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Terms or Semesters? Re-evaluating the Academic Calendar Structure within Uganda's Evolving Secondary Education Landscape

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Abstract

Background: Uganda's secondary education system has operated on a three-term academic calendar inherited from the British colonial model for over six decades, yet limited empirical evidence exists regarding its effectiveness compared to alternative structures, particularly semester-based systems that are increasingly adopted regionally and internationally. The evolving educational landscape, characterized by curriculum reforms, increased enrollment under Universal Secondary Education, and regional harmonization pressures, necessitates evidence-based evaluation of whether the traditional calendar structure optimally serves contemporary educational needs.

Main Objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of the current term-based academic calendar structure compared to a potential semester-based system in Uganda's secondary education, with the aim of providing evidence-based recommendations for academic calendar optimization that enhance student learning outcomes, improve resource utilization, and better serve the needs of all educational stakeholders.

Methods: This mixed-methods convergent parallel design study conducted between March and August 2024 involved 1,248 students, 288 teachers, 96 administrators, 480 parents, and 12 district education officers from 48 secondary schools (24 term-based, 24 semester-based) stratified by location and ownership. Quantitative data on academic performance, curriculum coverage, resource utilization, and stakeholder satisfaction were collected through validated questionnaires and analyzed using univariate statistics, independent t-tests, multiple linear regression, and binary logistic regression, while qualitative data from 24 focus groups and 36 key informant interviews were analyzed thematically.

Key Results: Semester-based schools demonstrated significantly superior academic performance (composite score difference = 5.39 points, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.425$), curriculum coverage (86.74% vs. 78.26%, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.795$), and knowledge retention (79.86% vs. 71.42%, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.653$) compared to term-based schools. Multiple regression confirmed calendar type as an independent predictor of academic performance ($B = 4.26$, $\beta = 0.172$, $p < 0.001$) after controlling for confounders. Semester-based schools achieved 32% reduction in administrative hours ($p < 0.001$, $d = 1.812$), 14.22 percentage points higher resource utilization ($p < 0.001$, $d = 1.066$), and significantly higher stakeholder satisfaction (3.84 vs. 3.18, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.738$). Binary logistic regression revealed that urban location (OR = 3.53), higher socioeconomic status (OR = 1.97), and teacher/administrator roles (OR = 2.36 and 3.25 respectively) significantly predicted semester preference, while financial concerns (OR = 0.40) and rural location presented significant barriers.

Conclusion: Semester-based academic calendar structures offer substantial advantages over term-based systems in Uganda's secondary education context, with measurable benefits in academic outcomes, operational efficiency, and stakeholder satisfaction. However, successful implementation requires context-sensitive strategies addressing the differentiated needs of diverse educational communities, particularly rural families and economically disadvantaged stakeholders.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education and Sports should implement a phased geographic transition to

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semester-based calendar structures beginning with urban schools while establishing pilot programs in rural settings with enhanced financial support mechanisms, flexible fee payment plans, and comprehensive stakeholder engagement to address economic and logistical barriers identified in this study.

Keywords: academic calendar structure, term-based system, semester-based system, secondary education, stakeholder preferences, educational policy reform, learning outcomes, calendar reform

INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

The structure of the academic calendar represents a fundamental organizing principle in education systems worldwide, profoundly influencing pedagogical approaches, student learning outcomes, and institutional effectiveness. In Uganda, secondary education has traditionally operated on a three-term system inherited from the British colonial education model, with each academic year divided into three distinct terms separated by holidays. However, as Uganda's education landscape continues to evolve in response to 21st-century demands, technological advancement, and changing socio-economic realities, critical questions have emerged regarding the continued appropriateness of this calendar structure (Edinah & Julius, 2024; Rubach et al., 2022).

The debate between term-based and semester-based academic calendars has gained increasing prominence within Uganda's educational discourse, particularly as the country seeks to align its secondary education system with regional and international standards while addressing local contextual needs. Proponents of the semester system argue that it offers enhanced curriculum continuity, better alignment with higher education structures, and improved opportunities for comprehensive student assessment (Bhushan et al., 2023; Julius & Nelson, 2024). Conversely, advocates for maintaining the term system emphasize its alignment with agricultural cycles affecting rural communities, its provision of more frequent breaks that may reduce student burnout, and its deep entrenchment within Uganda's educational culture (Birioukov, 2021; Shafie et al., 2022).

This study seeks to critically examine the implications of academic calendar structure on various dimensions of secondary education in Uganda, including student academic performance, teacher workload management, curriculum coverage, institutional resource utilization, and stakeholder satisfaction (Pauline, 2023; Tellmann, 2022). By systematically evaluating both systems within Uganda's unique context—characterized by diverse geographical settings, varying resource availability, and distinct socio-cultural considerations—this research aims to provide evidence-based insights that can inform policy decisions regarding academic calendar reform. The findings of this study hold significant potential to contribute to ongoing discussions about educational transformation in Uganda and may serve as a valuable reference for other East African nations grappling with similar questions of academic calendar optimization (Isaac Kazaara & Gracious Kazaara, 2024; Kukundakwe, 2024; Stanley & Charles, 2024).

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Uganda's secondary education system has experienced substantial transformation since the country's independence in 1962, yet the three-term academic calendar structure has remained largely unchanged for over six decades. This calendar configuration, consisting of three terms of approximately 13-14 weeks each, separated by month-long holidays, was inherited from the British colonial administration and was designed to accommodate agricultural

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seasons and travel constraints that were prevalent during the colonial era. The first term typically runs from February to May, the second from late May to early August, and the third from September to early December, with end-of-year examinations conducted by the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) (Bagonza & Kaahwa, 2023; Sengendo & Eduan, 2024; Wilbrod Aviu, 2024).

The contemporary Ugandan education landscape, however, differs significantly from the context in which this calendar structure was established. The country has witnessed substantial urbanization, technological advancement, and shifts in family structures that have altered the original rationale for the term system (Julius et al., 2024; Matovu et al., 2024; Peter et al., 2023). Additionally, Uganda's education sector has undergone significant policy reforms, including the introduction of Universal Secondary Education (USE) in 2007, which dramatically increased enrollment rates and placed new pressures on educational infrastructure and resource allocation. The National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) has also introduced competency-based curricula that emphasize continuous assessment and skills development, raising questions about whether the current calendar structure optimally supports these pedagogical approaches (Gracious, 2024; Hadijah & Ali, 2024).

Regional trends in East Africa have further intensified discussions about calendar reform. Several countries within the East African Community (EAC), including Kenya and Tanzania, have either adopted or seriously considered transitioning to semester-based systems, partly to facilitate student mobility and harmonize educational standards across the region. The semester system, typically consisting of two 18-20 week instructional periods per academic year, is argued to provide more extended periods of uninterrupted instruction, potentially enhancing deep learning and reducing the disruptive effects of frequent transitions between terms (Vincent & Jill Margaret, 2024; Vincent & Peter, 2024).

However, Uganda's unique contextual factors complicate straightforward adoption of alternative calendar structures. The country's predominantly agricultural economy means that many students, particularly in rural areas, still participate in family farming activities during school holidays. Transportation infrastructure challenges, diverse climatic conditions across different regions, and the financial constraints facing many families create practical considerations that must be weighed against purely pedagogical arguments. Furthermore, the examination-oriented nature of Uganda's education system, with high-stakes national examinations at O-level (S4) and A-level (S6), creates additional structural constraints on calendar flexibility (Kibuuka, 2022; Monday & Geophrey, 2023).

Recent studies from other developing countries have produced mixed findings regarding the impact of academic calendar structure on educational outcomes. While some research suggests that longer uninterrupted instructional periods enhance knowledge retention and reduce learning loss, other studies indicate that more frequent breaks may benefit student mental health and reduce teacher burnout. These conflicting findings underscore the importance of context-specific research that considers the particular circumstances of Uganda's secondary education system rather than simply importing models from different educational and cultural contexts.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite over six decades of utilizing the three-term academic calendar structure in Uganda's secondary education system, there exists limited empirical evidence regarding its effectiveness compared to alternative calendar structures, particularly the semester system. This knowledge gap has created significant challenges for educational policymakers

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and administrators who seek to optimize the academic calendar for improved learning outcomes, efficient resource utilization, and enhanced stakeholder satisfaction (Gideon, 2023b; Lubaale, 2020; Sarah & Gracious Kazaara, 2024).
The current term-based system presents several observable challenges that warrant systematic investigation. Teachers frequently report insufficient time for comprehensive curriculum coverage, particularly in science and mathematics subjects, due to the fragmented nature of instruction across three separate terms. The frequent transitions between terms disrupt instructional continuity, potentially affecting knowledge retention and deep learning. Additionally, the current calendar structure creates administrative inefficiencies, with schools investing substantial time and resources in repeated opening and closing procedures three times annually rather than twice (Gideon, 2023a; Kirya et al., 2021; Kokkinos et al., 2022).
Students, particularly those in rural areas, face significant challenges in maintaining academic momentum across the multiple holiday periods, with evidence suggesting substantial learning loss during breaks. The examination pressure is intensified by the need to prepare for high-stakes national examinations within a fragmented instructional timeline. Furthermore, the misalignment between Uganda's term system and the semester-based calendars used by many regional and international universities creates transition challenges for students pursuing higher education.
From an economic perspective, parents and guardians face the financial burden of multiple school fee payments and transportation costs associated with three opening periods annually, which may contribute to dropout rates and irregular school attendance. Schools also grapple with financial planning complexities arising from the tripartite fee collection structure, affecting their capacity for strategic resource allocation and infrastructural development (Daulay et al., 2022; Ryan et al., 2022). Despite these observed challenges and the ongoing regional shift toward semester-based systems, there is insufficient research examining whether a semester-based calendar would actually address these issues within Uganda's specific context, or whether it might introduce new challenges related to student fatigue, resource constraints, or socio-cultural misalignment. The absence of comparative empirical data on student performance, teacher effectiveness, curriculum coverage, resource utilization, and stakeholder preferences under different calendar structures has resulted in policy discussions based largely on assumption rather than evidence (Coakley et al., 2021; Duque Monsalve et al., 2022).
This research problem is further compounded by the lack of stakeholder consultation in previous discussions about calendar reform. The perspectives of teachers, students, parents, school administrators, and education officials—who would all be directly affected by any calendar restructuring—have not been systematically gathered and analyzed. Without this comprehensive evidence base, any decisions regarding academic calendar reform risk being suboptimal, potentially disrupting the education system without delivering the intended benefits, or alternatively, perpetuating an inefficient structure simply due to institutional inertia. Therefore, there is a critical need for rigorous, context-specific research that empirically evaluates the relative merits of term-based versus semester-based academic calendar structures within Uganda's evolving secondary education landscape.

MAIN OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To evaluate the effectiveness of the current term-based academic calendar structure compared to a potential semester-based system in Uganda's secondary education, with the aim of providing evidence-based recommendations for academic calendar optimization that enhance student learning outcomes, improve resource utilization, and better serve

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the needs of all educational stakeholders.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To compare student academic performance and learning outcomes between schools operating under term-based and semester-based academic calendar structures in selected secondary schools in Uganda, with particular attention to curriculum coverage, knowledge retention, examination results, and competency development.
2. To assess the operational and resource utilization implications of term-based versus semester-based calendar structures on secondary schools in Uganda, including analysis of administrative efficiency, financial management, teacher workload distribution, infrastructure utilization, and institutional planning capacity.
3. To examine stakeholder perceptions and preferences regarding term-based and semester-based academic calendar structures among students, teachers, parents, school administrators, and education officials, identifying factors that influence their preferences and their readiness for potential calendar reform.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does the academic calendar structure (term-based versus semester-based) affect student academic performance, curriculum coverage, and learning outcomes in Uganda's secondary schools?
2. What are the operational, administrative, and resource utilization differences between term-based and semester-based calendar structures in secondary schools, and how do these differences impact institutional effectiveness and efficiency?
3. What are the perceptions, preferences, and concerns of various educational stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, administrators, and education officials) regarding the current term-based system and a potential transition to a semester-based academic calendar?

HYPOTHESES

H_1: There is a significant difference in student academic performance and learning outcomes between secondary schools operating under term-based calendar structures and those operating under semester-based calendar structures in Uganda, with semester-based systems demonstrating superior curriculum coverage and knowledge retention.

H_2: Semester-based academic calendar structures demonstrate significantly greater operational efficiency, resource utilization, and cost-effectiveness compared to term-based structures in Uganda's secondary schools, as measured by administrative time allocation, financial planning capacity, and infrastructure optimization.

H_3: There are significant differences in stakeholder satisfaction and perceived educational quality between term-based and semester-based academic calendar structures, with stakeholder preferences being significantly influenced by factors such as geographical location (rural versus urban), socio-economic status, and institutional type (government versus private schools).

Methods.

This study employed a mixed-methods convergent parallel design conducted between March and August 2024 across

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48 purposively selected secondary schools in Uganda, stratified by calendar type (24 term-based and 24 semester-based schools), geographical location (urban/rural), and ownership (government/private). Based on power analysis calculations using G*Power 3.1 software, a minimum sample size of 960 students (20 per school) was determined to detect medium effect sizes (d=0.5) with 80% power at α=0.05 significance level for comparing academic performance between calendar structures; however, to account for potential attrition and enable robust subgroup analyses, the study recruited 1,248 students (576 from term-based schools and 672 from semester-based schools) from Senior 2-4 classes using systematic random sampling. Additionally, 288 teachers (6 per school), 96 school administrators (2 per school), 480 parents (10 per school selected through stratified random sampling), and 12 district education officers were purposively selected as study participants. Quantitative data were collected using validated structured questionnaires (Cronbach's α > 0.78 for all scales) measuring academic performance (standardized test scores in Mathematics, English, and Sciences), curriculum coverage completion rates, resource utilization metrics, stakeholder satisfaction scores, and sociodemographic characteristics, while qualitative data were gathered through 24 focus group discussions (12 with students, 12 with teachers) and 36 key informant interviews with administrators and education officials using semi-structured interview guides.

Academic performance data for the previous three years (2021-2023) were obtained from school records and UNEB examination databases. Univariate statistical methods included descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) to characterize the sample and key variables, Shapiro-Wilk tests to assess normality of continuous variables, and Levene's test to examine homogeneity of variances across groups. Bivariate analyses employed independent samples t-tests to compare mean academic performance scores, curriculum coverage rates, and satisfaction scores between term-based and semester-based schools after confirming normality assumptions, while Mann-Whitney U tests were used for non-normally distributed variables; chi-square tests of independence examined associations between categorical variables such as calendar type and dropout rates, stakeholder preferences, and resource adequacy classifications, with Cramér's V calculated to determine effect sizes; Pearson and Spearman correlation coefficients assessed relationships between continuous variables including study duration, performance scores, and resource utilization indices. Multivariate analyses utilized multiple linear regression models to predict academic performance outcomes, where the dependent variable was the composite academic performance score and independent variables included calendar type (dummy coded: 0=term-based, 1=semester-based), school location, ownership type, student socioeconomic status, teacher qualification levels, and student-teacher ratios; model assumptions were rigorously tested including linearity (assessed through scatter plots and partial regression plots), independence of residuals (Durbin-Watson statistic), homoscedasticity (Breusch-Pagan test and residual plots), normality of residuals (Q-Q plots and Shapiro-Wilk test on residuals), and absence of multicollinearity (Variance Inflation Factors < 5 and Tolerance > 0.2) (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023).

Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to compare academic performance between calendar types while controlling for confounding variables such as prior academic achievement, socioeconomic status, and school resource levels, with assumptions of normality, homogeneity of variances, homogeneity of regression slopes, and independence of covariate and treatment verified prior to analysis. Binary logistic regression was employed to model the likelihood

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of stakeholder preference for semester-based systems (coded as 1) versus term-based systems (coded as 0), with predictor variables including geographical location, socioeconomic status, educational level, and exposure to alternative calendar systems; model fit was assessed using Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test, classification accuracy, and area under the ROC curve, while the assumption of absence of multicollinearity among predictors was verified using VIF values. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using maximum likelihood estimation was applied to test a comprehensive theoretical model examining direct and indirect relationships between calendar structure, teaching quality, curriculum coverage, student engagement, and academic performance outcomes; model fit was evaluated using multiple indices including Chi-square/df ratio (<3), Comparative Fit Index (CFI >0.90), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI >0.90), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA <0.08), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR <0.08), with assumptions of multivariate normality assessed through Mardia's coefficient and adequate sample size confirmed (minimum 5:1 ratio of cases to estimated parameters).

Qualitative data from focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, involving data familiarization, initial code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and report production; NVivo 12 software facilitated coding and theme management, while triangulation between quantitative findings and qualitative themes enhanced validity and provided deeper contextual understanding of the statistical patterns observed. Ethical approval was obtained from Makerere University School of Education Research Ethics Committee (approval number EDREC/2024/018), with informed consent secured from all participants, assent obtained from students under 18 years alongside parental consent, and confidentiality maintained through participant anonymization and secure data storage protocols.

RESULTS

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Univariate Analysis of Academic Performance and Curriculum Coverage by Calendar Type

Variable	Calendar Type	N	Mean	SD	Median	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis	Shapiro-Wilk W	p-value
Mathematics Score	Term-based	576	62.34	14.18	63.20	24.50	95.80	-0.18	-0.32	0.994	0.142
Mathematics Score	Semester-based	672	67.85	13.76	68.40	28.30	98.60	-0.15	-0.28	0.996	0.286
English Score	Term-based	576	65.72	13.42	66.10	29.40	96.20	-0.21	-0.26	0.995	0.198
English Score	Semester-based	672	69.58	12.88	69.80	32.10	99.40	-0.14	-0.31	0.996	0.312
Science Score	Term-based	576	58.63	15.12	59.30	21.80	92.70	-0.16	-0.35	0.993	0.118

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Science Score	Semester-based	672	65.42	14.26	65.90	26.50	97.30	-0.12	-0.29	0.995	0.224
Composite Score	Term-based	576	62.23	12.84	62.70	28.60	91.50	-0.19	-0.30	0.994	0.156
Composite Score	Semester-based	672	67.62	12.32	68.10	31.20	95.80	-0.13	-0.27	0.996	0.268
Curriculum Coverage (%)	Term-based	576	78.26	11.38	78.90	48.20	98.50	-0.24	-0.22	0.993	0.124
Curriculum Coverage (%)	Semester-based	672	86.74	9.86	87.30	56.80	99.80	-0.28	-0.18	0.994	0.168
Satisfaction Score (1-5)	Term-based	576	3.18	0.92	3.20	1.10	5.00	0.06	-0.41	0.995	0.186
Satisfaction Score (1-5)	Semester-based	672	3.84	0.86	3.90	1.40	5.00	-0.09	-0.38	0.996	0.242

The descriptive statistics revealed substantial differences in academic performance indicators between term-based and semester-based calendar structures across all measured subjects. Students in semester-based schools demonstrated higher mean scores in Mathematics (M = 67.85, SD = 13.76) compared to their counterparts in term-based schools (M = 62.34, SD = 14.18), representing a difference of 5.51 points. Similar patterns were observed in English scores, where semester-based students scored 3.86 points higher (M = 69.58, SD = 12.88) than term-based students (M = 65.72, SD = 13.42), and in Science scores, where the difference was 6.79 points (semester-based: M = 65.42, SD = 14.26; term-based: M = 58.63, SD = 15.12). The composite academic performance score, calculated as the average of the three subjects, showed semester-based schools outperforming term-based schools by 5.39 points (67.62 vs. 62.23). Curriculum coverage rates exhibited an even more pronounced disparity, with semester-based schools achieving 86.74% mean coverage compared to 78.26% in term-based schools, representing an 8.48 percentage point advantage. Stakeholder satisfaction scores also favored the semester system, with semester-based schools recording a mean satisfaction score of 3.84 out of 5.00 compared to 3.18 in term-based schools. The Shapiro-Wilk tests indicated that all continuous variables were approximately normally distributed ($W > 0.993$, $p > 0.05$ for all variables), satisfying the normality assumption required for parametric statistical tests. The skewness values ranged from -0.28 to 0.06, and kurtosis values ranged from -0.41 to -0.18, all falling within acceptable ranges (±1.0) for normal distribution, further confirming the appropriateness of parametric analytical approaches.

The variability in scores, as measured by standard deviations, revealed important patterns regarding the consistency of educational outcomes under different calendar structures. Term-based schools exhibited slightly higher standard deviations across most academic performance measures, suggesting greater heterogeneity in student outcomes. For instance, the standard deviation in Science scores was 15.12 for term-based schools compared to 14.26 for semester-

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based schools, indicating more dispersed performance in the former. This greater variability could reflect inconsistencies in instructional delivery, curriculum pacing, or student engagement resulting from the fragmented nature of the term system. The curriculum coverage variable showed a similar pattern, with term-based schools demonstrating higher variability (SD = 11.38) compared to semester-based schools (SD = 9.86), suggesting that the semester structure provided more consistent conditions for curriculum completion across different schools. The range of scores further illustrated these differences, with minimum scores in all subjects being notably lower in term-based schools, potentially indicating that the term structure was less effective in supporting struggling students. The median values closely approximated the mean values across all variables, confirming symmetrical distributions and the absence of significant outliers that might distort subsequent inferential analyses. These univariate findings provided preliminary evidence that the semester-based calendar structure was associated with superior academic outcomes, more comprehensive curriculum coverage, and higher stakeholder satisfaction, while also demonstrating that the data met the distributional assumptions necessary for conducting more sophisticated bivariate and multivariate statistical analyses to test the study hypotheses.

Table 2: Bivariate Analysis - Independent Samples t-tests and Effect Sizes Comparing Academic Outcomes by Calendar Type

Outcome Variable	Term-based Mean (SD)	Semester-based Mean (SD)	Mean Difference	95% CI	t-statistic	df	p-value	Cohen's d	Levene's F	Levene's p
Mathematics Score	62.34 (14.18)	67.85 (13.76)	-5.51	[-7.18, -3.84]	-6.92	1246	<0.001	0.393	1.24	0.266
English Score	65.72 (13.42)	69.58 (12.88)	-3.86	[-5.42, -2.30]	-5.12	1246	<0.001	0.291	0.86	0.354
Science Score	58.63 (15.12)	65.42 (14.26)	-6.79	[-8.62, -4.96]	-8.01	1246	<0.001	0.457	1.52	0.218
Composite Score	62.23 (12.84)	67.62 (12.32)	-5.39	[-6.84, -3.94]	-7.48	1246	<0.001	0.425	0.94	0.332
Curriculum Coverage (%)	78.26 (11.38)	86.74 (9.86)	-8.48	[-9.82, -7.14]	-13.52	1246	<0.001	0.795	3.68	0.055
Knowledge Retention	71.42 (13.5	79.86 (11.94)	-8.44	[-10.12,	-11.26	1246	<0.001	0.653	2.14	0.144

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(%)	6)			-6.76]						
Teacher Workload Score	4.12 (0.94)	3.38 (0.88)	0.74	[0.62, 0.86]	11.48	286	<0.001	0.813	0.58	0.447
Administrative Hours/Term	142.60 (28.42)	96.80 (22.64)	45.80	[38.26, 53.34]	9.86	94	<0.001	1.812	2.86	0.094
Resource Utilization (%)	68.34 (14.28)	82.56 (12.42)	-14.22	[-16.84, -11.60]	-10.64	94	<0.001	1.066	1.24	0.269
Stakeholder Satisfaction	3.18 (0.92)	3.84 (0.86)	-0.66	[-0.76, -0.56]	-13.04	1246	<0.001	0.738	0.72	0.396

The independent samples t-tests revealed statistically significant differences between term-based and semester-based calendar structures across all academic and operational outcome variables, providing strong evidence in support of the study's first hypothesis. The most substantial difference was observed in curriculum coverage rates, where semester-based schools achieved 8.48 percentage points higher coverage than term-based schools ($t(1246) = -13.52$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.795$), representing a medium-to-large effect size according to Cohen's conventions. This finding was particularly noteworthy as it suggested that the extended instructional periods in semester-based systems allowed teachers to progress through the curriculum more comprehensively, addressing one of the primary criticisms of the term-based structure.

Academic performance differences were statistically significant across all subjects: Mathematics ($t(1246) = -6.92$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.393$), English ($t(1246) = -5.12$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.291$), and Science ($t(1246) = -8.01$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.457$), with Science showing the largest effect size. The composite academic score difference of 5.39 points ($t(1246) = -7.48$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.425$) represented a small-to-medium effect size, indicating that while the semester system was associated with better academic outcomes, the magnitude of improvement was modest rather than dramatic. Knowledge retention, measured through delayed post-tests administered after holiday periods, showed that semester-based students retained 8.44 percentage points more content ($t(1246) = -11.26$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.653$), suggesting that the longer instructional continuity in semester systems facilitated deeper learning and reduced the learning loss typically associated with extended breaks. Levene's tests for equality of variances indicated homogeneity of variances for all variables ($p > 0.05$), confirming that the equal variances assumption for t-tests was satisfied and that the reported results were robust.

The operational efficiency variables demonstrated even more pronounced advantages for the semester-based calendar

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structure, with some of the largest effect sizes observed in the entire analysis. Administrative hours per academic period were significantly lower in semester-based schools (M = 96.80, SD = 22.64) compared to term-based schools (M = 142.60, SD = 28.42), representing a reduction of 45.80 hours per period ($t(94) = 9.86$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.812$), which constituted a large effect size exceeding Cohen's threshold for substantial practical significance. This dramatic reduction translated to schools operating on semester systems spending approximately 32% less administrative time on opening and closing procedures, freeing substantial institutional resources for instructional activities. Teacher workload scores, measured on a 5-point scale where higher scores indicated greater perceived workload stress, were significantly lower in semester-based schools (M = 3.38, SD = 0.88) compared to term-based schools (M = 4.12, SD = 0.94), with the difference of 0.74 points ($t(286) = 11.48$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.813$) representing a medium-to-large effect favoring the semester system.

Resource utilization rates, calculated as the percentage of available instructional time, facilities, and materials actually employed for educational purposes, were 14.22 percentage points higher in semester-based schools (82.56% vs. 68.34%; $t(94) = -10.64$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.066$), indicating substantially more efficient use of educational resources under the semester structure. Stakeholder satisfaction scores showed a statistically significant difference of 0.66 points on the 5-point scale ($t(1246) = -13.04$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.738$), with semester-based systems receiving higher satisfaction ratings from students, teachers, parents, and administrators. The consistency of significant findings across all measured variables, combined with the absence of variance heterogeneity issues, provided compelling bivariate evidence that calendar structure had meaningful impacts on both academic outcomes and operational efficiency. However, these bivariate analyses did not account for potential confounding variables such as school location, socioeconomic status, or prior achievement levels, necessitating multivariate analyses to isolate the independent effect of calendar structure while controlling for these competing explanations.

Table 3: Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Composite Academic Performance Score

Predictor Variable	**B**	**SE B**	**β (Standardized)**	**t**	**p-value**	**95% CI**	**VIF**	**Tolerance**
(Constant)	28.64	3.82	-	7.50	<0.001	[21.14, 36.14]	-	-
Calendar Type (Semester=1)	4.26	0.54	0.172	7.89	<0.001	[3.20, 5.32]	1.14	0.877
Prior Academic Achievement	0.48	0.02	0.486	24.08	<0.001	[0.44, 0.52]	1.28	0.781
Socioeconomic Status	2.18	0.36	0.138	6.06	<0.001	[1.47, 2.89]	1.32	0.758
School Location (Urban=1)	3.42	0.52	0.138	6.58	<0.001	[2.40, 4.44]	1.18	0.847
School Ownership (Private=1)	2.86	0.56	0.114	5.11	<0.001	[1.76, 3.96]	1.22	0.820
Student-Teacher Ratio	-0.32	0.08	-0.094	-4.00	<0.001	[-0.48, -	1.16	0.862

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						0.16]		
Teacher Qualification Level	1.94	0.42	0.102	4.62	<0.001	[1.12, 2.76]	1.19	0.840
School Resource Index	0.26	0.05	0.118	5.20	<0.001	[0.16, 0.36]	1.24	0.806

Model Summary: $R = 0.748$, $R^2 = 0.560$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.557$, $F(8, 1239) = 198.42$, $p < 0.001$, Durbin-Watson = 1.98

Assumption Tests: Shapiro-Wilk test on residuals: $W = 0.996$, $p = 0.142$; Breusch-Pagan test: $\chi^2 = 12.64$, $p = 0.124$; All VIF < 2.0, All Tolerance > 0.75

The multiple linear regression analysis demonstrated that calendar type remained a significant independent predictor of composite academic performance even after controlling for multiple confounding variables, providing robust support for the first hypothesis while accounting for alternative explanations. The overall regression model was statistically significant ($F(8, 1239) = 198.42$, $p < 0.001$) and explained 56.0% of the variance in composite academic performance ($R^2 = 0.560$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.557$), indicating substantial explanatory power. The calendar type variable, coded as a binary predictor (0 = term-based, 1 = semester-based), demonstrated a significant positive relationship with academic performance ($B = 4.26$, $SE = 0.54$, $\beta = 0.172$, $t = 7.89$, $p < 0.001$). This coefficient indicated that students in semester-based schools scored, on average, 4.26 points higher on the composite academic performance scale compared to students in term-based schools, holding all other variables constant. The standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.172$) revealed that calendar type had a moderate effect on academic performance, ranking as the third most influential predictor after prior academic achievement ($\beta = 0.486$) and socioeconomic status ($\beta = 0.138$). The 95% confidence interval for the calendar type effect [3.20, 5.32] did not include zero, further confirming the statistical significance and suggesting that the true population effect likely fell within this range. Prior academic achievement emerged as the strongest predictor ($B = 0.48$, $\beta = 0.486$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that for every one-point increase in prior achievement scores, current performance increased by 0.48 points, underscoring the cumulative nature of learning. Socioeconomic status also demonstrated a significant positive relationship ($B = 2.18$, $\beta = 0.138$, $p < 0.001$), reflecting well-documented resource advantages associated with higher SES.

School location (urban vs. rural) significantly predicted performance ($B = 3.42$, $\beta = 0.138$, $p < 0.001$), with urban students scoring 3.42 points higher than rural students when other factors were controlled. School ownership type (private vs. government) showed that private school students scored 2.86 points higher ($\beta = 0.114$, $p < 0.001$), likely reflecting differences in resource availability and class sizes. Student-teacher ratio demonstrated a negative relationship ($B = -0.32$, $\beta = -0.094$, $p < 0.001$), where each additional student per teacher was associated with a 0.32-point decrease in performance, highlighting the importance of manageable class sizes for effective instruction.

The regression model satisfied all critical assumptions required for valid inference, as evidenced by comprehensive diagnostic testing. The Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.98 (acceptable range: 1.5-2.5) indicated that residuals were independent with no significant autocorrelation, satisfying the independence assumption. The Shapiro-Wilk test applied to standardized residuals yielded $W = 0.996$ ($p = 0.142$), indicating that residuals were normally distributed and supporting the validity of significance tests and confidence intervals. Visual inspection of Q-Q plots confirmed

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approximate linearity in the relationship between observed and expected residual values. The Breusch-Pagan test for heteroscedasticity produced a non-significant result ($\chi^2 = 12.64$, $p = 0.124$), indicating homoscedasticity and validating the assumption of constant error variance across predicted values. Scatter plots of residuals versus predicted values showed random dispersion without systematic patterns, further confirming homoscedasticity and linearity.

Multicollinearity diagnostics revealed no concerning collinearity issues, with all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values below 2.0 (range: 1.14-1.32) and all tolerance values exceeding 0.75 (range: 0.758-0.877), well above the concerning thresholds of VIF > 5 or tolerance < 0.2. The absence of multicollinearity indicated that predictor variables contributed unique explanatory power without redundancy, allowing for confident interpretation of individual regression coefficients. Teacher qualification level ($B = 1.94$, $\beta = 0.102$, $p < 0.001$) and school resource index ($B = 0.26$, $\beta = 0.118$, $p < 0.001$) both demonstrated significant positive associations with academic performance, underscoring the importance of qualified personnel and adequate educational resources. The finding that calendar type retained statistical significance and practical importance even when these multiple competing factors were statistically controlled provided compelling evidence that the calendar structure itself—independent of school resources, student backgrounds, or teacher characteristics—exerted a meaningful influence on academic outcomes. This result suggested that transitioning from a term-based to a semester-based calendar could yield approximately a 4.26-point improvement in composite academic scores, equivalent to roughly 6-7% of a standard deviation, representing a meaningful if modest enhancement in student achievement that would compound across a student's secondary education career.

Table 4: Binary Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Stakeholder Preference for Semester-Based Calendar System

Predictor Variable	B	SE B	Wald χ^2	df	p-value	Odds Ratio (OR)	95% CI for OR
(Constant)	-2.84	0.52	29.76	1	<0.001	0.06	-
Geographical Location (Urban=1)	1.26	0.18	48.84	1	<0.001	3.53	[2.47, 5.04]
Socioeconomic Status	0.68	0.12	32.11	1	<0.001	1.97	[1.56, 2.49]
Educational Level	0.42	0.09	21.78	1	<0.001	1.52	[1.27, 1.82]
Current Calendar Experience (Semester=1)	2.14	0.22	94.68	1	<0.001	8.50	[5.51, 13.11]
Stakeholder Type (Reference: Students)	-	-	18.64	3	<0.001	-	-
Teachers	0.86	0.24	12.76	1	<0.001	2.36	[1.47, 3.79]
Parents	-0.54	0.21	6.61	1	0.010	0.58	[0.39, 0.87]
Administrators	1.18	0.28	17.78	1	<0.001	3.25	[1.88, 5.62]
Years in Education System	0.08	0.02	16.00	1	<0.001	1.08	[1.04, 1.12]
Distance to School (km)	-	0.03	16.00	1	<0.001	0.89	[0.84, 0.94]

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	0.12						
Perceived Academic Impact	1.86	0.16	134.64	1	<0.001	6.42	[4.69, 8.79]
Financial Concern Score	-0.92	0.14	43.26	1	<0.001	0.40	[0.30, 0.53]

Model Summary: -2 Log Likelihood = 1384.62, Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.482$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.644$, $\chi^2 = 786.42$, df = 11, $p < 0.001$

Model Fit: Hosmer-Lemeshow $\chi^2 = 8.64$, df = 8, p = 0.374; Classification Accuracy = 81.6%, Sensitivity = 78.4%, Specificity = 84.2%, AUC = 0.886

Multicollinearity: All VIF < 2.5, All Tolerance > 0.40

The binary logistic regression analysis revealed significant predictors of stakeholder preference for semester-based versus term-based calendar systems, with the overall model demonstrating excellent fit and predictive capability. The full model was statistically significant ($\chi^2(11) = 786.42$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the set of predictor variables reliably distinguished between stakeholders who preferred semester-based systems and those who preferred term-based systems. The model explained substantial variance in stakeholder preferences, with Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.644$, suggesting that approximately 64.4% of the variation in calendar preference could be explained by the included predictors. The Hosmer-Lemeshow test yielded a non-significant result ($\chi^2 = 8.64$, df = 8, p = 0.374), indicating good model fit with observed and expected frequencies closely aligned across deciles of predicted probabilities. The model achieved 81.6% overall classification accuracy, with sensitivity of 78.4% (correctly identifying stakeholders who preferred semesters) and specificity of 84.2% (correctly identifying stakeholders who preferred terms), demonstrating strong discriminatory power. The area under the ROC curve (AUC = 0.886) indicated excellent predictive performance, well above the threshold of 0.80 for excellent discrimination. Current calendar experience emerged as the strongest predictor, with stakeholders currently experiencing semester-based systems having 8.50 times higher odds of preferring that structure compared to those in term-based systems (OR = 8.50, 95% CI [5.51, 13.11], $p < 0.001$), suggesting strong status quo bias or genuine satisfaction with experienced systems. Perceived academic impact was the second strongest predictor (OR = 6.42, 95% CI [4.69, 8.79], $p < 0.001$), indicating that for each one-unit increase in the belief that a calendar structure positively affected academic outcomes, stakeholders were 6.42 times more likely to prefer that structure. Geographical location significantly influenced preferences, with urban stakeholders having 3.53 times higher odds of preferring semester systems compared to rural stakeholders (OR = 3.53, 95% CI [2.47, 5.04], $p < 0.001$), potentially reflecting differential exposure to alternative calendar structures and varying alignment with agricultural cycles that remained more relevant in rural contexts.

Stakeholder type demonstrated significant variability in calendar preferences, with teachers and administrators showing stronger preference for semester systems compared to students (the reference category), while parents demonstrated lower preference for semester systems. Teachers had 2.36 times higher odds of preferring semester-based calendars (OR = 2.36, 95% CI [1.47, 3.79], $p < 0.001$), likely reflecting their appreciation for reduced administrative burden and enhanced curriculum continuity documented in the operational efficiency analyses. School administrators exhibited even stronger preference for semester systems (OR = 3.25, 95% CI [1.88, 5.62], $p < 0.001$), consistent with the administrative efficiency gains demonstrated in previous analyses. Conversely, parents showed 42% lower odds of preferring semester systems (OR = 0.58, 95% CI [0.39, 0.87], p = 0.010), possibly due to concerns

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about childcare during longer holiday periods or financial implications of restructured fee payment schedules. Socioeconomic status positively predicted semester preference (OR = 1.97, 95% CI [1.56, 2.49], $p < 0.001$), with higher SES stakeholders nearly twice as likely to prefer semester systems, potentially reflecting greater flexibility in managing childcare arrangements during extended breaks and less dependence on agricultural labor from school-aged children. Financial concern scores demonstrated a significant negative relationship (OR = 0.40, 95% CI [0.30, 0.53], $p < 0.001$), indicating that stakeholders with higher financial concerns had 60% lower odds of preferring semester systems, highlighting economic barriers as a critical consideration for calendar reform implementation. Distance to school negatively predicted semester preference (OR = 0.89, 95% CI [0.84, 0.94], $p < 0.001$), with each additional kilometer decreasing the odds of semester preference by 11%, potentially reflecting transportation cost concerns for families traveling longer distances. Educational level of stakeholders showed a positive association (OR = 1.52, 95% CI [1.27, 1.82], $p < 0.001$), with more educated stakeholders demonstrating 52% higher odds of preferring semester systems, possibly due to greater awareness of international educational standards and alignment with higher education structures. Years in the education system positively predicted semester preference (OR = 1.08, 95% CI [1.04, 1.12], $p < 0.001$), with each additional year of experience increasing odds by 8%, suggesting that familiarity with educational systems' operational challenges enhanced appreciation for semester structures' administrative efficiencies. The absence of multicollinearity concerns (all VIF < 2.5, all tolerance > 0.40) confirmed that predictor variables contributed unique explanatory variance. These findings supported the third hypothesis, demonstrating that stakeholder preferences were significantly influenced by geographical location, socioeconomic status, stakeholder role, and experiential factors, indicating that any calendar reform implementation would require differentiated change management strategies addressing the specific concerns and contexts of diverse stakeholder groups, particularly rural families, parents with financial constraints, and those living farther from schools.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully achieved its primary objective of evaluating the effectiveness of term-based versus semester-based academic calendar structures within Uganda's secondary education landscape through comprehensive empirical analysis. Regarding the first specific objective of comparing student academic performance and learning outcomes, the findings conclusively demonstrated that semester-based calendar structures were associated with significantly superior academic performance across all measured subjects, with students in semester-based schools scoring 5.39 points higher on composite academic assessments ($p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.425$) compared to their term-based counterparts. The semester system facilitated more comprehensive curriculum coverage, with schools achieving 86.74% mean coverage compared to 78.26% in term-based schools ($p < 0.001$, $d = 0.795$), representing an 8.48 percentage point advantage that translated to more thorough content mastery. Knowledge retention rates were significantly higher in semester-based systems (79.86% vs. 71.42%, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.653$), indicating that extended instructional continuity reduced learning loss during holiday periods and promoted deeper cognitive processing. The multivariate regression analysis confirmed that calendar type independently predicted academic performance ($B = 4.26$, $\beta = 0.172$, $p < 0.001$) even after controlling for confounding variables including prior achievement, socioeconomic status, school location, ownership type, student-teacher ratios, teacher qualifications, and resource availability, thereby establishing a robust causal relationship between calendar structure and educational outcomes.

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Regarding the second specific objective of assessing operational and resource utilization implications, semester-based schools demonstrated substantially greater efficiency across all measured dimensions, including 32% reduction in administrative hours (45.80 hours less per academic period, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.812$), significantly lower teacher workload stress (difference of 0.74 points on a 5-point scale, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.813$), and 14.22 percentage points higher resource utilization rates (82.56% vs. 68.34%, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.066$). These operational advantages translated to more efficient deployment of institutional resources, reduced redundancy in administrative processes, and enhanced capacity for strategic planning and infrastructural development, thereby supporting superior educational delivery while simultaneously reducing institutional strain on personnel and systems.

Addressing the third specific objective of examining stakeholder perceptions and preferences, the study revealed complex patterns of support and resistance to calendar reform that varied significantly across stakeholder groups and contextual factors. Overall stakeholder satisfaction was significantly higher in semester-based systems (3.84 vs. 3.18 on a 5-point scale, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.738$), indicating broad appreciation for the benefits associated with this calendar structure. However, the binary logistic regression analysis revealed important nuances, with urban stakeholders demonstrating 3.53 times higher odds of preferring semester systems compared to rural stakeholders ($p < 0.001$), and parents showing significantly lower preference for semester structures (OR = 0.58, $p = 0.010$) compared to other stakeholder groups, primarily due to financial concerns and childcare considerations during extended holiday periods. Teachers and administrators demonstrated strong preference for semester systems (OR = 2.36 and 3.25 respectively, $p < 0.001$), reflecting their direct experience with the operational efficiencies and reduced administrative burden associated with this structure. Financial concerns emerged as a significant barrier (OR = 0.40, $p < 0.001$), with economically disadvantaged stakeholders showing 60% lower odds of supporting semester systems, while distance to school (OR = 0.89 per kilometer, $p < 0.001$) and rural location significantly predicted resistance to calendar reform. These findings indicate that while semester-based calendar structures demonstrably enhance academic outcomes and operational efficiency, successful implementation requires carefully designed interventions addressing the legitimate economic and logistical concerns of rural families, parents, and financially constrained stakeholders. In conclusion, this study provides compelling empirical evidence that semester-based academic calendar structures offer substantial advantages over the traditional term-based system in Uganda's secondary education context, with measurable benefits in academic performance, curriculum coverage, knowledge retention, operational efficiency, resource utilization, and overall stakeholder satisfaction, while simultaneously highlighting the critical importance of context-sensitive implementation strategies that address the differentiated needs and concerns of diverse educational communities across Uganda's varied geographical and socioeconomic landscape.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Phased Geographic Implementation Strategy: The Ministry of Education and Sports should implement a phased transition to semester-based calendar structures beginning with urban and peri-urban secondary schools where stakeholder readiness, infrastructure capacity, and financial resilience are strongest, while simultaneously establishing pilot programs in selected rural schools with enhanced financial support mechanisms including adjusted fee payment schedules, transportation subsidies, and community sensitization programs to address the specific concerns of rural families regarding agricultural labor needs, childcare during extended breaks, and transportation costs. This graduated approach would allow for systematic evaluation of implementation challenges, refinement of support structures, and

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generation of locally-relevant evidence that can inform subsequent expansion to more rural and resource-constrained settings.

2. Comprehensive Financial Support and Restructuring Framework: Educational policymakers should develop and implement a comprehensive financial restructuring framework that addresses the economic barriers identified as primary sources of stakeholder resistance, including flexible fee payment plans that allow families to spread costs across the extended semester periods rather than requiring large lump-sum payments, targeted subsidies or bursaries for economically disadvantaged families to offset transportation and boarding costs during longer academic periods, and establishment of school-based or community-based childcare and productive engagement programs during extended holidays to address parental concerns about supervision and lost agricultural labor while creating educational enrichment opportunities for students. This framework should be accompanied by transparent communication campaigns that demonstrate the long-term economic benefits of improved academic outcomes and reduced administrative costs that can be redirected toward instructional quality improvements.

3. Capacity Building and Change Management Program: The Ministry of Education and Sports, in collaboration with the National Curriculum Development Centre and District Education Officers, should establish a comprehensive capacity-building program targeting teachers, administrators, parents, and school management committees to facilitate smooth calendar transition, including professional development workshops focused on optimizing instructional strategies for extended semester periods, curriculum pacing and assessment redesign to leverage longer instructional continuity, administrative process streamlining to maximize efficiency gains, and stakeholder engagement forums that address concerns, gather feedback, and build community ownership of calendar reform. This program should incorporate lessons from international jurisdictions that have successfully transitioned calendar structures and should establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that track implementation fidelity, identify emerging challenges, and enable adaptive management responses to ensure that the documented benefits of semester-based calendars are realized in practice across Uganda's diverse educational contexts.

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