

“University teachers’ and students’ perception for their preference of grades over knowledge and skills”

Ms. Naina Hassan Ali

Lecture at Hamdard University (FSS&H)

Abstract

The aim of the research was to study the perception of university students’ selecting grades over knowledge and skills. This study was conducted in one of the private university of Karachi, Pakistan. A qualitative research method was used in which a case study method was applied to gather the data. Semi- Structured and Focus group interview were used as a research tool to collect the data. The findings revealed that knowledge and skills development is one of the significant element of teaching learning process. Majority of the students are satisfied with existing approach. However, few students are not satisfied with current approach of assessment approach. Hence, it would be recommended for universities to use both formative and summative assessment with equal marks weightage.

Keywords: Formative and Summative Assessment, Knowledge and skills, University Students.

Introduction

In present era of education theory and research, the students play an important role in regards of their views, principles and approaches about teachers, peers, circumstances and actions (educational setting) (Crooks, 1988). According to various theories that says that students are the direct receivers of knowledge and the way an individual perceive knowledge and skills and their evaluation reflect the true format of education system (Hasnain & Bhamani, 2014). In our context, students give more priority to grades because of two major reasons i.e. motivation to learn and the information that is required for learning. The main question over here is to reflect that the grades truly fulfill the criteria. Nowadays, more importance is given to grades rather than actual learning. It has been noticed that students tried to gain better grades by opting for less challenging task. Furthermore, competition among candidates is there in the market but its focus is on grades rather than knowledge or skills (Tippin, Lefreniere & Page, 2012). Similarly, in education system teachers are also focusing more on grades that motivates students to earn better grades rather than learning outcome.

Rationale

The purpose behind conducting this study was to identify students' perception regarding grades and knowledge. This study gave the researcher an idea about the present scenario of University with regards to acquiring knowledge over seeking better grades. Furthermore, through this study, the researcher was able to identify what is more important for students i.e. either

getting better grades or acquiring learning/ knowledge. Moreover, this study also tried to understand assessment models prevailing in the University and its impact on the students' learning and motivation.

Significance

- This study was helpful for the researcher to identify the current scenario of assessment at University.
- This study was helpful for University students as they got a chance to give their views regarding assessment system.
- This study was also helpful for University teachers to understand students' perception of Grades over Knowledge and also identify gaps that are encountered in their teaching learning process specifically assessment.

Research Question

- Why do University students perceive pertaining grades over knowledge and skills?
- What are the perceptions of University students towards the grades?

Subsidiary questions

- What are the impact of grades on university student's motivation level?
- What motivates them in getting good grades or acquiring knowledge and skills?
- Do university students give more importance to learning or to grades?
- What is the relationship between current assessment practices at University with students' inclination towards grades?
- What is the relationship between better grades and good jobs opportunities?

Objectives of the study

Overall the research intends to focus on the analysis of unanticipated or unintended outcomes of whether students pertain grades over knowledge or vice versa.

In specific terms, the following will be the objectives of the study:

- To explore students' and teachers' perception regarding knowledge/ skills versus grades.
- To explore the relationship between current assessment practice at University with students' inclination towards grades.
- To explore the relationship between better grades and good jobs opportunities.

Literature Review

It is well known fact that students' assessment is one of the most important factors which contributes to and has an impact on students' learning (Thomas & Brain, 1984). With the changing needs in the era of globalization, each individual and society in general are competing with one another and striving to remain among top in order to improve their quality of life in comparison to others (Khan, 2014). From an individual point of view, outstanding results in college and university determines a promising and fulfilling life style generally. It also reflects in grading system in education where performance of students is often considered as most important measurement and evaluation of educational objectives (Tippin, Lefreniere & Page, 2012). It is safely to assume that assessment and grading becomes most significant component to evaluate and assess students' learning and acquiring knowledge abilities.

An important feature of the quality of education is to be known by academic factors within the universities. Walker (2008) explains that students' expectations from university is determined by three categories; grades, academic staff and course contents. It was in the 1700s that Yale University had developed the criterion to grade students giving introduction to the 4-point grading in education system. Most of the students are unable to find justice in the grades they have obtained nor the educational organizations state with absolute conviction that the grades or points students obtained have a direct relation with the knowledge and skills acquired by them. This is because it does not necessarily imply that a student who obtained good grades become a highly skilled professional (Hasnain & Bhamani, 2014). On the other hand, it has given rise to competition among students who are busy in obtaining as much knowledge necessary to get a good grade. Student become grade oriented rather than knowledge seekers (Baker, 1999). Buttler and Nisaan (1986) notes that grades enhance students' motivation for learning to avoid getting bad results. Moreover, grades diminish students' intrinsic motivation and give rise to extrinsic motivation, reduce level of enjoyment in the class, decrease interest for seeking knowledge, develop fear of failure, demotivate students to pursue challenging tasks and increase anxiety among students (Harter, 1978; Butler and Nisan, 1986; Butler, 1988; Crooks, 1988; Pulfrey et al., 2011). In addition, research has also shown that individuals who are oriented towards the acquisition of grades in contrary to understanding of the content materials often involve in superficial or surface level learning approaches (Gibbs and Simpson, 2002; Race, 2005).

Acquiring skills and obtaining knowledge are the foundation of education in schools, colleges and universities (Rich, 1998). It gives success, self-contentment, employment opportunities, job satisfaction and participating in civic life (Hasnain & Bhamani, 2014).

It is not to say that classroom assessment by any definition is harmful or hamper students' learning abilities. Good assessment strategies, now a days include mechanism for providing feedback to students. Swinton (2010) found that a grading system that rewards students' efforts in addition to rewarding knowledge enthused student interest in improvement. This means that balancing accuracy-based grading along with the mechanism of meaningful feedback and rewarding and appreciating students' effort could help avoid some of the negative consequences of grading as mentioned above.

Bloom (1968, 1976) presents evidence and a theoretical framework for alternative view of feedback whereby majority of students would not fail into the middle grades and are expected to outshine. He states, "If the students are normally distributed with respect to aptitude, but the kind and quality of instruction and the amount of time available for learning are made appropriate to the characteristics and needs of each student, the majority of students may be expected to achieve mastery of the subject. And, the relationship between aptitude and achievement should approach zero." This idea is bringing advantageous position for teachers because it freed them from the stigma associated with awarding a large number of high grades (Schinske & Tanner, 2014). Bloom's model presents the case for students to succeed given that for proper learning environment to happen and students are assessed on the mastery of skills learned rather than against one another.

Another assessment strategy for effective grading is to design assessments that have inherent opportunities for continuing feedback and multiple submissions. In this way students can monitor their progress both in terms of knowledge and skill sets. Perhaps rubrics are the best idea to help students understand university's expectations for performance (i.e., what level of performance is required to attain a specific grade). Although creating a high quality rubrics is time consuming but once it is developed, will have impact on students' assessment and will expedite the overall grading process. Moreover, sharing rubric with students will provide them opportunity to see their different levels of performance in any given assessment (Carnegie Mellon University, 2016).

Methodology

Research Design

This study explored the Perceptions of University students pertaining Grades over Knowledge skills. A qualitative approach has been selected for this study. As Qualitative research seeks "to understand and interpret how the various participants in a social setting construct the world around them. To make their interpretations, researchers gained access to the multiple perspectives of the participants" (Glesne, 2006, p. 4-5). Qualitative design allows researchers to explore perceptions, experiences, and feelings of participants in a detailed, descriptive and interpretative manner (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative research allows a researcher to "design methods so open that they do justice to the complexity of the object under study" (Creswell, 2003). In addition, qualitative design allows using multiple tools to collect data and

develop a rich picture of phenomenon. A qualitative approach in this proposed study allowed the researcher to make sense of: What is more priority for the students of University Grades or Knowledge. Within this paradigm, Case study method was employed. As the design of this proposed study focused on interactions with the teacher student of B.Ed and M.Ed program at one particular University of Karachi, Pakistan. As Case studies method is an in-depth investigations of a single individual, group, events or community (Yin, 2018). Case studies permit a researcher to explore a topic in far more detail than might be possible if they were dealing with a large number of research participants (Yin, 2018).

Setting and Research Location

The proposed study was carried out in one of the private University in Education department in Karachi, Pakistan.

Research Participants

Students. As this study revolve around the student's perception over pertaining grades over knowledge or skills. Hence, students were the main research participants for this study. To get in-depth understanding regarding researcher conducted Focus group interview with the students.

Teachers. Teachers were secondary participants for this study. In-depth interviews were conducted with two or three teachers to have their clear understanding what makes students motivate more knowledge or grades?

Sample and Sampling Procedure

For the selection of both, research site and research participants, purposive sampling method was used. They were purposively selected based on their willingness to participate in the study.

Data Collection

Semi-structured Interviews and Focus group Interviews was used to gathered data to contribute to the trustworthiness of the data. Data was also gathered from Focus group interview and Semi-structured interview of Students and Teachers. The Students was primary research participants, the teachers were included as a secondary participant to enrich the data and make more 'believable the findings'. These data gathering techniques are described below. A description on how the research participants will be involved is also provided.

Interviews. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) have described interviews as a way to “gather descriptive data in the subjects’ own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how the subjects interpret some piece of the world” (p. 94).

Teachers. One interview was conducted with each of the teachers. The interviews were semi-structured and were focused on exploring the students’ perception of pertaining grades over knowledge. The interviews were tape recorded with prior consent from the teachers.

Focus group Interview.

Students. Focus group interview was conducted with 4-5 students of University of B.Ed and M.Ed program. Through this focus group interview (FGI), students' responses were gathered.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are at the heart of any research study. Anonymity and privacy, informed consent, no misrepresentation of data, confidentiality is considered as the basic principles of ethical conduct in qualitative research (Glesne, 2006). Data gathered were kept in password protected files and only research team had access to data. Consent of all research participants were taken prior to the research project. Participants have the right to withdraw at any stage of research without any penalty or consequences. During the study, pseudonyms was used to ensure the anonymity of the research participants. Moreover, it was ensured that the information shared by the participants will not be shared with University management.

Finding and Analysis

This section discusses the findings of the data. Findings were put into the following themes; Assessment with Types of Assessment system at University level and Satisfaction with current assessment/grading system as sub themes, Importance of acquiring appropriate knowledge, Comparison of Grades with Knowledge / learning with Relationship of better grades with better jobs opportunity and Impact of grades/knowledge on university student's motivation level as sub themes and race for grade. These themes are discussed below.

Assessment

Assessment is a recall process in which students learning are being assessed based on their Understanding. As one of the students said that "For me assessment is a process through which an individual learn and explore themselves". Teachers at university level also consider assessment as process through which students learning can be evaluated. As one of the teacher said, "Through assessment we can check students understanding based on the concept that has been taught to them and how much students can relate those concept to their real life scenario".

Types of Assessment system at University level. There are different types and forms of assessment i.e. formative, summative etc. From the data it is revealed that at university level different type of assessment format is employed based on which students are being graded. As majority of the students from the focus group interview said that main system on which students are being graded is through both summative and formative approach. Few students even said that more focus is given on summative approach as one student said, "Over here more focus is given on summative and less on Formative approach, as there is 70% and 30% ratio". One of the teachers even said that "I have no idea about assessment criteria over here; we hardly get any

report from the management regarding assessment criteria”. Data also shows that in this specific university following are some of the assessment methods that are being used, i.e. for summative copy pencil test mid-term and final term and for formative approach presentation, quiz, class activities, group work and portfolios etc.

Satisfaction with current assessment/grading system. Assessment/ grading system is very important factor to increase the satisfaction level of the students’ as well as teachers of that particular system. In this university, majority of the students are satisfied with the current approach of assessment in university, as when they were asked regarding the satisfaction level with the current approach of assessment technique and grading system, one of the students said, “Yes we are satisfied with the current approach of assessment and grading as it helps them [students] in learning. However, instead of keeping the ratio of 30% and 70% they should keep it 50% and 50% ratio”. One of the teachers said that “Over here more weightage has been given on mid-term and final-term and less weightage on assignments and presentations. Hence, university should keep more weightage on formative assessment rather than summative approach”.

Importance of acquiring appropriate knowledge

Education is most important tool to change an individual attitude and behavior. It helps to distinguish an individual with both right and wrong form of life. Every students had their different perception in regards with acquiring appropriate knowledge, one of the students said “knowledge is to understand what information has been given to us and make sense of that information”. Another student even said that “education doesn’t only mean that you are just taking some knowledge, but with knowledge you are changing your behavior and attitude as

well". Hence, it shows that main purpose of knowledge is not just to acquire information but to bring changes in his/her attitude. One more student said, "... aim of education is to choose the right path, i.e. what is good and what is wrong". One of the teacher from the University said that "For me knowledge is that in which we understand any subject area and have command on the specific subject that we are teaching".

Comparison of Grades with Knowledge / learning

From the data it was revealed that for majority of the students both the things were important i.e. learning and grades, as one student said, "for me learning and grading is balance between 50% and 50%. However, few students said that in this university more preference has been given to grades as compare to learning. One more student said, "I think over here more focus is on grades as compare to learning but learning do happen, if student participate in classroom discussion". Another student said that "in this university it's the ratio of 70% and 30%, i.e. 70% we are focusing on grades and 30% on learning that is a proof that in this university more importance is given to grades rather than knowledge". Some students favored on learning system over grading, as one student said " for me learning is more important as by the end of the session as through learning one can develop their practical knowledge and incorporate their learning into practice".

In regards with students opinion teachers have completely different opinion as one of the teachers said, "For children right now it is more important that they focus on their grades". Another teacher said, "I think both are equally important, as those students who learn through proper understating are the one who achieve good grades in exams". One more teacher said that

“Students give more preference to grades over knowledge; however, they should give equal preference to both the things”. Some teachers have different opinion when we talk about comparing knowledge with grades, as one teacher said, “In this university, most of the students say that they want to learn for the sake of papers, hence they ask for most important things that will be part of their exam. These students’ major focus is just to have degree and they don’t achieve anything in their professional life thereafter”. Students with good understanding and learning are the ones who mostly have good relation with their teacher or it would be better to say that their teacher give them more preference, as one of the teacher said, “according to me the one who have good understanding of topic, I like those students more as those students understand the concept better and give good reply in the class”.

Relationship of better grades with better jobs opportunity. From the data that has been abstracted, it was quite evident that getting good grades have direct relationship with getting better job opportunities. Many of the students said that the grades play a significant role in getting an appropriate job. In this regards one of the students said, “In an ideal world we would like to hold learning up there and grades in low but in practical world we would say it’s not possible. As it is like everybody would see your transcript or degrees first for job”. However, there were few students who had different perception in regards with job over getting better jobs opportunities. As one of the students said, “Beside getting a good job at university level as well one’s need to get good grades, as if one will not get good grades then one won’t be able to achieve what he or she wants to achieve”. One more student said “It’s like double edge knife form for.eg. if you don’t have good grades then you can’t get good job and suppose you have

good grades but doesn't have enough knowledge then also it is difficult to survive in that particular job". Hence, grades as well as learning plays a significant role being successful at job life.

Impact of grades/knowledge on university student's motivation level. From the data that has been retrieve it is quite clear that knowledge plays a significant role in increasing students' motivation level towards learning. As one of the students said: "Grades are not that much important but your inner skills are more important, as one's inner talent will help you in future and definitely if one's inner talent is good, he/she will achieve good grades".

Another student gave different perspective over her motivation level, she said "The motivation for my learning is my friends, as whenever I just look into my surroundings I found myself where I am lacking behind, where I can make myself stand and due to which I am getting motivated by looking at my colleagues and that is why I am just improving myself and due to which day by day I am getting more motivated for increasing my grades".

Race for grade

Race for grade is also considered as one of the major issue due to which majority of the students' give more priority to grades rather than their learning or skills development. However, these students' focus more on their learning rather than having competition for grades. As one of students said, "As per my respective class, I have never seen as such competition, as everyone focus on their own learning outcome rather than each other grades".

Discussion

In this study, I have used case study method to conduct this study with students as my main research participants and teachers' as secondary research participants. Semi-structured interview and focus group has been used in this study to collect data. Moreover, main research questions are "Why do University students perceive pertaining grades over knowledge and skills?" "What are the perceptions of University students towards the grades?" From the findings that has been revealed both these question have been answered expertly.

In this university, majority of the students said that the main purpose of knowledge is not just to acquire information but to bring changes in his/her attitude. Literature also supports this, as Rich (1998) says that acquiring skills and obtaining knowledge are the foundation of education in schools, colleges and universities that will help an individual to enrich their life ahead. In this university, majority of the students' as well as teachers perceive assessment as an important element. For them assessment is a process through which an individual learn and explore themselves. Moreover, literature on assessment also agrees with it. According to Thomas & Brain, (1984) student's assessment is one of the most important factors which contributes to and has an impact on students' learning. It had been explored from the findings that the majority of the students are satisfied with the current assessment method and grading strategy that is being implemented in this university. However, few students' in this particular university say that there is a ratio of 70% (Summative) and 30% (Formative), hence, more importance is being given to summative rather than formative approach. They further recommended that there should be a 50/50 percent ratio.

While comparing the student's giving preference to learning over grades, most of students felt that grades and learning both plays an important role in students' development. However, there were some students who felt that learning is more important as compare to grades as having better knowledge and understanding will help them in their life ahead. According to Hasnain & Bhamani, (2014) Knowledge gives success, self-contentment, employment opportunities, job satisfaction and participating in civic life ahead. However, students' do feel that during job finding student's grades play a very important role as a person is being recruited on the basis of their grades. According to Swinton (2010) students grades have a very significant role on their chances of getting better job opportunity.

From the above discussion, it is concluded that in this particular university where this study was being carried out both learning and grades are being given equal importance. However, major importance had been given by the students to their learning and skills development and less importance students gave to their grades.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, it could be stated that this study had helped the researcher to explore students' and teachers' perception of grades over learning and skills by using case study method. Moreover, focus group interview and semi-structured interview had given an in-depth understanding over the student's perception as those were main research participants. Through this study, it shows that in this university in education department, where this study was being carried out majority of the students gives more importance to their learning rather than their grades. However, student's feel that as grading criteria in this university has been designed in a way which shows that major focus of this university has given to grades rather than their students learning or understanding. Hence, it would be recommended that university need to revise their assessment and grading criteria and give more importance to students learning.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendation have been given, on analyzing the results; it would be a good option to compare the findings of a similar strategy with a different approach of methodology i.e. using the Quantitative method. As this study was being carried in one private university of urban area, it would be interesting to conduct similar researches in more than one university in different geographical areas of Pakistan. As finding of this study had revealed one of major issues students as well as teachers are facing at this university is the less grading weightage given to formative assessment and more on summative assessment or pencil test. Hence, it would recommended to the all the universities to use both formative and summative assessment with equal marks weightage.

References

- Baker, H. E. (1999). Student and faculty perceptions of the impact of plus/minus grading: A management department perspective. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 10 (1), 23-33.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1998). *Qualitative research in education: An introduction to theory and methods* (3rd ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bloom BS (1968). Learning for Mastery. *Instruction and Curriculum*. Regional Education Laboratory for the Carolinas and Virginia, Topical Papers and Reprints, Number 1. *Eval Comment 1*(2), 1–11.
- Bloom BS (1976). *Human Characteristics and School Learning*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Butler, R., & Nisan, M. (1986). Effects of no feedback, task-related comments, and grades on intrinsic motivation and performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 78(3), 210-216. doi:10.1037//0022-0663.78.3.210
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Crooks, T. J. (1988). The impact of classroom evaluation practices on students. *Review of Education Journal*, 58 (4), 438-481.
- Gibbs, G. & Simpson, C. (2004) Conditions under which assessment supports students' learning, *Learning and teaching in higher education*, 1, 3-31. Available online: <http://www.glos.ac.uk/departments/clt/lathe/issue1/index.cfm>. Accessed 9

May 2018

- Glesne, C. (2006). Making words fly: Developing understanding through interviewing. *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*, 3.
- Hasnain, A., & Bhamani, S. (2015). Exploring Perceptions of University Students Pertaining to Grades over Knowledge and Skills. *Journal of Education and Educational Development*, 1(2), 101. doi:10.22555/joeed.v1i2.42
- Khan, H. (2014). A discussion of globalization and education. *Journal of Education and Educational Development*, 1 (1), 67-70.
- Palmer B. E Is for Fail. (2010). www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/explainer/2010/08/e_is_for_fail.html (accessed 19 February 2014)
- Schinske, J., & Tanner, K. (2014). Teaching More by Grading Less (or Differently). *Cell Biology Education*, 13(2), 159-166. doi:10.1187/cbe.cbe-14-03-0054
- Schinske, J., & Tanner, K. (2014). Teaching More by Grading Less (or Differently). *Cell Biology Education*, 13(2), 159-166. doi:10.1187/cbe.cbe-14-03-0054
- Tippin, G. K., Lafreniere, K. D., & Page, S. (2012). Student perception of academic grading: Personality, academic orientation, and effort. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 13(1), 51-61.
- Thomas, P. R., Bain J.D., (1984). Contextual dependence of learning approaches: the effects of assessment. *Human Learning*. 1984;3:227-40

- University, C. (2018). *Explore Strategies - Eberly Center - Carnegie Mellon University*. [online] Cmu.edu. Available at: <https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/solveproblem/strat-complainingrades/complainingrades-01.html> [Accessed 9 May 2018].
- Walker, P. (2008). What Do students think they (should) learn at college? student perceptions of essential learning outcomes. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 8(1), 45–60.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*.