



Choice Based Credit System and Semesterisation for Undergraduate Programmes

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Abstract:

In Higher Education the option must be introduced for the students in undergraduate and post graduate courses to choose additional subjects not related to their core courses. "For instance, a student in Arts stream can choose some Science subjects Today education must follow the all knowledge access system so that the student can learn and progress the way he/she likes. CBCS has the ability to accommodate diverse choices that students may like to have. It is also recommended to establish centers of excellence in all universities and provisions for core-credits and elective or optional credits for different levels of academic programmes.

Keywords: *Credit, Semesterisation, Choice-based Credit System, Grading, Continuous assessment*

1. Introduction

The various universities of Gujarat State has recently adopted the report of the Committee on Restructuring of Undergraduate (UG) Education in India. As the academic community is gearing up to adapt the same, certain ideas embedded in the report requires explanation in plain English. This article attempts to do exactly that. At the outset itself, it needs to be understood that the Recommendations of the Higher Education Council are of an advisory nature only. This reform will have to be implemented by the Universities only through the usual process of academic debate in its academic bodies, the board of studies, faculties and the academic councils. These bodies may make amendments in the recommendations as they deem fit.

2. The Four Pillars of the U.G. Reforms

The four major aspects of the newly proposed reforms are:

- **Semesterisation**
- **Choice-based credit system**
- **Continuous assessment**
- **Grading**

2.1 Semesterisation

What should be the ideal length of an academic term? *3 years? 2 years? 1 Year? 6 months? 4 Months? ...* All the above models have been used/are in use in various Universities, year system being the rarest internationally. The examination at the end of the B.A. / B.Sc. Honors Programme supposedly covered all that was transacted in the 3 years of the degree programme. One can imagine what a demand on memory recall such a 3-year final examination would have

created. Also, it can be any one's guess as to whether examination questions in such an examination could have achieved a comprehensive coverage of topics studied. If we reject the 3-year and 2-year alternatives, a year system best suits the administration of examinations. This is because the current work force and work-load of the University administrative Set-up is in principle tuned to the year system. However, by the same logic we reject a 3-year examination; there is an academic case for 6-month academic term. Shorter terms seem to be more suited academically, as (i) shorter terms will have relatively less demand for memory recall (ii) Questions can cover topics more comprehensively (iii) it is easier to ensure cohesive learning Experience and academic momentum for shorter terms. As already noted, this requires a careful Transformation in teaching and learning practices.

2.2 Choice-Based Credit System

Our traditional degree courses are reminiscent of a served lunch, or the traditional sadya. Irrespective of the need and taste, the same food is served for all, with no choice for the main course, with a few choices in the final course! It has its advantages and disadvantages. If people take the full course, some balance of diet as envisaged traditionally will be met. Also the logistics of administering the lunch is simplified. But for those who want to meet their needs only, it is no good. The new choice based system is like a buffet lunch, where students choose the 'papers' of their choice, within certain broad restrictions (if we let kids eat an unrestricted buffet lunch, they might end up eating just chicken and ice cream, a nutritionally imbalanced meal!). In a choice-based Credit system, we divide the papers into core and elective groups and ask students to choose, say, 60% of their papers from core group and the rest from electives. The electives could ideally come from other Departments also. This ensures inter-disciplinary teaching and learning. For instance, in an ideal situation, a student specializing in mathematics can opt to learn a paper in Sanskrit, or Ethics or Introduction to Life Sciences, if she so desires. A horizontal integration of learning experience across disciplines will thus become possible. This suits the changing knowledge scenario. Today, no biology student can ignore mathematics and computer science, no computer science student can ignore linguistics; no biology student can ignore ethics.

Naturally, the logistics of administering the courses under a choice based credit system will become more complicated especially, in view of shortage of teachers and also infrastructure. But the system is fairer to the student, permitting her to seek knowledge that suits her varied interests, aptitudes and also ensures the interdisciplinary knowledge requirements of the present times.'

In the new system, "papers" will be referred to as "courses" and B.A./B.Sc. "courses" will be referred to as B.A./B.Sc. "programmers". One of the major features of the new system is that not every paper (course) is treated equal. While designing syllabus, courses can have weight ages defined. These weight ages are called credits. A paper/course which has 4 *contact hours per week per semester* is taken as a full paper/course and is considered as having a weight age of 4, or as a 4-credit course. A paper with 2-credits is like a half paper. An example is a seminar. Dissertation Projects typically carry higher credits. Instead of adding all marks directly, they are meaningfully multiplied by their weight ages (i.e., credits) to arrive at the aggregate (we will soon see that we do away with marks). This is indirectly equivalent to giving more marks for more important papers or for activities such as dissertation projects.

In the new system, instead of specifying number of papers/courses, only the total credits to be

earned are specified. If a 6-semester UG programme specifies credit requirement as 120 credits, it means that at an average 20 credits need to be earned each semester, which can be earned in different ways such as: (i) five *4-credit courses* (five full papers) or (ii) four *4-credit courses* and two *2-credit courses* (four full papers and 2 half papers) or (iii) six *3-credit courses* and one *2-credit course*.

A vast majority of Universities and higher education institutions in the world (including Central Universities, IITs and II Sc in India) have been practicing the credit system for decades. Most Universities practice the credit system in their PG programmes, and also for selected UG programmes. In an age where student mobility is on the increase, this system will ensure that our academic programmes are understood well by other educational institutions and students find it easy to transfer their credits across institutions.

2.3 Continuous Assessment

In the year system, assessment of students is through end-of-the year university examinations. Even though class tests are practiced, as they do not form part of formal assessment. A continuous assessment in semester system (also known as internal assessment/formative assessment) is spread throughout the duration of the course and is done by the teacher teaching the course through various means including written tests, MCQ (multiple choice question)–based quizzes, mini projects, presentations, group activities, field visits etc.

The most important aspect of continuous assessment is that continuous feedback on teaching and learning are available to the teachers /students which are crucial in readjusting the teaching and learning accordingly.

By its very nature, continuous assessment can afford unstructured assessment tasks spread across a span of time and also reaching out of the classrooms, like case studies, projects, field visits and other such activities. Typical end-semester assessment attempts to measure direct and indirect cognitive achievement alone. Continuous assessment makes it feasible to measure non-cognitive outcomes also. This implies taking into account the specific conditions of the class room and also the teaching style of the teacher and learning style of the students and hence is feasible only if conducted by the teacher concerned. Indeed, for the same reasons, there is strong case that all assessment must be made by concerned teachers – *those who teach must mark. Teaching, learning and evaluation are inseparably linked.*

Continuous assessment is often discussed in the backdrop of (i) victimization of students by some teachers and (ii) generous granting of marks in profit-motivated institutions. A very transparent and somewhat structured assessment system (structured to the extent that it does not kill the creativity in assessment envisaged in continuous assessment) will address the victimization possibility which must be seen as one-off incidences, anyway. Transparency can be achieved by publishing assignment questions and grading policies in advance. There should also be clear grievance redressed system in place. When assignment is given, there must be clear guidelines as to how to earn each grade. See for example the assignment guideline below:

This assignment is aimed at giving the students an opportunity to practice some activities that will enable them to acquire Knowledge/statistics related to some topics covered in the syllabus. The starred questions may require self-study of topics not covered in the course. Dead-line: 3PM, Friday of the 16th week of the semester (if holiday, then the subsequent working day) Delayed submission will attract 5% less marks/day. Any request for delayed submission will be

entertained only if the work completed as on the deadline is submitted. Grading would be as follows:

- A : Evidence of exceptionally keen involvement and successful completion of all tasks.
- B : Evidence of keen involvement and attempt to solve at least some of the starred tasks and successful completion of other tasks.
- C : Successful completion of all tasks except starred ones
- D : Partial/Satisfactory completion of all tasks except starred ones
- F : Unsatisfactory

2.2.1 Scientific Normalization Procedures

(for instance, conversion to z-scores) adopted by the University can, to certain extent, address the generous granting of marks in profit-motivated institutions. Continuous assessment to the tune of 40% has been practiced in professional courses in Kerala for the past 30 years. The complaints are very few (indeed, there could be a lot of untold complaints) considering the fact that over 25000 students in each year of four year courses, totaling 1,00,000 students, are under it anytime, currently. It is also to be noted that the democratic movements of students and teachers can play a positive and balancing role to prevent victimization and also in preventing false allegations of victimization.

2.4 Grading: The Basic Idea

Universities and higher education institutions in the world (including Central Universities, IITs and II Sc in India) have been practicing grading for decades. The grading system proposed in the UG restructuring is not just a mere translation of range of marks to letter grades, but a comprehensive and philosophical shift in assessment practices. At the bottom of the practice of grading is the scientific outlook that measurement of educational outcomes is subjective. The subjectivity arises from many sources such (even the so-called objective type tests (MCQs) are subjective in many of these aspects):

- The subjective choice of questions in examinations
- The subjective assignments of weight age to questions
- The subjective interpretation of marking schemes by examiners
- The human element in making assessment

It is also to be noted that it is impossible for any education system to ensure that the students who are subjected to a 'standard assessment' also have a standard educational experience. The wide variations such as the following are well-known:

- The varied learning experiences of students
- The varied linguistic skill of students
- The varied socio-economic background of students

Due to long standing history of assigning numerical scores during evaluation of answer scripts, sometimes marks are taken too seriously as an indication of the exact measurement of the students' achievement. How else can we fail a student who scores 39 and pass one who gets 41? In most cases a revaluation by the same examiner might result in 39 becoming 42 or 41 becoming 37. This is not a fault of the examiner, it is the natural subjectivity of assessment coming to fore. Harper & Harper (1990) quotes many studies in India itself regarding unreliability of examination marks. (i) 90 photocopies of the same history answer books were awarded marks ranging from 22% to 76% marks by 90 experienced examiners (ii) A mathematics examiner remarked 50 scripts after 6 months raised the marks of one student by 20 points and reduced another by 8 points. On an average (in 4000 scripts covering subjects Hindi, Biology, History and Mathematics), 34% of the scripts were awarded a different class or division

when they were marked again (happily, the researchers report that Indian examiners are slightly more reliable than those of many other countries, including USA, England and France).

The best proof that we seem to be ignorant of such *invalid ... inadequate ... subjective* nature of examinations is that we still have the ranking system in Degree programmes in our Universities. Is it fair is it to compare students based on such a subjective measurement ? How can one say a student with 78.11% aggregate is above and a student whose aggregate is 77.98%. If the figures quoted by Harper and Harper are considered, can we even say that a 78.11% is above 68.11% ? If we accept the premise that educational measurement is subjective, then conscious steps are required to prevent disadvantage to the student community. The focus thus falls on reducing (not removing) this subjectivity.

One way of reducing the subjectivity is to consider an alternative to the 0-100 point scale of differentiation. Even though we mark answers in shorter ranges, this final scale cannot be justified, as ultimately this is what we depend on. Some means of using a shorter scale at every level of assessment would be reasonable, given the subjectivity that has already been pointed out. It would be fairer to classify students into 5 or 10 categories than 101 categories as the 0-100 mark range does. If we choose a short differentiation range such as 0-5 and replace numeric figures with letters, we have the skeleton of a grading system.

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