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Elective Grading as a Transformative Assessment Model in Islamic Higher Education: A Mixed-Methods Study on Motivation, Performance, and Stress

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ABSTRACT. Prevailing assessment regimes in higher education remain predominantly standardized and instructor-centered, often neglecting learner variability and exacerbating academic stress, particularly within underexamined faith-based educational contexts. Addressing this gap, this study theorizes and empirically evaluates Elective Grading (EG) as a student-centered assessment paradigm in Islamic higher education. A mixed-method quasi-experimental design was employed with 60 undergraduate students assigned to an EG intervention group (n = 30) and a conventional assessment group (n = 30). Quantitative data were collected using academic performance tests and validated academic stress scales, complemented by qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews. Results indicate that EG significantly improves academic performance (M = 85.4 vs. 75.8), $t(58) = 5.47$, $p < 0.001$, and yields a substantially greater reduction in academic stress (18.7% vs. 3.2%), $t(58) = -4.28$, $p < 0.001$. A moderate-to-strong negative correlation between academic stress and achievement ($r = -0.62$, $p < 0.01$) highlights the centrality of affective factors in assessment design. Qualitative findings further reveal that EG enhances learner agency, perceived assessment fairness, and adaptive coping strategies. Theoretically, this study advances a culturally grounded assessment framework by integrating EG with Islamic educational values: *ikhtiyar* (intentional effort), *adl* (justice), and *amanah* (ethical responsibility), thereby extending student-centered assessment discourse into faith-informed learning environments. These findings reposition assessment as a mechanism for aligning academic achievement with student well-being. Despite contextual limitations, this study offers robust empirical and conceptual contributions to the reconfiguration of equitable and human-centered assessment practices in higher education.

Keywords: *Academic stress, Assessment fairness, Assessment reform, Elective grading, Islamic higher education, Learner agency, Student-centered assessment*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, higher education systems worldwide have faced increasing calls to reform traditional assessment practices in response to evolving pedagogical paradigms and student needs (Mahfoodh, 2021; Naibaho & Silalahi, 2022; Aguayo-Hernández, 2025). Conventional grading systems, often characterized by standardized examinations, fixed weighting structures, and uniform evaluation criteria, have long been the dominant mechanism for measuring academic achievement (Chen et al., 2010; James Popham et al., 2014). However, such rigid assessment structures are

increasingly criticized for their limited capacity to accommodate diverse student learning preferences, abilities, and trajectories. As higher education moves toward more learner-centered approaches, scholars have emphasized the need for flexible assessment models that enable students to demonstrate learning through multiple pathways and allow greater autonomy in shaping their learning experiences. Recent studies highlight the growing importance of flexible assessment systems that allow students to demonstrate learning through multiple pathways while supporting learner autonomy and engagement (Rideout, 2018; Wanner et al., 2024). Flexible assessment has been shown to increase students' sense of control over their learning, improve motivation, and reduce academic stress (Barua & Lockee, 2025).

One of the most pressing concerns associated with traditional assessment systems is their impact on students' psychological well-being. Numerous studies indicate that high-stakes testing and inflexible grading structures contribute significantly to academic stress, anxiety, and reduced motivation among university students (Von der Embse & Witmer, 2014; March & Robinson, 2015; Tagher & Robinson, 2016; Silaj et al., 2021). Excessive reliance on standardized assessments may increase academic stress, negatively influencing students' motivation, interest, and academic performance (Deng et al., 2022; Pekrun, 2024). When assessment is perceived primarily as a mechanism of control rather than a tool for learning, students may become disengaged and adopt surface-level learning strategies aimed solely at achieving grades rather than deep understanding. Consequently, recent educational discourse increasingly advocates for assessment systems that promote learner agency, personalized learning, and student participation in the design of evaluation processes.

These global concerns are particularly relevant within the context of Islamic Higher Education (IHE). Islamic universities aim to cultivate graduates who are intellectually capable, ethically grounded, and socially responsible (Al-Sowaidi & Mohammed, 2024; Ismail et al., 2024; Khimmataliev et al., 2025). Such holistic educational goals require learning environments that nurture not only academic achievement but also personal growth, responsibility, and reflective engagement with knowledge. Research by Nili and Tasavori (2022) shows that autonomy-supportive learning environments significantly enhance students' intrinsic motivation, engagement, and creativity. Nevertheless, assessment practices in many IHE institutions remain largely conventional, relying heavily on mid-term examinations, final examinations, and standardized written assignments (Wilby et al., 2018; Panadero et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2024). While these methods provide clear measurement of academic outcomes, they often fail to account for individual differences in learning styles, strengths, and emotional conditions. This discrepancy raises important questions about whether current assessment systems adequately support the broader educational mission of Islamic higher education.

Contemporary assessment scholarship emphasizes that evaluation should serve multiple pedagogical functions beyond the measurement of learning outcomes. Modern assessment frameworks distinguish between assessment of learning, assessment for learning, and assessment as learning. Together, these perspectives highlight the importance of integrating assessment into the learning process so that evaluation becomes a mechanism for feedback, reflection, and improvement (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). Such approaches encourage students to become active participants in their own learning, fostering metacognitive awareness and self-regulated learning strategies that are essential for long-term academic development.

A key theoretical framework that explains the importance of student involvement in learning processes is Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Developed by Ryan and Deci (2020), SDT posits that optimal motivation occurs when three fundamental psychological needs are fulfilled: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In educational settings, autonomy refers to students' perception of meaningful control over their learning activities. When students are allowed to choose learning strategies, assignments, or evaluation processes, they are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation and stronger engagement with academic tasks. Self-Determination Theory suggests that students'

motivation improves when their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled (Nili & Tasavori, 2022). Empirical studies confirm that autonomy-supportive learning environments enhance intrinsic motivation while simultaneously reducing students' stress levels (Ariati et al., 2025). Consequently, assessment systems that support autonomy may contribute not only to improved academic performance but also to greater psychological well-being.

In line with these developments, innovative assessment models have emerged to enhance learner autonomy within grading systems. One such model is Elective Grading (EG), which allows students to determine the relative weighting of different assessment components, such as examinations, assignments, projects, or quizzes. Unlike traditional grading structures that impose a fixed formula for all students, EG offers flexible grading schemes that enable learners to choose the evaluation structure that best aligns with their learning strategies and strengths (Rodríguez-Planas, 2022). By allowing students to design aspects of their own assessment framework, the model aims to create a more equitable, transparent, and motivating evaluation environment. Elective Grading represents an emerging assessment innovation that allows students to determine the weighting of different assessment components based on their learning strategies, thereby promoting autonomy and ownership of learning (Telles-Langdon & Telles-Langdon, 2025).

Previous studies examining Elective Grading in various higher education contexts suggest several potential benefits. Flexible grading systems have been associated with increased student motivation, greater perceptions of fairness in evaluation, and reduced levels of academic stress. Furthermore, when students are involved in determining aspects of their assessment structure, they often develop stronger ownership of their learning processes and a greater sense of responsibility for academic outcomes. These findings are consistent with Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes that autonomy-supportive environments can significantly enhance intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement in learning.

Despite these promising findings, several critical gaps remain in the literature. First, most empirical research on Elective Grading has been conducted in general higher education settings, while studies exploring its implementation within Islamic higher education institutions remain extremely limited. Second, the potential integration between flexible assessment models and Islamic pedagogical values—such as responsibility (amanah), effort (ikhtiyar), and fairness (adl)—has received little scholarly attention. Third, existing studies rarely examine the simultaneous effects of Elective Grading on both academic stress and academic performance, leaving the relationship between psychological well-being and learning outcomes under flexible assessment systems insufficiently explored. Finally, empirical investigations employing mixed-methods quasi-experimental designs to evaluate the effectiveness of Elective Grading in real classroom contexts remain scarce.

To address these gaps, this study introduces a contextualized implementation of Elective Grading in an Islamic higher education setting, integrating contemporary educational theory with relevant Islamic pedagogical perspectives. By combining the autonomy-supportive framework of Self-Determination Theory with ethical principles emphasized in Islamic education—particularly those related to responsibility, effort, and fairness—this study proposes a novel approach to understanding how flexible assessment models can function within faith-based higher education environments. This integration not only enriches theoretical discussions on flexible assessment but also provides a culturally grounded perspective on student-centered evaluation practices. Therefore, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of the Elective Grading model in Islamic higher education. Specifically, the research investigates the impact of Elective Grading on students' academic performance and academic stress while also exploring students' perceptions regarding fairness, motivation, and learning comfort under this flexible assessment system.

This study contributes to the existing literature in several important ways. Theoretically, it advances current discussions on flexible assessment and learner autonomy by integrating Self-Determination Theory with contextual insights from Islamic educational philosophy. Empirically, the study provides evidence from a mixed-methods quasi-experimental investigation examining both psychological and academic outcomes of Elective Grading. Practically, the findings offer valuable implications for lecturers and higher education institutions seeking to design more flexible, equitable, and student-centered assessment systems that promote both academic success and student well-being.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods quasi-experimental design using a non-equivalent control group pre-test–post-test design to examine the effectiveness of the Elective Grading (EG) model. The quantitative component measured changes in students' academic performance and academic stress levels before and after the intervention, while the qualitative component explored students' perceptions and experiences with the EG system through in-depth interviews. A quasi-experimental design was chosen because the study was conducted in a natural classroom setting where random assignment of students was not feasible. Instead, two intact classes were assigned as experimental and control groups. The pre-test–post-test structure allowed the researchers to compare students' academic outcomes and stress levels both within groups (before and after the intervention) and between groups, thereby strengthening the internal validity of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The mixed-methods approach followed an explanatory sequential design, in which quantitative results were collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data collection to provide a deeper interpretation of the statistical findings (J. Creswell & Clark, 2023).

Participants

The participants consisted of 60 undergraduate students enrolled in the fourth semester of a management course at an Islamic Higher Education institution in Indonesia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on their enrollment in the selected course and willingness to participate in the research. Students were divided into two groups: (1) Experimental group: 30 students who experienced the Elective Grading model; (2) Control group: 30 students who followed conventional assessment methods. The demographic profile of participants included 35 female students (58%) and 25 male students (42%), with an average age of 20.3 years (SD = 1.1). All participants had previously experienced conventional grading systems but had no prior exposure to flexible grading models. Participation in the study was voluntary. Prior to data collection, students were informed about the research objectives and procedures, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Research Context

The study was conducted at an Islamic Higher Education institution in Indonesia that integrates academic learning with Islamic values. The selected course was a compulsory subject in the fourth semester curriculum and was delivered over one academic semester (16 weeks). The institutional context was particularly relevant for the study because the university emphasizes holistic education that combines academic excellence with ethical and character development. This environment provided an appropriate setting for examining how the Elective Grading model could align with educational values such as responsibility, fairness, and student autonomy. The experimental class implemented the EG system throughout the semester, while the control class followed the standard institutional assessment structure, consisting of fixed grading components such as mid-semester and final exams, assignments, and class participation.

Intervention Procedure

The Elective Course Assessment intervention was implemented over a semester through four structured stages. The first stage was the preparation phase, in which researchers developed course materials, assessment rubrics, and a digital assessment spreadsheet designed to support the Elective Course Assessment system. Students in the experimental group were introduced to the concept of flexible assessment and trained in using a digital spreadsheet to simulate and calculate various assessment scenarios. The second stage was a pre-test, conducted at the beginning of the semester, requiring all participants to complete two basic assessment forms: an academic performance test to measure mastery of the course material and an academic stress questionnaire. The pre-test results indicated that both groups had relatively equal initial conditions.

The third stage was the implementation of the Elective Course Assessment, in which students in the experimental group were allowed to determine the weighting of assessment components within a predetermined range, including midterm exams, final exams, assignments or projects, quizzes, and class participation. Students established the weighting scheme at the beginning of the semester and were allowed one adjustment mid-semester. A cloud-based spreadsheet system was used to automatically calculate grades based on the selected structure, ensuring transparency and accuracy in the assessment. Meanwhile, the control group followed the institution's conventional grading system, in which each component's weighting was determined entirely by the lecturer. The fourth stage was the post-test and qualitative data collection. At the end of the semester, students again completed the same academic performance test and academic stress questionnaire as in the pre-test. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 students from the experimental group, selected using maximum variation sampling, to obtain diverse perspectives on their experiences during the intervention.

Instruments

Student academic achievement was measured using a standardized course performance test consisting of 30 multiple-choice and short-answer items covering key learning objectives. The instrument's content validity was evaluated by three experts in educational assessment, yielding a Content Validity Index (CVI) of 0.87, indicating high validity. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding $\alpha = 0.89$, indicating strong reliability. Meanwhile, academic stress was measured using a modified version of the Academic Stress Scale consisting of 20 items with a 5-point Likert scale. The instrument's construct validity was tested through an exploratory factor analysis, with factor loadings ranging from 0.62 to 0.81, indicating that all items met the construct's eligibility criteria. The reliability test results showed a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.91, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interview guides designed to explore students' experiences with the EG model, including perceptions of fairness, motivation, and learning comfort. Classroom observations were also conducted using structured observation sheets to document student engagement and participation during the learning process. To ensure trustworthiness, data triangulation was applied by comparing interview results, observation notes, and quantitative findings.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Before hypothesis testing, statistical assumptions were checked, including data normality using the Shapiro–Wilk test and homogeneity of variance using Levene's test. Once all assumptions were met, the analysis continued with a paired-samples t-test to compare pre-test and post-test scores within each group, and an independent-samples t-test to identify differences between the experimental and control groups. Furthermore, the intervention effect size was calculated using Cohen's d to determine the magnitude of the treatment's effect.

Qualitative data obtained from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis according to the Braun and Clarke (2006) procedure, which comprises six stages: data introduction, initial coding, theme discovery, theme review, defining and naming themes, and preparing the final report. The coding process was conducted inductively, allowing themes to develop naturally from the data rather than being predetermined. To enhance the reliability of the analysis, two researchers independently coded the transcripts and then discussed any discrepancies until consensus was reached. In the mixed methods approach, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings is carried out at the interpretation stage, where qualitative themes are used to explain and deepen the statistical results, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of the Elective Course Assessment model on academic achievement, stress levels, and students' learning experiences.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Quantitative Result

Prior to conducting the main statistical analyses, several assumption tests were performed to ensure the validity of the parametric procedures. The Shapiro–Wilk test indicated that the distributions of both final scores and academic stress scores did not deviate significantly from normality ($p > 0.05$ for all variables). In addition, Levene's test for equality of variances confirmed the assumption of homogeneity between the experimental and control groups ($p = 0.37$ for final scores; $p = 0.42$ for stress levels). These results justified the use of independent samples *t*-tests.

Academic Performance

To examine the effect of Elective Grading (EG) on students' academic performance, an independent-samples t-test was conducted comparing the EG and conventional assessment groups. As shown in Table 1, the analysis reveals a statistically significant difference in final scores between the two groups, with students in the EG condition outperforming those in the conventional system.

Table 1. Comparison of Academic Performance Between EG and Conventional Groups

Variable	Group	N	Mean (M)	SD	t(df)	p-value	Cohen's d	95% CI of Mean Difference
Academic Performance	Elective Grading (EG)	30	85.40	4.30				
	Conventional Assessment	30	75.80	5.60	5.47 (58)	< 0.001	1.89	[6.09, 13.11]

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to examine whether the implementation of Elective Grading (EG) influenced students' final academic performance. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups, $t(58) = 5.47$, $p < .001$. Students in the EG group obtained significantly higher final scores ($M = 85.40$, $SD = 4.30$) than those in the conventional grading group ($M = 75.80$, $SD = 5.60$). To provide a more comprehensive interpretation of the magnitude of the difference, Cohen's d was calculated. The effect size was $d = 1.89$, indicating a very large effect according to conventional benchmarks. The 95% confidence interval (CI) for the mean difference ranged from 6.09 to 13.11, suggesting that the true population difference in final scores is highly unlikely to be trivial.

Academic Stress

To evaluate the impact of Elective Grading (EG) on students' academic stress, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the percentage reduction in stress levels between the EG and conventional assessment groups from pre- to post-measurement. As presented in Table 2, students in the EG group experienced a substantially greater reduction in academic stress than those in the conventional group.

Table 2. Comparison of Academic Stress Reduction Between EG and Conventional Groups

Variable	Group	N	Mean Reduction (%)	t(df)	p-value	Cohen's d	95% CI of Mean Difference
Academic Stress Reduction	Elective Grading (EG)	30	18.7				
	Conventional Assessment	30	3.2	−4.28 (58)	< 0.001	1.47	[-1.52, -0.56]

Students in the EG group experienced a mean stress reduction of 18.7%, whereas the control group reported only a 3.2% reduction. The difference between groups was statistically significant, $t(58) = -4.28$, $p < .001$. The calculated effect size (Cohen's d) was 1.47, indicating a large effect of the EG intervention on stress reduction. The 95% CI for the mean difference ranged from −1.52 to −0.56, confirming the robustness of the observed effect.

Correlation between Stress and Academic Performance

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a moderate to strong negative relationship between academic stress and final academic performance ($r = -0.62$, $p < .01$). This result indicates that students who reported lower levels of stress tended to achieve higher academic scores. The finding supports the proposition that reducing assessment-related pressure may enhance learning outcomes.

Table 1. Independent Samples t-Test Results for Academic Performance and Stress

Variable	Group	n	Mean	SD	M Difference	t	df	p	Cohen's d	95% CI	% Change
Final Academic Score	EG	30	85.40	4.30	9.60	5.47	58	<.001	1.89	6.09 – 13.11	+12.66
	Control	30	75.80	5.60							
Academic Stress Reduction	EG	30	−18.7%	6.50	−15.5	−4.28	58	<.001	1.47	−1.52 – −0.56	−18.7
	Control	30	−3.2%	7.10							

Qualitative Results

Qualitative analysis was conducted to deepen the understanding of students' experiences with the Elective Course Assessment system and to complement the quantitative findings. Semi-structured interviews with 12 students from the experimental group were then analyzed using thematic analysis following the steps outlined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006), including repeated reading, initial coding, theme development and refinement, and final interpretation. The coding process was conducted independently by two researchers, with high agreement ($\kappa = 0.82$), indicating strong reliability. To maintain data accuracy, this study employed triangulation with quantitative results, member checking with participants, discussions among researchers, and systematic documentation of the analysis process. Through this analysis, three main themes were identified that comprehensively represent students' experiences.

Increased Learning Motivation

A dominant theme across the interviews was that the Elective Grading system enhanced students' intrinsic motivation. Participants reported that having the opportunity to determine the weighting of assessment components fostered a stronger sense of ownership over their learning process. Students perceived the grading flexibility as empowering, encouraging them to invest more effort in tasks aligned with their strengths. One participant stated: *"With Elective Grading, I feel more enthusiastic about learning because I can adjust the weight of assignments and exams to match my abilities."* Another student emphasized that the system increased their sense of responsibility: *"I have become more responsible because I have to choose and manage my own assessment weightings."* These narratives reinforce the quantitative evidence indicating improved academic performance among students in the EG group.

Perceived Fairness and Transparency

Participants frequently highlighted the perceived fairness and transparency of the Elective Grading system. Students appreciated the clarity regarding grading criteria from the beginning of the semester. Many participants noted that the explicit explanation of grading calculations reduced ambiguity and minimized potential conflicts regarding grade evaluation. One participant explained: *"This system is very clear; I know my grade proportions from the start. I feel the assessment is fair."* Another added: *"The lecturer can explain the grading calculation easily, so we all understand, and there is no room for disputes."* These perceptions of fairness are consistent with theories of procedural justice in educational assessment, suggesting that transparent evaluation structures can positively influence student engagement.

Improved Academic Stress Management

The third theme relates to students' experiences of reduced academic stress. Participants consistently reported that the ability to tailor assessment weightings allowed them to manage academic pressures more effectively. Several students explained that the flexibility reduced anxiety associated with high-stakes examinations and enabled better time management. One participant noted: *"Because I can set my own grade weightings, I am not as stressed about big exams."* Another student commented: *"This system lets me learn at my own pace without being burdened by one grade that determines everything."* These narratives align with the quantitative findings, which show a significant reduction in stress among students in the experimental group.

The mixed-methods design of this study enabled the integration of statistical findings and student experiences, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the Elective Grading (EG) intervention. Quantitatively, students participating in EG demonstrated higher academic performance and greater stress reduction. Qualitative findings then provided context for these results by explaining the underlying mechanisms: increased motivation to learn, in line with improved final grades; perceptions of fairness and transparency leading to more active engagement in the assessment process; and improved stress management skills, in line with the negative relationship between stress and academic achievement. The integration of these two types of data strengthened the validity of the findings, as the emerging statistical patterns were not isolated but were supported by students' lived experiences.

Table 3. Qualitative Themes, Subcoding, and Quantitative Triangulation

Main Theme	Sub-theme	F	Representative Quote	Inter-rater Reliability (κ)	Quantitative Link	Integrative Interpretation
Increased Learning Motivation	Ability to choose assessment weight	10	*"I can choose how my grade is calculated based on my strengths."*	0.88	Academic performance ↑ (Δ = 12.7%)	Student control over assessment structure increases motivation and learning engagement.
	Greater responsibility for learning outcomes	8	*"Since I choose the components, I feel more responsible for my results."*	0.87	–	Autonomy strengthens intrinsic motivation and self-regulated learning.
Fairness and transparency	Assessment system perceived as fairer	9	*"This grading system feels more fair compared to traditional exams."*	0.85	Academic performance ↑	Perceived fairness improves trust in the evaluation process and academic engagement.
	Opportunity to balance strengths across tasks	7	*"If exams are not my strength, I can focus more on projects."*	0.86	–	Flexible assessment accommodates diverse learning styles.

Improved Stress Management	Lower pressure during evaluation	8	*"I feel less stressed because the grading is not based on a single exam."*	0.87	Academic stress ↓ (Δ = 18.7%)	Flexible assessment structure reduces evaluation anxiety.
	Improved time management	6	*"I can manage my workload better throughout the semester."*	0.85	–	Students adopt better learning strategies and workload planning.

The qualitative themes reinforce the quantitative findings. Learning autonomy and perceived fairness are associated with observed improvements in academic performance (Δ = 12.7%), while reduced academic stress is associated with a significant decrease in stress levels (Δ = 18.7%). These converging findings indicate that Elective Grading not only influences measurable academic outcomes but also improves students' psychological experiences during assessment.

Discussion

This study examined the effects of Elective Grading (EG) on academic performance, academic stress, and students' perceptions of fairness within the context of Islamic higher education. The findings indicate that implementing EG is associated with meaningful improvements in both cognitive and psychological dimensions of learning. Quantitative results showed that students who participated in the EG intervention achieved significantly higher academic scores than those in the conventional grading system, with an average increase of approximately 12.6% and a very large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.89$). In addition, the EG group experienced a substantially greater reduction in academic stress (18.7%; $d = 1.47$) than the control group. From a pedagogical perspective, these effect sizes indicate that the intervention produced substantively meaningful improvements rather than merely statistically significant differences. In educational research, effect sizes above 0.80 are generally considered large (Cohen, 1988), suggesting that the magnitude of improvement observed in this study represents a substantial change in learning outcomes. These results support emerging international evidence that flexible, student-centered assessment systems can enhance learning engagement and academic performance (Bearman et al., 2024; Winstone & Boud, 2022).

One of the most prominent findings of the study is the increase in student motivation associated with the EG system. This outcome can be interpreted through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that intrinsic motivation is strengthened when the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2020). By allowing students to determine the weighting of different assessment components, EG directly supports the autonomy dimension of SDT. Rather than being passive recipients of predetermined evaluation criteria, students actively participate in shaping the structure of their assessment. Previous studies have demonstrated that autonomy-supportive learning environments significantly enhance motivation, persistence, and learning engagement in higher education (Coppley & Niemiec, 2021; Shankar & Robinson, 2024).

The qualitative findings in this study reinforce this interpretation. Participants reported that having control over assessment weightings encouraged them to reflect on their learning strategies, manage their workload more effectively, and assume greater responsibility for their academic progress. These narratives provide explanatory insight into the quantitative improvements in academic performance observed among EG participants. In this sense, the qualitative data triangulate and substantiate the quantitative findings, suggesting that the observed performance gains reflect genuine behavioral and motivational changes rather than statistical artifacts.

Beyond its impact on motivation, the EG model also appears to facilitate the development of self-regulated learning (SRL). SRL theory emphasizes that effective learners actively monitor their progress, regulate their learning strategies, and adapt their behavior in response to feedback

(Hemmler & Ifenthaler, 2024; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2023). The flexibility inherent in EG encourages students to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses when determining assessment weightings. This process requires metacognitive reflection and strategic decision-making, both of which are central components of self-regulated learning. Recent research suggests that assessment models involving student participation in evaluation processes can significantly enhance metacognitive awareness and learning autonomy (Barua & Lockee, 2025; Kessels et al., 2024).

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings supports this interpretation. While statistical results indicate improved academic performance, interview data reveal that students became more strategic in allocating effort across learning tasks. This suggests that EG may contribute to the development of adaptive learning behaviors, which are crucial for long-term academic success. Another significant theme emerging from the qualitative analysis concerns students' perceptions of fairness and transparency in the grading process. Participants frequently reported that the EG system made evaluation criteria clearer and more understandable.

These findings highlight the importance of a sense of fairness in shaping students' assessment experiences. When students clearly understand how they will be evaluated, they are more likely to trust the process and engage meaningfully with feedback. The qualitative insights make this even clearer: students felt more at ease when grading criteria were explained from the beginning, as it reduced uncertainty and anxiety. This clarity and openness seem to play a key role in lowering academic stress, suggesting that assessment is not only about measuring learning, but also about creating a supportive and reassuring learning environment.

The reduction in academic stress observed among students in the EG group is consistent with a growing body of research highlighting the psychological impact of assessment design. Traditional high-stakes examinations are frequently associated with increased anxiety, burnout, and surface learning strategies among university students (Derakhshan et al., 2022; Pascoe et al., 2020). Flexible grading systems may alleviate these pressures by distributing assessment across multiple components and allowing students to align evaluation with their strengths. The qualitative findings in this study suggest that students perceived greater control over their academic progress, which may explain the observed decrease in stress levels.

Psychological research indicates that perceived control is a critical factor in stress management (Schnitzler et al., 2021). When students believe they can influence academic outcomes through strategic choices, the perceived threat of evaluation is reduced. In this sense, the EG model may transform assessment from a source of anxiety into a supportive component of the learning process. Within the context of Islamic higher education, the Elective Grading (EG) model demonstrates that contemporary pedagogical innovation can be constructively integrated with Islamic educational values that have long served as ethical foundations for learning. The core principles underlying the EG system—such as learning autonomy, individual responsibility, fairness in evaluation, and balance in the learning process—are conceptually aligned with values emphasized in Islamic educational philosophy. In the Islamic intellectual tradition, the concept of *ikhtiyar* highlights the importance of responsible choice, while *'adl* underscores justice and fairness in social and institutional practices, including education. Furthermore, the value of *amanah* emphasizes moral responsibility and trustworthiness in fulfilling one's duties, whereas taysir emphasizes facilitation and the reduction of unnecessary hardship in the learning process (Maulidya Nisa et al., 2024).

Within this framework, the flexibility provided by the EG system can be interpreted as a practical embodiment of these ethical principles. By allowing students to determine the weighting of different assessment components, this system not only strengthens students' academic responsibility but also promotes the development of learning autonomy, which is a key factor in fostering intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement in learning activities (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This approach is also consistent with recent scholarship on participatory assessment, which

highlights the importance of involving students in evaluation processes to promote metacognitive reflection and deeper learning (Li & Yuan, 2022). Moreover, integrating Islamic ethical values with modern pedagogical innovation can strengthen the legitimacy and institutional acceptance of educational reform. Research indicates that educational practices aligned with local cultural and religious values tend to be more readily accepted and more sustainable in their implementation (Marshall, 2025). Therefore, the EG approach represents not only a technical innovation in assessment design but also an example of how educational reform can occur through the reinterpretation of traditional values to remain relevant to the demands of twenty-first-century pedagogy.

Despite the promising results, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study involved a relatively small sample size, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. Second, the research was conducted within a single institutional context, which may have influenced the outcomes. Third, the intervention was implemented over only one academic semester, making it difficult to determine whether the observed benefits would persist over longer periods. In addition, the qualitative component used purposive sampling, which may have led to the inclusion of participants who were particularly engaged with the EG system. As a result, the perspectives captured in the interviews may not fully represent the experiences of all students.

Alternative explanations should also be considered. For instance, improvements in academic performance may partly reflect a novelty effect, in which students respond positively to a new instructional approach simply because it differs from traditional practices. Similarly, reductions in academic stress may be influenced by contextual factors such as teaching style, peer collaboration, or course design. Future research should therefore employ larger samples, multi-institutional comparisons, and longitudinal research designs to examine the long-term effectiveness of flexible grading systems. Further studies could also investigate integrating digital assessment platforms and learning analytics to support the implementation of EG in blended and online learning environments. Additionally, future research could explore broader learning outcomes, including self-regulated learning skills, academic resilience, and long-term student well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Elective Grading (EG) is a highly effective student-centered assessment model in Islamic higher education, yielding significant improvements in academic performance alongside substantial reductions in academic stress, with large effect sizes indicating strong practical impact. Beyond these outcomes, qualitative evidence reveals that enhanced learner autonomy under EG fosters greater motivation, strengthens perceptions of fairness and transparency, and supports more adaptive stress management strategies. These findings contribute theoretically by extending student-centered assessment discourse through the integration of self-determination and self-regulated learning principles within a culturally grounded context, while practically repositioning assessment as a pedagogical mechanism that aligns achievement with student well-being. Although limited by a relatively small sample, single-institution scope, and short intervention period, this study provides compelling evidence for advancing more flexible, equitable, and human-centered assessment practices, with future research needed to test the scalability and long-term sustainability of EG across broader higher education settings.

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