

Feedback First: A longitudinal feasibility study of implementing ungrading principles in Yr 1 Higher Education

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Abstract

Within the UK state education system, grading is first used within 6 weeks of a child starting school. Grading is then used throughout primary, secondary, further and higher education. Whilst grades can serve as a measure of academic performance, they have also been found to have detrimental effects related to self-esteem, competition, surface learning and fear of failure.

This paper examines the impact of a trial of Ungrading at a UK University. Ungrading is about broadening the academic understanding of "good performance" to include acquisition, retainment and application of knowledge and skills alongside curiosity, reflection and risk taking, also reducing student anxiety.

For this trial, 1st Year Psychology undergraduates were moved to a pass/fail system across all modules, with the standard UK university grading system introduced in 2nd Year. This impacted over 340 students and 30+ academic staff. We discuss findings exploring metrics and perceptions of staff and students.

Full paper

An aim of 1st year study within Higher Education is to develop students' academic engagement; however, research has found that grading can diminish student's interest in the content they are learning (Dweck, 1986; Lynch & Hennessy, 2017). While a correlation between grades and motivation has been evidenced (Dobrow et al., 2011), intrinsic motivation has been found to be lowered by grading (Deci et al., 2001), particularly for students receiving poor grades in year 1. Even those receiving good grades are encouraged to pursue performance, not learning outcomes (Beatty, 2004). Curiosity and risk taking have also been found to be reduced by metric-based grading (Kohn, 2011) whilst student anxiety is increased (Chamberlin et al., 2018). Finally, the provision of individual grades has been found to undermine collaborative group work, practice and performance (Hayek 2014, Hayek et al 2015).

Ungrading has been found to result in deep learning and reflection (Altahawi et al., 2012; Dahlgren et al., 2009). It can ease stress and foster a collaborative approach (Bloodgood et al., 2009; McMorrان & Ragupathi, 2020) which, with a supportive study culture, has been evidenced to lead to greater student belonging (Kjaergaard et al., 2024). Particular for first year university courses, moving away from grading, and refocusing the 1st year on exploration, mastery and competence can set the shape of the students' approach to their learning (Altahawi et al., 2012; McMorrان et al., 2017).

Ungrading can, however, cause students to experience ambivalence and question their position within the social hierarchy (Kjaergaard et al., 2022). Students can be unsure they have gained the necessary proficiency in 1st year to gain high grades in 2nd year and may have a lower motivation to engage with subjects they find less interesting. This ungrading ambivalence experienced by students may have potential benefits. Ambivalence provides the opportunity to challenge students' perceptions of control, allowing students to focus more on exploring and thinking outside of the box, thereby enhancing students' capacity to successfully adapt to key life stressors (Pratt and Pradies, 2011).

This paper examines the impact of a trial of Ungrading at a UK University. Year 1 Psychology undergraduates were moved to a pass/fail system across all modules, with the standard UK university grading system introduced in year 2. Alongside ungrading we introduced study teams, team assessment and peer review. We discuss metrics around student success and support seeking, alongside qualitative findings exploring the perceptions of staff and students.

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