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Aligning the approach to staff and student experiences within higher education: A need for compassion and community

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper considers the current landscape in Higher Education (HE), specifically around the area of increased stress and anxiety. It addresses the role that community and compassion can play in alleviating these symptoms. In doing so, it will propose responses to the high levels of emotional burnout seen in HE recently. It argues that nurturing a sense of belonging lies at the heart of these factors and that for many institutions this will require a cultural shift which refocuses its attention on staff mental health as well as student mental health, and on staff experience as well as student experience. Approaches to staff and student experiences are a recurrent feature of the article and have previously been separated within policy and practice leading to a chasm within the HE community. Ultimately, a conclusion is drawn, that the development of a holistic approach will help to mend this rift and create a more compassionate community. Furthermore, the element of self-compassion and sense of work-life balance must be supported institutionally with decisions being made through a compassionate lens.

Keywords: compassion, community, anxiety, burnout, higher education

Introduction

During the last 30 years, there has been a gradual increase of stress-related absences in UK workplaces (HESA, 2022). Furthermore, stress, anxiety and burnout have together come to be recognised as one of the largest contributors to days taken as sickness absences, with an increasing amount accounting for long-term absences (Denney, 2023; HSE, 2022; Morrish, 2019; Wray & Kinman, 2021). In the context of UK Higher Education (HE), mental health issues are increasingly focused on as a concern, both for staff and students with the crisis in mental health issues in young people becoming a well-documented topic (Carrier et al., 2023; NHS (Digital), 2018; NHS (Digital), 2021; Thorley, 2017), and, though not a direct focus of this article, it would be amiss not to recognise the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on young people (Alkan et al., 2021; Bhatia et al., 2022; NHS (Digital), 2021) and academic staff (Denney, 2023; Jump, 2021; Wray & Kinman, 2021). Research in employee mental health issues is slower in coming, particularly in the HE sector where students are generally prioritised and as this article progresses the tension between staff and student wellbeing will become more apparent.

This article will attempt to bring together different theories on anxiety, stress and burnout; compassion and belonging; self-compassion and organisational approaches to wellbeing. In doing so, we will consider the links that draw these together and how institutions can create a balanced and holistic approach moving forward that addresses both staff and student wellbeing.

Stress, anxiety and symptoms of burnout

According to Hutmacher (2021), stress itself is seen as a universal concept, which could be said to transcend time and culture, though he warns of the need to contextualise this historically when looking at the development of the concept. Despite this, the modern focus on stress as a physiological and psychological response is something relatively new in scientific terms with Seyle (1936) accredited with beginning modern discussions. Accordingly, although there is a general acceptance that stress is a common component of everyday life, there is also a clear modern interpretation that it is a psychological response to when things are "getting too much and out of balance" (Hutmacher, 2021, p. 1). Burnout is a more modern phenomenon which was coined by Freudenberger in the early 1970s. Although first attributed to those working within positions involving a high level of pastoral care, such as the medical profession (Freudenberger, 1974), it is now widely accepted as a condition which can manifest in most occupations. This includes HE (Kinman & Wray, 2013), and it is recognised by the World Health Organisation (2019) within the International Classification of Diseases environments. The most widely accepted model of burnout was presented by Maslach and Jackson in 1981 and involves three subdimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and a reduced sense of achievement. It is in this way that these concepts are to be understood within this paper.

One of the first complete studies on stress, anxiety and burnout symptoms in staff in HE came in 2013, with Kinman and Wray's report on behalf of the University and College Union (UCU) entitled 'Higher Stress: A survey of stress and well-being among staff in HE'. This report was based on the use of a self-report survey instrument designed by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). The report measured elements of work activity which have been identified as common psychosocial hazards in the workplace, such as demand, control, manager support, peer support, role, and relationship (Clarke et al., 2004). These elements are known to be the most critical factors of employee wellbeing and organisational performance (Kinman & Wray, 2013). This was not the first time that the survey had been used but it clearly demonstrated that the gaps between all stressors, apart from control, were increased in HE when compared to other sectors. This means that in all stressors, UCU members were reporting lower wellbeing than workers in other target group industries (including education), and that the biggest gaps were seen in work demands, change management, management support, and role clarity. It also demonstrated that working hours remained high. This continues to be the case with over one third of UCU members reportedly working more than 50 hours a week in 2021 (Shorter, 2022).

Alarmingly, despite warning bells having been raised repeatedly around the time of this survey, when revisited in 2021 the results indicated no significant change (Wray & Kinman, 2021). All stressors in HE fell within the lower 20th percentile, well below the HSE benchmarks – with the exception of the stressor 'control'. In a positive way this indicated that staff in HE did feel that they retained some control over their workloads, though the weight of the workloads appear repeatedly to impact wellbeing (Brewster et al., 2022; Ohadomere & Ogamba, 2021). Wray and Kinman's research in 2021 was more extensive than their work in 2013 with the inclusion of other areas of study related to the working life in UK HE institutions. Amongst their results there were indications that over half (53%) of those surveyed showed probable signs of depression, and that 21% work an extra two days over their contracted hours. In terms of burnout symptoms, their findings also indicated that "[T]he overall level of emotional exhaustion was high. More than six respondents out of ten (65.3%) reported feeling emotionally drained from their work at least 'once a week', with 25.6% feeling this was 'a few times a week' and 28.6% 'every day'." (Wray & Kinman, 2021, p. 30).

These statistics are not only worrying but are echoed in other recent studies which focus on burnout (Watts & Robertson, 2011), poor mental health in academia (Morrish, 2019), and other similar factors such as wellbeing (Cherkowski et al., 2021; Ohadomere & Ogamba,, 2021). In highlighting this a focus is drawn on the need to address recognised stressors, such as heavy workloads. Qualitative studies are critical about the type of support that is available, and their ability to access this ahead of other work priorities (Brewster et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is evidence of oppositional narratives that have formed between staff and student wellbeing strategies (Brewster et al., 2022). In doing so there is a recognition that the institutional focus on the student experience, and student support, and that wellbeing training habitually focuses on helping others rather than the individual. This increases pressure to support others, namely students, rather than focusing on staff wellbeing. When taken alongside external market driven forces and commercialisation there is a negative impact on staff wellbeing and increased work-related stress and burnout. At the same time this inadvertently decreases productivity (Fontinha et al., 2019; Morish, 2019; Wray & Kinman, 2021) and, in turn, staff ability to effectively support students (Brewster et al., 2022).

There is also clear evidence that young academics, and female academics, are more prone to burnout symptoms (Reisz, 2011) with referrals to counselling increasing by 70%, and occupational health increasing by 60% for female staff (Morrish, 2019). This is hardly surprising when the normalisation of roles related to student wellbeing and pastoral issues are given to female members of staff. A recent quote from Brewster et al. (2022) reflects this:

> Sometimes though somebody will be crying and I work mostly with men and they go, "[female name] this one's crying" as if they can't deal with the crying student, and I have to deal with it. (SWB/Cardiff) (Brewster et al., 2022, p. 553).

The effects of this are illustrated by the different effects increases in emotional pressure and related workloads have on females and males with studies finding that typically females exhibit signs of emotional exhaustion, and males more often exhibiting signs of depersonalisation (Watts & Robertson, 2011). This was reaffirmed during the pandemic with more recent data which indicated that females were more adversely affected by work stress than their male counterparts (Azcona et al., 2020; Özkazanç-Pan & Pullen, 2020). With such differences emerging in various studies, it begs the question as to whether different indicators, interventions and support mechanisms may be appropriate, or whether this may exasperate the seemingly natural tendency for females to take on pastoral roles.

Belonging and compassion

Almost in response to the above, and alongside increases in stress, depression and anxiety, theories with more focus on a compassionate approach have emerged, often with an emphasis on inclusion (Bovill, 2020; Capper & McVitty, 2021; Denney, 2023; Dutton et al., 2014; Waddington, 2017). These theories attempt to address the above by building a sense of belonging and by moving away from the self-sufficient, individualist approaches towards a more cohesive, compassionate approach. For organisations this is important because stress, depression and anxiety have been noted by the HSE to account for 51% of work absences in the UK (HSE, 2022). Meaning that if such approaches are correct, and they reduce stress, depression and anxiety, organisations will benefit through a decrease in work-related absences.

Separating out compassion and belonging, and looking at compassion first, historically this has been viewed in the West as signifying "sympathy, often associated with patronizing attitudes related to pity" (Coles, 2021, p. 24). In stating this, Coles recognised that this may be dependent on people's religious and cultural

background but the general conception of compassion being a 'look down' approach which in some way evokes sadness for another's position is common. Looking at the workplace, where environments are target driven and outcome orientated, it could be considered that this perspective around compassion may be accentuated. Furthermore, when academics have gone on to consider the workplace within HE, there has been found to be an embodiment of a general culture of individualism and selfishness (Breslin, 2021). This results in selfish actions being rewarded and those displaying altruistic traits being seen as a benefit to collaboration, but not consistent with promotional standards. The effect of this is to continue to isolate individuals by promoting self-serving actions, and, if we consider that females are viewed more as naturally inclined towards pastoral roles which require altruistic tendencies, this could be considered as an indirect element of institutional bias towards men. This is not helped by the natural incline towards compassion being a feminine trait (McDermott, 2016). These views appear to match the above evidence that stress, anxiety and symptoms of burnout are seen more in women. It also strengthens the argument that we need to view compassion differently.

More recent movement away from such gender biased definitions of compassion have helped promote a more neutral view. Modern perspectives have begun to place more focus on the proactive elements of compassion, viewing these as features which can motivate change and alleviate suffering (Sinclair et al., 2016). Although discussions on compassion were originally formulated in healthcare (Sinclair et al., 2016), these have more recently moved to discussions on how compassion can be extended to leadership through a more organisational approach. Definitions have also started to incorporate a more collective approach. For example, Kanov et al.'s descriptions of organisational compassion as existing when "members of a system collectively notice, feel, and respond to pain experienced by members of that system" (Kanov et al., 2004, p. 808). This reflects a collective response to a collective feeling. In 2014, Dutton et al. went on to identify six key organisational aspects that they consider important to compassion in the workplace. Their research was based on a review of literature in the area which indicated that compassion within the workplace tended to be process orientated and focused on relationships. These relationships manifest themselves in shared beliefs and values, organisational norms and practices, and the quality of connections within those relationships inclusive of leadership, and a leader's potential to react to employee's suffering. In 2017, Worline et al. went further and explained compassion as an "enacted desire to alleviate suffering" (Worline et al., 2017, p. 5). In organisational terms this means that the organisation should act to identify suffering and enact a desire to alleviate their employees' suffering. In their book, 'Awaking compassion at work', they go on to say that suffering is pervasive at work and can come in many forms. It can also come from internal sources, or external sources. In response, this can be viewed as requiring a more holistic leadership approach. Tulshyan (2022) considers such an approach to embody empathetic concern, awareness and action to create a work environment which enables employee trust and increased engagement. By enabling academic trust and increased engagement within their role, this would enable a more compassionate and empathetic approach to teaching environments which increase the potential to nurture a more trusting and engaging environment for students and their learning. Tulshyan (2022) highlights such empathetic concern, awareness and action as integral to inclusion within an organisation.

The issue of inclusion (which is sometimes used as a synonym for belonging) itself has become increasingly discussed in HE and this has been fuelled by political agendas such as widening access and participation and increasing the rate of 'good degrees' (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018). Although seemingly well intended, these types of agendas have fuelled the marketisation and commercialisation of universities and left many students viewing degrees as something which they have paid for rather than something they work towards

(Morrish, 2019). Furthermore, competition rather than collaboration, marketisation rather than intellectualism, and individualisation rather than cohesion, has resulted – something which has been exacerbated by the pandemic in recent years (Brodie & Oskowska, 2021; Haddow & Brodie, 2023). Simultaneously, there has also been evidence of a growing shift away from community (Boyer, 1990) and students appear especially susceptible to this shift towards loneliness with a disproportional impact seen on students from minority backgrounds who are often confronted with outdated elitist conceptualisations of university (Haddow & Brodie, 2023). In psychological terms, this pressure, and commercialised outlook, leans further towards the academics being there to teach and detracts from the student being there to 'learn'. It also fuels the oppositional narrative between students and staff by enforcing students as the consumers (Brewster et al., 2022) and placing responsibility for enhancing student experience on the academic (Haddow & Brodie, 2023; Meehan & Howells, 2019). The consequence of this could be viewed as a further creation of isolation and siloing within both the academic and student communities. Recent student surveys appear to reinforce this with an increasing number of students reporting loneliness and isolation (Capper & McVitty, 2022). These types of surveys are valuable in making sense of what is going on within the relevant environment (Weick, 1995), and also help to create a lasting impression on those within the environment.

In HE, initiatives such as the Athena Swan Award, and the Equality and Diversity Charter, have helped ensure that inclusion and equality stay high on universities priorities with the need to produce Access and Participation Plans regularly and account for funds dedicated to this agenda. Some of this has again fuelled the opposition narrative between staff and student wellbeing, but some attempts have been made to refocus on staff inclusion and wellbeing with growing narratives recognising the importance of staff health and wellbeing to the successful provision of student education. Furthermore, conversations on decolonisation, increasing positive ethnic and gendered role models, and including inclusion and diversity in career enhancing activities have helped to create a more considered environment which leans towards a more community orientated environment. Conversations on inclusion and diversity have also focused more on the issue of belonging within a community (Capper & McVitty, 2022; Tulshyan, 2022) and the need to increase positive role models. Again, this is not a new concept (Kanov et al. 2004), but it moves away from what could have been considered an individual employee centred approach, which focused on an individual being adopted into a community, to a more holistic approach where everyone is considered to belong in an environment that recognises different views and experiences as positive elements. Conversations and research have thus moved from inclusion towards developing a sense of 'belonging' which encompasses an organisational approach towards community and wellbeing.

Why compassion and belonging are so important in higher education?

The above begins to highlight why compassion and belonging are so important within an HE context but the issues become more complex when working with a student body, and a staff body who have a very different positioning within the institution. Compassion and belonging in organisational leadership is indeed important, but, in HE, to whom that compassion and belonging is directed is equally as important. Reference to this paradigm has been made and is especially true when considering the neo-liberalised model in HE has led to marketisation. This has produced a conflicting narrative between universities commitments, and obligations, towards the students, and equally their employees.

HE itself is accepted as a place where enabling students to achieve their full potential within the subject of their choice is at the centre of what we do. Even prior to the pandemic there were calls for more flexible learning which could be presented online, in person, or a mixture of both (Loon, 2022). The recent pandemic forced a more immediate response to experiencing online learning environments. Academics had to quickly develop an understanding of the challenges that online teaching and learning brought. For most academics, moving out of the pandemic has resulted in a period of both online and in person teaching, with many now having moved back to in person teaching only. When surveyed in early 2021 many academics considered blended learning itself as unsustainable after the difficulties of moving online during the pandemic (Jump, 2021).

Despite this, our institutes continuously call for academics to be proactive in enhancing their teaching, including the use of online learning, and a focus remains on the enhancement of student experience (Denney, 2023). This continued focus is argued by some to potentially be at a cost to academic teaching staff who were already considered at high risk of burnout prior to the pandemic (Kinman & Wray, 2013; Smyth, 2017). Regardless, improving student engagement and student experience continues to be seen as central to our own success and the neo-liberal approach to commercialisation and competition within HE continues.

Simultaneously, and partly in response, there also appears to be a shift in approaches with compassion starting to be recognised as an important feature within the working environment and within approaches to leadership (Denney, 2020; Denney, 2021). Furthermore, rather than the attitudes commonly associated with the workplace prior to the 21st century which were typically norms that demanded "people leave their pain behind when they enter the workplace" (Lilius et al., 2003, p. 4), there is an increased focus on engendering employees to bring their whole selves to work. This is something which assumingly needs to be mimicked in terms of the students, who should also be able to bring their whole selves to their teaching and learning environments. The recognition of increasing mental health concerns within our student populations has also demanded a more equitable and diverse approach to teaching, which is highlighted in the importance of compassion within our institutes, and instrumentally within our teaching and learning environments.

Anecdotally, through social media conversations, staff can be cynical of wellbeing initiatives – seeing them as sticking plasters rather than of any help towards dismantling systemic issues. University staff are relied on to support students, especially new undergraduates, with their development and learning while, as mentioned, they are also undergoing intense periods of stress and poor wellbeing (Mosanya, 2021). This can lead to staff finding it difficult to show empathy to students and compassion to each other (Denney, 2020). By inclusively bearing in mind not everyone has the same opportunities to access wellbeing initiatives (Cherkowski et al., 2021) enabling staff to flourish and concentrate on what is in their control will have more of an impact on their ability to create relationships than attempting to 'fix' them so they 'fit' better.

By being authentic in teaching and research activities we can start to form better relationships and create the type of workspaces we want. The development of a more understanding and accepting environment where students can feel they belong is thereby vital to their ability to bring their whole self to their learning. However, in doing so some of the myths around compassion being a feminine concept, a weakness, or a disadvantage must be broken and the reinforcement of compassion as a communal experience with common values and aims must be recognised (Tuck, 2018). Focusing on difficult discussions may be a step in the right direction but often there is little focus on listening to what they are saying, and

what their experience has taught them. A refocus is therefore needed whereby leaders listen rather than tell in order to ensure voices are heard and included.

This ties in with the Professional Standards Framework (Advance HE, 2023), specifically the Professional Values aimed at recognising equality of opportunity for learners, and the promotion of diverse learning communities. Thus, the ability to empathise with the students and to act to redress their needs allows for a safer learning environment where they are individually recognised and they are engendered to belong. These elements are also embedded within the Wonkhe student belonging and inclusion survey (2022). This also connects with theories of working with students in partnership, and pedagogies which focus on relational and collaborative pedagogy (Bovill, 2020; Bovill et al., 2016; Flint et al., 2014). Significantly, these approaches bring staff and students together rather than seemingly sacrificing staff wellbeing at the cost of the student experience which reinforces the urgency of belonging within our learning communities.

Furthermore, the Wonkhe belonging survey illustrates the need for a sense of community. The survey is rich in data and can be viewed alongside other student surveys to form a rich data basis on the student experience, for example, the Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey; National Student Survey and the Office for National Statistics Student Experience Insight Survey. The University Mental Health Charter (Hughes & Spanner, 2024) has been introduced, and there has been an increase in university toolkits such as the 'Stepchange: Mentally healthy university' which includes models and toolkits which attempt to align the student and staff experience (Universities UK, 2017).

On a positive note, a movement in HE organisations changing their outlook to include a sense of organisational compassion has been seen. However, unlike most private organisations, HE organisations have a dual responsibility, first, towards their employees, and secondly, towards their students. Furthermore, this extends to both within the teaching and learning environment, and outside. In fact, difficulties are often drawn as to where the organisations' duty towards students lies, and where their responsibility ends – an issue which is compounded when considering the increase in mental health concerns within our student population, coupled with the rate of burnout seen in academics and the political agenda affecting HE organisations.

Enabling role of self-compassion

It is also argued that no discussion of compassion is complete without mentioning the concept of self-compassion. Self-compassion is becoming increasingly recognised in the research and in the mainstream. Forty years ago, Professor Noddings, the late educator and philosopher, wrote that the carer must maintain themselves adding "if she is not supported and cared for, she may be entirely lost as one-caring" (Noddings, 1984, p. 100) and since then interest has grown; for example, a search of Google Scholar for articles on self-compassion brings up 132k results. More recently, Germer and Neff have brought together aspects of contemplative practice and psychology to set up the non-profit global Center for Mindful Self-Compassion to support people to become compassionate towards themselves. This includes free conferences and a Facebook site which currently has 29k members who share their own experiences and offer support to others in the group.

Self-compassion can be defined in three parts: self-kindness, recognising that events experienced are shared by a common humanity, and being mindful of emotions (Neff, 2003). That is, we cannot give ourselves self-compassion if we do not firstly recognise and acknowledge our own pain. While the amount and the way we suffer differ, recognising that we all suffer is a key factor of self-compassion (Neff, 2023).

Engaging in self-compassion has been associated with a reduction in self-judgement, isolation, and overidentification (Neff, 2023). It has a long history and features in many of the world's religions; however, it is mostly synonymous with Indo-Tibetan Mahāyāna Buddhism teachings (Dunne & Manheim, 2023). In this case self-compassion is not separated out but is considered part of a wider, and more holistic, approach – as Neff (2023) states, it is omni-directional, meaning it flows to all directions and back again. Compassion, as described above, and self-compassion, require that one recognises that suffering is taking place, to turn towards it even if this causes discomfort, and aims to help rather than berate or pity.

Non-judgmental kindness to ourselves is fundamentally important to sustain our compassionate drive for others (Gilbert et al., 2019). If people are compassionate towards others without engaging in self-compassionate practices such as self-care, they can experience compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue is defined as indifference to others and suffering as a result of compassion overload (Moeller, 2002; Tester, 2001). When compassion fatigue occurs, those experiencing it may also experience symptoms of two effects: the bystander effect and the boomerang effect (Zembylas, 2013). The bystander effect is when an individual is overwhelmed by negative emotions to a point where they feel unable to act. The boomerang effect is where people feel indignation or anger over someone trying to shame them for their lack of compassion (Zembylas, 2013). While it has been argued that focusing on our own suffering can lead to self-pity and a lack of connection with others, ultimately leading to depression and a lack of hope, the importance of recognising that our feelings and experience of events can be shared by others is also noted (Germer & Neff, 2022; Neff, 2023).

Isolation of individuals and even departments is common in the HE sector due to the autonomous nature of the role (O'Brien & Guiney, 2018; Roper, 2021). This has become increasingly so over the last fifty years as universities have followed successive governments' neoliberal agendas (Radice, 2015; Smyth, 2017; Troiani & Dutson, 2021). Staff also regularly face disappointments through grant funding and article rejections, along with competitive and uncertain job prospects (Chan et al., 2021). To counter this, it is important that staff have opportunities to share their stories and listen and learn from others (Denney, 2023). Denney opines that staff can start by sharing their experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic, something that affected all staff albeit in different ways. Doing so will help to establish one of the main tenets of self-compassion, that of recognising our common humanity rather than becoming separated (Neff, 2023). Dreisoerner et al.'s (2023) research agrees with Denney's emphasis on increasing conversations. They found in their comparison study of a self-compassionate writing intervention against an avoidance-oriented coping strategy of 317 academics that the self-compassionate approach reduced negative feelings, increased job satisfaction and engagement, unlike the avoidance strategies which provided few positive results. They recommend that conversations about wellbeing and mental health are encouraged, that discussion about self-compassion as a concept is increased and that staff are taught how to engage in self-compassion.

Organisational and individual approaches – what universities are currently doing for students and staff

Student numbers have increased significantly over the last few decades (Bolton, 2024) while at the same time staff numbers have not kept up (Erickson et al., 2021). As staff/student ratios increase and campuses become larger and more geographically spread out, it is becoming increasingly recognised that students need support in the transition from school or college to university (Pownall et al., 2022) as well as support with their general wellbeing throughout their time there (Dodd et al., 2021). The increased suicide rate of students in HE, and the ruling of the Bristol case (Abrahart v University of Bristol; Samuels, 2022) have

increased urgency around this. As such, student wellbeing and initiatives to support it are increasing in universities. Examples of this include signposting to internal and external therapies, financial and disability services, online and physical spaces where students can socialise and/or express worries and concerns, out-of-hours support, religious and pastoral teams and Mental Health First Aiders. While universities are still unclear as to the best way to implement and measure wellbeing of their students (Dodd et al., 2021) it is clear to see that universities are starting to take it more seriously.

Staff wellbeing initiatives are also on the increase albeit at a slower pace (Brewster et al., 2022; Fleming, 2024). Employer Assistance Programmes have been bought in by Human Resources in which online financial, health, and relationship guidance is provided, along with crisis numbers. Alongside this, wellbeing weeks where puppy yoga, relaxation therapies, sessions on time management and resilience are offered annually. While in the university calendar there is never a perfect time to suit everybody, timing can be particularly ill-considered if these events clash with student exam periods which is a time when students will be relying on staff more and feeling increasingly sensitive to noise, as well as with staff marking periods. While these initiatives are appreciated by some, they can be viewed as 'sticking plasters' rather than real attempts to support staff. They have also been shown not to be effective if systemic issues are not addressed and, in some cases have even had negative effects (Fleming, 2024). Such efforts have been derided on social media with staff remarking that they do not have time to attend wellbeing events due to the increased marking load or that the focus on resilience places the blame on the individual rather than the structures in place.

Universities UK recommends a holistic, and therefore, organisational approach to supporting staff and students (Universities UK, 2017). Job adverts for Wellbeing Coordinators and Champions to join university Human Resources Departments are increasingly being advertised in an effort to create and maintain events and initiatives to support staff. They are also being trained as Mental Health First Aiders to support both staff and students. These roles are often intended to work closely with counselling and organisational development services in a bid to create and embed a holistic and institutionally wide strategy and response. The appointed staff are supported by a team of voluntary staff who become wellbeing 'champions' whose role it is to promote and support wellbeing in their own departments and across the institution. It is positive to see that these roles are starting to include mention of the inclusion of conversations with managers regarding the application of related policies and procedures rather than focusing on fixing individuals, as well as focusing on the building of communities. In addition to this, the authors have noted that leadership training in courageous conversations and an increase in mentoring and coaching have been occurring, both in leadership development programmes and more generally.

While there have been some positive steps as universities start to take the creation of a holistic approach to wellbeing more seriously, there remain significant and noticeable compassion gaps. There are still very few community-based activities. Students and staff are starting to work more closely together due to an emphasis on 'student partners' (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017); however, social events for staff and students are often separated – with graduation being a noticeable exception as one of the rare times that students and staff mingle in celebration. Where individuals and small groups do take the initiative to create such events, their efforts are not recognised. Anecdotally, emphasis (and money to follow) is then given to recreate activities such as 'pizza parties' with an emphasis on the food provided without recognition of the hard work and effort behind it that has gone into the building of a community. To address instances such as this it is recommended that universities take the following approaches to address this: collecting narrative

approaches to identify and resolve failures of compassion, encourage courageous conversations, and include compassion and its application within leadership development programmes (Waddington, 2017).

Creating balance: What higher education institutes need to do moving forward

In conclusion, what can be seen is that universities need to start focusing on a more holistic outlook in order to enable a greater sense of community and belonging for both staff and students simultaneously. Discussions on the student experience need to include the staff experience, and departments need to begin to consider how their decisions might affect other areas of the universities. These actions will begin to discourage the sense of siloing and disconnections that have started to become normal in HE. As highlighted above, sharing experiences is important, and can be key to encouraging self-compassion (Denney, 2023). Furthermore, if leaders are willing to begin to listen during difficult conversations, rather than to direct these conversations more compassionate organisational change may be seen.

Recognising the impact of such wider organisational strategies, structures and processes within HE also has the potential to influence our learning and teaching environments and our daily communication with other academics, and particularly with our students. This notion continues Dutton et al.'s (2014) work by highlighting our capacity as facilitators of learning as being influenced by the collective institutional approach. Thus, if the organisation listens, and adapts compassionately to academic and student discussions, this may allow educational spaces to become more inclusive and understanding through institutional leadership and their policies and practices. In short, by listening and adapting this allows a sense of community and belonging to filter through leadership decisions. Without this, the potential for educational spaces to continue encouraging siloing, and to increase the perceived rift between academics, professional services and students is high.

This makes the call for restructuring and refreshing leadership models more compelling. However, to be effective, such conversations must be refocused on community, compassion and inclusion. There is of course a place for business models, and it cannot be denied that the purpose of HE organisations has a financial element, but there needs to be recognition of the mental health crisis in our student populations, alongside the stress and burnout being demonstrated by those working in HE. In order to reconcile these more effective communication models need to be embedded and a holistic approach to ensuring both staff experiences and student experiences are enhanced. This may mean more money is placed in wellbeing centred activities that do not just pay 'lip service' to the issue.

Alongside such leadership changes, time needs to be given to enable and enhance self-compassion. Mindfulness activities may be embedded into teaching environments giving time and space to think and create meaningful bonds. Such activities could be simultaneously embedded into leadership meetings. This would give a clear message to those working on the ground, that this is an organisational move towards wellbeing which is seen as serious, and inclusive rather than just to pay homage to the students' needs. Furthermore, ensuring decisions do not adversely affect those most at risk before implementation would help to ease pressure on those most affected and demonstrate a commitment towards decreasing stress and anxiety.

Biographies

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