

Rethinking assessment? Research into the affective impact of higher education grading

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Abstract

Assessment plays a central role in learning in higher education (HE), but often the impact of grading assessment on student motivation, behaviour and wellbeing is insufficiently considered in policy and practice. With the growing concern in the HE sector about student mental health, a consideration of the affective dimension of grading is timely.

The discussion in this paper on the affective dimension of grading is based on research conducted during the pandemic on the 'no-detriment' implementation of pass/fail assessment at the University of the Arts London (UAL). Qualitative research was undertaken with first-and second-year undergraduate students in the fields of creative arts, design and communication to investigate the effects of the switch from letter grading to pass/fail and student views on grading more generally. Our findings suggest that grading affects student stress, anxiety, learner identity, motivation, student self-expression, creativity, and peer relationships.

In the light of our findings, we bring together discourses about assessment, grading and student wellbeing to consider the longer-term implications for assessment practices in a post-pandemic world.

Key words: grading, pass/fail, emotion, wellbeing.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a significant rupture in higher education (HE) practices. Globally, universities were forced to put in place measures to adapt assessments to deal with the challenges of the pandemic. In the United Kingdom (UK), a range of measures were instituted under what was called a 'no-detriment' approach, focusing on fairness and guaranteeing that students' final grades would not be lower than grades prior to the pandemic

(Hill, 2023). These changes – including more frequent application of pass/fail, removal of the penalty for resubmission, simplification of late submission regulations and exclusion of failed credits from overall degree grades (QAA, 2020; Means and Neisler, 2020; Chrysanthos, 2020) – led to critical reflection in the sector upon how we might “*reimagine assessment for good*” (Sambell and Brown, 2021, p.11).

This paper draws on research conducted at the University of the Arts London (UAL) during the period of implementation of the ‘no-detriment’ policies. UAL is Europe’s largest specialist art and design university, comprising six colleges that teach art, design, fashion, communication and performing arts. In 2020 and 2021, as part of a ‘no-detriment approach’ in response to the pandemic and the ensuing national lockdowns, the first year became pass/fail, a decision implemented to compensate for students’ lack – at various points during the academic year – of physical access to university spaces, such as studios and technical equipment. The aim was to counter any consequent risk of damage to student assessment outcomes and the research intended to evaluate the effects, for first-year units, of replacing letter grades with pass/fail. Such an exceptional change in the assessment approach also afforded us the opportunity to explore students’ attitudes to grading and consider how we might re-think assessment practices, taking account of their feelings.

In the case of this research paper, we differentiate between letter grading and pass/fail grading, as this was the policy change that we were researching. Grading is a taken-for-granted practice, our assessment and feedback regimes being still too often focused on justifying grades (Sambell and Brown, 2021). If the pandemic was a useful opportunity to re-think assessment, it is important that we do not continue to make assumptions about any aspect of our HE assessment processes. The impact of grading in HE has been under-researched, the focus in the literature having tended towards quality, standards, assessment for learning and feedback practices.

Increased prevalence of mental health issues for students in the UK highlights the importance of student wellbeing no longer just being a matter for student support services, but one for all teaching staff and the wider institution (Imad, 2022). This reflects growing interest in the connection between wellbeing and assessment (Jones *et al.*, 2021) to ensure “*assessments stretch and test learning without imposing unnecessary stress*” (UUK, 2020:14).

Given the central role of assessment in learning in HE, this paper discusses how the grading aspect may affect the emotions of recipients. This discussion is based on research conducted during the pandemic on the ‘no-detriment’ implementation of pass/fail assessment at the University of the Arts London (UAL). We bring together discourses about assessment, grading and student wellbeing to consider the longer-term implications for assessment practices in a post-pandemic world.

To frame this study, we start by looking at the literature, the sector context and the intersections between wellbeing, emotion and grading. We then report on the findings of our research before discussing its implications for practice. Finally, we suggest ways forward and call for further research on the emotional impact of grades.

Literature review

For this paper, we are focusing specifically on how the grade and the grading part of HE assessment practices affect the emotional wellbeing of undergraduate students. Assessment is one of the key drivers of student behaviour and the student experience (Boud and Falchikov, 2007). During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was some concern that ‘no-detriment’ policies might impair quality and standards. For example, Rust *et al.* (2021), in reviewing these ‘no-detriment’ policies, argued that such changes made to assessment outputs, i.e., student grades, are indefensible because they undermine standards. However, the pandemic highlighted, amongst many other things, how assessment and assessment practices can shape the human, affective side of the university experience. These emotional and wellbeing aspects of assessment are often missing from the literature and debates. Even during the pandemic and the emotional toll it took on many, assessment literature still focused upon the quality assurance aspects of standards, validity and reliability, with little discussion of the role of assessment for wellbeing. To illustrate, a key publication by Advance HE, the UK’s professional body for teaching and learning in HE, entitled ‘Assessment and Feedback in the Post-pandemic Era’ (Baughan, 2021), mentions ‘compassion’ just four times in a 220-page document, in contrast to ‘standards’ (over forty times) and ‘valid’/‘validity’ (over twenty times). Where the human aspects of assessment do emerge in the literature, they tend to relate to feedback practices rather than to assessment itself. New paradigm feedback practices seek to address the hidden relational and affective aspects of feedback practices (Winstone and Carless, 2020).

Letter or numerical grading has become a normalised practice in the UK HE system that prioritises and “*emphasizes objective measures of performance, ranking, and quantitative marks*” (Stommel, 2018, paragraph 10). For example, Johnson (2008) presents the wider UK policy context on grading versus binary judgments. Historically, however, qualitative reports were often used rather than grades (Brookhart *et al.*, 2016) and binary judgments such as pass/fail or met/not met are still widely used, though are more commonly applied at doctoral or master’s level. Letter or numerical grades have become a required part of HE assessment practices, particularly at undergraduate level.

The role of emotions in relation to assessment practices, and especially to grading, is under-developed in HE. This is surprising, given what we know about the importance of the role of emotions in learning (Imad, 2022; Immordino-Yang and Damasio, 2007). Emotion is inherently linked to learning through, for example, motivation, belonging, cognitive skills and self-regulation (Osika, 2022). The limited literature that does exist on grading and its emotional effects suggests how student behaviour, motivation and wellbeing respond to this form of assessment. A meta-analysis of the impact of grades on motivation in primary and secondary school education noted that students who were doing less well academically were also less motivated because of grading (Koenka *et al.*, 2021). A few studies have found that student stress levels are higher with letter-grading, but are lower with pass/fail (Michaelides and Kirshner, 2005, Bloodgood *et al.*, 2009).

Alternatives to any form of grading are re-emerging, often in the form of what is now called ‘ungrading’. Ungrading is an umbrella term for a variety of practices that decentre grading (Blum, 2022); it addresses concerns about how grades distort behaviour and attitudes to learning (McMorran and Ragupathi, 2019). Kohn (2011) argues that grading makes students less orientated to learning, causing them instead to pursue the easiest way to get a good

grade, and lowers the quality of their learning and thinking: “*all students adjust to and comply with the kind of grading system to which they are exposed*” (Dahlgren *et al.*, 2009, p.191). Ungrading is the response of many educators in all education sectors concerned about the instrumentalism of grading and how it might distort student behaviour and adversely affect student emotions and wellbeing (Gibbs, 2020). Similarly, McMorran and Ragupathi (2019) highlighted the potential for gradeless learning to improve student wellbeing and adjustment to university. However, they did identify challenges related to student motivation in the absence of grades. The problem with the ungrading literature base is that most of the experiments in ungrading have been local and often under the radar of university standards and quality procedures (Blum, 2020) and the wider literature has frequently focused on secondary education, not HE.

Assessment literature and debates emphasise quality and standards and largely ignore emotion and wellbeing, except for the impact of our feedback and feedback practices. Separately, although there is significant concern in the sector about student wellbeing, the emphasis here is on building student resilience, developing a growth mindset to assessment feedback and coping with exam-related stress (Allman *et al.*, 2021) rather than on directly addressing institutional assessment and grading policies and practices. A gap exists in both practice and the literature to address the role of wellbeing and emotion in assessment.

Methodology

Ethical framework

This qualitative study explores undergraduate students’ experiences of pass/fail grading and is situated within a qualitative, social constructivist, interpretivist paradigm (Rust *et al.*, 2005). We obtained ethical approval from UAL’s educational ethics committee. As a collective team of educational developers, we were ethically committed to designing and implementing a research project that took a ‘no-harm approach’ and to ensuring compassionate experiences for student participants. We carefully devised our online data collection methods to minimise pandemic-associated risk, recognising that many students were experiencing stress, grief, loneliness and pressure (Newman *et al.*, 2021).

Data collection

This study is based on the results of interviews that we held over a two-week period in June 2021 with thirty-two first- and second-year undergraduate students from across the institution and representing a range of disciplines including fine art, design, theatre, media communication and fashion management. There were around 18,000 students at UAL with over 5,600 Undergraduate year 1 students enrolled for 2020/21 when the research was conducted.

As our sampling methods, we used an open call-out through the Student Union and college communications, along with snowballing. We designed the interview in three different formats to encourage a diverse range of students and to be as inclusive and compassionate as possible. Student participants were invited to choose from a one-to-one interview with a member of the research team, a peer interview or a set of questions sent and answered via email (responses could be either text, audio or video).

The peer interview method was developed in response to Heron's (2020) friendship method of interviewing whereby two peers take part in a guided conversation that "*provides insights into issues and aspects delineated, defined and explained by the students themselves*" (Heron, 2020, p.4). Students who chose this method attended a thirty-minute session with another peer. A member of the research team welcomed them and introduced the interview before leaving. The students recorded their discussion using prompt questions. This method attempted to mitigate power relations between the researcher and the researched (Seale *et al.*, 2015) and opened a space for different experiences to be shared (McLeod, 2011).

Analysis

We applied thematic analysis (Kiger and Varpio, 2020) as a flexible, analytical method and took a deductive approach in constructing our themes. We recognised the importance of researcher subjectivity and shared our responses to the stories as part of our reflexive collaboration. To build familiarity with the data we analysed across the data set and met regularly to discuss "*patterns of shared meaning*" (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p.593). We took wellbeing as our centralising organising concept (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Our initial coding generated a set of codes (Saldana, 2016) that can broadly be categorised as relating to: affective, social feedback, grading, process, impact on learning.

For this paper, we then developed sub-themes for the areas we felt to be directly linked to the emotional impact of grading on student wellbeing before generating our four themes:

1. Grading, stress and anxiety – how grades influence feelings of stress and anxiety;
2. Grading and the impact on learner identity and motivation – how grades shape how they feel as a learner and their approach to learning;
3. Grading and the impact on self-expression and creativity – how grading makes them feel about what they can and cannot do in their work;
4. Grading and the impact on peer relationships – how grades mediate the social milieu on the students' course.

Results

Impact of grading on stress and anxiety

One of the most prominent comments made by students about their experience of pass/fail related to the impact of grades on stress and anxiety levels. The shift away from grading was seen by most as successfully helping them through the difficult times of the pandemic:

"I was having some major anxiety issues. And if I hadn't had pass and fail, I don't know what I would have done at that time. It helped me get through my work. And even though I was demotivated, and I was not feeling well, I actually got it still done because the fact that like, okay, I'll do my best, even

though it's not my best, but I'll do the best over that period of time for me. So at least it got to me through the next year."

However, students' comments went beyond pandemic-specific issues. There was a strong sense that grading is stressful and causes anxiety in any context. The move back to a graded system in the forthcoming second year was described as a return to "stressful old days".

"I've experienced a grading system during my foundation, and I was a lot more stressed out and tired than what I'm right now. I understand the necessity of being graded, but just I have to put so much attention into the grading system. And I don't really feel like I'm enjoying the process of creating things. I'm really nervous to go back to the grading system."

This nervousness generated by the grades is emphasised by other students, often describing them as a source of anxiety. One student, for example, likened the anxiety of receiving a grade to having a "heart attack". It appears, then, that students' comments about the impact of grading, and the relief of pass/fail, are often focused on how grading creates anxiety and stress and harms their overall wellbeing.

Impact of grading on learner identity and motivation

For many students, the grades received were deeply embedded in their sense of who they were as learners and the type of student they each saw themselves as being, as their reflections on the questions 'How good am I?' and 'Am I good enough?' demonstrated.

For those students who expressed a preference for grading and not pass/fail, their argument centred on 'How good am I?' For them, the grade was the best indicator of their level, regardless of the quality of the feedback given. Repeatedly, students voiced the concern that, when not given a grade, they were uncertain of "what level I'm working at" and that it was "hard to tell how well you've done." This occurred even when students acknowledged they were given good feedback on their work and were told about their strengths and the areas to improve: "the feedback is good, but it's not helpful enough alone." There was clear evidence that students were struggling to develop feedback literacy and that the process of switching to pass/fail had not sufficiently addressed supporting students to develop feedback literacy in the absence of grades.

This lack of feedback literacy also resulted in worries about not being good enough when not given any grades. Students were concerned that going into the second year their current performance was not going to be good enough and they were worried about being unaware of this:

"I've been getting consistent passes, so I should be fine. But I'm very much just nervous ... What if I've just scraped by? What if I haven't done very well?"

Students were emotionally affected by the question 'Am I good enough?' as it influenced their personal sense of self as a learner. For students struggling, feelings of not being good enough can lead to withdrawal from the course which, for some, were mitigated by pass/fail:

“I just didn't feel like I was doing well enough on my current course... maybe if we did have the grading system in the first year, and I wasn't doing [well enough], I wasn't getting the highest grade, I probably would have changed my course.”

One student reflected on low grades as a sign of being “you know, the worst person.” Other students confirmed this view, noting: “If you didn't get the grade that you expected, I feel like that will put a downer on, you know, yourself.”

For students doing well, grading can combine with a sense of perfectionism and a desire to achieve the perfect score (Blum 2020). This can lead to a sense of not being good enough. Several students felt they had to get everything right to feel successful and good about themselves:

“I'm one of those people has to be like a perfect person. So even with a B I'm like, why didn't I get an A? ... And then your whole mood just goes because you just think about it constantly, constantly, over in your head.”

The idea that working hard meant getting good grades was also prevalent in the interviews. Students linked the grade to the amount of effort they put into their work and not necessarily the learning that had taken place. Students openly expressed distress that their hard work would not be properly acknowledged without an appropriate grade.

This close link between effort and good grades then affects student motivation. For some students, having grades would have motivated them to “*push more.*” Without the grade, the visible reward for student effort, why would a student be motivated to do well? As a student explained, the grade was a “*realisation that you have to put in the work to get the grade.*” For those students who seemed focused on the grade, grades provided extrinsic motivation and were needed to confirm their self-identity as hard-working students. The removal of grades may demotivate them and undermine their identity as learners and students. Learning seems to have become a secondary consideration to a focus on grades and effort.

However, this was not true for all students. For them, pass/fail changed the nature of their motivation without demotivating them:

“But I think that's why I think this pass/fail system worked really well because instead of making us work because we don't want to have a bad grade, it makes, made us work because we are actually interested in what we're writing.”

For some students, pass/fail supported intrinsic motivation and a focus on learning:

“I also wanted to make the work and the assessments better, because they were about something that is important to me. So, the fact that they weren't graded, didn't mean that I wasn't making an effort to make them better.”

Impact of grading on self-expression and creativity

The absence of grades was experienced by some students as a liberation, a space to experiment, to be more themselves. Students talked about feeling freer to follow their interests,

experiment, take risks, fail and be authentic. They described pushing themselves out of their “comfort zone” and “feeling more freedom to, like, be experimental” rather than worrying about grades. This idea of the freedom to fail and try things differently was illustrated in a story one student described:

“I remember hearing about a pottery class where they divided the class, and they said to this group, your assignment is to make as many pots as possible, it doesn't matter what the quality is, or anything, you've just got to make a tonne of pots. And this side, your only allowed to make one pot, you'll be graded on that one pot it's got to be good. And the side that made loads and loads of pots, they made better pots, because they didn't care and they did all of the work and they just got loads of practice in, whereas the side were like that one pot the quality of it really mattered they, they didn't have the time to prepare, they were so stuck in in making that one count.”

Or as another student elaborated:

“It's not just about grades anymore. And that's the wonderful thing about it is that you're really able to create something out of out of your own passion and your own inputs.”

Graded assessment in some instances led to self-censorship and people-pleasing, as students adhered to notions of what knowledge is valued and what is not by both tutors and society (Yosso 2005). Students discussed how grading influenced what they did or did not do in their work, based on what they believed would get a good grade. They felt the need to assimilate to norms and “play it safe” to fit in. One student explained:

“Because you know like there's two paths that you can pick, there's a path where you know you'll get a good grade, and then there's a path you know is right for you but you're not sure how that person (tutor) will perceive that.”

The same student went on to explain how grades interplay with power to create a fear of speaking truthfully and authentically. This student felt passionately about issues of racism and diversity in the fashion industry but felt wary of discussing them in assessment for fear of sanction.

“I feel if it was graded, I would have thought more about [submitting] it ... because when you talk about racism ... you're just told you should just quiet down.”

This highlights the social context within which assessment and grading processes take place.

Impact of grading on peer relationships

One of the core themes in the data was how frequently students made social comparisons and compared themselves to their peers in terms of effort and grades. When students did not receive a grade through pass/fail assessment, some were frustrated at not being able to ascertain their standing in relation to their peers. Not only were students worried about their level in relation to themselves, as outlined earlier, but they were also concerned about their

rank and place in the social hierarchy: *“with normal grades, you can tell just your place.”* They equate grades with a sense of their own value in the wider social milieu.

Many students expressed discontent that pass/fail meant there was no grading differentiation that they could use to confirm their own social status. Some students felt it was unfair that other students could get a pass, just as they themselves could, but without putting in the same effort. They were resentful at not being recognised for aspects of their comparative learner identity, be that considering themselves as harder working, more caring, more able or having greater ambition:

“Because as you say, you don’t want to sound arrogant, but say with me, there’s been me and a couple of other people who’ve been the people in the lessons who have always had our cameras on, always answered questions, always been in the studio as soon as the studio opened. And like we try hard. And for me, I can tell who’s not as present. So, for them to come out of all the units with the exact same [emphasis] grade as me, even though from surface level I’m trying a hell of a lot harder than they are, is kind of irritating... are they here in a pass [hand signal lower] and I’m here in a pass [hand signal higher]?”

For many students, grading created a sense of peer competition. When letter grades were removed, those students used to being at the top of the hierarchy were dissatisfied. In extreme cases, this competition can lead to exclusionary tactics and cliques amongst students. Students disclosed experiencing *“nasty,” “toxic,”* and *“spiteful”* learning environments.

Conversely, pass/fail was reported as reducing competition and increasing cooperation. For some, the experience of everyone being *“at the same level”* was emotionally supportive and a relief from the *“toxic kind of bad”* of grades, as it removed the peer comparison fuelling feelings of inferiority:

“It’s been quite nice not having that like, oh, I got a third and everyone else got a 2:1, what have I done wrong? ... there’s not been like in a sense, like, cliqueiness because like, ‘Oh, we’ve got 2:1’s we’re like the ones who were the best in the class’.”

Discussion

The pandemic and subsequent ‘no-detriment’ policies offered a unique opportunity to examine student perceptions of grading. The ubiquity of grading in educational systems meant that all the students interviewed had been graded many times in their educational journeys but very few had experienced pass/fail. Having the experience of pass/fail meant they were able to explore their perceptions of grading in more detail. Students had very different perceptions of grading and pass/fail. There was no clear consensus about their experiences of pass/fail compared to their previous experiences of grading. However, what we saw in the data was a range of themes related to emotions that were surprising and unsettling. Our research goes beyond current literature discourses about grading as a detriment to learning and motivation (Kohn, 1993) and extends into the affective domain.

The association of grading with stress and anxiety was the strongest theme running through the data. It is also a theme emerging through the literature (Bloodgood *et al.*, 2009; Balslev and Lindhardt, 2017). The risk is that the stress of grading harms learning and students' overall wellbeing (Gibbs, 2020). Jones *et al.* (2021) highlight the inherent tension between the need for assessment to be challenging to prompt learning versus the psychological threat to wellbeing posed by summative assessment. We would argue that a significant contribution to that psychological threat is the grading component of summative assessment. Many of our participants felt that removing grading reduces that threat and enhances wellbeing without compromising the learning that takes place.

For some students, the ubiquity of grading has created a dependency on grades to support their learner identity. Repeated conditioning by their educational environment has led them to see grades as the key indicator of success (Stommel, 2020). Grades are often not a good measure of learning (Stommel, 2021) and are given for a range of factors – such as effort – that are valued by teachers, in addition to measuring the learning that has taken place (Brookhart *et al.*, 2016). When their grade expectations are not met it, it lowers their self-esteem and creates negative feelings, such as inadequacy (Neff, 2011). Our research shows that grades can hinder students' recognition of their own value by emphasising external, more than internal, indicators of self-esteem. For many students, grades were the only way they knew how to make self-judgments and define their value as learners (Winkler, 2021; Crocker *et al.*, 2003).

Our findings suggest that grading may impair creativity and willingness to take risks (Blum, 2020). Students felt the need to 'play it safe' rather than take risks and fully express their creativity. In the twenty-first century, creativity is increasingly being recognised as a crucial skill to be developed in HE (Saroyan, 2022). In our art and design context, where students often desire to express their identities through their assessed work (Orr, 2010), finding the courage to self-express authentically and being valued to do so are critical. Grades promote a culture in which students assimilate to norms in order to 'fit in', thus preventing themselves from bringing their whole selves to their learning and feeling a sense of belonging.

This tendency of grading to enforce normativity highlights the social dimension of grades. Grades are used as a form of cultural capital to show superiority (Lynch and Hennessy, 2017). In our research, students wanted to know their place in the social hierarchy, so highlighting grading as a system that promotes separation rather than interconnection because it breeds cliques and competition between peers (Tronto, 2013; Stommel, 2021; Blackwelder, 2020). Grades damage trust and feelings of togetherness, as well as impose barriers to perceived peer-to-peer support, collaboration and peer conversations about the course.

What does this mean for assessment?

Assessment policies and practices are “*notoriously immune to radical change*” (McArthur, 2021, p.23). Though it is challenging to make radical changes to HE assessment policies and practices, there may be opportunities to make smaller changes of benefit to students.

The curriculum should provide more authentic ways for students to be recognised (McArthur, 2018). This could be, for example, through publications, conferences, awards and exhibitions. Rather than using grades as the indicator of students' being good enough, we can support students in determining this recognition themselves (Blum, 2020). One important way of supporting this would be through developing students' internal feedback (Nicol and McCallum, 2021) so that they can recognise their own performance and celebrate it.

As is commonly acknowledged in the literature, we agree that assessment for learning should be central to the assessment process and believe that there should be greater focus on both qualitative formative feedback (Black and William 1998; Boud, 2007) and discussion about process and reflection rather than product (Bali, 2021). Students perceive grading and feedback as something 'done to them' over which they have limited control. It helps to re-think the dynamic of feedback – from what Winstone and Carless (2020) describe as 'old paradigm' feedback to new paradigm feedback which emphasises the importance of the human connection that we have discussed in this paper. Our research suggests that academics should openly discuss the emotional impacts of grades (Stommel, 2021) throughout the assessment and feedback process.

Though these are important measures of mitigating some of the emotional aspects we have discussed in this paper, there remains the challenge of fully addressing the affective dimensions inherent in graded assessment. The current landscape of neoliberal HE – with a culture of competitiveness, a growing concern about student wellbeing and no space to take risks and fail – suggests a need to re-think grading and assessment by designing compassionate assessment policies and procedures (Waddington, 2021). Waddington (2018, p.87) argues that universities have a duty of care to protect students from "*physical and/or emotional harm*". It is therefore incumbent on universities to consider how policies, such as those related to assessment and grading, may be compassionate.

Limitations

The pandemic and the temporary use of pass/fail grading provided a one-off opportunity for research on students' perceptions of grades. However, our study focused on a particular cohort at one institution, within a certain range of disciplines and in exceptional circumstances. In other disciplines, students may have differing perceptions and experiences of grading. The impact of grades on self-expression and creativity, for example, may be discipline-specific.

This paper should therefore be seen as an encouragement for further research, on the emotional effects of grading and how we might adapt our assessment practices to foster a compassionate environment. Another limitation stems from the fact that, unfortunately, the opportunities for further exploration of this are limited because the changes made to assessment policies on pass/fail at the university have been subsequently reversed. Yet we see that further exploration of how pass/fail and grading of students respectively may affect them is vital in current times of anxiety.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the role and impact of the affective domain in HE assessment and grading. This area of assessment is both under-researched in the literature and under-discussed in practice. We have found that grades can have a significant emotional effect in four inter-related ways: they are a source of stress and anxiety; they can shape learner identity; they can present a barrier to student creativity and to their bringing their whole self to assessment; they can influence peer relationships. The unquestioned nature of grading leads to assessment practices which can harm student wellbeing. Approaches which aim to support students in their understanding of assessment and grades do not directly address the emotional impact that grades may have on students. We need to go further than this.

Furthermore, there is a need to recognise how we have normalised the psychological threat of grading in HE and take action to alleviate this threat. However, addressing this threat is challenging in a letter- or number-graded system (Stommel, 2022). Kohn, Stommel and other ungrading advocates would argue that not using grades is a far better solution so that feedback practices can fully focus on student learning. While we are not advocating a fully ungraded approach, even the move to pass/fail instead feels impossible within the current UK HE system. Since our research has highlighted the role of grading in shaping student wellbeing, maybe it is time to reconsider what our system should look like, given both the long-term changes still occurring post pandemic and the UK Government and HE sector's current focus on supporting student mental health. At the very least, we should as a sector spend more time exploring ways of mitigating the emotional effect of grades. The pandemic offered a unique opportunity to explore different grading practices. Can we capitalise on this to reimagine different ways of assessing learning in HE for compassionate futures?

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