

Adverse Childhood Experiences Support Hub
Trauma and ACEs Informed Higher Education in Wales
Vision Paper

Purpose

To set out the vision of our work for developing Trauma Informed Higher Education Settings for the Senedd Cymru Children and Young People Education Committee. This paper sets out the need for this approach, and some broad expected outcomes of the pilot we are about to commence with Glyndwr University.

Introduction *The ACE Support Hub*

The ACE Support Hub is directly funded by Welsh Government to create an environment for large scale, whole system transformation. Our mission is to enable and support organisations and communities in making changes that make Wales a world leader in preventing, mitigating and tackling ACEs and their significant impact. We aim to challenge and transform ways of working and create a societal shift in order to break the long term cycle of ACEs, adversity and trauma.

We are already on the journey to realising one of our ambitions to ensure that every school in Wales is strong, inclusive and trauma-informed, helping children to flourish and have the best start in life. We are supporting this by delivering training to make the school environment ACE aware, and then able to confidently respond to trauma, in line with the Welsh Government aim to ensure pupil inclusion, well-being, behaviour and attendance, directly supporting the development of a whole school approach.

We recognise that Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) are vital parts of the whole education system and are embarking on co-producing and working with Welsh Government, HE Institutions (HEIs) and FE Colleges to develop a whole system approach that works across sectors and delivers on key priorities. The Welsh Government has provided specific, additional funding for this year to take forward the FE approach. This is about building on the wealth of existing work and practice and working in collaboration to recognise what has been achieved and where there may be more focussed effort.

In FE, there have been a number of key conversations with Welsh Government, FE partners and individual FE Colleges to develop a proposal for this work in that setting, and work is continuing to identify a pilot area.

In HE, the Hub invited all HEIs in Wales to be part of our approach. Specific discussions with colleagues from Aberystwyth University, Glyndwr University, Welsh Government (WG), HEFCW and Public Health Wales (PHW) have informed the development of resources towards an embedded ACE-informed approach across the sector. These resources include:



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- Principles for ACE-/Trauma-Informed Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) Setting- please see appendix 1
- ACE-Informed Organisations: Embedding ACE Awareness and ACE Informed Practice Implementation Toolkit
- Introduction to ACEs e-Learning
- A framework for sustainable delivery, for consultation, that includes a potential Quality Mark

The unprecedented context in which we all find ourselves operating at the moment has led to a renewed focus on the impact of trauma and adversity and the need to be able to respond effectively to that, as well as to the specific needs of individuals. We all now have an experience of adversity due to COVID19, and some a real experience of trauma such as bereavement, isolation or anxiety that provokes a normal reaction to coping. But on top of that is the ongoing adversity that some people were already experiencing such as domestic abuse in the home, or drug and alcohol dependency that may have been exacerbated by social distancing measures, unemployment and inequality, and we are yet to know the full effect of this psychologically on children and young people.

The current pandemic has prevented children and young people from experiencing transition to HE and FE in a way that they may do otherwise, and as a result we felt we needed to move more rapidly into piloting an approach this year that takes account of these circumstances and enables us to focus effort where it is needed most.

We are delighted that Glyndwr University has agreed to be a flagship university and work with us, to test and evaluate our concept which can then be scaled up as relevant, with the aim of an All Wales approach but implemented in line with local needs and priorities.

Background and Context

What does it mean to be ACEs-/Trauma-informed?

Trauma-informed practice is recognition that trauma experiences are a possibility for anyone and consideration to this through policies, procedures and approaches. Activities that prioritise physical and emotional safety and promote opportunities for wellbeing, healing and recovery - with everyone having a role.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events, particularly those in early childhood that significantly affect the health and wellbeing of people in Wales e.g. living in a household where there is domestic abuse, substance misuse or parental mental health issues.

[Research](#) into the prevalence and impact of ACEs in Wales demonstrates the cumulative effects of ACEs and the increased risk of health-harming behaviours, poor mental wellbeing and increased risk of physical and mental ill health.



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The ACE Support Hub recognises the potential impact of trauma and adversity from the research as well as the links to poverty, deprivation and subsequent inequalities. We implement a strengths based approach to responding, by identifying the importance of safety (cultural, emotional, and physical safety) and support for those affected as well as protective factors and resilience (e.g. positive relationships, feeling connected and a sense of belonging) universally as mitigating factors. Children and Adults may come into contact with sources of resilience or protective factors at many points in their lives, unsurprisingly education plays a significant and crucial role.

Application within Education settings - Transition Points

Transition points are where children and young adults may experience higher risk of protective factors being taken away. These transitions are significant changes in their lives as they move through physical and mental developmental changes from child adolescence through to 'adulthood', but also from environments where there was support to ones where there is not.

Those in primary school receive the most support in nurturing environments through a single class teacher which promotes access to stable and trusted adult relationships. Secondary schools present a more challenging environment, they remain a safe haven for those children who are at risk or experiencing ACEs at home but it is the point of the system where children fall into different paths. Although there are still resilience sources, via provision of opportunities to connect and for structure and support, if those protective factors are reduced or removed they become more at risk of being affected by the trauma they have experienced.

Those who choose to enter Further Education (FE) or Higher Education (HE) usually do so because they want to remain in education. This is a key transition point from childhood to adult hood (by definition of age), but into an environment where children are suddenly expected to be adults. Many are not even 18 at this point and have never lived away from home. This is a crucial transition point for those continuing in education, and a point where they may need additional support to cope with the impact of childhood experiences. Equally this applies to mature students, returning to education and who will be juggling financial and other pressures and assimilation into a new environment.

ACE-/Trauma-informed (TI) Higher Education in Wales

In Higher Education, a whole-institute trauma-informed approach is as much about staff wellbeing as it is student wellbeing and is about the content of the courses/qualifications offered.

A TI approach must include the staff and student themselves in shaping it and understanding what works for the university itself to embed and sustain this approach long term.

This approach has never been more important given the current COVID 19 global pandemic. Levels of ACEs, trauma and vulnerability amongst prospective students and HE workforce has been amplified in a number of ways.



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Educational establishments are closed meaning that opportunities to build and maintain resilience factors are limited, especially where home is the source of adversity and trauma. Added to this, exams have been cancelled creating much uncertainty about individuals' future and chosen career pathways. As a result any transitions into Higher education will be much more difficult with the strong likelihood of increased social anxiety, isolation, poor mental wellbeing/ health and/or other issues that were previously being managed. HE institutions are places where young people often flourish; but also where they may need additional support through the multi-faceted transitions outlined above, and as highlighted as a risk area by the work of Papyrus in their recently published report on the impact of COVID19 on children and young people.

All of this requires societal change and universities are part of this through the students they support, the staff they employ and their teaching. We recognise that Universities are working hard to maintain and develop their existing offers to students and staff and that there are already many processes in place to respond to the expectations of Welsh Government, and of bodies like HEFCW and Public Health, who have developed frameworks and guidance around mental health, or domestic abuse. But what we feel we can offer is way to take all those component parts and implement a whole system TI approach, which recognises the fact that all students and staff may have experienced trauma, and have differing responses to it. The basis of that understanding will help inform and support the universal aim of prevention of re-traumatisation and building a trauma responsive environment for all, to support the specific, targeted response for those who need it as set out in the existing frameworks.

Why is this important and what would it mean in practice?

The key pillars that universities are measured upon for success include: 'attracting students to apply, attracting the best teaching staff, retaining students when they arrive, supporting them to compete their studies whilst having a satisfying experience at university, and achieving the best academic outcomes that reach their potential and allow them to gain employment, and maintaining academic standards and staff.

FE Colleges also face the same challenges, although may be measured slightly differently. A trauma informed approach to HE effectively follows these principles; realising the prevalence of trauma, recognising how it affects students and the workforce, resisting re-traumatisation and responding by putting knowledge into practice. So, any university that knows and understands its population demographic, and already has a student support service who are working towards wellbeing goals and standards set by for e.g. HEFCW and Universities Wales etc, are already working towards the recognition of prevalence of issues like mental ill health, substance misuse, domestic abuse etc. What would benefit and enhance this work is the development of that whole institution, whole system approach that changes the environment for all and ensures protective factors are built in and accessible. Working in a trauma informed way would achieve this.

The universal, strengths-based approach proposed to develop a model for TI HE and FE in Wales supports elements highlighted in WG HE policy statement on



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coronavirus which recognises the importance, now more than ever, of health and wellbeing of staff and students particularly with the additional worry and anxiety caused by the pandemic and the commitment in HE to HEFCWs Well-being and Health Policy Statement and delivering Welsh Government's well-being policy expectations.. It complements the requirement for HEIs having activities and measures in place to support staff and students' health and wellbeing including support for students who may be feeling isolated during the Pandemic and for whom the university is their primary residence / a place of safety / important factor for resilience.

In short, taking this type of approach builds upon existing work and will be a benefit to the key goals of the university or FE College, as well as making sure that all students and staff are supported and empowered to do their best and achieve their potential.

Next steps:

We have already developed a set of principles for taking this work forward in the HE/FE setting. Now we have changed approach to respond to the current need and are developing a more specific pilot arrangement in both settings to explore the feasibility of this work, we will be looking to quickly put in place some agreed steps to take this forward.

This will include working with Glyndwr in the first instance to conduct a self-assessment and review of what is already in place, development of products to support any identified areas of need and a clear plan for evaluation of any of the overall approach.

We would be very happy to provide further updates to this committee as the work progresses, particularly after we have made firmer arrangements with FE to identify a pilot college. And of course will be happy to share any of the resources mentioned above, or new ones as they develop, that maybe of broader use to support work with children and young people.



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Appendix 1

Agreed Principles of Trauma-informed HE and FE Settings

Trauma informed HE and FE settings understand, recognise and respond to the effects of all types of trauma and prioritise physical and emotional safety in learning. They have an understanding of how trauma impacts brain development and respond to it in both action and curriculum. It considers student-led teaching styles, creating restorative practices and fostering resilience while facilitating learning. Trauma-informed higher education / further education settings:

Realise, that:

- students (and staff) may have history of trauma such as ACEs
- negative behaviours may result as an attempt to cope with trauma
- risks of re-traumatisation and secondary trauma should be prevented
- resilience resources can reduce the harms associated with trauma

Recognise:

- the different types of trauma that may be experienced
- the signs and symptoms of trauma
- that staff support and wellbeing is important

Respond:

- by maximising student choice
- by teaching and integrating tools and knowledge to aid in healing and empowerment
- with culturally and personally RELEVANT person-centred approaches
- in ways that RESIST re-traumatising
- to build RESILIENCE in students so they can grow and thrive