



Queen Margaret University

LEARNING ENHANCEMENT AND
ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

Pass/fail grading as compassionate assessment

LTA Connect, UHI
31 October 2024

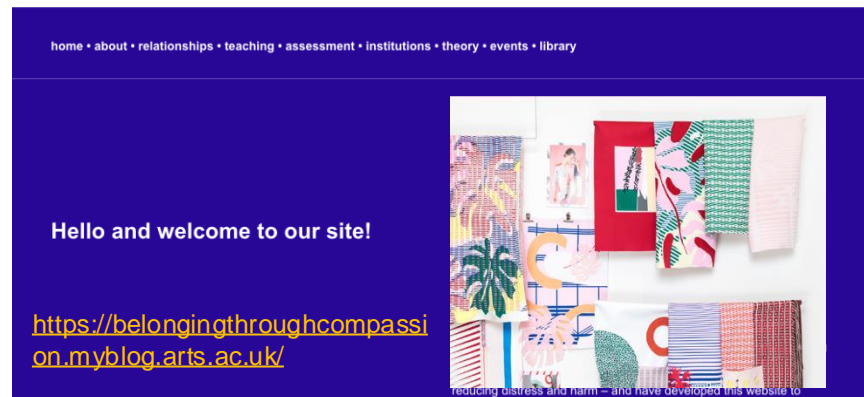
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Queen Margaret University,
Scotland





ual:
Belonging Through Compassion



*Lost as we feel there is no better compass than compassion –
Amanda Gorman*



Compassion

'To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin'
(bell hooks, 1994, p.13)

'...compassion means the noticing of social or physical distress to others and the commitment to reduce or prevent that distress'
(Theo Gilbert, 2017, p.189)

'..motivation to act/acting to alleviate suffering'
(Strauss et al, 2016, p15).

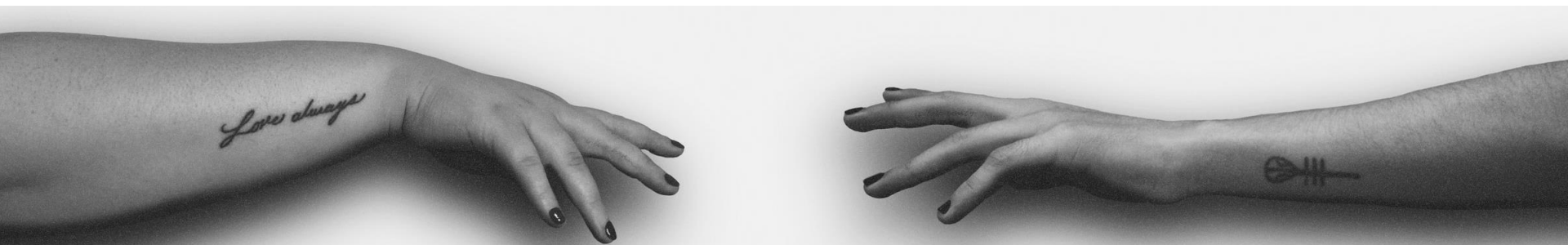




No Detriment policies

UAL stated that the implementation of a pass/fail grade for all Level 4 units was *“in order to simplify the assessment process and ease the pressure during a very stressful time for staff and students and in an exceptional external context.”*

(Level 4 Regulation Amendment Guidance Note for staff
- 1 April 2020)

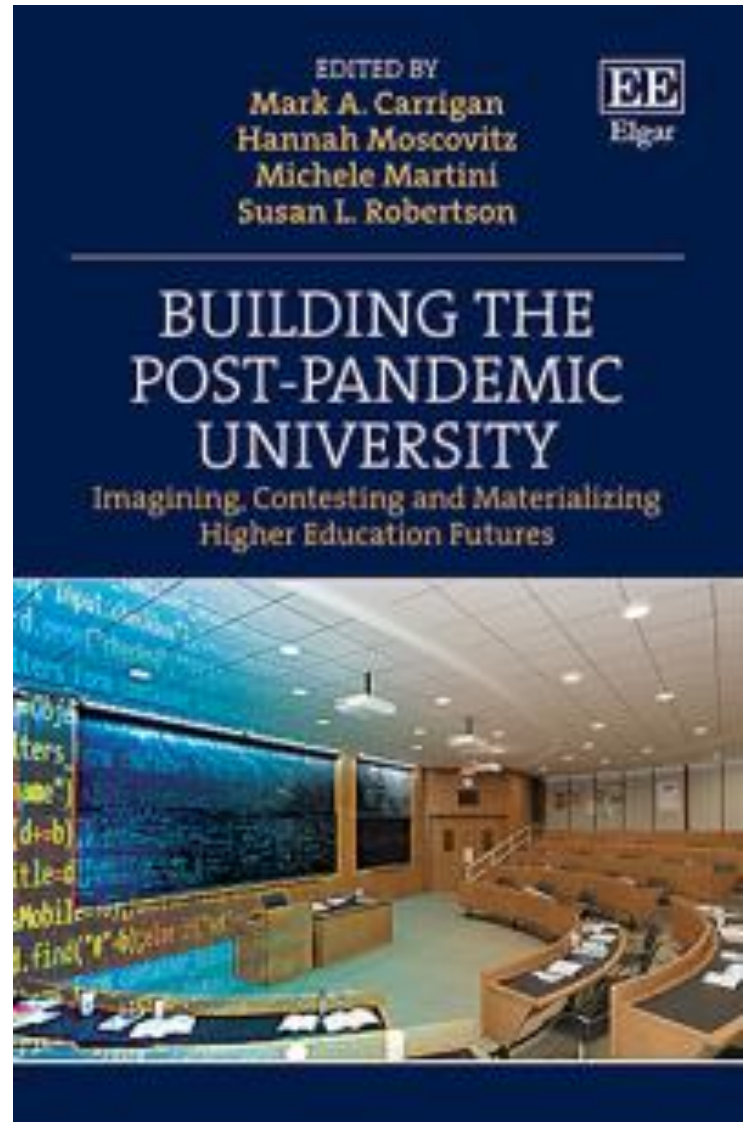




Enacting compassion during the pandemic: academic staff experience of a No Detriment Policy on pass/fail assessment

- emotional impact of personal beliefs on policy enactment,
- translating policy into compassionate praxis
- institutional barriers to compassionate enactment.

Hill, V. (2023) Enacting Compassion during the pandemic: academic staff experiences of a No Detriment Policy on pass/fail assessment in Carrigan, M., Moscovitz, H., Martini, M. and Robertson, S. (Eds) [Building the Post-Pandemic University: Imaging, Contesting and Materializing Higher Education Futures](#). Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd





Why do we need to rethink graded assessment?

'Deliberate, systematic quality assurance ensures that assessment processes, standards and any other criteria are applied consistently and equitably, with reliability, validity and fairness' (QAA, 2018, p.2).

- Unreliability and inconsistency of lecturer assessment practices (Yorke, 2008)
- Fixed habits (Wolf, 1995)
- Lack of engagement with criteria (Ecclestone, 2001),
- Complexity of decisions making (Bloxham et al, 2016)
- Norm-referencing (Bloxham, Boyd & Orr, 2011).





Pass/fail

- Letter grading designed in the 19th century to '*very explicitly to sort students by ranking them based on their performance*' along a perceived continuum (Rose, 2016, p.167).
- Grading can:
 - reduce the quality of students thinking;
 - diminish interest in the task
 - create a preference for easy tasks(Kohn, 2011)
- Pass/fail assessment has been shown to reduce stress and improve wellbeing (Bloodgood, 2009)
- Grading normalised as staff and students are conditioned to work within a system that '*emphasizes objective measures of performance, ranking, and quantitative marks*' (Stommel, 2018).





Rethinking Assessment? Research into the affective impact of higher education grading

Liz Bunting, Dr Neil Current, Vikki Hill & Dr Emily Salines

- Qualitative study explored 32 undergraduate students' experiences of pass/fail grading situated within a social constructivist, interpretivist paradigm (Rust et al., 2005).
- Offered interviews via 121, peer interview or email (including audio & visual)
- The peer interview method influenced by Heron's (2020) friendship method of guided conversation that '*provides insights into issues and aspects delineated, defined and explained by the students themselves*' (Heron, 2020, p.4).
- Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) as a flexible, analytical method and took a deductive approach in constructing our themes.
- <https://journals.gre.ac.uk/index.php/compass/article/view/1496>





Themes

We found that grades can have a significant emotional impact in four interrelated ways:

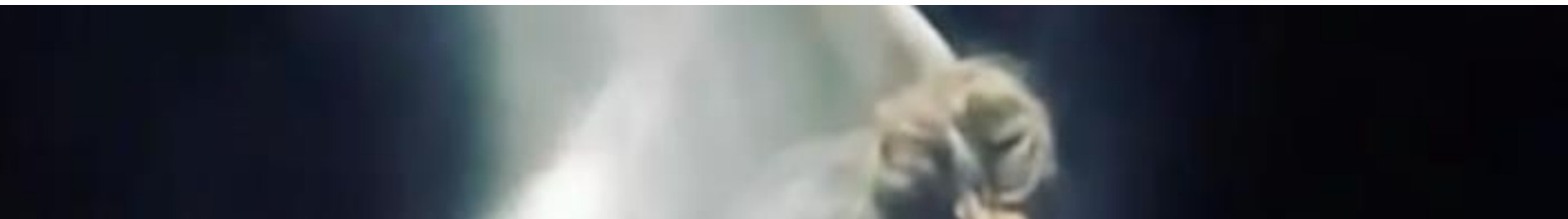
- they are a source of stress and anxiety,
- they can shape learner identity,
- they can present a barrier to student creativity and bringing their whole self to assessment,
- and they can influence peer relationships.





Impact of grading on stress and anxiety

I was having like some major anxiety issues. And if I hadn't had pass and fail, I don't know what I would have done at that time. It helped me get through my work. And even though I was like demotivated and I was not feeling well, I actually got it still done because the fact that like, okay, I'll do my best, even though it's not my best, but I'll do the best over that period of time for me. So at least it got me through the next year. (Year 1 student)





The impact of grading on learner identity and self-worth

*I'm one of those people has to be like a perfect person. So even with a B I'm like, why didn't I get an A? ... And then your whole mood just goes, because you just think about it constantly, constantly, over in your head.
(Year 1 student)*





Impact of grading on self-expression and creativity

“Because you know like there's two paths that you can pick, there's a path where you know you'll get a good grade, and then there's a path you know is right for you but you're not sure how that person will perceive that” (Year 1 student)





Impact of grading on peer relationships

*Because as you say, like, you don't want to sound arrogant, but like, say with me, like there's been me and a couple of other people who've been the people in the lessons who have always had our cameras on, always answered questions, always been in the studio as soon as the studio opened. And like we try hard. And for me I can tell who's not as present. So for them to come out of all the units with the **exact** same grade as me, even though from surface level I'm trying a hell of a lot harder than they are, is kind of irritating... are they here in a pass (hand signal lower) and I'm here in a pass (hand signal higher)?
(Year 1 student)*



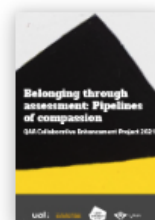
Belonging through Assessment: Pipelines of Compassion

At each stage of assessment, how our students experience feelings of belonging is critical to their involvement with their learning processes and their identification as successful learners. This QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project set out to explore how institutional regulations and practice regarding assessment can impact students' sense of belonging.

This collaboration aimed to:

- identify areas of enhancement in assessment policies and practices to promote students' sense of belonging and tackle issues of social justice
- link this relational work with the attainment gap/awarding differentials agenda in the creative arts
- develop collaborative, dialogic, effective resources for staff development across the HE sector.

Read the full project report



Belonging through assessment: Pipelines of compassion - project report

Publication date: 08 Feb 2023

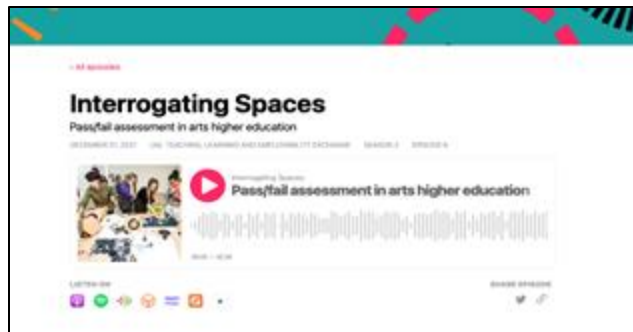
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Research / Evaluation findings

- 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 transition into university.
- Pass/fail grading enabled some students to feel free to experiment, play, have more freedom and take risks in their creative practice.
- Letter or number grading can create a more competitive rather than collaborative environment.





Ten challenges of pass / fail grading

1. Pass / fail is unfamiliar - can cause additional anxiety
2. Can be destabilising - needs careful explanation.
3. Can be perceived as lowering standards.
4. Signals “just a pass” - can impact motivation and effort.
5. Does not recognise high achievement.
6. If only used at level 4 (year 1) can cause assessment literacy challenges when moving to year 2.
7. Fears of how it will be perceived by employers.
8. Removes compensation, no such thing as a marginal fail.
9. Runs counter to prevailing UK policy around signaling higher achievement and excellence.
10. Pass / fail is a rarity in UK context which requires continual justification.





Ten benefits of pass / fail grading

1. Removes students' focus from grades to learning.
2. Can help activate intrinsic motivation and self-regulation.
3. Can create space for conversations about assessment and learning.
4. Can encourage greater engagement with feedback.
5. Can benefit student mental health.
6. Can encourage a more cooperative rather than competitive learning environment.
7. Can encourage greater access to additional learning opportunities, co- & extra-curricular, societies, volunteering etc.
8. In first year, can create a common space for students of different backgrounds to transition into HE.
9. Can lead to greater marking consistency.
10. Reduces concerns about grade inflation.



Do No Harm: Bringing Compassion, Joy and Social Justice Into Assessment

How might our assessment practices cause harm?

How might our assessment practices cause harm?
Dr Jan McArthur & Vikki Hill

<https://padlet.com/DecoloniseTheArtsCurriculum/DoNoHarm>



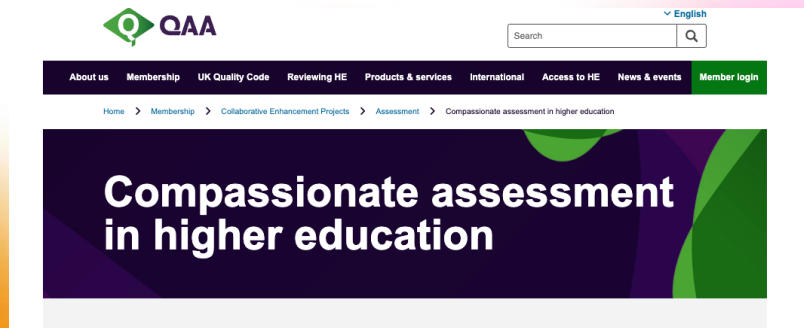
Compassionate Assessment Network

- Share good practices and policies.
- Encourage research and collaboration related to compassionate assessment.
- Co-create resources to support greater compassion in assessment.
- Empower ourselves and others to bring about change to the sector.

<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/membership/collaborative-enhancement-projects/assessment/compassionate-assessment-in-higher-education>

21 November, 10:00-11:00 (GMT)
Dr Juuso Henrik Nieminen

Dr. Nieminen's research concerns the social, cultural and political dimensions of educational assessment. Dr Nieminen has particularly focused on understanding the social effects of assessment on students' inclusion, belonging and identities. Book a space [here](#):





With thanks to collaborators

Prof Sam Broadhead, Dr Laura da Costa, Peter Hughes, Liz Bunting, Dr Emily Salines, Dr Neil Current, Allan Atlee, Prof Vicky Gunn, Robert Mantho, Dr Marianne Greated, Dr Thea Stevens, Dr Jan McArthur, Dr Maha Bail and Dr Kate Mori



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