

How does coaching, as a tool of compassionate practice, empower staff to resist toxic environments in higher education?

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper reports on the progress of a PhD thesis investigating toxic environments in the UK Higher Education sector. It considers the subsequent suffering created by leadership, the media, intense regulation and colleague behaviours. It asks whether the creation of compassionate universities (Waddington, 2021) could be an answer to ameliorating that suffering. The paper outlines what compassion and self-compassion are and how they link to coaching. At this stage, there are no preliminary nor final findings. Instead, it seeks to report on how one researcher is taking a critical humanist ontological viewpoint and bringing together themes of agency, compassion and love as a transformative force to make a stand against poor working practices within UK Higher Education. Ultimately, it is hoped that by taking such an approach, universities will start to mend - creating a better environment for staff and students alike.

Full paper

Introduction

UK universities are increasingly becoming toxic workplaces. This is characterized by excessive unpaid workloads, unmanageable administrative burdens, widening of duties, and a general lack of work-life balance (Waddington, 2021; Denney, 2020; Erickson et al., 2021). This toxicity impacts staff well-being, in turn undermining the student experience. As such, there is an urgent need to address these issues through compassionate and humanistic approaches (Waddington, 2021; Denney, 2020). One such approach is coaching.

The State of UK Universities

Toxic Leadership and Behaviour

Toxic leadership in UK universities mirrors that of corporate institutions, involving control, coercion, selfishness, and negative organizational outcomes (Padilla et al., 2007). This environment cannot be created in a vacuum and is exacerbated by susceptible followers and a conducive organizational culture (Padilla et al., 2007; Pelletier, et al., 2019). Staff experiencing overwork and overwhelm may resort to competitive and unkind behaviours (Moran et al., 2020), while bullying and harassment are on the rise.

People may follow bad leadership for a variety of reasons; e.g. unmet needs (Maslow & Lewis, 1987), a low sense of self (Padilla et al., 2007), and rapid changes such as restructures and historical events (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Staff in UK universities are regularly restructured and, like the rest of the world, have just experienced a major historical event in the form of a global pandemic.

Toxic positivity

Approaches to resolving wellbeing issues have been met with cynicism and distrust. This is due to having focussed on 'fixing' individuals rather than addressing systemic and structural issues. Wellbeing sessions, such as yoga, meditation and workshops on increasing resilience, are offered but without corresponding reductions in workload, improved staff/student ratio, promotion equity etc. The implication being that if staff cannot find time to attend these sessions they are responsible for not dealing with the issues being faced, and may even need sessions on time management (Brewster et al., 2022)

Resistance and suffering

Strikes and marking boycotts have become commonplace over the last five years in the UK university sector. These were called over pay disputes, precarious contracts, pay gaps related to race, disability and gender, pensions and high workloads. In February and March 2023, there were 18 days of walkouts across the sector with more than 70,000 academic and professional staff across 150 institutions taking part. While there were some pension improvements, little progress seems to have been made on the rest. Due to the lack of movement in demands, increased casualisation and fewer job positions, staff are looking at alternative (alt-ac as known on social media) positions in industry, scientific or other sectors (Shorter, 2022). Those that stay protest on social media regarding the unfair nature of using citation metrics as part of promotion e.g. #MoreThanOurRank, or they are 'quiet quitting' as a way of intentionally spending less time on academic work and more on personal family time (Lawless, 2023).

Amidst this resistance, cases of extreme suffering, including loss of life, have occurred. (Pellis, 2018). Suffering in organizational life can be divided into avoidable (e.g., structures, systems, behaviour) and unavoidable (e.g., bereavement, illness) (Kanov, 2021; Frost, 2011). As unavoidable suffering is a universal human experience, compassion should be a fundamental aspect of organizational life. Meanwhile, steps can be taken to address avoidable suffering.

Critical Humanism

Critical humanism is a movement that seeks to understand what it means to be human and how people can develop capabilities to create and recreate the worlds they live in (Given, 2008). As such, it combines theories of love (Fromm, 1956; hooks, 2000), compassion (Neff, 2003) and agency (Freire, 1970) to offer a transformative approach to studying and addressing the challenges referred to. It particularly focuses on connection between humans and the societies, cultures and communities they live in and seeks to repair a world that is struggling (Plummer, 2021). Critical humanism is relevant to this study as the theory seeks to link the personal with the political and the mind and the body. The creation of clear goals and the process of working towards them (as seen in coaching) is a way of achieving self-actualisation and purpose (Fromm, 1956).

Why coaching?

Coaching is a viable and appropriate approach to combatting toxicity in universities. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that it can help with developing autonomy, agency, relationship-building and the achievement of goals. It involves skills such as holding space, noticing and active listening (Waddington, 2021). These are considered key components of what is needed to create a compassionate university (Matthewman, 2021). Conference attendees will be introduced to how this research is progressing.

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