

Compassionate Leadership in a Changing Higher Education Landscape: Strengthening Wellbeing, Connection and Collaboration



By Dr Amanda Super (Chartered Occupational & Coaching Psychologist)

Introduction

Across the UK Higher Education sector, the landscape in which leaders operate is shifting more rapidly than at any other point in recent memory. Financial pressures, sector-wide efficiencies, restructures, and the merging of departments or whole schools have created new organisational forms and reconfigured long-established teams. As institutions adapt, leaders are being asked to deliver change at pace while also sustaining staff wellbeing, morale and performance.

In this context, **compassionate leadership** and **self-compassion** have become not only desirable, but essential capabilities. Compassion provides an evidence-based foundation for wellbeing, psychological safety and effective collaboration, all of which are increasingly important in an environment where teams are newly formed, stretched, or navigating significant uncertainty.

Drawing on current research and my work with staff and senior leadership teams across multiple HE institutions, this paper explores the challenges facing leaders right now and offers practical insights that can support individuals and teams to navigate this period with greater clarity, care and connection.

This paper explores:

- the human impact of organisational change and restructuring in Higher Education
- why compassionate leadership and self-compassion matter during periods of uncertainty
- the particular challenges facing newly configured teams
- practical ways leaders can strengthen connection, collaboration and psychological safety

The Current HE Context: Pressure, Restructure and Human Impact

Research consistently shows that staff working in Higher Education face high levels of stress, burnout and emotional fatigue, with levels increasing significantly during and following the Covid-19 pandemic (*Jayman et al., 2022; Wray & Kinman, 2021*). At the same time, universities are undergoing substantial organisational change:

- Faculties and schools are being merged
- Leadership structures are being redesigned
- Teams formed from previously separate departments are now asked to function as unified entities
- Workloads, performance demands and student expectations continue to rise
- Sector-wide uncertainty, financial and political, is placing additional pressure on leaders

While these changes are often necessary for institutional sustainability, the **human experience** of working through them is often overlooked. Staff with a long history in previous structures can feel a sense of loss, disorientation or identity disruption. New colleagues may join established units without a shared history, shared norms or trusted relationships.

In this landscape, it is unsurprising that leaders frequently report experiencing:

- Fragmented working relationships
- Reduced sense of cohesion
- Heightened emotion or frustration within teams
- Difficulty creating collective purpose within newly formed groups
- Increased pressure to demonstrate empathy, steadiness and clarity



This is where compassion and self-compassion offer vital grounding.

Why Compassion and Self-Compassion Matter in Times of Change

Compassion is the intention to be helpful, not harmful, to ourselves and others (*Gilbert, 2019*). In leadership terms, compassion is expressed through awareness, attunement, empathy, wise action and a commitment to support people effectively.

Self-compassion, treating oneself with kindness rather than self-criticism, recognising common humanity and practising mindful awareness (*Neff, 2003*), provides the emotional resilience required to lead well under pressure. Research shows that self-compassion is linked to:

- Lower stress, anxiety and burnout (*MacBeth & Gumley, 2012*)
- Higher resilience and emotional intelligence (*Heffernan et al., 2010*)
- Greater capacity to respond constructively to challenge (*Leary et al., 2007*)
- Improved wellbeing and job satisfaction (*Dreisoerner et al., 2022*)



Crucially, self-compassion enhances our ability to be compassionate leaders. When leaders have the internal resources to steady themselves, they are better able to steady those around them.

Leadership in Newly Configured Teams: A Developmental Stage, Not a Deficit

As universities bring disparate groups together, sometimes for the first time, leaders often find themselves navigating:

- Differing legacies, cultures, and ways of working
- Variation in expectations and psychological safety
- “Inherited” tension from previous structures
- Reduced shared identity or trust
- Emotional undercurrents that arise during transition

These are **normal developmental features** of newly formed groups, not signs of failure. Compassionate leadership offers a frame that helps leaders recognise the human reality beneath structural change, including uncertainty, loss, adaptation and the search for belonging.

Understanding this can immediately shift the tone of leadership conversations

from **judgement**

“Why aren’t we working well together yet?”



to **compassion**

“Of course we are still finding our feet, what might help us?”



Practical Ways Leaders Can Strengthen Connection and Collaboration

Leaders in higher education do not need to become team-building facilitators. Instead, small, intentional practices can create the conditions for healthier, more trusting environments during change. Based on research and practice, the following approaches can offer immediate impact:

1. Make space for honest, grounded conversations

Invite brief, structured discussions about what people are experiencing in the transition. These are not therapy sessions. They are opportunities to normalise the challenges of change and reduce unspoken tension.

2. Establish shared expectations for how you will work together

Creating group agreements around communication, respect, boundaries and compassion can be surprisingly stabilising, especially for teams without shared history.

3. Recognise emotion as a natural response to organisational change

Leaders who acknowledge that change can evoke loss, uncertainty or fatigue reduce the likelihood of defensiveness or withdrawal.

4. Prioritise simple relational practices

Small habits (e.g., check-ins before meetings, expressing appreciation, slowing down to listen) help rebuild connection and reduce siloed working.

5. Model self-compassion and healthy boundaries

Leaders who demonstrate steadiness, fairness and self-care set a powerful tone for their teams, particularly during periods of pressure.

6. Create psychologically safe spaces for learning and adaptation

People adapt faster when they feel able to ask questions, share concerns and try new approaches without fear of judgement.

Conclusion: Compassionate Leadership as a Strategic Capability

The HE sector is undergoing profound transformation. As structures shift and teams are re-formed, leaders are being asked to hold complexity, deliver on organisational goals and support staff wellbeing simultaneously.

Compassionate leadership, grounded in research and strengthened by self-compassion, provides a framework that enables leaders to:

- Navigate pressure with clarity
- Support staff during uncertainty
- Build trust and cohesion in newly configured teams
- Enhance wellbeing, belonging and performance across the institution

My work across multiple universities suggests that while the context is challenging, there is also significant opportunity. Leaders who actively cultivate compassion, connection and reflective practice are better equipped to create cultures where staff feel valued, supported and able to thrive, even in times of change.

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