

Embracing trauma-informed approaches in higher education: more than just a passing trend

This blog was kindly authored by [Joanna McCloughry](#), freelance consultant and trainer in trauma-informed approaches.

There is no universally accepted definition of trauma; however, the word 'trauma' comes from the Greek word meaning 'wound'. It is an emotional wound we cannot see, which has far-reaching impacts on both individuals, university communities and wider society. It is [estimated](#) that over half of students studying at UK universities have experienced at least one form of [adverse childhood experiences](#) (ACE) or trauma, such as abuse, neglect, or experiencing or witnessing violence. Certain groups, such as young people who grow up in social deprivation, women, LGBTQI+ communities, ethnic and racial minorities, and people with disabilities, are more likely to experience multiple forms of trauma before they even get to university. It's crucial to recognise that the process of being marginalised or discriminated against can itself be a traumatic experience for these groups.

Prevalence in higher education

A ground-breaking study conducted by the University of East London (UEL), has revealed significant insights into the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences among its undergraduate students. The findings in [their study](#) are striking:

1. A substantial majority (79%) of UEL students reported experiencing at least one adverse event during childhood.
2. More than half (51%) of the students surveyed indicated they had endured three or more such adversities.
3. One particularly alarming statistic showed that 18.9% of UEL students reported experiencing sexual abuse during childhood, nearly triple the rate of 6.3% reported in the general UK population.

Trauma is now thought to be the largest public health issue facing our children and young people [today](#), the scale of which has been exacerbated post Covid-19. We now have cohorts of students entering university settings who have had their adolescence characterised by educational disruption, social isolation, loss, uncertainty and anxiety. Additionally, students may also face academic stress, financial pressures, or social isolation that exacerbate existing trauma or create new traumatic experiences. The findings of UEL's study highlight the importance of understanding and addressing the impact of childhood adversities on university students.

Impact on learning and engagement

Trauma is best understood by looking at how people adapt to cope with difficult experiences, rather than focusing on the difficult events themselves. These adaptations can mean that students who have experienced trauma are especially prone to difficulty in [self-regulation](#), negative thinking, being on high alert, difficulty trusting adults, and inappropriate social interactions. Students often haven't learned to express emotions healthily and instead show their distress through aggression, avoidance, shutting down, or other behaviours which may affect their ability to thrive in higher education settings. These actions can feel antagonistic to staff who don't understand the root cause of the student's behaviour, which can lead to misunderstandings, ineffective interactions, loss of productivity, engagement and higher drop-out rates.

Neurobiologically, students can't learn if they don't feel well-connected and [psychologically safe](#). When we are proactive and responsive to the needs of students suffering from traumatic stress and make small changes to our interactions and the environment that foster a feeling of connection and safety, it makes a huge difference in students' ability to learn and succeed. This is the basic under-lying principle of a trauma-informed approach to education.

Trauma-informed principles

A trauma-informed [approach](#) reflects adherence to six key principles rather than a prescribed set of practices or procedures. These principles seek to recognise and address the experience of the loss of safety, trust, choice and connection when people experience trauma particularly in their early years as their brains are rapidly growing. With increasing take-up across [sectors](#) these principles provide consistency and shared language around how to implement services in ways that don't retraumatise people. These principles guide organisations to work in ways that encourage relationships, and resilience so that students can develop the tools for independence that will benefit them beyond their university years. The now widely recognised principles include:

- **Safety:** Physical, emotional and psychological safety is a priority for a trauma-informed approach, and a crucial factor enabling individuals to seek support.
- **Trustworthiness:** People who have experienced trauma and adversity may mistrust other people or services as in the past people in positions of power have let them down or abused their trust. Building trust involves being consistent and reliable, and doing what you say you will do.
- **Choice:** Experiences of trauma and adversity can cause feelings of powerlessness. Even in settings where being able to provide choice may seem very limited, providing some choice wherever possible can give some sense of control back to individuals.

- **Collaboration:** *People need to be involved in decisions that affect them. It is important for organisations to identify areas where there is a culture of 'doing to' people and where there may be opportunities to collaborate and include people in the decisions being made about their lives.*
- The above principles are applied with the aim of **empowering** and **including** people who may previously have been marginalised or excluded.

Trauma-informed education

The field of trauma-informed education has grown significantly over the past two decades, with consistent evidence supporting its effectiveness across various [educational settings](#). A trauma-informed approach to education seeks to create a psychologically safe learning environment that recognises the impact of trauma on students, promotes resilience, and adapts strategies to support all learners' emotional and academic needs. [Carello and Butler \(2015\)](#) argue educators should '*recognize that any student may be (or become) vulnerable, and we therefore have a responsibility to prevent possible harm.*' It is essential that educators understand the prevalence of trauma among their student populations, the possible presentations in behaviour and the lifelong impacts of these early negative experiences and seek to interact with students in ways that do no further harm.

Training faculty and staff is critical to creating more compassionate cultures within higher education so that trauma-informed principles can be implemented in practice. Carello and Butler (2015) demonstrated the power of this approach in their [study](#) of social work education. They found that when faculty were trained in trauma-informed approaches, students reported feeling more supported and better able to manage course content. This led to a significant 12% decrease in course withdrawal rates. While their study focused on social work, the principles can be applied across disciplines, highlighting the potential for trauma-informed approaches to improve student retention and success across the university.

Wide-ranging benefits

The benefits of trauma-informed approaches in education are wide-ranging and well-documented. In terms of mental health and well-being, [researchers](#) found that students exposed to trauma-informed approaches showed a 20% reduction in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and reported significantly improved coping skills. While their study was conducted in a school setting, the implications for higher education are clear, especially considering the mental health challenges many university students face.

Whilst higher education settings may harbour concerns over resource and cost implications of training staff to understand the root causes of students behaviour and presentation, there are [research findings](#) which show the potential long-term cost savings through improved student retention and reduced crisis interventions. Research by [van der Kolk, \(2015\)](#) suggests that these approaches can help students develop better emotional regulation and interpersonal skills, which are fundamental for success in adulthood. Higher education settings have a unique opportunity to bridge the transition to independence which particularly for the students we are now seeing who have had their adolescence defined by stress and disruption, is more important than ever.

Conclusion

The evidence is clear: trauma-informed approaches have significant potential to improve outcomes in higher education. From the increased retention rates demonstrated by Carello and Butler (2015) to the improved academic performance and well-being shown by [Brunzell et al.\(2016\)](#), and the mental health benefits highlighted by [Mendelson et al. \(2015\)](#), the positive impacts are undeniable. As we move forward, it's crucial that higher education institutions embrace these evidence-based practices, adapting them to the unique needs of their student populations. In doing so, we can create more inclusive, and effective learning environments that enable all students to thrive independently, regardless of their past experiences.

Joanna McCloughry is an experienced trauma-responsive facilitator and consultant, offering a range of services including training, consultation, and program development to help organisations implement trauma-informed principles in practice effectively. With over a decade of expertise and a MSc in Conflict Resolution and Mediation, she brings a unique blend of academic knowledge and practical experience to her work across diverse sectors such as public health, social care, education, and criminal justice. Joanna's approach combines evidence-based practices with compassionate leadership, empowering individuals and organisations to create lasting, positive change.