

Webinar Trauma-Informed Complaint Handling

Transcript

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Sarah Bendall

Hello, everyone.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the lands on which we meet. For me, that's the Wurundjeri, Woi Wurrung and Boonwurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation and I pay my respects to elders' past, present, and emerging, and extend that respect to any First Nations people here today.

I also warmly welcome everybody here today and congratulate you on giving you a time to better understand how to deliver trauma informed complaints handling services, wherever you might be on that journey, whether it's right at the beginning or more advanced.

My name is Sarah Bendall and I'm the First Assistant Ombudsman at the NSO and it is my very great pleasure to welcome you to our first webinar. And this one is focused on understanding how to deliver trauma-informed complaints handling services. I've been in complaints handling myself for about 20 years now and I can genuinely say that one of the most exciting developments over the last 20 years has been the recognition of the need to deliver trauma informed complaint handling services. So, it is really exciting to be here today to advance that conversation with you all.

I'm going to share a few slides that I have about the National Student Ombudsman, just because I'm conscious that not everyone here will know where we're up to in the journey of the National Student Ombudsman. So I'm going to share a little bit about what we're hearing from students in relation to complaints about higher education providers and what students have to say about trauma-informed complaints handling.

At this stage in the NSO's life, which dates back to February last year, we've received 5 and a half thousand contacts, which has translated into roughly 4 and a half thousand complaints. And we've resolved around 72% of those contacts so far. And this slide also gives you a sense of the student cohorts that are using the NSO service and the percentage of complaints relating to gender-based violence and racism. But I guess, you know, for this slide, I just wanted to emphasise that through all complaints, not just complaints about gender-based violence and racism, we hear students talking about concerns about the way that complaints themselves, regardless of the nature of complaints, are handled and some of the key things that we hear from students do relate to delivering trauma-informed services. The most common thing we hear is that

students don't feel that they've been listened to. But we also hear complaints from students about the actual process itself not making them feel safe.

This slide gives you a better sense of the nature of the complaints coming through the NSO service. And again, similar to what I was saying about the last slide, you can see here that the most common complaints are about what we call course administration. And incidentally, so that's things like delays or issues with course enrolments, transfers, deferrals, application of special consideration. If you partner course administration with fees and finance, which is also often an administrative activity, it's almost half of the complaints that come through the NSO's doors.

And I think while you might not necessarily believe you need to deliver a trauma-informed service about a complaint about course administration, I guess I would caution against that because we do see a very strong connexion in the NSO between course administration and students who may have suffered trauma or be suffering from trauma. You know, for example, there's a close connection between gender-based violence complaints and requests for deferral or withdrawal from courses. So, we, you know, we all need to be really mindful that students suffering from trauma can talk to you about complaints of a different nature.

I want to recognise at the outset before we talk about this slide that we know at the NSO that there's a really, there's a lot of great work being done by the higher education sector to better understand how to deliver trauma-informed services and, you know, the fact that we have, we're almost at the 500 mark for this webinar, demonstrates that there's a real keen interest in understanding how to deliver trauma-informed services better.

And so, with that in mind, we thought we would share here some of the experiences that students tell us to help how we shape our improvement journey. So, as you can see here, the main things that students talk about when they tell us that services could be delivered better is that responses to trauma disclosures are often described as procedural or they're dismissive or minimizing. So that's the student experience and also, students feel like they're unfairly denied adjustments when they explain the trauma that they've experienced and that the trauma itself is not identified, and by extension, processes are not safe or accessible. They're really the main themes.

Some suggestions from students that they would like to see us all do better is deliver a service that is more trauma informed, which enables them to continue with their studies and to change processes to be more trauma informed and in practise to have a better experience of engagement with the provider when a student has suffered trauma and I guess in order to achieve all of the above, to have staff training to make all of that happen.

It is now officially my very great pleasure to introduce our presenter today, Kim Copeland. Kim is a consultant, trainer and facilitator with a clinical background and

extensive experience in university conduct and investigation work. Kim manages, 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 processes and 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. And I can say that on my own journey to better understand how to deliver trauma-informed Complaints handling, I've been lucky enough to see Kim present a few times and I get something more out of it every time I hear Kim speak. So, she is an expert and we are all very lucky to have her with us today.

All right; that's it for me. I'm officially handing over. Thank you, Kim.



Kim Copeland

Thanks, Sarah.

What we're going to be covering today is a whole range of information. And I get asked often, what are the steps or what's the map to make sure we undertake a trauma-informed complaints process or investigation? And what I can say to people is it's not so much a map with very specific steps. That's what your policy and procedure do for you. They have the steps that you need to take. But the trauma-informed approach is about principles and practise that we can apply that give us the compass to navigate, depending on the situation and what it is that the person needs, to be able to apply our policy and our procedures in a trauma-informed way. So that's what I'm going to work you through today. We're going to talk about some of the fundamental underpinnings of what we need to understand to be able to apply that trauma-informed approach. And we'll look at different stages of complaints handling processes and investigations and highlight a few examples of what that might look like.

So let's get started with revisiting, I'm sure, for most of you, what we mean when we're talking about complaints handling to really set that foundation. Because when we talk about complaints handling, we're not talking only about formal investigations. We're talking about the whole process, the entire way that a university responds to a concern from the very first time a student might raise the concern or contact through those formal pathways right through to follow up and what we do after. Because not only is that important for you as the Complaints handlers, but to think about the student experience, that they don't necessarily see it as a series of discrete steps or understand who's doing them and exactly what they mean. It feels like one long process. So, everything from how they're acknowledged when they first raise a concern or a complaint to how things are explained or whether they feel engaged or supported and well communicated with is really significant when we think about trauma-

informed complaints handling. And what we know is that the first response matters. It sets the tone for how everything is going to go, how we'll set that first set of expectations or understanding of the process. And it really sets the tone for everything that happens right up to the outcome.

And what we know from evidence about trauma reform processes is that when they're well, they're done well, even if the outcome isn't what the student hoped for or expected, they will generally reflect that the process was okay and did no more harm. And I want you to think about that as we talk through today because trauma-informed processes are fair, they're procedurally fair, they follow all of the same processes of looking at the evidence available and obtaining information that's needed to help the decision maker make the decision that they need to. What they focus on is the experience of that process in many ways. So, complaints handling, as I've mentioned, spans everything from that early resolution, informal and formal responses, investigations where that's relevant and follow up. And good complaints handling doesn't end simply with closing a case. It looks at what have we learned?

Where could we improve? What's this complaint told us about our systems or our processes or where barriers might exist for students? We learn so much from complaints processes. And in fact, we can do a lot to influence prevention work as well when we really explore how they've worked. So how we design those processes actually either reduce confusion or stress, or they unintentionally add to it. So, we can learn a lot about that as we work through it. And A trauma-informed approach gives us a lot of hints in how we might do that.

Investigations are a component of complaints handling and I'll refer to them at different times today. And I'm going to use investigation in its broadest sense today of seeking information, sometimes speaking to people or looking at information. So, I will talk to you about trauma informed engagement or talking to someone about information, acknowledging that complaints processes have a whole range of ways that you might do that. So, when I refer to an investigation, I mean a fair, structured and evidence-based process that we use to determine what's occurred and how the university policy applies. Because investigations aren't about advocacy or punishment or any of those things, they're actually, as we know, about gathering the information to make defensible decisions under our policy. And trauma-informed approaches don't change that at all. What an investigation or a complaints' process also gives us is an opportunity to commence or to continue repair in the relationship between those involved and the university. And so, this is a really trauma informed approach and sometimes referred to as things like restorative approaches and how we look at maintaining a relationship and trust and looking at how are we going to move forward at the end of this right from the start.

Now, that's for a different day, but I do want to just park that, that it fits really nicely with trauma-informed approaches. And I also want to take the opportunity to remind you

that when we're talking about investigations or any complaints process, as you know, we're looking at the civil standard of proof administrative, so the balance of probabilities. Trauma-informed doesn't change that either. It's about fair and reasonable, transparent decision making. So, I want to be really clear that nothing changes in that when we're talking about trauma-informed approaches. What we do know is that complaints processes and investigations done well obtain information to give to the decision maker to be able to make that sound factual decision. And a lot of evidence tells us that trauma-informed approaches actually help to gather more information. It's often considered that it's quite different to that, but they look at helping people to feel safe through the process, to trust the process, to have agency in how they participate and they do often result in more information or more significant information that helps decision makers. So, they still have structured processes. They're clear on the scope. They're clear on the policy and the information that's needed. They gather that information and they have procedural fairness as central. And what we know is that most of the challenges that we come across when we do investigations aren't necessarily from the policy or the process. They're sometimes how people experience the process or their level of engagement, their level of safety, their trust, how we ask for information, how we manage interactions, and how safe and understandable the process feels. So, these trauma-informed approaches we're talking about really help us to understand how we do that within our processes. For me, the most important thing that we can do is keep remembering that people are central to these processes. And this really matters and that's certainly what drives me in the work that I do. The quotes that you can see on the screen are things that I've heard far too many times throughout my career, whether people in criminal justice systems through to administrative processes in workplaces across sectors and in universities. And I think it's important for us to stop and think about this, because what we're all trying to work together, and I can say a lot of you have joined today, what we can do is actually work really hard to never hear this again, and trauma-informed processes give us a great compass to be able to do that.

What stands out when you hear these kinds of comments isn't just dissatisfaction with outcomes, it's that the process has caused harm and trauma-informed approaches aim to do no more harm. They acknowledge the impacts of things like stress and trauma, and they create techniques and practises that help to address that, regardless of whether you know that it exists. Because one of the interesting things about trauma-informed approaches is they say, let's universally apply them because they benefit everyone, whether there's trauma or not. So, I want to plant that seed early. We know that trauma-informed Complaints processes isn't about assuming that every student's experienced trauma, but acknowledging that if there's trauma, it can make it difficult for many students to participate, but also that stress and even the best processes but the most experienced and compassionate people are still stressful for everyone involved. And we know stress has some really similar impacts to

trauma. So, when we apply trauma-informed approaches, they actually do a lot to address the impacts of stress. I'm going to talk to you a bit more about that on the next slide. So, I want to, there's no secret that I'm an absolute advocate for trauma-informed approaches, but I'll keep adding some more benefits and some more things that we know about from evidence of why they work. Because as I said, the process can unintentionally amplify stress or distress, even when you're managing the complaint correctly and under your policy. So, we want to do things that don't add harm. they think about that process, they're still procedurally fair, there's no change to that. And when you get that in place, what you'll find is that there will be an increased sense of trust in your processes and trust, and an increased sense of trust leads to increased engagement. And generally, in being able to gather the information that you need to enable you to make the decision.

So, before we get into what does trauma-informed Complaints process look like, let's just explore for a minute the impacts of stress and trauma. So, what we know is that stress and trauma impact us physiologically and neurobiologically. So many of you may not have expected that we'd be exploring this today and exploring the brain, but it's one of the main underpinnings of trauma-informed practice. It's quite scientific in a lot of ways. It's not about diagnosing trauma or going beyond the boundaries of your role, but it's about understanding and recognising those really common and normal human responses to stressful or traumatic situations.

So, what we know is that within physiology, our bodies, when we're under stress, our body can activate its survival reflexes. And we often hear them referred to as things like fight, flight, freeze, or even fall. And that's not something that we control. That's something that our brain does to protect us and look at survival. It also does things like increases our stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. Cortisol is that thing that wakes you up at 3am to sort of review the day before or think about stressful things. Many people have experienced that. But we know that when that increases, it's helping the body prepare for survival.

It's a really interesting way to think when we're thinking Complaints processes. I'll talk some more about it when we look at the brain. What it means is that our bodies diverting energy away from things like our higher order thinking to keeping us safe. And it can affect all kinds of things like how we interact, how we feel physically. and all the things that we generally rely on in a process to have people able to engage. So when we think about this, it significantly impacts people and trauma can add to this even more. Let's look at the brain. This is such an important component of thinking about trauma-informed approaches and something I encourage you to continue to learn about. Because what happens is that when we're stressed or we've experienced trauma, there's some parts of the brain that it particularly impacts to different levels for different people, and I really want to stress that. The first is the

amygdala. That's our internal threat system. That's generally triggered by things like fear and anxiety.

So it's actually responsible for detecting when we feel unsafe. Now, these might seem like strange words to be using when I'm talking about a complaint process. But I mentioned anxiety as one of the things that can trigger our amygdala, so that worry about what will happen next. And if you sort of think through what are the things that students might think about or the barriers to reporting or the things they worry, they generally worry about what will happen next. They will find out, you know, will there be any retaliation or what does it mean for my study or a whole range of things. So, when we think about that, while you might not immediately think of things like fear and anxiety when we think complaints, actually our brain can interpret what's an administrative process in a lot of ways as an actual threat. So really interesting way to think about things because it sends us into a very different response than what you might anticipate. There's another part of our brain, the prefrontal cortex, that often gets impacted by stress and trauma and that's a really important part of our brain for our executive high-level thinking and functioning, how we process information, how we even manage our emotions, regulate our emotions. So, when you're asking questions or asking people to relate things that might seem straightforward, if they're under stress, there are times where our brain just doesn't work in the same way. And an example I could give you is if you've ever done a job interview and been asked a question and had a moment where it's been hard to kind of process the question and answer. That's an example of your prefrontal cortex under stress, maybe not processing it in the same way that it would have at another time. And when you walk out the door of the interview, you suddenly remember the three things that you'd meant to say. So, it's a really good example of how that works. And the third part of the brain that often gets impacted by stress and trauma is our hippocampus. That is where we store our memory and where we go back to when we need to recall it.

So, when we're asked to recount things or to help the person managing the complaint or investigating, to gather an account. So, what that means is sometimes memory isn't stored there in the way that it would be if the person wasn't under stress or trauma at the time, and it can be harder to recall, or it might be fragmented and not linear. So, it can be really hard for people to give you a linear account. So, when we understand this, we can understand how people might be feeling or thinking as they're participating in these processes. And another thing that's of interest is the amygdala, which doesn't normally store our memory sometimes stores our emotional memories, the things that cause us that stress or distress or trauma. So, there's a lot of things that are worth exploring and understanding some of this, and today we won't go right into it. But understanding this helps us in how we engage with people, maybe even how we ask questions or understand the way we might get information.

And one of the things that I often say to people is, it means we're collecting the dots and then we're connecting the dots with the person. You know, traditional ways of asking people, can you start at the beginning and work through step by step, are not very effective if someone's experiencing stress or trauma and has and during the process, sometimes those parts of the brain activate in a way similar to when the stressful traumatic event occurred. So we've kind of gone through that very, very quickly, but I encourage you to keep learning about this if it's new, because when you're doing complaints handling,

There are a lot of really practical techniques that you can learn to try to help around creating the best environment for those parts of the brain to settle and some techniques which enables people to participate more fully in the process and for you to gather the information. So, it's just a good introduction that underpins trauma-informed practice.

Now the foundations, and I'll put them all up for you, trauma-informed principles and practise are much more complex than many people realise, but I want to counteract that by saying a lot of them are about being a good human and understanding that these processes aren't easy. And even when you run a good process, they can be stressful for everyone involved. They've got outcomes that people are putting a lot of energy and effort into or concern. And that includes for respondents as much as complainants and witnesses. So really important that we think more broadly when we think trauma informed, then the principles I will talk you through to what underpins it. And one of the main things is understanding the prevalence of trauma. And for many people, they're not aware of just how much trauma exists in our society. So, in Australia, about 75% of adults will experience a traumatic event in their adult lifetime. And we know also that adverse childhood experiences that can lead to trauma are really high as well. So, what we know is that the prevalence of trauma is very high. And because today we're also talking about impacts of stress, because they're quite similar and they can impact complaints process and participation, we know that things like study, is generally stressful. Students experience really high levels of personal stress, academic stress and financial stress. So, we know that it may already exist before we're even engaging in a process. And we also know that complaints processes can be experienced by people as stressful and sometimes traumatic in addition to trauma they may bring with them.

So understanding that helps us understand one of the primary principles of trauma-informed approaches, which is if we assume that trauma may exist in times where we apply our process, we'd actually develop it with a trauma-informed approach to ensure that we would do everything we could to do no more harm or to address that with someone who did have a history of trauma, because we might not always know. And because we know that trauma informed approaches also help under stress, you can start to see the connexion that taking a universal approach, being trauma informed in all complaints processes, actually helps everyone who's involved.

Another component of trauma-informed approaches, really important ones, about preventing further harm. It's about thinking of every component of the process and the experience the student may have as they navigate it to ensure we reduce things like re-traumatization or those comments that we heard earlier on the slide that people might say about the process. We reduce retelling, we find ways to move that information with consent through the system, and we aim to do no more harm during what is a stressful process. So, we design our systems and our processes in that way. Now, trauma-informed approaches have a background of looking at trauma and trying to think differently to traditional medical ways that sort of looked at the impacts of trauma of what's wrong with the person, to really understanding that what we need to understand is that a whole range of experiences result in impacts. So, it's more that what's happening or what you might be seeing in someone is about what happened to them. It's not about what's wrong with them. Because responses to trauma or to stress are natural and normal and they vary quite a lot.

We know that trauma-informed approaches need to be underpinned by understanding things like physiology and neurobiology that I've just talked to you about a bit, and really understanding how that looks in how you engage, how information might come across, or what that means in terms of the work that needs to happen to engage people in a way that you can address those impacts. And we also know that trauma-informed approaches operate best when we acknowledge the way people might participate or barriers to participation in processes, previous experience, a whole range of things and context. So, we need to understand cultural context, historical, gender dynamics, power, a whole range of things. And examples might be understanding ongoing impacts of colonisation, on First Nations peoples' participation in processes or intergenerational trauma. Now, we're not going to have the time to get into these sort of complexities today, but it's really understanding everyone who comes to these processes may have history or a range of things we don't know. And if we assume that may be the case, that we design our processes in a way that would address those to the extent that we can. So, it's a very universal approach.

Now, the next component of trauma-informed approaches is the principles. And the principles are very much like the compass I referred to. The things that help us to determine what do we need to do, or even if you're unsure what comes next, generally the three main principles that you can see on the screen of safety, trust and agency can be a really good anchor point to think about where to from here, because these are the principles of trauma-informed practice. They're not about specialised trauma responses and counselling. They're these universal principles that when we apply, actually protect procedural fairness, they improve the quality of evidence we receive, and they support consistent decision making, while also aiming to help people navigate the process and for no more harm or traumatising to occur from the process. These principles don't change no matter which context we put them into. So, you could put those into leadership, into a process, into recruitment or

performance management, no matter what you do, they don't change but today I'll talk to them specifically in relation to complaints handling. And I also want to say all of the principles you can see on the screen apply equally to complainants, to respondents, to witnesses and to you as the complaint's handlers. That's a really important thing to think about. So, I'm going to talk through each of the principles and give you some more examples of what they might look like. So safety, which you can see there has a lot of components, things like physical, psychological, social, emotional, cultural, spiritual. And if there was more room, we'd probably add another layer of things like collective safety when people are in groups, in classrooms, in sports teams, living in residential accommodation or ethical safety or digital or technological. So, safety has so many elements to it. They're those things that we have to be thinking about rather than a quite narrow view of what it looks like. And when we're thinking Complaints management, it's that experience of safety through the process because when people don't feel safe in the process or the process feels threatening or doesn't feel manageable for them, it can actually make people have that experience of fear or anxiety and set off that amygdala response that we've covered earlier and can re-traumatise people because they involve things like power imbalances or uncertainty or potential consequences. And when safety is compromised, people can disengage or struggle to process the information. They might not participate; they might withdraw from the process. So, a trauma-informed approach sees safety as the first prerequisite for participation.

So, it aims to establish safety right from the beginning and through every step of the process. So, safety, just to be clear, doesn't mean comfort or avoidance. It means that you don't unintentionally escalate distress. So, what it looks like is being calm and clear in our information being sure that students understand the steps that is going to happen. If you're going to meet with a student, it's about letting them know prior what they can expect the meeting to be about. It's about providing information in a conscious way that's relevant to each step of what's happening. It can be allowing people to make decisions not rushing them, explaining your role in a way that makes sense. So rather than simply a job title, what that means, what's your role in the process and what's your role today? And things like explaining whether you're a decision maker or not. So, where you're not a decision maker and you that, that can help students a lot in terms of how they engage. It's about encouraging people to bring support people, letting them know they can take breaks. There's a whole range of really practical things that help around safety. Now when we talk about trust, and I should add safety always comes first, Trust is only a smidge behind. It's so important because it's about confidence in the integrity and reliability of the process and in the people. It's not about agreement or not with the outcome. It's about trust in the process and in the person that students engage with right through to trust in the university. It takes a lot of work to establish trust, but we can lose it in a heartbeat and that's really important to recognise. So, trust looks like people doing what they say they're going to, being

consistent, predictable and reliable. So, if your website says to expect something, but that's what the student experience is. they see the policy in action. If they got an out of office or an automatic response when they submitted A complaint that said, we'll talk to you within a time frame, that that occurs. And it's done in a compassionate way. The agency is your right and your ability to make decisions about what you participate in, whether you report, how you engage. But I want to be really clear that that is the ability to do that within boundaries of things like legislation, regulation and policy. So, when we offer examples to our student, or sorry, options to students, for example, we make sure we only offer the things that we can, the things that are possible to do within policy. So, we think about that. So, trauma-informed practise looks at where can agency be supported without compromising fairness or policy. So I want you to really take note of that distinction. And there's a reason that safety and agency, where they overlap, it says choice. And that's because we do take a safety-first approach. And there may be times where a student might ask for nothing to be done or for something not to be taken further. But if you identify there's a safety concern, that as an employee of the university and having a duty of care you may need to. And there's a common misperception that with trauma-informed approaches that you cannot act or do exactly what the student asks you, but actually you have an obligation around safety. And the reason choice is there is because what's important to do is say, Things like, I understand that you don't want me to do anything, but I have a duty of care. What I can do is talk to you about how. So, whether we talk to someone together or submit a form or seek some advice, for example. So wherever possible, we give choice. And transparency, being one of those other principles, is about letting students know what to expect. letting them know about where information goes and who's involved and how the university operates when there is concern or there's risk. And we work in collaborative ways to develop things like safety plans or how things will be managed. So, I'd love to spend a lot more time on this, but in the interest of moving along.

I'm going to keep going, but again, these principles, they're your guardrails. They're the things to set your mind back to when you want to work out what are the next steps and what do I need to do. I'll give you some more examples of that soon. I just briefly want to highlight a few myths and facts that come up sometimes. I have the privilege of talking to lots of people across universities about embedding trauma-informed practice. And it means I get to hear where people might have some concerns or want to talk things through. So, there's some examples up here. I hear a lot that people are concerned that trauma-informed approaches focus only on complainants. And I hear a lot of staff who care deeply about student wellbeing in general and they understand the stress of the experience for respondents and sometimes for witnesses. So, I want to really reinforce that trauma-informed practise is universal and safety, trust and agency is just as important and should be applied to respondents as well. So regardless of what the outcome is going to be and whether or not the student has done what they're alleged

to have done, it's a stressful process and they deserve the dignity of a process that's done in a way.

That does respect that, so it applies to everybody. There's also some concerns sometimes that trauma-informed processes avoid the hard questions, or they're done in a way that in order to try to find the safety balance, they might avoid things. And I can say they do not stop us from seeking the information needed to make decisions. What they do is help us with ways in how we manage the complaint or maybe even how we obtain evidence. And at the end of the day, a decision maker can only make a decision on the information that they have. We know that when we apply trauma-informed approaches, we often get better information, but it doesn't change that we might need to ask things that can be uncomfortable, but we can do it in a trauma-informed way.

We also sometimes hear that people misuse trauma in the process, but what we know is that trauma can affect participation. We need to acknowledge that, but it doesn't change the thresholds in which decisions are made. So, what we do with trauma-informed approaches is reduce those unnecessary burdens or the things that may impact participation. And we also look at how we can obtain what we need to be able to make the decision within the same thresholds that have always been there. So, if people are talking about how they're feeling about the process or impacts, we can provide support and we can connect them to support services and places who can help them to navigate the process. But I would not label that as misusing trauma and I'm more than happy to talk more in the questions if you want too about that. There's a few more myths and facts and that's that sometimes there's concerns about bias, but I can assure you trauma-informed processes respect the policy, procedure and processes that need to occur. They're about how, as I keep saying, you manage that process and gather the information. And there's some really good techniques that trauma-informed approaches have for things like interviewing or engaging or gathering information. Sometimes there's an idea that trauma-informed approaches reduce accountability, but actually they're very much about accountability and they're about that engagement, participation and safety as you apply those policy standards and proportionate outcomes.

Finally, trauma-informed approaches, sometimes I get asked if they lower the standard of proof, but they don't change that at all, because you're guided by your policy and your procedures and those thresholds that exist within there. So that segues nicely into accountability and trauma-informed practice. What we know is that when we're thinking about student complaint processes, accountability means making decisions about behaviour and impact using the evidence and the policy. So, you're determining if a breach of your policies occurred. And that needs to be done in a way that's fair, reasonable, transparent and defensible. So, the trauma-informed approach doesn't change the accountability requirements. It doesn't change that standard of proof. And you may feel I've said that many times, but it's because it's probably one of the most

common things that I hear people expressing concern or confusion about. And trauma-informed approaches don't excuse conduct or behaviour. What they say is we need to understand it. They reduce that risk of the process actually interfering with accountability.

And part of that is by increasing participation. So, I want you to keep thinking about that connexion that when we apply trauma-informed approaches, we increase engagement and participation most of the time. So, things like providing additional time for someone to think about their options, or after talking to someone, giving them time to provide additional information if they recall something later. So, thinking back to impacts on the brain, as well as stressful engagements.

They don't dilute accountability; they strengthen the integrity of decision making by increasing the likelihood of getting some really solid information that you're able to present to that decision maker. So, what we know is that students can't engage meaningfully if they don't clearly understand what behaviour is being examined, for example, how the policy applies or how decisions are being made. So, what we do is we combine trauma-informed practise with those practises that we do to make sure people understand what is the process, what's required of them. We might adjust the process a little, the how, not necessarily the policy procedure, I want to be clear, but the how we approach that, but not thresholds or standards or expectations. So, I'll probably cover this a little bit more as we work forward on the next few slides.

But I want to stress that safety and fairness actually work together. They're not polar opposites. And in fact, fairness will be increased where people feel safe enough to participate fully in the process, everyone involved, and you can get the information that you need. I'm very briefly going to talk about some stages of complaints management and how trauma-informed approaches apply to them. So, what we know is that before we often even engage with people, unless we're getting a verbal complaint that was unplanned or unexpected, we generally get some information that we receive where we start by working out what is it that we've received? What's the scope of this? What's the policy that guides me here or the procedure? Is it a complaint or is this a concern or something where a student's unsure how they want to proceed? These are things that many of you would do in your everyday practice.

But that's also a really important step in the trauma-informed approach to investigations. Because it's about stopping and thinking about what have I got in front of me? What is the scope of what I've got? What's included or not? Is it even a complaint yet? So, identifying what is the scope and what guides you, helps you to prepare before you engage and explain to a student. And it helps you to think about how your engagement will occur. Are there any non-negotiables in what you need to do? Or is there some options here based on the information in where a student might go next?

I think this stage is often underrated and people, especially if you've been doing this a while, you kind of jump straight to engaging, to responding in an email or having a conversation. But in trauma-informed approaches, we make this a very, very clear and practical step that's separated from that next one of engaging. Because we think as well about, is there anything here that might suggest the student could benefit from more support? That actually I need to think about how I engage and some of the impacts of stress or trauma or how they might experience the next step. I need to think about the logistics if I'm going to offer to meet with a student.

For example, do I have an option or is it viable to meet in person or online before I offer or just assume that it will be one or the other? And to really think about what I need to do in that engagement that I'm going to have. When it's rushed, what we know is that we can see things like, we've received your complaint and the student thought, I didn't know I was complaining yet. So, we kind of rush and we make assumptions and fill gaps. And they can kind of feel locked into something or suddenly worry about, I didn't realise the rest of the information I just got or what the next steps were. And we know barriers for students often are worrying about what will happen. So, when we prepare well and we look at what we've got, we can engage in a way that understands that. And when it's done well, it's about clarifying whether the student's seeking information or support or to initiate a complaint, if that hasn't been very clear to identify what is guiding us in our discussions and not assuming escalation. We think about whether we'll have an informational contact, a conversational one, a formal one. So, you start to see it gets us thinking about the how. And it also helps us to think whether supports might be beneficial.

Now they always will be, but particular supports. And are you aware of how to explain them to a student? Is there something in there that suggests there's quite a nuanced bit of support that I need to be aware of how to give to a student? So, we prepare for that as well. And when it's done really well, this process, it sets the scene for...

the rest of the complaints management process and reduces the likelihood that someone will withdraw during the process. It reduces the concept that harm may occur or re-traumatisation.

The next stage that I usually talk about is engaging and explaining. Now this happens many times in some investigations. It can be engaging at each stage and explaining the stage, explaining your role, why you're in contact, what's needed from the student, what options are available to them and what happens next. And this is really important for trauma-informed approaches because it sets the expectations and actually what happens is it determines whether trust is built or undermined. It's such an important component. And when it's not done well, it's where students get very specific prescriptive language, like you must respond within a certain number of days. I want to be really clear, you may have policies that have time frames and that's fine, but it's the wording. It's about how we say it. So when we can actually explain this part of the process, this is how it works, and this is the time frames it works within, students can

process that in a very different way and it doesn't make them feel as unsafe as they can when they get that really legalistic or authoritative kind of language. So, we think about how we do that. So, students often don't have a sense when it's not done well about what's happening here, what's the next step, who's the decision maker, why are you asking me for this information? When that happens, it can set off things like our amygdala response. We might not think in the same way. We might start to worry about what does this mean? It's starting to sound serious, which it is. but in a scary way. But when it's done well, students get a really clear explanation. They get acknowledgement that their concern or their complaint's been received, that no decisions have been made yet, but the purpose of the contacts about getting some more information or exploring options of what the next steps are.

I have no doubt that you're already doing this a lot, but what I want you to reflect on after today and the next time you go to look at it, if you've got templates or ways that you respond, is the kind of language or how that might be perceived by a student. Because we can still tell them all the things we're required to and all of the things that they need to know and need to understand.

We really need to think about that in a way that doesn't reinforce some of those power differentials or feelings of not being safe. We also need to not assume that students will understand terminology and processes and the kind of language that we'll use, that they'll know what the next steps are, or that they really understand why you're asking them for things. So, we want to in this phase, engage people, allow times for things like questions or concerns. And I don't give scripts very often, but in my experience, I've noticed that when I asked, do you have any questions, I get some, but if I say, have you got any questions or concerns, there's a lot more engagement. Because a lot of people have concerns at this point. Or there might have been those things we know are potential barriers that follow through process, like what happens next, who sees it, what will the respondent see? Now, they probably won't use the word respondent, but lots of people don't know that the respondent needs to see allegations if it's a complaint about a student or a staff member. Or it might be that you just need to explain what's the next step as we resolve this complaint about an administrative matter. So, I really want to stress that this may feel like it takes a bit longer when it's done well, but what it does is remove the likelihood of problems later. It increases trust and likelihood of people asking questions and staying engaged. And it also often leads to gathering more information and more relevant information quite soon in a process. And over time, what you'll see is a reduction in needing to go back to people when they engage and explain process is done really well. So, I know that some of you may be thinking, how long does this take? It doesn't have to take a long time.

It might feel like longer, but in the whole process, I can assure you, you'll start to see patterns of the whole process. In other steps, having a reduction in time required. The next part, if you're talking to a student and gathering an account, now it might be different. Sometimes you need evidence in terms of written things, you might need an

assessment, you might need to ask for an email or something that was referred to. So, I'm talking about the cases where you might want to talk to someone, either to gather further information or I've used the term gather an account, but let's look at that quite broadly. From a trauma-informed perspective, once we've engaged and explained, you know, today we're meeting to talk about your complaint and concern, and this is my role, this is what we're going to be going through today. I'd encourage you to say things like, I'll tell you at the end, how you can let me know something if you remember it later, because that's really common and to put that into place. Then to start with something like, is there anywhere you'd like to start? Or where would you like to begin? I often also ask questions like, is there anything you don't want to forget, or you had in mind you really wanted to let me know today?

They're very gentle ways to let people know you can start wherever it is that you want to start. And the reason that's strongly informed is it gives back agency, it gives back some choice, it's collaborating about the process, but it's also acknowledging those neurobiological impacts. That idea of we're trying to settle that feeling of, I'm not sure if I'm going to get the answers right or I'm concerned. And even if you're the most compassionate and amazing complaints handler having the conversation, people often are having those feelings. So, we just need to understand them. When it's not done well, what we see is that students have trouble coming up with the answers, if they're forced into trying to go in chronological accounts and it's not making sense to them, that they can miss things or it can feel like it's not making sense, they can jump around, they can repeat themselves or you see gaps and inconsistencies, which you may anyway, but it can feel like it's not going well and sometimes it leads to thoughts about credibility as opposed to understanding what the response might be. And this is just as relevant for respondents who are usually under high stress, there's high stakes for them about what the outcome will be. When it's done well, they're told start where you're comfortable and we'll work through it. And if you don't remember something, that's okay, just let me know. It's common for people not to remember things. So, we want to normalise that. And the more we do that, ironically, the more people tend to remember because of the way our brains work under stress.

So, what we know is that when we apply those kinds of approaches, the safety, trust and agency and choice and collaboration and transparency, the accuracy actually improves when pressure decreases or the feeling of pressure decreases. We know that we, as the investigator or the complaints Handler, get an opportunity to collect the information and then connect it and go back if we need to, to clarify things.

I'm not going to go in depth into what it looks like to ask trauma-informed questions, except to say, we really want to simplify questions, help students understand why we're asking them things. Be curious, so listen as much as we can and then seek to clarify. We want to slow our pace and not stack questions with multiple questions. And I really want you to think back to that brain diagram we talked about. And you're starting to see more and more, hopefully, why understanding how we respond under stress and

trauma is so important throughout the whole process. And what we know is that when we apply those better questioning techniques in a way that acknowledges the impacts of safety, trust and agency, we get better detail, we get improved recall and actually get fewer errors. So, another area I'd love to talk about more, but in the interest of time, I'm going to move us on to the next stage, which is about how we close and communicate with students. This is about a couple of different things. One is how we end our interaction. So that might be a conversation or an email with what's going to happen next, what we've covered, where we are in the process. So, we're trying to reduce ambiguity, anxiety, and even unnecessary follow-up, but mainly those things that can increase stress, increase feelings of unsafety or uncertainty, or bring in some trust challenges if students feel they're not being given information. There are some things you can't tell students, and it's okay to tell them that. There're some things that I can't tell you.

What I can tell you is, this is where we're at. A decision hasn't been made yet. There's still some process to be done. I'm not sure of the exact timeframe, but what I will do is keep in touch with you about that. So, you start to see that how we communicate needs to be honest and transparent but not breaching anything we shouldn't be telling people. Students should generally know when they could expect to have someone let them know the next step and that might be, we'll be in touch when we get to that, or you should expect to hear from us within this period of time. If you have a delay, then it's really important to get in touch, even if it's to say, I don't have any updates, but I'm connecting to let you know we're still working on it and I wanted you to know that. That short interaction can mean the world to a student who otherwise can feel they're being forgotten. And for you, a week or two weeks might seem really reasonable, but for that student, depending on what they've complained about or what the circumstances are, it can feel like a lifetime. So, what we want to do is reduce misunderstandings. We want to give certainty as much as we can, even about waiting, because that reduces stress. And we always want to let students know what to do if they need to ask questions or they're seeking more support. So, we end in a way that people can continue through the process. And that might seem strange, but I've seen lots of people actually withdraw at the point that you've finished collecting information because of that level of uncertainty. And we know that the more that uncertainty keeps going then, the harder it is for people to participate.

I also want to say if you give outcomes, that we need to do that as clearly as we possibly can. We need to start with the outcome and then talk about why and what. Often you see students either in a discussion or in a letter, it's way down at the end. What we want is as soon as possible to let them know. this is what the decision was. Because if you've ever scanned a letter trying to wait to work out what the answer was for something, you would probably recall we don't read well. The stress in our brain doesn't work very well. You want to acknowledge impact regardless of what the outcome was. You want to allow space for people to react.

You want to make sure they have options for support, and you want to be fair and transparent and person centred. I know I'm moving quickly at this point because I know I want to get to questions as much as I'm sure Sarah does. So, the last thing I want to leave you with is when you've finished a complaint handling process, or an investigation. Taking the time and thinking about evaluation reflecting as part of the work, not as an optional add-on or a nice to have, is so important. It's about noticing what worked and what didn't, or what barriers to participation came up, or what did we hear about systemic challenges or the things that students thought about or that got in the way when they were thinking about making a complaint. As much as what worked, we want to think about how we can apply that reflection and the outcomes to strengthen our systems, the way we work, and to reduce the harm that can happen when we don't do that. So, Trauma-informed complaints handling isn't separate to everyday complaints handling and reflection isn't separate to a good complaints process. I'd love to keep going, but what I'm going to do is step back and let's have a look at the questions that you might have.



Sarah Bendall

Thank you so much for that information, Kim. we've got a good set of questions. The team tell me, the theme from the questions is around maintaining boundaries and self-care. So we're keen to know if there's any advice you can offer at an institutional level to support staff wellbeing and safety and the management of vicarious trauma in complaints handling.



Kim Copeland

Oh wow, I feel like I need an hour for that because I'd love to get into it. But I think I'm going to go straight to the balancing your boundaries and self-care. There's a couple of things. One is when we're interacting with people, we know that people can feel strong emotions during processes like complaints processes and there can be times that you're trying to balance not only the process you're doing, but the impacts and how people might be experiencing them. So, I really encourage you to think about applying some nice frameworks and simple models like the recognise, respond, refer model we see in accidental counselling. Things like I can see that you're upset. We might ask, are you okay to continue or would you like a break? Or it sounds like there's been a lot happening even outside of this process. Can I tell you a bit about some of the supports that we have? Or before you go any further, that's a little outside the scope of what we're talking about in the investigation. But it sounds important and I don't want you to have to retell. So, is it okay if I talk to you about supports that might be available either now or at the end of what we're talking about today? Those boundaries, I think, are really important to remember. You're not expected to be a councillor. You can't be when you're being an investigator or complaints handler, but you can be

compassionate. And I also think remembering what you're doing for yourself is you're working within the boundaries of the policy. You're determining whether a breach occurred and there'll be lots of other things that might come into play but really focusing on what your role is and the limits of it. And if you're finding things difficult, talk to a colleague.

Talk to your supervisor, use EAP or work out a way as a team to come together often to talk about the challenges of the work, how it might impact or what you can do to feed into your prevention teams or to your administration team or to someone who's managing things like fees where you're seeing multiple complaints come through. Go and talk to them and say, hey, we've noticed this thing that we think might help. I'm pretty sure they'd like to hear that too, and that helps you around your own self-care to see you contributing to prevention. Now I've gone on many tangents, but I'm sure there's many more questions.



Sarah Bendall

The tangents are great and that is a really important area to explore. I know from my own experience in complaints handling, it actually took me a really long time myself to feel that it was okay that complaints were impacting me, which in hindsight just seems so silly. And I think I am someone who just left it too long, you know, just wasn't, didn't have the self-awareness enough at the time. So even just encouraging people, even asking that question is fantastic and just encouraging people to just cheque in with yourself and how and how you are going with complaints because some of them can really be challenging.

I am moving us to a new theme. So, at times, Kim, there can be a tension between trauma informed practise and legal advice, particularly when it comes to gender-based violence complaints or complex behavioural issues. What advice do you have when navigating these sometimes opposing requirements?



Kim Copeland

That's a really interesting question. I feel like I have follow-up questions, but... I too have had some conversations where there's been some concern around is trauma-informed practise or approaches procedurally fair and I think that's where you're coming from with this. And what I really want to emphasise, and you'll always hear me say it is your policy and your procedure is what you're following, or legislation or regulations always. And trauma-informed practise never says anything but that. But what it does say is there are very specific things that we must do, sometimes in an order or sometimes in a way that must occur. But the how is how do we apply it or do those steps in a way that thinks about safety and the experience of the person that looks at establishing trust and often through transparency. So, taking the time to

explain. I know you've told us that you're not happy that we need to take this step, for example. But what I want to do is explain to you why. And you'd be surprised how often people are more comfortable with that. Or let's work together on how we could make it safer for you to do that or let me tell you what the options are for you. That's the kind of practise that we're doing, and it shouldn't interfere with the processes. If it is at such odds with your procedure, then you probably need a review of your procedure would be my advice. So if you're getting legal advice, that differs from trauma-informed practice, I'd be really interested in what the difference is to be able to answer it more, because I think the question you'd need to ask of the lawyer or the legal team is, can you explain to me some more about what it is that you're worried about, like which part of it, so that we can understand more? And then have a conversation. I don't think I can say more than that, not knowing exactly what it is, but I do think that disconnect sometimes is about each party really sticking to their lane of what they do, but often there's a third alternative of how do these things fit together. And I can't imagine, I can't picture any process that you can't apply trauma-informed practise to that interferes. But I do understand why there's sometimes concerns about that. And maybe some discussions even outside of cases between you and your legal team would be really good too, to say, help us understand that so we know in future. Because when we're in a case, we sometimes can feel very passionately about advocating for certain things and it's often not the time to explore that. So, I hope that helps.



Sarah Bendall

Yeah, I think I think that's all exactly right, Kim. You know, there's sometimes a different culture. Maybe that's the way of putting it between how Complaints handlers do their work and how you want to deliver a trauma informed service versus a more legal lens over a complaint and that, you know, that potential tension between risk assessment for a provider or a university versus feeling confident in yourself as a complaints handler to be open and transparent about process.



Kim Copeland

Mm.

I agree. And actually, if I could add, Sarah, and I'm sorry to jump in, I think sometimes too, we have to remember that when we're managing A complaint or investigating, we're very much in this process and in that team, but we also work for the university. The role of the legal team is to think from the university and some risks, and we have to remember that, that we're actually thinking broader. And sometimes I hear, you know, I didn't tell them this because the student didn't want them to know. I think, but actually you work for the university, and I can't stress that enough, that often the legal team are thinking much more broadly. So, when you ask the question of why, it can really help understand and that we shouldn't withhold information from people

who are thinking about it from that organisational perspective. And I feel like trauma-informed processes sometimes get a bit misconstrued there.



Sarah Bendall

Yeah, I think that's really key advice, Kim, to just everyone feel empowered to ask. If you're not really sure why you can't do something, then it's absolutely okay to ask.



Sarah Bendall

Okay, here's one. Kim, good practice. This is a question about good practice. Tell us about what good practise you've seen across the higher education sector in delivering trauma-informed services, what's being done really well in a complaint or investigation, even something that you thought was maybe outside the box, but as it turns out, was fantastic.



Kim Copeland

Great question. I think where I'm seeing that across the board, because I'm seeing it in lots of places, is where people who are thinking about complaints processes are really trying to look at it through the student experience. Because when we understand these complex processes and we develop websites and we think they're amazing and we've simplified them, if you actually get a group of students, especially some who've never used the process, and I've seen this done well recently, gathering a group of students who've never made a complaint at the university and sitting them down and saying, where would you start? Who would you talk to? Let's have a look at the process. And the staff were a bit surprised at what they thought was really simple, at students saying, what does that mean? Which one would I press? Which button? So, I think what a great example of a really simple process to do and so, I think there's that. And I also think where I particularly enjoy seeing good practise is where people are thinking about those stages I took you through.

So what does it look like to prepare for the interaction with the student instead of feeling like I'm just the hamster on the wheel and I'm in such a rush I just have to send a template? So templates can be useful as long as we can adjust them. But thinking about what am I about to engage in, how do I prepare myself for what might be a difficult conversation right through to that reflective practice. So, we're going to set up times to come together or debriefing and support for tricky ones are the default. You opt out if you don't need it rather than try and find your manager or someone to debrief with if you need it.

So really changing mindsets that all of those stages I took you through are part of a complaints management process, but often the 1st and the last one are seen as nice to have and we don't have time for. And yet they are the ones that are going to make all

of the difference in setting up safety trust agency and continually improving. Yeah, I think there's so many more good practise examples, but those are the things that jump out to me.



Sarah Bendall

Yeah, I'm reminded of, and this isn't actually something that I've seen in the sector, but once upon a time, a million years ago, when I was being first trained on complaints handling, part of the training that I had was role playing. So, I had to... I was given a role; I was a complainant. It was actually a family law divorce type situation. So, I was the wife and mother, and I was participating in a divorce. And it was actually one of the most foundational experiences that I had in learning about how to how to manage complaints well, and was just, it was really, and maybe it's just how we, you know, we learn when you experience it yourself, but experiencing that perspective, it never really left me, you know, that sense of not understanding the process, you know, not being in control of something that was going to have such a significant impact on my life in the role play. So yeah, really encourage people when you're thinking about training to include the role playing. It might feel a bit naff, but actually it's really instrumental.



Kim Copeland

Yeah. I agree, especially practising things like, I'm going to tell you something, but I don't want you to tell anyone. I think being ready to say before you go any further, I actually can't promise that. A lot of people feel uncomfortable, but role playing some of those sorts of things, and they come up all the time. Don't say yes, absolutely, and then try to work out how to get out of it but start with full transparency. I can't promise that. But what I can do is tell you if I think I need to tell someone and we can work that out together.



Sarah Bendall

Yeah.

all alright. Kim, do you have any advice on balancing contrasting trauma-informed needs of multiple students in the same process? For example, a disciplinary process involving 2 students where student A's needs contradicted student B's needs.



Kim Copeland

Oh, that's an interesting one. I'd love to get into that conversation too. Let me make some assumptions, the thing I often say don't do in trauma reform work. If, say, student A is a complainant and student B is a respondent, and you're trying to work out how will we navigate keeping them connected to study, as much as we can while the process

occurs, for example, and one student wants one thing and one's another, I think if you go back to how do you have the trauma-informed conversation where you're doing some planning with them, even saying things like, I'd like to talk to you about the process, about what it looks like, what your expectations might be or how we might plan to keep you engaged while we work this through, because a decision hasn't been made. I can't make any promises that I can definitely do everything you ask but tell me how you'd like to manage that. It's a really interesting process and in fact, sometimes the response you get we come up with all sorts of complicated answers and the student says, oh, if you could just do this, I'd feel okay in the meantime. So, there's one thing, or if two students are asking or needing something quite different, being able to talk to them without breaching any privacy about, you know, there's some complexities to how we do that. Could we talk about what might be possible and what's not possible and then see what we can do with that? So again, that's an example of a trauma-informed conversation where a lot of people think there's no boundaries, but actually only give agency or choice within the options available. If a student...

One was saying they were feeling unsafe. Safety is paramount. It guides us there. So, I don't know that I'm exactly answering because I'd need to understand some more, but I think that's how we collaborate. It's how we work with students on what they might need. It's how we take a person-centred approach that different students might need different things but we're really clear about what we can and can't offer. And if we find that we're a bit stuck, we get some advice. We go to people who can help us with that and really get into the nuances of the case.



Sarah Bendall

Thanks, Kim. All right, question for you, Kim. In step one, you talked about prepare and plan. You mentioned choose proportionate information parts. Can you talk more about this, please?



Kim Copeland

Yeah, I think I used very umbrella-like terminology to think about, depending on the nature of the initial contact that you've had, have you had a phone call or an email or a chat with a student saying, I'm thinking about what I can do or I'm experiencing something and I'm not sure what my options are then how we'd give that information needs to be proportionate to the way the contacts occurred. So, responding to that or preparing a huge dossier on every policy and procedure and option is not proportionate to the kind of contact that you've had. If someone's talking about a a process or an interaction with someone or wanting to understand that, then you would prepare information that matches what they've given you and be open to that you might not have quite understood it. But if it's something like a student reporting racism or a student reporting gender-based violence, you'd want to think about how

am I going to respond in a way that's probably more trauma informed, asking for less things in writing, for example, and really looking at some sort of interpersonal interaction or who's the right person. So, it's that proportionate to what you've got at the time. And what we also know is for many students, depending on the type of complaint,

The information we get when they first raise a concern, or a complaint isn't usually all of it. So really understanding that we just want to respond to what we've got now and open the door to, you know, there may be some more information we need, but we're going to take it one step at a time. It's really tempting to go, right, we've got a complaint, let's just give everything and the student experience is overwhelmed. And all those things we talked about in the brain or the response or the feeling of trust was, I raised this concern, and now it sounds like this huge thing's going to happen. So, I think it's that proportionate to what you've got at the moment, knowing it's probably an iterative process for many things.



Sarah Bendall

Yeah, trying to take that fear or confusion out of the process is really important while balancing transparency of the process. It is, it can be really tricky. We've got another one here, which is diving into the nuts and bolts, which is a really good question.

What about students who choose to discontinue the complaints process when it comes to putting allegations to a respondent? This is obviously a stressful point in the process. We try to provide additional support through developing safety plans and support referrals, but do you have any advice for supporting students through this particular stage of the process?



Kim Copeland

I love that question because it comes up so often that when you're a complaints handler or an investigator, you know the process intimately. You know every step and you know that a fair process does and should give an opportunity for the respondent to respond to the allegations and to have a chance to be heard and for that information to be considered. You would be surprised how many students do not realise that that's a step in the process. So, I would want to start with that. But sometimes at the point that you say, we're going to send these allegations, you have moments where students say, I didn't know that.

Now, a lot of complaints handlers or investigators say, well, of course we do internally. No, of course we do. But you would, I think that's the first thing to say is when we start from that very first preparation and planning to, I'm going to be talking to this student, we start then with not overwhelming them, But would you like me to outline to you even briefly some of the steps, because we can talk to that as we go. We want to be talking

to them about managing their safety and wellbeing and those kinds of things. So, we say, you know, there's a process and a decision hasn't been made yet. So, what we're going to do is talk to you about how that process will go, what supports you might need or want for us to help you with. And then, as part of that, the respondent, which we wouldn't use that word necessarily with the student, will have a chance to respond as well because the decision maker then makes a decision based on that. So, I guess I'm reinforcing first.

Don't assume that students understand the process or will be surprised when they get that surprise if you haven't done that preparation, the engaging, the explaining and transparency. That's why it's so important. But sometimes it's the barriers to reporting that play out through the whole process. So, I often suggest to people that they think about what are the perceived barriers. And students often is what will happen about retaliation, who will find out what will happen next, or I want the behaviour to stop, but I don't want to have to do this process. I don't really want to have to engage with that person or know that you've told them that I've raised my concern. Now from a complaint's perspective, we can only do a fair and reasonable and procedurally fair process if that occurs. But so often students, they're not comfortable, they don't feel safe, or they don't trust, or there's something else going on. So, the earlier we can explain the steps, and the why, help people understand why. Let them know the support, go at their pace, but also acknowledge that sometimes people won't be comfortable with that. And then we need to take a different approach that's safety first and keeping them engaged as much as we can. It is such a tricky thing, but I've seen it time and again.

where students say, I just didn't know that's what happened and people really shocked. So that example of when you get a student in the room and say, tell us about where you'd start if you wanted to make a complaint and they look at your shiny website and say, I don't know what to do. We need to really understand the student experience.



Sarah Bendall

Yeah, it's such a it's a really great question to ask and I'm sure could be a topic on its own for a webinar. Thank you, Kim, because it has been amazing. Lots and lots of questions here about avoiding repeating retelling or re-traumatization, as well as challenges when ensuring the needs of complainants are met whilst upholding procedural fairness for respondents.

So, you know, the question is, how do you avoid re-traumatizing the complainant and ensuring that the respondent has a fair hearing?



Kim Copeland

Great question. I think the National Code, and I know it's not only about gender-based violence, gives us a great doorway in with responding to disclosures training. Right from

the tips on things like before you go any further, I don't want you to have to repeat this and you've indicated you'd like to talk to someone.

So we reduce retelling and re-traumatisation through to getting consent from students to pass information in warm referrals, including to complaints handlers. And right back to what we do within the processes that we do. If someone starts to disclose something and you know you're about to take a formal account, saying, this sounds really important and I certainly don't want to stop you from saying it, but I'm about to start this process with you and I don't want you to have to repeat it, but we can start there. So, there's some techniques, but you also did a great trauma-informed process of telling me there were too many, two more questions and giving me some guardrails on time. So, I'm going to park that and ask for the next question.



Sarah Bendall

Okay, last question. When thinking about risk assessment, especially for GBV cases, is there an area of risk that you think is commonly missed or minimised?



Kim Copeland

Yes. I think, what is it? It depends on the case. There's many risk components that are missed and I think often it's the one about understanding the risk of not understanding the impact or acknowledging the impact or the level of fear or safety concerns that even if they don't make sense to you as the Complaints Manager, because we store emotional memory and much stronger than any other type of memory. So, people will talk about particular components that might not make sense, or it's sitting in their amygdala, that memory. So, when they're thinking about it, fear and anxiety are kicking in. And I think when this doesn't make sense to me, the information I've got and the response aren't making sense,

When that's not connected, I think there's a great risk, not only to the individual, to the support they receive, but to the process, because you've also got the risk of attrition out of the process. We could talk about so many elements and domains of risk, but I think that one, the just understanding trauma and stress don't always present in the way you'd think they would and parking that and being prepared to go, there's something happening here. I need to acknowledge it and address it.



Sarah Bendall

Yeah, and I think just remembering that a risk assessment process is not static. You know, you will learn different things at different times.

On behalf of everyone here, Kim, thank you so much for that presentation. It was True to form, again, I learnt new things and I'm going to take away some different techniques from my own practise, and I hope that everybody else has as well.

Thank you again so much, everyone, for coming today.