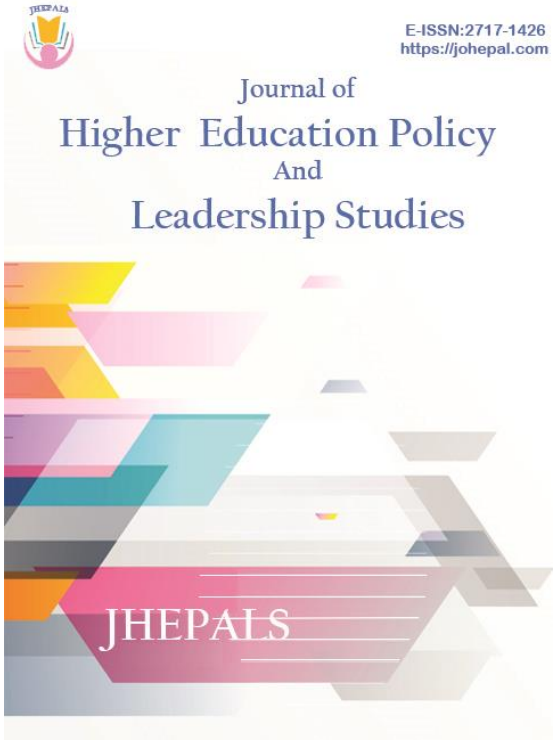
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Compassion in Higher Education Leadership: Casualty or Companion During the Era of Coronavirus?

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Abstract

Coronavirus has presented the world with enormous challenges but also, potentially, an opportunity in that it has provided a way for people to share that they are suffering and to permit others to respond with compassion. Universities have become increasingly difficult working environments since the late 1990s due to high levels of competition, global league tables and a move towards scientific managerialism. A lack of compassion in academia now contrasts sharply with the care and support that we have seen in our communities as a result of Covid-19. This opinion piece acknowledges that different forms of suffering can be either inevitable or preventable and argues that our university leaders must take the opportunity presented by Covid-19 to redesign compassion into our structures and eliminate the preventable suffering. This is a call to arms for the sector to embrace compassion as the leadership tool of the future.

Fiona Denney *

Keywords: Compassion; Leadership; Higher Education Management; Pandemic Era

Introduction

On the 23rd March 2020, lockdown started in the UK. Universities had already taken note of the train of events that were happening globally and had started to move assessments and teaching online from the week before. Staff and students adapted their working and studying environments rapidly, albeit amidst enormous confusion, and everyone started to talk about the 'new normal'. In amongst this, there were a number of other trends happening within our universities: great compassion amongst peers and for students emerged – people felt that they were 'in this together' and openly shared how they were coping with adapting their working practices around childcare, home-

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schooling, attending Joe Wickes' online PE sessions and caring for shielded friends and relatives. It is notable, however, that this emerged from within communities, i.e. amongst departments and existing communities in universities, rather than driven by university leadership. At the same time, just two weeks into lockdown, it became clear that the focus of many university leadership teams was on financial pressures caused by Covid-19 and there were immediate cancellations of temporary contracts – particularly hourly-paid teaching staff – and redundancies. This, then, was a time when the casualisation of university staff that has increased steadily over the past 20+ years came home to roost and initiatives such as the 'Corona Contract' (https://coronacontract.org) were set up to try to encourage some protection for more vulnerable university staff.

This apparent lack of compassion for staff on insecure contracts contrasted sharply against the compassion that colleagues were demonstrating towards each other and their students, and also against compassion that was being enacted in our communities at large – namely volunteer services being set up to support those who were shielding, the NHS and keyworkers clapping on a Thursday evening and the sheer generosity being shown towards the NHS frontline workers. In this article, I examine what this says about the role of compassion in our leadership in UK universities? Why were many of our leaders so quick to respond with redundancies and why did compassion take an apparent back seat at this point? Why, too, did our communities suddenly feel so different because of an increase in compassion? Has this been the 'missing link' for some time in our universities and why was this suddenly and acutely showcased by the coronavirus pandemic?

Compassion: What is it?

Compassion is a topic that is largely under-researched in leadership studies and does not appear, in particular, to any extent in the higher education research literature. The notable exception is an article by Kathryn Waddington which reflects on what she terms as the 'compassion gap' in an increasingly toxic environment in UK universities (Waddington, 2016). Waddington's observations resulted from her own experiences of compassion being identified as a critical element in health and social care – and indeed, this is a field that is relatively well researched. Waddington observed however that there is a compassion gap in universities where the educators of the professionals who then proceed to work in health and social care often do not experience a compassionate learning environment.

There is now an increasing body of literature on compassionate education and compassionate teaching but still a resounding silence on compassionate leadership in educational organisations – and, in particular, in higher education. Some of the problem may lie in the definition – or, more accurately, in the general perception - of what compassion is. It tends to get interpreted as a feeling or an emotion, which in itself puts it out with the domain of scientific study, logical and critical thinking and a competitive working and studying environment, such as that typically found in modern western universities. This is not, however, an accurate definition of compassion and Step 1 in enabling leaders to demonstrate compassion themselves and to support our work environments in becoming less toxic, is in defining it correctly and addressing some of the perception issues with compassion. Worline and Dutton, who rank as two of the most experienced and influential international scholars on compassion in the workplace, define it as:

> *"…more than an emotion; it is a felt and enacted desire to alleviate suffering."*
> (Worline & Dutton, 2017, p. 5)

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They go on to delineate a four-stage process that involves:

1. *Noticing* that suffering is present;
2. Making *meaning* of the suffering in order to create the desire to alleviate it;
3. *Feeling* empathic concern for those who are experiencing the suffering;
4. *Taking action* to alleviate the suffering to some extent at least.

This process clearly identifies that compassion requires behaviour and action and that it is not just a feeling. Nussbaum notes that compassion therefore requires that we have to understand what our choices mean for other people and compassion is then able to act as a bridge between the individual and the community (Nussbaum, 1996). Leadership, if done well, is all about bridging between the individual and the community of the workplace which raises the question of how our universities have become so toxic that compassionate leadership is the exception rather than the rule?

Toxic Universities – how did we get here?

The global context of higher education has changed exponentially over the past 20 years with institutions facing immense challenges of being part of a global market along with such aspects as widening access, the pace of technological change and a significant shift in student expectations. Furthermore, most UK institutions are experiencing additional pressures in terms of the effective management of finances, estates and environmental sustainability. Not only in the UK, but also globally, the increased focus on transparency and competition has led to a plethora of league tables being produced – all with shortfalls in the way in which data are interpreted - but nonetheless leading to a constant increase in the pressure of competition. The great irony is that most university leaders dismiss league tables as being flawed, but still play the game of trying to improve their own ranking. All of these pressures steer university leaders to drive through change after change in pursuit of a holy grail of excellence and efficiencies and to emphasise constant innovation – at the risk of exhausting their staff and confusing their students. This is not to imply that change is necessarily bad or should not be undertaken. Quite clearly, there are ways in which higher education can, and must, improve. But change undertaken in pursuit of something unattainable which just piles on more and more pressure with less and less resource only serves to produce a toxic environment for all concerned. And too often, changes are implemented without compassion which can have serious consequences for productivity. Leaders would be wise to read Cameron and Smart's (1998) article on the impact of the 'dirty dozen' characteristics in US universities experiencing financial pressure and downsizing, which cause worse problems with effectiveness. (Cameron and Smart, 1998)

In the UK, the seeds for the current highly competitive environment are usually considered to have been sown by the Dearing's report in 1997 (Dearing, 1997) although Middlehurst (2004) argues that the roots of a free market were sown much earlier by governments in the 1960s, with reality taking some shape from the 1980s onwards (Middlehurst, 2004). One of the main impacts of the Dearing report was the consistent and considerable expansion of the UK higher education sector since the late 1990s, and along with this, a requirement for more transparency and better stewardship of public funds. In and of themselves, these are not necessarily bad things, of course, but the changes resulted in a move from universities as collegiate communities of scholars to a system of hierarchical management and leadership and the running of universities as global 'businesses' (Deem, 1998). At the same time as this transition was taking place, there has been an

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enormous and growing amount of change taking place both internally and externally to universities. As a result, the working environment has become a pressure-pot, with external demands resulting from league tables and increasing government assessment of university performance via measures such as the Research Excellence Framework, the Teaching Excellence Framework, National Student Survey results and, more recently, heightened scrutiny from a new government regulator for the sector – the Office for Students.

Students are consumers of higher education – they pay tuition fees – and both they and their families are more apt to engage with the institution for information, clarification and complaint than ever before. At the same time, universities have found funding to be increasingly restricted and have increased class sizes and employed more staff on a casual basis than ever before.

What I have set out here is a very brief overview of the stresses that both the system and individual universities have been operating under for some time. Year on year the pressures and scrutiny have increased and other development, outside of the sector, such as social media for example, have only served to make this worse. Academics are increasingly suffering from stress-related conditions (Erickson et al., 2020) and the plugging of holes with hourly-paid staff has not improved the students' educational experiences, although they may have served to stop the ship from sinking completely. The reality is that the pressures that have built up have created toxic environments in which people are suffering, but the need to keep the ship afloat and the concerns about its inherent structural fragility, has meant that few individuals want to admit to suffering themselves, or, in the case of leadership, that suffering is endemic in the institution. Where staff members have admitted to suffering – or been forced to through diagnoses of mental ill-health – they have been treated as individuals and there has often been little desire to look into the collective toxicity present in the systems, structures and cultural environment in our universities.

Whilst I do not want to draw attention away from the crucial issue of the systemic pressures and the need to rethink more widely, we do need to acknowledge that compassion is a force for good and could be something that can be of enormous benefit to us all. This will, however, necessitate that we admit publicly that suffering is taking place in our universities, which both the sector and individuals have been, up until now, unwilling to do. Most importantly, if we admit to suffering, we can all then do something to respond to it.

Compassion – What can it do to help?

Suffering in our universities, of course, is not just caused by work but may also result from other factors that are often deeply personal. Individuals suffer from personal hardships at various times in their lives and most, at some point, experience bereavement, illness and injury. Kanov (2020) makes a clear distinction, therefore, between suffering that is inevitable and suffering that is preventable – in other words, is caused by poor management, structures and leadership in our work organisations (Kanov, 2020). The impact of the coronavirus pandemic has been particularly interesting, however, because it seems to have lifted the lid on something that was previously unspeakable in academic environments – people's individual suffering – *and* was additionally directly related to suffering caused by workplace stresses through redundancies, furlough uncertainties, poor management and increased work pressures. Coronavirus has provided an unprecedented 'opportunity' in combining both inevitable and preventable suffering. The message is that we are ALL suffering and because we are all on an equal footing with this – although our suffering may be greater or lesser than those around us – it has become much more okay to acknowledge that

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suffering exists and is present. Social media, for instance, has a number of examples of how people have changed their email tones and phrasing[*] to reach out to others – we are all in the same storm, although we may be in different boats.

Worline and Dutton (2017) make the point that suffering that goes unnoticed will never be met with compassion, which is why organisations need to create an environment that supports noticing and also makes it okay for people to raise issues of suffering in the knowledge that they will be treated with compassion and not 'gaslighted'. Kanov (2020) also makes the crucial point that responding with compassion is not enough when suffering is preventable. We should not use compassion as an excuse to continue with poor working practices which cause suffering. This is backed by an interesting thread on Twitter recently that was criticising the way in which academics were treated in terms of taking annual leave. The original poster gave an opinion that universities should not tell academics to take annual leave whilst at the same time, loading them with unreasonable workloads that mean that they are unable to take the time off[†]. One of the responders mentioned having raised issues with their workload with their line manager, only to be told to take a time-management course. As the responder eloquently said: 'I have workload issues, not time-management issues'. This illustrates a broader pattern of passing the responsibility for the suffering back to the sufferer, rather than both meeting the sufferer with appropriate compassionate action and addressing the work issues that are causing the suffering. Worline and Dutton (2017) identify 3 circumstances that shut down compassion:

- When we think someone is blameworthy – which, at first glance, appears to have happened in the instance paraphrased above. The sufferer was perceived to be at fault for not managing their time properly, instead of their line manager acknowledging that the workload might be an issue – which of course, is the line manager's responsibility;
- When we think someone does not deserve compassion;
- How we understand our own capacity to respond with compassion – which depends on our own resources and capacity.

This last is what I think is causing a lot of the problems within our universities and perpetuates the preventable suffering. I also think the capacity issue is the real problem that the Twitter responder was illustrating, although of course, I am speculating on this. I doubt that the line manager actually thought that the individual in question was unable to manage their time effectively (although of course, they may have done), but I suspect that the line manager is also feeling overloaded, unsupported and therefore has little personal resource or capacity to respond compassionately. This is highly illustrative of the entirely preventable but deeply systemic nature of stress and suffering – it is a vicious cycle where everyone in our universities feels pressured, overloaded and incapable of being compassionate to one another. How, then, do we get out of this, recognise the preventability of such suffering and do something about it? Compassionate leadership, surely, has got to hold some of the answers.

Compassionate Leadership – how can this get us out of the mess we are in?

[*] See for example, this article: https://www.wired.com/story/email-during-coronavirus/
[†] https://twitter.com/DrKelly_PS/status/1291728186078789639

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Compassion in Higher Education Leadership

I recently spoke with a university Vice-Chancellor, Professor X, who was cited to me by her staff as being highly compassionate. She talked to me about the challenges of implementing what she described as a 'really tough transformation through the university' which she appreciates as being really hard for the staff. Professor X described to me the importance of treating staff with as much dignity and respect as possible and about being led by her strong values set. She said to me, 'I can't do anything that comes from my heart and doesn't look genuine and it won't work…I try to be the best I can be every day.' Her leadership style and approach is led by a strong personal belief that you can only lead effectively when you are genuine and you take people with you. Universities without compassion, she believes, will be diminished: 'Universities are meant to be the seats of creativity and innovation. [Without compassion]…We will become impoverished and we won't be able to carry on.'

The role of Vice-Chancellor and the senior leadership team has become substantially more complex in the post-Dearing era. Erickson et al. (2020) describe the explosion of audits, league tables and neoliberal managerialism as resting in the hands of senior managers. Although literature on senior management of universities is limited, that which does exist is largely unflattering, with Erickson et al stating:

> "…that has been published has tended to be unequivocal in representing university management as sociopathic leaders befuddled by a caustic combination of narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Perry and Miller 2017)." (Erickson et al., 2020. p. 4)

This is in part, riposte to the significant change of university leadership from a collective, collegiate model of academics working together to manage the community in their own interests, to that more akin to a global business model. Between 2005 and 2014, there was an increase of, on average, one post per institution in the second tier of leadership in the UK's pre-1992 institutions (Shepherd, 2015), reflecting an ever-burgeoning sector of professional academic managers with their own portfolio responsibilities such as education, research or 'international'. Whilst it is not the intention of this article to consider whether such a development is right or wrong, it is the contention here that the relentless focus on the management of 'things', the measurement of activities and an inherently-Taylorist approach in the systems and structures of universities have all contributed to an environment where suffering is indeed endemic (and preventable), but hugely unacknowledged and where leadership styles, approaches and values could be the critical tipping point for either having a compassionate university or not.

Compassionate leadership is not some kind of utopian panacea to all the difficult decisions that still have to be made. Note that Professor X did not stop the restructuring nor the painful decisions that she had to make. Indeed, compassion demands that we sometimes have some of the most difficult conversations that we can engage with and not that we avoid these. But what we all need is for leaders to identify openly that our current systems and structures are causing suffering and that compassion could play a big role in changing them for the better longer term. And in the short term, compassionate conversations would be hugely appreciated. The Coronavirus Era has started these – let's not stop here.

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