

“The teacher didn't really care about my wellbeing or academic success”: Students' experiences of an absence of kindness in higher education

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Abstract

Kindness can be conceived as a transformational power that can reconfigure higher education institutions away from reductionist, performative, and corporate sensibilities. However, an absence of kindness can also play a significant role within a student's tertiary experience, leaving students who receive unkindness with a diminished sense of self, belonging, and achievement. Underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and positioning theory, our article explores students' experiences of the absence of kindness during interactions with lecturers in the higher education context, and the impact of such interactions on students' academic success and personal wellbeing. Survey data of 23 students from a larger study who described an absence of kindness from lecturers were analysed via reflexive thematic analysis. Using the metaphor of dance, findings revealed several themes about the impacts of the absence of kindness on students, including Out of Step, Side-Stepping, Stepping on Toes, Walking on Tiptoes and Bowing Out. These findings have significant implications for higher education institutions.

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Practitioner Notes

1. Experiencing the absence of kindness from lecturers has a significant impact on students, emotionally and academically.
2. This is true regardless of whether the absence of kindness is intentional or unintentional, a one-off or repeated behaviour.
3. Common forms of the absence of kindness include being out of touch with the complexity of student life, ignoring responsibilities, and being rude or unhelpful.
4. Lecturers should be aware of the ways their words and behaviour can impact students, and act respectfully, empathetically, and professionally.
5. Higher Education may not support lecturers to be kind and may facilitate the absence of kindness by putting them in stressful environments.

Keywords

Higher education, Bronfenbrenner, positioning theory, the absence of kindness, power

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Introduction

As university lecturers and tutors, we are aware of the importance of kindness in higher education (HE). We define kindness as the act of or disposition of providing physical or emotional support to others (Tait-McCutcheon et al., 2026). We have all experienced the impact of a kind lecturer during our tertiary studies, so we strive to prioritise kindness in our teaching and relationships with students. While still a developing field, there is an increasingly robust body of literature that examines the role and impact of kindness in tertiary institutions (Denial, 2024; Gorny-Wegrzyn et al., 2022; Tait-McCutcheon et al., 2025, 2026). Kindness in HE can play a key role in enhancing student wellbeing (Walker et al., 2023), cultivating a sense of belonging (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2019), promoting resilience and persistence (Tinto, 2017), and supporting student learning and achievement (Snijders et al., 2022). More broadly, kindness can be conceived as a transformational power that can reconfigure the tertiary institution away from reductionist, performative, and corporate sensibilities (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2021). Kindness in teaching is more than merely a cognitive process; it is a relational human endeavour (Torregosa et al., 2016). Tait-McCutcheon et al. (2025) explored the academic help-seeking behaviours of students in HE through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model. This enabled them to gain insights and compassionately frame how students in HE live and learn, and the challenges they experience-which can potentially be managed or even overcome with kindness.

The absence of kindness can also play a significant role within a student's tertiary experience, leaving them with a diminished sense of self, belonging, and achievement (Erikson, 2019; Wagner et al., 2019). This can further lead to feelings of inferiority, underperformance, and disengagement (Clark, 2008a). Thus, kindness and the absence of kindness are both a wellbeing and academic concern within HE. The two are linked: when students feel belonging and efficacy, they are more likely to thrive in their studies. Conversely, when students feel inferiority and judgement they may disconnect from their studies. The absence of kindness (or unkindness) can be seen as "the quality of not treating someone very well, or not considering someone's feelings" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2026). This definition encompasses a range of actions or behaviours towards an individual that may impact them in a negative way. Where kindness can help create trusting relationships and effective learning environments, the absence of kindness can undo this (Campbell et al., 2024; Erikson, 2019). Sadly, the claim has been made that the absence of kindness is acceptable, if not expected, within HE (Killam, 2023).

Previous research has focused on perceptions of incivility and the absence of kindness in relationships between lecturers and colleagues (Clark et al., 2013; Heffernan & Bosetti, 2021), lecturers and students (Orfan, 2023), and students and peers (Rose et al., 2020). Students' experiences of lecturer incivility have been less explored than lecturers' experiences of student incivility, leading Campbell et al. (2024) to posit that "there is a need to determine to what degree students face incivility in HE in order to promote a safe and beneficial learning environment" (p. 2).

In this article we focus on examples of the absence of kindness in HE from lecturers to students, where there is a noticeable gap in research (Nguyen-Viet & Nguyen, 2024), and turn to our participants' responses to determine what made an experience negative and how this was linked to an absence of kindness. We are interested that the actions and behaviours that made our participants' experiences negative were those that might be globally understood as an absence

of kindness. This research focus is important because such interactions are increasing in frequency and severity world-wide (Knepp & Knepp, 2022) and pose a substantial risk to effective learning environments (Campbell et al., 2024). Research into incivility, a common manifestation of the absence of kindness, has tended to focus on nursing education (Clark, 2008a, 2008b; Rose et al., 2020). Penconek et al. (2024) claimed that “incivility in nursing is much like incivility in other academic areas” (p. 9), so we extend our focus past nursing and incivility to explore broader acts of the absence of kindness in HE. Our research question is: How do students experience the absence of kindness in HE and how does that experience impact them?

Literature

Students in HE describe the absence of kindness as lecturers showing no interest in developing a rapport or relationship with them, withholding important information, not responding to questions within a timely manner, making problems and challenges harder, exerting superiority, making rude or sarcastic comments, and not understanding or recognising the complexity of students’ lives beyond HE (Clark, 2008b; Tait-McCutcheon et al., 2025). The absence of kindness in HE tends to be framed and described in literature as academic incivility (Baker & Burke, 2023; Hudgins et al., 2023a). Incivility is generally described as discourteous behaviour and actions that negatively impact a learning environment. However, the term has also been deployed broadly to reflect “any action that disrupts a harmonious and cooperative learning environment” (Nguyen-Viet & Nguyen, 2024, p. 2).

In practice, academic incivility includes “any discourteous verbal or non-verbal behaviours directed toward others” (Campbell, 2024, p. 1). These uncivil behaviours can be intentional or unintentional, overt or covert, passive or active, consistent or inconsistent, innocuous or targeted, minor, moderate, or serious. Regardless of how it is given, received, or observed, incivility “violates the norms of mutual respect” (Clark, 2008b, p. 38). Both students and lecturers are capable of incivility in ascending and descending hierarchies in lecturer-lecturer, lecturer-student, and student-student interactions (Nguyen-Viet & Nguyen, 2024; Orfan, 2023). Additionally, a behaviour or act that a lecturer or student may consider to be civil may be received as incivility depending on who the enactor is and the surrounding circumstances (Snijders et al., 2022). Different contexts and factors that are cultural, personal, and familial come into play leading up to and at the time of the unkind experience (Orfan, 2023). However, “incivility begets incivility” (Campbell et al., 2024, p. 6), and teacher incivility can be an antecedent to student incivility (Orfan, 2023). As such students are likely to respond with incivility to lecturers whose behaviour has been uncivil toward them (Knepp, 2012).

Lecturers’ incivility includes verbal and non-verbal behaviours—such as being accusatory, aggressive, or exclusionary—used to assert power and dominance (Clark, 2008a; Hudgins et al., 2023a; Orfan, 2023). Inaction from lecturers, such as denying a problem exists, denying a situation is a problem, and not responding to students’ requests and questions, are also examples of incivility. Incivility can be attributed to bad behaviours, but also to ineffective teaching practice, including inexperience, poor classroom management, inability to engage students in their learning, inequitable marking, and an unwillingness to be challenged (Nguyen-Viet & Nguyen, 2024; Penconek et al., 2024).

Such behaviours can be triggered by personal and professional challenges. Personal causes could include their home-life or disposition and temperament, whilst stress and workload

pressure, challenging student behaviour, a lack of institutional support, and power imbalances could be professional causes. The impact of both can be physical and emotional exhaustion, decreased self-efficacy and confidence, academic achievement, and job satisfaction and retention (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2009; Tait-McCutcheon et al., 2026). Students who feel they have not been treated kindly can experience depression, declining self-efficacy and quality of life and study, diminished or unmet learning goals and career development, and suicidal ideation (Hudgins et al., 2023a; Walker et al., 2023). The flow of their learning is disrupted, their relationship with the teacher becomes cautious, their confidence with other teachers and within other learning areas is weakened, and their respect for the institution decreases (Knepp, 2012).

Unkindness in HE should not be framed as only an interpersonal phenomenon; instead, the contexts and systems that produce cultures of incivility must be held to account. Excessive workloads placed upon lecturers' compromise their wellbeing (Hodgins & Mannix-McNamara, 2021), and their ability to maintain kind and meaningful relationships with students. Macroeconomic and ideological conditions have tangibly reshaped the capacity for both lecturers and students to engage deeply and intentionally in the learning experience.

Method

In this article, we look at what happens when there is a miss-step in the dance between the lecturer and student and examine the impact this has on a student's university journey. While either a student or a lecturer can make these missteps, our focus will be on the students' perceptions and experiences of the absence of kindness from lecturers. To address this, we employ a dance metaphor, inspired by Clark (2008a; 2008b). In her seminal research exploring incivility in nursing education, Clark conceptualised incivility as a dance between two parties. Dancing requires "interaction, engagement, and communication" (Clark, 2008a, p. E37). We also draw on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) as our theoretical frameworks.

Researchers' Positionality

Our research team consists of lecturers and tutors in HE, enabling us to consider our data from both student and lecturer perspectives. Working in the same HE context as our participants meant we could make greater meaning of our data, with an inside knowledge of the contextual aspect of participants' responses. The survey was anonymous, distributed within a faculty that none of us had taught in, thus, mitigating any potential conflict of interest.

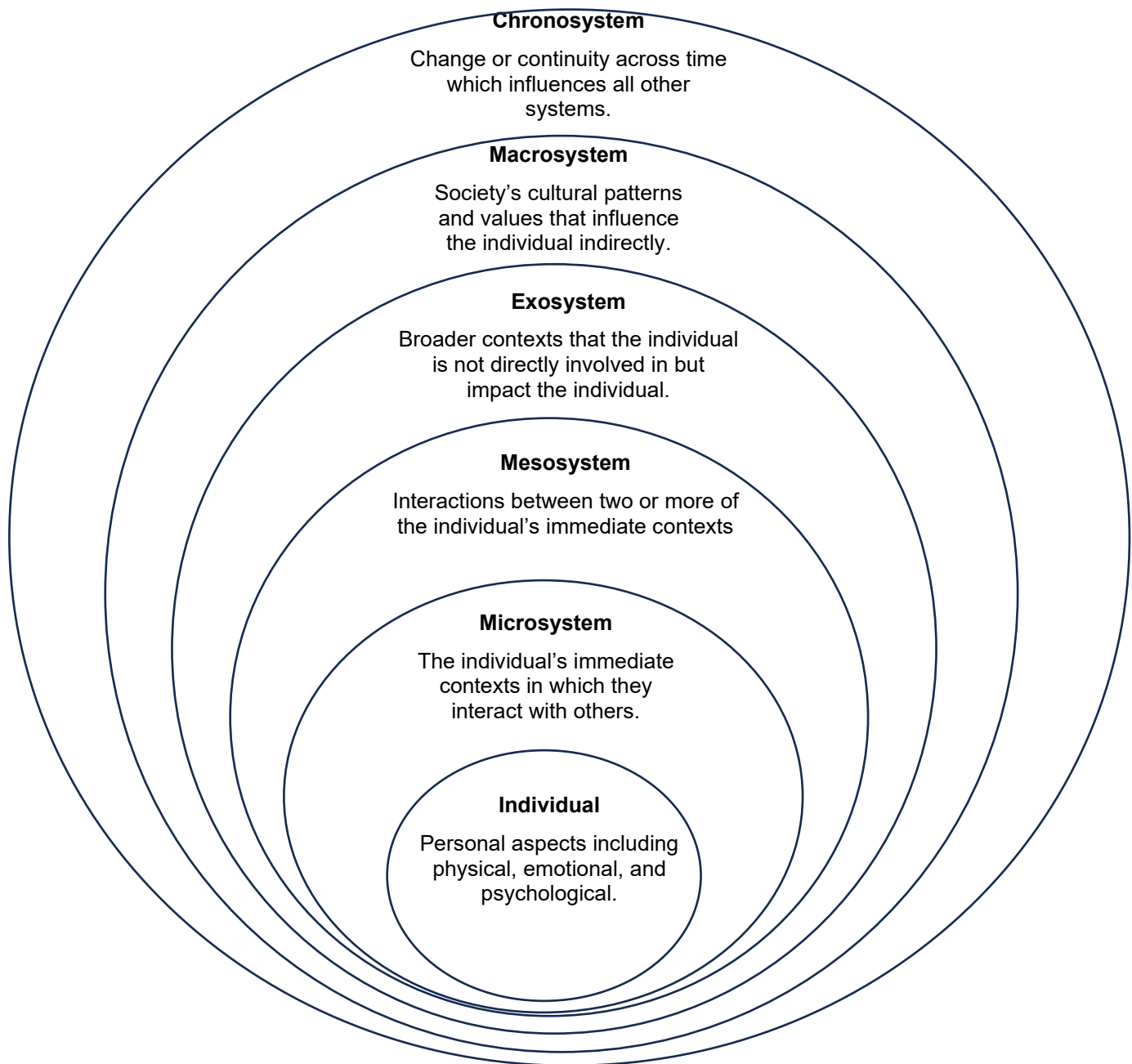
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems

Every dance takes place in a specific context and even within a single institution, the dances enacted will be dependent on the dancers' various contexts. The first theoretical frame underpinning our data analysis is Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory which posits that human development takes place through complex interactions between individuals and factors in their environment. These interactions differ depending on the individual's personal attributes, the environment, and the areas of development that are evolving at the time. Interactions are embedded in a larger context, which also influences development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework depicts itself as multiple nested contexts (systems) in which individuals live, learn, and develop, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem,

macrosystem, and chronosystem. This framework was constructed in three phases (O'Toole et al., 2019). Phase 2 considers the role of the individual as well as the environment in an individual's development, where individuals can influence their own development yet are constrained by the environmental circumstances in which they find themselves. This is the phase that we will be drawing on.

Figure 1

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (adapted from Akaba et al., 2022)



Bronfenbrenner's model provides a lens through which we can understand the various environmental contexts influencing students' experiences, ranging from their immediate interactions (microsystem) to broader societal norms and policies (macrosystem). When considering the absence of kindness, this allows us to examine how incidents are shaped not only by individual encounters but also by departmental cultures, institutional policies, and even wider societal discourses around student support and well-being. For example, a student experiencing the absence of kindness from a lecturer (microsystem) might find their ability to cope influenced by the university's pastoral care system (exosystem), or by broader societal expectations about resilience in higher education (macrosystem). Complementing this ecological mapping, positioning theory offers a critical tool for analysing interactions within these systems.

Positioning Theory

Positions are important in a dance. Positioning theory explains “how people use words to locate themselves and others” in social interactions (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010, p. 2) and is our second theoretical frame for data analysis. Individuals' actions, such as speech and behaviour, enable them to position themselves and others during interpersonal interactions. The positioning process is interactive and dynamic, involving the allocation of “mutual and contestable rights and obligations” (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 1), which can be acquired, assumed, or imposed. During an interaction, one individual always positions the other, while simultaneously positioning themselves.

When interacting, individuals can accept self-imposed or assigned positions based on roles, rights, duties, obligations, and the power they hold in the interaction (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Power is a social aspect embedded in a particular context and emphasises how individuals perceive the possibility of achieving a position (Davies & Harré, 1999). If an individual has autonomy they can perform their desired position, if not, they must perform positions that are imposed upon them.

Power and Positioning in Higher Education

The traditional student-lecturer power dynamic in HE is an inherently unbalanced one, where “the learner is awarded very limited dispositional power in comparison to the teacher, who possesses the capacity to exercise power in the form of structuring lessons, distributing grades, disciplining, and so forth” (Symonds, 2021, p. 1072). While there have been arguments for classroom relationships to move from this dynamic of “power-over” to one of “power-with” (Schwartz, 2019, p. 87), where learning is seen as a collaborative journey that students and lecturers embark on together, such a change is yet to be widely adopted (Symonds, 2021).

The unbalanced power dynamics of the traditional student-lecturer roles are so dominant as to have become naturalised in HE, with both students and lecturers often seeing their position in the classroom as established and unavoidable (Fairclough, 2015). Students may see their lecturers as more intelligent and more knowledgeable than themselves and can adopt the role of novice and passive learners, whilst lecturers may see their expertise and authority as commonplace (Symonds, 2021). In this way, students and lecturers both perpetuate traditional power dynamics by seeing their roles as immutable and inevitable, reinforcing their own and each other's perceptions of the power imbalance by positioning themselves in that expected way. The asymmetric power dynamic between lecturer and student can facilitate distance, challenge the

establishment and maintenance of effective relationships, and make the effect of potential absences of kindness directed at students by lecturers much greater (Barrow, 2015).

Positioning theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory allow us to interpret specific incidents involving the absence of kindness. Bronfenbrenner's model facilitates the identification of the multiple layers of influence surrounding an unkind act, and positioning theory provides the analytical tools to unpack the interaction itself. Through the ecological framework we can understand the contextual factors that enable or mitigate the absence of kindness, while positioning theory offers a micro-level analysis of the interactional dynamics, power struggles, and shifting identities at play in the dance.

Setting, Participants, and Data Gathering

This qualitative, cross-section study took place in 2022 at a large university in Aotearoa New Zealand, during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. This was a challenging time for students and staff in HE settings because of widespread Covid-19 illness, disruption to learning due to regulations put in place by the Aotearoa New Zealand government in response to the pandemic, such as sudden lockdowns, and declining mental health of students, lecturers and other staff (Cameron et al., 2022). To mediate such challenges, HE institutions responded in various ways, such as changing to online learning, providing flexibility for assessments, and granting assessment extensions more generously (Tait-McCutcheon et al., 2026).

We designed an online Qualtrics survey that asked participants to recall a time when they sought help with their studies from teaching staff and describe the nature and impact of this interaction. We considered an interaction to be positive if it triggered positive emotions or outcomes for the student; whilst a negative interaction was one that caused stress, negative emotions or outcomes. Participants associated positive interactions with kindness and negative interactions with the absence of kindness in their reflections. The survey was promoted over three weeks to recruit students from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS) as participants, by using email, posts on the FHSS social media pages, and word-of-mouth, yielding 477 survey responses. The research was funded by the University through a Summer Student Scholarship Grant, and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences was selected based on the funding requirements. The survey enabled us to gain a large amount of data from this specific sample of individuals in an efficient, cost-effective way. However, we also acknowledge some limitations of using surveys: including participants choosing to selectively answer questions, submitting incomplete surveys, or providing silly answers (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). Many students who began the survey answered only the short-answer questions and omitted the questions requiring a short paragraph describing their experiences of help-seeking at the university. To mitigate these limitations, responses that did not answer the long-form questions, or provided silly answers were identified and excluded from our dataset prior to analysis, leaving 214 responses. Of these 214 responses, 23 student participants described negative experiences. Nine of the 23 participants were in their 1st year of study, six in their 2nd, five in their 3rd, and three in their fourth. Eighteen identified as female, four as male, and one as gender diverse. Their ages ranged from 12 who were 17 to 20 years of age, 10 who were 21-24, and one who was older than 25.

These 23 participants were purposefully selected because in their survey responses they described detailed experiences of negative interactions with lecturers. We define detailed experiences as responses where the student sufficiently described the context of the situation

and discussed the emotional impact. Data saturation was not considered because philosophically we align with Low's (2019) stance that "there are always new theoretical insights to be made as long as data continues to be collected and analysed" (p. 131).

On opening the survey, participants were given an information sheet and electronically confirmed their consent. The survey was anonymous, so we referred to our student participants by number (for example, S-10) during our study, and in the 'Findings' section of this article.

Data Analysis

The six steps of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis were used to analyse the data.

1. Each member of our research team read and familiarised themselves with the 23 survey responses.
2. Individually, we generated initial codes from the survey responses using open coding, where codes were developed and modified during the coding process. We individually produced themes, collating codes into themes based on commonality.
3. We collaboratively discussed and reviewed the themes we each identified, and combined ideas to reach a consensus. This was a reflexive process (Braun & Clarke, 2022) where we all shared their thoughts about what they considered the commonalities of themes were, and involved theme construction, negotiation, and reconstruction to reach agreement on final themes. We then checked that our final themes aligned in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset, forming a coherent pattern.
4. Final themes were refined, defined and named.
5. Findings were written up and for each theme, we selected participants' quotes that illustrated the theme.

Our thematic development involved a blend of inductive and deductive approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2022). First, we used an inductive approach to explore the survey responses where codes and themes emerged directly from the data. We then used a deductive approach to identify quotes in data that appropriately represented each theme.

The metaphor of dance (Clark, 2008a) enabled us to conceptualise our data through the relational back-and-forth dynamics of dance moves. An iterative process followed, where we debated how the data represented different aspects of a dance gone wrong; we continually questioned whether our themes fit the data and, in some cases, we folded themes together for thematic integrity. It is important to note that our themes were not strictly prescribed – while Clark (2008a) was our launching pad, the actual construction of individual dance themes was a process derived inductively from our data.

Table 1

Themes, definitions and examples related to participants' experiences of the absence of kindness

Theme	Definition	Example
Out of step	Participants felt a lack of awareness, and understanding about what was happening in their personal lives.	"I was studying and working 30 hours per week to meet living costs. After explaining my situation to a teacher, I asked for an extension. They did not grant me one and told me to cut back on my hours..." (S-95)
Side-stepping	Participants felt lecturers avoided-responsibilities that were part of their role as an educator.	"I emailed a teacher. He didn't reply for multiple days, and when he did, he told me to refer to a notice that was non-existent." (S-165)
Stepping on toes	Participants felt that communications from lecturers were disrespectful or dismissive.	"Looks like this isn't the course for you, good luck finding another." (S-143)
Walking on tiptoes	Participants recalled that lecturers' behaviours and responses made them feel wary and cautious, prompting them to avoid interacting with lecturers in the future or disengaging with the course.	"I don't approach teachers at all as I am much too scared. Poor interactions in the past have made it so I don't feel comfortable approaching any staff." (S-51)
Bowing out	Participants' interactions with some lecturers prompted them to bow out altogether – withdraw from the relationship, the course, their programme of study, or the university.	"Because of all the stress and the lack of support I felt because of this teacher I withdrew from Trimester 2." (S-165)

Findings

(In)civility in higher education can be framed as a dance between two parties (Clark, 2008a/b). Both student and teacher engage in a shared set of 'steps,' acting and reacting according to an implicit, unspoken, choreography. For example, when one party emails the other with a question, the implicit understanding is that the other will reply in a timely manner. While many students and teachers understand how each step should be performed, for some, there are missteps where one or both parties feel misunderstood or mistreated. In the findings section, we use the term 'misstep' as a synonymous analogy for the absence of kindness. We explore what the absence of kindness means for our participants, focusing on the impact of a lecturer's missteps in interactions where a student has reached out to ask for help or support. Our themes include lecturers being perceived as Out of Step, Side-Stepping, and Stepping on Toes, resulting in students Walking on Tiptoes or Bowing Out (Table 1).

Out of Step

Students recalled times when they felt their lecturer had been out of step with the realities of what it meant to be a student and that they lacked understanding and empathy. Lecturers offered

unrealistic solutions, or no solutions at all, and caused “more stress in an already stressful time” (S-155). Students were left feeling disregarded and disrespected. S-107 described a situation far beyond their control that could have been manageable if they were shown some kindness.

I was visiting my mother who was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer and didn't have a laptop with me [...] I was given a 2-day extension when I explained why I would be away for the entire weekend.

This student felt they had to “choose between urgent family matters and school” and “started seeing the councillor afterwards.” Their lecturer was both out of step and out of compassion.

For many students, paid work is essential to be able to live and afford university studies. Lecturers not being realistic about this need positioned students in no-win situations. As S-53 described it, students “have to work and so need to get extensions, but I can't get an extension, so I get worse grades”. S-95 had a similar challenge:

I was studying and working 30 hours per week to meet living costs. After explaining my situation to a teacher, I asked for an extension. They did not grant me one and told me to cut back on my hours – a solution that would leave me unable to pay for living costs. I nearly failed the course due to the lack of empathy for my situation.

Students also described lecturers as being out of step with the realities of the Covid-19 pandemic, with S-109 describing how they were “declined an extra day to complete a tutorial assignment” when they had Covid-19: “the teacher declined it and was a bit rough about it”. S-62 missed a tutorial when they had Covid-19 and asked if they could “hand in the test from the tutorial a day late” but were “rejected”.

Being positioned to feel guilty for something they had no control over caused students to feel unsafe and that they and their requests were troublesome. S-109 shared how they were “left feeling stupid” and “like it was my fault for getting sick”. Other students shared similar experiences.

When I had Covid, I asked the teacher if I could have an extension on a tutorial task. I was told I couldn't get an extension. It took me three days to write 500 words as I was so sick, and the work was not up to standard. Having to submit subpar work hurt my overall grade. (S-77)

When approached for help, these lecturers reacted in ways that were dismissive, ignoring their students' requests and refusing to suggest any realistic alternative solutions, to compromise, or to empathise. These examples from students suggest that lecturers can be unkind by being unaware or ‘out of step’ with the multifaceted circumstances and realities of students' lives.

Side-stepping

Students shared experiences of the absence of kindness that occurred when they believed their lecturers side-stepped and avoided their responsibilities. The students were “at an already emotionally turbulent time” (S-65) when they asked for help, and the lack of responses and support from teachers exacerbated their struggles and stress levels, leaving them feeling ignored, disrespected, and unworthy. Their access to learning and ability to learn were also negatively impacted. Two students described feeling ignored when they were made to wait an unacceptable amount of time for extension requests.

I approached a teacher about an extension due to the recent diagnosis of a disability. After 4-weeks I reached out to my tutor for help and they managed to get a response a week later, by which point it was too late. This added to the stress and negatively affected my ability to learn well in the course. (S-65)

I emailed a teacher. He didn't reply for multiple days, and when he did, he told me to refer to a notice that was non-existent. I replied saying as such and he told me to wait. Then he said that he wouldn't grant me an extension and I'd have to take the penalty if I submitted late. (S-165)

Missing grades prompted one student to contact their lecturer. S-9 was made to wait two months for confirmation they had passed an assessment.

I approached a teacher about a delay [of about 1-month] in one of my grades. All my classmates had their results back, so I was naturally quite concerned. The teacher was quite defensive in their emails. Their responses often failed to answer the questions I had sent and were very short. The correspondence ended with me having none of my questions answered, beyond that my grade was not ready. I eventually got the grade back [about two months later]. It may seem silly, but I have social anxiety and another condition that make these sorts of interactions quite trying.

S-127 received a fail grade due to being unaware of the status of their submission and no communication from their lecturer.

I approached a teacher concerning marks and was asked to book a meeting. I agreed and waited on the date and time to be confirmed by the teacher. No additional information was given. I was trying to sort a solution for the assignment but could not get hold of them. I ended up not passing the course because of the lack of communication.

Similarly, S-70 sought help with an online test "that had glitched and completely froze". It took some time to get support from their lecturer and "it was unfair of the teacher to claim there was nothing they could do to help me, when they did help me in the end."

I checked everything at my end, but the issue was online. I emailed the teacher with photos to show it was not my fault. They responded that there was nothing they could do to help me and that I would have to deal with a half-finished test. After a few emails back and forth I managed to get extra time to finish the test.

Students described feeling "anger and frustration" (S-65), "unsupported and let down" (S-95), and "stressed and disappointed" (S-127) when not treated in a timely manner or given unhelpful advice. These findings emphasise a degree of carelessness and irresponsibility on behalf of lecturers, suggesting some were inadvertently unkind by avoiding or sidestepping the responsibilities of their role.

Stepping on Toes

The responses that students received from their lecturers were not always respectful or civil. Students felt their lecturers could have made the choice to be helpful but chose not to and, in some cases, made the situation "much harder than it needed to be" (S-16). S-10 recalled how

teachers had been “dismissive and not understanding of circumstances” with a “generally unpleasant demeanour in emails”. S-143 described their lecturers’ actions and behaviours as “unfair” and S-65 “felt ripped off.” Their frustration at not being able to change or improve the situation was evident, with S-16 claiming they were “infuriated and shaking with adrenaline”.

S-13 approached their teacher about an extension because their father was diagnosed with stage 4 pancreatic and liver cancer, whilst S-16 disclosed having Covid 19.

This put me in a bad mental state for a very long time. I asked for an extension and tried to explain about my dad. I was told to drop the course and try again next year. (S-13)

I asked for an extension due to having Covid. I was responded to in a rude, passive aggressive, guilt tripping, and insulting way ... they acted like it was my fault, but I had no control over it! This increased my anxiety. (S-16)

S-208 wanted reassurance about how to complete their assignment, but their lecturer seemed disinterested in providing any support. Instead, the student received a somewhat sarcastic response.

I wasn’t sure my argument fitted the instructions, so I wanted to double check with them. They sort of begrudgingly admitted it was okay but were not very supportive in any way and seemed disinterested in what my arguments were. Basically, their advice was “hope that the tutor who marks your essay agrees with your interpretation of the question.” The funniest part was that when it did eventually get marked by the tutor, it was the essay, I got the highest grade in the entire course!

The lack of support and empathy shown here are concerning, and interactions like these cause students to lose faith in the humanity and integrity of their lecturers. As S-95 explained, “most teachers don’t care about students within their classrooms and would rather have them pay more money to retake the course than show any form of empathy for their situation”. In another example of being treated unfairly, S-143 was trying to be proactive and solve a problem because they were unable to attend mandatory campus tutorials due to being unwell. Showing agency, S-143 emailed their lecturer with a reasonable and legitimate solution and asked if they could attend the online tutorials which were offered to distance learners. The lecturer did not agree with the proposed solution and stated, “looks like this isn’t the course for you, good luck finding another.” S-143 felt that the “interaction was negative” and “the teachers’ actions and the outcome were unfair”.

For many, the uncivil interactions with their lecturers tainted the relationship, leaving “a sour note” (S-208). S-16 expressed feeling “less favourably about the teacher” and S-70 explained they “lost some respect for the teacher”. These findings suggest that thoughtless or rude responses from lecturers caused negative feelings and emotions in students, diminished their motivation and aspiration for future study and their sense of self-worth, and tainted student-lecturer relationships. Students felt stepped on.

Walking on tiptoes

The behaviours of the lecturers described above made some students wary and cautious. S-51 shared how they already “walked on tiptoes” around lecturers, feeling scared and uncomfortable due to past negative experiences. While S-51 acknowledged that not interacting with lecturers could result in lower grades, this was a sacrifice they were prepared to make as it meant they were less apprehensive.

I don't approach teachers at all as I am much too scared. Poor interactions in the past have made it so I don't feel comfortable approaching any staff. I do all my academic interactions through my disability advisor. This may have reduced my grades slightly but overall gave me a good result that I was happy with ... and I was less stressed – less anxious.

Other students described experiences where they were left feeling they were “burdensome and an annoyance” (S-9). This led to students tiptoeing around the lecturer to avoid both them and their course. S-10 explained how they were “struggling and starting to lag behind” but that they felt they would be “bothering staff” if they contacted them and so were “generally unwilling to start a conversation”. An interaction S-34 had with a lecturer left them feeling nervous about attending their next tutorial. S-103 described the profound effect that the absence of kindness had on them.

I had to disclose my mental health and grief to teachers to explain my lack of assignments. Two teachers sent short and, for me, stress-inducing emails that scared me to the point of panic attacks, and then I refused to open their emails. I never emailed them again after that. I would avoid eye contact and would get a good scare when I saw them. It affected my learning greatly; I could not approach them without shaking or crying. I avoided any contact when I desperately needed it. It stopped me from finishing tasks. I felt like I had already failed them before I started due to my mental state and how I thought the teachers viewed me because I wasn't focusing. I suffered from major imposter syndrome when I was around others in my course.

A collegial lecturer-student relationship is essential for learning. However, these examples of students' experiences suggest that the absence of kindness they experienced bought on a sense of fear and reluctance for future interactions, thus impairing the student-lecturer relationship and deeply impacting student well-being, engagement, and learning.

Bowing Out – Leaving the dance floor

The most severe consequence of these negative interactions for the student was terminating their study. Three students felt reluctant to continue their learning with a particular lecturer or area of study.

I considered dropping the subject next year as I was worried the same person might be teaching it. (S-9)

This interaction made me cynical of that area of study. (S-65)

Even though I completed the course, this experience did affect my feelings toward the subject and impacted whether I wanted to continue learning in the subject next year. (S-191)

For some students, the lack of support and kindness led to them withdrawing from the course and the trimester.

If I had been given more support from the beginning, I would have continued with the course. I withdrew as I couldn't get the help I needed. (S-62)

They made me feel stupid and like it was my fault. I left the course as it was damaging my mental health to have an extra course that had already dragged me down. (S-109)

Because of all the stress, and the lack of support I felt because of this teacher I withdrew from Trimester 2. (S-165)

This theme suggests that an absence of kindness from a lecturer can break the rhythm of learning and be a trigger for students to leave the dance floor and discontinue their studies. Our findings suggest that to our student participants, in the context of student-lecturer interactions, the absence of kindness means an absence of empathy and understanding towards others, avoiding responsibility, being unhelpful, displaying disrespectful behaviours or responding in a way that is off-putting, distancing or impeding future interactions and relationships.

Discussion

The students in our research were trying to do their best in an already stressful situation. Seeking help from their lecturers, they were trying to find a solution to a problem, which oftentimes was not of their doing and beyond their control.

Through the chronosystem, we have identified how students in HE are living increasingly complex lives – and this complexity often stems from sociopolitical and economic drivers. Rising fees and the cost of living combine to make studying without paid work or parental investment prohibitively expensive (Roper, 2018). Both create student precarity and compromise the ability for some to focus upon their studies when their living situation is at constant risk. Thus, financial stress is embedded into the foundation of the university student experience.

As educators, we may wish that our students could focus their attention solely within the university microsystem, but that is not the world they inhabit when access to tertiary education is gatekept by ever-rising fees and student debt. This situation is not inevitable and nor has it always been this way. The passage of time brings changing political and economic ideologies, prerogatives, and priorities which have a substantial impact upon the individual lives of our students. The absence of kindness is likely to occur in interactions where a lecturer either fails to recognise a student's ecological realities or pushes the narrative that the university system should always take precedence.

The value of applying an ecological lens to our findings is that it aids in recontextualising the dance of incivility from being exclusively about individuals and their respective behaviours. Indeed, ecological theory is essential for bringing the *dance floor* to the fore; the space in which all interactions and power positionings reside. The dance floor is never static nor neutral and conditions how dancers move and take up space. In our findings, it is clear that students and lecturers may not always share awareness of their dance floor(s). A student may see themselves as dancing through family commitments, illnesses and the costs-of-living, whereas a lecturer may see their students as simply dancing through university. It is possible that neither one will see the socioeconomic environment that also makes up the dance stage.

Positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) provides a means for exploring the allocation of rights and obligations in our participants' examples of their experiences of the absence of kindness in HE. These interactions mostly took place when stressors arose within a student's work, home, or family environment that impacted their ability to meet deadlines and complete coursework. In other words, a student would face a challenge within one microsystem that negatively affected their university microsystem and necessitated a change in the mesosystem to solve. These challenges were wide-ranging and included illnesses, rent pressures, family responsibilities, and deaths. Students had the right to ask for help and seek support; they had the right to initiate a dance with their lecturer. However, once they had made the first move, they were powerless - the right to choreograph the next steps lay solely with their lecturer. Unfortunately, the lecturers in our students' experiences did not position themselves as having a responsibility to respond in a civil or kind manner. Instead, lecturers chose to ignore, minimise, blame, and criticise - behaviours perceived by their students as unrealistic, inequitable, and punitive. These lecturers did not seek to understand their students' perceptions, feelings, or fears. More broadly, they did not seek to understand their students as people who inhabit multiple contexts and systems that feed into each other. The students' identity as a student within the university microsystem obscured their view of anything else. This, however, is reductionist. Complexity in a student's ecological systems is not optional; life is inherently complicated.

Of course, students are not the only ones with complex lives and colliding microsystems. Within our research, we do not know what was happening in the lives of the lecturers featured in our research. Lecturers regularly feel stressed and exploited, with too many demands on their time and attention, and not enough respect for the intricacies of teaching or scholarship. Staff operate within systemically pressured environments that are fraught with inequities and injustices (Denial, 2024). Some staff members feel that the university as an institution is fundamentally unkind to them, and share the frustrations of students who feel ignored, disrespected, and powerless (Tait-McCutcheon et al., 2026). Under such a system it may be easier to be unkind than kind, uncivil than civil, and many lecturers may be unintentionally unkind and uncivil because they are constantly preoccupied. Much like their students, lecturers have complex lives beyond the academy, and HE often does little to prepare staff for taking on the responsibility (and skill) of teaching (Denial, 2024). Additionally, the focus on institutional profitability has created an environment where staff are expected to be increasingly productive - teaching larger courses, generating more publications, and creating more content (Tait-McCutcheon et al., 2026). We do not know about the history of their relationship with each student, or what stressors they were experiencing in their personal or professional lives. But we do know that the absence of kindness does not occur in a vacuum (Clark, 2008a), and the lecturers described in this article may have been facing challenges and hardships themselves, making them less tolerant of student concerns. However, it is also not our purpose to "evaluate the legitimacy of students' perceptions" (Tantleff-Dunn, 2002, p. 200), and while this helps to explain the behaviours of some lecturers towards students, it does not excuse it. As we have demonstrated, what may be an accidental misstep from a teacher can have an enormous impact on a struggling student (Burton, 2021; Tait-McCutcheon et al., 2026). Ignoring the student or responding inappropriately "is unprofessional and likely to fuel unnecessary power struggles that deter effective conflict resolution" (Tantleff-Dunn, 2002, p. 200). Lecturers in HE must be prepared and feel able to prevent, understand, and resolve conflict. Incivility affects teachers and students individually and in their relationships. However, it is the most vulnerable, the students, who are affected the most (Knepp & Knepp,

2022) and punished the most (Layne et al., 2024). The students in this research felt they were taking responsibility in initiating a choreographed dance of civility (Clark, 2008a). What they lacked was a dance partner.

Lecturers and students agree that the first step of kindness and civility must be taken by the lecturers (Layne et al., 2024). Additionally, in times of incivility and the absence of kindness, lecturers should reflect on, and as required change, their behaviours (Hudgins et al., 2023b; Wagner et al., 2019). We are not declaring that lecturers can never say no to students – sometimes students do request unreasonable or impossible things. But lecturers can refuse something without being unkind, by expressing sympathy, offering alternatives, and explaining why something is or is not possible. There are always options in terms of how we choose to act; as Erikson (2019) maintains “we can fail our students kindly or unkindly, or we can push them outside their comfort zones kindly or unkindly” (p. 173). When lecturers are in the wrong, they can apologise. These are not only decent human behaviours, but they also shift the positioning of students and lecturers closer towards an equal relationship.

Conclusion

From the students’ descriptions we know how they felt when they experienced an absence of kindness and incivility. They said they felt angry, anxious, burdensome, cynical, depressed, disengaged, distrusted, frustrated, helpless, hopeless, ignored, infuriated, judged, lost, mistreated, overwhelmed, rejected, saddened, scared, stressed, uncomfortable, unmotivated, unsupported, unworthy, and worried. The university is often an already challenging environment, and at no time would the emotions listed here contribute to a student’s wellbeing, sense of belonging, resilience, or learning. Indeed, as our data shows, an absence of kindness can discourage students to the point of changing or leaving their course of study.

Our data was collected via student participant self-report, giving rise to potentially biased accounts of the situations described because lecturers’ perspectives were not considered (see Tait-McCutcheon et al., 2026). By focusing on students’ experiences, we do not intend to portray lecturers as deliberately callous or cruel. However, as we have demonstrated whether the actions of a lecturer were deliberately unkind or only perceived as unkind is immaterial to the consequences for the student affected. While we cannot know the impetus behind every individual misunderstanding or disagreement, we do know that “it takes two to tango” (Clark, 2008a, p. 37), and it takes student and lecturer to resolve the problem. These students were in challenging situations that they needed support to be able to manage. They could not resolve the situation on their own but could in partnership with their lecturer. Whilst we acknowledge that our findings are based on students’ experiences in HE in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is likely that students may encounter similar experiences in HE institutions internationally - making scope for future research. We hope that our findings encourage lecturers worldwide to understand the significant impacts of their actions on students - and to act with kindness whenever possible Clark (2008a) urges us to set aside incivility and the absence of kindness, choosing empathy, respect, and kindness in every interaction - may we have this dance?

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