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# Declining idealism: A study of higher education teacher's beliefs about grading decision making

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to unpack higher education teachers' beliefs about grading decision making. A qualitative approach was employed in this study to answer the research question. In-depth semi-structured interview as the main data collecting technique was utilized to gather any information from higher education teachers. Four higher education teachers with different educational backgrounds and teaching experiences volunteered to be the participants. Three main themes were generated from the data i.e., the factors considered in grading decision making, the most challenging parts in grading, and handling students' complaints about grades. This study indicates that developing assessment rubrics, discussing them with students, and documenting them in the learning contract may be effective strategies for teachers to remind the students of the course requirements to reach minimum criteria of mastery learning.



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## 1. Introduction

Education is not only a process of facilitating learning but also a process of acquisition of skill, knowledge, values, habits, and so forth. Education always happens with the involvement of others, and usually the more knowledgeable others. It is very unlikely that an individual can develop intellectually without the assistance of other people. Therefore, the presence of teachers or the more knowledgeable individuals in the process of education is inevitable [1]. Education is a long process investment. People cannot expect to see the result of an education in a short period of time. They need to monitor students' learning process and progress to ensure that the teaching and learning process is on the right track and in line with learning objectives. The activities carried out by the teachers to collect information about students' learning attainment is called assessment.

In general, the success of learning depends on some factors such as the learner factors and the teacher factors and learning facilities. Teacher factors become the most central factor in teaching learning process in order to assist students learning. Grading is a process within the practice of classroom assessment where the teachers calculate the students' grades for standardized report cards [2]. Grades as the result of grading by the teachers also play an important role in students' academic life. Grading is used by teachers to know the ability of students in mastering predetermined learning goals and to find out which parts of the learning outcomes is still unsuccessful and needs to be improved. Achievement of learning objectives is determined by the ability of each student to master competences based on the learning outcomes. The standard used to assess whether the students have reached the completeness of learning is called as minimum criteria of mastery learning. However, in reality, teachers are often confronted with a fact that the student's ability level in terms of digesting and mastering the materials is far from what they have expected [3]. This situation affects teachers' grading decision making.

Grades which result from the compilation of students' work assessments should provide information about students' achievements and ability in learning [4]. In addition, a process within the practice of classroom assessment in which teachers calculate students' grades for standardized reports is called grading [2]. According to Brookhart [5], there are three types of grading. First is criterion-referenced grading; this is comparing student's work to standards. Second is self-referenced grading; it is comparing student's work to their previous work to show progress. The last is norm-referenced grading; this is when a student's work is compared to the work of others.

There are some principles of grading that a teacher needs to take into account after doing an assessment. These principles include the curriculum objectives of learning expectation, an accurate representation of students' achievement, results of multiple assessments and that grade should be communicated clearly to the students, parents and other teachers [2]. In grading decision making, teachers consider both academic and non-academic factors [4], [6-13] to provide the actual competence of the students. In addition, in their study, Mailol, Retnawati, Arifin, Kesuma, Putranta [14] found that soft skills such as ethics, self-reliance, responsibility, patience, critical thinking skills, communication skills, teamwork, tolerance, and social skills which were developed in their program become parts of grading system. Finally, other factors such as students' effort, homework, study habit [4], subject matter [13], the students' individual positive personal characteristics, the teachers' willingness to motivate, to encourage and to appreciate students' greater learning effort and achievement for the sake of students' improvement and further development, the accountability with the larger community, the school organization and parents, and the teachers' own integrity [13], teachers' values and beliefs about learning and external factors such as parental influences and state accountability testing pleasure [4] contribute to grading decision making. Finally, in Guskey's study [15] teachers were asked to define the purpose of grading; they indicate that both academic and non-academic factors needed to be considered when calculating grades.

On the other hand, Wormeli [16] and Winger [17] believe that grades should only reflect an accurate measure of a student's mastery of content. This is supported by Sadler [18] who argues that grades should reflect an authentic representation of a student's level of academic achievement, and if a grade is to be trusted to communicate this achievement, then the only factors that should contribute to the grade must qualify as achievement. Furthermore, grading should also meet the students' learning needs [19]. Guskey [15] identified the teachers in his study who determined the purposes of grading fell into six categories: 1) to communicate achievement to students and parents, 2) to provide information for students for the purpose of completing self-evaluation, 3) to identify students for specific educational programs, 4) to provide incentives for students to learn, 5) to evaluate the level of effectiveness of instruction programs, and 6) to provide evidence in support of students' lack of effort, lack of responsibility, or decline in behaviour expectation. Referring to these purposes of grading, a study conducted by Anderson [20] concluded that the grades obtained by the students can affect the quality of their lives, suggesting that grades can affect either positive or negative impacts.

Reeves [21] and Brookhart [5] agree with Guskey [15] and McMillan [22] who believe the purpose of grading is to provide accurate, specific and timely feedback to increase student performance, previously described as formative assessment. Most researchers agree that one of the most common purposes of grading is to communicate student achievement with students and their parents [5], [15], [16], [22], [23]. McMillan [22] believe that there is much variability in grading practices which offers little consistency across schools and within classroom, even when schools and teachers have adopted the same grading guidelines. Carifo and Carey [24] believe that grading policies are often controversial but believe that a critical step in employing equitable grading practices is for each school to first examine their grading policies because many schools lack a uniform grading policy, resulting in variations in student assessment from teacher to teacher. In realisation, schools have an educational responsibility to communicate progress to students, an initial examination of policy should reflect the school's purpose of grades. Grades should provide and reflect fair and accurate student accomplishments and achievements based on standards and learning goals. Teachers should base their grading practices and policies on criteria that are clear, equitable, and unprejudiced [15].

In recent years, many researchers have become increasingly interested in the study of teachers' grading decision making. Some studies about this issue which have been peer-reviewed and published in reputable journals are reviewed and presented in this section to find out the research gap. The first study is done by Isnawati and Saukah. Focusing on three research questions; 1) teachers' beliefs about grading decision making, teachers grading practices and their use of assessment types, and factors considered by teachers in grading practices, the study examined two junior high school

teachers applying different curriculum policies. Using qualitative approach, the study revealed important findings. The participants believed that students' grades serve not only for assessing students' competences but also for making them active users of the language, giving them life skills and experience, and motivating them. Furthermore, two types of grading practices are used by the participants: formal and informal assessment. Finally, achievement and non-achievement factors are used as the factors considered in grading decision making [25].

The second study focussing on grading decision making was done by Yesbeck. Using qualitative study, the research aimed to examine the grading factors considered by the teachers in students' final grades. Middle school language arts teachers from one mid-sized suburban school district in Virginia were involved in this qualitative interview which addressed the topics such as 1) the purposes of grades, 2) the grading factors teachers consider when they grade, 3) the teachers' influences in determining their practices, and 4) how teachers' grading practices relate to measurement theory. The result shows that teachers' grading aimed a) to communicate with students and parents; b) to provide feedback to students; c) to demonstrate students' progress and mastery over time; and d) to adhere to grading policies and procedures. Furthermore, factors considered by the teachers when grading include a) influences when determining grading practices; b) academic factors; c) non-academic factors; and d) factors deemed most important by the teachers. These findings, together with teachers' influences, the use of formative and summative assessments, and the need for professional development are consistent with the literature. This suggests that although measurement theory experts recommend that achievement factors should be the only factors that determine student grades, the results of this study indicate that teachers use a mixture of variables in determining student grades, known as hodgepodge grading [12].

The third research was conducted by Warsen in which he examined the relationship between grade point averages (GPAs) and American College Test (ACT) scores for four graduating high school classes in two high schools. This case study qualitatively investigated teacher thinking and decision making around planning instruction, assessment of student learning, and grading practice with math and English language arts (ELA) teachers from the schools. This study looked into how teachers reacted and responded when presented with correlational analyses of student grades and ACT scores over four graduating classes and asked for their reflections and interpretations of those correlations. The qualitative results showed that correlations between math and ELA grades was moderately positive and significant. Qualitative findings from interviews with ELA and math teachers from the case study schools shows a high degree of intentionality on the part of teachers to connect their instruction, assessment, and grading decisions to state standards and to position students for successful performance on the ACT. When positive and significant correlations between grades and ACT scores were presented to teachers, they articulated an expectation that this would be the case. Some teacher disenfranchisement from less autonomous decision making in these areas was also noted [26].

Finally, a study conducted by Cheng and Sun [4] looked into the factors the English language teachers considered in grading decision making and the types of assessment they used to make decision in regard with the students' grades. Different from the earlier studies explored, the study of Cheng and Sun employed descriptive quantitative method by distributing questionnaires to 350 secondary school English language teachers in China. This study revealed that the English language teachers considered non-achievement factors such as effort, homework study habits, over the achievement factors. They also used multiple types of assessment, teacher-self developed assessment. The findings suggested that both internal and external factors affected their grading decision making. The present study is different from all the previous studies explored, especially in the aspects of participants and the objectives. The participants of the previous studies were mostly teachers in secondary schools while the participants in this present study were those from the higher education institution. How the teachers react to the students' complaints in regard with the grades they received was also a part of the focus in this study, the issue that other studies have never dealt with before. This study should have an implication to educators on how to deal with assessment, grading and strategies on responding to any complaints the students may have.

## 2. Method

This study was qualitative in nature with semi-structured interview to collect data from the participants. This technique was opted because it allowed the researchers to follow the flow of interview and to ask further questions to acquire rich and rigorous data from the participants with the



questions out of the prepared set [27]. The interview consisted of questions related to the participants' academic backgrounds, teaching experience, subjects they taught, assessment types they implemented, attitudes towards students' performance, beliefs and practices about grading decision making, reasons for each decision they made and their reflection on their grading decision making. With semi-structured interview which gave spaces to interviewers to ask questions out of what had been prepared earlier, the participants had opportunities to construct knowledge around the questions they were asked [28]. This strategy encouraged the participants to do reflection, identified and evaluated important issues during their teaching experience, assessment techniques as well as grading decision making.

Of seven higher education teachers approached to be the subjects of this study, three of them withdrew their interview appointments as they had urgent family matters. Therefore, there were only four teachers who responded cooperatively to have interview sessions with the researchers. These four participants indeed met the objectives of this study. They were also representatives in terms of length of teaching experience, educational background, and sex. One of them was male teacher, has Ph.D. background and more than 25 years of teaching experience. Three of them were female teachers with Master degree; one of them was a senior teacher with 30-year teaching experience and was a Ph.D. candidate, while two of them had less than five-year teaching experience and graduated from Master of English education. The senior teachers had worked with different kinds of curricula and were familiar with many kinds of assessment types. They had also experienced in handling conflict due to students' dissatisfaction with their grades.

All the interviews were recorded and saved in mp3 files for further transcription purpose. All the interviews were then transcribed by the researchers and checked against the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. To maintain its trustworthiness, the result of the transcription was then doublechecked by the participants to make sure that no information was missing. During this process, the participants were given chances to correct, delete and add information. Based on the transcription, coding process was carried out inductively. To ensure the coding process produce accurate result, the transcription was read repeatedly and marked differently based on the emerging themes. Finally, pseudonyms such as Abby, Aliya, Adam, and Uzma were used to maintain the participants' identity.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Before the findings are presented in this section, some limitation of this study, especially in regard with the data sources and data collection are addressed to show the actual process of the research. As mentioned earlier in the methodology, the data were collected through semi-structured interviews from seven teachers. However, due to limitation in time and personal reasons from three of the participants, they withdrew their involvement. While their absence in the interview was potential to limit the amount of the data collected, at the same time their absence did give more opportunities for the researchers to investigate data more deeply from the other participants. In addition, while various resources suggest that the number of participants in qualitative research ranges from 5 to 50, meaning that this study can be assumed to be lacking participants, others argue that these numbers may be unnecessary to ensure the depth of the data [29]. Indeed, the qualitative data is said to be adequate when it is already saturated.

This study was about higher education teachers' beliefs in grading decision making, focusing on three aspects; 1) the factors considered by teachers in grading decision making, 2) the most challenging part in grading, and 3) handling students' complaints about grades. The following section elaborates more about detail findings based on its thematic themes.

#### 1) Factors considered by teachers in grading decision making

Grading decision making can be very complicated for teachers in higher education because the grades they assign to their students can affect students' achievement, which can also result in their success in accomplishing their study. The data obtained from the interviews with the participants show various factors affecting these teachers in giving grades to their students. In addition, the data revealed that factors such as learning contract, learning process, hard skills, and soft skills contribute to the teachers' decision making in giving grades. The following paragraphs explain the more specific findings regarding the factors considered by teachers in grading decision making.

**Learning contract.** It is a very common practice that the first meeting of a course is usually used to discuss about the RPS (*Rencana Pembelajaran Semester*) or course semester plan, syllabus as well

as the learning contract between the teachers and the students. In this first meeting, the teachers explain everything related to the course such as what the students are going to learn during the semester, what assignments they have to complete, and how the assessments are carried out, including the score components of the final grade. Having information about grading system in the learning contract, it is expected that the students can fulfil their obligation required in the course and obtain maximum grades.

One of the participants, Abby mentioned that she explained grading system in the beginning of the semester when she discussed learning contracts with the students. She stated: *"I've already explained about grading system in the learning contract"* (Abby). As the learning contract included the components of the students' score such as assignments, quizzes, mid test and final test, she relied much her grading decision making on these items.

Similar opinion mentioning learning contract as the factor affecting students' grades was also revealed from Uzma who mentioned that:

*"I gave students' grades based on the learning contract which I already discussed with my students in the beginning of the semester. Well... There are many kinds of score components, but sometimes I change them myself. For example, there are columns of quiz, attendance etc. I don't use the attendance because they have to meet 75% minimum attendance. So I only consider mid semester exam, assignment, final exam, attitude and or behavior"* (Uzma)

**Learning process.** Students' achievement is influenced by many factors; one of which is by learning process. Some students tend to excel more than other students which are proven by their good academic achievement. However, some others seem to have lower achievement compared to others. Even though these students perform unsuccessfully in the class, some teachers give these students rewards by focusing more on their learning process rather than looking at the final result individually. Abby, one of the participants, responded to such phenomenon by saying:

*"I focus more on students' learning process rather than on their final result of the course. I'm just thinking that it would not be fair to assess their achievement by looking at their test scores. Therefore, I'll think about their learning process in my class"* (Abby).

Learning process can also be observed from students' participations in the classroom. Another participant, Aliya, was in agreement with Abby regarding assigning grades to students. She added that class participation also became the factor affecting her in giving grades to her students. She said:

*"The first thing that I consider when grading my students is to see how a student participate in my class. After that, I'll see how the students do all assignments and quizzes I give, and finally their results on the mid test and final test"* (Aliya).

Finally, learning process needs students' engagement in order to produce effective learning outcomes. Therefore, one of the participants, Adam, consider students' attendance as one of the factors affecting students' grades. He said, *"Students' final grades are obtained from assignments, individual and group presentations, online discussions, mid test, and final test, as well as students' attendance which contributes 10 % of the total score"* (Adam). According to him, it would be rather difficult for the students to achieve the learning goals effectively if they barely attend the class, both online and face to face meeting.

**Hard skills.** One of the most observable and measurable learning outcomes is based on students' hard skills. Students' hard skill can be assessed from how they perform their skills such as speaking or writing. In his interview, Adam said that he focused more on students' hard skill rather than soft skills in deciding grades for his students. He said *"Students' grades are derived from students' attendance 10%, students' presentation, online discussions, students' mid test 30%, and students' final test 30%. Students get information about these score components in the syllabus in the beginning of the semester"*. He added, *"in teaching English I'll assess students' presentation from their grammar, pronunciation, content, fluency, and accuracy. Why? Because our alumni are going to be teachers so they must speak English well"* (Adam).

**Soft skills.** While Adam considers hard skills as the most important component in grading, and ignoring students' soft skills, Abby, Aliya, and Uzma look at other aspect such as students' attitudes or soft skills. When asked further about how they assessed students' attitude, Aliya answered,

*"I try to know my students by calling their names whenever checking their attendance. This way, I know A is like this, and B is like that in their everyday activities. Also, I know who is diligent, who is lazy, and who is always late. Thus, attitude or soft skills contribute 5% of the total score"* (Aliya).

Similarly, Uzma mentioned, "...so far, I'll pay attention to how they [the students] behave ...."

#### 2) *The most challenging part in grading*

As mentioned earlier, it is not easy for teachers to assign grades fairly to their students. Grading activity requires a process within the practice of classroom assessment where teachers calculate students' performance based on the grading system established in the learning contract. There are many factors that teachers should consider before finally deciding to give certain grades to their students. Teachers' responsibility in giving grades to their students could lead to students' success.

However, teachers are often struggling with the grading decision making. In one side, they want to give the best scores to their students so that the students can proceed to the next steps of learning. In fact, grades which result from grading should provide information about students' achievements and ability in learning (Cheng & Sun, 2015). Unfortunately, they often find situations in which they cannot just give good grades. This is regarded as the most challenging part in grading. Different teachers have different parts of problems when grading students' achievement. Such phenomenon was also experienced by these participants of the study. The following paragraphs describe the participants experience regarding their most challenging part in grading which are caused by 1) students' low achievement, 2) students' low integrity, and 3) students' low soft skills.

**Students' low achievement.** It becomes the satisfaction of a teacher to see most of the students would get the best grades of A. Some teachers believe that one of the successful indicators of teaching is when most students taking their subjects would get the best grade possible and minimum number of students or no student fail. However, these participants often experienced problems when making decision regarding students' grades. One of the participants, Abby, said *"Well...frankly speaking, the students' result is not very high, but I think it's still ok because they are in the process of learning"* (Abby). She further stated that sometimes there were very few students who got the highest scores in her class. She continued her statement

*"The most challenging part in the assessment is how to give more "As in the class (than other grades). Usually there are only 2 or 3, not like what I and the authorities have expected. So, I often reconsider to upgrade the grades so that not many students would fail"* (Abby).

Similar case was also experienced by Uzma in which she sometimes had to lower the standard of her grading system so that the students could pass. This is her excerpts:

*"Sometimes, I have to lower the criterion for A, hoping that more and more students would get the best grade of A. For example, when the score of a student is 70 which is close to get A, I will upgrade it so that he can get A. I just think that I cannot teach well because not many students got A. Perhaps this is my mistakes"* (Uzma).

These statements suggest that in fact the grade that the teachers gave to the students did not really show the students' competence. It sometimes results from the teachers' manipulation to meet their satisfaction and the institution policy, or the teachers' lowering their standard regarding grading decision making. Therefore, it is interesting to find out the fact that eventually these participants sometimes have to decline their idealism in grading decision making. In her explanation, Uzma said that she had gradually changed the way she did grading. Previously, she was firm with her belief that she would only assign grades based on the students' competence, suggesting that if a student performed very well in the exam, she would definitely give the best grade. On the contrary, when a student performed poorly in the exam, she would fail him. Today, however, she cannot do that again. Her belief in grading has changed, and she has to decline her idealism due to the influence of both her colleagues and the institution authorities who periodically give feedbacks on her grading. She said:



*“At the beginning, failing students was normal for me (if they did not perform well), but after some time I saw many teachers were not like me, then I became like an alien myself. Then my emm... idealism changed. I cannot be as trick as I used to be. In my early years of teaching here, I often gave mark E, then the authorities were not happy with me. It’s different from the time when I was a student. If I got C, it’s ok. But here, it’s different” (Uzma).*

**Students’ low integrity.** Grading decision making becomes more challenging for teachers because students do not always maintain their integrity. With the development of technology and massive information which can be assessed very easily from any online resources, students are able to find out information which can be used to fulfil their assignment. They sometimes just copy and paste resources and claim them as their own work.

It is not easy for the teachers to give grades to a piece of work which does not belong to the students. Adam acknowledged “

*When asking my students to describe about quantitative approach, they just explain in one or two sentences, and then copy and paste for the rest of their assignment. Even though I asked them to paraphrase the resources, they just ignore it” (Adam).*

**Students’ low soft skills.** According to Higher Education Curriculum (Kurikulum Perguruan Tinggi), students’ learning outcomes are measured from both hard skills and soft skills. Therefore, grading becomes more complex for teachers because it should measure both skills. Of these score components, some participants find that grading students’ soft skills is not easy. Abby and Uzma said that “attitude” becomes the most challenging part in grading without giving more explanation. When asked about the most challenging part in grading, they simply said “students’ attitude”.

On the other hand, Aliya was willing to share her opinions about the reasons why students’ attitudes became the most difficult part in grading. She stated

*“As my students are prospective teachers, they have to maintain good attitude. I want to change their paradigm from the simple thing, for example how they wear proper clothes. In addition, they should not use their mobile phones in the class because I myself have a commitment not to use mobile phone even though just checking my Whatsapp messages” (Aliya).*

She further explained that students’ attitudes were essential because different children had different characteristics. Some students were good while some others were not. Thus, it was her obligation as their teacher to guide them to do the right things. Finally, she also emphasized that it was also her responsibility to attract students’ attention and know them personally. This way, she believed she could manage students’ distraction in the classroom.

### *3) Handling students’ complaints about grades*

It was common that sometimes the students were not happy with the grades they received after the exam. These students would usually come to their teachers and asked why they got such grades. This teacher participants would then show the grade rubrics with all the components. Usually after the students saw the rubrics, they could accept it. The situation in which the students were not happy receiving their grades were experienced by most of the participants, and they were usually ready to give various responses. Some of the responses are such as 1) explaining students’ score thoroughly, 2) giving motivation, and 3) asking for an apology to the students and reflecting on what she did. The followings are several responses given by these participants when their students complained about their grades.

**Explaining students’ score thoroughly.** Adam stated that students should not complain with their grades because he already explained the grading system in the learning contract. He made sure that all students were in agreement with the learning contract. Therefore, if he found out that some of his students were not happy with their grades, he would ask them to recheck the scores in the file. He said:

*“One of my students asked me why I got B instead of A. Then I replied to him by saying “Please look at your score in this assessment file. You know what?? Actually, your score*



*was lower than B, but because the highest score in the class was only 70, then I lower the standard of the students' grades. Thank god you finally got B" (Adam).*

Other participant thought that it was necessary for her to show and explain the score components to the students as her response to their complaints. Uzma said:

*"If a student complains with the mark I give, I will show the grading rubric and so far they can accept it. If I show them, "this is your mark of mid semester, and this is the mark of your final test, this is your assignment, your behaviour, they can accept it." But of course, we must have complete data so we can show all the records. So far they can accept it. Finally, even though they got unsatisfied grades, they expressed their sincerity and thankfulness. The most important things is that we should keep our assessment record so that we can show them their actual scores" (Uzma).*

**Giving motivation.** Abby realized some students were probably unhappy with the grades she had given. However, she tried her best to give understanding to the students. She said *"I give motivation to those students having bad scores in my class. Also, I show them their assessment records so that they can learn from their weaknesses"* (Abby). By giving motivation to these students, Abby expected that she could maintain good relationship with them when she meets the again in the future.

**Asking for an apology to the students and reflecting on what she did.** While most of the participants such as Abby, Adam, and Uzma needed to give various explanation and showing assessment records to their students who were not happy with their grades, Aliya responded students' complaints with her own way. Whenever students came to her and complained about their grades, she would just ask for their apology. She simply said *"I ask for their apologies as I haven't given the best scores for them. And after that, I just did reflection on what I did"* (Aliya).

The findings of the study show that regarding teachers' factors in grading decision making, almost all participants were in agreement that students' grades depend on not only academic factors or hard skills but also non-academic factors such as learning contract, learning process, and soft skills. Such opinions are addressed by previous researchers who argued that in determining the final grades, teachers are not only supposed to take into account the academic factors such as homework, assignments, project, and so forth but also non-academic factors such as study habit, attitudes, student collaboration etc. These results are consistent with the study conducted by various researchers [4], [6-13]. In Indonesian context, non-academic factors such as soft skills receive considerable attention from the government and therefore, they become a major issue and have to be stated clearly as one of the learning objectives. There should also be learning activities prepared to ensure that the learning objectives are achieved. Soft skills in Indonesian education system are considered as an important factor and there is a need that these skills be given special attention in teacher profession education program. In addition, Mailol, Retnawati, Arifin, Kesuma, Putranta [14] found that soft skills such as ethics, self-reliance, responsibility, patience, critical thinking skills, communication skills, teamwork, tolerance and social skills were included in the grading system. This confirms that including soft skills as **non-academic factors in grading decision making is a common practice and has a strong basis in Indonesian education system.**

Dealing with the most challenging part in grading, the data from the participants show three aspects such as students' low achievement, students' low integrity, and students' low soft skills. As grading does include not only academic but also non-academic factors such as students' efforts, one of the participants of the study finally declined her idealism and gave better scores than the students' actual performance. This phenomenon happened as this participant realized that the grades given to the students may affect their life in the future. This indeed corroborates a study conducted by Anderson [20]. In addition, these challenges related to the most difficult part in grading are from the teachers' point of view, which may be different from the students' point of view, and in Indonesian educational context. This study shows different result compared to that conducted by Didenko and Zhukova [19] which found that meeting the students' learning needs became an issue in grading decision making. Other than that, they also found that fairness and validity cause problems in assigning grades to students. The context of Didenko's and Zhukova's study may suggest the reasons why the difference happened. Although Didenko's and Zhukova's study was conducted in English language education department, this study was specifically conducted on ESP subject of which students' learning needs

became a major consideration. This study was also carried out in Ukraine in which the education learning system may be different from that in Indonesia.

Finally, these teacher participants use various responses in handling students' complaints regarding their grades. The data show that teachers in this study explain students' score thoroughly, give motivation, and ask for an apology and do reflection as a means to handle such situation. Explaining students' scores thoroughly includes showing scores from each component such as homework, assignments, projects etc. is considered as a fair way to make the students aware why (s)he passed or failed, or why (s)he was assigned a certain grade. Fairness as one of the principles in grading and showing students' accomplishment and achievement in detail [15] have been applied by the participants to satisfy the students' curiosity in grading. In doing so the teacher would also show the grading rubric which can explain in detail which component contributes which grade. This is one of the ways to uphold the grading policy and fairness. This fair action would at the same time motivate the students to improve themselves and to work harder for better accomplishment and achievement in the future.

#### 4. Conclusion

Having three more specific research issues comprising the factors considered by teachers in grading decision making, the most challenging part in grading, and the strategies to handle students' complaints about grades, this qualitative study employed in depth semi-structured interviews with four participants. The findings show emerging themes such as learning contract, learning process, hard skills, and soft skills as the factors considered by the participants in decision making, while students' low achievement, students' low integrity, and students' low soft skills are regarded as the most challenging parts in grading. Finally, in handling students' complaints regarding their low scores, these participants applied several strategies, namely explaining students' score thoroughly, giving motivation, and asking for an apology to the students and reflecting on what the teaching practice. This study indicates that developing assessment rubrics, discussing them with students, and documenting them in the learning contract may be effective strategies for teachers to remind the students with the course requirements to reach minimum criteria of mastery learning. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers in higher education take a professional development program, especially in the assessment and grading system to maintain their professionalism so that they are able to serve their students better.

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#### Declarations

- Author contribution** : BWP: initiated the research ideas, instrument construction, data collection, analysis, and draft writing; EP revised the research ideas, literature review, data presentation and analysis, and the final draft.
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