

# Do policies transform patterns? Effects of the implementation of written assessment criteria at an entire faculty

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**ABSTRACT:** Literature on assessment criteria in higher education indicates that they can have substantial positive effects on student learning. A few years ago, the Faculties of Humanities and Theology at Lund University therefore decided that written assessment criteria were to be formulated for all their courses. During the implementation process following this decision, we are conducting a longitudinal research project to investigate the outcomes and effects of this implementation. We investigate how students and teachers experience working with assessment criteria. Do the criteria transform patterns in student learning and if so; how? Do they influence teachers' communication with their students and/or amongst colleagues and if so; how? Do they have effects on assessment patterns on a departmental level and if so; how? How is the policy decision enacted at the departmental level? We address these questions by analysing the results of specifically aimed questionnaires as well as semi structured interviews made with students, their teachers and directors of studies during the first period of implementation. These data will be compared with corresponding data collected after the implementation is realized to enable longitudinal analyses. At an early stage we can, however, already observe interesting indications of the intriguingly complex and far from linear relation between policy intention and outcome.

## 1 THE PROCESS OF IMPLEMENTATION

The idea of outcome based learning (OBL) and constructive alignment currently permeates much of how we design curricula in higher education in Sweden. In 2015, the Faculty of Humanities and Theology at Lund University, commenced a process in which written assessment criteria are to be formulated for all its courses (1199 in total). The process was carefully prepared by investigating conditions for how it might best be done, and by designing various forms of support (a.g. a handbook, Bergqvist 2015, workshops and a decentralised administration). The process is to be accomplished by the expiration of 2017. At the present stage, departments are in the middle of putting into action the decree and in this process, we, the authors of this paper, are exploring how students, teachers and leaders experience this and what they think about it.

Previous research shows that the relation between intention and outcomes when it comes to policy implementation is far from simple and linear (Barman et al, 2014). Loosely coupled organisations (Meyer and Rowan 1977) where knowledgeable agents collectively construct organisations signified by dynamic equilibrium (Smith and Lewis 2011) make implementations unpredictable. Therefore, investigations into such processes are complex and sometimes unnerving (Senge 2006). Despite this we hope to, through a longitudinal perspective be able to discern the intriguing complexity in how students and faculty have chosen to relate to the policy demand on assessment criteria. How has this affected them, what will be the intended and unintended outcomes?

### 1.1 Policy implementation: Intentions

The policy decision on written assessment criteria, made by the board of the Faculty, was based on the conclusion that whatever grading scale is used (it varies within the Faculty), grades should be based on explicit criteria related to the intended learning outcomes (ILO) in the course syllabus. Furthermore, the decision was motivated by the idea of four major long-term effect goals: increased assessment transparency; increased legal security for students; explicit and intelligible learning outcomes; and quality assurance concerning assessment over time (Hetherington 2014, p. 4).

### 1.2 Policy implementation: Experiences

During the implementation process, we are interested in exploring the contexts in which the implementation processes take place, and how these contexts influence how the decision was received, what is done as a consequence of it and what effects that may have. *Context* in this framework includes the sociocultural setting in which specific academics operate, including collegial relations,

discipline-specific traditions and personal positions and engagements, i.e. the various micro cultures (Mårtensson 2014; Roxå 2014) in which the academics are active as teachers. By extension, of course the students – the main target group of the investment in writing criteria – are confronted with the result, and the question is who, and during which conditions, might benefit from it.

Our longitudinal research project investigates through surveys and semi structured interviews how students, teachers, and directors of studies experience the policy implementation, working with assessment criteria and what role this plays at the academy. In this paper we focus on

- what teachers do to get students to understand what is being assessed and valued, and what their attitudes towards and experiences of criteria are;
- how directors of studies go about to lead the implementation of the policy determined by the Faculty board, what they think about it and how they perceive their assignment as leaders

We also try to capture notions of the micro cultures within which academics deal with their daily work and the pedagogical issues associated to this, in order to better understand the premises against which we can later evaluate possible effects and changes related to implementation.

In this paper we present some observations so far, based primarily on the analysis of semi structured interviews with teachers (11 teachers in 9 courses) and their directors of studies (6).

## 2 ACADEMICS' PERCEPTIONS

The academics in our study agreed to be interviewed upon an open request. Within the group of 11 individuals from 9 different subjects and courses, we found those both in favour of and sceptical to written assessment criteria, as well as those without articulated opinions. When interviewed, most of them were still tentatively beginning to formulate and/or using assessment criteria, whereas a few of them had used it for quite some time, on their own initiative.

We can already discern a number of factors affecting respondents' standpoints, and we address some of these below. The aspects addressed below are illustrated with references from our interview PM's.

### 2.1 Perceptions of assessment criteria in higher education

In Sweden, assessment criteria are used in all elementary school and high school. Many academics have direct or indirect experiences of this, e.g. via their own children or students. Even if the criteria suggested for the Faculties of Humanities and Theology differ in many respects from the criteria used in pre-university education, ideas of the latter sometimes lead to prejudices which clash with epistemological and ideological values in higher education.

This worries some teachers: 'Nowadays we import everything from high school. Attending university used to mean something different, and this difference was emphasized. Now it is not emphasised any more'. Other teachers think university must meet the current student group, which is used to criteria, and don't consider it a problem to still communicate to students that attending university differs from previous educational experiences. 'Many of us, like me, have children in high school. There the presence of assessment criteria is very clear. [---] It would be very odd, then, if when they begin university, there is nothing, just a 1000 pages of literature. [---] We don't necessarily have to change anything of what we are doing, just *explain* what we're doing.'

Several interviewed academics express a worry that assessment criteria (if known to students and used as a pedagogical tool), will lead to instrumentalism and surface approaches to learning, and that it provides them with 'a shortcut to the exam' which will refrain them from engaging more open mindedly in their studies. One teacher specifically expresses the ambition to 'foster an academic, questing and curious attitude', and worries that explicit criteria counteracts this.

Other teachers see obvious benefits both for themselves and for their students: 'I think it may be used as a pedagogical tool, and be really beneficial for students, but also support the teacher when one is correcting exams or when one designs one's course'. Several teachers express an awareness that even carefully written criteria cannot themselves constitute the sole communication of what is expected from students; they still need to be explained.

Some are concerned that written assessment criteria may make them, as teachers, vulnerable if students choose to question their judgement, whereas others see criteria as something to support them

in such cases. 'As a teacher one makes quite a quick judgement, but if you do wrong it might be very problematic. You want to get it done. My experience tells me I know how to read, analyse and look at this [a student's performance] in all sorts of ways, and I think assessment criteria might be helpful in that'.

In many departmental milieus, there seem to be a generational divide. 'The younger generation of academics are instructed in different pedagogical ideals than the older generation', one academic comments, and continues: 'The younger colleagues do not even necessarily see instrumentalism as mere problematic, but as something that could be a support for certain students'.

## **2.2 Epistemological concerns and student cue awareness**

Traditions are strong within Lund university. There seems to be a tension between a somewhat elitist versus a more inclusive attitude. Even among those teachers who are more inclusive there is a concern that clear communication of requirements might exclude the ingenious students. 'Standards works for ordinary students, but not for a genius, and it is the obligation of a university to recognize and advocate the genius'.

One major concern for teachers in some disciplines is that the complexity of knowledge and skills taught at university cannot be boiled down to some simplified written criteria without distorting the very essence of what academics are trying to convey to students. The objections thus seem to be of epistemological character. There are ideas that not everybody is fit for university. 'I think there is a point in that some realize this is not something they should occupy themselves with'. Others recognize this but see it as more problematic: 'University education resembles a "secret handshake": 'perhaps you can make it, perhaps your parents attended university so you know what it is about, but otherwise...?'

So, we notice an awareness of the heterogeneity and changing compilation of the student groups and a recognition of various degrees of cue consciousness (Miller & Parlett 1974). It might be those less conscious (cue deaf) that are best helped by explicit assessment criteria. 'It doesn't matter what you do to the strong students, they will perform well in any case. In any crappy course.' But the 'weaker ones' need more of explicit communication about what we want from them.'

## **2.3 Assessment literacy**

We mention above the noticed generational discrepancy observed within groups of colleagues, where younger teachers who are trained in pedagogical courses express a more positive attitude towards written assessment criteria. It is more common among senior academics to express that 'I recognize a brilliant piece of work when I see it' or 'when you have marked exams for 30 years you *see* that this person knows what she is writing, similar to good or bad hand writing' (compare with Ecclestone 2001).

But it is not only a matter of age. Even some senior academics, who have so far not been working with explicit criteria, ponders that 'For myself, I think I would need some criteria to make fair assessment. I have a tendency to award those who use a correct language and present a good argument. Sometimes I forget to check if they answered the question'. Some teachers also express that for themselves, the mere process of writing criteria might help them to understand and be more aware of what they assess.

## **3 ADDRESSING DIRECTORS OF STUDY**

Six directors of study, who coordinate and lead teachers on departmental level agreed to be interviewed. They were addressed after individual academics in their staff had been interviewed.

Within this group three individuals had been part of a preparatory project group at the Faculty (leading to the policy decision), whereas the other three had not. This provides an interesting opportunity for comparison.

### **3.1 Leading change**

It is very clear from our interviews that many directors of study apply a very gentle form of leadership in general, and that this goes also for implementing the Faculty decision on written assessment criteria. A director of study is a collegial position of confidence. In accordance to this, many choose to give instructions and formulate some frames but do not try to control or supervise in detail. One director of

studies, who herself is in favour of the idea of criteria, says she wants those not so positive to 'discover for themselves, in time'. She observes that the teachers who believe in the benefits of explicit criteria also write criteria of much higher quality. Hence, there is no point in being overly imperative. As always, too, faculty are already heavily burdened with a workload seldom matching the time they are paid for. Additional work, another document to write, therefore, is by many seen as yet something that steals time that does not exist.

In our interviews, we observe a very clear disparity between the directors of study who had themselves been part of the preparatory project on behalf of the entire Faculty and those who had not. Those who had been part of the project expressed how they had been 'preparing the ground' carefully before asking their teachers to start working with their criteria. Also, one person expressed that being part of that project had prepared her for leading the work ahead and provided her with valuable insights and knowledge on the matter. 'When you realize the value of it, it is worth the effort'. It is interesting to note, too, that this particular director of study initially had been markedly critical to the whole idea, but was now one of the more affirmative ones.

As a contrast, one director of studies, who had not been part of the preparatory project and who himself (in accordance with most of his departmental colleagues) has fundamental doubts about the benefits of the whole thing, is faced with the challenge to still have to lead his colleagues in implementing the policy. 'I have had to put my own opinions and worries to the side; it is my responsibility to do this [---] but what proof is there that this is the most beneficial pedagogical investment for all courses as compared to other things we could have spent time on?'

Apart from what might be strong principal, epistemologically related objections to using explicit assessment criteria, it seems as if those directors of study who had been able to prepare themselves and think through issues on assessment praxis and criteria in their subjects or departments, experienced a higher degree of ownership and agency in leading the process. This gives them confidence in moving forward. The same goes, not surprisingly, for individual academics who had already before and on their own initiative been using explicit assessment criteria.

#### **4 SO, DO POLICIES TRANSFORM PATTERNS?**

Well, as indicated above, it is too early to know the outcomes of this implementation process in the deeper sense of the word. The relation between intention and outcome is intriguingly complex and far from linear, as illustrated by our preliminary findings.

We have commented on the opposing attitudes noticed among interviewed directors of study. This might perhaps be interpreted as if increased knowledge on the matter, with a more profound and perhaps nuanced acquaintance with what is on the agenda and the underpinning incitements and ideas, facilitate a feeling of agency and personal motivation in operationalizing and handling a pedagogical investment. In the specific forum of this conference, we might say that increased scholarship of teaching and learning, especially concerning the specific matter of assessment criteria, might be of fundamental importance for the prerequisites of success.

Most problematic is, perhaps, the situation when a policy imposed "from above" collides with strong fundamental epistemological values and beliefs, often profoundly anchored in the traditions of subjects and disciplines. The whole preparation of support and formal context emphasized the ownership of the processes at the departments, as a way to urge a move in a constructive direction that would focus on pedagogy and contextual communication. But, it is not yet possible to distinguish how this will land.

Implementation takes time, assessment is a complex thing, universities are complex contexts and academics highly self-propelled. All these influences implementation. As one director of study insightfully concluded: 'I believe that the implementation will take longer than we thought. It is one thing to write assessment criteria for one's course; it is all together another thing to make people really work with them in the way it was intended – that takes longer time'.

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