

Trauma-Informed Complaint Handling

National Student Ombudsman

Empowering students, ensuring fairness



**Friday, 27 March 2026
12:00 – 13:30pm (AEDT)**

Our service

5493 contacts

4494 complaints

72% resolved

40% International students*

14% Students with disability*

2% First Nations students*

2% relate to gender-based violence

2% relate to racism and racial discrimination

*of those who identified through web form



Issues we hear about most

Course administration **31%**



Unmet academic or misconduct **20%**



Teaching and learning **19%**



Fees and finance **16%**



Discrimination, racism, or inadequate support **5%**



Provider administration **5%**



Health and safety **4%**



What we are hearing from students

- Responses to trauma disclosures are described as **procedural, dismissive, or minimising.**
- Students are **denied adjustments** to support engagement in their education.
- Trauma responses are **not recognised or understood.**



Outcomes students are seeking

- The ability to **continue their studies**
- **Processes** that incorporate trauma-informed approaches
- Improved **responses to disclosures**
- **Staff training** in trauma-informed practices



Kim Copeland

Kim is a consultant, trainer and facilitator with a clinical background and extensive experience in university conduct and investigation work.

She has managed university conduct processes, student and staff investigations and delivers training in trauma-informed investigations and interviewing across multiple sectors.

Kim specialises in applying trauma-informed approaches across all aspects of investigative practice. She supports institutions to improve reporting pathways, strengthen investigation models and build staff capability to respond to complex and sensitive matters with confidence and care.



CONTENT



- **Complaints handling**
- **Impacts of stress and trauma**
- **Trauma-informed fundamentals**
- **Accountability and trauma-informed practice**
- **Trauma-informed complaints processes**
- **Communicating outcomes**

COMPLAINTS HANDLING



Complaints handling refers to how an organisation:

- **Receives and acknowledges concerns and reports**
- **Decides how they should be addressed**
- **Supports the people involved**
- **Takes appropriate action**
- **Communicates decisions and next steps**

It spans:

- **Early resolution**
- **Informal and formal response**
- **Investigations (where required)**
- **Follow-up, and**
- **Learn and improve**

INVESTIGATING A COMPLAINT

An investigation is a fair, structured and evidence-based process used to determine what has occurred and how university policy applies.

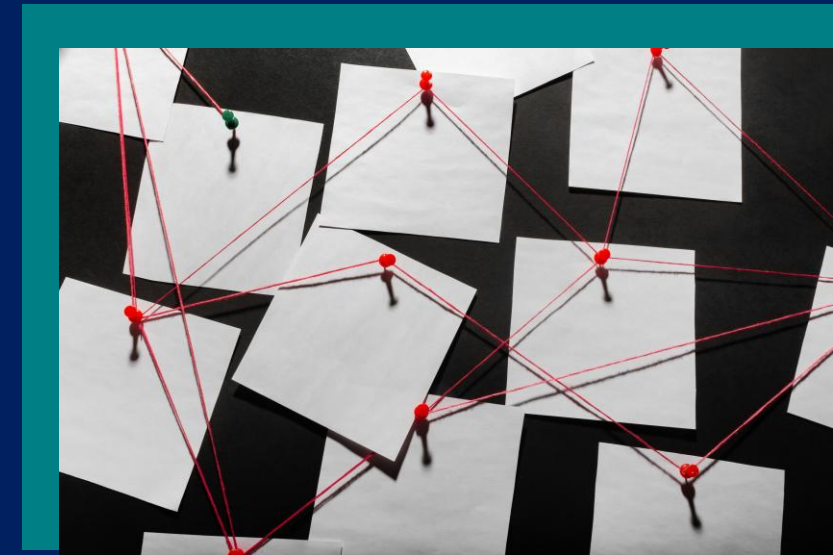
PURPOSE

- To establish relevant facts using the civil standard of proof (balance of probabilities)
- To make decisions that are fair, transparent and reasonable
- To support appropriate decision-making under policy

PROCESS

A structured approach that involves:

- Planning and preparation
- Gathering and assessing relevant information
- Considering all evidence and providing opportunities to be heard
- Recording findings and reasons





I wish I never said anything.

Susan said making a complaint was the worst thing she ever did. Should I?



TRAUMA-INFORMED COMPLAINTS HANDLING:

- Acknowledge the impacts of stress and trauma
- Prioritise safety and wellbeing
- Ensure procedural fairness
- Aim to do no more harm
- Increase trust in your processes and outcomes



I wouldn't recommend anyone report anything.

The process was worse than what happened.



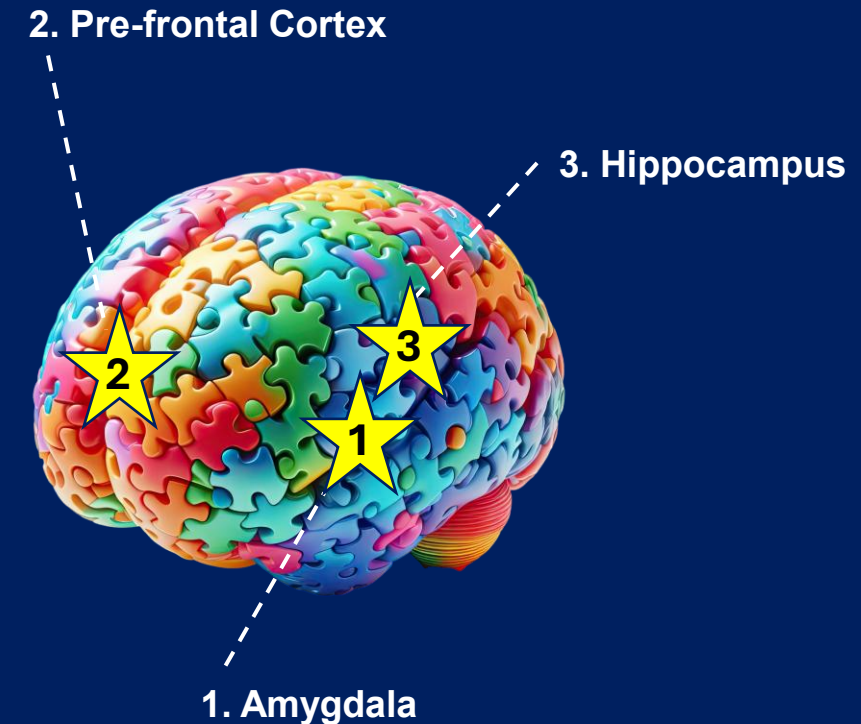
IMPACTS OF STRESS/TRAUMA

Physiology

- Activate the body's threat response (fight, flight, freeze)
- Increase stress hormones (e.g. adrenaline, cortisol)
- Divert energy away from reflection and reasoning
- Can affect sleep, concentration and emotional regulation

Neurobiology

- The amygdala (threat detection) becomes more reactive
- The prefrontal cortex (planning, reasoning) works less efficiently
- The hippocampus (memory) may store information differently
- Memory and recall may be impacted



***Under stress or trauma, people's brains prioritise survival over precision.
This can shapes how information is stored, recalled, shared and processed.***

TRAUMA-INFORMED FOUNDATIONS

01

PREVALENCE

Understand the widespread prevalence of trauma, and assume trauma exists.

02

PREVENTION

Prevent re-traumatisation by developing safe systems and processes.

03

REFRAME

Ask, "What happened to you?", not "What is wrong with you?"

04

IMPACTS

Understand the impacts of trauma, including physiology and neurobiology.

05

ACKNOWLEDGE

Recognise that past experiences influence safety, trust and engagement.

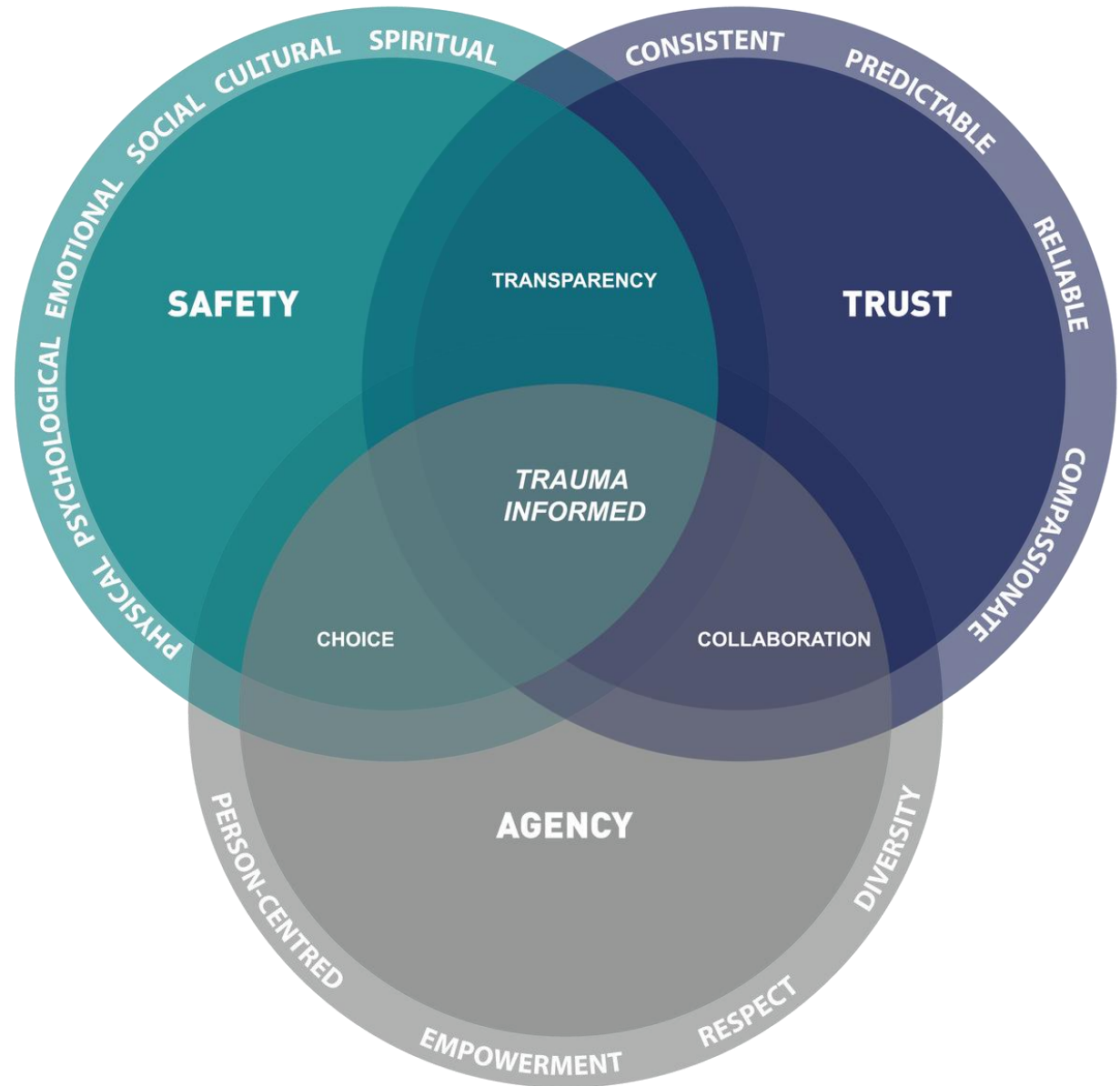
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CONTEXT

Address cultural, historical and gender dynamics.

TRAUMA- INFORMED PRINCIPLES

- Apply universally
- Protect procedural fairness
- Improve evidence quality
- Support consistent decision-making



TRAUMA-INFORMED MYTHS AND FACTS

MYTH

Trauma-informed practice only focuses on complainants.

Trauma-informed practice is “soft” and avoids hard questions.

People misuse trauma in the process.

FACTS

- Trauma-informed practice is universal.
- The same process, options, and supports apply to complainants, respondents, and witnesses.

- Trauma-informed practice does not stop us seeking information.
- It changes how we manage complaints and how we ask questions, but it still relies on evidence and facts.

- Trauma can affect participation; it does not change thresholds.
- We reduce unnecessary burden so participation is possible; the complaints process and decision standards remain unchanged.

TRAUMA-INFORMED MYTHS AND FACTS

MYTH

Trauma-informed practice believes the complainant and is biased against the respondent.

Trauma-informed practice excuses conduct / doesn't hold people accountable.

Trauma-informed practice lowers the standard of proof.

FACTS

- Trauma-informed practice doesn't pre-decide outcomes.
- It aims for safety, trust and agency for everyone and uses techniques to provide the best chance of participation and recall.

- Trauma-informed practice enables engagement, participation, and safety while still applying policy standards and proportionate outcomes.

- The standard of proof doesn't change.
- Trauma-informed practice improves trust in the process and the quality of information, so decisions can meet the same standard.

ACCOUNTABILITY & TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE

- **Focus on behaviour and impact**
- **Operate within the boundaries of policy**
- **Adjust the process, not the standards or expectations**
- **Support engagement and participation**
- **Use proportionate outcomes alongside appropriate supports**
- **Safe, fair and reasonable**



Safety and fairness work together.

A trauma-informed approach supports accountability without changing standards.

1. PREPARE AND PLAN



- Clarify scope of complaint and/or investigation
- Identify relevant policy/ies and procedures
- Plan supports available to all parties
- Anticipate risk; be ready to adjust as you engage
- Plan logistics
- Choose proportionate information paths

***Good planning reduces harm before the first contact.
It sets expectations, lines up support, and reduces re-traumatisation.***

2. ENGAGE AND EXPLAIN



- Explain what will happen and why
- Describe roles, including the support person
- Offer choice, agency and options
- Normalise stress, gaps in memory and questions
- Explain supports and how to provide information later
- Provide sufficient particulars to respond
- Ask if there are any questions or concerns

***How we explain the process shapes how safe it feels.
Trauma-informed engagement gives agency and sets clear expectations.***

3. GATHER AN ACCOUNT



- Ask where the person would like to begin
- Allow non-linear or partial accounts
- Remember stress and trauma can impact memory and recall
- Normalise pauses and breaks
- Advise how to provide information recalled after your meeting/interview
- Apply the same approach to everyone involved

Design the conditions for recall. You'll get more usable detail, fewer gaps, and clearer records to support defensible decisions.

4. ASK TRAUMA-INFORMED QUESTIONS



- Use plain English
- Keep to one idea per question
- Purpose first: Explain why before you ask
- Be curious: Listen first, then clarify
- Slow your pace and avoid stacking questions
- Reflect back to confirm understanding

Better questions lead to better evidence. Clear, purpose-led questions produce more detail, better recall, and fewer errors or re-contacts.

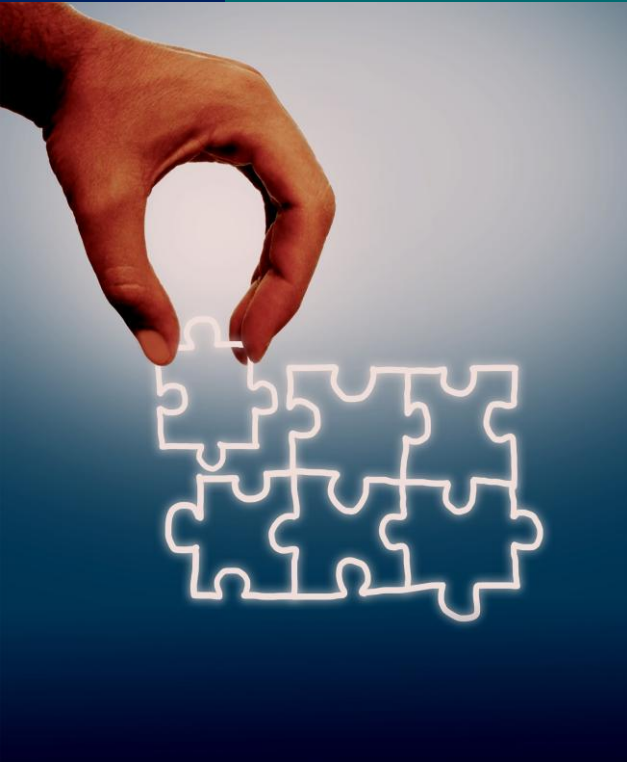
5. CLOSE AND COMMUNICATE



- Summarise your interaction
- Link next steps to policy, timelines and who will do what
- Explain how to add or correct information
- Explain support options
- Confirm how updates will be communicated (and by whom)
- Provide clear pathways for questions or concerns

End in a way people can continue. Acknowledge the process, encourage support-seeking, and keep the door open for more detail later.

6. PROVIDE THE OUTCOME



- Set context and purpose clearly
- State the outcome early and plainly
- Use neutral, precise language
- Acknowledge impact, regardless of outcome
- Explain reasons without re-arguing evidence
- Allow space for reaction
- Be clear about next steps, including review/appeal options

Be fair, transparent, and person-centred. State the outcome, link to evidence and policy, acknowledge impact, and outline what happens next.

7. EVALUATE AND REFLECT



- Reflect on how the interaction/investigation went
- Assess whether trauma-informed practice was applied
- Identify areas for improvement and learning
- Notice what went well and can be used next time
- Act if debriefing, advice or support would help
- Consider if you can contribute to prevention or reducing barriers

Reflect to care and prevent. Look after yourself, and build what you've learned into future cases to reduce avoidable harm.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION



Trauma-informed written communication will:

- **Assume students may be reading under stress or pressure**
- **Use plain English and clear structure**
- **State the purpose of the communication early**
- **Prioritise clarity over volume**
- **Break information into manageable sections**
- **Be mindful of timing**
- **Provide clear and realistic response timeframes**
- **Ensure tone supports engagement**
- **Check consistency across communications**

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