

When Policy Meets Practice: A Multi-College Qualitative Study of Systemic Misalignment in Outcome-based Assessment

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Abstract

Assessment is still considered as the important component of implementation of OBE, with a considerable gap between policy for constructive alignment and what really happens in the classroom. As a critical part for quality of education in Sustainable Development Goal Four, this qualitative research uncovers systemic misalignment between OBE and assessment practices within science lecturers at the Malaysian Matriculation Programme. The study used purposive sampling and captured collective institutional experience primarily through focus group discussion, supplemented by individual interviews and analyzed the data using thematic analysis. The finding identified five themes that are closely related which are variability in assessment practices, conceptual ambiguity in OBE and assessment, limited awareness of constructive alignment, structural time constraints and weak assessment literacy. These systemic misalignments were further reinforced by administrative accountability demands, resource limitations, and student-related challenges, indicating that misalignment extends beyond individual competencies to a broader systemic and institutional conditions. This study contributes empirical evidence of how policy-driven OBE reforms may translate into compliance-oriented assessment practices under institutional constraints. Through a multi-college qualitative analysis, this study demonstrates important systemic requirements for enhancing assessment practice conditions in pre-university education and draws attention to the ongoing discussions surrounding constructive alignment.

Keywords: Outcome-Based Education, Constructive Alignment, Assessment Practices, Policy–Practice Gap, Matriculation Programme

Introduction

OBE Context and Constructive Alignment

Driven by the need to align educational delivery with job requirements skills, Outcome-based Education (OBE) has become a dominant framework guiding the curriculum reform in higher education system worldwide Mahrishi 2025 (Mufanti et al. 2024). Beyond the pedagogical

aspect, this globally reform is deeply built into policies and quality standards required by accreditation bodies and international agreements such as Washington Accord (Priya Vaijayanthi and Raja Murugadoss, 2019). As a result, higher education institutions now use OBE as a main benchmark for institutional accountability, ensuring that graduates possess the same essential skills regardless of their geographical location (Almuhaideb and Saeed, 2020). Central to the success of this paradigm is the concept of constructive alignment, which refers to intended learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment tasks that must be aligned and support each other (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Hailikari et al. 2022). Out of these three parts, the 'backwash effect' makes assessment probably the most critical component where students naturally adjust and drive their learning strategies based on how they are going to be assessed (Leber et al. 2018). A robust outcome-based curriculum requires that assessment tasks are not only mapped to Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs) but are also capable of generating valid evidence that Program Outcomes (POs) have been attained (Derouich, 2025). However, assessment remains the most challenging aspect of OBE implementation, often revealing significant gaps between policy intent and classroom reality (Mufanti et al. 2024).

Challenges and gaps in Implementing OBE Assessment

Despite the widespread use of OBE in higher education, existing research on OBE implementation has largely focused on quantitative surveys, single institution case studies and self-reported lecturer perceptions (Handayani and Wibowo, 2021; Kushari and Septiadi, 2022; Mohd Noor et al. 2021; Mufanti et al. 2024; Yusof et al. 2017). While these studies provide valuable data which often relies on self-reported knowledge of educators, they often fail to capture how assessment practices are enacted under real institutional constraints or how policy requirements interact with classroom teaching realities (Ag Damit et al. 2021; Mufanti et al. 2024). Consequently, there is a notable gap in qualitative evidence of how OBE assessments are implemented across multiple institutional contexts, particularly from the lecturers' perspective within centrally governed and high accountability pre-university systems. As a result, the organizational, cultural, and systemic factors that maintain assessment misalignment remain inadequately explored.

Although the OBE system has been used for a long time, studies show that there are still major problems in implementation action (Alonzo et al. 2022). Many educators still feel it is difficult changing the old way of teaching to a new one which prioritizes student learning outcomes. As a result, educators have difficulty providing learning materials and tests that are truly appropriate (Mufanti et al. 2024). Furthermore, what is promised in the course objectives is often not the same as what is learned in class. For instance, mapped courses frequently lack the specific content required to achieved problems solving problems outcomes (Priya Vaijayanthi and Raja Murugadoss, 2019). This misalignment is getting worse because educators may not be skilled in modern assessment methods and still use traditional tests that measure the true abilities of students effectively (Leber et al. 2018). Finally, factors such as administrative burdens and lack of support from the school also prevent this system from running smoothly (Mufanti et al. 2024).

This study is conceptually informed by policy implementation theory and institutional accountability perspectives, which emphasizes the gap between formal policy design and current practice within organizations. From this perspective, lecturers are viewed as frontline implementers, who must translate centrally mandated OBE requirements into classroom

assessment practices while managing time constraints, reporting demands, and institutional monitoring. Within an accountability-driven system, constructive alignment may shift from being a pedagogical principle to a compliance mechanism shaped by documentation and audit pressures. This theoretical grounding guides the interpretation of findings by framing assessment misalignment not as individual lecturer failure, but as a systemic outcome shaped by institutional governance structures, workload conditions, and performance expectations.

Outcome-based Curriculum Reform in the Malaysian Matriculation Programme

While these challenges have been documented across various higher education contexts, limited research has examined how such misalignment unfolds within centrally governed pre-university systems such as the Malaysian Matriculation Programme where accountability structures are particularly strong. Tension between documented alignment and implemented assessment classroom practices may be exacerbated due to strong compliance and reporting pressures. In order to determine whether OBE reforms serve as administrative mechanisms or as pedagogical transformation, examining such context is therefore critical for understanding.

Prior to the implementation of OBE, the Malaysian Matriculation Programme focused more on teaching subject content and academic preparation for studies at the university level. The Matriculation Programme, which manages by Matriculation Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia, was established in 1998 by the Ministry of Education Malaysia as a pre-university pathway to help students, especially *Bumiputeras*, continue their studies in science, technology and professional fields at universities both domestically and abroad. Over time, the Matriculation Programme has expanded with an increase in the number of students, the addition of colleges, and the offering of more diverse study streams, demonstrating its important role in the Malaysia education system.

During academic session 2018/2019, Matriculation Programme undertook complete curriculum restructuring with the implementation of OBE. The reform changes from traditional content-based teaching into competency-based frameworks, highlighting clear and assessable learning achievement. Curriculum revisions were guided by the *Standard Kursus Asas* framework from the Malaysia Qualification Agency, maintaining with country's higher education quality and accreditation (Agensi Kelayakan Malaysia, 2014).

Although the guidelines and curriculum structure have been clearly provided, the success of OBE in Matriculation Programme is determined by lecturers' understanding and their teaching practices. Actual OBE implementation differs from college to college even with available comprehensive guidance on learner outcomes and achievement standard. Therefore, it is important to see how science lecturers in various matriculation colleges understand and implement OBE assessment so that the causes of this problem can be identified.

Purpose of the study

To address this gap, this study examines how outcome-based assessment is presented across multiple Malaysian Matriculation colleges, focusing specifically on science lecturers as frontline implementers. Adopting a qualitative multi-site design, the study explores how time constraints, accountability requirements, and institutional structures influence assessment

procedures in centrally manage pre-university system. Rather than evaluating individual competencies, the study aims to find systemic documented OBE policy expectations and implemented classroom assessments practices. As a result, the scope of the study's scope is limited to the assessment procedures used in the Malaysian Matriculation Programme and it makes no effort to generalize outside of this institutional context.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study used focus group discussion (FGDs) and individual interview to investigate the widespread problems why OBE assessment isn't working properly among science lecturers in Malaysian Matriculation colleges. FGDs were selected because participant interaction stimulated collective reflection, enabling lecturers to elaborate, justify, and negotiate shared experiences of college assessment practices in way less accessible through individual interviews (Morgan, 2012; Plummer 2017). Meanwhile, individual interviews were conducted to supplement FGDs where participants were unavailable and were analyzed alongside FGD data using the same thematic process. Purposive sampling was used to choose participants from different colleges to make sure we got relevant responses and contextual knowledge of OBE assessment implementation (Wright et al. 2012).

Participants were selected from several Malaysian Matriculation colleges representing different institutional contexts. A total of 4 science lecturers participated in a focus group discussion while 3 individual interviews were conducted independently for those who were unable to attend the group discussion. All participants had direct experience in implementing OBE assessment in classroom. Researchers facilitated the FGDs and interview who held no administrative role in OBE implementation, enabling participants to discuss challenges candidly without institutional reporting concerns. All discussion were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality were carefully followed because the topic deals with sensitive professional matters (Theadore et al. 2011; Wright et al. 2012).

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, which selected for its ability to identify recurring themes and interpretation but at the same time acknowledge the researcher's engaged position in the analytical process (Ahmed et al. 2025; Xu and Zammit, 2020). The analysis process included data familiarisation, creating codes based on what emerge from the data itself, theme development and review, and analytic writing. Five interrelated themes were generated, capturing systematic patterns in assessment practices, institutional conditions, and conceptual understanding of OBE. Findings were reported using an integrated narrative's structure to reflect the interconnected nature of the themes rather than treating them as discrete categories. Credibility was enhanced through thick description and verbatim quotations across participants, while dependability was supported through transparent documentation of analytic decisions and reflexive memoing throughout the analysis (Ahmed et al. 2025).

Research Finding

Unless specified differently, the participant quotes presented in this study are primarily from FGDs while interview quotes are included to support and explain the themes that emerged from data.

Systemic Misalignment of Assessment Practices Across Colleges

Participants highlighted the differences between in assessment implementation between colleges, which makes it difficult to ensure fairness and transparency according to the same standard. They were concerned that that each college used its own assessment methods without a uniform assessment framework.

“Bila pelaksanaan itu mengikut kolej kan. Jadi ikut kolej lah macam mana penilaian, pentaksiran semua mengikut kolej lah... Jadi kita pun tak tahulah antara kolej ni macam mana penilaian, macam mana telusnya penilaian tersebut.” (P1FGD)

“Kolej ni lain soalnya... Jadi ni kalau disekatakan, disamakan, saya rasa bagus juga.” (P2FGD)

Participants were also recognized the significance of need for unified assessment designs, suggesting that consistent evaluation structures might support fairness and diminish competitive dynamics among college.

“Masing-masing kita di bawah satu bumbung yang sama... Bila satu bumbung yang sama, kita bukannya berfokus nak kolej ni, nak kolej ni yang naik ke apa kan. So dari segi tu biarlah orang kata matlamat tu adalah matlamat yang sama.” (P2FGD)

Participants also share experiences about the adjustments they had to make because of the time constraints.

“Kadang-kadang dalam SOP kami, kami menyusun tu tak selaras pun... Maksudnya kalau intro tu dekat ni, minggu tujuh katakan. Tapi intro amali intro tu dah minggu baru, minggu empat kita jalankan. Macam tu lah.” (P3FGD)

Conceptual Ambiguity in Understanding OBE and Assessment

Participant questioned whether assessment should be equated with examinations or should prioritize a continuous and formative approach. There is confusion about the purpose and function of assessments within the curriculum framework, which raises questions about the effectiveness of existing assessment methods in measuring student achievement and development.

“Saya nak tanya. Kita ni kan penilaian. Penilaian kan adakah sama seperti peperiksaan?” (P3FGD)

Another concern was the rigidity on assessment practices, particularly in relation to opportunities for students to review and improve their work.

“Bila penilaian tu sentiasa ada peluang penambahbaikan. Tapi kami masih follow lah yang itu. Okay. Tapi bila difikir balik penilaian kenapa tak boleh beri peluang penambahbaikan?” (P3FGD)

“Saya nak reason tu, apa reasonnya kami selepas for dia submit, tak boleh beri balik, tak boleh bagi peluang penambahbaikan.” (P3FGD)

Participant also raised concerns about the order of assessments in schedule, especially practical tests. Participant questioned whether students should complete all practical test first before the theoretical component of vice versa.

"Itulah di bahagian sebenarnya benarkan ke kita buat kemudian kita buat practical kan dulu waktu baru kita sambung balik. Nak tahulah sebenarnya." (P1FGD)

In addition, there are differences of opinion on assessment practices among lecturers. Lecturers admit that there are various opinions on the methods of implementing assessment, which further adds to the confusion among educators and students.

"Memang ada perbezaan dalam pendapat lah. Itu tidak boleh kita nafikan." (P7Int3)

Limit Awareness of Constructive Alignment as a core OBE Principle

Participants expressed difficulty in identifying constructive alignment in curriculum and assessment documents. Although they interacted with various academic guidelines provided by the Matriculation Division, there was still ambiguity in understanding how this aspect related to the principles of constructive alignment that should be implemented in the learning and assessment system.

"Tak pastilah macam mana rupa dia. Ada banyak dokumen yang kita tengok. Tapi kita tak pasti ada yang kita tengok itu adalah penajajaran konstruktif." (P5Int1)

Participant also reported that they had never been exposed to the concept of constructive alignment, while others were still unclear about the exact definition and methods of its implementation in the teaching and assessment system.

"Penajajaran konstruktif. Oh, itu tak pernah dengar. Tak tahu lah pun, tak dengar, tak pernah dengarkah, ataupun apa benda yang dimaksudkan secara formal kalau dengar-dengar cakap pun tak tahulah pula." (P6Int2)

"Constructive alignment, tak." (P7Int3)

Structural time Constraints and Assessment Feasibility

Another problem raised by lectures is insufficient time constraints to carry out a comprehensive student assessment.

"Siapa nak pakai tinggal masa nak evaluate? Sebab kita ada tiga minggu je. Minggu kita kan ni berapa minggu? Ada 18 minggu kan? Berapa minggu je kita boleh buat evaluation tu?" (P3FGD)

"Penat. Kami bukan berjalan tau kami berlari. Ya betul. Lari pecut. Kami lari pecut." (P3FGD)

"Cuma untuk lepas OBE ni masa yang diberikan sangat singkat. Dan kita hanya mengajar certain sahaja... Selalunya practical test lah." (P4FGD)

On the other hand, lecturers expressed regret over the tight schedule constraints for the implementation of practical tests which are part of the continuous assessment component. The pressure to complete these tests earlier than the last week of the semester poses challenges in ensuring the smoothness and accuracy of the assessment process.

"Jadi, agak kekangan dah dekat situ. Kita sebenarnya kekangan masa di matrik ni. Ujian amali untuk markah PB, kita kena ambil awal. Minggu 16 dah kena habis." (P2FGD)

Participant also expressed the opinion that the implementation of teaching and assessment is not always in line with SLT recommendations.

"Cuma ni dari segi pelaksanaan, realitinya tak berlaku lah seperti mana SLT." (P2FGD)

Assessment Literacy: Rubrics, Task Design, and Scoring Practices

Participant informed about the weakness of the assessment rubric, which is too simple, where the assessment tends to be in a binart format (yes/no) without detailing the level of achievement in detail.

"For me, problem is the rubrik. Rubrik dan kekangan masa. Rubrik kami yes, no, yes, no je." (P3FGD)

Participant also acknowledged that developing well-structured rubrics requires specific skills, which they may not yet fully mastered.

"Sebenarnya, we said rubrik, kita mesti ada skill." (P3FGD)

Other problem raised by participants include the difficulty in designing and developing high quality assessment questions.

"Saya paling terasa dalam tutorial, dalam assignment dan soalan laporan adalah penghasilan soalan laporan yang berkualiti. Penghasilan soalan laporan dan assignment yang berkualiti lah. Maksudnya kompetensi pensyarah dalam mentaksir ataupun menggubal soalan." (P3FGD)

Participant revealed that there is a tendency among lecturers not to provide detail reports explain the factors that caused students to obtain low grades to the college management.

"...Pengurusan akan minta laporan pelajar rendah ni kenapa dia dapat rendah. Kadang-kadang ya lah dalam kalangan pensyarah sendiri pun kalau boleh dia nak mengelak lah. Buat laporan sedemikian." (P1FGD)

Participant also informed that the obligation to prepare reports places them under stricter scrutiny from institutional management.

"So bila buat laporan tu, kita akan ada kekangan dengan orang atasan kita lah, pengurusan lah. So bila dalam keadaan macam tu, memang tak faham kita. Dan pensyarah pun akan kena buat laporan. So bila laporan tu kita kena sediakan, kita jadi macam tak senang duduk lah kan sebab pengurusan nak tanya kita." (P2FGD)

Discussion

All five themes identified in the Findings are retained as the analytic structure for the Discussion.

Systemic Misalignment of Assessment Practices Across Colleges

Differences in way that institutions carry out assessments have been strongly connected to maintaining fairness and transparency, particularly when there is a lack of calibration or standardization between assessors, which leads to differences in how they mark students' works (Alqahtani et al. 2025). These inconsistencies get even worse when institutions don't have clear and well-organized policies and rules, which have been shown to produce significant variability and inconsistency in assessment practices. According to The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2008), audit reports have indicated that many institutions operate without comprehensive quality assurance policies for assessment and

significant variation in how assessment requirements is implemented across institutions. Furthermore, such issues persist beyond isolated cases, as audit trails reveal ongoing inconsistencies and differences in assessment practices (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008). On top of that, this variability contributes to the inconsistent application of assessment criteria, thereby posing substantial challenges to universities in achieving assessments that are both fair and transparent across colleges (Gonsalves and Lin, 2025).

The need for a standardized assessment structure is recognized by lecturers strongly supported by recommendations that an assessment unit be set up to control the planning and execution of assessment and to enforce a clear policy for all examiners (Alqahtani et al. 2025). An assessment unit should actively monitor assessment systems and provide ongoing support to examiners through training and discussion panels. This would ensure sustained consistency and shared understanding across colleges (Alqahtani et al. 2025). At the operational level, the concept like consistent scoring over completion date, who conduct marking and assessment timeframe seems to underscore the role of standardized frameworks in promoting equity and fairness in assessment outcomes (Ling, 2024). Extending beyond mere operational consistency, educators suggest that building collaborative academic culture emphasizes teaching effectiveness and continuous improvement which can transform from competitive exercise between institutions into collective academic accountability (Dennin et al. 2017). Following this viewpoint, institutions have been advised to create and put into effect formal assessment policies and procedures in order to ensure that assessment, advancement, and award processes are in line with best practice, strengthening a unified and goal-oriented assessment framework (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008).

This theme interacts closely with structural time constraints, where the absence of share assessment framework among colleges deepens the pressure on lecturers to make immediate adjustment to assessment implementation which meet the institutional timelines.

Due to time constraints in allocated classroom contact hours, it is frequently necessary to either eliminate specific learning activities or adjust them into independent assignments. These adjustments were further worsened through perceptions that executing continuous assessment seems impractical when lecturers are burdened with substantial administrative documentation and assessment grading workloads (Shahazwan M. T. et al. 2025). Existing research has similarly reported that allocated instructional time, such as 90 minutes per week, is inadequate for executing continuous assessment method, resulting lecturers to prioritize syllabus completion over formative assessment practices (Senouci, 2022). In addition, large class sizes combined with limited instructional time were identified as structural barriers that restrict lecturers' ability to integrate diverse assessment strategies effectively into their lessons (Moges, 2018). As a result, some lecturers acknowledged omitting key OBE-related practices, such as sharing learning objectives, assessment criteria, and implementing self- and peer-assessment, because the time provided was too short relative to the breadth of content required (Moges, 2018).

Overall, the findings indicate that different colleges assessing students inconsistently, which led to a major fairness problem. In the absence of common standards across colleges,

lecturers interpret marking criteria differently and practice irregular marking. This pattern reflects a policy-practice gap in OBE implementation where policy claims all students should achieve similar outcomes, but colleges don't have the coordination, training, or support system need to work consistently. Without a centralised mechanism to set standards and ensure college are marking the same way, misalignment is likely to persist and normalise sudden assessment judgement under time pressure, undermining confidence in outcome claims across the Matriculation Programme.

Conceptual Ambiguity in Understanding OBE and Assessment

In higher education, assessment methods have traditionally been stuck in a testing culture with a strong emphasize on assessment of learning rather than assessment for learning. This culture reinforcing the tendency to equate assessment with examinations (Williams, 2024). This exam-oriented focus is evident in how students are constantly put through for high stakes summative assessments, rather than continuous learning and development (Baartman and Quinlan, 2024). Empirical findings show consistently indicate that most grading remain summative in nature, even though teachers agree that formative, ongoing feedback is what helps student improve. This agreement led to a major gap between what assessment is supposed to do and how its practice (Alqahtani et al. 2025). Part of this problem is that the traditional learning theories treat formative assessment as a separate, end of lesson activity rather than natural part of daily learning which causes confusion about how it fits into the whole curriculum (Moges, 2018). As a result, traditional assessment still favours memorizing facts and theories, while failing to measure practical competencies, deep reflection and creativity and ultimately failing to show the full picture of student achievement and development (Radzali et al. 2025).

A central concern in rigid assessment practices is that formative assessment is incomplete without a follow-up stage that allows both students and teachers to adjust and improvements, highlighting the importance of iterative learning processes rather than one-off judgments (van der Steen et al. 2023). In this regard, scholars have emphasized the need to permit students to resubmit their work after improvement, as such practices enable learners to act on feedback and demonstrate progress over time (Moges, 2018). This point of view aligns assessment more closely with learning enhancement than just grading by redefining it as an active process of feedback-informed development rather than just and endpoint (McGuire, 2025). However, experienced educators recognize the challenge to build a room for change and advancement when teaching with excessively pack course outline which frequently reinforces strict and inflexible assessment methods (van der Steen et al. 2023). Time restraint and excessive administrative workload worsen these issues by acting as structural obstacles to continuous assessment and limiting the availability of meaningful formative feedback (Shahazwan et al. 2025).

Conceptual ambiguity is further intensified by structural time constraints. This encourages reliance on familiar examination-oriented assessment practices rather and reduce opportunities to perform continuous assessment effectively.

There is uncertainty about the best order for assessment, which is a part of a larger debate in education. Currently, researchers do not know much about whether it's better to teach theory first then followed by practice or vice versa in relation to assessment design (Natarajan

et al. 2021). This uncertainty has led prompted researcher to explicitly examine whether curricula should use a 'capstone' approach where theory comes before practice or a 'foundation stone' approach where practical experience introduced first (Natarajan et al. 2021). This shows that there is no agreement on the best order of assessments. From the learner's perspective, student feedback has shown a strong preference for a 'theory before practice' sequencing, suggesting that students may feel better prepared to engage in practical assessments after gaining sufficient conceptual understanding (Natarajan et al. 2021).

Various teaching and assessment styles currently coexist across higher education is demonstrated by differences in assessment practices whereby varied expectations and method are created among lecturers (Keong et al. 2020). These variations are largely shaped by the fact that instructors' perceptions of assessment directly influence how assessment is designed and implemented, leading to opposite interpretations of appropriate assessment practices (Moges, 2018). Professional discussion reveals a clear diversity of understanding, as lecturers report that different viewpoints among colleagues confuse the design of suitable assessment tools which further complicating efforts to establish shared assessment norms (Muspardi et al. 2020). Consequently, the lack of clarity arising from these divergent perspectives results in diverse interpretations among stakeholders such as module leaders and tutors, who may prioritize different aspects of assessment transparency and rigor (Gonsalves and Lin, 2025). Over time, such variability has been shown to produce inconsistent application of assessment criteria across departments within the same institution, reinforcing confusion among both educators and students (Gonsalves and Lin, 2025).

Overall, the results show that lecturers frequently continued to use traditional, exam-oriented approach because of conceptual ambiguity surrounding the assessment's goal within OBE frameworks. This ambiguity significantly reduced the purpose of continuous assessment for student learning. Consequently, these results show a profound disconnect between OBE policy and what actually happens in practice. The policy says assessment should show evidence of student learning, but lecturers are working in an environment with heavy workloads. At the same time, existing assessment cultures push them to focus on giving grades and covering content rather than helping students improve progressively. If Matriculation Programme doesn't provide clearer guidance and proper training to help lecturers understand assessment purposes better, the system will end up using OBE policy on paper while implementation works like traditional exam focused system. This could make outcome claims less credible of how students are actually developing and learning.

Limit Awareness of Constructive Alignment as a core OBE Principle

Identifying and understanding the constructive alignment in curriculum and assessment widely recognized as challenging especially when it involves alignment of learning outcomes at different level such as in modules, programmes and national qualifications. (Loughlin et al. 2021). This challenge is anchor by valid practice where learning outcomes mostly specified for the sake of paperwork while other syllabus is kept blurry on purpose. The document of paperwork technically exists but does not actually help educators understand or use the real principle of constructive alignment (Loughlin et al. 2021).

Nasrallah (2014) and Romanowski et al. (2024) further indicates that attempts to align learning outcomes with teaching methods, institutional plans, and accreditation

requirements have, in some contexts, added to faculty misinterpretations rather than clarifying constructive alignment, reinforcing conceptual ambiguity (Nasrallah, 2014; Romanowski et al. 2024). At the policy level, superficial alignment has been shown to encourage the sterile creation of learning outcomes designed to fit existing, unmodified modules, weakening the intended pedagogical coherence of CA (Loughlin et al. 2021). Such issues are often intensified by a lack of institutional strategic vision or clarity, which can lead to weakened alignment practices or a compliance-oriented, 'tick-the-boxes' implementation of constructive alignment (Ruge et al. 2019).

According to Romanowski et al. (2024), lecturers who receive insufficient training on constructive alignment become confused of some important issues. This demonstrates how insufficient exposure to constructive alignment causes lecturers to have misconceptions about learning outcomes, such as their crucial role in teaching and assessment practices, their inability to understand what they mean, and their confusion with objectives (Romanowski et al. 2024). As reflected in findings, there also a small number of faculty members who demonstrate an adequate understanding of learning outcomes, while many remaining unaware of the student-centered nature that underpins constructive alignment (Romanowski et al. 2024). Other than getting the definition problem, Ali (2018) pointed out that the real problem in higher education is figuring out how to make constructive alignment work in real classroom (Ali, 2018). Constructive alignment worsens this limited understanding in new institutional context where lecturers frequently interpret procedures and practice differently, leading to inconsistent enactment (Bauer and Kenton, 2005; Romanowski et al. 2024). Consequently, key alignment components such as learning objectives, instructional activities, and assessment tasks are frequently missing or not explicitly linked, reflecting practical implementation gaps that stem from limited conceptual clarity (van der Steen et al. 2023).

This lack of knowledge about constructive alignment is related to assessment literacy, as it limits lecturers' capacity to create tasks, rubrics, and scoring procedures that make sense. Despite the absence of precise conceptual knowledge about constructive alignment, lecturers still engage in understanding alignment decision that were influences by time constraints and institutional requirements rather than pedagogical considerations.

In practice, the findings show that constructive alignment usually just ends up as paperwork that need to complete rather than actual teaching principle that should guide them how to design assessments and teach in classes. The gap between OBE policy and actual practice is enormous. The policy requires lecturers to demonstrate alignment in curriculum documents, but there is not enough support for actual training or time they need to apply in their everyday teaching. Without enough institutional support and proper training, OBE will just become 'tick-the-box' where people fill out forms to meet requirements. This undermines the whole point of OBE where we can't trust that student outcomes are actually meaningful.

Structural Time Constraints and Assessment Feasibility

Teaching a large class size with limited instructional time consistently constraint lecturer ability to integrate comprehensive assessment strategies in their teaching practices (Moges, 2018). These constraints get even worse when lecturers don't have enough time to conduct continuous assessment because of paperwork and marking demands which limit frequency of assessment can be done. (Shahazwan M. T. et al. 2025). Senouci (2022) found that allocate

instructional time such as one and a half hours per week is not enough for implementing the constructively aligned assessment approaches. Lecturer more prioritizes the completion of syllabus over a time rather than doing many assessments activities. (Senouci, 2022). Due to the limited time to cover the syllabi content, this condition led to a situation where lecturer skip over the assessment practices including communicating the learning objectives, assessment criteria, and implementation of self and peer assessment (Moges, 2018). This condition consistent with Shahazwan M. T. et al. (2025) findings where time constraint and heavy administrative workloads become systematic barriers to continuous assessment and reducing the effectiveness of formative feedback to the students.

These structural time constraints also amplify systemic misalignment across colleges, because inconsistent assessment expectation reduce opportunities for coordinated assessment planning and increase pressure for rapid, localised implementation decision.

Practical and performance-based assessments are widely acknowledged to require a substantial amount of time and a high level of precision from lecturers, making them particularly vulnerable to scheduling pressures within the academic semester (Muspardi et al. 2020). Under such tight timelines, lecturers have reported modifying or reducing planned assessment activities, including skipping certain tasks or reallocating them as homework, to cope with limited time for implementation (Lestari and Yusuf, 2025). These constraints also help explain why lecturers tend to limit the use of constructively aligned practices and instead rely on simpler assessment formats, such as quizzes or group-based assignments, especially when attempting to assess large student cohorts within restricted timeframes (Senouci, 2022). Furthermore, concerns have been raised regarding the reliability and accuracy of assessments conducted within very short periods, leading some lecturers to question whether high-stakes summative components, such as final examinations, should carry substantial weighting under such conditions (Basera, 2019).

As part of the curriculum structure design, Student Learning Time (SLT) is formally embedded withing Summary of Course Information (SCI) which specifies Programme Objectives (PO), learning outcomes and the calculation of SLT (Md Jani et al. 2020). However, there is a big difference between theoretical curriculum planning and classroom realities. Lecturer struggle to integrate curriculum-based assessment practice while following the documented SLT requirement. (Shahazwan et al. 2025).

Previous studies that specifically map assessment schedules and the quantity of assessment tasks to SLT allocations provide more proof of this misalignment, indicating that the workload state in curriculum documents might not be reflected in the current implementation (Md Jani et al. 2020). According to practitioners' viewpoint, institutional expectations may not match pedagogical realities, and variations in lecturers' and institutions' definitions of a "successful program" also lead to the uneven implementation of SLT recommendations (O'Neill et al. 2024). At a conceptual level, critiques have argued that formal models of constructive alignment and SLT fail to account for the local, experiential, and context-specific nature of teaching practice, which further explains why SLT prescriptions are not always faithfully enacted in real teaching and assessment contexts (Romanowski et al. 2024).

Overall, lecturers are prevented from conducting adequate assessments by their busy schedules. Having a complex, need detailed feedback and precision, and lack of hours for assessment prevent them to follow through the continuous assessment. This highlights a major disconnect between OBE policy and actual practice. College documentation assumes a certain SLT and lecturer effort, but those numbers are often unrealistic for the actual classroom practice. The policy assumes time and resources that match the reality of teaching conditions. If the system does not make an adjustment on workload models, assessment schedule, and administrative demands, things won't get better. Lecturer will keep simplifying assessment to meet requirement rather than doing the high-quality teaching. Consequently, the system will continue rewarding compliance over quality.

Assessment Literacy: Rubrics, Task Design, and Scoring Practices

Assessment rubrics used in practice are often reduced to checklists that are easily converted into scoring sheets with simple 'yes/no' decision. This decision thereby limiting the ability to represent varying levels of student achievement (Allen and Tanner, 2006). According to Ling, (2024) this issue is worsened because of many rubrics are inconsistent and characterized by dichotomous positive/negative tone. Instead of offering a distinct evaluation, this rubric force educator to make binary judgement. Even though the use of rubrics is widespread, many are still confusing for both teachers and students. This lack of clarity prevents them from being function as transparent tools (Orrell, 2020). One big reason for this weakness is that the performance levels are not usually based on actual learning frameworks but relying on vague words like "satisfactory" or "excellent" which offer a little guidance to the performance standard. Because of this, lecturers have reported struggle with inconsistency grading and personal bias. This ultimately compromises the reliability and fairness of assessment outcomes (Alqahtani et al. 2025).

Since creating enough high-quality items consistently has been found to be challenging across disciplines, the difficulty of creating high-quality assessment questions is widely recognized, demonstrating that this issue occurs everywhere and not just in one context (Karthikeyan et al. 2019). The problem is made even worse by the fact that there is limited research explaining why people struggle to write high quality assessment item in the first place. Because of this limitation, educators are often left without any clear guidance on how to improve. (Karthikeyan et al. 2019). Research shows that many educators lack the right skills to create their own assessment questions. Because of this, they often recycle past examination papers instead of developing new ones that fit the class learning. (Senjiro and Lupeja, 2023; Shafii and Berger, 2025).

These assessments literacy challenges interact with conceptual ambiguity in OBE, where uncertainty about assessment purpose reduces lecture's ability to design task that capture higher order learning outcomes.

In terms of difficulty, the development of higher order thinking skills (HOTS) question is always misunderstood particularly about its concept and lack of knowledge how to test for it. This makes it tough for them to create questions that really make students think hard (Lestari and Yusuf, 2025). Because of this, educators usually resort to basic oral questions, classwork, or homework task that does not really connect with what they are teaching daily. This means

the questions they use don't really help students learn better or show what they know (Moges, 2018).

A recurring issue in assessment reporting otherwise is about the tendency for lecturers to submit only final grade without supporting explanations details, thus limit management's ability to understand the factors of students' low performance (Muspardi et al. 2020). This practice usually reinforced by institutional reporting system, where academic portals often require only summary grades, thereby reducing the evidence support of student assessment attitudes, knowledge and skills. (Muspardi et al. 2020). In addition to these systematic factors, educators also face practical difficulties in processing and entering assessment data in detail, especially for a large class size. Thus, educators become discouraged to prepare the comprehensive assessment report to represent the student learning development. (Muspardi et al. 2020). Taken together, these assessments conditions reflect the influence of administrative accountability pressure, where reporting, monitoring, and compliance requirements increasingly shape assessment practices beyond pedagogical considerations.

As a part of educator daily routine, making tests, grading students and manage student learning seem to be burden when they are being watched and checked by the administrator. (Parsons and Slabbert, 2001). This situation becomes distinct when assessment policies are perceived as policing mechanisms, where the supervisor in administration closely monitor the test instrument to ensure the guidelines are being followed (Mussawy et al. 2021). This scrutiny came from the broader managerial demands on higher education institutions to value the money invested, improve the productivity, and to respond to external pressure (Parsons and Slabbert, 2001). From governance level, policy makers believe that they have the right to watch academic staff allocate their time in institutions and demand efficiency and effectiveness across institutional operations (Parsons and Slabbert, 2001). Consequently, institutions increasingly rely on management information systems to generate detailed data for accountability purposes, makes many lecturers feel that all the reporting is just a way for management to control them (Parsons and Slabbert, 2001).

Overall, the findings show that lecturers struggle with assessment literacy such as creating good rubrics, developing quality test items, and evaluating complex thinking skills. When rubrics are too simple of teachers don't know how to test critical thinking, the evaluation and grading don't actually prove what students learned. There is a significant gap between OBE policy expectations and what is happening. Administrative keep pushing lecturers to report student outcome and meet accountability requirements which makes lecturers focus on filling out paperwork instead of focusing on real teaching. Without systemic training and clear guidelines to improve rubric quality, test design, and consistent grading, OBE risks producing outcomes score that don't credibly reflect actual student learning experiences.

This study suggests three key contributions to the literature on OBE and assessment practices. First, in conceptually, it advanced the understanding of assessment misalignment by framing it as a systematic and institutional phenomenon rather than an individual lecturer weakness. Second, through empirical, it provides rare multi-college qualitative evidence from a centrally management pre-university system, extending the existing OBE research that largely focused on single institutions or quantitative self-reports. Next, as practically, the findings demonstrate how accountability compliance-oriented assessment practices offering

important implications for education policymakers and institutional leaders responsible for OBE implementation.

Conclusion

This multi-college qualitative study examined systemic misalignment in OBE assessment practices among science lecturers in the Malaysian Matriculation Programme. Qualitative analysis reveals that misalignment is sustained by institutional, structural, and conceptual conditions rather than isolated lecturer shortcomings. Assessment practices among lecturers shows an absence of shared assessment framework and varies across colleges, compromising the fairness and transparency. Lecturers demonstrate a significant lack of clarity about the specific function and component of assessment in OBE, which is mostly limited by understanding of constructive learning. Structural barriers including heavy workloads and rigid time requirements restricted the implementation of continuous assessment while lack of assessment literacy led to simplified rubric and inability to design assessment in higher order thinking. Together, these conditions illustrate how policy-driven OBE reforms, when enacted under strong administrative accountability pressure, can translate into compliance-oriented assessment practices that compromise educational quality. Without addressing the constraints identified, assessment will continue to diverge from intended learning outcomes, undermining the integrity of pre-university level science education and potentially affecting student readiness for tertiary study. There are some limitations on this study. The results are context and specific and cannot be used to generalised as it is qualitative exploration. The focus on science lecturers within the Malaysian Matriculation Programme may limit transferability to other educational systems. Future research could extend this work through mixed-methods design, longitudinal studies, or comparative analyses across different pre-university or foundation studies to further examine how systemic conditions shape OBE assessment practices.

Glossary

FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HOTS	Higher Order Thinking Skills
PO	Programme Outcomes
OBE	Outcome-Based Education
SCI	Summary of Course Information
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SLT	Student Learning Time

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