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# Policies and Practices for Grading of Student Work in Distance and Online Learning System: A Survey of Teachers' Perspective

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## Abstract

Examining the current discussion on efficient grading practices in online and distance learning, a mixed-method study was designed to assess the grading policies and practices. Through census sampling, all of the education department's teachers as well as the head teachers of the Pakistani virtual university were chosen. In the questionnaire as research tool for this study, open and closed-ended questions about the learning outcomes, accuracy, and fairness of the grading scheme were developed by the researchers and approved by four experts prior to administration. The instrument's reliability was 0.89. The policy document was reviewed, and thematic analysis was done for open-ended question. Based on the results, majority of teachers were agreed that the grading schemes were accurate, fair, and measured learning outcomes. Additionally, the grading policies and the grading practices are aligned. However, there was a conflict between grading practice and policy in grading on curve. In addition to offering suggestions for creating an equitable, open, and engaging assessment system in online and distance learning, the findings may help administrators, instructors, and virtual universities to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the current grading procedures and help them optimize the assessment process in order to better support students' learning and success.

***Keywords:*** *Grading, policy, practice, online distance learning, students, evaluation*

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## Introductıon

The field of education has been revolutionized by technology, leading to new possibilities for virtual learning. Virtual universities provide flexible and accessible educational opportunities for students who are unable to attend traditional brick-and-mortar institutions. In this context, it becomes essential to explore the effect of the grading scheme on the education of virtual university students. The grading scheme refers to the system used to assess and evaluate students' performance and assign grades based on their achievements. Grading has become embedded in educational institutions and offers instructors, students, and others an easy way to measure and explain the many and covert aspects of learning. However, some educators have started to challenge the accuracy of and assumptions around traditional procedures, including how grades are calculated and their influence on learner behavior. We use them to evaluate learning, categorize pupils, encourage learning behaviors, and offer feedback (Supiano, 2019).

Grades are without a doubt the most important indicators of student performance in schools (Guskey & Link, 2019). Educational systems worldwide use them as the most commonly exchanged currency. Student learning is summarized and has had an impact on various high-stakes educational decisions about students, such as college or university admissions (Brookhart et al., 2016). In spite of the widespread use of grades and their significant impact on educational decision-making, research has revealed that teachers use varying data on achievement and non-achievement when making grading decisions (Guskey, 2011; Nowruzi & Amerian, 2020; Randall &Engelhard, 2009; Yesbeck, 2011). Teachers, parents, educational administrators, and researchers are increasingly expressing doubts and concerns about ineffective grading practices and conflated grades (Brookhart, 2004, 2013; Guskey & Bailey, 2001). The use of multiple sources of evidence can contribute to the multidimensionality of grades and complicate their meanings, according to some argue (Cross & Frary, 1999). Educational systems' currency is grades, which are really important. They can have a big impact on students in the short or long term. Unfortunately, there's no way to judge how good students' work is, and grading is subjective, which can lead to questions about fairness and reliability (Sadler, 2009). Some schools have tried to make grading more objective by using tools like scoring keys or rubrics, but these don't always work and can lead to mistakes. Students know that assessment isn't an exact science, and schools can spend a lot of time answering questions about grades and dealing with complaints.

Contrary to the measurement community's recommendations to grade only on achievement (Airasian, 2000; Stiggins, 2001), the great majority of grading research reveals that teachers base their grades on related traits of achievement, such as effort, participation, ability, improvement, behavior, personality traits, and work habits (Brookhart, et al., 2016; Cizek, 1996; Duncan & Noonan, 2007; Guskey, 2011; Guskey & Link, 2019; McMillan, 2001; Nowruzi & Amerian, 2020; Randall & Engelhard, 2009, 2010; Svennberg et al., 2014; Yesbeck, 2011). Previous studies have shown that academic knowledge had only a marginal impact on the grade assigned (Linn, 2000; Willingham et al., 2002; Woodruff & Ziomek, 2004). According to Cizek (1996), despite being relied upon to communicate important information about academic performance and progress, grades may not be the only means.

## Literature Review

### *Grading Practices*

According to Ekstrom et al., (1994), the examination of grading procedures to norm-referenced and criterion-referenced grading is limited, which are both the most common and most pertinent. Generally, norm-referenced grading refers to the practice of assigning grades to students depending on how they performed in comparison to their peers. Norm-referenced grading, also known as relative grading, assigns the highest score to the group's best performers and the lowest grade to the group's poorest performers, regardless of how well they really performed in terms of curriculum knowledge. This practice is closely related to the practice of "grading on a curve," which requires professors to assign grades to pupils according to a predetermined ideal distribution that must be adhered to or at least well approximated. Although this method of grading is extensively used, educators and policymakers have condemned it, and throughout the years, its use has decreased.

Criterion-referenced grading, sometimes referred to as absolute grades, is the most popular competing grading method. According to this system of grading, students' grades are exclusively determined by their knowledge of and proficiency with the course material; as a result, in theory, a student's grade is unaffected by the academic achievement of their classmates. Theoretically, if a group of students demonstrate the greatest degree of anticipated mastery, they should all earn the highest mark. Many educational systems, including those in Denmark, England, and Sweden, have switched from a norm-referenced to a criterion-referenced grading practice over the past few decades. This change has been motivated by the claims that (i) norm-referenced grading depends on

students' performance as well as that of their peers, and (ii) norm-referenced grades are less indicative of the students' actual skills.

Various studies have been conducted on teachers' grading practices, which examine the factors that are considered in grading and the motives for awarding conflated grades to students. McMillan and Nash (2000) proposed the initial model for how teachers assess and grade classrooms, analyzing the grading practices of 24 elementary and secondary mathematics and English teachers. Their model had six themes, with three of them being teacher beliefs and values, classroom realities, and external factors that affected teachers' decision-making about grading. Internal factors like teachers' teaching and learning philosophies and external criteria like parents, standardized testing, and classroom constraints were cited as constant sources of tension. The balance between internal and external grading influences was constantly a challenge for teachers, as found by McMillan and Nash (2000). Their findings may have been partially skewed due to the lack of consideration for the differential grading practices of teachers across two basic subjects, math and English, in elementary and secondary schools.

The grading scheme plays an important role in shaping students' learning experiences and outcomes. It provides a framework for measuring students' knowledge, skills, and competencies, and serves as a basis for feedback, recognition, and progression. Understanding the effect of the grading scheme on virtual university students' education is vital for optimizing the assessment process and ensuring that it aligns with their needs and supports their learning goals. This research aims to evaluate the grading policy and practices of virtual universities. By examining, the study seeks to uncover the potential benefits and challenges associated with the grading scheme in virtual learning environments.

## Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to; (1) analyze the grading schemes commonly used in virtual university to assess the achievement of students, (2) find out the perceptions of virtual university's teachers about the fairness, accuracy, and learning outcomes of the grading scheme, (3) know the elements for the engagement of students and improvement of the grading scheme.

## Research Questions

The research addressed the following key questions:

1) What grading schemes are commonly used in virtual university to assess the achievement of students?

2) To what extent do virtual university teachers agree with the fairness, accuracy, and learning outcomes of the grading scheme?
3) What elements will be changed for the engagement of students and the improvement of the grading scheme?

## Methodology

In this research, an exploratory mixed method was used to evaluate the grading policies and practices. In the qualitative part, the policy document was reviewed, and thematic analysis was done for open-ended question. In the quantitative part, data was collected from teachers through a questionnaire. All the teachers of the faculty of education and head teachers of all departments from the Virtual University of Pakistan were the population of this study. A total of 48 teachers and head teachers were selected from the Virtual University of Pakistan by using a census sampling technique.

### *Instrumentation*

Questionnaire was developed by the researchers and validated by four experts before administration. The questionnaires consisted of close-ended and open-ended questions, there were total 29 statements related to the fairness, accuracy, and learning outcomes of the grading scheme. In the questionnaire there were three close-ended questions that were related to engagement of students and improvement of grading practices. The policy document was reviewed for the analysis of grading practices at the virtual university of Pakistan. Content validity of the questionnaire was ensured through a comprehensive literature review and expert feedback. Questionnaires were based on a 5-points Likert scale. The reliability was determined through the pilot testing of the instrument. Pilot testing was conducted on the 70 teachers enrolled in Virtual University, not where the actual study was conducted, and necessary modifications were made based on the feedback received. The reliability of the instrument was 0.89.

### *Data Collection*

For this research, the data was collected through an online questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was generated in a Google Form and sent by email to the selected 48 teachers and head teachers.

### *Data Analysis*

Document of policy was reviewed for the analysis of grading practices of virtual university of Pakistan. The open ended question was analyzed by thematic analysis. The quantitative collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

## Findings

***Q#1. What grading schemes are commonly used in virtual university to assess the achievement of students?***

***Policy Analysis***

The policy document of the virtual university about grading practices was reviewed. Letter grades, grade points, and equivalent percentages are part of the grading scheme. In the policy, it is mentioned that students will not be given any grace marks. But in practice, Grading on Curve (GOC) has been applied in the courses. That is a contradiction between policy and practice in grading. Following is the comparison of the grading scheme of policy and practices of the Virtual University of Pakistan.

Table 01

*Comparison of VU Grading Scheme in Policy and Practices*

| Policy | Percentage | Practice | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Quizzes/ Graded Discussion Boards (GDBs) Assignments/ Presentations/term papers/short projects, etc. | 10-20 | Quizzes (GDBs) Assignments | 5 2 8 |
| Mid Semester Examination | 20-30 | Mid-Term | 25 |
| End Semester Examination (60%) | 60 | Final term | 60 |
| Grand Total | 100 | | 100 |

Table 01 shows the comparison of grading scheme mentioned in policy and in practice. The grading scheme of policy is aligned with the practice of Virtual University of Pakistan.

***Q#2. To what extent do virtual university teachers agree with the fairness, accuracy, and learning outcomes of the grading scheme?***

The analysis of descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, for the responses of teachers and head teachers regarding the awareness, fairness, accuracy, and learning outcomes of the grading scheme are discussed in the following tables.

Table 02
*Frequency of Grading Scheme*

| Grading Scheme | Yes | | No | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | F | % | F | % |
| Are you aware about the grading scheme of Virtual University? | 45 | 91.8 | 3 | 8.2 |
| Have you locked an assessment scheme in any semester? | 27 | 55.1 | 21 | 42.9 |
| Do you know about the GOC (Grading On Curve)? | 25 | 51 | 23 | 46.9 |
| Have you applied GOC in this semester? | 18 | 36.7 | 30 | 61.2 |
| Do you think the grading policy of VU is fair to students? | 42 | 85.7 | 6 | 10.2 |
| Do you know the passing criteria of the course? | 45 | 91.8 | 3 | 8.2 |

*N= 48*

Table 02 shows that teachers are aware of the grading scheme of Virtual University. 46.9% teachers don't know about grading on curve and 61.2% teachers have not applied GOC in the semester.

Table 03
*Descriptive Statistics about Learning Outcomes of Grading Scheme*

| Learning Outcomes | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Grade of students depict their competency/achievement/learning. | 3.52 | 1.09 |
| Grade represents the student achievement with the achievement of their class fellow/peer. | 3.44 | 1.05 |
| The grading structure encourages objective appraisal of students' work. | 3.79 | .92 |
| The grading scheme is aligned with the objectives of the courses. | 3.60 | 1.16 |
| It was easier to get a passing average this year. | 3.68 | .90 |

*N= 48*

Table 03 displays the mean and standard deviation of respondents regarding the learning outcomes of the grading scheme. The mean scores showed that most of the teachers agreed that the grading scheme is aligned with the objectives of courses and also assesses the achievement of students.

Table 04
*Descriptive Statistics about Fairness of Grading Scheme*

| Fairness | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Grading scheme of VU does not give all students the same chance to show that they deserve a good grade | 2.64 | 1.19 |
| The grading structure ensures that students receive a balanced distribution of marks (e.g., A, B, C). | 3.45 | 1.12 |
| Grading is not as fair as most other grading systems. | 2.75 | .97 |
| I would be satisfied with grading if I were a student. | 3.58 | 1.08 |
| Grading is consistent with my own personal idea of fairness. | 3.60 | .98 |
| Grading does not treat all students fairly. | 2.70 | 1.12 |
| I would be satisfied with the five grade system if I were a student | 3.66 | .95 |
| The five grade system is consistent with my own personal idea of fairness. | 3.72 | .84 |
| The five grade system does not treat all students fairly. | 2.97 | 1.08 |
| When the five grade system is used, teachers can be inconsistent when assigning final grades to students. | 3.22 | 1.03 |
| The five grade system ensures that each student is graded by the same set of rules. | 3.62 | .86 |
| The five grade system is not as fair as most other grading systems. | 3.18 | .95 |

*N= 48*

Table 04 displays the mean and standard deviation of respondents regarding the fairness of grading scheme. The mean scores showed that most of the teachers were agreed that the grading scheme is fair for all the students.

Table 05
*Descriptive Statistics about Accuracy of Grading Scheme*

| Accuracy | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| When relative grading is used, teachers can be inconsistent when assigning final grades to students. | 3.47 | 1.07 |
| VU should not adopt relative grading/GOC. | 2.89 | 1.12 |
| Grading ensures that each student is graded by the same set of rules. | 3.97 | .75 |
| GOC grading will usually result in better grades for students. | 3.79 | .84 |
| Use of GOC improves academic quality at VU. | 2.95 | 1.14 |
| The new GOC/grading policy had little effect on student efforts. | 3.52 | .89 |
| The five grade system is a good grading system. | 3.85 | .75 |
| The five grade system is a balanced grading system. | 3.78 | .85 |
| VU should not continue with the five grade system. | 2.95 | 1.06 |
| The five grade system increases the value of an A. | 3.70 | .71 |
| Use of the five grade system usually results in better grades for students. | 3.66 | .83 |
| Use of the five grade system improves academic quality at VU. | 3.41 | .91 |

*N= 48*

Table 05 displays the mean and standard deviation of respondents regarding the accuracy of the grading scheme. The mean scores showed that most of the teachers agreed that the grading scheme is accurate for all the students. The five grade system is a good grading system. But teachers were disagreeing that GOC improves academic quality at VU.

***Q#3. What elements will be changed for the engagement of students and the improvement of the grading scheme?***

***Engagement of Students and Improvement of Grading Scheme***

The themes generated from the open-ended questions were; (1) clearly defined grading criteria, (2) consistency and standardization, (3) rubrics, (4) balanced assessment methods, (5) continuous assessment, (6) formative feedback, (7) grade weighting, (8) grade curves with caution, (9) accommodations for diverse learners, (10) review and feedback process, (11) regular assessment of the grading system, (12) grader

training and calibration, (13) grade appeal process and (14) focus on learning outcomes.

The majority of the teachers and head teachers believed that they should provide detailed and transparent grading criteria for each assignment, project, or exam. With this, students will be able to comprehend what is expected of them and focus on the relevant aspects of their work. The respondents also believed that they should; ensure grading is consistent across all instructors and courses, develop standardized grading guidelines and periodically review grading practices to maintain consistency and fairness, implement rubrics for assessments whenever possible. The rubrics break down the grading criteria into specific components and provide clear descriptions of different levels of performance. This helps both students and teachers to assess performance objectively. Teacher should use various assessment techniques, such as projects, presentations, and practical demonstrations. Different students excel in different areas, so a well-rounded assessment approach can capture a more comprehensive view of their capabilities. Teacher may introduce continuous assessment throughout the course rather than relying solely on a few major exams. This approach encourages regular engagement with the material and provides students with opportunities to improve their performance over time. Students should be provided with timely and effective formative feedback, which aids in their comprehension of their strengths and weaknesses and allows them to make necessary improvements before final assessments. Teachers should be clearly communicate the weighting of each assignment or exam so that students understand how their performance in different components contributes to their overall grade.

Be cautious when implementing grade on curves. While they can address issues of difficulty, it's essential to ensure that students are not unfairly penalized or rewarded based on the performance of their peers. Be mindful of diverse learning needs and provide appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities or unique challenges to ensure a fair grading process. Establish a process for students to review their graded assignments, exams, or projects and seek clarifications if needed. This allows for open communication and ensures transparency in the grading process. Continuously evaluate the effectiveness of the grading system through feedback from students, instructors, and other stakeholders. Make adjustments and improvements based on this feedback. If multiple instructors are involved in grading, conduct training and calibration sessions to ensure uniformity in grading standards and practices. Create a clear and accessible grade appeal process for students

who believe their grades were assigned unfairly or inaccurately. Emphasize the importance of learning outcomes rather than just grades. Encourage students to focus on their progress and understanding of the subject matter.

**Discussion**

This study aimed to evaluate grading policies and practices for an online distance-learning environment. The findings revealed that the grading scheme of policy is aligned with the practice of the Virtual University of Pakistan. In the policy it is mentioned that students will not be given any grace marks. But in practice, GOC has been applied in the courses. That is a contradiction between policy and practice in grading. The majority of the teachers were not aware of grading on curve and have not applied GOC in the semester. According to Marzano (2000), the lack of understanding and consistency throughout classrooms can negatively affect students. Therefore, because teachers had little knowledge of the new grade scales, the information that was provided to students was imprecise.

Most of the teachers agreed that the grading scheme is aligned with the objectives of courses and also assesses the achievement of students. Grades of students depict their competency/achievement/learning. Munoz & Guskey (2015, p.1) stated, "The purpose behind grading is to assess how well students have fulfilled the learning objectives or goals set for their class or course of study. The evaluation of students' performance on specific learning criteria should be reflected in grades." Majority of virtual university teachers were satisfied with the grading schemes, perceiving them as fair, accurate, and measuring learning outcomes. Teachers agreed that the grading scheme is accurate for all the students. The five-grade system is a good grading system. But teachers were disagreeing that GOC improves academic quality at VU. When working with traditional grades or any grading scale, often times, "letter grades are based on the number of points a student earned in a subject, but they don't always tell the student what they learned" (Long, 2015, p.2). Especially in distance learning universities, the use of modern methods (MST, CAT, etc.) in the grading system and thus in the measurement will allow much more accurate measurements. In this way, all stakeholders (teachers, students, policy makers, etc.) will have much more accurate and reliable learning outcomes.

The majority of the teachers and head teachers believed that they should provide detailed and transparent grading criteria for each assignment, project, or exam. With this, students will be able to

comprehend what is expected of them and focus on the relevant aspects of their work. The respondents also believed that they should: ensure grading is consistent across all instructors and courses, develop standardized grading guidelines and periodically review grading practices to maintain consistency and fairness, provides students with opportunities to improve their performance over time, provide students with timely and effective formative feedback, which aids in their comprehension of their strengths and weaknesses and allows them to make necessary improvements before final assessments. Therefore, according to research done through teacher questionnaires and teacher responses, it is clear to state that grades are used to provide feedback on student achievement, which is one of the more obvious purposes (Marzano, 2000). More descriptive feedback that is pertinent to students' learning, development, and performance improvement is given via efficient grading procedures (Reeves, 2016). The main purpose of grading system modifications, as stated by Reeves (2006), is to make grading systems capable of providing fair, accurate, specific, and timely feedback.

Be cautious when implementing grade on curves. While they can address issues of difficulty, it's essential to ensure that students are not unfairly penalized or rewarded based on the performance of their peers. According to Guskey (2015), changing grades can disrupt traditions. This study showed that educators, as well as students, were resistant to reform efforts that were taking place.

**Conclusion**

The objective of this study was to evaluate grading policies and practices in an online distance-learning environment. The findings revealed that the majority of virtual university teachers were satisfied with the grading schemes, perceiving them as fair, accurate, and effective in measuring learning outcomes. Teachers were aware of the grading scheme at Virtual University. They agreed that the grading scheme is aligned with course objectives, effectively assesses student achievement, and is fair and accurate for all students. The five-grade system is considered a good grading system. However, teachers disagreed that the Grading on Curve (GOC) improves academic quality at VU. Most teachers are unfamiliar with grading on a curve and have not applied GOC in the semester. As a result, they think that GOC should not be applied to improve results.

To ensure grade consistency across all instructors and courses, it is important to develop standardized grading guidelines and periodically review the grading practices. For assignments, projects, and other assessments, it is advisable to develop and implement rubrics whenever

possible. The emphasizing on the importance of learning outcomes rather than on just grades will encourage students to focus on their progress and understanding of the subject matter. Additionally, the study highlights the need for continuous assessment in grading systems to improve performance over time. By incorporating flexibility, adaptability, and timely feedback, virtual universities can further enhance the overall learning experience for their students.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are attained: (1) grading on curve should not be applied to improve the result, which disturbs the true reflection of students' performance, (2) develop standardized grading guidelines and periodically review grading practices to maintain consistency and fairness, (3) provide students with timely and constructive formative feedback, which will enable them to comprehend their strengths and weaknesses and make necessary enhancements before final assessments, (4) if multiple teachers are involved in grading, conduct training and calibration sessions to ensure uniformity in grading practices, (5) incorporating various assessment methods (e.g., project, demonstrations, presentations) will offer a more comprehensive evaluation of students' knowledge and skills.

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