

# The Nurture-U Compassionate Campus Project

J. Dooley, V. Okobia, N. Alsaadi, J. Bate, C. Hyde, Y. Prajapati, M. Islam, P. Card, F. Thomas, E. Watkins, L. Lawrence, N. Byrom



The Compassionate Campus Project was developed to create practical recommendations for how institutions can become compassionate environments for their students and staff, ensuring equity, respect, and connection. This project aimed to explore the concept of compassion by finding out: (1) how and if students experienced compassion in two very different university campuses, and (2) student ideas for what compassion in higher education should look like.

## 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, 2024.)

## Method

- Data was collected across two different UK Russell Group Universities: University of Exeter and Kings College London (2022 & 2023). Participants were recruited through university newsletters and social media. The study was advertised to all students as a discussion about 'Compassion on Campus'.
- University of Exeter:
  - 2 focus groups recruited only on the wider topic: 'Compassion on Campus'
  - 3 later focus groups advertised for people who had experienced: 'racism, classism, or ableism' on campus.
  - Focus groups were ran by academics (LL, JD, PC and FT)
- King's College London:
  - 5 focus groups recruited with the advertisement: 'we are interested in hearing from students who might feel excluded due to; class, gender, disability, illness, sexuality, ethnicity or neurodivergence'
  - Focus groups were ran by two trained students (YP and MI)

## Data Analysis

- Reflexive Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the data. Initial coding was conducted by two student (YP and MI) and two researchers (JD and NB), after which a summary of initial themes from each university were written up by JD and NB
- These initial themes were presented to 13 Nurture-U student advisors where feedback for rewording/refocusing was given
- Four student advisors from this group (JB, CH, VO, VF) assisted with further analysis and write-up, writing comments and summaries on the raw data, highlighting pertinent quotes
- Comments and quotes were synthesised by author JD before being checked again by student advisors

## Results

- 44 students participated (32 Exeter, 12 King's)
- Three overarching themes were generated:

### It is important for universities to promote and cultivate personal connections.

*'Just kind of reaching out and checking that people are okay and like making them feel like, just reminded that we are like, all in this together'*

- Genuine personal connection is key to feeling supported**
  - Students want to feel like they are talking to a human being rather than a computer system
  - Peer support was recognised as highly beneficial however, concerns were expressed of the potential burden putting the onus on students
- Universities need to make space for all to connect**
  - Both students and staff felt that having the time and space to connect was a substantial barrier
  - It is up to the university to ensure staff in personal tutor positions should actively want to support students/ should get incentives to do so

### It is important for universities to proactively acknowledge and act upon issues surrounding diversity

*'Compassion is if you actively try to understand what other people are going through... you understand but you also accept.'*

- Student experience of exclusion, ignorance and discrimination**
  - Participants felt that prioritising the importance of understanding other's perspectives, as opposed to trying to define people by their identities would create a more inclusive and compassionate environment
  - Students expressed that there was a lack of diversity in staff
- University efforts to promote inclusion are performative, leaving students to take on the burden**
  - Students believe there is still considerable work that needs to be done to promote equity and inclusion for minoritised communities, however, students feel unsupported by the institutions.

### It is important for universities to prioritise resources towards the student experience

*'[Compassion] doesn't have to be helping. It could also just be like kindness, which in a sense is helping, but it's kindness and treating people fairly and properly.'*

- Student wellbeing relies on inclusive and efficient services, not university elitism**
  - The challenges of 'belonging' at university were exacerbated by the physical environment
  - There's a lack of personalisation and efficient communication from support services
- Time-efficient and accessible communication about compassionate initiatives is key**
  - Stronger coordination between sectors of the university is necessary to support better communication and dialogue
  - Systems could be improved if universities responded to student feedback

## Conclusions

- Student voices call for universities to insert genuine compassion in Universities. 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...

