WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY

Vice-Chancellor's GENDER EQUITY FUND Final Report 2024

Surviving Violence, Surviving University

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Contents

Content Warning 3

Recommendations 4

Student Focused Supports 4

Staff Focused Supports 6

Executive Summary 8

Itemised Budget Expenditure 11

Research Report 12

Background and Literature Review 12

Project Aims 13

Methodology 14

Student Survey 14

Student Focus Groups 17

Staff Focus Groups and Autoethnography 17

Findings 18

Forms and Patterns of GBV 18

The Ongoing Impacts of GBV 22

Challenges navigating university systems and norms 24

Staff exposure to vicarious trauma and preparedness to respond 42

References 53

Appendices 60

Appendix 1 - Survey 61

Appendix 2 – WSU Wellbeing Plan 79

Appendix 3 – Good Practice Guide Content Warnings 82

Content Warning

This report draws on themes including sexual violence, sexual abuse and harassment, domestic and family violence, child sexual abuse, reproductive violence, coercive control, suicide, depression, anxiety and trauma.

Recommendations

Student Focused Supports

Supporting Help-Seeking for Extensions and Disruption To Studies (DTS)

- **In Principle**: Greater understanding of the sensitivities around disclosure and creating appropriate frameworks for the recognition of the impact of GBV is needed. This must avoid harmful practices of disclosure that re-traumatise and/or produce pathologising constructions of the individual student.
- **In Practice**: Participants suggested support could be offered more consistently across the academic systems and processes relating to requesting extensions and providing supporting evidence.
    - Students recommended that we explore the possibility of implementing the equivalent of an Academic Reasonable Adjustment Plan (ARAP) in the context of students with broader trauma/welfare histories. This would remove the need to provide evidence for every extension by having a consultation with a WSU counsellor that could allow them to apply for a 7-day extension, and implement reasonable adjustments, such as options for alternative assessments and consistent content or trigger warnings by providing an equivalent of an ARAP.
    - Build confidence in reporting/support seeking: Students reported a number of perceived barriers to reporting. It is recommended that WSU explore platforms that would allow students to anonymously 'practice' making a disclosure for different help-seeking needs that would mitigate their concerns around confidentiality, legal repercussions, victim blaming, and evidence burdens.

Supporting Trauma Informed Pedagogies

- **In Principle**: Greater attention should be given to trauma informed pedagogies, and the relationship between inclusive pedagogical, curricular, assessment and support frameworks and practices, and flexible and responsive time structures.

- **In Practice**: Students recommended the following:
    - Content and trigger warnings need to be used consistently across subjects and embedded into learning guides.
    - Ensure students are aware of support services if they find course content or assessment tasks emotionally or psychologically challenging. Referral options to WSU counselling should be embedded into vUWS sites, especially around assessments with content related to GBV.
    - Assessment practice: Where possible, implement trauma-informed approaches to assessment. This may include:
        - **Training**: Provide training for staff on trauma informed pedagogy.
        - **Clarity**: specific instructions, and requirements being made very explicit. This can reduce the cognitive load in the context of trauma. Large or complex assignments should be broken into **smaller, manageable chunks** with **clear timelines** to help reduce stress and allow students to engage at their own pace.
        - **Choice**: Offer alternative assessments which are trauma informed.
        - **Flexibility**: Allow students to choose topics for assignments or present in alternative formats (e.g., video instead of in-person presentation), particularly for those who may experience anxiety or distress in certain situations.
        - **Clear Rationale for Sensitive Content**: Provide a clear rationale for including sensitive or potentially distressing material in courses and ways to navigate this. For example, subjects with potentially distressing content should provide resources such as the 'WSU Wellbeing Plan' or the "WSU Self-awareness and care in learning" Plan (see Appendix 2).
        - **Empathy**: Normalise and validate students' emotional responses to such content.
        - **Boundaries and Self-Protection**: Allow students to set boundaries regarding their participation in certain activities.

Offer alternatives for engaging with content (e.g., watching videos privately, reading instead of viewing distressing material).

Staff Focused Supports

Trauma-Informed Staff Training

- **In Principle**: Staff feel unprepared to respond to disclosures and may be unclear on the pathway for complex cases. Staff need better training, institutional support, and clear guidelines to manage the emotional and ethical complexities of these situations.
- **In Practice**: Suggestions include:
    - **Trauma-informed training for all staff**. Regular and mandatory training for all staff. Training should be 'hands-on', practical and 'case study' based learning.
    - **Clear referral pathways for staff to refer students**. Ensure that all staff are familiar with the full range of available student support services (e.g., CAT team, counselling services) and are trained in how to refer students appropriately (which service, when to refer and how?) without overburdening themselves. These pathways should be regularly updated and communicated to ensure all staff, including new, sessional, and existing employees, are informed of any changes to or introduction of additional services.

Vicarious Trauma Management and Support for Staff

- **In Principle**: Greater understanding and management of vicarious trauma is required. VT is an inherent risk for staff in roles that require direct interaction with students disclosing traumatic experiences, more consideration should be given how this impacts teaching staff. This emotional strain manifests in a range of symptoms, from intrusive thoughts to heightened anxiety and avoidance of work. While this is a personal challenge, it is also an institutional responsibility.
- **In Practice**: Suggestions include:

- **Education and Awareness**: Providing staff with information on the symptoms and impacts of VT can help them recognise the signs and seek support when necessary. Training should focus on both understanding VT and the cognitive changes it can cause, as well as strategies for coping and managing the emotional burden (e.g. https://fullstop.org.au/training/vicarious-trauma). These should be appropriately workload as staff professional development.
- **Support for responding to VT**: Access to university support (e.g. EAP) as well as other supports, such as the Clinical Advisory Team (CAT). These are available but staff are often unaware of these supports, or express concerns about accessing them.
- **Limiting exposure to traumatic student disclosures**. Staff expressed a concern with DTS and extension applications containing traumatic content disclosing violence (including pictures, detailed descriptions, police reports etc.) WSU should limit exposure to such direct traumatic content, or forms should contain a content and trigger warning so staff are aware of the content in advance.
- Student-facing academic staff carry significant emotional and cognitive burdens, by managing emotional labor, problem-solving, and decision-making in often unpredictable and high-stress situations. To better support these staff members, WSU must recognise the full scope of their workload. WSU should **regularly assess workloads** through staff feedback to ensure that expectations are realistic and aligned with the challenges staff face. This would reduce burnout and improve staff well-be 1ing, as well as strengthen quality support for students.

Executive Summary

This report provides empirical research examining the impact of gender-based violence (GBV) on students' experiences of university. While GBV across the life-course is an extremely prevalent and pressing social problem, it has been largely invisible within higher education unless experienced on campus.

Very little previous research has examined the question of equity in higher education through the prism of students who have suffered GBV across their ***lifetimes*** (see Burke et al. 2023). This project aims to fill that gap by examining the experience of entering and participating in university for students who are currently, or have previously, experienced GBV.

- What are students' experiences of negotiating the impacts of Domestic/Family/Sexual Violence at university?
- What are the motivations and barriers to higher education for students with current/previous experiences of Domestic/Family/Sexual Violence?
- How does experiencing domestic/family/sexual violence impact university education, progression, and experience?
- How do teaching staff experience and respond to disclosures of domestic/family/sexual violence?
- Based on student/staff experiences, what are the gaps in WSU policy and practice that respond to domestic/family/sexual violence?

This research utilised surveys, focus groups and autoethnography with students and staff. Surveys and focus groups with students aimed to understand their experiences of GBV, the impact this has had on their education and study, and their experiences of disclosures at the university, including what could be done to better support them. Staff were asked about their experiences of receiving disclosures from students, their training and preparedness for such disclosures, vicarious trauma and the gaps in policy and practice.

In this research we take a sociological perspective of GBV that understands GBV as related to the broader socio-cultural context of gendered inequalities (Fraser, 2013). In order to gain a sense of the 'continuum of experiences' of GBV (Kelly, 1988), a questionnaire was designed to understand the different forms of GBV that student victim-survivors experienced in their lifetime. This GBV continuum might include for example domestic violence, sexual assault or verbal sexist abuse. The GBV continuum is significant in understanding the relationship between all acts of GBV to wider gender injustice, including the more taken-for-granted incidents of sexism, at one end of the continuum, or extreme forms of violence at the other (Anitha & Lewis, 2018). In line with a continuum, the survey revealed experiences of different forms of violence, by different perpetrators, across the lifespan.

The key findings from this research are presented through the following themes:

Ongoing impacts of GBV. GBV experiences have an enduring impact that shapes experiences of higher education

- Past experiences of GBV have long lasting impacts (for example, shame and heightened anxiety). These impacts are often invisible, particularly when the weight of responsibility is on individuals to conform to institutionalised university expectations.
- The enduring sequelae of GBV bring with it an "infinitive temporality", whereby the past repeatedly intrudes upon the present (Wieskamp & Smith, 2020: 79).

Challenges navigating university systems and norms.

- Participants detailed uneven experiences of student support across their studies, where some cultural environments were more enabling than others.
- Time and 'evidence' burdens: Problematic linear conception of time that is embedded in university structures means students perceive a mismatch between their lived experience of GBV victim-survivors and the current support mechanisms offered within higher education settings. These

mechanisms tend to be ad hoc and incapable of recognising the ongoing impact of GBV experiences for higher education participation.

- Participants detailed uneven application of 'trauma informed' pedagogies and teaching practices: It is essential for recognising that traumatic content taught in courses, especially in fields such as social work, law, and criminology, may cause significant distress, even for students without direct trauma histories (Bosse et al., 2021; Parrotta et al., 2021; Rhodes, 2019). Teaching trauma without safeguards can be harmful and unethical. Educators should not only teach about trauma but also apply trauma-informed principles in their teaching approaches.

Staff exposure to vicarious trauma and preparedness to respond

- Emotional and Logistical Challenges for Staff: University staff, particularly those in student-facing roles teaching and academic roles, face significant emotional strain when students disclose GBV. These disclosures often occur during requests for accommodations (like extensions), presenting a complex emotional landscape that can affect staff well-being and performance. Teaching staff feel unprepared to navigate these disclosures and their emotional impacts.
- Vicarious Trauma: Academic Staff members can experience vicarious trauma when exposed to students' distressing stories. This includes secondary traumatic stress symptoms like intrusive thoughts, heightened anxiety, and avoidance behaviours, which can impair their work and personal well-being. Vicarious trauma is a continuum. Everyone who is exposed to trauma is at risk of experiencing VT in some way. However, it's a continuum from minor to severe. When these impacts begin to cause impairment or distress and impact a person's ability to do their job, it requires strategies for intervention and support.

Itemised Budget Expenditure

Total funded amount $4536.47

Date	Activity / Item	Cost (GST incl.)
	Participant vouchers @ $50 each x 7	$550
	Marking buyout: 25 hours	$1957
	$50 voucher for survey draw	$50
	Research assistant: 29 hours	$1979.47
Total expenditure:		$4536.47

Research Report

Background and Literature Review

Violence against women is a pervasive issue in Australia, yet the impacts of this violence on university students is under explored. Most existing research on violence among tertiary students has been restricted to dating and sexual violence among young women (Rennison & Addington, 2014). The *limited* available data suggest that other forms of violence and trauma, including intimate partner violence, family violence, and dating violence is a pervasive problem for female tertiary students in Australia (see Chan et al., 2008; Cale et al., 2017), and that students report a lack of understanding and support for this issue at university (Guberman et al., 2018). Furthermore, There is a dearth of research both within Australia and internationally considering the impact that these types of violence have on tertiary education (Zark et al., 2022). A small body of existing work in the U.S has observed the academic impacts of intimate partner violence (IPV) among tertiary students, finding that violence impacted on academic performance, progression, and attrition (Mengo and Black, 2016; Banyard et al., 2017; Voth Schrag et al., 2019). Even fewer have considered the experiences and preparedness of university staff and teachers who are often at the coalface of student disclosures (Branch et al., 2011). Conversely, a strong body of primary prevention evidence (see Jewkes, 2002; Salter and Gore, 2020; Voth Schrag and Edmond, 2018; Resko, 2007) demonstrates that completing tertiary education is a protective factor against future victimisation for women.

While the recent *National university student survey on sexual assault and sexual harassment* has led to action in addressing sexual violence on campus, there is a dire need to investigate broader experiences and impacts of violence. Most existing research on violence among tertiary students has been restricted to dating and sexual violence among young women (Rennison & Addington, 2014). However, the available data suggest that other forms of violence and trauma, including intimate partner violence, family violence, and dating violence is a pervasive problem for female tertiary students. Indeed, Resko (2007) found that women are at an *increased risk* of experiencing domestic/family violence during tertiary education, as

attaining higher education threatens the power dynamics within abusive, coercive, or gender stratified relationships (Resko, 2007). This is reflected in the *limited* Australian data, suggesting that 86.7% (more than 6 in 7 students) reported having experienced violence (physical, sexual, psychological, and/or financial) from an intimate partner and/or family member during adulthood (Zark et al., 2022). Furthermore, Guberman et al., (2018: 79) found that "what affected students most deeply was their experience of harm in the home by family members—fathers, brothers, mothers, and extended family" (Guberman et al., 2018: 79), which took physical, sexual, emotional, and financial forms. However, students described a lack of understanding and support for this issue at university. The full extent of the violence experienced by women in tertiary settings is unclear, there is a dearth of research both within Australia and internationally considering the impact that these types of violence have on tertiary education (Zark et al., 2022).

Project Aims

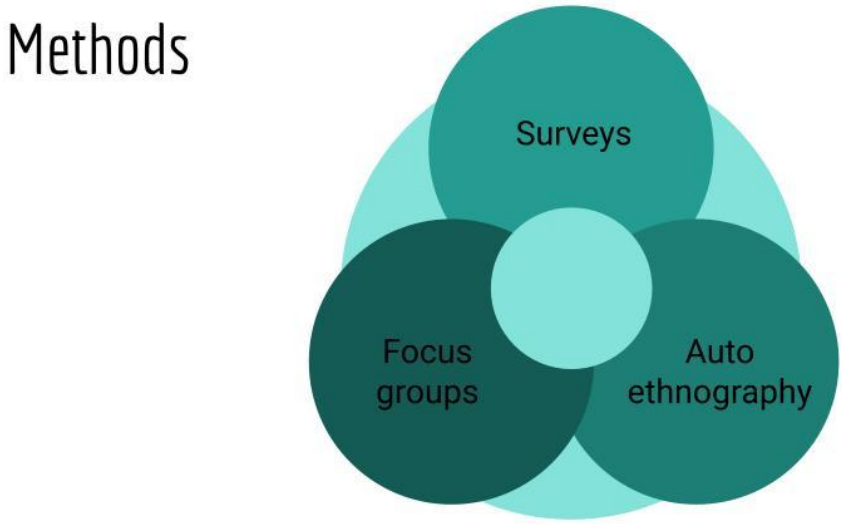
This research project aims to respond to this gap in Australian evidence about university students' experiences of domestic, family, and sexual violence, and how well university teachers are prepared to respond to disclosures of this violence.

This research project aims to respond to the following questions:

1. What are students' experiences of negotiating the impacts of Domestic/Family/Sexual Violence at university
2. What are the motivations and barriers to higher education for students with current/previous experiences of Domestic/Family/Sexual Violence
3. How does experiencing domestic/family/sexual violence impact university education, progression, and experience.
4. How do teaching staff experience and respond to disclosures of domestic/family/sexual violence
5. Based on student/staff experiences, what are the gaps in WSU policy and practice that respond to domestic/family/sexual violence.

Methodology

The project involved several data collection points including a Qualtrics survey for students, focus groups with students and discussions with staff, including autoethnography by the authors of this report.



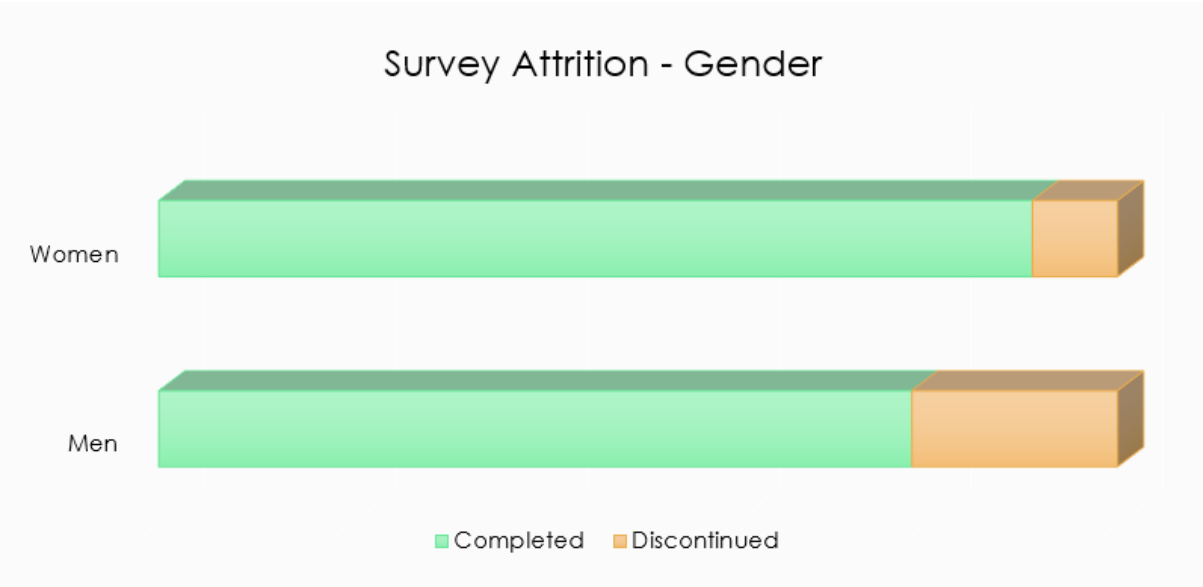
The survey (see Appendix 1) was distributed through Associate Dean's, Learning and Teaching, as well as other informal networks, such as the Women of Colour (WOC) network with the opportunity to win a $50 gift card. Students were undertaking their studies in Counselling and Psychotherapy, Arts, Psychology, Criminology, Social Work, Policing, Law, Social Science, Cybersecurity and Behaviour, Communication, Medical Science, International Studies, Business, Public Health, and Health Science.

Student Survey

Survey data set and attrition

The survey received 111 responses between July and November 2024. Of these 111 responses, 86 responses included demographics and 77 responses included responses on the types of violence, relationship to perpetrator, impacts on study etc.

As a part of this study, we were interested in students who agreed to complete the survey and filled out the demographic questions, but did not complete the survey questions on types of violence. In this case, 10 people did not continue on past the demographic questions. There appears to be a gendered dimension as the attrition did not reflect the whole data set. Women made up 72 (83.7%) of the 86 respondents, while men made up 11 (12.8%) of 86 respondents (1 respondent was gender fluid, 2 preferred not to say). However, 7 out of 72 women (9.7%) did not continue the survey, while 3 out of 11 men (27.3%) did not continue the survey.



While the number of men in the survey overall is small, this data reflects a disproportionate attrition of men once asked about their experiences of violence. The result is somewhat unsurprising, given the broader context of masculinity and victimisation, where men often struggle to come forward as victim-survivors of GBV. Notions of shame, weakness and stigmatisation, which conflict with traditional masculine ideals, can shape men's experiences in discussing GBV (Taylor et al., 2022). Within this research, at least one male participant discussed a high level of internalised shame which demonstrated a clear example of the barriers that men face as victim-survivors of GBV.

This context is important for future research as it highlights the need to create more inclusive and supportive environments for men to disclose experiences of GBV.

Understanding the unique barriers that men encounter can help researchers and practitioners develop targeted interventions that address these challenges.

The data set is based on the 77 responses that were considered as 'completed'. However, as each question was optional, not all responses are recorded for each question.

Survey Participant Snapshot

- Students ranged in age from 18 to 52, with the mean being 24.
- Most of the participants identified as women (n=67, 87%), while 8 identified as men (10.4%), 1 as gender fluid (1.3%) and 1 preferred not to say (1.3%).
- Cultural backgrounds were varied and included Anglo-Australian, Iraqi, Assyrian, Maltese, Greek, Italian, Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, Samoan Australian, Indigenous Australian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Hungarian, South American, African, Fijian Indian, European, Russian, Chilean, Bengali, Middle Eastern, Nigerian, Egyptian, Tongan, Thai, Syrian, Lebanese, Asian, Nepalese, Armenian, Kenyan, and Filipino.
- The majority of participants identified as straight or heterosexual (n=60, 77.9%), 8 identified as bisexual (10.4%), 4 identified as lesbian (5.2%), 2 preferred not to say (2.6%), 1 identified as gay or homosexual (1.3%), 1 identified as pansexual (1.3%), and 1 identified as queer (1.3%).
- 7 participants (9.1%) were Aboriginal, 1 preferred not to say (1.3%), 69 (89.6%) were not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
- 14 participants (18.2%) noted that they had a disability, 5 preferred not to say (6.5%), 58 (75.3%) said they did not have a disability.
- Participants were mainly undergraduates (n=66, 85.7%), with a smaller, but still significant number of postgraduates (n=11, 14.3%) completing the survey.
- There were a significant number of students that were first in family (n=40, 51.9%) and/or international students (n=13, 16.9%).
- Degree and discipline varied, with the survey being distributed across a number of schools and networks. The discipline areas included Counselling

and Psychotherapy, Arts, Psychology, Criminology, Social Work, Policing, Law, Social Science, Cybersecurity and Behaviour, Communication, Medical Science, International Studies, Business, Public Health, and Health Science.

Student Focus Groups

Upon completion of the survey, students were invited to participate in a focus group in return for a $50 gift voucher. 37 students indicated they would be interested in a focus group. These students were emailed to gauge their availability to join one of two, two-hour focus group sessions during the Spring mid-semester break. A total of seven students, across two focus groups, were able to attend. Focus group students were asked semi-structured questions.

1. What are your experiences of negotiating the impacts of domestic/family/sexual violence at university as a student?
2. What are the motivations and barriers to higher education for students with current/previous experiences of domestic/family/sexual violence?
3. How does experiencing domestic/family/sexual violence impact your university education, progression, and experience?
4. Based on your experience as a student, what are the gaps in WSU policy and practice that respond to domestic/family/sexual violence?

Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed and participants were de-identified. The data was coded and underwent a thematic analysis.

Staff Focus Groups and Autoethnography

Four staff members, in addition to the three researchers named on this project, were able to contribute to the staff discussions on disclosures, vicarious trauma and support. Staff responded to the following questions:

1. As an academic staff member, have you received disclosures of domestic/family/sexual violence from students? What context did this happen in?

2. How do you as teaching staff experience and respond to disclosures of domestic/family/sexual violence from students?
3. How well-trained or prepared do you feel about receiving disclosures from students regarding their experiences of IPV and sexual violence?
4. Do you think you have experienced 'vicarious trauma' in navigating these disclosures? How supported have you felt to deal with this?
5. Based on your experience as a staff, what are the gaps in WSU policy and practice that respond to domestic/family/sexual violence?

Staff who are not named on this project were given a $50 gift voucher for their time.

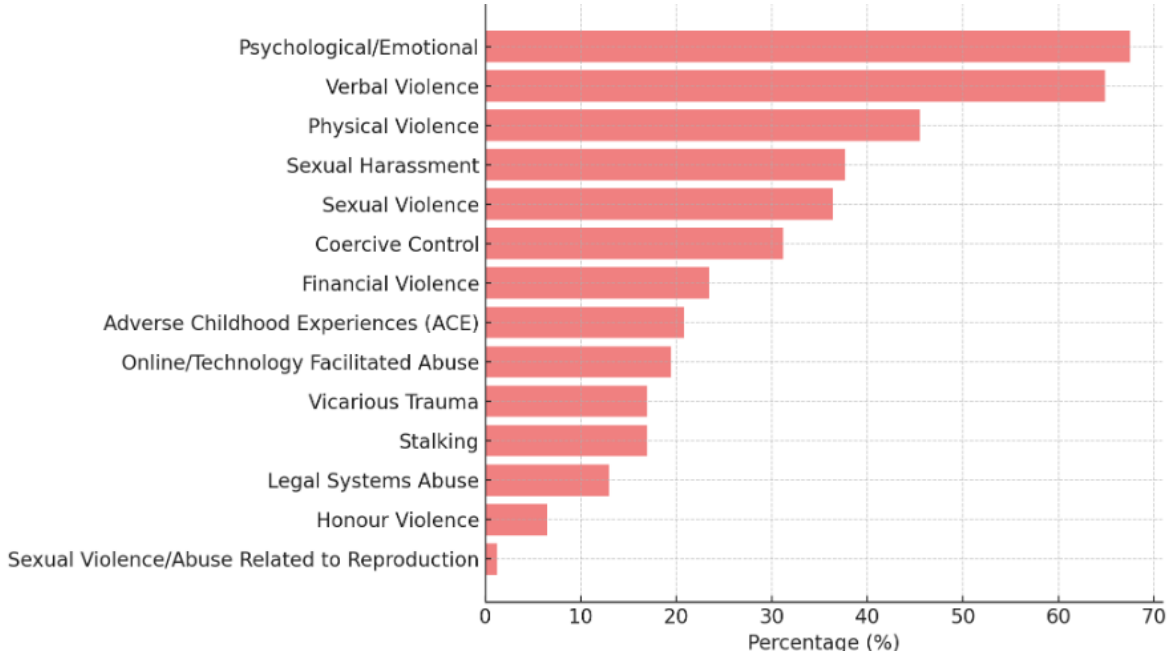
Findings

Forms and Patterns of GBV

The survey asked participants to indicate the different spaces in which their experiences of GBV had occurred; how recent the abuse had been (current, recent or historic); and their experience of help-seeking at university. In keeping with our approach to GBV as including a "vast array of lived experiences" and as deeply ingrained in structural and intersectional inequalities, which "impacts the everyday lives of people yet remains invisible" (Merry, 2009: 4), we also asked participants to nominate what forms of GBV they had experienced.

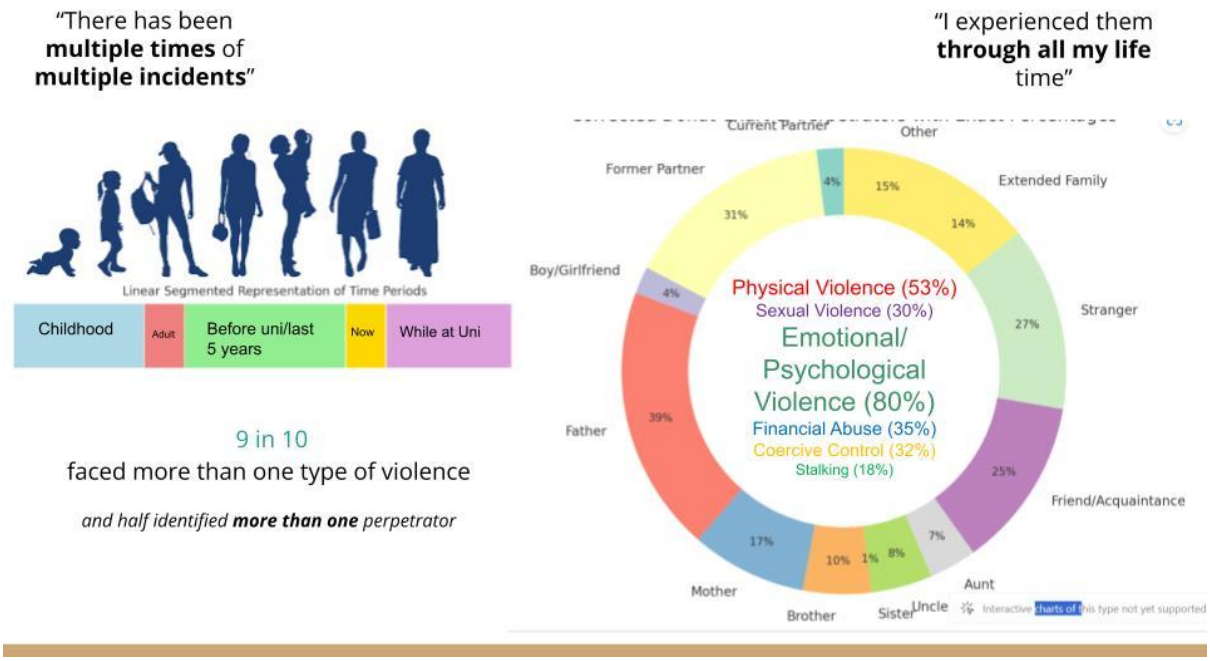
Students highlighted a range of violence that often overlapped across the lifecourse, as is common with GBV (Burke et al., 2023). The most common form of violence was psychological/emotional (n=52, 67.5%) and verbal violence (n=50, 64.9%). This was followed by physical violence (n=35, 45.5%) sexual harassment (n=29, 37.7%), sexual violence (n=28, 36.4%) and coercive control (n=24, 31.2%). Financial violence (n=18, 23.4%), Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) (n=16, 20.8%), online or technology facilitated abuse (n=15, 19.5%), vicarious trauma (n=13, 16.9%), stalking (n=13, 16.9%), legal systems abuse (n=10, 13%), honour violence (n=5, 6.5%), and sexual violence/abuse related to reproduction (n=1, 1.3%) were all also recorded as types of violence experienced by students. 9 in 10 students faced more than one type of violence.

Types of violence experienced by students



9 participants (11.7%) highlighted that the abuse had not happened to them, but someone they cared about. Like students directly impacted by violence, these students also highlighted the impact that this violence had on their studies.

The temporal aspects of GBV meant that many students had faced violence prior to university, recently (n=23, 29.9%) and historically (n=34, 44.2%). However, a concerning number of students are currently experiencing violence (n=14, 18.2%) or have faced violence during their time at university (n=16, 20.8%). This can be seen in the graph below.



The most likely relationship to the perpetrator was father, followed by former partner, stranger, friend, acquaintance and mother. However, half identified more than one perpetrator.

The most common setting that students had experienced any form of GBV in was at home (n=57, 74%). Public places were the second most common, with 41.6% (n=32) reporting incidents there. Other locations accounted for 27.3% (n=21), while 19.5% (n=15) experienced GBV on the street or at work. Smaller percentages were reported in other settings, such as travelling to or from university (5.2%, n=4), on a university campus (7.8%, n=6), and at recreational or leisure places like gyms or pools (5.2%, n=4).

While it is positive that students report lower levels on GBV on campus, the literature underscores the importance of not overlooking the connection between GBV (off-campus) and the pedagogical and institutional context of higher education – which can reproduce or rupture gendered injustice (see Burke et al., 2023; Roberts et al., 2023). There is a general trend in research that explores GBV in higher education contexts to conflate this focus with violence that occurs on campus or which is directly related to the university context (Heywood et al., 2022). The

ways in which GBV occuring in external settings from the institution then impacts on student experience is underexplored. However, experiences of GBV for students, academics and university staff in any context affects the ways in which they then participate in and experience higher education, as well as how they interact with each other. This dynamic was captured by one staff member describing her encounter with a student disclosure of child sexual abuse, which mirrored her own lived experience:

> I went home and debriefed with my husband. He was really concerned that the student had disclosed this to me and was really worried about my mental health. I didn't really want to talk to anyone at the university about it. My husband experienced DV from a step parent as a child. He witnessed his mum being abused and the step father was emotionally and financially abusive toward him, so it's not ideal sharing this stuff with him either. I don't feel any support from the university. I have sometimes discussed the matters with other staff at the same level as me, but I try not to do this as I am aware other staff also have trauma from sexual violence and I'm conscious not to impact their mental health

In this report, we understand these effects and inter-relationships with GBV by adapting Liz Kelly's (1988) notion of the continuum of sexual violence. Continuum thinking can allow us to understand the connection, whilst maintaining distinctions that are important conceptually, politically and legally between different forms of GBV. Different forms of violence—whether experienced directly or indirectly, in various settings—can have cumulative and interconnected impacts on individuals. As a concept, it points to how GBV operates across various contexts and relationships, influencing people's experiences over time. Conceptualising GBV as a continuum recognises that the experiences and impacts of GBV are also not temporally confined; victims and their families can experience ongoing GBV and effects across their lifetime (Sullivan et al., 2021). It uniquely highlights how both student and staff experiences of GBV can intersect on this continuum through an 'extended timeframe' and share 'the interwoven spaces and contexts' (Sullivan et al., 2021). This

conception also extends beyond a minimalist conception of violence that focuses on incidents of violence and recognises the violence as a 'violation' that includes a wide range of transgressions and the "ripples of violence" affecting survivors, their families, and their communities over time. In the context of this report, it draws attention to how experiences of GBV and higher education are 'continually re-situated across and within interconnected, institutional and multidirectional timescapes' (Burke et al., 2023) for both staff and students.

The Ongoing Impacts of GBV

GBV can have a profound impact on a student's emotional and psychological well-being. Many students express how their trauma continues to affect their daily lives, particularly in academic settings. One student shared that, despite reassurances that the violence was "not their fault," certain classes still trigger feelings of guilt, reminding them of past experiences. Others mentioned suffering from anxiety as a result of their trauma, with some noting that the emotional scars made even basic activities like eating, studying, or sleeping feel impossible, as their thoughts were consumed by the trauma. The physical and emotional toll of these experiences is also evident, as some students described intense feelings of sickness, heart palpitations, and a sense of powerlessness and helplessness when reminded of their past abuse in the context of university classes or study:

> Anything small you see will start to remind you of what happened. You get flashbacks all the time.

> I get a panic attack when I just couldn't handle what he was saying.

Some students described current circumstances of family violence that created dynamics of fear that impacted their immediate sense of safety as well as their ability to engage fully with higher education:

> It makes you feel so sick to your stomach, your heart starts beating fast, you feel powerless and helpless, he makes you feel so small and convinces you

> that your stuck and there's nothing you can do about it…The cycle just keeps repeating itself, and then anything small you see will start to remind you of what happened and they don't go away no matter what you do.

> i don't like going out because i get scared that his gonna do something to her (mum) and i wont be there with her and i know shes not a child shes my mum and shes very strong but i just cant get the idea and thought out of my head. anyone can say useless threats but only some will actually do it and mean it and when i look him in the eyes and he says it i genuinely believe he will do it.

For these students, while GBV in the home made study difficult, it was also their driving motivation for pursuing their education. Yet this places a increased pressure on these students to succeed in the face of extreme barriers:

> when you think about someone you love that's so innocent getting abused like that everytime and you cant do anything about it and you just watch you get that sick feeling and you get that sharp pain in your heart it makes you want to kill yourself cause there's no escape I'm only 18 where am i suppose to go i work really hard to save up money and study full time but lets face it in this economy ill barely survive a week with my savings and i won't leave my mum with him no way. i have a plan to graduate and finish my degree and get a good job somewhere far and get very rich and take my mum with me somewhere he can never find us that's the only reason I'm still trying but its just so hard to mentally focus and do good when you have that burden and pressure on your mind 24/7.

These struggles demonstrate the lasting effects of trauma on a student's mental health and ability to engage fully in their education as outlined below:

> it impacted my motivation to finish school work or stay awake during class due to the nightmares I would have the night before.

> It's funny how they say - it's not your fault - but certain classes remind you of different experiences in your life and then you just begin to feel guilty, which puts you in a really bad place when trying to achieve good marks.

GBV significantly impacted students' academic choices, progress, and performance. Many students reported that their experiences led them to change their study path or course selections, with 27.3% (n=21) indicating they had to alter their class or subject. Additionally, 32.5% had to avoid certain places or classes due to trauma-related triggers. The impact on academic progress was particularly evident, with 41.6% (n=32) stating that they had to take leave, reduce their study load, or withdraw temporarily before returning to their studies. A significant number of students (35%, n=27) missed classes, further disrupting their educational experience. The emotional and psychological toll of these experiences also negatively affected academic performance, with 62.3% (n=48) of students acknowledging that their grades suffered as a result of the ongoing trauma. Past experiences of GBV have long lasting impacts (for example, shame and heightened anxiety). The enduring sequelae of GBV bring with it an "infinitive temporality", whereby the past repeatedly intrudes upon the present (Wieskamp & Smith 2020: 79). These impacts are often invisible, particularly when the weight of responsibility is on individuals to conform to institutionalised university expectations as explored below.

Challenges navigating university systems and norms

Navigating help-seeking and disclosure

Many students who experience GBV report feelings of shame and embarrassment as an ongoing impact and barrier to full university participation and success. These feelings are often rooted in internalised beliefs about deficiency and not being "good enough," as noted by Burke (2017). Such emotions are compounded by the deficit discourses prevalent in higher education, which frame certain student groups—particularly survivors of violence—as less capable or worthy of success (Webb, 1997; Williams, 1997; Burke, 2002). The experience of shame can be exacerbated when

students feel they are failing to meet the high academic and personal expectations set by the institution. This leads to low self-esteem and a lack of confidence, which is often tied to their experiences of abuse. For example one student commented on feeling made to feel deficit when he had to withdraw in the aftermath of family violence:

> The only communication I received was about my GPA or standing - this creating another level of anxiety - the contact is about my bad grades.

This feeling of shame significantly affects students' reluctance to seek help, especially in academic settings where requests for extensions or support are involved. Help-seeking involves actively pursuing external support, while disclosure refers to sharing experiences of victimisation with others. In the literature, the terms "help-seeking" and "disclosure" are often used interchangeably (Zark et al., 2023).

The survey results show that a majority of students have not disclosed their experiences of GBV to anyone at the university. Specifically, 22.1% (n=17) reported disclosing their experiences, while 53.2% (n=41) did not. There are several reasons why university students may report low or no incidences of gender-based violence. These reasons include failing to recognise the behaviour as a crime or as sexual or domestic violence, normalising such behaviour as something expected, or trivialising it as not serious enough to report. Students may also feel ashamed, blame themselves, or avoid reporting to prevent the perpetrator from facing consequences. Fear of retaliation from the perpetrator or doubts that help providers will take their experiences seriously can also deter reporting. Some may worry about receiving discriminatory or unsympathetic responses from those offering help, or they may believe that nothing can be done and that they can handle the situation on their own (see Roberts et al., 2023). Students in this research expressed a variety of concerns around disclosure, ranging from fear of victim blaming and privacy, concerns about legal repercussions, fear of not being believed and a sense that the university would not be able to help:

> You have concerns about exposing yourself to victim blaming. In the context of family/friends responses ,people you love pass judgement. I don't even know who is on the other side of this form.
>
> Will I implicate myself in a way that could bar me from employment?
>
> I wouldn't feel it would help. What's done is done, and even if I was going through it I wouldn't know how they could actually help

Students in the focus group described a pervasive fear of 'victim blaming' that prevented them seeking extension or disruption to study support options for fear of having to disclose their experience. One student recounted:

> It's tricky if you don't know if our experience 'fits' the extension rules. Sometimes it's about the options 'events' listed as acceptable - does my experience fit that. Then disclosing is another aspect - I start typing then think 'no way I can't say that' - so you think what else can you say, then you worry about how you will look 'deficit' or full of problems to whoever reads it. I have to find the balance of giving enough evidence without wanting to look like 'I have all these problems'. The pervasive victim blaming culture means I would rather say it's because of caring responsibilities with my kids, or mental illness, anything except say I'm a victim

Some students described how their fear of reporting was tied to concerns about legally implicating themselves in a 'crime'. For example, one male student indicated he had internalised a great deal of shame and suffering over a sexual incident, although he wasn't sure if it was a sexual assault. Since this event he felt triggered by class content, and described symptoms of secondary traumatic stress and avoidance when faced with class content concerning sexual assault cases "I would shut my laptop closed and walk away". But he was concerned if he reached out to a university counsellor, he might implicate himself in ways that could "bar me from employment". Another student in the focus group described an experience of a close

friend at university. The friend had been assaulted in her first year by her "dealer," but was concerned about incriminating herself in making this disclosure. She had an ARAP related to a disability and reportedly used this as a way to seek extension support without having to disclose her victimisation.

Furthermore, students reported anxiety about appearing undeserving of support tied to a diminished sense of self-worth. The student's case reflects a broader pattern where survivors of GBV struggle to seek help due to fears of stigmatisation or the belief that they must "perform" at a high level despite their traumatic experiences. Moreover, this internal conflict between recognising the need for help and fearing judgment or pity often prevents students from fully utilising institutional support mechanisms, even when these services are available. As noted in the account of a staff member, students often view extensions and support services as "special treatment" and feel guilty about accessing them, despite the clear evidence of hardship they are facing. This is compounded by their perfectionism, which is sometimes a coping mechanism developed as a result of trauma. In this context, even a small "win" like a good grade feels undeserved, contributing further to the student's low self-esteem and difficulties in accepting help. For example, one student explained her hesitation to ask for an extension due to her father's abuse, fearing that she would be perceived as cheating or receiving special privileges. The teaching staff member explains her interactions with this student below:

> I noticed that this student, a young woman, was late handing in an assignment. She had been very engaged so this was strange. I emailed her to check in and she responded via email to say that she had to flee home because of her abusive father. In the email she explained that her brother had also fled home with her, and they were cough surfing together at a friend's house. Her mother had stayed with the father and had cut contact with them. The student positioned the mother as a victim, and acknowledged that the mother faced numerous barriers to leaving the father, and while she didn't resent her mother for not speaking to her and her brother she didn't take this personally. She expressed in her email the impact of all of this on

her ability to attend uni and was profusely apologising for not meeting the assignment deadline. I encouraged her to reach out to Student Welfare and WSU counselling for support, but also encouraged her to ask counselling for evidence and to submit a disruption to studies application. She responded to say she was worried she would feel like she was cheating or being given special privileges if she did this.

What struck me was with the student who had experienced DV from their father. I have been. Victim of DV, it does turn you into a perfectionist and impact your sense of self worth. I sensed that she had low self esteem, and that doing well in uni assignments was giving her a sense of pride. It was like she thought if she got a good mark after an extension that she 'didn't deserve', this little 'win' in her life wouldn't be worth as much. I'm not articulating that the best probably, but I think we need to be conscious of how abuse influences students' self perceptions and confidence, and how this can impact on their help seeking behaviours.

When students did disclose, feelings of embarrassment were still evident. Often students minimised the details or depth of their disclosure. One student in the survey explained:

Because I disclosed the information a while after ending the relationship, I was very short and brief with the advisor as I didn't see the need to get further assistance. Perhaps at the time I also could've felt a little embarrassed because I remember saying to them, 'I don't want to turn this into a therapy session but I was in an abusive relationship so my grades went downhill'. However, the advisor was empathetic and acknowledged the information shared.

Most of the time we could be very embarrassed to talk about such issues. I felt like at the time I'd sound stupid to tell the advisor I was in an abusive relationship because I was only 18 and probably didn't know what I was

> talking about. To sum up I think our minds can be clouded with a lot of doubt and could use a fresh mindset to guide us with assistance, even if we think we don't need it, sometimes all we want to do is just talk but at the same time feel resistant from embarrassment. While the counsellors are good with dealing with this stuff, other uni staff are not. They can be insensitive or careless when confronting it and that should be improved.

Among those who did disclose, the majority spoke to other students (n=12, 15.6%), while a smaller number approached a WSU Counsellor, tutors, or subject coordinators (n=3, 3.9%, for each of these categories). Other disclosure sources included other individuals (n=11, 14.3%) and even a class (n=2, 2.6%). Disclosures to other students and classes were often 'spontaneous', related to the content being covered in classes. It is worthy to note, students who were victimised were less likely to seek formal support and more likely to seek informal support, this is consistently demonstrated in research throughout the overall literature (Zark et al., 2023).

In terms of how their disclosures were received by the university, responses varied. A total of 10.4% (n=8) felt their disclosure was received "good", while 11.7% (n=9) felt it was "fair". A small percentage felt their disclosure was handled "very well" (5.2%, n=4), while others had negative experiences, with 5.2% (n=4) rating the response "not very well", 2.6% (n=2) feeling it was "very poor", and 1.3% (n=1) rating it "poor".

Positive responses to disclosures were characterised by empathy and understanding and in some cases, those who were able to offer practical support such as a change in class or additional time for completing assessments. Students commented in the survey:

> I contacted Western Success and they were very understanding, they seemed to be strongly understanding of the issues that I was facing.

> I think the counsellor could only help me a little, I was recommended to seek therapy which I did, and that did aid me massively (or maybe the passage of time, still unsure which was the proper aid, so I credit both) in letting the university know that I needed help and extra time when completing assignments due to depression and anxiety.

However, there is a concern that students were often *only* disclosing to seek academic support in the form of extensions or other formal support measures, such as 'withdrawal without academic penalty'. In other words, students would not have disclosed if not for the evidence requirements required by formal processes. One student explained the lengthy process of applying for a 'withdrawal without academic penalty'.

> The only time I was willing to talk was attempting to Withdraw without Academic Penalty. It took me nearly a year after being removed to contact someone at the university and discuss the issues and the process to withdraw.

In qualitative sections of the survey, students have identified that processes related to withdrawal without penalty and applying for extensions/DTS have been problematic. Some have stated that they did not have sufficient evidence to support the application. Others have attested that they felt too much shame to seek any university support at all. Time and 'evidence' burdens were especially problematic and a significant barrier to formal help-seeking

> I was disappointed to know that I wouldn't be able to successfully withdraw as there was no police records and no psychologist / counsellor to vouch for my situation as I didn't speak to someone regarding the issues. I feel for further improvement, there should be the ability to see a university counsellor as someone who can assess the issue if someone didn't or can't afford to see one.

> When I requested an extension/disruption to studies, I have mentioned I have a historic matter before court but never disclosed the nature of the crime. However, I have also not applied for withdrawal/extensions in the past because I have not wanted to disclose any further information to university, or disclose to GP to obtain supporting documentation. I currently have a counsellor through victim services and that is who I speak with regarding these types of experiences, but I also find it hard to ask for her support with university, or tell her I am struggling.

Additionally, linear conceptions of time that are embedded in university structures means students perceive a mismatch between their lived experience of GBV victim-survivors and the current support mechanisms offered within higher education settings. These mechanisms tend to be ad hoc and incapable of recognising the ongoing impact of GBV experiences for higher education participation. One focus group participant explained that her case was complicated by the fact that it was past abuse. She detailed that she only understood that what had happened to her was a sexual assault after she came to university and learned a critical language around abuse, consent, and assault. Her education provided a framework to understand her past experience as abuse, which led her to go to the police and make a formal report. This led to a current/ongoing court process which has spanned multiple years. She recounted the challenge of trying to explain for the purpose of requesting extensions/DTS:

> I struggle to articulate the timeline of court cases - DPPs (Department of Public Prosecutors) will not contact you for months then call three times in a week discussing triggering content. But that stuff technically happened years ago, and the trial is not technically progressing at this point. It's tricky to fit this in a comment box for an extension without knowing who will read it.

In these circumstances where time and evidence burdens were perceived as barriers to formal help-seeking, students indicated they were more likely to seek informal support directly through a tutor or subject coordinator. However, students detailed

uneven experiences of student support across their studies, where some people and environments were more enabling than others.

> The response I received was very comforting and genuine. She thanked me for sharing about my experiences and opening up in the reflective activity and provided free university counselling support.
>
> One of the unit coordinators was not empathetic and did not want to hear me out in any way. She also rejected my extension request when it was needed at the time, I didn't want to disclose personal information in my request.

Considering the impact of GBV on the capacity for students to complete assessment work is important; but the ways in which this recognition is embedded in university policy is at institutional discretion, applies primarily to circumstances of acute violence and requires students to disclose abuse. Yet the underreporting of domestic violence and the difficulties that confront victim-survivors in disclosing their experiences is well documented in scholarly literature (for an overview, see: Watts & Zimmerman, 2002).

Navigating the classroom and learning experiences

The challenges in navigating university systems and norms also extends into the classroom, particularly when students feel that their personal experiences are being "taught" or analysed in academic settings. One student described feeling embarrassed by how case studies on sexual violence were presented as mere theoretical content, without consideration for the emotional and personal weight such topics carry for survivors. She felt that she was shamed for having a personal connection to the material and that her experiences were being trivialised or dismissed. She described how she felt that she was expected to be "logical" when examining cases presented in course work and that she felt 'shamed' for 'feeling weird' about the content. Likewise, students reported discomfort when 'cases' of GBV were presented in course as 'ahistorical' or an 'anomaly'. Students in the focus group agreed that in general it was triggering to have case studies of GBV presented

in neutral terms or as 'matter of fact' cases to be analysed at a distance. In contrast they commented that they felt 'safer' when teaching staff took an active moral stance around these case studies, rather than encouraging neutral analysis.

Similarly, students reported feeling uncomfortable when their lived experiences of abuse were invalidated by teachers, who may not recognise the emotional impact of discussing certain topics. For example, one student in the survey detailed at length how her experience of sexual violence was dismissed and invalidated by a tutor in the classroom. This lack of sensitivity in the classroom exacerbates feelings of shame and contributes to a sense of alienation for survivor-students, making it difficult for them to engage with the material and participate fully in class discussions. As well as being invalidating, these experiences can contribute to a sense of 'institutional betrayal' from the university. Institutional betrayal refers to "institutional action and inaction that exacerbates the impact of traumatic experiences" (Smith and Freyd, 2014). Actions and inactions associated with institutional betrayal include minimising the severity of a victim's experience, refusal to take proactive steps in preventing or addressing victimisation, responding inadequately to claims of trauma, creating an environment in which similar traumatic events seem more likely, making it difficult to report traumatic experiences, and punishing trauma victims in some way for coming forward (Smith and Freyd, 2013). This type of betrayal not only compounds previous traumas but also creates new ones (see Bedera, 2021). Survivors who experience institutional betrayal are at greater risk of anxiety, depression, sleep problems, sexual problems, and dissociation (Smith and Freyd 2013, 2017). Institutional betrayal primarily takes place in organisations that a survivor trusts, making a classroom with a respected teacher a place where institutional betrayal is particularly likely and especially harmful (Bedera, 2021).

Students in the focus group detailed at length examples of 'good' and 'bad' practice in their experience that made navigating university more or less challenging in the aftermath of GBV. A primary point of concern was where teaching approaches to

content perceived as 'triggering' or 're-traumatising' for students with lived experience of GBV.

> I experienced sexual violence throughout childhood and people I know affected by Domestic Violence. I have done 5-6 subjects around this stuff. Only one class (family violence) had good practice on trigger warnings, making sure everyone was ok and regular email communication making sure students were ok with content. In other classes things come up and there is no context or trigger warning.

Students in the focus group agreed that there were overall inconsistent use of 'trigger warnings' across subjects, and this should be standardised as a minimum. Content warnings are verbal or written notices that precede potentially sensitive content. These notices flag the contents of the material that follows, so readers, listeners, or viewers can prepare themselves to adequately engage or, if necessary, disengage for their own wellbeing. While content warnings flag content that is potentially sensitive for anyone, trigger warnings are a specific variant of content warnings that flag content that may cause intense distress for an individual based on lived experience. The inclusion of warnings for commonly sensitive content can be helpful to students who may not feel comfortable telling teaching staff they barely know very personal information about their mental health and/or past trauma. Additionally, 'Tagging' can be used to create content warnings for themes and topics in more specific readings, lectures, videos, or discussions. With particularly challenging content in readings, try to flag specific pages. Warn students if class discussions or lectures will heavily focus on flagged passages. 'Tags' serve not only to warn students of potentially sensitive material but also to highlight some of the aspects of the novel that they need to be thinking about and focusing on as they read (Curtin Student Guild, 2024). These practices are important, as when the survivor is triggered, it can spark traumatic symptoms like anxiety, depression, and other posttraumatic stress disorder responses like flashbacks (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It can also change the way the survivor interprets other stimuli, affecting the senses like eyesight and hearing, and impairing memory function,

impacting their ability to succeed in the classroom (Bedera, 2021). Furthermore, many of the responses educators label as triggers from survivors are better described as new traumas resulting from institutional betrayal in the classroom.

Despite the insinuation of much of the public debate on triggers, the discussion of sexual violence is not inherently hurtful for survivors (Bedera, 2021). Inappropriate comments (e.g., victim blaming, normalising or minimising violence) can harm victims, but survivor-supportive comments can heal them (Ahrens et al., 2009), and universities can show solidarity to survivors by acting with courage around discussions of GBV (Ahmed, 2015; Freyd, 2019).

Best practice on the other hand, they suggested, exceeded trigger warnings and included teaching staff reaching out to students to regularly 'check-in'. They also reinforced the important role that teaching staff (tutors, lecturers etc) were perceived as playing in constructing a safe learning environment. When asked what might improve their classroom and learning experiences, students commented:

> More consideration and empathy from tutors and unit coordinators, trigger warnings and less judgement when leaving classes due to sensitive topics. Less pressure to disclose experiences when seeking support.

> Open discussion environments that make people feel safe to talk to staff about issues that may be interfering on students learning. As well as discretion, and direction to counselling services.

By centering survivors and using trauma-informed methods, teachers can create healing spaces that offer survivors the information they need to make sense of what happened to them. Students in this sense were reinforcing the need for consistent application of 'trauma informed' pedagogies and classroom practices. There is clear potential for victim survivors of GBV to be re-traumatised through their coursework at university (Mummert, Policastro & Payne, 2014). Teaching content related to GBV themes and topics demands particular sensitivity and the availability of support for

students (Murphy-Geiss, 2008). Best practice research suggests that having appropriate strategies for mediating the possibility of disclosures and re-traumatisation in learning environments is imperative (Cares et al., 2014; Bertram & Crowley, 2012; Branch et al., 2011). The studies highlight the need for strategies and frameworks in universities at the institutional level to support students who have experienced gender-based violence. They state the need for strategies and procedures to be developed and made known for staff, students, and peers involved in disclosures. The literature on trauma-informed pedagogy in higher education emphasises the importance of creating an environment that recognises the potential impact of trauma on students and incorporates this understanding into teaching and support systems. Trauma-informed pedagogy is relatively new but gaining traction in higher education. It is essential for recognising that traumatic content taught in courses, especially in fields such as social work, law, nursing, and mental health, may cause significant distress, even for students without direct trauma histories (Bosse et al., 2021; Parrotta et al., 2021; Rhodes, 2019). The concept of trauma-informed care in education draws on the idea that students bring their personal histories into the classroom, which can affect their learning experiences and emotional well-being. A trauma-informed approach prioritises emotional safety, seeks to prevent re-traumatisation, and provides supportive structures to help students navigate their academic work in ways that do not exacerbate past trauma (Butler et al., 2011; Harris & Fallot, 2001; Harrison et al., 2023). A trauma-informed approach to teaching is guided by the 4 R's: Recognise the presence of trauma and its potential effects on students, acknowledging that past experiences of trauma can significantly influence their emotional responses and learning abilities. Respond appropriately by addressing students' emotional needs and vulnerabilities, offering support and understanding when necessary. It is crucial to resist re-traumatisation by avoiding content or teaching methods that may inadvertently trigger distress, or by providing alternative ways for students to engage with sensitive material. Finally, realise that trauma affects students' capacity to learn and requires educators to implement careful, sensitive teaching practices that prioritise emotional safety and promote a supportive learning environment (SAMHSA, 2014). A student experiencing a trigger cannot be expected to learn while in a traumatised mental state and may

need individualised instruction or an alternative assignment to make up for material initially introduced during a time of extreme duress (Bedera, 2021). Carello and Butler (2014) suggest several principles for educators to integrate trauma-informed practices into their teaching:

- Emotional safety should be recognised as an essential component of learning. Educators must understand that students with trauma histories may be vulnerable to re-traumatisation and should tailor their educational practices accordingly.
- Recognise trauma histories: Educators should be aware of students' potential trauma backgrounds and how this could affect their academic performance and interactions with authority figures.
- Provide referrals: In case of distress, educators should be prepared to guide students toward counselling services or emergency care when necessary.
- Understand the impact of trauma on academic performance: Trauma can affect students' engagement and performance, even in courses not directly related to trauma. Educators should be mindful of this impact.
- Learn about trauma: Educators must familiarise themselves with the effects of trauma, including secondary traumatisation and re-traumatisation, to better support students and mitigate any unintended harm (Elliot et al., 2005).

However, students also acknowledged the role of staff workload in being able to offer this form of care. One student in the focus group commented:

> teachers show that they are stressed. I know lecturers with 600 students - they are just too busy to support us. They need an assistant coordinator. One coordinator for 100 students would be understandable from a student perspective. 400 students could have 4 coordinators.

Take away messages:

- Participants detailed uneven experiences of student support across their studies, where some cultural environments were more enabling than others.

- Time and 'evidence' burdens: Problematic linear conception of time that is embedded in university structures means students perceive a mismatch between their lived experience of GBV victim-survivors and the current support mechanisms offered within higher education settings. These mechanisms tend to be ad hoc and incapable of recognising the ongoing impact of GBV experiences for higher education participation.
- Participants detailed uneven application of 'trauma informed' pedagogies and teaching practices: It is essential for recognising that traumatic content taught in courses, especially in fields such as social work, law, and criminology, may cause significant distress, even for students without direct trauma histories (Bosse et al., 2021; Parrotta et al., 2021; Rhodes, 2019). Teaching trauma without safeguards can be harmful and unethical. Educators should not only teach about trauma but also apply trauma-informed principles in their teaching approaches.

Specific Recommendations:

Supporting Help-Seeking for Extensions and DTS

- **In Principle**: Greater understanding of the sensitivities around disclosure and creating appropriate frameworks for the recognition of the impact of GBV is needed. This must avoid harmful practices of disclosure that re-traumatise and/or produce pathologising constructions of the individual student.
- **In Practice**: Participants suggested support could be offered more consistently across the academic systems and processes relating to requesting extensions and providing supporting evidence.
    - Students recommended that we explore the possibility of implementing the equivalent of an ARAP in the context of students with broader trauma/welfare histories. This would reduce the evidence burden, by removing the need for evidence for every extension by having a consultation with a WSU counsellor that could allow them to apply for a 7-day extension, and implement reasonable adjustments, such as options for alternative assessments and consistent trigger warnings by providing an equivalent of an ARAP.

- Build confidence in reporting/support seeking: Students reported a number of perceived barriers to reporting. It is recommended that WSU explore platforms that would allow students to anonymously 'practice' making a disclosure for different help-seeking needs that would mitigate their concerns around confidentiality, legal repercussions, victim blaming, and evidence burdens.
- Resources should be clearly communicated to students, including what each process involves (contacting the counselling team, as opposed to welfare or disability). Many students reported knowing about the counselling team, but were unclear on what they could offer and whether it was appropriate to seek support. Information should be easily accessible (e.g. vUWS sites) and not dependent on a formal disclosure. The counselling directory would be useful to integrate to vUWS sites https://counsellingdirectory.westernsydney.edu.au/wellbeing.

Supporting Trauma Informed Pedagogies

- **In Principle**: Greater attention should be given to trauma informed pedagogies, and the relationship between inclusive pedagogical, curricular, assessment and support frameworks and practices, and flexible and responsive time structures.
- **In Practice**: Students recommended the following:
  - Training for teaching staff regarding core principles of trauma-informed pedagogy and practice.
  - Content and trigger warnings need to be used consistently across subjects and embedded into learning guides. Curtin Student Guild (2024) has produced a strong guide (see Appendix 3), and Bedera (2021) offers useful advice. Clear templates should be provided to teaching staff, for example:
    - **Content Warning**

I acknowledge that each of you comes to this [class, subject, program] with your own unique life experiences. This contributes to the way you perceive various types of information. In [class name], all of the class content, including that which may be intellectually or emotionally challenging, has been intentionally curated to achieve the learning goals for this course. The decision to include such material is not taken lightly. These topics include [list topics]. If you encounter a topic that is intellectually challenging for you, it can manifest in feelings of discomfort and upset. In response, I encourage you to come talk to [me, your friends or family, or a WSU counsellor] about it. Class topics are discussed for the sole purpose of expanding your intellectual engagement in the area of [subject/major], and I will support you throughout your learning in this course (Sample adjusted from University of Connecticut 2021).

- **Trigger Warning**

  I acknowledge that each of you comes to [class, subject, program] with your own unique life experiences. This contributes to the way you perceive several types of information. In [class name], we will cover a variety of topics, some of which you may find triggering. These topics include [list topics]. Each time this topic appears in a reading or unit, it is marked on the syllabus. The experience of being triggered versus intellectually challenged are different. The main difference is that an individual must have experienced trauma to experience being triggered, whereas an intellectual challenge has nothing to do with trauma. If you are a trauma survivor and encounter a topic in this class that is triggering for you, you may feel overwhelmed or panicked and find it difficult to concentrate. In response, I encourage you to take the necessary steps for your emotional safety. This may include leaving class while the

topic is discussed or talking to a WSU counsellor. Should you choose to sit out on discussion of a certain topic, know that you are still responsible for the material; but we can discuss if there are other methods for accessing that material, and for assessing your learning on that material. Class topics are discussed for the sole purpose of expanding your intellectual engagement in the area of [subject/major], and I will support you throughout your learning in this course (Sample adjusted from University of Connecticut 2021).

- **Tag Warning**

  Wk 3 readings: Chapter 1-4 Content Warning: Racism, Racist Slurs, Violence (graphic scene pgs. 32-46) (Sample from Curtin Student Guild 'Best Practice Guide, Appendix 3).

- Ensure students are aware of support services if they find course content or assessment tasks emotionally or psychologically challenging. Referral options to WSU counselling should be embedded into vUWS sites, especially around assessments with content related to GBV. Dedicated support for particularly vulnerable students (e.g., the Clinical Advisory Team/CAT) should be clearly communicated to students.
- Assessment practice: Where possible, implement trauma-informed approaches to assessment, course design, and classroom culture. This may include (see L'Estrange et al., 2023):
  - **Training**: Provide training for staff on trauma informed pedagogy.
  - **Clarity**: specific instructions, and requirements being made very explicit. This can reduce the cognitive load in the context of trauma. Large or complex assignments should be broken into **smaller, manageable chun**ks with **clear timelines** to help reduce stress and allow students to engage at their own pace.
  - **Choice**: Offer alternative assessments which are trauma informed.
  - **Flexibility**: Allow students to choose topics for assignments or present in alternative formats (e.g., video instead of in-person

presentation), particularly for those who may experience anxiety or distress in certain situations.

- **Clear Rationale for Sensitive Content**: Provide a clear rationale for including sensitive or potentially distressing material in courses and ways to navigate this. For example, subjects with potentially distressing content should provide resources such as the 'WSU Wellbeing Plan' or the 'WSU Self-awareness and care in learning' Plan (see Appendix 2)
- **Empathy**: Normalise and validate students' emotional responses to such content.
- **Boundaries and Self-Protection**: Allow students to set boundaries regarding their participation in certain activities. Offer alternatives for engaging with content (e.g., watching videos privately, reading instead of viewing distressing material).

- Evaluate the policies and guidelines related to extension and DTS. Ensure policies and guidelines are flexible enough to support students (e.g. a more detailed understanding of 'time' and 'evidence') based on a trauma-informed approach.

Staff exposure to vicarious trauma and preparedness to respond

The disclosure of GBV by students presents significant emotional and logistical challenges for university teaching staff, such as tutors, subject coordinators, and lecturers. When students share traumatic experiences—whether in formal applications for accommodations, like extensions, or through informal communications—staff face a complex emotional landscape that can affect both their professional performance and personal well-being.

Staff members working in student-facing roles, such as tutors, subject coordinators, and academic advisors, often encounter distressing disclosures from students seeking accommodations like extensions. These disclosures often involve deeply personal, distressing details, which can create emotional strain for staff members

> A student disclosed in their DTS application that they had experienced sexual abuse from an employer. That they are an international student and that they had become debt-bonded and essentially then exploited and pushed into sex work.
>
> I noticed that this student, a young woman, was late handing in an assignment. She had been very engaged so this was strange. I emailed her to check in and she responded via email to say that she had to flee home because of her abusive father. In the email she explained that her brother had also fled home with her, and they were couch surfing together at a friend's house.
>
> I had one case where a student emailed me for a last-minute extension, citing sexual assault as the reasoning. Other similar cases of disclosure have occurred via WesternNow eforms.

For staff, these moments are often overwhelming as staff are not always equipped with the skills or immediate access to crisis support, leading to a potential risk of secondary trauma. Students in the survey and focus group reported that their experiences "definitely made me file more extensions than I would like" but expressed additional real and perceived barriers to disclosing their experience of GBV as part of the formal application process. Such burdens replicate formal reporting practices which can re-traumatise victims (McDonald, 2020). One student explained that this process

> …was traumatic to be 'forced' to speak about my experience with someone else, especially someone in a professional capacity if that makes sense.

This was also reiterated by staff, who often received confronting disclosures in the need for an extension. Staff members found it "deeply problematic that students feel compelled that they need to apply for extensions and disclose excruciating details of horrific things that have happened to them." One staff member said this often

occurs in contexts where staff report that students apply for DTS but have their application rejected at the administrative level due to lack of evidence, so the student emails the subject coordinator with evidence. One staff member said "this is a symptom of how inhumane the institution is…. [there's] so much onus on providing evidence". In one scenario, a student offered to send the police report about their domestic violence incident. In another case, a sessional subject coordinator had received a request for a 'Disruption to Studies' with details of a student's recent suicide attempt, while another subject coordinator received a photograph depicting traumatic content. The staff member said:

> its trauma uninformed and re-traumatising for students and there's the risk of vicarious trauma

Vicarious trauma (VT) refers to the emotional toll that occurs when individuals are exposed to the trauma of others. Vicarious trauma transforms the inner experience of the helper due to empathetic engagement with a victim and their trauma. There are two elements of VT; 'Secondary traumatic stress' and 'Cognitive changes'. Secondary traumatic stress is a symptom of PTSD. This can manifest as symptoms of intrusion (e.g., intrusive thoughts or flashbacks about students' experiences), arousal (e.g., heightened anxiety or agitation), and avoidance (e.g., avoiding work or stressful situations). Cognitive changes refers to the way that exposure to traumatic content can change the way you think about the world, it can lead the helper to feel powerless, hopeless, pessimistic, cynical – the world is an unsafe/unjust place.

Staff in the focus group described many symptoms of 'secondary traumatic stress' including ongoing 'intrusive thoughts' about the students wellbeing and their response to the student. Staff described the impact as a 'slow burn' and something that "picks at me" and could still be "vividly remembered" even years after the event. For staff in higher education, these symptoms can significantly impair their ability to perform their duties and affect their well-being. One staff member commented that:

> For me it's the added anxiety and emotional labour that comes with these disclosures. It stays with you

Another staff member described her experience of intrusion and arousal symptoms after a student disclosure below:

> When you work in a student-facing role, it's really hard to encounter these types of disclosures and then just "carry on" with your work. I remember one student telling me she's trying to leave an abusive relationship and is working some things out and just needs a 3-day extension – I was like "take two weeks, what else can I help with? Are you well supported by family and friends? Would you like to access our free and confidential counselling services?" – She replied and thanked me and said she was okay - but I was so anxious that day and couldn't sleep that evening. What if something happens to her? Did I do enough? She said she's handling it, but is she? It's so hard.

This is exasperated for staff members who have lived experienced of GBV themselves

> I am a victim of child sexual abuse and domestic violence myself, so while I want to give students as much support as I can, I'm conscious I have to be very mindful of my own welfare.

Across staff comments, a common theme was the experience of vicarious trauma when students make disclosures in DTS and extension forms:

> We open these and there is no trigger warning. I think that is why it's so jarring. You never know what you will get. Sometimes it's just 'I hurt my ankle' and other times it's 'I have become trapped as a sex slave'. It's jarring when you aren't prepared to read something really concerning

> I think the requirement to provide evidence for DTS opens students up to thinking they have to share very intimate details. It's not a system based on trust. Perhaps we could make it more flexible

Other staff commented on the cognitive change brought about by these disclosures, commonly describing feelings of 'hopelessness' and 'helplessness'. One staff member expressed feeling an immense sense of helplessness upon learning about a student's situation, reflecting on their own vulnerability as a parent, and how hard it is to "just carry on" with their work after hearing such distressing stories:

> I was really upset. I just felt a sense of immense helplessness. I'm a parent and it's hard to turn off that instinct to protect young people. I know they are technically adults, but they're very young and vulnerable.

> There was a student who insinuated that both her and her mother were being sexually violated by her father, who was a lawyer so they feared taking any action against him. What kind of help can I provide for such a helpless situation - I feel helpless.

Part of this sense of hopelessness in responding to these disclosures related to teaching staff feeling as though had a had a lack of knowledge and training on appropriate university supports for referral such as the CAT team:

> (student) told me he lives with his grandmother because his mother was a drug addict and had brought an abusive man into the household. The abusive man had abused him physically and sexually when he was very young. He reflected on how the abuse had impacted his life now and his ability to stand up for himself. I empathised and told him I was proud of him for coming to university and overcoming so much adversity. Then I asked if he had reached out to WSU counselling. He said that he had but not recently as there is often

> a backlog to get an appointment. At that time I didn't know about the CAT team. If I knew, I would have called them and asked them to check in on him
>
> I have never received any formal training for this…It's funny because if we want to do research on these topics, we have to demonstrate to the ethics committee how we will protect ourselves as researchers. There seems to be no consideration for this in a teaching context, it's wild.
>
> I also think staff need training. My husband gets a tonne of training at his work. He has frequent meetings where he has to check in with a psych. It's a different context, the disclosures are more frequent and often really really traumatic, but the organisation seems more proactive in ensuring the staff know what to do
>
> I do think there is a gap in staff training. I think a case-study based training opportunity is important and should be mandatory for all teaching staff, particularly those with student-facing governance positions and subject coordinators of large subjects. Are we work loaded for these types of training opportunities? If the university wants to take these issues seriously, they need to make adequate time for staff to be able to upskill.

Equally, staff expressed concerns that attempts to censure these disclosures in these forms may then have the unexpected consequence of dissuading students from applying for these supports at all. One staff member recalled one such discussion among her colleagues:

> In a recent meeting, the APA who had been informed of a student death expressed that these kind of disclosures are becoming more frequent and that as staff we do not feel prepared to handle them. The person chairing the meeting, a senior colleague, suggested we could look into the DTS forms and consider how we might communicate to students that they shouldn't share these details with staff. However, I do worry then that they will say nothing

> and we will miss the opportunity to help them get the support we need. I also worry about staff who have no training but take on the responsibility of supporting these students, inviting them into their office and counselling them. I think it's a slippery slope. If something goes awry it's surely a huge liability for the university.

An added source of turmoil for teaching and student focused academic staff was the feeling of being caught between their own ethics and politics around student disclosures, and institutional policies and procedures. There's a tension between encouraging students to follow bureaucratic processes (e.g., getting evidence for extensions) and providing immediate support. One staff member described how they were aware other staff sometimes bypass these evidence processes to provide immediate support to students and avoid the students discomfort, but this is viewed as potentially insufficient in addressing the student's broader needs:

> It sounds bad but I often ask them to go to get evidence for extensions etc in the hope that this will be the carrot to get them through the door so they can access more support. I know some staff just give the extension and try to manage the student themselves but I actually think this is doing them a disservice. Obviously we shouldn't force them to disclose to someone they are not comfortable with, but we cannot help them in the way they need.

Other staff described the ethical challenges of navigating confidentiality of student disclosures. One staff member reflects on a case involving a student who had experienced sexual assault, where they were concerned about their ability to intervene due to confidentiality restrictions. Since the student did not directly reach out, the staff member was limited in what they could do and had to focus on supporting the subject coordinator in encouraging the student to access the proper support systems. The process of encouraging students to disclose and gather supporting documentation for extensions was seen as burdensome, especially when students may already be dealing with significant personal challenges.

> I once had a sexual assault student case referred to me as APA by a subject coordinator who was concerned about a student of theirs. This was really hard for me – we can't breach confidentiality and because the student did not come to me there wasn't much I could do but help support the subject coordinator in encouraging the student to contact me, getting them to apply for DTS, and requesting a letter from counselling if their other subject coordinators would not accept the extension application without supporting documentation. It's a lot of background work and to be honest, I wonder whether it just puts more of a burden on the students who are already dealing with so much.

Staff also highlighted that, alongside feeling unprepared to respond to disclosures, they were unaware of the supports available for managing vicarious trauma. In addition to a lack of awareness of available support resources, some staff expressed a mistrust of institutional support services like EAPs. There is a need for clearer communication about support options and for services that staff can trust to provide genuine, confidential assistance.

> I know of a staff member who called the CAT team to seek their support for a student and while on the phone she disclosed how she was experiencing vicarious trauma from the disclosure. The CAT team arranged for her to meet with them and offered her support. I didn't even know staff could do this. I know we have the EAP, but I think a lot of people worry that this is just a liability mitigator for the university. I know of many people in other organisations who say they don't trust EAP counsellors, and I think there is a genuine widespread belief that they act on behalf of the organisation so people just avoid them.

Take away messages:

- **Emotional and Logistical Challenges for Staff**: University staff, particularly those in student-facing roles teaching roles, face significant emotional strain when students disclose GBV. These disclosures often occur

during requests for accommodations (like extensions), presenting a complex emotional landscape that can affect staff well-being and performance. Teaching staff feel unprepared to navigate these disclosures and their emotional impacts.

- **Vicarious Trauma**: Staff members can experience vicarious trauma when exposed to students' distressing stories. This includes secondary traumatic stress symptoms like intrusive thoughts, heightened anxiety, and avoidance behaviours, which can impair their work and personal well-being. Vicarious trauma is a continuum. Everyone who is exposed to trauma is at risk of experiencing VT in some way. However, it's a continuum from minor to severe. When these impacts begin to cause impairment or distress and impact a person's ability to do their job, it requires strategies for intervention and support.

Specific Recommendations:

Trauma-Informed Staff Training

- **In Principle**: Staff feel unprepared to respond to disclosures and may be unclear on the pathway for complex cases. Staff need better training, institutional support, and clear guidelines to manage the emotional and ethical complexities of these situations.
- **In Practice**: Suggestions include:
    - **Trauma-informed training for all staff**. Regular and mandatory training for all staff. Training should be 'hands-on', practical and 'case study' based learning.
    - **Clear referral pathways for staff to refer students**. Ensure that all staff are familiar with the full range of available student support services (e.g., CAT team, counselling services) and are trained in how to refer students appropriately (which service, when to refer and how?) without overburdening themselves. These pathways should be regularly updated and communicated to ensure all staff, including new, sessional, and existing employees, are informed of any changes to or introduction of additional services.

Vicarious Trauma Management and Support for Staff

- **In Principle**: Greater understanding and management of vicarious trauma is required. VT is an inherent risk for staff in roles that require direct interaction with students disclosing traumatic experiences, more consideration should be given how this impacts teaching staff. This emotional strain manifests in a range of symptoms, from intrusive thoughts to heightened anxiety and avoidance of work. While this is a personal challenge, it is also an institutional responsibility.
- **In Practice**: Suggestions include:
    - **Education and Awareness**: Providing staff with information on the symptoms and impacts of VT can help them recognise the signs and seek support when necessary. Training should focus on both understanding VT and the cognitive changes it can cause, as well as strategies for coping and managing the emotional burden (e.g. https://fullstop.org.au/training/vicarious-trauma). These should be appropriately workload as staff professional development.
    - **Support for responding to VT**: Access to university support (e.g. EAP) as well as other supports, such as the Clinical Advisory Team (CAT). These are available but staff are often unaware of these supports, or express concerns about accessing them.
    - **Limiting exposure to traumatic student disclosures**. Staff expressed a concern with DTS and extension applications containing traumatic content disclosing violence (including pictures, detailed descriptions, police reports etc.) WSU should limit exposure to such direct traumatic content, or forms should contain a content and trigger warning so staff are aware of the content in advance.
    - Student-facing academic staff carry significant emotional and cognitive burdens, by managing emotional labor, problem-solving, and decision-making in often unpredictable and high-stress situations. To better support these staff members, WSU must recognise the full scope of

their workload. WSU should **regularly assess workloads** through staff feedback to ensure that expectations are realistic and aligned with the challenges staff face. This would reduce burnout and improve staff well-being, as well as strengthen quality support for students.

Conclusion

This report underscores the profound impact of gender-based violence (GBV) on both students and staff within higher education. It highlights the pressing need for universities to adopt trauma-informed policies and practices that are sensitive to the enduring and multifaceted consequences of GBV. From navigating academic systems to participating in classroom discussions, students' lived experiences of violence often intersect with institutional structures in ways that can either exacerbate or alleviate their challenges.

For students, the barriers to help-seeking—ranging from concerns about disclosure to the emotional toll of institutional processes—suggest scope to reevaluate support systems. Recommendations such as implementing Academic Reasonable Adjustment Plans (ARAPs) for students with GBV related trauma and ensuring consistent use of content and trigger warnings across curriculum aim to address these gaps and foster a more inclusive environment.

For staff, the emotional labor of responding to student disclosures, compounded by a lack of training and institutional support, highlights the need for systematic interventions. Regular, case-based trauma-informed training and clearly defined referral pathways are critical to managing vicarious trauma and ensuring effective support for both students and staff.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Survey

Appendix 2: WSU Wellbeing Plan

Appendix 3: Good Practice Guide Content Warnings

Appendix 1 – Survey

Default Question Block

Student survey participant information sheet f

Project Title: Surviving Violence, Surviving University

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Western Sydney University.

The ethics reference number is: H15975

I hereby consent to participate in the above-named research project. I acknowledge that:

- I have read the participant information sheet (or where appropriate, have had it read to me) and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s
- The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to:

Participating in a survey

I consent for my data and information provided to be

used in this project and other related projects for an extended period of time.

I understand that my involvement is confidential, and that the information gained during the study may be published and stored for other research use but no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without affecting my relationship with the researcher/s, the University and any organisations involved, now or in the future.

- ○ I consent
- ○ I don't consent

Section 1: Demographics

In this section we would like to ask a few questions about who you are

What is your age?

What is your sex assigned at birth?

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ intersex
- ○ Non-binary / third gender
- ○ Prefer not to say

How do you identify in terms of gender identity?

- ☐ woman
- ☐ man
- ☐ gender fluid
- ☐ non-binary
- ☐ gender non-conforming
- ☐ transgender
- ☐ Prefer not to say

What is your sexual orientation?

- ○ Heterosexual or straight
- ○ Lesbian
- ○ Gay or homosexual
- ○ bisexual
- ○ pansexual
- ○ Queer
- ○ I use a different term

- ○ Prefer not to say

How do you identify in terms of cultural background? Please write your answer in the box. (Your cultural background is the cultural/ethnic group(s) to which you feel you belong or identify. This background may be the same as your parents, grandparents, or your heritage, or it may be the country you were born in or have spent a great amount of time in, or you feel more closely tied to.)

How do you identify in terms of racial background? Please write your answer in the box

Are you Aboriginal and/or Torres Straight Islander?

- ○ Yes, Aboriginal
- ○ Yes, Torres Straight Islander
- ○ No
- ○ Prefer not to say

What religion were you born into or you identify with? Please write that in the box here

Do you have a disability? (please note the definition of disability includes sensory, intellectual, neuro-diverse, physical and mental illness - where the disability is permanent or is likely to be permanent).

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Prefer not to say

Where is your place of residence? Please choose whatever options apply.

- ☐ I live in a major city
- ☐ I live in regional area
- ☐ I live in a remote area
- ☐ I usually live overseas
- ☐ prefer not to say

What is your previous education level?

- ○ High school certificate or equivalent
- ○ Tafe certifcate or equivalent
- ○ A diploma or an advanced diploma
- ○ Bachelor's
- ○ Honours
- ○ Master's
- ○ PhD or any doctorate degree

Section 2: Level of Education

What is your current level of study

- ○ Undergraduate (Bachelors Degree)
- ○ Postgraduate (Masters or PhD)

What are you studying?

Are you (tick all that apply)

- ☐ First in family to go to university

- [ ] Domestic Student
- [ ] International Student
- [ ] Full-time student
- [ ] Part-time student

Section 3: Experiences of Violence

Which, if any, of the following forms of Gender-Based Violence have you personally experienced at any time throughout your life, select all that apply

- [ ] Not me personally, but someone I care about (please go to section 4)
- [ ] Psychological/Emotional
- [ ] Physical violence
- [ ] Verbal violence
- [ ] Sexual violence
- [ ] Sexual violence/abuse relating to reproduction (i.e forced pregnancy, forced abortion, denied medical treatment
- [ ] Financial violence (e.g. taking away your earnings, withholding money, forced financial dependence)
- [ ] Sexual harassment
- [ ] Coercive Control
- [ ] Online or technology facilitated abuse (i.e using technology to stalk or harass you, limit access to technology)
- [ ] Stalking
- [ ] Legal System Abuse (i.e using 'systems' such as the police or the family law and custody law to further intimidate and control you)
- [ ] Forced Marriage
- [ ] Honour Violence

If you're not sure, or would like to further explain, please do so here. Please be mindful not to provide names of alleged perpetrators of violence

What relationship did you have with the person who perpetrated the above behavior? e.g. current partner, former partner, family member, acquaintance, stranger

- [ ] Current partner
- [ ] former partner
- [ ] boy/girlfriend
- [ ] father
- [ ] mother
- [ ] brother
- [ ] sister
- [ ] uncle
- [ ] aunt
- [ ] friend/aquaintance
- [ ] stranger
- [ ] extended family
- [ ] other

When in your life did you experience this violence?

- ○ While studying my university degree
- ○ Current/now
- ○ Before I started university, but recently (within the last 5 years)
- ○ Not recently but in my adult life
- ○ When I was a child

If you would like to elaborate please do so here

Where did you experience this violence? Tick all that apply

- ☐ At home
- ☐ at work
- ☐ at a public place
- ☐ at a recreational or leisure place (a gym or a pool for example)
- ☐ on the street
- ☐ On a university campus
- ☐ travelling to or from university
- ☐ somewhere else

Section 5: Impact on University Life

In this section we would like to better understand how this impacted your university education and experience. Please select all of the below options that apply

- [ ] It affected my performance (e.g my grades suffered)
- [ ] It affected my progress (e.g I have had to take leave, reduce my study load, or withdraw and come back)
- [ ] It affected my choice in study (e.g I had to change my class or subject)
- [ ] I had to avoid certain places or classes
- [ ] I missed classes
- [ ] Other

if 'other' impacts, or if you would like to expand on the impacts please do so here

Section 4: Experiences of Violence (family or friend)

Which, if any, of the following forms of Gender-Based Violence has someone you care about (your family or

friend) experienced which has impacted you? select all that apply

- [ ] Psychological/Emotional
- [ ] Physical violence
- [ ] Verbal violence
- [ ] Sexual violence
- [ ] Sexual violence/abuse relating to reproduction (i.e forced pregnancy, forced abortion, denied medical treatment
- [ ] Financial violence (e.g. taking away your earnings, withholding money, forced financial dependence)
- [ ] Sexual harassment
- [ ] Coercive Control
- [ ] Online or technology facilitated abuse (i.e using technology to stalk or harass you, limit access to technology)
- [ ] Stalking
- [ ] Legal System Abuse (i.e using 'systems' such as the police or the family law and custody law to further intimidate and control you)
- [ ] Forced Marriage
- [ ] Honour violence
- [ ] Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)
- [ ] Vicarious trauma

If your not sure, or would like to further explain, please do so here. Please be mindful not to provide names of alleged perpetrators of violence

What relationship did your impacted family/friend have with the person who perpetrated the above behavior? e.g. their current partner, former partner, family member, acquaintance, stranger

- [ ] Current partner
- [ ] former partner
- [ ] boy/girlfriend
- [ ] father
- [ ] mother
- [ ] brother
- [ ] sister
- [ ] uncle
- [ ] aunt
- [ ] friend/aquaintance
- [ ] stranger
- [ ] other

When in your lifetime and your loved one's life time did this occur? Tick all that applies

- [ ] Current
- [ ] while at university

- [ ] recent
- [ ] historic

If you would like to elaborate o the temporal characteristics of the event and how it impacted you and your loved ones, please do so here:

Section 5: Impact on University

In this section, we would to better understand how the experience/s you have mentioned above impacted your university education experience. Please select all the options that apply.

- [ ] It impacted my performance
- [ ] It impacted my progress
- [ ] I changed my subject/course
- [ ] I avoided certain course/places
- [ ] I missed classes
- [ ] other impacts

If you would like to elaborate, please do so here:

Has your experience of violence impacted what course you have chosen to study, or your motivation for coming to university?

Section 6: Disclosure at University

In this section, we would like to learn about 'disclosure' experiences. This refers to if, when and why you might have disclosed your experience to the university (for example, by telling a tutor, subject coordinator, or other person).
As a student, have you ever disclosed your experiences to someone at university?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

To whom did you disclose?

- [ ] A tutor
- [ ] A subject coordinaor
- [ ] A class
- [ ] Other students
- [ ] A WSU Counsellor
- [ ] Other

Can you tell us a little about the context in which your disclosed and what motivated you to make the disclosure? *For example, was it a spontaneous disclosure in the context of a classroom discussion, was it a planned disclosure so that you could seek help or acknowledgement? Here might consider what you hoped to gain from making the disclosure, for example were you hoping have validation from peers or a teacher, better educate your peers about the experience or impact of violence, seek support, seek an extension or special consideration for an assessment or task?

In terms of the responses from the university, how do you feel your disclosure was received and responded to:

- ○ Very Well
- ○ Good
- ○ Fair
- ○ Not very well
- ○ Poor
- ○ Very Poor

If you would like to elaborate on the university response, please do so here:

What do you think could have improved the response?

Block 8

Thank you for your time. You will now automatically go into the draw to win a $50 voucher, drawn in September. Would you be interested in also participating in a follow up focus group? Focus groups are group discussions with

other students with similar experiences, led by the research team. This will last approximately 2 hours and you will be reimbursed with a $50 voucher.

If you would like to participate in the focus group or learn more about it, please either:

Email: Leisha Du Preez: l.dupreez@westernsydney.edu.au, OR

Leave a contact email below so we can reach out to you.

Appendix 2 – WSU Wellbeing Plan

Self-awareness and care in learning

My Wellbeing Plan

Step	Description	Plan
Things that are important to me	List some of the things that you enjoy and value, such as hobbies, leisure and social activities, spending time with family, going to the gym etc.	How will you fit in the things you need to do and the things that are important to you? Are there any resources you need to help you do these things (what and from who)?
Triggers	List some of the things that cause you stress, such as not asking for support when you need it, significant events, times or situations.	What can you do to lessen the impact?
Warning signs	List some of your warning signs that suggest you may need to take action, such as feeling unusually	What actions can you take? What has helped in the past?

	tired, irritable or overly sensitive, negative self-talk, difficulty sleeping.	
Strategies	List some strategies below that you can use to help manage difficult situations, such as talking to someone you trust, remembering how you have gotten through difficulties in the past, identifying your strengths.	Are there things other people could do to help you?
Trusted people I can talk to	List some of your main trusted support people, such as your partner, family member, workmate, neighbour, best friend.	Are there any other people (Or animals!) in your life who support you?

Professional support	List some of the main names and numbers of support services you would contact if needed.	

Appendix 3 – Good Practice Guide Content Warnings

Good Practice Guide

CONTENT WARNINGS

CURTIN STUDENT GUILD

Introduction

This guide explains what content warnings are, why they are important, and examples of how to use them. While there has been much debate over the implementation of content warnings in the classroom, the debate stems primarily from a misunderstanding regarding what content warnings are, how their use can make a classroom more inclusive for students with a diverse range of lived experiences, and how they do or don't impact quality of teaching.

Contact Information

If you need more support or have questions about content warnings please contact:

Learning Innovation and Teaching Excellence Centre

LITEC@curtin.edu.au

CHALLENGES

Until you develop a sensitisation for common sensitive topics, it is easy to forget that they occur and where they occur in your course material.
Some people may feel resistant to include content warnings, feeling as though they put restrictions on instructors and coddles students. However, the inclusion of content warnings is neither restrictive (it does not label anything as off-limits to teach) nor coddling (it does not assume that students cannot handle the material), on the contrary, it treats students as adults who can and should attend to their wellbeing with all available information.

CONTENT WARNINGS

Content warnings are **verbal or written notices that precede potentially sensitive content**. These notices flag the contents of the material that follows, so readers, listeners, or viewers can prepare themselves to adequately engage or, if necessary, disengage for their own wellbeing.

While content warnings flag content that is potentially sensitive for anyone, trigger warnings are a specific variant of content warnings that flag content that may cause intense distress for an individual based on lived experience and/or associated conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The inclusion of warnings for commonly sensitive content can be helpful to students who may not feel comfortable telling teaching staff they barely know very personal information about their mental health and/or past trauma. When it comes to students with specific, and potentially less common triggers, direct them to AccessAbility services for a CAP.

At a university level, course content deals with topics that can impact the wellbeing and academic success of students who have lived experience of those topics. Some people may be at a point where they choose to avoid such topics in an academic context so that they can more effectively interact with it at a later date, while others may be at a point where they are ready to confront such topics but still benefit from a forewarning to prepare themselves before participating in a classroom discussion around it.

Content warnings are not intended to censure instructors nor invite students to avoid material that challenges them. On the contrary, warning students of potentially sensitive material can aid their engagement by **giving students autonomy to take charge of their health and learning**.

For example, when presented with a scene that includes racist language towards south-east Asian people, a student with that cultural background might shut down, disassociate, panic, become angry, or otherwise disengage from the class as they put all their attention into managing the emotional and physical symptoms the material brings up for them. However, if the student is forewarned that the material includes the use of racist language, they might prepare for it by meditating, seeing their therapist, or simply give themselves more time to work through the material so they can process it under controlled conditions.

The student may still need to disengage and, for example, skip pages in reading material or step out of class for a few minutes when the material is being discussed —this may not seem ideal, but **it is important for your students to be able to prioritise their mental health and safety in order to continue to engage with course materials and content long-term**.

The motive behind including content warnings in classes is based on the simple idea of creating safe spaces for students to effectively learn.

UNINTENTIONAL EXCLUSIONS

It is not uncommon to miss including content warnings on topics that students may find confronting. Mistakes are likely to happen as you are not always sensitised to the same things your students are, especially if you have been working with the content for a long time.

The best action to take if you are made aware of a mistake is to:

- **Acknowledge the student(s) concern and inform them that you will take it into consideration when reviewing the course.** Ensure that the student does not feel ignored when providing feedback.
- **Seek clarification if required – preferably from a colleague first before asking the student(s) themselves**. Students may be uncomfortable having these discussions with their teaching staff.
- **Keep notes of where you should include content warnings in future and pass that information onto other relevant teaching staff.** By keeping note of where content warnings have been included historically, it will be quicker and easier to include them going forward.

COMMON TOPICS REQUIRING CONTENT WARNINGS INCLUDE:

Images/voices of deceased Indigenous people	Sexual assault	Abuse (e.g. physical/emotional/ financial)
Child abuse/paedophilia/ incest	Animal cruelty/animal death	Self-harm/suicide
Eating disorders/body hatred/fat phobia	Violence (e.g. physical, verbal, domestic)	Genocide
Pornographic content	Kidnapping/abduction	Death/ dying
Pregnancy/childbirth	Miscarriages/abortion	Blood
Ableism	Racism/ racial slurs	Sexism/misogyny
Poverty/Classism	Hateful language directed at religious groups	Transphobia/trans misogyny/ Homophobia/ heterosexism

HOW TO IMPLEMENT CONTENT WARNINGS

Implementing content warnings can vary based on your teaching material and the frequency of sensitive content in your courses. It is recommended to use a combination of blanket warnings and specific tags. Ensure warnings are included in key student touchpoints such as unit outlines, Blackboard, lecture slides, and verbal announcements.

BLANKET WARNINGS

- Include a warning in the syllabus if most material will be emotionally challenging or potentially sensitive. This can also be used if there are content warnings elsewhere in the unit outline.
- Restate this blanket warning during the first class when discussing the unit's structure.
- Use blanket warnings for entire weeks or topics focused on potentially sensitive content.
- Inform students about available support services (e.g., Wellbeing, Counselling) when issuing blanket warnings.

USE OF 'TAGS'

- 'Tagging' can be used to create content warnings for themes and topics in more specific readings, lectures, videos, or discussions.
- With particularly challenging content in readings, try to flag specific pages.
- Warn students if class discussions or lectures will heavily focus on flagged passages.

For example:
Wk 3 readings: Chapter 1-4
Content Warning: Racism, Racist Slurs, Violence (graphic scene pgs. 32-46)

In this example, the 'tags' serve not only to warn students of potentially sensitive material but also to highlight some of the aspects of the novel that they need to be thinking about and focusing on as they read.

UNIT OUTLINE WARNINGS

- Indicate specific warnings on the unit outline next to the assigned material.
- Tag themes and topics for text, video, lecture, or discussion.
- For readings, add tags alongside the information about the text.
- Include tags for weekly topics with potentially sensitive content in the Program Calendar.

BLACKBOARD WARNINGS

- Post content warnings in the announcements channel on Blackboard prior to the class to flag what is being presented

and/or

- Post a blanket warning if it is more suitable, and pin it to the top of the channel.

and/or

- Include the content warning in the weekly topic folder

IN-CLASS WARNINGS

In class, try to provide a break before tackling potentially distressing material, and let students know what will be discussed or viewed after the break.

For example, you might announce:
"We're going to take a five-minute break, and when we come back, we're going to discuss the scene in which Armstrong is killed and its relationship to the real-life murder of Emmett Till. This will include some graphic and disturbing photos of violence and death. I expect our discussion to last until the end of class today."

- This kind of warning lets students know exactly what to expect, when to expect it, and for how long it will go on.
- By sandwiching the discussion between a break and the end of class, you give students the ability to prepare themselves for the difficult material (maybe take some deep breaths, go for a short walk, or move to the back of the room so they can make an easy exit if the material is more than they can handle).
- If the material is too traumatic for the student to engage with, they know what they will be missing if they choose to leave class early.

TEMPLATES

This sample text can be used as a blanket warning within the syllabus:

The content and discussion in this unit includes potentially sensitive topics that can be emotionally and intellectually challenging to engage with. For specific content warnings please see the unit outline and unit BlackBoard.

This sample text can be used as a template for warnings on Blackboard/email/slides:

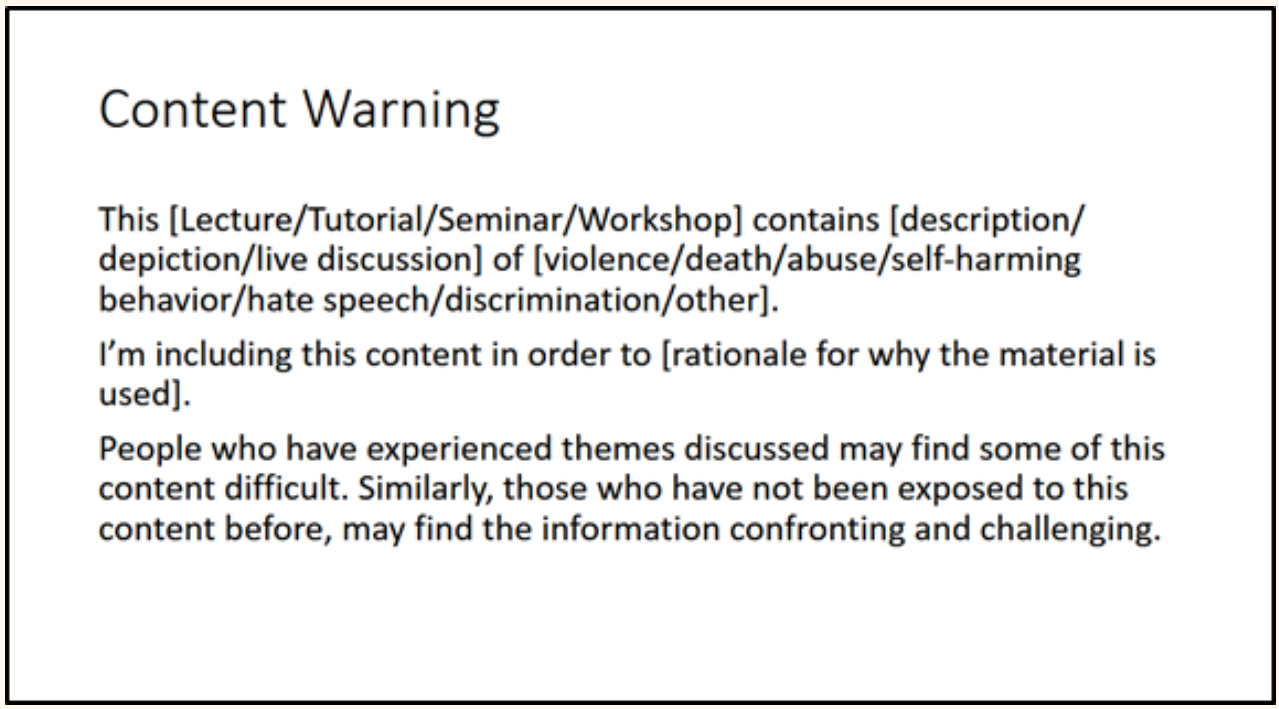
This [material/case/video/set of images/class session] contains [description/depiction/live discussion] of [violence/death/abuse/self-harming behavior/hate speech/discrimination/other]. I'm including this content in order to [rationale for why the material is used]. People who have experienced themes discussed may find some of this content difficult. Similarly, those who have not been exposed to this content before, may find the information confronting and challenging.

or

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this [material/case/set of images/class section] contains images, voices and names of deceased persons.**

EXAMPLE PRESENTATION SLIDE

ENSURE THE CONTENT WARNING IS NOT ON THE SAME SLIDE AS THE CONTENT ITSELF



*Content warnings for potentially sensitive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content is for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. This should be made clear in its use. It is important that non-Indigenous is students are challenged with potentially sensitive content in this context

STRATEGIES THAT YOU CAN IMPLEMENT ALONGSIDE CONTENT WARNINGS:

- **Give your students as much advance notice as possible** about potentially sensitive content. A day's notice might not be enough for a student to prepare emotionally, but two weeks could be. A good point to aim for is at least 7 days where possible.

- **Allow students to interact with potentially sensitive material outside of class.** A student might feel more vulnerable watching a documentary about racism towards south-east Asian people while in a classroom than in the security of their home.

- Try to **"scaffold" a potentially sensitive topic to students.** For example, if you are beginning a history unit on the Holocaust, don't start with graphic photographs from Auschwitz. Instead, begin by explaining the historical context, then verbally describe the conditions within the concentration camps, and then introduce the photographic record as needed. Whenever possible, allow students to progress through upsetting material at their own pace. Aim to end on a positive and/or lighter note.

- When necessary, provide **written descriptions of graphic images** as a substitute for the actual visual content. For example, if you are showing the suffering of a group of people, try and use written descriptions or art depicting the scene instead of a photograph where possible.

- When potentially sensitive content is under discussion, **check in with your students** from time to time: ask them how they are doing, whether they need a break, etc. Let them know that you are aware that the material in question is emotionally challenging.

- Advise students to be aware of potentially sensitive content when they are preparing **class presentations**.

- **Avoid putting students on the spot** if they look distant, distressed, or choose to leave the room.

- **Help your students understand the difference between emotional trauma and intellectual discomfort:** the former is harmful, a classroom is not an appropriate place to elicit trauma; the latter is fundamental to a university education – it means our ideas are being challenged as we struggle to resolve cognitive dissonance.

WELLBEING SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS

When potentially sensitive content is used, it is best practice to give students an opportunity to debrief and check in with your students from time to time; during class, at the end of class and in subsequent lessons.

If at any point you cover any potentially sensitive topics, you need to ensure that students are aware of the support services available to them:

- **Psychological and Counselling Services**
- **Student Wellbeing**
- **Student Assist**

A comprehensive list of support services can be found **here.**

You can alert students to delayed reactions by saying:

'Being distressed by this content can be an understandable reaction. If you continue finding the content confronting for some time after the event (days even) it is critical that you seek help with a support service'.

Link these services for your students wherever relevant (in lecture slides, emails, Blackboard announcements, etc.)

WELLBEING SUPPORTS FOR STAFF

If you cover any potentially sensitive topics, there is as potential that students might choose to disclose their own experiences to you.
If you need support because of this or any content covered please reach out to:

- **Employee Wellbeing Team**
- **Assure Employee Assist Programs**

A comprehensive list of support services can be found **here.**