

An Investigation into Student Experiences of Feedback First

Link to article: [IMPact | An Investigation into Student Experiences of Feedback First | Web](#)
Digital Object Identifier (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.82406/30jh-4278>

Jessica Phillips¹ and Dr William Burkitt²

¹Year 2 Undergraduate Student Researcher

²Senior Lecturer in Psychology

College of Health and Science, School of Psychology, Sport Science & Wellbeing
University of Lincoln

Abstract

Research has demonstrated that grading has many negative impacts on student mental health, wellbeing and motivation. This study aimed to assess if implementing an “Ungrading” approach, known as Feedback First, would successfully increase student wellbeing and promote personal development. Grades are often tied to student motivation and wellbeing, which can cause drops in self-esteem and resilience. Therefore, the Feedback First approach has been proposed as an alternative to providing grades. It emphasises feedback which can help promote personal development skills, autonomy and engagement in the learning process. The Psychology, Sport and Wellbeing programmes at the University of Lincoln implemented Feedback First as a new approach to assess and provide feedback to first year students, and this study collected student feedback about their thoughts and experiences of Feedback First. Five participants (One first year student, five second year students; one male, five female) were recruited to take part in a focus group and had the opportunity to discuss Feedback First in a group environment. The results showed that students felt negatively about Feedback First largely due to poor feedback, and that it led to a decrease in motivation for assessments. The implications of these findings were that Feedback First may not be currently feasible when being applied to students in the UK until it is reformed.

Keywords: Ungrading, Feedback First, Student Wellbeing, Motivation

Introduction

Grading has been found to have negative impacts on student mental health and motivation (Chamberlin et al., 2023), this has led to the development of alternative

approaches to teaching and assessment. This study investigated if an “Ungrading” approach (removing letters and number grades in favour of on feedback and self-development) was feasible for assessments (Ferns et al., 2021) as it has been beneficial at other universities, such as Stanford University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Fung, 2020). Supported by the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Scheme (UROS) at the University of Lincoln, developed under the principles of Student as Producer model. I worked with tutors to plan, run and analyse the findings of a focus group evaluation on the Feedback First (FF) approach.

Project Background

One contributing factor to student mental health struggles are exam and grade systems due to academic pressure (Steare et al., 2023). Current grading practices at UK universities use percentage-based grades. However, grades are often linked to a student’s personal wellbeing as academic competence often becomes tied to a student’s self-esteem. Crocker et al (2003) found that psychology students’ self-esteem dropped when receiving a bad grade, but was increased when receiving a good grade, suggesting grades encourage contingent self-esteem (whereby self-esteem is influenced by performance on assessments). When students receive “bad” grades, it causes higher levels of anxiety and lower feelings of perceived competence (Chamberlin et al, 2023). However, intrinsic motivation where students have a positive feeling of autonomy, competence and relatedness lead to more positive engagement and increased interest in their degree (Trenshaw et al., 2016).

Feedback approaches focusing on intrinsic motivation have been shown to improve academic performance in students (Lin et al, 2003) and well-being (Howard et al., 2021; Lyboldt et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024). This is through prioritisation of personal development and reflection which are often overlooked. Grades also further cause tension between classmates due to peer comparison, causing unnecessary competition (Rohe et al., 2006). Consequently, there is a lack of risk-taking and creativity in assignments to avoid receiving bad grades (Clark & Soutter, 2023).

As a response across the HE sectors some institutions have introduced ungrading approaches. This is defined as decentralising grades in assessments (removing achieved percentage) and instead emphasising feedback (Ferns et al., 2021). By doing so, studies have shown student engagement and wellbeing increases, and performance-related anxieties and stress decrease (Rohe et al., 2006; Shah, 2024; Stenson, 2025). This approach is theoretically underpinned by Self-Determination Theory, which suggests that reducing the controlling role of grades supports autonomy and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Although FF has extensive theoretical research, there is limited applied research. This has resulted in a need for an assessment of its feasibility in the context of the University of Lincoln to help target student stress and

burnout. This involved applying the FF approach within multiple psychology cohorts at the University of Lincoln during the academic year 2024/5.

Literature Review

By removing pressure and fear that comes with grades, students can focus more on learning outcomes and skill development (Shah, 2024). This enables deeper learning, conceptual understanding and reflection, which can be focused on without hindering academic performance. One approach to ungrading is simplifying grades into pass or fail (known as minimal grading), this is a successful method that has been introduced in elite American universities (Gorichanaz, 2024). Other strategies include self-assessing, peer assessing, contract grading and feedback-centred assessments (Stommel, 2018 as cited in Asaale, 2024). Regardless of the specific approach, ungrading has been shown to be successful.

Rohe et al. (2006) found that using pass-fail led to lower stress and peer competition alongside better moods. Additionally, Kjærgaard et al. (2024) reported that ungrading led to higher motivation (both intrinsic and extrinsic) and decreased surface learning habits (learning material to pass assessments rather than developing an understanding of knowledge). Students have been observed to enjoy learning more, feeling more responsible for their learning, taking more risks and were more creative (Hasinoff et al., 2024; Gorichanaz, 2024). These traits are fundamental for employers and reflect the importance of skill development. Notably, all studies did not find any changes to performance, suggesting ungrading does not harm attainment.

The Feedback First (FF) approach (based on Ungrading) was conceptualised by Miller et al. (2025) as a new approach to learning and assessment within higher education. Its aim was to reduce overall student stress whilst simultaneously developing different skills in students. The aim is to transition first year students to consider skill development (by encouraging intrinsic motivation) more than grades using a self-determination theory approach. Specifically, by considering student needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, the researchers devised specific goals necessary for each category to help create a clear transition to the FF approach. For example, autonomy focused on the ungrading approach, competence focused on skill development and feedback emphasis, and relatedness addressed collaboration. By creating this framework, FF could be trialled. The Psychology programme was chosen for its integrative grading approach that had already decentralised grading and emphasised practical skill development, knowledge application and critical analysis. With limited research on ungraded methods in the UK, it is important to assess UK students' adaptability given the large teaching and assessment differences (Dhillon, 2025).

Methodology

To most appropriately collect student feedback, focus groups were hosted to facilitate student led discussions about their experiences and views of FF honest and substantial feedback from students. This project was approved by the University of Lincoln Researchers Committee (ethics reference 2025_1749). Participants were recruited by advertising during lectures and tutorials on Psychology programmes at the University of Lincoln.

The pre-focus study group link comprised of several sections. Summary statistics were collected, and students completed a story completion task involving a first-year student ("Alex") being informed about the FF approach (see Table 1 for the full prompt).

Fifty students completed the questionnaire; six attended the in-person group – five females and one male, one first year and five second years. The focus group lasted 1 hour and 30 minutes and had eight pre-decided questions which explored different themes – see table 2. The themes were based on core FF ideas. There was flexibility for the researcher to ask follow-up questions. The focus group was recorded on both a Dictaphone and Microsoft Teams call to enable transcription – this was reviewed and edited before the thematic analysis took place.

Feedback First Project: Story Completion and Focus Group Questions

Instructions

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this Story Completion study. Below these instructions is the beginning of a story and we would like you to continue the story. There are no right or wrong ways of doing it and we would encourage you not to over-think your response but to write down whatever comes into your mind. There is no maximum word count, however, we'd really appreciate responses to be at least 200 words (this instructional section is 110 words for reference).

Story Completion Stem

In the first year of university, Alex is told that there would be more emphasis on feedback than getting grades. Alex is asked to focus on using the feedback to develop skills and knowledge. For some assessments, Alex works in a team with other students to complete assignments. How do you think Alex feels about approaching learning and assessment this way? Please complete the story explaining what happens next. _____

Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. Can you explain how you continued the story? (please feel free to share what you feel comfortable sharing in terms of your story)
2. How is this similar to your personal experiences?
3. How do you feel about the idea of emphasising feedback and development overgrades?
4. How has your relationship to feedback changed during your time at university?
5. What was it like to work in a team to complete an assessment/project?
6. How do you know if you are doing well at university?
7. Has this changed from when you started university and if so please say how?
8. How has the way you approach learning changed since you started university?

Table 1: The sheet used in the focus group detailing instructions to be read out to participants before the focus group began, the story prompt, and the discussion questions

Results

A reflexive thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) guide was followed. Themes were reviewed with other researchers to ensure they best reflected the focus group. Five main themes emerged with a total of eleven subthemes: see table 2.

Theme Title	Sub-Themes
Grades act as a motivator and performance indicator	• Students feel no pressure and put in minimal effort when there is no grade to aim for – “just passing” is enough • “Pass-Fail” still encourages performance comparison against peers • “Pass-Fail” approach causes decrease in motivation and interest
Ungrading leads to feeling unprepared for following years and future employment	• Students feel more stress entering years where grades are given due to lack of experience • Receiving grades is likened to receiving feedback at work so deemed as essential
Students are not used to FF approach and are unhappy with current feedback practices	• Students aren’t used to this type of assessment approach so feel negatively about FF • Students may be willing to adapt to FF if current feedback practices are improved
Group work	• Students’ opinions on group work fluctuates depending on personal experiences • Students believe group work is important and believe FF could work for group assignments

Theme Title	Sub-Themes
Grades are linked to personal wellbeing	• Receiving grades have greater effect on a student's wellbeing in comparison to FF, which affects motivation • Students feel it is important to experience the feeling of a "bad grade" for personal development

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes derived from focus group

Grades act as a motivator and performance indicator

Grades largely influence student motivation: there was a large decrease in motivation for all students within their first year of study. This is in contrast to previous findings, where there was positive reception in both attitudes and wellbeing (Trenshaw et al., 2016; Kjærgaard et al., 2024). This may not have been replicated because of the removed extrinsic motivator driving student effort. Therefore, students found it much easier to align with attitudes encouraging minimal effort, which was referred to colloquially as "pass only" by participants 17 times.

It is important to question why our findings did not align with the literature: one reason may be because our sample are familiar with the UK grading system, whereas the majority of feasibility trials of Ungrading took place in America. Entry into UK universities require specific grade boundaries to be met in particular subjects: however, US high schools award a single diploma which is more flexible when entering higher education (Kerckhoff et al., 2001). This may highlight a cultural difference where grading is essential for UK students to understand their performance in comparison to US students. So, FF may have had a negative effect as it challenges academic practices where performance is based solely on grades.

Ungrading leads to feeling unprepared for following years and future employment

Kjærgaard et al. (2024) found ungrading reduced student effort. Our findings support this as students do not adapt university workload in their first year, they struggle as they progress. Participant 3 stated in regard to their first year "towards the start, I cared about the feedback, I only need to get there [...], and then the stress coming into second year as well as getting grades [...] it adds stress on". These highlights students feel unprepared when they have not experienced grades at a university level. Participant 3 also drew similarities between grades and receiving feedback at jobs: "Go to a job you know [...] there's going to be people judging you [...] the sooner you can get used to it [...] that would be helpful." This comparison suggests eliminating grades may deprive students of experiencing evaluation and criticism, and feedback does not carry the same weight to students.

Students are not used to FF approach and are unhappy with current feedback practices

Students may have not aligned with FF due to being unaccustomed to ungrading. Participant 1 quoted “we’re used to getting grades” Previous research supports this, showing students struggle transitioning due to familiarity with grade-based practices (Asaale, 2024). Students therefore must reconsider how success is measured beyond letter grades/percentages, which may be difficult (Kohn & Blum, 2020). This is supported by Participant 2 quoting “When I came to university and there was no grades [...] there’s no motivation to actually want to do well, whereas at college I got a grade.”. This highlights that students are only motivated to succeed when quantitative measures of performance are used. Future feasibility assessments could implement short, educational lectures teaching students about ungrading and FF, which may help students understand how to redefine measures of success. For example, Hooper (2025) discussed with his students about ungrading as an alternative to grading and found students positively and engaged with assignments beyond expectations whilst questioning the purpose of grading within their education.

Group work

Students view group work positively for skill development but opinions swayed based on personal experiences: the word “luck” was mentioned 8 times by all participants. Students who stated they were “unlucky” believed they benefitted by learning how to manage a difficult team member: participant 1 stated “I think learning to deal with a difficult person isn’t a bad thing.” Students also felt positively about using FF to assess group work: participant 3 quoted “Having that feedback can let you know what you did in your contribution, regardless of the full grade.”. When asked about removing grades from group projects, Participant 3 replied “I think it would be fairer in some ways [...] the exercise is more about working with the research team.” This highlights group work is received positively by students and should be continued, which has been a similar in the literature (Kesler, 2025).

Grades are linked to personal wellbeing

Students strongly associated grades to personal wellbeing: those with “poor” grades exhibited higher stress and anxiety. Participant 2 said: “When I get bad grades, I feel like I have failed”. When the researcher asked if grades affect mental health, all participants agreed. Students see value in receiving lower grades, believing the experience develops long-term motivation. Participant 4 stated “Having some sort of grade initially would be a little bit upsetting, but even so you’d want to say ‘Ok, that’s where I am now. What do I do next?’”. This indicates why students felt negatively about FF: there is a belief that experiencing the feeling of receiving grades (predominantly perceived “bad grades”) is important for personal growth and resilience.

UROS Experience

The UROS experience was very positive for me and has been very beneficial to both my academic career and personal growth. I have gained more confidence in myself and I have enjoyed working on a research project. Being able to be hands-on with research planning, collection and analysing has made me feel much more prepared to complete my dissertation. Through UROS, I have completed many requirements of completing a dissertation, such as completing ethics forms, data collection and analysis and writing and I feel confident going into my final year.

Having a supervisor to support me on this project was very valuable and has helped me gain an understanding of my role within a research project and where I can contribute meaningfully. I have a better understanding on where I flourish when conducting research, and I feel positively about being able to apply these new skills.

Conclusion

Overall, our findings did contrast with previous literature and found that the FF approach did not significantly positively impact student wellbeing, motivation or engagement. Therefore, the FF approach may require some adaptation to be successful at the University of Lincoln as it was negatively perceived by our sample. However, by incorporating educational lectures to help students understand the benefits of FF, it may be possible to improve student perception and encourage greater acceptance of the approach. Further research is warranted to understand why our findings contrasted other literature. It is important to note all participants stated they were open to this approach with improved feedback systems – therefore, the FF approach can be revised for future reassessment.

References

- Asaale, S. (2024) Ungrading as an Alternative Assessment Method in Higher Education: A Comprehensive Review and Analysis. *Antistasis*, 14(1) 158–166.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2) 77–101.
- Chamberlin, K., Yasué, M. and Chiang, I.A. (2023) The impact of grades on student motivation. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 24(2) 109–124.
- Clark, S. and Soutter, M. (2023) Can Grades Be Used for Good? The Complex and Surprising Relationship between Assessments and Intellectual Risk-Taking. *Zeal: A Journal for the Liberal Arts*, 2(1).

Crocker, J., Karpinski, A., Quinn, D.M. and Chase, S.K. (2003) When grades determine self-worth: consequences of contingent self-worth for male and female engineering and psychology majors. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 85(3) 507.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2012). Self-determination theory. *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, 1(20), 416–436.

Dhillon, S. (2025) The ostensible originality of ungrading. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 57(4) 364–373.

Ferns, S., Hickey, R. and Williams, H. (2021) Ungrading, supporting our students through a pedagogy of care.

Fung, N. (2020) Universities differ on whether a pass-fail grading scheme should be optional. *University Affairs*.

Gorichanaz, T. (2024) "It made me feel like it was okay to be wrong": Student experiences with ungrading. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 25(1) 67–80.

Hasinoff, A.A., Bolyard, W., DeBay, D., Dunlap, J.C., Mosier, A.C. and Pugliano, E. (2024) "Success was Actually Having Learned:" University student perceptions of ungrading. *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*, 12 1–22.

Hooper, J. (2025) *Using Ungrading to Get Students to Think about Their Work*. Available from <https://www.umass.edu/ctl/using-ungrading-get-students-think-about-their-work#:~:text=I%20adopted%20ungrading%20to%20encourage,search%20of%20a%20better%20grade..>

Howard, J. L., Bureau, J., Guay, F., Chong, J. X., & Ryan, R. M. (2021). Student motivation and associated outcomes: A meta-analysis from self-determination theory. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 16(6), 1300–1323.

Kerckhoff, A.C., Haney, L.B. & Glennie, E. 2001, "System Effects on Educational Achievement: A British–American Comparison", *Social science research*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 497–528.

Kesler, T. 2025, "This Course Is Ungraded: The Impact of Ungrading Practices on Students and Their Instructor", *International Journal of Changes in Education*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 139–151.

Kjærgaard, A., Buhl-Wiggers, J. and Mikkelsen, E.N. (2024) Does gradeless learning affect students' academic performance? A study of effects over time. *Studies in Higher Education*, 49(2) 336–350.

Kohn, A. and Blum, S.D. (2020) *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)*. West Virginia University Press.

Lin, Y., McKeachie, W.J. and Kim, Y.C. (2003) College student intrinsic and/or extrinsic motivation and learning. *Learning and individual differences*, 13(3) 251–258.

- Lyboldt, K.E., Bach, K.D., Newman, A.W., Robbins, S.N. and Jordan, A.J. (2022) Impact of satisfactory/unsatisfactory grading on student motivation to learn, academic performance, and well-being. *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education*, 50(5) 554–563.
- Miller, K., Merdian, H., Burkitt, W. and Mossop, L. (2025) Decentering grades in Year 1: conceptualising Feedback First, a feasibility trial of ungrading at programme level. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, (35).
- Rohe, D.E., Barrier, P.A., Clark, M.M., Cook, D.A., Vickers, K.S. and Decker, P.A. (2006) The benefits of pass-fail grading on stress, mood, and group cohesion in medical students. *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, 1443–1448.
- Shah, R. (2024) “In this Class I Feel Like I was Truly Learning”: Ungrading the MA Classroom. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 1–21.
- Stear, T., Gutiérrez Muñoz, C., Sullivan, A. and Lewis, G. (2023) The association between academic pressure and adolescent mental health problems: A systematic review. *Journal of affective disorders*, 339 302–317. Available from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0165032723008510>.
- Stenson, M. (2025) Implementing Ungrading in Undergraduate Exercise Physiology: Student Perceptions of Learning. *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*, 13 1–22.
- Stommel, J. (2018) *How to ungrade*. Available from <https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/>.
- Trenshaw, K.F., Revelo, R.A., Earl, K.A. and Herman, G.L. (2016) Using self-determination theory principles to promote engineering students’ intrinsic motivation to learn. *International Journal of Engineering Education*, 32(3) 1194–1207.
- Zhang, S., Xu, J., Chen, H., Jiang, L., & Yi, X. (2024). Influence of teacher autonomy support in feedback on high school students’ feedback literacy: the multiple mediating effects of basic psychological needs and intrinsic motivation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1411082.