

Instructors Attitudes towards Criterion – Referenced Assessment

Dr. Melaku Girma
St. Mary's University

1. Introduction

The SMU in 2009, with a University College status, has developed a “Student Assessment Policy”. This policy didn't clearly and explicitly discuss about the conceptual frameworks for grading. The institution uses letter grades to describe student achievement. This awards superior work with an A grade, above average work with a B grade, average work a C grade, unsatisfactory work with a D grade, and failing work with an F grade. This is described for both staff and students in the appropriate document.

In connection with this, Higher Education Relevant and Quality Assurance (HERQA 2009) in its Institutional Quality Audit of St. Mary's University College highlighted the following:

The Education Quality Assurance (EQA) team explored the operation of the grading system with staff representatives and with students. Student representatives were critical of the application of the system. The SED also reports (page 32) that students have complained that the grading system is too stringent. It is claimed that the students are assessed on their achievement of the objectives of the courses that they have followed but, in line with grading rules, instructors use a comparative system to grade students. The SED appendix on grading indicates the proportions of a student group that should be awarded each grade. For example an A grade should normally be awarded to between 0% and 10% of the students and a C grade to between 30% and 65%. While these are quite broad ranges, the system depends on a student's performance relative to that of other students rather than the achievement of predetermined criteria. This is an unsatisfactory system. An assessment system must allow for all students who satisfy the criteria for a grade to be awarded that grade. Grade criteria should not relate to the achievements of other students. Systems that relate to average students in a cohort give no assurance on students (page 29).

In SMU grades are determined mostly by norm – referencing where by students are given grades relative to one another, rather than to specific pre –determined performance criteria. Students generally do not know the level of achievement they must reach to get a particular grade. A norm referenced assessment system is essentially unsatisfactory for the maintenance of standard.

Nevertheless, since 2006 E.C. (2013/2014) academic calendar, the university has exerted some efforts to change the scenario. Hence, in some courses criterion- referenced assessment has been introduced where the final exams have been prepared by the Testing Center of the university in accordance to the Test Blue prints. In 2007 E.C. plan has been made to implement in all major courses so that it may be a good impetus for quality enhancement of the teaching - learning process.

2. Objective of the Study

This small study is designed to gather some opinions on criterion- referenced assessment and its implementation in St. Mary's University which might help to determine the instructors' attitudes towards the subject in question. Thus, the study attempts to give answers to the following question.

What are the attitudes of the instructors towards criterion- referenced assessment and its implementation?

3. Methodology

3.1 Operational Definitions

A. **Attitudes:** - Feelings directed towards an idea, object or event. Include likes and dislikes, and perceptions of what is aesthetic and unaesthetic. Attitudes here are considered to contribute to values.

B. Criterion- Referenced

3.2 Assessment: a conceptual framework where grades are assigned by comparing a student's performance to a defined set of standards to be achieved, targets to be learned, or knowledge to be acquired. Students who complete the tasks, achieve the standards completely, or learn the targets are given the better grades, regardless of how other students perform.

3.3 Population: the study targeted instructors involved in degree offering departments namely: Marketing, Management, Accounting, and Informatics Faculty.

3.4 Sample: Due to administrative limitation, available instructors were considered as a sample. In this regard 3 from Management, 4 from Marketing, 14 from Accounting and 9 from Informatics faculty, a total 30 were included in the sample.

3.5 Instrument: The linker- type scale was employed to measure the extent to which the instructors have favorable or unfavorable feelings toward criterion- referenced assessment and its implementation. The scale had 10 items focused on criterion - referenced assessment (see the Annex).The respondents were requested to respond to each statement on a five-point scale: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree. All items were worded such that they expressed definite favorableness. The alternatives were weighed 5, 4,3,2,1 from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

4. Presentation and Analysis of Data

Concerning the opinion that “Instructors are now in a position of assigning grades by comparing a student’s performance to a defined set of standards to be achieved, targets to be learned, or knowledge to be acquired”

- 18 or 60% of the instructors seem to have to valuable attitudes;
- 9 or 30% of the instructors seem to have no clear position; that is, they have neutral attitudes;
- 3 or 10% of the instructors seem to have unfavorable attitudes.

Here the majority (60%) of the instructors seem comfortable with the idea that instructors are now in a position of assigning grades by comparing a student’s performance to a defined set of standards.

In connection to the opinion that “Instructors are properly using the criterion – referenced assessment”

- 12 or 40% of the instructors show positive attitudes;
- 6 or 20% of the instructors show neutral attitudes;
- 12 or 40% of the instructors show negative attitudes.

Thus, the majority (60%) of the instructors appear to be undecided or to have negative attitudes regarding the idea that instructors are properly using the criterion referenced assessment

Regarding the opinion that “For instructors setting learning targets and standards are not difficult and complex”

- 20 or 66.7% of the respondents appear to have favorable attitudes;
- 9 or 30% of the respondents appear to have no clear positions;
- 1 or 3.3% of the respondents appear to have unfavorable attitudes

The opinion presented here is much same as the 1st opinion but, worded differently and the responses seem to be consistent where the majority (66.7%) of the instructors indicated that setting learning targets are not difficult and complex.

Pertaining to the opinion that “I believe that instructors are properly trained in implementing criterion- referenced grading”

- 10 or 33.3% of the respondents show positive attitudes;
- 10 or 33.3% of the respondents show neutral attitudes;
- 10 or 33.3% of the respondents show negative attitudes.

Therefore, the 66.6% (seem large majority) appear to be uncertain or don’t believe that instructors are properly trained in implementing criterion – referenced grading.

As regard to the opinion that “Criterion –referenced grading is very important to enhance quality in teaching – Learning process vis- a - Vis norm referenced grading”.

- 25 or 83.3% of the instructors seem to have favorable attitudes;
- 2 or 6.7 % of the instructors seem to have neutral attitudes;
- 3 or 10% of the instructors seem to have unfavorable attitudes.

Hence, a very large proportion of respondents (83.3%) seem to have positive attitudes towards the opinion that criterion – referenced grading is important than norm referenced to enhance quality.

Concerning the opinion that “I see major difference between criterion – referenced grading and norm – referenced grading”.

- 22 or 73.3% of the respondents show positive attitudes;
- 7 or 23.3% of the respondents show neutral attitudes;
- 1 or 3.3% of the respondents show negative attitudes.

In line with the previous opinion here again, the big majority (73.3%) of the respondents seem to have the feeling that they see major difference between criterion – referenced and norm – referenced grindings.

As regard to the opinion that “Employing a criterion – referenced grading is not a waste of time”.

- 17 or 58.6% of the respondents appear to have positive attitudes;
- 10 or 34.5% of the respondents appear to have neutral attitudes;
- 2 or 6.9% of the respondents appear to have negative attitudes :
- 1 is missing value.

The majority (58.6%) fined it to have the opinion that using a criterion – referenced grading is not a waste of time.

Finally in connection to the opinion that “Overall the criterion – referenced assessment in SMU seems promising”

- 9 or 30% of the instructors tend to have positive attitudes;
- 15 or 50% of the instructors tend to have neutral attitudes;
- 6 or 20% of the instructors tend to have negative attitudes.

Therefore the large majority (70%) seem to have the view that criterion – referenced assessment in SMU is not yet promising.

In connection with the opinion that, “Criterion – referenced assessment is of great importance to improve quality in the teaching – learning process”.

- 25 or 86.2% of the respondents show positive attitudes.
- 4 or 13.8% of the respondents show neutral attitudes;
- 1 is missing value

Overall, as it has been observed in the above three consecutive opinions, a comfortable majority of the instructors tend to have favorable attitudes towards criterion –referenced grading as compared to the norm –referenced grade in improving quality.

Pertaining to the opinion that “criterion – referenced assessment requires revisiting the methods of teaching, curriculum and testing materials as well as re teaching thus put some pressure on instructors”.

- 21 or 70% of the instructors seem to have favorable attitudes;
- 7 or 23.3 of instructors seem to have neutral attitudes;
- 2 or 6.7% of the instructors seem to have unfavorable attitudes,

Hence, the big majority (70%) appears to have the opinion that criterion – referenced assessment put some pressure on instructors.

The attitude scale had 10 items focused on criterion – referenced assessment. The scores of the 10 items in this scale summed to yield on instructor’s score. With this respect the maximum possible score is 50, when averaged equals 5.0 on the scale –which is the most favorable response, the minimum possible score is 10, when averaged equals 1.0 on the scale – which is the most unfavorable response. The average score of the scale is 30, when averaged equals 3.0 on the scale – which is the exact neutral position. However along the continuum the scores between 3.5 and 2.5 were considered as neutral positions. Besides this, scores equal to or greater than 4.5 were taken as very encouraging and scores equal to or less than 1.5 as very discouraging.

The instructors’ attitudes are summarized in the table below

Attitude	f	%
Very encouraging	3	10.0
Encouraging	16	53.3
Neutral	9	30.0
Discouraging	2	6.7
Very discouraging		
Total	30	100.0

The table above shows that of the 30 instructors;

- 19 or 63.3% of the instructors appear to have favorable attitudes;

- 9 or 30% of the instructors appear to have no clear positions; that is, they have neutral attitudes
- 2 or 6.7 of the instructors appear to have unfavorable attitudes.

When one examines the degrees of favorable and unfavorable attitudes of the instructors;

- Of the 19 or 63.3% of the respondents who have favorable attitudes 3 or 10% tend to be most favorable.
- Of the 2 or 6.7% of the respondents who have unfavorable attitudes 0 or 0.0% tended to be most unfavorable.

Therefore, in light of the above results it seems that the large majority have favorable or desirable attitudes towards criterion –referenced assessment where the overall instructors’ responses average equal 3.6 which lie in the favorable category on the scale

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

This mini study was planned to gather some opinions on criterion –referenced assessment and its implementation in SMU so as to determine, to some extent, the instructors’ attitudes towards the subject in question. This might be a good feedback for the concerned bodies in their effort to bring about quality improvement in the teaching –Learning process.

To meet the objective 30 available instructors involved in degree offering departments will be considered. A likert – type five point scales was employed to collect their opinions.

The results hinted that the large majority of instructors have favorable or desirable attitudes towards criterion – referenced assessment where the overall instructor’s response average equals 3.6 which lies in the favorable category on the scale. Nevertheless, more work appears to be needed in this area. Because the available information and findings alone are not comprehensive enough to provide conclusive results; one has to be aware of the limitations of attitude scale and the difficult task of attitudinal study.

5.2 Recommendations

On the basis of the findings the following areas need serious attention:

- Whether instructors are properly using the criterion – referenced assessment,
- Whether instructors are properly trained in implementing criterion – referenced grading and overall ,
- Whether the criterion – referenced assessment seems in the right track.