## *'If I do well I feel on top of the world'*: Investigating the impact of psychology students' academic achievement on self-esteem

Academic achievement can be thought of as the extent to which learning has been accomplished. Previous work suggests that students' self-esteem is impacted by academic achievement, though it is not entirely clear why this is. The current study therefore explored this through interviewing eight students from a Scottish university, before using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six stage reflexive thematic analysis to analyse the resultant data. Two themes of *Grades and feedback* and *Peer comparison* were identified, highlighting two important conclusions. Firstly, self-esteem is positively impacted by strong performance, and negatively impacted by poor performance but that crucially, this is mediated by others' poor performance. That is to say, good grades and feedback make students feel good, and poor grades and feedback make students feel bad, but such 'badness' is appeased if peers perform equally poorly, which has potential consequences for peer relationships. Secondly, students value feedback in order to increase their chances of academic achievement, noting the negative impact on self-esteem when feedback is not constructive, just critical. This highlights the importance of 'mindful marking' in terms of taking care to provide useful feedback to students to improve their work; something that is reported to be hugely appreciated. Implications, limitations and future research suggestions are detailed.

Keywords: academic achievement, self-esteem, students, higher education, feedback, peer comparison

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Academic achievement is one of the most discussed concepts in educational research and practice (York et al., 2015). Although the term is often thought of in relation to just attainment of good grades (Choi, 2005; Tracey et al., 2012), this is problematic, as it does not take into consideration acquisition of skills or competencies. It is suggested, then, that academic achievement relates to a number of outcomes including accomplishment of the learning process, acquiring desired skills and abilities (including the development of employability skills), and being satisfied, persistent and successful after leaving education (Cachia et al., 2018). It should be noted though that the assessment driven systems used to measure students' achievement in higher education are likely to have implications for future employment. This means that students are likely to be aware of how 'good', or competitive, their degree is which may lead to feelings of pressure around academic achievement (Stan, 2012).

Evidence suggests that a range of factors can impact on students' academic achievement such as assertiveness, conscientiousness and emotionality (Mihaela, 2015), self-control (Duckworth et al., 2019), engagement (Lei et al., 2018), and mind set (Sisk et al., 2018). Given this, it follows to consider another concept which impacts each of these: self-esteem.

### *Self-esteem and Academic Achievement*

Self-esteem refers to the way in which we evaluate our innate sense of self (Hepper, 2016; Myers et al., 2014). Early psychologist James suggested that high self-esteem is the result of a subjective process in which individuals continuously meet their personal standards and goals (James et al., 1890), though the term was not defined until later as an individual's overall evaluation of the self, with high self-esteem consisting of high self-respect and self-worth, and low self-esteem, the opposite (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-esteem is an important and widely explored construct, underpinning a number of psychological theories: for instance, Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs recognised self-esteem as being essential for human beings to reach

self-actualisation and fulfilment. Similarly, Rogers (1959) believed that individuals possess an innate desire to progress, develop, and grow, arguing that self-esteem is fundamental to how individuals for relationships, and approach problems and challenges; such as those faced within the context of education.

The correlation between self-esteem and achievement has been investigated by a number of researchers within academic environments (e.g. Cvencek et al., 2018; Li et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2019). In separate studies, Aryana (2010) and Virtanen et al. (2016) confirmed a link between self-esteem and academic achievement in pre-university students, and subsequent work has shown the same pattern to be present in a younger sample too, with self-esteem predicting academic achievement (e.g. Booth & Gerard, 2011; Topçu & Leana-Taşcilar 2018). Further work has shown that self-efficacy – 'how well one can execute courses of action to deal with prospective situations' (Bandura, 1982, p.122) – also predicts academic achievement (Asakereh & Yousoft, 2018; Zuffianò et al., 2013); an important point to note given that high self-efficacy is predictive of high self-esteem (Hajloo, 2014).

Within higher education specifically, evidence has demonstrated a significant relationship between self-esteem and achievement among university students (e.g. Arshad et al., 2015; Jirdehi et al., 2018; Naderi et al., 2009; Mohsen, 2017; Román et al., 2008). Such research expands our understanding of the link between self-esteem and academic achievement in students, however, it does not provide insight into *why* this is. There is therefore a need to further examine what processes may influence this relationship.

### *The Current Study*

The current study thus aims to address this gap in our understanding by adopting a qualitative approach to the study of self-esteem and academic achievement, focusing specifically on university students. Such an approach allows for a deeper understanding of the relationship

between self-esteem and academic achievement; we know that these are correlated in that higher self-esteem promotes higher academic achievement and vice versa, but we do not know the specific reasons why – i.e. how self-esteem is impacted by academic achievement. Interviews with current university students that explore their perspectives permit a more in-depth look at self-esteem within the academic context, allowing us to obtain intricate knowledge which in turn will help educators to consider practice in terms of how students can best be supported as they complete their degrees. The current study therefore asks the research question: *How is self-esteem impacted by students' academic achievement?*

## Materials and methods

### *Participants*

Convenience sampling was conducted at a Scottish university, with the only inclusion criteria being that participants had to be fluent English speakers, over eighteen and a current student at the time of participation. Further demographic information was not collected, partly as it was not necessary for the study, and partly to ensure participant anonymity as far as possible. Participants thus consisted of eight Psychology undergraduate students, with recruitment ceasing at this point when data saturation was achieved, as suggested by Braun and Clark (2013). Given that data collection and initial data analysis were conducted concurrently, it was immediately clear to see that participants were detailing the same kinds of experiences in their answers, focusing on concepts pertaining to the two resultant themes. In addition, as data collection continued, the interest from psychology students only somewhat shaped the study and subsequent findings to become discipline-specific – in that the results would be specific to the experiences of psychology students only as opposed to a broader cohort – and so after the 8th interview, it was decided that recruitment should cease.

### Data Collection

Ethical approval was granted from the home institution, and data collection did not begin until then. Potential participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the purpose of the research, with the explanation that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw their data and participation at any point. Participants were then asked to provide signed consent, and face to face semi-structured interviews were conducted. During the interviews, participants were asked a number of open-ended questions that explored the topic of academic achievement on self-esteem, including, *How do you feel about your academic achievements?*, *What impacts your attitude towards your education?*, and *What motivates you to succeed at university?*

After completing the interview, participants were thanked for their time and given a debrief form which restated the purpose of the study and researchers' contact details. Each interview was recorded on a Dictaphone, before immediately being uploaded to a secure OneDrive account upon completion. Data collection took place between September 2019 and January 2020, with the longest interview duration being 14:15 minutes, whilst the shortest was 5:12 minutes (m = 8:17 minutes).

### Data Analysis

Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, omitting any personal details that could identify participants, and assigned each participant a number ('Participant 1', 'Participant 2', and so on). Transcription is considered an 'interpretative act' of assigning meanings rather than just reproducing the data in a written format (Braun & Clark, 2006). This was followed by application of Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, which is an accessible and flexible method used to identify, analyse and report patterns present within a data set. The

stages involved in reflexive thematic analysis are as follows: data familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes, systematic data coding, generating initial themes from coded and collated data, developing and reviewing themes, defining, refining and naming themes, and writing the report. This analytical process resulted in the identification of two main themes, which will be illustrated and discussed in the following section.

## Results

In answer to the research question, *How is self-esteem impacted by students' academic achievement?,* the themes of *Grades and feedback* and *Peer comparison* will be discussed.

### Theme 1: Grades and feedback

Assessment is a fundamental aspect of the student experience, and alongside it comes the receipt of grades and feedback. There is an abundance of ways in which student ability and understanding can be assessed, but typically their efforts will be transformed into some form written feedback accompanied by some form of numerical value, at some point classifying the degree award they will obtain (QAA, 2018). In the current study, this process was shown to hugely impact students' self-esteem.

*Grades*

To begin, there was a lot of focus on grades being received. Firstly, participants discussed the impact of receiving good grades:

> *I was getting quite high a grade… I was really happy with that… it just gave me the kick I needed because I felt… "I can do this". (Participant 4)*

> *If I do well and get an A, I feel on top of the world and my self-esteem goes up.*
>
> *(Participant 5)*

Here we see participants 4 and 5 detail positive responses to receiving a good grade. This is expressed through the strength of the description, demonstrating the extent to which achieving high grades impacts upon them. Participant 5 explicitly mentions their self-esteem increasing, and participant 4 highlights the increase in self-efficacy felt by obtaining a high grade. This is particularly pleasing to note, as in academic settings, self-efficacy has been shown to be a strong predictor of future performance (Asakereh & Yousoft, 2018), as evidenced by participants 6 and 4 below when asked what motivates them to do well in their studies:

> *Once you've had an A you do tend to chase that. (Participant 6)*

> *My marks pushed me on so much… it just gave me such a lift. (Participant 4)*

Here, we see participants talk about the impact of receiving good grades: that it encourages them to 'chase' subsequent high marks and 'pushes' them on. This focus on future performance is important, because research has shown that academic self-esteem fluctuates (Fairlamb, 2020). As such, if we can establish ways in which students are continually developing their academic abilities, this suggests that this will have a positive impact on self-esteem. However, what happens when students receive poor grades? Consider the following:

> *Getting a grade that I don't want really, really disheartens me and makes me almost think, like "what's the point? I'm not good enough". (Participant 3)*

> *Once the grades start to count you put yourself down so much more… I know they're OK grades but because they count towards my degree, I don't feel like I'm doing well enough. (Participant 2)*

Here, we see participants 3 and 2 detail the impact poor grades can have on their self-esteem in terms of being good enough and doing well enough. Both participants make reference to they feel: being disheartened, and the progressive impact it has as grades begin to contribute to their final degree classification. Participants also detailed how receiving a poor grade can be a catalyst for further negative reactions:

> *As soon as I get a bad grade it's something that gets in my head that this is not going well and then it just starts spiralling. (Participant 1)*

> *Bad grades definitely can have a negative effect and it's really, really hard to not let it affect you too much because it's just a downwards spiral if you do that. (Participant 4)*

Both participants here make reference to 'spiralling', indicating that receiving bad grades is more than just a transient dip in over all academic achievement. Participant 1 expresses that when they receive a low grade, they begin to doubt their abilities, and that this has an increasingly detrimental and unmanageable impact on their wellbeing, mentioning that it 'gets in (their) head'. Similarly, participant 4 emphasises the difficulty in not letting bad grades affect them, and the potential outcome if they do. Of importance to note here is the seriousness with which receiving low grades is treated by students: it is not just brushed off, but rather, the potential long term impacts are noted.

Participants also spoke about the impact of receiving poor grades on their motivation. The relationship between grades and motivation has long been established in literature (e.g. Chamberlin et al., 2018). When asked what demotivated them, participants 7 and 2 answered as follows:

> *A bad grade… it makes you feel like you're not good enough to achieve what you need to do the job you want to do. (Participant 7)*

> *Recently I got a bad grade, and it took me like three days to finally pick up coursework again… I just feel demotivated. (Participant 2)*

Participant 7 above discussed the impact of receiving a bad grade in terms of feeling demotivated to achieve their career goals, whereas Participant 2 discussed it in terms of feeling demotivated to continue with coursework: highlighting that receiving poor grades has consequences that reach out with the immediate assessment period. This reflects the fact that students are completing their degrees within a system that is inescapably and unavoidably assessment-driven until the very end where even their degree is classified on a scale of essentially 'bare pass' to 'excellent pass', and so it is of little surprise that lower grades are received so poorly. While educators cannot unjustifiably increase grades, they can help boost self-esteem in terms of the feedback they provide, as detailed next.

*Feedback*

Research suggests that students value feedback (e.g. Cho & Park, 2019), but that there are ways in which it could be improved. For instance, feedback which is presented as constructive is appreciated, as demonstrated by the following:

> *I like being told not just that I'm wrong; like, how am I wrong, how do I make it right?.. I definitely need more constructive criticism rather than just criticism when we get grades back. (Participant 3)*

> *You can get feedback which is constructive criticism which you can learn from or you can get criticism back that just seems to be like, constantly bringing you down or is negative and it feels like an attack other than constructive. (Participant 6)*

> *I don't think the feedback is that helpful, a lot of the time it's not informative and is just a load of negative comments. (Participant 8)*

Participants note the difference between feedback that is constructive, and feedback that is simply critical; an issue highlighted previously in the likes of Dweck's (2006) work on mind sets. The participants here point out that they want to learn from the feedback they receive, which highlights the importance of it being beneficial. Discouragingly, participants also detailed the more drastic impact feedback could have on them:

> *Sometimes I feel really confident and other times I'll get feedback and it completely knocks the confidence. (Participant 7)*

> *I know they're trying to give you good advice… some have been a bit too brutal. I think that really impacts my self-esteem and self-confidence. (Participant 5)*

There is an established link between academic achievement and confidence (e.g. Srivastava, 2013; Stankov et al., 2014), and the effect this can have on students is clearly detailed. Participant 5, in particular, makes a specific connection between the 'brutal' feedback received, and the bearing that has on self-esteem. Given that feedback has the potential to help improve academic achievement – which in turn impacts self-esteem – it is imperative that feedback processes ensure that the focus is on helping students, and not fixating on what has been done wrong.

The results here have shown that while good grades can motivate, poor grades de-motivate students. Poor grades are unavoidable at times, so perhaps there needs to be a clearer focus on feedback in terms of boosting students' self-esteem. However, as detailed above, it is important that feedback focuses on the constructive more so than the critical. This discussion around the impact of grades and feedback on self-esteem is continued in the next theme, Peer comparison.

### *Theme 2: Peer comparison*

We already know that individuals compare themselves to others to make conclusions about their sense of self-worth (Festinger, 1954). The findings from the current study demonstrated this in terms of how participants considered their academic achievements in comparison to their peers, and how this impacted on their self-esteem, with regard to both. There upward and downward social comparison.

*Upward Comparison*

Participants in the current study expressed a tendency to compare their academic abilities and grades to those of their peers, which often resulted in displays of negative self-evaluations, when others are perceived to be achieving more. Consider the following quote:

> *I compare myself to others… it makes you feel like you're not as good as them.*
>
> *(Participant 7)*

Here, participant 7 states the impact of comparison: it makes them feel 'not as good' as their peers; clear evidence of the impact on self-esteem. There were a number of similar references in the data, but also some more pointed examples, such as the following:

> *Comparing myself to other students… if I speak to somebody and they say they're so far through on a piece of coursework, I'll instantly think I'm rubbish. (Participant 3)*

> *If I'm working with someone and I know that they didn't put a lot of work in, they just do an essay in like two hours and they get a much better grade than me, I feel down, like there's something wrong with me because I can't do what they do. (Participant 2)*

Here, participants 3 and 2 highlight how comparing themselves to other students makes them feel 'rubbish', 'down', and that there is 'something wrong' with them. Of interest is the way in

which this seems to be measured or conceptualised: in both examples above, the participants use working on an assignment as the standard to which comparisons are made: for participant 3, a peer having made more progress than themselves is the catalyst for a negative self-evaluation, and for participant 2, it is a peer having put in less effort. This links to previous work around talent versus effort, and the impact on achievement (see Duckworth et al., 2015).

Such comparisons were not only detailed with regard to working on an assignment, but in terms of grades received, too:

> *In first year everybody else had received at least one A, and I hadn't had any, and that was a bit disheartening, because you're looking at everybody else and wondering why they're doing well and you're not. (Participant 8)*

> *In third year my grades dropped dramatically… at that point I seen everyone was doing so well and I wasn't, and I ended up thinking "well maybe I should just pack this in because I'm obviously not as good as them". (Participant 6)*

Participants 8 and 6 here make reference to comparing themselves to their wider circle of peers as opposed to just one other student. Both suggest that 'everybody'/ 'everyone' else doing well had the effect of making them feel at best disheartened and at worst, question whether they should continue with their degree. Comparing themselves to this wider group additionally has the effect of making their respective poorer achievements feel even worse in comparison; that it is not just that they are not performing as well as a couple of peers, but are being outperformed by the whole year (in their opinion).

Perhaps in an attempt at self-preservation, participants also detailed how they avoid such upward comparison with peers, as in the following:

> *There are some people I don't talk to because I know they'll have done better than me, so I don't want to know what they got. I'll even go as far as to like, avoid them. (Participant 2)*

> *I definitely compare myself, I don't like to talk about my marks, 'cause they're usually lower than I want them to be. (Participant 1)*

Participants 2 and 1 describe taking measures to avoid comparing grades with other students who they consider to have performed better than themselves, by not talking to them and in one case even avoiding them. In this scenario, self-esteem is protected through preventing the detrimental effects of upward social comparison; a tactic reported by past research also (e.g. Muller & Fayant, 2010). If such avoidance is not possible, this can result in jealousy, as detailed below:

> *I get – I think jealous is the wrong word – but I get upset that people are achieving what I want to achieve. (Participant 1)*
> *I get a bit jealous, especially if I feel like I've done the same amount of work towards it. I know my friends work hard as well but I do get jealous, like say if my best friend got an A it would be quite annoying. (Participant 5)*

A 2015 study by Rentzsch and colleagues showed that students develop a sense of hostility towards others with academic self-esteem and that envy can mediate this, which is what we are seeing here. Although participant 1 retracts their use of the word 'jealous', the fact that they even mention it suggests it is option for how they are feeling, and participant 5 blatantly references the jealousy they feel – even of best friends – who have performed well.

*Downward comparison*

In contrast, participants also detailed the ways in which their self-esteem is bolstered by their academic achievements, through comparing themselves favourably to peers who have not performed as well as them. Such comparisons can protect self-esteem by providing reassurance that students' abilities and grades are similar to, or better than, those of their peers, as detailed by the following:

> *You don't want to compare yourself to everyone else but you sometimes can't help it because you think it might make you feel better or give you reassurance. (Participant 5)*

Here, Participant 5 explains that comparing themselves to others serves the function of boosting or protecting their confidence. The concept of downward comparison in the academic environment acting as protection of self-esteem is detailed more specifically in the following:

> *When I was in first year, I got a crap mark that really knocked my confidence for six, but it did actually make me feel better when one of my pals got a crap mark as well. (Participant 8)*

> *I've actually done better than a lot of these people... that's kind of made me feel better. (Participant 8)*

Here, participant 8 highlights two ways in which their self-esteem is boosted in terms of downward comparison; when peers get equally poor marks, and when they perform better than others. This suggests that although it might be dismaying to perform poorly, this is mitigated somewhat by others performing similarly, leading to – if not increased self-esteem – no detriment to self-esteem. Another way in which this is achieved is by considering some alternative reason for receiving a poorer grade:

> *I like speaking to people... if everybody else has got a rubbish mark I can blame it on the marking. (Participant 3)*

> *That one recently I didn't do very well in… when I looked about at all my other peers, they hadn't done great either… so, I think you're able to say "well is there a problem with that coursework?"… and I think that makes you feel better. (Participant 4)*

There are clear links to attribution theory here (cf. Heider, 1958) in that when they have not done well, participants blame other factors in the academic environment – as opposed to their own ability – such as incorrect marking or issues with coursework. This is supported by the phenomenon of self-serving attributions, in which individuals attribute positive outcomes to themselves and negative outcomes to other factors (Myers et al., 2014). In the context of academic feedback, social comparison allows the individual to credit themselves (or at least not blame themselves), and fault other factors in the academic environment.

The above discussion suggests that students comparing themselves to other students has an impact on self-esteem in terms of it being threatened when others have performed better, and protected (and possibly enhanced) when others have performed the same or worse. While none of these findings may be new, they offer an up to date expose of the factors that impact upon academic self-esteem in students. This discussion will be continued in the final section.

**Discussion**

The current study aimed to address the research question, *How is self-esteem impacted by students' academic achievement?* The first theme of *Grades and feedback* showed the positive impact of performing well and receiving what was considered a high grade. Participants made specific reference to the efficacious impact this had on their self-esteem, and the motivation it inspired to keep producing work of the same quality, in order to maintain or improvement academic achievement (Keppell & Carless, 2006). This lead to the discussion around the impact of receiving poor grades which were quite alarming: lowered self-worth, poor mental

wellbeing, questioning future career directions and demotivation were detailed as ramifications (Crocker et al., 2003). While grades cannot necessarily be increased, the manner in which they are delivered to students – in terms of feedback – can be addressed. Participants highlighted the need for criticism with an emphasis on constructiveness (Cho & Park, 2019). Negative comments can be even more damaging than poor grades giving their propensity to knock confidence in a way that has been described as 'brutal' and 'attacking'.

The second theme of *Peer comparison* offered insight into the extent of comparison in students, and the impact this has on self-esteem. Upward comparison threatened and decreased self-esteem through viewing peers in the academic environment as achieving higher grades, having better abilities and having superior motivation (Duckworth et al., 2015). Participants detailed the jealousy they felt of their peers, and the ways in which they would avoid talking about their results (Rentzsch et al., 2015; Muller & Fayant, 2010). However, participants also demonstrated downward comparison in terms of the self-esteem boost obtained when they achieved the same or better than their peers. In alignment with attribution theory (Heider, 1958), self-esteem was also protected by attributing poor results to some other academic factor, rather than self-ability.

***Implications***

These results seem to suggest, then, that poor academic achievement in terms of performance impacts negatively on self-esteem, exacerbated by comparisons to peers who have performed better. Students do not need to have out-performed their peers to increase self-esteem, but they do need to have performed to at least the same ability level. This suggests that students would benefit from better managing their expectations in terms of their performance and trying to avoid comparing themselves to others. It is worth reminding ourselves as educators of the impact of receiving grades; of how it feels to have our work be whittled down to a letter or

number, particularly when effort has been put in. Research has shown that students tend to categorise grades as simply 'good' or 'bad' (Boatright-Horowitz & Arruda, 2011), highlighting the importance of accompanying feedback.

Feedback plays a big role in terms of promoting confidence and protecting self-esteem, so it is crucial that educators pay closer attention to the feedback they provide, and practice 'mindful marking'. Given that it has the potential to help improve students' quality of work – and thus increase academic achievement – it is imperative that feedback processes focus on helping students, and not fixate on pointing out what has been done wrong. It is important that educators treat marking and feedback seriously, even though it can be a laborious and time-consuming task, particularly when academics are already under increasing amounts of workload pressure. Research has highlighted how important it is to students, and the long term impact it can have for on students' mind sets (Dweck, 2006), so it should be important to institutions too in terms of supporting staff to deliver such feedback processes as comprehensively as possible.

Given the current changing landscape within HE in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, this is an issue that warrants further attention. Academics continue to face the competing challenge of supporting and motivating students' self-esteem whilst fairly grading to avoid diluting awards, amidst the backdrop of an increasingly market-oriented higher education environment (O'Donovan, 2017).

### *Limitations*

The current study allowed the researcher to explore the complexities and underpinning thoughts, feelings and experiences regarding students' self-esteem in relation to academic achievement. However, it is also important to note that this study has several limitations. Firstly, the findings are limited to the experiences of Psychology undergraduate students and

as such cannot be generalised to other education levels or to other degree courses, and may only be applicable to the specific university from which the current data was taken. As such, the issues raised – and thus the findings – may only be relevant for this groups of students, and not the general undergraduate cohort. Future research therefore may want to focus on lower levels to see if the same topics arise, or if the impact of academic achievement on self-esteem becomes more prominent closer to the awarding of the degree classification. In addition, the researchers must be cognisant to the fact that students who take part in research are typically higher achievers and so the results may be skewed to reflect only those potentially more invested in their university degree, engaged, or those who are achieving higher grades (UCAS, 2012).

Further, we must consider the time at which data was collected, and whether there are more 'sensitive' periods of the year where assessment is more prominent an issue for students. In addition, we did not collect data on any previously experienced failures of participants. This could impact how participants conceptualise the topic, potentially discussing issues that are current at the time, but might not be representative of a 'usual' time at university.

### *Future Research*

Given the focus on grades, feedback and peer comparison, in addition to the points raised above, future research should aim to understand more about how students engage with feedback. We have demonstrated that academic achievement (in this case, grades) impacts self-esteem. Educators may not be able to change their grading as an assessment of student ability, but they can change their feedback practices in order to provide more support for students, and help soften the blow to self-esteem of receiving a poorer than expected mark. This is particularly important given that research has shown that students evaluate their instructors based on the grades they have received (Clayson et al., 2017; Vaillancourt, 2012), so if we can

provide more support for students in terms of how they can improve their work, this may help the relationship between student and tutor in order to promote learning (Glover & Brown, 2006). In order to do so, however, we need to understand more about the processes by which students interact with feedback: do they engage more if they did well or poorly? What exactly is it about comments that they find useful or harsh? In addition, it may be worthwhile considering how informative marking schemes and feedback formats are from a student perspective: for instance, research has suggested that students tend to rate written feedback poorly (e.g. Nicol, 2010) so one way to address this would be to use supplementary video feedback, which in turn may help to build rapport with the student and therefore be received more positively (Mathisen, 2012). If students understand these better, feedback may be received as constructive rather than diminishing to self-esteem. In addition, research has been positing for years that students should be more involved in the assessment process as they can be considered valid stakeholders (e.g. McDowell & Sambell, 1999), and given the unprecedented changes to HE over the past couple of years and current debates about the appropriateness of exams (e.g. Advance HE, 2021), we suggest that now is the ideal time to re-evaluate exactly how we are assessing our students.

*Conclusion*

Overall, the findings of the current study have demonstrated some of the ways in which academic achievement impacts self-esteem. This was detailed in terms of the attainment of good grades; when these are not achieved, this negatively impacts self-esteem, most noticeably when others have performed better. Educators cannot change the grades they assign, but can change the feedback they provide, which has shown to have an effect on self-esteem also.

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