

Towards a Practice Framework for Engaging Lived Experience Student Experts in University Gender-based Violence Prevention: A Literature-informed Approach

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Abstract

There is growing interest across the higher education sector in drawing on the expertise of those with lived experience to inform institutional strategies addressing gender-based violence (GBV). This interest has been driven in part by Change the Course: National Report on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at Australian Universities (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017) and the Australian Government's Action Plan Addressing Gender-based Violence in Higher Education (Department of Education, 2024). These sector-specific documents highlight the importance of embedding lived experience voices in university prevention efforts. However, despite this growing recognition, there is a lack of formal frameworks or guidelines for engaging with those with lived experience within the higher education sector. The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework (Lamb et al., 2020) and Building a Trauma-Informed World (Blue Knot Foundation, n.d.) provide evidence-based approaches which may be adapted to inform this engagement. This paper outlines these frameworks and discusses how the University of Newcastle has drawn on them, and other existing literature, to create its Lived Experience Student Consultants program.

Keywords

Lived experience; Lived expertise; Experts by experience; Gender-based violence prevention; Higher education; Student voice; Praxis; Domestic, family and sexual violence; DSFV; Practice-based frameworks; National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence.

Introduction

From hooks (1989) and Charlton (1998) to more recent scholars such as Brogden et al. (2024) comes an understanding of lived experience as a form of expertise. This expertise has, in turn, become increasingly central to the design and implementation of progressive and inclusive organisational strategy. Experts by experience are those whose knowledge is drawn from lived and living experiences of marginalisation, discrimination, harm, and direct engagement with systems of power or care (Hawke et al., 2022). Their involvement offers unique and essential insight into the real-world consequences of institutional decisions and actions. This expertise can be found in those with lived experiences of disability; gender-based violence (GBV); racism; sexism; heterosexism; discrimination; socio-economic disadvantage; refugee status; mental ill-health; substance use; and other intersecting factors related to marginalisation, discrimination, and harm. Their contributions not only illuminate blind spots in policy and practice but also ground institutional responses in the realities of those most affected. Rather than treating lived experience as anecdotal or secondary, organisations that centre it as expertise in decision-making processes are well positioned to identify service gaps, build trust with communities, and co-develop solutions that reflect the nuanced realities of those most affected (Fiolet et al., 2024; Keogh, 2023; Roennfeldt & Byrne, 2020). This shift not only increases accountability but also challenges the hierarchies of traditional expert knowledge, reconfiguring whose voices are heard and valued in strategic planning and service

delivery (Australian Mental Health Commission, 2024). Sectors which have adopted lived experience expertise as part of their strategic and operational processes include mental health services (Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission, n.d.; Mind Australia, 2021; Roses in the Ocean, n.d.), specialised family violence services (Wark et al., 2023), and government (Family Safety Victoria, 2022).

Drawing on student voice and lived experience of gender-based violence in higher education

GBV negatively impacts higher education outcomes, with those who have experienced GBV being 15% less likely to obtain a university degree (Summers et al., 2025). This, in turn, affects their ability to enjoy lifelong benefits associated with higher education. Research indicates that individuals with a bachelor's degree earn approximately 41% more than those without (Leigh, 2024). Universities have a critical role in prevention, response, support, and creating systemic changes within the community to help close this attainment gap and empower women (Department of Education, 2024) and other marginalised communities disproportionately affected by GBV (Heywood et al., 2022).

Recognising these impacts, there is growing interest across the higher education sector in drawing on the expertise of those with lived experience to inform institutional strategies addressing GBV. In 2016, the first National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) was conducted in Australia. This survey measured the prevalence of sexual assault and sexual harassment on university campuses, effectively drawing on the lived experiences of university students around the country (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017). Engagement with lived expertise is also recommended in *Change the Course: National Report on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at Australian Universities* (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017). The report recommends vice-chancellors ensure their institutions have an advisory body — including student representatives — responsible for developing an action plan to implement the report's recommendations (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017, p. 10). Durbach and Keith (2017) also assert that universities' student services can benefit greatly from comprehensively engaging and consulting with students. Their report suggests that regular consultations with students can help identify any limits and issues within the available student services. These examples reflect a growing consensus that student voices are integral to shaping institutional responses to GBV in higher education.

In 2024, the Australian Government released its *Action Plan Addressing Gender-based Violence in Higher Education* (Department of Education, 2024). This plan highlights that the higher education sector has a unique opportunity to lead social change around GBV at a large scale, with over 1.5 million students and 130,000 staff nationwide. As part of this plan, The Federal Minister for Education recommends that universities take a “whole-of-organisation approach” to prevent GBV (Department of Education, 2024, p. 18). This approach means that all levels within the institution, from students to leadership, are involved in the design and implementation of prevention work to ensure “the voices and needs of students and staff are centred in decision-making” (Department of Education, 2024, p. 19). The 2021 NSSS indicated that one in two (48.0%) survey respondents had experienced sexual harassment at least once in their lifetime (Heywood et al., 2022). Female students (62.9%), transgender students (62.8%), and students who were non-binary or identified as another gender (76.8%) were more likely to have experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime than male students (26.0%) (Heywood et al., 2022). In addition, one in six students reported experiencing sexual harassment since starting university, and one in 20 reported sexual assault, indicating that this is not a small-scale issue for universities (Heywood et al., 2022). Simultaneously, universities occupy a uniquely pivotal position for prevention. The Australian Government's action plan also explicitly recognises the sector's scale as a singular opportunity to

drive large-scale social change (Department of Education, 2024). By embedding proactive prevention strategies — such as respectful relationships education, leadership accountability, and culture-building communications — before students enter the workforce, universities can disrupt the perpetuation of harmful norms and produce graduates with strong foundations in equity, safety, and respect (Our Watch, 2021).

The Australian Government’s action plan also proposes the strengthening of provider accountability by the establishment of a new *National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence* (henceforth, the Code). The Universities Accord (National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence) Bill 2025 (Cth) was introduced into the House of Representatives on 6 February 2025 and passed into legislation in August 2025. The Bill seeks to establish a robust, national regulatory framework aimed at reducing GBV in Australian higher education institutions by mandating safety, prevention, accountability, and enforcement measures for universities and associated student accommodation providers. The Code specifically indicates that providers’ action plans must be “developed in respect to [their] design and implemented through engagement and collaboration with Students and Staff, including those who have experienced Gender-based Violence” (Department of Education, 2025, p. 5).

Reputation, power, and mistrust: Challenges for GBV victim-survivors in higher education

Despite growing recognition of the value of lived experience in shaping effective responses to GBV, there is a lack of formal frameworks and guidelines within the higher education sector to support purposeful integration into prevention efforts. Risk aversion within the sector can mean that initiatives that are perceived as emotionally complex, politically sensitive, or reputationally risky result in cautious, procedural approaches that prioritise institutional protection over transformative change (Ahmed, 2012). In addition, significant power differentials persist between institutions and students, particularly those who have experienced GBV. Research by Mendes et al. showed the prioritisation of higher education institutions over the experiences of female students. These experiences remain subject to the “unspoken rules of patriarchal power, misogyny, and violence in educational spaces” (Mendes et al., 2022, p. 132) and perpetuate the experience of harm for victim-survivors. Reflecting on these institutional dynamics, Coffey et al. argue:

Although there is finally widespread acknowledgement that sexual violence is a problem at universities, even when it occurs on university grounds, it is rarely recognized as a problem of the university (Colpitts 2022). ... Taking a broader view of the problem of gender-based violence as occurring both on and beyond the campus is crucial if we are to fully realize the power structures that perpetuate and create the conditions for abuse to occur in the first place. (p. 625)

These dynamics can create substantial barriers to participation. Students may feel disempowered; intimidated; or distrustful of institutional motives, policies, and procedures (Marques et al., 2020), especially if they have previously encountered disbelief, inaction, or harm or re-traumatisation when disclosing experiences (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2020; Spencer et al., 2017). Students may also feel concerned about the stigmatising or safety risks of being identified as a victim-survivor (Heywood et al., 2022, Figure 23). Thus, for students providing lived experience expertise, the stakes are often high. Their academic progress, housing, employment, or visa status may depend on the very institutions they are being asked to critique or advise. This dependence can make it risky or emotionally fraught to speak openly. These power imbalances are often compounded for students from marginalised backgrounds, who may also navigate racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia,

transphobia, or classism within university systems — forms of oppression that frequently intersect in ways that intensify their impact (Crenshaw, 1989). For a lived experience framework to be ethical and safe, trauma-informed practice is critical to minimising the risks of re-traumatisation or additional harm for those with lived and living experience as they provide their feedback and expertise.

Professional practice in “safer communities”

In the university context, much of the work in GBV prevention is carried out by professional staff — often in “safer communities” or “respectful university” teams — rather than academic staff engaged in teaching and research. Professional staff often bring deep practical knowledge and commitment to the work. However, they may lack access to — or time to access, understand, and implement — frameworks, protocols, and clinical or research-informed guidance that ensure their engagement with lived expertise is both ethical and safe. This gap can be particularly pronounced when staff have limited formal training in trauma-informed practice or when their work is siloed from academic research, clinical practice, and strategy and policy development.

Yet universities are uniquely positioned as sites of praxis — spaces where theory, research, and critical reflection intersect with lived realities and professional practice to effect transformation. As Coffey et al. (2023) argue, the university is not only an educational institution but also a site where GBV occurs, is responded to, and leaves enduring impacts on student wellbeing, participation, and identity. Students may access counselling and wellbeing services to assist with emotional distress and the effects of trauma within the very institutional environments which may have contributed to the harm or reinforcement of distrust. This tension highlights the need for universities to critically interrogate their structures, services, and practices, and to centre the expertise of those with lived experience of gender-based violence.

Bridging the gap between research and practice requires more than policy development; it calls for a reimagining of institutional responsibilities. Those doing frontline prevention and response work need access to research, reflective supervision, and communities of practice that enable safe and contextually informed approaches. At the same time, researchers must remain accountable to the communities their work affects (Pieper & Thomson, 2016), ensuring that lived experience informs the production and application of knowledge. Without this reciprocal relationship, prevention efforts risk becoming tokenistic, fragmented, inconsistent, or inadvertently harmful (Kilpatrick et al., 2017; Parker, et al., 2020; Pieper & Thomson, 2016; Trainor & Bouchard, 2013). For this reason, GBV prevention work in higher education must be grounded in both evidence and ethical practice, supported by institutional mechanisms that enable safe, skilled, and responsive engagement with student victim-survivors.

Development of a lived experience student consultant initiative at the University of Newcastle

Following the release of the *Report on the Prevalence of Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault Among University Students in 2021* (Heywood et al., 2022), the University of Newcastle created its *Action Plan for the Prevention of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at the University of Newcastle* (2022). This action plan has four key focus areas: Governance, Response, Prevention, and Awareness. The responsibility for implementation of this action plan was held by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and the Pro Vice-Chancellor Student Experience, supported by the Respectful Communities Coordinator. Student consultation is embedded in every focus area of this plan. Currently, this consultation includes the lived experience student consultant (LESC) roles. These roles were informed by a previous iteration of lived experience student engagement at the university, the evidence-based *Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework* (Lamb et al.,

2020) and the approaches contained in Blue Knot Foundation's *Building a Trauma-Informed World* (n.d.).

Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework

The development of the LESC initiative was guided by the *Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework* (Lamb et al., 2020), which emphasises trauma-informed, ethical, and collaborative engagement. These principles closely align with the aims of the LESC initiative, recognising that contributing lived experience — particularly in relation to systemic harm — can be both meaningful and emotionally demanding. Drawing on the framework, psychological and cultural safety were prioritised through voluntary, opt-in participation; regular check-ins; flexible time commitments; and clear role boundaries. The framework's recommendation to provide financial remuneration as a way of valuing expertise was also implemented. LESC's were given the option to be engaged as casual employees or to receive gift card remuneration. This flexibility sought to maintain participants' privacy where desired and to minimise the potential for power dynamics associated with an employee–employer relationship to affect their willingness to engage openly. Enabling LESC's to choose the focus of their projects was intended to ensure their input was substantive and impactful, rather than tokenistic or directed by the institution. The framework's emphasis on inclusion and reducing power imbalances also informed the commitment to centring reciprocal relationships built on trust, transparency, and care. Although developed for the family violence sector, this framework's trauma-informed foundation made it highly applicable to the university context, particularly in engaging students whose lived experience relates to GBV and marginalisation.

Blue Knot Foundation: Building a Trauma-Informed World

The LESC initiative was also informed by Blue Knot Foundation's *Building a Trauma-Informed World* (n.d.) framework, which emphasises the centrality of safety, empowerment, and relational connection in all forms of engagement. Blue Knot's articulation of trauma-informed practice as a universal and systemic responsibility resonated strongly with the Respectful Communities team's aims to ensure student participation was not only safe but also affirming and transformative. Their principles — particularly the emphasis on recognising the pervasiveness of trauma, fostering trust and transparency, and enabling choice and collaboration — influenced the design of our engagement structures and support systems. The Respectful Communities team sought to uphold these values by creating flexible opportunities for involvement, embedding choice at every stage of the process, and prioritising the emotional wellbeing of student consultants through supportive, relationally attuned practices. The framework's recognition that trauma intersects with systems of inequality further reinforced the commitment to centring marginalised voices and working to actively reduce institutional harm.

Timeline: Lived experience student engagement at the University of Newcastle

2023 Survivor Advocate Advisory Group

In late 2022, the University of Newcastle Survivor Advocate Advisory Group (SAAG) was founded by What Were You Wearing Australia (WWYW), a local student activist collective led by Sarah Williams. Sarah is a victim-survivor of sexual violence and the founder and Chief Executive Officer of WWYW, an Indigenous-led, not-for-profit organisation fighting to end sexual violence. The SAAG initiative was the first of its kind at an Australian university and was created with the intention of formalising a pathway for students with lived experience to advocate for victim-survivors and influence university policies and procedures. The group was developed in collaboration with and supported by the University of Newcastle, with the university aiming to

provide access to institutional resources and infrastructure, including administrative support, meeting spaces, and wellbeing services.

The SAAG was developed with clear terms of reference; regular scheduled meetings; and support from the university's Respectful Communities, Wellbeing, and Counselling teams. From January 2023, participating students were compensated for their time and expertise with a \$50 gift card per meeting, funded under a Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) allocation in the Health and Welfare category.

By leveraging the networks of WWYW and its founder Sarah Williams, the SAAG engaged student survivor advocates who were already using their voices to push for systemic change. This approach helped mitigate potential risks associated with engaging victim-survivors as these students were already experienced advocates with an understanding of the subject matter and work involved, as well as having relevant support systems and developed help-seeking behaviours in place. Furthermore, having experienced student advocates in the group provided less experienced group members with peer support and a greater sense of belonging (Graham et al., 2022) and the development of social confidence (Curran & Wexler, 2017). The membership opportunity was promoted on the social media accounts of WWYW and the university. Applicants were interviewed to ensure safety and support options were in place, or to determine what might be needed to safely support them. Campus Care — the university's behavioural response team — worked closely with WWYW and the Respectful Communities Coordinator to assess the suitability and safety of the potential applicants.

With seven final members appointed, the SAAG was chaired by Sarah Williams and convened for monthly meetings to determine items for discussion and action. Throughout the year, the SAAG contributed to several initiatives, including the development of a survivor-led resource guide, the review of the Consent Matters module, and active collaboration in the university's 16 Days of Activism campaign.

The authors acknowledge that this seven-member group represents a small cohort of students, and that this may have resulted in a limited range of voices speaking for a much larger population and breadth of experiences. However, recruitment was kept necessarily limited for this pilot project. The necessity of a relationship-based approach (Doherty et al., 2021) was determined to be a mitigating factor in the potential risks of working with a vulnerable cohort. Thus, this was considered a priority over engaging with larger numbers without the necessary resources.

2024 to present — Lived Experience Student Consultants (LESCs)

Due to a variety of pressures, including increased resourcing required for WWYW's external advocacy work, the university investigated new modes of engaging students with lived experience. This transition was made with the agreement of WWYW, recognising the need for more sustainable engagement models while still building on the foundational work and advocacy established by the SAAG in 2023. With the SAAG having made a clear case for the role of students with lived expertise in university prevention work, replacement options were explored.

In 2023, during ongoing engagement with the SAAG, the Respectful Communities Coordinator introduced the concept of offering members the option to be employed for their contributions, as an alternative to receiving a gift card. This proposal was informed by the *Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework*, which advocates for a range of remuneration options for lived experience experts. This framework was developed by researchers from the University of Melbourne Research Alliance to End Violence to Women and their Children (MAEVe) with victim-survivors from the MAEVe WEAVERS (Women and children who have Experienced Abuse and Violence: Advisors

and Researchers) Victim Survivor Group (Parker et al., 2020). The framework emphasises the importance of providing compensation while also recognising individuals' diverse needs, such as the desire for privacy, the benefits associated with formal employment, and the value of maintaining independence from the institution being advised. These considerations may exist in alignment or tension with the goals and structure of the advisory work and the goals and needs of the student experts.

From this foundation, the LESC role was created for implementation in 2024. These were funded as casual roles with around 3–6 hours a week available, using the SSAF Health and Welfare allocation. Three students were directly appointed to the roles, with one of those being a previous SAAG member and the other two being connected via professional activities and networks. In these early stages, recruitment was intentionally limited to a small cohort. Given the finite resources available and the high potential for risk, a cautious, relationship-based approach was adopted. This allowed time to develop the internal structures, supervisory capacity, and support systems necessary to ensure safety for both students and staff. As the framework is further embedded, broader and more inclusive recruitment pathways will be explored.

In addition to financial recognition, it is essential that LESC members also experience tangible accomplishments and a genuine sense of purpose within their roles. Without this, there is a risk they may feel tokenised, engaged merely for the university to tick a box, which may inadvertently replicate feelings of exploitation associated with their original trauma/s (Parker et al., 2020). Additionally, providing more than only financial reward ensures LESC members are engaged for the right reason: they want to support systematic change. It is critical to foster an environment where their contributions are valued, impactful, and personally fulfilling, with real, tangible results.

Work for LESC members is generally project-based and opt-in in nature. Projects thus far have either been generated by LESC members or their supervisor, or, as awareness of the roles increased, requested by other university units. In 2024, projects included awareness-raising activities on campus; fundraising for relevant research and charities; and reviewing and providing recommendations for student services such as Campus Care, the university's reasonable adjustment plan (RAP), and adverse circumstances processes. In addition, LESC members have an opportunity to sit as student members of the university's GBV Prevention and Response Advisory Group.

By following the recommendations of the *Action Plan Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education* (Department of Education, 2024), the LESC initiative aims to give victim-survivors a voice within the University of Newcastle. This allows their valuable insight and experience to inform the university's strategy and actions to prevent GBV.

Discussion and recommendations

Embedding trauma-informed practice in higher education

The development and implementation of the LESC initiative has been a continuous process of learning, adaptation, and reflection. Drawing on the *Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework* (Lamb et al., 2020) and Blue Knot Foundation's *Building a Trauma-Informed World* principles (n.d.), the Respectful Communities team has come to understand that embedding trauma-informed, human-centred practice requires more than intention. It must be grounded in genuine collaboration, reflexive practice, co-design, and sustained investment.

Principles of safety and student agency

Central to both frameworks is the principle of safety, understood not only as physical and psychological safety but also as cultural, professional, educational, and structural safety. For LESC members, who often hold complex intersections of identity and lived experience, this includes the

right to define their own boundaries, maintain confidentiality, and engage on their own terms. The opt-in model, flexible role design, and commitment to anonymity where preferred reflect this priority.

Navigating the dual role of student and staff

A significant challenge has been the dual identity of LESC as both students and staff. While employment provides recognition, skill development, and a measure of financial security — core principles of the Domestic Violence Victoria framework — it can also create tension. Students employed as LESC may wish to critique the very institutional systems within which they are embedded and that also provide their higher education. This underscores the need for survivor-led processes for consultation and feedback that extend beyond formal employment or student-facing mechanisms. Relational modes of working and engaging have underpinned our approach to managing some of these concerns.

The value of remuneration and sustained investment

Our experiences reinforced the value of remuneration not only as fair practice but as a structural recognition of lived experience as expertise. Sustained funding is essential to ensure that this practice extends beyond pilot phases and does not rely on precarious resourcing or goodwill. Equally important is investment in training, supervision, and support, both for LESC and for the staff who work with them. Supervisors require skills in trauma-informed engagement; non-authoritarian, relational leadership; and the facilitation of psychologically safe spaces. This includes reflective supervision practices to mitigate vicarious trauma and prevent burnout.

Adapting existing frameworks to university contexts

In translating these frameworks into higher education, it has been necessary to make explicit adaptations. While the Domestic Violence Victoria and Blue Knot frameworks were developed in community and family violence contexts, our focus was on student communities and the unique dynamics of university life. This required aligning our work with the *Action Plan Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education* and foregrounding student wellbeing and flourishing within higher education study.

Professional development was emphasised for LESC in their dual roles, aligning with both the university's Performance Review and Development (PRD) framework and the *Strategic Plan* objective of fostering "life-ready graduates" (University of Newcastle, 2020). LESC attended in-situ workshops, engaged in training, and participated in events such as the NSW and ACT Universities Prevention Connection Symposium. They were also offered membership on the university's Prevention and Response to Gender-Based Violence Advisory Group, chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Engagement and Equity). Through networking, collaborative problem solving, and authentic influence, LESC build employability while contributing to institutional responsiveness. Engagement in governance structures further supports student agency and aligns with recommendations from the *Change the Course* report. These adaptations highlight that the frameworks were not simply adopted but reshaped to meet the specific risks and opportunities of higher education.

Compassionate expectation management

A key innovation that emerged during the implementation of the LESC role was the concept of *compassionate expectation management*. This refers to the relational practice of supporting students to understand institutional constraints — such as policy environments, approval pathways, resourcing, or legal limitations — that may prevent their ideas from being fully realised. Rather

than dismissing advocacy, this approach centres radical honesty, empathy, and care. Done well, it validates contributions even when outcomes differ from the original vision. For example, if a student proposes an idea requiring more resources than available, supervisors can acknowledge its value, explain limitations, and help co-design alternative projects. This should be done without excusing institutional failures or exploiting power imbalances.

Language, meaning, and survivor-led principles

Language matters (Victorian Government, Family Safety Victoria, 2021). Terms such as *trauma-informed*, *co-design*, and *student voice* must not become rhetorical placeholders. They must be actively examined for their implementation and impact. Our challenge is to ensure these terms are embodied in inclusive, equitable, and survivor-led practice.

Limitations and supervisory structures

While the LESC framework prioritises agency, empowerment, and flexibility, managing expectations within self-directed projects can be complex, particularly when external stakeholders expect deliverables. To balance these expectations with the ethos of the role, supervisors play a critical role in project management and stakeholder engagement. Within the University of Newcastle approach, supervisors work collaboratively with LESC to establish project schedules and timelines, ensure alignment with objectives, and identify barriers early in the planning process. Supervisors also provide regular guidance, adapt projects as needed, and maintain consistent engagement through meetings and online communication. Importantly, when LESC cannot maintain sufficient progress, compassionate, trauma-informed mechanisms allow for renegotiation of goals or project roles without punitive consequences. Supervisors must also acknowledge their relative power, advocate for LESC where required, and support stakeholder management in ways that validate contributions when appropriate at any stage of completion. Clear supervisory structures that balance support with accountability, and recognise the fluctuating impacts of trauma, study demands, and institutional barriers, are foundational to the LESC framework. These mechanisms must be co-designed with students as LESC and as individuals to uphold principles of choice, safety, and empowerment.

Student knowledge as institutional expertise

Drawing on Burke et al. (2022), it is clear that students with lived and living experience of GBV bring critical knowledge about navigating higher education. Their study highlights the “distinct temporalities of GBV trauma, and how these often conflict with the universities’ systems for assessment and participation” (Burke et al., 2022, p. 48). This research study includes a range of recommendations that can be viewed as a form of collective lived expertise. Such insights reinforce the imperative to see students not only as recipients of support but as co-creators of knowledge and institutional change. The evidence underscores that students with lived experience of GBV possess critical, situated knowledge that is essential to the design of responsive, inclusive, and trauma-informed educational environments. Our framework is therefore purposefully tailored to reflect the temporal, relational, and structural conditions of university life. The contributions of students with lived and living experience of GBV challenge conventional academic norms and offer transformative possibilities for how universities conceptualise wellbeing, participation, and success.

Recommendations

Informed by these reflections are the following recommendations:

- Establishing a sustainable funding model to support long-term, multi-modal remuneration and infrastructure for LESC roles.
- Embedding trauma-informed training and supervision for all staff working with LESC.

- Ensuring that lived experience roles remain consultative, flexible, and student-guided, with clear boundaries around dual identities.
- Embedding compassionate expectation management as a supervisory practice, with honesty, empathy, and acknowledgment of institutional limitations.
- Co-developing clear protocols around privacy, confidentiality, and safe disclosure.
- Developing clear supervisory structures that balance support and advocacy with accountability; provide guidance on project management and stakeholder relationships; and ensure compassionate renegotiation of goals, timelines, or outputs when required.
- Continuing to evaluate and iterate the initiative with feedback mechanisms independent of employment relationships.
- Advocating for survivor-led, choice-based, and non-tokenistic student engagement.
- Facilitating participatory research pathways that are resourced, ethical, and advocacy-oriented, positioning lived experience as expertise for institutional transformation.

An evolving ethic

Ultimately, putting trauma-informed frameworks into practice is not a fixed endpoint but an evolving ethic — one that requires continual revisiting, co-design, care, humility, and accountability. Trauma-informed practice in higher education must remain a living commitment, sustained through reflexivity, student expertise, and institutional responsiveness.

Conclusion

Embedding lived expertise into the design and implementation of GBV prevention strategies in higher education is not a symbolic gesture — it is a necessary transformation in how institutions understand harm, accountability, and justice. The University of Newcastle's SAAG and LESC initiatives offer a case study in how trauma-informed, survivor-led engagement can begin to shift entrenched power dynamics and make institutional processes more responsive, ethical, and inclusive.

Through this work, it can be seen that meaningful integration of lived experience demands more than consultation. It requires sustained funding, flexible structures, supportive supervision, and a commitment to ongoing relational care. The implementation of trauma-informed frameworks such as the *Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework* and Blue Knot's principles demonstrated that centring safety, agency, and choice enables participation that is empowering rather than extractive. Yet these efforts also surfaced tensions that cannot be ignored — between recognition and protection, between student and staff roles, and between institutional ambition and bureaucratic limitation.

These tensions do not negate the value of lived experience engagement; rather, they highlight the need for clear boundaries, survivor-led design, and what may be described as compassionate expectation management. Institutions must hold space for students' critical voices even — and especially — when they challenge the systems in which they are embedded. Without that space, engagement risks becoming tokenistic, re-traumatising, or co-opted.

Ultimately, the lessons from this initiative point to a broader imperative. GBV prevention in higher education must move beyond compliance and toward a cultural and structural reimagining of who holds expertise, how power is shared, and what genuine partnership with student survivors can look

like. This is not a one-off project or a pilot that can be “completed” — it is a long-term, evolving commitment to equity, safety, and justice.

To deepen this work, a forthcoming reflective autoethnographic paper co-authored by two LESC's and the initiative's manager will explore the lived, felt, and relational dimensions of this collaboration. Their reflections will offer further insight into the ethical complexity and transformative potential of working at the intersection of personal experience and institutional change.

Moving forward, the authors carry both the achievements and limitations of this work with us. We remain accountable to those whose experiences have shaped it, and committed to co-creating a university culture where student voices are not only heard but respected, resourced, and central to meaningful change.

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