

A preliminary case study: Challenges, approaches, and pressures in the policy implementation of iCGPA

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Abstract

This study explores the institutional-level implementation of the integrated cumulative grade point average (iCGPA) initiative at University A, focusing on its intentions, challenges, and responses during the early stages. Introduced by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education to produce holistic and balanced graduates, iCGPA seeks to complement a decade-long effort under outcome-based education (OBE). However, achieving these objectives remains elusive. Using a qualitative approach, interviews with Academic Standards Quality staff and Heads of Departments revealed key issues, including the absence of collaboration between researchers and policymakers, and the reliance on a top-down policy approach. The study highlights the role of isomorphic pressures—coercive, mimetic, and normative—in shaping policy adoption and highlights the need for evidence-based policymaking to balance standardisation with adaptability. These findings provide valuable insights for policymakers and higher education institutions to refine strategies for future policy implementation.

Keywords: iCGPA; evidence-based policymaking; isomorphic pressure; top-down approach

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Introduction

This paper examines the policy implementation of the integrated cumulative grade point average (iCGPA) introduced in Malaysia in 2016 and its transition from a mandatory requirement to an optional practice within a short period. The findings of this research highlight the critical need for evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) strategies. Additionally, the paper explores the challenges of a top-down policy approach, the difficulties anticipated by policy recipients, and isomorphic

pressure—defined as the tendency for organisations within a sector to become increasingly similar (Kezar & Sierra, 2019).

Although the iCGPA policy was initially formulated through a top-down approach, by 2018, the government had recognised its shortcomings and decided to grant higher education institutions (HEIs) greater autonomy. Former Education Minister Dr. Maszlee Malik remarked, ‘In the spirit of freedom and autonomy, the varsities are now allowed to decide for themselves whether they want to continue or drop the use of the iCGPA programme in their respective universities’ (Zanariah, 2018, para. 4). Mattsson et al. (2024) further emphasised that universities occupy a unique position among government agencies, where rigid top-down steering is insufficient in a policy field requiring self-regulation and autonomy. Thus, relying solely on a top-down policy approach may not effectively balance power and control.

Drawing on evidence from the iCGPA case, this paper explores the findings from a preliminary case study to explore the potential advantages of proactive policy implementation over reactive approaches. The research aims to provide valuable insights for policymakers and institutions striving to design policies grounded in empirical evidence.

Evidence-based policymaking (EBPM)

Evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) is a structured approach that integrates scientific evidence into decision-making to enhance policy outcomes and democratic legitimacy. By systematically incorporating the best available evidence from diverse sources—including research, expertise, and stakeholder input—EBPM ensures that policies are effective, efficient, and responsive to societal needs.

EBPM emphasises the use of various types of evidence, such as randomised controlled trials (RCTs), systematic reviews, and qualitative research, to establish a robust foundation for policy decisions (Mittal et al., 2024). This diversity of evidence sources enhances the reliability and comprehensiveness of policy outcomes. Moreover, stakeholder engagement is critical, involving researchers, practitioners, and community members to integrate diverse perspectives. Such collaboration ensures that policies are contextually relevant, improving acceptance and effectiveness (HakemZadeh & Rousseau, 2024; Galluccio, 2021).

Cairney (2016) noted that evidence can often become lost in the complexities of the political process during policy development. Policymakers may overlook, misinterpret, or fail to act on appropriate evidence, even when researchers present well-defined problems and evidence-based solutions. However, Cairney

argues that policymakers are legitimate actors in democratic systems, balancing evidence with considerations like public values and political constraints. He cautions against labelling policies as ‘not evidence-based’ solely because they selectively use evidence or deviate from scientific recommendations. Instead, research should be seen as contributing to awareness, informing solutions, and enriching societal understanding, rather than solely dictating decisions (Cairney, 2016).

The gap between research and policymaking stems from systemic and cultural challenges. Limited institutional resources, political instability, and budget constraints often impede the translation of research into policy (World Health Organization, 2022). Divergent frameworks across ministries—such as incompatible timelines, reporting requirements, and funding systems—further exacerbate these difficulties (Gunn & Mintrom, 2021). Cultural differences between researchers and policymakers also hinder collaboration, as policymakers often lack the capacity or incentives to use academic findings effectively. Addressing these challenges requires improved practices and incentives to bridge the gap between research and policy (World Health Organization, 2022; Gunn & Mintrom, 2021).

Organisations have been established to serve as bridges between government and academia to address this disconnect. For example, Malaysia’s National Council for Higher Education, founded in 1996, advises the government on higher education matters (Sirat & Azman, 2014). Chaired by the Minister of Education, the council coordinates higher education policies with a degree of impartiality from political influence. The council also established the National Higher Education Research Institute (IPPTN) to conduct policy research on its behalf (Sirat & Azman, 2014).

The role of EBPM in proactive policymaking

EBPM urges policymakers to adopt proactive approaches by using robust scientific data to anticipate societal needs and challenges rather than merely reacting to them as they arise (Galluccio, 2021). This forward-thinking strategy aims to develop sustainable solutions that address problems before they escalate. However, as Gunn and Mintrom (2021) observed, while EBPM and research impact are mutually beneficial, tensions exist between the two. Policymakers and researchers may operate within different ministries, hindering alignment between research application and policy formulation.

Cairney and Oliver (2020) emphasised the importance of fostering collaboration between policymakers and academics, while Fotheringham et al. (2021) advocated for proactive dissemination of research findings through diverse communication channels. Sirat and Azman (2014) also highlighted key challenges in EBPM decisions, including the following:

1. The absence of evidence in emerging areas of higher education due to the time required to conduct robust research.
2. The tendency to use evidence selectively to support predetermined policy directions.
3. Political considerations often outweighing evidence in policy decisions.

Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) play a pivotal role in addressing these challenges by providing reliable, unbiased evidence essential for informed decision-making (Khosrowi, 2022). RCTs are often seen as one of the best ways to evaluate interventions. They play a crucial role in many fields, including education, and have made a significant positive impact. For example, RCTs were utilised to evaluate early-grade reading programs in India, Kenya, and South Africa, leading to improved teaching practices (Shalem & Clercq, 2023). In England, the Education Endowment Foundation has funded RCTs to assess interventions for disadvantaged student groups (Xiao et al., 2024).

Despite their strengths, RCTs face challenges such as ethical concerns, resource limitations, and the need for adaptability in rapidly evolving fields like digital education. Moreover, applying RCT findings within broader theoretical frameworks is complex, highlighting the challenges of using RCTs in EBPM.

EBPM is essential for equipping policymakers with the necessary data to make informed decisions and avoid relying on intuition, ideology, or conventional wisdom (Sirat & Azman, 2014). While EBPM faces numerous challenges, it provides a critical framework for addressing issues in higher education policymaking, enabling more effective and sustainable outcomes.

Context and concerns

The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education has continuously sought to push the boundaries of its educational system to fulfil its vision of providing high-quality tertiary education, developing excellent individuals, and fostering a prosperous nation. In line with this vision, the Malaysian Qualifications Framework, managed by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), along with the Ministry,

mandated a transformation in higher education curricula by adopting outcome-based education (OBE) in 2007.

OBE enhances learning by setting clear goals, creating meaningful, student-centred experiences, and aligning with desired outcomes (Sun & Lee, 2020). It ensures that graduates are workforce-ready by focusing on skills such as critical thinking and communication, while also bridging the gap between education and industry needs. OBE allows for continuous curriculum reviews, ensuring that programs remain relevant and effective, promoting quality assurance and enhancing institutional credibility (Sun & Lee, 2020).

In addition to OBE, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education introduced another policy, the iCGPA, in 2016. This initiative aimed to assess and report on students' development, performance, learning ethics, knowledge, and ability to produce more holistic and balanced graduates.

Student performance under the iCGPA system is presented in two ways: first, through a list of subjects and grades similar to conventional academic transcripts, and second, through a 'spider web' of points that profile specific skill sets acquired through extracurricular activities (Doria, 2015). Former Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh emphasised in a report in the local newspaper (Rozana, 2017) that the iCGPA system benefits various stakeholders, particularly students, future employers, and higher education institutions.

While this initiative aims to strike a balance between academic requirements and extracurricular activities, concerns arise regarding the curriculum design required to assess students' achievements outside the classroom, as well as academics' preparedness for the new assessment system. The rigidity of the iCGPA mapping mechanism could also be problematic, particularly in how student performance is evaluated. Trowler (2008) warns that one way to fail is by seeking predefined, high-fidelity solutions to problems that may not even be recognised as such by those directly involved. This concern highlights that a rigid profiling system in student transcripts may overlook the diverse perspectives and contexts of the students it aims to assess.

Implementing the iCGPA policy alone may not ensure the production of balanced and holistic graduates. It is crucial to consider the perceptions of ground-level participants in the policy process (Trowler, 2008). This raises the question of whether the ongoing effort to implement iCGPA is truly effective. The concern is that quality assurance may not necessarily lead to quality enhancement. This study examines the perspectives of those who were initially impacted by the policy.

The formulation of the iCGPA policy in 2016 provides a micro example of how Neo-Institutional Theory (NIT) manifests in HEIs. According to NIT, institutional change can occur through three mechanisms: coercive isomorphism—

which stems from political influence and legitimacy concerns, mimetic isomorphism—which arises from institutions responding to uncertainty by imitating others, and normative isomorphism—which is tied to professionalisation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 150).

In this context, one concern is the isomorphic pressure experienced by institutions. Institutional isomorphism assumes that institutions can transform to align with a particular institutional environment (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017). However, the environments of different institutions can vary significantly, which poses a challenge to the iCGPA implementation. Not all institutions may be able to adopt this policy uniformly.

In 2017, University A embarked on the journey of iCGPA implementation for two primary reasons: 1) to comply with the Ministry of Higher Education's directives and 2) to achieve standardisation. These motivations will be explored in more detail in the following sections.

A significant concern in policy implementation, particularly with a top-down approach, is highlighted by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), who argue that structural changes in organisations are increasingly driven by bureaucratisation and other forms of organisational change that make institutions more similar, without necessarily improving efficiency. This paper explores whether University A's adoption of the iCGPA was primarily driven by the need to comply with the Ministry's mandated criteria. It examines the influence of isomorphic pressures, the policy approach employed, and the challenges faced during the implementation process, providing valuable insights for other HEIs and future policy initiatives.

The following research questions guide the investigation into the challenges and difficulties involved in implementing the iCGPA initiative at the institutional level while also evaluating the role of isomorphic pressure during the change management process:

- RQ1: Does isomorphic pressure explain the reason for iCGPA implementation at University A?
- RQ2: What policy approach can be identified in the strategic implementation of iCGPA at University A?
- RQ3: What challenges are anticipated during the initial implementation of iCGPA?

The following section will provide a brief overview of the iCGPA system, followed by a discussion of the research findings. The paper concludes with the author's conclusions and recommendations.

Grading, assurance and standardisation

The iCGPA grading system incorporates additional profiling of specific skills through a spider web representation. This initiative stems from the Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint 2015-2025, which outlines ten strategic shifts. The first of these shifts aims to produce holistic, entrepreneurial, and balanced graduates. The implementation of iCGPA is intended to support this goal, aligning with the aspirations of the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education. However, concerns remain about whether this quality assurance effort will significantly impact students' performance.

The iCGPA system measures all Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs) in alignment with eight Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) domains and six student aspirations:

Table 1.

Malaysian qualifications framework domains & student aspiration

MQF domains	Student aspirations
1. Knowledge	1. ethics and spirituality,
2. Practical skills	2. leadership skills,
3. Social skills and responsibility	3. national identity,
4. Values, attitudes and professionalism	4. language proficiency
5. Communication, leadership and team skills	5. thinking skills
6. Problem-solving and scientific skills	6. knowledge.
7. Information management and lifelong learning	
8. Management and entrepreneurship	

These components, outlined in Table 1, serve as the foundation for assessing and reporting the integrated development of students. The system evaluates their ethical values, declarative and functional knowledge, disciplinary expertise, and technical abilities. As described in the iCGPA Rubric Learning Outcomes Assessment Guide (Ministry of Higher Education, 2016), 'iCGPA is a system or mechanism for assessing and reporting learners' integrated development and learning gains ... [and] aims to assist various stakeholders in making decisions or planning for improvement' (p.113).

While iCGPA seeks to enhance quality assurance, its introduction raises questions about its necessity, particularly when compared to existing practices

under OBE. Since 2007, the Ministry of Higher Education has actively promoted OBE as a prerequisite for accreditation, beginning with engineering degree programmes (Hashim and Azizi, 2009). OBE emphasises cyclic, continual improvement with revisions to teaching and learning pedagogies, delivery methods, and assessment strategies (Rajaei et al., 2013). It integrates continuous quality improvement (CQI) processes, using learning outcomes assessments to refine educational practices.

OBE also aligns with the constructive alignment framework proposed by Biggs (2003):

The key is that all components in the teaching system—the curriculum and its intended outcomes, the teaching methods used, and the assessment tasks—are aligned with each other. All are tuned to learning activities addressed in the desired learning outcomes. The learner finds it difficult to escape without learning appropriately. (p. 3)

The introduction of iCGPA at this juncture implies an additional layer of assurance is needed to ensure graduates meet all MQF domains. This raises the question of whether this added mechanism improves educational outcomes or merely increases administrative complexity. Quality assurance efforts can, at times, fail to enhance the quality of student learning (Newton, 2000).

In the subsequent findings and discussion section, this paper will further explore the intentions behind iCGPA's introduction, the anticipated challenges, and whether universities face any isomorphic pressures as a result.

The next section outlines the methodology and ethical considerations employed in this study.

Methodological & ethical considerations

This study represents a preliminary qualitative investigation into the implementation of the iCGPA policy. It aims to understand participants' perceptions and experiences, recognising that qualitative research is particularly suited to exploring socially constructed meanings and nuanced insights.

Participants and sampling

This study commenced at the beginning of 2018 and utilised a purposive sampling method. This approach was chosen to ensure that the participants could provide rich and relevant insights to assist the researcher in understanding the problem and

answering the research questions (Creswell, 2014). All participants were staff members of University A, chosen to represent a diverse range of perspectives on the iCGPA policy implementation. They included the following:

- One staff member from the Academic Standards and Quality office, responsible for initiating and implementing the iCGPA policy at the institutional level based on guidance from the MQA.
- Three heads of departments (HODs) from three different schools at the University.
- One academic staff member.

The selection of these participants aimed to capture varied perspectives based on their roles and responsibilities. The Academic Standards and Quality staff member was included to provide insights into the overarching implementation strategy, while the HODs and academic staff member were chosen to reflect the challenges and views of policy receivers at the departmental and individual levels. The inclusion of diverse schools ensured representation across academic disciplines, enriching the study's findings.

Data collection

Two sets of semi-structured interview questions were developed for this study. The first set targeted the Academic Standards and Quality staff member to explore the perceptions of the policy implementation process, including specific details and institutional strategies. The second set was designed for the HODs and the academic staff member, focusing on their experiences, perspectives, and challenges as initial receivers of the policy.

The development of interview questions was guided by the study's research questions and informed by relevant literature on policy implementation. The questions were reviewed and refined to ensure alignment with the study's objectives. Before conducting the interviews, the questions were emailed to participants along with an information sheet and consent form. This allowed participants to familiarise themselves with the topics and ensure informed consent. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio recorded, and subsequently transcribed.

Data analysis

The data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2019), which involves an ongoing cycle of data collection, condensation, display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This continuous process began during data

collection, with brief descriptive memos composed during the transcription phase. Manual coding was performed due to the small sample size of five participants.

The initial coding process involved identifying preliminary categories aligned with the research questions. These categories were refined iteratively through multiple rounds of analysis to discern emerging themes. Key steps included:

1. Initial coding: Responses were coded according to broad categories related to the research questions.
2. Refinement of codes: Iterative procedures were employed to condense data and display key themes.
3. Establishing themes: The refined codes were analysed to identify overarching themes that addressed the study's research objectives.

This iterative approach ensured a thorough examination of the data, allowing for the development of meaningful themes and insights. The researcher revisited transcripts and codes multiple times to ensure accuracy and consistency, adhering to qualitative best practices (Miles et al., 2019).

Ethical considerations

This research adhered to ethical guidelines set by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024) and received approval from the research ethics committees of both University A, Malaysia, and Lancaster University, United Kingdom. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising participant data and securely storing all research materials. By addressing these ethical considerations, the study ensured respect for participants' autonomy and adherence to professional research standards.

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore participants' perceptions of implementing the iCGPA policy. The socially constructed nature of meaning was acknowledged, recognising that participants might perceive the same experience in various ways (Miles et al., 2019). The study provides nuanced insights into the implementation process and its associated challenges through careful sampling, robust data collection, and iterative analysis.

Findings & discussion

The findings of this study consist of information gained from the interview sessions with all the purposively selected participants, as mentioned in the preceding section. The findings are presented according to the emerging themes. To ensure clarity, this section presents an integrated analysis while distinguishing between participant perspectives, literature, and the author's interpretation. Interviewee contributions are explicitly signalled using direct quotes, each assigned a number code, to maintain anonymity while allowing for transparency in attribution.

Isomorphic pressures and the rationale for iCGPA implementation

At University A, the iCGPA initiative led the institution to change its grading system from Overall Average to CGPA. The findings indicate that one of the significant factors influencing the initiation of the iCGPA policy was the lack of standardisation. The participants' comments reveal the underlying motivations:

iCGPA implementation will commence in 2020 for all universities in Malaysia, including private institutions. In order for us to be at standard with other public universities and private universities in Malaysia, we have to change. (Participant 1)

The main thing is standardisation across universities so that it is easier then to make comparisons between performances and hopefully it can be recognised internationally. (Participant 5)

These statements illustrate that standardisation, driven by benchmarking requirements and international recognition, was a primary factor in the adoption of iCGPA. As Wolhuter (2022) noted, rankings and standardisation facilitate benchmarking, enhance visibility, and enable global recognition—particularly significant for institutions in the Global South. However, these benefits come with trade-offs, such as compliance-driven decision-making and potential homogenisation of institutional identity.

Neo-Institutional Theory (NIT) provides a framework to understand how external pressures shape institutional behaviour, particularly through isomorphic processes. The findings from this study align with the three types of isomorphism identified by DiMaggio and Powell (1983): coercive, mimetic, and normative.

Coercive isomorphism arises from regulatory mandates and external pressures. At University A, coercive pressures were evident in the direct influence of MQA and the Ministry of Higher Education:

Part of it is government bureaucracy. My understanding is that it is driven by MQA and Ministry of Higher Education, especially the iCGPA.... I think the University is not voluntarily participating, especially the iCGPA; it is just thrust upon the institution by the regulators. (Participant 2)

This is what the government wants. (Participant 3)

If we look at the institutional perspective, we have to change it because of MQA. (Participant 4)

These comments illustrate how iCGPA implementation was enforced through regulatory mandates, exemplifying coercive isomorphism. Such pressures drive institutions to conform, creating homogeneity within the higher education domain, as noted by DiMaggio and Powell (1983).

Mimetic isomorphism occurs when institutions emulate practices from peers or global trends to manage uncertainty. The comments from Participant 5 suggest that international recognition and comparability were significant drivers for adopting iCGPA. The pursuit of standardisation aligns with global benchmarking practices and the desire for institutional legitimacy in an increasingly competitive environment.

Normative isomorphism stems from professional norms and shared values within a field. The implementation of iCGPA at University A reflected a broader normative shift towards standardised graduate attributes, driven by expectations from employers and professional bodies. While standardisation ensures consistency, it may inadvertently diminish institutional diversity and academic autonomy. Over-standardisation has been linked to reduced variation in professional skills among Fortune 500 board members (Hirsch & Whisler, 1982, as cited in DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Similarly, uniform education systems have been shown to instil comparable professional values, potentially limiting diversity (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017). The findings suggest that normative isomorphism could result in producing graduates with homogenised attributes, as institutions prioritise conformity over innovation.

While iCGPA offers a standardised framework for assessing student performance, it also raises concerns about the long-term implications for higher education in Malaysia. The rigid assessment system may restrict autonomous progression, fostering a system of massification rather than diversity. As Bhalerao et al. (2023) argued, isomorphic pressures drive institutions toward homogeneity, potentially undermining individual identity and academic autonomy. The following

extract emphasises this tension: ‘With iCGPA implementation, we don’t have any other choice’ (Participant 1).

In summary, the iCGPA initiative at University A exemplified the relationship of coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphisms under NIT. While it addressed standardisation and benchmarking needs, it also highlighted the challenges of over-standardisation and the potential erosion of diversity. Further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of these isomorphic pressures on graduate outcomes and institutional identity for future policy changes.

Policy approaches in iCGPA implementation

The findings of this study indicate that the Academic Standards Quality Department was the dominant player in implementing the iCGPA initiative at University A, with the implementation scheduled for August 2019. The first step in this process involved adapting the CGPA system accordingly. University A appeared confident in introducing the necessary grading scale without facing significant impediments. As previously mentioned, there could be potential benefits to embracing the CGPA grading scale. However, according to Participant 1, ‘In order for us to move towards iCGPA, there’s a lot to be done.’ This statement highlights the extensive steps involved in implementing this new change, which, at the time of the research, had only been piloted by five public universities in Malaysia.

To facilitate a smooth and seamless transition, University A had been engaging with and receiving feedback from the public universities that piloted the iCGPA system. A key finding was that the first crucial element in implementing iCGPA was the development of a system capable of capturing iCGPA rubrics. University A worked closely with its Information Technology Services Department to design and implement a suitable system. The second essential element involved making the necessary adjustments to Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs) and Subject Learning Outcomes (SLOs) to align with iCGPA requirements.

Despite the diligent efforts in strategic implementation, feedback from participants suggests that the process was primarily managed through a top-down approach. For example:

But they said that they have no choice if the instruction comes from top management. They have to accept. But every training and every instruction has to come from Academic Standards and Quality. (Participant 1)

The University needs to make sure the process of implementing this is done more participatively, involve more... maybe the students should also get

involved especially in iCGPA... If the University is setting up a committee or task force to implement this. (Participant 2)

While Participant 2's comment highlights the lack of collaboration among affected parties and the need for broader stakeholder involvement, Participant 1's statement reflects a more directive approach by management in driving policy implementation.

The feedback from participants 1 and 2 affirms that University A predominantly employed a top-down approach in its strategic implementation process. While this approach has its advantages—such as minimising conflict and ensuring alignment with initial policy objectives (Parson, 1995)—its success hinges on specific conditions, as outlined by Cairney (2009):

- Clear and consistent policy objectives are understood.
- The policy functions as intended when implemented.
- Tasks are fully specified and communicated to skilled and compliant officials.
- Adequate resources (including political will) are committed to the program.
- Dependency relationships are minimal, and support from interest groups is maintained.
- External or socioeconomic conditions do not significantly undermine the process.

Given that iCGPA was a new system to University A, there was no guarantee that these conditions, particularly the second point, would be met. Doria (2015) also highlighted potential issues with iCGPA implementation:

It is also unclear if the iCGPA system can solve key issues in graduate employability, particularly university–industry collaboration and curriculum development. It may yet be another chase for student scores and additional documentation load to be completed by academics and administrators. Another potential shortcoming of the system comes in quantifying some graduate attributes, especially on unity and patriotism. How might the students' love for the country be fairly measured and assessed? (p. 4)

To address challenges related to top-down implementation, system readiness, and curriculum alignment, it is recommended that University A collaborate more effectively with the policy recipients who will be directly involved in executing the

initiative for future policy changes. Research by Hodson and Thomas (2003) indicates that institutions are more successful when staff are involved and feel ownership of the process. Similarly, Suggett (2011) advised against using a top-down approach in initiatives with high uncertainty and conflict. Instead, Suggett suggested fostering engagement through networks, experimentation, and testing while maintaining strong leadership and collaboration with interest groups. As Suggett (2011) noted:

Sometimes, a way to minimise conflict is to actually acknowledge the uncertainty over actions and to establish an environment around engagement in networks, experimentation and testing. The keys to managing in this environment appear to be through establishing strong leadership around the vision for the policy and through strong engagement with the networks and interest groupings, while working to advance the issue by reducing one or both of the conflict and uncertainty. (p. 8)

In summary, while University A has made significant strides in implementing the iCGPA initiative, greater collaboration with stakeholders is essential for its successful execution. By involving policy recipients in the implementation process, the University can ensure broader support, shared ownership, and a more effective transition.

Anticipated challenges during early iCGPA implementation

The findings of this study indicate that the main issue with iCGPA implementation was the transition and realignment from Program Outcomes to the assessment. Here are the comments of the participants of the study relating to this issue:

Refining of subject learning outcomes is an ongoing process. And from the lecturers' perspective, marking scheme, teaching and learning, that is going to be a big impact as well. (Participant 1)

Some of these things, how do you measure? How do you measure leadership? To me, certain things are qualitative. You just expose them. You hope the students grasp it. Sometimes it makes me question, assurance of learning, how can you make sure 100% that learning has taken place? (Participant 2)

Doing the iCGPA, you must match the students' performance to skills traits, which can be very rigid. At times, it can give wrong impressions to the

students. Some students are very good in leadership but may not be reflected in the curriculum or not reflected in their knowledge, but when we do implement iCGPA, basically we look into their assessment, how can we judge a person's leadership quality based on the final exam. (Participant 4)

These concerns align with the issues highlighted by Doria (2015, p.4), who stated that in order to evaluate students on the nine graduate attributes, it is essential to design appropriate programmes and learning opportunities, ensure trainers and academic staff are well-informed about the rubrics and assessment criteria, and align the implementation of these programmes with existing student development agendas at both the faculty and university levels.

The concerns and expected hurdles mentioned by Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 4 are interconnected. According to Participant 4, 'when OBE was implemented in University A in 2009 or 2010, MQA was very concerned in closing the loop. However, that died off, and now there is an additional alignment requirement, iCGPA.' This reflects the ongoing challenge of maintaining alignment and improvement, as illustrated in Figure 2. The objective of OBE is to align all the aspects and continuously make improvements by reviewing these objectives. According to MQA, the main aim of OBE is to achieve continuous quality improvement (CQI). As Participant 5 mentioned, 'this is not a departmental effort but a joint effort and a joint struggle. We must embrace change by looking at current needs and anticipating the future with the current patterns.' However, this raises the question: Will this alone be sufficient? Can quality assurance be achieved solely by embracing CQI?

Given the numerous anticipated impediments in the system, institutions must carefully evaluate the justification for adopting this new initiative like iCGPA before proceeding with the implementation. To ensure success, it is critical to address the alignment challenges, prepare academic staff adequately, and adopt a holistic and flexible approach to assessment that reflects the diverse abilities and attributes of students.

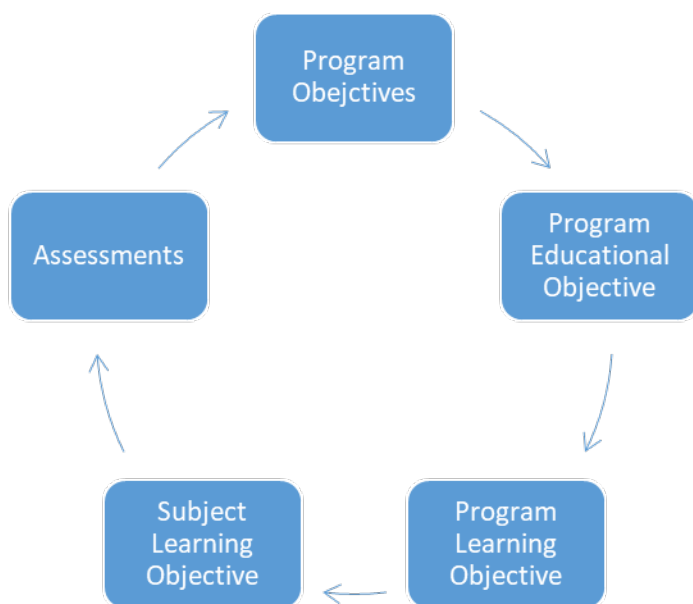


Figure 2. *OBE alignment loop*

Reflections and implications

The findings of this study highlight critical concerns raised by participants regarding the implementation of iCGPA, particularly its impact on ground-level recipients such as students and academicians. While many participants held administrative roles, they were also members of the academic staff, and their perspectives highlighted significant challenges during the initial stages of implementation. Their reflections are represented in the following extracts:

There is going to be a big revamp, so we need proper justification. Students are not yet aware except for student representatives. (Participant 1)

With regards to iCGPA, my only concern is that academic staff will spend a lot of time working on this. Doing more work is fine, but does it add value to student learning. I'd rather spend more time figuring out ways to ensure students learn. (Participant 2)

The understanding among the academics and students. They will be confused between CGPA and iCGPA; why there are so many measurements? The second thing is our system. Is our system ready to accommodate the changes? The third aspect is manpower. That is very critical. If the current OBE rubrics can't be used, it will be a major revision.

I'm not being selfish, but I hope iCGPA will not be implemented. We need specialists to look into this area. There will be inconsistency in terms of grading because we have existing students who will be using a particular grading system and the new students using different grading system. By using iCGPA, are we providing clear justification to the students? (Participant 4)

It depends how individuals adjust themselves to the system. The issue is to convince lecturers that the policy is beneficial, probably to redo their rubrics and understand iCGPA. This will take time, especially for those who have been here for many years, they are used to the system and asking them to make changes, they need time. How would the students react to this, especially the existing students and how are we going to justify this? When you implement something, it has to be a whole. You can't just leave out the existing students out of the new initiative. (Participant 3)

These comments reflect concerns over the readiness of systems and resources, the potential confusion for students, and the additional workload for academic staff. For instance, Participant 2's remark aligns with Harvey and Knight's (1996) observation that excessive monitoring can compromise the quality of the student learning experience. Similarly, the comments by Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3 point to the necessity of clear justifications for the implementation of iCGPA to address concerns from both staff and students.

As Trowler (2008) asserts, when introducing an innovation, it is essential to ask, 'How do the aims of this organisation relate to this innovation?' (p.14). Without a thorough evaluation of perceptions at the ground level, policy implementation risks failure, particularly if it disregards the multiple pressures faced by its primary stakeholders. This study emphasises the importance of considering these perspectives to mitigate potential challenges during implementation.

The analysis also reveals broader implications for higher education institutions. It raises the question of whether standardisation efforts, such as those embodied by iCGPA, truly represent meaningful improvements. For example, Participant 3 asks, 'Now we have CGPA, iCGPA, and what's next? Is there a lifespan for this system? Will this system benefit the students? We must embrace change, but the change must be justified as better than the old one.' Such reflections point to a broader theme: the need for higher education institutions to critically evaluate the rationale behind policy innovations, especially when they might lead to unnecessary complexities or pressures.

The findings of this study suggest that isomorphic pressures—the drive to align with other institutions—influenced the adoption of iCGPA at University A. The top-down approach used in its implementation highlights the need for micro-level perspectives, prioritising the experiences of students and academic staff. EBPM and close collaboration between researchers and policymakers are critical for ensuring that policies are both justified and effective. Furthermore, institutions must balance aspirations for standardisation with considerations of contextual relevance and stakeholder readiness.

In brief, while the iCGPA policy aims to position institutions on par with global standards, it is imperative to address the concerns of ground-level recipients to ensure its successful implementation. Recommendations in this study aim to provide practical insights for improving the adoption process, benefitting not only University A but other institutions considering similar policies.

Recommendations and conclusion

As mentioned earlier, Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) play a crucial role in informing evidence-based policymaking, particularly within complex systems. They provide rigorous methodologies to evaluate interventions, allowing policymakers to derive actionable insights from empirical data. Before a policy is made compulsory, intervention plans are crucial. This subsection connects the current study's findings with prior research to offer actionable recommendations for future policy changes.

The findings from this study highlight the influence of isomorphic pressures in shaping educational policy implementation like the iCGPA. These pressures show the need for evidence-based policies to achieve standardisation and adaptability. RCTs offer a methodological framework to evaluate such policies effectively before large-scale implementation.

A study by Angrist et al. (2023) highlights the usefulness of large-scale RCTs in evaluating educational interventions across diverse contexts. Their research demonstrates the value of evidence-based approaches in informing education policy and system improvement. Similarly, the current findings suggest that interventions like iCGPA could benefit from RCT-based evaluation to assess their scalability and impact across diverse institutional contexts. The emphasis on large-scale trials aligns with the findings of this study, which highlight the need for standardised benchmarks while addressing diverse institutional needs.

Wozny et al.'s (2018) low-cost RCT designs provide a practical approach to educational interventions, enabling evaluation without extensive financial

constraints. This aligns with the current study's recommendations for balancing regulatory mandates with institutional autonomy. Such low-cost methodologies could serve as a template for piloting policies like iCGPA in varied settings, ensuring feasibility and inclusivity. However, as Connolly et al. (2018) noted, RCTs' strict methodologies may overlook contextual factors critical to educational success. While RCTs are invaluable, they should be complemented with qualitative research to capture the nuanced impacts of policies like iCGPA on institutional culture and graduate outcomes.

Final thoughts

Policies like the iCGPA should undergo rigorous testing through randomised controlled trials before being implemented nationwide. This approach would provide empirical evidence regarding their effectiveness and scalability. Institutions should consider low-cost RCT designs, as Wozny et al. (2018) suggested, to evaluate interventions without placing undue financial burdens on the system. Such designs can make it more feasible to assess a variety of educational contexts. Additionally, complementing RCTs with qualitative research would help capture contextual factors, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the policy's impact. Policymakers must strike a balance between the need for standardisation and the preservation of institutional diversity and autonomy, addressing the risks of over-standardisation highlighted in this study.

While this study provides valuable insights, its findings should be interpreted with caution due to the small scale of the research and the limited number of academics involved. Future studies with broader participant pools and diverse institutional settings would strengthen the generalisability of these findings.

The findings of this study emphasise the need for standardisation to facilitate benchmarking and international recognition. However, they also highlight the risks of over-standardisation and homogenisation. By integrating the recommendations above, policymakers can design and implement educational policies that are not only effective and scalable but also contextually sensitive and inclusive, ultimately fostering a more equitable and innovative higher education landscape in Malaysia.

Author biography

Christine Shobana Arthur obtained her PhD in Higher Education: Research, Evaluation and Enhancement from Lancaster University, United Kingdom. She is passionate about evaluating the effectiveness of feedback and assessments in higher education and exploring the potential of evaluative research within the field of educational research. Dr. Christine is dedicated to supporting students from diverse backgrounds, with a particular focus on helping underachievers in English language learning.

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