



# Supporting Trauma-Informed Higher Education Practices

## STEP Project Newsletter #2

### Scoping Review

As a first step of our project, our aim was to gain an overview of how trauma-informed teaching is addressed in scientific literature. For this purpose, a scoping review was conducted.

#### What is a scoping review?

A scoping review is an established form of evidence-based research that aims to systematically map and structure a field of research. In contrast to classical systematic reviews or meta-analyses, a scoping review does not focus on answering narrowly defined questions (e.g., regarding the effectiveness of a specific intervention) but rather follows an exploratory approach. Its purpose is to “map” a research area: making visible which concepts, topics, and research approaches exist and how broad the field is (JBI, 2024; Peters et al., 2020).

Scoping reviews are particularly useful when a topic is complex, heterogeneous, or still under-researched. They provide an important foundation for guiding future research, contextualising existing knowledge, and supporting practice-oriented developments (JBI, 2024; Peters et al., 2020). The development and implementation of this scoping review were guided by the methodological criteria of the JBI.

#### What was our aim and which questions did we address?

The aim of our scoping review was to provide a systematic overview of how trauma-informed teaching and learning are conceptualised, implemented, and researched within European higher education institutions. As this is a relatively new and interdisciplinary field, a scoping review is particularly suitable for synthesising existing knowledge, clarifying key concepts, and comparing different research approaches and practical implementations.

A specific focus was placed on identifying and categorising concrete didactic strategies, teaching methods, and interventions described or applied in trauma-

informed teaching. At the same time, we aimed to explore which challenges (barriers) and supporting factors (enablers) are reported in the implementation of such approaches.

The findings of the review contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the current state of research and practice. Furthermore, they provide an important foundation for the next steps of the project - particularly for the development of our questionnaire and the identification of future research needs.

Based on this, we formulated the following main research question: What is known about trauma-informed teaching and learning practices in higher education institutions? This main question is further specified by the following sub-questions:

- Which didactic strategies, teaching methods or interventions have been described, implemented or evaluated?
- Which barriers and enablers to trauma-informed practices have been reported?
- Which gaps in the literature have been identified, and what future research is recommended?

### How did we proceed?

The scoping review was conducted in accordance with the methodological recommendations of the JBI Reviewer's Manual, which represents an internationally recognised standard for evidence-based literature reviews.

First, the aim of the review and the main research question were defined. Based on this, clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established. For example, only publications with accessible full texts, that had undergone peer review, and that were published in German or English were included. Studies focusing on non-higher education contexts (e.g., schools) were excluded.

In the next step, an initial literature search was conducted in three selected databases. The identified publications were then screened at a preliminary level to refine the search terms. Based on this, a comprehensive literature search was carried out across a total of ten databases. In addition, further relevant publications were identified through the reference lists of previously selected studies.

In total, 1,439 publications were identified. Of these, 1,270 were excluded before the screening process due to lack of relevance or failure to meet formal criteria. The remaining 169 publications were then systematically screened. Finally, 48 studies were included in the data extraction and analysed in detail.

## Key findings

The findings of our scoping review indicate that trauma-informed teaching in higher education is still a relatively young and dynamically developing field of research. Most of the analysed studies were published in recent years and are strongly concentrated in specific countries, particularly the United Kingdom and the USA.

One key finding is that trauma-informed approaches are currently implemented mainly at the level of everyday teaching practice. Most commonly, measures aim at creating supportive and psychologically safe learning environments. These include respectful interactions between lecturers and students, transparent communication about course content, and flexible participation and assessment options. Such relational and practice-oriented approaches appear to play a crucial role in students' well-being and engagement.

In addition, more specific didactic approaches were identified, including creative and reflective methods such as writing exercises or arts-based formats. These approaches allow students to process challenging experiences without having to disclose them explicitly. More comprehensive programmes, such as trauma-informed curricula or targeted support initiatives for specific student groups (e.g., students with refugee backgrounds), also show promising potential, although they have not yet been extensively evaluated.

Overall, the review shows that a variety of promising approaches and good practice examples already exist. However, these are often not yet systematically implemented or comprehensively evaluated. While the existing research provides important initial insights, it also highlights significant gaps, particularly regarding the effectiveness of specific interventions, long-term outcomes, and the institutional integration of trauma-informed teaching.

## Next steps?

Based on the findings of the review, questionnaires will be developed next to collect data from higher education experts and students in each country.

## References

Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) (2024). *10. Scoping Reviews*.

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