

**Citation:** Shoukat, L., Waheed, M., & Nawaz, M. S. (2021). Perceiving the Paradigm of Semester System and the State of Affairs in Running it in Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan. *Global Educational Studies Review*, VI(II), 188-197. [https://doi.org/10.31703/gesr.2021\(VI-II\).18](https://doi.org/10.31703/gesr.2021(VI-II).18)



## Perceiving the Paradigm of Semester System and the State of Affairs in Running it in Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan

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**Abstract:** *The semester system is, now a days, prevailing in almost every county around the world due to its more effective in conducting the process of teaching and learning. As with other systems, this system also has a specific philosophy that gives it a certain shape of semester. If it is to run with its genuine mode, then its philosophy should be understood. The ideas that work behind its functioning are flexibility, freedom, continuous assessment, relevant principles of evaluation and grading, self-assessment, and monitoring. In Pakistan, this system was introduced without genuine homework. Most of the teachers and other authorities who designed and developed this system were not trained on the semester system. The dominant number of teachers who are teaching in this system have studied under the annual system, and after inducting them in the semester system, no reasonable training was given to them. As a result, they do not know how to develop syllabi, what could be the teaching and assessment strategies suitable for the semester system, and how to utilize the concept of a credit hour to involve the students in continuous learning. Phenomenology, as the major approach, has been adopted to analyze the documents, observation, and discussion.*

**Key Words:** Semester System, Credit Hour, Flexibility, Grade Point Average

### Introduction

Before 2008, the dominant academic system in educational institutions in Pakistan was based on annual doctrine in which the teaching-learning process continued for one year long. At the end of the year, the examination was conducted; and question papers were prepared to cover the whole syllabi studied in the whole year. The HEC introduced the semester system in higher education with the logic that it was a modern system that administers teaching-learning activities more efficiently than the annual system. In addition, the HEC wanted the education system of Pakistan to be on a par with the education systems of other developed countries. Switching to a quite new system is not a simple process because every system runs under a certain philosophical background that demands various

behavioral changes in people, responsible for developing and running that new system, compatible to the requirements of that system; otherwise, the people would make such changes according to their already existing mindset. As a result, the originality of the system to be introduced would be lost.

The current research is based on this theme to analyze to what extent the higher educational institutions where the semester system is being run, are following the true spirit of the semester system.

### Review of Literature

The 'semester' derived from a Latin word 'sēmentris' meaning half-yearly, originated in

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German “via German from Latin *sēmestris*” ([“Semester Lexico.com,” n.d.](#)) where it is pronounced as ‘ze’ meste’ ([“Semester,” n.d.](#)). In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was adopted in the American education system. Now, this term is widely used around the world.

In terms of structural and operational point of view, it refers to an academic year divided into two halves, typically consisting of 15 to 18 weeks duration. In German universities, a semester is of six months duration, including periods of the recess (usually called semester break) (“Semester, Dictionary.com,” n.d.). In some countries like Canada or America, it might be trimester ([“Trimester. collinsdictionary.com,” n.d.](#)) consisting of three terms in an academic year, and Quarter ([“Quarter | Meaning & definition for UK English | Lexico.com,” n.d.](#)) for four terms in an academic year.

### **Implementation of Semester system in Pakistan**

The introduction of semester system is not new in Pakistan. In 1974, a Semester Examinations Section was established in the University of Karachi, which developed an annual cycle for all the activities from 1998 to 2006. In 1999 & 2000, the semester rules were revised and updated with the approval of the Academic Council (“Semester examination section,” n.d.). After the National Education Policy had been published in 1979, universities in Pakistan started adopting the semester system, but, by and large, the experience of the semester system faced complete failure at the university level ([Saad, 1979](#)).

However, HEC issued “Policy Guidelines for Implementation of Uniform Semester System in Higher Education Institutions of Pakistan.” (HEC, 2008 a) A National Committee on Examination System (NCES) appointed by HEC recommended: “a uniform system of semester-based assessment by faculty to objectively evaluate the academic performance of their students” ([HEC, 2008b, p.1](#)), containing the details on how to implement the fair and objective examination system by 2008.

### **Objectives**

1. To explore the paradigm of the semester system.
2. To understand the characteristics/features of the semester system

3. To analyze whether the higher education institutions under the semester system are following the true spirit of semester system.

### **Methodology**

This research is based on the analysis of documents, personal observation and experience, and formal and informal discussions with teachers to analyze the phenomenon under study. In qualitative research, the document analysis provides the evidence required that leads to knowing the reality of certain facts, which in turn help answer the research questions ([“Document analysis - SAGE research methods,” 2018](#); [Bowen, 2009](#)). In this research, the documents were used not for the purpose of literature review but to explore the nature of characteristics of phenomenon (semester system), which was the intent of this study ([Bowen, 2009](#); [Harvey, 2011](#)). Phenomenology, as the major approach, has been adopted to analyze the documents, observation, and discussion. The researchers also drew upon personal observation and discussion to reach the conclusion in order to satisfy the aspects prompted in objectives.

### **Discussion**

It is well known and established the fact that the annual and semester systems are two quite different systems; and work under entirely different philosophies. When a person thinks of any of these two systems and mentions the differentiation between these two, he just focuses on the ways these systems assess and evaluate the students’ achievement. However, this is an important aspect but is not the whole reality. The purpose here is not to discuss the differentiation between these two systems but the philosophy or paradigm which gives that system a certain meaning and nature. In this context, the semester system is being discussed and analyzed.

### **The paradigm of Semester System**

Every system has two aspects- one is its philosophy, and the other is the structure that takes its certain shape under the influence of the particular philosophy working behind it. Without understanding the philosophy, a system cannot be run with true spirit.

The semester system should not be considered a mere exam-based system but as a complete system of teaching and learning that provides specific conditions to both teacher and learner to perform their teaching and learning activities in a petite time.

[Pabla \(2012\)](#) has pointed out the rationale working behind the semester system as "to impart enhanced values" (p.173), which demands the following orientation:

- a) Continuous learning (to discuss under credit hour)
- b) Continuous evaluation and assessment (under self-assessment)
- c) Interdisciplinarity (interdependence)
- d) The harmonious and best correlation between Under Graduate & Post Graduate courses ([Pabla, 2012](#)). (Integration)

### Flexibility and Freedom

The semester system permits greater freedom ([Sing & Kumar, 2016](#)) and flexibility ([Raza & Malhotra, 1991](#)) in many ways. Flexibility and freedom are also great intentions that should be ensured in deciding on the pedagogical design, course formulation and development, and the way the students' performance is evaluated. A teacher can design, change and improve his course within a framework for this purpose; what suitable teaching methods and how to assess the performance and achievement of students are purely done by the concerned teachers as per the requirement of the course. It is quite logical because the nature and learning experiences involved vary from course to course.

The flexibility and freedom in the semester system is not only limited to the teachers but also be maintained as the right of the students because it is actually the learner-centered system. The students enjoy the freedom of planning their learning activities according to their interests, abilities, available time, and space. A semester system works under the range of time period for the completion of a certain degree, and how much time a student avails within this time frame is to be managed by the student. In the same way, a student can pick a number of courses flexibly. Therefore, many top universities around the world charges fee per course opted by the student.

### Continuous Assessment

A system of continuous assessment and evaluation

is another theme that is compulsory to be employed in the semester system. Without maintaining it, the semester system does not qualify the criteria of implementing it with true spirit. The whole duration of academic activities in a semester is divided into various segments during or at the end of which, assessment is done to know how successfully the students have achieved the learning outcomes. This time-to-time assessment provides a great opportunity for students to know their mistakes and weaknesses (self-assessment) and the time to overcome those which contribute to better learning and achievement. In the semester, the teachers are given the freedom to choose relevant and best methods of assessment according to the course being taught.

### Self-sufficiency

In running the semester system effectively, a teacher must be resourceful to conduct the teaching-learning process in a more effective way. Therefore, a teacher should understand the requirements of the semester system, has mastery of subject matter, and how to teach and assess the learning outcome. It is the prime obligation of the educational institutions to make available all the resources pertaining to physical and administrative infrastructure according to the spirit of the semester system.

### Decentralized and Individualized

The concepts of decentralization and individualization are an integral part of the conceptual framework of the semester system, without which its unique structure and function cannot be validated. Decentralization means delegation of powers to the teachers at the class level to make decisions related to changes in course content, choosing methods of teaching and evaluation according to the needs of the course. Every class is unique, and it should be dealt with uniquely by the institution and teacher. The 'individualized' refers to addressing the needs and abilities of the individual student, and opportunity is given to students to choose how many courses he could manage to study; and also, the provision of a conducive classroom environment where he could freely discuss his point of view and raise questions to reflect the areas of further attention.

### Determine the Grading Philosophy

Assessment and grading system is the main and

exclusive feature in the semester system that needs to be built on a specific philosophy of human nature and capabilities of tools of assessment. The first point is that every individual is unique and different from the other. So, he /she should be treated accordingly. Secondly, there is no perfect tool for assessing the learning and achievement of a person with hundred percent accuracy or perfection. Therefore, multiple techniques in accordance with the nature of the course may be adopted to assess the performance of the students to minimize the extent of imperfections of the tools of assessment. Thirdly, Human error is also a critical factor that has an influence on the assessment process. Human error occurs that is "not intended by the actor; not desired by a set of rules or an external observer" ([Senders & Moray, 1991, P. 25](#)). For example, if a teacher assesses essay-type questions and awards marks to the answers. If the same answers are assessed again by the same teacher after some gap of time, the marks awarded would be different from the previous ones. Fourthly, there is no standardized technique to maintain the equal standard of evaluating the performance of the students. For example, if two teachers assess the same task (answer of a question or an activity like practical or presentation, etc.) done by the students, the assessment results by these teachers will be different.

Whatever philosophy about grades a person or institution adopts, it must address the above issues and ensure fairness and validity in maintaining the grading standard; and can justify if challenged ("[Before you begin grading](#)", n.d.).

The theory of awarding grades in the semester system depends on how some issues are addressed, as mentioned below.

- The meaning attached to grades
- The criteria and their justification used to assess
- Reasons of choosing the grading system like absolute or relative, etc.
- How different components be valued, like student attendance, class participation, assignments and presentation, etc.? ("[Before you begin grading](#)", n.d.)

### **A Relative Grading or Grading on a Curve (Norm-Referenced)**

This grading philosophy explains how the performances of students in a group are compared

and ranked with one another or determines the percentage of A's, B's, C's, and D's grade distribution to be awarded relative to the average performance of the class.

### **An Absolute Standard Grading (Criterion-Referenced),**

Grades are based on predetermined standards or criteria like 90% and above is an A, 80-90% is a B, etc. Under this philosophy, every student in a class could get an 'A' in a course if they achieve the standard or criteria of grade 'A.'

Whatever grading system is thought suitable, it should be compatible with the course objectives, the teaching materials and methods, and departmental policies, and also clear and justifiable.

### **Continuous Learning**

Continuous learning and regularity are the sole ideas on which all teaching and learning activities are organized in the semester system. There may be various aspects but understanding the introduction of a credit hour is of prime importance to run the semester system under its real philosophy.

A credit hour refers to the time limit in the front face, but, actually, it is the amount of work to be done both by the teachers and the students defined by an institution and approved by accrediting agency or approval agency. There are two aspects of credit hour-one takes place in the classroom or laboratory while the other beyond the classrooms.

### **Credit Hour and Logic behind it**

A credit hour is a unit of time defined by the institution, traditionally one hour of classroom or direct faculty-student contact and a minimum of two hours out-of-class to be done by students for approximately fifteen weeks in a semester ([US Department of Education, 2012](#); [Berrett, 2012](#)). For example, a course with one credit hour means that there will be one-hour face-to-face contact of student-teacher for the purpose of instruction; and the students will have to study independently for at least two hours to have a good understanding and learning of what was taught in the classroom in one week.

This concept needs to be understood in the context of the semester to make clear the

relationship of credit hour and contact hour. A credit hour or semester credit hour refers to the weight or credit (worth) a student earns on successful completion for one contact hour and at least two hours independent study per week (this may be more), while 15-16 contact hours plus at least 30-32 hours independent study per semester. This is the actual logic behind the credit hour in a semester. Now, a three credit-hours course requires 45-48 contact hours and a minimum of 90-96 hours of independent study in a semester duration for a theoretical course. The teachers are required to arrange academic activities for teaching-learning a course, keeping in view the matrix of credit hour. In this way continuous learning may be maintained.

### State of Affairs in Pakistan

The annual system of education has a long history in Pakistan. Almost all higher education institutions have been running under the annual system till 2008. However, Medical colleges and education at secondary and higher secondary levels are still following the annual system. The Faculties of Pharmacy in top universities in Punjab Pakistan are also maintaining the annual system. Many universities are still offering MA' private' under the annual system.

### Learning experiences of Students under annual System

At school and college levels, students study under an annual system where the spirit of teaching and learning is quite different. HEC banned admission in B.A./B.Sc. under the annual system from 2018 (["HEC announcements," 2019](#)). The students, after studying 12 years or even 14 years under the annual system, have been developed the specific learning styles that are compatible with the annual system. When these students enter into higher studies under the semester system, they find a quite different pattern of teaching-learning from that of the annual system. It is difficult for them to leave altogether their previous learning experiences and switch to a completely different mode of semester system. Therefore, they try to remain stick to their established old patterns of studies because no one guides them on how to modify their learning experiences to cope with the needs of the semester system.

### Teaching Experiences of Teachers

The teachers at higher education institutions had

also studied under the annual system at least for 12 to 14 years of education or even 16 years in many cases. After being inducted as teachers at higher education, they do not get any suitable training to work as teachers, especially under the semester system. The teachers at higher education institutions, in the dominant majority, also have not got any training to understand the philosophy, nature, and skills required to work under the real spirit of the semester system. The important point is that almost all the teachers at the turning point of switching over to the semester system were graduated under the annual system; and these teachers designed the semester system for their institutions without having been trained for the semester system.

### As a result

When the students from the background of the annual system to a new system of the semester, they find only a change of nomenclature and not the paradigm of teaching-learning. Therefore, they need just to understand and adopt the structural changes of the semester system but continue their previous learning experiences. In fact, the semester being run in most of the higher educational institutions is superficial, just reflecting the structural changes, but the spirit does not conform to the semester system.

### Inflexible and Delimited

The design of the semester system being implemented deviates from its characteristics of flexibility and freedom. There is a fixed and structured semester-wise design in which the teachers has almost no permission to change or modify any portion of course content, teaching methods, and assessment techniques according to the emerging needs, not only at a personal level but also at the departmental level or even Faculty level. Therefore, it requires a log procedure, passing through almost four bodies, to get the approval of any change. That is why the syllabi and their related aspects once designed and developed, remain unchanged years after year.

The semester system also provides a very reasonable flexibility and freedom to the students to decide their learning pace according to available time and resources. This feature is again denied in the existing semester system. Each semester offers a number of courses, and students are bound to study all of them. In addition to this,



they have to pass each and every course along with maintaining a certain SGPA (semester GPA); otherwise, they may either be dropped from the roll or promoted provisionally subject to achieving the required SGPA by repeating the course(s) whenever they are given the chance. When a condition of securing SGPA in a semester is imposed, it means all the courses are taken as a single unit that is a highly enclosed pattern.

There exists no credit transfer system in case a student has to shift from one university to the other due to some unavoidable circumstances like transfer of job place of their parents, etc.

### Lacking a True Sense of Credit hour being Implemented

As it is discussed earlier that the concept of a credit hour is linked to face-to-face teaching (contact hour), students' independent learning beyond the direct teaching, and various activities assigned to students to promote and assess their learning progress. So, this is a comprehensive concept in which the activities are interlinked and contribute to computing how much time should be allocated for a meaningful learning. As the majority of the teachers are not trained to work in a semester system, syllabi are not designed as per the requirement of the semester system, very limited and structured teaching-learning activities have made the concept of credit hour very superficial. Both teachers and students think that one credit hour means academic work, just one hour in class. Therefore, teachers do not suggest

extra reading, and students believe that whatever is discussed in the classroom is enough; and rely merely on notes taken during the lecture. The students prepare assignments just by copying and pasting the material found through the internet. As a result, the concept of credit hour has been lost.

### A Confusing Grading Policy

The philosophy of grading the students' achievement is not found in the true spirit of the semester. The analysis of grading shows a lot of confusion that is the result of not adopting the clear approach of how and what to assess. A stereotype approach is prevailing that is the combination of different grading schemes trying to accommodate every aspect to satisfy the multiple needs. The prevailing grading policy includes both absolute (criterion-referenced) and relative (norm-referenced) grading along with percentages. The process is done iteratively- once the teacher has awarded the marks, letter grades are assigned according to the percentage of numbers in each course, then grade point average is calculated based on credit hour, and predefined grade points are allocated to percentages of marks for each semester called SGPA; afterward, the overall CGPA for all semesters are computed. In the last, a simple overall percentage of marks obtained is computed, and an again overall letter grade is assigned based on overall percentage. Is not this confusing? The following result card shows all that is explained in the text.

**Table 1.** Specimen Result Card issued at M.Phil level

Subjects	Total marks	Obtained marks	% age	Credit hour	Grade point	Quality Point	Grade
	100	98	98	3	4	12	A <sup>+</sup>
	100	90	90	3	4	12	A
	100	87	87	0	Non-credit		A
	100	80	80	3	3.7	11.1	B <sup>+</sup>
	100	80	80	3	3.7	11.1	B <sup>+</sup>
Semester-I	400	348	87.0	12	3.85	46.2	A
	100	79	79	3	3.6	10.8	B
	100	85	85	3	4	12	A
	100	85	85	3	4	12	A
	100	79	79	3	3.6	10.8	B
Semester-II	400	328	82.0	12	3.8	45.6	B <sup>+</sup>
	200	180	90	6	4	24	A
Semester-3 <sup>rd</sup> & 4 <sup>th</sup>	200	180	90.0	6	4	24	A

Subjects	Total marks	Obtained marks	% age	Credit hour	Grade point	Quality Point	Grade
Total Credit Hours:	30						
Marks obtained:	856/1000						
				Total Quality Points:	115.8	CGPA:	3.86
				Cumulative Percentage:	85.60	Grade:	A

The above table shows a result card where the following types of grading are used:

- Simple percentage of obtained marks
- Letter grades
- Grade point average

Different grading philosophies are used in these three types of grading. Simple percentage as calculated in the annual system, criterion-referenced grading in letter grades where certain percentage is denoted by specific letter like 85% to 100 for 'A'; the weighted average is used to compute grade point average (GPA).

As the mechanism of calculation is different in either of these grading schemes, therefore, the results are also different, which create confusion. If you see Semester-I in table-1 above, the percentage of marks is 87, corresponding to Letter grade 'A', but grade point 3.85 is equivalent to B<sup>+</sup> according to ready reckoner scale.

The overall result in the end of table-1 also creates confusion. The overall percentage of marks is 85.60, and its corresponding grade is 'A'. However, the CGPA is 3.86, and its corresponding grade is B<sup>+</sup>. The discrepancies are due to using the different grading philosophies.

Another feature of grading commonly attached to the semester system is not awarding any position attached to the performance of the students. It is the feature of the annual system where certain top positions are announced to those who secure the highest percentages of marks in the group. The philosophy behind this practice of not declaring a position is that a certain range of marks represents the same grade or grade point. For example, 95-100 is A<sup>+</sup> with a grade of point 4. It means that there is no difference between marks obtained from 95-100. If a student secures 95 and other 99, these are considered on the same level

because the difference in marks may be due to human error.

### Teacher-Student Ratio and Workload

A teacher-student ratio in terms of the number of students in a class is much high, usually ranging from 50-70 students in a class. It is highly unmanageable to perform teaching-learning activities in a real sense. For example, assignment and presentation is components that each student has to complete. How can 50 students (taking the lowest limit) be managed to offer their presentations for only 10 minutes each in 48 (maximum) one-hours periods? If some teachers strictly follow this time ratio, it would take 8 hours for presentations to be completed.

In recent years, the intake of students has become double or even triple because this is the only and quick source of raising income. The increased number has created more stress on resources and time management. One can find a situation of a high number of students, fewer resources, and the lowest ratio of time in institutions that has influenced badly the genuine academic and research activities like seminars, presentations, class discussion, laboratory work, research projects, etc. To cope with the increased demand of teachers, a simple way is to appoint a significant number of part-time teachers. This practice has promoted favoritism in various ways. Appointing part-time teachers has become a tool to promote public relations and nepotism and ignore the personally disliked regular faculty. It was noted that teachers in power enjoyed by teaching minimum courses as workload but maximum as part-time.

Now, a brief analysis of time is required to conduct some major activities of a teacher with a class of 50 students in the theoretical course.

**Table 2.** Time required to conduct some major academic activities

Activity	Time required (minimum)	Time for 50 students
Assignment write-up 4 pages (just read one time and make major corrections)	20 minutes	20*50= 1000 or 17 hours
Preparation of One quiz for mid and one for final terms	60 minutes	60 or 1 hour

Activity	Time required (minimum)	Time for 50 students
Checking of 2 quizzes	15 minutes	15 *50= 750 or 13 hours
Preparation of one midterm question paper that include MCQs, Short-answer, and essay questions of 30 marks	90 minutes	90 minutes or 1.5 hours
Evaluation of one midterm solved paper	30 minutes	30*50=1500 minutes or 25 hours
Preparation of one final-term question paper that include MCQs, Short-answer, and essay questions of 50 marks	120 minutes	120 minutes or 2 hours
Evaluation of one final-term solved paper	40 minutes	40*50=2000 minutes or 33 hours
	Total time	93 hours

A lecturer or assistant professor's work load is 4 courses per semester. The teachers also teach 3 courses part-time, and it becomes 7 courses per semester. The total time required to manage the activities in the table-2 is almost one month. The time required to prepare 48 lessons or lectures for each course is not included in it. A teacher can supervise 4 Ph.D. students and 7 M.Phil students, with no limit of undergraduate research students as standard decided by HEC. If a teacher supervise 2 Ph.D, 4 M.Phil, and 8 undergraduate research students, the time required to supervise their research work is also not included. In addition to these, the time for educational and administrative tasks is not part of this calculation. Could a teacher justify this? A genuine teacher fails to cope with the teaching-learning environment and, therefore, faces a lot of stress, especially when the demand of administration is to produce good results and smooth, cool, and calm conditions without any problem of any sort. Therefore, every department tries to create such an environment where everyone is managed to be satisfied and happy.

### No Effective Mechanism of Monitoring

The universities cannot develop a well-designed and efficient, bias-free mechanism of monitoring and evaluation of what is going on in this teaching-learning process under semester system.

In fact, the teachers are enjoying absolute freedom of being all-in-all. Practically, well-designed outlines of courses are not developed. In most of the cases, just a list of topics and some suggested books are mentioned. If somehow they exist, nobody bothers to follow these. A teacher is

free to teach how much he wishes to. The students are also enjoying this opportunity along with achieving high grades.

Nobody bothers what is actually going on? Everything is ok in files, in media, and in databases. Everyone is happy-teachers are happy, policymakers and administrators are quite satisfied, students are confident and proud of their achievements, and parents are contented on their sacrifices made for the progress of their children. But, all of them in their private meetings show their serious concerns on what is happening in our education system.

### Conclusion

The semester is an efficient system for teaching-learning if it is understood and implemented with its true spirit. It provides ample opportunities to both teachers and students to perform with freedom according to their capabilities to achieve goals to the extent of high level.

Unfortunately, in Pakistan, the spirit, norms and practices of semester system are not clearly understood or being implemented partially. As a result, the actual purpose of semester system has been distorted. The claim of universities that they offer freedom and flexibility to students and teachers is not true. In fact, there is a strict set-up and the both the students and teachers have to follow it. In the absence of efficient and bias-free monitoring and evaluation system and no rewards and accountability, the system is coming to prove counterproductive. In such environment, both real teachers and students are facing hard time to perform in true sense and spirit.



The in-depth understanding of what is going on in educational institutions concludes that this system is neither semester not annual but an amalgamation of diversified concepts where one can find features of many systems. It is quite astonishing that even after about fourteen years of

strong advocacy of the semester system, the education system is prominently divided into two main streams of annual and semester systems. The reason is that the semester system is not being implemented with its true philosophy and spirit.

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