

# **Belonging through assessment: Pipelines of compassion**

**QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project 2023**

**ual:**

**THE GLASGOW  
SCHOOL OF ART**



## **Contributors**

[Vikki Hill](#) - project lead

[Prof. Samantha Broadhead](#)

[Liz Bunting](#)

[Dr Laura da Costa](#)

[Dr Neil Currant](#)

[Dr Marianne Greated](#)

[Peter Hughes](#)

[Robert Mantho](#)

[Dr Emily Salines](#)

[Dr Thea Stevens](#)

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Danielle Tartaro working in the Studio. International Preparation for Fashion, LCF. Photograph by Alys Tomlinson.

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Ceramics by Simon Kidd shortlisted for the MullenLowe NOVA awards, Show 2. BA Ceramic Design, CSM. Photograph by Vic Philips.

# Introduction

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a white pencil, poised to draw on a dark, textured surface. The hand is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the frame. The background is a dark, almost black, surface with subtle, wavy patterns, possibly a piece of fabric or paper. The lighting is soft, highlighting the contours of the hand and the texture of the surface.

Diamond Nuchjalearn drawing in the studio. Fine Art: Drawing, CCW.  
Photograph by Alys Tomlinson

In February 2021, colleagues from University of the Arts London (UAL), Leeds Arts University (LAU) and Glasgow School of Art (GSA) secured funding for the QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project – Belonging through assessment: Pipelines of compassion. The project began against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic and the team identified a shift in assessment practices across the three participating arts institutions. This offered an opportunity to further our work, in collaboration, to address social justice, belonging and inclusion through compassion.

This project aims to:

- 1.** Identify areas of enhancement in assessment policies and practices to promote student sense of belonging and tackle issues of social justice.
- 2.** Link this relational work with attainment gap/awarding differentials agendas in the creative arts.
- 3.** Develop collaborative, dialogic, polyvocal and affective resources for staff development across the HE sector.

Three research strands emerged from themes relevant to our own institutional priorities, mutually informing the project and institutional practice and policy. These are pass/fail grading, trauma-informed policy and compassionate feedback. Initial cross-institutional research and evaluation into pass/fail assessment was taking place at UAL and at LAU in the wake of measures introduced during the pandemic. The trauma-informed

policy strand developed from academic enhancement work on Fostering Belonging and Compassionate Pedagogy at UAL. The compassionate feedback research strand linked to enhancement work in progress at GSA around assessment policies and practice and with UAL work on formative feedback practices and assessment design.

The following sections introduce and then delve into each of the research strands in turn, providing both theory and practical advice. The final section of the resource outlines indicators for compassionate assessment across both higher education policy and practice.

The project is fully documented on our blog at <https://belongingthroughassessment.myblog.arts.ac.uk/>



# Pass / fail assessment

Lily Gale and her poster work. BA Jewellery Design, CSM. Photograph by Alys Tomlinson.

## Overview

The use of discriminating grades, with letter or numeric representations, for the assessment of student work is embedded in higher education systems internationally. However it has long been recognised by educationalists that grade-based assessment exerts a substantial influence over students' study behaviour through extrinsic motivation, and this has led to concerns that a narrow focus on grades can result in overly strategic and superficial approaches to learning (Boud & Falchicov, 2006; Harland et al., 2014; Rust, 2002).

Countering the dominance of the grade-based approach is a modest history of pass/fail, or gradeless assessment. In the United States, from the 1960s and peaking in the 1970s, the practice was associated with a small number of radical liberal arts colleges (Weller, 1983). More recently there has been a growth of use within professional subjects, particularly medical education and allied subjects where the role of assessment is to judge whether someone is competent in a field (White & Fanlone, 2010; Spring et al., 2011; Ramaswamy, Veremis & Nalliah, 2020). Parallel to this, a pedagogic movement associated with "ungrading" (Blum, 2020) has developed, although we recognise that pass/fail is in effect a binary grading system, rather than the absence of grading. In pass/fail there is still a specified standard that a student needs to achieve in relation to a body of learning to achieve their pass.



Photograph by Nathan Dumlao.

In the UK during the pandemic, many universities implemented 'no detriment' policies which increased the use of pass/fail assessment. Such policies were generally seen as necessary and compassionate responses to the unprecedented circumstances that students were experiencing. Specifically at UAL, the 'no detriment' policy included making the whole first year pass/fail instead of letter grading. This shift occurred part way through Academic Year (AY) 19/20 and was applied for the whole of AY 20/21. At Leeds Arts University pass/fail assessment was introduced for first year undergraduate students during AY 20/21 as part of a range of regulatory and other measures taken by the University to support students through this situation. Pass/fail assessment was already used within all postgraduate courses at Leeds Arts, so there was familiarity with the approach, but this was the first time it had been used in undergraduate study. This natural experiment in the two institutions gave the team a chance to investigate the impact of pass/fail and investigate staff and students' attitudes to grading. Both universities carried out research with students and staff and used institutional data sets to gain insight into pass/fail assessment.

For this section of this project digital resource, we offer a compendium of resources that we developed during the course of the project and as part of our respective institutional work on this theme. This includes:

- An overview of advantages and challenges associated

with pass/fail assessment.

- A podcast capturing an extended panel discussion between members of the panel on pass/fail grading in arts education.
- Two think pieces reflecting on experiences of grading and exploring the potential harm of grading.
- Student perspectives on pass/fail grading form.



Textile with geometric pattern by Emily Boxall. BA (Hons) Textile Design, CCW.

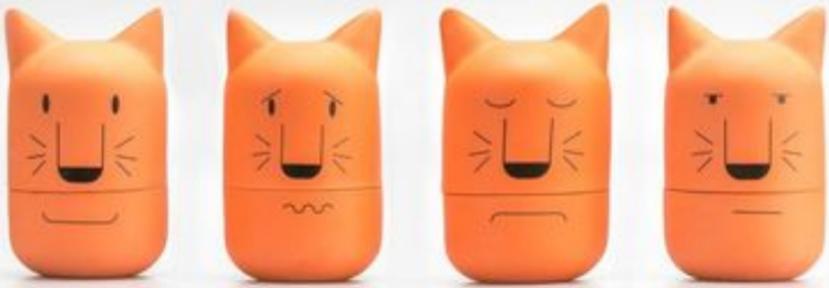
## Pass/fail assessment in arts higher education

As part of this project we convened a panel discussion to explore different perspectives, within the project team, on pass/fail grading within an arts education context.

Our discussion has been captured in a podcast, and we invite you to engage with that as an alternative to the text-based narratives within this section of this digital resource. Click the link below to listen.



[Interrogating Spaces - Pass/fail assessment in arts higher education podcast](#)



Pots by Elena Gomez de Valcarcel, Show 2. BA (Hons) Ceramic Design.

## **Advantages and challenges associated with pass/fail assessment**

Both of our institutional initiatives (UAL & LAU) were driven by the exceptional circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic and were policy responses to the immediate circumstances of our students. However, it was important to situate these within a broader evidence base around pass/fail and to look at ways of maximising potential advantages while acknowledging challenges.

As a resource for any institution or individual considering introducing pass/fail assessment we present summaries of two significant international studies below (examples 1-2), along with ten advantages and ten challenges associated with pass/fail assessment (examples 3-4.)

## Example 1: Swedish Study

Dahlgren et al. (2009) conducted a major study of 402 students on thirteen different courses of different disciplines across eight Swedish universities. They compared the experiences and learning of students on pass/fail courses with courses using grade-based assessment.

Among their arguments and findings are the following points:

- Grading systems are one point in a chain of relationships that includes: the design of assessment, assessment criteria, the approaches to learning of students and the learning achieved. Consequently, a change in grading system should be expected to affect these other aspects. Grading systems are not neutral approaches to learning – the evidence of this study shows that pass/fail grading is more likely to encourage a deep approach to learning.
- Students on pass/fail courses have more emphasis on production, rather than reproduction of knowledge.
- Students on pass/fail courses are more likely to see assessment as promoting learning and cooperation.
- Students on pass/fail courses feel freer to pursue their own learning interests when planning their studies.

- The addition of just one discriminating grade (e.g. including “distinction” alongside pass/fail) results in students reverting to grade-chasing behaviour, and taking a more surface approach to their learning.
  - Pass/fail grading also affects the way staff approach the design of assessment tasks as establishing differentiation between students is no longer significant.
  - The marking process is also affected. The clearer focus for markers on a single point of discrimination, i.e. between pass and fail, contributes to more reliable assessment.
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Dahlgren, L.O., Fejes, A., Abrandt-Dahlgren, M. & Trowald, N. (2009) 'Grading systems, features of assessment and students' approaches to university learning', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14 (2), pp. 185-194.



Photograph by Katie McNabb.

## **Example 2: National University of Singapore Study**

Since August 2014, gradeless learning is offered to all first semester, first year students (typically 7000+ a year) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) (McMorran, Ragupathi & Luo, 2017; McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020; McMorran, 2021). This initiative aims to support students' transition to higher education study by providing a slight pause in a heavily GPA-oriented Singaporean educational culture. Although presented as gradeless, first year students are still able to opt to receive a typical grade if they prefer.

Drawing from four surveys, across eighteen months, which elicited responses from more than 2000 students and 500 teaching staff, the following points have been reported among the findings:

- Student support for the approach is high and has grown over time. Staff support is more equivocal.
- The most successful aspects of the scheme have been: improved student attitudes toward learning, including the taking of risks, and reduced stress which has aided transition into the university.
- Conversely, particularly in the early stages, for some it has introduced different sources of stress, for example, initial confusion relating to the novelty of the approach

and concerns about how future employers may view the lack of a grade on a transcript.

- Staff are concerned about negative study habits (e.g. poor attendance) developing in some students. This is in part understood as a natural relaxation from the typical high pressured Singaporean system, and that perhaps one semester isn't sufficient for students to adjust to the new system and acquire different study habits.
- The fact that students still have the option to receive a grade is seen by some staff to undermine the purity and potential of the scheme.
- Engagement with and buy in from teaching staff is important for success. There is a recognition that teaching in a gradeless system requires different approaches to the development of student motivation. Staff should be encouraged to redesign teaching and assessment for a gradeless environment. The role of feedback needs to be carefully considered.
- It isn't easy to undo the dominant grade-centric way of learning and teaching in a single semester.
- The initiative makes the university a sector outlier, and consequently there was a continuing need to justify the policy within and beyond the institution to challenge misperceptions.



Stitch-School Supper cloth. CCW. Photograph by Alys Tomlinson.

McMorran, C. & Ragupathi, K. (2020) 'The promise and pitfalls of gradeless learning: responses to an alternative approach to grading', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44 (7), pp. 225-938.

McMorran, C., Ragupathi, K. & Luo, S. (2017) 'Assessment and learning without grades? Motivations and concerns with implementing gradeless learning in higher education', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42 (3), pp. 361-377.

## **Example 3: Ten Advantages of Pass/Fail Assessment**

1. Removal of a focus on grades enables students to concentrate on learning. Students take a deeper approach to their learning, and are more likely to take risks, experiment and be creative. Students are more likely to be producers rather than reproducers of knowledge.
2. In activating intrinsic motivation, pass/fail grading can make a significant contribution to the development of the self-regulation and self-management of learning.
3. The absence of a grade signals that something different is happening. This is not an assessment practice that students have experienced before. This opens up space for conversations around the purposes of assessment, the relationship to learning and ongoing development and the nature of standards in assessment. This should make a positive contribution to the development of students' assessment literacy and show benefits elsewhere in a students' studies, even in grade-based systems.
4. The absence of a grade means that students are more likely to read/listen to and engage with feedback. There is clearer opportunity for dialogue with peers and staff about areas for future development for learning, rather than how to get "more marks". Good feedback

throughout the process is essential to making pass/fail grading work.

5. The approach is positive for student welfare and mental health in that it removes a lot of anxiety and stress associated with the chasing of grades whilst retaining clarity about the standards that need to be met to pass. It is potentially a more compassionate form of assessment.

6. It promotes a more co-operative approach to learning among student cohorts.

7. As students feel more comfortable with their studies, they feel freer to access additional learning opportunities in co- and extra-curricular study, student societies and volunteering.

8. If used during the first year of undergraduate courses, it helps to create a common space for students from different educational backgrounds to transition into higher education learning and move forward together.

9. Pass/fail leads to a greater consistency in standards as staff marking student work become, through time, much clearer about what distinguishes a body of work that passes from one that doesn't. Staff attention isn't stretched across several different standards and grade boundaries.

10. There are minimal concerns about grade inflation with pass/fail.

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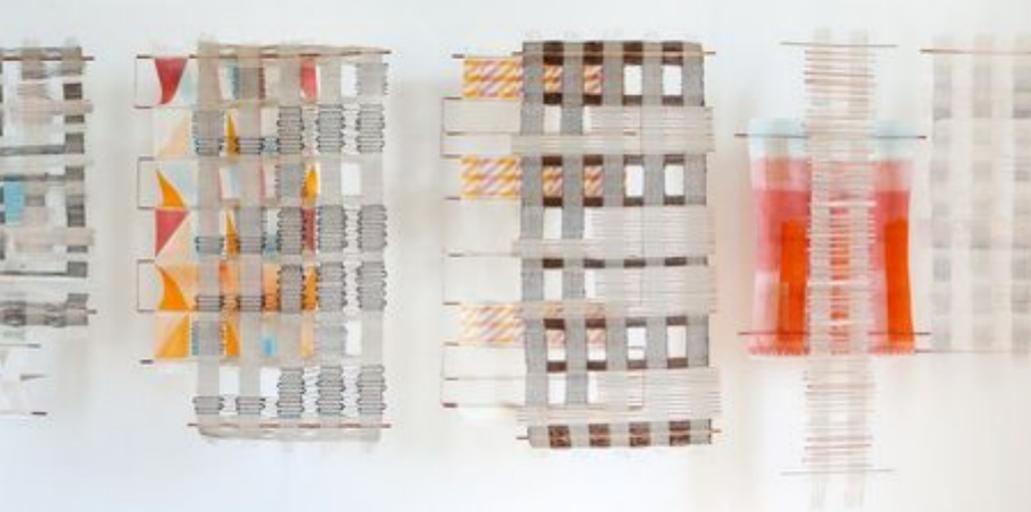
Adapted from Hughes, P. (2021) Pass/fail assessment revisited. SEDA. 7 May. [Online]. [Accessed 24 October 2022]. Available from [JISCMail - SEDA Archives](#)



Organic shapes ceramics and installation by Zoe Bernet. BA (Hons) Textile Design, CCW. Photograph by Alys Tomlinson.

## **Example 4: Ten Challenges Associated with Pass/Fail Assessment**

1. The unfamiliarity of pass/fail assessment, with both staff and students, can lead to additional anxiety and stress for some. This may partly offset some of the gains for student wellbeing anticipated by a move away from a focus on grades.
2. Removing grades can initially be destabilising and needs careful explanation, dialogue and support.
3. There can be a perception that the removal of grades amounts to a lowering of standards. In part this relates to the codifying of language. In assessment terms “pass” is more frequently associated with the bare minimum, threshold achievement. This concern may extend to external stakeholders, e.g. employers. Use of alternative language to “pass” and “fail” can be considered to alleviate this. This extends to practical issues around how achievement in a pass/fail system is represented on student transcripts.
4. For some students, the signal that “all I need to do is pass” could lead to a loss of motivation and consequently coasting. This can have knock on effects for other students for example in group work situations, however variation in motivation among a group of students is not unusual.



Textiles with geometric patterns by Madison Mcglennon. BA (Hons) Textile Design, CCW. Photograph by Alyx Tomlinson.

5. Conversely, pass/fail assessment does not recognise high achievement. Consideration needs to be given to that part of the student body which may have built learning strategies and even their learning identity around being successful and getting good grades. Parallel competition/award/recognition schemes can help alleviate this.

6. If introduced at Level 4 only, a situation is created where students have to unlearn previous assessment experiences, understand and feel comfortable in pass/fail assessment, before shifting back into traditional competitive grading at Levels 5 & 6. This places an additional burden for the development of assessment literacy as students have one less year to get familiar

with the honours degree classification system.

7. In some cases the introduction of pass/fail has led to push back from students who request a return to the more familiar environment of grades. Key factors in this have been lack of familiarity and fears about perceptions of employers.

8. Pass/fail assessment removes any opportunity for compensation as there is no such thing as marginal failure.

9. Pass/fail assessment may be seen as running counter to the current UK educational policy trends toward clearer recognition and signalling of high achievement and excellence.

10. Adoption of pass/fail in a higher education environment where that is a rarity places the onus on the provider to continually justify, internally and externally, the merits of the approach. A clear evidence base aids this.

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Adapted from Hughes, P. (2021) Pass/fail assessment revisited. SEDA. 7 May. [Online]. [Accessed 24 October 2022]. Available from [JISCMail - SEDA Archives](#)



Work by Ella d'Aguilar. BA Fashion Styling and Production, LCF.



# Ethics

## **The potential harms of grading: Is grading ethical?**

**An opinion piece by Neil Currant.**

When the project team started to analyse the data from student interviews we realised there were strong emotive themes emerging that could potentially be harmful to students wellbeing and their learning. One of the most dominant themes students discussed when talking about grades and grading was around stress and anxiety. Within the pass/fail strand this has raised the question of whether numerical or letter grading is an

ethical concern in addition to being a practical concern. Is grading ethical? (This piece was first published in UAL's 'Situated: Texts on Educational Ethics, pp.18-21)

The ethics of grading is rarely discussed in literature on assessment and feedback practices. Grading is just considered to be a 'taken for granted' part of higher education. However, the pandemic and the ungrading movement started by Alfie Kohn (Kohn 1999[i]) has opened up space to reconsider grading. Especially in the context of an Art and Design education where the aim is to encourage creativity and risk-taking not conformity to predetermined learning outcomes and grading rubrics (e.g. Addison 2014[ii]).

Danaher (2020[iii]) makes the case that a lot of our grading practices are unethical but that for any individual academic we must continue to grade because of the educational and cultural systems within which we work. The moral argument for grading is based on the fact that we would do more harm to students if we did not grade because grades (degree classifications) act as important signals for employment. Consequently, an academic should therefore strive to grade transparently and fairly to make grading as ethical as possible given the limitations that Danaher outlines.

However, the system was not always this way. The current ubiquity of grading in formal education hides the fact that over the past century assessment and feedback

changed from a focus on qualitative comments to an ever-increasing focus on the illusion of 'quantitative' grading (see for example Brookhart et al 2016[iv]). But why might grading be unethical?

Firstly, grading seems to harm student wellbeing. The Academic Enhancement team at UAL conducted research into the pass/fail 1st year during the pandemic and found that pass/fail was less stressful for students and that it made them less anxious than letter grading. This is echoed elsewhere; for example, Bloodgood et. al. (2009[v]) found an increase in student wellbeing and reduction in stress for students who experienced pass/fail as opposed to students who were given letter grades with no difference in overall performance between the two groups.

Secondly, grades undermine student motivation to learn, take risks and experiment with their work (e.g. Danaher 2020, Reid 2009[vi]). The majority of students in our research at UAL were grade rather than learning focused. They were more interested in how they could get a better grade than on what they were learning. This strategic approach to learning outcomes and grading could be seen as particularly problematic for creative disciplines (Addison 2014). There was an assumption for most students that a good grade meant they were producing interesting, creative work. Whereas one student succinctly summarised the problem: "there are two paths that you can pick, there's a path where you know you'll



Asymmetric pots by Charik Saragouda, Show 2. BA (Hons) Ceramic Design. Photograph by John Sturrock.

get a good grade, and then there's a path you know is right for you but you're not sure how that person (the tutor) will perceive it."

We also found that academics use grades to send signals to students about their behaviour and motivation. One academic explained that a D grade can be used to signal to a student to "get your act together" and help motivate them. This use of grades is done with good intentions to help the student. However, counter to many academics' instincts about the impact of grades on motivation, research suggests that grades actually lower motivation, notably intrinsic motivation and especially for those students who are doing less well (Koenka et al 2021 [vii]).

Thirdly, grading can be biased, subjective and unfair. In Art and Design assessment, academics perspectives on student work are shaped by their own identities and backgrounds (Orr 2010 [viii]) bringing with it the potential for bias. The HE sector in the UK has long standing awarding gaps for disadvantaged students that are related to biases in our teaching and assessment practices. Interestingly, the introduction of 'no detriment' policies during the pandemic seems to have narrowed some of these awarding gaps (Kernohan 2021 [ix]). At UAL, the 'no detriment' policy seems to have increased progression rates for Black students whilst largely having no impact on overall progression rates (i.e. no detriment did not make it easier to pass the first year.) This offers tantalising evidence that a rethink of assessment and

grading could have significant benefits in addressing bias.

Doing harm, bias, manipulating motivation and reducing creativity are not usually considered ethical practices. Whilst my arguments for the ethical challenges of grading are similar to Danaher's, I think we should go further than his suggestions and not accept the status quo. The answer to the ethical challenges of grading has typically been to increase the transparency of assessment criteria, learning outcomes and grading processes. All of which are problematic in an art and design context (Addison 2014). Alongside this has been a push for de-biasing training. I would argue that these measures are largely ways of covering over the cracks in a fundamentally flawed approach to student assessment. The problem is grades and grading. Maybe now is the time to rethink grading at university.

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[i] Kohn, A. (1999). *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes.* (Rev. ed.) Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

[ii] Addison, N (2014) *Doubting Learning Outcomes in HE contexts; from performativity towards emergence and negotiation.* *International Journal of Art and Design Education*, 33 (3). pp. 313-325.

[iii] Danaher, J. (2020) *The Moral Problem of Grading: An Extended Analysis* [online] available at

<https://philosophicaldisquisitions.blogspot.com/2020/02/the-moral-problem-of-grading-extended.html>

[iv] Brookhart, S.M. et al (2016) A Century of Grading Research: Meaning and Value in the Most Common Educational Measure, *Review of Educational Research*, 86 (4), 803–848.

[v] Bloodgood R.A., et. al. (2009) A change to pass/fail grading in the first two years at one medical school results in improved psychological well-being. *Academic Medicine* 84 (5): 655–62.

[vi] Reid, E.S. (2009) Teaching Risk-Taking in College Classrooms. *The Teaching Professor*, 23.8 pp.3.

[vii] Koenka, A.C. et al (2021) A meta-analysis on the impact of grades and comments on academic motivation and achievement: a case for written feedback, *Educational Psychology*, 41 (7), pp.922–947.

[viii] Orr, S. (2010) Making Marks: Assessment in Art and Design. *Network's Magazine* issue 10 pp.9–13.

[ix] Kernohan, D. (2021) No detriment seems to have helped disadvantaged students attain their potential, *WONKHE* [online] available at <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/no-detriment-seems-to-have-helped-disadvantaged-students-attain-their-potential/>



Golden beauty mask by Riccardo Righi, Graduate showcase. MA Graphic Media Design, LCC.



## **Reflections of a former grader**

### **Introduction**

I (Neil Currant) trained as a Chemist and so numerical grading was natural and made perfect sense to me. As a student and as a chemistry teacher, numerical grading seemed normal and perfectly acceptable. However, when I shifted into more educational work, I felt that something was not quite right with grading but could not quite put my finger on what that was. The following are my reflections (edited from various blog posts) on grading during my work on this project as I try to articulate how my perceptions of grading have changed.

## Arbitrary Grading Cliffs

To set the scene, think about the big picture of assessment which is the student's final degree classification. In UK education we have a range of grade classifications available to recognise student performance at different levels. However, certain grade classifications act as cliff-edges and receive far more attention and institutional focus than others. At university, that cliff-edge is a 2.1 degree classification which often translate to a 60% or a B grade. Why does this matter and what impact does it have on our educational practices?

Firstly, let's be clear that this grade cliff-edge is entirely arbitrary. At some point in history graduate employers decided (completely arbitrarily) to set a 2.1 degree classification as a simple metric to weed out having too many applications to review (in 2004 52% increasing to 76% in 2012 [\[i\]](#) of graduate recruiters used 2.1 as a threshold. Recently we have seen a reverse in this trend). The 2.1 degree classification cliff has become the de facto measure of a so called 'good degree'. It impacts employment prospects and whether students can study for a Masters degree. It has become THE marker of university success. Regardless of the fact that for many students just getting a degree represents a remarkable achievement, not getting a 2.1 can carry a social stigma. This in turn creates enormous stress and pressure on students worried that they might not be able to achieve a

2.1. I am not sure this current situation is compassionate for our students. In addition, university awarding gaps for students of colour mean that such thresholds end up being discriminatory. Setting a 2.1 as a minimum requirement means 'weeding out' a higher proportion of Black students than White students.

What concerns me is that this arbitrary cliff-edge is harmful to student wellbeing and can shape their learning behaviours towards grade chasing rather than learning. I can find no good evidence to suggest having a 2.1 makes you a better or more successful employee than having a 2.2. Malcolm Gladwell addresses this issue in two episodes of his Revisionist History podcast ([1st episode](#), [2nd episode](#)). Some big graduate recruiters are starting to recognise this and are aware that such a cliff-edge limits the diversity of the talent pool available to them.

Of course, it is easy to criticise but less easy to offer a solution. What is my solution? Firstly, we should recognise the arbitrary nature of such grade cliffs and think about why and whether they should exist and what impacts they have on our educational system. At the moment, these boundaries are taken for-granted and treated as if they have some sort of absolute reality that cannot be changed rather than acknowledged as socially constructed, arbitrary boundaries that can be changed. Can we support students to understand this and make the whole process more compassionate and less

stressful for them. Ultimately, I would suggest a simpler pass/fail grading system, especially at university (with its supposed criterion referenced system of assessment). More radically, we might even consider 'ungrading!' [\[ii\]](#)

## **How do we judge what grade to give?**

Now let's delve more deeply into grading. What are we doing when we are grading? Typically, in UK higher education, as part of the movement to be more explicit and transparent in our assessment processes, we use assessment criteria / rubrics to help students understand what they need to do and to help academics make a judgement about student work. The image below shows an excerpt from the level 7 (postgraduate) rubric that I am required to use when marking student work on the PGCert course that I teach on. On the left is the criteria, in this case Enquiry, which the rubric attempts to define in relation to the level of enquiry required by a student at level 7. As a marker, I can understand what the student is required to do in their work and I am thus directed to find examples of where the student has done this as I go through the marking process.

However, where I start to stumble is how I would differentiate between the grades. What is satisfactory, good, very good and excellent evidence of this criteria? To do this I would need to fall back on the idea of "I know it when I see it"; my tacit knowledge and past experience.



## Enquiry

Engagement in practice informed by analysis and evaluation of relevant practices and ideas

**F**

Little or no evidence

**E**

Insufficient evidence

**D**

Satisfactory evidence

**C**

Good evidence

**B**

Very good evidence

**A**

Excellent evidence

I would be using all of my past experience of assessing similar work, working with my colleagues and discussing similar work, moderation and standardisation practices etc. to judge where an individual piece of work would fall on this scale. In other words, I would have to rely on my socialisation as an academic in my discipline to be able to make judgements that would be consistent with other markers on the course. Of course, moderation, standardisation and other assessment practices are considered the norm for being able to make reliable academic judgements. In a sense there is nothing controversial about this.

The problem is that we claim to be using criteria, which we can make explicit to students, to make judgment whether one students work is better than another students but in reality making those distinctions is mostly an implicit, social, subjective process. As Wiliam\_ [iii](1997:6) describes it, *"The mark given to a piece of work indicates the extent to which the individual has acquired the values and norms of the community of practice, and therefore the extent to which they are full or peripheral participants in that community. Such judgements are neither norm- nor criterion-referenced, but rather construct-referenced, relying for their dependability on the existence of a shared construct of what it means to be a full participant."* Subsequent research "suggests that staff ignore criteria, choose not to adopt them or use implicit standards which may not match those published to students." (Bloxham, Boyd and Orr 2011:10)[iv] The suggested solution to this

problem is to be more honest with students and discuss the complexities and the socially constructed nature of grading.

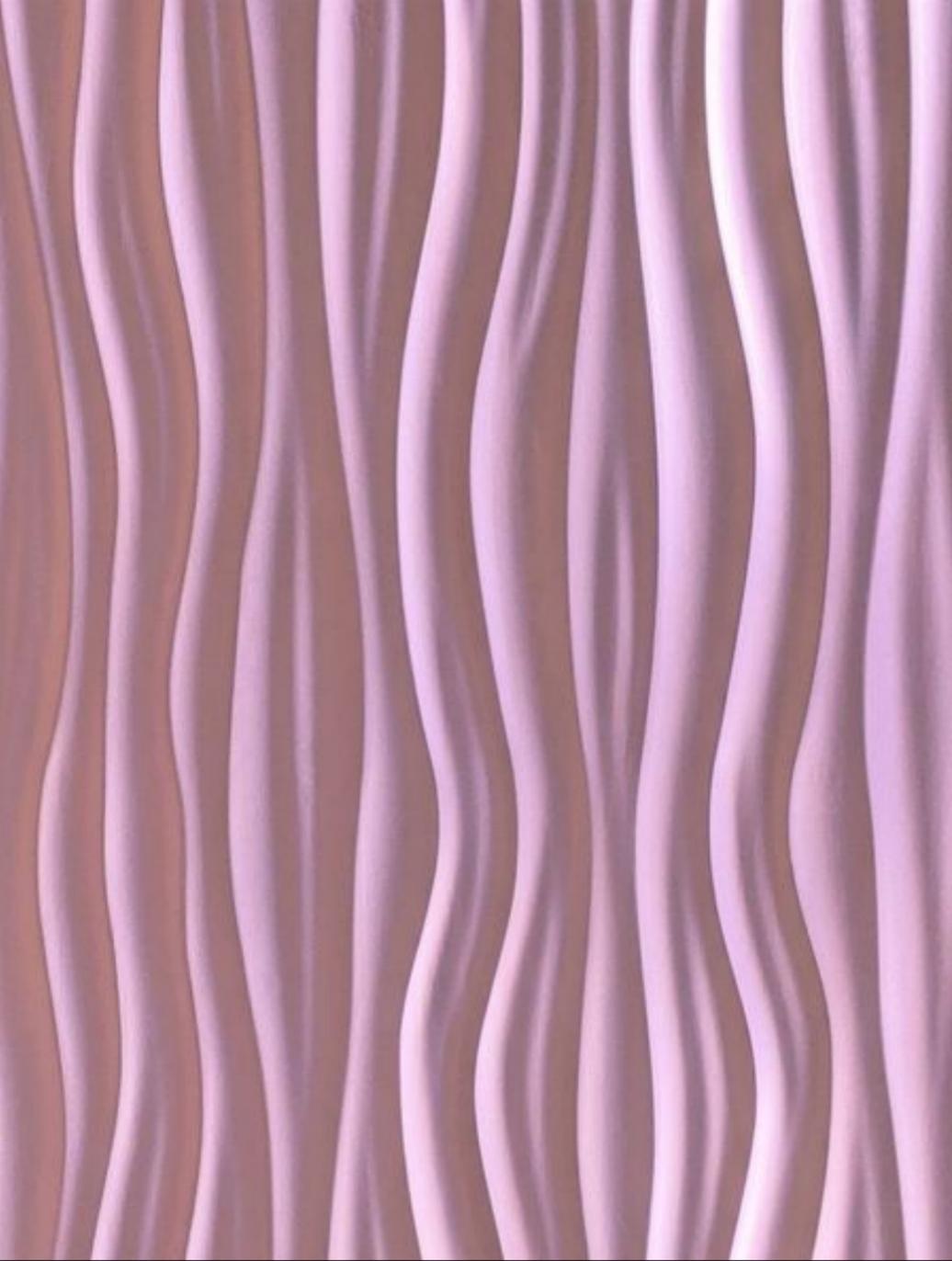
However, this complexity, the need for rubrics, the need for these conversations arises from the very act of grading and trying to determine whether one student's work is better than another's. Might it not be better to apply Occam's razor and simplify the whole process and just determine whether a student has met the intended learning outcomes or not; pass/fail. This seems to me the compassionate approach. We reduce student anxiety and the stress of trying to grapple with the complexities of understanding what it is the tutor / discipline requires so they can focus on their learning. Remember students are 'novices' in the discipline, how can they be expected to understand community standards when even new academics struggle?

I think it is worth spending some time thinking about this complexity in assessment processes in higher education but I will come back to this later. Next, I want to take a personal digression into my own story related to disciplinary standards.

## **A Personal Story: The illusion and variety of a Disciplinary Standard**

To illustrate my thinking and how I got here, I want to

share a personal dilemma. I have worked on a similar PG course at 6 different universities. My understanding of the standards upheld with the disciplinary community in which I work have inevitably evolved over time. As a novice member of the community, it was more about absorbing the standards from more experienced colleagues. Now, as a more experienced member of the community, I feel I have (or at least should have) a good understanding of those standards. Yet, my current dilemma is that I am having to apply different standards on two nearly identical courses in different universities with the same course titles. One course is at a pre-92 university with a wide range of disciplines and one a post-92 with a narrower range of disciplines taught. This dilemma primarily focuses around grade distinctions. I am confident that those who pass should pass and vice versa but when it comes to allocating grades, I have never felt so unsure. You might be thinking that maybe there is a flaw in my understanding or that my current institutional processes are flawed but I don't think either is true. What is true is that the institutional contexts are very different. The shared community that I graded in before (at the university with a full range of disciplines) only partially overlaps with the shared community of which I am part of now (at the university with a narrower range of disciplines). Similar course, different community. Those related but different communities seem not to share a common understanding of standards on the PG course I teach on. The net result is that students could get a very different grade at one university compared to if



Photograph by Susan Wilkinson.

they had done the same course at the other university. I find myself then in an uncomfortable ethical position of having to absorb and apply the new community's standards even though I feel they are out with the wider disciplinary standards.

The point of this personal vignette is to illustrate just how hard it is to have consistent standards when student work is graded and how hard it is to do anything about inconsistencies between communities across the sector. The problem of consistent standards is made more pressing and complex by grading. Rather than one single threshold standard (pass or fail) there are multiple standards and grade boundaries. What is the standard for an A? What is the standard for a B? etc. And so, I want to return to this idea of assessment complexity in a little more detail.

## **Assessment complexity**

So far I have argued that grading is a complex process largely relying on socially constructed standards that are *sometimes* agreed within disciplinary communities to make fine grained distinctions about whether some students work is better than others. Phew, sounds hard, right! Added to this grading can be a cause of student stress and anxiety that shapes student attention in undesirable ways often away from learning and that requires tutors to have lengthy conversations with

students in order to help them understand the subjective, socially-constructed nature of the process. As more issues are identified with the whole process of grading, we have added more and more complexity to make the process fairer and to just make it work. It feels like in order to justify grading as a fair, transparent, quality assured process we have constructed a giant Jenga tower! And that is even before we start to consider the whole 'grade inflation' debate, which I am not going to touch here!

To illustrate, much of the literature on assessment in higher education over the last few decades has focused on three broad strands. The first strand is a quality assurance strand that focuses on questions such as the reliability and validity of assessments, assessment standards and summative assessment. The second strand has focused on assessment design, the types of assessment used and how they impact learning. In this area there has been a shift to diversify assessment types and embrace authentic, work-relevant assessments. The third strand has focused on student assessment literacy and, latterly, feedback literacy. This relates to how students understand assessment standards and assessment types to learn and progress their learning.

The first and second strands have resulted in assessment regimes that are extremely complex. Students have to somehow integrate and consider learning outcomes, assessment briefs, multiple assessment types and

assessment criteria/rubrics when producing their work. Then once the work has been graded students need to understand the grade, understand their feedback and deal with the emotional impact of assessment and their own expectations and motivations. The recognition of this has resulted in the third strand on assessment and feedback literacy. Assessment and feedback literacy is a necessary requirement in order to help students grapple with the complexities of assessment regimes. Added to the complexity of assessment regimes is the fact that 'higher' learning is itself complex and often hard to define in explicit ways.

## **Conclusion**

So, what does this all mean? For me, the fairer, more compassionate approach is to reduce the complexity and adopt a system that focuses more closely on learning outcomes and not assessment criteria. A system that does not place students in hierarchies and perpetuate notions of 'more able' and 'less able' students. Ideally this would be the full 'ungrading' experience but on a more practical level pass/fail (which is already used for some courses, although not at undergraduate level) seems like a reasonable compromise from where we are currently.

Firstly, pass/fail removes the need for complex assessment criteria/rubrics and the need to help students understand what they mean. Instead students

can focus on meeting the learning outcomes. Secondly, pass/fail removes the letter or numerical grade. This should free up academics from having to spend time deciding and justifying fine-grained grading decisions and give them more time to focus on feedback. It could also help students deal with the emotionally impacts of grading, which can often be a cause of stress and anxiety. Thirdly, pass/fail should reduce or better mitigate the use of implicit criteria. With more focus on whether the learning outcome has been met, fine grained subjective, socially-constructed judgments should be reduced.



Work by Nikhita Andi on display, with a visitor interacting with the installation. MA Textile, CCW.

## Coda

There is a caveat to all this which is disciplinary related. My reflections and this project have been conducted within art and design institutions and my own current disciplinary context of education. I think the argument for numerical grading in some disciplines is much stronger than in others. In education, art, design and humanities I think the justification for numerical or letter grading is weak as I have outlined above.

It is interesting to note that in the recently published UUK (2022) report on awarding gaps[v], there are distinct variations based on disciplines. Subjects like mathematics and medicine have almost eliminated awarding gaps and other subjects such as education have large awarding gaps. I could argue that those first two disciplines have much more rigorous and objective assessments than many other disciplines. Those disciplines might be justified in using numerical grading because they are better able to define different levels of performance without the same level of complex, socially-constructed understanding required in education or in art and design.

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[i] <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2012/jul/04/graduate-recruiters-look-for-21-degree>

[ii] <https://www.jessestommel.com/ungrading-an-faq/>

[iii] Wiliam, D. (1997) 'How to Do Things with Assessments: Illocutionary Speech Acts and Communities of Practice,' Proceedings of the 21st Conference of the International Group for the Psychology of Mathematics Education: July 14-19, 1997, Lanti, Finland.

[iv] Bloxham , S., Boyd, P. & Orr, S. (2011) Mark my words: the role of assessment criteria in UK higher education grading practices, *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(6), 655-670.

[v] Universities UK (2022) *Closing ethnicity degree awarding gaps: three years on*. UUK: London.



Dress by Lorna Doyle. BA (Hons) Textile Design, CCW.

## **Student perspectives on pass/fail grading**

For further insight on student experiences of pass/fail grading at Leeds Arts University we convened a focus group of second year students who had experienced the Covid-related pass-fail grading during their first year studies the year before. An asynchronous online extension of the focus group was also established to enable participation from any people with a preference for written over verbal communication, or who were unavailable for the face to face session.

At the same time, one undergraduate student and one postgraduate student discussed their experiences of pass/fail grading in a podcast for QAA

A series of question prompts were developed to explore students' experiences of grading, and these were used both for the focus group and the podcast.

- Describe your previous experiences of grading in education, prior to study at University.
- Recall your reactions and feelings to first learning that the work they produced for their course (Level 4 Academic Year 20/21) would be evaluated as pass/fail only.
- Reflect on your approaches to studying under

pass/fail.

- Reflect on your reactions when you received your first piece of pass/fail graded work back from your tutors.
- Describe your experience of returning to graded assessment in Academic Year 21/22.

## **Previous experiences of grading**

Students reflected on their diverse educational backgrounds including GCSE, A level, BTEC, access courses and other higher education. Key points mentioned included:

- A constant focus on grades is a significant part of the GCSE, A level and BTEC experience. This brought pressures, from schools, teachers and parents. It also formed a big part of the motivational context, both extrinsically in terms of demands set by schools and intrinsically in terms of personal goals (e.g. accessing university).
- Students felt that grades offered useful milestones, particularly when associated with grade descriptors. They help students understand progress in terms of how well they're doing, improvements to make and things to aim for. They offer a stepped, or incremental approach

including smaller milestones. They are really important for parents.

- Previous experiences of grading had mainly been in terms of letters or simple grade bands like pass/merit/distinction and students felt that through time they developed an understanding of these. There was no familiarity with percentage marking.
- Students reflected on the impact of Covid and how this had disrupted and brought a lot more uncertainty into their experiences of grading. For some, the lack of examinations (GCSE/A level) meant they didn't really quite believe in their achievements at school or college and the grades they'd ultimately been awarded. This made some question whether they were really good enough to be at university, which meant they placed an even greater importance and expectation on university grading to offer them that validation.

Being introduced to pass/fail assessment for Level 4 studies AY 20/21

Students were informed of the change to pass/fail grading for L4 modules in early January 2021, just at the point that they were finalising submissions for semester one modules.

Initial reactions were varied and included disappointment, confusion and relief. For some, their hope that they had

moved on from the issues of uncertainty around assessment that had impacted their A levels and BTECs was swept away. There was an initial sense that an important indicator of their progress, and the validation for them being at university, was being lost. However there was some sense of relief as it made the transition into university seem less stressful and daunting.

Students acknowledged that staff tried to explain grading, but that this seemed abstract until marks and written feedback on assessed work were received back. It was mainly at this point that students realised that they



Alaa Kassim in the Studio. MA Fine Art, Photograph by Alys Tomlinson.

didn't fully understand how things worked and what things meant.

## **Approaches to studying under pass/fail**

Some students felt that their approaches to studying were unchanged, whereas for others there was a sense that they adjusted their approach.

For some, particularly in the second half of the year when things were a bit clearer to them, pass/fail afforded more freedom to try new things. Students reflected that if they were focused on a good grade they may have played safe with methods and approaches, but under pass/fail they felt a lot freer to try new things out as they tried to work out who/what they were as a creative. The fact that first year modules don't contribute to the final degree award also contributed to this approach, and again students recalled that this was something emphasised by staff.

Most students reported working as usual but it was acknowledged that the security of pass/fail gave some students a bit more belief in themselves and conveyed that they did not need to get so anxious about striving to prove that they deserved to be at the university.

One student acknowledged that they felt their motivation dip off during the year as a mindset of "only needing to pass" sank in.



Garment by Alisa Lomax. Foundation Diploma in Art and Design, CSM.  
Photograph by Richard Nicholson.

## **Reactions to feedback and assessment under pass/fail**

There was a shared sense that receiving a grade/feedback is a key moment in understanding “am I doing well enough?” Usually, the grade affords a short-cut signifier of this and therefore the lack of a grade was seen as initially confusing.

All students acknowledged that the lack of a formal grade made them pay a lot more attention to feedback, as they looked for more information about their performance. There was a perception that because work was ungraded the tutors had put a lot of effort into written feedback.

One student reported being a bit deflated by receiving just a pass, as in their prior education that was seen as not good enough. However this student acknowledged that this reaction reflected their prior conditioning and that they would like to learn to break away from this mindset.

Students described how course cohorts shared information with each other to make sense of what was going on, but that the lack of a grade offset some of the usual competitiveness of such exchanges.

One student described their journey through the process of initial disappointment about lack of grading through to

a realisation that grades weren't the important thing at L4, it was the feedback, learning and development that mattered.

## **Transition back to grading**

The two elements of a returning to grading and the fact that second year (level 5) work counts toward final degree awards means that students are now more focused on their goals and how to achieve them. For some this "step up" is also associated with feelings of anxiety, pressure and stress.

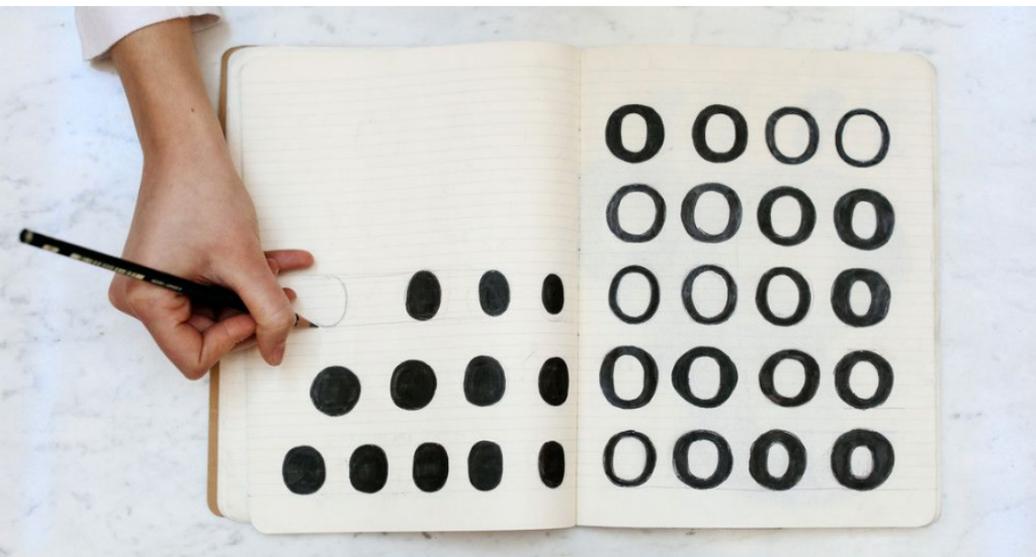
There was widespread agreement among the students that the lack of grades during their first year had helped them learn to pay more attention to feedback, and that they had carried that through with them to their second year studies.

One student described how the presence of grading meant that the course environment felt a lot more competitive during their second year, and that there was a sense of stratification of the year group. Although this brought pressures it enabled a better sense of where they stood in relation to others. It was acknowledged that part of this change also came from returning to face to face learning. Alternatively, another student offered a picture of a supportive and collaborative cohort which has an ethos of checking whether each other are happy

with how they are getting on, rather than comparing grades with each other.

Students felt that the presence of a grade meant that it was now easier to convey to others, e.g. parents, how they were doing.

Students describe still feeling somewhat confused by the grading system, and some struggle to make sense of the many different bits of information, grades and numbers on their feedback sheets. Screenshots were shared across group chats as students tried to work out "what does it all mean?" Grades seem more comprehensible than percentage marks. Students are still undergoing a process of making sense of what counts as a "good grade" in a university context.



Sketchbook by Marion Bisserier during her Internship at Pentagram.  
Photograph by Alys Tomlinson.

## Focus Group Summary

The points raised by students during the face to face and online asynchronous focus group can be summarised as follows.

- Students have nuanced perspectives on grading.
- Students recognise that their previous educational experiences have to a degree conditioned them to work within a graded system, such that removal of that can be destabilising.
- Over time, students appreciated that pass/fail grading helped reduce stress and anxiety around their first year transition into university.
- Pass/fail grading enabled some students to feel free to experiment and take risks in their creative practice.
- University grading is for many students mystifying at first and understanding only develops through time. Students acknowledge that staff talk to them about this, but it only begins to have meaning when they are holding graded work in their hands.
- Many students are constantly asking themselves the questions: “Am I good enough?” or, about their work, “Is this good enough?” Grading provides one signifier of this, but students recognised that the removal of grading



Cem Hamlacibasi during his Internship at Narrative Projects.  
Photograph by Alys Tomlinson.

made them pay much more attention to feedback, and they found that that was where the more important information was.

- There are some indications that an immersive experience of pass/fail grading has helped students break out of previous mindsets, helped them become more independent learners, and better able to judge the quality of their own work.
- There is some indication that the return to grading during their second year has made the learning environment feel more competitive, although it is evident that there are very distinct cultures on different courses.

## Podcast

The QAA podcast recording provides a useful complement to the focus group. It features one undergraduate and one postgraduate student reflecting on their experiences of grading including pass/fail grading.



**Students' views and experiences of pass/fail assessment**

[QAA Membership Podcast: Students' views and experiences of pass/fail assessment](#)



# Trauma- Informed Policy

Wimbledon Space, Merton Hall Road building. CCW. Copyright holder:  
Ideal Insight

## Background

The trauma-informed policy strand grew from an exploration of how compassionate assessment necessarily involves the whole self: viewing staff and students as human beings and institutions as groups of people. How we design policies, set assessments and respond to assessment is mediated by our experience. This exploration led to a focus on conceptualising possible ethical assessment policies based upon doing no harm as a foundational principle. For example, in order to practise compassionate assessment, understanding is needed of the student's wider social and emotional context, rather than treating students as merely people to be measured and judged. This empathic understanding is informed by the ways in which oppression, through policies and practices, harms students and staff (Shevrin Venet, 2021). To explore this further, we analysed assessment regulations from our three creative arts institutions to determine if the policies embodied compassion for others, whether this be the students or the members of staff.

Our work drew upon equity-centred trauma-informed education, a compassionate praxis that supports a sense of belonging, as a lens of "understanding the ways in which crisis and trauma impact students and educators individually and collectively and using that understanding to improve" (Thompson and Carello, 2021: 5). Trauma-informed education offers an urgent response to

collective traumas we continue to live in – pandemic, war and climate crisis – which are compounded by prior trauma histories for some staff and students within our educational communities. These might be racial, intergenerational, and adverse childhood experiences. This trauma frames educational experiences. As Thompson and Carello (*ibid.*) assert, this is a pertinent moment for Higher Education to “redress the impact of trauma”.

When we speak of trauma, we refer to the definition by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), “an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.” What constitutes as traumatic varies person to person, as trauma is an individual experience.

Trauma has a direct impact on student learning; it impairs our ability to remember, communicate and learn as our brains are in survival mode (Imad, 2020). Thus, trauma-informed approaches to assessment are a way to help our community to thrive. As Higher Education institutions we can mitigate against these challenges and support all learners by creating an ecology of support in policies, processes and cultures that enable educators to enact trauma-informed care and address the inequities that cause and worsen trauma.



Paintings by Ariane Hughes. BA (Hons) Fine Art Painting, CCW. .  
Photograph by David Poultney.

## **What are trauma-informed policies?**

Being a trauma-informed institution requires a turn towards compassionate cultures. Embedding a proactive, human-centred stance within our assessment systems, processes and policies to prevent re-traumatisation and promote thriving.

When we mention 'policy', we refer to the complexity of policy production such as the design, making and implementation along with the outcomes such as enactment, translation and practices (Bailey, 2013).

In our research we specifically focus on policy design, acknowledging that "...policies are 'contested', mediated and differentially represented by different actors in different contexts..." (Ball, 2015: 311). Influenced by policy archaeology (Scheurich, 1994), we drew upon Hummer et al.'s (2009) four principles of trauma-informed care to create a framework for compassionate assessment regulations and policies to ground our analysis. We have adapted these to speak to a Higher Education context.

Principles of trauma-informed policies:

**1. Connect:** Supportive and trusting relationships mitigate the destructive impact of trauma. Trauma-informed policies support the building and maintaining of relationships, and networks of support, within university communities.

**2. Protect:** Traumatic events often make us feel unsafe, anxious and fearful. Trauma-informed policies support an individual's emotional, cognitive, physical and interpersonal safety. Cultivating a sense of safety through transparency, stability, and preventing further harm.

**3. Respect:** Individuals often feel they have lost a sense of control or agency following traumatic experiences. Trauma-informed policies empower students and staff through choice and voice, promoting agency, sharing

power and decision-making.

**4. Redirect:** When we experience trauma, we can lose touch with our sense of purpose. Trauma-informed policies anchor education as a space for healing, centring on skill-building and competency, enabling students to have positive futures and embroidering hope into educational experiences.

These principles are interconnected and collectively provide a basis for trauma-informed assessment regulations, policies and practices

## **A reflective resource to provoke compassionate futures of Higher Education**

We advocate making necessary time to rethink policies and practices in order to remove systemic barriers to belonging. Trauma-informed approaches require sensitivity and continued attention. No one action will accomplish this change, and our understanding of needs will continually evolve. As such, this is an ongoing process.

We propose a set of reflective questions to provoke a review of policies and regulations based on our analysis of assessment regulation documents. Use these questions to challenge assumptions and normative practices.

Think about these questions in light of the above trauma-informed policy principles, your experiences with assessment and those of your students and staff. Do you have an up-to-date understanding of the assessment experiences of a wider demographic of students and staff, and the challenges they may encounter?

### **Questions:**

- 1.** Whose interests and needs are being met by the policy?
- 2.** Does the policy start from a point of trust?
- 3.** Does the policy strive for equity or prioritise notions of fairness?
- 4.** Are unequal power relations mitigated, is the policy done *with* staff/students not *to* them?
- 5.** Does the policy start with the premise of proactively supporting all students to pass and build skills (rather than punishing failure)?
- 6.** How do policies and regulations recognise stressors and mitigate against potential re-traumatisation?
- 7.** Is the policy clear, transparent and accessible for students and staff to understand (e.g. wording, links to other policies)?

**8.** Is the burden of responsibility for understanding and enacting the policy equitably shared between institutions, staff and students?

We provide an example below of how the above questions can be applied and expanded upon when considering policy around extenuating circumstances and extensions.

Extenuating Circumstances / extensions policy:

**How does the policy process demonstrate trust?** Do we start from a position of believing students when they tell us something is impacting upon their learning? If we are asking students to prove their need for an extension, why is this? Do we trust that students know best what they need in order to learn? How are signals of trust or mistrust impacting relationships between students and staff?



Photograph by Janita Sumeiko.

**How does the policy ensure equity over notions of fairness?** That is, giving individuals what they need, rather than treating everyone the same. Does the policy assume that giving extra time is an unfair advantage, despite students not starting from an equitable position and learning at different paces? What does getting equitable accommodations entail and how might this impact an individual? Is the burden on students to disclose?

**How does the policy mitigate power dynamics?** Who decides what a 'compelling reason' is or what constitutes 'beyond normal difficulties'? Is there disagreement between staff and students or even amongst staff? Are we acknowledging the multiplicity of peoples' experiences, and accepting of an individual's ability to identify what they personally find difficult/traumatic? Do we give students any agency in decisions about their learning, or might they feel powerless in the process?

**How does the policy protect students from further harm?** What information do we require students to disclose, how quickly, and how straightforward is this? Is it absolutely necessary if it risks retraumatizing or adding further distress to the individual? If a student is in the middle of a crisis, informing the institution, providing evidence, or being left in limbo of the decision could add to emotional distress rather than be supportive.

**How accessible is the policy?** Can students understand

it? Do students or staff need to jump through hoops? Does the policy refer to many other (accessible or inaccessible) policies, leaving a burden on students to 'follow breadcrumbs'?

These questions are likely to give rise to further questions, informed by your student body and institutional context. Such active questioning can also be applied to processes around late or non-submission, reasonable adjustments, alternative forms of assessment, examinations, feedback, and assessment schemes more widely. Ultimately, applying the principles of trauma-informed policy across a range of policy areas will contribute towards a more compassionate consideration of the whole selves we bring to academia, and hopefully to a greater sense that we all belong.

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Installation by Katie-May Boyd. MA Material Futures, CSM.  
Photograph by Vic Philips.

# Compassionate feedback



Chloe Jones. BA Graphic and Media Design, LCC. Photograph by Ben Turner.

## Overview

This strand of the project focuses on feedback as a critical area of practice. It considers the emotional impact of assessment (Falchikov and Boud 2007; Rowe, Fitness and Wood 2014; Winstone and Carless 2020) and how compassion may be enacted to support belonging. While the central role of feedback in students' learning is well documented (Hattie and Timperley 2007), and guidance and support for staff for effective feedback are available across the sector (Boud and Molloy 2013), using compassion as the main driver of feedback has been less explored.

The two key aims are:

- Develop definitions of what compassionate feedback might look like and devise guidance and support for approaches to compassionate feedback within the art and design disciplines in collaboration with academic staff. What advice might we give to ourselves, our colleagues, and students for a compassionate approach to feedback?
- Explore with staff how existing structures and processes may be adapted and modified to enable compassionate feedback, bearing in mind the potential cost for staff of what E. Spaeth calls the 'emotional labour of feedback' (Spaeth 2018), including issues of workload. The approach responds to Jan McArthur's call

to restore 'joy' in assessment (McArthur 2018) and make the assessment process both manageable and compassionate.

Work was undertaken to understand compassion and belonging in relation to the student experience of feedback and how these concerns relate to staff practices and experiences. Special attention was paid to the contribution that compassionate assessment feedback can make to an experience of connectedness, the perception of being valued or important and the feeling of being cared about, accepted and respected within a Higher Education learning environment.

This work aims to support the development of compassionate feedback particularly in relation to staff guidance. It builds on key principles of assessment for learning to ensure a feedback loop occurs as students progress and examines the assessment process including the time load and emotional impact on staff. Assessment and feedback has been examined holistically to identify opportunities for the use of compassionate principles to enhance belonging within assessment feedback practices.

## Our Values and Approach

Seeing compassionate approaches as fostering a sense of belonging, this research began with exploration and speculation on the place of compassion in the policy and practice of assessment feedback. Examining compassionate pedagogy literature and analysis of the challenges of compassionate assessment and feedback indicated that there was little guidance or support for staff in relation to compassionate assessment.

Therefore, this project aimed to develop a resource that supports staff in understanding and engaging with compassionate feedback.

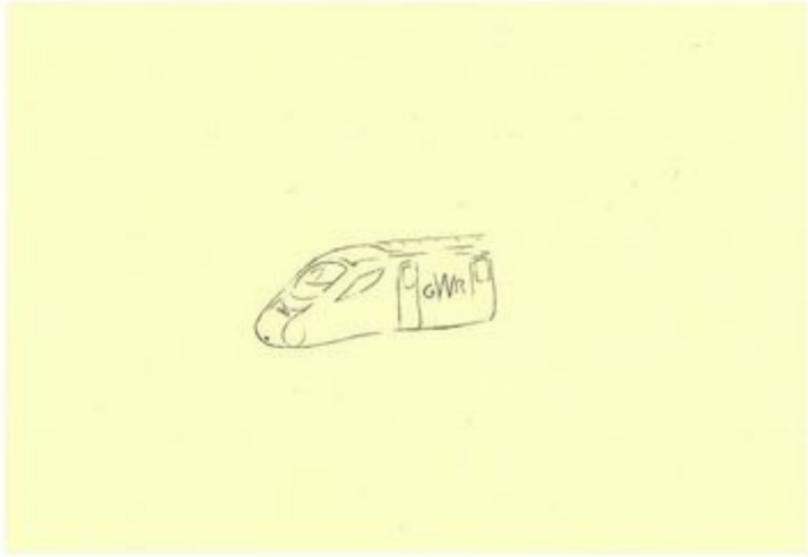
Establishing an approach and core set of values helped to ensure that the investigation was undertaken with principals of compassion and belonging at the centre. The approach taken was an active process, using co-creation, with open, reflective discussion as a primary mode of inquiry.

The use of an active process in the methodology was influenced by experience of undertaking action research projects and the benefit of the dynamic and flexible nature of using direct practice to investigate. An understanding was developed through the application of core principles, enhanced by interaction and exchange, which facilitated the discovery and the building of a common language. Working through new concepts in a practical framework helps connect existing knowledge to

developing insights, allowing for the incorporation of past experience, speculation and reflection. This form of exploration is engaging, putting skills and expertise to use in building new operable knowledge.

Applying a co-creative approach to our exploration helped to embed compassion within the thinking. The participatory model was seen as critical, working together with colleagues to construct shared definitions and understandings of methods of applying the principles of compassion in assessment. Approaching the task with colleagues as a shared experience, listening to and learning with each other allowed the complexities of compassionate assessment and feedback to be explored. Co-creation builds on the strength of diverse contributions and the reformulation and extension of thinking developed through the reconciliation required in the construction of consensus. The principle of co-creation is echoed in the assessment and feedback process, with participants considering this a necessary element of the process and highlighting the need for students to recognise their role in the co-creation of assessment.

To find tools for applying the notions of compassion, particularly in the production of feedback, it was deemed important to maintain an ethos of openness when working with colleagues. The collaborative workshop was designed without a preconceived notion of either the fundamental definitions of compassion and belonging, or



Train, Work by Paola Rouse. BA Fine Art: Sculpture, CCW. Photograph by Paola Rouse.

potential outcomes. While basic definitions of compassion and belonging were provided as starting points for conversations, the co-creation event was predicated on building working definitions, so that the group shared concepts and aimed at transparency in discussions. This openness allowed ideas to emerge over time, unrestricted, and to include a wide range of possibilities and connections.

The final core approach was to engage a discursive model in the exploration of compassionate practice. In examining the issue of producing a resource for staff and students, it became clear that being reflective and discursive was critical to apply compassionate principles in gathering knowledge. It was deemed important to hear voices involved in assessment and feedback from across disciplines and experiences, in a forum that allowed exchange and interaction. Discussions were framed as discovery, not as training or guidance, so that challenges and issues as well as potential applications of the thinking were developed in the conversations. Participants were keen to understand through moving through and around ideas together, to identify concerns and uncover how compassion could be practised for everyone involved in assessment.

The framework of approach and values is particularly important as this research is continuing to develop therefore this framework will underpin and help construct outputs, as well as provide consistency and clarity in evaluating information. This ethos will allow future work to evolve and respond to the deepening of knowledge and experience, while maintaining the freshness and energy of the initial phase of the research.



Painting-Installation by Emily Durtnall. MA Fine Art, CCW. . Photograph by Alys Tomlinson.

# Examples of workshop plans

## Discursive Models

In exploring compassion and belonging and the application of these in assessment and feedback, it is critical to establish how students and staff understand compassionate principles and their role in encouraging belonging. As outlined previously, methods for doing this should be consistent with values of inclusiveness and recognition of the experiences of all those involved in assessment. In an effort to develop a knowledge base drawn from and relevant to these audiences, the models below are starting points for potential co-creation events. The first model uses the familiar breakout session, while the second proposes a short prompting model. The longer model benefits from being something many people have experienced, as well as providing time for discussions to develop. The prompt model suggests a quick, dynamic model, which also has less impact on busy schedules. The slide presentation for the Breakout model is provided, as well as slide deck of prompts for use in the Prompt model. These are only 2 of many possible models, which are possible starting points, both to be used or for critique to point to other models.

## Breakout Workshop Model

Discussion based workshop, framed around short presentations and working sessions which explore topic

through free discussion.

Introduction – 5 mins. Brief description of the overall project and the goals for the Compassionate Feedback strand. Followed by an outline of the workshop structure and schedule.

Breakout Session 1 – 20 mins. The collective participant group was broken into 2 smaller groups of 4-5. Each group discussion was prompted with the following questions aimed at building a common understanding of compassion in the context of assessment:

What is your understanding of compassionate feedback?

a) How do we define compassion?

b) In what ways can compassion be used in assessment?

c) What are the principles of compassionate feedback?

Feedback/Discussion – 20 mins. A discussion was framed using feedback from the smaller group discussions. The discussion drew out key themes and some practical suggestions for approaching the challenges of using compassionate principles in assessment and feedback.

Break

Briefing for Session 2 – 10 mins. Presentation outlining approaches to Compassion/Belonging, with emphasis on keeping the breakout discussion open.



Summing Up – 10 mins. The facilitators provided a brief summary of the discussions and outlined the next steps for the project - the review of the workshop, presentations to colleagues, future workshops and potential publication.

## **Prompts Workshop**

Short workshop aimed at low-impact gathering of snapshot feedback using prompts. Group limited to 6 to allow all participants to speak.

Introduction – 5 mins. Short description of the quick format and the focused goals of the discussion.

Prompts Session – 15 mins. List of prompts is presented, with participants selecting 3 to work with. Participants spend 3 mins responding to the selected prompts.

[Compassionate feedback prompts.](#)

Conclusion – 3 mins. The facilitator provides a brief summary of the group's input.

Follow Up – Facilitator collates the participant responses and circulates. Multiple Prompts workshops are combined and analysed for common themes and pointers. Compilation into a summary resource for use.

## What we learned

The prototype workshop created a space where participants could come together to think about how to support students and ourselves as staff in feedback and feed-forward for assessment. The experience afforded an understanding of the appetite, enthusiasm, and deep critical engagement with which staff participants entered into this type of conversation. After the workshop, and as part of the analysis and reflection process, the researchers summarised the points raised according to three interrelated themes: **understanding**, **learner journey**, and **whole self**. In turn, these themes and insights can be framed as reflective questions, as set out below:

### What is our understanding of compassionate feedback?

With education as an act of love (Freire), belonging is understanding: students need to understand that their educators understand their learning journey, as well as to be seen and understood by their peers and colleagues. Interpretations of compassion include: mirroring so that the other feels 'seen'; active listening; honesty and transparency; understanding individual requirements for learning; and inculcating awareness of diverse experiences. Assessment creates artificial structures dealing with non-human elements, including grades. More compassion built into the structures would be key, as well as acknowledging our own power position and

the power relations that are potentially at work in the feedback exchange. Our pedagogy should suggest and guide rather than dictate.

## **How can we enact compassion in feedback for assessment as a learner journey?**

Feedback for assessment is a durational learner journey, where formative feedback offers powerful constructive affordances. A consistent thread was how participants viewed feedback for assessment as a holistic journey; while formative feedback is a key moment where compassionate approaches can be enacted, they would also underpin feedback for summative assessment. So, to balance, would compassionate approaches towards students and staff workloads place most value on the formative moment and frame the summative (albeit with a feedforward element) as more 'contained'? Formative feedback might acknowledge past learning, although there may be both positives and challenges thereof; and there might be value in 'unlearning' past educational experiences. Engaging students in assessment (e.g., self- and peer-assessment, co-creation) and decoding assessment structures (e.g., transparent constructive alignment) would inform mutual understanding. Feedback for assessment should be a two-way conversation and process recognising environment, tone, and language, a relational and dialogical 'done with' rather than 'done to' that foregrounds staff and student partnership.



Floral design installation by Christiana Mitropoulou. MA Textile Design, CCW. Photograph by David Poultney.

## **How can we support the whole self in the experience of feedback for assessment?**

In this framework of reciprocal conversation, students should feel empowered to recognise their work and their journey. Here, empathy, sensitivity, and the ability to understand others and recognise risk-taking and obstacles lead to a conception of the 'whole self' in the experience of feedback for assessment. Some of the challenges include how feedback for assessment should focus on the work, not the person; but also navigating the tension between feeding back on the work and recognising the person in the work so that the whole self

can be enacted. How the role of the pastoral (e.g., personal tutor system) helps students feel 'seen' and how that framing might be brought into the feedback experience could also be interrogated, as well as the potential to explore other types of feedback such as peer-to-peer that enhance the relational experience. For staff, compassionate approaches have a deep linkage to workload and environment, not least in terms of pandemic impacts and triangulating assessment with institutional systems, including the digital and hybrid. Above all, and for staff and students alike, compassionate approaches need nurture, space, and duration.

## **Reflection: Understanding, Learner Journey, and Whole Self**

The insights that workshop participants raised centred on how compassionate feedback might feel for student learners and staff around core values: understanding, learner journey, and the whole self. In partnership with the staff involved in the research and reflection, these values are contributed as a resource on which further discursive spaces can be built around fostering compassion and a sense of belonging in feedback for assessment. While such a discussion raises challenges and issues as much as solutions, it is precisely there that its value as a compassionate space lies. After all, feedback for assessment is framed as something that is done *with*, rather than done *to*, our contribution is to

explore and outline support and guidance for staff to co-create their *own* compassionate feedback principles and practice. So, as well as offering sample workshop plans and guidance that can be used to frame such co-development, it is proposed that the value of such approaches and spaces helps to interrogate whether staff workload and environment are conducive to compassionate assessment and feedback practices. This is framed in terms of an institutional approach to enhance assessment and feedback practices so that support staff and student partnership are foregrounded within an overall framework of compassion and belonging.

## Podcast on compassionate feedback

Click the link below to listen.



Interrogating Spaces

**Compassionate Feedback**



00:00 | 35:59

[Interrogating Spaces - Compassionate Feedback podcast](#)

# Compassionate feedback

Ideas for prompting reflection on compassionate approaches to feedback



Enhancing  
assessment  
for equity

Click below to access the full document:

[Ideas for prompting reflection on compassionate approaches to feedback](#)

## References

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A photograph of a woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a black turtleneck sweater, looking at a large, vibrant red textured artwork. The artwork consists of several vertical, irregular strips of red material with a fibrous, felt-like texture, set against a light background. The woman is seen from the side, her back to the camera, as she gazes at the art.

# **Indicators of compassionate assessment**

Visitor looking at Sayan Chanda's work. MA Fine Art: Drawing, CCW.  
Photograph by Sayan Chanda.

Our approach to indicators of compassionate assessment are based on qualitative information gleaned from reflective questioning rather than quantitative data. This is because our work on compassionate assessment is concerned, primarily, with human interactions through educational practices that are difficult to quantify. It could be argued that any attempt to create quantitatively measurable indicators do so would produce results that lack meaning and resonance for staff and students. We also wanted to suggest a reflective process that did not contribute towards increased bureaucracy and managerialism/performativity.

During this project we have argued that compassion is a valuable principle of rigorous assessment. Current practice, we suggest, is based on a series of assumptions about the behaviours and motivations of students and staff that are often left unexamined. Also, fundamental beliefs about the function of assessment need to be challenged.

We have devised some indicators of compassionate assessment as a series of questions. It is suggested that policy-makers and practitioners use these questions as an evaluative tool to reflect on their own regulations and assessment processes operating at institutional and course level. It is hoped that the questions will inform a quality design process for assessment going forward, for for example, the responses can be used as a form of comparison between different areas within an institution

as well as to compare across institutions.

We have designed these questions to be open and as starting points for critical debate, so that the underpinning ideas can be applied in a variety of educational contexts. We are mindful that issues around assessment need to be addressed in a sensitive and careful way by institutions who are aligning compassionate assessment with other operational objectives.

The questions have been developed from the work of the three research strands:

**Strand 1: Pass/fail grading**

**Strand 2: Trauma-informed policy**

**Strand 3: Feedback**



Students working in the canteen, CCW. Photograph by Alys Tomlinson

## **Strand 1: Pass/fail grading**

**Policy:** What flexibility do the university assessment regulations have to allow course teams to use pass / fail grading for credit where they deem it to be in the best interest of student learning at any stage in their course?

**Practice (for course teams, course leaders):** Do the learning outcomes and aims of a unit or module better suit the use of pass / fail instead of letter or numerical grading? For example, letter grading on a collaborative unit might actually disrupt students' ability to be genuinely collaborative.

## **Strand 2: Trauma-informed policy**

**Policy:** To what extent are assessment policies designed and enacted in a way that supports trusting relationships within the educational community, and promotes agency, emotional and physical safety, and student-centred skill-building?

**Practice:** What part do students play in their assessment: are students' own interests and learning goals reflected and to what extent are students' selves and views regarding assessment valued?

## **Strand 3: Feedback**

**Policy:** What policies or structures are in place to ensure

staff workloads and environments are conducive to compassionate assessment and feedback practices? For example, how are the values derived from compassionate pedagogy (active, open, co-creative and discursive process) evident in the development of assessment policies and student partnership agreements?

Practice: How do our assessment feedback practices foreground and / or support student-staff partnership to enact compassion? Such as: what form of support is available for staff around compassionate feedback is available, e.g. written guidance or examples of good practice?

# Belonging through assessment: Pipelines of compassion QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project 2023

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For further multimedia resources contact us through our  
blog:

<https://belongingthroughassessment.myblog.arts.ac.uk/>

