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Conceptualising and optimising student workload in Philippine higher education

Richard R. Jugar[1]

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Abstract: This study examines how student workload is conceptualised and measured in Philippine Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs). Using a mixed-methods concurrent explanatory design, data were collected from 135 academics across ten public and private universities representing four disciplinary clusters: arts and humanities, social sciences, engineering, technology and physical sciences, and life and health sciences. Qualitative data, obtained through short-response and word-association prompts, were used to elicit academics' conceptions of student workload. For the quantitative component, Bologna-derived tools were employed, including activity-based workload projection and term-based workload calculation. Results indicate that academics predominantly equate student workload with contact time and lesson delivery, with very limited consideration of preparatory and follow-up learning activities. Normative workload estimations demonstrate substantial variability across disciplines, with projected weekly workloads for a typical 24-credit semester ranging from extreme under-allocation to excessive levels that exceed international benchmarks such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). These results indicate systemic non-standardisation and partial accounting of student workload in PHEIs, driven largely by policy frameworks that omit explicit recognition of non-contact learning time. The study argues that without

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an explicit, workload-based credit framework, Philippine degree programmes remain structurally disadvantaged in regional and international mobility and recognition.

Keywords: student workload; workload-based curriculum; higher education; course credit.

I. Introduction

Student workload is a critical element in curriculum design and policy formulation in higher education (Kember 2004; Ruiz-Gallardo et al. 2010). Student workload refers to the total amount of time required for a student to complete the academic requirements of a course (Bowyer 2012). There are two basic components of student workload: contact and non-contact time. Contact time is the scheduled time spent in structured interactions with instructors such as lectures, laboratory sessions, or seminars (Nosair and Hamdy 2017). This typically takes place within physical spaces such as classrooms or laboratories but has also been expanded to include virtual contexts, such as online synchronous meetings (Whitelock et al. 2015). Non-contact time on the other hand is the time students spend on independent learning activities, such as reading, assignments, and research (Ruiz-Gallardo et al. 2015; Scully and Kerr 2014). In most institutional records and academic policies, contact time is generally made more explicit than non-contact time, making the latter more susceptible to open interpretation and non-standardisation. Globally, student workload is considered the currency of internationalisation (Magette and Richardson 2020). The Bologna Process, for instance, identifies student workload as one of the major bases for the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System or ECTS (Alshamy 2017; Parker et al. 2015; Souto-Iglesias and Romero 2018). Several regions in the world likewise utilise student workload in establishing the mobility and equivalency of degrees and qualifications across regions, including Latin America, Australasia, North America, and East Asia (Ministry of Science, Technology & Innovation 2005). The measurement of student workload plays a vital role as it complements the outcomes alignment and disciplinary requirements in ensuring the credit afforded to the different degrees and qualifications are objectively and consistently determined (Wagenaar 2019). The UNESCO Regional Conventions on Qualifications also emphasise the role of student workload for degree programmes. The Lisbon Convention, which serves as the convergence point for European countries, is one of the most established and active recognition frameworks (Knight 2004; Sekiyama 2018). Currently, the Tokyo Convention is the regional convergence for Asia

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and up to the time of this writing, ASEAN member states have yet to ratify this convention (Ashizawa et al. 2024; Teter and Wang 2021).

In terms of curriculum planning and implementation, workload management serves as a bridge between intended learning outcomes (ILOs) and actual learning experiences. Systematic measurement of student workload enables more realistic planning to ensure the attainment of the desired learning outcomes as it explicitly identifies the time requirement for each activity or deliverable (Ruiz-Gallardo et al. 2010; Scully and Kerr 2014). A balanced workload ensures academic rigour without overburdening students, encourages active participation and engagement, and aligns with institutional goals for learner development. Proper management of workload ensures that students can meet academic requirements without being overwhelmed, encouraging better learning outcomes and improved well-being (Cano et al. 2024). Beyond time investment, student workload also encompasses the complexity and intensity of academic tasks. A well-designed workload facilitates meaningful learning, while a poorly managed workload risks student disengagement or burnout (Kanwal et al. 2023; Parker et al. 2015; Thi and Duong 2024). Student workload consideration for instructors and professors is also a useful tool for the development of reflective practice in teaching. The explicit consideration of the time needed to satisfactorily attain the desired learning outcomes will allow instructors to reflectively select essential teaching-learning activities and assessments (Lyng 2017). Corollary to this, non-essential activities or busy-work requirements will be reduced if not downright eliminated as the instructor becomes increasingly conscientious in ensuring that outcomes are attained without unnecessarily increasing the associated student workload (Chickering and Gamson 1989; Dee 2020; Smaill 2020).

In many Southeast Asian countries in general and the Philippines in particular, student workload has not been given emphasis both in practice and research (Lorenzo 2021). While the ASEAN University Network has a thematic network for the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS), there is no defined policy about what constitutes an academic credit with respect to the associated workload (Berse 2018; Chao 2017). Country-specific exemplar practices exist such as Vietnam's definition of a standard academic credit as equivalent to 40 hours of learning and Malaysia's integration of Student Learning Time (SLT) that technically translates the provision of non-contact time component in workload allocation (Hanh et al. 2020; Nguyen 2020; Thu 2021). In 2021, the project focused on Comparing the Achievement of Learning Outcomes of Higher Education in Asia (CALOHEA) introduced student workload as one of the recognition mechanisms for programme

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internationalisation, mobility, and equivalency (Yusoff 2024). This project led to the development of the ASEAN University Network Qualification Excellence (AUN-QEx) initiative in 2025, which currently conducts mastery training workshops for the development of recognition mechanisms in ASEAN higher education institutions. One of the foundational foci of AUN-QEx is the installation of the culture of measuring and using student workload in the design and implementation of the degree programmes (ASEAN University Network 2025). The importance of student workload consideration in ASEAN was also emphasised in the EU-ASEAN Policy Dialogue conducted through the EU-ASEAN Sustainable Connectivity Package – Higher Education Programme (SCOPE-HE). The current direction of these initiatives highlights the need for ASEAN to develop a systemic approach in policy and practice to ensure that student workload is integrally embedded in programme internationalisation and mobility. This is essentially to ensure that both intra-regional and inter-regional degree recognitions have solid and established bases for crediting and validation (ASEAN Higher Education Space Roadmap 2022).

In the Philippines, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) generally ascribe to the ASEAN Qualification Reference Framework (AQRF) through the contextualised Philippine Qualification Framework (PQF) (Albia and Chan 2017; Berse 2018; García and Marigmen 2020). Despite this ascription, PHEIs face unique challenges in institutionalising the consideration of student workload in curriculum planning and implementation as the current policy only considers contact time in instructional delivery. This means that the resulting student workload measurement will only include partial data as the current system does not explicitly indicate the non-contact time component of student learning. This poses a significant limitation in terms of programme mobility and equivalency outside of the country since Philippine degree programmes will be categorically classified as credit-insufficient when viewed through the lens of student workload-based qualification crediting.

In practice, PHEIs do not have a defined set of criteria for student workload consideration and utilisation. While the policy indicates the required contact time for both experiential and non-experiential courses, there is no explicit provision for the associated non-contact for the different courses (Largoza and Fernandez 2025). Consequently, institutional policies and instructional practices are heavily structured towards the contact-time requirement of the degree programmes. This creates an imbalance in practice as non-contact time is generally acknowledged as extant but not operationally considered in the actual implementation of the teaching learning process. Student workload could therefore be insufficient if no

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non-contact time is allocated or overdone if heavy non-contact time work is demanded (Nomura et al. 2021). This fundamental limitation is also exacerbated by the unique challenges that persist in managing student workload, given the diversity of institutional capacities, programme designs, and learner demographics.

Given the limitation in policy and literature on student workload in PHEIs, this study intends to examine academics' conception of student workload and their implementation practices in terms of estimating the workload associated with specific teaching-learning activities and assessment tasks.

II. Methodology

The study employed a mixed-method approach using a concurrent explanatory research design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018). Opportunity sampling was used to determine the main participants of the study (Howard 2022; Wood et al. 2023). A total of 135 academics from ten higher education institutions in the Philippines, comprising three private and seven state universities. Since these academics belong to the different teaching units of their respective universities and teach different courses or disciplines, the categories derived from the Times Higher Education classification of academic disciplines were used. These categories are (1) Arts and Humanities, (2) Social Sciences, (3) Engineering, Technology, and Physical Sciences, and (4) Life Sciences and Health Sciences.

Table 1

Participants Disciplinary Profile and Distribution (N=135)

Years of Teaching	n	% of Total	Cumulative %
1–5	24	17.8	32.6
6–10	36	26.7	59.3
11–15	20	14.8	14.8
>16	55	40.7	100.0

In terms of teaching experience, all participants have been teaching from three to thirty-five years and were clustered into distinct groups. Most of the participants are experienced teachers with more than five years of teaching experience (M=13.9, SD=8.44).

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Table 2

Participants Teaching Experience Profile and Distribution (N=135)

Discipline	n	% of Total	Cumulative %
Arts and Humanities	27	20.0	20.0
Engineering, Technology, and Physical Sciences	40	29.6	49.6
Life and Health Sciences	14	10.4	60.0
Social Science	54	40.0	100.0

For the data collected, the qualitative component allowed the participants to define in their own terms and understanding what constitutes student workload as well as identify the components of this workload with respect to their curricular activities and requirements. They were instructed to provide their conceptual association to student workload and were given relative freedom to express these conceptions in words. The quantitative data were derived from their initial estimations, activity-based projections, and term-specific workload calculations.

A researcher-developed activity focused on imagery generation of a typical higher education student in the Philippine context was used as the main tool for the elucidation of the participants' conceptions of student workload. A specific activity on the development of a synthesis paper as a common undergraduate course requirement was introduced to the participants. They were instructed to describe the activities and processes that a typical higher education student would have to do or undergo to produce an acceptable synthesis paper result. Further, the participants were also instructed to provide the estimated number of hours needed for each identified activity or process leading to the completion of required synthesis paper.

III. Results and discussion

The result of the initial exercise on identifying the steps and processes in the development of an undergraduate synthesis paper by a typical higher education student initially generated a relatively simplistic series of well-defined steps. This conception essentially reflects the expectation of the participants in the process of producing or demonstrating an acceptable level of learning outcome. In the process of contextualising student workload through the lens of the student, the initially proposed four-step process morphed into a complex multi-phased series of events.

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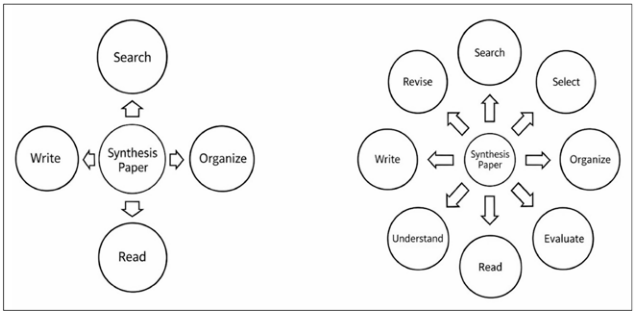


Figure 1

Changes in the identified steps and processes before and after student workload considerations

Note: The object on the left represents the initial process conceptions while object on the right is the resulting process conceptions after workload contextualization

The responses of the participants about their conceptions on what constitutes student workload range from single term to multiple sentences. Each of these responses was grouped together based on word or phrase frequency, and explicit meaning. This allows for the generation of keywords or phrases that adequately reflects the responses of the participants into distinct thematic groups. The word cloud visualisation of these responses is presented below.



Figure 2

Word cloud visualisation of participants' student workload conceptions

Note: Word cloud image using all raw textual data from the participants

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While the word cloud visualisation essentially shows the most closely associated word or concept of student workload for academics in the group, it is important to consider that the different disciplines may have contextual nuances that contribute to their respective conceptions of student workload. Based on the textual responses, categories were developed to cluster the responses in specific groups based on the interpreted focus or area. These groups include (a) workload as contact time, (b) workload as a practical or technical engagement, and (c) workload as assessment driven. Treemap visualisation was used to show how the different disciplinary categories associate student workload based on the grouped responses of their expressed conceptions.

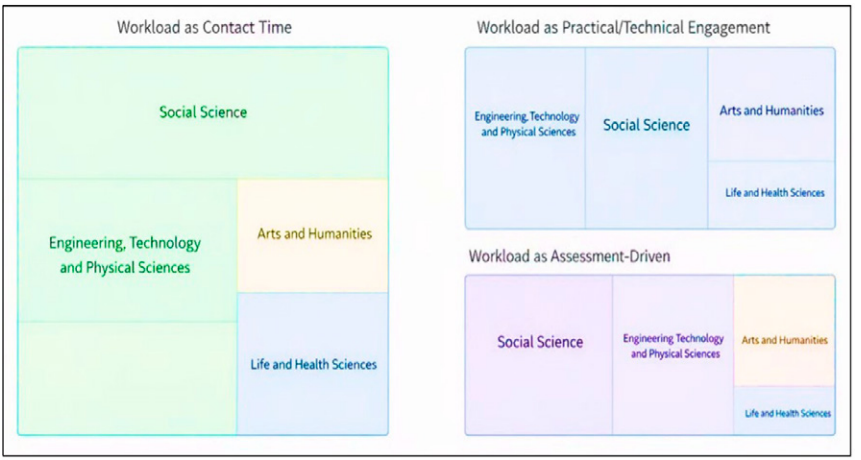


Figure 3

Treemap visualisation of the participants' disciplinary categories and grouped student workload conceptions

Since the student workload estimated for each activity is also categorised in three distinct phases that include preparatory, implementation, and follow-up, packed circle visualisation was used to clearly show how each of the disciplinary clusters associate student workload to these phases. Results clearly indicate that workload is most associated with implementation with less consideration for preparatory activities and even less for follow-up. It is also worth noting that the life and health sciences cluster is only present in the implementation circle and is inherently absent in both preparatory and follow-up circles.

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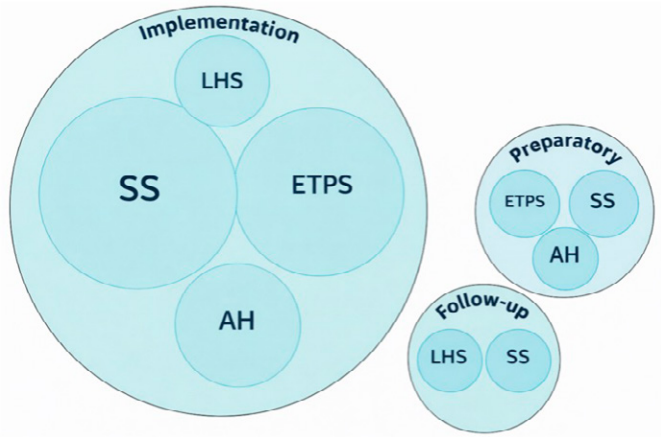


Figure 4

Packed circle visualisation of participants disciplinary categories and time-related workload conceptions

Note: SS – Social Sciences, LHS – Life and Health Sciences, ETPS – Engineering, Technology and Physical Sciences, AH – Arts and Humanities

III.1. Activity-based workload projection

The results of activity-based student workload projection were generally derived from a selected three-week period within the regular eighteen-week allocation of a typical semester. Additional conditions were provided to the participants to consider regular academic weeks that do not include university or community-related activities such as extra-curricular activities or examinations. Moreover, three sets of workload estimations were conducted for each activity namely preparatory, lesson delivery, and follow-up. Preparatory workload would include all activities that are asked of the students in preparation for the actual contact-time. This may include advanced readings and pre-laboratory activities among others. Lesson delivery workload refers to the time that students will spend on actual onsite or online synchronous classes that students will have to attend. As for follow-up workload, this refers to the time students will spend in fulfilling tasks that are done after the lesson delivery. These tasks may include post-lesson activities such as revisions, enrichments, or additional requirements that are still related to the implemented lesson. The aggregated estimations for preparatory,

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implementation and follow-up constitute the reported workload estimation for each activity. The weekly normative value and the projected typical semester value consisting of eight courses or equivalent to 24 credit units' estimation values for each group of disciplines are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Weekly Normative Student Workload Values of Activity-based Workload Projection

Discipline	n	Mean Normative Estimated Value (3-credit course)	SD	Min–Max (Per Course)	Min–Max (Eight Courses)
Arts and Humanities	27	10.4	3.29	3–15	24–120
Engineering, Technology, and Physical Sciences	40	10.7	3.33	3–16	24–128
Life and Health Sciences	14	11.3	2.23	8–15	64–120
Social Science	54	10.6	3.41	3–16	24–128

III.2. Student workload conception

The most common conception of academics regarding student workload is heavily oriented towards contact time. This is evident in the most common keywords and key phrases that include class, lectures, laboratory work, and examinations are consistent with the general conceptions of academics (Alshamy 2017; Kember 2004; Nomura et al. 2021). Nonetheless, there are also those who included non-contact related responses such as homework, reading assignments, site visits, and studying. One interesting association of student workload is on its assessment-driven interpretation. This conception tends to associate workload with examinations and assessment. While this association is not necessarily erroneous, reducing workload solely for assessment and assessment-related activities underestimates the actual value as it does not adequately consider both preparatory and class-implementation time. Because most assessments especially summative ones are generally conducted after lesson delivery, the risk of excluding preparatory-related workload allocation becomes even more pronounced (Bouwmeester et al. 2019). The idea that student workload is largely determined by contact hours

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or scheduled classes remains a prevalent interpretation among academics and administrative staff in higher education.

Regarding the time element of student workload conception, academics tend to predictably focus on lesson delivery. Very few respondents considered preparatory activities in the estimation process, and the consideration of follow-up is almost non-existent (Fischer et al. 2023; Kenny and Fluck 2022). While this is expected because of academics focusing on contact time activities, it is important to note that the non-consideration of preparatory activities and exclusion of follow-up estimations could dramatically affect the overall estimation or allocation of student workload (Impola 2025; Pardos et al. 2022). As a case in point, the actual class of three hours a week for a typical three-credit course may end up requiring more preparation time from the students as well as additional follow-up deliverables. Taken together, the unaccounted non-contact components for the planned lesson of the week can collectively increase the students' workload to over three times of what has been formally acknowledged and reported.

The policy on credit allocation for PHEIs is essentially contact-centric in nature such that one credit is typically allocated an hour for each week of typical semester in a regular lecture course (Cahapay 2020; Cuaton 2020; Esposo-Betan and Fresnido 2022). There is no national policy that acknowledges the existence of a non-contact component, more so on its regulation with respect to credit assignment (Largoza and Fernandez 2025). This could probably be attributed to the American-derived system whose credit system is derived from the Carnegie unit (Alarcón et al. 2014; Herlehy 1997; Kikomeko et al. 2019). In effect, both contact and non-contact components are treated within the contact-time allocation of the curriculum. The non-contact component of accounting for student workload is essentially treated as a de facto element of curriculum design. While at the outset the exclusion of non-contact time does not affect the attainment of learning outcomes, explicit auditing of the associated workload vis-à-vis the teaching-learning and assessment would indicate otherwise. Student feedback would have been a good starting point but the absence of an explicit policy on student workload standardisation gives very limited bearing if at all included (Huang et al. 2020).

III.3. Normative workload projection

In the context of the study, normative workload estimation is a syllabus-based time value derived from actual teaching-learning activities and

assessments in the courses taught by the participants. All disciplinary categories have relatively similar mean values at ten hours a week and exhibit relatively similar spreads based on their respective standard deviations. For this set of participants, the Life and Health Sciences cluster has the highest mean normative workload per course at 11.3 hours while the Arts and Humanities cluster has the lowest at 10.4 hours. This means that the Life and Health Sciences cluster requires 11.3 hours per meeting on the average, to satisfactorily deliver or demonstrate the expected learning outcome while the Arts and Humanities cluster only requires 10.4 hours. It is important to note that the indicated normative values can be largely affected by the nature and number of teaching-learning activities and assessments in the chosen three-week period of a typical three-credit course. Nevertheless, even the 10.4-hour requirement of the Arts and Humanities cluster remains substantially higher than what is deemed acceptable workload for a typical three-credit lecture course. For a typical semester consisting of approximately eight courses, a 10.4-hour per course would essentially result to workload of 83.2 hours a week. With reference to ECTS for instance, one ECTS credit is around 25 to 30 hours of workload that roughly translates to 40 to 60 hours of academic-related work per week in a typical semester (Renes 2017; Rivadeneyra 2022; Waage and Geirsdóttir 2025).

The workload allocation disparity becomes even clearer if the normative value for a typical three-credit course is extrapolated to a typical student load of eight courses or 24 credit units in one semester. The minimum and maximum values indicated in Table 3 for each discipline show a relatively large range of workload estimates. The minimum values represent the amount of time spent for the entire week if all courses will only consider the currently mandated 1:1 ratio of credit to weekly contact time. This means that if applied, a student taking a 24-credit load for a semester will only work for 24 hours within the entire week – a value that is way lower than other regional standards such as that of ECTS. On the other hand, the maximum values could reach as high as 128 hours for both Social Sciences and Engineering, Technology and Physical Sciences clusters. This value is also way too high for students such that it even exceeds the supposed upper limit of 60 hours a week with ECTS (Nosair and Hamdy 2017; Souto-Iglesias and Romero 2018). Overall, the wide range in the computed normative values strongly indicates that a non-standardised workload allocation could either lead to under- or over-allocation of teaching-learning activities and assessments with over-allocation to be occurring in greater likelihood as the data suggests.

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IV. Conclusion and implications

This study contributes to the scholarship on student workload by demonstrating how credit systems that are formally outcomes-based may nonetheless remain structurally incomplete when workload is operationalised almost exclusively through contact time and selective non-contact activities. In the Philippine higher education context, student workload functions less as an explicit curricular construct and more as an implicit by-product of instructional practice. This partial conception produces significant distortions in workload estimation.

The findings advance a theoretical distinction between *acknowledged workload* and *experienced workload*. While contact time constitutes the former and is clearly regulated within existing policy frameworks, preparatory and follow-up learning activities largely comprise the latter yet remain unstandardised and invisible in credit allocation. This misalignment helps explain the extreme variability observed in normative workload estimates across disciplines and courses. Importantly, the study shows that under- or over-allocation of workload is not an exception but a systemic risk arising from the absence of workload auditing mechanisms.

From a policy perspective, the persistence of a contact-time centric credit framework places Philippine higher education at a structural disadvantage in regional and international recognition systems that explicitly require workload-based transparency, such as ECTS-aligned and ASEAN recognition mechanisms. Without formally recognising non-contact learning time, Philippine degree programmes risk being misclassified as credit-insufficient, regardless of their actual academic rigour. This has direct implications for student mobility, cross-border programme recognition, and institutional participation in emerging ASEAN quality assurance architectures.

The study therefore argues for a recalibration of credit policy from a nominal contact-hour model to an explicit workload-based framework grounded in activity-level estimation. Such a shift does not require increasing academic demands but rather making existing demands visible, bounded, and pedagogically intentional. Embedding workload estimation into curriculum design can function as a regulatory mechanism that aligns intended learning outcomes, teaching–learning activities, and assessment practices, while simultaneously safeguarding student well-being.

At the theoretical level, the study positions student workload not merely as a measurement tool but as a mediating construct between policy, pedagogy, and learner experience. Recognising workload as a regulatory principle enables higher education systems to move beyond compliance-driven curriculum design toward evidence-informed coherence. For Philippine

higher education and similar systems, the institutionalisation of workload-based curriculum design represents a significant enabling condition for sustainable internationalisation, instructional accountability, and equitable student learning.

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