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Introduction

In February 2021, colleagues from University of the Arts London (UAL), Leeds Arts University (LAU) and Glasgow School of Art (GSA) received funding for the QAA Enhancement Enhancement Project – Transforming Assessment in Higher Education. The project aimed to support the transition to the New Normal for the Covid-19 pandemic and the team identified a shift in assessment practices across the three participating institutions. The project was initially scheduled to further our work on Collaboration, Co-creation, Feedback, Marking and Evaluation through comparison.

The first project aims to:

1. Identify areas of enhancement in assessment policies and practices to promote student sense of belonging and their sense of agency.
2. Link this national work with attainment gap/awarding differentials agenda in the creative arts.
3. Develop a comparative framework for assessment and feedback to be adopted/adapted in other HE sectors

These objectives have emerged from previous research and our own practice-based experiences of reforming the project and institutional practice and policy. These are powerful guiding, the whole-staff approach to assessment, the student experience of assessment and feedback practices and the attainment gap at UAL and at LAU is the width of measures introduced during the pandemic. The whole staff approach to assessment has been a powerful mechanism for change in the Creative Arts Assessment Practice at UAL. The feedback research project led to a disinvestment in progress at GSA and the attainment gap at LAU has been a focus of research and practice on Scottish Government and Scottish Funding Council agendas.

The Belonging through Assessment Symposium was held on Thursday 21 October, 2021. Hosted by Leeds Arts University, the symposium was a forum for practitioners, students and other stakeholders to share, critique, explore and develop our practices of assessment in curricula belonging in a way. The symposium was attended by 40 people from the three institutions and from Kingston University, Bath Spa, Manchester Met, Ulster Arts Athlone and Stella Jones-Gordon, alongside the project team. Keynote speakers were Professor Jane Hughes, Dr Marianne Kaplan, Richard Mitch, Professor Sally Brown, Sheila Gaffney, Colleagues from UAL, GSA and LAU opened up space to consider harnessing assessment practices to foster belonging, Professor Sally Brown's keynote was a powerful call for transformation in the assessment practice landscape, Sheila Gaffney's presentation on Scottish Funding Council's priorities and the implications for Scottish HE sector and the implications of these experiences on policy design and assessment.

All project work has been documented on our blog which will be the final site to host and share our resources and project findings: https://transforming-assessment-blog.arts.ac.uk/

In the following section, each of the three research strands (parallel graphic whole staff feedback) will be discussed in relation to the QAA aims and plans for future development and project reception.

Strand 1: Parallel grading

The use of discriminating grades, with letter or numeric representation, for the assessment of student work is fundamental to Creative Arts Assessment Practice (Hunter, Newbery, Chew, 2021). It is underpinned by relationships that grade based assessment exerts a relational influence upon students' study practices (Boud, Dawson, Bearman, 2018; Ecclestone, 2019; Hughes, 2021). The use of grades in UAL, LAU and GSA has been a focus of research and practice since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (Broadhead et al, 2019; Rust, 2020). Opening up the discussion around parallel grading involves questioning some of the assumptions underpinning our assessment practices.

Countering the dominance of the grade based focused approach is a modest history of practice, of grades being withheld, of students being given the choice of grade, of students being given a grade and assessed with a great number of radical liberal arts colleges (Weiner, 1993). More recently there has been a number of practitioners and pedagogical academics, who have sought to develop practices in which where the role of assessment is a judge whether someone is competent is a fact (Wilde & Fortune, 2021). Wilde & Fortune (2021) argue that the role of the tutor is to be a critical friend, supporting students to develop their own judgements. Ecclestone (2019) argues that the role of assessment in higher education institutions adopt powerful grading as part of a range of measures to reflect the complexity of learning and development in higher education. Hughes (2021) argues that assessment is the UK system, this has been reflected to students only as an option (Burke, 2020; Bunten, 2021).

Parallel grading is a practice that has been developed in response to the pandemic and the need to reduce the use of power / fear assessment. Specifically at UAL, the no detriment policy created making the artwork form a key part of assessment and grading practice. Parallel grading was focused on the work that was applied for the Advice of PET action. At Leeds Arts University parallel assessment was introduced as a response to the pandemic and the need to reduce the use of power / fear assessment. Parallel grading seems to the University to support students through this situation. Parallel assessment was already in place in the Creative Arts Assessment Practice at UAL and LAU. At GSA, the use of parallel grading was introduced as a response to the pandemic. At Leeds Arts University this has been a key part of the grade based assessment from 21/22, but the experiences of the pandemic intervention continue to be considered in the development and review of grade based assessment in the Creative Arts Assessment Practice at Leeds Arts University.

The initial research into the use of parallel grades has been a collaborative investigation into the impact of years 1&2 and investigate staff and students attitudes to grading.

What have we been doing?

At UAL in the Summer Term of 2021, research was conducted with students and staff evaluating the work from a graded first year in comparison to ungraded years 2&3 from year.

Participants:

Year	Context	Number of participants
1st year (undergraduate level 4)	Experiences of year 1 &2 in AY2020 and grading in AY 2021	15
2nd year (undergraduate level 5)	Experiences of year 1 &2 in AY2020 and grading in AY 2021	15
Academic staff	Experiences of years 1&2 in AY2020 & AY2021	5

Data was collected using focus groups and interviews, comparing against other's grades, comparing grades to expectations, and comparing grades to other years.

Process – video about how the change to pass / fail was implemented, e.g., workbook for improvement, lack of feedback etc.

Pass / fail – students mostly about grading, e.g., comparing against other's grades, comparing grades to expectations, comparing grades to other years.

Process – video about how the change to pass / fail was implemented, e.g., communication to students, staff, lack of feedback etc.

Impact on learning – video about how different grading regimes shaped the students learning, e.g., pass / fail made students feel like they were able to learn.

The research was used to produce an internal evaluation report for Deans, has been disseminated at Teaching and Learning Committee and Academic Board.

At Leeds Arts University there has been a process of reflection on and evaluation of the experiences of students and staff in the Creative Arts Assessment Practice. The Creative Arts Assessment Practice has, proposed for May 2021, received the second evidence base for parallel grading to aid the evaluation of the Creative Arts Assessment Practice, and prepared for May 2022 to receive the evaluation of the 2021 experiences, informed by the literature review and drawing upon institutional data and evidence from the Creative Arts Students and staff. Along with students who had experienced parallel grading the previous year.

After this, a collaborative research and review process (including consultation, validation and progression, student satisfaction surveys) were explored to investigate how the outcomes and experiences of students and staff in the Creative Arts Assessment Practice at Leeds Arts University in series of question prompts were developed, informed by the parallel literature, to explore students' experiences of parallel grading.

- Previous experiences of grading in education, prior to study at Leeds Arts University
- Experiences of grading in Leeds Arts University during the work first pandemic year (2019 / 2020) – world like evaluated as parallel only
- Experiences of parallel grading in Leeds Arts University
- Satisfaction with feedback and assessment in the year of parallel graded work (end of term tutors)
- Evaluation of assessment and feedback (end of semester 2 2021/22)

Initial learnings

In evaluating and learning from the experiences of parallel assessment across the two institutions it is important to consider the contexts in which students and staff have been working and what it is to be a single phenomenon in a pandemic. Data and information around overall student performance and attainment, staff and student feedback, and the impact of the pandemic on learning and teaching, suggest that students and staff felt supported that the parallel assessment approach was a good idea in the current research. They were part of a pedagogy of institutional responses developed and implemented at pace in unprecedented circumstances.

At Leeds Arts University, from the student focus group, and from the UAL research it has been learned that:

- Students have learned perspectives on grading
- Students recognise that their previous educational experiences have led to a degree conditioned them to be in a grade based system, and that this is not the only way to be in education
- Students have mixed perspectives that parallel grading has supported their learning and development and that it conditioned them to be in a grade based system
- Students recognise that they felt introduced into way through an assessment year their initial response was more negative. For example, at Leeds Arts University overall student satisfaction with assessment and feedback was 5% lower than the sector average in 2020 and 2021 the gap increased to 10% lower than the sector average. Students felt that they were in a new grading regime, and that the experience from first year students where the parallel grades were not in place at the start of the academic year.
- Parallel grading enabled some students to have to experiment and take risks in their creative practice
- University grading is for many students disorienting at first and overbearing only because through the pandemic it has been the only way they have been graded. This is a key part of the work that is to be undertaken in the next academic year and beyond, as we return to a new normal.
- Many students are concerning stating themselves the questions – "is I good enough?", or about their creative practice "is this good enough?" Concerning the signifier of the grade, the students are seeing the removal of grading make them pay much more attention to feedback, and they found that that was a good thing, as it supported their learning.
- Students have mixed perspectives on the impact of parallel grading on their learning, some students made great use of previous mistakes, helped them become more independent learners, and better able to judge the quality of their own work.
- There is some indication that the return to grading at LU has made the learning environment feel more competitive.

From course leaders there remain mixed views over the merits of parallel grading, but a shared perspective that it has supported students to grade, and students seem more able to make connections between systems and in their development of assessment literacy.

Initial research into the use of parallel grades in Creative Arts Students and staff in the single phenomenon threshold of parallel assessment may act as a stance into of distinction than in existing assessment practices, and students are engaged in it. Concerning "I exist, therefore I am", typical to many UK HE assessment frameworks. Disappoints. This aspect of parallel, and the potential consequences of that, is a key area for further research and development. Students are not used to being in a system that is unknown from the previous three years but there is some indication that grades are increased for students who have taken the option of parallel grading. At Leeds Arts University the difference in grades was an increase in BAME grade rates around 20% of who taking a decrease in grades 48%.

Plans

At both UAL and Leeds Arts there are discussions about potential continued a wider use of pass / fail assessment in existing assessment frameworks, and students are being asked to consider what they have changed in light of research and their project.

"COVID-19 has been a wake-up call for us all" (Thompson and Cavalli, 2021: 8). We continue to live in unprecedented times. Assessment is a global phenomenon, and the Covid-19 pandemic has brought into prime focus instances by some members of our educational communities (e.g., intergenerational, socio-economic, ethnicity, disability, etc.) of inequity, bias, and discrimination. Thompson and Cavalli (2021) argue that "the pandemic has exposed the inadequacy of our assessment practices and the impact of issues". When we speak of trauma, we refer to the definition by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014): "individual trauma results from an event, series of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, and spiritual well-being." What constitutes as traumatic varies person to person, as trauma is an individual response.

What we know from neuroscience is that trauma has a direct impact on student learning. It impacts our students' ability to concentrate and focus, and our bodies are in survival mode (Van der Kolk, 2014). Curriculum innovation and assessment is an area in which we can support our students to flourish. Higher Education Institutions are in a position to "ease students' transition into university life, to reduce their feelings of isolation, to build their self-confidence, to develop their self-efficacy, to feel supported, to feel empowered, safe, connected and hopeful (ibid.). This sections our shared humanity (Devine, 2021). Our students are our future teachers, lecturers, researchers and leaders (Thompson and Cavalli, 2021). Our duty of care is to make a commitment to do no harm, and enact compassionate pedagogies and assessment practices. Devine (2021) argues that "compassion is the antidote to trauma".

We adopt an equity-centered lens to trauma-informed education, conceptualising how oppression transcends institutional policies and practices and permeates classrooms. Equity-centered lens is a critical lens on policies, practices, cultures, curricula and mentor (ibid.). We aim to use pedagogies and assessment practices that are trauma and anti-racist informed.

This underpinning scholarship has informed our methodology.

What we have done

This shared project investigation from three institutions to determine if the related documents were coded to communicate compassion for others, whether this by the students or the institutions and staff.

This work drew upon trauma-informed education as a lens of compassion, and the three institutions coded documents to identify if they were coded to be compassionate to students and staff, and if they were coded to improve" (Thompson and Cavalli, 2021:8). The aim was to conceptualise a preliminary strategic framework for assessment and feedback and staff-focused offer and voice, positioning agency and "to Dare" Dominant policies implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The three institutions coded documents, and UAL self-evaluated to the six dominant policies of creative arts institutions acknowledge the interaction between assessment and students' whole self, and the emotional and psychological dimensions of assessment.

The contract of the 'whole self' is taken from behavioural psychology and has been applied to conceptualise assessment and students' experiences in creative arts education. Assessment practice is needed of the student's entire social and emotional context, rather than understanding students as separate from their assessment and learning.

Methodology

Two analytical tools were considered: Percy Acknowledge (Schuman, 1994; Hunkins, in press) and Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954). Percy Acknowledge was considered because it is a tool that has been used in Creative Arts Assessment Practice and Critical Incident Technique was considered because it is a tool that has been used in Creative Arts Assessment Practice and applied the trauma-informed care lens to the documents. Four fields were applied: contract, trauma-informed care, trauma-informed care framework, and trauma-informed care. Critical Incident Technique was a framework to explore assessment regulation and policies. These are underpinned by the theoretical lens of the Tripartite Model of Compassion (Gilbert, 2020).

1. Contract – how do they support building and maintaining relationships within university communities?
2. Protect – how do they support feelings, emotional, cognitive, physical and interpersonal safety?
3. Provide – how do they support students and staff through difficult and crisis, positioning agency and sharing power and decision making?
4. Prevent – how do they support safe-building and competence, enabling students to have positive future lives?

For these notions originate from another discipline, we interpreted them within an arts educational context.

The research group conducted one stage of coding the regulations using a shared document. Then the resulting themes were subjected to a second stage of coding. This was an iterative process that also enhanced the interpretation of the four fields from an arts education perspective.

Initial learning

Our analysis suggests that although there are variations between the institutions there were some common regulations that were found in all three institutions.

Finally, the regulations offer certain positive actions to manage the assessment process. Secondly, the regulations offer a sense of control and a sense of contract of fairness and security rather than anxiety. Thirdly, the student agency in the assessment process is not facilitated, nor is the student voice represented in the documents. Fourthly, the regulations are written in a way that is not trauma-informed. Fourthly, the regulations are written in a way that is not trauma-informed. Finally, the regulations suggest that students are not encouraged to feel safe because they are prone to retraining failed modules, years and even their courses, to not cited.

Plans

- As a research group we are still to decide whether to relate our themes to a policy archaeology framework.
- Explain how the 'whole self' approach intersects with issues of social justice and memberships of communities of practice.
- Develop recommendations and practice-centred.
- Test out our themes on a group of academic staff and students to confirm and also to gain additional insights.
- Develop quality indicators, which have been already forming during the project.
- Develop a framework of reflective questions for professional practice.

Strand 3: Feedback

This section of the project focuses on feedback as a critical area of practice where the emotional, psychological and cognitive dimensions of learning are at the forefront of our work. Our initial research into the impact of the pandemic on our students and staff identified a shift in our practices of feedback in situation learning in each document (Hatte and Tompsett, 2021), and guidance around the sector (Boud and Molloy 2013), using compassion as the main driver of feedback have been explored.

We have done

- In collaboration with students' staff, develop definitions of what compassionate feedback might look like and devise guidance and support for approaches to compassionate feedback within the art and design curriculum. This work has been shared with students' staff in seminars, our colleagues, and students for the Advice of PET project, and at our Symposium.
- Explore with staff how existing structures and processes may be adapted and modified to enable compassionate feedback learning in more ways and contexts such as staff and student, Staff-to-staff, intersectional advice of feedback (Tysomb 2019), including voices of dominant. The approach responds to the Advice of PET Symposium in September 2019 and make the assessment process both transparent and compassionate.

What have we learned?

Through the initial scoping of the field, the project team identified a gap in support and provision for students' and staff in relation to compassion of the feedback process and compassion pedagogy. The team developed and delivered a collaborative workshop that asked invited participants from SSA's the Advice of PET project, the Student Union and students' and staff to consider a compassion pedagogy and feedback framework, particularly at the Symposium. We explored what guidance might need to make this a manageable and sustainable approach. We explored the potential of a pedagogy of compassion in the design process. What basic principles to define a compassionate approach would be most helpful to identify?

Initial learning

"This final project identified an underpinning of the equitable, antiracism, and deep engagement with which staff participants recognised this reflective investigation. Our initial analysis suggests compassion has significant potential to support the developing of these intersectional frames.

Defining and underpinning compassion

With education as an act of love (Freire), belonging in understanding students need to understand themselves as a part of a community of practice. Belonging is a sense of being accepted, supported, and valued for who they are and what they contribute to the community. Belonging is a fundamental requirements for learning, and awareness of diverse experiences. Assessment creates artificial environments, and students need to be prepared for the transition into professional practice. Assessment structures excel for me, and acknowledging our own power position. Our pedagogy should suggest and guide rather than dictate.

Journey: how compassion can be used in feedback for assessment

Feedback for assessment is a developmental learner journey, where formative feedback offers powerful opportunities for students to develop their self-assessment and self-evaluation capabilities. Feedback should be a dialogue, and students need to be supported to develop their self-assessment and self-evaluation (and with a bookmark/ research) as more 'connoisseur'? Formative feedback might acknowledge past experiences, and be a dialogue between students and tutors. Feedback should be personal, and be conversational (e.g., self and peer assessment, co-creation) and 'do-ing assessment structures and processes. Feedback should be a dialogue between students and tutors and offer academic enhancement should be a free-flow conversation and process recognising environment, time, and relationships, and be conversational and with rather than 'done to'.

Whole Self: student and staff experience

Students and staff experience of assessment and feedback practices are complex and have emotional and short journey lines, empathy, sensitivity, and the ability to understand others and recognise risk. Students and staff experience of assessment and feedback "lived" in the processes of feedback for assessment. Some of the challenges include talking about the work, not the person, but recognising the person in the work. Recognising the impact of the pandemic on students' and staff experiences, helps students feel 'seen'. Reflecting on the impact of the pandemic and transgressing assessment practices and feedback for assessment approaches does have a deep lasting in staff and students, given the value of what and the assessment.

Plans

Our reflective review of the material and accompanying of key themes form the basis for upcoming conferences and publications (Hughes and Hastings, 2021) presentations at Kent in June 2022. These presentations are opportunities to extend the exploration with the broader communities of the two conferences and to develop our ideas around compassion pedagogies and practices.

We will use the analysis, reflection, and dialogue to develop and frame a subsequent reflective focus on our practice. We will use our research and our experiences of assessment and feedback practices to inform the co-creation process. We will review and evaluate this second co-creation exercise towards developing a shared understanding of what compassion means in relation to our practices and feedback for assessment. To further enhance the proposed guidance, we plan to test this resource with UAL and LAU students' and staff. We will use the feedback to inform the development of a set of guidance for our students' and staff. We will also use the feedback to inform our ongoing work around belonging, co-creation, compassion, and understanding in the process, language and policy of feedback for assessment, and our current role in supporting students' and staff with assessment and with academic enhancement work on assessment and feedback.

Multi-partnership collaborative approach

As a project team, we have identified common ground between the three pre-institutions that have different languages and approaches to assessment. Our work in developing the Assessment Framework has been a collaborative process and part of this. Our project team is made up of colleagues from three institutions, and we have developed a collaborative approach to our work. We have developed and professional benefits of making connections with the minded academic across institutions to discuss our practices. We have developed a collaborative approach across high-impact projects. The collaboration has allowed us to capture and build the 'zeitgeist' in relation to the thinking and practices around assessment and feedback. We have developed a shared language, and we have developed a shared understanding of our practices. We have developed a shared understanding of our approach to assessment literacy. Within our project team, we have experienced mentoring, as we learn from each other's practices and we have developed our own professional practices.

The project has been presented both within our institutions and externally, extending discussions with colleagues across the sector through conferences, conferences, podcasts and more. Below is a list of outputs to date.

Blog

- Project blog: https://transforming-assessment-blog.arts.ac.uk/

External Events

- Assessment in Higher Education conference as part of paper on 'Challenging Assessment Habits' (Hughes and Hastings) (21st September 2021, Sheffield Hallam, UK)
- Dis-ha Hairs: Bringing compassion, joy and social justice into assessment, SRHE, Video link with Dr Sarah Dixon (December 2021)
- Belonging through Assessment – On No Hairs, Quality Improvement Strategies conference, QAA, Video link (24 Feb 2022)
- Educational Developers, Campaign Committee (10 May 2022)
- QAA Evening Student Engagement Conference, Jan 11, Bunting & Ka Costa (Dr Laura) (Video link)
- Belonging through Assessment: Authentic Assessment in a post-Covid world, QAA Annual Conference, Video link (17 May 2022)

Internal Events

- Advice of PET Symposium, Leeds Arts University, Video link (15 March 2022)
- Dean's Education Conference, Dr Emily Gibson (July 2022)
- Leeds Arts University Teaching and Learning Committee (Project update) Prof Sam Broadhead

Broadhead, Peter Hughes, Dr Laura Da Costa (24 June 2022)

- GSA Learning & Teaching Conference, Dr Marianne Greated, Dr Thea Stevens, Robert Mantho (June 2022)
- UAL Quality Standards Committee (pass/fail presentation) Vikki Hill, Dr Neil Currant (30 Nov 2021)
- Belonging Through Assessment: Pipelines of Compassion, Leeds Arts University Learning, Teaching and Enhancement Conference 2021 – Decolonising the Curriculum (Project Update) Dr Laura Da Costa (25 June 2021)

Media

- Podcast – Pass/fail assessment in arts higher education, Prof Sam Broadhead, Dr Neil Currant, Peter Hughes https://interrogatingspaces.buzzsprout.com/683798/9644305-pass-fail-assessment-in-arts-higher-education
- Vimeo showcase of films from project symposium (including keynotes from Dr Jan McArthur and Dr Maha Bali). https://vimeo.com/showcase/pipelinesofcompassion

Press

- It's reasonable to expect universities to practice emotionally literate pedagogies, WONKHE (Debbie McVitty, 25 May 2022)
- Building back learning and teaching means changing assessment, WONKHE (Debbie McVitty, 24 Jan, 2022)

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