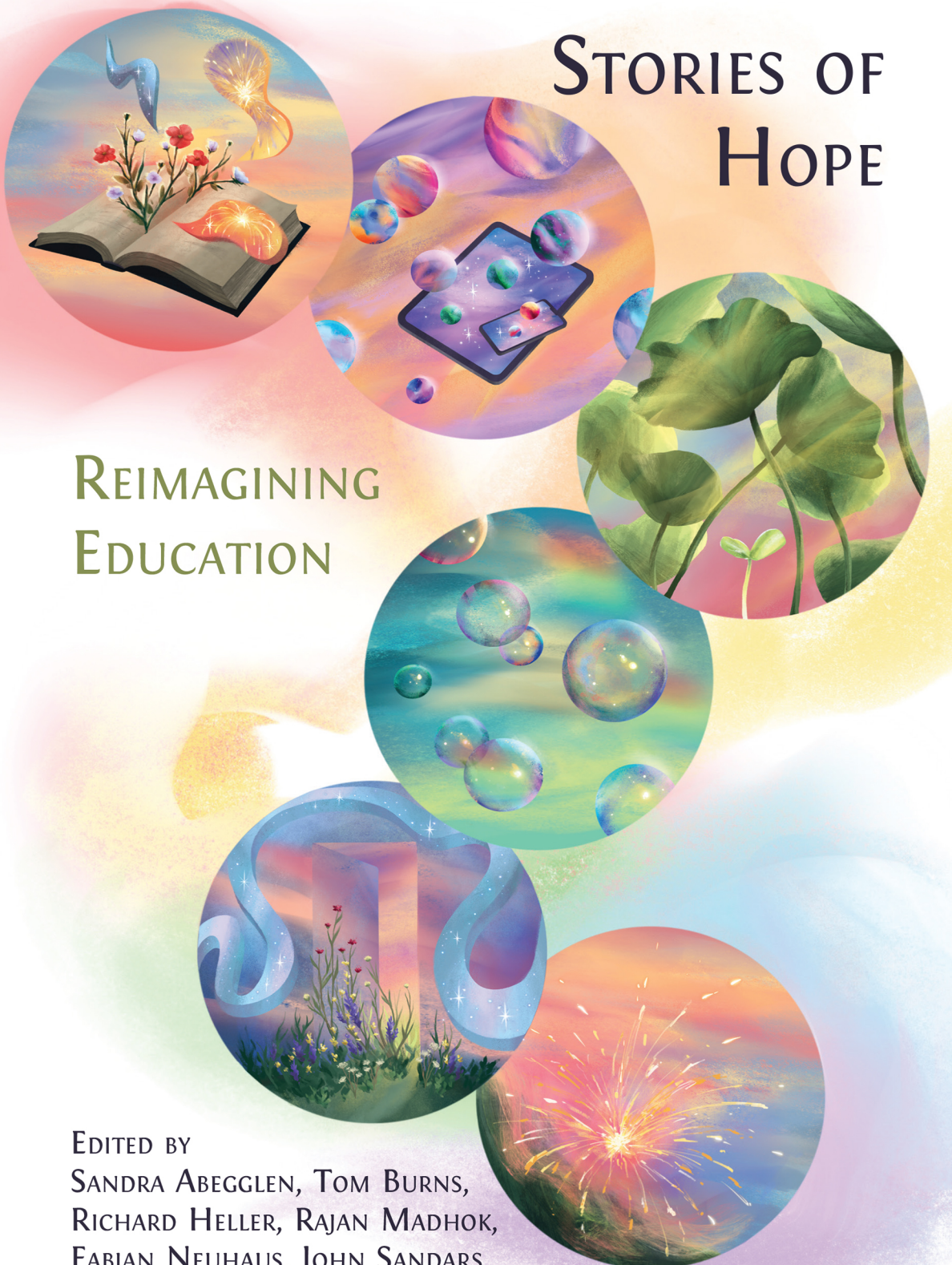
Stories of Hope

Reimagining Education



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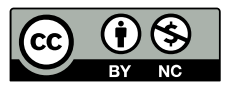

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45. Embracing compassion and self-care: Educator wellbeing amidst the chaos

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Abstract

This chapter is a call for self-understanding and hope, beginning with the individual. It explores how Higher Education professionals can apply self-compassion—through self-kindness, recognition of shared humanity, and mindfulness—to support their own wellbeing amid the growing pressures of teaching, administration, and research. As lecturers, tutors, and teachers face increasing burnout, overwork, and underpayment, self-compassion offers a practical framework for academic self-care, helping educators to hold themselves with gentleness rather than harsh self-judgment. The chapter also argues that the principles of self-compassion must extend to colleagues, fostering a more supportive and humane academic culture.

Keywords: educator wellbeing; kindness; self-care; compassion; self-compassion

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When a student comes calling...

"I'm so sorry for not getting this done yet. I feel really bad..."

A flustered colleague apologises to me for not sharing a project document before our meeting. They're clearly stressed about this, but as our conversation develops, it turns out they prioritised one of their students over preparation for our meeting. As the familiar story goes, unexpected, unannounced and upset, a student had knocked on my colleague's door to get the help they needed. My colleague did the right thing—the human thing—and reprioritised. The student got the time they needed, and I lost a bit of preparation time for a meeting because of it. The latter was my colleague's cause for concern—but ultimately—it was concern over something that had already happened and was out of my colleague's control.

I get it. We have a duty to our colleagues as much as we do to students, and my colleague recognised that their decision has impacted me. Yet, even though I told them I felt they had made the right decision, they were still beating themselves up over the impact on our meeting. Since when did we all start to feel bad for doing the right thing?

Chaos from a messy world

This one interaction has been an important source of reflection for me—for months. Mainly because this is a common story, and something most academics or Higher Education professionals have experienced. Over and over again, I hear from colleagues that fall behind their expected progress because of things far beyond their control. With post-COVID-19 recovery (Gamage, 2023), economic instability (International Monetary Fund, 2022), a cost-of-living crisis (Office for National Statistics, 2023), and a growing mental health epidemic (Campbell et al., 2022), we are all bound to come across unexpected moments where students (or colleagues) need us. While we cannot control the unexpected, we can control how we respond.

The juggling of complicated academic and pastoral workloads (Shaw & Blazek, 2023) has become normalised in the current neo-liberalised, marketised Higher Education landscape (Breeze et al., 2019; Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). The competing demands of research, teaching

and pastoral support have led to "overwhelming stress and conflict" (Shen & Slater, 2021, p. 100) for both academics and professional service staff. Yet, in a recent systematic review, Ogechi Ohadomere and Ikedinachi Ogamba (2021) demonstrate minimal evidence of support for academics to manage stress and mental health. This is in a climate of a growing workload and precarity of contracts, leading to the University and College Union's (UCU, 2023) "Four Fights" campaign, which has long advocated for better pay, a fairer workload, greater equality, and the elimination of precarious employment. Then there was the COVID-19 pandemic and the significant disruption that it brought to global Higher Education (Corbera et al., 2020; Gamage, 2023). Yet, it can also be argued that COVID-19 was a turning point, with Esteve Corbera and colleagues (2020, p. 191) calling for a "culture of care" to "make academic practice more respectful and sustainable". We now just need to deliver that in the post-lockdown landscape, a period that is increasingly becoming characterised by further uncertainty. War, conflict, political upheaval, and the rise of artificial intelligence have dramatically changed the world landscape (Vinjamuri et al., 2025), and the profound impact this is having on Higher Education is continuing to emerge. International student mobility and concern over the cost of university education are part of the global narrative of Higher Education. In a context of upheaval and cuts across most institutions, there has never been a more important time to consider the role of compassion and care in Higher Education.

A culture of care presents a significant opportunity for hope in Higher Education. Putting care first ensures human values like empathy, respect, participation, collaboration, and ethics are considered within all academic policies, procedures, and ultimately, actions and interactions. These human values are important and should sit at the heart of everything we do. However, it is important to note that values like empathy and respect should not be about selflessness and putting students first (often at our own expense). Academics and professional service colleagues are an important part of this equation, and with the examples of wellbeing and sustainability, they are firmly in the frame. Ultimately, this is about finding ways forward that work for everyone involved, or at least as many people as possible.

Self-compassion as a framework for academic self-care

Inevitably, when we have to deal with a challenging situation or when something goes wrong or not to plan, we reflect. It can be argued that the competing demands on academic time and the often-challenging issues that students bring us certainly provide plenty of opportunities for such reflection. Reflection is an innate human skill (Bassot, 2020), but it can easily turn into unhelpful self-critique. Reflection focused on this alone goes beyond the helpful forms of reflective practice we see established in models from Stephen Brookfield (2017) and Jennifer Moon (1999). It becomes toxic and harmful—and even more problematic when we are powerless to control the outcomes. I am not arguing against reflection. As Higher Education professionals, we absolutely should reflect on our teaching, research, and pastoral support practices (Brookfield, 2017), but such reflection should focus on realistic targets (Bassot, 2020)—we cannot magic more time into the day. We cannot control those times a student (or colleague) just needs us, and other things must wait.

This whole book focuses on stories of hope—and my argument is that hope starts with us being kinder and more compassionate with ourselves. We need to give ourselves hope. This is not selfish or disconnected—but an acknowledgement that you cannot look after others until you can take care of yourself (Johnson & Humble, 2022). I think a lot of this starts with self-compassion, an intentional act (Waddington, 2017) of "compassion turned inward" (Neff, 2012, p. 80). Kristen Neff (2012) argues that self-compassion has three components:

1. **Self-kindness**—give yourself a break and avoid harsh self-criticism when it ceases to be constructive. Self-kindness is based on positive actions and emotions to nurture yourself when things go wrong.
2. **Humanity**—acknowledge we are imperfect and make mistakes. Self-judgment can be isolating and self-distorting. Acknowledging humanity acknowledges failure and challenge as part of being human.
3. **Mindfulness**—be self-aware, balancing useful reflection against overthinking. It is a therapeutic technique used to be present, accepting your feelings and experiences without judgment.

These things rarely come easily. We are trained to be critical – to dig into situations and get to the bottom of things. But maybe we also need to recognise when to give ourselves a break. Likewise, we should apply that same understanding, compassion, kindness and humanity to our colleagues and students too. Neff's (2012) frame of self-compassion is not new, but I see new validity for it in Higher Education (see Figure 45.1).

Fig. 45.1 Self-compassion (image by author, based on the theories of Neff, 2012, CC BY-NC 4.0).

A critical approach to self-compassion

While mindfulness is a vehicle for keeping reflection therapeutic, we should also be aware that it can place too much focus on the role of the self (Purser, 2019). While this might seem counter to the argument I

am developing, there is nuance here. Ronald Purser (2019) argues that mindfulness has been co-opted to serve neo-liberal interests. Ultimately, it can keep us focused on ourselves as opposed to the systems and processes that lead to the challenges in the first place. I argue that we should have a critical mindfulness that supports us to work within a framework of self-compassion, allowing us to be less self-critical, especially when, as this chapter has shown, many of these factors are outside of our control. However, such an approach to mindfulness should also allow us to recognise when policy, procedures and structures are the source of the problem. In such cases, we should take the onus further off ourselves and place our effort towards challenging the system. This should always be done carefully and in the context people are working within.

It is also important to acknowledge that academics and professional service colleagues are diverse. I realise I am writing optimistically regarding the very possibility of self-compassion and mindfulness—this is not easy. In some cultures and neurodiversities, aspects of self-compassion and mindfulness may be very challenging or even impossible—and yet, tolerance, kindness, and compassionate pedagogies are often a route for their success (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). This is an essential acknowledgement too. The scale of modern Higher Education can be overwhelming (Breeze et al., 2019), but we must never forget the individual. I cannot emphasise enough how much this applies to not only students, but also colleagues, managers, and others we may work with. You may need a break—but so do they (at times).

Sharing the love: Extending the understanding to others

As much as self-compassion starts with us, we can extend it to others. This is also in full acknowledgement that such kindness is not always going to be extended back. Colleagues and students will have different approaches and understanding—and this is something we need to respect as well. This is yet another aspect of compassion—extending it to others, even when we may receive nothing in return. Sometimes doing the right thing really is enough.

For me, there is a lot more hope in Higher Education if we can be that bit kinder to ourselves as Higher Education professionals—and extend

that same courtesy to those around us. Ultimately, we cannot control what happens, but we can control how we hold ourselves to account and how we feel about our progress. By extension, we can control how we hold others to account and how we feel about their progress. While this essay is fundamentally a call for self-understanding, it extends to understanding others. This is a call for hope, that starts with us—with something we can fundamentally control—our feelings, our self-accountability and our support for each other as colleagues.

We need to go easy on ourselves

Considering the significant global and local changes within Higher Education, it can all feel a little overwhelming—and further paradigm shifts in education are on the horizon (Orr et al., 2020). Times will inevitably be tough, especially as we need hope. I've found great solace in the use of a structured planner, something that provides space for weekly planning, but also space for weekly and monthly reflection. Every month, it asks me "what tasks were not accomplished *and why?*". Every month that gives me a chance to practise—in writing—self-compassion. I embrace my successes as much as my failures, but I've learned to learn from them, and not dwell. This has been liberating—and for me—hope comes from more compassion and kindness, and that always starts with the self.

I recognise this is not easy. I think forgiveness is not as innate as reflection and self-critique, but it is a worthy goal when we are applying it to ourselves. As the title suggests, things are that little bit chaotic right now. However, as this essay has argued, it is through embracing compassion and self-care that we can bring a little hope to ourselves—and hopefully that kindness will pass on to others. Next time you're about to apologise for something, think hard. Was it *really* your fault, and can you just let that issue go?

Steps toward hope

- Actively practice self-kindness, mindfulness, and recognition of shared humanity to support personal wellbeing and resilience in the face of academic pressures.

- Shift from self-criticism to self-support, focusing on how to respond to challenges with understanding rather than harsh judgment.
- Foster a culture of collective care by showing the same kindness and understanding toward colleagues.

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