BUILDING A MORE COMPASSIONATE CAMPUS
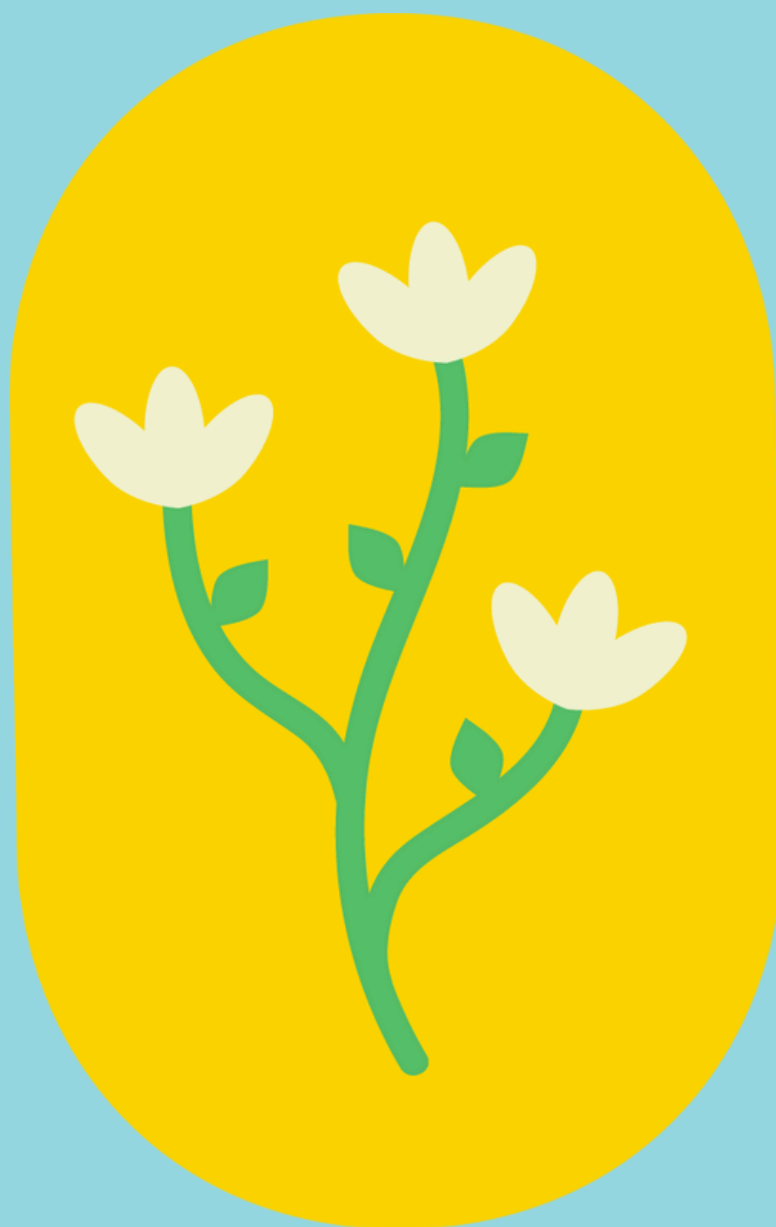
GUIDANCE FOR UNIVERSITIES ON HOW TO MAKE CAMPUSES MORE COMPASSIONATE

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Contents

What is a Compassionate Campus?

A compassionate campus is a supportive and inclusive community where students and staff from all backgrounds feel safe, valued, and connected.

Compassion means:

- Recognising struggles and unfairness that others may face.

- Taking action to help ease those struggles and create a fairer environment.

- Providing personalised support, fostering an inclusive culture, and practicing empathy in communication and leadership.

In a compassionate campus, students feel supported by services, policies, and teaching methods that focus on both their academic success and their well-being. Students also feel that they can seek help that respects their cultural and personal identities without fear of judgment or exclusion.

Research indicates that compassionate campuses are associated with better academic, social, and wellbeing outcomes, increased student retention and engagement, and a more positive collective culture which promotes mutual respect, and responsibility for oneself and others (Waddington, 2021).

However, 'compassion' risks becoming a buzzword in Higher Education, which is rarely as yet reflected in people's experiences on the ground (Dickinson, 2024). Or, worse, policies aiming to enhance compassion are causing increased labour for staff and burden on students (Armstrong & Byrom, 2023).

We therefore need to examine the processes that enable cultural, structural and procedural change. This report aims to provide guidance for universities to reflect on how to make their campuses more compassionate, using findings based on UK research.

Introducing Nurture-U

The Nurture-U Project is funded by the Medical Research Council as part of the Adolescent Mental Health and Developing Minds funding scheme (MR/ W002442/1), it is a national research consortium focusing on finding better ways to support university students with their wellbeing and mental health. Within this project we have been conducting ethnographic and qualitative research to understand experiences of compassion amongst staff and students on university campuses, where gaps in compassion lie, and to identify examples of good practice with potential for transferable learning. Here we draw together our research insights to support the sector to think about how to make campuses more compassionate.

We have mapped our findings across three areas:

Compassionate Culture — How can we embed compassion into organisational structures and university culture?

Compassionate Communication — How can messaging between leadership, staff, services, and students promote compassion?

Compassionate Community — How can individuals thrive together in an inclusive and compassionate way within the university context?

In each section, we highlight our results and signpost to relevant literature and reports in this area.

At the end of this document, we ask a series of reflexive questions which are designed to launch conversations for university staff on practical ways to develop and maintain a compassionate university.

Within each area, the questions are mapped to the University Mental Health Charter framework, to allow institutions to align the overlapping agendas of compassion and student mental health.

Compassionate Culture

We identified key positive changes that universities could implement to foster compassion within their institutional culture and the organizational contexts influencing students' living and learning environments:

Observable diversity

Students want more than rhetoric around diversity; they want environments where this can be seen. This involves diversity in teaching staff: students from minority backgrounds commonly report feeling a stronger connection to lecturers and support staff from a similar background and being better able to talk to them about their university experiences. Students felt that prioritising free and accessible social spaces over coffee shops and brand partnerships would show university dedication to enhancing the experience of students from all backgrounds.

Well-resourced and inclusive wellbeing services

Student frustrations with support services, including oppressive bureaucracy, long waiting times and limited support options, could be alleviated with more investment and innovation. Increased awareness of students' experiences when accessing support and corresponding action to remedy barriers to effective support would allow for more considerate care. Those from minority backgrounds or with disabilities argued that a wider diversity of staff and care providers in the health, wellbeing, and educational support systems could help provide more understanding of diverse needs and experiences.

Acting and reacting

Students notice and appreciate efforts made by the university to collect their views and opinions. However, the most vital step in including student voices is closing the loop: showing students how they have been listened to and what changes have been made because of their feedback. Student unions are a powerful voice of change and so must be representative of all types of student.

Compassionate Culture

*"Compassion is being nice to people and making an effort to be nice to people. Even if you don't understand what is going on, it's about trying to create a good space for them where they feel supported." ***

In our research, students and university staff highlighted specific aspects of university culture that can hinder compassion:

Competitiveness

"In my course, the staff encourages people to compete."

Hierarchy in Pedagogy

"I remember one particular professor, whenever she would talk, I always felt like, 'Oh my God, she's being so condescending.' It always felt like she was saying things like, 'These stupid people' or something."

Tokenistic University Policies

"Actually addressing [student wellbeing] instead of being like, 'Oh, it's mental health week, let's do some fancy colouring.'"

"Whenever they do cultural competency or some kind of minority ethnic initiative, it's exactly that—tokenistic. They group everybody under one umbrella. We're all lumped under the term BAME, B-A-M-E. Because of that, for example, specific challenges that South Asians face are overlooked, since everything just falls under BAME."

Homogeneous Support Systems

"The only people you can speak to are white males or females..You're not going to understand why being called a monkey is dehumanising because you've never had to deal with that."

Bureaucratic and Delayed Responses to Distress

"When students are genuinely distressed, asking them to seek out and provide formal evidence is often time-consuming and a source of further distress."

"If I have a problem, they don't respond quickly. There's a delay, and it's not really fair—it just puts added pressure on for no reason. It's just frustrating. You're sending emails and emails, and no one's responding to you. It's like, 'Oh my God, for the love of God, do your job.'"

All quotes from student participants

Compassionate Culture

Consistency

Students should have opportunities for equitable experiences of support and resources regardless of where they are living, what they are studying, their backgrounds, and their abilities to navigate systems. A compassionate culture must be university-wide to ensure everyone has equitable access to supportive environments. Societies should be encouraged to hold events across every campus. Compassionate initiatives, for example welcoming committees in Freshers week, mentor opportunities, or peer-support systems, should be available across all accommodation types and departments. Importantly, initiatives should be sustained across the year to ensure connection and belonging is encouraged even as academic pressures increase.

Physical environment and safety

Reliable and efficient transportation to and around campus in the day and night, appropriate lighting in all areas of campus, and modernised buildings ensuring maximum accessibility demonstrates proactivity by universities to make all students feel secure. Universities can proactively promote health and wellbeing through access to nature on campus, or through funding trips to the surrounding areas.

Compassionate pedagogy

University staff should pay equal attention to relational processes and academic outcomes. Curricula should be designed to encourage student-student and student-staff connection, including material on mental health literacy and cultural competence within general curricula. Departments can cultivate belonging through active decolonisation of the curriculum and making space for conversations around power and historical misrepresentation in academia. Concepts of respect, inclusivity, and connection should be core aspects of higher education, rather than an afterthought.

Mindful and flexible academic processes

Creating an environment around learning that accommodates for the variation in student experiences at university will allow for all students to thrive. Self-certified mitigation, or simplified mitigation application, was seen as a demonstration of the university's respect for students as adults and a step towards de-medicalising academic processes. Appropriate support for students who need a break from their studies, allowing for smooth and individualised transitions back to learning will create a culture of holistic support for wellbeing.

Compassionate Culture
Guiding Questions

Learn

- As you seek to provide a whole-university approach to supporting student learning, is diversity comprehensively considered, so that students have equitable experience of support?
- Does your curriculum support students to acquire skills, knowledge and understanding at an appropriate pace?
- Does learning and teaching enable all students to develop academic confidence and improve performance?
- Is transition support embedded into the curriculum at each stage of transition?
- Does the design of learning, teaching, and assessment support student mental health and wellbeing?
- Do students receive compassionate and timely support when struggling academically and how is this measured?
- Is the information about assessments on your course clear and comprehensive?
- Do students clearly understand the criteria against which their work will be assessed?
- Do students feel confident about how to navigate assessment deadlines and university systems?
- Are students who take a break from their studies supported during and after their break?

Support

- What steps are in place to ensure the quality, safety, and effectiveness of support services?
- What mechanisms are in place to ensure services respond effectively to fluctuations in demand?
- Do staff in mental health support roles feel properly equipped and supervised?
- Are support services accessible to all students in terms of location, physical accessibility, opening hours, and mode of provision?

Compassionate Culture
## Guiding Questions

Work

- Is diversity prioritised in recruitment of student facing staff?
- Do staff across the institution feel properly equipped, supervised and supported in their role?
- Does your institution provide training to support all staff to understand equality legislation and how this applies for their work?

Live

- Does the university provide appropriate free and accessible social spaces for students and staff?
- How does the university ensure all students feel a sense of belonging?
- Does the university embed well-being and accessibility into the design of new buildings?
- Are staff and students encouraged to engage with nature?
- Is the university campus safe at all times of day and night for all students?

Enabling Themes

- How does the institution ensure student voices are heard, feedback is acted upon and actions are communicated back to students?
- What mechanisms are in place for diverse students and staff to influence mental health and wellbeing support service development and provision?
- Are institutional processes clear, compassionate, and accessible for all students (e.g., extensions, assessment outcomes, communication of deadlines, and exams) for all students?
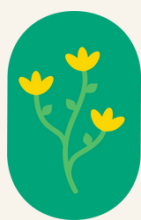
Compassionate Communication

> *"Someone shouldn't feel like they're by themselves or isolated"*

Students highlighted the following areas of communication that they felt could be more compassionate:

Lack of Points of Contact

"Over Christmas, I had to have surgery and missed the first two weeks of term... Because no one on my course is friends with me, there wasn't really anyone I could contact."

"This university has always pushed for your personal tutor as your first point of contact —'If you need anything, contact them.' But most student experiences with tutors are just not good."

"My personal tutor is supposed to stay the same, right? It's changed three times… I had so many problems… [One] just abandoned me; one day, I got an email saying my personal tutor had been changed, and I didn't really get a reason."

Bureaucracy Over Proactivity

"Sometimes it feels like you get all of this paperwork and stuff in place, but it just feels like paperwork. It feels as if there's not a lot of taking action."

Systems Not Prioritising Student Experience

"I had an incident with my flatmate using very dehumanising racial slurs. I tried to report him… The process was so long, so exhausting. At one point, they were going to make me sit in a room with him and have a conversation."

"I tried to talk about [racial slurs] to my supervisor… He told me he was obligated to report it, even though I said not to… So I toned down the whole event slightly. [My supervisor] asked me, 'Do you think you can just talk to that person?' I said okay… but I don't really talk to them."

Individualistic Pedagogy

"Lectures and seminars can be quite isolating because... a lot of the lecturers don't really know who you are, and every module is different, so it's a different set of people."

"It felt kind of lonely because you go to lectures and that's it… You don't really have a lot of time to meet or talk with people because everybody comes to lectures. The lecturer delivers the lecture, and then the lecturer leaves, and you leave, and that's it. So you don't really get a lot of time to just chat with people."

Compassionate Communication

We provide examples of how universities can actively demonstrate an awareness of diverse student needs and cultivate a compassionate culture through their communication practices:

Simple and honest messaging

Messaging from leadership to staff and students, for example emails, newsletters and webpages, should use clear and concise language, avoiding rhetoric or gloss. Time of day and time of year should be taken into account with messaging to ensure readability and avoid saturation. Content of messaging should be reflective of individual experiences of staff and students, not embedded in corporate speak that can lead to disconnect. A simple and easily accessible form of communicating campus events and activities, such as a well-resourced and maintained calendar, would promote belonging and connection for students and staff.

Clear and accessible information about academic processes

Students and staff should have access to clear, step-by-step instructions on academic procedures such as assessment and mitigation. Assessment rubrics can help students understand what is expected of them in academic assignments and provide transparent feedback. Changes to academic processes should be communicated in a timely manner with opportunity for students to ask questions and for these to be answered clearly and comprehensively.

Connection within learning environments

Creating opportunities for teaching staff to learn student names can increase student sense of belonging. Encouraging peer-to-peer support and working within courses and departments can increase student understanding of peers from different backgrounds.

Encouraging help-seeking

Students should feel supported to disclose poor mental health or academic struggles. Staff should have capacity to allow space for these discussions and feel confident in signposting students to expert support. There should be systems in place to ensure minimal academic or social repercussions of seeking help. Wellbeing services that are integrated into and well connected with academic life will encourage a culture of support alongside learning.

Compassionate Communication

A name and a face

Compassion comes from feeling heard and understood. A named member of staff for students to contact when they need help is vital for equitable access to support. Universities must give staff time and resources to prioritise student wellbeing amongst their other educational, research and administrative tasks. A well-resourced and easy to access personal or pastoral care system could be one way of navigating this challenge.

Responding effectively

A crucial part of being heard is appropriate and effective reaction. In situations where students disclose concerns or distress, services and staff need to demonstrate to individuals that they care by providing timely and tailored support.

Mindful communication within systems

Systems for health and wellbeing support, reporting incidents, or accessing academic aid should be mindful of student experience throughout the process. The point of access should be clearly signposted, there should be clear information about mechanisms (for example, waiting times, reasons for data collection), and effort should be made to understand and meet student expectations. Services should be flexible to the needs of a diverse student population, and this should be reflected in diversity of staff and types of support.

Connected communication across services

Compassion involves seeing the whole person when providing care. This involves a recognition that mental health, physical health, living circumstances, and academic outcomes are all intertwined. Where appropriate, different services should be able to share information in a way that works for students, i.e. to avoid students having to repeatedly re-tell their story and to allow effective co-working to provide holistic support.

Compassionate Communication
Guiding Questions

Learn

- Are students given clear information about assessments, deadlines and exam arrangements?
- Do students know how to directly connect with staff if they have concerns or queries about an academic course?
- Are there opportunities for students and staff to connect in ways that students feel are meaningful and supportive?
- Is peer-to-peer interaction and learning supported?

Support

- Do you publish highly visible, accessible and transparent confidentiality arrangements, so that students can be more able to make informed choices and will better understand the potential consequences of disclosing information?
- How can we create a culture in which students feel safe and supported to disclose mental health concerns?
- Are students aware of how long they may need to wait for support services, and do they understand the reasons for delays?
- Are you aware of and able to act on the broader local context of partnership working opportunities e.g. with NHS/Social Care or third sector organisations, which may help fill gaps or enable a wider support offer?
- If you work in partnership/collaborate with other organisations/services, do you have a shared understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities?
- If you work in partnership/collaborate with other organisations/svices are arrangements in place to assess and communicate risk, report concerns and support students in a coherent, timely and joined up manner?
- Does the institution have effective ways of informing academics across the university about students who may have additional support needs due to their educational background?
- When students disclose distressing information in a request for an academic extension, do they receive a compassionate response and relevant support?
- Are students receiving a compassionate response when disclosing distressing information?
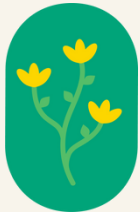
Compassionate Communication

Guiding Questions

Work

- What structures are in place to ensure that student mental health and well-being are built into training for staff?
- Do staff have allocated and recognised time and resources to prioritize student well-being?
- Are there structures in place to provide accreditation and professional recognition for staff working to improve compassion within HE?
- Do you have a willingness to undertake continuing professional training and development to develop your skills to support compassion on campus?
- Are academic staff trained in how to support students while maintaining appropriate, supportive boundaries?
- Are academic staff clear on their role in supporting student mental health, and appropriately supported to fulfil this role?
- Do you feel confident and skilled to signpost students to access timely, expert advice and guidance. What is needed to enable you to do this?

Enabling Themes

- Is student-facing information clear and accessible for all?
- How do we ensure all students understand institutional processes and policies?
- Do you feel you are aware of and able to respond to changes in needs amongst the student population? What information and/or resourcing do you need to be able to do this?
- Do you understand the composition and needs of the student community? What mechanisms are in place for you able to understand and respond to changes in student composition and need?
- When students disclose distressing or worrying information in a request for an academic extension, is this recognised and does the student receive a compassionate response that acknowledges the distress and connects the student with relevant support or information?

Compassionate Community

> *"Reaching out and checking that people are okay and making them feel reminded that we are all in this together."*

Students described how feeling like an outsider significantly affected their personal wellbeing and academic engagement. They shared examples of how a lack of university focus on fostering inclusive communities led to feelings of burden and isolation.

Lack of Understanding of Other Cultures

"I think there just must be some form of education, some form of conversation to have compassion for other people—where it's your onus to learn about someone else's culture. Why should I be made to feel like I'm nothing?"

"I feel like some people from different cultural backgrounds should be more compassionate. I think it's not their fault, because their culture doesn't teach them how to talk to LGBT people."

Students and Societies Shouldering Responsibility

"We're talking about students having to shoulder all the responsibility for everything. A lot of the societies and groups are student-run, and they don't really get any help."

Lack of Equity in Support

"I don't think a lot of people realize that disabled students often need extra support. I really need people just saying, 'Oh, you're doing a good job,' encouraging me, helping me, and teaching me."

"The clubs and societies—they're all for 18-year-old students. As an older student, I'm not ordinary; I feel overlooked… I don't get any of it."

Compassionate Community

Encouraging compassion throughout the university community involves understanding where people may struggle and actively building a society which avoids this.

Creating communities in living spaces

A warm welcome and clear point of contact on arrival shows understanding of the transition and upheaval many students face when starting university. This should also be available for students who cannot live on campus, and may entail targeted and more personalised support for international students. Creating shared living spaces in all types of accommodation is key to encouraging integration. Universities can show understanding that some students live at home and actively promote inclusive events that fit around commuting or parenting responsibilities.

Recognising and supporting difference

Diversity on campus and in the classroom matters to students. Contextual offers are valued but students need ongoing support to ensure a level playing field throughout their university journey. As universities are intentionally bringing together a diverse group of, predominantly, young people, teaching and support should be targeted to help students manage the diversity in their community sensitively and appropriately. Within the university, diverse communities should be encouraged; structures that promote stratification (for example through tiered accommodation pricing) should be avoided. A wide variety of subsidised events should actively cater for all interests and abilities. Support should be tailored to people from different backgrounds and with different needs.

Fostering student belonging in the wider community

Universities should recognise that not all students will establish their connections and sense of community through campus societies or events (activities often are concentrated in term time, and/or come at a membership cost). It is equally important to foster and facilitate meaningful connections within the towns and cities where students reside, particularly for those who remain there during non-term periods. Engaging with local activities and the broader community plays a crucial role in promoting civic engagement, contributing to a sense of belonging, and supporting students' overall well-being.

Compassionate Community

Removing barriers to integration

Removal of financial barriers to inclusion in societies, events, and sport are key to inclusivity. Societies and event planners should be made aware of the specific needs of different student groups, such as students with disabilities, mature students or international students. Specific support for students in paid employment can encourage academic success and social integration without burnout.

University support for societies and individuals

Where specific societies and individuals are key to supporting different groups, universities should recognise and resource these initiatives appropriately. Training should be given for societies and student groups to recognise, develop and celebrate inclusive practices. Societies and individuals should not feel burden for supporting their peers, but should be empowered to celebrate and promote difference.

Compassionate Community
Guiding Questions

Support

- Are the support services provided culturally competent?
- How well are students from different backgrounds accessing support services?

Work

- What training is available to staff to ensure culturally competent service provision?
- Does your institution provide training to support all staff to understand equality legislation and how this applies for their work?
- How well are accommodation staff trained and supported to identify and respond to students experiencing poor mental health or wellbeing?

Live

- How does the institution support students who are also in paid employment to engage in student life?
- Are student societies and event organises aware of the needs of different student groups?
- Does the university provide funding and resources for student societies that promote inclusion?
- Are students supported in creating their own peer networks and cultural communities?
- What steps are being taken to remove financial barriers to student engagement in academic and extra curricular activities?
- How does the university ensure that student accommodation is inclusive and supportive?
- Are students supported in building friendships and a sense of belonging in their residential environments?

Enabling Themes

- How can students feel empowered to share their experiences of accommodation and its impact on well-being?
- What mechanisms are in place for diverse students and staff to influence mental health and well-being service development?

Compassionate Campus Video Case Studies

We gathered student stories and experiences and created short films in collaboration with students and leadership, then shared them with university stakeholders to drive meaningful change
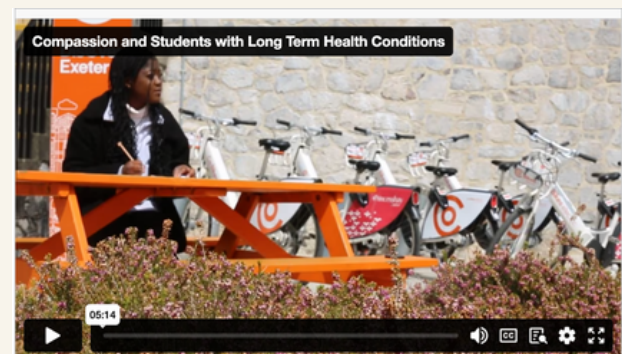
Compassionate Leadership

https://vimeo.com/929839948?share=copy

Living with Chronic Illness as a Student

Student Story: Lauren Asare

https://vimeo.com/755703731?share=copy

Commuting and Connections

Student Story: Eleanor Zalick

https://vimeo.com/851289112?share=copy

Exeter Community Garden and Compassion

https://vimeo.com/836690748?share=copy

Wellbeing and Medical Students

Student Story: Libby Terrieux-Taylor

https://vimeo.com/780434621?share=copy

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