and assignments, whereas there is no continuous evaluation in annual system. Students and teachers are always kept on their toes in semester system while they become more lazy and lethargic in *Annual* system. Teachers are more authoritative in *Semester* system. He is not only instructor but at the same time the responsibility of continuous evaluation also falls upon his shoulders. In *Annual* system he just delivers lecture and has nothing to do with evaluation and examination of students. Teachers mostly rely on books and hard stuffs while teaching in *Annual* system but they are compelled to use internet and modern technologies in semester system. There is more check and balance from the head of department in a *Semester* system as compared to annual system. Credit hours are strictly followed in universities while no such strict time table is followed in an *Annual* system. 80% of the teachers have accounted less time and subjectivity as the demerit of semester system while 20% are of the opinion that eighteen weeks are also enough to master a subject. 80% of the teachers are of the opinion that *Semester* system is totally related to technicalities and, therefore, proper training for a teacher is mandatory if he is switching over from an *Annual* to *Semester* system while 20% do not

think it to be mandatory. 80% of the teachers have recommended *Semester* system in Pakistan arguing that semester is the demand of modern time. 10% are favouring *Annual* system because they think that deep analysis of literary subject (In MA English) is necessary and *Annual* system suits more to such students. 10% are in favour of implementing *Term* system in Pakistan because the modern technology and facilities are lacking in Pakistan which are required for *Semester* system.

6. Conclusion

The above findings show that both students and teachers view that *Semester* system is far better for the students' learning strategies and outcomes. Like prevalent in universities, *Semester* system needs to be incorporated in the colleges as well. However, it was felt that owing to lack of proper resources *Semester* system cannot be a successful system in most of the governmental institutes of Pakistan. Similarly, more importantly, the teachers ought to keep objective outlooks and practices in doing the formative and summative evaluations of their students. As an undercurrent, the study also tried to show that a student cannot settle down to study effectively unless s/he knows what and why s/he is doing that activity in class. It is believed that if a student is more informed the better will be his/her motivation and his/her ability to study. It is, therefore, strongly recommended that proposed learning objectives and learning strategies regarding *semester* system ought to be communicated to students and even to their teachers, via some seminar etc., who are new to the system.

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