

Report on the outcomes and evaluation findings of the project in the form of a short self-contained article

The Working Group on Subject Quality Assurance (WGSQA) was set up under the auspices of the Learning and Teaching Committee (L TC) to fulfill the following project objectives (as extracted from the project proposal):

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- 1. To refine the grading levels and descriptors, a general reference used by all subjects offered by the University's Handbook on Academic Regulations and Procedures, which provide a framework used to determine a student's overall performance in a subject.*
- 2. To review the (a) effectiveness of current subject QA policies and procedures to assure that subject intended learning outcomes are appropriate for the level of study and comparable to similar subjects offered by other institutions; (b) subject grades and examine whether they are a true representations of students' academic achievements.*
- 3. To recommend policies and / or measures for ensuring that practices that are essential for setting appropriate outcomes and ensuring grading integrity are consistently implemented across departments.*
- 4. To recommend policies and / or measures for facilitating the development of rubrics and their appropriate use in setting and grading assessments and providing feedback to students.*

Deliverables

- (i) Discussion paper on PolyU's Institutional Level Subject Grading Descriptor (ILSGD) and Grading System.

Refer to objective I above, a discussion paper (submitted and reviewed in the previous annual progress report on relevant findings and the proposed ILSGD and grading system was submitted by the Working Group on Subject Quality Assurance (WGSQA) to the L TC for consideration. The paper was subsequently endorsed by L TC in March 2019. The findings and proposals presented in the discussion paper were made based upon numerous studies and consultations as listed below:

- *Comparative study on grading descriptors*
The WGSQA conducted a comparative study on the grading and assessment criteria from the eight Hong Kong UGC-funded universities and IO other leading universities outside of Hong Kong. It was noted that while the

majority of universities had grade descriptors defined for four to six levels, PolyU has nine (A+, A, B+, B, C+, C, D+, D, F). The WGSQA, upon the benchmarking exercise, suggests streamlining the grading system in PolyU by offering only 5 descriptors (A, B, C, D and F), and modifiers(+/-) should be adopted for the first three grades (A, B, C), allowing the level of performance to be differentiated in a more meaningfully generic manner.

- *Preliminary survey on PolyU's ILSGD and grading system*

Based upon the comparative study, a preliminary survey has been developed, with the advice of our external consultant, Prof. Prosser, to collect feedbacks from academic staff on several proposed ILSGD. An invitation has been sent to all WGSQA members to complete the survey in order to have a preliminary review on the proposed ILSGD based on the feedbacks of the WGSQA members which consists representative from all Faculties and Schools.

- *Wider Consultation on PolyU's ILSGD and grading system*

Based upon the feedbacks from the preliminary survey, a refined survey has been developed, with the advice from Prof. Prosser, and a wider consultation was conducted to all Departmental Learning and Teaching Committee (DL TC) Chairs and Programme Leaders of all UGC funded and self-financed programmes. The purpose of the wider consultation is to receive feedbacks from a wider community comprising representations from all departments within PolyU.

- *Comparative study on grading systems*

Outcomes from the comparative study and consultations above suggested that changes to the university's grading system shall have corresponding effect to the existing grade points system and award classification system adopted. Modifications to such systems require in-depth study as they might have direct effect to various existing university requirements such as graduation requirements, passing requirements and etc. The totality of the effects from the changes to the university's grading system were reviewed and considered prior submitting to L TC for approval.

- *Forum on proposed PolyU's ILSGD and grading system*

The WGSQA organized two open fora to present the proposed ILGSD and grading system. The open fora supported transparency and provided a platform for all academic staff to exchange opinions on the presented proposed grading

system and descriptors. Also, if the proposed grading system and descriptors are approved, it is plausible that this type of open forum can support better transition for academic staff in future, instead of announcing them spontaneously after approval.

(ii) Discussion papers on Subject Intended Learning Outcomes (SILOs) and Moderation of Assessment

Refer to objective 2(a), the explanations of subject levels currently adopted by PolyU which is extracted from the Guidelines and Regulations for Programme Planning, Validation and Management was reviewed and compared with other universities. It was observed that the explanations by PolyU could be further elaborated and served as a better reference to academic staff for setting subject intended learning outcomes which are appropriate for the level of study and comparable to similar subjects offered by other institutions. It was also noted that the university is currently in the process of revising the explanations of subject levels, and it would be sensible, as a whole, to let the process take its course at this stage.

Refer to objective 2(b), the regulations and procedures in the Assessment and Examinations section in the Handbook on Academic Regulations and Rules for Taught Programmes and Handbook on Procedures for Examinations and Assessment Results for Taught Programmes (both August 2019 version) was reviewed for its adequacy in stipulating a moderation process suitable for outcome-based and criterion-referenced assessment. A new section on the moderation of assessment and other corresponding amendments were recommended to provide comprehensive guidance on moderation at different stages of an assessment process that is generally applicable to all major assessment tasks. The new section on moderation of assessments was developed with reference to the moderation policies of the University of Edinburgh, University College London, University of Manchester, and Nottingham Trent University.

Refer to objective 3, the findings and recommendations above have been drafted in the form of discussion papers (submitted and reviewed in the previous annual report) and the paper on moderation of assessment has been presented for discussion in the 73rd and 74th LTC meeting held on June 2019 and October 2019 respectively. The paper on moderation of assessment was endorsed with minor comment from LTC in the 74th LTC meeting and the further revised paper (attached as Appendix 1) was submitted to the LTC on **December 2019**.

(iii) Development of Rubrics Manual

Refer to objective 4, the WGSQA drafted a rubrics manual and introduced it in the workshops held in April 2019. The rubrics manual aims to continuously facilitate the development of rubrics by PolyU academic staff. The rubrics manual was developed based on PolyU's context (grading system, grade descriptors, etc.) and contains guidelines for developing rubrics which is supported with good practices and rubrics examples from PolyU and other universities. The manual is also downloadable from the online resource centre referred below.

(iv) Development of Online Resource Centre

Refer to objectives 1 to 4, the WGSQA, with the support of the Information Technology Services (ITS) department, developed an online resource centre (ORC) which contains the institutional level subject grading descriptors proposed, rubrics guidelines and examples, interactive videos on rubrics, relevant subject quality assurance information and reference websites. Resources from our past seminars and workshops are also available in the ORC. The ORC aims to ensure sustainability and easy access to all academic staff on the outcomes of the project. The simplified version of the ORC which contained the proposed ILSGD and rubrics manual was introduced in the workshops during April 2019 for reference by academic staff. The final version of the ORC was introduced to all Head of Departments and DL TC Chairs for further promotion to all academic staff via a dissemination email sent on December 2019. The ORC is assessable at <https://www.polyu.edu.hk/wgsqa/>.

(v) Departmental consultation sessions

Refer to objectives 1 to 4, the WGSQA has invited Prof. Prosser to provide individual departmental consultations on subject quality assurance matters which mainly included subject matters such as intended learning outcomes, assessment methods and marking rubrics. The consultation sessions aimed on strengthening the implementation of criterion-referenced approach to assessment (CRA) and provide development support on rubrics within academic departments. The set of proposed ILSGD, which is considered as an influential element to the CRA, was also presented for discussion during the consultation sessions with different academic departments. The concepts on aligning marking rubrics with the descriptors and designing relevant assessments were shared during the consultation sessions. All departments I schools were invited during Apr and Nov 2018 and a total of 24 departments I schools participated in the consultation sessions, either once or twice. Details of the consultation schedules and list of participants have been submitted and reviewed in the previous annual progress report.

(vi) Workshops on developing assessment rubrics and moderation

Refer to objectives 1 to 4, the WGSQA has invited Prof. Prosser, in-collaboration with the Educational Development Centre (EDC), to provide workshops to provide the participants with deeper insights into the development of subject assessment rubrics, grade descriptors, grading integrity and moderation of assessment. The workshops also took into consideration what challenges have emerged from the consultations sessions as mentioned above. Likewise, the set of proposed ILSGD was also presented for discussion during the workshops. The concepts on aligning marking rubrics with the descriptors and designing relevant assessments were shared during the workshops. A total of 10 workshops were conducted throughout the project period. Details of the workshops (abstract, list of participants, feedback, etc.) have been submitted and reviewed in the previous annual progress report.

(vii) Dissemination workshops (cancelled due to closure of university campus)

To facilitate the dissemination of the major deliverables by the WGSQA, dissemination workshops were planned to be conducted to introduce (1) the ILSGD, (2) rubrics manual, (3) online resource centre and (4) moderation of assessment. The workshops were agreed to be conducted during week one of Dec 2019 (scheduled according to the availability of our external consultant and higher probability of participation by academic staff). However, the university campus was closed unexpectedly for an indefinite period of time since mid-November and the workshops have to be cancelled. Nevertheless, the final version of the ORC, which includes the major deliverables mentioned, was introduced to all Head of Departments and DLTC Chairs for further promotion to all academic staff via a dissemination email as mentioned in paragraph (iv) above.

(viii) Publications

Apart from fulfilling the project objectives (e.g. review QA policies, provide development supports and develop resources on rubrics, etc.), the WGSQA also considered it worthwhile to put our project work into the form of manuscripts for journal submission. While it is understood the process towards acceptance of the manuscripts by the respective journals requires reasonable time and multiple attempts, there will be continuous effort by the authors to support publication of the manuscripts.

The brief information on the manuscripts prepared are as below:

Manuscript 1

Title: Assuring Grading Integrity in Development of an Institutional Level Grading Descriptors in a Tertiary Institution

Target Journal: Quality in Higher Education

Abstract

Over recent years, there has been a concerted effort to move away from norm-referenced assessment in higher education to criterion and standards referenced assessment. The change claims argued that students should be assessed on the quality of what they know and can do, rather than how they perform compared to their peers. Along the way, there have been a number of criticisms made on how grade descriptors and marking rubrics, (both key components in the development of criterion and standards referenced assessment), have been developed and applied. Also, with the development of descriptors and rubrics, the move away from norm-referenced procedure has led to a growing concern about grade inflation. In this paper, an institution's attempt to respond to comments of its institutional level grade descriptors and its approach to assuring the integrity of its grading processes would be described.

Manuscript 2

Title: A moderation of assessment strategy for criterion and standards referenced assessment: a case study

Target Journal: Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education

Abstract

Over recent years, there has been a growing trend of adopting the criterion and standards-referenced assessment rather than the norm-referenced assessment in higher education. The subject grades entered in tertiary institution academic transcripts, purportedly represent the students' standard, or level, of achievement in a subject. Often, the grades are taken at face value and considered as equivalent across differing courses. There have been a number of criticisms of the standards against which student works are graded, chief of which are that the standards are poorly understood, and inconsistently applied among various assessors. Academic judgements, which form the basis of grading in criterion-referenced assessment, may allow for increase grade inflation in comparison to norm-referenced assessment. This paper describes one institution's attempt to develop a set of elements for a moderation strategy in criterion and standards-referenced assessment. The paper also reviews, and provides to references to, current literature thinking on assessment moderation.