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TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH IN EDUCATION AS A FOUNDATION FOR SUSTAINABLE SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT

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Sustainable societal development is unattainable without education that simultaneously ensures the quality of learning, mental well-being, and social cohesion. In contemporary crisis conditions, schools become one of the key institutions for restoring human capital, fostering trust, and preventing the long-term social consequences of traumatization (*United Nations*, 2015). For Ukraine, where the education system operates under prolonged stress, wartime risks, and forced displacement, this issue has acquired strategic importance both for national resilience and for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to quality education and health and well-being. The relevance of a trauma-informed approach is further intensified by the scale of disruptions to educational infrastructure and learning processes. According to UNICEF data, as of 26 November 2025, a total of 1,611 educational institutions in Ukraine had been damaged or destroyed since the onset of the full-scale escalation, while the actual figures may be higher due to limitations in verification. Alongside physical destruction, losses in instructional time and educational quality have increased, as learning is systematically interrupted by air-raid alerts and forced population movements. Against this background, the psychological burden on children, parents, and educators has significantly increased, directly affecting the capacity to learn and to teach. Assessments by the World Health Organization for Ukraine indicate that 9.6 million people may be at risk of, or living with, mental health conditions, while 3.9 million may

experience symptoms of moderate to severe intensity (*World Health Organization, 2022*). In addition, UNICEF analytical materials on mental health and psychosocial support report high prevalence rates of severe anxiety and post-traumatic stress symptoms based on survey data, underscoring the systemic nature of the problem and its profound implications for education.

Under these conditions, a trauma-informed approach in education is conceptualized as a scientifically grounded framework that enables a shift from punitive and control-oriented responses to practices focused on supporting functioning, ensuring safety, and restoring learning capacity. Its practical value lies in the implementation of principles of psychological safety, predictability, co-regulation, non-discrimination, and partnership with families, as well as in the early identification of risks and appropriate referral to professional support. At the systemic level, this creates conditions for reducing learning losses, preventing secondary traumatization of both students and educators, enhancing inclusivity, and strengthening the social resilience of communities.

Thus, a trauma-informed approach in education should be interpreted not merely as a set of psycho-pedagogical techniques, but as an integral component of a broader strategy for sustainable societal development that integrates scientific evidence on the impacts of trauma with governance and policy decisions in education. This perspective establishes a clear link between the quality of education today and the capacity of society for recovery, productivity, and social cohesion in the long term.

In scientific and applied literature, trauma-informed practice in higher education is conceptualized primarily as an organizational and systemic approach rather than as a discrete pedagogical technique or psychological intervention. The classical definition proposed by SAMHSA emphasizes that a trauma-informed institution operates on the basis of four core assumptions (“the 4Rs”) and six guiding principles (*Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014*). The 4Rs include the realization of the widespread nature of traumatic experiences among students and staff and their impact on academic and professional functioning; the recognition of signs and manifestations of traumatic stress within the educational environment; the capacity to respond through institutional policies, procedures, and practices; and the active resistance to re-traumatization within the culture of the university. The six principles encompass the promotion of psychological safety; trustworthiness and transparency in academic processes; peer support and collegial interaction; collaboration and mutuality among all participants in the educational process; empowerment, autonomy, and choice for students and academic staff; and sensitivity

to cultural, historical, and gender-related factors. The relevance of this framework for higher education lies in its shift of focus from individual “deficits” or academic “failure” toward institutional responsibility for creating conditions in which learning, teaching, and scholarly activity become possible (Carello, & Butler, 2015). Research reviews and methodological guidelines consistently describe the core mechanisms through which traumatic experiences and prolonged stress affect educational outcomes, mechanisms that are directly applicable to higher education contexts. Chronic activation of stress responses disrupts attention, working memory, executive functioning, and self-regulation – capacities that are fundamental to independent learning, academic writing, critical thinking, and research activity (Henshaw, 2022). Within university settings, these effects may manifest as difficulties in concentration, procrastination, decreased academic motivation, avoidance of assessment situations, or, conversely, excessive overexertion and maladaptive perfectionism. Among academic and teaching staff, elevated risks of secondary traumatization and professional burnout have been documented, adversely affecting the quality of instruction, research supervision, and academic interaction. For this reason, trauma-informed approaches in higher education are not framed as substitutes for psychotherapy, but rather as universal strategies for reducing systemic risks and supporting the functional capacity of the majority of students and staff, complemented by clearly defined pathways to specialized professional support for those who require it. Within higher education, trauma-informed practice is most commonly conceptualized through a multi-tiered model of institutional support. The first, universal level encompasses the entire university and focuses on establishing a safe, predictable, and supportive academic environment. This includes transparent rules and procedures, clearly structured curricula, fairness and predictability in assessment, accessible communication channels, and pedagogical and managerial practices oriented toward de-escalation and the support of self-regulation. The second, targeted level addresses the needs of students from groups at increased risk, including those with experiences of forced displacement, loss, disability, or social and economic vulnerability, through structured group formats, mentoring systems, and the development of emotional regulation and academic adaptation skills. The third level involves individualized support plans and clearly defined referral mechanisms to mental health professionals in cases where symptoms are severe, persistent, or associated with risks to safety and academic functioning. This multi-level logic is consistent with international recommendations for integrating psychosocial support into education systems in crisis-affected contexts.

A distinct emphasis in the literature is placed on the understanding that trauma-informed practice in higher education entails a transformation of academic culture. Systemic frameworks highlight the necessity of change not only within psychological services, but also across institutional policies, governance structures, and everyday interactions among all categories of university staff. Core elements of a trauma-informed university culture include a shared understanding of trauma, a supportive and non-discriminatory academic climate, restorative rather than punitive approaches to addressing misconduct and conflict, partnership with students and, where appropriate, their families, coordination with community-based services, and sustainable mechanisms for professional development, supervision, and staff well-being. Importantly, a trauma-informed university does not seek to “diagnose” all students; instead, it enhances the sensitivity of the institutional system to risks and needs and ensures access to support without stigma.

At the level of specific pedagogical and educational practices, contemporary guidelines align trauma-informed approaches in higher education with evidence-based components of social-emotional learning, academic adjustment, and psychosocial support. The development of social-emotional competencies, co-regulation skills, and responsible academic communication is shown to reduce distress, increase engagement, and strengthen social cohesion within university communities (*UNESCO, 2024*). Crucially, these components are not limited to standalone “training sessions,” but are integrated into teaching practices, research supervision, and academic governance, supporting the restoration of executive functioning through structure, predictability, and relational support. International guidance further underscores that universities may serve as platforms for scaling group-based psychosocial interventions only when supported by trained personnel, ethical protocols, and coordination with professional support services. A critically important component of trauma-informed practice in higher education is the clear conceptual distinction between “trauma-informed,” “trauma-sensitive,” and “trauma-specific” approaches. Trauma-informed practice provides the overarching framework for institutional policies, culture, and interaction; trauma-sensitive practice refers primarily to pedagogical and communicative strategies within teaching and learning contexts; and trauma-specific interventions consist of clinical or specialized programs aimed at treating trauma-related conditions and must be delivered by appropriately trained professionals. This distinction is particularly vital in higher education, as it safeguards institutions from both the neglect of trauma-related consequences and the risk of inappropriate “pseudo-therapeutic” practices within academic settings that lack the necessary expertise, resources, and safeguards. Within this framework, the role

of the university and academic staff lies in support, early identification of risk, and appropriate referral, rather than in replacing professional mental health care.

From the perspective of sustainable societal development, the significance of a trauma-informed approach in higher education extends well beyond immediate educational outcomes and acquires a broader systemic, socio-economic, and cultural dimension. In contexts of prolonged crisis, armed conflict, social instability, and large-scale displacement, universities increasingly operate under conditions of elevated risk, where the capacity to maintain continuity of teaching, learning, and research becomes a key indicator of institutional resilience. Within this framework, trauma-informed approaches contribute to the preservation of educational and scientific capacity by creating conditions that support cognitive functioning, academic motivation, and professional engagement among both students and academic staff. In the long term, this function is directly linked to the restoration and development of human capital, which constitutes a central resource for sustainable societal development. At the same time, trauma-informed practice in higher education plays a critical role in reducing educational and social inequalities. Empirical research consistently demonstrates that students with traumatic life experiences, histories of forced displacement, loss, disability, or socio-economic vulnerability are disproportionately affected by barriers to academic participation, access to institutional resources, and degree completion. When higher education systems operate without explicit consideration of psychosocial factors, such inequalities tend to be reproduced or intensified. In contrast, trauma-informed institutional models promote more equitable and flexible learning conditions, thereby mitigating risks of academic exclusion and attrition. In this sense, trauma-informed higher education functions as a mechanism of structural prevention of inequality, closely aligned with broader objectives of social justice and inclusive development.

A further dimension of societal relevance concerns the preventive potential of trauma-informed approaches with regard to mental health disorders and professional burnout. By prioritizing psychological safety, predictability, and co-regulation within academic environments, trauma-informed universities reduce chronic stress exposure and the risk of secondary traumatization, particularly among academic and teaching staff working under conditions of high cognitive and emotional demand. Over time, this preventive function yields substantial societal benefits by decreasing pressure on public health and social protection systems, sustaining workforce productivity, and preserving professional communities that are essential for the continuity of education, research, and innovation. Beyond these direct effects, universities that systematically implement trauma-informed principles increasingly assume

the role of agents of social resilience and transformation. Through their academic culture, pedagogical practices, and governance models, such institutions cultivate competencies in collaboration, responsible leadership, critical reflection, and adaptive functioning under conditions of uncertainty. These competencies are central to the sustainability of democratic societies, as they shape graduates' capacity for civic participation, ethical decision-making, and constructive engagement in processes of social recovery and development.

A trauma-informed approach in higher education should therefore be conceptualized as a scientifically grounded systemic paradigm that integrates knowledge about the psychosocial consequences of trauma with institutional governance, pedagogical practice, and academic culture. Its significance extends beyond improvements in educational climate or individual well-being to encompass broader processes of human capital development, inequality reduction, and social resilience. In this capacity, trauma-informed higher education constitutes a foundational element of sustainable societal development, establishing a durable link between educational quality, mental well-being, and long-term institutional and social stability.

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