



Supporting Trauma-Informed Higher Education Practices

STEP Project Newsletter #3

Developing Our Questionnaires

As part of our aim to strengthen trauma-informed teaching in European higher education, we need to understand the real-life experiences, perspectives and needs of the people at the heart of our higher education institutions: the students who are learning and the lecturers who are teaching. Over the past few months, the STEP consortium has therefore developed two comprehensive questionnaires: one specifically for students in higher education and one for lecturers.

This newsletter offers you a look behind the scenes and shows how these tools were developed.

From First Draft to Final Instrument

The questionnaires were developed under the coordination of FH JOANNEUM (Austria) as a collaborative process that brought together the diverse expertise and different contexts of the five partner institutions.

The process began with an initial project meeting in February 2026, at which the methodological approach and the overall structure of the questionnaires for students and teaching staff were discussed and agreed upon.

The questions themselves were based on suggestions from all five partner countries. Rather than being designed in isolation by a single team, the questionnaires underwent several rounds of iterative feedback. Each partner contributed their expertise to ensure that the questions were relevant, meaningful and understandable across different cultural, linguistic and institutional contexts.

In addition, a sampling plan was drawn up which balances statistical reliability with practical feasibility.

Implementation, Translation, and Data Protection

Once the questionnaires had been finalised, FH JOANNEUM transferred them to the LimeSurvey platform.

To ensure accessibility in all partner countries, the questionnaires were translated into the respective national languages of the participating institutions: German, Finnish, Croatian and Ukrainian. The translations were carried out partly by members of the project team and partly with the support of AI translation tools, with all translations subsequently reviewed and verified by the respective partners for accuracy and nuance.

Between 22 and 26 May 2026, the partners carried out a final practical review by completing the questionnaires directly in LimeSurvey, testing each item for functionality, clarity and flow.

Equally important was compliance with ethical and legal standards. In consultation with the FHJ's data protection officer, a data protection notice was drawn up, confirming that the planned procedure fully complies with applicable data protection regulations. This document was also translated into all the languages of the partner countries to ensure that every participant could make an informed decision about their participation.

Inside the Questionnaires: What We Are Asking

Both surveys are designed to capture complementary perspectives: those of the learners and those of the lecturers. When developing the questionnaires and formulating the individual questions, special attention was paid to preventing participants from being re-traumatised. Below, we provide an overview of the structure and key themes of each questionnaire.

Lecturer Questionnaire

The lecturer survey begins with sociodemographic questions covering age, gender, academic qualification, institution type, discipline, country, teaching hours per week and professional experience in higher education. It then moves on to four thematic

sections:

- Experiences with trauma-related challenges explores how often lecturers encounter students from diverse cultural or migration backgrounds, whether they observe signs of emotional distress, hypervigilance, or disengagement in their classrooms, and how they perceive their own role in supporting students' psychological safety, including their uncertainties, boundary concerns, and feelings of adequacy.
- Knowledge and understanding of trauma-informed teaching assesses lecturers' familiarity with the concept, the contexts in which they have encountered it, and their understanding of core trauma-informed principles.
- Current practices and institutional conditions examine lecturers' self-perceived competence in managing emotionally challenging situations, such as remaining calm, setting boundaries, and recognising when to refer students, as well as the institutional landscape: whether their university has clear policies, offers professional development, fosters interdepartmental collaboration, and provides safe spaces and referral pathways.
- Institutional and training needs asks lecturers what additional training, guidelines, and structures would help them, with topics ranging from an introduction to trauma's psychological and educational impact, to managing emotionally challenging classroom situations, to self-care and prevention of secondary traumatization. Open-ended items invite suggestions on how training should be designed and what strategies should be considered locally.

Student Questionnaire

The student survey mirrors this structure, beginning with sociodemographic information including age, gender, country of study, institution type, subject area, degree level, and year of enrolment. Importantly, it also gathers contextual information relevant to trauma-informed teaching: migration background, whether the language of instruction matches the student's native language, and whether the student has been personally affected by conflict or forced displacement. It then moves on to four thematic sections:

- Experiences in the university context explores students' sense of belonging, their ability to participate in class without fear, and whether they feel supported and recognised by lecturers.

- Knowledge and understanding of trauma-informed teaching asks students whether they have heard of the concept and whether they have ever attended a course where trauma-informed teaching was visibly applied. An open-ended item invites students to describe a personal example.
- Current practices and institutional conditions surveys students' perceptions of their university as a whole: whether the institution is trauma-informed, provides supportive procedures, actively raises awareness, and offers visible support services. It also captures perceptions of lecturer behaviour, cultural sensitivity, respectful interaction, proactive content warnings, and flexibility during stressful periods.
- Competence assessment and training needs shifts the perspective to the future: students rate the importance of specific trauma-informed practices and indicate whether they believe training and structural changes are needed at their institution. Open-ended questions invite students to propose what teacher training should include and what additional practices their university should adopt.

Looking Ahead

Now that both surveys are online, data collection is underway in all five partner countries: Finland, Germany, Austria, Croatia and Ukraine. The responses gathered will provide one of the first cross-national insights into how trauma-informed teaching is experienced and understood within European higher education.

These findings will feed directly into the next key milestone of the STEP project: the development of a research-based curriculum, a practical guide and training materials to support lecturers in creating psychologically safe and inclusive learning environments.