STEP | Supporting Trauma-Informed Higher Education Practices

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STEP Project Newsletter #4

From Data Collection to First Insights from Lecturers Survey

The STEP project has moved from questionnaire development to data collection and analysis. Student and lecturer surveys have now been completed across all five partner countries, providing valuable insights into trauma-informed teaching, psychological safety, inclusion, and support in European higher education. The findings will inform the development of an evidence-based curriculum, practical guidance, and training materials.

The dataset from the lecturers' survey consists of responses from 245 university lecturers from Germany, Austria, Ukraine, Finland and Croatia. Participants represented diverse disciplines and institutions, with an average of 15.7 years of teaching experience. The results highlight the growing relevance of trauma-informed teaching: 94% of lecturers reported teaching students from diverse cultural, linguistic, or religious backgrounds, while 87% work with students who may have experienced conflict, displacement, migration-related stress, or other significant life challenges.

Trauma-Informed Teaching Is Widely Considered Important

One of the key findings of the survey is that lecturers view trauma-informed teaching as an important aspect of higher education. The overall score for the perceived relevance of trauma-informed teaching was high (M = 7.76/10), with the strongest support reported in Ukraine and Finland. Respondents generally agreed that creating psychologically safe learning environments is part of their professional role and that student wellbeing is closely linked to learning and academic success. Lecturers also reported regularly encountering signs of emotional distress, stress, disengagement, and participation difficulties among students, particularly in Ukraine and Finland.

Awareness of the Concept Remains Limited

While the principles of trauma-informed teaching were widely endorsed, awareness of the concept itself remains relatively low. Only 29% of lecturers had heard of the term

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"trauma-informed teaching" before taking part in the survey, while 58% had not encountered the term previously. Awareness was highest in Ukraine (52%) and lowest in Germany (17%). Those familiar with the concept had usually learned about it through colleagues, professional development activities, conferences, or academic literature rather than through institutional policies or university guidelines. Nevertheless, respondents demonstrated a moderate to high level of knowledge about trauma and its educational implications, including its impact on learning, behaviour, emotional regulation, engagement, and academic achievement.

Supportive Structures Matter

The survey indicates that higher education staff recognise the importance of creating supportive and inclusive learning environments and generally feel capable of addressing student wellbeing within their professional role. At the same time, respondents highlighted the need for additional guidance, resources, and professional development to strengthen confidence in responding to complex student situations.

The findings also suggest that the successful implementation of trauma-informed approaches requires a broader institutional commitment. Participants emphasised the value of clear support structures, shared responsibilities, and collaboration between teaching staff and student support services.

Strong Demand for Training

A strong demand for professional development emerged across all partner countries. The overall training-needs score was high (M = 7.48/10), particularly in Finland and Ukraine. Respondents identified several priority areas for future training, including:

- recognising and responding to signs of trauma,
- understanding trauma's psychological and educational impacts,
- managing emotionally challenging situations,
- promoting self-care and preventing secondary traumatisation, and
- applying evidence-based strategies and guidelines.

Lecturers emphasised that training should be practical, interactive, and grounded in real-life examples. They also stressed that trauma-informed teaching should become part of ongoing professional development and institutional strategies rather than remain

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a stand-alone initiative.

Conclusion

The STEP lecturer survey premiliminary findings demonstrate that higher education educators increasingly recognise the impact of trauma, stress, and adverse life experiences on students' learning and wellbeing. Although awareness of the term trauma-informed teaching remains limited, many lecturers already apply trauma-informed principles in their everyday practice, often intuitively rather than systematically. The findings also reveal substantial needs for additional training, clearer institutional policies, stronger referral pathways, and more comprehensive organisational support.

Overall, the results suggest that trauma-informed higher education requires a whole-institution approach that combines educator competence, institutional commitment, accessible support services, and a shared commitment to creating psychologically safe and inclusive learning environments for all students. More results will be available in later publications.

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