

Self-Compassion in Higher Education: An Evidence-Based Perspective on Supporting Staff Wellbeing



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Introduction

There is now substantial evidence that staff working in Higher Education experience high levels of stress, burnout and psychological distress. The marketised environment, increasing workloads, organisational restructuring, financial uncertainty and rising student expectations continue to place considerable demands upon academic and professional services staff alike (*Jayman et al., 2022; Wray & Kinman, 2021*).

Universities have rightly invested in a wide range of initiatives to support **staff wellbeing**, including approaches that encourage self-care. Such initiatives make an important contribution to helping staff maintain their health and wellbeing. Alongside these approaches, there is growing evidence that self-compassion offers an additional psychological resource. Rather than focusing solely on what we do to care for ourselves, self-compassion is concerned with how we relate to ourselves when work becomes difficult, mistakes occur or we experience pressure and uncertainty.

This paper explores:

- the current wellbeing challenges facing Higher Education staff
- what self-compassion is and the evidence supporting it
- why self-compassion may be particularly relevant within Higher Education
- how self-compassion can complement wider organisational approaches to staff wellbeing

The Wellbeing Challenge in Higher Education

Research suggests that the wellbeing of university staff has become an increasingly significant concern.

Jayman et al. (2022) describe a staff wellbeing crisis across Higher Education, whilst Wray and Kinman (2021) reported that over half of Higher Education staff surveyed were experiencing probable depression. Dougall et al. (2021) similarly highlighted poor mental health, chronic stress and exhaustion following the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly among women, staff with caring responsibilities, ethnic minority staff and those employed on temporary contracts.

Importantly, staff wellbeing also influences the wider university community. Plakhotnik et al. (2021) suggest that staff wellbeing is closely linked to the student learning experience, reinforcing the importance of supporting those responsible for teaching, research and professional services.

These findings suggest that improving staff wellbeing is not solely a moral imperative; it is also fundamental to organisational effectiveness.

Understanding Self-Compassion

Self-compassion has been defined as compassion directed towards ourselves during times of difficulty, failure or suffering (Neff, 2003). Rather than judging ourselves harshly when things go wrong, self-compassion encourages a balanced and supportive response.

According to Neff (2003), self-compassion comprises three interacting components:



Self-kindness rather than harsh self-criticism.



Common humanity, recognising that struggle and imperfection are part of the shared human experience rather than something we experience alone.



Mindfulness, acknowledging difficult thoughts and emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them.

Importantly, self-compassion is frequently misunderstood.

It is not about lowering standards, avoiding accountability or becoming complacent. Rather, it enables individuals to respond to challenge with greater kindness, balance and wisdom, helping them recover from setbacks whilst continuing to pursue meaningful goals.

As Professor Paul Gilbert (2019) argues, compassion involves an intention to be helpful rather than harmful to ourselves and others. Similarly, Germer (2009) described self-compassion as the foundation from which compassion towards others develops.

The Evidence for Self-Compassion

The evidence supporting self-compassion has expanded considerably over the past two decades.

Research has associated self-compassion with:

- greater psychological wellbeing
- lower anxiety and depression
- reduced burnout
- greater resilience
- improved professional quality of life



Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates strong relationships between self-compassion and psychological wellbeing (*Zessin et al., 2015*). MacBeth and Gumley (2012) found significant negative associations between self-compassion, anxiety and depression, whilst Barnard and Curry (2011) identified self-compassion as an important protective factor against burnout.

Systematic reviews by Kirby et al. (2017) and Ferrari et al. (2019) concluded that self-compassion interventions produce meaningful improvements across a range of psychological and wellbeing outcomes. Additional research has demonstrated positive relationships with emotional intelligence (*Heffernan et al., 2010*), resilience (*Neff & McGehee, 2010*), self-care (*Beaumont et al., 2016*) and professional quality of life (*Duarte et al., 2016*).

Why Self-Compassion Matters in Higher Education

Universities are environments in which high standards, intellectual challenge and continual evaluation are both expected and valued. Whilst these characteristics contribute to academic excellence, they can also reinforce perfectionism, self-criticism and feelings of inadequacy when individuals experience setbacks.

Emerging evidence suggests that self-compassion may be particularly relevant within this context.

Dreisoerner et al. (2022) demonstrated that a brief self-compassion intervention significantly improved job satisfaction, work engagement and job-related wellbeing among academic staff.

Alongside supporting individual wellbeing, self-compassion also appears to strengthen our capacity to respond compassionately to colleagues, students and those we lead. Research by Neff and Germer (2013) and Neff and Pommier (2013) suggests that developing self-compassion also enhances compassion for others, reinforcing the close relationship between personal wellbeing and compassionate organisational cultures.

Contributing to Compassionate University Cultures

Supporting staff wellbeing requires a systemic approach.

Research consistently emphasises that organisational initiatives, including manageable workloads, psychologically safe cultures, supportive leadership and accessible wellbeing interventions, remain essential (*Nielsen & Noblet, 2018; Brewster et al., 2022; Hughes & Spanner, 2019*).

Self-compassion should therefore be viewed as complementing rather than replacing organisational responsibility.

Emerging Evidence from Workplace Practice

Alongside the wider academic literature, my own research has explored whether self-compassion can be effectively developed within workplace settings.

A recent peer-reviewed randomised waitlist control trial evaluated a brief online self-compassion intervention with 190 professionals. Participants demonstrated statistically significant improvements in self-compassion and mental wellbeing, together with significant reductions in perceived stress and burnout (*Super et al., 2024*).



The findings contribute to the growing evidence supporting self-compassion as an effective and scalable workplace intervention that may have relevance across high-pressure professional contexts, including Higher Education.

Concluding Thoughts

Higher Education has always been concerned with developing knowledge, advancing research and nurturing human potential. Supporting the wellbeing of those who teach, research, lead and provide professional services within our universities is therefore not peripheral to academic excellence; it is fundamental to it.

The evidence presented in this discussion paper suggests that self-compassion offers a valuable addition to existing approaches to staff wellbeing. It is not a replacement for organisational responsibility, nor does it diminish the importance of creating healthy workloads, psychologically safe cultures and compassionate leadership. Rather, it represents an evidence-based psychological resource that can help individuals respond to the inevitable pressures of university life with greater kindness, balance and resilience.

As universities continue to navigate increasing complexity and change, there is an opportunity to move beyond supporting **what** staff do to look after themselves, towards also supporting **how** they relate to themselves during times of challenge. Integrating self-compassion within broader organisational wellbeing strategies has the potential not only to enhance individual wellbeing, but also to contribute to healthier relationships, more compassionate leadership and more sustainable university communities.

Ultimately, investing in the wellbeing of university staff is an investment in the quality of teaching, research, leadership and the wider student experience. Self-compassion is one evidence-based approach that may help universities create environments in which both individuals and institutions can flourish.

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