# Re-thinking Grading

This presentation reports on a trial of non-graded assessment that I ran in 7015 HSV Disability theories and approaches. My rationale for choosing non-graded assessment in this course is threefold. The research and literature explores how students are increasingly prioritising a focus on assessment over learning and we've probably all seen that that a lot of student questions are really focused on what do I need to do for this particular assessment as opposed to a lot of engagement around key learning and course concepts. We also have a lot of research which shows that students have high stress rates and increasing mental health challenges, and I wondered if assessment might be one of the reasons why students are feeling that way. I'm also a big supporter of universal design for learning, our principles across all courses and there's some suggestion in the research and literature that this should move beyond just how we present our courses and also be embedded across assessment. I chose this specific course to have a look at non-graded assessment because it traditionally attracts quite small numbers of students under 50. There's also a high percentage of students in this group working in the disability field, so they have a lot of that work life balance issues. There's a high percentage of students with complex needs and responsibilities in this course. A lot of them attracted to this programme, which is the graduate certificate for disability studies because they themselves are disabled or their careers. There's also quite a few who haven't studied formally in many years, and I wondered if the assessment might be a bit of a stressful challenge for them because of that. And this course had very low retention rates. So you can see there that in 20/22/23 point 8.1% of students actually withdrew from the course and that's backed up in previous years as well, 2021 and 2020. And traditional ways of sort of dealing with the retention and trying to heighten it didn't work. So I was left thinking what else can I do, and I thought that having a look at the assessment might be a good place. There are multiple ways of approaching non-graded assessment. I went with a complete or incomplete mark. I still developed marking criteria and assessment outcomes, there just was no point system attached to that. I marked the papers and the assessment as I would any other, providing written feedback on each assessment item. So the process was actually no different, it was just that no mark was applied other than complete incomplete. I saw three different types of feedback on the experience for students. Put out a short mid trimester survey. It just had two open ended questions on it, and I got a pretty good response rate to that. The SEC and SAT's of course, and again not a bad response rate. And I also had six students who just sent me unsolicited feedback via email about the non-graded assessment. In Approaching Non-Graded Assessment, I had a bunch of questions and curiosities that I wondered about. I wondered if students would report lower rates of stress and anxiety with non-graded assessment. I wondered if they'd feel that their learning was enhanced due to this approach. I wondered with students with disabilities and diverse learning needs what they would report if they would feel that this was an improved situation for them for assessment. I wondered if the students overall experience of the course would be improved, and I wondered what would happen to that retention rate. I was a little nervous when I first put the course site together and I put in some information about why I had chosen a non-graded assessment for them, but their initial responses were really, really positive. So here's one student who sent me an unsolicited email saying that I noted that in one of your announcements you mentioned that you’re trialling the pass-fail approach. I want to give initial feedback. That's absolutely a wonderful approach. It really allows students the opportunity to focus on learning and improving our understanding our practise without the overwhelming stress of grades and marking criteria. So super positive. So based on all the feedback I received, I want to revisit to those questions and curiosities that I asked. Did students report lower rates of stress and anxiety with non-graded assessment? Yes, they did. So here's some quotes here of the student experience as a student who's working full time while studying part time and managing other life commitments. This approach to assignments of pass fail is far better for quality of life and mental health stress levels as well, another student said. I feel that non -graded assessments are more suitable for me as they reduce the anxiety around Marks and provide more confidence and equality with other students. I feel the absence of graded assessment is really helpful in the learning of the course and has a huge positive impact on my mental health. In terms of mental health and well-being, I can 100% say with confidence that I much prefer this approach. So really positive responses around that question, Students absolutely did feel that they're learning was enhanced. I have two quotes here. With this non-graded approach I can focus on genuinely learning and taking a deeper dive into what I'm studying. For this reason I give this approach a 10 out of 10. I feel less stressed and find studying more enjoyable in this course. In the past, I started feeling stressed about IT investment or exams before the course even starts. Now I feel that I can spend my time going through the course content rather than focusing on passing the assessment or exam. Did students with disabilities and diverse learning needs report an improved experience of assessment and learning? Yes, they did. I think personally the non-graded approach is more accommodating learning styles, abilities and disabilities. And then another student shared this course seems to be much more inclusive of different learning styles, embracing the many ways in which people learn and understand information. Well done for your creativity and your ability to consider that people are all different in the way that they learn and hopefully many students have also benefited from this style of learning. What students overall experience of the course improved? Yes, it was. We got a 4.7 SEC in 2023 and we've had an average of 4.5 in the last three years. So the course has always been well received, but we have seen a bump this year that's an improvement of 4% over the last three years of SEC's. Was the retention rate improved? Happily, yes, it was in 2023, the withdrawal rate before census was 8.3%. That's actually a 286% improvement in retention rate from 2022. Or expressed another way, that's a threefold improvement in retention rates. I want to share now some critical feedback that I got. I had three students with negative comments, and that's across all of the different forms of feedback. There were only three students who had some critical feedback. The first student reported that they had initial concerns. However, they went on to feel that these concerns actually changed. They shared that this is my first experience of non-graded assessments. At first I became quite anxious about this because I'm so accustomed to calculating my scores on assessments for my overall scores and my subjects. Once I started to lean into the new approach, I started to realise that my overall anxiety towards the assessments began to reduce, and I was able to focus on doing my best for the assessment and focus less on worrying about the score I might receive. One student made a comment that they were initially anxious about knowing the way a fail was determined and one student had a negative comment on the SEC. I strive when I feel compelled to work towards a high standard. The fact that there's no way of knowing if you did exceptionally well or just passed cause me to feel less motivated to aim for a higher quality mark. So all really valid pieces of critical feedback there. So here's an overall snapshot of that feedback. I had 36 positive comments and three negative comments across all pieces of feedback, so I'm going to call that a success. One thing that I didn't actually expect was what the teaching experience would be like for me of running a non-graded course. Initially I really hadn't thought about that at all. I was more focused on the students experience of it. But I realised once I was about halfway through marking the first piece of assessment that it was actually having a really big impact on me as well. I hadn't realised how much. When we're marking papers, we have that marking schema in our mind. So you know as you're going through and you're making the paper, you're thinking about each criteria point and a rough mark you might give this particular paper compared to maybe another student’s paper. But freed of that obligation, I actually found that I was able to focus much more on the content of a paper or a piece of assessment and enter into it in a way that felt that much more deep connection with what the student was sharing with me and that felt really, really nice. So it was this improved focus for me on the content over the final mark that I was going to give a student as well. That was a really pleasing come for me. So what does this mean moving forward? So we know there's a major shake-up going on at the moment with assessments. Some of this is around the growth in AI tools and contract cheating, which we know is a massive problem and we've all been asked to think a little bit more creatively about how we approach assessment moving forward. So I'm, I'm still really curious about that has this, does this have an impact on levels of academic integrity and contract cheating? And that's a curiosity that I'm going to investigate further moving forward. It's also a recognition that UDL principles are embedded in assessment did seem to make a difference for students and I'm really curious about this moving forward as well. So I plan to repeat this trial in 2024 to see if the results are consistent across cohorts. And I'm also working with a colleague to undertake further research on this approach. These are the references they used in this presentation. But there is actually a massive growth in looking at ingraining, non-grading. Lots of different terms are being used, but there's currently a bit of an explosion about looking at changing the way that we focus on assessment. Thanks so much for having a listen to my presentation and please reach out and contact me if you have any questions or you would like to try this for your own course. I'm happy to provide some support and information for you. Thank you.