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ICGPA as an Integrated Grading System: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The presented paper shares the perception of Integrated Cumulative Grade Point Average (iCGPA) as an integrated grading system. The iCGPA system is one of the key initiatives outlined for implementation under the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education). A qualitative approach through discussion with the focus group was applied for information gathering. The sample populations were seven lecturers and fifty students who are directly involved in the iCGPA pilot project. Their perceptions on iCGPA were explored during the interviews. The findings show that iCGPA is evidently able to identify the students' actual ability, knowledge, skills, and attitude. The analysis of interview data yielded four major themes. The iCGPA assessment not only aids students to improve their performances but also directly helps lecturers in varying their teaching methodologies. Further research on the effects of different contexts and factors is necessary to make a systematic evaluation of iCGPA.

Keywords: *iCGPA, integrated grading system, qualitative, Malaysia*

Introduction

Human capital is the most significant investment in the development of any country. It has a core value in terms of innovation and high-income economic impact. Human capital also enhances organizations and contributes significantly to organizational competences, which in turn becomes a strong impetus for further

innovativeness (Hollander & Mar, 2009). Schultz (1993) noted that human capital is the key element in improving organizational assets and employee productivity and in turn sustains the competitive advantage. Besides, human capital involves processes that relate to training, education and other interventions to increase the levels of knowledge, skills, abilities, values, and social assets (Yasmeen, 2010). In short, education, competence, and training are the integral elements of human capital.

Research Problem

A holistic evaluation system reflects the need for universities to be responsive to the changing dynamics in the global job market. The evaluation system should address two critical issues at one go: first, institutional efforts in support of developing the holistic student, and second, issues of talent development in general, and particularly graduate employability. Doria (2015) argued that iCGPA implementation was not practical. She suggested that for the student to be evaluated based on the domains, relevant teaching, and assessment rubrics must be planned and designed. Also, academic staff must be well briefed and trained to be familiar with the rubrics and criteria for assessment and must be aligned with the existing student development agendas at both the faculty and university levels (Selingo, 2015). Therefore, there is a need to explore the concept and challenges in piloting the iCGPA project from the students' and staff's perspectives.

Research Focus

Graduate employability has been a long-standing issue discussed by policy makers, universities, and employers in Malaysia. Most of the jobs in the challenge of economic growth not only require knowledge but also specific training and skills, which affect graduate employability. To fine-tune with the industry needs, the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia (MOHE) proposed the usage of the iCGPA. MOHE believes that the assessment of academic competence, character development, and non-academic competence development should run in parallel every semester throughout studies. Universiti Teknologi MARA Malaysia was chosen to pilot the project. While applying the iCGPA, the university faced many challenges not only dealing with the system but lecturers and students as well. As the iCGPA system puts Malaysia's graduate employability agenda into the spotlight, this paper aims to explore the challenges in piloting such an assessment mechanism, from the students' and staff's point of view.

Research Methodology

The qualitative approach through discussion with the focus group was applied for data collection. The rationale for choosing this method was the intention to understand, recognize phenomena or reveal matters relating to typical behavior rather than describing the individual behavior through arithmetic or statistical analysis.

Sampling and Instrument

The sample of the study consisted of 7 lecturers and 47 students from the Department of Culinary Arts and Gastronomy, Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, who were directly involved in the iCGPA pilot project. Purposive or theoretical sampling was used to gain an in-depth insight into the participants' perceptions of their experiences concerning iCGPA. Structured questions were developed with a pre-determined set of questions in a logical order to ensure uniformity of the collected information. The questions were designed interactively to develop a relaxing, friendly atmosphere, thus obtaining high-quality information. The synthesis of the questions asked is discussed in the analysis section.

Procedure for Data Collection

This study utilized in-depth, individual interviews as the primary method of qualitative data collection. The authors interviewed the students using open-ended questions, presented in a natural, non-threatening, conversational and informal setting. Two separate closed sessions of the roundtable discussion with the lecturers and students were conducted at the end of the first and second semesters in the Faculty. In both sessions, each of the informants was provided with a list of questions for discussion and an open and candid exchange of ideas was encouraged. One of the researchers chaired both sessions and tape-recorded each of the answers given. The chairman ensured that leading questions were not asked, which could lead the informants to respond in a certain way and provide a greater chance of biased answers.

Individual interview questions were arranged from general to specific ones to follow a progression of the participants' experiences concerning iCGPA. The researcher probed their perceptions and understanding of iCGPA before and after its implementation, the comparison between iCGPA and conventional student assessment mechanisms, proactive action undertaken by the lecturers for iCGPA assessment and finally their attitudes toward iCGPA initiatives. Once data was collected through individual interviews, audiotapes were transcribed and trans-

ferred from spoken to written word to facilitate analysis. Qualitative data analysis procedures followed.

Data Analysis

A research assistant performed a verbatim transcription of the interviews. The transcripts were analyzed with the use of Atlas.ti (Version 7) software. The researchers performed investigator triangulation to improve the credibility and transferability of the analyzed data. The researchers interviewed the respondents independently to ensure the validity of the qualitative data and establish trustworthiness. In addition, the researchers presented the results to the participants during the concluding interview as a method of enhancing the credibility of this study results.

Research Results

It is worth mentioning that a narrative analysis is used in the interpretation of the collected data. This study captures something important about the data concerning the research issue and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the information collected or creates an aggregate of a group of approaches. Findings indicated that there were four (4) main themes derived from the interviews. They included initial perception, assessment mechanism, proactive action, and acceptance. These variables appeared to be among the most important attributes at the initial stage of iCGPA implementation.

Initial perception of the iCGPA

The majority of the lecturers involved in the pilot project felt that iCGPA was a complicated student academic assessment compared to the conventional practices. The iCGPA assessment was considered to create an additional load and burden for them besides their primary task of giving lectures and using current assessment. In fact, they argued that the understanding of the whole concepts of iCGPA, especially in the eighth stipulated domains, also required some extended time. Preparing rubrics for each domain is an enormous burden and tedious task; it is complicated as it deals with a substantial amount of thought and outreach. However, the lecturers admitted that they gradually recognized the essence of the concepts and the importance of iCGPA through continuous training, workshops, and explanation, together with hands-on activities. In short, they admitted that despite the fact that each domain had a distinct function, their understanding was getting better during the preparation of the rubric.

iCGPA assessment mechanism

From the responses received, the lecturers acknowledged iCGPA as one of the ways of systematic and holistic student academic assessment. Compared to the previous student assessment, the apparent strength of iCGPA is its mechanism which explicitly portrays details of student performance through the stipulated domain measured for a particular course in each semester. In this sense, the result or grade of each pre-determined attainment is revealed, which displays the strengths and weaknesses of the student's performance in the particular program learning outcome (PLO) domain. They agreed that iCGPA evidently incorporates all the aspects of generic skills that include the cognitive elements associated with academic and non-academic skills.

Some of the lecturers posited that each of the pre-determined attainments in iCGPA should comprise several sub-skills, i.e., "must have skills" and "good to have skills." The "must have skills" refer to soft skills, which are a combination of interpersonal skills, social skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, personality traits, attitudes, career attributes and emotional intelligence quotient. While "good to have skills" can be regarded as additional ones like assertiveness, competitiveness, resilience, adaptability, friendliness, and these skills are considered a bonus for the student. Furthermore, it is important to note that the lecturers admitted that a detailed assessment of iCGPA is also closely linked to their teaching and methodologies used in the classroom and laboratory. In sum, revealing both skills not only provide useful information for the students and lecturers but to the industry players as well.

Proactive action undertaken

The third question probed during the focus group discussions intended to reveal the proactive action undertaken by the lecturers from the result of the student assessment. Based on what was gathered through the interviews, the lecturers felt that student performance reflected in grades in each domain measured in a semester can easily be used by them for interventions. The intervention means advice given by a lecturers responsible for a course or by an appointed academic advisor, who are also among the lecturers. From the examination result obtained, the personal advice is given based on students' weaknesses and strengths in specific domains compared to the previous methods of assessment, which are of more general nature. In other words, through iCGPA assessment, students will be able to know clearly what is lacking in their performance, thus necessary action could be undertaken by them to improve in subsequent semesters.

Acceptance of iCGPA

The students' responses were based on the outcomes of evaluation, forms of assessment and the environment in which assessment is implemented. This, in fact, relates to practical courses, which commonly concentrate on the psychomotor or practical skills and theoretical knowledge. Although in the first semester of the pilot project, the students were not really familiar with the criteria used for the assessment, either in the practical or theoretical aspects, but after explanation made through the comprehensive rubric by their lecturers in the second semester, the students gradually got familiar with the concept, hence giving a positive reaction and having a favorable attitude towards the iCGPA assessment. It is also interesting to note that despite having mixed feelings, the majority of the students explicitly admitted that iCGPA assessment was fair and much better than the previous method of assessment.

Conclusions

This study offers a more comprehensive understanding of what are the students' perceptions on the latest assessment method and how to possibly better serve them. iCGPA is an effective method of students' academic assessment as it can identify the detail of their ability, knowledge, skills, and attitude. Also, iCGPA gives a very clear picture of student achievement either in the theoretical or practical aspect compared to the conventional assessment method. The student's strengths and weaknesses in academic and non-academic aspects are also revealed. Such assessment not only helps students to improve their performances but directly helps lecturers in diversifying their teaching methodologies. Thus, although still at the piloting stage, a good indication drawn from iCGPA is giving varying implications to the institutions, the ministry of higher education and industry as a whole.

In this context, the initiative in introducing the iCGPA student assessment by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) is a good move and undoubtedly can be implemented in all higher education institutions in Malaysia. iCGPA serves as a reminder to students that there is no room for them to skate through their studies solely on conventional quizzes, tests, and assignments. The student needs to invest time and effort in programmes and initiatives both inside and outside the classroom. Thus, all higher education institutions should offer full support. It is worthwhile, as it assists the institution in producing graduates who have the entrepreneurial competence necessary on the labour market. Besides, students' true ability, knowledge, skills, and attitudes revealed with the use of iCGPA enable

employers to make the right judgment and decisions of hiring graduates. Finally, further studies on the relationship between the iCGPA assessment practices and graduates' actual performance in business should be undertaken.

Future studies should focus on the role personality preferences play in students' perceived experiences of iCGPA. In addition, future research might be expanded to investigate how teaching styles influence the iCGPA assessment practices and graduates' actual performance. It is hoped that these studies will shed some light on how to objectively assess this relatively new but exciting dimension of student engagement assessment.

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