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## **Introduction**

The transition to university empowers students to take charge of their learning and brings with it certain social and educational freedoms, including the freedom to live on their own, live without a fixed schedule, pursue personal interests, discover what piques their interest from a wide variety of subjects and eventually pursue the field of their choice.

However, this freedom brings worries and concerns. A flexible schedule and multiple options can lead to increased distractions and a poorly balanced workload. Though most students begin university with good intentions, they may become overwhelmed with the freedom and the greater responsibility needed to make well-informed decisions and live with the consequences.

One way of easing students' transition to university is by removing the pressure of grades. Writing of the importance of rethinking grades, Tannock (2015) points out that only by re-examining the role of grades in higher education can universities create 'critical, reflexive, independent and democratically minded thinkers'. Advocates of gradeless learning emphasise three key benefits: (1) the sense of collective solidarity and mutual responsibility between students, instead of competition; (2) the promotion of dialogical engagement and critical questioning of authority, instead of blind acceptance; and (3) the development of intrinsic motivation among students as independent, critically engaged, self-directed learners, instead of skilled memorisers of select information for a short period of time.

Echoing such advocates for grade-free learning, National University of Singapore (NUS) introduced a 'gradeless first semester' in 2014 to all of its 7000-plus first-year students. The rationale for the policy was to 'encourage our students to choose their courses based on their learning needs and interests, rather than on optimising their grades' and to empower them to 'explore, experiment and discover their passion through the courses they take' (Tan 2014). Under the policy, all freshmen earn a grade for each course they complete. However, they have the freedom to opt for the grade earned, an 'S' (Satisfactory) if they pass with at least a C, or an 'U' (Unsatisfactory) for anything below a C. Choosing an 'S/U' gives the student control over their GPA, as this option means a student's results do not affect his/her GPA. In other words, the policy allows high-performing students to begin their academic life with a strong GPA, while also ensuring that underperforming students do not fall behind due to the overwhelming freedom experienced in their first semester.

## **Research Study**

This study aimed to analyse student understanding, reception, and adoption of the gradeless first semester policy. Data comes from three anonymous online student surveys administered at the start of each semester – Survey #1(August 2014; N=1207), Survey #2(January 2015, N=748), and Survey #3(August 2015; N=1366). The survey collected both quantitative and qualitative responses related to the general opinion and support of the policy, how it affects students' decisions to choose courses and major, as well as what they perceived as the

benefits and potential weaknesses. In order to understand the relationship between the policy and students' feelings of freedom and control over their learning, this paper focuses on responses to the following specific questions – 'What is the best thing about the gradeless first semester?', 'Did the existence of the gradeless first semester influence your module selection this semester? If so, please explain why the policy influenced/did not influence your module choices', and 'Do you think the gradeless first semester has allowed you to take risks and explore subjects you might not normally choose to read?'

## Results and Discussion

Overall support among students for the policy gradually improved over the three surveys and stood at 72% (Figure 1).

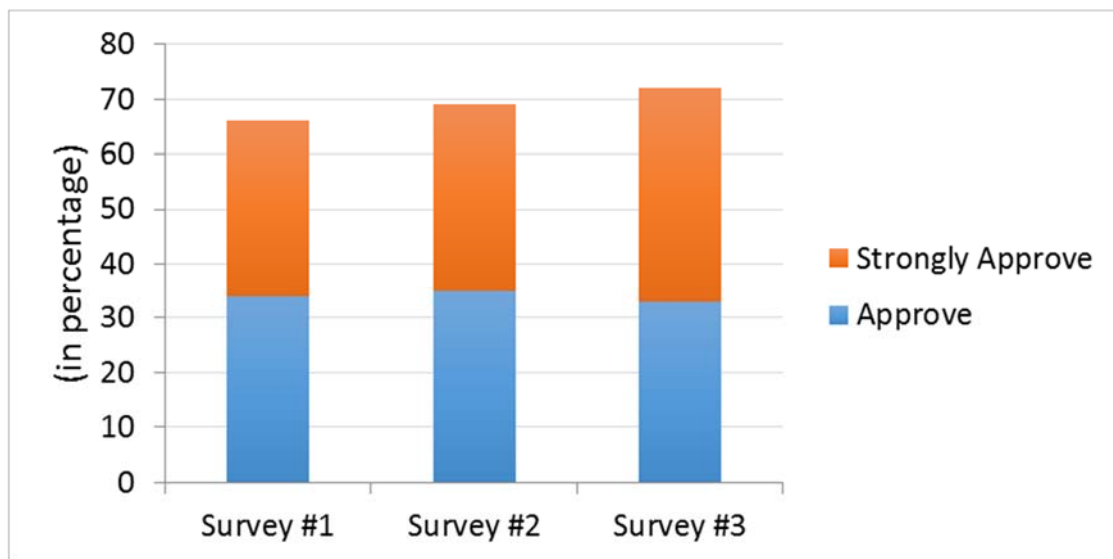


Figure 1: General opinion of the gradeless learning policy

Figure 2 showcases how the policy influenced module selection amongst students.

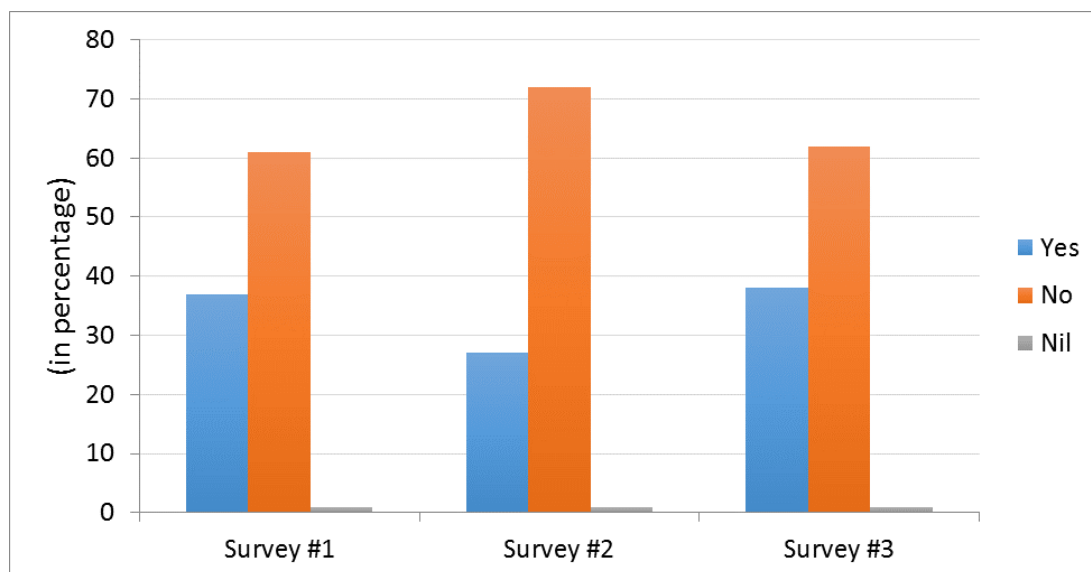
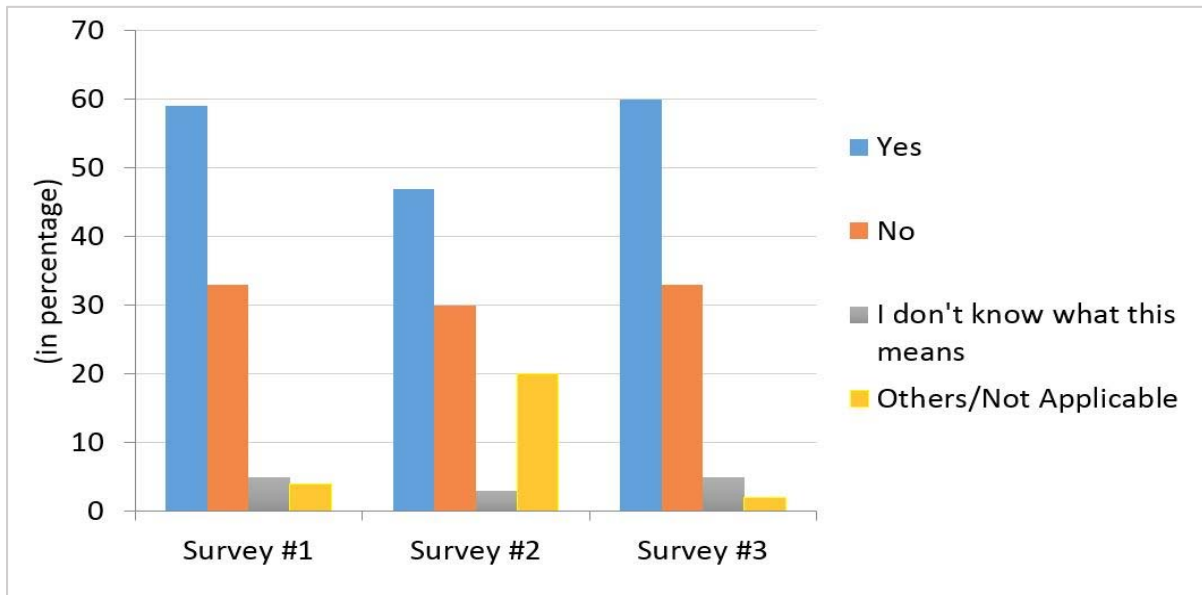


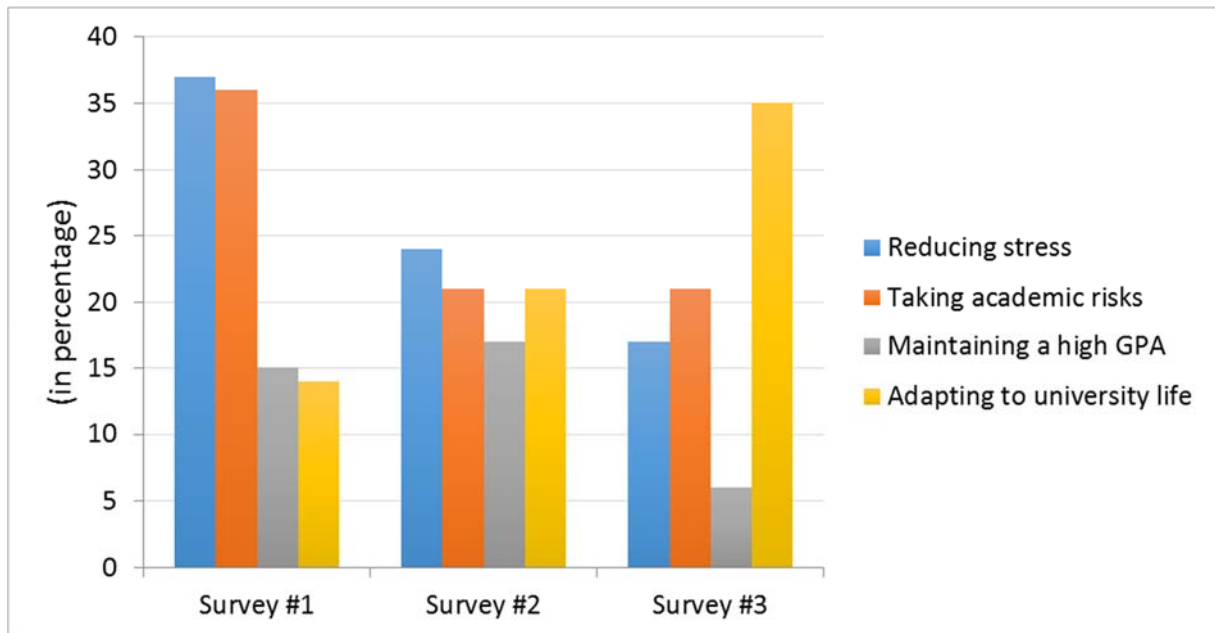
Figure 2: Influence of module selection due to gradeless learning policy

When asked about whether the policy allowed students to take risks and explore subjects that they might not normally choose to read, nearly 60% of students felt they could do so (Figure 3). However, some students were also quick to point out that their freedom to choose modules was constrained by the system at the National University of Singapore. Institutional barriers (e.g., need a CAP to apply for student exchange programmes), departmental constraints (e.g., requirement to take core, compulsory or pre-allocated modules, necessity to complete pre-requisite modules), and cultural context (expectation by family members and society to focus more on earning ‘As’ than exploring their interests) were some reasons highlighted.



**Figure 3: Ability to take risks and explore subjects**

Detailed responses to the question ‘What is the best thing about the gradeless first semester?’ fell into four broad integrated categories and are in close proximity to the views of educators who support gradeless learning: 1) reducing stress, 2) taking academic risks, 3) maintaining a high GPA via the S/U option, and 4) adapting to university life (Figure 4).



**Figure 4: Strengths of gradeless learning policy**

While Survey #1 showed that students perceived reduction in stress as the greatest strength of the policy, subsequent surveys revealed less emphasis on reducing stress and more benefit from adaptation to university life (from the least important in survey #1 to most important in survey #3). The ability to take academic risks remained important but tapered off following Survey #1.

As one respondent wrote, ‘[Gradeless learning] enables students to make a smoother transition to university life and adapt to a style of learning which may be drastically different from their previous experiences’. Other responses focused on the freedom that the system allows: ‘[Gradeless learning] allows flexibility to explore interests and aptitude before finally deciding on a major. It also gives time to socialise and integrate into university life’. Students also pointed to the control that comes along with this freedom to explore. However, certain institutional factors unique to some departments prevented some students from having this freedom. As one respondent mentioned, [students in my major] ‘do not have the freedom to select our modules as all our 5 modules are pre-allocated to us.’ This speaks to the paradox of increased freedom for some students under the policy, while other students lack the same level of control over their educational choices. This study reveals the rewards of giving students freedom via gradeless learning, as well as the need to eliminate barriers that stand in the way of incorporating such policies.

## References

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Tannock S. 2015. “No grades in higher education now! Revisiting the place of graded assessment in the reimagination of the public university”, *Studies in Higher Education*. doi:10.1080/03075079.2015.1092131