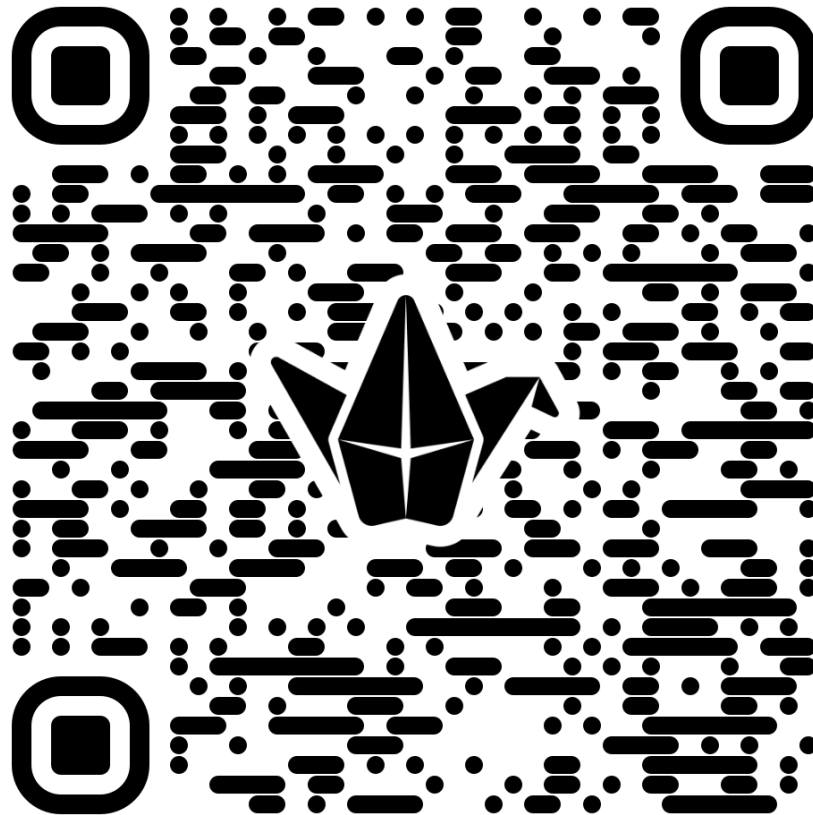


Compassionate Assessment

Dr. Neil Carrant, Assessment lead (University of Bedfordshire)
with thanks to Liz Bunting (University of the Arts London), Vikki Hill (Queen Margaret University), & the Academic Enhancement Team at UAL.

Aberystwyth University July 2025

- What is your interest in compassionate assessment?
- What are you hoping to learn about this morning?
- Padlet:





Provocation

HE assessment is broken.

Compassion as a lens to
address assessment
challenges.

Questions

Who thinks assessment policy is problematic?

Who is struggling with assessment design?

Who thinks assessment is broken?

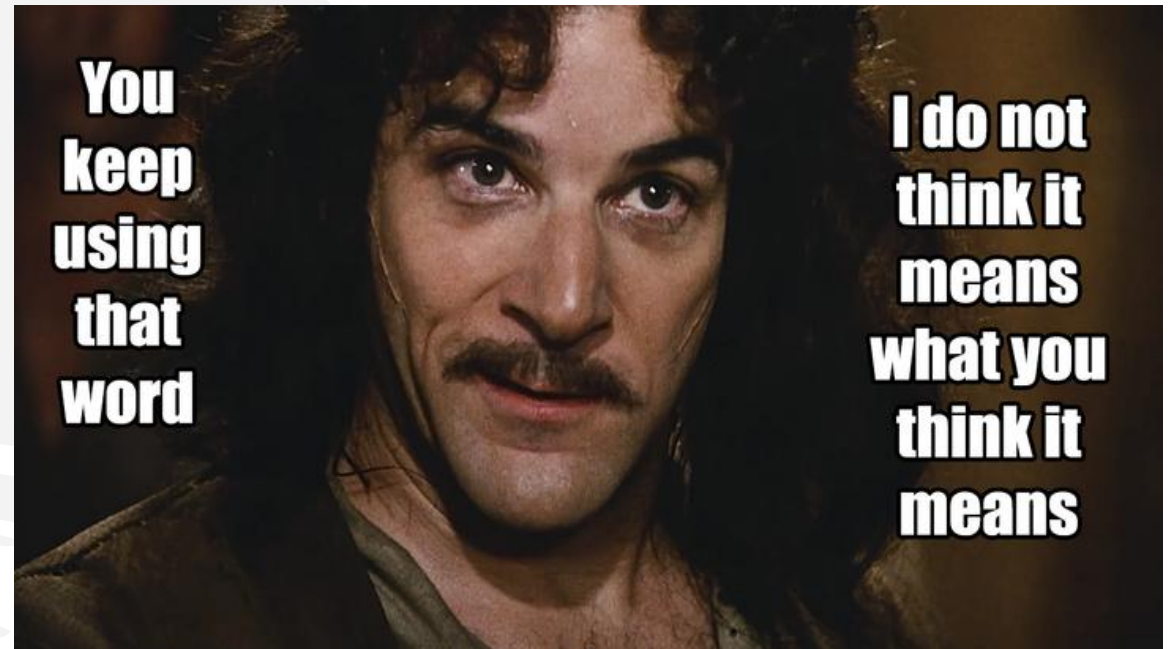
Isn't that just making sure students aren't crying at the end of exams?

Why are we now framing such approaches as 'compassionate' rather than using terms such as 'inclusive' or 'equitable'?



What is compassion?

- <https://tinyurl.com/yhszc75ch1ng40g90sf5>





What is compassion?

- Two components:
 - Sensitivity to / awareness of suffering in self and others. (motivated attention)
 - Commitment to alleviate or prevent. (motivated action) (Gilbert et al 2017)
- It is not: kindness, care, sympathy, empathy alone, although they may all be elements of compassion.
- Compassion is Relational.




Some examples from our data about the impact of grading: Stress & Anxiety

I've experienced a grading system during my foundation, and I was a lot more stressed out and tired than what I'm right now (pass/fail only). I understand the necessity of being graded, but just I have to put so much attention into the grading system.

*And **I don't really feel like I'm enjoying the process** of creating things. I'm **really nervous** to go back to the grading system.*

Authentic Self



Because you know like there's two paths that you can pick, there's a path where you know you'll get a good grade, and then there's a path you know is right for you but you're not sure how that person (tutor) will perceive that.

constant surveillance and performance...marking as
a mode of surveillance...the good grade rests on
repeating hegemonic knowledge

Rethinking assessment? Research into the affective impact of higher education grading

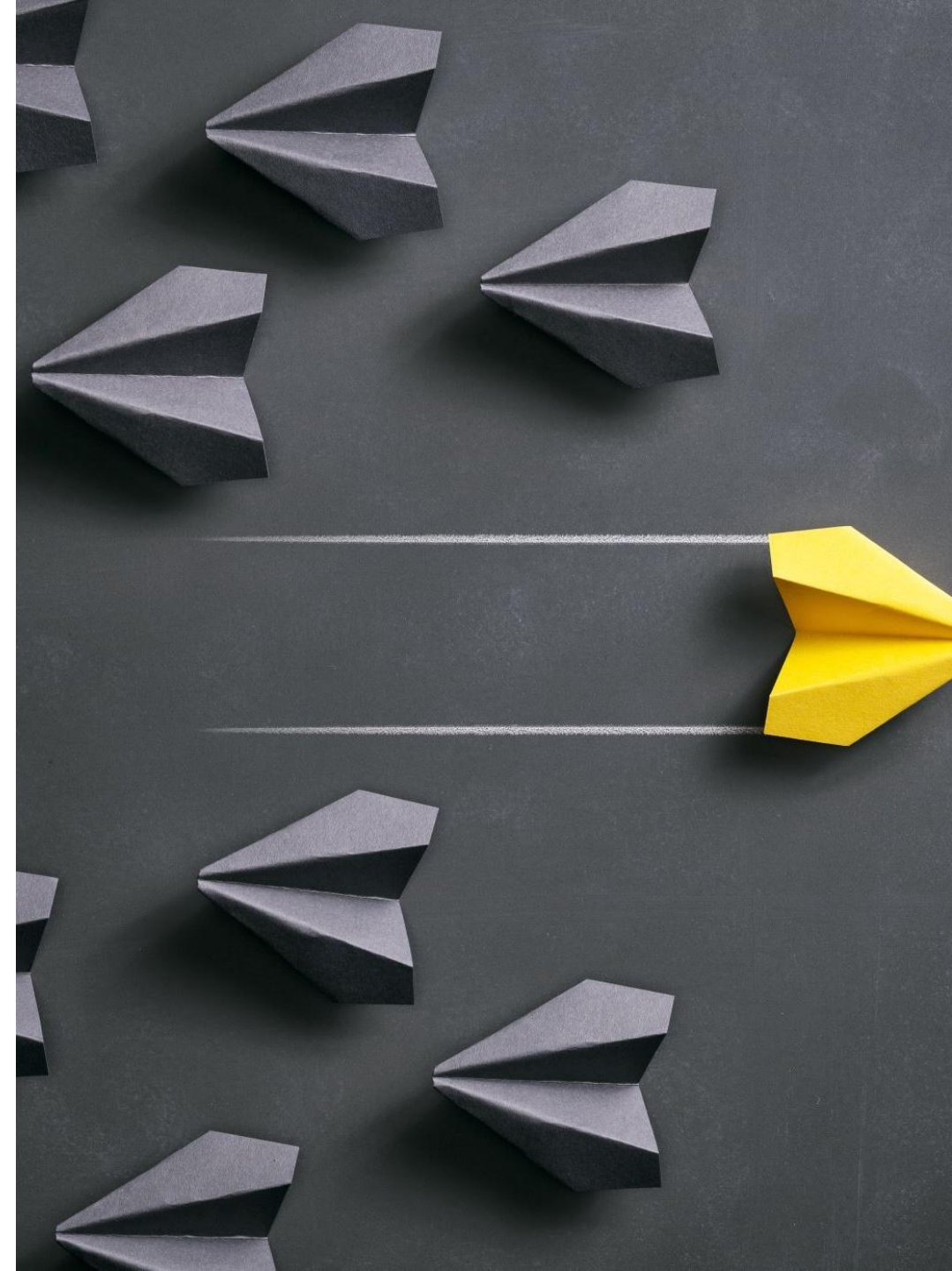
Neil Carrant, Liz Bunting, Vikki Hill and Emily Salines (2024)

Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching in HE

Grades impact on:

1. Stress and anxiety
2. Learner identity and motivation
3. Self-expression and creativity
4. Peer relationships

[Article](#)



4 Challenges

Inclusion

Wellbeing

Gen AI

Community

Challenge 1: Inclusion

almost half of disabled students who responded to our survey still report having received a lower mark on their course due to an assessment being inaccessible to them.

(Disabled Students UK 2024)

Challenge 1: inclusion

Increasing numbers of students declaring a disability.

Disability still understood as a technical problem within a person (e.g. Goodley, 2024) rather than a systemic issue that we can support through assessment.

Some still fear that inclusive practices lower standards or offer minoritized students an unfair advantage (e.g. Ramdas et al., 2025).

Too much focus on accommodations rather than inclusion.

A lack of choice and flexibility in assessment.

Kneejerk reaction to Gen AI is often to be less inclusive, e.g. more exams / vivas / presentations.

Challenge 2: Wellbeing

Rising mental health difficulties for students: 6-fold increase in students reporting MH issues to university in last decade. (Lewis & Stiebahl 2025)

27% of students diagnosed with MH condition (Student Minds 2022) / 21.6% of home students (HESA 23/24)

The role of academic pressure (especially related to assessment) in student suicides.

Challenge 3: Gen AI



The challenge of assessment type.

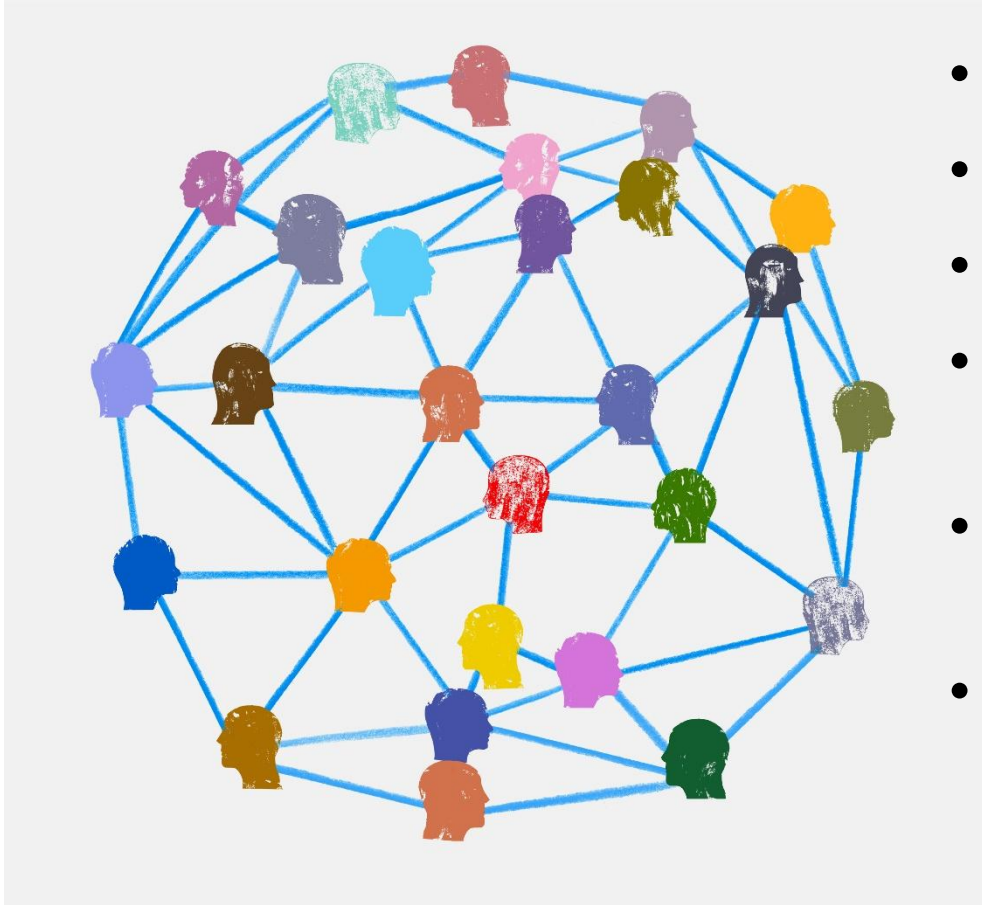


What is ethical and acceptable use of Gen AI? (e.g. Russell group principles)



Putative / cheating v. education / honesty

Some AI use data (Oct 24, n=8028)



- 83% using AI in their studies.
- Why? 85% - make things easier and faster.
- 91% worried about breaking rules.
- 40% used AI when not supposed to.
- 32% felt they were given enough guidance in using AI for study.
- Students want **certainty, guidance and transparency**
- Students understand and appreciate that GenAI cannot replace the human collaboration and compassion they value as part of their university experience. They also value empathy in decision-making.

<https://aiinhe.org/>

responsibility
honesty

trust **forgiveness**
responsiveness

Challenge 4: Human connection & Community

McArthur (2018)

Challenge 4: Human connection & Community

Alienation (Jessop
2024):

- Powerlessness.
- Meaninglessness.
- Normlessness.
- Social Isolation.
- Self-estrangement

Alienating
assessment patterns:

- Disproportionate summative assessment
- Insufficient formative assessment.
- Prevalence of closed book exams.
- Random varieties of assessment.

Current
assessment
practices,
processes and
policies are
broken.

How can we fix assessment to
be more...

- **Fun**
- **Motivating:** Support intrinsic motivation, deep learning and engagement.
- **Creative:** Tap into student creativity, inspiration and self-expression.
- **Relevant:** more meaningful and authentic to the student and their future aspirations.

Where does compassionate assessment come in?

- Not as another assessment agenda but...
- As an approach to assessment or a set of assessment values that addresses many existing agendas and challenges.

“Compassionate assessment considers the inclusivity of assessments, the impact of assessment on different students and how overall assessment demands can impact student success. Central to a compassionate approach to assessment and feedback is human relationships. Creating a sense of community, belonging and trust between students and between staff and students is important. This community and trust creates greater opportunities for effective formative feedback, peer and self-assessment.”
Bedfordshire’s Assessment ethos and values

Assessment agendas in HE link to compassion

- Compassionate assessment is inclusive.
- Compassionate assessment is equitable, e.g. addresses awarding gaps.
- Compassionate assessment is authentic.
- Compassionate assessment supports student wellbeing.
- Compassionate assessment supports belonging.





Solution: Compassionate feedback

- Feedback for assessment should be a two-way conversation and process recognising affect, and the relational and dialogical ‘done with’ rather than ‘done to’.
- <https://belongingthroughassessment.myblog.arts.ac.uk/feedback/> & <https://belongingthroughassessment.myblog.arts.ac.uk/resources/>



More Practice

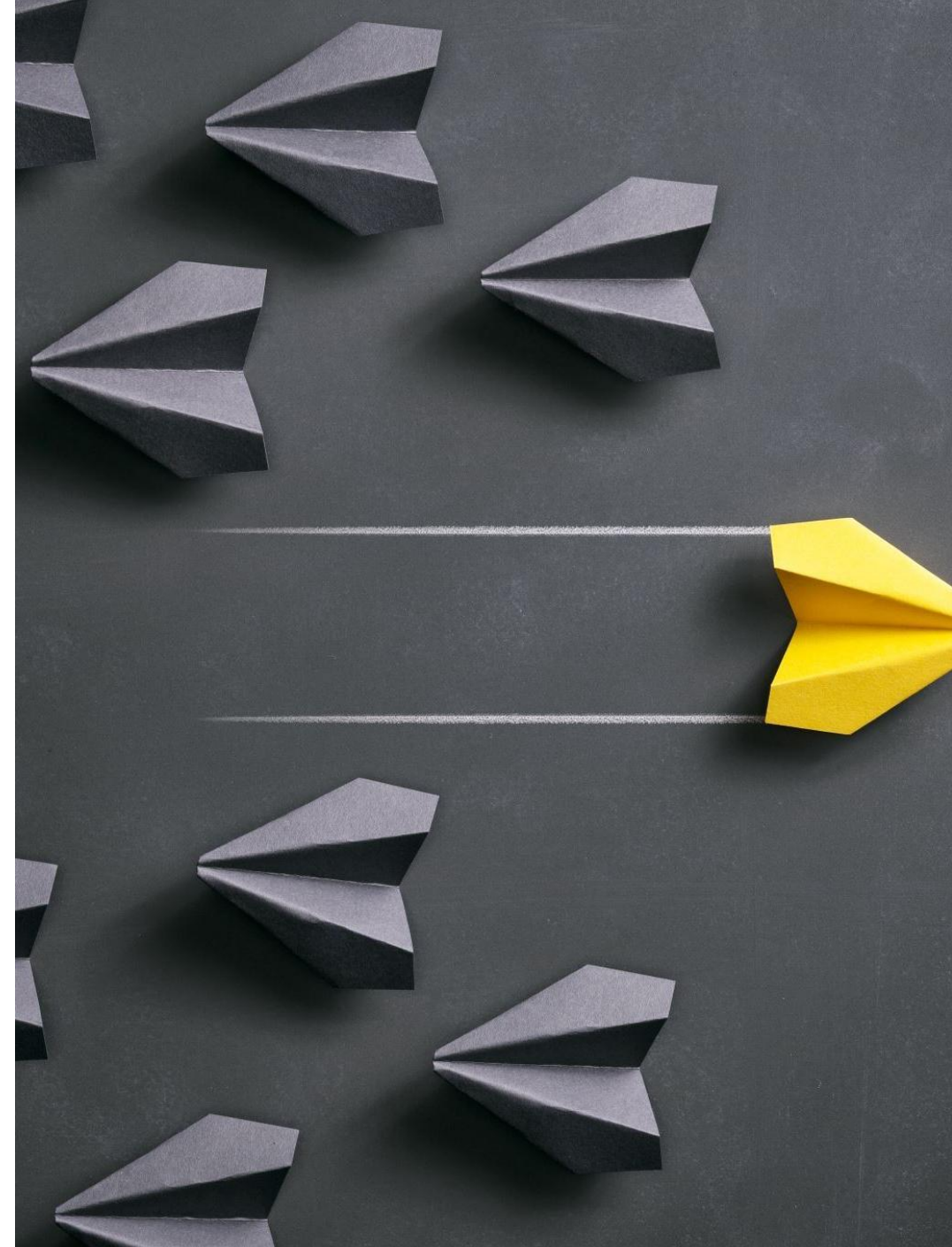
- Explaining the processes of grading, moderation and feedback
 - Talk about the process to reassure students of the robustness and fairness.
 - Feedback literacy (e.g. Winstone and Carless 2020).
 - Developing internal feedback (Nicol and McCallum 2021).
- Assessment choice ...as long as we are open to unexpected outputs...and learning outcomes and rubrics don't get in the way! (e.g. Hussey and Smith 2002)

Policy: Fairness as procedure

“get the right procedures in place and we can be assured that our assessment practices are fair. Such thinking underpins many of the taken-for-granted assessment practices that are still common today: ... students should be assessed in the same way; assignments should be submitted at the same time; ... and the same rules should apply to everyone.” (McArthur 2023:19)

Policy

- Mitigating circumstances
 - Self-certification (no evidence requirement).
 - Negotiated deadlines.
- Penalties for late submission / capped resubmission
 - Negotiated deadlines.
 - Pass / fail.
- Limitations on assessment design / module descriptors
 - Inclusion, choice and flexibility.
 - Avoid accommodations which add to burden of being disabled.



Summary



There are serious challenges to our current assessment regime:

Inclusion, wellbeing, Gen AI, community, trust...



Compassion offers one lens in which to redesign and rethink assessment.



Questions

Further reading: Belonging through Assessment: Pipelines of Compassion

QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project 2021



Vikki Hill, Sam Broadhead, Liz Bunting, Laura da Costa, Neil Currant, Marianne Greated, Peter Hughes, Robert Mantho, Emily Salines, Thea Stevens.

[Project Blog](#)

[Ebook](#)

[QAA Project Page](#)



**QAA- funded Compassionate
Assessment Network events monthly:
For more info and to join**

<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/membership/collaborative-enhancement-projects/assessment/compassionate-assessment-in-higher-education>



References

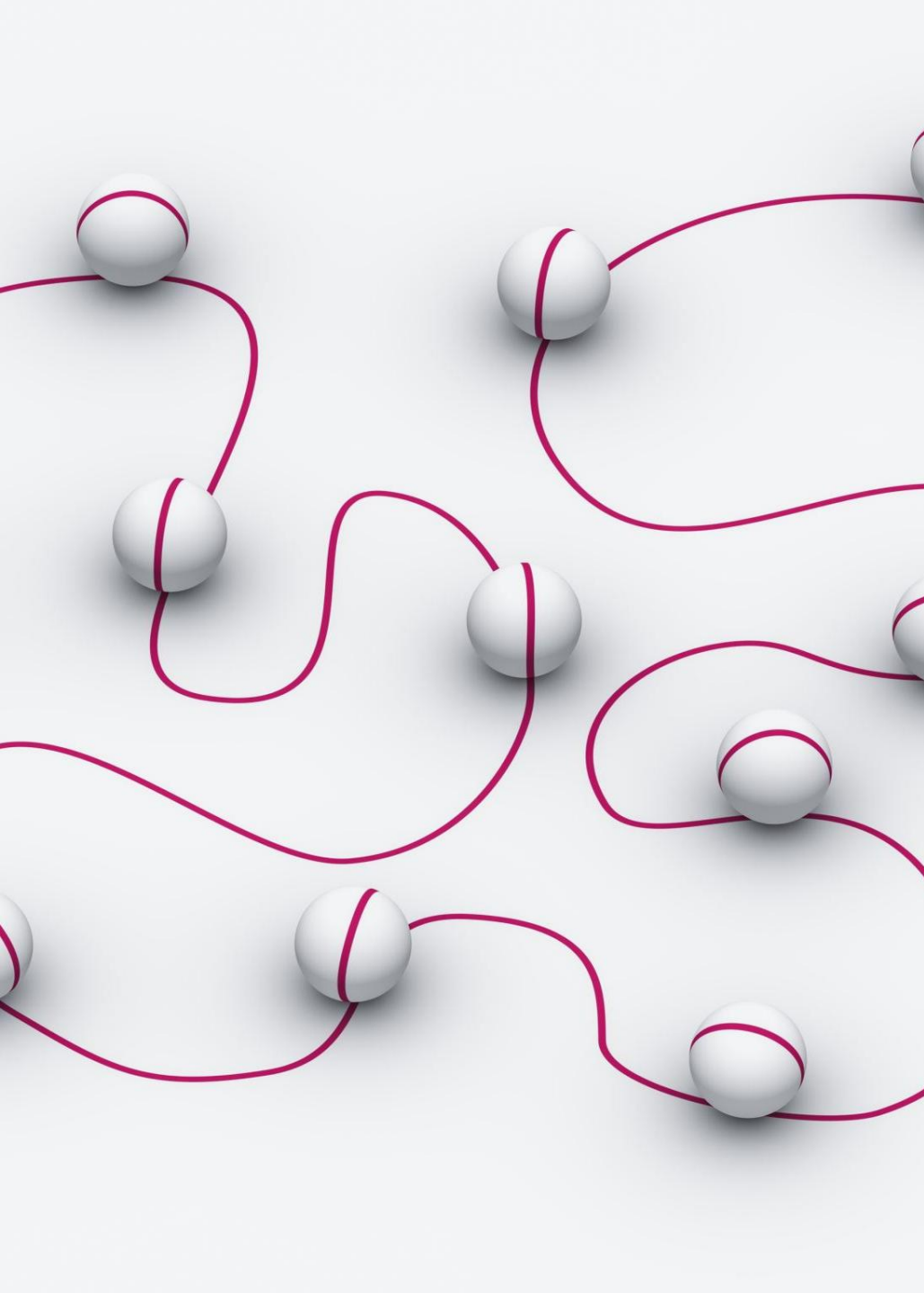
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Workshop – The scale of assessment policy and practice



In groups:

- List assessment practices, processes and policies that you think could be improved through a compassionate lens.
- For each, list who would be responsible and who could influence.
- Move round tables to see what others have put.



One change?

- Pick one from your list and redesign the practice, process or policy to be more compassionate.

How do we address challenge 4 in our assessment design?

- Referring to Jessop and McArthur:
 - Powerlessness. Meaninglessness. Normlessness. Social Isolation. Self-estrangement.
 - Disproportionate summative assessment, Insufficient formative assessment. Prevalence of closed book exams. Random varieties of assessment.
 - Honesty, Trust, Responsiveness, Responsibility, Forgiveness.

