



# **Absurdity in our rules? To what extent should unorthodox assessment practices, such as ‘ungrading’, disrupt quality assurance practices in higher education?**

**Katrina Swanton**

Edinburgh Napier University, UK

## ***Abstract***

Ungrading involves adopting a critical view on the purpose and value of assessment practices and working to shift the focus away from the awarding of grades to practices that instead focus more on feedback and activities that support learning. These practices are often deemed to be unorthodox and in tension with the policies and practices in place within our institutions intended to safeguard academic standards and quality. As ungrading is an emerging practice, the research base is currently limited; however, this paper draws upon the literature on student self-assessment to challenge the notion that summative assessment should always be marked by an academic ‘expert’. This paper advocates for greater practice which helps students to learn, and importantly to recognise and value that learning, even if it disrupts the status quo within the UK. However, given that any challenge should be evidence-led, the paper calls for more research studies to be conducted on ungrading practices.

**Keywords:** quality assurance; assessment; marking quality; ungrading; higher education; United Kingdom.

## ***Introduction***

My interest in ungrading was piqued by this provocative statement made by the US-based academic, Jesse Stommel, an advocate of ungrading practices:

My goal in eschewing grades has been to more honestly engage student work rather than simply evaluate it. Over many years, this has meant carefully navigating,

and even breaking, the sometimes absurd rules of [...] institutions (Stommel, 2020, p.27).

As a professional responsible for defining and upholding institutional rules and regulations within a UK post-92 university, it is important to know when these rules need breaking, as it potentially means that something important is not fully understood (either on the side of the rule-maker, or indeed the rule breaker). Stommel's claims of 'absurdity' in our rules would certainly suggest that the rule-makers are in the wrong; are quality assurance professionals, like myself, inadvertently prohibiting effective learning, teaching, and assessment approaches?

This opinion piece shares some of my personal reflections as I have begun to engage more critically in assessment practices that are often taken for granted.

### ***What are the rules, and why do we have them?***

For the past two decades, I have been responsible for ensuring that institutional policy and processes comply with UK Quality Code expectations. In the UK, the awarding of grades has been bound up within the UK Quality Code Core Practice that students have opportunity to achieve standards *beyond* threshold level (QAA, 2018). In my own institution, the norm is for assessment tasks to receive a mark/grade that culminate in a grade for the module as a whole, and ultimately these grades determine the overall classification or outcome for the qualification to indicate achievement beyond the threshold of 'pass'. While occasional exceptions are permitted for competency-based assessments where pass/fail is permitted, in general the requirement for a mark or grade is a rule.

Another rule is that the mark is determined by suitably qualified members of the teaching team (Taras, 2008). Another is that the determination of the mark has been informed by some form of assessment criteria or rubric developed alongside the assessment instrument, and that the assessment instrument, assessment criteria, and indeed marks awarded have been subject to some form of internal and/or external moderation to give confidence of the validity, reliability, and transparency of the assessment process.

I will confess that, until recently, I had not given too much critical thought to these specific 'rules'. I had assumed that in demonstrating compliance with the UK Quality Code through

the application of these rules, we were doing right by students in terms of safeguarding the quality of their qualifications. However, I have been increasingly engaged in interesting dialogue within my own institution with colleagues who have shared a desire to disrupt power dynamics around grading (Tannock, 2017; Nieminen, 2022) and to empower students to take a more active role in determining their grades, and grades of their peers. It is recognised that students focus more on assessment than any other aspect of their courses and, as such, assessment is a major driver for student learning (Boud, 1990; Kearney, 2013), but is the same true of grades and marks? Does achieving the right grade/mark become the focus for the student, over and above the actual learning process (of which risk-taking, failure, and curiosity should be part of) (Kohn, 2006; Blum, 2017)? These seem like very good questions to be asking, particularly now, when the higher education sector is under scrutiny around what the impacts of the development of generative artificial intelligence tools mean for the validity of our assessment methods. I am very much an advocate of any practices which can support student assessment literacies, and place the focus more on the recognition of, and value of, learning in and of itself, and I was curious to explore these emerging practices of 'ungrading' more, particularly through a quality assurance lens.

### ***What is meant by ungrading?***

Exploring the literature in this field presented a challenge at the time of writing. My attempts to undertake a review of the literature utilising keywords 'ungrading in Higher Education' using the EBSCO database resulted in very few results, even when keywords and filters were adjusted. Searching the term 'ungrading' in GoogleScholar identified additional monographs and articles, but many of the results were opinion pieces and not underpinned by the peer-reviewed research articles I was seeking. It is evident that the lack of clear definitions and terminology in the area of 'ungrading' is problematic (Andrade, 2019), but the absence of results also suggests that this remains an under-researched area of higher education practice, ripe for many more empirical studies.

Stommel (2020) describes a number of different approaches to ungrading, including the provision of feedback instead of grades; minimal grading (for example pass/fail); authentic assessment tasks (where the outputs offer their own reward and demonstration of learning); peer-assessment; and self-assessment. Self-assessment offers a greater sense

of student agency and ownership of the assessment task, while still resulting in a mark that can be provided to meet university expectations. Perhaps this is why, in my own institutional context, this is the area of emerging ungrading practice which is beginning to surface. As such, I focused my attention to research exploring the quality assurance aspects associated with this self-assessment as an unorthodox assessment practice.

### ***Quality assurance implications of summative use of self-assessment***

A literature review on student self-assessment undertaken by Heidi Andrade (2019) provided me with an insight into some of the research undertaken to date. It provided a critical review of 76 empirical studies in school, college, and university contexts. The studies were grouped into themes, including studies that focus on the accuracy (or consistency) of student self-assessment and that between the 'expert' graders (academic tutors); student perceptions of self-assessment; relationships between self-assessment and student achievement; and the association between self-assessment and self-regulated learning. Given the focus on quality assurance and academic standards, I was drawn towards the studies focused on accuracy and consistency, but that is not to dismiss the compelling research in support of self-assessment in supporting learning, which I am unable to discuss in detail here. Studies such as those conducted by Tejeiro et al. (2012) and Boud et al. (2015) involved students being permitted to use criteria-based judgements to assign themselves a grade, which was subsequently compared to that assigned by the academic marker. The results indicated that the alignment between the student and tutor's marks were stronger when the mark did not contribute to a final grade, yet when it was being used summatively, the reliability decreased (students either had a tendency to over-mark, strategically seeking to achieve the best grade possible; or under-mark, typically due to the unease and self-doubt associated with assigning their own grade (Tejeiro et al., 2012). The study by Boud et al. (2015) found that academic ability also influenced students' accuracy in self-assessing (aligning to academic tutor's grade), with academically weaker students tending to overmark themselves and failing to improve on accuracy over time. Andrade (2019) concludes her research by asserting that the literature does not strongly support the use of self-assessment in a summative context (where self-assessment counts towards the final grade), rather that it is most beneficial when used formatively, in terms of supporting student achievement and self-regulated learning. Does this research finding therefore justify the existence of our institutional rules requiring

academic experts to remain responsible for assigning summative grades? Perhaps, but what assumptions are made with respect to the quality of academic marking in the first place?

### ***The quality of academic marking?***

The studies reviewed by Andrade (2019) were predicated on the assumed expertise and accuracy of the academic marker. Is this a fair assumption to make? How many teachers in higher education have formal training in assessment theory and practice? How many, in reality, tend to rely on their own experience as students and on what they have picked up on the job (Orrell, 2006; Sadler, 2011; Norton et al., 2019). Indeed, the complexities of contemporary university teachers' marking practices are surprisingly still relatively poorly understood (Tuck, 2024). We tend to picture the academic processes around marking as technical and precise, whereas in practice, the process of arriving at judgements is much more complex than this (Carless, 2015). A qualitative study conducted by Susan Bloxham and colleagues (2011) explored how assessment criteria was *actually* used by academics by asking lecturers to think aloud as they graded two of their students' written assignments. The findings were that tutors came to a holistic conclusion regarding the mark, with no evidence of them assigning marks to individual elements in the assessment criteria, and when assessment criteria was used, it tended to be post-judgement to refine these initial decisions. The authors conclude that there is 'a disjunction between stated policies and actual practices in marking, particularly in relation to analytical, criterion-referenced grading' (Bloxham et al., 2011, p.667), which surely offers an interesting insight into the performative application of institutional 'rules' around assessment and raises the possibility that there are a whole set of 'unseen' rules at play in this space. If this were true, then surely it follows that we should not be so quick to dismiss student self-assessment practices on the grounds of failure of the grades to align between students and academic markers alone. *If*, in reality, academic tutors are not using assessment criteria in the linear, analytical, and accumulative way in which they are described (and presumably how students would expect them to be used), then it is hardly surprising that there may be a lack of alignment in the resultant grade outcome – as arguably the tutors and students are adhering to a different set of rules.

While research findings such as this have the potential to send quality practitioners, such as myself, into some form of existential crisis, it is also important to step back and reflect that, on the whole, our assessment processes are robust in safeguarding academic standards. This is because we do not rely on marking itself alone. Ensuring consistency and fairness in the marking process is acknowledged as a quality assurance matter, and this is typically addressed through moderation processes including blind second marking, sample moderation, consensus moderation, etc. (Mason and Roberts, 2023). Moderation is intended to safeguard against the challenges of inter-marker variation and individual marker biases and, as such, surely moderation could have a key role in mitigating the risks identified by Andrade (2019) around increasing confidence in the validity of student summative self-assessment, and thus in safeguarding standards? Another mitigation would be to ensure that students being asked to self-assess are trained and supported to do so with confidence. As well as helping to ensure that the grade determined by the student is fair and accurate, scaffolded support would also work towards addressing the student unease and discomfort associated with self-assessment (Boud et al., 2015; Nieminen, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

It is pertinent to recognise that vocal advocates of ungrading practices, such as Jesse Stommel and Susan Blum (2020), are not bound by the national regulatory contexts experienced in the UK and are perhaps afforded greater autonomy to experiment in their practice. That is not to say that we cannot, and should not, challenge and disrupt the status quo within the UK; however, any challenge should be evidence-led, and I would call for more research studies to be conducted on these unorthodox assessment practices. In June 2024, the Quality Assurance Agency published a new sector-owned UK Quality Code (QAA, 2024) underpinned by 12 new sector-agreed principles, replacing the previous Expectations and Core and Common Practices for quality and standards which arguably stifled the development of more radical assessment practices. Within my own institution, I will continue to advocate to support innovative practices which support students to learn, and importantly to recognise and value their learning, including less orthodox approaches such as self-assessment, where appropriate. As I use the new UK Quality Code to map the new principles against our institutional policies and procedures (rules), I will certainly take a more critical view as to whether our rules add value in safeguarding standards and

improving the quality of the student experience, or whether, on reflection, they could be deemed 'absurd' and in need of review and removal.

## **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank the *Studying Educational Research* module team in the Department of Learning and Teaching Enhancement at Edinburgh Napier University for their constructive feedback and encouragement which has culminated in this article.

The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

## **References**

Andrade, H.L. (2019) 'A critical review of research on student self-assessment', *Frontiers in Education*, 4. Available at:

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2019.00087> (Accessed: 30 May 2024).

Bloxham, S., Boyd, P. and Orr, S. (2011) 'Mark my words: the role of assessment criteria in UK higher education grading practices', *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(6), pp.655-670. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075071003777716>

Blum, S.D. (2017) 'Ungrading: the significant learning benefits of getting rid of grades', *Inside Higher Education*, 13 November. Available at:

<http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/11/14/significant-learning-benefits-getting-rid-grades-essay> (Accessed: 30 May 2024).

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

Boud, D. (1990) 'Assessment and the promotion of academic values', *Studies in Higher Education*, 15(1), pp.101-111. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079012331377621>

Boud, D., Lawson, R. and Thompson, D.G. (2015) 'The calibration of student judgement through self-assessment: disruptive effects of assessment patterns' *Higher Education Research and Development*, 34(1), pp.45-59. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2014.934328>

Carless, D. (2015) *Excellence in university assessment: learning from award-winning teaching*. London: Routledge.

Kearney, S. (2013) 'Improving engagement: the use of "Authentic self-and peer-assessment for learning" to enhance the student learning experience', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38(7), pp.875-891. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2012.751963>

Kohn, A. (2006) 'The trouble with rubrics', *English journal*, 95(4), pp.12-15

Mason, J. and Roberts, L.D. (2023) 'Consensus moderation: the voices of expert academics', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 48(7), pp.926-937.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2022.2161999>

Nieminen, J.H. (2022) 'Disrupting the power relations of grading in higher education through summative self-assessment', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 27(7), pp.892-907. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1753687>

Norton, L., Floyd, S. and Norton, B. (2019) 'Lecturers' views of assessment design, marking and feedback in higher education: a case for professionalisation?', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 44(8), pp.1209-1221. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2019.1592110>

Orrell, J. (2006) 'Feedback on learning achievement: rhetoric and reality', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11(4), pp.441-456. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510600874235>

QAA (2018) *UK Quality Code for Higher Education*. Available at:

<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code> (Accessed: 31 July 2024).

QAA (2024) *UK Quality Code for Higher Education*. Available at:

<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/uk-quality-code-for-higher-education-2024.pdf> (Accessed: 31 July 2024).

Sadler, D.R. (2011) 'Academic freedom, achievement standards and professional identity', *Quality in Higher Education*, 17(1), pp.85-100.

Stommel, J. (2020) 'How to ungrade', in S.D. Blum (ed.) *Ungrading: why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)*. Morgantown: West Virginia Press.

Tannock, S. (2017) 'No grades in higher education now! Revisiting the place of graded assessment in the reimagination of the public university', *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(8), pp.1345-1357. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1092131>

Taras, M. (2008) 'Issues of power and equity in two models of self-assessment', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13(1), pp.81-92. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510701794076>

Tejeiro, R.A., Gomez-Vallecillo, J.L., Romero, A.F., Pelegrina, M., Wallace, A. and Emberley, E. (2012) 'Summative self-assessment in higher education: implications of its counting towards the final mark', *Electronic Journal of Research in Educational Psychology*, 10(2), pp.789-812.

Tuck, J. (2024) 'Defamiliarizing assessment and feedback: exploring the potential of "moments of engagement" to throw light on the marking of undergraduate assignments', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 49(1), pp.72-85.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2023.2181942>

## **Author details**

Katrina Swanton has been Head of Quality and Enhancement at Edinburgh Napier University since 2016. She is currently Convenor of the Scottish Quality Forum and represents Heads of Quality in Scottish Universities in a number of sector-level Committees. She is a Principal Fellow of Advance HE.

## ***Licence***

©2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (JLDHE) is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE).