

# How can grading in creative arts higher education be more inclusive to facilitate learning?



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# Abstract

Creative education faces challenges with traditional grading systems that emphasise uniformity over inclusivity, often stifling originality and creativity. This study critiques these grading practices and their impact on student motivation, mental health, and mindset. Through mixed-method research, including surveys and interviews with industry experts, it explores alternative and inclusive assessment methods such as ungrading. Findings highlight the importance of inclusive, student-centred approaches that prioritise facilitation, feedback, self-reflection, and autonomy to enhance intrinsic motivation and creativity. Recommendations include a radical shake-up to assessment practices in collaboration with industry and policy makers, professional development for educators, and integrating assessment literacy and feed-forward feedback into curriculum to support student-centred learning environments.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Welcome to flatland: grading in higher education

Creative education encompasses a multitude of subjects with personal, interdisciplinary, and humanistic forms of expression, skills, and creative outputs. Assessing these inspiring outputs requires an inherent subjectivity and an ipsative approach that is entangled with the students' learning journey (Orr, 2007; Orr, 2010a; Houghton & Reeves, 2019). However, the challenge in creative education lies in the contradiction of nurturing original, conceptual, and critical thinking within a model of education born of the industrial age - one that prioritises uniformity, efficiency, and quantitative academic assessment. (Wharton, 2023).

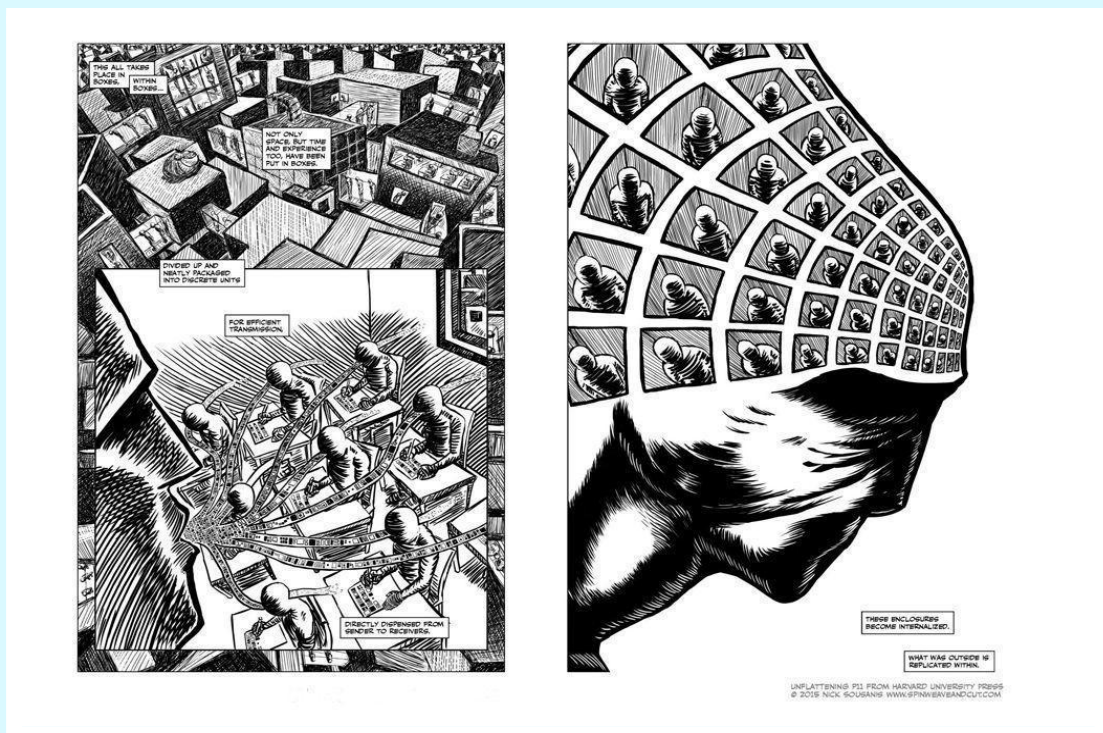


Fig.1 *Unflattening* (2014)

Measuring students' learning through classification grading is illustrated in the opening scenes of Sousanis' (2015) *Unflattening*; students sit lined up in rows and tallied by uniformity. This reflects a society where human efforts and abilities are limited by governing impositions and raises a pertinent question for creative

education - is there more than what can be immediately perceived or imagined through numerical grades?

Classification grading in the UK traces its origins to a system designed and born out of the intellectual culture of the enlightenment as well as the economic context of the industrial revolution (Robinson, 2010).

“We have a system of education that is modelled on the interest of industrialism and in the image of it. Schools are still pretty much organised on factory lines [...] We still educate children by batches.” (Robinson cited in Popova, 2010).

Grading increases stress and decreases academic self-esteem among school students (Högberg *et al*, 2021). The transition from school to higher education transfers these fixed behaviours, and poses a further hindrance to creativity, critical and divergent thinking, and intrinsic motivation for learning (Robinson, 2007; Degbotse, 2015:5); many first year students start higher education with a fixed mindset and face barriers to exhibiting curiosity and risk-taking (Vaandering, 2023).

Criticism of grades whether number/letter encourages surface learning and memorising for the sake of achieving “good” or “better” grades (Butler & Nisan, 1986). Grades can limit student choices of exploring beyond what is being marked, hindering learning. So what are the alternatives and how can current grading practices be changed to facilitate learning?

## **1.2 Aims and scope**

This study explores the question “How can grading in creative arts higher education be made more inclusive to facilitate learning?” with the aim to:

- Understand current grading practices.
- Explore how grading impacts student learning, mental health, motivation, and mindsets.
- Analyse the potential of alternative and inclusive grading practices for facilitating learning.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Understanding inclusive assessment

With changing technologies and a diverse body of students, it is educators' role as facilitators of learning to provide students with a compassionate learning environment (Rogers, 1986), and assessment can play an important role in shaping learning outcomes and determining student success. Current grading and assessment practices may not accurately represent students' creativity or subject knowledge (Orr, 2010a), reflect bias (Cowdroy & Williams, 2007), contribute to a culture of competition over collaboration (Bailey *et al*, 2016), reduce creativity and critical thinking (McCorren *et al*, 2017:2), and encourage extrinsic motivation whilst diminishing intrinsic motivation (Hennessey, 2016).

In today's education, the pursuit of institutional targets often takes precedence over pedagogical considerations (Berg & Seeber, 2017). Higher education, driven by accountability measures and performance metrics, prioritises achieving specific grades. Consequently, assessment practices become instrumental in shaping teaching approaches. The alignment of teaching with assessment structures is pervasive, influencing curriculum design, instructional strategies, and students' learning (Lawrence, 2019; Hanesworth 2019).

When assessment determines pedagogical decision-making, the "how" of assessment overshadows the "why" (Stommel, 2020). Educators grapple with designing assessments that meet institutional requirements, at the expense of deeper educational goals. The focus on achieving predetermined outcomes can hinder the fundamental purpose of education: developing students' critical thinking, creativity, and holistic development.

"Assessment tends so much to drive and control teaching. Much of what we do in the classroom is determined by the assessment structures we work under."  
(Elbow cited in Stommel, 2012)

To address this challenge, pedagogic research advocates for a shift toward student-centred assessment practices. Inclusive assessment, defined as "the design

and use of fair and effective assessment methods and practices that enable all students to demonstrate to their full potential” (Hockings, 2010) poses many challenges due to the multi-purposes of assessment. We must consider the legacy structures within our educational institutions, the certification/accreditation function of assessment, and how we can prepare students for learning beyond education.

Alternative strategies have arisen, such as:

- Ungrading and pass/fail, that emphasises feedback, self-reflection, and autonomy over assigning letter/numerical grades (Blum, 2020).
- Universal Design for learning (UDL) also aims to create flexible learning environments that accommodate diversity, by providing multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression ensuring that assessment is accessible to everyone (CAST, 2024).
- High-structure course design, that aims to remove the ambiguity of assessment by providing well-defined rubrics, clear learning objectives, and detailed instructions in the hopes of enhancing assessment inclusivity (Beck & Roosa, 2021)
- Transformative education that focuses on empowering students to develop deep reflections, social consciousness, and personal growth (Bolden *et al*, 2024).

## **2.2 Ripping up the rulebook: ungrading to create student-centred learning**

Motivation in learning is complex, and Filgona *et al* (2020) highlight how intrinsic motivation aids not only academic achievement but lifelong and independent learning. As Reeve *et al* (2020) also suggest, “when learners feel that they have control over their success in something, then they are more motivated to achieve it”. Therefore, creating the grading conditions for autonomy, choice, reflection, and critical thinking are key to developing an intrinsic behaviour and growth mindset in students (Dweck, 2014).

An emphasis on motivation and autonomy in learning is reflected in the adoption of innovative ungrading practices (Blum, 2020; Gorichanaz, 2022; Stommel, 2023). Schultz-Bergin (cited in Blum, 2020:186-187) tests this approach in the classroom through ‘grade anarchy’; creating a student-centred classroom where the rules are

generated by the students who feel obligated to themselves and to one another rather than to grades or the teacher. Stommel (2018) takes a similar student-centred approach by utilising qualitative feedback, peer review, and self assessment to allow for more honest assessment of students' work. The educator stepping back creates conditions for autonomy and students “learn more significantly [when] they have more freedom to be and become” (Rogers, 1986:7). Rapchak *et al* (2023:95) champion ungrading as a way to “relinquish control, to trust students, and to intentionally place students in charge of their learning”.

### **2.3 Aligning inclusive grading with quality assurance**

As a subject benchmark, creative education emphasises imagination and creativity, with courses designed to develop students' intellectual powers and their abilities related to the aesthetic, ethical, and social contexts of human experience (QAA, 2019:3). Despite this subjectivity, much of creative education is still assessed through numerical grading. Delandshere (2001:127) has critiqued these assessment practices which are based on assumptions that “knowledge is monolithic, static, and universal” - a stark contrast to assessing creative outputs (Elton, 2007). Shay (2005) and Orr (2010b) recognise that assessment can be a context dependent, socially situated, and interpretive activity; requiring a connoisseurship with expertise built on experience and tacit knowledge. Insights from Cowdroy and Williams (2007:98-99) reflect the slippery nature of assessing creativity:

“When we attempted to be conscientious and objective in our assessment of creative ability and the feedback to our students, however, we found it almost impossible to explain to students how a particular mark or grade had been derived [...] why one student (with a higher grade) was more creative than another (with a lower grade).”

This post-structuralist analysis of grading and assessing creativity shows that objectivity may not always be possible (Orr, 2007a). Therefore there are benefits to aligning this mercuriality to subject benchmarks and quality assurance frameworks. Quality assurance provides accountability; the assessor gains a sense of security



about their marking judgements and ensures students' learning and outcomes remain inclusive (Bloxham & Boyd, 2012:631; Bloxham *et al*, 2011). The quality of creative outputs can be assured through inclusive practices; including transparent and explicit learning outcomes (UCA Creative Education Network, 2015), constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003), feed-forward assessment feedback (Visser *et al*, 2017), and criteria-based marking rubrics that assess for creative and personal development (Xu and Tognolini, 2022).

#### **2.4 From flatland to 3D technicolour: the research gap**

The multidimensional qualities of creative education show that there is a tension between assessing and grading creativity alongside the application of long-standing degree classification grading - should students' creativity be compressed into a number? Ungrading has emerged as an alternative form of assessment but literature demonstrates there is a gap in recent published research on alternative and inclusive grading practices within creative arts education.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Overview

To understand the implications of grading on student learning within creative education, the research took a two-part, mixed-method approach. A student-centred survey and interviews with industry experts were conducted to gain insights into the implications of assessment strategies on student learning. Quantitative and qualitative data was gathered on students' experiences with grading relating to mental health, motivation, and mindsets.

A deductive approach was taken with the student-centred survey using closed questions, with the inclusion of a few open questions that allowed for the exploration of respondents' experiences or knowledge that may not have been foreseen (Kara, 2018:54). Additionally, the survey utilised both convenience and maximum variation sampling (Essa, 2024a); by using connections, it was sent out to students from varied levels of learning at UK creative arts higher education institutions. Thematic analysis was applied to the student-centred questionnaire to identify commonalities and patterns across the data.

In parallel, the interviews took an inductive approach to allow for richer analysis. The interview respondents were selected using a purposive approach, using critical case and expert sampling (Essa, 2024b) to enable the collection of the most insightful information from those with expertise on assessment. Six interviews were conducted with experts within higher education to get sector perspectives on grading and student-centred assessment.

Analysis and observation of the resulting data were treated as an opportunity to identify gaps as well as synthesise the larger patterns encountered within the literature review (Booth, 2016:14-15). The aim was to keep student learning at the

centre and construct or speculate on a theoretical approach towards inclusive grading in creative arts education.

### 3.2 Limitations

The student survey conducted obtained a sample of 83 students, however, it is important to note that the results are heavily weighted towards level 4 undergraduate studies, where the understanding and positive/negative experiences of grading have not been fully explored in a higher education setting. The findings therefore may be influenced by bias and further research is necessary to prove the validity of the results arising from the research.

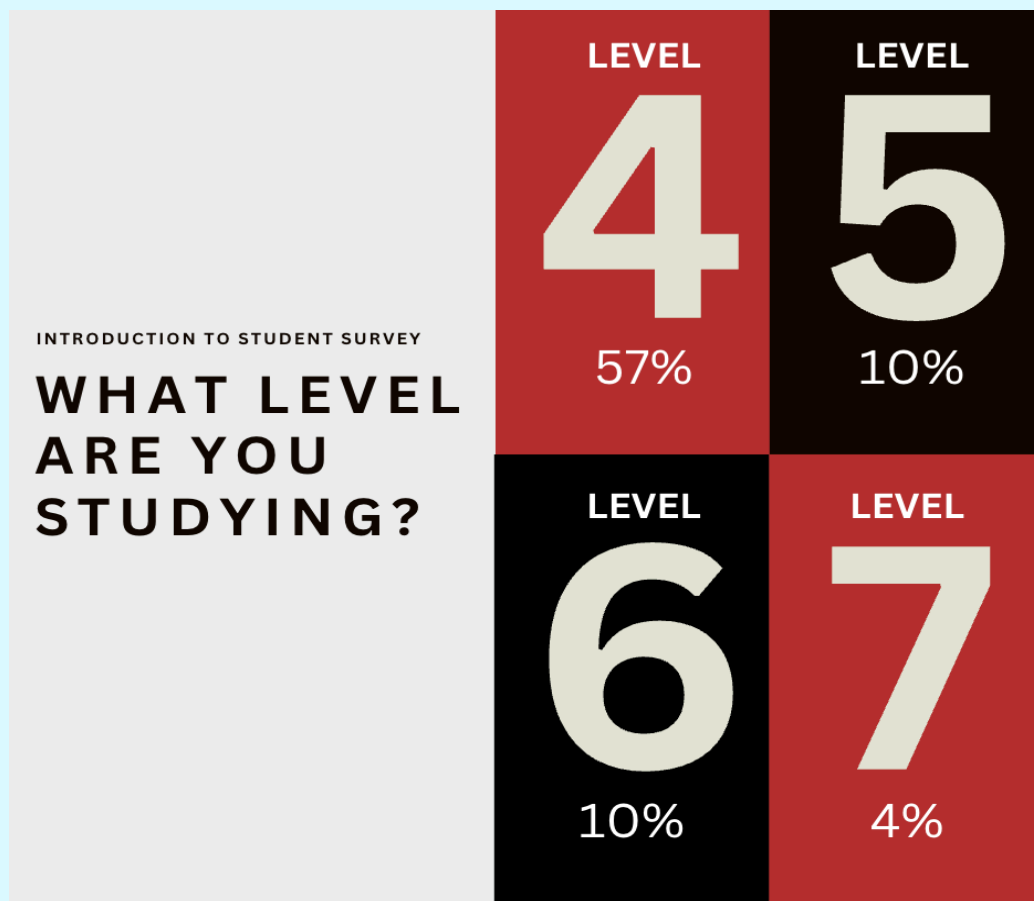


Fig.2 Student survey respondents by level

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Grading's impact on mental health, motivation, and mindset

There is significant evidence that grades serve as a strong extrinsic motivator and can contribute to higher student academic performance (Chamberlain *et al*, 2023). Findings further highlight the potential Grades have on motivation, however, this potential may not always have a positive effect.

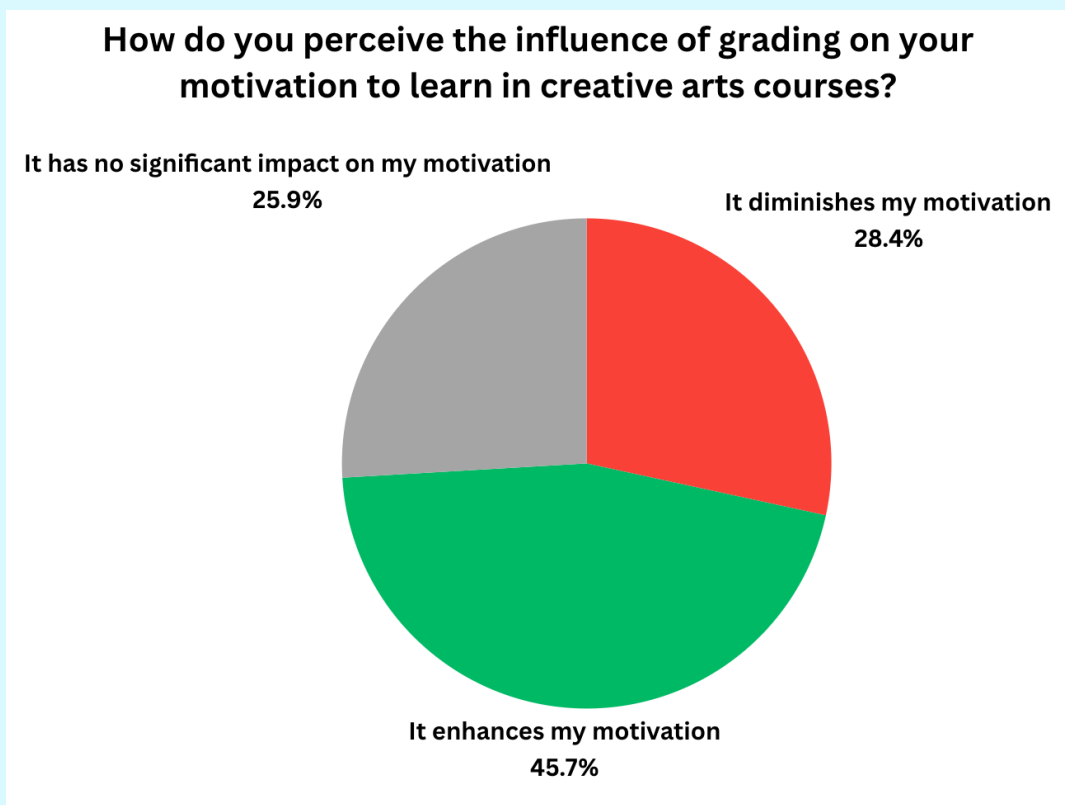


Fig.3

Data reveals that grading enhances students' motivation but some students experienced the opposite effect, with grading diminishing their motivation, emphasising the impact it has on academic performance as illustrated in Fig.3.

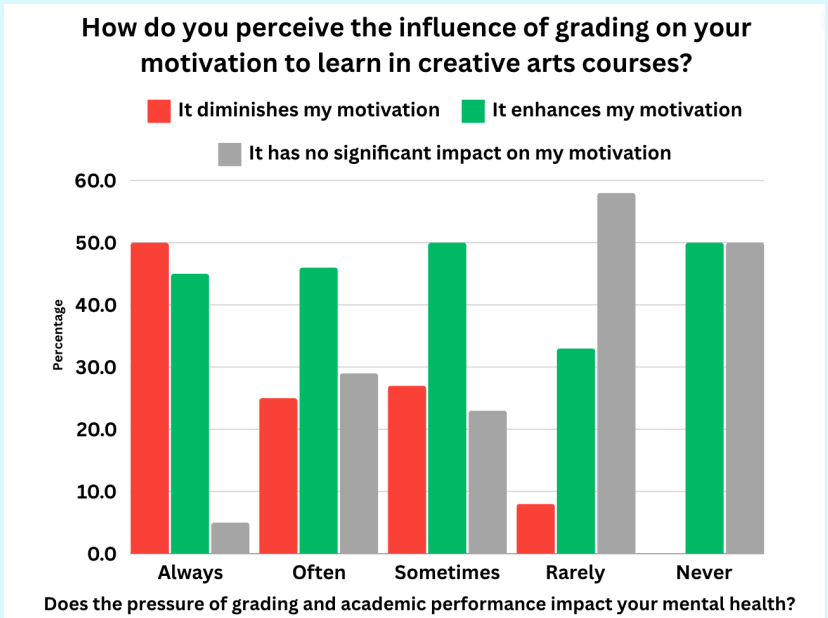
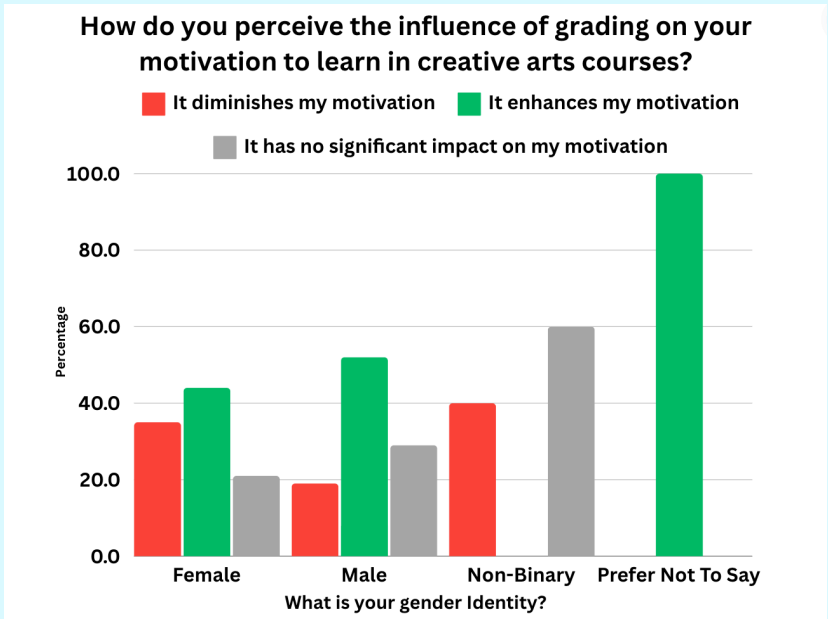
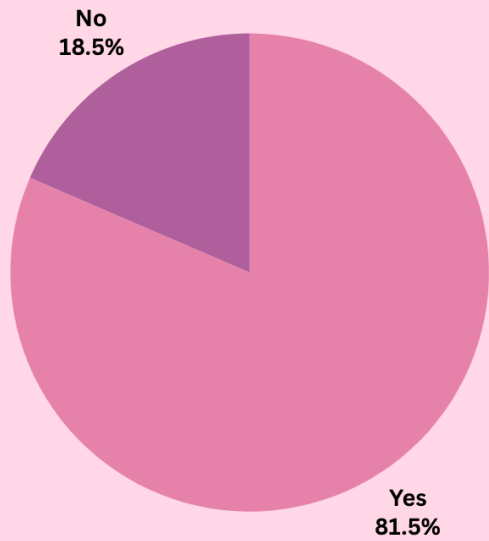


Fig.4&5

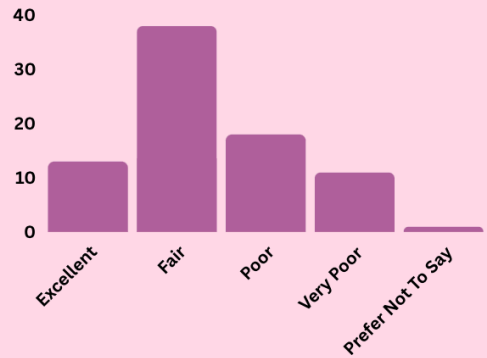
When comparing the influence of grading on motivation against more specific demographics the results arrive at some interesting conclusions. Male respondents were much less likely to experience diminished motivation, compared to female and non-binary students (Fig.4). Further investigation is needed to understand the complexities of grading on gender and intersectional experiences.

Comparing the same data to how students respond to the pressure of grading and academic performance on their mental health the results seem obvious. 0% of students that are never affected by the pressures of grading or academic performance experienced diminished motivation (Fig.5).

# Mental Health Overview



Have you experienced any stress or anxiety when receiving formative or summative feedback?



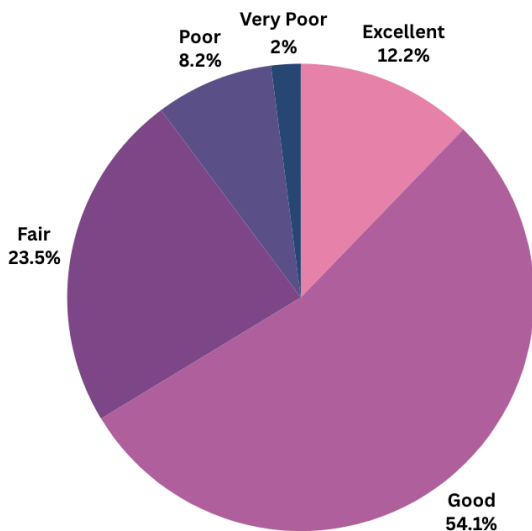
How would you currently rate your overall mental health and well-being?



Does the pressure of grading and academic performance impact your mental health?

Fig.6

How do you categorise your your motivation levels within your creative arts degree?



How would you currently rate your overall mental health and wellbeing?

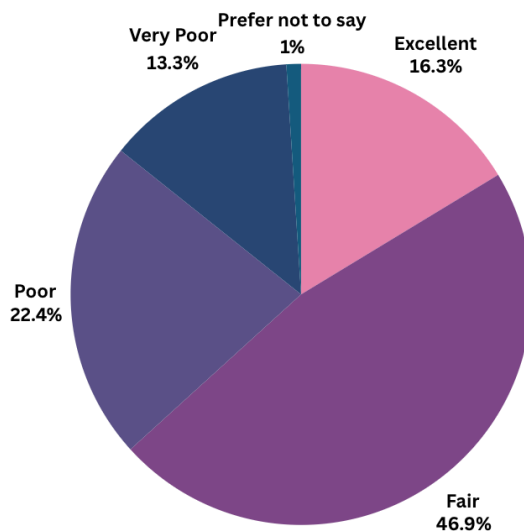


Fig.7

Fig.6&7 highlight a strong correlation between overall mental health and motivation levels. It also revealed the prominence of anxiety and stress when receiving formative or summative feedback.

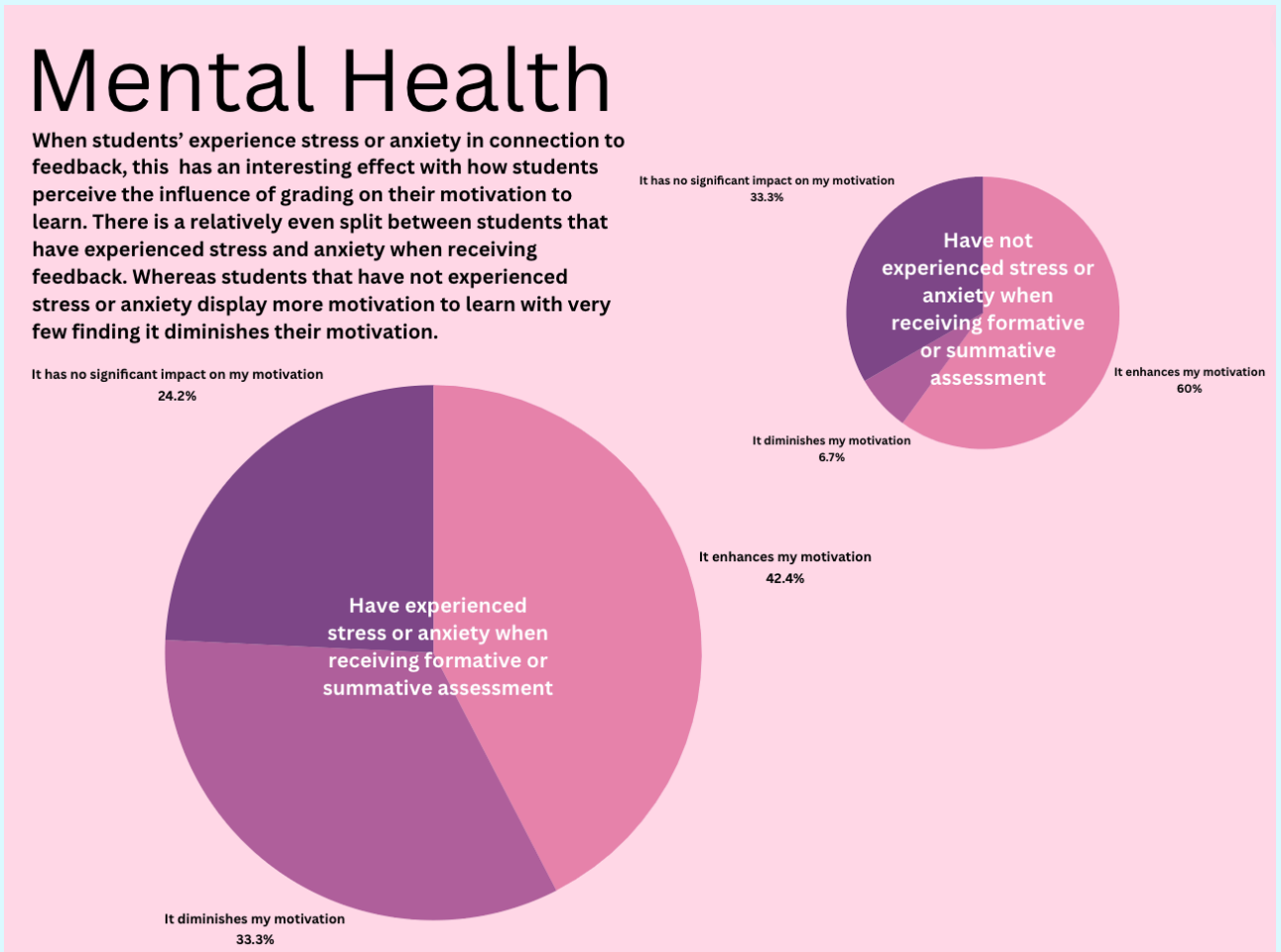


Fig.8

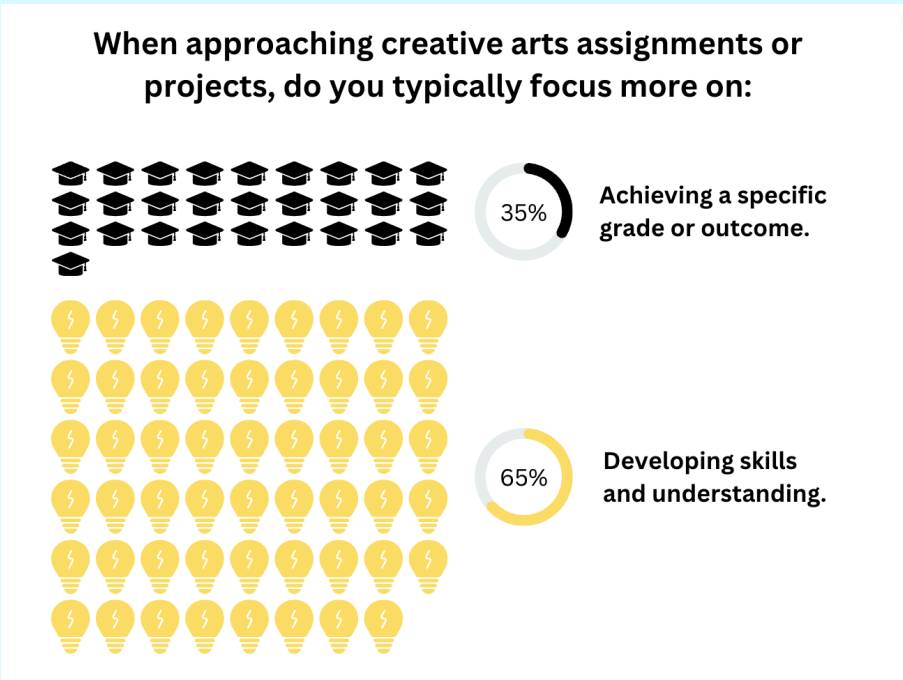
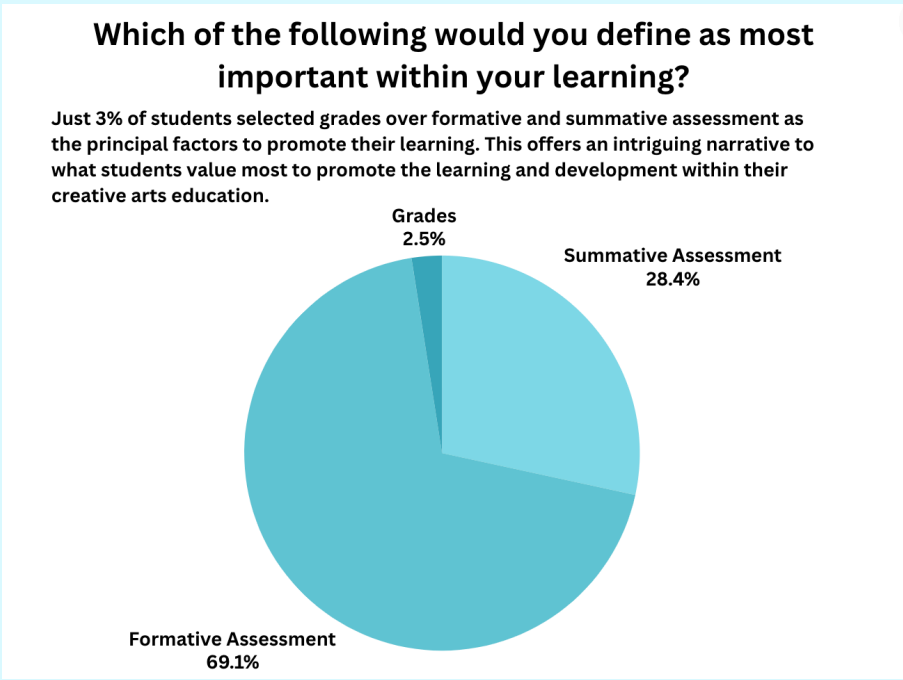


Fig.9

Fig.10

When comparing the responses above (Fig.9&10), the following links are formed:

- Students selecting both formative and summative assessment are more likely to focus on developing skills and understanding.
- Whereas 100% of students that focused more on achieving grades entirely focused on the grade versus developing skills.



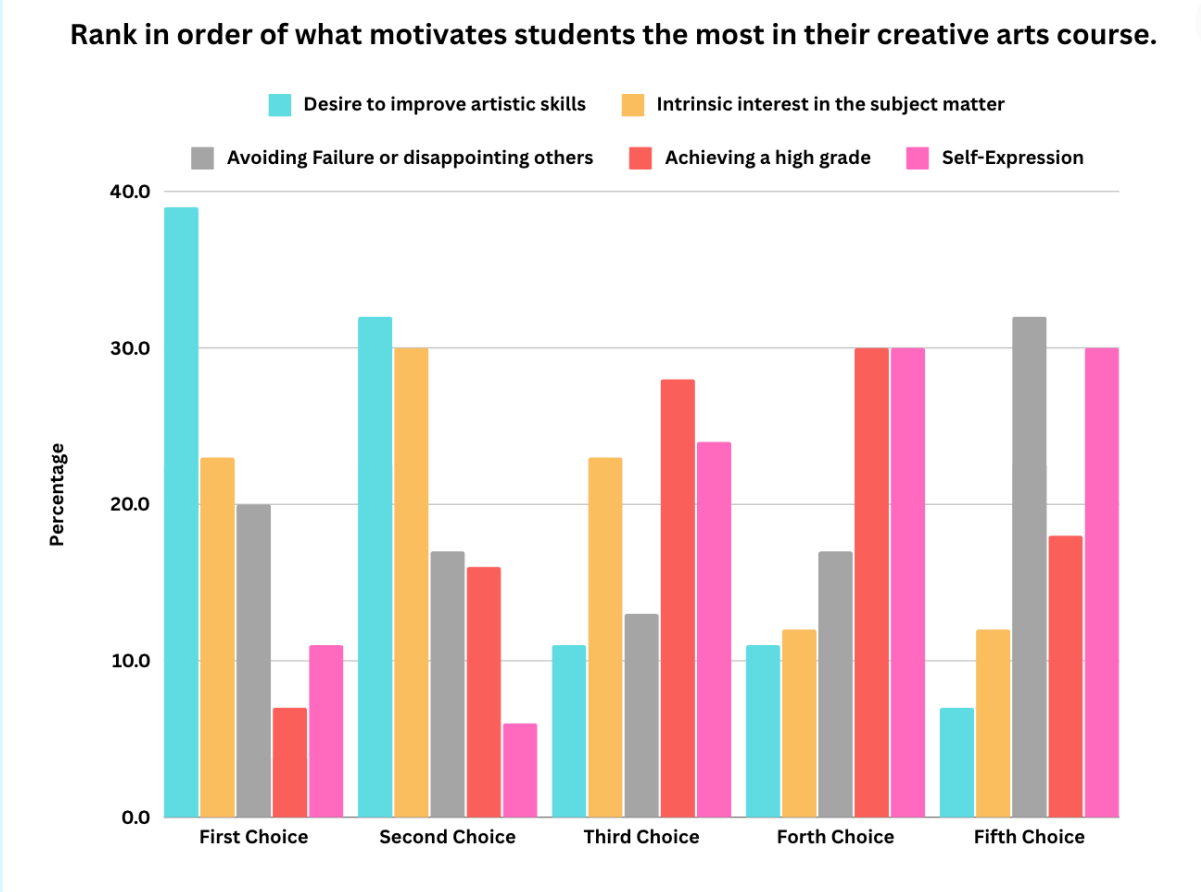
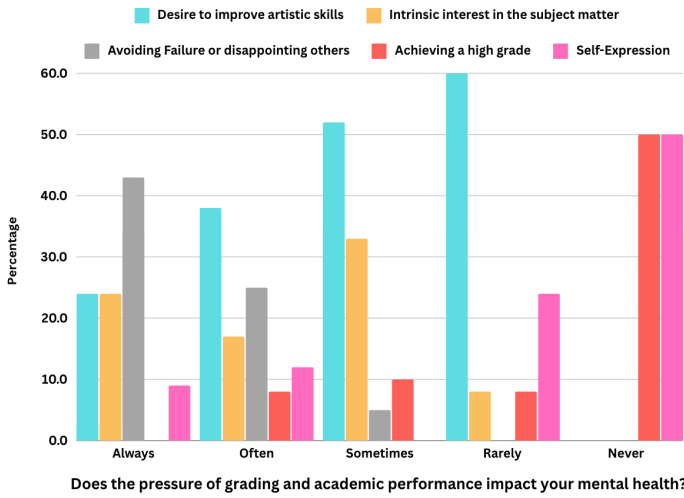


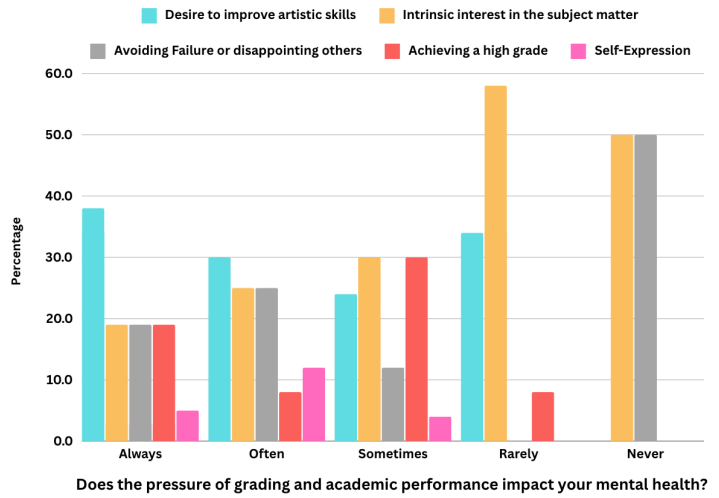
Fig.11

Fig.11 findings provide further insight into student motivators, with a desire to improve skills and intrinsic interest in the subject area being top. Grades, in this scenario, hold the least motivational value out of the options provided. This finding can be further supported by the data in Fig.9 with just ~3% of students choosing grades over formative/summative assessment as the principal factor to promote their learning.

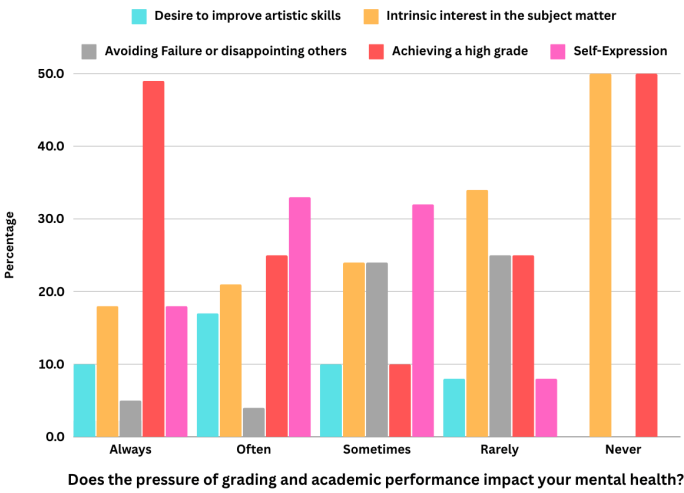
**How Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Dictate Intrinsic/Extrinsic Motivations  
FIRST CHOICE**



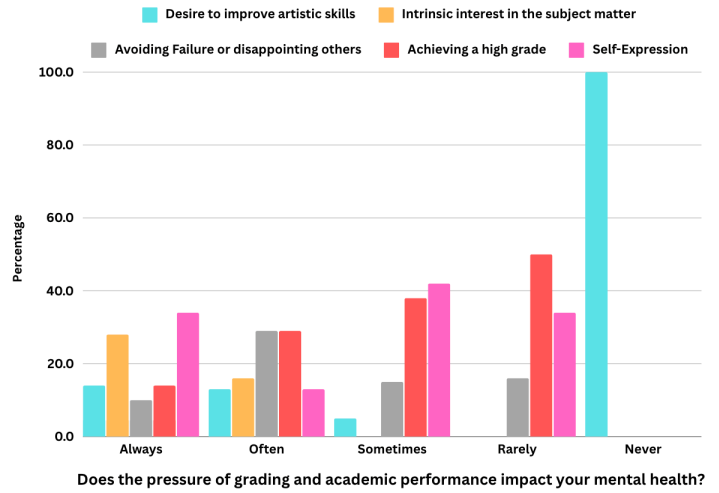
**How Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Dictate Intrinsic/Extrinsic Motivations  
SECOND CHOICE**



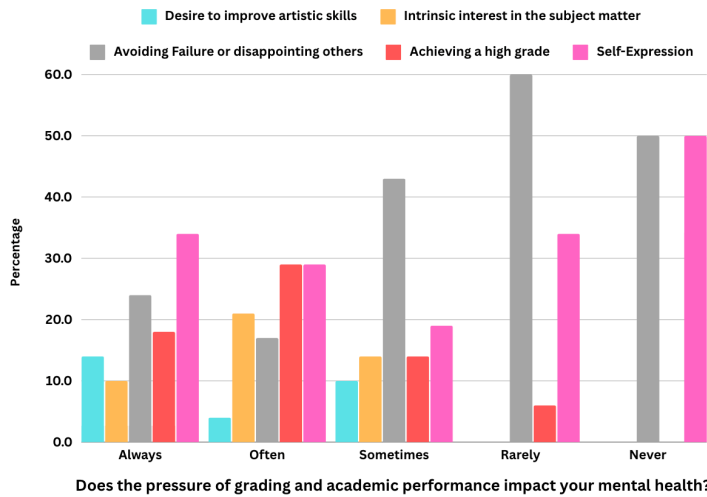
**How Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Dictate Intrinsic/Extrinsic Motivations  
THIRD CHOICE**



**How Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Dictate Intrinsic/Extrinsic Motivations  
FORTH CHOICE**



**How Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Dictate Intrinsic/Extrinsic Motivations  
FIFTH CHOICE**



There is a clear relationship between mental health, motivation, and mindset. Findings suggest that poor mental health contributes to students prioritising grades even if this has the potential of contributing towards diminished motivation levels within their learning. This focus could result in the adoption of a failure avoidance mindset (Dweck, 2014). This is particularly evident in students who feel overwhelmed by grading pressures and whose mental health is impacted by academic performance. These students tend to prioritise avoiding failure and not disappointing others as their main motivators (Fig.12&13).

#### **4.2 Ungrading, quality assurance, and institutional barriers**

The literature review and interview findings revealed that ungrading could benefit student motivations and learning over traditional assessment methods. However, academics and institutions are bound by institutional barriers, quality assurance measures, and government regulatory bodies (OfS, 2018; QAA, 2019), which require students to achieve a certain mark in order to progress.

According to Participant 1 (Appendices 1:1-2) students, accustomed to grading systems from their previous schooling, desire grades to know where they stand in preparation for Level 6 studies. Furthermore, educators are not only concerned with individual student needs, but are also evaluated based on their students' performance in exams (Participant 1, Appendices 1:3).

“The reason why we haven't rolled ungrading out to all levels [...] is for pragmatic reasons [...] as it could disadvantage some student's job prospects as employers wouldn't understand why some degrees are graded and others are not [...] and people wouldn't come to us to study because they want a result” (Participant 1, Appendices 1:15).

This approach can be problematic as the pursuit of institutional targets can also lead to grade inflation (Michelson, 2023). Achievement data can be seen as “controversial, as it may encourage higher marks to be assigned, this can be further complemented by university policies and grade averaging” (Participant 1, Appendices 1:5-6). Another barrier for the implementation of alternative, inclusive

assessment practices may fall under “ignorance and the reluctance to accept change from the long established academic norms”. (Participant 3, Appendices 3)

This signals the need for a radical shakeup of the educational system as a whole, as it raises the question - who really benefits from grades, students or academic institutions?

“So I fundamentally think that, especially at school level, grades should be abandoned. I think we should take more of an interest in the students' individual learning and how we assess that and how we write that down, how we record it, that's probably the biggest challenge”. (Participant 6, Appendices 6)

To relieve some of the stress and anxiety surrounding grades, and to help students settle into university life, some institutions have made the first unit at Level 4 ungraded (Participant 1, Appendices 1:1-2). This indicates that there are further opportunities for educators to experiment with and design their curriculum with principals of the ungrading pedagogy or alternative inclusive pedagogies weaved into the graded model.

#### **4.3 The future of grading and inclusive student-centred assessment**

The Burgess Report (2007) concluded that the classification grading system had served its purpose and is no longer fit for the complexities of modern higher education; further recommendations from HEAR (2012) also called for more transparent systems to support the diverse variety of student achievements (Participant 1, Appendices 1:3). Decades have passed since these reports and the emergence of artificial intelligence puts creative education back on the cusp of a revolution once again - what does it mean to grade students' creativity in an age of AI?

“AI writing will become the norm [...] and we're entering a period of “post plagiarism” [...] we have to acknowledge that because the way that we write is changing, we have to redefine things”. (Participant 5, Appendices 5:14-15)

AI has potential to revolutionise creative education by energising students to learn for the joy of learning and de-center their motivation of learning to achieve a grade (JISC, 2023). As Compton (2023) explains, the urgency to respond to new technologies could create “a more personalised, process-focused, and humanised approach to assessment” which is “desirable but also driven by a need to engage with new ways of teaching, learning, and assessing”. A humanistic and critical approach to redefining grades pulls educators closer towards facilitators of experiential learning; students remain autonomous, embracing self-reflection and self-discovery at the heart of their learning (Rogers, 2011). Participant 5 (Appendices 5:7) further states:

“Students have to be engaged in the conversations about what you're doing and why you're doing it [...] that is critical pedagogy [...] it's saying we are challenging the hegemony of grades! Also, the hegemony of a conservative established system where “I” the authoritative academic filling your empty vessels, your empty brains with knowledge.”

Far from empty vessels, creative students are deep pools of imagination; 65% of survey respondents stated that they are motivated by a desire to develop their own artistic skills and understanding. Results also showed that a few respondents felt ungrading could allow for more autonomy to be creative (Appendices 6:2). However, very few seemed to understand the benefits of ungrading to facilitate risk-taking and experimentation, highlighting the need to foreground assessment. As Stommel (2022) urges, “grading and assessment can't be compassionate, unless it's work we do with students rather than something that happens to them”. Participant 6 (Appendices 6) highlighted how they conduct this work with students' by supporting their understanding through embedded assessment literacy.

“Assessment literacy is the most important thing that you can do in terms of helping students to understand [...] the learning outcomes and [...] what each band of grade means for each student” (Participant 2, Appendices 2).

The research highlights educators' forward-thinking approach implementing more inclusive grading and assessment; addressing the challenges of contemporary

curriculum and nudging students away from the extrinsic motivation learnt through being graded at school. At the core of this is open dialogue with students and peer-to-peer learning to develop their assessment literacy.

## 5. Conclusion

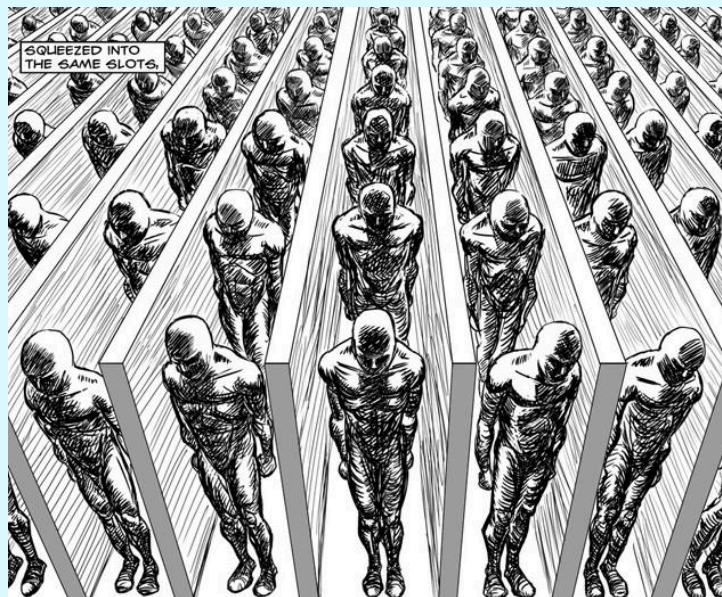


Fig.17 *Squeezed into the same slots* (2014)

Assessing creativity is at odds with standardised grading and may continue to inhibit students if educators, HE institutions, industry, and policy makers do not collectively respond to the challenges and changes needed:

“It’s easier to process large quantities of numbers rather than trying to assess large quantities of creative individuals or individual thinking, that’s a real challenge [...] if we have to write 600 words instead of just giving 2 numbers [...] where do we find the time?”. (Participant 6, Appendices 6:8)

“‘Assidere’ is the Latin root for the word assessment, and it actually means ‘to sit beside’. Sitting beside someone as an assessment is very much different to the sort of evaluative definition of assessment which is to walk between tables, scrutinising people [...] I think we’ve got a skewed understanding of what assessment means, what its purpose is”. (Participant 5, Appendices 5:5).

As Orr and Shreeve (2017:136) state, “student learning is supported when [students] are active agents in the assessment” and so we must reimagine what grading and assessment mean today, in collaboration with students, in order to create a more inclusive and student-centred approach.

Recommendations to adopt inclusive, humanistic, and social justice approaches (Hanesworth, 2019) include:

- continued professional development on evolving assessment practices.
- ungraded or pass/fail grading.
- peer-to-peer feedback, formative feedback and feed-forward feedback.  
Grades often act as the end of learning for students but feed-forward summative feedback is key to facilitate learning beyond the grade (Winston & Boud, 2022:663).
- self-assessment that is formatively updated and changed according to the students’ learning journey.
- marking rubrics in line with subject benchmarks.
- introducing assessment literacy early in the curriculum.

Briggs (2024) speculates on evolving assessment practices and the benefits of adopting them - “course leaders get a potentially much richer, more varied marking experience, driven by in-person conversations about subject expertise”. Grading is deeply rooted with tangential links to industry, quality assurance, and government policy so further research and collaborative dialogue is needed to ensure grading and assessment facilitate inclusive student-centred learning.



## List of Illustrations

Cover: Pietrzyk, A. (s.d.) *Ungrading* [Graphic Illustration] At: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/ungrading-light-4-simple-ways-to-ease-the-spotlight-off-points> (Accessed 15/06/2024).

Fig. 1 Sousanis, N. (2014) *Unflattening* [Comic Illustration] At: <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/Ln7J10yn9iA/maxresdefault.jpg> (Accessed 15/06/2024).

Fig. 2 to 17 Bell, A., Bragadottir, H., Lacey, L., Payne, R., and Sood, P. (2024) *Student survey results* [Charts and Graphs] In possession of: the authors: see Appendices 7.

Fig. 17 Sousanis, N. (2014) *Squeezed into the same slots* [Comic Illustration] At: <https://www.pinterest.com/nsousanis1/> (Accessed 15/06/2024).

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# Appendices

**Appendices 1** - Interview: Participant 1, Professor/Education Leader at UK HE Arts Institution - [Interview Transcript](#)

**Appendices 2** - Interview: Participant 2, EDI Academic Advisor & Senior Lecturer at UK HE Arts Institution - [Interview Transcript](#)

**Appendices 3** - Interview: Participant 3, Course Leader & Senior Lecturer (MA Photography) at UK HE Arts Institution - [Interview - Transcript](#)

**Appendices 4** - Interview: Participant 4, Learning Technologist at UK HE Arts Institution - [Interview Transcript](#)

**Appendices 5** - Interview: Participant 5, Artificial Intelligence & Innovation in Education Leader at UK HE Institution - [Interview Transcript](#)

**Appendices 6** - Interview: Participant 6, Senior Lecturer at UK HE Arts Institution - [Interview Transcript](#)

**Appendices 7** - Student survey questions and results - [Review of Student Survey](#)

**Appendices 8** - Documentation of team research - [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ErsQ3ppCm26uD0T9YWcVTJRm3gwrupzK?usp=drive\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ErsQ3ppCm26uD0T9YWcVTJRm3gwrupzK?usp=drive_link)