

## Keep calm and carry on

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### Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

### Abstract

UK higher education is experiencing a period of acute disruption—externally contested through political and media narratives, and internally challenged by funding constraints, staff wellbeing concerns, and structural instability. Drawing on research from York St John University's 3rd SpARK initiative, this presentation explores how dichotomous thinking—particularly “us vs. them” framings—has become a pervasive response to institutional strain. Such binary thinking risks undermining the very pedagogical advances the sector has worked to embed, including co-creation, collaborative learning, and authentic assessment. This session critically examines the impact of crisis on academic culture and proposes a collective reorientation. By investing in inclusive practices, fostering communities of practice, and engaging reciprocally with our local communities, we can strengthen institutional resilience. “Stay calm and carry on” becomes not a passive mantra, but a strategic call to preserve and progress the values that sustain meaningful higher education.

### Full paper

Every general election the universities in the UK are attacked as one of the political footballs that prospective MPs say they will sort out (the sorting out varies depending on their political position and to whom they are talking to). Newspapers love to get their readers all fired up by pointing at “ivory towers” and implying that it is the fault of the academics. In times of hardship, such as we are seeing now, these attacks are becoming more frequent, even outside of an election).

Concurrently, university communities face internal pressures that compound these external critiques, in which staff are wrestling with difficult workloads (Kinman, 2024) and issues that they are not fully equipped to deal with (such as the mental health crisis) (Bassa, 2022), all under the threat of redundancies (over 3,500 expected job cuts in the UK (The Times Higher Education, 2025)). While there has been much good work put into higher education pedagogies over the last few decades such as collaborative working (such as

Healey, 2024), problem-solving, authentic assessment (such as Brown and Sambell, 2020) and co-creation (such as Glessmer and Daae, 2021), these developments were not yet fully solidified into general practice and some colleagues reactions to Generative Artificial Intelligence now threatens to undo much of this important work.

'Crises are disruptive situations – potentially rendering something inoperable and irreparably damaged – requiring extraordinary intervention to be over come' (Deans and Kelsey, 2023).

That many of our former product-based assessments are now no longer fit for purpose could imply that are assessment judgements are compromised (Kizilcec *et al.* , 2024; Kofinas, Tsay and Pike, 2025; Gonsalves, 2024). That university budgets are insufficient to maintain their current staffing levels implies that the current system of funding and a competitive market place are not working (Habib and Hastings, 2025; Universities UK, 2025). That staff frequently sacrifice their research time to cope with teaching responsibilities and many will sacrifice their own personal time in an attempt to progress their careers implies a critical issue with capacities (Kinman, 2024). It would be unhelpful to debate if these issues are in fact 'inoperable' or 'irreparable' but we can agree agree that our systems are 'damaged' and that an 'extraordinary intervention' is required.

At York St John University, the 3rd SpARK (3rd Space Action, Research and Knowledge) group have been working to unite colleagues from across departments to address the wicked problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973) at our institute. In our evaluative surveys and observations we have noted a pervasiveness in dichotomous thinking (Lewis, Fraga and Erickson, 2019), namely 'us and them' (Janis, 2013). Every group, department and tribe is an 'us' and everyone else is a 'them', and most problematic is the idea of a faceless corporate 'them' ala Big Brother known as The University (or YSJ). To students, all staff are 'them'. To third space colleagues, academics are a 'them'. To academics, senior management are the 'them'. It is not unusual to apply or revert to dichotomous thinking such as this in times of crisis, but more often this is part of seeking to blame rather than to resolve a problem (Scheffer *et al.*, 2022).

The presentation will propose that we 'Keep calm and carry on' focusing on progress that is currently being disrupted, arguing that resisting binary framings and re-centring collaborative academic practice is essential not only for institutional resilience, but for reimagining a more inclusive future for higher education. Redoubling our efforts into communities of practice, active and collaborative learning, and co-creation can support students in feeling part of their university. Encouraging staff to recognise and exercise their agencies and responsibilities as part of the university community will empower them to feel valued and have a voice in the university' future. And reaching out and inviting in the local communities to our institutes can foster stronger and healthier relationships based reciprocity.