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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 continued 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 their relation to the practice of coaching. A previous presentation at SRHE reported on how this researcher took a critical humanist ontological viewpoint and brought together themes of agency, compassion and love as a transformative force to make a stand against poor working practices within UK Higher Education. Since then a critical humanist philosophy has been combined with a reflexive interpretivist phenomenological approach to create an inductive and qualitative research design. This presentation builds on that work and presents preliminary findings from the data collection.

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 currently undergoing mass redundancies and, like the rest of the world, have experienced a major historical event in the form of a global pandemic as well as more recent global political tensions.

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 have been 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 .More recently, 93 universities have introduced severance and redundancy initiatives leading to further strikes (UCU Queen Mary, 2025). 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.

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).

Methodology:

Critical humanist philosophy and a reflexive interpretivist phenomenological approach underpinned this study. A qualitative and inductive research design was created and strategic and purposive criterion sampling was used to interview candidates from six universities pre, during and post-coaching. Preliminary findings have been identified and will be reported at the conference.