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Pastoral Care Work in Higher Education: Breaking the Silence

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Abstract

In this article we draw attention to the relatively under discussed issue of the emotional labour involved in providing pastoral care and the toll it takes on staff in higher education. We present a composite vignette which draws on a combined experience of our 15 years as educators across three institutions. In offering an immersive account of the everyday workings of student facing roles, we highlight the effort involved in offering pastoral support to students in the classroom and beyond and call for acknowledgment and recognition of this 'hidden' work. We reflect on the implications of this unrecognised work for higher education management practices and hope to start a conversation, a movement for a radical and kinder academia.

Keywords

Pastoral support, care work, emotional labour

Prologue

In what follows, we first present a composite vignette drawing on a combined experience of our 15 years as educators across three institutions. Methodologically, we first collated our individual accounts of moments, locations, interactions and experiences and chronological career accounts and then crafted a joint composite vignette in the first person to represent our experience and illustrate our argument. The vignette is constituted of our combined lived experiences but does not map onto a specific chronology of events, location, individuals or institutions. By offering an immersive account of the everyday workings of student facing roles, we draw attention to the ‘hidden’ everyday pastoral care work in higher education with the hope to start a conversation, a movement for a radical and kinder academia.

An 'unseen' day at work

It is 8:30 am and I am driving in. The scattered blocks of building material, incomplete construction structures and closely packed parking spaces, as the campus undergoes *transformation*, makes me feel like I am seeing the insides of my own mind – busy, chaotic, full to the brim, struggling for order, craving some space.

I grab a quick coffee from my favourite cafe, a quiet sip of bliss before yet another day of yet another busy term begins.

As I walk towards my office, I run into my colleague who I am aware is dealing with a heart-breaking loss. We have a chat (I try my best to keep it brief as I would very much like to send few emails before my meetings but that feels *unkind* as they clearly need to talk). Profusely apologising for having to leave as it is already 10am and I have a student waiting, I make my way to my office.

The student had written to me to discuss their essay plan. As I sit down, I ask "How are you? Are you alright?" They shake their head. As we talk things through, it is evident to me that they are struggling – the exact cause is unclear, but they are scared and alone. I feel like I am pouring from an empty cup here – I do not know what to say, what to do – but I keep trying. I draw on my over thirty years of life experience to offer support. And in the midst of it all they confess they are struggling with their mental health and are dealing with some very difficult thoughts. As tears flow down their cheeks, I feel my tummy knot into a tight ball (*I need a minute to just take this in – what does this mean, what should I do, how can I help*). I pass them a tissue and tell them I will go get them water. I walk across the corridor and am grateful to find a colleague who has been here longer – in under 30 seconds I narrate what I am confronted with, and they say they will send me some thoughts and links via text message so I can continue to sit with the student. I try to calm the student down and sign post them to support services. As we continue to speak, it turns out they are getting help and are in touch with relevant health services (*I am concentrating really hard trying to make mental notes of what they are saying, where they live*). Once they seem calmer, I bring the meeting to a close and ask them what they will do next. After over an hour (*which felt like a day*), they leave. I have another student waiting outside but I apologise and ask them to wait for few more minutes and quickly call the campus security services and send off an email to the university student support services (*I have to do all I can…).*

The next student comes in and we talk about their studies. I ask them why they took so long to reply to my messages and meet me. They confess that they have recently been dealing with a medical issue. They add that they have not even told their parents, and are confiding in me, that they have a supportive friend and are doing ok (*I nod along but I feel tensed – is the student doing ok? Does this instance meet the criteria of escalating to a support team? I am concerned but there is nothing alarming, I do not have any evidence – what do I do. I decide to make a note to let a programme team member know about my conversation to make sure they are aware*). As the student feels they can talk to me, they start sharing details about their medical situation (*I get all knotted up – I cannot stand blood, my worst fear is hospitals, and I try not to zone out*). I get up and open the window (*You have to hang in there and listen I tell myself. I concentrate really hard*). We agree the next date for a meeting and then they leave.

It is past 12 noon now, I have so many emails to catch-up on and so many things on my to-do list (which keeps getting longer - the lecture I have been meaning to revise, the paper I wanted to

read, the conference abstract I wanted to put together, the thoughts I promised to write down for a colleague – all tasks I want to do keep on accumulating, the list keeps on growing as everyday urgent tasks have to be prioritised. I feel so behind, so full of guilt but what do I do). I hope to spend time tackling my forever expanding inbox before going along to a research seminar I am very much looking forward to. As I am reading through emails while having a quick lunch, a colleague knocks at the door – they want to go through an issue they are dealing with. As they leave, another student wants to know if I have a minute. I have fifteen minutes until the seminar, so I nod. But our conversation goes on for nearly 45 minutes. As they are talking about their current struggles with their studies, I feel I cannot interrupt them (in my head I am thinking of the session I really wanted to go to, but this feels more important – I feel almost guilty for wanting to go to the session and for the part of me that considered telling them I needed to leave whilst they were upset and clearly needed to talk).

As they leave, I have nothing left in me. It is just 2 pm but feels much later. We allocate time in the workday to planned activities. Days are to be filled with scheduled meetings and teaching. It was suggested when I started in HE that I block out my diary for research and writing time. And I have been doing it. My calendar gives the viewer an impression of an organised, well-planned professional who is largely in control of their days and weeks and should be getting it all done. *But what does one do about the unscheduled activities? Those which do not have any tangible 'output'? The colleague who comes to you for advice or reassurance. The student who has concerns. A human who needs to talk and wants another human to listen*.

The people, their queries and concerns may be different, but the volume I have dealt with today is not uncommon. The demands on your time can feel endless. I sometimes work from home (when I can) as I know I will get more done without interruptions. I may also sit in other places on campus to 'hide away'. Yet I also want to support people, be there for them, and at the very least bear witness to their struggles by listening to them (even if I cannot do anything else). I acknowledge that the days I spend in the office will be times of interrupted work. I am tired. And understandably so - emotional labour is involved in providing pastoral care. It requires effort, time and energy and can be exhausting, draining and stressful (França et al., 2023), often leaving one without the 'headspace' to work on other aspects of their academic role (Ashencaen Crabtree and Shiel, 2019).

But I do want to have the space and time to 'care'. Am I in the grips of the 'seductive' power of care (Hughes et al. 2007) when there is satisfaction to be derived from caring and of being caring? Although I do not feel 'pleasure' as Hughes refers to it – what I feel is a constant sense of falling short, being constantly behind.

But how do I continue to offer support with so many demands on my time? How do I keep on top of things? Where is the acknowledgement and space for the demands of care? Who do I go to discuss the impact this is all having on me? I am aware these conversations take a toll - I experience it so I do not want to just go and talk to someone as I am conscious of the burden I will generate for them. This makes me even more hesitant. I feel alone and I wonder if I am wrong - should I care less? *Is there a need to be uncaring in higher education?*

In the evening, I speak to my parents on the phone and tell them what I can about my day. I am tired and even though we are on an audio call, they know I am tired. I recognise the difficulties of dealing with life as it unfolds for students and colleagues alongside a rising workload. Despite this, I tell them (but more myself) that, *I do not want to stop caring*.

Towards a 'caring' academia?

Teaching…encompasses one dimension that is neither recognised nor rewarded…even though it is expected: the dimension of care (Hooks 1994).

Providing support to students (and colleagues) is a key but often hidden area of our work as educators in HE. Caring about students is an essential aspect of teaching which involves 'emotionally engaged labour' (França et al., 2023). This work often goes unrecognised and unrewarded, with the contribution in terms of time not fully accounted for, as care and support are generally offered responsively or reactively with other things becoming deprioritised during these moments (Hubbard and Brewster, 2024). The provision of support is dependent on goodwill and availability in an environment where academics possess "little ability to protect their time" (Hughes et al, 2018, p.24). Students (and colleagues) tend to gravitate towards those who are available, who they know and are comfortable with. This work therefore also is often inequitable with an unequal burden of support work falling on early-career colleagues, women and those from ethnic minority backgrounds (Hubbard and Brewster, 2024).

There is also a lack of clarity around the boundaries of this pastoral care work, with a lack of training and support offered to those who undertake it. This can lead to staff feeling overwhelmed by student needs and unsupported in dealing with these. There can also be a lack of acknowledgement of the mental wellbeing of staff – those who provide the pastoral support and care. Providing pastoral care has a personal impact; the emotional and mental burden linked to the effect of 'hearing and carrying peoples' stories' (Hubbard and Brewster, 2024, p.8) requires attention. However, little has been written about emotional labour involved in academic work (Ashencaen Crabtree and Shiel, 2019) and few studies have looked at how academics are responding to the increasing demands of pastoral care.

There is a need for this care work to be recognised. Staff who undertake this emotional labour require training and information, including an orientation of key support services to help identify the most appropriate referral point, advice on dealing with challenging conversations, and help with being able to recognise students (and colleagues) who are in more serious difficulty. Whilst areas of this support are already available, having the time to complete this training is also key.

Formal support should be in place for dealing with the impact and consequences of offering pastoral support. Those who undertake this care work require care themselves. Yet there are few opportunities within HEIs for academics to experience this care. Informal support networks, including the role of collegiality, with the possibility of time to share and reflect on experiences, are therefore important.

Emotional labour can be invisible and difficult to identify, however it is a key aspect of academic labour. Through this short article, our hope, and aim is to put out a call for recognition of and support for this 'hidden' work that so many of us perform in HE. Do we even acknowledge it and the toll it takes ourselves? Might it be useful to recognise this work and create and cultivate spaces for care in higher education institutions. Could a first practical step be to organise conversations inviting discussions about how 'care work' is enacted and experienced? We could use the insights thereby gathered to outline a plan of action. *If we do not do this now, then when?*

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Author Profile

Divya Jyoti and **Beth Suttill** are colleagues in the Department of Organisational Work and Technology in Lancaster University Management School. In addition to their everyday teaching, research and management roles and activities, they have been engaged in attempting to create a 'space' for care both at an individual as well as collective level. Working as a team, they have offered each other 'pastoral care'. This allows them to pass this care on to their students and colleagues as they enact their everyday roles as lecturers, academic tutors and programme directors. Collectively they are working on crafting formal and informal, planned and spontaneous social spaces for students and colleagues to 'simply be' and are committed to raising the awareness of the time, effort and space needed to undertake 'care work'.

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