

Issues on the Examination Grading System of the Open University of Tanzania Undergraduate Students' Academic Programmes

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Abstract

Assigning grades to students' academic performance is a significant part of learning. This article highlights some of the issues in the Examination Regulations of the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). The main objective of the article is to stir up OUT stakeholders' critical outlook at issues raised. The main issues raised are the lack of grading Student Progress Portfolio (SPP); the un-proportional weight given to the Annual Examination relative to Main Tests; the rationale of having 40% as a pass mark for a course in a degree programme; the classification of Failure; the big range of Grade "A" relative to the other grades; and the question of only giving "C" to re-sitters and repeaters regardless of their performance in respective courses. Several recommendations have being advanced in regard to the above issues.

Introduction

Assessment of students' academic performance is one of the major tasks of a lecturer at a university. Allen (2004) points out that educational assessment involve specific procedures of documenting data on students' performance on the expectation of refining programs and improving student learning. At the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) the course lecturer is involved in the whole process of assessment in the form of setting, marking and grading Main Timed Test (MTT) and the Annual Examination (AE). This undertaking has great impact on the students' motivation to learn in form of expectations and also their future, professionally and academically. Also, assessment determines the quality of education offered by the university and it is a mechanism for quality assurance.

Thus, it is imperative for a lecturer to be conversant deeply and broadly with all that is in the university assessment mechanism.

Statement of the problem

This article highlights some of the issues and questions that emerge upon reflections on the assessment mechanism of OUT. Thus it intended to critically analyse OUT Examination Regulations and identify the issues therein that have contradictions or ambiguities.

Conceptual framework

Most of the content in this article is a subjective reflection on what is found in the section on General University Examination Regulations for Undergraduate Courses in the Open University of Tanzania Prospectus 2013/14 (pages15 and 16); and classification of degrees on page 22 and 23). This paper assumes that the lecturers and students have access to the Prospectus and hence the examination regulations. The regulations indicate the weight allocated to each component in the assessment process, grades for marks acquired and the classification of degree received at the candidate's completion of the respective programme.

The information provided is conclusions or resolutions passed by the institution's responsible organs. The Prospectus does not provide rationale for the regulation; and neither does it indicate nor suggest where these discussions can be accessed. Thus, from the very beginning the author acknowledges as having a limited knowledge on the background of assessment mechanism of the OUT. Also, the article does not make a comparison between OUT regulations and that of other higher learning institutions in Tanzania or elsewhere. This is based on the belief that what matters to OUT stakeholders are the existing examination regulations and the current practices of the institution. In identifying the issues the article assumes that OUT grading mechanism is a reflection of some of the functions of grading as mentioned by M. Scriven (1974). These include:

- To describe the worth and value of work accomplished

- To improve student's self-evaluation
- To stimulate and encourage good work by students
- To communicate teachers' judgment of the student's progress
- To select people for awards and continued education

Also, the article assumes that there is a positive correlation between student's grade and his/her academic performance. Grades derived from examination marks provide information on how well the students are learning (Erickson & Strommer, 1991) and demonstrate students' mastery of knowledge and skills.

Scope and objectives of the study

It also aims at sensitizing the stakeholders to have a critical look at this very important component in students' academic progress and achievement. This paper is only limited to the grading component of the assessment mechanism employed at OUT. It is assumed that the examination marks are an accurate summary of students' performance on the course based on valid assessment instruments. Ignored in this article are negative side effects of examinations and grading e.g. test anxiety, cheating (passing without learning), sense of inferiority (for being labeled "Absolute Failure") or deterioration of knowledge since when the grade was obtained. It is assumed that OUT examinations/tests are fair and the marking process is reliable.

The article has not exhausted all the issues that can be raised in regard to the OUT grading system. The main objective is make stakeholders have a critical look at what is practiced with the aim of having a serious discussion on these important issues that are rarely discussed.

Methodology

This study deployed the documentary research method. Payne and Payne (2004) describe the documentary method as the techniques that are commonly used to investigate, interpret and identify the limitations of commonly written documents. Mogalakwe (2009) points out that although this method is not very popular in social science research, however it is acceptable as a scientific research method. The prime document for assessment of this study was the

OUT Prospectus, solely in section describing Examination Regulations. A critical analysis of the regulations was used to identify the issues highlighted here. According to essaypro.com (Retrieved 2018) critical analysis refers to an academic paper designed to understand certain written work that expresses the personal opinion of the writer. Thus the opinions in this article in reference to OUT examinations are subjective in nature.

Why is Student Progress Portfolio (SPP) not graded?

The OUT's academic assessment system for undergraduate students' courses normally consists of three components, namely: Student Progress Portfolio (SPP), Main Test (MTT) and Annual Examination (AE). A Student portfolio is a " compilation of academic work assembled for the purpose, among several, of evaluating coursework quality, learning progress, and academic achievement; determining whether students have met learning standards or requirements for a course; and helping students reflect on their academic goals and progress as learners (2016, edglossary.org>portfolio).

Portfolios can be used in different levels in education system and be in form of collection of student's work as the evidence of learning. Normally the institution, depending on objectives of the portfolio, decides on how and if to grade the students' portfolio. When the institution is looking for overall mastery of the course then there is need to grade a portfolio through a rating scale (McDonald, 2011). SSP is mandatory to all OUT students. SPP is not allocated any score or grade although it is assessed and used to determine student's preparedness for examination. According to regulation 3.5 it is stated that no mark will be awarded for SSP (OUT Prospectus 2013/14). However, a student is not allowed to attempt AE without first submitting SPP for assessment by academic staff.

SSP component is very demanding, especially when compared to MTT and AE. In SPP the student is required to summarise, in one page, by giving a description of what s/he considers to be the most important knowledge and skills gained from the respective subject.

Relatively, in MTT a student only learns half of the course content and his/her performance is reflected by a score. In AE the student has to cover the whole course content and his/her performance is reflected by a score. A critical analysis of the three components leads one to conclude that SPP is more demanding since the student has to make a self evaluation on his/her competency in the subject; sort the important knowledge and skills gained from the subject and then come out with a one page summary. It is not a small feat to summarise a whole course in a single page paper size A5.

In making an assessment, one expects the outcome to be a pass or fail. In case of OUT SSP results lead into being eligible (pass) or ineligible (fail) to get Examination Hall Ticket (EHT). Total failure of SSP may lead to student being asked to withdraw from the university. However, one observes that the SSP results are solely based on subjective judgment, i.e. both by the student and the academic staff. When a student submits SPP s/he has already evaluated himself/herself and believes that s/he has gained the required levels of competency to attempt AE. The assessing academician on the other hand can judge that the student has failed or totally failed hence contradicting student's self evaluation. Also a different academic staff assessing the same SPP can judge that the student has passed. The issue is why not be objective in assessing the SPP and come up with a score that clearly indicates whether the student has passed, failed or totally failed? Introducing the score and grade will necessitate the institution to establish criteria and benchmarks in the assessment process of the SSP.

Why should the annual examination component weigh so much and marginalize the timed test?

The Main Test accounts for 30% of the total course marks and the Annual Examination accounts for 70%. The total marks for the two components are thus 100% i.e. having scored the highest possible marks in each of the components. [The total marks of 100 indicate a perfect score for both the Main Timed Test and in the Annual Examination]. Theoretically the total score is assumed to reflect the

amount of effort expended by the student on the course and his/her mental ability. So, with the regard to distribution of marks, a student is expected to spend more energy and time on Annual Examination than on the Main Timed Test. The article assumes that if the scores in the components are on interval scale, the total scores of Main Test weigh approximately 42.9% of the Annual Examination. The proportion between the two components i.e. Annual Examination and the Main Test is 7:3. Thus, the Annual Examination outweighs the Main Test greatly; implying that the Annual Examination's great significance in the process of assessing students' academic performance. However, some aspects in the assessment mechanism reveal that the real situation does not reflect the above assumptions. Specifically, the Main Timed Test covers half the material that is covered in Annual Examination. In ideal conditions the marked Main Timed Test is returned to the students before they sit for the Annual Examination so that they can identify their weaknesses and strengths in the course in preparation for Annual Examination.

Hence, preparing for the Final Examination is making revision of the material learned for the timed tests. The pass mark for all undergraduate courses is 40% of the total marks. According to the current regulations if a student gets 40 marks in the Annual Examination and gets a zero in the Timed Test s/he will still pass the course. In order to complete a course one is obliged to attempt all three components of the examination. In an extreme case one can get an Honour's Degree solely based on the Annual Examination marks. Thus, once a student knows that s/he can do well in the final examination s/he may become motivated not to study for Main Test. The issue is, why is the weight of one component of the examination so big that it can alone make one pass the course? If the aim is to be competent in the course, the regulations of the examination should compel students to study hard for all components. One option is to reduce the weight of the Annual Examination to the point almost impossible to pass the course entirely depending on it alone. Another option is requiring a minimum of 40% in each component for an

individual to pass the course i.e. 40% of the Main Test and 40% of the Annual Examination.

Why award marks for breaking a fundamental Assessment Regulation?

OUT Examination Regulations for Undergraduate Courses clearly state that, “The assessment shall consist of a two hour written test in the middle of academic year and a three hour annual examination at the end of the academic year” (OUT Prospectus 2011/12, Regulation 1.1, pg. 15). The word “shall” imply that this condition is obligatory to all students without an exception i.e. the two components are integral part of course assessment and that the test will precede the annual examination. However, Examination Regulation 1.8 undermines the above condition by stating, “A candidate who attempts the annual examination without having done the test in that year will be awarded the mark zero for the test” (OUT Prospectus 2013/14, pg. 16).

Although out of scope of this paper, this regulation assumes that in open learning mode a student has to attempt the test and the annual examination in the same academic year. The researcher believes that a student can attempt the test in one academic year and then the annual examination in that year or in the following year. The test marks obtained in the previous year cannot be equated to zero if the student does not attempt the Annual Examination in that academic year. This seems unfair to the respective student. Getting 35 marks out of 40 in the previous academic year can never equal to a ‘zero’ in this academic year in an ODL mode of delivery. From my perspective this student is much better than students who got 25 out of 40 in the previous or current academic year.

This regulation can, at worse, make a student who attains very low mark in the test to deliberately miss the Annual Examination that academic year with the hope of starting the course anew in another academic year in the future. A ‘zero’ in interval scale has a quantitative value. A student who attempts a test and does not have a

single response correct is awarded a 'zero'; and the one who has all responses correct is awarded a full mark of 100%. So, based on regulation 1.8, awarding 'zero' for attempting the Annual Examination without having done the examination rewards the students for going against regulation 1.1. This implies that the student is treated the same as a student who attempts the test and obtains a 'zero'. The researcher is of the opinion that a student who prepares for a test cannot be treated the same as a student who does not prepare for the test. A student who attempts the test and gets a 'zero' is theoretically academically better off than the one who deliberately does not prepare to take the test. Briefly, the issue is what is the rationale of having a regulation that permits and rewards one for breaking a fundamental component of the learning process and assessment procedures? The researcher proposes to delete Examination Regulation 1.8 and make all students adhere to Examination Regulation 1.1.

A Pass Mark of 40%!

One objective of having examinations in any institution is the acknowledgement of setting a level of proficiency that one must achieve to be accepted as competent in that particular area of study. This is much more so where criterion reference performance mode of assessment is used, such as at the OUT. Performance above the set level is "Pass" and below that level is "Fail". When joining the OUT, students are aware of the examinations and thus aim to work hard in every course they register for to be in the level of "Pass" and avoid "Fail".

According to Examination Regulation 1.3 for undergraduates "The pass mark for both continuous assessment and annual examination shall be 40% except for the Foundation course which is 50%" (Prospectus 2013/14 pg 16). Coursework evaluation for Master's Degree at OUT for 'pass' is 50% and for Postgraduate Diploma in Education courses the minimum 'pass' is 'B' which is equivalent to 50%. The main concern here is "Why is 40% of the performance considered a 'pass' at undergraduate level and 'fail' for the

Foundation Courses and Master's courses which are one level below and one level above the undergraduate courses respectively?" The author strongly believes that there is a need for the OUT to openly elaborate the rationale for setting 40% as pass mark for undergraduate degree programmes. One wonders the reasons behind setting different points for 'passes' when the institution is using the same interval scale (0-100) to evaluate performance for its programmes. Students at postgraduate programmes are demanded to have a higher performance level than that they had at undergraduate programmes i.e. pass mark of 40% at undergraduate and of 50% at postgraduate.

However, the situation is contrary when moving from Foundation Courses to undergraduate programmes. Pass mark for Foundation courses is 50% and at undergraduate is 40% i.e. the performance bar is lowered when one successfully moves to a higher level! What does this say with regard to the expected level of performance to Foundation students when joining the undergraduate programmes? The same rationale applied for raising the bar at postgraduate level should be used for undergraduate programmes, i.e. pass mark greater than that of the Foundation Courses. On one hand this point is too low to reflect the accepted level of performance at the end of the course. A mark of 40 implies that the student only knows 40% of what s/he is supposed to know. Or in other words, the student *does not know 60%* of what s/he is supposed to know as determined by the assessment mechanisms of the institution.

The implication here is that the institution is satisfied with state of affair since in regulation 10.9 it is indicated that 40% counts as "satisfactory" (Prospectus 2013/14 pg 22). Imagine employing an English Language teacher whose mastery of the language is only 40% of the stated level. Couple that level of language proficiency with the Teaching Practice assessment of only 40% level of competency. Expecting him/her to be a qualified teacher in the field is doubtful. Secondary school students trained only by such a teacher cannot be expected to be fluent in English language. The same can be said to

students' performance in other professions. On the other hand if teachers with performance level of 40% are competent in classroom teaching then there is something odd about the definition of a pass. It is odd since superficially the 40% looks very low while in reality the outcome from such a student is of high quality. Or is it that the examinations and the tests are artificially very difficult that the level of pass must be set very low so that a great number of students can pass the respective course? One of the objectives of examinations is to motivate students to study hard. Without examinations few students would bother to work hard. Extrinsically motivated students will only aim for 40% performance to realize their goal. On the lecturers' side, those not interested in helping each student realize full potential will be satisfied with 40% performance. Raising the bar to a higher level will necessitate both the students and lecturers to work harder and to raise the quality of OUT outputs and learner outcomes.

Why have Fail, Marginal Fail, Absolute Fail and Total Failure?

Fail can be defined as being unable to attain the required standard as in examination (Collins English dictionary, retrieved 2018) In the OUT examination regulation there is no specific part precisely stating what "Fail" constitutes. Part of Examination Regulation 3.7 reads "Only in cases of *total failure* and on recommendations of the Faculty Board, a student may be asked to withdraw from the University" (OUT Prospectus 2013/14, pg. 17). Going through the Open University of Tanzania Prospectus 2013/14 the author was unable to identify the definition of the term *total failure*! Is failing one course a total failure or is it failing all courses in a given period? There is need to have quantitative definition of *total failure* based on assessment processes for each programme so that the institutional responsible organs can make decisions based on objectivity. (I am just thinking aloud, what happens to a student who rejects the "request to withdraw from the university" after obtaining a total failure? Decisions based on objectively obtained information should be clear, i.e. a student obtaining total failure should be terminated outright from the university and not be requested to withdraw). Examination Regulation 10.9 in specifying range of marks identifies

Marginal Fail (35%-39%) and Absolute Fail (0%-34%). The issue here is why have two categories or levels of Fail? Normally the Fail mark zone starts at the point just below the pass mark. For OUT undergraduate degree programmes there is no need to classify the Fail zone. The consequences of Marginal Fail and Absolute Fail to a student are the same, i.e. one has to do Supplementary Examination or repeat the whole course in case of failing the second time regardless whether it is a Marginal Fail or Absolute Fail. To make the two categories have value one can suggest that for Marginal Fail a student be required to do Supplementary Examination and for one with Absolute Fail be required to repeat the respective course.

OUT has a “fail one fail all policy” i.e. to get a certificate one has to pass all the required courses in the respective programme and failing one course means failing the whole programme. If one gets 90% in all courses except one in which s/he gets a Marginal Fail or Absolute Fail after Supplementary Examination and repeating, s/he is counted as having failed the whole programme. So, why have these different categories/levels of Fail in degree programmes when the repercussions to the concerned students are the same? The author is of the opinion that the classification in the degree programmes should have a bearing on the respective students. The “fail one fail all” policy should be modified whereby a student who passes all core courses but gets a Marginal Fail in one or two elective courses gets a degree. A student who gets a Marginal Fail in a core course should do Supplementary Examination and the one who gets Absolute Fail should repeat the whole course without be given a chance to do Supplementary Examination.

Why should more effort or higher ability amount to no difference?

At OUT the total marks of the course assessment (Main Timed Tests + Annual Examination) is assigned a letter grade as follows (Regulation 10.9, pg 23):

Table 1. Classification of Marks

Letter	Quality	Range
A	Excellent	70%-100%
B+	Very Good	60%-69%
B	Good	50%-59%
C	Satisfactory	40%-49%
D	Marginal Fail	35%-39%
E	Absolute Fail	0%-34%

The source: The OUT Prospectus 2013/14

The letter grades give the examination score a qualitative value with "A" having the best performance and in descending order to "B+", "B", "C", "D" and the lowest is "E" indicating the worst performance. The letter indicates the general area where one's score falls. Being called an "A" student is a great honour in a university. A critical look at the allocation of letter grades relative to scores reveals a number of issues that need clarification. The first one is why should there be a "B+" but no "B-", "A+", or "C+"? Is there something special about "B+" or the range of "B" that makes it necessary to be classified into two categories but not so in the other grade letters? Or is the sign "+" representing the word "Very" since "B" is "Good" and "B+" is "Very Good"? The best explanation that the author can think of is that the letter grades are a nominal scale representing an interval scale. The score range among the grade letters differs quantitatively. The table below illustrates this, starting with the grade letter with the biggest range in descending order:

Range of Marks

Grade Letter	Range (Marks)
E	34
A	30
B+	10
B	10
C	10
D	5

The source: The Author (2014).

This range of marks of the OUT examination scores are on performance based criterion. The letter with the biggest range is "E", at one of the extreme end which represents the Absolute Fail i.e. a range of 34 marks. The second letter with the biggest range is "A" with 30 marks and then followed by "B+", "B" and "C" with each having a range of 10 marks and the smallest range is "D" with 5 marks. The issue here is why the range of "A" so big? The rationale for having the big range of "E" at the other extreme cannot be applied in the opposite extreme. The principles of normal distribution cannot be applied to university students' performance since what is being measured is related to mental ability and level of competency in the respective field. Those in the general population with low learning or mental ability have already been screened out in the previous levels in the education system, so it is impossible to have them at a university level. One would expect a negatively skewed distribution at a university level in regard to mental related performances.

In OUT the grade letter is more important than the marks it is based on. There is no difference between getting 40%, 45% or 49% since all are "C" amounting to "2" points, also 50%, 55% and 59% are "B" and amounting to "3" points each. Grade letters determine the Cumulative Grade Average Point (GPA) and the classification of the degree awarded and, as such acts as a factor in student motivation to learn. In many cases GPA has impact on the future of the respective student e.g. to pursue a Master's degree programme at OUT the prospective student must have at least a cumulative GPA of 2.7; to be a Tutorial Assistant or Assistant Lecturer at OUT one must have a cumulative GPA of 3.8.

In theory a student who wants to have a better grade is motivated to study harder to get more marks that will be translated to in higher value letter grade. However, the range of "A" may have a negative impact on students needing to achieve the optimal performance in the course. The range of pass mark area is 61 i.e. 40%-100%. The range of "A" is 31 marks, making it more than 50% of the pass mark area! In

fact the combined range of "C" to "B+" is 29, less range than that of one grade letter. An increase of 10 (sometimes as little as 0.5%) marks moves one from "D" to "C", "C" to "B", "B" to "B+" or "B+" to "A". At an extreme situation an increase of 16 marks moves one from "E" to "B" and an increase of 25 marks from "E" to "B+" i.e. from "Absolute Fail to Good" or "Absolute Fail to Very Good" respectively! Once one gets 70% s/he is motivated not to learn since even an increase of 29 points makes no difference in the letter grade, GPA or the classification of the OUT degree certificate. The issue here is why an increase of 10 points or less is more important and significant in one's future while not acknowledging an increase of 30 points. Is OUT satisfied with motivating students to acquire only 70% as the optimal performance and uninterested in making her students realize their full potentials?

If 70% is "A" with qualitative value of "Excellent" is it possible for 85% -100% to be "A+" with a qualitative value of "Marvelous"? (Just thinking aloud, "If the range of 50%-69% is categorized into "B" and "B+" why not categorize the range of 70% -100% into 70%-79% as "A-", 80%-89% as "A" and 90%-100% as "A+"). The author is of the opinion that a student with 100% material is quantitatively and qualitatively superior to the one with 70% material. Treating them as equal or ignoring the differences in performance is unfair and detrimental to the development of students' full potentials in their respective courses or professions. One can also speculate that there are lecturers who are eager to facilitate learning conditions that can lead students to perform in the range above 70%.

When "more" is equal to "less"!

In criterion reference based performance all candidates can pass or fail depending on the level set for acceptable performance. The performance of one individual or all individuals has no effect on the performance of the other individual(s). At OUT there are students who fail in one or more courses. A fail requires doing Supplementary Examination i.e. do the Annual Examination of the respective course only and not the Main Test. A second fail means relearning the course

and redoing the Main Test and the Annual Examination. A third fail leads to discontinuation from the programme. Giving students who fail a chance to do supplementary or repeat the course implies failing once or twice is not the end of the world and there are chances to the respective individual to improve his/her academic performance to the extent of passing the course. Sadler (2005) point out that grading refers to evaluation of course in degree program whereby scores serve as raw material that is converted into a different symbolic representation of overall achievement. Grading symbols used by OUT are A, B+, B, C, D and E. the table below indicate the symbolic representation as used by OUT.

Grade	Quality	Marks	Grade Point
A	Excellent	80%-100%	4.4-5.0
B+	Very Good	70%-79%	4.0-4.3
B	Good	60%-69%	3.0-3.9
C	Satisfactory	40%-60%	2.0- 2.9
D	Marginal Fail	35%-39%	0
E	Absolute Fail	0%-34%	0

The source: The Author (2014).

Examination regulations 1.4 and 1.5 state the maximum grade attainable in a supplemented subject and/or repeated subject for the respective student is a C. So, according to OUT regulations any marks above 40% (pass mark) in the second or third attempt is counted as a "C" and translated into 2 points. Thus, whether one gets 40%, 50%, 60%, 85% or 95% it all amounts to "C"! The issue here is, is the second attempt performance of 85% the same as the first performance of 40% and worse off than the first attempt of 50% or 60%? Translating these scores to language proficiency for example, who is a better English language teacher, the one with 50% proficiency in the first attempt or the one with 75% proficiency in the second attempt? By giving "B" for 50% to one teacher and "C" for 75% for the other teacher, the employer will think that the first teacher is better in English language proficiency than the second teacher. The author acknowledges that being given a second chance to pass is a privilege and that second learning of the same material is often easier than the first learning.

Also, those who pass in the second or third attempt cannot be treated equally as those who pass in their first attempt. However, based on using the criterion reference assessment the letter grade should at least reflect to some degree the level of performance of the student in the respective course. Also the letter grade for repeating students should act as a motivation to achieve a higher score as possible rather than just passing the course by getting 40%. For the second attempt the score for pass could remain the same but have a higher score for "B", "B+" and "A". An example is illustrated in the table below:

Conclusion

This paper has identified some of the issues in the OUT grading system that needs to be discussed and explained so as to remove ambiguities to the concerned community. The objective was not to show the deficiency of the system but rather use the information provided to raise a healthy academic discussion on this very important aspect of the learning process. In the end the OUT grading system should motivate students to learn to their fullest potential; be accurately assessed and get the score and grade that reflects student true academic performance.

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