



ACADEMIC
REGISTRARS'
COUNCIL

Compassionate Communication in Higher Education

Foreword

In the fast-paced environment of higher education life, communication plays a pivotal role in shaping both academic success and personal well-being. This piece on compassionate communication is crafted with the intention of guiding university communities through the nuances of expressing themselves with empathy, respect, and understanding in an academic setting.

Compassionate communication, as explored in this work, goes beyond the mechanics of speaking or writing effectively. It delves into the emotional and psychological dimensions of how we interact with others, emphasising the importance of empathy, active listening, and mutual respect. In an age where digital communication often supersedes face-to-face interactions, the principles of compassionate communication become even more important. They remind us that behind every communication, there is a person with feelings, perspectives, and experiences that deserve acknowledgment and understanding.

In a world where miscommunication can easily lead to conflict and misunderstanding, compassionate communication offers a pathway to creating more meaningful connections and fostering a supportive academic environment.

The Academic Registrars' Council is delighted that our sector body has been involved in this important work and that we can help shape its future direction.

Ben Rogers

Academic Registrars' Council (ARC)

Introduction

Compassionate Communication sets out principles for higher education providers in England through the work of the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce, though it is hoped that they will also inspire change in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. It has been developed by the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce, drawing on existing practice within UK higher education and beyond, and on expertise from HE professionals, specialists, and students themselves, and is now owned and will be periodically reviewed by the Academic Registrars' Council (ARC).

Compassionate Communication codifies new and aspirational principles of practice in academic and conduct processes, and more broadly, which I strongly believe are a true reflection of the values and ambitions of today's higher education sector. As a sector we are already committed to supporting the wellbeing and mental health of students, recognising an increase in stressors on young people and a rising incidence of mental health concerns within the student age population. As we deliver proactive and reactive interventions to address these challenges, it is fundamental that our own processes and communications, at minimum, do not inadvertently worsen any difficulties that students may be experiencing, and ideally improve and enhance the student experience.

Compassionate Communication is most effective when higher education providers and their students are actively engaged.

Students can expect their provider to have implemented or to be actively working towards the principles as outlined below. This should be increasingly evident in their processes and communications, creating a supportive learning environment.

Higher education providers should, in turn, expect their students to engage with them, follow relevant rules and regulations, respond to communications and, as far as possible, bring to the provider's attention any mitigating circumstances or changes in their circumstances.

This reciprocal commitment helps to build a collaborative approach to student wellbeing and success.

The principles presented below are consistent with the principles of the Good Practice Framework published by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) and may be taken into consideration by the OIA when reviewing student complaints about higher education providers in England.

I commend these principles to your careful attention, and it is my sincere hope that you will work to embed them when reviewing and updating institutional processes and your overall

Student Charter, drawing on inspiration from the case studies that accompany this document.

Professor Edward Peck

Chair of Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce

Compassionate Communication Commitment

1. We commit to adopting a **Culture of Kindness** and incorporating it into student-facing policies, processes, and communications.
2. We commit to **Mindful Communications** which are clear, empathetic, action-focused, and supportive.
3. We commit to **Timely Communications** ensuring that careful consideration has been given to both delivery and timings, enabling students to access advice and support when they most need it.
4. We commit to **Inclusivity** by actively identifying and addressing barriers to engagement, as well as carefully considering the impact of processes and communications on all student groups.
5. We commit to the principle of **Reflection and Continuous Improvement** by dedicating time to review challenges and successes in delivering student-facing policies, processes and communications with compassion and empathy.

1. Culture of Kindness

A culture of kindness brings together a commitment to the values of respect, empathy, and compassion along with clear and reasonable expectations and boundaries. We commit to integrating this culture of kindness into every aspect of student-facing policies, processes, and communications.

Principles:

- Academic and behavioural expectations are proportionate, explained clearly and upheld within the institution;
- Student-facing policies and processes are responsive to the evolving needs of the student body;
- Students receive feedback that is aimed at supporting their development;
- Students are typically trusted in the first instance and, where evidence is required, the potential impact of providing this evidence has been considered;
- There is a coordinated approach to minimising the need for students to provide evidence on multiple occasions for the same life event or requirement;
- There is an agreed balance between the application of process and the ability of staff to exercise discretion; and
- Staff across the organisation, and student representatives, are supported to embed the principles of Compassionate Communication in their day-to-day work.

2. Mindful Communications

The way that communications are approached, and the form of words used, both have an impact on students' wellbeing, academic performance, and retention¹. We commit to mindful communications which are clear, empathetic, and action-focused.

Principles:

- Communications to students about academic or behavioural processes are treated as confidential within the boundaries of safe practice, with careful consideration of who needs to be informed and why;
- In communications, it is assumed – and emphasised – that the student is a competent individual, but it's recognised that there may be circumstances where a student is unable to take action without support;
- Academic processes or behavioural expectations, and any support that may be accessed, are developed, and communicated, in terms of growth and learning;
- Encountering and overcoming difficulties is seen as being a normal part of student life, but careful consideration is given to processes or communications that could lead to negative feelings and worries;
- Communications are written in a manner that is accessible to students and unnecessary legal language or jargon is avoided;
- Additional factors that could contribute to academic difficulty are acknowledged in communications where relevant: for example, finances, health, family matters;
- Where appropriate, language mirrors the way that a student talks about their own difficulties in order to avoid making assumptions;
- Reasonable boundaries are established and any consequences are made explicit;
- The next steps are set out clearly;
- Where relevant, communications emphasise that seeking support is a positive action and there are examples of ways in which students can access support; and
- In the rare circumstance that a specific message is likely to have a seriously negative or life-changing impact, this should be delivered in person.

¹ These principles draw on the work of Tim Fricker, Dean of Students, Mohawk College, Canada: [Evaluating the Impact of Academic Standing Letters on the Experience and Retention of Students](#)

3. Timely Communications

The mode and timing of communications can significantly affect the way they are received. We commit to communications that are appropriate for those receiving them, ensuring that consideration has been given to the mode of communication and their timings so that students are able to access advice and support when they most need it.

Principles:

- Communications have been co-ordinated between different departments and do not contradict one another;
- An appropriate mode of communication has been chosen for each message conveyed, taking into consideration the students' communication preferences and accessibility requirements;
- Communications arrive at a time when the student can act on them and can seek further clarification or support if needed;
- Communications include clear timescales for action on both sides, and clarify entitlement to request extensions or access support if needed;
- Staff are aware of OIA good practice in relation to timeliness, and provide updates to students when normal timeframes need to be extended;
- Timescales for students' actions are realistic, and consider personal circumstances; and
- Advice and support services are proactive at times when students are most likely to seek advice, for example setting up and advertising results drop-in advice sessions.

4. Inclusivity

Student-facing processes and communications should recognise and accommodate the diversity of current and prospective students. We commit to inclusive processes and communications by identifying and removing or reducing barriers to engagement wherever possible and considering the impact of processes and communications on different student groups.

Principles:

- There is a widespread understanding of different cultural backgrounds and their potential influence on how communication is received and understood;
- Euphemisms, idioms and other non-literal terms are avoided;
- Processes and communications take account of a wide variety of student circumstances, for example, disabilities, caring responsibilities, difficult circumstances in home country;
- The emotional and practical impacts of any proposed changes, such as interruption of studies, have been considered in light of students' backgrounds, protected characteristics, circumstances and support networks;
- Expectations placed on individual students through processes and communications are reasonable given the student's circumstances; and
- There is a periodic review of the diversity representation in the composition of key committees and panels, along with the development of strategies to achieve broader representation as necessary.

5. Reflection and Continuous Improvement

We commit to reflection and continuous improvement by taking time to review challenges and successes in delivering student-facing policies, processes and communications with compassion and empathy.

Principles:

- Involve student representatives in development and review processes;
- Create time to listen to students and staff about the impacts of policies, processes and communications;
- Build a common understanding of kindness and compassion across the organisational community;
- Support the sharing of learning and good practice across departments;
- Encourage student feedback and ensure mechanisms are in place to take appropriate action in response;
- Incorporate reflections on kindness, compassion, and inclusion in reviews of policies, processes, and communications; and
- Develop ways to measure the impact of Compassionate Communication on students, staff, and other stakeholders.