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No grades in higher education now! Revisiting the place of graded assessment in the reimagination of the public university

Stuart Tannock*

School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WT, UK

The concept of the ‘public university’ has been widely promoted as the principal alternative vision for higher education to the neoliberal, managerialist model that currently prevails. However, if the public university is to serve as the holder for collective ideals of a just, sustainable and democratic future in higher education, then there is a need to think through carefully what this concept actually means in practice, in order that it does not become an empty, misleading form of public relations rhetoric. This article uses the example of assessment to argue that if the public university is to perform the role of fostering critical, reflexive, independent and democratically minded thinkers – a role that has been universally embraced by its promoters – then the use of grading in higher education assessment needs to be strongly contested.

Keywords: assessment; democratic education; grade abolition; grading; the public university

Not grading in higher education matters. In January 2014, arbitrator Foisy (2014) upheld the firing of Denis Rancourt by the University of Ottawa over his refusal to grade students ‘objectively’. Rancourt was a physics professor who, after taking a sabbatical year in 2003 during which he read widely in progressive pedagogy (including the works of Paulo Freire, Noam Chomsky, Alfie Kohn, Paul Goodman, etc.), decided to abandon grading (Rancourt 2009). Arguing that grading undermines learning and is undemocratic, Rancourt told students in one of his courses they would all receive a mark of A+, and offered another course on a pass/fail basis only: in both cases, he was challenged by university administrators. Rancourt’s refusal to change his assessment practices led eventually to his being banned from campus, arrested, handcuffed and fired. Student supporters rallied to his cause under the banner ‘Grades Hurt, End the Pain’, with one group calling themselves the ‘Anti-Grading Liberation Front’ and arguing that ‘abolishing grades is the rightful path towards liberation and it will transform education to release the full potential of human creativity’ (quoted in Bayblab 2009). Academics from across Canada likewise wrote letters to support Rancourt’s arguments against the use of grading in higher education (Veilleux 2009; Westhues 2009; Cosco 2010).

*Current institutional affiliation and address: UCL Institute of Education, University College London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL, UK. Email: s.tannock@ioe.ac.uk

In this conflict, the arbitrator's ruling in favour of Rancourt's firing is revealing. For Foisy (2014, 31–32) does not challenge Rancourt's arguments about the harmful impact of grading on student learning, but acknowledges that he 'may very well' be right and that 'a number of researchers have written books on this teaching approach applied by Professor Rancourt'. The arbitrator argues, however, that though Rancourt's statements of the need to change assessment practices in higher education are protected by the principle of academic freedom, his actions in actually attempting to change these practices are not:

The University is not disciplining Professor Rancourt for his ideas or beliefs in regards to his teaching method . . . [The University] made it very clear that Professor Rancourt could openly promote his convictions as to teaching in his classroom, on campus and elsewhere. The research aspect and the promotion of ideas is one thing, the implementation is quite another. (28)

In explaining why it is so important for universities to retain 'the right' to require professors to grade 'objectively' – interpreted as grading students 'comparatively' – the arbitrator makes no reference to what is best for learning, but only to the need to sort students for future career progression and financial gain (Foisy 2014, 32). Without the use of grades that rank students in relation to one another, Foisy (2014, 25) argues, 'grading of students would become meaningless'.

The case of Denis Rancourt and the University of Ottawa, though like any case having its own idiosyncrasies, raises issues of general relevance across the higher education sector. In part, these come from arguments made by Rancourt himself: that assessment matters. In recent years, in the context of a global struggle against public funding cuts and rising tuition fees, university student and staff protesters have come together around the common cause of defending the 'public university' from further neoliberalisation, marketisation and privatisation. Yet, the concept of the public university has generally been underdeveloped and there is a danger of rallying to try to save a model of higher education that contains its own injustices and inequalities (Marginson 2011). As some argue, it is not enough to 'defend the university in its current form'; rather, there is a need for 'invigorating and democratising' the university, developing 'a clear vision of what the university should be', and 're-imagining higher education as a public good' (Freedman 2011, 2, 10; Nixon 2011, 67; Pusey and Sealey-Huggins 2013, 443).

The question of grading in assessment is just one piece of thinking through what a genuinely empowering, emancipatory and democratic model of public higher education should look like. But it is also a terribly important piece. As Docherty (2011, 125) argues, 'assessment is, in many ways and for many people, the single most essential thing that a University is about'. In rethinking the place of grading in assessment, we are forced to address 'almost every other aspect of a [university's] functioning – how power is distributed and used, faculty–student relations, educational priorities, instructional procedures, administrative politics, parental aspirations, the job market, and the like' (Kirschenbaum 1976, 111; see also Canally 2012). In this, the arbitrator's decision in the case of Rancourt, though upholding his firing, paradoxically ends up reinforcing his claims. For what this ruling makes clear is that the structure of the contemporary neoliberal university continues to be able to accommodate any number of radical claims and ideas – provided that no attempt is made to put these into practice within the university itself. We remain free to espouse our belief in democratic

education, even as we labour and learn within profoundly undemocratic educational institutions. So long as the core ‘grammar’ or disciplining logic of the university is left unchanged, the ideas themselves remain of limited consequence (Tyack and Tobin 1994).

The purpose of this essay is to argue for the need for an expanded, critical conversation about what a truly ‘public higher education’ should ideally look like, as an effective alternative to the currently dominant privatised and neoliberalised model of the university, and, more particularly, to argue that contesting the central place of grading in assessment is a vital piece of developing this ideal model of the public university. The essay is organised into three sections. First, it looks at recent calls to defend and reimagine the public university as an essential prerequisite for developing an alternative, more democratic future for higher education in society to the neoliberal and managerialist model that prevails today. Second, it puts these calls in the context of a long history of arguments against graded assessment that come from both the theory and practice of democratic education, and that have received considerable backing from empirical research in the sociology and psychology of education. Finally, it considers contemporary shifts in higher education and society, in the UK and beyond, that may provide renewed openings for moving the contestation of graded assessment to the forefront of discussion over the future of the public university.

Reimagining the public university

In the global context of public funding cuts and rising tuition fees, student and staff protesters have argued that what is at stake in current changes in the higher education sector is not simply a dispute over who should pay for university, but a conflict between two opposing models of higher education in society: a privatised vision of a university that serves individual, economic and market-based interests and is paid for privately, by those who benefit directly; and a public vision of a university that is dedicated to serving the universal public good – benefiting those who work and study at universities and those who don’t alike – and is therefore publicly funded and supported. In the UK, for example, the Campaign for the Public University (2011), along with a coalition of more than 20 other academic staff and student organisations, released an alternative white paper on higher education in 2011 arguing that universities are (and should remain) ‘autonomous’ institutions that provide vital ‘public benefits’ through their teaching and research by helping to create and maintain a ‘democratic society’ (in particular, through fostering independent, critical, informed and trusted ‘public debate’), as well as a ‘fair’ and ‘equal’ society (in particular, by enabling social mobility and educational opportunity for all). Similar arguments of a conflict between public higher education and current, neoliberal forces of privatisation and marketisation have been widely made elsewhere (e.g. Newfield 2008; Folbre 2010; Giroux 2011; Holmwood 2011; Nixon 2011).

As a number of sympathetic critics have pointed out, the problem with organising opposition to neoliberal higher education policy around a project of ‘saving’ or ‘defending’ public higher education is that the concept of the ‘public university’ as an ideal is vague and underdeveloped, and past and present existing examples of public universities, whatever public benefits they may have bestowed, have also always been marred by all kinds of inequalities and exclusions, as they have always been captured in part by the (private) interests of privileged groups both within the university itself and in society at large (Calhoun 2006; Marginson 2006, 2011). Indeed, concepts of

equity and justice in higher education in general tend to ‘have a feel good flavour to them that can cover up the absence of precise meaning’, and are ‘frequently used without clear and agreed definition’ (Brennan and Naidoo 2008, 287). Dominant ideas of how higher education serves the public good have constantly shifted over time and long been contested (Williams 2014). Contemporary campaigns and arguments around saving the public university most often focus narrowly on the twin issues of public funding for and student access to higher education, while leaving essential questions about the internal organisation and substance of that education relatively unaddressed. Clearly, if the ‘public university’ is to serve as the holder for an ideal vision of a just, sustainable and democratic model of higher education, it is not enough simply to invoke its name; rather, there is a pressing need to think through what this ideal actually means (and should mean) across a wide range of higher education functions, structures, practices and contexts, so that we can say when a particular university or higher education system is serving the general public interest, and when it has become disfigured and limited to serving the interests of some (private) groups more than others. As Calhoun (2006, 37) writes, ‘for universities to be effective institutions for the public good, we need ... a stronger analysis of how universities can be public’.

Conceptual work on reimagining the public university is limited but has begun. Calhoun (2006, 10) suggests there are at least four questions that need to be asked in thinking about the public nature of higher education: ‘(1) where does the money come from? (2) who governs? (3) who benefits? and (4) how is knowledge produced and circulated?’ Marginson (2011, 11) argues that the public university should be imagined in opposition not just to the forces of privatisation, marketisation and commodification, but also to the ‘field of status ranking’ that has long been central to higher education and is oriented not to contributing to the general public good, but to producing individual ‘positional goods’ instead. As Marginson notes, positional hierarchies are produced in higher education among both students and staff, between universities and national higher education systems overall. Burawoy (2011) proposes that the essence of the public university may be found in a unique, interdependent and antagonistic relationship between four essential types of knowledge (professional, policy, critical and public) that it produces and distributes in its research and teaching; the survival of this public function is dependent on the right balance of governance and autonomy, critique and engagement both within universities, and between universities and society at large. Like Marginson, Burawoy argues that the public university is threatened not just by the forces of ‘commodification’, but state-led, top-down ‘regulation’ as well. Nixon (2011), like Burawoy, defines the public university in terms of essential forms of intellectual practice (capability, reasoning and purpose) that it nourishes, and suggests, further, that higher education serves the public good by providing ‘a dedicated space within which to debate what constitutes the public good’ and producing ‘an educated public with the capabilities and dispositions necessary to contribute to that debate’ (x). In terms of specific areas of university practice promoting the public good, issues that have received the most attention include: the challenge of ensuring fair access to higher education for individuals from all social backgrounds (e.g. Meyer et al. 2013); academic freedom and the importance of autonomy from state and market interference in research and teaching (e.g. Schrecker 2010); and the enduring value of those subject areas (e.g. the humanities, social sciences and liberal arts) that have been marginalised in the neoliberal university (e.g. Nussbaum 2010).

In this project of reimagining the public university, the issue of assessment has been left under-analysed. When assessment is addressed in the context of critiquing the neo-liberal university, it is typically to raise concern over grade inflation: of the ways in which marketisation, the promotion of education as a positional good and spread of a consumerist ethos in higher education lead to pressures to raise student grades (e.g. Côté and Allahar 2007; Oleinik 2009; Rojstaczer and Healy 2012). But this misses the question of whether grading itself, regardless of marketisation and inflationary pressure, is problematic in the public university. In all conceptualisations of public higher education, there is a universal concern with the central importance of fostering critical, reflexive, independent and democratically minded thinkers. Calhoun (2009, 901, 923) argues that the ‘public mission’ of the university is to ‘educate students to be participants in free inquiry’ and nourish ‘the kind of behavior citizens need to practice for democracy ... to work’. Marginson (2011, 19) proposes that the purpose of the public university is to ‘foster critical intellectual reflexivities’ and ‘solidarity’ that are essential for ‘building advanced democratic forms’. Burawoy (2011, 41) writes that the public university should seek to ‘orchestrate a deliberative democracy’, both among its own staff and students and with the rest of society. Indeed, as Holmwood (2011, 7) points out, the idea that one core role of the public university is to serve ‘democratic citizenship by improving debate and the capacities of citizens’ was, until very recently, an explicit part of state higher education policy in the UK, as elsewhere (see also Brown 2011; Docherty 2011; Giroux 2011). For this and all other core purposes identified for the public university, it is essential to ask whether particular university practices – including the forms of graded assessment that now dominate higher education worldwide – serve such goals or not. What Nixon (2011, 114) suggests – echoing a long line of practitioners of democratic education, including Denis Rancourt – is that, actually, ‘much of what passes for assessment in higher education is wholly inadequate to this task (if not downright dysfunctional)’.

Democratic education and the argument against grading

Arguments against the use of grading in assessment have long been a central part of democratic education theory and practice. ‘Having ... started from the principle of solidarity and equality’, wrote Ferrer (1913, 55) in 1908:

we are not prepared to create a new inequality. Hence in the Modern School there will be no rewards and no punishments; there will be no examinations to puff up some children with the flattering title of ‘excellent’, to give others the vulgar title of ‘good’, and make others unhappy with a consciousness of incapacity and failure.

Alex Bloom likewise rejected marks, prizes and competition in setting up a democratic school in the mid-twentieth century, arguing that only a school based on ‘communal spirit’ could foster effective, independent and critical democratic learning: ‘Because there are neither carrots nor goads, there will be no donkeys, for when children are treated as we would have them be, they tend to reach out accordingly’ (quoted in Fielding 2005, 123). John Dewey wrote extensively of the harmful impact of grading in education: in fostering ‘individualistic competition’ in place of ‘cultivation of the social spirit’, as well as ‘emulation and rivalry’, a ‘fear of failure so extreme and sensitive as to be morbid’, feelings of ‘superiority’ among the successful and ‘continuous and persistent inferiority’ among those who fail (Dewey 1903, 17–19); and in promoting

‘the colorless, negative virtues of obedience, docility and submission’, motives for performing schoolwork ‘which are foreign to truly moral activity’, and an ever-present ‘temptation to cheat’ (Dewey and Dewey 1915, 297–8).

In general, democratic educators have focused on three key arguments about the use of graded assessment. First, grading undermines the sense of collective solidarity and mutual responsibility between students that democratic education seeks to foster, and promotes instead an embrace of competitive and detached individualism. Second, grading undermines the principles of dialogical engagement and critical questioning of authority figures vital to democratic practice, by instead promoting relationships of passivity, obedience and submissiveness among students towards their teachers. ‘The correlation between power and subordinacy in the classroom finds its most blatant expression in the grading process’, writes Giroux (1984, 84): ‘Grades are used, in many cases, as soft cops to promote social conformity and to enforce institutional sanctions.’ Third, grading undermines intrinsic motivations among students for becoming independent, critically engaged, self-directed learners – again, the type of learners who are widely held to be essential for preserving healthy democratic societies – instead substituting extrinsic motivations of working and learning to gain reward or recognition from others, or avoid failure or discipline. From these core concerns stem a further set of consequences: increased social division among students depending on where they stand in the grading hierarchy, and particularly destructive impacts on the learning, esteem and identity of students at the lower end of this hierarchy (Heron 1988; Apple and Beane 1995; Akyea and Sandoval 2004; Bain 2010; Knoester 2012).

While most of the opposition to grading in education developed at the primary and secondary levels, parallel arguments against grading have been widely extended to higher education, most notably in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, student groups such as Students for a Democratic Society called for the ‘abolition of the grade system’, seeing it as a key demand for ‘radically altering the shape and purpose of our educational system’ (Davidson 1966). Experimental, alternative colleges were established that used no grading in their work with students – some of which (Evergreen, Fairhaven, Hampshire, etc.) continue to operate today. Evergreen College in Washington State, for example, rejected grading in an effort ‘to change fundamentally the traditional dynamic of power and authority between students and faculty’ (Narrative Evaluation Study Group 2004, 65); while Hampshire College in Massachusetts opposes grades because they ‘inhibit curiosity, encouraging students to do only what is required, ... stress competition and reduce collaboration’ (Lash 2014). Many mainstream universities also adopted alternative forms of assessment at the time, in particular, by offering some courses on a non-graded, pass/fail basis only, in the hopes of relieving ‘pressure and competition’ among students, encouraging ‘intellectual curiosity’, while removing the “enforcing” aspects of traditional grading’ (Pedrini and Pedrini 1972, 2–3). Concerns over grading in higher education stretch back much further in history: in 1918, Thorstein Veblen was already arguing that the ‘system of academic grading ... resistlessly bends more and more of current instruction to its mechanical tests and progressively sterilizes all personal initiative and ambition that comes within its sweep’ (quoted in Schneider and Hutt 2014, 11).

Claims made by democratic education theorists and practitioners about the harmful impacts of graded assessment have received support from decades of both sociological and psychological education research. Becker, Geer, and Hughes’ (1968) classic study of undergraduate culture at the University of Kansas introduced the concept of the ‘grade point average perspective’: in an environment marked by ‘the institutionalization

of grades as the chief valuable in the area of academic work', students develop strategic approaches to university study based on maximising chances of 'getting a good grade', rather than in terms of increasing their learning engagement (121, 133). Subsequent studies have documented similar phenomena in the USA in the 1980s (Rabow, Choi, and Purdy 1998); Denmark in the 1970s (Kvale 2007) and most recently, New Zealand in the 2010s (Harland et al. 2015). Psychological and experimental studies have produced parallel findings. A widely cited experiment by Butler (1988) with fifth- and sixth-grade students in Israel found that, not only did students perform better and express greater interest in learning tasks when assessed with feedback comments rather than grades, but also when given both comments and grades, students tended to ignore comments and focus on grades, with corresponding negative impacts on their performance and, among low-achieving students, their interest in learning. Similar findings of negative impacts of grading on student performance and intrinsic learning motivation in experimental conditions have been reported for undergraduate students in the USA (Lipnevich and Smith 2008), and secondary school and professional school students in Switzerland (Pulfrey, Darnon, and Butera 2011, 2013). Recent experimental studies by Hayek and colleagues done with university students and fifth-grade students in France found that use of individual grades can undermine collaborative group work practice and performance in education (Hayek 2014; Hayek et al. 2015).

As alternatives to traditional grading, three complementary sets of approaches have generally been adopted by democratic educators: (1) dialogical or participatory forms of assessment, in which students play an active role in the assessment process, for example, through self, peer or collaborative assessment, grade contracts or collective negotiations over the assessment system as a whole (Giroux 1984); (2) learning-centred, information-rich and formally diverse forms of assessment that are non-comparative, non-competitive and non-graded, such as narrative- or portfolio-based evaluations (Knoester 2012) and (3) particularly in contexts where there is a clearly identifiable set of skills or knowledge to be acquired, use of a basic pass/fail model of certifying competence or mastery (Ferrer 1913; Gray 2013). None of these in themselves are panaceas to the problems associated with grading. As higher education researchers have documented, participatory forms of assessment can lead not to student empowerment and equality, but new forms of discipline and control (Reynolds and Trehan 2000; Tan 2012). Narrative evaluations can come in many different forms, with different audiences, purposes and strategies in mind: lack of clarity and critical reflection about the process, as an internal review at Evergreen College in 2004 found, can lead to the production of narrative assessments that are 'bewildering', 'maddening', 'dispiriting', 'obscure' and lacking in clearly definable value (Narrative Evaluation Study Group 2004, 1–2). Such evaluations can also be difficult to do at scale, in large classes, and have thus sometimes been written off as 'boutique' solutions that are 'untenable as systemic responses' (Schneider and Hutt 2014, 17). Competency-based assessments can be controlling and disciplining, and become overly and inappropriately prescriptive in specifying the outcomes of learning (Ecclestone 1999); they can also be defined in ways that either raise or lower expected levels of achievement (Wilkinson 2011). Pass/fail assessment can end up becoming another form of grading if different levels of passing are added (high pass, pass with honours, etc.); and when used in a larger cultural and institutional environment that remains dominated by the logic of grading, may lead to students putting in less time and effort on pass/fail courses than courses that remain graded (Michaelides and Kirshner 2005).

The bigger issue here is that change of grading mechanisms needs to be linked with changes in a wide range of other structures, practices, goals, roles and relationships in the university if it is to avoid becoming a mere change of ‘window dressing’ (Wilkinson 2011, 860). Opposition to the use of graded assessment in higher education, as groups such as Students for a Democratic Society argued decades ago, is best viewed as a starting point for transforming the university, not an end point. In other words, just as the promotion of the ideal of the public university will only find success if it is linked with changes in specific, concrete practices and structures in higher education, so too will the transformation of higher education practices and structures – such as those involving assessment – with the goal of making these more empowering and emancipatory most likely be effective if these are directly connected to a larger, collective vision and project of reimagining the university overall as a ‘public university’ that, in all of its diverse elements, works towards promoting the kinds of learning, knowledge, work, disposition and sensibility that are vital to the strengthening of a healthy democratic society.

Prospects for an anti-grading movement in higher education

Critiques of grading are often accompanied by an acceptance of their inevitability, a belief that ‘a rejection of grades would be too drastic a break with expectations and conventions of schooling’ (Placier 1995, 48). Calls to abolish grading, perhaps especially in the current era, are liable to be labelled as radical and unrealistic. If, however, there is to be a serious effort to develop a model of the public university that is oriented to developing critical, independent, self-motivated, democratic thinkers, then what decades of educational theory, research and practice seem to suggest is that, actually, what might be more unrealistic is the expectation that higher education, with its current forms of graded assessment (among other problems), is going to be able to effectively support such a vision. The question becomes, then, what prospects exist for an anti-grading movement that could help start to turn the ideal of a public, democratic university into a concrete reality?

Three potential areas of opportunity currently exist. Within undergraduate education, there has been increasing concern over the ‘dominant discourse of assessment’ that is driven by a ‘focus on control, discipline and selection’, ‘constructs learners as passive subjects’ and demands of students that ‘they conform to the rules and procedures of others to satisfy the needs of an assessment bureaucracy’ (Boud 2007, 17; Kvale 2007, 57). There is now a robust and extensive research-, theory- and practice-based literature that promotes a wide range of alternative forms of higher education assessment that are learner-centred, pedagogically informed, information-rich and encompass student participation (e.g. Boud and Falchikov 2007; Hounsell et al. 2007; Price et al. 2008; Medland 2014). One dilemma with this body of work is that it is only rarely connected to broader discussions of reimagining the public university and promoting healthy democratic societies, and tends to focus more abstractly and academically on the agenda of developing forms of assessment that will foster critical, self-motivating and independent thinkers – that will help create the ‘twenty-first century learner’, as Medland (2014, 8) puts it. Consequently, it is often unable to draw on the strengths of a collective political project that could mobilise to shift not just assessment practices, but other forms of higher education structure and practice as well – from university governance, to staff–student roles and relationships, to common understandings of the overall purpose of higher education – that would be essential for supporting

any genuinely empowering and effective democratic form of higher education. A second dilemma with this literature is that it only rarely directly challenges the use of grading in assessment itself. Instead, what has tended to happen is that innovation and change in assessment in the university has been concentrated in developing forms of what gets called ‘formative assessment’, which is categorically distinguished from ‘summative assessment’, that remains tightly wedded to traditional, hierarchical and authoritarian practices of grading and ranking, comparison and competition.

A second area of opportunity concerns educational developments now occurring outside of undergraduate education. In North America, in particular, collective organising at the level of compulsory education against high stakes testing has generated extensive attention to the social politics of assessment, and interest in embracing alternative assessment. A number of schools and school districts across the continent have opted to abandon letter and numerical grading in favour of more detailed, descriptive and dialogic forms of documentation of student engagement and progress in learning (Falk and Darling-Hammond 2009; Grinberg 2014; Millar 2014); and school reformers often include the movement away from traditional grading as a core part of their vision of how learning should work in the future (Brooks and Holmes 2014). The imperative of retaining grades in undergraduate education is most commonly based on claims of the essential role they play in ranking and selecting students for subsequent entry into the labour market and postgraduate courses of study. Here, critical discussion of what the core purposes of the public university should be, and contestation of the dominant use of education as a commodity and ‘positional good’ is vital (Marginson 2011). So, too, is careful attention to the injustice and ineffectiveness of using grades as markers of difference in student learning achievement. As Rust (2007, 233) observes, ‘much current practice in the use of marks and the arrival at degree classification decisions is not only unfair but is intellectually and morally indefensible, and statistically invalid’. But also, it is important to recognise that the one area in higher education where there is currently the most interest and activity in abandoning grades is in postgraduate education. In North America, many medical schools, in particular, are beginning to use pass/fail models of assessment in place of letter or numerical grades. One reason for this shift is the belief that while ‘physicians in practice are expected to maintain their competence throughout their careers by participating in continuous learning processes’, traditional forms of medical school pedagogy and assessment – including the use of ‘discriminating grades’ – fail to foster the kinds of intrinsic motivations, practices and abilities that are necessary for medical graduates to become effective and collaborative ‘self-regulating’ learners (White and Fantone 2010, 469–70). A study of the use of a non-graded ‘learner-centered portfolio assessment system built around competency standards and continuous formative feedback’ at a medical school in Cleveland, Ohio, found that while the assessment system was successful, one of the challenges reported by students was having to deal with the ‘significant culture shift’, coming in from undergraduate education experiences in which student work had been based entirely around the need to get good grades (Altafawi et al. 2012, 221). Such findings turn standard arguments for why grades need to be kept in undergraduate education upside down.

Finally, one of the most important openings for an anti-grading movement may be that one of the consequences of the neoliberal, managerialist university is that grading is increasingly being used not just to assess students, but academic staff as well (Lynch 2014). In university- and college-level teaching, staff are being held accountable for grades that are based on student module evaluation reports. Indeed, one of the

biggest collective movements against grading in the UK recently has been teaching staff in the further education sector protesting the use of grades in management observations of staff teaching practice (Coffield 2012; O’Leary 2013; Matthews and Noyes 2014). In research, too, the use of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) to assess all university research done in the UK has given rise to university internal REF exercises in which research active staff are given grade point average scores based on recent research publications. Criticisms and concerns over this form of research assessment closely parallel the concerns that have been raised over the use of grading in student assessment: that it lacks validity; undermines collegiality and collaboration, while fostering inequality and competition; and leads to shallow, strategic forms of academic game playing, with ‘intellectual horizons narrowed, imaginations cramped and “risky” work marginalised’ (Sayer 2014; see also UCU 2013; CDBU 2015). Yet, if grading is so inappropriate and harmful to use in the assessment of the teaching and research work of academic staff, surely it is just as inappropriate and harmful in the assessment of students as well. In the context of the neoliberalised university, where growing tensions and divisions are emerging between teaching and research, staff and students, perhaps it is the issue of grading that could prove to be an essential meeting point of common cause and concern for staff and students, teachers and researchers alike. In the name of defending – and more to the point, reimagining – the public university, as a vital institution for the promotion and preservation of healthy democratic societies, the problem of grading in assessment should once again be brought to the forefront of our collective attention.

Disclosure statement

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