The Nurture-U Compassionate Campus Project

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The Compassionate Campus Project was developed to create practical recommendations for how universities can integrate compassion into their culture. Multiple research projects have fed into the development of guidance, which is now available on the Student Minds Library of Learning, directly feeding in to university applications to the University Mental Health Charter Award.

What do we mean by 'Compassion'?

Compassion: 'the noticing of distress and/or disadvantage to self or others, and a commitment to take action to reduce it'

Critical Compassion: 'to avoid compassion becoming another aspect of metric frameworks, we need to "see compassion through students' eyes"' (Waddington & Bonaparte, 2024₁)

Methods

o Focus groups with 32 marginalised students from the University of Exeter and King's College London.

o Participatory film making with 8 students

o 11 in-depth interviews with staff (academics, administrators, mental health professionals)

o 28 unstructured photo-elicitation interviews with first year students
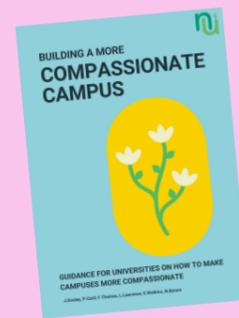
Co-production

Nurture-U student advisors conducted data collection, data analysis and dissemintation throughout the project.

Student films

Short films provide in-depth lenses into lives of students whose voices might not have been heard before

Guidance

We synthesised the findings from all the research strands into guidance, which takes the form of questions to start conversation in universities.

Key themes

Three overarching themes were generated, which form the basis of the guidance:

Compassionate Culture:

Resources signal institutional values
- Visible and credible: observable diversity, visible change over rhetoric

Compassion needs to be embedded in systems and processes
- Every day systems (academic processes, accessibility) need to facilitate trust

Student voice needs to be translated into change
- Close the loop - students need to feel valued

Questions for Universities:
How are compassion and care embedded in institutional structures, policies, and decision-making?
What do institutional priorities and resource allocation communicate about what is valued?
How are student voices heard, and how is feedback translated into visible action?

Compassionate Communication:

Human, relational points of contact
- Avoid generic inboxes and paperwork
- Learning environments should encourage connection

Clear, timely, joined up communication
- Step by step guides
- Changes communicated early and plain language

Joined up systems
- Services should work together
- Students shouldn't have to re-tell stories

Questions for Universities:
How easy is it for students to know where to go for support and what will happen when they ask for help?
Do students experience communication as human and relational, or as bureaucratic and procedural?
How joined-up do services feel from a student perspective?

Compassionate Community:

Belonging is a shared institutional responsibility
- It should be a task for staff, not left to students or societies
- Difference should be recognised and supported

Removal of structural barriers to participation
- These include financial costs, time pressures, disabilities
- Actively reduce isolation, including in living environments

Questions for Universities:
How are differences in background, identity, and experience recognised and supported?
Who is responsible for creating and sustaining inclusive communities—students, staff, or the institution?
How do physical spaces, accommodation, and local environments shape connection and inclusion?

Conclusions

Based on the opinions of students, we recommend that universities need to:
- Change the focus from **highlighting diversity** to instead **actively acknowledging** and **acting upon social injustices**
- **Increase representation**, combining initiatives to increase diversity with **continued support on arrival**
- **Put more resources into spaces** - physical or psychological - that **actions take place in**
- **Move from performative compassion**, where the end game is to commend the university, in order to thrive
- Provide **compassionate structures** for students to look after their own wellbeing

Limitations

It is important to note several limitations of our study:
- We did not include opinions from those in **staff or leadership positions**
- It is likely that our advertising attracted students who had **particularly strong views**
- Students are from **'elite' Russell Group universities** so their experience may differ from those in other higher education institutions

Find out more…

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