

Perceptions of “going gradeless” a case study of a master’s programme in the education field

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research is to explore the perceived concept of “going gradeless” among education master’s students and academics within a Hong Kong university. This study aims to explore differing perspectives on “going gradeless” and identify the key potential issues associated with its implementation in higher education.

Design/methodology/approach – The research employed a qualitative method using purposive sampling to select participants for semi-structured focus interviews, and the sample consisted of nine education master’s students and two academics. The data collected from these interviews were systematically analyzed using NVivo software, and the codes were developed into themes within the participants’ perceptions of “going gradeless.”

Findings – The findings reveal that students and academics view going gradeless differently. Students have mixed feelings about a gradeless system. Most recognize the problems associated with an overemphasis on grades and the potential benefits of going gradeless, and they also express concerns about the personal advantages of recognized credentials, differentiation from peers and resistance to implementation. Conversely, academics call for a change in grading policy, citing the negative impact of grade-driven approaches on learning. However, they also raise concerns about institutional and cultural factors that could pose challenges to a gradeless system.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the underexplored area of gradeless learning in higher education, particularly within Confucian societies. By revealing differing perspectives between students and academics, offering critical considerations for policymakers and educators seeking to reform grading practices and enhance learning outcomes.

Keywords Gradeless learning, Gradeless system, Higher education grading policy, Confucian society, Student involvement

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In East Asian cultural contexts, particularly in Hong Kong (HK), a competitive mindset dominates educational systems. This ethos creates internal contradictions, as these systems claim to value holistic education but ultimately prioritize examination results (Tsang and Lian, 2021). While the overemphasis on grades is not unique to East Asia or Confucian societies, it represents a global issue that remains challenging to resolve. In response, educators increasingly advocate for gradeless learning (GL) as a potential solution to mitigate the current grade-centric focus in education (Chan and Sun, 2021). Traditional grading systems, instead of fostering a genuine interest in learning, often cultivate a performance-oriented culture where students prioritize achieving high marks over understanding and applying knowledge.

There has been growing interest in gradeless systems (GS) as alternatives to traditional grading, shifting the focus from grades to intrinsic motivation, mastery of content, personal growth and lifelong learning (O’Connor and Lessing, 2017). This approach promotes comprehensive



feedback, self-assessment and formative assessment practices that encourage deeper engagement with the material without the pressure of grades. Case studies and pilot programs worldwide have reported benefits such as increased student engagement, reduced stress and improved teacher-student relationships (McMorran and Ragupathi, 2020). However, critics highlight concerns about student motivation, the risk of poor learning attitudes and the practicality of these systems in diverse educational settings (McMorran *et al.*, 2017). The newness of GS, its lack of immediate outcomes and variability in effectiveness have led some institutions to revert to traditional grading or modify their systems to recognize exceptional achievements. In Hong Kong, interest in GS is emerging, driven by a desire to reduce academic stress and promote a more holistic approach to education (Chan and Sun, 2021). However, deeply entrenched Confucian values, which emphasize academic achievement and hierarchical assessment systems, present significant obstacles to adopting GS to promote GL (Lin and Ho, 2009).

1.1 Clarifying “going gradeless,” gradeless learning (GL) and gradeless systems (GS)

The concepts of GL and GS provide the foundation for understanding “going gradeless” in education. GL emphasizes the intrinsic value of learning, focusing on mastery, creativity and self-directed growth rather than external rewards like grades (Blum, 2020). GS translates this philosophy into practice through structural changes, such as implementing pass/fail systems, removing grades or delaying grade releases to prioritize formative feedback (De Jesús and Moldavan, 2022; Normann *et al.*, 2023).

Normann *et al.* (2023) explain that GS, such as replacing grades with feedback, fosters reflective learning environments where students focus on mastery goals rather than performance goals. Blum (2020) emphasizes that grades act as extrinsic motivators, shifting attention away from meaningful learning toward performance outcomes.

Burns and Frangiosa (2021) clarify that “going gradeless” does not mean lowering standards or eliminating accountability. Instead, it creates a supportive environment where students can pursue mastery goals without the anxiety of a poor assessment defining their progress. They argue that GS maintains high expectations while promoting continuous improvement through regular, goal-oriented feedback, aligning with Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) model of effective formative feedback.

GL redefines assessment by prioritizing learning trajectories over static achievement (Blum, 2020). In this approach, teachers and students engage in feedback cycles that foster goal-setting, self-assessment and reflection, focusing on growth rather than final grades (De Jesús and Moldavan, 2022).

Together, GL and GS work to shift the focus from performance goals to mastery goals. “Going gradeless” represents this transition, blending the ideals of GL with the practical implementation of GS and offers a framework for rethinking how learning is valued and assessed in higher education (HE).

2. Literature review

2.1 The graded system

The emphasis on grades has been a cornerstone of education systems, particularly in Confucian societies. GS and GL challenge this deeply entrenched paradigm, which has its roots in historical and cultural traditions. For over 1,300 years, the Chinese Imperial Examination System (IES) was the primary method for selecting talent, like how certifications are used today to secure employment. This system emphasized “classifying students by their grades,” fostering a belief in the high returns associated with academic success (Lin and Ho, 2009). Even though the IES was abolished in the late Qing Dynasty, its principles of meritocracy, public examinations and fair competition continue to shape modern education systems in East Asia (Li *et al.*, 2022).

In contemporary Confucian societies, this historical legacy has evolved into an education culture marked by stratification and involution, or “neijuan,” where increased effort does not yield proportional outcomes. The concept of “winning at the starting line” is deeply ingrained

in Hong Kong, where pressure to achieve good grades is instilled from a young age (Tam *et al.*, 2021). Students are predominantly driven by assessments, highlighting an extrinsic motivation framework. Confucian values such as filial piety, education and proper behavior also contribute to a strong focus on education, with families investing heavily in tuition as a private duty (Yang, 2019). Today, high-stakes exams like the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE), Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A-Level) and Mainland China's "Gaokao" are pivotal in determining students' futures. However, this excessive emphasis on grades can lead to academic integrity issues, stress and mental health problems, as students blur the line between learning for grades and learning for knowledge. Historical parallels exist, where scholars in the IES era engaged in dishonest practices for personal gain, reflecting the dangers of an education system overly focused on external validation (Li *et al.*, 2022).

In Hong Kong, both public universities and private institutions predominantly use the grade point average (GPA) system. Originating in the United States of America, the GPA system converts letter grades into a 4.0 scale, serving as a universal metric that facilitates the comparison and understanding of student performance across institutions. Initially designed for internal use within institutions in the early 1900s (Braxton *et al.*, 1988), the GPA system has since become integral to various educational and professional contexts, including graduate school admissions, scholarship opportunities and employment benchmarks. When students perceive GPA as performance goals rather than a byproduct of learning, intrinsic motivation diminishes. Researchers have introduced the metaphor of "grades-as-money," wherein students view grades as transactional rewards rather than indicators of mastery or competence (Beatty, 2004). This transactional view aligns with a focus on performance goals, where students aim to outperform others to enhance their self-image, rather than mastery goals, which prioritize the understanding and application of knowledge (Ames, 1992).

Although performance and mastery goals can coexist (Harackiewicz *et al.*, 1998), an overemphasis on performance goals undermines deep learning and long-term cognitive growth (Anderman *et al.*, 2002). Studies indicate that the goals students pursue directly impact the quality of their academic achievements (Covington, 2000). Students driven by performance goals are more likely to avoid challenges, employ superficial learning strategies and exhibit impaired problem-solving abilities. Kohn (1993) argued that grades, as performance rewards, diminish intrinsic motivation by making students feel that their actions are externally controlled. An excessive focus on performance goals can foster dysfunctional academic behaviors, such as cheating, and promote a competitive atmosphere that undermines collaborative learning and negatively affects the overall educational experience (Schneider and Hutt, 2014).

Research shows that performance-contingent rewards, such as grades, significantly decrease intrinsic motivation and prioritize performance over mastery (Deci *et al.*, 2001). To address these issues, some scholars advocate for eliminating grades entirely (Kohn, 1993; Tannock, 2017), while others suggest less radical approaches like gradeless courses or semesters (McMorran *et al.*, 2017; White and Fantone, 2010). Chamberlin *et al.* (2023) found that metric-based grading reduces academic motivation and increases anxiety, leading to risk-averse behavior. Studies suggest that reduced grading can enhance motivation for learning (Schinske and Tanner, 2014) and recognize that students respond differently to grades (Klapp, 2015). Armstrong (2010) indicated that grades do not impact the quality of work and supports more ungraded assignments for productive pedagogy. Conversely, some colleges believe grades are necessary to drive performance and study habits, with graded conditions producing higher reliability and better performance (Napoli and Raymond, 2004). In Hong Kong, traditional grading systems create significant pressure and anxiety, negatively impacting students' mental health and well-being (Chan and Sun, 2021). Grades influence self-esteem, social status and career opportunities, often equating high grades with intelligence and diligence while stigmatizing lower grades as underachievement. This pervasive grading culture can stifle intellectual risk-taking and creativity, as students may fear negative evaluations (Tsang and Lian, 2021).

2.2 The gradeless system

GL provides the philosophical foundation for GS, guiding the principles behind changes to assessment structures. While GS operationalizes the goals of GL, it does not inherently guarantee the realization of GL's intended outcomes. For instance, a GS implementation such as a pass/fail system may reduce stress and competition but might not foster the deep, intrinsic motivation and mastery orientation central to GL (McMorran and Ragupathi, 2020). Conversely, GL can exist within traditional grading systems if educators adopt practices like formative feedback and mastery-oriented instruction while still assigning grades. Thus, while the two concepts are interconnected, they are not synonymous. GL represents the "why" behind rethinking grades, while GS represents the "how."

GS are linked to enhanced student well-being and self-regulation. McMorran *et al.* (2017) and McMorran and Ragupathi (2020) observed that students experienced less stress during a gradeless first semester. Research shows that students in gradeless environments are more likely to engage in self-directed learning and pursue knowledge beyond classroom requirements (Kohn, 1993). These students also tend to demonstrate better understanding, higher critical thinking skills and greater knowledge retention compared to those in traditional grading systems. Students are more likely to take intellectual risks and explore creative solutions, fostering a deeper engagement with the material (Schneider and Hutt, 2014; McMorran and Ragupathi, 2020). Normann *et al.* (2023) identified three primary strategies for implementing GS:

- (1) Transitioning from a traditional grading system to a pass/fail system;
- (2) Abandoning or reducing the use of grades in assessments and
- (3) Delaying the release of grades to focus on formative feedback.

Different extents of GS implementation include:

- (1) GS applied to some components of a course;
- (2) GS implemented in one or a few courses within an entire curriculum;
- (3) GS adopted across all courses within a specific major and
- (4) GS applied across all majors within a school over a designated time period.

GS influences student performance and attitudes in various ways. Reducing or eliminating grades can improve student well-being and reduce stress and anxiety related to academic performance (Bloodgood *et al.*, 2009; Khanna, 2015; Kitchen *et al.*, 2006; McMorran and Ragupathi, 2020; McMorran *et al.*, 2017; White and Fantone, 2010). However, implementing GS may present unforeseen challenges. Traditional grading systems serve multiple functions, such as sorting students, rewarding achievements, facilitating communication between institutions and signaling potential to employers (Schneider and Hutt, 2014; Schinske and Tanner, 2014). Removing grades can raise concerns for students seeking jobs or further education. Additionally, some educators fear that GS might lead to lower motivation and poor study habits, challenging the practicality of GS (Bloodgood *et al.*, 2009; Khanna, 2015).

The question of whether to grade remains critical in higher education, as grades are often blamed for causing excessive stress and negatively impacting student learning. Despite efforts to eliminate grading, inertia and the societal value placed on grades, such as their importance in the job market and social recognition, pose significant challenges. This resistance highlights the difficulties in disrupting the entrenched grading system (Schneider and Hutt, 2014). Implementing GS is particularly challenging in environments dominated by Confucian values and a long history of grade-centric thinking. These deeply rooted cultural and institutional norms make it difficult to shift away from traditional grading practices (McMorran and Ragupathi, 2020). The results of GS implementation have varied. This system is often introduced in prestigious universities, where students are motivated to perform well, whether intrinsically or extrinsically (McMorran *et al.*, 2017). Partial implementation of GS has proven

effective in socially deemed elite specializations such as medical, business (Kjærgaard *et al.*, 2023) or law schools. Additionally, GS is sometimes used as a secondary grading system in subjects deemed less critical, like physical education. Completely removing grades can create uncertainty and reduce motivation for some students (Deci *et al.*, 2001). Grades are deeply ingrained in the academic and professional cultures, making it difficult to implement GS widely (McMorran and Ragupathi, 2020).

3. Research methodology

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with significant experience or knowledge of grading systems in Hong Kong. Qualitative research through semi-structured interviews was chosen for its flexibility and depth, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of participants’ attitudes and experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The study adopted a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore perceptions of GL among postgraduate education students and academics. Participants were purposively selected to ensure relevance and expertise. Nine students and two academics were chosen, as their dual roles as educators and learners or their expertise in pedagogy provided unique insights into the implications of GL and GS. Table 1 provides details on the postgraduate students, including their work experience and field of expertise. Table 2 outlines the profiles of the academics involved, including their teaching experience and time spent in Hong Kong.

The sample size, though small, is justified by the study’s focus on depth of inquiry and thematic saturation. Interviews lasted between 45 min to one hour, allowing for rich, detailed responses. Data collection was guided by key questions addressing participants’ understanding of GL and GS, its potential benefits and challenges, the feasibility of implementation and the impact of cultural and institutional factors. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, as shown in Table 1: HKS1-4 for postgraduate students working in the higher education field, TS1-3 for postgraduate students with teaching experience and S1-2 for postgraduate students with no teaching or administrative roles in education. From Table 2, Teaching professor A (TPA) and teaching professor B (TPB) represent the two academics. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software, which facilitated the organization and coding of the interview transcripts. The process involved reading transcripts multiple times, generating initial codes through open coding and grouping these codes into broader themes through an iterative review process. This approach allowed for a detailed exploration of the participants’ perceptions of GL and GS.

Table 1. Interview participant profiles – education masters’ student

Students’ work experience	HE management-related	Teaching-related	Other field
Current education postgraduate students	HKS1: >5 years HKS2: 5 years HKS3: 3 years HKS4: >2 years	TS1: >5 years TS2: >3 years TS3: 3 years	S1 S2

Source(s): Author’s own work

Table 2. Interview participant profiles – teaching professors

Teaching professors (TP) >5 years of teaching experience	TPA <1 year in Hong Kong TPB >2 years in Hong Kong
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Source(s): Author’s own work

While the reduction of emphasis on grades has gained attention globally, it remains underexplored in East Asia and Confucian societies, with limited implementation in the region. Although some institutions have adopted pass/fail systems, these are not widespread and are often secondary to traditional grading methods. This study seeks to investigate how key stakeholders, postgraduate students (both those currently working in higher education and those without such experience) and university academics perceive going gradeless in Hong Kong. Understanding their attitudes and beliefs is crucial for informing future grading policies. Specifically, the study addresses two research questions:

- RQ1. How do postgraduate education students and academics at a Hong Kong university perceive the concepts of going gradeless?
- RQ2. Do they view the implementation of a gradeless system as a viable solution for promoting GL?

4. Findings

4.1 Perceptions of “going gradeless” among students and academics

The concept of “going gradeless” was interpreted inconsistently among participants, with many conflating GL, which emphasizes mastery and intrinsic motivation, with GS, the structural elimination or reduction of grades. This lack of a shared understanding significantly influenced participants’ perceptions. Most participants assumed “going gradeless” implied the complete removal of grades, overlooking alternative implementations such as partial GS or integrating formative assessments alongside traditional grading. The two interviewed academics expressed conditional support for GS, emphasizing its potential to promote deeper engagement with material and reduce grade-related anxiety. However, all participants highlighted significant cultural and institutional barriers, including the reliance on grades for university admissions and employment evaluations. Their cautious support was contingent on incremental changes, such as piloting GS in select programs or integrating formative feedback mechanisms. Given the small sample size ($n = 11$), these findings cannot be generalized but provide initial insights into the faculty perspective. Initial codes of perceptions for both postgraduate education students and academics are presented in [Tables 3 and 4](#).

4.2 Grade-centric culture and learning approaches

Participants widely agreed that Hong Kong’s grade-centric culture fosters performance-oriented learning, which prioritizes achieving high marks over engaging in deep learning, defined here as the development of critical thinking, synthesis and application of knowledge in novel contexts. However, this culture is deeply rooted in societal, historical and institutional practices, rather than being merely a byproduct of performance-oriented learning. The emphasis on grades as extrinsic rewards creates an environment where students focus on rote memorization and superficial learning strategies to satisfy assessment criteria.

Participants frequently highlighted the unique intensity of this focus in Hong Kong. As TPA described, “I was very confused and surprised that people seem to really care about something called GPA. It is like a kind of cultural inertia.” This indicated TPA was surprised at how pervasive the grade-centric mindset is compared to TPA’s previous teaching contexts. This cultural dynamic was further elaborated by TPB, who added, “Most of my students are from mainland China, but apparently the grades really matter a lot. That is kind of a shock, because I do not think master’s students really care that much about their grades in other parts of the world.” TPB’s comment supported TPA’s observation that this mindset is not universal but regionally influenced.

Academics noted that this culture stifles intellectual risk-taking and creativity, as students are often unwilling to experiment or explore beyond what is necessary to achieve high grades. TPA observed, “There’s a lot of shallowness that comes from that competition. It’s hard for me

Table 3. Initial codes of students perspectives

Attitudes and perceptions	Mixed feelings about going gradeless due to dual identity as students and working professional in education Optimism about going gradeless to promote genuine learning Pessimism about going gradeless due to realistic and actual resistance from various stakeholders
Motivations and drivers	Unchanged motivation regardless of grading system Grade as main motivation Grade association with effort Grade-driven behaviors Grade as reward for hard work
Academic and career impact	Gradeless system to promote gradeless learning Academic risk-taking and exploration Career development of students Good GPA association with landing on good jobs Indicators for employers to identify good candidates Benchmarks for school to compare students
Cultural and institutional factors	Grade-centric culture influence Grade tradition Mainland influences Resistances from intuition, parents, instructors and students
Learning environment	Multiple commitments of postgraduate students Competitiveness of students with good grades Competition among students High-stakes exams Performance-oriented learning approach Difference in student personalities and study habits
Benefits and challenges	Energy saving for future learning External push is required for some students Impact of going gradeless differs in different level Going gradeless promotes lifelong learning More collaborations between students Significant stress reduction for students
Recommendations	How gradeless system needs to be carefully implement Grading policy risk-taking for the first university to take action in Hong Kong

Source(s): Author's own work

to tell if they care about the deeper questions.” While TPA expressed concerns about students’ limited engagement with deeper inquiries due to grade-related pressure, TPB worried about student behavior, where “students often do the bare minimum.” Both classroom engagement and behavior were negatively affected, and rigid performance goals could hinder active participation learning. Academics observed that Hong Kong students are “more grade-driven” compared to students in Western educational systems, a difference attributed to the lack of institutional practices in Hong Kong that prioritize mastery-oriented learning goals. TPA further explained, “In other countries, students focus more on the knowledge itself. Here, it’s all about how to get the grade.” Reinforced the contrast between mastery-oriented versus performance-oriented education settings. This lack of emphasis on mastery-oriented learning in Hong Kong not only limits students’ engagement with the material but also diminishes their capacity for creativity and intellectual growth. As TPB emphasized the difficulty of transitioning away from an extrinsic reward system ingrained in students’ academic experiences, “If you remove grades, I’m sure many students would be very sad and depressed because their whole life has been about studying for some kind of external goal. It’s not easy to change.” Students also reflected on this cultural phenomenon. S2 shared, “A lot of students are just asking for [. . .] model answers [and] the grading scheme [. . .] just want to know what to write to get a high grade.” Coupled with the widespread reliance on templates and rote

Table 4. Initial codes of academics perspectives

Current observations on student behaviors	Surface learning observed Concerns for students focused on grades over mastery Strong feelings about grades from students Difficulties developing deep learning
Institutional and cultural context	Lack of responsibilities for their studies Marketized education for taught masters Strong mainland influences, weak reputation internationally Context comparison with other regions Strong competition in the city
Educational impact and challenges	Grade-centric environment concerns Classroom environment stressful, rarely joyful Concerns about students losing goals if grades removed Bell curve influence, grade distribution
Recommendations	Students as career-oriented with other commitments Call for grading system reforms More student feedback on grading system Trainings for international academics on student dynamics Student involvement in policy making

Source(s): Author's own work

responses, TS3 observed that Hong Kong's cultural condition reinforced grade-centric expectation, describing students in Hong Kong as "all trained to think that grades equal success. It's hard to move away from this mindset."

4.3 Challenges of implementing gradeless systems

Most participants initially equated "going gradeless" with the complete elimination of grades, raising concerns about its practicality and potential unintended consequences. TS3 highlighted the procedural complexities involved in such systemic changes: "If you suddenly abolish the grading system, you need to go through a lot of consultation." Similarly, HKS2 reflected on faculty autonomy and resistance to institutional mandates and explained, "Most professors may not have the motivation to implement something new and embed it in the curriculum. There is nothing the university can do to compel a professor to follow a specific guideline." These comments highlight the procedural and institutional challenges associated with transitioning to GS. However, when participants were introduced to flexible strategies, such as implementing GS for specific course components, delaying grade release or introducing pass/fail systems, their receptiveness increased. HKS1 commented, "I personally find it appealing." This shift in perception suggests that much of the initial resistance stemmed from a lack of familiarity with the flexibility and nuance inherent in GS models.

Many participants felt that grades remain necessary for undergraduates and high school students due to their developmental stages and reliance on external validation. ES2 explained, "For postgraduate students, I think it's more beneficial to have a gradeless system. Whereas for undergraduates, I think it's more useful to still have some grades involved in their academics." HKS3 expressed skepticism about the feasibility of a GS for less mature students, stating, "It is very difficult to implement a gradeless system for less driven students who require an external push." Student participants with teaching-related experiences were generally concerned about student independence and intrinsic motivation at different educational levels, and perceptions of academic maturity influenced opinions on GS feasibility.

4.4 Communication gaps and hidden grading practices

Another key finding of the study was the disconnect between academics and students regarding grading practices and expectations. Academics perceived students as overly focused

on grades yet reluctant to seek formative feedback to deepen their understanding. As TPA observed, *"I never get emails from students requesting feedback, even though I told them if they want to get an A+, come to my office, but no response,"* indicating that students may prioritize grade outcomes over meaningful feedback. TPB observed a similar situation and commented, *"I feel like study skills and motivation are sometimes lacking. It gives me the feeling of being a high school teacher. If I tell students to email me for feedback, they do not, but then they complain there is no feedback,"* reinforcing the idea that students may expect feedback to be delivered passively rather than seeking it actively.

In contrast, students felt that academics prioritized research over teaching, limiting their opportunities for engagement and meaningful feedback. HKS4 commented, *"Professors are too focused on their research. It feels like teaching is not their priority."*

The study also revealed the unofficial enforcement of bell curve grading, despite institutional policies that formally discourage the practice. Academics reported feeling administrative pressure to justify high grades and adjust distributions to prevent GPA inflation. TPA shared, *"I actually got an email from the administrator in my first term, saying my grades were among the highest of all professors and asking me to explain why. I even offered to change the grades if this was not normal for the university."* TPB echoed this sentiment, stating, *"We are not supposed to use a curve, but in reality, many professors still do because of concerns about giving too many A's."* This tension between policy and practice not only undermines trust in the institution but also perpetuates a grade-centric culture that detracts from deeper learning.

4.5 Viability of a gradeless system for promoting gradeless learning

Several students expressed support for the idea of a gradeless system, particularly for its potential to improve mental health and create a more relaxed and fulfilling learning environment. TS2 highlighted the mental health benefits, stating, *"I think having a gradeless system would impact mental health in a more positive way because you won't be concentrating on grades. You will just think about whether you can pass, which is less stressful than being stressed over getting an A or B."* Similarly, TS1 agreed with TS2 and shared their personal experience, *"Going gradeless would definitely reduce my anxiety level."* These quotes illustrated that some students viewed GS as a way to reduce academic pressure and foster a more balanced learning experience.

Fairness and recognition were recurring themes among students who had reservations about going gradeless. Some students feared that their hard work might go unnoticed in a system without clear differentiation based on effort or achievement. S1 explained, *"There's no way to see who has worked harder if everyone is given the same score,"* reflecting apprehensions about the lack of differentiation in performance. Others worried about the implications of a gradeless system for future employment. HKS3 remarked, *"It is a standard for employers to evaluate who's better at learning. Some jobs might require them to apply what they learned, like medical students' practical skills. So those with higher grades are identified by employers and get better opportunities."* This suggests that students perceive grades as an important metric for signaling competence to potential employers.

Many believed that Hong Kong's competitive, performance-oriented culture would resist such a change. HKS1 remarked, *"Due to the bureaucracy and traditional perception, there will be a lot of barriers to implementing such a system in universities,"* highlighting the bureaucratic challenges and entrenched cultural norms within Hong Kong's education system. Resistance from parents was also cited as a significant hurdle. TS3 explained, *"This does not sound convincing to the parent. If there's no recording at all, and there's no grading, how could you tell if a student is performing well?"* This indicates that parental expectations also contribute to the resistance.

Participants also pointed out institutional contradictions that could hinder implementation. Despite official policies against bell curve grading, hidden practices such as grade distributions

to control GPA inflation were widely acknowledged. While some students expressed reservations about implementing a gradeless system at lower levels of education, there was broader support for its application in postgraduate studies. Participants noted that postgraduates are generally more mature and intrinsically motivated, making them better suited for GL. However, some students believed even postgraduate students might struggle to adapt due to the ingrained nature of performance-centric learning in Hong Kong.

Academics advocated for moving away from a traditional grading structure at the postgraduate level, emphasizing the need to focus on deeper learning and skill mastery. TPA emphasized this point, stating, “*I don’t even think we should really be grading students at the master’s level.*” Similarly, TPB criticized the performance goal approach, describing, “*The most horrible thing is that we have graduates who didn’t actually master too many skills.*” These perspectives suggest that academic view grade-driven practices are currently prevalent among students and detrimental to student development.

Academics also highlighted the importance of incorporating student input into grading reform. As TPA acknowledged, “I’m not sure [. . .] the voice of the students to me is hard to hear right now. I wish there could be more student input into how the grading should work that will really help us.” This reflected the need for greater student involvement to ensure that grading policies align with their needs and expectations. TPB further remarked, “It would be quite meaningful to receive some kind of training on how to deal with Chinese students, because, like, 99% of my students are Chinese,” indicating there is a need for professional development to better understand and address the cultural backgrounds of their students. Despite numerous complaints about the grading system being stressful, few students challenged it, suggesting they might be accustomed to or even content with the current system. TPB observed, “You hear a lot of complaints about the grading systems, stressful, but no one challenges them. I think people might be very happy about this in HK.” The implications showed that while students voiced concerns, their lack of action implied a level of acceptance or satisfaction with the status quo.

5. Discussions

Postgraduate students exhibited mixed views on GS that their dual roles as students and educators shaped their differing attitudes. As students, they valued potential benefits such as reduced stress, enhanced collaboration and lifelong learning. However, as educators, they expressed concerns about GS’s practicality, particularly for younger or less motivated students, and emphasized the importance of grades as benchmarks for effort and recognition. Academics showed higher levels of support for GS, acknowledging the limitations of traditional grading in fostering deep learning. However, they cited significant challenges, including cultural inertia, institutional dependencies and logistical barriers.

Both students and academics emphasized the reliance on grades for admissions, job placements and societal validation, creating substantial resistance to reform. Additionally, the findings highlighted a policy-practice disconnect within institutions. Despite policies discouraging practices like bell curve grading, hidden enforcement persists to control GPA inflation, further entrenching the reliance on grades as a stratification tool and complicating efforts to implement GS.

Hong Kong’s market-driven education model, which emphasizes academic excellence, creates a strong link between grades and career prospects. This model has positioned Hong Kong as a regional education hub, attracting international students and institutions seeking globally competitive qualifications (Chan and Ng, 2008; Jung, 2020). However, this grade-centric model has led to concerns about the depth and quality of education, as academic success is often narrowly defined by GPA and standardized metrics (Lo and Li, 2023). Employers in Hong Kong frequently prioritize academic credentials, such as letter grades or GPA, during recruitment processes, particularly in competitive sectors like law and finance, leading high-achieving students to favor traditional grading systems to enhance their career prospects (Tang, 2024). Additionally, the recent increase in the non-local undergraduate quota to 40% is unlikely to

significantly diversify the student population, as many non-local students are from mainland China (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 2023), where the emphasis on grades remains strong. The concept of a gradeless system is virtually absent in Hong Kong and Mainland China's education systems (Normann *et al.*, 2023), raising doubts about student readiness and posing challenges for implementation, especially if not initiated by students.

Successful implementation of a GS depends heavily on active student participation in grading policymaking. However, some staff members question the legitimacy of student participation, perceiving representatives as self-interested or immature (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). This skepticism can undermine student representatives' confidence and effectiveness. Instead of merely integrating student representatives into university governance, adopting a dialogic approach that emphasizes ongoing dialog between students and management could foster trust and responsiveness.

Additionally, the lack of immediate, measurable outcomes from a gradeless system limits institutional incentive to pursue such changes, especially in Hong Kong's market-driven environment. Consequently, the grade-driven culture persists, making reform challenging as societal norms reinforce the importance of grades and traditional grading strategies.

Despite these barriers, both students and academics identified specific contexts where GS could be more feasible. Postgraduate students, especially in liberal arts, were seen as suitable due to their strong intrinsic motivation (Hegarty, 2012). This aligns with Pereles *et al.*'s (2024) observation that as students mature, particularly in executive-level and professional master's programs, their engagement deepens alongside their ability to manage their own learning. The combination of intrinsic motivation and self-regulation strengthens their capacity for independent work. These characteristics suggest that postgraduate learners might possess the necessary disposition for engaging with formative assessments and self-directed learning, making them well-suited for GS implementation. However, for such initiatives to succeed, careful consideration of the specific program context and support mechanisms, including professional development for academics, remains essential.

6. Conclusion

This study provides new insights on perceptions of "going gradeless" among postgraduate education students and academics in a Hong Kong university. The findings reveal that student-initiated momentum is essential for the success of "going gradeless." Without students' active participation and awareness, attempts to implement GS are unlikely to succeed. However, in a culture where competition is a defining characteristic of education, fostering such awareness will not happen immediately. Many students appeared unaware of the type of competition they were engaged in, often pursuing performance-oriented goals aimed at external rewards rather than mastery-oriented goals centered on intrinsic growth and understanding.

There is a pressing need to recalibrate the focus of competition in educational systems. Instead of grades being treated as the ultimate indicators of success, students should be encouraged to view learning as a collaborative, fulfilling process that emphasizes mastery, creativity and self-improvement. This shift is especially significant for Confucian societies, where education systems aim to promote holistic development but remain constrained by grade-centric frameworks that prioritize extrinsic validation.

The insights from this study also highlight the importance of gradual, context-specific implementation strategies for GS. Encouraging dialog between students and educators, promoting professional development for academics and piloting flexible models of GS are necessary steps toward fostering a culture of learning that values mastery over mere performance.

6.1 Limitations

This study has several limitations, including the purposive selection of participants, which assumes that participants are knowledgeable about education and that postgraduates have dual

roles as students and employees within the university. Future research should involve undergraduate students and individuals from other fields to gain a more comprehensive view of going gradeless in universities. The reliance on self-reported data from students and academics is another limitation, as it can be subject to bias and inaccuracies. Participants may have provided socially desirable responses rather than candid opinions.

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