Compassionate Communication in Scotland's Tertiary Sector

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Introduction

What is compassionate communication?

Compassionate communication is an approach adopted by institutions to improve their interactions with students. It involves clear, empathetic, and supportive communication and is aligned with the values of kindness, respect, timeliness, and inclusivity. In 2024, the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce created a set of principles for Compassionate Communication, owned and maintained by the Academic Registrars' Council. These principles are a key reference point for this project.

Why is compassionate communication a priority for Scotland's tertiary sector?

QAA Scotland was asked by the Scottish Funding Council to include a focus on compassionate communication in the National Review of Awarding Arrangements. QAA Scotland subsequently identified this as a relevant and timely priority area for the whole of Scotland's tertiary sector, within the context of a student population significantly impacted by mental health challenges; a continued focus on digital education and what student support looks like in online spaces; and ongoing considerations of the use of AI in communications with students.

Compassionate communication can enhance student wellbeing, increase engagement with services, support earlier intervention, enable students to make more informed decisions, enhance students' sense of belonging, and reduce harm and distress. Embedded effectively, it has the potential to improve measurable outcomes including student retention, satisfaction and completion rates. By making the choice to prioritise compassion, institutions can cultivate a culture of empathy and kindness, in which all members of an institution's community are recognised as individuals deserving of care, respect and understanding.

This project aims to facilitate the sharing of good practice and to support institutions to enhance their activities in this area, in order to improve the student experience for all learners in Scotland's tertiary sector.

What is the scope of this work?

Compassionate communication is a shared responsibility across all members of an institution's community. Every interaction between two individuals in a college or university should be approached with empathy, respect and kindness. While compassion should underpin all communication, it is particularly important in specific processes and situations that involve sensitive conversations and have the potential to significantly affect a student's wellbeing, academic journey and educational outcomes.

This project is therefore particularly focused on processes where compassionate communication is most needed, including:

- extensions, appeals and mitigating circumstances
- academic and student misconduct
- cases where students need to repeat a year, take an interruption of study, or can no longer continue on their course
- reasonable adjustments
- communicating module, end of year and final qualification results
- finance
- accommodation
- reporting abuse, harassment, and discrimination
- fitness to practise/study
- complaints
- admissions

What is the purpose of this report?

This report contains a thematic summary of a series of national events on the topic of compassionate communication. The events consisted of 5 roundtable discussions and an additional session with Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs)'s Tertiary Quality Student Expert Group. In total, QAA Scotland engaged with **218 attendees** from **39 institutions** (with representation from 20 colleges, 17 universities and 2 tertiary institutions). The participants came from a diverse and wide-ranging set of roles and responsibilities across professional services, academic departments and student representative roles.

At the roundtables, participants discussed 5 questions:

1. What does compassionate communication mean to you in your role?
2. What has worked well at your institution in relation to compassionate communication?
3. What are the challenges of embedding compassionate communication?
4. What resources related to compassionate communication could QAA Scotland create that would support you in your work?
5. What format(s) would you like these resources to take?

Discussions took part in small groups, facilitated by a member of QAA staff. Facilitators took notes and participants were also asked to contribute their thoughts to a Padlet. These have been thematically analysed to identify the common themes across discussions. No individuals or institutions have been identified in the report.

This report will summarise the key themes from the roundtables, with the intention of capturing what compassionate communication means to Scotland's tertiary sector, why it is important, and how it can be successfully embedded in our colleges and universities.

This report is part of a suite of resources on Compassionate Communication, housed on the QAA Scotland website.



Themes arising from the roundtables:

Delivering compassionate communication in practice

Clarity is an integral part of compassion.

Clarity is an essential component of compassionate communication. Communication needs to be honest and transparent, with clear, concise language which avoids ambiguity. There was broad consensus across the roundtables that clarity and compassion do not sit in opposition. Instead, a truly compassionate approach to communication ensures a student understands what decision has been made (and why) and what will happen next. Participants emphasised that this is particularly important when communicating processes and decisions related to complaints, Fitness to Practise processes, withdrawals, and academic misconduct cases.

Participants felt that compassionate communication is often misrepresented as involving an 'over-softening' of language. Instead, communications which are overly verbose or euphemistic can sometimes lead to false hope or misunderstanding, which in turn can cause further harm to the student. Discussions emphasised the need not to over-promise or over-commit to future options, as this can lead to subsequent disappointment when these are not possible. Any options presented to the student should be realistic and credible.

Staff in colleges and tertiary institutions are communicating with learners across a range of SCQF levels and language should be adapted accordingly to meet their needs. Across all institutions, students may have limited familiarity with the type of language used in further and higher education, which is often different to the wording they may be more familiar with from school or from the workplace. Students may also experience additional challenges navigating a new set of terminology if they articulate from college to university. As these students enter directly into year 2 or 3 of university, they sometimes miss the key messages shared with students in year 1 and can therefore find systems particularly confusing to navigate. There was broad consensus at the roundtables that staff should aim to use plain English and to reduce 'jargon' and overly technical or corporate language. This has benefits for all students but is particularly important when communicating with students for whom English is a Second or Other Language.

Discussion at the roundtables emphasised that compassionate communication does not mean avoiding difficult conversations – on the contrary, it is a necessary tool in order to convey challenging news successfully. Participants expressed a need to change perceptions of compassionate communication from a 'nice to have' to a 'need to have'.

When and how you communicate is as important as what you communicate.

Participants highlighted the importance of sending communications in a timely manner, as lengthy wait times can increase anxiety and, in some cases, allow existing issues to escalate. Staff should set clear expectations with students as to when they can expect a response, with timescales set which are proportionate to the issue being handled.

Discussions also underlined the need for students to have immediate access to support services at the time of receiving communications, particularly for correspondence which is conveying difficult news. Several institutions have established policies and practices which ask staff to send 'no bad news on Fridays', at the end of the working day, or ahead of extended holiday periods. Other participants shared incidences where students had received unsuccessful admissions decisions while in the middle of sitting exams. Participants noted that there is an additional challenge to ensuring students are receiving sensitive correspondence at appropriate times when staff are communicating with students in different time zones due to studying on transnational or online courses. To avoid contacting students with important communications in the middle of the night when there is no access to on-call support, participants recommended making use of the 'scheduled send' email function to delay communications until a more appropriate time.

Discussions at the roundtables highlighted the challenge of getting key messages across at the right time when the volume of communications students receive is so high. Students receive a significant number of emails, particularly at key times of the year such as induction and during assessment periods, and staff report being unsurprised that important messages are missed as a result. Some participants suggested the use of 'just in time' approaches, where staff are encouraged to send targeted communications at the time they are needed rather than overwhelming students with policies and processes they won't need until later in their student journey. Others recommended a staged approach to communications, where students are given initial advance warnings which are then followed up with escalating prompts and reminders to ensure that they are on track. Institutional leaders can support with the volume of communication by taking a strategic look across the institution as a whole and considering the totality of communications a student is receiving at any one time.

Although the majority of the roundtable conversations focused on written communication, participants noted the importance of considering the best method of communication for the circumstances. In some cases, a face-to-face meeting may be most appropriate, in order to ensure that the student has understood the situation and has immediate access to support following difficult news. Suggestions of practice included following up any in-person meetings with a written summary of the important points and next steps, to ensure that the student has not missed any key messages. Others recommended the use of phone calls ahead of sending a formal letter, to provide a more personal method of communication in which tone can be more easily conveyed than in writing. Where possible, staff recommended giving students a choice of how they would prefer to be contacted and adapting to their preferences.

Student diversity requires tailored communication.

Students and staff emphasised the increasing diversity of the student population, with an associated variety of communication needs. A 'one size fits all' approach to communication is therefore unhelpful and participants suggested that, where possible, staff should aim to offer choice and personalised approaches to interactions with students.

Groups which were most regularly identified as needing tailored communication approaches included:

- International students and Students with English as a Second or Other Language, who may experience language barriers and bring different cultural expectations to conversations.
- Neurodivergent students, who may have different communication preferences or accessible format requirements and an increased need for clarity.
- Students experiencing mental health challenges or in distress, who may struggle to process information while in crisis.
- Care-experienced students, who may have different support networks or need access to alternative arrangements.

In all of these cases, discussions emphasised that the individuals who are part of these groups are not homogenous and communications should be tailored to the specific individual as much as possible, without making assumptions about their needs. Asking a student what they require as early as possible is the best approach to ensuring they are communicated with in a way that suits them and their needs. Participants also suggested that all members of an institution's community should be aware of unconscious bias and be willing to explore and challenge their own and each other's assumptions about a student due to their background or characteristics.

Staff noted that they are working with an increasing number of students with complex mental health difficulties and additional support needs. In some cases, staff felt underprepared to manage these conversations and expressed a desire for more training in how best to support students in distress. Discussions at the roundtables also focused on the challenge of supporting students who have chosen not to disclose a disability or additional need until they reach a crisis stage. Some students may choose not to disclose because of a fear of stigma or discrimination. Participants emphasised the importance of communicating with students as early as possible in their learner journey (and ideally pre-induction) to encourage them to disclose any additional needs as soon as possible and to highlight the benefits of doing so. Students can also experience frustration when the information they provide at school does not automatically transfer with them to college or university and they have to 'start again' in terms of establishing a support package which meets their needs.

Examples of compassionate approaches to communication for a diverse student body included providing student choice, offering a range of communication mechanisms (e.g. emails, in-person meetings, phone calls), regularly reviewing existing processes through an accessibility lens, and providing students with named advocates who can provide additional support throughout processes.

Ongoing support and signposting should be built into compassionate approaches to communication.

Participants recommended the use of clear signposting to additional support services, particularly when delivering difficult news. This may include an institution's own wellbeing, academic, advisory and careers services, as well as external support. Participants also highlighted the need for all students to be made aware of out-of-hours and crisis support available to them, in the event of an incident which is too urgent to leave until the next day. This is often a phone number which students, or a friend or family member supporting them, can access 24/7.

Where a student needs to contact an alternative member of staff, signposting needs to be handled carefully to ensure a student doesn't feel that they are simply being 'passed on' to somebody else or dismissed, particularly if this has happened repeatedly and a student's query has already been transferred through a number of teams. Participants suggested that this can be partly alleviated in in-person interactions by accompanying the student to the right person or service, introducing them, and ensuring that they are now with the person best placed to help them.

Participants recommended the use of phone or video calls and in-person meetings before and after important written communication, in order to provide opportunities for the student to ask questions and to ensure the student is with someone when difficult news is shared. Staff reported success with adopting a 'team around the student' approach, where several staff members are involved in ensuring wrap around support for the student from across academic and professional services roles. This joined-up approach means that students do not have to share their story repeatedly to new people, which may be especially challenging for the student when their circumstances are personal or distressing.

A related recommendation shared at the roundtables was to update mitigating circumstances policies to include an option to record 'enduring and recurring' circumstances. This means that students with ongoing circumstances that have a continuing impact on their academic experience, such as a long-term disability, do not have to communicate the same information repeatedly for every assessment.

Discussions at the roundtables noted that joined-up approaches may sometimes be required between teams where this need may not be immediately obvious. For example, student immigration teams may be communicating with a student about engagement issues affecting their visa conditions, but some of these engagement issues may be due to health and wellbeing concerns of which student support teams are already aware. Linking up teams at an early stage allows for proactive interventions before situations escalate or reach crisis stage.

Other examples of early intervention included regular wellbeing-check ins; 'long and thin' induction models, the strategic use of attendance monitoring to send communications to students who have missed class or have low attendance; and undertaking early outreach when initial concerns arise. Participants also recommended giving prior warning to student wellbeing teams before a student is given high-impact news, in order to ensure that they know support will likely be needed and are ready and prepared to offer this in a timely manner.

Discussions at the roundtable highlighted that students who have gone through a termination of studies can find themselves in a particularly vulnerable situation, as their access to institutional support ceases (sometimes with near immediate effect) due to their change of student status. Participants recommended the inclusion of signposting to additional support in termination of studies letters and working with institutional policy and student support teams to build in some flexibility into the access students get to services in these circumstances. Some participants shared related existing practice in cases where students are on interruptions of study. Institutional policies were changed to ensure that these students had access to key services such as Counselling, Disability Services and the Students' Association while their studies were paused.

Institutions need to demonstrate person-centred, trauma-informed and psychologically safe approaches to communication.

One of the most common themes from the roundtables was that compassionate communication starts with recognising the student as an individual rather than simply a case, process or problem. There was a strong emphasis on recognising that staff do not know everything going on in a student's life and any communication should account for this uncertainty. Participants also frequently talked about the need for empathy and 'putting yourself in the student's shoes' to consider the situation from their perspective. Students' lived experiences need to be respected and all students, regardless of their circumstances, should be treated with dignity and humanity.

Participants referred to the importance of 'trauma-informed' practice and approaching communication through this lens. Compassionate communication should recognise that a student's behaviour, engagement and responses may be shaped by previous trauma, adverse life experiences and ongoing complex personal circumstances. This theme was particularly prevalent among college participants, many of whom spoke highly of College Development Network (CDN)'s training on the Trauma Informed College. This training has now been incorporated into CDN's updated programme on The Changing Learner, which enables the creation of a positive, supportive, and inclusive learning environment for all students. In some institutions, training and resources on trauma-informed practice are being rolled out to all student-facing staff, in order to aim for a whole-institution understanding of the impact of trauma.

Staff and students highlighted several behaviours and examples of practice connected to person-centred and trauma-informed practice which can contribute towards a culture of compassionate communication. Staff should be non-judgmental and avoid making assumptions about a student's circumstances. Communications should build trust with the student by being transparent about next steps and, crucially, following through on promises and doing what you will say you will do. Institutions should aim for a joined-up approach to supporting the student which avoids them having to repeat their circumstances over and over again, leaving them open to re-traumatisation. 'Aftercare communications' should be built into any process, with opportunities to check in with the student following significant correspondence.

Where possible, staff should give the student choice as to their next steps and empower them in decision-making. Discussion at the roundtables highlighted the particular importance of this when a student is reporting gender-based violence. In these cases, participants emphasised the need to restore a sense of autonomy to the student, in order to give them back some control at a time when this may have been taken away from them. Participants also emphasised the need for students who have experienced gender-based violence to feel that they have been listened to, believed and validated.

Discussion also highlighted the importance of the physical environment in creating a psychologically safe space. Some formal processes, such as conduct hearings, may traditionally take place in spaces usually not open to students and sometimes these rooms can be configured in a way that is particularly intimidating to students. These environments can add to a student's anxiety and distress in psychologically challenging situations. Students who have previously been part of legal proceedings or children's hearing panels may be particularly affected by formal meetings organised in a way which feels similar to these processes, with a large group of staff on one side of the table and the student on the other.

Participants recommended that staff should consider which locations are most appropriate for having difficult conversations (e.g. a quiet space which is ideally familiar to the student). Some institutions have established non-bookable rooms which can be used in the case of emergencies and to have particularly sensitive conversations, but the availability of these rooms can be difficult to protect when space is an increasingly scarce resource. When a student prefers an online meeting so they can join from their own home, this should be supported if possible (while also being aware of what support the student may have around them when difficult news is being shared and considering whether it may be better to meet in-person so the student is not alone).



Themes arising from the roundtables:

Relationships and partnerships

Relationships and dialogue are central to compassion.

Discussions repeatedly emphasised the importance of relationships in establishing and maintaining a foundation for compassionate communication. Participants recommended that each student should be allocated a named person to contact. A range of examples of roles from across the institution were offered, including personal tutors, members of student support teams, and course directors. Ideally, a student would be given a named contact at the beginning of their time at the institution, and this individual would remain consistent across the full duration of their studies. It was recognised that this is not always possible in practice, but that should not stop institutions from aiming for it as best practice.

When students receive communication from someone familiar to them, they are more likely to trust that the individual has their best interests at heart and be willing to share personal information with them. Where possible, participants suggested that challenging news should be communicated to a student by someone who already knows them and has the best idea of their needs. Discussion at the roundtables highlighted that a student often has a relationship with their School or Department, but communications related to key processes are often sent from a central department such as Registry. Correspondence is therefore likely to come from someone with whom they are unfamiliar and with whom they don't have an existing relationship. Participants suggested copying in the student's personal tutor or course director so that they are aware of any ongoing situations and so that the student feels confident that someone who already knows them and their circumstances is involved in their case.

Discussions at the roundtables did nevertheless highlight that, although individual relationships are beneficial to establishing effective student communications, it is important not to inadvertently create single points of failure. In some cases, staff observed that specific members of staff were making a significant positive impact on the student experience, but there was a risk that the system was too dependent on them.

Participants emphasised the importance of regular and proactive contact from a staff member throughout the year. This builds in regular check-ins to ideally identify issues before they reach crisis point and means that the pressure and responsibility isn't solely on the student to make contact. There was recognition that this type of contact is increasingly challenging to facilitate in the context of rising staff-to-student ratios and ever-growing expectations on both academic and professional services staff. However, participants emphasised that building these relationships between students and staff was one of the most important underpinning activities to the facilitating of effective compassionate communication.

As part of relationship building, participants emphasised the importance of dialogue and two-way communication when engaging compassionately. Staff should communicate with students, not at them, ensuring that they are actively listening and seeking to learn from the student as much as to convey a key message. If students feel known, heard, and understood by a staff member, they are more likely to communicate themselves in a way that is conducive to achieving a positive outcome.

Co-creating communications with students is an effective way to make your messaging more compassionate.

A key theme across the roundtables was the value of working in partnership with students to shape communications. Benefits of this approach shared by participants included improved tone and accessibility; the use of clearer and more student-friendly language; a greater understanding of diverse student needs at the design-stage of creating communications; and greater consistency across departments. Participants also identified that communication co-developed with students led to increased trust from the wider student body.

Across the roundtables, a wide range of institutional practices were shared, including the use of student review panels where staff can submit existing communications for review; working in partnership with the Students' Association to co-design communication templates on key processes together; and rewriting policies and procedures using student feedback. Types of communications developed with students were far-ranging and included those related to academic misconduct, student conduct, appeals, onboarding systems and complaints. Staff and students emphasised that engagement should be meaningful rather than tokenistic, with the most successful practice often involving students co-creating communications alongside staff.

Participants highlighted the need to appropriately reward and recognise students for their engagement in this work and to ensure that participants are representative of the diversity of the student population. Discussions at the roundtable suggested that the students most likely to be negatively impacted by poor communications are the least likely to engage in partnership opportunities. This is because the same barriers which these students are facing in accessing education are likely to also be barriers to their engagement in extra-curricular roles and engagement opportunities outside the classroom. Partnership activities therefore need to be designed to be accessible to as wide a breadth of students as possible, with due consideration made to timing, location, cost and mode of engagement. In some cases, institutions may want to specifically target student demographics which engage in their processes most frequently or have particular service needs, to ensure that these students are key partners in the decisions that directly affect them.

Discussion at the roundtables also focused on the benefits of writing up a student's own case notes with them. Collaborating with a student to ensure that the language used in relation to a situation is what they want documented gives power back to the student and makes the process as a whole more transparent. It also allows the staff member to check their own understanding of the student's report for accuracy and reduces the chance that a student will later feel they have been misrepresented or misquoted.

Institutions need to provide support and guidance for parents, carers and third-party advocates.

Participants highlighted that parents, carers and other such third parties are an increasingly important part of students' support systems, but that their involvement can create challenges in terms of communication.

Parents and carers need clear expectations to be set from the beginning as to how they will be involved in their child's case. Parents and carers may have expectations of being involved in their child's circumstances in a similar way to how they may have been involved at school. In reality, the institution will treat the student as an independent adult and family members do not have a legal right to information about a student. Institutions need to have consent from the student before discussing matters with them, and to abide by data protection and confidentiality processes. This can cause tension when a parent or carer feels that the institution is being intentionally obstructive in withholding information from them.

Understandably, many parents expect to be notified when their child's welfare is at risk. Some institutions have put in place agreements with students which allow them to notify a pre-identified contact when they have a significant concern about their welfare. In the majority of cases, it is the choice of the student themselves as to whether they want a family member to be informed and involved in their situation and it is important that students are aware of their right to make this choice.

In some situations, parents may not have all of the information about a case. In highly sensitive cases related to student conduct matters or appeals, this can cause some parents to express anger or frustration with the institution based on the information that they currently hold and the perception that the institution has not been supportive to the student. Participants expressed the challenge of receiving negative communication from a student's family members while being unable to clarify the details of the situation due to the need for confidentiality outlined above. This can have a significant impact on staff mental health and wellbeing. In the roundtables, staff members shared the development of 'etiquette guides' for individuals who are accompanying students to meetings, aimed at setting expectations of all parties to behave compassionately and appropriately.

There was a consensus at the roundtables that institutions need to more effectively explain to parents and carers why certain information cannot be shared with them. Staff also emphasised the need to exercise compassion not just towards students but also towards parents, carers and family members. Parents and carers may likely themselves be feeling anxious and distressed about their child's situation and some may be unfamiliar with college or university processes and procedures. Staff need to listen respectfully to parents, remain empathetic, and, where the student has given permission, explain clearly why decisions have been made.

Communication with external parties also includes engagement with employers. In cases related to apprentices and students on placement, institutional staff may be corresponding with staff at the student's place of work. As with parents and carers, some employers may be less familiar with institutional processes, and it is important that staff avoid unfamiliar acronyms and language.

Participants spoke about the addition of third-party support for students in meetings and the benefits that this can bring to the student. Good practice shared at the roundtables included informing students that they can bring a support person to a meeting, such as a friend, family member, social worker, or Students' Association advocate. It is important that students know they can choose who this person is and that they are given the autonomy to identify the person who is best for them.

It is important for staff to recognise that some students may not have parental support and not to assume that all students have family members who can help them navigate processes. Care-experienced students, estranged students and unaccompanied asylum seekers were all highlighted as groups of students who may benefit from additional advocacy in meetings and may need support from the institution to identify a third party who can be with them. Participants highlighted potential equity issues when dealing with issues involving more than one student, such as misconduct cases brought by one student against another, where one party has a parent advocating on their behalf while another does not. These power differentials should be recognised and, where possible, mitigated against through the practices suggested above.



Themes arising from the roundtables:

Building organisational capacity and capability

Compassion needs to be part of an institution-wide approach, embedded in culture, systems and strategy.

Across the roundtables, participants expressed concern that compassionate communication can be seen as a 'nice to have' rather than a fundamental and necessary part of an institution's strategy. Compassion cannot just be an individual commitment. Instead, participants emphasised the need for institutions to embed a 'culture of compassion' across the whole organisation, with an institution-wide commitment created, articulated and modelled by senior leaders.

Some staff spoke about the challenge of embedding compassion in the face of entrenched attitudes or perceptions from other staff that compassion involves overindulging students or sheltering them from the 'real world'. It is important that institutions explain to all staff why compassionate communication is necessary and set clear expectations of all members of the community. This includes the way in which staff communicate with one other and the way in which students communicate with staff and with other students. Every staff member is responsible for student wellbeing and holds a duty of care.

A recurring theme at the roundtables was the need for compassionate systems which underpin communications. Participants observed that we can be as compassionate as possible in communications, but if the systems, policies and processes are not in themselves compassionate then the exercise is futile.

Many participants emphasised the challenge of maintaining consistency in communications across an institution. This can lead to inconsistent signposting and advice, students receiving conflicting messages, and, ultimately, to a loss of trust. The challenge of maintaining consistency can be particularly difficult in large, decentralised institutions and in institutions with multiple campuses, particularly those with a wide geographic spread across Scotland, the UK or internationally.

Suggestions of effective practice in this area included adopting a shared definition or principles for compassionate communication which are understood institution-wide; producing institution-wide templates for key types of communication; creating guidance and policy documents which are embedded in staff training programmes; and establishing a cross-institutional working group on compassionate communication. Participants also emphasised the need to balance consistency with adopting a personalised approach to support and treating students as individuals with their own communication needs and preferences [see above].

The challenges of capacity, workload, resource and scale form barriers to compassion.

Capacity and workload pressures were one of the most frequently mentioned challenges across the roundtables. Staff highlighted the significant increase in student numbers and the growing complexity of student needs over the past few years, without a proportionate increase in staffing. As a result, staff are handling an increased volume of enquiries, and it is not always possible to provide the desired level of compassion and personalisation. Compassionate communication takes time to get right, but staff feel they do not always have sufficient resources to effectively deliver it while responding efficiently. Participants observed that the larger the system gets, the easier it is for empathy to get 'diluted' by speed, stress and competing priorities. The challenge of communicating at scale also impacts the opportunity to meet students face-to-face, which may be more suitable for some communications.

Some staff shared the need to adopt more automated messaging systems and send more bulk emails in order to respond to the size of their workload. This forces communications to be more generic and makes it harder for staff to develop and maintain individual relationships with students. Participants largely spoke positively about the use of pre-written template communications for routine processes, which allowed them to work more efficiently at scale. However, staff emphasised the need for sufficient time to modify these to each individual student, rather than relying solely on pre-existing wording which may not capture the nuance of a situation.

Staff development and training is necessary – compassion is a skill.

Participants highlighted that compassionate communication is a skill and to do it effectively requires training. Specialist skills are required for frontline roles, but there was broad consensus that it would be helpful for all staff to have access to some level of training or resources.

Many participants observed that, although their roles involved highly sensitive discussions and managing difficult conversations, often their skills had been gained through time and experience rather than through specific, tailored training. Those in frontline roles reflected that they would have particularly appreciated training when new in post, when they couldn't yet rely on the expertise they would go on to develop throughout their subsequent careers. Many participants spoke positively about the importance of peer learning and support, often asking their colleagues to 'sense-check' draft communications and confirm that they have set the right tone.

A theme repeated across all the roundtables was the need to increase staff confidence. Participants observed that their colleagues sometimes lacked the confidence in having difficult conversations, establishing boundaries, and deciding on the most appropriate language. Staff expressed concerns about 'saying the wrong thing' and inadvertently making a situation worse, as well as how to most effectively balance empathy and professionalism.

Discussions at the roundtables noted that the staff population is as diverse as the student body, and just as students have a range of approaches and needs related to communication, so do our staff.

Participants identified several examples of training that would be useful in enhancing staff and students' abilities to communicate compassionately. Those who had already completed such training reported that it had been beneficial. Recommended training topics included:

- developing an understanding of what compassionate communication means (and what it doesn't mean)
- managing difficult conversations
- complaint handling
- active listening
- trauma-informed practice
- mental health
- neurodiversity
- managing boundaries
- safeguarding.

Participants pointed to a range of existing training opportunities which have been helpful in their roles, including Mental Health First Aid training and College Development Network's Trauma Informed College training.

We need compassion for staff as well as students.

The focus of the majority of the discussions at the roundtable events was unsurprisingly on the use of compassion by staff to students. However, there was also frequent mention of the importance of compassion for staff, both from students and from fellow staff members.

Staff highlighted the ongoing emotional impact of liaising with students on topics which can be distressing and upsetting, as well as on being the frontline member of staff who has to deliver 'bad news' to a student. Some staff members shared their experience of subsequent burnout and 'compassion fatigue'. Participants emphasised the need to maintain clear and firm boundaries with students, in part to ensure that they can protect their own wellbeing.

At the roundtables, some staff shared their experience of receiving confrontational or aggressive communication from students, as well as, in some cases, those supporting them, such as parents or carers. More support was requested to handle these situations and participants particularly emphasised the importance of feeling the institution was providing visible support and offering additional assistance to staff in distressing situations.

Some discussion also focused on communication between staff members. Participants emphasised the need for staff to model compassionate behaviour to students by ensuring that communication between colleagues is also kind, respectful and person-centred. In many cases, staff spoke positively about the peer support they receive from other staff members, particularly when navigating challenging cases. This may include practical support, such as sense-checking draft communications, as well as offering a space to listen when a staff member is handling a distressing situation. Participants also identified as helpful practice the proactive scheduling of support meetings for staff handling challenging cases, so that this support is built in from as early as possible rather than retrospectively.

Participants highlighted the link between staff wellbeing and staff capacity. Staff need to be given sufficient time to handle casework, particularly when the subject matter is complex and emotionally challenging. Participants also emphasised the importance of self-compassion and ensuring staff are given enough time to decompress and reflect on a situation before immediately taking on something new. This builds resilience and individual capacity so that staff can maintain a high level of compassion over time.



Themes arising from the roundtables:

Navigating external influences

There is a tension between compliance and compassion.

A theme expressed frequently across the roundtables was the challenge of remaining compassionate while also complying with the requirements of institutions, professional bodies, and government processes. Examples included the need to comply with existing academic regulations and disciplinary processes; awarding body requirements; UK Visas and Immigration requirements; data protection and GDPR obligations; Fitness to Practise requirements; and funding body regulations. Participants described the challenge of communicating with students in situations where specific wording is mandatory or legally required and this wording is perceived by some students as cold, unsupportive or hostile.

Some staff have introduced in-person meetings with students ahead of sending written communications, in order to explain outcomes in a more personalised way and to offer a chance to ask questions face to face. Others have added supplementary wording before and after the mandatory text they are required to send, in order to add warmth and a more individualised touch to correspondence.

Participants suggested that sector bodies and regulators could also learn from the work on compassionate communication currently being undertaken by institutions. Sometimes institutions perceive the practices of external bodies as fixed and unchangeable, but many participants felt that, just as the culture of compassion is being embedded into our colleges and universities, this cultural shift can also transfer to national bodies, regulators and government departments.

There are both opportunities and risks to using technology and AI in communication.

The use of technology came up frequently in conversations. There were a range of views expressed regarding the use of technology and, in particular, AI in communications with students. Examples of practice included prompting AI to review draft communications to improve tone, clarity and accessibility; working collaboratively with AI to draft communication templates; and the use of chatbots to provide 24/7 support for students on regular queries. Participants also described using a range of digital platforms to communicate with students, including the use of Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp and social media sites. Others shared the practice of using automated emails and push notifications from apps to update students on key messages or to provide regular check-ins to students who may have been identified as requiring additional support. Staff observed that many students are using emails less than in previous cohorts and it is therefore more important than ever to consider a range of tools and technologies in order to ensure students are receiving key messages.

For those using technology regularly, the benefits participants reported included being able to respond more efficiently to a greater number of students and the opportunity to have a 'second pair of eyes' on communications. Some staff had specifically prompted AI to make their communication more compassionate, warm or supportive. Nevertheless, a general consensus across the roundtables was that AI should be used as a tool to support staff in their roles rather than to replace human relationships. Many staff who used AI did so in more standardised cases and preferred to run more complicated and sensitive communications past a fellow human.

Participants also shared their concerns about the over-reliance on AI and automation. Some felt that AI-generated communications can lack empathy and authenticity and fail to understand the wider context of a student's life. Automated messages can feel impersonal and some staff reported that students were receiving contradictory messages from different sources due to the lack of human oversight. Where institutions are using automated messages to respond to students at scale, this risks losing the personal touch and may mean that students are less likely to reach out to individuals for help when they most need it.

Participants raised the emerging challenge of AI-generated student communication, particularly in complaints and appeals. The knock-on effect of this is significant, with correspondence becoming longer, increasingly legalistic, and students responding to emails in minutes rather than in the hours or days it would have taken previously. In some cases, students are sending communications that include incorrect information or that may refer to laws or regulations not applicable in their jurisdiction. For example, participants reported receiving AI-generated communications from students that referred to English law rather than Scots law. Staff observed that students using AI in their communications often expected responses in unrealistic timeframes that matched the speed of their own communications and that the use of semi-legal language was leading to institutions needing to respond in kind, moving the communication away from compassion and towards a more bureaucratic and formal tone.



Looking forward

During the roundtable events, participants were asked to identify the types of sector resources they would like QAA Scotland to develop to support colleges and universities to embed compassionate communication in their institution. Following the roundtables, QAA Scotland established the Compassionate Communication Advisory Group, comprised of staff and students from Scotland's tertiary sector. Over summer 2026, QAA Scotland worked with the advisory group to identify and begin development on this set of resources, based on the steer given by attendees of the roundtables. This collaborative process was undertaken to ensure that the resources QAA Scotland creates as part of this work reflect the needs of students and staff in Scotland's tertiary institutions.

From October 2026 onwards, resources will be published on the QAA Scotland website across the 2026/27 academic year.

The full list of outputs is as follows:

Resource	Publication date
Suite of case studies, sharing current examples of practice from across Scotland's tertiary sector.	October 2026
"Before and After" examples of communication, illustrating compassionate communication in practice.	October 2026
Report on Compassionate Communication in Scotland's Tertiary Sector, giving an overview of themes from a series of national roundtable events.	October 2026
Executive Briefing, sent to senior leaders in Scotland's colleges and universities in order to outline their role in embedding compassionate communication at a strategic institutional level.	October 2026
In-person sector event on 7th October 2026, which will launch the first set of resources, provide an opportunity to hear existing practice from across Scotland's colleges and universities, and shape the ongoing development of future sector outputs.	October 2026
'Top Tips' poster, designed live by an illustrator at the in-person sector event in collaboration with attendees.	Winter 2026
Annotated templates of key institutional communications.	Winter 2026
Student Co-Creation Toolkit, to support staff to work in partnership with students to develop communications.	Spring 2027
Customisable training materials on compassionate communication and accompanying train the trainer programme.	Summer 2027

There is no one way to approach compassionate communication and institutions will want to adopt strategies that best suit their own contexts. Many colleges and universities already demonstrate innovative and effective practice in this area, and this project is intended to support continuous enhancement by building on this already strong foundation.

All institutions are encouraged to take an opportunity to reflect honestly and constructively on their approach to communication across all stages of the learner journey. Creating spaces for genuine dialogue with staff and students can help identify what is working well and what can be improved. The themes in this report may provide useful prompts for these conversations, alongside the tools included in the accompanying suite of resources.

QAA Scotland would like to thank the participants who took part in the sector roundtable events and attended sparqs' Tertiary Quality Student Expert Group.

As this report highlights, these individuals are undertaking some of the most challenging and sensitive conversations taking place within our institutions, and we are grateful for the time they have taken away from their day-to-day work and studies to share their perspectives with us. Across the roundtables, the student-centred approach that staff across Scotland's tertiary sector take to their roles was evident, along with the care and kindness which motivates their approach to communicating with students and staff and to ensuring the student experience is as positive as possible for all.

QAA Scotland would also like to thank members of the Compassionate Communication Advisory Group for their engagement in this project.

The group has been instrumental in ensuring that this project is delivered in partnership with staff and students working and studying in Scotland's colleges and universities and that the outputs reflect the needs and preferences of those that the work is designed to support.

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