Swinburne dumps grades, says marking hinders creative process

Swinburne University is moving to remove grades from some core sections of its design degree, saying students' focus on high marks was stifling the creative process.

Eight out of 23 units in the graduate design degree will switch to a pass-fail model, and students who fail will have the opportunity to resubmit their work.

"We were noticing more and more that students were fixating on grades, and that was not necessarily having a positive effect on the outcome," said Nikki Wragg, Swinburne's associate dean of education in design and architecture.

Students were not consulting enough with each other and lecturers, Ms Wragg said, with the industry more concerned about a portfolio and process.

Coursework through the year will be evaluated on whether it meets expectations, exceeds expectations, or fails to do either. There will also be ongoing feedback throughout the semester.

The concept of "ungrading" came from advocate Jesse Stommel, cofounder of Digital Pedagogy Lab. He developed workshops with Swinburne to develop the new "assessment for learning" concept.

"[Mr Strommel] talks about how grading can create an 'us versus them' impact and a fixation on the prize rather than the making," Ms Wragg said

"Ultimately, we've made quite a bold move to upgrade eight of our core units of studying. So students can immerse themselves in practise. And learn and really work through what their own design process is."

Ms Wragg said the university would be monitoring the grade-free plan over the next couple of years to assess its success.

Tara Magdalinski, one of Swinburne's pro vice-chancellors, said design was a discipline where students needed to imagine and create, "which takes both risk and reflection".

"Students are naturally worried about risking their grades if they go out on a limb, so the assessment-for-learning approach supports students to explore novel ideas, evaluate their own and each other's creative work, reflect on their process and improve upon their designs," Professor Magdalinski said.

Swinburne bachelor of design and business student Nasya Wu said having a safe and supportive environment to take creative risks was important in design.

"Assessment for learning makes me feel more comfortable experimenting with new skills, even when I might be uncertain of the final outcome," the student said.

Ms Wragg said the move dovetailed with the needs of the design industry.

"Ultimately you get lots of feedback in this industry, you don't get lots of grades," she said.

"Underpinning the 'ungrading' or 'assessment for learning' is this idea that we are setting them up to really be able to analyse, evaluate critical thinking, evaluate feedback and really understand from the beginning of their course how to apply that feedback and take it on objectively and not always personally."

Tim Kotsiakos, director of Fitzroy design studio MASS, said too much of an emphasis on cramming for good grades could inhibit students from going through the important design process.

"Placing too much emphasis on the final outcome, too early on, can distract designers from discovering the best possible solution," he said.

The move was described as "ballsy" by independent designer Celine Tan, who said she was motivated by grades when she went through Monash University's visual communication degree.

"The first thing that went through my mind was 'cool', the way we get into the course was through a portfolio, to follow on from that, that is interesting," Ms Tan said.

However, she questioned the impact it would have on students.

"In my mind, I'm thinking, will the students still have motivation? I don't know how it will pan out."

"I'd be so interested to see how that carries on and how that impacts the students in terms of their creativity."

Melbourne University master of teaching senior lecturer Daniela Acquaro said it was an interesting concept. From her experience, some students were motivated by grades and other students find that it can be a really crushing experience to not get the grades you want.

"If you aren't grading, you'd have to make sure you have really well-structured feedback so students understood where they were and how they could improve," she said.