



RESEARCH PAPER

Formative Assessment Practices in Public Sector Universities of Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to analyse the formative assessment practices in public sector universities of Pakistan through the perception of heads of departments, departmental controllers of examinations, university teachers and students. Forty eight (48) heads of departments, 48 departmental controllers of examinations, 144 university teachers were interviewed and 48 focus group discussions were conducted among the BS students in 6 public sector universities of the Punjab. Findings of the study reveal that defining assessment criteria is essential for: following university policy; maintaining record in a proper way; achieving course objectives; ensuring fair assessment and minimizing the subjectivity in assessment. Although university teachers develop assessment criteria however, they had no clear idea that on what grounds they have to develop assessment criteria and wrongly take the weightage of marks for different components of formative as the fundamental grounds for developing assessment criteria. University teachers themselves claim that they are not sufficiently aware of the semester examination rules.

Introduction

English Assessment is generally seen as one of the fundamental part of teaching learning process (Kaur 2018, Arekkuzhiyil 2019). In its various forms, it is among the most common activities that the teachers practice at all levels of education. At the same time, it is the most difficult activity to carry out satisfactorily (Bacquet 2020). Assessment not only determines the quality of our students' learning but the quality of our educational processes as well (Struyven, 2005). It is also viewed as the most important factor for steering students' learning and behaviour (Schuwirth and van der Vleuten 2011).

Assessment can be defined as a process of gathering and arranging information from purposeful sources to draw relevant conclusions about teaching and learning process; about individuals; and making comparisons based on some established criteria (Lamprianou and Athanasou 2009). In simple words assessment can be used both for evaluating students' learning achievements (assessment of learning) and enhancing students' learning itself (assessment for learning) (Yorke 2003, Reinholz 2016).

Assessment is classified into different types according to its purposes. It is used to summarise the achievements of students in order to go for making a decision on awarding them some kind of certification i.e. summative assessment; and for providing students with feedback on their work with the notion to support their learning i.e. formative assessment (Yorke, 2003 & Falchikov, 2013).

The sole objective of formative assessment is to give feedback to students about their performance for the contribution in their learning; help teachers in continually monitoring their own understanding of students' needs; and adopt relevant instructional techniques (Greenstein, 2010). This type of assessment may be formal or informal. In case of formal formative assessment the specific curriculum is assessed (Alzina, 2016, Can Daşkın & Hatipoğlu, 2019).

Mainly, there are two ways carrying out assessment i.e. external assessment-annual assessment system and internal assessment- semester assessment system. During last decade, the semester examination system has been adopted by most of the universities. (Ballantyne 2003 & Munshi, 2012).Semester system is more successful in generating a serious attitude in students about regular working and increasing reading habits. Semester system has an objective and that is to improve the standard of education. The teachers are devoting more time and energy in their teaching (Biswas, 2007). In semester examination system university teachers have to perform multiple tasks regarding assessment of students learning and performance. They are responsible for the provision of immediate feedback for the improvement and motivation of students. Alongside they have authority of awarding marks and judgement on students' performance and their grading as well. Consequently, university teachers are required to apply many types of assessments. Brown and Knight (2012) stated that teachers should use a variety of assessment measures to determine more exactly what a student knows and does.

All the five years plans and the education policies reviewed the functioning of the existing assessment systems and showed serious concerns about their effectiveness and relevance with the real life requirements. They recommended fundamental reforms in these assessment systems for aligning it with national demands and international standards (Kiani, 2011).National Educational Policy 2017 highlighted the numerous dimensions and variables which influence quality of higher education— mechanism for educational assessment is one among them. Despite having spacious and better physical facilities in many of public sector universities, the academic excellence of their teaching faculty and the standard of their assessment systems is questionable. Particularly there are gaps and

inconsistencies with respect to prevailing situations of assessment practices in different universities. The national education policy further highlighted that different universities have different scheme of studies and mechanism for conducting examination. The Universities have spelled out comprehensive criteria and principles of assessment system for their regular students. It is unfortunate that university teachers from different departments loosely follow these criteria for continuous assessment for students' accomplishment (GOP, 2009). This situation necessitates a rigorous study on the prevailing formative assessment practices under semester system in public sector universities of Pakistan.

Material and Methods

Research Design

The qualitative survey research design was found best fit for the present study. The cross-sectional survey was adopted to collect the perception of respondents about formative assessment practices in public sector universities of Pakistan because it provides information in a short span of time (Mathiyazhagan & Nandan 2010 & Creswell & Klassen, 2011).

Population

The population of the study comprised all heads of departments, departmental controllers of examination, students and teachers of public sector universities of the Pakistan.

Sample and Sampling Technique

Multistage sampling technique was used to select a representative sample of the study. Hence, the respondents of the study were selected in the following way.

- At first stage, 6 general public sector universities from the province Punjab, Pakistan were selected randomly.
- At second stage, eight departments were taken from each selected university (4 sciences and 4 social sciences departments – 48 departments in total) to have an equal representation of both sciences and social sciences disciplines.
- At third stage, from each selected department, the head of the department (48 in total), one departmental controllers of examinations (48 in total), 3 faculty members (144 in total) and a group of at least 6 students for focus group discussion were selected (48 groups).

Instrumentation

Three semi-structured interview schedules and one focus group discussion guidelines were used. In pursuance of the development of research tools, two focus

group discussions (FGDs) were held with the stakeholders (heads of departments, departmental controllers of examination, university teachers and students) to explore the relevant determinates of internal assessment. The first FGD was conducted with two heads of departments, six teachers and two departmental controllers of examination from the departments of Chemistry and Education, University of Sargodha. The second FGD was organized with ten students (five from each) of the same departments. The discussions were recorded, transcribed and analysed. Findings of the analysis yielded several determinants of internal assessment in public sector universities of Pakistan. Afterwards the related literature was reviewed to explore relevant determinants of formal assessment practices.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher personally visited the selected universities and collected the data. Thematic analysis technique was used to analyse the data. It is one of the most common techniques of analysis in qualitative research. It emphasizes pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns (or "themes") within data. Themes are patterns across data sets that are important to the description of a phenomenon (Creswell 2012). The recorded interviews were transcribed and coded. Matrix of themes was developed on the basis of objectives of the study.

Results and Discussion

Determinants of Formative Assessment Practices in Semester System

Eight Determinants of formative assessment practices in semester system were explored.

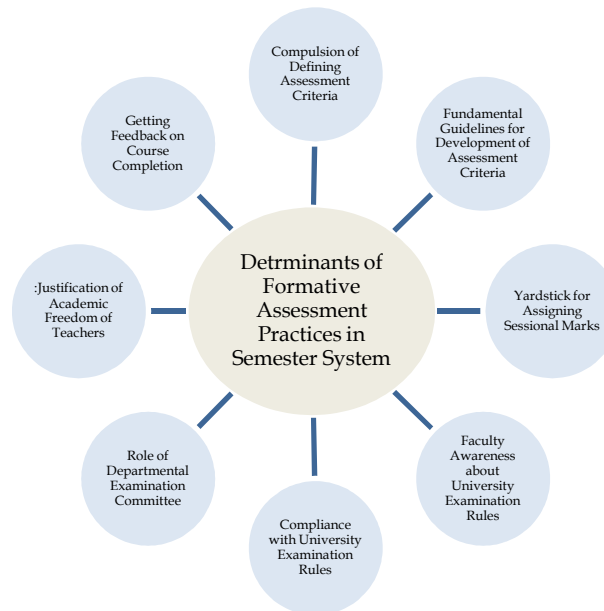


Figure 1: Determinants of formative Assessment practices

Table 1
Thematic Description of planning of Assessment in Semester Examination System
Determinants of Formative Assessment Practices in Public Sector Universities of
Pakistan

Determinant 1: Compulsion of Defining Assessment Criteria		
Heads of Departments	•	for record maintenance (n=43, 89%)
	•	helpful for the preparation of examination (n=43, 89%)
	•	for fair assessment of students
	•	helpful in fulfilment of teachers' responsibilities
Departmental Controller of Examinations	•	for the achievement of course objectives (n=45, 93%)
	•	for maintaining the record (n=45, 93%)
	•	for fair assessment of students by teachers (n=45, 93%)
	•	for identification and resolution of assessment related problem
	•	for planning the teaching and assessing the achievement of programme objectives
University Teachers	•	for fulfilment of instructions of university management (n=136, 94%)
	•	to guide students how to prepare the examination (n=136, 94%)
	•	to provide a roadmap for judging quality assurance (n=136, 94%)
	•	to help avoid bias and ensure fairness to students' assessment (n=136, 94%)
	•	helpful in effective teaching (n=136, 94%)
	•	helpful in fulfilment of teachers' responsibilities (n=136, 94%)
Determinant 2: Fundamental Guidelines for the Development of Assessment Criteria		
Heads of Departments	•	unawareness of teachers about guidelines for the development of assessment criteria (n=42, 87%)
	•	teachers' independence to develop their own criteria (n=15, 30%)

Departmental Controller of Examinations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • predetermined assessment criteria by university (n=41, 86%) • in the light of course outlines (n=41, 86%)
University Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • according to the nature of course (n=84, 58%) • predetermined assessment criteria by university (n=35, 24%) • teachers' self-developed assessment criteria (n=84, 58%)
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • predetermined assessment criteria by university (n=39, 82%) • in the light of course outlines (n=39, 82%)
Determinant 3: Yardstick for Assigning Sessional Marks	
University teachers assign sessional marks on the basis of:	
Heads of Departments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • students' overall academic performance and conduct (n=40, 83%)
Departmental Controller of Examinations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • university guidelines (n=26, 54%) • their self-define rang of awarding sessional marks (n=19, 40%) • students' performance (n=17, 35%)
University Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • criteria determined by the university (n=75, 52%) • students' performance in assignments, presentations, class attendance (n=40, 28%) • overall behaviour of students (n=20, 14%)
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • their liking and disliking (n=42, 87%)
Determinant 4: Faculty Awareness about University Examination Rules	
University teachers are:	
Heads of Departments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fully acquainted with the university examination rules (n=125, 93%)
Departmental Controller of Examinations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are fully acquainted with the university examination rules (n=43, 90%)
University Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not sufficiently conversant with the university examination rules. (n=86, 60%) • are acquainted with the university examination rules (n=52, 36%)
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fully acquainted with the university examination rules (n=44, 92%)
Determinant 5: Compliance with University Examination Rules	
Heads of Departments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semester examination rules are being followed properly (n=47, 99%)

Departmental Controller of Examinations	•	semester examination rules are being followed properly	(n=43, 89%)
University Teachers	•	semester examination rules are being followed properly	(n=139, 96%)
Students	•	semester examination rules are being followed properly	(n=43, 90%)
Determinant 6: Role of Departmental Examination Committee			
Heads of Departments	•	departmental examination committee plays its due role effectively	(n=44, 91%)
Departmental Controller of Examinations	•	departmental examination committee plays its due role effectively	(n=42, 88%)
University Teachers	•	departmental examination committee plays its due role effectively	(n=136, 94%)
Students	•	departmental examination committee plays its due role effectively	(n=45, 94%)
Determinant 7: Justification of Academic Freedom of Teachers			
Heads of Departments	•	academic freedom of university teachers is justified	(n=41, 84%)
Departmental Controller of Examinations	•	academic freedom of university teachers is justified	(n=42, 87%)
University Teachers	•	any university teachers are not enjoying kind of academic freedom	(n=75, 52%)
Students	•	no academic freedom for university teachers	(n=28, 58%)
	•	academic freedom of university teachers is unjustified	(n=52, 39%)
Determinant 8: Getting Feedback on Course Completion			
Heads of Departments	•	no such practice of getting feedback about course completion	(n=41, 86%)
Departmental Controller of Examinations	•	heads of departments always seek feedback on course completion	(n=43, 90%)
University Teachers	•	heads of departments always seek feedback on course completion	(n=134, 93%)
Students	•	heads of departments commonly seek feedback on course completion	(n=42, 88%)

Total No of respondents = 288, (HODs = 48, Controller of Examination = 48, University teachers = 144, Students = 48 groups)

Table1 shows the sub themes, respondent wise categories and their frequencies under the major theme '*determinants of internal assessment process in semester examination system*'. It is evident from the table that the '*determinants of*

internal assessment process in semester examination system' comprises eight determinants that include '*compulsion of defining assessment criteria*', '*fundamental guidelines for development of assessment criteria*', '*yardsticks for assigning sessional marks*', '*faculty awareness about university examination rules*', '*compliance with university examination rules*', '*role of departmental examination committee*', '*justification of academic freedom of teachers*' and '*getting feedback on course completion*'.

Compulsion of defining Assessment Criteria

It was found from the views of the respondents – heads of departments, departmental controllers of examinations and university teachers that defining assessment criteria was highly supportive for: planning the teaching activities and assessing the achievement of programme objectives: the achievement of course objectives; ensuring fair assessment; fulfilment of teachers' responsibility; proper record maintenance; the preparation for examination; identification and resolution of assessment related problems; following university policy; guiding the students how to prepare for examination; and provision of roadmap for judging quality assurance.

Fundamental Guidelines for the Development of Assessment Criteria

Assessment criteria are a statement that describe and inform the students and their teachers about the qualities, characteristics and different aspects of a given learning outcomes. It permits the teachers to assess the students' achievement in a more open, consistent and objective way. Generally, universities disseminate guidelines for university teachers to assess the intended learning outcomes of their students.

On the basis of respondents' opinion, it was found that universities maintain and disseminate their policy on developing criteria for students' assessment. Departmental controllers of examinations, university teachers themselves and the students believe that university teachers follow university guidelines regarding developing assessment criteria and they are bound to do so. They have no authority to formulate their own assessment criteria or to alter the university guidelines for this purpose. Heads of departments proclaimed that university teachers had no clear idea that on what grounds they have to develop assessment criteria. They wrongly take the weightage of marks for different components of semester examination system as the fundamental grounds for developing assessment criteria and formulate the same on their own according their understanding.

Yardstick for Assigning Sessional Marks

Sessional marks are awarded to students at the end of each semester as part of their continuous assessment. These marks are awarded on the basis of students' performance in assignments, quizzes, quality of presentations, their class attendance, class participation, and overall behaviour.

It is evident from the patterns of the responses that universities disseminate predefined criteria for awarding sessional marks to students which university teachers are bound to follow. They are authorised to award maximum marks up to 25. These marks are usually granted on the basis of students' performance in assignments, quizzes, class attendance, class participation, quality of presentations and their overall behaviour. The other pattern of respondents' perception depicted that there exists no single predetermined criterion for the award of sessional marks. University teachers are free to define their own criteria for this purpose which varies from university to university, department to department and teacher to teacher. The third pattern of the perception, which was specifically focused at by the university students, revealed that liking and disliking of the university teachers is the only criterion for awarding sessional marks. CRs and GRs are the potential beneficiaries of this malpractice that is usually done by visiting teachers.

Faculty Awareness about University Examination Rules

The informants were inquired on to what extent university teachers were conversant with the university examination rules. Here under the analysis of respondents' perception is presented.

It was found that universities maintain their policy guidelines for semester examination system and the university teachers are adequately conversant with the semester examination rules. These rules and guidelines are shared with the teachers at the time of their appointment. Additionally, these rules and subsequent amendments are circulated through the departmental controllers of examinations. They are directed to convey them to university teachers. Moreover, these rules are also displayed on university websites. However, it is surprising that university teachers themselves claim that they are not sufficiently aware of the semester examination rules.

Compliance with University Examination Rules

The informants were asked about the extent of the compliance of university examination rules. The following part shows the analysis of their perception in this regard.

It was revealed from perception of heads of departments, departmental controllers, university teachers and their students that the universities circulate semester examination rules to their subsidiary departments. These rules are disseminated to university teachers through departmental controllers of examinations. It was concluded that examination rules were followed in true letter and spirits.

Role of Departmental Examination Committee

It is evident from the data that the departmental examination committees are playing their due role effectively. The participants also informed about the major obligations of these committee. They stated that the committees were to: prepare date sheets; warrant quality and confidentiality of the question papers; manage examination process and handle any sort of discrepancies in the examination process.

Justification of Academic Freedom of Teachers

Three patterns of behaviour are evident from the perception of the participants regarding the justification of academic freedom of university teachers. The heads of the departments and the departmental controllers of examinations believe that the academic freedom granted to university teachers is justifiable in a sense that they have first-hand information on students' performance in all academic activities and their overall conduct. Moreover, they have to assess and report the students' achievements. Academic freedom for university teachers is necessary so that they can assess the learning achievements of their students without any fear and external pressure. However, university teachers themselves and the students opposed this standpoint. They stated that university teachers do not have any academic freedom in semester examination system. They are bound to follow pre-determined university rules in all respects specifically in students' assessment. A small segment of university students pointed out that the teachers have unnecessary freedom and they do what they want. This extraordinary freedom, in most of the cases, urge them to involve in malpractices e.g. biased attitude towards certain students, and disgraces the impartiality of university teachers regarding assessment.

Getting Feedback on Course Completion

The informants were inquired that whether or not the heads of departments get feedback on course completion during examination planning meetings.

Analysis of data yielded two pattern of behaviour on getting feedback about the course completion. Departmental controllers of examinations, university teachers and the students claimed that the heads of departments usually get feedback about the completion courses in their examination. They arrange regular meetings with teaching faculty, call monthly progress reports and analyse the progress of course completion. At times, they cross-verify it with the feedback from the students. On the other hand, it is surprising that the heads of departments maintained that there is no proper mechanism of getting feedback on course completion.

Discussion

The study was conducted to analyse the existing practices of formative assessment in public sector universities of Pakistan. For this purpose, perception of participants were collected to analyse the formative assessment practices. Majority of

respondents reported their dissatisfaction with the existing functioning of semester examination system and established the prescribe rules and regulation are not being followed in letter and spirit. As there exists no mechanism to evaluate both formative assessment practices. Consequently, the transparency in semester examination system is compromised. These finding are consistent with the work of Perveen and Saeed (2014), Munshi, Javed et al. (2012), Ayubuzder and Ali (2013) who concluded that the informants of their studies also showed discontent with working of the semester examination system. On the contrary, the semester examination system has been found a valid and reliable system in other countries (Dahal 2018). It follows that the problem does not exist with the semester examination system itself rather the improper implementation may be the root cause of the existing problems.

Conclusions

Diversified formative assessment practices in different public sector universities of Pakistan were revealed and reported as under:

Defining assessment criteria is essential for: following university policy; maintaining record in a proper way; achieving course objectives; ensuring fair assessment and minimizing the subjectivity in assessment.

Departmental controllers of examinations, university teachers themselves and the students believe that university teachers develop assessment criteria in line with university guidelines and they are bound to do so. They have no authority to formulate their own assessment criteria or to alter the university guidelines for this purpose. Whereas, heads of departments proclaimed that university teachers had no clear idea that on what grounds they have to develop assessment criteria. They wrongly take the weightage of marks for different components of semester examination system as the fundamental grounds for developing assessment criteria.

Most of the informants reported that universities disseminate predefined criteria for awarding sessional marks to students which university teachers are bound to follow. They just have the authority to award maximum 25 sessional marks to students. These marks are usually granted on the basis of students' performance in assignments, quizzes, class attendance, class participation, quality of presentations and their overall behaviour. The other pattern of respondents' perception depicted that there exists no single predetermined criterion for the award of sessional marks. University teachers are free to define their own criteria for this purpose, which varies from university to university, department to department and teacher to teacher. The third pattern of the perception, which was specifically focused at by the university students, revealed that liking and disliking of the university teachers is the utmost criterion for awarding sessional marks. CRs and GRs are the potential beneficiaries of this malpractice that is usually done by visiting teachers.

It was found that university teachers are adequately conversant with the semester examination rules. These rules are shared with the teachers at the time of their appointment. Additionally, these rules and subsequent amendments are circulated through the departmental controllers of examinations. They are directed to convey them to university teachers. Moreover, these rules are also displayed on university websites. However, it is surprising that university teachers themselves claim that they are not sufficiently aware of the semester examination rules.

It was revealed that examination rules were being followed in true letter and spirits. It means that the examinations were conducted as per scheduled given by the universities. The facilities and resource were being provided in the examination halls. The departmental examination committees are effectively playing their due role. The participants also informed about the major obligations of these committees. They stated that the committees were to: prepare date sheets; warrant quality and confidentiality of the question papers; manage examination process and handle any sort of discrepancies in the examination process.

The heads of the departments and the departmental controllers of examinations believe that the academic freedom granted to university teachers is justifiable in a sense that they have first-hand information on students' performance in all academic activities and their overall conduct. Moreover, they have to assess and report students' achievements. Academic freedom for university teachers is necessary so that they can assess the learning achievements of their students without any fear and external pressure. However, university teachers themselves and the students opposed this standpoint. They stated that university teachers do not have any academic freedom in semester examination system. They are bound to follow pre-determined university rules in all respects specifically in students' assessment. A small segment of university students pointed out that the teachers have unnecessary freedom and they do what they want. This extraordinary freedom, in most of the cases, urge them to involve in various malpractices e.g. biased attitude towards certain students, and disgraces the impartiality of university teachers regarding assessment.

The heads of departments, predominantly, get feedback on the progress about the completion of courses during the examination planning meetings. They arrange regular meetings with university teachers, call monthly progress reports, and analyse the progress of course completion. At times, they cross-verify it with the feedback from the students. On the other hand, a reasonable number of the informants maintained that there is no proper mechanism in most of the universities for getting feedback on course completion.

The study strongly recommends the implementation of semester examination regarding formative assessment of students. Moreover, higher education of Pakistan should formulate a uniform assessment criteria and it should be not only disseminated university authorities, university teachers but the students as well

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