



Developing a Student Compass AI Character

A bridge to real people and services, not another chatbot, but providing a guiding hand in instances where bureaucracy breaks belonging

A white paper for AMOSSHE members, student leaders and pro vice chancellors for student experience, on why academic misconduct, extenuating circumstances, appeals and complaints processes often become a barrier to belonging, and how a guiding hand AI character can help without displacing essential human contact, especially in universities with fewer staff available to support students through these high-stakes processes.

Executive summary

The problem. Academic misconduct, extenuating circumstances, appeals and complaints are necessary university processes, but they often become a time when students feel confused, isolated and disconnected from their institution.

The proposition. Student Compass is a deliberately narrow AI character¹ designed to act as a guiding hand to real people and services. Student Compass is not another chatbot, adviser or companion. Its role is to explain what happens next, reduce confusion, and connect a student to the right human being quickly.

What it does. Student Compass can, at any time of the day or night, explain processes in accessible language, help a student understand what information they need, prepare them for a conversation with a member of staff, and route them towards the appropriate service or person.

What it does not do. It does not assess the merits of a misconduct case, decide whether an appeal has grounds, judge a complaint, provide clinical judgement or replace professional advice. In high-stakes situations, escalation to a human is the intended outcome.

Why this matters now. Universities are managing pressure on staff capacity at the same time as students are becoming more familiar with AI. A well-governed internally developed and delivered AI guiding-hand character offers a way to preserve human contact while reducing the procedural confusion that can prevent students from reaching it.

How it should be governed. Student Compass should be jointly owned by student services and the Students' Union, with clear accountability, regular review of interactions, equity auditing and a straightforward route to human redress. Students should be involved in its development through paid co-production.

The test of success. The measure is not how long a student stays with the AI or how many enquiries it absorbs. A successful interaction is one in which a student understands what happens next and reaches the right human with less confusion and less friction.

The objective is not AI efficiency. It is human connection.

1. When bureaucracy breaks belonging

There is growing awareness of what builds belonging, and where. The obvious examples sit within induction, clubs, societies, sport, residential life, and a sense of mattering to staff and peers. Much less attention goes to what actively breaks it as these tend to happen cumulatively along the way. Academic misconduct, extenuating circumstances, appeals and complaints processes are among the most damaging processes that impact on a student's sense of belonging, precisely because they are unusual, high-stakes and almost never designed with belonging or mattering in mind.

¹ The term AI character is used throughout in preference to adviser, companion or assistant. It comes from the Rithm Project framework (Lee et al., 2026), which distinguishes between AI that acts as a tool connecting people to humans, and AI that acts as a companion substituting for them. In the absence of a specific UK AI governance framework, the Student Compass character's development is guided by the principles of accountability, fairness and human decency underpinning the EU AI Act.

Misconduct proceedings compound an already lonely and isolated student cohort. A student under investigation is often advised, and at some institutions formally required, not to discuss the case with course mates, cutting them off from the peer network that might otherwise carry them through a stressful period. Several university's own Student Academic Misconduct Procedures ask the subject of an investigation to treat the process as confidential throughout.

The MIT Ad Hoc Committee on AI Use in Teaching, Learning and Research Training found that stepping up policing around AI use contributes to an adversarial atmosphere of distrust that damages the relationship between students and staff, and wonkhe's 'Trained to stop learning' research, by Jim Dickinson and Mack Marshall, found that unclear policy is penalising the most conscientious students hardest, leaving them anxious and confused rather than reassured. A student who does not know what evidence will actually be used against them, or whether their case is typical or exceptional, experiences the process as something happening to them rather than something they can navigate; almost a working definition of not belonging.

Extenuating circumstances processes have a different but equally corrosive effect. They are triggered by a crisis, bereavement, illness, financial shock or caring responsibility that has already isolated the student before any form filling begins. The process then asks a student in crisis to produce evidence, meet a deadline and articulate their situation formally at precisely the point they are least resourced to do so. Sector experience consistently shows that many students do not know extenuating circumstances exists as a route until they have already missed a deadline or failed an assessment, at which point the conversation becomes remedial rather than supportive, and the student's first experience of the process is typically being told they are too late.

Academic appeals turn an academic frustration into a dispute with the university, at a moment when strong identification with the university community (by feeling they matter) is what protects belonging. Appeals are typically time limited and evidential, and students who do not access independent Students' Union advice frequently attempt to navigate them alone, unsure whether they are meant to prove they were failed by the process or simply dissatisfied with a grade. This is an issue within the OIAHE's good practice guidance with expectations for universities to address this uncertainty with clarity. The adversarial experience common to appeals procedures, however necessary procedurally, sits awkwardly against everything else the university is trying to do to make a student feel they belong or 'matter' there.

These processes do need to exist, and universities need them to be fair, evidenced and consistent. Many were likely designed at a time when there were more staff and support systems on hand to translate them from bureaucracy into more human language. It is the confusion and isolation surrounding these processes, not their existence, that damages belonging, and a carefully designed guiding hand AI character² could reduce that confusion without weakening the fairness or rigour of the process itself.

2. A shrinking workforce, and the loss of institutional memory

² The term AI character is used throughout this white paper in contrast to 'adviser', 'companion' or 'assistant'. It comes from the Rithm Project framework (Lee et al., 2026), which distinguishes between AI that acts as a tool connecting people to humans, and AI that acts as a companion substituting for them.

The case for a guiding hand AI character is stronger now than it would have been three years ago. Developments in AI, coupled with fewer people left to connect students to make this an increasingly impactful combination. Times Higher Education's analysis of 2024-25 financial accounts for 90 Universities UK members found that the sector shed 13,300 roles that year alone. This was on top of 9,290 in 2023-24 and 6,960 in 2022-23, almost 30,000 roles in three years.

HEPI's reporting on the UCU's live tracker recorded 105 institutions undergoing redundancy or restructuring programmes as of December 2025 and noted that staff who remain after each round face increased workloads, survivor's guilt and continuing uncertainty about further cuts to come.

Restructures and severance schemes are not designed with belonging in mind. They select by role, function or voluntary uptake against cost targets, not by which member of staff happens to hold the informal, undocumented knowledge of how a particular misconduct panel actually runs, how an extenuating circumstances policy is applied in practice from one faculty to another, or which member of the disability service a student in crisis should really be pointed towards. When key complaints and appeals staff leave, that knowledge usually leaves with them, and remaining staff end up spending more time explaining the process to the student than working towards its resolution, regardless of how clearly it is written down in policy.

Cost-driven restructuring and genuine belonging work can, unsurprisingly, pull in opposite directions. Where a Student Compass character can help amid these pressures is that as experienced staff leave and process ownership changes more often than it used to, a character that holds a stable, well-maintained, regularly reviewed map of who to talk to and how a process actually works becomes more valuable. It can handle the preparatory steps a student needs to take before that meeting, so that when the student does reach a human, the conversation is about the substance of their case rather than the procedure, the evidence and the form filling that got them there.

3. What Student Compass is

The distinction at the heart of Student Compass is between handholding and a guiding hand. Handholding means an AI system that tries to carry a student through a process on its own: drafting statements, weighing evidence, or offering a view on outcome. A guiding hand means a character whose measure of success is reducing confusion and pointing a student towards the right human quickly, then stepping back from the interaction.

This is explicitly not an AI companion or assistant. It is closer to what one potential client described, in a phrase this paper borrows deliberately, as a bridge to real people and services rather than another chatbot.

Student Compass differs from the whole-institution AI support platforms now common across the sector. These platforms integrate across the VLE, student portal, ticketing system and IT helpdesk to give a single AI layer over most student-facing operations, answering everything from timetabling and password resets to programme information and enrolment queries. The case for adopting one is usually about efficiency including fewer support tickets and a lower cost to serve, which is not unreasonable for an institution to want from its digital infrastructure.

Student Compass is not attempting to provide similar efficiencies and should not be evaluated in the same way. A whole-institution platform succeeds when volume and cost come down and routine answers are accurate. Student Compass succeeds when a student in a misconduct case, an extenuating circumstances crisis, an appeal or a complaint ends the conversation talking to the right person, whether or not that takes longer than a self-service answer would have done. Its scope is deliberately narrow, covering the processes discussed in this paper and a handful of other student journeys that impact on belonging.

These journeys are already identified in the wider Student Compass question bank, rather than the full breadth of student-facing queries a general-purpose platform is built to absorb. The whole institution platforms increasingly market themselves as more than a chatbot. The distinction that matters is not the marketing claim but whether it holds up process by process, and for the high stakes processes in this paper it is the deliberately narrow, 'human decency' first design of a bespoke character, not the breadth of a whole-institution platform, that does the work.

This difference carries through to governance and ownership, set out in section 5. A whole institution platform is typically owned by IT or digital services and reported on through efficiency and satisfaction metrics. Student Compass needs joint ownership with student services leadership, the Students' Union and any other relevant service, and success measured against the belonging outcomes in section 1 rather than support ticket reduction.

The two are not necessarily in competition. Where an institution already runs, or is considering, a whole institution platform, Student Compass's role is to be the considered, narrow layer for the small number of highest-stakes journeys, potentially sitting alongside that infrastructure rather than duplicating it, so the procurement conversation does not need to be an either / or discussion. The ability to involve student interns in the Student Compass Character development is also an important factor to consider which is outlined in section 5.4.

Student Compass in practice

Student Compass does. Explain university processes in plain language; explain what happens next; help students prepare for a human conversation; identify the appropriate service or person; reduce unnecessary repetition; and escalate when distress, risk or confusion is apparent.

Student Compass does not. Decide the outcome of a misconduct case; assess whether an appeal has merit; judge a complaint; provide clinical judgement; replace Students' Union advice; or replace professional or specialist support.

A successful interaction. The student understands what happens next and is connected to the right person. The AI should not be measured by how long it keeps the student talking.

4. What the evidence says

Jisc's 2025 student perceptions research found that many students avoid AI altogether not from disinterest but from fear that any use will be classed as cheating, alongside a lack of clarity in institutional guidance, an ongoing challenge in these processes that is likely worsening as fewer

staff remain to explain them in person. The Advance HE StudentXGenAI survey, led by Stephen Gow and Sam Illingworth, found that the biggest factors discouraging students from using AI are a wish to do their own work and a distrust of whether AI is accurate.

A transparent, simple explanation of what a well-governed Student Compass character can and cannot would address those concerns. The HEPI Student Generative AI Survey 2026 found that institutional support for AI has not kept pace with student use, and separately that around fifteen per cent of students are already using AI for companionship or to address loneliness. This is precisely the risk a guiding hand character is designed to avoid, in contrast to a companion, assistant or adviser that could deepen rather than resolve this increasingly impacting issue.

The question of what a responsible AI character should and should not do can be found within the Times Higher Education's April 2026 piece by Michael Cowling and Joseph Crawford. They set out a playbook for GenAI in student services: appropriate for low-risk procedural explanation and rehearsing what a student wants to say before a human conversation, never appropriate as a stand-in for clinical judgement, a counsellor, or a default replacement for human contact. AMOSSHE's own Beyond the chatbot case studies, from the University of Galway's Cara through to Sheffield Hallam's Hallam Helper, show institutions already treating AI as an extension of existing student services teams rather than a replacement for them.

Paul LeBlanc's Reclaiming Purpose: The University in an AI World, published by Wiley in July 2026, adds further insight and building on his concept of 'mattering' from his 2023 book 'Broken'. Speaking on Inside Higher Ed's podcast The Key in September 2026, LeBlanc argued that AI should push universities away from treating education as knowledge transfer and towards what he calls human flourishing, freeing capacity for the human, relational work he believes will define a future care economy of jobs built around helping and uplifting other people. A guiding hand character that gets a distressed student to a real adviser rather than absorbing the conversation itself is a small but direct expression of that same principle, and a useful one to consider weighing in terms of whether AI belongs in this part of student services at all.

5. Governing the character

The EU AI Act is not directly applicable to UK universities, but the ethical principles that shaped it, developed by the European Commission's High-Level Expert Group on AI and carried through into the Act's own recitals, give AMOSSHE members, student leaders and PVCs a ready vocabulary for governing an AI character in a space this sensitive. Three principles map cleanly onto the processes discussed above: accountability, fairness, and what this paper calls human decency, the Act's own language of respecting human dignity and personal autonomy. A fourth, practical question, who actually builds the thing, sits alongside them.

5.1 Accountability

Every escalation Student Compass makes, and every case where it does not escalate but perhaps should have, needs to be auditable. This means a visible owner for the character, most usefully the student services leadership working jointly with Students' Union, rather than a system that reports only to a product or IT team. This means embedding a routine review of transcripts where a student mentioned misconduct, extenuating circumstances, an appeal or a

complaint, to check the character routed them appropriately. And it means a clear, human route of redress if a student feels the character misdirected them, mirroring the human oversight the AI Act's own principles require for any system operating in a high-stakes context.

5.2 Fairness

wonkhe's research found that disabled students already rely on AI to fill gaps that formal adjustments have not closed, and that the students least able to self-advocate through an unclear process are disproportionately the same students already disadvantaged elsewhere. Fairness here means proactively designing Student Compass so a first in family student, an international student unfamiliar with UK appeals conventions, or a disabled student who finds a phone call harder than a written prompt, gets the same quality of route to a human as a confident, well networked peer would find unaided. It also means auditing the character's own responses for consistency, so a query about extenuating circumstances phrased hesitantly gets the same clear routing as one phrased confidently.

5.3 Human decency

This is the principle most at risk of appearing absent in misconduct, extenuating circumstances, appeals and complaints where a student is most likely to be frightened, ashamed or grieving. Human decency means the character never implies it can judge a misconduct case, assess grounds for appeal, or evaluate a complaint, and never lingers in conversation with a distressed student when a human is what they actually need. It also means simple things done well: acknowledging distress briefly and warmly rather than clinically, never asking a student to repeat a painful story to the AI before repeating it again to a human, and treating the handover to a person as the successful outcome of the interaction, not a fallback for when the AI reaches its limits.

5.4 Co-production with students

The three principles above propose who is accountable once the Student Compass Character is live. They say less about who builds it in the first place. Our recommendation is that the content, tone and even the name of the character should be developed jointly with students, most practically through a paid student internship sitting inside student services or the Students' Union, rather than commissioned entirely by staff and handed to students as a finished product. There are many examples across universities of success using this approach.

As well as giving student interns direct experience of specifying, testing and refining a live AI product used across their own institution rather than a generic placement, this approach also gives the character credibility with the student body it exists to serve, in a way a staff only developed character cannot replicate. Student interns are sometimes better placed than staff to catch tone, phrasing and cultural assumptions that would not occur to a team drafting the question bank alone. Character co-production is likely to be beneficial for any student interacting with it.

This extends to the name itself. Student Compass is a working title used throughout this paper, not a fixed brand, and there is a reasonable case that the final name, along with the character's visual identity and voice, should be decided in consultation with the student interns a wider student group and the Students' Union rather than settled in advance by the institution commissioning the work.

6. Where this connects to the wider student experience

Reducing confusion around misconduct, extenuating circumstances, appeals and complaints does not sit in isolation from the rest of student experience strategy. This is where a guiding hand character can support some of the priorities AMOSSHE members are already accountable for.

Employability strategy increasingly emphasises the human, relational skills Paul LeBlanc argues will matter most in an AI-reshaped labour market, and a character that consistently models connecting students to real people rather than substituting for them is practising that same principle in miniature, before the co-production route begins.

Imperatives like the Disabled Student Commitment or meeting OIAHE expectations by providing fair, low-barrier routing through exactly the kind of dense, jargon-heavy process that disabled and international students report finding hardest to navigate unaided can be addressed. Where a university already has a Student Partnership Agreement or equivalent jointly owned statement of priorities with its Students' Union, these Student Compass aided processes are a natural, concrete place to point to when demonstrating that the agreement is being delivered rather than simply signed.

7. What this means in practice

- For AMOSSHE members and student services teams: you can build the misconduct, extenuating circumstances, appeals and complaints entries in the question bank around explaining process and routing to a named human, never around assessing the substance of a case. For quality assurance you can review transcripts regularly for missed escalations.
- For student leaders and Students' Union officers: you can hold joint ownership of the content bank for these and treat the student internship route as the initial mechanism for that ownership, since a character built with students, not just reviewed by them, will be trusted in a way a finished institutional product will not.
- For pro vice chancellors with a student experience remit: you can evaluate the character against accountability, fairness and human decency explicitly, with a named owner, regular equity audits of who it is and is not reaching, and a standing rule that any sign of distress, risk or confusion defaults to a human rather than further AI conversation.
- Across all stakeholders: you can treat a successful interaction as one that ends with a student connected to a real person, not one that keeps a student talking to the character for longer.

These points sit alongside the design principles, system prompt and escalation rules already set out in the Student Compass Character development to date which comprises of a three-part response structure as follows:

- acknowledge briefly,
- connect to a human,
- offer one short follow-up

Leadership takeaway

The proposition. Student Compass should be judged not by how effectively it keeps students within an AI system, but by how effectively it helps them reach the right human.

For universities considering this approach.

Five questions should help your consideration of deploying the Student Compass AI Character:

1. which high-stakes student journeys create the greatest procedural confusion ?;
2. where does a student need a human rather than an automated answer ?;
3. who owns the character and is accountable when it gets something wrong ?;
4. how will students and the Students' Union participate in its development? ;
5. and what evidence will demonstrate that the character is improving access to human support rather than replacing it?

A student journey: from confusion to connection

9:12pm — A student opens an email notifying that they are being investigated for academic misconduct.

9:18pm — They open Student Compass and asks what happens next.

9:19pm — It explains the process in plain language, clarifies what the student needs to do next and identifies the appropriate independent/student support route.

9:24pm — The student knows what the next step is and has a named human service to contact.

The AI Character has not resolved the case. It has made the human system easier to reach and provides certainty.

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