Is ungrading a solution to create an inclusive and student-centred learning environment?

STUDENT COMPARISON

INSTITUTIONAL RANKING

GRADING ACROSS LEVELS

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INTRODUCTION

It is our contention that percentage grades have an adverse effect on students well-being. This is created by the hegemonic effect of grading norms used throughout compulsory education and produces HE students with high anxiety and stress when faced with assessment. We consider methods to change the assessment process in HE that result in an improvement in the student experience, reduction of stress and anxiety, and an enhancement of our students' mindset. We understand different perspectives of current grading systems through research and interviews with students, academics and learning designers, to evaluate the current percentage system against a proposed ungraded model. Then tackle the borders created by percentage ranking and recommend an ungraded system that builds bridges to a more professional student mindset.

GO TO OUR RESULTS..

METHOD

We undertook qualitative research in the form of interviews, collecting primary data from:

1. Five undergraduate students studying art or design subjects
2. Two lecturers teaching on undergraduate art and design courses.
3. And two higher education designers.

Learning designers develop holistic strategies to create curricula; educators have to use those designs everyday to deliver to students; students are the end users of those designs and so evidence their effect. By interviewing these three groups we felt that we could make an aligned interrogation of the use of grading and have a broader analysis of its effects.

This data was synthesised, using Blackbox theory (1998) from Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam. Our Blackbox is a hypothetical HE classroom governed by a ungrading policy, into which we will 'input' themes that affect student mindset. By assigning the 'output' as satisfied students with a positive mindset, we will critically examine what an ungrading policy will have on the evidence that we have collected. Each of our sections respond to this idea, showing the perspectives of our interviewees on traditional grading and synthesising that evidence through an ungraded model to show its positive effects.

STUDENT COMPARISON

Traditional grading encourages competition and comparison between students, which distracts from their personal development.

The Assessment Reform Group's Assessment for Learning Beyond the Black Box (1999), defines five criteria to reform assessment to improve learning – the fourth is **"the recognition of the profound influence assessment on motivation and self-esteem of students, both of which are critical influences on learning."** (Aubrey & Riley, 2019:248). The following section responds to this idea, showing the perspectives of our interviewees on ungrading, traditional grading and student experience.

Read all of our quotes on this section..

1
"When you do get the grading back, because you think I haven't done well enough compared to other people, you start comparing" Student 2 (Sheppard. 2022)

"So you have to look around and see what other people are doing. But I think if you focus too much on that, then it can have unhelpful consequences as well." Ella (Tydeman. 2022)

"I can see the advantages of grading because I think I think we're programmed to want to be graded because we know from a lot of research into behavioural science that we can't help but compare ourselves to other people."
Ned (Bohannon, 2022)

2
"I think with the numbers like it is good. With like, knowing if you get if you get like a lower number is something to work to knowing that you have, like you've got a number to aim for. Whereas if it's just pass or fail, you just have to pass. And that's it. So I think it's quite helpful in that way, is quite motivating." Student 1(Sheppard. 2022)

"I think you'll find that it's high achievers, A grade students who want the grades, they're like a drug…So it's no wonder they like them, you know, it's like me saying to somebody, I'm going to stop giving you prizes. Well, why? I want my prizes. I want the prizes. I'm doing the work, I want the prizes." Jonny (Bohannon, 2022)

"... I think it can be distracting actually, from there's a centering I think, too, when you're doing sort of creative projects, of owning what you do. And, and really, it's like these abstract criteria have been trying, they're trying to match that to good, good creative practice..." Ella (Tydeman. 2022).

3
"It gives you like, more of like, an incentive to like, engage on your feedback as well, when you get a certain percentage. Because you feel like you're more clear on knowing like, where you stand rather than just in like a vague, like, group, or being pass or fail." Student 2 (Sheppard. 2022)

"....there's a universal baseline in UK Higher Education against their peers, because they immediately ask one another, what did you get, I got 80%, I got 45%. Oh, my God, I'm a disaster" Jonny (Bohannon, 2022)

"It can make them very eager. And it might make them tick certain boxes to get what a B would be… it makes them… have to fulfil certain things in order to get one grade or another one." Khloe (Tydeman. 2022).

Policy of Ungrading
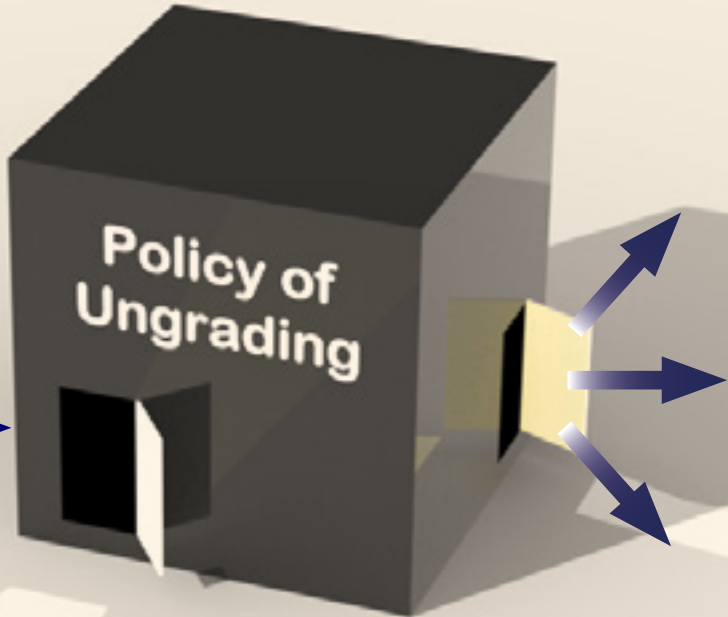
1
- Percentage grading causes students to compare themselves to each other, affecting their self esteem and motivation

- Comparison between students can led to unnecessary pressure on themselves, affecting their mental health and student experience

- Ungrading wouldn't eliminate this issue, but an ungrading policy reform would reduce the scope for comparison.

2
- Traditional grading structure can motivate students, especially the high achieving students. But how can we evolve grading to be more inclusive?

- Percentage grading detracts from student centred progression, risk taking and personal development, student can focus too closely on the achieving a certain percentage rather than exploring their creativity or learning journey.

- Ungrading can release some of the external pressure to achieve the 'perfect' percentage grade, however students who thrive under these pressures may struggle to adjust to an undgraded system.

3
- This shows that the students can rely on the percentage grade as a bench marker to understand how they have performed in a project or unit. Students rely on the percentage rather than engaging with their feedback.

  Inspired by Ruth Butler (1988), Black and Wiliam observed students and proposed feedback and grades shouldn't be used together, instead students should engage with their feedback prior to receiving their grade (Aubrey & Riley, 2019:250).

- Students can be motivated by achieving high grades, rather than a self-motivated need to improve their practice, leading to questions around how will they be motivated to develop outside of HE?

INSTITUTIONAL RANKING

Institutions are obsessed with ranking. This may help internal results analysis, but externalising this obsession to students affects mindset.

In their paper of 1998, *Inside the Black Box - Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment,* Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam stated,

"Approaches are used in which pupils are compared with one another, the prime purpose of which seems to them to be competition rather than personal improvement; in consequence, assessment feedback teaches low-achieving pupils that they lack "ability," causing them to come to believe that they are not able to learn."

The following quotes from academics and learning designers illustrate the approaches taken to ranking students and the subsequent pedagogic adaptations made to allow students work to illustrate its full value.

Read all of our quotes on this section..

1

"..grading is about being able to maintain league tables, set standards for courses and benchmark courses against each other." Ned (Bohannon, 2022)

"..now that I don't work for a university, I can probably say what I like, which is quite liberating. I know that, as I'm sure you've heard, that, staff are often put under pressure to massage grades upwards to meet quotas and things and yeah, I mean, it's just that, that just, just doesn't work at all, it kind of defeats the whole object." - Ned (Bohannon, 2022)

2

" I think [ungrading at undergraduate level] it works well. Even though it might mean more work for us, but I'm more than happy to do that. Because I really think it enables them to be more free..what is it without freedom? And without the feeling of freedom, everything is possible.." Khloe (Tydeman. 2022).

"The whole bit like you pass or fail, if it's within Arts, because it will make 'The Work' talk for itself. Yeah. It will make people judge you, people, gallery, scholarships, anything, jobs, MA acceptance...they will have to look, we'll have to look at the portfolio and the work rather than just say she is a C?" Khloe (Tydeman. 2022).

"We mustn't lose sight of the quality of the work as the goal rather than the grades. The grades are nothing, they, they, they don't have any value...The value is the value that we place on them. But it's the work that should have the inherent value. We're losing sight of that." - Jonny (Bohannon, 2022)

3

"But if you look, if you look back to where it starts, you start doing spelling tests and you know, you get 15 out of 20 or 10 out of 20. And you just need to know whether you've got something right or not..Once you start to introduce grades into that, it does introduce a level of complexity, because then I suppose some, you can see that some people are performing at a higher level than others." Ned (Bohannon, 2022)

"So I worked on a PGCE when I was in Bradford. And we had percent grading, and there was no opportunity, I didn't have the agency, there was no opportunity for me to remove that. So what I did was what anybody in higher education can do today, if they want. And that's that I didn't release the grade with the feedback." Jonny (Bohannon, 2022)

Policy of Ungrading

1

- Grade performance for institutions will become a very limited metric and the student experience will become a more important metric for ranking

- The use of grade inflation by institutions will reduce and values and priorities that underline an institution will become more learning centred

2

- Teachers can privately use grades to rank students to aid pedagogic assessment, without increasing complexity for students

- Feedback becomes the main part of assessment to the student and using feedback becomes the main discourse for students to progress, not a number

- Teachers will not have to continue to make adaptations to assessment to make the current system work for the students

3

- Ungrading creates an ecology that allows more creative freedom for students

- More personalisation of current working is levels attained, the work will have to talk for itself and institutions will have to use students work to celebrate success, not just numbers

- Creative value is communicated purely through the outcomes of work, this celebration is localised, relevant and has less bias

GRADING ACROSS LEVELS

Black and William (1998) argue that percentage-based grades are often over-emphasised, above useful learning feedback.

"A numerical score or a grade does not tell students how to improve their work, so an opportunity to enhance their learning is lost" (Black et al. 2004:13).

Our interview responses suggest a similar view, that Feedback is often ignored & grades are over-emphasised as the metric for progression into postgraduate study or employment.

The following interview quotes provide perspectives on the impact of grading for widening participation and inequalities in attainment.

Read all of our quotes on this section..

1

"So as you know, grading is integral to university places, we know.. that's a problem. So if you were to take that away, how would you? You'd have to completely rethink the transition to tertiary education." - Ned (Bohannon, 2022)

2

"From compulsory through to tertiary through to PhD,.. there is a journey. And unfortunately, it isn't designed, and it could be designed a lot better. You know, if the metrics that are used are not helpful in terms of progression and achievement and employability and satisfaction, then we're measuring the wrong things because none of it measures learning." - Ned (Bohannon, 2022)

"What about the students who are consistently getting C's, can't get above the C? Actually, they're working against all sorts of other environmental and social factors, and achieving very well according to their contexts. But that C pushes them into a pigeon hole, very often they can't escape from because we have these conventions, we have a system that favours the few. We have structures that prejudice people against people from marginalised groups" - Jonny (Bohannon, 2022)

3

"people who come out from undergraduate certainly within creative arts, you don't need to have got a first to do well, it's really is reflective of what your experience was, then at that time, at the age you were what was going on in your life, what you were doing" Ella - (Tydeman. 2022).

Policy of Ungrading
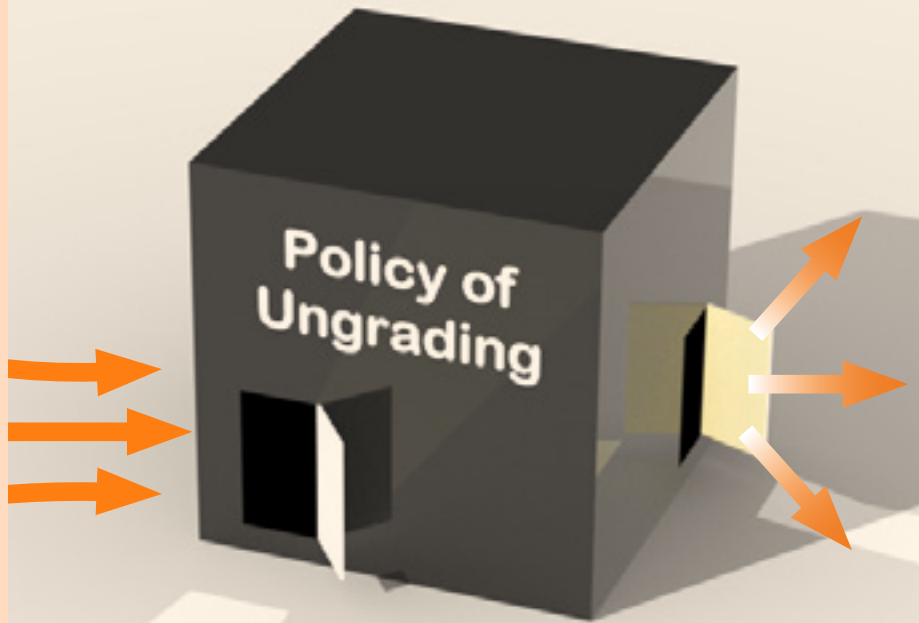
Access into HE:
Can we rethink percentage-based grades as integral to the transition into HE?

Assessment for learning:
The educational journey into HE and beyond could be improved to support learning. Minimal grading such as pass/fail could help shift focus onto useful feedback for learning.

Attainment gap:
Ungrading could open-up participation and improve attainment gaps, by potentially reducing the impact of underachievement.

Ungrading for creative disciplines:
Could a pass/fail grading system encourage HE achievement to be seen in context, as part of a life-long creative journey?

Our findings suggest percentage-based grading can impact access and progression within HE. Ungrading could function as assessment for learning, as opposed to a barrier for progression.

CONCLUSION

The interviews were semi-structured; using open-ended questions conducive to analysis. The same questions were asked of all interviewees, allowing direct analysis of data across our three interview groups.

This is a preliminary pilot study to inform inclusive and student-centred assessment strategies within higher education. We hope this research will encourage enquiry into the future of undergraduate grading.

"If there are ways in which policy makers and others can give direct help and support to the everyday classroom task of achieving better learning, then surely these ways ought to be pursued vigorously." (Black and Wiliam, 1998:140)

Proposed models of ungrading -

1. "met" "not met" and "exceeded" the learning objective/outcomes
2. pass / fail

Alignment: changing the whole system - Confront archaic behaviourist framework that is outdated for the current learner. Provides an aligned framework that unites all levels of education no matter where you join or finish. With reference to Black and Wiliam's Black Box, teachers shouldn't be the ones adapting to make policy work for the policymakers.

Reward system entrenched in the culture - Confront the archaic, behaviourist framework that is outdated for the current learner. Pedagogically we have identified the most beneficial environment for students to learn in and that has shaped our Constructivist, student-centred approach to teaching.

So why stick to an elitist, demoralising, statistically self-serving grading structure?

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