



## **Compassionate assessments in HE: using a trauma-informed approach to develop an assessment design strategy and feedforward practice**

**Alice Graeupl**

Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

**Amanda Miller**

Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

**Marilena Antoniadou**

American College of Greece, Greece

### ***Abstract***

This brief communication offers reflections, through the lens of trauma-informed education, on the implementation of a portfolio approach to assessment design and feedback within a large business school department. Recognising the interconnectedness of assessment and feedback, we have fostered a more caring and compassionate culture at the department level by leveraging the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Being guided by trauma-informed education, we also strengthened the importance of anchoring teaching practices within an ethic of care (Keeling, 2014). Our approach involved the introduction of flexible assessment design and feed-forward strategies, complemented by staff development workshops focused on race awareness and inclusive best practices. We advocate for adopting a trauma-informed approach, emphasising compassionate leadership and transparency to drive meaningful change. Our experience underscores the importance of nurturing a compassionate culture in assessment design and feedback, especially during times of trauma, empowering both students and colleagues to thrive academically.

**Keywords:** compassionate assessment and feedback; trauma informed; assessment design; feedforward practice.

## ***The context: what happened and what we did***

What if education focused on understanding each other's experiences rather than just grades? Imagine higher education policies rooted in compassion, empathy, and a deep understanding of trauma. What if we created trauma-informed assessment and feedback policies based on the principles of authentic assessment that prioritise the well-being of students and staff over students' academic performance?

We pose this challenge to all readers: consider your assessment regulations and policies through the lens of equity-centred, trauma-informed education, as suggested by Thompson and Carello (2021). They argue that trauma-informed teaching is not merely a set of strategies, but a paradigm shift that involves understanding how trauma impacts students and educators both individually and collectively. This approach aims to create learning environments where all students feel safe and supported while acknowledging the effects of trauma on well-being and its varied impact on individuals. Integrating trauma-informed practices can transform educational spaces to support healing and growth, requiring changes in teaching, assessment design, feedback, and interactions with students and staff.

Consider the pandemic as a form of trauma. We know that the impacts of COVID-19 will resonate through the education system for years to come with students having 'lost' years of learning. We know that students are reporting higher levels of mental health issues across higher education impacting retention and attainment (Salimi et al., 2023; Monte et al., 2024). Consider the role of policy, not just as a set of rules but as a tool for creating inclusive and supportive environments. The COVID-19 pandemic forced us to rethink assessments and feedback, exposing and exacerbating inequities in education. The shift to online learning highlighted diverse challenges like limited technology access, varying home environments, and the mental health impacts of isolation and uncertainty (Birmingham et al., 2023). The pandemic created a perfect storm for an overstretched university workforce, as teaching fluctuated between online and in-person, presenting new daily challenges in delivering an excellent student experience.

This unprecedented situation led to an acceleration in the need for change within this case study business school department. During the first year of COVID-19 contingencies, we

recognised our traditional methods of assessment and feedback were insufficient to address the new realities faced by our students and staff. The pandemic provided a unique opportunity to accelerate transformational change by redesigning our policies to better support the holistic well-being of our educational community.

What did we do? We explored integrating trauma-informed approaches into our assessments, aiming to design sensitive assessments and provide constructive, empathetic feedback, guided by equity-centred trauma-informed education principles (Thompson and Carello, 2021). We introduced an authentic assessment strategy, an inclusive feedback policy, curated workshops, and created a community of practice to foster a caring and compassionate culture. Integrating trauma-informed approaches and authentic assessment strategies quickly improved student satisfaction. Offering flexible choices in topics meant students could select, for example, different organisations, geographical contexts or consumer proformas to focus upon. The assessments allowed for integration of students' own lived experiences through a choice of formats including creative pieces such as vlogs and blogs. They also acknowledged students' circumstances, which fosters ownership and relevance, while boosting engagement and well-being. This increase in satisfaction, reflected in internal student voice data collection points and National Student Survey (NSS) data, confirmed the effectiveness of this compassionate, inclusive approach.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided the catalyst, highlighting the importance of trauma-informed education. Our pre-COVID-19 student voice data supported the findings of Higgins et al. (2001), showing that students often worried about assessments and found feedback irrelevant. By anchoring our practice within an ethic of care (Keeling, 2014) and responding to the pressures on staff and students, we streamlined and integrated authentic assessments. This policy was supported by staff development workshops on race awareness and showcased academics' effective practice in designing globally informed curricula and assessments. Additionally, this practice enabled staff to create more inclusive assessments (Tai et al., 2021) resulting in positive outcomes for targeting differential awarding gaps as data showed reduced awarding gaps between student groups. Feedback from staff and students highlighted greater awareness of inclusive assessment and a more compassionate approach to feedback. Staff felt more confident

designing assessments for diverse needs, and students reported feeling more supported and treated fairly.

Previously, student voice reporting mechanisms, including the NSS internal student feedback surveys, and staff-student consultative committee meetings, had identified the received assessment feedback as irrelevant, inconsistent and uncaring. Hence, our new feedback policy included three key elements: highlighting strengths, identifying areas for improvement, and offering suggestions for future assessments through a set of prepared statements with embedded links to academic resources from study skills and library services. Additionally, workshops and guidance were provided to ensure a compassionate tone and approach in delivering feedback, reflecting an ethos of care. The policy led to a streamlined, effective approach to assessment design and feedback and gave permission to colleagues to introduce authentic assessment and to adopt a compassionate, caring approach to feedback.

The shift towards authentic, compassionate assessment strategies significantly improved student satisfaction. Examples of authentic assessments included projects where students could select topics aligned with their personal interests or goals. For instance, marketing students designed campaigns for a product or service of their choice, applying theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts. Assessments were adapted to allow various formats, like video presentations, enabling students to showcase their strengths in different mediums. Students appreciated the flexibility in choosing topics and submission formats, making assessments more relevant and engaging. This approach acknowledged individual interests and strengths, fostering ownership and motivation, and developed career-ready confidence. As a result, students felt more understood and supported, boosting their confidence and satisfaction, as reflected in our student voice data and the NSS. This alignment with students' personal and academic needs created a more inclusive and supportive environment, enhancing overall well-being and academic success.

Our goal was to develop policies that not only assess academic performance but also foster resilience, connection, and growth. Assessments should be flexible, allowing students various ways to demonstrate their understanding, and feedback should be encouraging and developmental, helping students build on strengths and improve with confidence.

In this creative exploration, we imagine a future where education is truly trauma-informed, prioritising compassion, empathy, and understanding. It is a future where every community member feels seen, heard, and supported, regardless of their past experiences or challenges. While this future may seem distant, it is within our reach if we dare to dream and take bold action.

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## **Author details**

Alice Graeupl is a senior lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University where she works in the Business School. She teaches and supports students on tourism and marketing programmes. In her role as assessment lead, she has created significant impact and change with an inclusive, compassionate assessment strategy by empowering staff to find the right fit for their modules. Alice has also been involved in a QAA project on 'Learning in Blocks' and still contributes and consult with universities considering a change to block teaching. She is a senior fellow of the HEA. Her research interests lie within flexible, functional assessment that empowers both students and staff.

Amanda Miller is an associate professor/reader at the Manchester Metropolitan University Business School. She is currently in her second year as an institutional lead innovation scholar and co-leads a cross-university strategic community of practice in authentic and flexible assessments. This role is a newly created secondment, representing a step change for the university to utilise strategic communities of practice to amplify excellence in practice and inspire innovation and excellent student experiences and outcomes. She is based within the triple-accredited business school and teaches in the area of marketing and tourism: co-leading on a department final year undergraduate independent study module and leading a module at the postgraduate level. Amanda has led significant

curriculum change initiatives at the department level and mentors colleagues new to academia, those who aspire to apply for education leadership roles, those new to the scholarship of teaching and learning, and those working towards achieving professional recognition (via Advance HE). Externally, Amanda is the Director of Education for EuroCHRIE, a certified management and business educator (Chartered Association of Business Schools) and a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and holds a number of external examining posts at UK institutions.

Marilena Antoniadou is an associate professor in management, currently serving as the associate dean for education and employability at the American College of Greece, and she oversees academic programs, curriculum development, faculty development, and accreditation processes. Her leadership emphasises bridging the gap between academia and industry, equipping students with practical skills for successful careers. Previously, Marilena held significant roles at Manchester Metropolitan University, including Director of Education for the Faculty of Business and Law, where she spearheaded initiatives to enhance student satisfaction, retain triple accreditation, and elevate global rankings. Her teaching and research interests lie in organisational behaviour, workplace emotions, and education for sustainable development, with numerous publications in academic journals. A Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and an active member of professional bodies, she has led innovative projects, secured research funding, and contributed to curriculum development internationally. Holding a PhD in organisational behaviour and several postgraduate degrees, she is dedicated to developing inclusive, collaborative environments that inspire growth and learning.

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