

Investigating Undergraduates Grading Preferences During Remote Learning

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected higher education in unprecedented ways. As students are getting accustomed to the new mode of remote learning and the revised assessment components, the decision-makers at the university are letting students decide on their preferred method to receive their grades. In this paper, we report on the grade-reporting preferences of a total of 8,819 undergraduate students at one public university in Malaysia. The university provided three reporting choices: (1) using the existing grading scheme of CGPA; (2) using the ordinal-like scale of excellent, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory, with no CGPA; and (3) reporting both CGPA and grades with modifications. Results of chi-square statistics provide evidence of significant relationships between students' preferences with their socio-economic status, year of studies, and CGPA. As the university continues the remote learning implementation with the new semester, there is a need to decide on whether to continue adopting the inclusive assessment policy. More voices should be given to students as they endure the new normal in their studies. A flexible policy can be tailored to students' needs and demographics.

Keywords: Grading preferences, Remote learning, Higher education.

Introduction

Almost every learning institution in the world transitioned to the remote learning approach when teaching and learning activities were disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Instead of having face-to-face instruction, online platforms like Webex and Zoom became a viable option (Aziz et al., 2021). It became the most appropriate opportunity for education to persist even though there was a list of other learning issues to be tackled by educators around the globe. Teachers and students found themselves in a new educational setting without even a practice run to iron out any potential repercussions, regardless of the teaching medium (Rudenko et al., 2020). Assessment during the pandemic was another primary issue

that was thought and discussed by experts around the world to ensure fair and just assessment being conducted and yielded. As the pandemic-affected academic year came to a close, one issue that needed to be addressed urgently was how to communicate their performance via grading. Grades are crucial because they are frequently used as a criterion for post-secondary admissions, scholarships, and financial aid. It was not fair to just carry out any assessment without considering various aspects from the students' side as well (Tabroni et al., 2022). During the pandemic, students learning was disrupted as many could not join the online classes due to Internet reception issues. This elevated stress and invited other learning issues such as student engagement and assignment completion. Higher education

institutions should be more receptive in accommodating students' learning as to maintain the quality and standard of teaching, learning and assessment. In addition to that, final examinations were cancelled and replaced with other forms of alternative assessment during remote learning increase issues on consistency and accuracy of this assessment (Salehi & Masoule, 2017). As such, this paper examines the grading preferences of undergraduate students during remote learning.

Literature

Hundreds of millions of students were afflicted by the coronavirus disease 2019 which forced countrywide educational institutions closures in numerous countries. In Malaysia, effective March 2020 schools and other learning institutions were closed gradually when the Covid-19 cases started skyrocketing, resulting in the government imposing Movement Control Orders (MCO). Unexpected university closures have an impact on students, their families, and instructors. As a result of the immediate closures, classes at all levels transitioned from traditional to distance-learning settings. The teaching and learning environment, as well as educational relationships, have changed in a situation where education is given entirely online.

The Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020) categorizes three groups of income for Malaysian household, namely B40 (referring to the lowest 40% in the income distribution), M40 (referring to the 41%-80% in the income distribution), and T20 (referring to the top 20% in the income distribution). In the year 2020, the B40 income is below RM4,360, meanwhile the M40 group has its household income between RM4,360 – RM9,619. Subsequently, the T20 has its household income above RM9,619. In conjunction to the information shared above, a preliminary study conducted on the implementation of remote learning in one of the public universities in Malaysia revealed that students are concerned on expensive internet data and unconducive learning environment at their homes (Nurahimah Mohd Yusoff et al., 2021). The report also highlights the scarcity of learning facilities at home such as laptops and computer software.

In a normal circumstance, online learning enables flexibility in learning for students to from anywhere at any time. The COVID-19 epidemic, on the other hand, triggered an emergency shift from traditional to distance learning at all levels of education, known as emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020). In response to the pandemic, an emergency remote teaching programme was established. For teachers, students, and parents, the situation was unlike the well-planned typical technique of online learning since it was unexpected and unplanned. For the first time in history, all students and professors were compelled to take all of their classes online. Online learning, on the other hand, is a complex process that necessitates rigorous instructional design and development in order to provide an effective learning environment (Ergulec, 2019).

An online learning system is web-based software for distributing, tracking, and managing courses over the Internet. It comprises utilising technological advancements to direct, produce, and deliver learning content, as well as to facilitate two-way communication between students and teachers (Mukhtar et al., 2020). They contain features like as whiteboards, chat rooms, polls, quizzes, discussion forums, and surveys that allow instructors and students to collaborate and share course information via an online platform. These can be beneficial and practical instruments for reaching learning goals. For synchronous classes, Malaysian universities employ Google Meet, Edmodo, and Moodle as learning management systems, as well as its video conferencing apps Zoom, Skype for Business, and WebEx.

Studies on the effectiveness of remote learning show various responses from both instructors and students. Misirli and Ergulec (2021) strongly felt that self-regulated learning skills among their students have increased during remote teaching. This is also due to the reason that, during the pandemic, the increased usage of technology for educational purposes encouraged the learning of the 21st century digital skills. On another note, Dhawan (2020) raised her concern that it is crucial to build content that does not only fulfil the curriculum's requirements but also engages pupils. Student engagement becomes the highlight in any form of teaching approaches, be it during online or

face-to-face learning. Even though scholars believe that online learning is the way forward, they find it essential for educators to upskill their technological skills alongside with pedagogical knowledge to be able to face challenges in teaching and learning (Dhawan, 2020; Ergulec, 2019; Hodges et al., 2020; Misirli & Ergulec, 2021; Mukhtar et al., 2020).

Assessment is an integral component in learning as it informs us the learner's progress and how they can be helped to achieve the goals of learning. There are two main types of assessments that can be used in learning which are formative and summative assessments (Salehi & Masoule, 2017). During the pandemic, studies (Kanjee & Bhana, 2020; Zou et al., 2021) show that most instructors adopted formative assessment in their courses as it could yield continuous information about their students' acquisition of the subject matter.

There are also instructors who went the extra mile in designing alternative assessment tasks such as portfolio (Flynn, 2022; Syafei et al., 2021), oral presentations (Kanjee & Bhana, 2020) and open book assessments (Slack & Priestley, 2022). Studies show that most course instructors adopted formative assessment as their mode of assessment during the pandemic and grading were done primarily by abiding to rubrics that were given to students much earlier during the beginning of course (Kaup et al., 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Twist, 2021).

Because of the interdependence of grading practises, teaching practises, and student behaviours, as well as the lack of empirical studies examining the holistic effects of grading preferences, Ormrod's Interdependent Network of Teaching can be used to reflect on the instructor's practise and the students' preferences. Ormrod's (2008) network displays the interconnectivity of planning, instruction, assessment, classroom atmosphere, and student behaviour, all of which have an impact on one another. The articulation of learning goals and

Table 1 Current grades and proposed grades

No	Current Grades	Proposed Grades
1	A+, A, A-, B+	Excellent
2	B, B-, C+, C	Satisfactory
3	C-, D+, D, F	Unsatisfactory

the implementation of diverse instructional tactics to assist learning activities are referred to as instruction. Diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments are used in this study; feedback, homework, and score reporting is all used in this component. Climate, behaviour management, and relationships make up the environment. Students' demands for safety, belonging, freedom of choice, and enjoyment are considered in the classroom atmosphere (Maslow, 1943). Finally, student behaviours are linked to desirable employability qualities including communication, flexibility, ethical leadership, initiative, and accountability

There were not many studies conducted during the pandemic to look at the students' grading preferences. As such, this study intends to fill the gap in the literature by sharing findings from students' grading preferences from this large-scale study involving a university at the northern state in Malaysia.

Method

This university level research employed a mixed method approach through an open-ended survey distributed to the university students. (N=8819). The survey consisted of four structured items that required students to select their grading preferences and an open-ended item that requires their other preferences from the ones listed in the survey. A pilot study was conducted to establish credibility of the instruments. Further amendments were made in the improved instrument before it was sent out via email to the university students.

Item 1 requires students to indicate if there are no changes to the existing grading system. Subsequently, item 2 requires students to select three proposed grades which are Excellent, Satisfactory and Unsatisfactory based on the following grading system as depicted in Table 1.

Meanwhile, item 3 requires students to select grades based on the following grading system as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2 Current grades and proposed grades

No	Current Grades	Proposed Grades
1	A+, A, A-, B+	No changes to these grades: A+, A, A-, B+
2	B, B-, C+, C	Satisfactory
3	C-, D+, D, F	Unsatisfactory

Finally, the open-ended question requires students to inform other options if they have not chosen options 1, 2 or 3 as described in Tables 1 and 2.

Results

Students who declared no source of income have showed constantly lower CGPA compared to their peers during their studies at UUM. Interestingly, these students opted for the grading option for that semester to remain the same. High income students that opted for existing grading selection were in the second-class upper group, regardless of year of studies. With existing grading mechanism, they may still stand a chance to increase their CGPA, especially when almost all courses changed

their course assessment component to 100% coursework—which is known to be relatively easier to score better grades when students met all the assessment criteria.

As expected, students from the high-income family in their 4th (considered final year for most students) year with first-class ranged CGPA preferred the no-CGPA grading option. They may have chosen such a grading option to avoid risking their existing CGPA. All second-year students with CGPA of approximately 3.30, regardless of their family income, chose the grading option in which both grade and CGPA will be reported. Figures 1a, 1b and 1c illustrate the findings on relationship between SES and CGPA based on the three grading preferences.

Figure 1a The Relationship between SES and CGPA based on Grade Preference 1 (Existing)

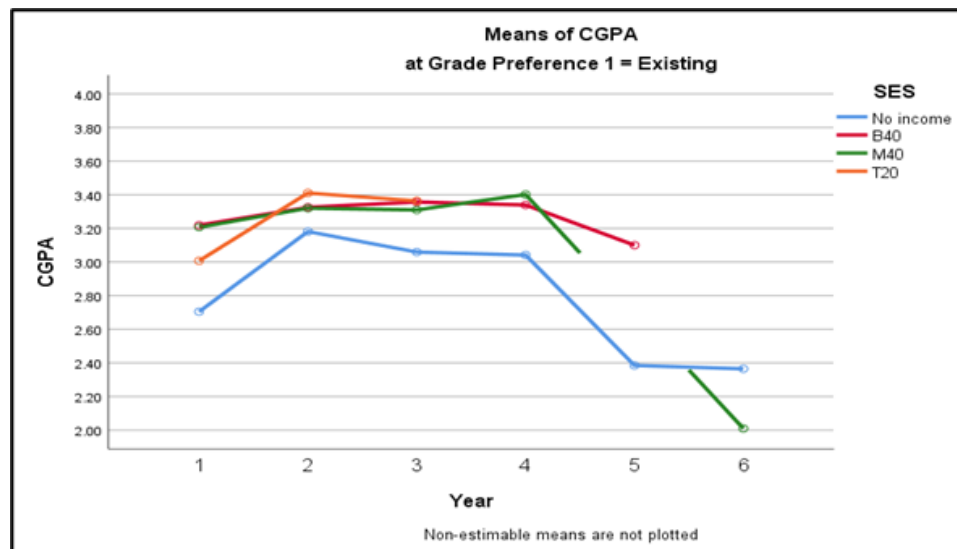


Figure 1b The Relationship between SES and CGPA based on Grade Preference 2 (No CGPA)

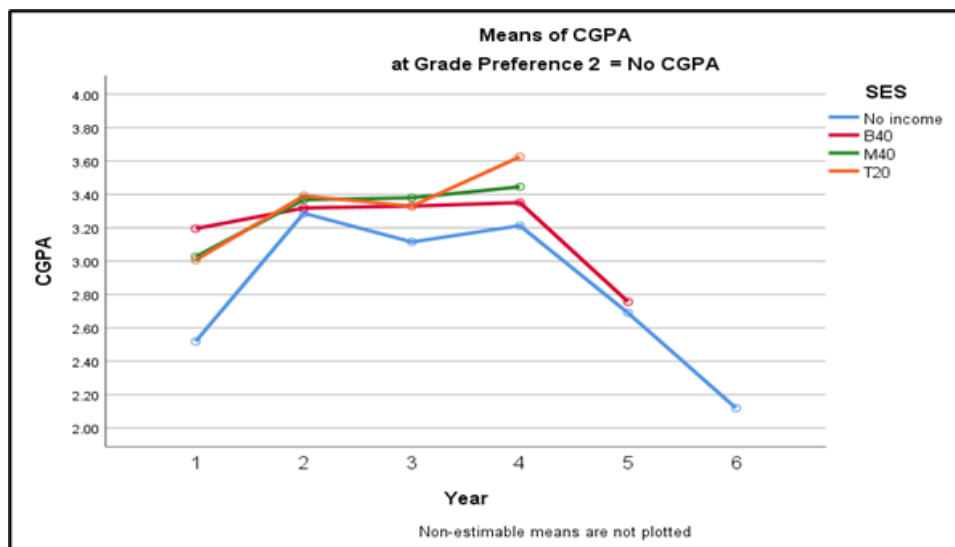
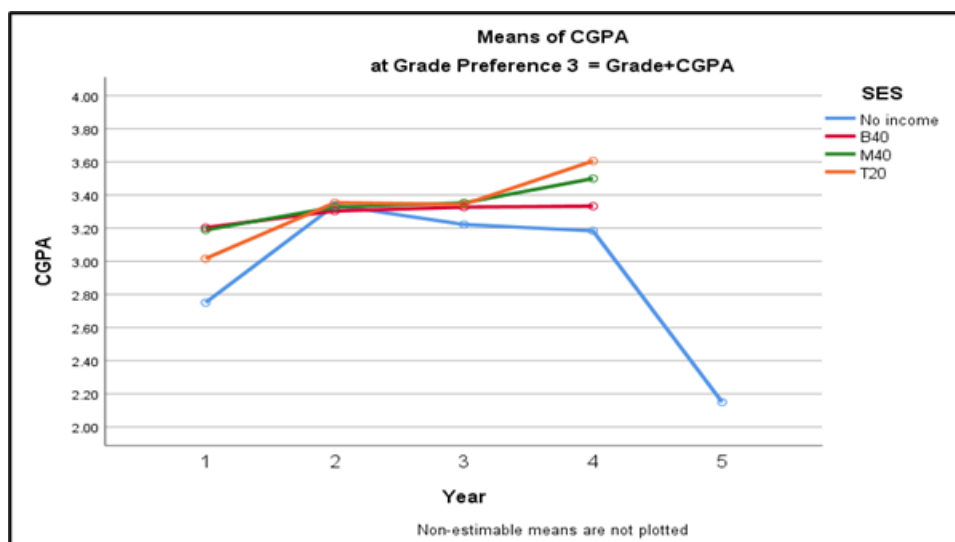


Figure 1c The Relationship between SES and CGPA based on Grade Preference 2 (Grade and CGPA)



Results of chi-square statistics provide evidence of significant relationships between students' preferences with their SES, year of studies, and CGPA. Specifically, it was discovered that both variables of grades preference and CGPA are not independent

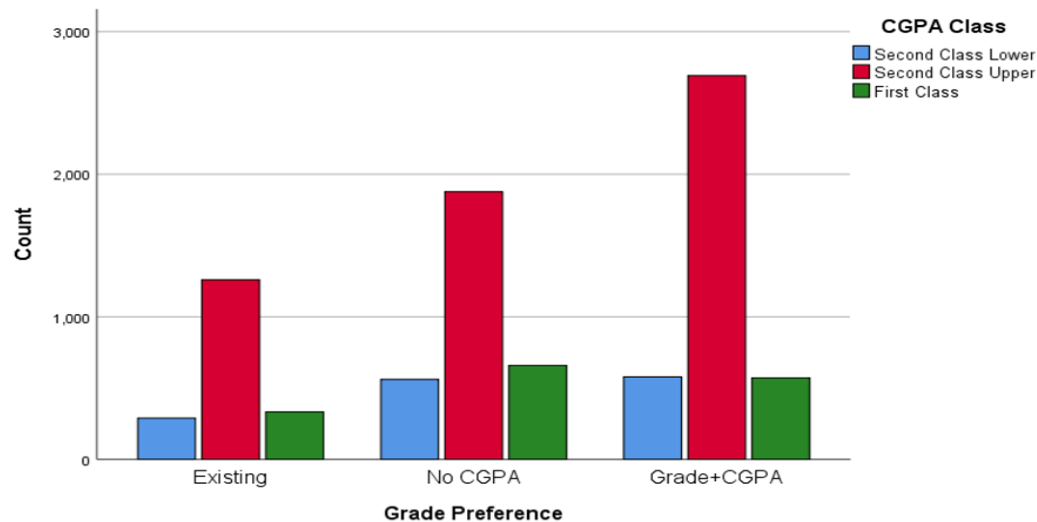
which means there is an association between the students' preference in grading and their CGPA ($p < 0.05$). Table 1 provides the chi-square statistics based on the two categorical variables. Figure 2 illustrates the frequency of the students based on the two.

Table 3 Chi-Square Test based on Grade Preferences and CGPA

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	73.859 ^a	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	73.593	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.591	1	.058
N of Valid Cases	8819		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 304.58.

Figure 2 A Bar Graph Representing the Grade Preferences based on CGPA



For our third questions, it was discovered that both variables of grades preference and students' SES are also not independent which means there is an association between the students' preference in grading and their CGPA

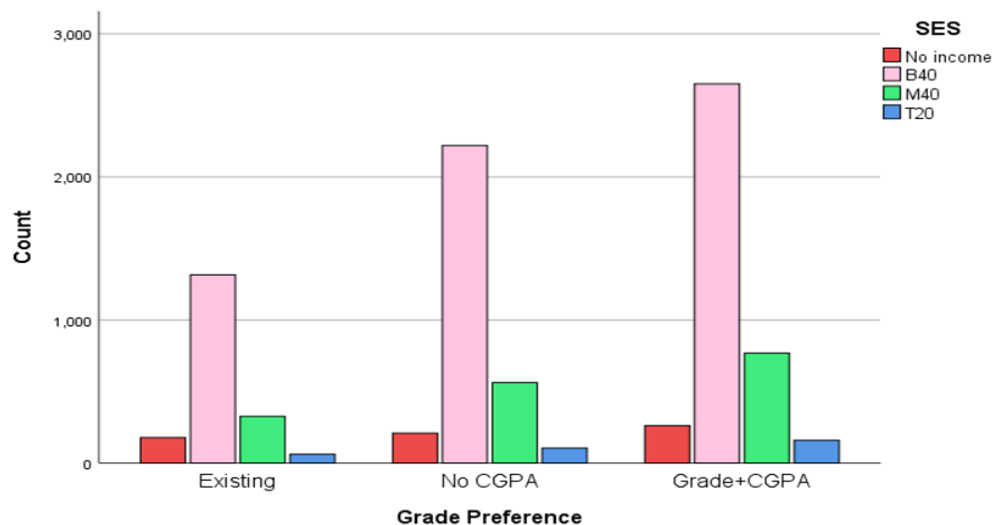
($p < 0.05$). Table 2 provides the chi-square statistics based on the two categorical variables. Figure 3 illustrates the frequency of the students based on the two.

Table 4 Chi-Square Test based on Grade Preferences and SES

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	25.709 ^a	6	.000
Likelihood Ratio	24.821	6	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	17.336	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	8819		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 69.32.

Figure 3 A Bar Graph Representing the Grade Preferences based on SES

Similarly, both variables of grades preference and students' academic year shows an association between the students' preference in grading preference and their academic year

($p < 0.05$). Table 3 provides the chi-square statistics based on the two categorical variables. Figure 4 illustrates the frequency of the students based on the two.

Table 5 Chi-Square Test based on Grade Preferences and Academic Year**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	74.870 ^a	10	.000
Likelihood Ratio	75.445	10	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.667	1	.006
N of Valid Cases	8819		

a. 5 cells (27.8%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .85.

In addition, Tables 6 and 7 below describe the CGPA by gender and college.

Table 6**CGPA by Gender**

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Male	1414	3.35	.34	-5.515	.001
Female	4984	3.41	.28		

The results showed that there was a significant difference for CGPA by gender, $t(1983.13) = -5.515$, $p < 0.01$. The level of loyalty of female students was higher ($m = 3.41$, $SD = 0.28$) than male students ($m = 3.35$, $SD = 0.28$).

Table 7

CGPA by College					
CGPA	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Group	1.710	2	.855	9.960	.000
Within Group	549.087	6395	.086		
Total	550.798	6397			

Post Hoc Tukey-LSD Test For CGPA

College		Mean Difference	STD. Error	Sig
CAS	COB	-.001	.009	.998
	COLGIS	.042*	.012	.001

Based on the ANOVA Table above, it was found that there was a significant difference for CGPA based on college of study ($F(2, 6395) = 9.960$; $p < 0.01$). CAS students ($M = 3.40$, $S.P = 0.279$) and COB students ($M = 3.40$, $S.P = 0.295$) were significantly higher than COLGIS students ($M = 3.36$, $S.P = 0.299$). However, the CGPAs of CAS students and COB students were not significantly different.

Discussion

Covid-19 has changed the landscape of higher education. As such, the university management continues to improve the teaching, learning and assessment standards by making assessment inclusive. Giving voices to the students in deciding how they should be graded is an effort made during the pandemic as to reduce the learning gaps and other learning issues faced by students who are learning remotely from their homes. Knight and Cooper (2019) reaffirmed that a lot of reflection takes place when students' voices are integrated in grading system and it makes them accountable to their learning. Additionally, by being accommodative towards students' needs, the university is committed in upholding quality services to its clients. It is unfair to maintain the same grading system during the pandemic for the students because they come from different

SES as they have various learning issues when remote learning was implemented. This is supported by Kinney and Rowland (2021) in their student which indicated that when all students were ordered not to return to class after spring break, some students shared moving testimonies about how they were the only one in their family who could maintain a full-time job in a crucial line of work. The effort to offer the choice on grading is imperative on students as above as an effort by the university to be fair and just. There rises the need to ensure a balance between giving the students flexibility in making decisions about their grading preferences while maintaining the good practices of the university to promote good governance and quality standards.

The findings suggest that there are significant relationships between students' preferences with their SES, year of studies, and CGPA. As such, it is imperative on the university to consider students' backgrounds, learning differences, learning environment and emotional wellbeing. Karadag (2021) pointed out that in comparison to other classes, first-grade courses typically receive lower marks in higher education. Instructors often implicitly discipline their students for future problems that might occur. This is a pressing issue to be addressed as the pandemic may have disrupted

the students' basic needs and learning process. It is reported that 78% of the students come from families with no income and B40 who have been deprived of proper learning facilities with big number of family members vying for the limited internet receptivity for learning and other uses.

48% of the respondents selected the no grading options. This is probably because they worry that their CGPA might be negatively affected as they could not maintain the results. It is interesting and worthy to note that students with lower CGPA opted for the existing grading option. This could be due to the replacement of the final examinations with alternative assessment that are deemed to be more flexible, formative and contextualized (Vielma & Brey, 2021).

Conclusion

Even though Covid-19 is deadly and has brought disastrous effects on us in multiple facets of our lives, it has also some light to the changes in our current education system, specifically in the grading preferences among undergraduates. This move is parallel with the effort to bring in creativity and innovation in assessment whereby the steps taken to introduce alternative assessment as opposed to final examination is taking effect gradually now. It is also time that instructors pay attention to the different needs of the students who come from vast background.

The changes in grading preferences should also highlight the changes in policy and procedures in conducting teaching and learning remotely and integrating online learning measures. This should also highlight the importance of students' voices in an effort for student accountability and empowerment to their learning. While conducting this study, the researchers gained some insights in managing education in times of crisis and there are lessons learnt for better practices should similar predicament hit the education world in the future.

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