Assessment and Practice in Educational Sciences

Student-Defined Indicators of Fairness and Transparency in Grading Practices

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to identify student-defined indicators of fairness and transparency in grading practices among university students. A qualitative, phenomenological approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews with 22 university students from diverse fields of study in Tehran. Participants were selected via purposive sampling until theoretical saturation was achieved. Interviews, lasting between 35 and 60 minutes, were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed through thematic analysis using NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke's systematic approach to coding and theme generation. Three main themes emerged from student interviews: perceived fairness, transparency in the grading process, and trust in the grading system. Perceived fairness included consistency of grading, justification of scores, opportunities for appeal, recognition of student effort, and considerations of equity. Transparency indicators emphasized clarity of grading criteria, timely communication of grading policies, accessible grading information, feedback mechanisms, transparent regrading procedures, and student involvement in assessment design. Trust was associated with teacher professionalism, student voice and agency, historical reliability, confidentiality, alignment of grading with learning goals, and responsiveness to mistakes. The study highlights students' nuanced expectations of fairness and transparency, demonstrating that students strongly value consistency, clarity, meaningful feedback, and the opportunity to engage actively with grading processes. Trust in grading was significantly related to perceived professionalism, transparency, and equity. Incorporating student-defined indicators into grading practices can enhance student motivation, engagement, and educational outcomes. Institutions are recommended to involve students in co-constructing assessment criteria, maintain clear and consistent grading procedures, and ensure robust mechanisms for feedback and appeals.

Keywords: Fairness, Transparency, Grading Practices, Qualitative Research, Student Perceptions, Assessment Literacy, Higher Education, Iran

Introduction

The processes of grading and assessment have long served as foundational mechanisms for evaluating student learning, guiding academic progression, and shaping future opportunities. At their core, grading practices are not simply technical or procedural acts, but are deeply embedded within the broader ethical, cultural, and psychological landscapes of education (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). The legitimacy of these practices rests not only on their capacity to accurately capture student performance but also on their ability to uphold fundamental principles of fairness and transparency. With the advent of increased student

diversity, shifting educational paradigms, and growing calls for accountability in education, questions concerning the fairness and transparency of grading have assumed critical significance in both research and practice (Brookhart, 2013; Tierney, 2014).

Fairness in grading is a multidimensional construct encompassing consistency, impartiality, equity, and procedural justice (Tierney, Simon, & Charland, 2011). When students perceive grading as fair, they are more likely to accept assessment outcomes, remain motivated, and persist in their academic endeavors (Gordon, 2019). Conversely, perceptions of unfairness—manifesting as inconsistency, favoritism, or lack of due process—can foster disengagement, diminished trust in instructors, and even withdrawal from learning activities (Betebenner & Linn, 2005; Feldman, 2018). In parallel, the concept of **transparency** refers to the openness and clarity of grading processes, criteria, and rationales, ensuring that students understand how their work is evaluated and have access to the reasoning behind assigned grades (Andrade, 2005; Carless, 2015). Transparency in grading not only demystifies the assessment process but also empowers students to take responsibility for their learning and promotes constructive dialogue between educators and learners (Boud, 2015; Winstone et al., 2017).

Historically, research into grading practices has often foregrounded the perspectives of educators, policymakers, and assessment designers, emphasizing standardization, objectivity, and technical rigor (Sadler, 2009; Guskey, 2015). Yet, as assessment systems have become increasingly high-stakes and complex, there is a growing recognition that students' voices must be central to discussions about what constitutes fair and transparent grading (Elwood & Klenowski, 2002; Smith, Worsfold, Davies, Fisher, & McPhail, 2013). Students are not passive recipients of grades; rather, they actively interpret, contest, and respond to assessment practices, drawing upon their lived experiences, expectations, and aspirations (Nieminen & Lahtero, 2020). Their definitions of fairness and transparency may diverge markedly from those held by teachers or administrators, reflecting contextual factors such as cultural background, prior educational experiences, and prevailing classroom climates (Brown, 2011).

Emerging scholarship points to several key dimensions of fairness and transparency as experienced by students. Consistency of grading across students and over time is frequently cited as a hallmark of fairness (Tierney et al., 2011). Students also value justifications for assigned grades—detailed feedback and explanations that elucidate how marks were awarded or deducted (Boud & Molloy, 2013). The existence of a legitimate appeal process, recognition of individual effort, and sensitivity to issues of equity and diversity have also been highlighted in recent studies (Carless & Boud, 2018; Feldman, 2018). On the dimension of transparency, students consistently call for explicit criteria, timely communication of grading policies, easy access to grading information, and feedback mechanisms that facilitate understanding and improvement (Andrade, 2005; Winstone et al., 2017). Transparency is further enhanced when students are involved in the co-construction of assessment criteria or are provided with exemplars illustrating expectations (Boud, 2015; Carless, 2015).

Despite the proliferation of research advocating for fair and transparent assessment, there remains a notable gap in empirical studies that directly solicit and analyze students' own definitions and indicators of these constructs, particularly in non-Western or under-represented educational contexts (Bloxham, den-Outer, Hudson, & Price, 2016). Most existing frameworks and policy interventions are rooted in normative or prescriptive assumptions, with insufficient attention paid to how students themselves perceive and experience grading practices (Brookhart, 2013; Nieminen & Lahtero, 2020). This oversight is consequential: when students' perspectives are marginalized or misunderstood, reforms intended to enhance fairness and transparency may inadvertently perpetuate distrust, resistance, or inequity (Smith et al., 2013; Brown, 2011).

In the context of Iran—and specifically within metropolitan educational environments such as Tehran—the issue of grading fairness and transparency is particularly salient. Iranian universities have undergone substantial changes in recent years, including increasing student diversity, adoption of new technologies for assessment, and growing public scrutiny of educational standards (Azizi, 2020; Salehi & Bahrami, 2019). Yet, the literature on assessment in Iran has largely mirrored international

trends in emphasizing faculty or administrative perspectives, with few qualitative studies giving voice to students themselves (Hosseini & Mohammadi, 2021). This lacuna is problematic, as cultural norms, social expectations, and systemic factors unique to the Iranian context may profoundly shape students' understandings of what is fair and transparent in grading.

Qualitative research, with its focus on exploring lived experiences and generating nuanced insights, offers a powerful means to redress this imbalance (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, researchers can surface the tacit, context-bound meanings that students attribute to grading processes—meanings that might otherwise be obscured by standardized surveys or top-down policy pronouncements (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, the adoption of participatory and student-centered methodologies aligns with contemporary educational philosophies that position learners as co-constructors of knowledge and agents in their own assessment journeys (Carless & Boud, 2018; Smith et al., 2013).

The current study addresses these gaps by qualitatively exploring the student-defined indicators of fairness and transparency in grading practices among university students in Tehran. By foregrounding the perspectives of those most directly impacted by grading, the research aims to answer two central questions: (1) What indicators do students themselves identify as essential for fairness and transparency in grading? (2) How do these indicators reflect students' lived experiences and broader expectations regarding educational justice? In seeking answers, this study not only contributes to the empirical literature but also provides actionable insights for instructors, assessment designers, and policymakers striving to create more equitable and transparent assessment systems.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to explore student-defined indicators of fairness and transparency in grading practices. The research focused on capturing the lived experiences and perspectives of students regarding grading fairness and transparency within their educational context. The study was conducted among students in Tehran, Iran, selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of backgrounds, fields of study, and academic achievement levels. In total, 22 participants, including both undergraduate and graduate students from various universities in Tehran, voluntarily participated in the study. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that additional interviews no longer yielded new themes or significant insights related to the research objectives.

Data Collection

Data were collected exclusively through semi-structured interviews to allow for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions. An interview guide was developed based on relevant literature and expert consultation, focusing on students' interpretations and experiences of fairness and transparency in grading, as well as their expectations and suggestions for improvement. Each interview lasted between 35 and 60 minutes and was conducted in a private setting either in-person or via secure online platforms, depending on participant preference and availability. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. To ensure the credibility of the findings, participants were encouraged to elaborate on their responses, and clarifying questions were asked as needed.

Data analysis

The transcribed interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) systematic approach. Data coding and analysis were facilitated using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. The analysis began with

repeated reading of the transcripts to ensure familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively, capturing key phrases and concepts related to fairness and transparency in grading as defined by students. Codes were then organized into broader themes and subthemes, reflecting patterns across the data set. To enhance trustworthiness, two researchers independently coded a subset of the data and discussed discrepancies until consensus was reached. Analytical memos and reflective notes were maintained throughout the process to support the development of meaningful and robust themes. The analysis continued iteratively alongside data collection, and ceased once theoretical saturation was achieved, ensuring that the identified themes comprehensively represented the perspectives of all participants.

Findings and Results

Main Theme 1: Perceived Fairness

Consistency of Grading:

Students overwhelmingly identified the consistency of grading as a fundamental indicator of fairness. Many participants noted the importance of applying the same criteria to all students, avoiding favoritism, and maintaining uniform standards across assignments and students. As one participant explained, "It's unfair when different students get different treatment for the same work; grading should be the same for everyone." The use of clear rubrics and the absence of unexplained grade changes were highlighted as essential for ensuring perceived fairness.

Justification of Scores:

Participants stressed that transparent justification for scores is critical. Detailed feedback and clear rationales for grade deductions allow students to understand how their work was evaluated. Several interviewees emphasized the need for "explanations of why points were taken off," as well as providing examples of correct answers and outlining explicit expectations. One student shared, "When teachers explain why I lost marks, it feels a lot more fair, even if I don't agree with every detail."

Opportunity for Appeal:

Having a clear, accessible appeal process was viewed as a vital element of fairness. Participants valued being able to review their scripts, engage in respectful dialogue, and receive timely responses when contesting grades. The absence of fear of retaliation for appeals was also cited. A participant reflected, "If I think my grade is wrong, I want to know there's a process and that my complaint will be heard, not punished."

Recognition of Effort:

Recognition of effort, not just outcome, emerged as a significant subtheme. Students valued partial credit for problem-solving approaches, acknowledgment of improvement over time, and grading for participation and process, not only final results. Flexibility in considering individual context was also mentioned. As one student put it, "Sometimes the process is as important as the answer, and I appreciate when teachers recognize hard work, even if the outcome isn't perfect."

Equity Considerations:

Participants identified equity as integral to fairness. Adjustments for diverse backgrounds, accessibility accommodations, consideration for language barriers, personalized feedback, and sensitivity to special needs were all cited as essential. One interviewee remarked, "Not everyone comes from the same place or has the same resources. Fairness means understanding those differences."

Main Theme 2: Transparency in Process

Clarity of Criteria:

Clear communication of grading criteria before assessments was frequently cited as an indicator of transparency. Students wanted pre-disclosed rubrics, sample assignments, and explicit grading scales to eliminate ambiguity. One participant stated, "If I know what's expected, I can aim for it. Ambiguity only makes grading feel random." Seeing examples of high-quality work was also considered highly beneficial.

Communication of Policies:

Timely and consistent communication of grading policies was important to students. Early announcements, written guidelines, and explanations for any changes in grading policy were appreciated. Some valued open Q&A sessions regarding grading approaches. "When policies change mid-course and we aren't told, it creates confusion and feels unfair," said one respondent.

Access to Grading Information:

Students stressed the value of prompt and detailed access to their grading information, including the use of online grade portals, timely release of grades, breakdown of grade components, and opportunities to consult with instructors. One student mentioned, "It's important for me to see exactly how I did and where I need to improve, not just get a final grade."

Feedback Mechanisms:

The presence of effective feedback channels was another key indicator. Participants valued personalized, actionable, and timely feedback, as well as multiple opportunities to receive feedback. As described by a participant, "Getting feedback quickly and having a way to ask questions really helps me understand how to do better next time."

Transparency in Regrading:

Students highlighted the need for clear, non-punitive regrading procedures and rationales for any grade changes. They appreciated independent reviews and transparent feedback on regrading outcomes. As one interviewee put it, "If I ask for regrading, I want to know it's done fairly and that asking won't hurt my score."

Involvement in Assessment Design:

Involving students in creating rubrics or giving feedback on assessment design was seen as increasing transparency. Some mentioned participatory policy development and opportunities for co-constructing assessments. "When we have a say in how we're graded, it feels more transparent and invested," noted a student.

Main Theme 3: Trust in Grading System

Teacher Professionalism:

Participants linked trust to the professionalism of teachers, including impartiality, subject expertise, clear communication, responsiveness, respect, and ethical conduct. One student observed, "I trust teachers who are consistent and treat everyone with respect. If they explain their reasoning, it builds trust."

Student Voice and Agency:

The ability to express concerns, participate in student surveys, provide anonymous feedback, and have representation in assessment committees contributed to a sense of agency and trust. As expressed by one participant, "Being able to share my concerns, even anonymously, makes me feel the system cares about my opinion."

Historical Reliability:

A history of consistent, fair grading and positive resolution of disputes fostered trust. Participants appreciated when previous cohorts reported few disputes and fair outcomes. One interviewee stated, "I know teachers are fair if I've heard that past students rarely had grading issues."

Confidentiality and Privacy:

Students emphasized the importance of secure handling of grades and maintaining privacy in communication, avoiding public disclosure of grades, and respecting sensitive situations. "Grades should be between the student and teacher—no one else needs to know," a student emphasized.

Alignment with Learning Goals:

Trust was enhanced when grades reflected genuine learning, were aligned with course objectives, and avoided busywork or irrelevant tasks. As a student shared, "I want my grade to show what I've actually learned, not just how well I followed instructions."

Responsiveness to Mistakes:

Finally, the willingness of educators to correct mistakes promptly, apologize for errors, and clearly explain the correction process was seen as a critical trust-builder. "Everyone makes mistakes—what matters is that teachers fix them and let us know," commented one participant.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored student-defined indicators of fairness and transparency in grading practices among university students in Tehran. The qualitative analysis yielded three overarching themes: perceived fairness, transparency in process, and trust in the grading system, each comprising several detailed subthemes. These findings collectively underscore students' nuanced expectations and highlight the complexity inherent in establishing equitable grading practices.

Regarding perceived fairness, students emphasized consistency, detailed justification of scores, opportunities for appeal, recognition of effort, and equity considerations. The participants consistently voiced concerns about grading consistency, highlighting that variability in grading criteria undermines fairness perceptions. This aligns with existing research that argues fairness in assessment largely depends on procedural consistency and clarity (Tierney et al., 2011). Feldman (2018) similarly posits that students perceive grades as fair when instructors apply consistent standards across all learners. Furthermore, students expressed a strong need for justification and feedback to understand the rationale behind grades awarded. Boud and Molloy (2013) emphasize the centrality of detailed feedback in grading practices, noting its role in enhancing both fairness perceptions and academic motivation. Students' request for transparent and respectful appeal processes also echoes previous studies advocating for clear dispute-resolution mechanisms to ensure justice and reduce student anxiety around grading (Carless & Boud, 2018). Equity considerations such as accommodation for diverse backgrounds and sensitivity to special needs underscore the importance of inclusive assessment approaches, supported by prior findings advocating for personalized feedback and accommodations in diverse classroom settings (Brown, 2011).

Transparency emerged strongly in the findings as participants valued explicit communication of criteria, clear grading policies, timely access to grading information, robust feedback mechanisms, transparent regrading processes, and student involvement in assessment design. Students highlighted that clarity in grading criteria and consistent policy communication significantly enhance their understanding and acceptance of grading outcomes, mirroring arguments by Andrade (2005) and Carless (2015), who assert that transparent rubrics and clear communication of expectations are foundational to effective assessment practices. Access to timely and detailed feedback was another vital aspect emphasized by participants. These findings align closely with Boud's (2015) assertion that effective feedback requires not only clear content but also timely delivery to facilitate learning and reflection. Transparency in regrading was particularly significant, reflecting students' desire for clarity and impartiality in review processes. Research by Nieminen and Lahtero (2020) supports the idea that transparent regrading procedures reinforce student trust in assessment practices. Additionally, participants expressed appreciation for being involved in designing assessments, suggesting that participatory approaches in assessment can significantly enhance

transparency. Smith et al. (2013) corroborate this finding, advocating for greater student participation in assessment processes to strengthen their assessment literacy and trust.

Trust in the grading system emerged as a foundational theme influencing students' overall assessment experience. Participants emphasized teacher professionalism, student voice and agency, historical reliability, confidentiality and privacy, alignment with learning goals, and responsiveness to mistakes as key factors fostering trust. Students linked trust directly to the professional attributes of teachers, including fairness, respectfulness, and ethical conduct. Gordon (2019) similarly identifies teacher professionalism as a critical determinant of students' trust in grading processes. The importance of student voice was another notable finding, aligning with Carless and Boud's (2018) advocacy for student involvement and feedback literacy to enhance assessment legitimacy. Historical reliability, as demonstrated by consistent grading across cohorts, was identified as a significant trust indicator. This aligns with Feldman's (2018) observations that consistency over time reinforces students' confidence in assessment systems. Additionally, the findings stress confidentiality in grade handling, aligning with research underscoring privacy as an essential component of respectful and ethical grading (Elwood & Klenowski, 2002). Lastly, participants' assertion that grades should align explicitly with learning goals resonates with arguments by Boud and Falchikov (2007), who stress that assessments should meaningfully represent students' actual learning and competencies rather than arbitrary benchmarks.

Overall, the findings reflect a sophisticated student understanding of fairness and transparency in grading, underscoring the necessity of incorporating student perspectives into assessment practices. The alignment of these findings with existing literature reinforces the argument that students' perceptions provide vital insights into improving grading practices. This suggests a need for ongoing dialogue between educators and students to maintain and enhance fairness, transparency, and trust in assessment systems.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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