Decentering grades in Year 1: conceptualising Feedback First, a feasibility trial of ungrading at programme level

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Decentering grades in Year 1: conceptualising Feedback First, a feasibility trial of ungrading at programme level

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Abstract

The preparation of students for an unpredictable future means higher education plays a substantial role in supporting students to develop core graduate competencies: risk-taking and learning from failure; effective collaboration and communication; critical thinking; and a love of learning. This competency development can be undermined by grading practices. Grading can also foster unhealthy competition, inducing stress and anxiety. Ungrading is often associated with decentering grades within the learning process with removal of letter/number grades to assess students' work; instead, students are encouraged to develop mastery of skills. In previous studies, students who have been exposed to ungrading have shown increased motivation and an appetite for risk-taking and curiosity, however, its impact on mental wellbeing is not clearly established. This paper describes an initial ungrading feasibility trial, called Feedback First, at a UK university, presenting a pedagogical innovation and strategy change focused on reorienting staff and students to consider growth and development across the first-year of our degree provision. This involved pass/fail assessment, increased collaboration, and feedback focus. We will describe the process of developing the Feedback First format, outline how we gained school and institutional support for this change of practice, present our evaluation strategy, and reflect on challenges encountered in the development and implementation of this trial.

This paper will conclude with lessons learnt from our own pedagogic risk-taking, aiming to contribute to the pedagogical debate in higher education**.**

Keywords: ungrading; feedback; self-determination theory; innovation evolution.

Introduction

The educational approach within state education in the UK is metric focused and outcome based. From as young as four years old, schools must report their students' attainment, which is a key performance indicator from primary to further education feeding into league tables and national regulatory oversight ratings. Grading can be defined as the use of letters/numbers to sort students, reward achievement, and indicate promise to potential employers (Tocci, 2010; Buckley, Soilemetzidis and Hillman, 2015).

When comparing grading situations involving higher versus lower grades, students receiving higher grades show greater self-reported task interest, but this has not been found to fully explain continuing motivation for a task (Pulfrey, Darnon and Butera, 2013), with intrinsic motivation lowered by grading (Chamberlin, Yasué and Chiang, 2018), particularly for students receiving poor grades (Deci, Koestner and Ryan, 2001). Even those receiving good grades are encouraged to pursue performance, not learning outcomes (Beatty, 2004). Grading can diminish students' interest in the content they are learning (Dweck, 1986; Lynch and Hennessy, 2017) and reduce curiosity and risk-taking (Kohn, 2011); however, both curiosity and risk-taking are strengths valued in graduates (Karanikola and Panagiotopoulos, 2018). Finally, the provision of individual grades has been found to undermine collaborative group work, practice, and performance (Hayek et al., 2014; 2015), yet teamwork (collaboration) is another core graduate attribute demanded by employers (McGunagle and Zizka, 2020; Rios et al., 2020). There are therefore tensions between a grade-based higher education institution (HEI) system and the skills valued by employers. With employment statistics a key metric within UK HEI (HESA, 2024), this is a challenge for our graduate development.

As academics, we believe that HEI should play a substantial role in supporting students to develop core graduate competencies: risk-taking, learning from failure, collaboration,

communication, critical thinking – and a love of learning. Colleagues in our school have consistently observed the tendency for students to prioritise assessment preparation by learning only what they believe is relevant to achieve a good grade. Given our experience and our review of the literature, we agree with Tannock (2017) that competency development can be undermined by grading practices.

Ungrading

One alternative to a continuous grade-based system is known as ungrading. Ungrading involves decentering grades within the learning process (Masland, 2023) and removing letter or number grades as a means of assessing students' work. Traditional grades can be replaced with many options including contract grading, self-assessment, or pass/fail grading, but all encourage students to develop and show mastery of skills.

Ungrading has been suggested to support deep learning and reflection with HEI students. Altahawi et al. (2012) found that amongst medical students, a gradeless competency-based portfolio caused a shift towards a learning approach focused on active, self-directed improvement. Based on a study of 402 students at a Swedish HEI, Dahlgren et al. (2009) suggested that the assessment itself was considered an opportunity for learning in pass/fail grading when compared to traditional grading approaches. Qualitative results from students experiencing ungraded courses in HEI revealed that students believed a gradeless approach fostered intrinsic motivation and reduced stress (Korson et al., 2023), as well as enabling increased risk-taking and reduced anxiety in relation to student study choices (Kalbarczyk et al., 2023). Students exposed to ungrading during an institution wide, gradeless first semester exhibited an enhanced love of learning, and an appetite for risk-taking and curiosity (McMorran, Ragupathi and Luo, 2017; McMorran and Ragupathi, 2020) alongside eased stress and enhanced collaboration (Bloodgood et al., 2009; McMorran and Ragupathi, 2020).

Therefore, particularly for first-year university courses, moving away from grading, and refocusing the first year on exploration, mastery, and competence can set the shape of the students' approach to their learning (Rohe et al., 2006; Altahawi et al., 2012; McMorran, Ragupathi and Luo, 2017). The impact of a full gradeless first year can be seen within the work of Kjærgaard, Mikkelsen and Buhl-Wiggers (2023) and Kjærgaard, Buhl-Wiggers and

Mikkelsen (2024) who found higher reported intrinsic and extrinsic motivation alongside a reduced likelihood to utilise a surface learning approach among ungraded cohorts in comparison to a graded cohort (Kjærgaard, Buhl-Wiggers and Mikkelsen, 2024). With the addition of a supportive study culture, an ungraded first year was also shown to lead to greater student belonging (Kjærgaard, Mikkelsen and Buhl-Wiggers, 2023). However, Kjærgaard, Buhl-Wiggers and Mikkelsen (2024) reported no differences in attainment or student wellbeing between the cohorts.

Cornerstones of Ungrading practice

Ungrading is about interrupting the performance-oriented culture of higher education (Kohn and Blum, 2020) but it can cause students to experience ambivalence towards their studies and to question their position within the social hierarchy of their programme (Kjærgaard, Mikkelsen and Buhl-Wiggers 2023). Students in the study by Kjærgaard, Mikkelsen and Buhl-Wiggers (2023) additionally reported feeling unsure they had gained the necessary proficiency in first year to gain high grades in second year, with some students indicating a lower motivation to engage with subjects they find less interesting. In contrast, the reported ungrading ambivalence experienced may have potential benefits: it may provide an opportunity to challenge students' perceptions of control, allowing students to focus more on exploring and thinking outside of the box, thereby enhancing capacity to successfully adapt to key life stressors (see review by Rothman et al., 2017).

In reviewing the ungrading literature we have identified three cornerstones of practice that we believe align with the development of intrinsic motivation, consistent with self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000):

- Autonomy: feeling in control of behaviours and goals.
- Competence: need to master challenges and gain knowledge.
- Relatedness: connecting with others and feeling a sense of belonging.

Self-determination theory is a useful framework for understanding factors that facilitate or undermine intrinsic motivation, alongside autonomous extrinsic motivation, and psychological wellness (Ryan and Deci, 2020).

Of all programmes within HEI, medical schools have most frequently implemented pass/fail systems and movement from a five-level grading system to a three-level grading system (pass/marginal pass/fail) has shown lower reported stress, better overall mood and greater group cohesion (Rohe et al., 2006). Rohe et al. (2006) found the decreased stress and improved group cohesion seen in the ungraded first year continued through second year, despite a 5-level grading system being introduced at that point. Bloodgood et al. (2009) found a significant improvement in students' psychological outcomes related to anxiety, depression, positive wellbeing, self-control, vitality, and general health in the first three semesters of medical school after changing to a pass/fail model for the first two years, while others (Rohe et al., 2006; White and Fantone, 2010; Spring et al., 2011) found no grading differences for students who had received pass/fail versus students graded on a scale, once they had both returned to a graded system. Ungrading has now been instituted across 18 of the top 20 US medical schools (Kohn and Blum, 2020).

Feedback First: a feasability trial of Ungrading

In our own School within a UK HEI, we are very familiar with courses adopting ungrading principles. We run three professional practice courses, where students work within clinical services alongside their university training. Therefore, assessments are based on academic and clinical skills, require substantial reflection (and its assessment), and pass-fail marking, with student progression dependent on mastery of skills alongside knowledge development. So, we knew the approach can work – but we wanted to take a more radical stance that not only referred to a change in marking (i.e., ungrading) but also the development and manifestation of crucial employability skills as part of the student's journey – a concept we called Feedback First (FF). FF is a pedagogical innovation and strategy change that is focused on reorienting staff and students to consider growth and development across the first year of our degree provision. While we think that such an approach has the potential to impact students at any point throughout their degree, we wanted to start with our first-year students as the group most impacted by the transition from a grade-based context. FF centres on feedback and mastery rather than grades as the key outcomes of first year. In a bid to increase intrinsic motivation amongst our students, alongside awareness of skill development, we followed the theoretical framework of self-determination theory and considered activities that align with the development of autonomy (reflective and ungraded), competence (mastery focused and feedback

oriented), and relatedness (collaborative). This refocus led us to make changes across all year 1 modules (see Table 1 for an overview of all activities). This radically reconceptualised the delivery of our first year programmes in line with the cornerstones of Ungrading Practice. In addition, we developed a comprehensive evaluation plan to allow systematic testing if Feedback First presents a feasible model for first year HEI programme delivery. We are currently delivering a feasibility trial of FF impacting over 600 students.

This paper outlines the development of the conceptual and evaluation framework to test the feasibility of FF, highlighting key stakeholders and considerations at each stage. We conclude with reflections on aspects that went well, challenges experienced, and lessons learnt that may inform colleagues in the field who are considering innovative or risky strategy changes within their own contexts.

Table 1. The alignment of Feedback First activities with autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Cornerstone of Practice	Activity Changes
Autonomy	• Move from grades to pass/fail across all first-year assessments. • Introduction of tutorial focused on self-evaluation skills audit. • Development of clear, self/student-defined goals. • Support of risk-taking.
Competence	• Move from grades to pass/fail across all first-year assessments. • Introduction of formative self-reflection assessment • Introduction of tutorials on metacognition. • Summative assessment using student peer review. • Inclusion of assessments encouraging creativity/curiosity.

	• Resits involving utilisation of feedback to improve first sit. • Individual Feedback focused on learning outcomes.
Relatedness	• Teamwork introduced in both summative and formative assessment. • Summative assessment using student peer review. • Retention of personalised feedback from tutors • Continued use of online discussion boards outside of classes.

Method: development of the conceptual and evaluation framework of FF

A crucial step for the implementation of any strategy change within a HEI context is to get appropriate buy-in from relevant stakeholders. To determine these, we identified our different implementation contexts and listed the respective actions they require, key agents, and potential barriers they may present:

Institutional context

Alignment with the university's philosophy on teaching and learning, the strategic plan, and the processes in place that assure the quality of these:

- Approval by university governance.
- Revalidation of the first-year content to pass/fail assessment and to implement a resit approach that removed compensation between assessment elements.
- Ethical approval to implement the data collection processes as part of the evaluation plan.
- Professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies context: compatibility with our professional accrediting body requirements allowing retention of the accreditation of

our programmes – conferring Graduate Basis for Chartership with the British Psychological Society.

Subject context: staff

'Buy-in' from staff as key drivers of the FF implementation; this was facilitated through all-staff updates and consultation on the proposal (both undirected and directed) at key points of the study development (for example, selection of success measures). In addition, key members of the staff group were invited to build a steering group alongside the project team.

Subject context: students

'Buy-in' from students; we discussed the proposal with student representatives who also had input at key points, for example, communication with students and evaluation strategy. Students also attended the revalidation event of the programme. This process further supported identification of project milestones and the development of a project timeline. Against this backdrop, the conceptual and evaluation framework for FF was then developed in four stages; a summary of each stage within their respective contexts can be found below.

1. Development of the conceptual framework

We wrote a concise conceptual paper, outlining the concept of FF, its theoretical and empirical background, and the specific changes we wanted to implement for the first year. The paper further acted as an initial research proposal, describing implementation and evaluation plans, the proposed timeline, and our risk assessment and mitigation plans.

2. Theory of change/logic model

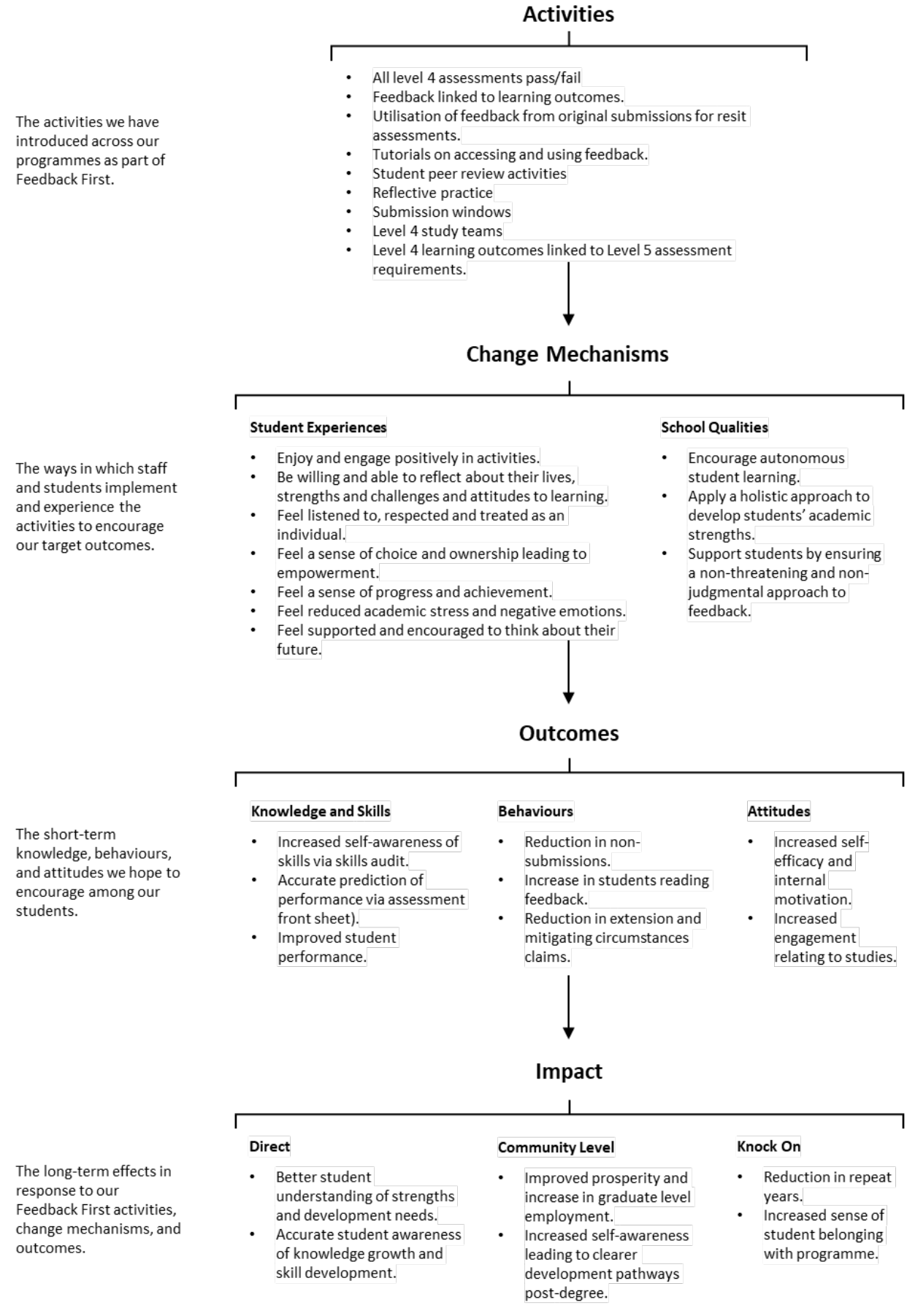
Based on the conceptual paper, a Theory of Change model (ToCM) was developed, following the guidelines by Noble and Hanford-Spira (2019). The ToCM provided an overview of the problem definition, the target groups, proposed impact, outcomes and their assessment, core activities and proposed mechanisms of change (and their assessment).

This approach also required us to articulate base assumptions underlying the proposed changes (not directly assessed as part of the study), for example, ‘first-year markers have the skills required to provide useful and consistent feedback’. While not a key target, articulating these may provide relevant explanatory context for any outcomes (or lack thereof) and may inform future refinements of the model/research approach.

3. Development of an evaluation framework

In this stage, the ToCM was translated into an evaluation design; for each outcome and change mechanism, we considered the most appropriate data source(s) and target samples, data collection format and content. To capture the complexity of the ToCM and the diversity of success indicators, we designed a longitudinal pre-post mixed-method approach, which combines quantitative and qualitative primary data collection and integrated secondary data routinely collected within the school/institution. The ToCM can be found in Figure 1; the full document can be requested from the authors.

Figure 1. A theory of change model for Feedback First.



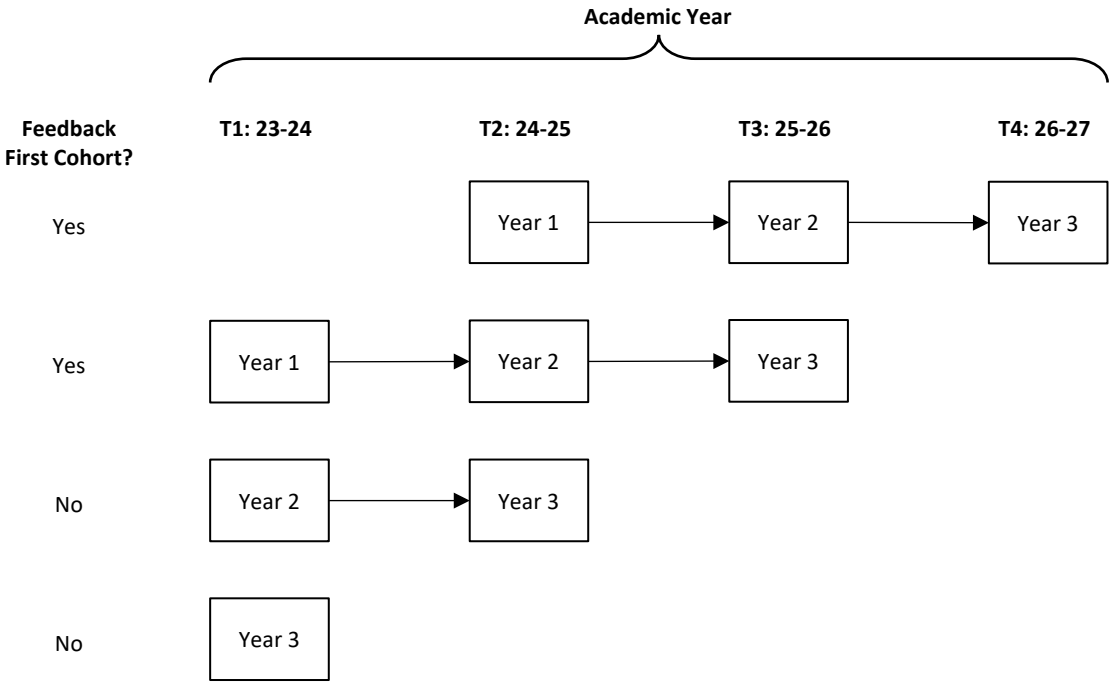
The study combines a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection; Table 2 shows the data sources that will be used to address each outcome. Due to our graded introduction of FF, we can compare students who have experienced FF at first-year with our second- and third-year students who have not (see Figure 2). All variables of interest can be found in the Appendix. Figure 2 provides a visual outline of our research.

Table 2. A list of outcomes of interest and associated data sources.

Key Question	Outcomes	Data Source(s)
Does FF reorient staff and students to consider growth and development across first year?	1. Do students show increased self-awareness of skills?	Story Completion (S). Focus Group (S).
	2. Can students predict their performance?	Focus Group (S): Assessment front sheets (S).
	3. Are student outcomes impacted?	University Metrics.
	4. Is Self-Efficacy and internal motivation increased?	Questionnaires (S). Qual Survey (AS).
	5. Do students show increased engagement with their studies?	Questionnaires (S); Focus Groups (S); Qual survey (AS).
	6. Are students engaging more with their feedback?	Focus Group (S); Qual survey (AS); Metrics.
	7. How have academic staff experienced Feedback First?	Qual survey (AS).
	8. Do students engage in reduced help seeking behaviour?	University Metrics/

Notes. S = student; AS = academic staff.

Figure 2. Longitudinal research plan.



4. Development of a project team and steering group

Following engagement with staff, interested staff members were appointed into the project team to oversee the study design, implementation, and evaluation process. In addition, a steering group was formed which included staff with key roles (such as Programme Lead) to advise on the project. An implementation group was set up, including first-year module coordinators delivering the intervention. This implementation group met regularly throughout the initial year of delivery, in order to discuss challenges as they emerged.

Initial reflections

Across the conception, development, and implementation of the FF feasibility trial there have been periods of joy and periods of challenge but integrating this innovation into our provision has ultimately been rewarding. In reflecting on this first year of FF, we have identified six key 'lessons' we have learnt, that may be helpful for someone wishing to bring innovative practice into their institution.

Different hats

All members of the project team wear a number of different hats – particularly, our project lead is both Head of School and lead researcher of FF. This has often required taking, and aligning, opposing perspectives. A specific example of the dual hat conflict is the expected increase in the fail rate and resultant summer resits, a consequence of students being required to pass every assessment element, without the ability to compensate between assessment elements as is standard practice in UK HEIs. For a Head of School, increased fails typically present a 'red flag' metric that needs explanation to university governance. As researchers, increased fails are in line with our predictions, presenting interesting data, leading to empirically informed new hypotheses. We have learnt that, sometimes, we need to review things with our different hats on – and then make a conscious choice how to align our own different perspectives. Working with others, and critical reflection, are key elements of successful practice.

Time

From initial idea conception to implementation often takes more time than initially planned. However, the time spent in informal communications with key people (both at school and institutional level) is highly valuable and highlights important changes needed to improve the proposal; this early engagement can significantly ease the formal processes that follow. Working as a team has been invaluable to allow focused time and attention on each element of the trial design whilst still managing the usual workload of the academic year, and to allow the consideration of multiple voices and viewpoints.

Critical friends

Ungrading and the other changes required for FF required radical change for many academics within the school. Early presentations were met with interest and excitement, but also scepticism and resistance – of a change in practice, of concerns that our degree is becoming 'too easy', of not being able to see quickly who the 'high-performing' students are. It is vital to listen to all the opinions voiced and avoid an automatic defensive reaction: While some opinions may come from fear, others will hold key insights or highlight oversights that need to be addressed. We went further and ensured that that a member of the core team was assigned the role as 'critical friend' – someone who is comfortable

challenging assumptions, providing candid feedback, and highlighting both strengths and areas for improvement.

Evaluation

It is not possible to measure every relevant outcome of interest, and it is also important to consider the assessment burden on students and staff. A comprehensive theory of change will help to allow us to revisit the core areas of focus and not get carried away with adding in an excessive and counterproductive number of measures. Our initial outcomes will help us shape future evaluation approaches within the theory of change framework.

Managing change

FF requires both staff and students to change habits that many have spent years developing. For students there is discomfort as they lose a key external indicator of their progress in the form of grades. It is important that this is not dismissed but reflected on and changes made, or communications updated. For academic and professional services staff, even those fully on board may not always show this. We need to explore these behaviours and consider the reasoning behind them. Is this due to a lack of clear communication, ownership/empowerment, care, or engagement? We must address what needs addressing, and treat staff and student responses, whether positive or negative, as meaningful data which will inform the feasibility testing of FF.

Risk assessment

Whilst it is tempting to focus only on the positive potential outcomes from change, it is crucial to consider what is the worst that can happen, and to be prepared. Risk assessment was a core feature of our initial feasibility assessment. The institutional appetite for risk and the support provided by our senior leaders comes into play here, too. To innovate, we need to be working from a position of psychological safety wherein we can continuously review, reflect, and redevelop our plans.

The development of FF has required us to examine the literature, reflect deeply on the reasoning behind our pedagogic approaches and to challenge our own assumptions and

established practices. We can become stuck in patterns of practice, often relying on assessment to drive student behaviours. Grading has been an inherent part of our own educational journeys and is an element that invokes strong emotions. The aim of this trial was to explore FF as a means to empower our students and we will use the wealth of data produced over this longitudinal study to interrogate our impact, whether positive or negative. We encourage the HE community to question, explore and examine established approaches so together we can further develop HE to meet the changing needs of our students. We hope the process information and lessons learned included within this paper will support all who wish to start this journey.

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