

An Exploration into the Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Objectivity During Exams Grading: A Case of University of Swat

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Abstract

Examinations are students' chance for show casing their learning to the examiners and to their teachers for the efforts that were put into their (Teachers) teaching for maximum benefits of the students. However, students, expectations about the gradings are not always fulfilled and students feel that they were either not awarded according to their abilities or they were discriminated against. Reasons of discrimination that students cite and have also been endorsed by different research in different parts of the world include; gender discrimination, discrimination on the basis of students, caste, creed and colour. Some research also links students' agreeable personality and submissive attitude in presence of the teachers as reasons for favoritism towards some students and discriminating against others beside teachers' mood swings during students grading, Dee and Gershenson (2017), by Fan et al (2019), Megalokonomou (2021), Terrier (2015) and Bygren (2020). The current research is focused on finding students perceptions about teachers, objectivity and biases students, exams grading through a qualitative case study. Ten (10) participants with equal gender distribution agreed for taking part in the study and for sharing their perceptions about teachers, teachers grading bias or objectivity. This, however, must be noted that the current research study is purely based on only students' perceptions. Research results show that majority of the participants are of the view that teachers grading has the element of bias on the basis of students' gender, behaviour, personality and their attachment or friendship with teachers.

Keywords: Student, Examination, Grading, Teacher, Objectivity, Gender, Race

Introduction

Examinations are the source and tool of students' assessment and resultant promotion or otherwise to the next grades. Beside evaluation that the teachers carry out throughout the year through different activities, examinations are considered final stage of such evaluation and are mostly considered a final decision for that particular year. However, it has been observed that whereas students face consequences for their performance, the authenticity of the teachers grading or marking is a source of debate among at least in the students' community. According to the research conducted by Bonefeld and Dickhouser (2018) their research results "indicates that biased judgments are made when assessing students" (p.5).

Teacher biased attitude could be linked to multiple reasons and factors that influences teachers' decision about favorable or non-favorable grades of the students. These various factors include students' gender, race, ethnicity, students' classroom behavior and students, personality. For instance, as of a gender bias Lavy (2008) as cited by Bygren (2020) found that 'boys were found to have been the victim of teachers discriminatory attitude'. This study showed teacher bias towards male gender of the students in an Israeli school. Similarly, lavy and Megalokomou study (2019) indicates that "teachers' gender bias affects not only the subsequent performance of boys and girls during high school but also their post-secondary choices and decisions and the quality of their university schooling" (p.25). The patterns of bias are not similar in all the study conducted so far. Some research study shows that boys are favored while other shows that boys are discriminated against as compared to girls. In the above research it is boys who receive the positive effects of teachers' bias while the study conducted by Lavy (2008) in an Israeli school yield that girls receive

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positive effects of the teacher's bias. In either case both the research study showed that bias in grading students is a reality and that fact that needs policy makers' attention. A study conducted by Quinn (2020) "On a vague grade-level evaluation scale, teachers rated a student writing sample lower when it was randomly signalled to have a Black author, versus a White author" (p.5) so it is not only gender but also race those effects teachers' objectivity during grading students. Teachers' bias is mostly so deep rooted that if a teacher is found pro-girls in marking, he or she will be pro-girls in grading students in all the classes mostly throughout his/her career without thinking that such bias has long lasting consequences for the students in their academic and professional career. On the basis of the teacher bias a student might not be able to get admission in college, university or he/she might not get the desired job that she/he otherwise deserve. Similarly, teachers are considered a role model for the students but their bias can bring a bad name to entire academic community. According to Megalokonomou (2021) "school, teacher biases continue to have a significant effect on students' probability of enrolling in tertiary education, quality of university and study program. These effects are similar for males and females". (p.2). Similarly, Terrier (2015) notes that she "find strong evidence for a substantial bias in favour of girls in math" (p.5) what matters most is that the cost of the teachers bias that students will have to pay is too much for something they (students) are not even aware of. During different research studies it has been observed that where female teachers are involved in students' evaluation less or no bias has been observed in students grading on the basis especially of students' cultural affiliation while male teachers show more bias during grading to the students of minority groups. The same has also been noted by Fan et al (2019). Their research results show that;

where there are larger proportions of female teachers, such as in the Arts and Social Sciences, there is less gender bias in student evaluations of teaching. In Science, where the largest proportion of staff are male English speakers, we have observed stronger biases against the minority group" (p11).

Moreover, this biased behaviour is not conscious always and that teachers have been found to show bias in grading students sometimes on the basis of their gender, race or classroom or out of the classroom behaviour. Some teachers apparently try to be neutral while grading their students but they still show bias while grading students. Sometimes teachers tend to be more lenient in grading students on the basis of the student agreeable personality while other times on the basis of students' gender or cultural background. In either case it is a practice that needs teachers' educational administrators and policy makers check while grading exams papers or students' assignments. These unconscious biases promote gaps sometimes in students' enrolments in a school or a particular subject in a university for certain minority groups thus help strengthening stereotypes about for example female in engineering subjects and other minority groups. For instance, as mentioned by Dee and Gershenson (2017) "The unconscious biases of teachers, school administrators, and fellow students may contribute meaningfully to the persistence of these gaps" (p.3)

This research study thus tries to look into the teachers' biases from the perspective of the students in the context of the university exams which are conducted internally and graded internally by the subject teachers.

Significance of the study

The study carries significant importance for both students and teachers as well as for the policy makers. It is important for the students in the sense that teachers biased and unbiased decision of assigning certain grade to a student is the basis for his/her future decision and the future course of action, for the selection of certain subject, school, college or for the continuation of his/her education or otherwise. It is the teacher decisions that give impetus to students' confidence and trust in his/her abilities. Similarly, the research study is also important for the teachers in the sense that their fair practices in every aspect of their teaching and communication process with students have almost blind parental approval, therefore, for them to exercise utmost transparency to their level best will help in not only increasing parents' teachers trust but will also contribute towards quality of the education and particularly towards fair teaching learning practices. Finally, the significance of the current research also resides in the formulation of the policies that promote fair practices in all fields of teaching learning process. This study will give policy makers an insight in devising grading practices that promote utmost objectivity in grading students.

Objectives of the study

To find out the students' perspectives about teachers' objectivity in grading students

Research Question

What are the students' perspectives about teachers' objectivity in grading university students?

Limitation of the study

The current research study has two main limitations. First the study may not be generalized to other context as it is purely based on the data collected in University of Swat. Secondly, it depends mainly on the students perceptions of the teachers' objectivity or otherwise, during students exams grading. Therefore, it is not conclusive in nature and may need exploration of the teachers' perspectives and varied contexts.

Methodology

Qualitative case study research method has been used to undertake the current research study. Case study is particularly useful for in-depth investigation of a phenomenon. It was due to limitation concerning in-depth analysis of quantitative research methods that case study particularly became famous for qualitative inquiries. As mentioned by Zainal (2007) that "Through case study methods, a researcher is able to go beyond the quantitative statistical results and understand the behavioural conditions through the actor's perspective" (p.1). it provides good insight into the participants experiences as it is difficult to encompass human behaviour and thought processes through quantitative research methods. The importance and effectiveness of case study for qualitative research has also been endorsed by Schell (1992) "As a form of research, the case study is unparalleled for its ability to consider a single or complex research question within an environment rich with contextual variables" (p.2).

Similarly, according to the nature of the study semi structured interviews were used for data collection. The suitability of semi structured interviews for data collection is an established fact. It allows the researcher to ask questions that needs contextual explanation and detail information for digging deep into the phenomenon under investigation. Semi structured interviews help in developing a dialogue between the researcher and participants thus resulting in extracting maximum information. According to Adam (2015) "The dialogue can meander around the topics on the agenda—rather than adhering slavishly to verbatim questions as in a standardized survey—and may delve into totally unforeseen issues" (p.4).

Research Participants:

Ten participants were selected from ten different departments of the University under convenience sampling technique. The participants five male and five female agreed to take part in the interviewing process and for audio recording of the interviews.

Ethical considerations were taken into account while interviewing participants. The students were given full details about the nature and purpose of the interview and research study. The participants were also informed about the audio recording of the interviews and also about their right of participation and withdrawal at any stage of the data collection process. As a result, all the participants requested for complete anonymity as according to them it could possibly have negative consequences for them. Importance of confidentiality of the participants is very important on the part of the researchers as has also been endorsed by Surmiak (2018) that "researchers take responsibility for ensuring confidentiality to their participants" (p22).

Sampling: convenience sample technique most suited to the nature of qualitative research was followed for selection of samples for the current research study.

Data Analysis and Interpretation Process

Qualitative data analysis is a laborious work. The data in qualitative research do not come in sorted form. It is the researcher who has to make sense of the available information and look for different themes. According to Ngulube (2015);

"Qualitative data analysis is concerned with transforming raw data by searching, evaluating, recognising, coding, mapping, exploring and describing patterns, trends, themes and categories in the raw data, in order to interpret them and provide their underlying meanings" (p.2).

Since the participants in the current research were in a fragile situation and they were not willing for disclosure of their identity in the least, therefore, for the sack of confidentiality they were assigned different codes starting from S1 to S10. Similarly different departments were coded under

ranging from D1 to D 10. Moreover, different themes that emerged during the data analysis process were identified and discussed under relevant heading in the following section.

Data Analysis

This section in particular deals with different themes that were identified during analysis of the students' responses. Different themes one by one will be discussed in this section as follows.

Teachers Gender Bias

Some of the students were of the opinion that teachers tend to mark female students' exams papers more favourably than that of boys. Most of the male students were of the opinion that such favouritism come from male teachers towards female teachers for instance according to male S3 from D2

"Female students have so many ways of endearing themselves towards male teachers. As a result, being from opposite sex they get the grades that they do not deserve". 1/03/2022

This student was of the opinion that male teacher own tendencies along with female students' tricks of getting sympathies does whatever they want to get from them. When further probed about nature of the favours he further explained that

"No, it always does not mean sexual transactions between the male teachers and female students, however, in rare cases that also is one of the ways of getting favours from teachers" S3/D2, 1/03/2022.

Out of the total 5 male students 2 (S3 and S5) were of the opinion that female students getting favours from male teachers does include illicit relationships in case of some male teachers. However, all the 10 respondents believed that such cases are limited only to few departments and some teachers only.

S4, a male student from D5 similarly recorded his feelings in the following words;

"Female students develop friendship with some teachers for getting favourable grades like they frequently visit to their offices keep contact with teacher through phone, sharing their problems with teachers in order to get their sympathies and mostly they are successful" 1/03/2022

He further elaborated that this does not mean that they cross the boundaries of students' teachers' relationships but due to the opposite sex attraction teachers easily start sympathizing with them where it obviously results in subjectivities.

Similarly, a female student (S6) from D6 believed that;

"Being female, I have never approached the teachers for favours. A teacher is a teacher for me whether male or female. I have never seen a teachers' who have marked my exams paper favourably just because I am female. My belief is that female students are more hard worker than male students and resultantly get good grades than male students. Also female students do not have other options like going out and grouping together frequently due to our cultural barriers, therefore we get more time to study" 2/03/2022

She (S6) further noted that if any female or even male student is getting such favours from teachers, one day they will reflect upon the genuineness of their grades. Also, teachers who succumb to such tactics from male or female students need to work on their integrity. They should have gone to some other profession not to a sacred profession like teaching.

S8 another female student noted her concerns in the following words

"Yes, there are female students who try to endear themselves to male teachers for getting good grades and this wrong it should not happen but then we forget to point out towards teachers who allow such students to come closure to them. Therefore, the male teachers should also be made the point of debate. Even this question of asking about female students reflects patriarchal mindset. Where only minority group has to be questioned and blamed. Similarly, what about male students who get favours from female teachers? You know this is a whole phenomenon which should be looked at by those on the high administrative seats. Male and female involvement comes later" 3/03/2022.

S9 from D1 explained his point in the following words;

"You cannot completely rule out female teachers giving favourable grades to male students; however, there are two things. One is that I have not witnessed such thing may be due to cultural constraints where female teachers could rarely allow male students to frequently visit her office. Secondly may be the frequency of such happenings is very low in my personal opinion. But I will endorse that between female students and male teachers such occurrences have been seen not only by myself but any student will tell you many stories of such nature". 3/03/2022.

Teachers' behavioural expectations

Second theme that emerged during data analysis was that of teachers' behavioural expectations of students. Teachers mostly expect students to show conformity to the general social expectations and classroom rules and regulation. Some teachers take students non-conformist behaviour as something related with students' age and ignore it while others take it as threat to their authority.

S7 (female student) from D7 believed that

"teachers' mostly expect students to show agreeable behaviour during class and during university timings. Those students who are outspoken and upfront in their activities and in their expression are not likable for some teachers both male and female. Resultantly they form an image of deviant personalities in teachers' minds which may unconsciously or consciously affect their grades. I do not mean to say it should happen but I feel that this is a problem with some of the teachers. May be teachers do not feel secure in presence of such students. But then as a teacher I believe they should look at what such students have written in their assignments and papers not what they did on such and such occasions" 03/03/2022

A female student S9 from D9 noted that;

We mostly in our mix (boys and girls) group go to canteen for refreshment almost every day. And every day we encounter one or the other teachers of our department. But I feel that one of our teachers do not like our mixing up with male students. She believes (based on my judgment of her) that we are not good girls. She seems to ignore my classroom participation and I kind of feel that even in my assignments she is looking for mistakes to punish me for my behaviour. Sometimes I feel that I should talk to her but then I guess I should not care this is how I am and let her judge me the way she wants. But the fact is that in her subject I am continuously under the worry that if I did a mistake she will make it an excuse for punishing me". 03/03/2022

Similarly, S8 from D8 (a female students) expressed her opinion as follows;

"I do not believe this perception of other students where they blame teachers for punishing them for their outside the class behaviour. I guess this is exaggeration. I am kind of person who does go out to canteen, at time involve in mischievous behaviour but I have never been punished by any teacher. A student obviously will not be in students' good books if he/she disturbs the classroom environment. This is teacher's responsibility to maintain classroom order but I have no one to blame for my out of class behaviour" 4/03/2022

Toady/Flattering students

One of theme that emerged during analysis of the students' interviews was that of toady students whose sole aim is to please students so as to get favourable grades. A student coded as S10 from D10 was very vocal about toady students. He believed that;

Some students from both male and female are very toady. They try to do every necessary and unnecessary thing for pleasing the teachers. They do it both with male and female teachers. I mean like there are some students who remember birthday dates, promotion celebration, kids graduation almost every important event of their teachers lives. Not that such students love their teachers but they try to be toady and to endear themselves to the teachers in the expectations of good grades in tests and exams. And then I am not sure although teachers are humans and they can be influenced through such tactics but I will say they should not be influenced. Even some students will offer their services for repairing teachers' laptops and helping them in shifting houses. I just cannot accept such behaviours. This is not respect. 04/03/2022

S3 a male student from D3 recoded his opinion in the following words;

"I totally agree with this point. I am sorry but I must say that I hat such behaviour of some students. You know sometimes teachers bring their kids along to the department and you will see some students especially female students who will buy different gifts and sweets for their kids not that they love their kids but their eyes are on the grading in examination. Male students also can be seen doing different favours to teachers so that they can build a positive image of them in front of teacher. This I guess should strongly be discourage by teachers" 05/03/2022.

S1 a male student from S1 was of the opinion that;

"Yes, I have seen students doing this but my point is that why blame students only. There are some teachers that I have seen and have also heard from students' who consider it their right to ask students for favours that have nothing to do with academics. For instance asking students to drop them to their home or pick them from their homes in the morning. I mean if a person is getting

favours, he/she will also have to return it and what could be a better favour for students than good grades?" 05/03/2022.

Teacher's mood/emotion

All the respondents also considered teachers' mood/emotion and his/her personal problems during grading as something that has to do with un-uniformed grading of students' exams papers. Some of the responses are given below;

S2, a male student was of the pinion that "people have different viewpoints but I guess one very important factor is teachers' mood. Teachers should be very careful when grading students' exams papers. Their personal state of mind or their personal worries should not affect students' results. It has been observed that teachers sometimes award low grades to very intelligent students and good marks to average students. Grades are very important for students' future. Our future depends on this. Teachers should carefully select a bench mark for grading students and then stick to it regardless of how he/she feels" 05/03/2022

Similarly, S6 a female student from D6 noted that;

"How teachers feel is not my problem nor do I have any solution for it. All I know that if I have done a good paper, I deserve good marks. They should not check exams papers when they know they cannot do justice. It's not teachers' mood that matters it's our future and our hard work that we put into taking exams" 2/03/2022

Most of the students agreed to teachers good or bad mood factor while marking students' paper but only above few talked into quotable details.

Handwriting

All of the 10 participants of the study agreed to the factor of handwriting as something that does have an effect on their marks. All of the participants accepted that they do not have good handwriting and that they are constantly under the pressure of losing marks due to bad handwriting. For instance, S10 remarked that;

I wish we had to typewrite instead of handwriting in examination. I have such a bad handwriting which will definitely have bad impression on the examiners about my intelligence" 02/03/2022.

Similarly, S4-1 from D4 explained that

"I am continuously in a kind of inferiority complex due to my bad handwriting. Every time I attempt paper and pray from God that may the teacher check the contents properly instead of looking at my handwriting" 02/03/2022.

Discussion:

Gender prejudice in marking students' papers and assignments, has been found to be a serious concern among academic quarters. The prejudice has been found to exist in both male and female teachers about both male and female students. Lavy (2008) research study confirmed existence of gender bias against boys in Israel. Similarly, Breda and Ly (2015) found that teachers favoured female students more than the male students in entrance test to a French University especially in male dominated fields. Although the motive here seems to encourage female students join the fields that are typically labelled as male dominated or male fit fields, but still it is discrimination based on gender and against justice. A research study carried out by Kacprzyk, Parsons, Maguire and Stewart (2019) found that "a significant bias against females was consistently observed for the same cohort of students in the MCQ exams with negative marking of 0.25 points". Discrimination against either male or female based on their gender is illegal and unwanted especially in academic community from teachers' side. Teachers are considered role model for students. This is highly unbecoming on the part of a teacher where he/she thinks of a student in other term than the only term which is that of a student.

Such discrimination in marking students' assignments and exams papers have lasting effects on students' interest level in the study and their future selection of subjects which further effects their choice of fields of jobs.

Teachers' behavioural expectations' is yet another factor that could have potential effects on students grading. Mostly during the class timings usually teachers' wants students to stick to expected behavioural codes of the class failing which students can face disciplinary actions. However, sometimes with some of the teachers' non-conformist behaviour is punished through biased grading of students' exams papers. Unfortunately, little research exists to confirm teachers' biased grading of students' exam papers due to their non-conformist behaviour. However, according to the study

conducted by Fermen and Fontes (2021, P.2) "show that students' in-class behaviour substantially affects their scores on teacher-graded achievement examinations, even conditional on proficiency in the material required by the test".

Poor handwriting similarly has also a negative effect on students' progress and on securing good grades. Since writing is a tool that conveys to teachers, the ideas and the point of view of students which he/she is required of, its poor quality could yield poor results in terms of marks/grades. According to the study conducted by Oshe (2014) that "when students find it difficult to write legibly, it effects their overall achievement" (p.1). Further it effects students' performance and lower his/her motivation. She/he start to believe that no matter how hard he/she study for good grades at a point their poor handwriting will come in the way of their success. It demotivates them and their confidence level is badly affected. Similarly, another relationship according to the students' perception that emerged during data analysis was between teachers' mood/emotions and students grading. Students were of the opinion that sometimes when teachers are in a happy and elated mood or emotionally stable condition due to any circumstances around them; they mark students' papers and test etc. leniently and if they (teachers/paper checker) happened to be in a bad emotional state then vice versa. The same has been endorsed by the research conducted by Brackett, Floman, Ashton, James, Cherkasskey, and Salovey (2013) their "research showed that the induction of positive versus negative emotion significantly affected evaluation decisions, such that positive emotion led to the assignment of higher grades on certain evaluation criteria compared to negative emotion" (p.11). Zumbach and Funke (2014) study also reveal results that endorsed positive relationship between mood/emotions and students' evaluation. Although further studies are needed to be carried out for generalization of such results such practices have serious consequences for students in their future decisions and choices regarding their professional and academic career. Their decisions' regarding admissions in their choice of institutes and discipline and regarding the job of their choice are limited thus affecting their whole life and limiting chances of their success. Students' toadyism also surfaced as a factor affecting teachers grading decision. However, unfortunately no literature could be found to back up the findings extracted out of the data. Nonetheless, participants of the study were of the opinion that students' flattering behaviour does affect teachers' decision of students grading.

Recommendations

Based on the data analysis following recommendations are recommended;

- This study is based on students' perceptions only, however, it would make a good study if future research included teachers' point of view also in the study.
- The study is qualitative and based on case study of single university thus not generalizable, it is therefore, recommended that more extensive study with a larger population and sample size may be conducted so as to get results based on a diverse view points and sample size.
- Research on similar pattern in only female and only male institution is highly recommended be to carried out as it would be interesting to see patterns of different kinds of discrimination in such settings.

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