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## **A crisis of trust? Graduate perspectives on power structures and pedagogy**

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### ***Abstract***

We use this opinion piece to examine the crisis of trust that permeates Higher Education Institutions, drawing on our experiences as a team of graduates who have worked in numerous ways to advocate for compassionate pedagogies, the wellbeing of students, and the decolonisation of Higher Education Institutions. This crisis of trust has been explored within contemporary pedagogical literature, but we have also experienced this crisis first-hand within our respective journeys as students and researchers. By drawing upon our personal experiences and those highlighted within the existing literature, we delve into the effects of this crisis of trust not only on students, but also on teachers and institutions at large.

It is inside the four walls of a classroom that there is the potential for an exchange of knowledge that not only shapes the learning of students but recognises its reciprocal nature and how it may facilitate further learning for the teacher (and institution). While most Higher Education Institutions are gradually attempting to recognise and move away from the power structures that impede on students' learning and development of trust, the change is slow, and the process is undoubtedly painful. This piece is therefore a call to action for students, teachers, and institutions. We embed tangible recommendations throughout this piece, aimed at fostering safe spaces conducive to revolutionary, sustainable change. We hope that these changes will facilitate the long-term goal of rekindling the joy of learning within Higher Education Institutions and fortifying trust as a fundamental pillar of compassionate pedagogy.

**Keywords:** crisis of trust; marginalisation; compassionate pedagogy.

## ***Introduction***

As a team of graduates researching and advocating for compassionate pedagogies, student wellbeing, and decolonisation at University College London (UCL) and King's College London (KCL), we have continued to experience and document a fundamental 'crisis of trust' within our educational institutions. Trust has been defined as a 'civic glue' that binds communities together through confidence in others' good intentions and actions (Calderone and Fosnacht, 2022, p.1614). It is typically driven by a sense of shared values (Gillespie and Mann, 2004), relational histories (Marková and Gillespie, 2007), loyalties (Rosanas and Velilla, 2003), and importantly, identity (Smith, 2013). Trust frequently 'positions the truster in a place of vulnerability' (Calderone and Fosnacht, 2022, p.1614).

The literature identifies trust as an essential tenet of reflexive, joyful, and freedom-centred learning, aiming to help learners navigate their relationship to complex and ever-changing social structures, positionalities, and knowledges (Curzon-Hobson, 2002; Niedlich et al., 2020). This kind of learning requires students to bring their own unique histories, perspectives, and positionalities to the table authentically, and allows them to be interpreted and transformed in interaction with perspectives by peers, teachers, and existing scholarship (Curzon-Hobson, 2002).

Learning is thus a fundamentally vulnerable pursuit, requiring participants to embrace 'risk, fragility, and doubt' in realising the incompleteness, subjectivity, and 'error of our most fundamental assertions' (Curzon-Hobson, 2002, p.267). Trust is an essential precondition for this academic free-fall — students must trust that their deeply personal perspectives, experiences, and positionalities are welcomed, valued, and recognised as part of a communal process of knowledge exploration and production. They must trust that they are safe to question, doubt, and make mistakes in the process, and must trust in the ability of fellow students, teachers, and institutions to guide and support them along the way.

What we mean, then, by identifying a crisis of trust in higher education, is the lack of confidence that students across our research projects and existing literature reported

feeling towards other students, faculty, and institutions relating to their ability to act with integrity, uphold shared values, and protect common interests. We argue that this crisis of trust effectively prevents reflexive, joyful, and freedom-centred learning from taking place, favouring prescriptive and authoritative models of education instead. In the following sections, we outline the crisis of trust on three levels: student, teacher, and institutional, using findings from the literature, as well as our own experiences and projects at UCL and KCL.

## **Students**

For the joy of learning to be realised, it is crucial that students in higher education can trust themselves, one another, and their educators. In our view, however, this goal is far from realised. In 2023, Connie helped the UCL Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences conduct a Changemakers project that explored what the experience of assessment is like for students in the faculty. It used 'friendship as method', which involved participants recording conversations between themselves and a friend in which they discussed their experiences of assessment at UCL. Through this method, they aimed to glean more authentic and personal testimonies than might be expressed in surveys or forums. The students who participated painted a clear picture of over-assessment, grade-related stress, and fears surrounding academic misconduct. While this project focused on one faculty in one university, evidence in the literature suggests that anxiety and burnout surrounding grades have contributed to a wider mental-health crisis among undergraduate and postgraduate-taught students, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis (Ibrahim et al., 2013; Laranjeira et al., 2022).

These issues are heightened for already disempowered students, with mental-health problems more likely to affect students who are financially worse off, neurodivergent, queer, or victims of sexual assault (Sheldon et al., 2021; Albuquerque Perrelli et al., 2024). Having the self-confidence to discredit these institutional pressures is harder for groups who have historically been excluded from higher education, or for students who are the first in their families to enter such spaces (Hussain and Jones, 2021). Moreover, grade disparities still exist for low-income students, disabled students, and students of colour (Mahmud and Gagnon, 2020; Bolton and Lewis, 2023). Marginalised students

typically bring varying perspectives to their learning, which should be seen as advantageous. However, marginalised students and teachers are often excluded in conversations, or have their knowledge othered (Arday, 2018).

Therefore, we encourage students to become active participants in their communities of learning. Current market-led, individualistic models of education 'encourage competition between individuals that pits student against student and dampens social solidarity' (Monchinski, 2010, p.109), isolating students from their peers and university staff in general. Contrary to what this approach would have us believe, learning is fundamentally a social pursuit that occurs because individuals interact with others who have different lived experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds to them (Ashman and Gillies, 2003). For the joy of learning to be reignited, it is thus imperative for each student to break out of their role as individual, passive recipients of knowledge and instead become active participants (Ashman and Gillies, 2003) in the community of learning. By contributing their own vulnerability, experiences, and questions, students can strengthen the community of learning and help it develop as a source of trust, inspiration, joyful learning, and support for students and staff alike.

## ***Teachers***

Trust is a crucial element of the position that teachers take in relation to their students. Curzon-Hobson (2002, p.265) argues that it is a necessary foundation for creating 'a critical, dialogical learning environment' in higher education, but that this dynamic is affected both within and beyond the classroom. He suggests that accountability systems reduce trust and in turn restrict learning. The development of the 'market-led university', which views students as customers, means that satisfaction with teaching methods has become an invaluable marker for institutions.

Similarly, Mangione and Norton (2020) argue that a standardised approach to teaching has placed an expectation of pedagogical excellence on teachers, diminishing trust in this relationship. An absence of vulnerability leaves little to no space for play and experimentation in the classroom, tools that are seen as increasingly important for fostering creativity, curiosity, and learning development (Whitton and Langan, 2018; Leather, Harper and Obee, 2020; Forbes, 2021). Brantmeier and McKenna (2020, p.96) describe vulnerability as an 'act of courage' that deepens learning and promotes

discourse and questioning. It is therefore critical for educators to bolster trust between students and themselves by being vulnerable and taking risks.

We urge educators to embrace pedagogies of care, question institutional hierarchies, and reframe their role in the pursuit of learning. Monchinski (2010, p.109) aptly explains the traditional role of educators 'as the expert to the students' ignoramus'. Within this hierarchical model, students become passive recipients of knowledge, disconnected personally and politically from the process of knowledge production and dissemination. In contrast to this approach, pedagogies of care aim to 'recognise and connect to humanity in others' (Albuquerque and Pischetola, 2023, p.40). By including students' (and their own) personal experiences and stories as a central tenet of the learning process, pedagogies of care not only centre diverse knowledge and experiences, but also recognise students as equal participants in an egalitarian community of learning. This transforms the role of the teacher 'from the sage on the stage to the guide on the side' (King, 1993, p.30) and allows for the building of a new relationship based on trust, reciprocity, and authenticity between students and educators (Tong, Standen and Sotiriou, 2018).

## ***Institutions***

On an institutional level, the crisis of trust manifests particularly in relation to institutional structures, hierarchies, and histories. In 2022, Gabrielle co-led the Decolonisation in Action symposium at KCL, which formed part of a larger project implementing decolonial practices in mental health education at the university. It was clear that while some welcomed the decolonisation of (mental health) education, most experienced a sense of discomfort. For many, they had placed their trust in hierarchical systems and structures that have a strong history at universities across the United Kingdom. They did not want to change. One stark example of this is work Monica assisted with on The UCL Inclusive Curriculum Project (Arshad et al., 2021). The study highlighted how minority knowledges, case studies, and analytical approaches were systematically marginalised and excluded within the curriculum at UCL, a phenomenon proven common across higher education contexts (see Foster et al., 2013; Colgan, 2017; Hardt et al., 2019; Pflaeger et al., 2021).

The systemic marginalisation of minority knowledges in higher education settings profoundly impacts both the joy and freedom to learn. First, it diminishes the overall quality of education by offering students a hegemonic, one-dimensional perspective on most subjects, which limits intellectual diversity and curtails critical thinking and engagement. Second, it erodes institutional trust. Research demonstrates that students and staff alike tend to place greater trust in institutions where they feel valued, respected, and represented (Arday, Branchu and Boliver, 2021; Baltaru, 2024; Mahmud, 2024). Luedke (2017) argues that staff of colour in higher education are more likely to support students' success by valuing their backgrounds and establishing authentic relationships rather than their academic experiences. Indeed, how can students be expected to fully engage, question, and explore with vulnerability and authenticity when their own knowledges, histories, and lived experiences are neither acknowledged nor reflected in the curriculum or by the educators who teach it?

To combat the crisis of trust on an institutional level, universities must take unequivocal steps to ensure the safety, wellbeing, and inclusion of marginalised students and staff on campus and in the classroom. To regain the trust of marginalised communities and facilitate the joy of learning for all, universities must reckon with the heterosexist colonial histories, knowledges, and structures that shape higher education today, and take credible steps to decolonise campuses and curricula. In doing so, we believe that institutions will bolster levels of trust throughout the academy, facilitating a safer environment for joyful learning to take place.

## ***Conclusion***

As illustrated throughout this opinion piece, if we can work towards these goals together, with the experiences and interests of marginalised actors at the heart of this change, we can collectively build a more caring, joyful, and sustainable environment within higher education. By embedding a pedagogy of trust into higher education, we can rebuild the potential for the joy in learning that many of us as students and staff lose touch with as we become institutionalised. By not just listening to students and staff but being willing to hear us when we voice the potential for the creation of an education system that is caring, creative, collaborative, and challenging, we open the door for a truly decolonised way of sharing and producing knowledge. Building trust

throughout higher education will benefit students, teachers, and institutions alike, so the responsibility to encourage this process must be borne by all of us together.

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