

# Assessment of Students' Learning Achievements under Semester System in Pakistan

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## ABSTRACT

Students and teachers face several problems while practicing newly introduced assessment procedures of semester systems in Pakistan. The study aims to find out ways to ease these problems. Statement of the problem was 'Preparation of Guidelines for the Assessment of Students' Learning Achievements under Semester System'. Objectives of the study were; (1) to study the current assessment procedures of semester system to evaluate the students' learning achievements in the public sector universities of Punjab, (2) to investigate the problems faced by teachers and students during practicing current assessment procedures in semester system, and (3) to prepare guidelines for the assessment of students' learning achievements under semester system in public sector universities of Punjab. After the review of related literature two separate questionnaires were constructed to collect data. Data were gathered from 450 students and 50 teachers of three public sector universities of Punjab. Development of assessment criteria, training for university teachers, monitoring mechanism over teachers' assessment of students' achievements and further research on professional standards of university teachers were recommended at the end of the study.

**KEYWORDS:** Assessment criteria; monitoring mechanism; professional standards.

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## INTRODUCTION

In Pakistan since 1947 major focus was on summative assessment. For higher education, at that time, there were three universities in the country: (1) Punjab (Lahore) 1882 (2) Sindh (Karachi) 1947 (3) West Pakistan (Dacca) 1921 (Forest & Altbach, 2006). These three universities were established on British Oxford style of annual system, and were practicing summative assessment style. One of the major forms of summative assessment is external examinations. These universities were responsible to conduct external examinations including Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSSC) examinations. Boards of Intermediate and Secondary Education were established later in 1954. Linn & Gronlund (2005) suggested that assessment procedures may be of paper-pencil-tests, extended responses (e.g. essays) and performance of authentic tasks (e.g. laboratory experiments). Shirazi (2004) have explored the merits and demerits of external examinations. Lesser chances to influence or approach to evaluators and uniformity of standard to assess competencies and achievements of the students are positive characteristics of the external examinations. However, lack of direct and personal contact of examiners with students and large concentration on getting marks rather than learning and understanding have created problems for effective assessment in the examinations.

To reduce these deficiencies in examination system Government took many initiatives in past years. One bold and effective initiative was the introduction of semester system in higher level institutions. In December 1973 Karachi University converted its system from annual to semester (Khurshid, 1981). In Punjab University Lahore, the system was introduced in 1975-76 and was abolished in 1980 (Qarshi, 2006). And in Agriculture University Faisalabad the system is working since 1976-77 (Agriculture University Faisalabad, n. d.).

In 2001 Government of Pakistan directed all higher education institutions in the country to change their academic system from (British-type) annual system to (American type) semester system (Mahmood, 2001). After the establishment of Higher Education Commission (HEC) in 2002, HEC took this responsibility to train and prepare faculty members of universities to adopt and role effectively in semester system.

Major essence of semester system is its formative, continuous and internal type of assessment that promotes teaching-learning process. Through this assessment method students frequently retain a relationship with their teachers and consequently learn and try to improve in the light of teacher's comments and feedback. This association plays vital role in enhancement of teaching as well as students' acquisition and is called 'the blood of teaching'.

Internal assessment also has some benefits and drawbacks. According to Shirazi (2004) and Satija (1999) internal examination system is direct, flexible and economical in terms of time and money. Results in the systems can be used to improve continuing teaching-learning process. However lack of teacher's competency to construct and use internal assessment techniques can create problems.

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A study conducted by Iqbal (2004) on the topic of 'Problems and Prospects of Higher Education in Pakistan' revealed various problems of students and teaching staffs engaged in university education. It states that existing system is not working well and construction of a uniform examination system is mandatory. Identification of these hurdles and barriers will lead to locate their solutions, which are mandatory for better and purposeful functioning of the system. In this research study, focus of researcher was on identifying these obstacles, discovering their solutions and arranging a set of principles for appropriate functioning of the semester system.

### Objectives of the study

Objectives of the study were;

1. To study the current assessment procedures under semester system for evaluating students' learning achievements in public sector universities of Punjab,
2. To investigate the problems faced by teachers and students during practicing current assessment procedures in the semester system, and
3. To prepare guidelines for the effective assessment of students' learning achievements under semester system in public sector universities of Punjab.

### Significance of the Study

This study was of great significance because it was believed that the study will be helpful to;

1. Improve effectiveness of the semester system.
2. Increase performance of the system.
3. Improve existing assessment procedures in the semester system.
4. Identify the deficiencies and flaws present in the system, and provide their solutions.
5. Boost up the entire existing semester system.

### Research Procedure

The study was a type of descriptive research, and survey method was used to collect data. Two Separate questionnaires were constructed to gather date from the students and academic staff of the universities. Major purpose of this study was to construct accurate and appropriate principles to improve assessment practices under semester system in public sector universities of Punjab. Hence population of this study was consisted of academic staff and students of all public sector universities of Punjab. Randomly three public sector universities from the province of Punjab were selected. From each university three departments of three different areas i.e. social sciences, physical sciences, and linguistics were selected using stratified sampling method. Finally, 5 members of academic staff and 50 students from each department were randomly selected as a sample to gather data.

## FINDINGS

Following major findings were drawn from data analysis.

### Data Collected from Students

Results of the study reveal when students are described that there is a continuous assessment of students' learning achievements throughout the semester under semester system 50% of them reply that there is a better continuous assessment throughout the semester under semester system and 40% reply that the system possesses this characteristic to some extent (Table 01). Whereas 08% of the students state themselves disagree with the statement and only 01% avoids giving answer.

Table 01  
*Assessment of Students' Learning Achievements in Semester System*

There is a continuous assessment of students' learning achievements throughout the semester in semester system.		f	%
1	YES: There is a better continuous assessment in the semester system.	226	50
2	YES: To some extent there is a continuous assessment in the system.	181	40
3	NO: I disagree with the statement.	38	08
4	SORRY: I do not know about this.	05	01

Data specify that giving the response to the statement "students are provided instructions according to their results of continuous assessment in semester system" 34% of students reply that teachers use to provide instruction after every assessment and 56% mark "yes but it depends on the teacher" (Table 02).

Table 02  
*Providing Instructions according to Students' Assessment*

<b>Students are provided instructions according to their results of continuous assessment in semester system.</b>		<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
1	YES: Teachers use to provide instructions after every assessment.	155	34
2	YES: But it depends on teacher.	254	56
3	NO: I am not provided any instruction according to my results.	27	06
4	NO: Results of continuous assessment are not provided to me.	14	03

According to 43% of the students, results of continuous assessment are a better available way to get feedback during the course and another 43% indicates that to some extent these results are helpful for the students to take feedback (Table 03).

Table 03  
*Getting Feedback from the Results*

<b>Students take feedback from the results of continuous assessment in semester system.</b>		<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
1	YES: It is a better available way to take feedback during the course.	194	43
2	YES: To some extent it is helpful.	194	43
3	NO: These results did not support me to take feedback.	38	08
4	NO: Results of continuous assessment are not provided to me.	24	05

Findings show that forty nine percent of students reveal that teacher's role as an evaluator in the classroom is greatly supportive for their learning achievements and according to 39% of students to some extent it is supportive (Table 4.04).

Table 4.04  
*Teacher's Role as Evaluator*

<b>Role of teacher as an evaluator in classroom is supportive to students' learning.</b>		<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
1	YES: It is greatly supportive for students' learning achievements.	221	49
2	YES: To some extent it is supportive.	174	39
3	NO: I do not think so.	25	06
4	NO: Teacher's role as an evaluator is a hurdle for students' learning.	17	04
5	SORRY; I have no idea about this.	13	03

According to 11% of students guess papers are completely supportive for students' preparation for assessment under semester system, 29% say that to some extent these are helpful whereas 34% of students negate that such material is helpful and 26% of students declare guess papers destruction for students' abilities (Table 05).

Table 05  
*Use of Guess Papers for Students' Preparation*

<b>Guess papers are helpful for students' preparation for assessment under semester system.</b>		<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
1	YES: These are completely supportive.	49	11
2	YES: To some extent these are helpful.	130	29
3	NO: Such material is not helpful.	153	34
4	NO: These are for the destruction of students' abilities.	118	26

Findings demonstrate that according to 38% of students study guides are completely supportive for their preparation for assessment under semester system and 42% say these are helpful to some extent whereas 14% of students declare that such material is not helpful and 06% state such material "destruction" for students' abilities (Table 06).

Table 06  
*Use of Study Guides for Students' Preparation*

<b>Study guides are helpful for students' preparation for assessment under semester system.</b>		<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
1	YES: These are completely supportive.	169	38
2	YES: To some extent these are helpful.	190	42
3	NO: Such material is not helpful.	62	14
4	NO: These are for the destruction of students' abilities.	29	06

Thirty seven percent of students declare themselves strongly agree with the statement that results of assessment in semester system reflect true picture of students' learning achievements (Table 07).Forty one percent of the students say that to some extent the system possesses this characteristic whereas 19% of the students reveal that results in semester system are not appropriate and 03% give no response.

Table 07  
*Results of Assessment And Students' Learning Achievements*

Results of the assessment in semester system reflect true picture of students' learning achievements.		f	%
1	YES: I strongly agree.	166	37
2	YES: These reflect an adequate picture of students' learning achievements to some extent.	185	41
3	NO: Results under this system are inappropriate.	85	19
4	SORRY: I do not know about this.	14	03

According to the opinions of 23% of students a major feature of semester system is that its current assessment procedures cover the assessment of entire syllabus and 59% of students say that it covers in some cases, it depends on subject (Table 08). Twelve percent of students negate this statement replying there is no such characteristic in current assessment system whereas 07% have no opinion about this.

Table 08  
*Assessment of Entire Syllabus*

Current assessment procedures under semester system cover the assessment of entire syllabus.		f	%
1	YES: It is a major feature of semester system.	102	23
2	YES: It covers in some cases. It depends on the subject.	265	59
3	NO: There is no such characteristic in current assessment system.	52	12
4	SORRY: I have no opinion about this.	31	07

Sixty four percent of students accept that current assessment procedures under semester system completely move them to work hard and 18% declare that these procedures possess this feature to some extent whereas 13% of students reveal that it depends on the subject and 04% declare themselves disagree with this notion. Only 01% provides no information about this (Table 09).

Table 09  
*Role of Assessment to Stimulating Students for Hard Work*

Current assessment procedures under semester system stimulate the students to work hard.		f	%
1	YES: These procedures completely moved me to work hard.	286	64
2	YES: To some extent these procedures possess this feature.	82	18
3	YES: But it depends on the subject.	59	13
4	NO: I disagree.	20	04
5	SORRY: I have no opinion about this.	03	01

Findings show that thirty five percent of students are completely aware of the structure of assessment under semester system and 50% have a little knowledge about this whereas 10% of the students have no knowledge about the structure and 05% reveal that they are not described about the structure of assessment under semester system (Table 10).

Table 10  
*Students' Awareness of Assessment Mechanism*

Students are aware of the structure of assessment under semester system.		f	%
1	YES: I am completely aware of the structure.	159	35
2	YES: I have a little knowledge about the structure of assessment system.	225	50
3	NO: I have no knowledge of this.	44	10
4	NO: I am not provided any knowledge about this system.	22	05

Twenty seven percent of students declare semester system a best system that it prevents all practices of unfair means. According to 39% of respondents it is comparatively better it prevents not all but some types of unfair means whereas 27% of respondents deny this as a feature of semester system stating many students find the ways to practice unfair means (Table 11). According to 08% of respondents the system is open for the wide and worse practices of unfair means.

Table 11  
*Practices of Unfair Means in Assessment procedures*

Current assessment procedures under semester system are free from the practice of unfair means.		f	%
1	YES: It is a best system. It prevents all the practices of unfair means.	120	27
2	YES: It is comparatively better. It prevents some unfair practices.	176	39
3	NO: Many students find out the ways to practice unfair means.	120	27
4	NO: It is open for the practice of any unfair mean.	34	08

According to 24% of students their grievances about any course instructor/teacher on the issue of paper setting, marking, grading etc. are redressed well on merit and 32% states it 'some time on merit' (Table 12).

Fourteen percent of students opine that they have no complaint of their teachers' role whereas 12% argues that there is no merit in case of teachers. Nineteen percent of students avoid providing any information.

Table 12  
*Redressing Students' Grievances about any Course Instructor/Teacher*

Students' grievances about any course instructor/teacher on the issues of paper setting, marking, grading etc. are addressed on merit.		f	%
1	YES: Students' grievances are redressed well on merit and time.	107	24
2	YES: But this occurs sometimes only.	142	32
3	NO: Students have no complaints of their teachers' role.	64	14
4	NO: There is no addressing and merit in the case of teachers.	52	12
5	SORRY; I have no opinion about this.	85	19

Thirty four percent of students opine that there is a dynamic committee in their department to check the coverage of course contents and is working well whereas 20% of students state the committee ineffective. Thirty four percent of students argue that they do not know about the existence of such committee and 12% reveals that there is no such committee in their department (Table 13).

Table 13  
*Departmental Committee to Check Course Coverage*

There is an examination committee at department level to check the coverage of course contents.		f	%
1	YES: There is a dynamic committee who is working well.	155	34
2	YES: There is an ineffective committee.	92	20
3	NO: If there is such committee, I do not know.	151	34
4	NO: There is no committee for this purpose.	52	12

Data reveal that according to 28% of respondents a monitoring mechanism over teacher' evaluation, marking and grading is mandatory and according to 43% of respondents it may improve evaluation practices (Table 14). Ten percent of students argue that it will be a burden on the system and 05% states it totally unnecessary. Fourteen percent of respondents provide no opinion.

Table 14  
*Proposed Monitoring Mechanism over Evaluation Practices*

There should be a monitoring mechanism over evaluation, marking and grading by teachers.		f	%
1	YES: It is mandatory.	126	28
2	YES: It may improve evaluation practices.	193	43
3	NO: It may be another Burden on the system.	44	10
4	NO: It is totally unnecessary.	22	05
5	SORRY: I have no opinion about this.	65	14

According to 38% of respondents there is a need of revision in current assessment procedures under semester system and 45% of students confirm revision beneficial. Only 08% of respondents declare current assessment procedures under semester system appropriate requiring no revision (Table 15).

Table 15  
*Revision in Existing Assessment Procedures*

Assessment procedures under semester system are required to be revised.		f	%
1	YES: There is a need for the revision.	171	38
2	YES: It may be beneficial.	202	45
3	NO: Current procedures are appropriate.	37	08
4	SORRY: I have no opinion on this issue.	40	09

Twenty nine percent of respondents declare the semester system appropriate, valuable, and productive supporting its large adaptation at higher level (Table 16).

Table 16  
*Further Adaptation of the Semester System*

Students propose a large adaptation of the system at higher level.		f	%
1	YES: This is an appropriate, valuable, and productive system.	130	29
2	YES: It can be adapted with some modifications.	210	47
3	NO: It is enough. It will demolish our education system.	33	07
4	SORRY: I am neutral on this issue.	77	17

Data reveal that forty seven percent of respondents also support its adaptation but with some necessary modifications whereas only 07% of respondents oppose the adaptation of semester system (Table 16). Seventeen percent of respondents declare themselves neutral.

### Data Collected from University Teachers

Findings reveal that according to 20% of university teachers' opinions, they are directed to use activity-base methods to assess students' learning achievements by the university and 78% arguments of teachers reveal that they are directed to use oral and written tests and exams for students' assessment (Table 17). Two percent of respondents' opinions reveal that the teachers are provided only marks distribution rather than specific assessment methods.

Table 17

#### *University Directions for Assessment of Students' Learning Achievements*

Would you like to tell what types of methods you are directed by the University to use for the assessment of students' learning achievements in semester system?		f	%
1	Activity-base Methods	09	20
2	Quizzes, assignments, presentations, written exams	35	78
3	No Methods only Marks Distribution is provided	01	02
Total Opinions		45	100

Data show that sixty four percent of university teachers' opinions states current assessment procedures completely effective and according to 28% of respondents' arguments these methods are effective to some extent (Table 18).

Table 18

#### *Effectiveness of Current Assessment Procedures*

Would you explain how much these methods are effective for valid, reliable and comprehensive assessment?		f	%
1	Completely Effective	34	64
2	Effective to Some Extent	15	28
3	Less Effective	03	05
4	Ineffective, Teacher's Perception Makes the results Biased	02	03
Total Opinions		54	100

When university teachers are asked to tell about grade inflation in Pakistani universities, 35% of their opinions only confirm the existence of grade inflation in Pakistani universities and four percent of opinions presents external exams as a solution of this problem. According to 29% of opinions objectivity in assessment practice may remedy grade inflation, 09% of opinions propose check and monitoring on teachers' assessment and 13% of opinions urge the development of standards for the assessment of students' learning achievement to reduce grade inflation in Pakistan. Ten percent of opinions are to deny the existence of grade inflation in Pakistani universities.

Table 19

#### *Grade Inflation in Pakistani Universities*

Do you think that grade inflation is a problem in Pakistani universities? If yes, please give some suggestions for its remedial.		f	%
1	Yes	17	35
2	External Examination	02	04
3	Objectivity in Assessment	14	29
4	Check and Monitoring	04	09
5	Creation of Standards	06	13
6	No Grade Inflation	05	10
Total Opinions		48	100

Six percent opinions of university teachers considers external exam essential for revision in current assessment practices under semester system. Thirty five percent opinions urge on the development of assessment criteria, 25% opinions are for teachers' training, and 13% opinions suggest check on teachers' assessment of students (Table 20). Twenty one percent opinions propose subjective type tests for better assessment of students' learning achievements.

Table 20

#### *Proposed Revision in Existing Assessment Practices*

Please give detail about the nature of revision and correction in assessment practices under semester system.		f	%
1	External Exam	02	06
2	Development of Assessment Criteria	11	35
3	Teachers' Training	08	25
4	Check on Teachers	04	13
5	Subjective Test	07	21
Total Opinions		32	100

According to 09% opinions of university teachers, short syllabus in semester system creates difficulty for comprehensive assessment of students' learning achievements. Forty six percent opinions declare time management a major problem for university teachers (Table 21).

Table 21  
*Difficulties in Assessing Students' Learning Achievements*

Would you like to explain difficulties and problems you face while assessing students' learning achievements in semester system?		f	%
1	Short Syllabus	03	09
2	Time Management	15	46
3	Students' Large Strength	06	18
4	Absence of Assessment Criteria	03	09
5	Students' Undue Pressure for Marks	06	18
Total Opinions		33	100

Findings show that 18% of university teachers' opinions consider large strength of students a problem for students' assessment, and 09% of opinions indicate absence of assessment criteria a big problem for teachers (Table 21). Eighteen percent university teachers' opinions show students' pressure on teachers for good marking is a problem for teachers.

**Conclusion**

It is concluded that majority of students confirms their satisfaction with the system. An indicator regarding the effectiveness of continuous assessment is teachers' instructions for students according to their results. Thirty four percent of students opine that their teachers provide them instructions according to their results whereas 56% of students argue that it depends on teachers. Though 83% of the students and 25% of university teachers propose teachers' training for effective assessment of the students' learning achievements but for the teachers major problem is time management. Forty six percent of the opinions of university teachers show them suffering from time problem. It may not only affect their assessment practices but provision of feedback to the students also. Less effective time management of teachers may be a reason that 59% of students are not strongly agree with the statement that their teachers take feedback from the results of continuous assessment in semester system.

It is proved by the study that role of teacher as an evaluator in the classroom is supportive for students' learning. Eighty eight percent of students and 86% of teachers support this idea but the major issue emerged by the study is favoritism of university teachers. Fifty two percent of students show their reservations on the issue of teachers' favoritism. Seventy one percent of students and 13% of teachers' opinions suggest a monitoring mechanism on teachers' practices for students' assessments. The solution presented by the university teachers in this regard is the development of assessment criteria. Thirty five percent of teachers' opinions declare them facing problems during assessing the students' learning achievements due to the absence of assessment criteria at university and departmental level. It may be a solid reason of the allegation of favoritism.

Role of examination and appeal committees of the departments requires improvements. Only 28% of students declare department appeal committee dynamic who is working well to address the students' grievances against teachers. There are 62% of students who are either unsatisfied with the performance of the committee or unaware about the existence of such committee in the departments. Seventy 76% of students do not declare the examination committee of their department dynamic but at the edge of teachers only 19% are unsatisfied with the role and performance of the examination committee of their department. Revision, correction and refinement in the structure and working styles of these committees may reduce this gap of opinions.

Another important thing presented in the study is problems faced by both teachers and students during assessment practices. Shortage of time is a common problem for teachers and students. Thirty one percent of students argue that duration of semester is too short to comprehensive preparation for exams. Similarly 46% of teachers' opinions disclose time management as a major problem during practicing assessment procedures. Though 54% of students opine that every student has equal chances to participate and perform in assessment activities but still a large segment of students is not completely satisfied with their participation level. The solutions provided by the teachers are reduction in students' strength and increase in semester duration. Twenty percent of teachers' opinions support the former whereas 22% of opinions propose the later.

**Recommendations**

Recommendations of the study are being presented in the shape of guidelines for the assessment of students' learning achievements under semester system.

1. There is need of comprehensive reforms in existing assessment structure for the evaluation of students' learning achievements under semester system in public sector universities of Punjab.
2. The study clearly indicates the importance of teacher training. Majority of students and teachers explicitly urged on the need of professional training for teachers. The training should be arranged on annual bases and should be mandatory for all university teachers. Focus of teachers' training should be on the

construction of different test tools, grading and interpreting the results and providing feedback to students according to their results.

3. The study concludes that for comprehensive and fair assessment, development of assessment criteria is obligatory. Teachers clearly indicate that they face problems during assessing the students' learning achievements in the absence of assessment criteria. Clear description of assessment methods along with their criteria will help not only for the elimination of favoritism allegations but for the creation of uniformity in the results of assessment also.

4. Another important issue is time problems. Majority of students complaints that they have no proper time for preparation of examinations. A significant proportion of students also complaints the tough exam schedule in the semester system without leaves among papers. The study suggests the flexibility in exams' schedules. Date sheet should be prepared with consultation of students and students' opinions should be given weightage in this regard.

5. For teachers a major problem is time management. Departments should assign reasonable work to teachers. Teachers should be given proper time for lesson's planning, preparation of lectures, evaluation of students' work, and provision of feedback to students.

6. The study also indicates the need of teachers' performance evaluation by the students. It will be a reliable mean for teachers to get feedback as well as a source for students to convey their suggestions. University and departments can also evaluate their teachers' performance on the basis of students' opinions. It is advised that teachers' performance evaluation mechanism should be systematically organized by the departments.

7. Grade inflation is an emerging problem for Pakistani education system. Though university teachers provide various solutions to reduce grade inflation but the most important as described earlier is the development of assessment criteria. The study strongly recommends the development and provision of assessment criteria to teachers to maintain validity and reliability of the assessment.

8. The study possesses primary significance for assessment practices in semester system. Further studies on development of teachers' professional standards as an evaluator in classroom at university level, construction of assessment criteria for different subjects, and role and responsibilities of examination committees of university department should be conducted.

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