Policy and Implementation of Undergraduate Student Learning Assessment: A Case Analysis of University M

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Abstract

Establishing policies to assure quality has become a top priority for institutions of higher education. In order to ensure the quality of learning, universities normally set up a learning assessment policy which provide academic staff with regulations or guidelines on quality assurance in learning assessment. However, it is vital that the policy of learning assessment should be in line with the core principles of learning assessment. Issues of how the policy will be communicated, promoted, perceived and implemented are also important issues. This study takes University M as a case study of learning assessment policy, making use of interviews with staff and document analysis. Twenty-two faculty members have been interviewed. The interview questions consisted of questions such as what the faculty members know about the policy, how they perceive and implement it, as well as the suggestions they provide. The documents that are analyzed were obtained from University M's website and the Registry.

The findings show that University M has established policies and guidelines on the implementation of assessment of learning but only four regulations directly link to learning assessment. Findings also show that the policy appeared to consider more about administrative management, and the purpose of assessment is summative orientated. It is suggested that the formulation of a learning assessment policy should take the learning goals of the institution, the nature of learning and the views and issues of teachers, into account.

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1. Introduction

"Quality is the foundation of university survival and development" (Huang, 2001, p. 161). The quality of university education has always been the focus not only in its own country, but also in the international context (Wang & Wu, 2010). In particular, the expansion of universities, the increasing diversity of learners, the growing demand for skills and abilities in society today, the academic, political and economic development that relates to globalization, and the increasingly fierce competition in higher education in various countries, all contribute to the demands of quality assurance in higher education (European Higher Education Area [EHEA], 2015; Huang, 2001; Wang, 2008; Wang & Wu, 2010). To set up policies to assure quality has become a top priority for institutions of higher education and their national accreditation body.

To explain the difference between policies within and outside the institution, D'Andrea (2007, p. 209) differentiates between "micro-level" and "macro-level" policies. Micro-level refers to the internal policies of quality assurance and "the teaching/learning processes in tertiary institutions including curriculum planning, the interaction between teachers and students in the learning environment and the development of learning communities, among others." Macro-level refers to the external policies of quality assurance, the "national/state higher education policies that affect tertiary institutions." To expend in a broader sense, the external polices also include "quality agencies, international and regional networks and protocols" (Kelly, Dollinger, & Coates, 2016, p. 34). For example, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA, 2015) proposed the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) to guide member states to achieve particular levels of quality in higher education. The guidelines point out that the policy, with particular reference to quality assurance, should be an open policy and be considered as part of a strategic operation. In addition, policy-relevant personnel (leaders, academics, students) should develop and implement the policy through appropriate structures and processes, and all personnel within the institution should play a part in the management of quality assurance at all levels. To achieve this, policies of quality assurance should own its official status and be open as well as accessible. They should also take the national and university contexts into account as well as the dimensions of research, teaching and learning (EHEA, 2015).

No one would argue that both internal and external policies of quality assurance are needed as it is often the case that "the process of internal review

followed by external audit has been the dominant approach to quality assurance" (Kelly et al., 2016, p. 34). However, the external reviews are often conducted through the quality assessment approach which "places an emphasis on measurement, external accountability and regulatory control … it does not, in and of itself, bring about improvements in teaching and learning at the micro level" (as cited in D'Andrea, 2007, p. 211). On the contrary, within an internal review perspective, "quality enhancement" is often seen as an appropriate approach which "places an emphasis on a range of teaching and learning activities across the institution, from curriculum development to communities of practice." In addition, "it uses a formative feedback process to bring about change" and "places institutional learning at the core of its framework" (as cited in D'Andrea, 2007, p. 211). However, external reviews for quality assurance cannot be conducted very often, usually once every 3-6 years, which means that they cannot provide prompt formative feedback for the institution to bring about change. In this regard, to set up internal learning assessment policies to regulate and assure the learning quality should be at the core of the institution's evaluation framework.

While it is generally agreed that teaching and learning should be at the core of higher education, the current emphasis on research and ranking in higher education is pushing research as the main goal of universities, with less attention to teaching and learning. This may also result in teacher's professional development being neglected at the expense of quality teaching and learning (Mcaleese et al., 2013). Mcaleese et al. (2013) suggest that higher education institutions should develop a comprehensive quality management system including setting out the goals of instructional and learning objectives as well as approaches to achievement. For example, in the EU countries, many institutions of higher education have developed policies to ensure the quality of teaching and learning. More importantly stakeholders including teachers, students and administrators, should actively participate in the management, implementation and assessment of quality assurance policies (Mcaleese et al., 2013).

The assessment of student learning outcomes is one of the dimensions that ensure excellence in teaching and learning (Peng, 2010) as well as "provide a comprehensive accountability system for the institution to ensure quality of its services" (Sanerivi, 2012, p. 1). In addition, the assessment of learning process and results is getting more attention because of the international competition and evaluation as well as the awareness of lifelong learning (Boud, 2000). It is this to be expected that the assessment of student learning plays an important part in the

set-up of the university quality assurance policy. As Erwin and Knight (1995, p. 179) argued, "the ways in which student learning is assessed constitute a sensitive set of indicators of the quality of the undergraduate experience" while "indifferent assessment arrangements can poison otherwise well-conceived curricula." In many instances, however, learning assessment is conducted by university teachers, who are employed for their academic expertise but who are not necessarily familiar with the theory and practice of assessment (Mcaleese et al., 2013). In order to ensure the quality of learning assessment, universities normally set up a learning assessment policy to provide academic staff with regulations to follow. For example, the University of Edinburgh in the UK has set up "Taught Assessment Regulations" pointing out that "assessment information is used in the quality assurance of courses and programmes. It is used by course teams to enhance course design and understand students' educational needs" (University of Edinburgh, 2016, p. 12).

However, it is vital to note that the policy of learning assessment should be developed in line with the core principles of learning assessment. It should begin with "educational values;" reflect "an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time;" have "clear, explicitly stated purposes of programme improvement;" require "attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes;" maintain ongoing not episodic assessment; involve representatives from across the educational community; begin with "issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about;" be "part of a larger set of conditions that promote change" and finally, "meet responsibilities to students and to the public through assessment" (American Association for Higher Education [AAHE], 1996, pp. 1-2).

In addition, after the policy has been formulated, universities need to consider such issues as: How should the policy be communicated and promoted? How will the policy implementers perceive the policy? How will they implement it? Are there any difficulties in the process of implementation? Are there any suggestions from stakeholders on policy improvement? However, these issues are not usually addressed in research and clearly need more in-depth investigation. In order to explore the issues in the development and implementation of university learning assessment policies, this study takes University M as a case study making use of a qualitative investigation.

2. Context of University M and Its Quality Assurance Policies

University M is the only public comprehensive university in its region. Currently, it has an overall student population of 9,400 and 560 faculty members. It consists of 7 faculties, one institute and one college and a number of centres. It offers more than 130 programmes at bachelor's, master's, doctorate levels, mainly taught in English, with some taught in other languages. The vision of the University M is "to be an outstanding, internationally-recognized institution of higher learning, firmly committed to learner-centered education, focused research with impact and dedicated public service. It aims to nurture self-reflective, caring and socially responsible persons within a culturally diverse and intellectually challenging environment." In the Ten-Year Development Strategy, University M underlines that its aims of undergraduate programmes are to produce graduates who possess the following attributes:

● Maintain a good balance between depth/specialty and breadth;

● Be able to think independently, critically and creatively;

● Be able to be biliterate, preferably trilingual;

● Have effective mathematics and IT literacy to reason and solve problems;

● Have good interpersonal and communication skills;

● Have competence to face the challenges of the globalization and knowledge economy;

● Be lifelong learners with an open mind and an inquiring spirit;

● Have ability to appreciate and preserve cultural heritage;

● Be responsible global citizens.

In order to achieve these goals, University M has sought to improve undergraduate education which includes establishing characteristic disciplines, and "a new 4-in-1 pedagogical model that consists of discipline-specific education, general education, research and internship education and peer and community education."

To ensure the programme quality of the institution, University M's regional authority has recently launched the Guidelines on Institutional Accreditation which emphasise that "institutional accreditation is undertaken by higher education institutions (HEIs) on a voluntary basis. Other types of evaluation will be conducted in accordance with the amended Higher Education Law and

related administrative regulations." In fact, before the launch of these Guidelines, University M had established its own Academic Quality Assurance System (AQAS) "covering 3 mechanisms, namely Annual Programme Review (APR) for all existing programmes, New Programme Accreditation (NPA) for all new degree programme proposals, and External Academic Review (EAR) for every academic unit once every five years." The first cycle of the EAR exercise at the faculty or departmental level, "which started in academic year 2011/2012, was completed in academic year 2014/2015, and the next cycle of the review exercise is scheduled to begin in 2016/2017." However, University M has not gone through the institutional accreditation yet but will "plan for an institutional accreditation or quality review after the revised Higher Education Law is passed."

Teaching is one of the core missions of University M. In order to assure the quality of teaching and learning, University M seeks to "enhance the functions of Centre for Teaching and Learning Enhancement in supporting faculty teaching development, new pedagogical and instructional design, assessment for teaching and learning, and on-line/E-learning." It also seeks "to enforce compulsory attendance of teaching development workshops for new assistant professors and instructors," and "to review the existing Teaching Effectiveness Survey and student assessment policy" amongst others.

3. Methodology

This study made use of documentary analysis and face-to-face interviews as the main method of data collection. Document analysis was based mainly on analysis of the university website and documents from the registry. The university website was first used to get the history information of University M and its student learning assessment policy, while the registry section was contacted to ask more relevant information.

The participants for the interviews were based on the following criteria. Firstly, all full-time Faculty members with two or more years' experience were selected (but 2 teachers in their first year were interviewed as well). Secondly the participants had to represent as many departments as possible. Thirdly, various teachers' ranking was indispensable to have a variety to teaching grades. Fourthly, since all interviewees' information was acquired from the faculty website, those with insufficient information on his/her website were excluded.

22 faculty members were finally selected for the interview, including two for

the pilot study, 4 with administrative positions and 18 from areas of humanities, science, and social sciences. The interviews were conducted between May and November 2015. The interview was designed to last around 40 minutes, but to be extended if the interviewee was willingly to share more, with the longest one lasting for three hours. Most of the interviews were conducted in English. The interview questions covered such areas as interviewees' knowledge of the university existing assessment policy, the concrete assessment methods used in the classroom, and suggestions for improving the current assessment system.

The interview data was analyzed according to a framework including background information, the content of the policy of student learning assessment, the rationale of the policy, the implementation of policy, the difficulties met during the process of implementation as well as the suggestions for improvement. To facilitate trustworthiness and fidelity of this study, the data from both sources of documents and interviews were examined with regards to its consistency. For example, when interviewees talked about the content of the policy of student learning assessment and its rationale, the documents could be served as a checklist to see whether the interviewees have the right information, and vice versa. For the sake of preserving the anonymity of both the institution and interviewees, the university and interviewees' personal identity will not be disclosed in this study. Therefore, a 2-digital coding system was applied for the interviewee identity; for instance, the first faculty member interviewee is named F1. Table 1 shows the faculty members who have been interviewed, with the information on their gender, ranking, specialization and other details.

Table 1. Basic Information of Interviewed Faculty Members of University M

Feature	Category	N	Total
Gender	Male	12	22
	Female	10	
Rank	Professor	4	22
	Associate Professor	7	
	Assistant Professor	9	
	Lecturer	1	
	Administrative leaders	1	
Specialization	Humanities	4	22
	Science	7	
	Social Science	10	

Table 1. Basic Information of Interviewed Faculty Members of University M (Continued)

Feature	Category	*N*	Total
Years of teaching at University M	1-3	3	22
	4-10	7	
	11-20	8	
	21 or more	4	

Source: This study.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Content and Rationale of Policy of Student Learning Assessment

According to the online official documents of University M and the interview with an administrative leader (F7), the major policy of student learning assessment includes 4 regulations, three of which are included in the "General Rules Governing Bachelor's Degree Programmes" with sections of K, L, M respectively. The fourth policy, "Guidelines on Grade Distribution of Undergraduate Programmes" was brought into force in 2013 but not included into the "General Rules Governing Bachelor's Degree Programmes" (F7). The details of these four regulations are as follows:

(1) Attendance and Absence: "participation in the work of a course is a precondition for a student's achievement of credits in that course," and

> a student who is absent without applying for leave of absence from a course for more than 20% of its scheduled teaching periods in the aggregate will not be allowed to take the final examination and will receive a failing grade for that course.

(2) Examination and Assessment: "a student will take course examinations, where each course will be examined or otherwise assessed at the end of the semester in which it is offered;" "a student who is absent from any examination without permission will be given a failing grade for that examination;" "in some courses, assessment may be made otherwise than by examination when the programme of study so specifies;" and

> A student will be examined or assessed for every course he/she has registered for on the basis of his/her performance in that course. Criteria for examination or assessment may include one or any combination of the following:

attendance, class-work, written assignments, laboratory work, field work, research papers, tests or examinations.

Apart from the regulation about examination presented above, there are "Examination Rules" and "General Information of the Final Examination" as a supplement to the main policy.

(3) Grading System: it provides the "Definition of Grades" such as "W" means "Withdrawal," and the system of grades awarding as Table 2:

Table 2. Grading System of University M

Letter Grades	Grade Points	Percentage	Scale
A	4.0 (Excellent)	97-100	20
		93-96	19
A-	3.7 (Very Good)	88-92	18
B+	3.3	83-87	17
B	3.0 (Good)	78-82	16
B-	2.7	73-77	15
C+	2.3	68-72	14
C	2.0	63-67	13
C-	1.7	58-62	12
D+	1.3	53-57	11
D	1.0 (Pass)	50-52	10
F	0 (Fail)	Below 50	Below 10

Source: University M.

The grading system also specifies that for the Faculty of Law, scales are official grades (F21), while for others, letter grades are the official grades. Grade points are used for the purpose of calculating the GPA. Percentages are for reference only.

(4) Guidelines on Grade Distribution of Undergraduate Programmes (Table 3): "this guideline applies to all undergraduate courses that have total enrolment of all sections with 25 students or above. Departures from the guidelines will be accepted for courses with enrolment less than 25 students." The main purpose of the guidelines is to "serve as important reference for Deans to review and approve the grades given by teachers." If the grade distribution is deviated significantly from this guideline, teachers are requested to submit justifications. This policy was also designed as a computer programme to monitor the final grade entries (F10, F12,

F13, F20). If the scores are not distributed in line with the regulation, the computer will remind teachers to adjust the scores according to the distribution or otherwise to give justification for the Dean's approval (F1, F7, F10). The Dean will have the right to decide whether it would be approved or not. If the Dean does not agree, teachers would need to adjust the score to meet the distribution (F7, F15).

Table 3. Grade Distribution of University M

Grades	Maximum Cumulative Percentage of Passing Students
A	10%
A	10%
A- or above	25%
B- or above	75%
C or above	100%
D or above	100%

Source: University M.

Strictly speaking, the policy of student learning assessment developed by University M only has 4 regulations. The policies on attendance, examination, assessment and grading system have been implemented for many years and have never changed since they were set up (F7, F18, F20). However, the Guidelines on Grade Distribution of Undergraduate Programmes, effective in 2013, was proposed by the vice-rector and then convened by the representatives of a committee and discussed with reference to the similar guidelines to another university close to the region. The main consideration is that the University should have a score specification to avoid scores which are too high or too low grades and which may lead to unfairness (F7).

In fact, the policy of student learning assessment at University M does not stand as an independent system, but forms part of the "General Rules Governing Bachelor's Degree Programmes." In order to avoid policy fragmentation, University M might consult other universities' practice such as McGill University (2016, p. 1) to "bring together into a single document all the disparate policies with regard to all types of student assessments" when setting up the student assessment policy.

In view of the nature of student learning assessment in the policy, it could be seen that in addition to the regulations on attendance which emphasize the learning process, other regulations such as examinations, grading system

and grade distribution, are all concerned with the final outcomes of students' learning. Although University M states that student learning assessment could be done through a combination of different approaches such as attendance, class-work, written assignments, laboratory work, field work, research papers, tests or examinations, it does not explain how to apply these methods or what principles to consider. In this respect, University M seems to concentrate more on summative (F22) than formative assessment. However, as AAHE (1996, p. 1) suggests, good practice in assessing student learning should begin with "educational values" and see "learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time." More importantly, it does not only "pay attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes," as well as maintain ongoing assessment. These principles underline the importance of formative assessment and feedback. Thus, it is vital for University M to encourage students "be able to think independently, critically and creatively," keeping the function of formative assessment into consideration and making it explicit as rationale or purpose when setting up the student assessment policy. To give a concrete example, the University of New South Wales (University of New South Wales [UNSW], 2016, p. 1) clearly states that the purpose of the Assessment Policy is to "define assessment and articulate the University's expectations in relation to the role of formative and summative assessment … the role of feedback in assessment … grading and the certification … the administration of assessment and quality assurance and enhancement of assessment." Another example is that of the University of Edinburgh (2016) which includes a statement on formative assessment in its assessment policy. Regulation 15 of the Taught Assessment Regulations -- Academic Year 2016/17 states that "all students will be given at least one formative feedback or feed-forward event for every course they undertake" (p. 14).

4.2 Dissemination and Access of Policy

This study shows that there were several ways for faculty members at University M to access the student learning assessment policy. The policy was made openly available on the university website. However, to access the information required several steps, namely first, find the webpage of Academic Affairs Office, then "Registry," then go "Academic Calendar," then choose the category "Academic Regulations and Rules," and finally, get to the "General Rules Governing Bachelor's Degree Programmes." Apart from that, it is not easy to associate the title of "Academic Calendar" with the policy of student

learning assessment (F10). According to the interviews, only 4 out of 22 faculty members knew where to find the online regulations (F1, F6, F7, F20). These four faculty members were either members of the University Council, or served as administrative leaders. The other 18 full-time teachers did not know the exact access to online policy. They were usually informed of the policy by emails sent from the administration office in each faculty (F3, F4, F5, F14), or were told during the faculty meetings (F3, F4). Some others got the information informally from their colleagues (F13, F21) and students (F16). Basically, all interviewees were aware of the four regulations, but were not informed in a systematical way (F15, F21). They were often informed by the administrative office when the regulation was about to be implemented. For example, a few weeks ahead of the final examination, the administrative office will send a notice on the examination rules, grade distribution and grading system to faculty members (F3, F4). It might be hard for newly recruited teachers to know the regulations in this way. F16 explained that

> I found that the faculty grading system was different from the university I served in the other country through my students. Then I searched the faculty website and found the relevant document, knowing that our grading system is not following the percentage system, but following the tradition of … (another country).... I feel that a new faculty staff needs to explore many things by himself/herself.

Fairly speaking, University M adopted multiple ways to disseminate the policy and make policies accessible to staff. However, the rationale of setting up the assessment policy was not elaborated in depth. In addition, University M did not explain the rationale of the policy to teachers when these polices were disseminated (F9). Therefore, teachers probably implemented the policies without knowing the rationale. In addition, some teachers were not aware of some of polices until they were interviewed (F4). For example, F4 said that he did not know that the failing score of a course was below 50 until he was interviewed. "In order to ensure that all internal stakeholders assume responsibility for quality and engage in quality assurance at all levels of the institution" (EHEA, 2015, p. 11), it is necessary to have a more systematic way to inform teachers about the student learning assessment policy, including the way of dissemination and access to make them assume responsibility for, and engage in, quality assurance (F9, F15).

4.3 Perceptions of Policy

This study shows that all teachers who were interviewed considered all of the four regulations as practices they should follow in assessment, including regulations of attendance, examination and assessment, grading system and grade distribution (F4, F12, F13, F14). For example, a teacher said "these are regulations, you must follow them" (F14). Another teacher thought that everyone needed to follow all regulations as soon as they were established (F4).

However, in terms of attendance, teachers in this study revealed different perceptions. Some teachers supported the idea that students are active learners, and it is thus not necessary to have the policy of attendance (F10, F11, F22). For example, a teacher said that "we need to move away from seeing university students as kids at school who need discipline all the time. For me, it is up to the teacher to motivate and engage the students" (F22). In contrast, some teachers considered it necessary to have a set limit on student absenteeism (F1, F3, F4, F8, F21). For example, a teacher stated that:

> I think it is important for students to attend a class, because the lectures are always well-designed with a lot of effort. In addition, it is only possible for students to acquire thinking and problem-solving skills when they attend the class. (F21)

In terms of examination, all teachers, except one, included examinations as a mode of assessment (F1, F10, F12, F14, F20). However, this practice does not imply that every teacher considers examinations as a good practice but said that this should depend on the nature of the subject. For example, a language teacher said that

> Some of the capacities I guess you can assess by examination, for example, grammar... I know it's a common practice to do exams in most of the subjects, but personally I've been always teaching more subjects related to written comprehension and production. I feel that it's more productive for the learning process of the student if he is given regular short assignments. (F10)

Some teachers think that examinations are important. For example, F6 said that "I believe every undergraduate course needs to have a final exam … in most universities both in Asia and in the West, this is often required." F18 pointed out

that "the subject I teach is mathematics, and what we do with assessment is all about exams, like 10% quiz, 30% mid-term exam."

The third regulation is about the grading system. Since it is only a way of presentation of final grades, it does not appear to be an issue for teachers. With regards to grade distribution, there were two contrasting views. Some teachers do not agree on this policy even though they are following the requirement (F6, F11, F16). For example, a teacher expressed that

> There are sets of guidelines relative to the final grade distribution. This is common practice in many places but I, as a faculty member don't support it. I do not support normative grading. I think all grading should be based on criteria and not normative. I believe that in a fair world, every student and every member in the academic community, should compete for personal best not against peers. When you have normative grading, sometimes one of the unintended consequences is a reduction in peer cooperation and an increase in peer competition. Good learning theory indicates that peer cooperation leads to more significant and better learning than competition. (F6)

Still, some teachers support the idea of grade distribution because they think that could make students' grades more fair (F2, F17, F18). A teacher explained that

> I do believe that a normal distribution is reasonable, which could serve as a reference point for the teachers. What I usually do is to combine the exam score and students' performance in class, to try to give a fair score to students. Currently, we don't have any requirement towards students' average score, but I think as a teacher, we do not willingly assign low scores to students, which could probably have a negative influence to his/her future. (F17)

To summarize, except for the regulation of grading, the other three regulations were perceived in two ways by the participants, one favourable and the other not. It indicates that these three regulations still remain issues that need to be discussed further, especially the grade distribution policy which remains controversial. Biggs and Tang (2007) discuss both the measurement and the standards models in their article *Aligning Assessment with Intended Learning Outcomes: Principles* and raise issues on "grading on the curve" of the measurement model. They argue that "grades follow the bell curve only

if two conditions apply: that ability is normally distributed, and that ability is the sole determinant of academic attainment" (p. 171). However, "the ability of our students is not likely to be normally distributed because students are not randomly selected and neither is ability the sole determinant of students' learning outcomes" (p. 172). Moreover, "grading on the curve" "assumes that universities are a selective device to find the intellectuals in the population or that the purpose of the undergraduate years is to weed out the 'pass' level students from the potential postgraduate research students" (p. 173). In fact, "the only place for assessing students selectively in the university context is for entry to university or to graduate school." "What you get is a measure of scholastic ability, which is robust enough to allow direct comparisons between students in different subject areas. It is rough, but it works over large numbers" (p. 173). However, "once students have been selected, the aim of undergraduate teaching is to get students to learn what is in the curriculum" (p. 173). In this regard, University M might need to have a more thorough deliberation in terms of setting up the policy of grade distribution. Furthermore, this study also found that although some teachers do not really accept these regulations, they still follow the regulations when they conduct assessment. It shows the power of the policy, and that the quality of policies is considered as very important and will likely influence policy implementation.

4.4 Implementation of Policy and Difficulties Met

In terms of attendance policy, this study shows that teachers have different practices to maintain the requirement of no less than 80% attendance in every course. Some teachers did not include attendance score in the final grade (F8), while on the other hand, some other teachers did, with different weighting varying from below 10% (F2, F10, F15), to 11-20% (F4, F13), and even up to 30% (F5). When taking attendance, some teachers used seat plans to know whether students were present (F4), others created registry sheets for students to sign (F8), or used electronic devices (F6). The difficulties that teachers met when implementing the policy was mainly the big class size that prevents teachers from taking attendance every session (F11, F13).

In terms of examination, all participants except one (F10) set final examinations for their course with a weight varying from 10% (F14) to 40% (F3, F4), to more than 50% (F2, F8). The difficulty most mentioned by participants, was that if they would not have examinations for their undergraduate courses, they needed the Dean's approval (F1, F10, F12, F14, F20).

In fact, among all regulations, grade distribution was discussed most often by the teachers; they also thought that it is the most challenging aspect in assessment. Even if the policy gives teachers the right not to follow the distribution by giving justification, teachers still tried hard to meet the requirement. For example, some teachers said that if their grade distribution did not match with the policy, they would adjust student's mark to fit it in (F12, F14). In order to avoid going against the policy, some teachers adopted another solution by increasing the degree of difficulty of the examination to differentiate between students' performance (F12, F13, F15). If it was still hard to meet the distribution request, some teachers would then provide justification for the Dean's approval. However, before making the decision either to adjust the scores or to give the justification, teachers would spend considerable effort in the process. For example, when the majority of students perform well it is really hard to decide whose grade should be reduced (F4, F10, F13) because teachers considered it unfair for students and it might affect students' further study and employment (F8).

The teachers did not have difficulty with the assessment part excluding examination since University M only provides names of assessment methods for teacher's reference. Overall, they used different approaches of assessment, such as student self-assessment, peer-assessment, presentation, project, group work, and examination. However, this study mainly focused on exploring how teachers implemented the mandatory regulations of student assessment of University M; the other assessment practices that teachers conducted will not be discussed here, but kept for further study in the future.

4.5 Suggestions for Quality Assurance Policy of Assessment

This study shows that there are both strengths and weaknesses in the student assessment policy of University M. While the number of regulations related to assessment is small, giving freedom for teachers to create their own assessment practice, the regulations are short of integration with little attention to formative assessment. With regards to policy dissemination and access, different approaches are provided, but not in a systematic way. The degree of policy implementation is high, but often the implementation process is full of challenges and struggles for the teachers. A teacher argued that "what is missing in the university is probability, assurance, practice for assessment" (F22). Another teacher pointed out that

I have been teaching here for more than 25 years. During this period, it seems that society, teachers, and students are all changing, but the assessment doesn't change much, how we can break the tradition and design the assessment considering students' needs is really important. (F18)

A teacher made another point that

If there are no regulations whatsoever, then there is a higher risk that things would be un-uniform and unfair and students are unprotected as well. If there are too many rules and regulations, then we will not be able to progress as university, we are not able to recruit good students because we will have restricted academic freedom. So it's always a balance. (F6)

To improve the current assessment policy, it is suggested that the formulation of a learning assessment policy should be based on the goals of university education (F11), the nature of learning and a variety of assessment methods (F5, F15). The university should explain the rationale of, and access to, the policy, and let staff know where to access the policy. For new teachers, it is advisable to introduce and provide guidance on university policies (F3, F16). Indeed, assessment can be developed to become a culture; the examination-based evaluation system will likely form a testing culture that makes students more difficult to accept other forms of assessment (F10). However, modern society should consider the concept of lifelong learning (Boud, 2000) and facilitate students' motivation to participation in their learning assessment. In addition, the assessment policy should be a system that integrates all the relevant provisions to facilitate teachers' understanding and implementation (F9).

This study has found that overall, University M have made significant efforts in quality assurance. It established a 3-level academic quality assurance mechanism, including "Annual Programme review for all existing programmes and New Programme Accreditation for all new degree programme proposals, as well as External Academic Review for every academic unit once every five years." In addition, it also set up a centre for the improvement of teaching and learning through diversified workshops, seminars and talks to "support faculty teaching development, new pedagogical and instructional design, and assessment for teaching and learning." There is no doubt that the actions University M has taken above definitely are beneficial for the improvement of the institution quality.

However, student learning assessment needs to be placed at the core of the entire quality assurance system, since the learning outcomes are a crucial aspect of the university's quality. University M should thus consider reviewing its assessment policy, including the content and the rationale as well as the implementation process in order to maximize the impact of the policy. The findings of this study show that the degree of policy implementation by teachers is very high and thus University M should take advantage by developing a sound student assessment policy to enhance the overall quality of the institution.

5. Conclusion

University M does not have many regulations on learning assessment, but its policy formulation appear to be more concerned with administrative management while the nature of assessment is summative. With regards to the attendance policy, teachers are most flexible in its implementation and have a variety of practices, including the way of taking attendance and whether to include attendance as part of the students' academic performance. In terms of final examinations and grade distribution, the flexibility for teachers is limited to two options: following the regulations or providing justification for approval to waive the regulation. In addition to the grade system, other policies such as attendance, final examination and grade distribution, have both positive and negative aspects. Regardless of whether teachers agree with the policy, however the interviewed teachers are in accordance with these provisions to implement.

Teachers encountered various difficulties in policy implementation. The main difficulty in implementing the policy on examinations is that it would increase the workload for teachers who would like not do final examinations because they need to apply for approval. With regards to grade distribution, teachers adopted criterion-referenced assessment but then need to turn the grades into norm-referenced ones. In many cases, most students perform well, but they still need to fit the standard grade distribution.

It is hoped that University M would consider all the issues in relation to the quality assurance of its assessment policy and construct a more comprehensive, systematic and formative-orientated policy of assessment. However, this study is an exploratory case study in one particular university, and there might be other important issues in other universities that need further research to have more thorough understanding about assessment policy and quality assurance. Having said, this, however, it would be useful for university leaders to take the following

recommendations, emerging from this study, into consideration when setting up student assessment policy: (1) The assessment policy should reflect the goals of university education; (2) The rationale and purpose of the policy should be clearly stated; (3) The policy should include both formative and summative assessment and keep them in balance; (4) The policy should be integrated, easy to access and systematically disseminated and (5) Policy implementation should be monitored and evaluated for its effectiveness.

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