

Outcomes and  
Recommendations  
from the  
Fostering Safety and  
Trauma-Sensitivity in  
Research with Potential  
Emotional Impacts  
(ReSTS) Project  
(2025-2026)

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# Contents

Executive summary .....	1
1 Introduction .....	3
2 Background and rationale .....	4
3 About the ReSTS network.....	6
4 Key cross-cutting insights .....	7
5. Roundtable: Reflections on Findings and Recommendations .....	15
6. Implications and recommendations for academic stakeholders .....	17
7. References .....	22
7. Appendices .....	24
7.1 Resources for researcher wellbeing .....	24
7.2 Resources for trauma-sensitive research methods .....	24
7.3 ReSTS Network Shared Resource Bank .....	25

## **Executive summary**

UCD hosts world-class research on themes of violence, conflict experience, surviving trauma, genocide, disasters and much more – important research on difficult and challenging topics that makes significant contributions to the university and wider Irish and global society. Many researchers at UCD who engage in this kind of challenging research face emotional, safety and wellbeing implications, both for researchers and research participants. While there is growing recognition of the need for institutional engagement and supports for emotionally impactful research among universities in the UK and elsewhere, this remains a gap at UCD.

The Fostering Safety and Trauma-Sensitivity in Research with Potential Emotional Impacts (ReSTS) Project created the first dialogue, exchange and networking among College of Social Sciences and Law (CoSSL) researchers conducting research of this kind. Over the course of a year, the project led activities to help researchers better understand, anticipate and recognise the impacts trauma may have on their research participants and themselves, and equipped researchers with skills and support to mitigate harm and foster researcher wellbeing.

This report presents the key findings and associated implications and recommendations for UCD stakeholders arising from the ReSTS Project. Across ReSTS activities, several cross-cutting insights emerged:

- Trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing are institutional, not exclusively individual, responsibilities;
- Researcher wellbeing is often profoundly affected by challenging research;
- Current institutional supports for researcher wellbeing are inadequate;
- Although trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing are crucial to fostering a positive and inclusive research culture, in the current research culture, raising concerns about researcher wellbeing can pose risks;
- Trauma-sensitivity is a hallmark of high-quality research but remains poorly understood and unevenly applied;
- Trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing are ethical issues that require appropriate ethical procedures;
- Researcher wellbeing is a health and safety issue that requires appropriate institutional care;
- Conducting trauma-sensitive and wellbeing-supportive research is a time-consuming, resource-intensive commitment to professional excellence that is rarely formally recognised by academic institutions or progression structures;
- Trauma-sensitive and wellbeing-supportive research is a gender equity and workplace equality concern; and
- Trauma-sensitivity and wellbeing are not limited to research roles, nor to the social sciences (CoSSL).

These insights raise implications and pose recommendations for academic stakeholders, aiming to support UCD to become a national and international leader in institutional support for fostering research excellence and an ethical environment in which to conduct challenging research. These target:

- Researchers, including students and early career researchers;
- Supervisors and principal investigators;
- Research development and management professionals;
- Research ethics committees and members;
- Equality, diversity and inclusion and Athena Swan leads at all levels;
- University leadership; and
- Research funders.

Implications prioritise a dignity and respect approach toward equal and inclusive access to supports, and provision for trauma-sensitive and wellbeing practices and resources institutionally rather than on an ad hoc basis. Recommendations include:

- **Raise awareness and incorporate skills training** around trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing in existing UCD practices and programs such as Brightspace modules on *Research Integrity* or *Managing Your Team* trainings.
- Recognise and integrate trauma-sensitivity and wellbeing in **research design, conduct, analysis and dissemination**, including in planning, proposal development, budgeting, and reporting wherever possible.
- Foster a **positive research culture** among leadership, schools and teams where wellbeing risks can be raised without fear of stigma or repercussions, including through accounting for the time-intensive and demanding nature of challenging research in workload recognition and promotion frameworks.
- Create researcher **wellbeing plans and trauma-sensitive risk assessments** that support high-quality research in a safe, ethical and sustainable way.
- Disseminate **accessible resources** and foster **communities of practice** to enable peer support, and sharing of best practices to reduce barriers to access and address uneven, ad hoc or localised measures.
- **Integrate equity** issues in trauma-sensitivity and wellbeing supports to account for diverse experiences and acknowledge the unequal distribution of associated responsibilities in challenging research; integrate trauma-sensitivity and wellbeing supports in equality, diversity and inclusion strategies.
- Recognise researcher wellbeing as a **health and safety obligation** and an **ethical consideration**, moving beyond compliance towards care-oriented processes that support informed, evidence-based and consistent practices.

# 1 Introduction

This report summarises key findings and associated implications and recommendations arising from the year-long ‘Fostering Safety and Trauma-Sensitivity in Research with Potential Emotional Impacts (ReSTS)’ Project (Mar 2025-Feb 2026). Described in more detail further below, the project broadly aimed to generate recognition of how emotionally challenging research impacts both researchers and research participants and to take initial steps towards generating knowledge and skills for supporting researcher wellbeing.

In this report, we seek to synthesise as accurately and comprehensively as possible, key reflections and insights from the project’s network activities, including trainings, seminar, network discussions and roundtable, and point to implications and actions that can be taken to promote a more trauma-sensitive and wellbeing-supportive research culture.

We recognise that this report is nevertheless only a partial account of an impossibly rich and nuanced series of discussions. It is important to note that the project did not undertake formal primary research, and so the insights summarised below reflect an informal synthesis of key points and discussion items raised in the course of a year-long series of trainings and exchanges, rather than the results of dedicated data collection undertaken with rigour and robustness in mind. Moreover, we recognise that the discussion topics that were raised and received relatively more attention or agreement over the course of the project may be influenced by the composition of the project team and network members: given considerations of positionality, it is likely the report inadequately reflects the concerns, priorities and experiences of groups historically and continually minoritised within academia.

Finally, we note two scoping conditions: first, that the network’s activities were specifically concerned with research practice – and not with the wider and diverse range of roles and responsibilities within academic institutions, including teaching, service and professional leadership, among others; second, that the network’s focus was on researchers within the College of Social Sciences and Law (CoSSL) and as such, may not accurately reflect the concerns, priorities and experiences of researchers in other faculties.

The report first sets out the background to the central themes and the state of the field of research related to researcher wellbeing. It then provides a summary of the ReSTS project and its aims and activities. This is followed by a presentation of the key cross-cutting insights that were gleaned through the work advanced by the ReSTS project. The report concludes with a set of recommendations categorised in terms of their relevance to different institutional entities and actors within and outside of UCD.

## **2 Background and rationale**

### **2.1 What is trauma-sensitivity?**

In this report, the term ‘trauma-sensitivity’ in research refers to approaches to designing, conducting, analysing and disseminating research that recognise trauma, seek to understand its profound effects and endeavour to anticipate and minimise further harm arising from the research process to participants who have experienced or are experiencing trauma. Trauma-sensitivity is related to, but falls short of, more comprehensive trauma-responsive or trauma-informed approaches (Trauma Informed Lancashire, *nd*). Trauma-sensitivity does not assume that all research participants are traumatised, nor that sensitive topics – even those that may relate to traumatic experiences – cannot be studied, but emphasises the responsibility of researchers to actively minimise the risk of harm related to trauma. Examples of trauma-sensitive practices in research include designing data collection tools to avoid unnecessary and potentially re-traumatising detail of distressing experiences; and developing capacity to recognise signs of trauma responses among participants so as to activate distress protocols or take other appropriate steps (see Resha & Mwaikambo, 2023). Neither trauma-sensitivity, nor related approaches, are diagnostic or therapeutic interventions and should not replace these.

### **2.2 What is researcher wellbeing?**

In this report, the term ‘researcher wellbeing’ refers to approaches to designing, conducting, analysing and disseminating research that recognise the diverse personal (emotional, psychological and physical) impacts of undertaking research, including risks of secondary trauma; and endeavour to anticipate and minimise harm arising from the research process to the researcher, and promote safe, ethical and sustainable research (Skinner et al., 2023). Related approaches to this area emphasise ‘researcher welfare’ (Whittaker et al., 2025), or health and human-rights-derived framings around ‘safer viewing’ of challenging material, for example (Baker, 2020). Examples of wellbeing-supportive practices in research include making provisions for psychosocial support for researchers exposed to distressing material in the course of their work. Wellbeing-supportive practices are not necessarily diagnostic or therapeutic interventions, though supports may include these.

### **2.3 What is emotionally challenging research?**

In this report, ‘emotionally challenging research’ refers to research that has potential emotional, safety and wellbeing implications. This includes, but is not limited to, research on issues of violence, conflict experience, surviving trauma, genocide, disasters and related topics. Emotionally challenging research is diverse and takes many forms: it can involve direct, firsthand exposure to dangerous environments or events, or more remote forms of engagement with distressing evidence or materials. Importantly, the risk of harm arising from undertaking research is not uniform: positionality, institutional and cultural contexts, as well as researcher experience can all condition the likelihood of experiencing harm as a result of undertaking emotionally challenging research (Fenge et al., 2019; Nelson, 2024).

## 2.4 Why are these issues relevant to research culture?

A core aspect of UCD Research Culture entails aligning our research environment with our values. The ReSTS project supported CoSSL researchers to concretely articulate what these values are and how we enact and engage with them in our research – establishing why the safety and wellbeing of research participants and researchers is central to a positive research culture in the following ways:

- **Strengthening collaboration and respect** (for researchers as well as research participants) by convening across Schools and centring safety and ethical practice.
- **Enabling research excellence** through capacity building with researchers via knowledge sharing accomplished through collaboration as well as through training to meet identified needs. This project was designed to help researchers better understand, anticipate and recognise the impacts trauma may have on their research participants and themselves, and take steps to design, implement and disseminate research in such a way as to avoid, minimise and mitigate the risks of (re-)traumatisation. Strengthening and safeguarding the wellbeing of both research participants and researchers will enable researchers to undertake this work with greater confidence and a clear commitment to ethics, thus empowering them to reach their full potential (Campbell et al., 2019; Edelman, 2022).
- **Fostering integrity and dignity** by disseminating project outcomes to inform long-term institutional and individual planning for researcher wellbeing. A research culture that prioritises integrity and dignity requires addressing the wellbeing of research participants and researchers. Investing in the resources required to support the design, implementation and dissemination of emotionally-challenging research is demonstrative of a commitment to an inclusive environment (Hart et al., 2016) and is necessary for ethical, empowering and excellent research.

## 2.5 Why carry out a project to explore this at UCD?

Many researchers at CoSSL and other UCD Colleges engage in emotionally challenging research that has emotional, safety and wellbeing implications, both for the researcher and research participants. This research comes with risks for researchers as well as research participants: secondary (vicarious) trauma occurs when an individual is exposed to or has empathetic engagement with people who have experienced trauma first-hand, and primary (re-)traumatisation might occur for researchers who work on emotionally challenging topics that triggers past traumatic memories or for participants re-living their experiences (Isobel, 2021; Williamson et al., 2020; Skinner et al., 2023).

While there is growing recognition of the need for institutional engagement and supports for emotionally impactful research among peer universities in the UK and elsewhere, this remains a gap at UCD. The ReSTS project stemmed from this need, creating the first dialogue, exchange and networking among UCD researchers conducting emotionally challenging research. The project set out to identify and initiate the first steps to equip researchers with a shared language with which to articulate risks, effective practices to mitigate harm, and critical support to foster a positive, sustainable and ethical research environment at UCD.

### 3 About the ReSTS network

The ReSTS project commenced in March 2025 and concluded in February 2026, with funding support from Wellcome through the second round of UCD's ReCLAIM Initiative.

#### 3.1 Aim

The aim of the project was to generate recognition of the specificities of conducting emotionally impactful research and contribute to fostering a more positive research culture at UCD in support of such research. The project set out to create the first dialogue, exchange and networking among researchers in the college conducting research of this kind, and by so doing, identify and initiate the first steps to address skills gaps in support of research with emotional, safety and wellbeing impacts. ReSTS network members envision this as a first step in a larger journey to equip researchers with a shared language with which to articulate risks, effective practices to mitigate harm, and critical support to foster a positive, sustainable and ethical research environment at UCD.

#### 3.2 Leadership and participation

The ReSTS project was led by Dr Christie Nicoson (Sutherland School of Law), with support from co-investigators Prof Aisling Swaine (Sutherland School of Law), Dr Melanie Hoewer and Dr Caitriona Dowd (both School of Politics and International Relations). A wider network of colleagues also contributed to the project, including Prof Katherine O'Donnell (School of Philosophy), Prof Kath Browne (School of Geography), Dr Ernesto Vasquez del Aguila (School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice); Professor Cathryn Costello, Dr Maebh Harding and Dr Deirdre Healy (all Sutherland School of Law), as well as a much wider and extensive input and engagement from the 52 members of the ReSTS network across CoSSL and beyond.

#### 3.3 Activities

In the course of its activities, the ReSTS project:

- **Established a network** of researchers across all levels, from PhD students to Full Professors, drawing colleagues from CoSSL, as well as in the College of Arts and Humanities and College of Business;
- **Hosted three network meetings** to connect colleagues and to share learnings and resources for research with potential emotional impacts around planning and carrying out the research, supervising students and working in research teams around these topics, designing ethical approaches, disseminating findings, and strengthening research culture to sustain this research long-term;
- **Collected resources** in a network resource bank to share knowledge and materials related to relevant trainings, literature, and networks (see Appendices); and
- **Facilitated two day-long capacity building workshops and one open seminar** by hosting external experts for bespoke skills trainings on trauma-sensitive research methods, and on fostering researcher wellbeing – bringing a focus on trauma-sensitivity and wellbeing for research participants and for researchers.

## 4 Key cross-cutting insights

Members of the ReSTS network readily identified that emotionally challenging research is a cornerstone of the intellectual, scientific and real-world contribution made by UCD. The university has a national and international profile as a leader in world-class research that tackles the critical issues of our time and that generates societal impact.

UCD's strategic plan prioritises excellence in research fuelling engagement for impact with "major issues confronting people and planet" (*Breaking Boundaries*). Strategic research themes at UCD include issues related to inclusive prosperity, examining inequalities across diverse contexts (CoSSL); justice and democracy, particularly where rights and responsibilities are contested (CoSSL); AI and society, especially related to issues of power, inclusion, and accountability (CoSSL); violence and society (College of Arts and Humanities); and sustainability (*Breaking Boundaries*), including topics such as forced migration, wars, environmental crises, or pandemics.

Researchers at UCD are leaders in their fields on a wide variety of challenging topics at national and global levels, such as gender-based violence, inequality, armed conflict, climate change, forced migration, and sustainability issues. Researchers working on these topics are deeply committed to their research, as many network members attest, and they proudly see UCD as holding potential to excel in these areas of research. UCD's profile attracts teams of collaborators and large funding awards, not least contributing to making UCD Ireland's top university for generating EU-funded research.

The design, conduct, analysis and dissemination of research on emotionally challenging topics that does not adequately address the potential for trauma can do real and lasting harm. Trauma-sensitive approaches are essential to safeguard researchers as well as research participants, and to anticipate and reduce further harm. Beyond care for individuals, trauma-sensitive research enhances methodological rigour, ethical integrity, and analytical credibility. Attentiveness to emotional impacts for research participants can also improve researcher reflexivity, data interpretation, and responsible dissemination. However, trauma-sensitivity remains poorly understood among many researchers and is seldom embedded in everyday research practice outside specialist fields. Training opportunities are limited, fragmented, or optional, and many researchers lack the knowledge, skills and confidence to apply trauma-sensitive approaches appropriately. Network meetings revealed a strong appetite for clearer guidance, shared language, and practice-oriented learning that frames trauma-sensitivity not as an optional add-on, but as a marker of professional excellence.

The emotionally challenging and trauma-sensitive research being conducted at UCD is not only of interest to the researchers leading this project, but integral to the wider university community and beyond. This research forms part of UCD's prestigious profile that attracts staff as well as students, generates substantial funding, and contributes to positive societal change. Outlined below are a set of key insights that members of the ReSTS network identified as integral to fostering safety, trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing in the important research with potential emotional impacts that is being conducted at UCD:

#### **4.1 Researcher wellbeing is often profoundly affected by challenging research.**

Network members consistently highlighted that emotionally challenging research can have deep and lasting impacts on researchers. Researchers across the ReSTS network reported experiencing a complex mix of emotional, psychological, and health-related effects of their research. These include emotional exhaustion, overwhelm, secondary or vicarious trauma, shame, anger, disillusionment, and altered perceptions of safety and the world more broadly. Such impacts may arise not only during fieldwork but also during data analysis, writing, teaching, and engagement with research audiences.

However, many researchers noted that these effects are rarely anticipated or openly discussed, particularly when research is assumed to be “non-traumatic” or methodologically distant. Network meeting discussions underscored that researcher wellbeing is not peripheral to research practice, but intimately entangled with how research is conducted, interpreted, and undertaken over time. These accounts are consistent with recent research in the UK that found that researchers doing this kind of work were dedicated and driven by the nature of their subject matter, but that they dealt with substantial impacts, with many showing symptoms of vicarious and secondary trauma (Skinner et al., 2023, 2025).

#### **4.2 Trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing are institutional, not exclusively individual, responsibilities.**

Despite the range of emotionally challenging research taking place at UCD and its importance in shaping UCD’s profile, members of the ReSTS network identified that responsibility for ensuring trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing within that research largely depends on individual researchers. For instance, even where the university provides wellbeing supports, the activities promoted include individual-level initiatives, and while these may be welcome, they do not reach the threshold for a systemic and sustained institutional fulfilment of its responsibilities to its research staff. The risks posed by this research can be mitigated in ways that enhance research and embrace challenging topics. Network members recognised this and emphasised that, rather than shying away from sensitive topics, UCD can further strengthen impact and research excellence through an intentional approach to mitigating harm by integrating trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing into research infrastructure.

There was strong agreement that trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing should not be the sole responsibility of individual researchers. It cannot be treated solely as a matter of individual resilience or self-care. Rather, research institutions have responsibilities towards their research staff, whose emotional safety is shaped by institutional structures, including ethics procedures, supervisory practices, workload expectations, funding arrangements, and access to appropriate support services. When institutions fail to acknowledge this responsibility, the burden of care is displaced onto individual researchers who must navigate emotionally demanding work individually and without adequate guidance or protection. Network members emphasised that recognising

wellbeing as an institutional responsibility is central to promoting a positive research culture and undertaking ethical and high-quality research.

Further, supports for trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing fall under the remit of health and safety concerns in the workplace under national legal protections. Beyond the institution's own dedication to fostering an inclusive and positive research culture, and to leading innovative and impactful research, the university also holds legal obligations towards its staff to ensure a safe working environment (see 4.6 below).

### **4.3 Current institutional supports for researcher wellbeing are inadequate.**

There was widespread agreement among the ReSTS network members that there is a need for better institutional recognition of the impacts of doing emotionally challenging research on researchers. Relatedly, it was identified that existing institutional wellbeing supports are poorly suited to the needs of researchers conducting such research, and there remains a need for a systemic approach to supporting researcher wellbeing.

Among ReSTS network researchers who currently take account of, budget for, and design researcher wellbeing structures or resources for themselves and their teams, many reported doing so on an ad hoc and localised basis. For example, individual researchers may independently research and apply wellbeing practices in their projects, or may access counselling on a personal basis, while often all principal investigators and supervisors can do is signpost resources. Further, even where researchers/PIs attempt to include budgeting for wellbeing supports, it is not yet a 'taken for granted' or uniformly accepted item in grant application budgets – either for funders or for the institution.

These gaps present several risks. First, they may result in uneven awareness of, access to, and uptake of resources that do exist within UCD, among students and staff. Several members highlighted insufficient trauma-centred wellbeing support for staff, and long waiting lists for student supports, for example, are inadequate and insufficiently available in cases of need.

Second, the quality and relevance of support is likely to vary: in particular, members reported challenges identifying supports tailored to researchers in these spaces (as opposed, for example, to social care professionals), since many counsellors are not familiar with these topics and impacts. In addition, where existing wellbeing-related supports exist, they are not necessarily appropriate for capturing the risks or needs of trauma-sensitive research. For example, the most relevant of UCD's current risk assessment templates is for Home Visit/ Face to Face Interviews. Not only is this designed for a specific type of research encounter, rather than a variety of research types that might encounter emotional challenges, but it also focuses on practical (e.g., transportation) and physical (e.g., equipment) hazards. In the current template version, any risks related to researcher distress or challenges would fall under the existing heading 'other hazards' rather than centring or prioritising the wellbeing of the researcher. Thus, recognition of specific trauma- and wellbeing-related issues are likely to be uneven

across risk assessment users, and are positioned as an afterthought, rather than a central component of ensuring a safe working environment.

Third, this approach is individually demanding in terms of time, energy, and resources and results in duplication of effort across individuals, teams, schools and units. Taken together, this places disproportionate strain on early career researchers and supervisors, in particular, who must often independently identify services, absorb costs, or manage risks without institutional backing.

Better awareness and support for the inclusion of these provisions as a standard practice is needed as part of research culture in UCD, and in its engagement with its funding institutions. Members noted that proper identification and assessment of risks and necessary resources requires support, which is not equally or adequately available to all, including for supervisors and mentors.

Network members strongly supported the need for structured, research-specific supports, including access to appropriate psychosocial services, centralised resources, and clearer institutional pathways of care. In addition, members also called for training and resources for identifying potential supports, as even where resources exist, they are not always readily identifiable or accessible. The network's meetings and creation of a shared resource bank demonstrated how sharing knowledge and resources enhanced capacity and efficacy among group members, saving time, money and energy.

#### **4.4 Trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing are crucial to fostering a positive and inclusive research culture. Yet, in the current research culture, raising concerns about researcher wellbeing can pose risks.**

Network members stressed that trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing are currently not addressed under the university's existing efforts to foster a positive research culture, a gap which fails to follow and advance best practices. The university's strategic plan, *Breaking Boundaries*, commits to "advance best practice in our research culture" (p. 3) as well as "promote a vibrant, inclusive and ambitious culture that is based on our values and is shared across the organisation" (p. 6). Establishing the safety and wellbeing of research participants and researchers is central to a positive research culture that prioritises openness, multi-disciplinarity and support. Safety and ethical practice should be practiced throughout the university, not be left to the interest of specific research projects or ad hoc initiatives.

Better understanding and recognition of the impacts that trauma may have on research participants and researchers themselves can enable individuals and teams to take steps to design, implement and disseminate research in such a way as to avoid, minimise and mitigate the risks of (re-)traumatisation (Campbell et al., 2019; Edelman, 2022). Strengthening and safeguarding the wellbeing of both research participants and researchers will enable researchers to undertake this work with greater confidence and a clear commitment to ethics, thus empowering them to reach their full potential (Campbell et al., 2019).

Where individuals seek to advance such practices in fostering a trauma-sensitive research culture at UCD, network members shared that they have faced barriers. Participants repeatedly noted that speaking openly about emotional impact or wellbeing concerns can be unpopular and risky within current academic cultures. Raising issues of trauma-sensitivity and wellbeing at a local School level can be understood as carrying implicit demands for time, funding and institutional resources, which may be seen as difficult in an increasingly efficiency-oriented context with constrained budgets. In the absence of widespread and formal recognition of the impacts of emotionally challenging research, some network researchers reported concerns with disclosing issues around researcher wellbeing arising from their work. Early career, doctoral, and precariously employed researchers, in particular, may fear being judged as unprofessional, “too vulnerable,” or unsuited to their research topics. In some cases, expressions of distress were perceived as potentially jeopardising ethics approval, supervision relationships, or career progression. This creates strong incentives for silence and self-censorship, reinforcing a culture in which harm remains hidden and unaddressed. Network meetings highlighted the need for safer institutional environments in which concerns about wellbeing can be raised without fear of stigma, penalty, or exclusion from research opportunities.

Network members and external consultants providing specialised trainings as part of the project stressed that a research culture which prioritises integrity and dignity requires addressing the wellbeing of research participants and researchers themselves, including by addressing the risks of primary and secondary traumatisation and implementing practical measures researchers can take to safeguard themselves, their teams and their research participants. Investing in the resources required to support the design, implementation and dissemination of emotionally-challenging research is demonstrative of a commitment to supporting an inclusive environment (Hart et al., 2016) and is necessary for ethical, empowering and excellent research.

#### **4.5 Trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing are ethical issues that require appropriate ethical procedures.**

A central insight from the project was that researcher wellbeing and trauma-sensitivity are ethical issues that must be addressed within research ethics processes, not in parallel or outside them. Some network members reported finding current ethics processes overly procedural, risk-averse, and focused on compliance rather than care. Reflections highlighted how experiences of ethical review rarely accounted for the emotional risks faced by researchers themselves, the risk of (re)traumatisation for research participants, nor the appropriate trauma-sensitive practices that could be adopted to mitigate these potential risks. These accounts are consistent with wider research on institutional ethics and researcher welfare in field such as terrorism research (Whittaker et al., 2025). Across network discussions, there was strong support for reforming ethics procedures to include researcher wellbeing, training ethics board members, and adopting more flexible, context-aware, and participatory approaches. Such reforms were widely seen as essential to strengthening, rather than side-stepping or diluting, research ethics and integrity processes.

#### **4.6 Researcher wellbeing is a health and safety issue that requires appropriate institutional care.**

Through network activities, members identified a number of potential concerns that rise to the level of Health and Safety issues, such as receiving threats in connection to their research, negative impacts on mental and physical health, anxiety in the workplace, negative impacts on work performance and relationships at work. Existing research on this topic highlights that these experiences are not personal, but are common impacts among researchers conducting work on emotionally challenging topics. A recent study, for instance, documented impacts as including altered mood and cognition or altered arousal or reactivity such as sleep disturbances or inability to concentrate (Skinner et al., 2025).

Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005, employers in Ireland are legally responsible for managing and securing safety, health and welfare of all employees. The mandate involves ensuring risk assessment processes are completed and reviewed, including for psychosocial hazards, and that risks are prioritised for action to be managed and monitored. Work-related stress is one of the specific Health and Safety areas for targeted risk assessment and management.

#### **4.7 Trauma-sensitive and wellbeing-supportive research is a gender equity and workplace equality concern.**

Discussions across network meetings highlighted that the labour involved in trauma-sensitive and wellbeing-supportive research is not evenly distributed across staff. Responsibility for emotional care, informal mentoring, and supporting distressed students or team members often falls disproportionately on colleagues who are younger, female or otherwise minoritised, as well as those perceived as more “approachable” or empathetic. This care-related labour is frequently invisible, uncompensated, and unaccounted for in workload models or promotion criteria, despite being essential to sustaining safe research environments and facilitating research excellence. In addition, researching, writing and publishing this kind of research can take longer, due to the need for researchers to find ways to manage the impacts of the research on themselves, as they are processing work. This can penalise researchers who do this work within institutional recognition and award models that are focused on number of publications as an indicator of quality outputs. As a result, trauma-sensitive practice can exacerbate existing gender and equity inequalities within academia, contributing to uneven workloads and career penalties. Recognising trauma-sensitive research as a gender equity issue is therefore essential to ensuring fair distribution of care responsibilities and to promoting an inclusive and equitable research culture.

#### **4.8 Conducting trauma-sensitive and wellbeing-supportive research is a time-consuming, resource-intensive commitment to professional excellence that is rarely formally recognised by academic institutions or progression structures.**

Network members consistently noted that conducting trauma-sensitive, wellbeing-supportive research requires substantial investments of time, emotional labour, training, supervision, and care work. Research recognises that applying trauma-sensitive and wellbeing-centred ethics of care requires the dedication of time and space to explore how emotions can be generated through the research process for both researchers and those whose lives they study (Brannelly and Barnes, 2022). These commitments often extend beyond formal job descriptions or funded project timelines. Yet such labour is rarely recognised within institutional reward structures, promotion criteria, or workload models, and is often framed as discretionary or “soft,” rather than as indicators of rigorous and responsible research. The meetings highlighted a shared concern that without formal recognition, incentives, or resourcing, this work remains undervalued and unevenly distributed – often falling to those already most exposed to emotional risk.

#### **4.9 Trauma-sensitivity and wellbeing are not limited to research or research-related roles, nor to the social sciences (CoSSL).**

During the course of the project, it became increasingly clear that there is significant interest in this topic beyond the scope of the current project. First, the project’s focus on trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing was identified as relevant across multiple schools and colleges, not just CoSSL, and including for example, practices in the health and animal sciences. Throughout the course of the project, colleagues from other Colleges throughout UCD expressed interest in the work of the project and the issues under discussion and attended events and provided input. One colleague from the College of Arts and Sciences shared that they found the ReSTS activities to be practical and positive in supporting emotionally challenging research. They noted its significance to the College of Arts and Humanities in order to support a positive research culture for colleagues working within the strategic research theme on Violence and Society or with topics including for instance forced migration, alcoholism, civil wars, environmental crises, or pandemics.

Second, participants in trainings and network meetings consistently emphasised that trauma-sensitivity and wellbeing are not confined to research, but extend to teaching and administrative roles. Student demand for courses on social and political issues – including armed conflict, peacebuilding, climate crisis, and violence – means that emotionally demanding material is regularly encountered in teaching contexts. Staff researching these themes are therefore likely to engage with them across multiple aspects of their roles, including teaching, supervision, and pastoral or administrative responsibilities. In doing so, staff must manage their own emotional responses while also responding appropriately to students’ reactions and support needs. Recognition of these overlapping demands and provision of appropriate supports beyond research-specific responsibilities would strengthen institutional responses to emotionally challenging work across teaching and learning contexts.

#### **4.10 Trauma-sensitivity is a hallmark of high-quality research and there is opportunity for UCD to become the lead institution in Ireland on this issue.**

During network activities, researchers identified the general lack of institutional leadership within Ireland on fostering trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing in research. There is therefore enormous potential for UCD to become a national and international leader through action on the legal and ethical responsibilities for hosting world-class research on challenging topics.

The university's strategic plan promises continued strengthening of UCD's reputation as a trusted partner nationally and globally, supports for staff and students to achieve effectiveness and add value to our activities to "promote a vibrant, inclusive and ambitious culture" (p. 2) that makes UCD a great place to work, as well as physical and digital campuses that "are exemplars for best practice" (*Breaking Boundaries*, p. 3). Taking a leading role in supporting trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing in research with potential emotional impacts not only stands to strengthen existing research culture at UCD, but to position the university nationally, in Europe, and globally as one of the few universities at the forefront of this issue and particularly well-suited to host researchers and funded projects that work on such themes. To date, the University of Bath has positioned itself as a leader in this field and many in Europe and around Ireland are turning to their example for resources and guidance (Skinner et al., 2023), which UCD could also do in a more formal way than has been possible under the short-term ReSTS project.

## **5. Roundtable: Reflections on Findings and Recommendations**

To conclude the ReSTS project, the network convened an open roundtable discussion in February 2026, bringing together network members, researchers in the wider UCD community, and university stakeholders. The discussion served as an opportunity to both discuss findings from the past year of activities, and to consider practical options for implementing recommendations. The following key points surfaced in the exchange:

### **5.1 Affirming the value, and costs, of doing emotionally challenging research.**

Roundtable participants emphasised that many researchers are motivated to undertake work on demanding topics and global challenges precisely because they feel a strong sense of purpose and commitment to the communities with whom they work and issues they study. Research in areas such as conflict, violence, and social injustice often reflects a desire to create meaningful change, amplify underrepresented voices, and contribute to public understanding.

At the same time, participants noted that this sense of commitment can coexist with significant emotional costs. These may arise through direct interaction with participants, prolonged engagement with distressing materials, or cumulative exposure to difficult subject matter over time. Participants highlighted that the impacts of such research extend beyond emotional strain alone, encompassing relational, physical, and professional dimensions of researchers' lives. Recognising the 'whole researcher' – rather than focusing exclusively on emotional wellbeing – was raised as an important step toward more appropriate institutional responses.

### **5.2 Strengthening dialogue, community and capacity.**

A recurring theme in discussion was the value of the network itself. Participants described the opportunity to share experiences and strategies with peers as one of the most meaningful aspects of the project. Several noted that working on emotionally challenging topics can be isolating, particularly when such impacts are rarely discussed in formal research environments. Structured opportunities for peer discussion and community-building were therefore identified as key complements to formal training.

Alongside this, many participants welcomed the network's recommendations around training and capacity-building, and suggested that several elements could be integrated into existing institutional structures with relatively modest resources. For example, trauma sensitivity and researcher wellbeing components could be incorporated into existing professional development programmes, such as training for PhD supervisors or researcher development initiatives. Embedding these topics within established training activities was seen as an effective way to build capacity while avoiding the perception that these are niche or specialised concerns. Nevertheless, participants emphasised that training should not be treated as a standalone solution. Instead, it should form part of a broader institutional approach that includes institutional support, recognition, and appropriate safeguards.

#### **5.4 Building shared understanding for ethics and research safeguards.**

The role of ethics review processes emerged as a central topic of discussion. Roundtable participants with various roles within the ethical review process highlighted that concerns about researcher wellbeing and safeguards are already considered during ethics review, often in an 'organic' way. The aim of such review processes is not to prevent research from taking place, but rather to ensure that appropriate safeguards are considered and integrated into research design.

However, participants noted that this process can sometimes be opaque to researchers. Without clear guidance on how researcher wellbeing considerations are evaluated, researchers may feel uncertain about how to communicate potential risks or the safeguards they have put in place. Some participants expressed concern that increased attention to emotional risk might inadvertently make ethics procedures more onerous, potentially discouraging important research. The discussion therefore highlighted the importance of transparency and shared understanding. Rather than expanding procedural burdens, improvements could focus on clarifying how wellbeing considerations are assessed, providing researchers with a clearer vocabulary to describe emotional risks and mitigation strategies, and building mutual confidence in the review process.

#### **5.5 Ensuring adequate and relevant supports.**

Participants recognised that existing wellbeing services, including the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), provide welcome and valuable support to staff. However, the discussion raised questions about whether such services are sufficiently tailored to the specific psychosocial risks associated with research of this kind. Exposure to distressing materials, secondary trauma, and supervisory responsibilities overseeing such work may require more tailored forms of support. The key focus, therefore, was not the absence of support, but rather the need to ensure that available services are appropriate, and institutionalised, rather than pursued on an ad hoc basis.

#### **5.6 Leading a change in research culture.**

Finally, participants noted that academic approaches to trauma and emotionally challenging research are evolving. In many professional health and social care fields, trauma-informed and wellbeing-supportive approaches are well-established, while research environments are only beginning to address these issues systematically. Participants described the current moment as a timely opportunity for UCD to distinguish itself as a leading institution in this area, valuing and supporting a safe environment for conducting emotionally demanding scholarship.

## **6. Implications and recommendations for academic stakeholders**

UCD hosts a widely diverse talent pool of researchers, students, and staff who contribute to innovative and impactful research. Much of this research revolves around topics that are emotionally challenging such as understanding societal inequalities, addressing global polycrises, tackling violence or injustice, or advancing sustainability. Not only can UCD pride itself in hosting world-class research on these challenging topics, but it actively aims to further develop as a national and global leader in research excellence and impact.

To do so, UCD must also be the kind of institution that has the infrastructure to support this kind of research – not only in physical and digital campus investments, but also in providing support for the emotional challenges posed to the researchers who conduct this research. Researchers require support for themselves and for their participants in order to mitigate potential harms for the people involved in this crucial research.

Among other reputable research institutions on the island, none have yet claimed a strong position as a leader on supports for emotionally challenging research. UCD has a unique opportunity to do so. With a targeted approach, UCD can learn from our community's experiences, adapt current models of practice, and build on existing resources to offer practical supports to not only strengthen ongoing research, but also to attract funding and talent necessary for a future as a world-leading research institution.

The following recommendations present concrete ways in which UCD can leverage and support various stakeholders for fostering trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing in emotionally challenging research.

### **6.1 Researchers, including students and early career researchers**

- Avail of training opportunities to build capacity and skills in applying trauma-sensitive, trauma-responsive or trauma-informed practices and approaches in research.
- Develop and maintain a researcher wellbeing plan that supports you to carry out high-quality research in a safe, ethical and sustainable way.
- Engage with peer support or community-of-practice networks for researchers in your field or employing your methods that may be a wellbeing resource and/or technical support to conducting trauma-informed research.
- Contribute to a positive research culture in relation to wellbeing by openly acknowledging and recognising wellbeing risks associated with research and contributing to an environment in which peers and colleagues can raise wellbeing concerns without fear of stigma or judgment.
- Advocate for institutional recognition of trauma-sensitive and wellbeing-supportive practice, including in the provision of institutional supports, workload recognition,

and allocation of funding in ways that reflect the resources required to conduct responsible research on emotionally challenging topics.

- Include resources for trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing supports in project planning and budgeting. This includes mandating risk assessments and researcher wellbeing plans, budgeting for wellbeing costs (such as counselling provision), and designing time-intensive tasks with recognition of the need for capacity building, supports and flexibility in timelines required by the nature of emotionally challenging research.

## **6.2 Supervisors and principal investigators**

- Invest in training opportunities to enhance capacity and skills in applying trauma-sensitive, trauma-responsive or trauma-informed practices and approaches in research, as well as to become more aware of available resources.
- Integrate trauma-sensitivity in research design, conduct, analysis and dissemination, including in planning, proposal development, budgeting, and reporting wherever possible.
- Make provisions for supervisee and team members' wellbeing in research projects with foreseeable potential wellbeing impacts at proposal design and budgeting stage by ringfencing resources for wellbeing supports and promoting their uptake.
- Familiarise yourself with researcher wellbeing resources in your institution and beyond, as applicable, and proactively signpost potential supports for supervisees and team members.
- Model responsible leadership with regards to researcher wellbeing by openly acknowledging and recognising wellbeing risks associated with emotionally challenging research and promoting a positive research culture in which supervisees and team members can raise wellbeing concerns without fear of stigma or professional repercussions.
- Resource for trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing by including supports in how you plan and carry out research with supervisees, including conducting and reviewing risk assessments, budgeting for trauma-sensitivity and wellbeing training and supports as dedicated research costs, and allow timeline flexibility to accommodate the intensive nature of emotionally challenging research.

## **6.3 Research development and management professionals**

- Avail of training opportunities to build awareness and understanding of trauma-sensitive, trauma-responsive or trauma-informed practices and approaches in research.

- Integrate guidance on trauma-sensitivity in research development supports, including in guidance on project design, budgeting, recruitment, project management and reporting.
- Integrate guidance on researcher wellbeing in research development supports for projects with foreseeable potential wellbeing impacts, including in guidance on project design, budgeting, recruitment, project management and reporting.
- Support the dissemination of relevant resources, guidance and best practice sharing among researchers and professional counterparts to reduce barriers to access and address uneven, ad hoc or localised measures.
- Integrate trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing concerns into risk assessment tools, and mandate use and review of these tools in research practice.
- Integrate trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing concerns into dignity and respect information and programming, raising awareness that challenging research may mean different things to different people, and people may experience challenges differently. A differentiated approach is needed in order to integrate trauma-sensitivity and wellbeing in a way that promotes dignity and respect.
- Integrate trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing awareness raising, resources, and best practices into existing frameworks at UCD to facilitate teaching and learning about the topic for researchers, teachers, and students. For instance, these topics can be included as a new section within the existing *Research Integrity* and *Managing Your Team* trainings.

#### **6.4 Research ethics committees and members**

- Recognise researcher wellbeing – including risks of secondary and vicarious trauma – as an ethical consideration, moving beyond compliance towards a care-oriented process of ethical review that does not incentivise self-censorship or silence around these concerns.
- Support transparency, promote shared understanding and build researcher confidence by clearly communicating how researcher wellbeing and emotional risk are considered in ethical review. This includes encouraging researchers to identify potential emotional or psychosocial risks associated with their work, as well as the mitigation strategies and safeguards they have put in place.
- Promote training opportunities for researchers to build awareness and understanding of trauma-sensitive practices. For instance, integrate trauma-sensitivity into the existing *Research Integrity* training module and encourage completion for staff and students.
- Promote consistent and evidence-based review practices, by ensuring committee members have opportunities to build their knowledge, understanding and capacity to evaluate emotional risk, and apply trauma-sensitive and wellbeing-supportive approaches.

## **6.5 Equality, diversity and inclusion and Athena Swan leads at all levels**

- Recognise trauma-sensitive and wellbeing-supportive research as equity issues, explicitly acknowledging the unequal distribution of associated responsibilities (emotional labour and care work, among others) in research.
- Promote the visibility and formal recognition of care-related work, advocating for promotion, workload and professional award frameworks to take account of the less visible work of supervising, mentoring and undertaking emotionally challenging research in an ethical, safe, responsible and sustainable way.
- Ensure attention to researcher wellbeing and trauma-sensitivity in EDI and related action plans, strategies and policies, pursuing concrete commitments to institutional resources, supports and workloads that reflect the (often uneven distribution of) risks associated with emotionally challenging research.
- Implement trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing supports with a focus on equality and inclusion, taking into account that factors such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, personal background, neurodiversity, and/or other privileges or marginalised situations may impact what counts as emotionally challenging research for each person, and how individuals differentially experience the challenges this work presents.

## **6.6 University leadership**

- Model responsible leadership with regards to researcher wellbeing by openly acknowledging and recognising wellbeing risks associated with emotionally challenging research and promoting a positive research culture in which supervisees and team members can raise wellbeing concerns without fear of stigma or professional repercussions.
- Invest in dedicated research-specific, institutional supports for researcher wellbeing that are attentive to the particularities of research-related risks and harms. This should include ensuring adequate trauma expertise in counselling support services. Such efforts should prioritise accessible resources open to all UCD researchers, to minimise project-specific resource demands or competition for limited schemes. Where existing supports are under-funded or limited in scale, increase investment in these as a clear signal of institutional commitment to workplace safety and research excellence.
- Review promotion, workload and professional award frameworks to ensure trauma-sensitive and wellbeing-supportive research practices have high visibility and formal recognition, rather than being considered marginal features of research. Recognise the time it takes to produce research of this kind within incentive and reward models related to research outputs.

## 6.7 Research funders

- Recognise trauma-sensitive and wellbeing-supportive research expenses as legitimate research costs, explicitly allowing expenditure on related capacity building and supports, as well as committing to flexibility in timelines where required by the intensive nature of emotionally challenging research.
- Encourage institutional investment in supports for trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing by inviting and as applicable rewarding applications that specify what provisions are available for researchers within host institutions, as indicators of the suitability of the research environment for the proposed project.
- Support sustainable capacity building and promote positive research culture by investing in trauma-sensitive and wellbeing-supportive practices beyond individual projects, through cross-institutional initiatives, networks or exchanges that promote the visibility of these issues, signal funder support and model responsible leadership.

## 6.8 Wider implications

Although the ReSTS project focused specifically on researcher-related implications of emotionally challenging research, network discussions highlighted that this work also presents unique challenges and opportunities in administration, teaching and learning. We encourage further exploration of the challenges and supports needed in relation to emotionally challenging topics specific to teaching, learning, and administrative roles.

- Trauma-sensitivity and researcher wellbeing supports should be provided to meet the diverse needs of the graduate student body. UCD attracts many graduate students who research emotionally challenging topics. The institution has a responsibility to ensure adequate access to necessary resources for them, and to support mentors and supervisors responsible for them. These students constitute a diverse group of individuals each with unique needs relative to trauma-sensitivity and wellbeing. An institutional rather than individual approach ensures that students have support regardless of whether their direct supervisor has resources or training to implement the necessary supports, and that the supports can be provided with considerations such as EDI and Universal Design well-integrated.
- Many researchers who work on emotionally challenging topics also teach on these topics, and by the nature of their work, tend to take on related responsibilities, such as pastoral care. Despite their expertise, a lack of resources amplifies the risks of engaging with these topics with students. Further investigation is needed to identify staff needs for trauma-sensitivity related to teaching, pastoral care, and other responsibilities that might fall outside of research.
- Given safety concerns raised by emotionally challenging research, university staff trade unions should engage with this topic in order to ensure they have adequate information to support their members and to meaningfully engage with the university on this topic.

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## 7. Appendices

All resources available at:

<https://bit.ly/4qsPaSj>

### 7.1 Resources for researcher wellbeing

Resources and materials generated through a training hosted at UCD, December 2025. Training delivered by Dr. Tina Skinner, University of Bath.

- Emotionally challenging research: Possible impacts and proactive interventions to support researchers – presentation slides from UCD training
- Researcher Wellbeing Plan Template © (updated 25 June 2026)
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### 7.2 Resources for trauma-sensitive research methods

Resources and materials generated through a training hosted at UCD, June 2025. Training delivered by consultants Sara Cook and Jo Dover.

- UCD Trauma-Sensitive Research – presentation slides from UCD training
- Community Resiliency Model – handbook
- Community Resiliency Model – info sheet
- Community Resiliency Model – reading list
- Resilient Zone Model
- Resilient Zone for Young People

### 7.3 ReSTS Network Shared Resource Bank

#### Publications and materials

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### Support networks

- Challenging Research Network: <https://challengingresearch.org/>
- Trauma Informed Research Network: <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/social-sciences-institute/events/trauma-informed-policy-and-research-ireland-critical-conversation>

### Training opportunities

- Converge: *Training modules offered on 'Conducting Emotionally Challenging Research' and other topics.* <https://converge.colorado.edu/resources/training-modules/>
- Core Change: *Training and consultancy on conflict transformation, participatory & creative process design, dialogue and participation, trauma and loneliness.* <https://corechange.ch/>

- Medica Mondial: *Trauma work: What is the Stress- and Trauma-sensitive Approach (STA)?* <https://medicamondiale.org/en/violence-against-women/overcoming-trauma/trauma-work-the-stress-and-trauma-sensitive-approach#c2200>
- Mental Health First Aid training. <https://www.ehsinternational.com/mental-health-first-aid/>
- National Centre for Research Methods (periodically lists courses on trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive research). <https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/training/alltrain.php>
- Quality Matters: Training and group facilitation for social services. <https://qualitymatters.ie/services/training-and-facilitation/>
- Trauma Informed Care Ireland. <https://qualitymatters.ie/trauma-informed-care-in-ireland/>
- Trauma Informed Practice Ireland. <https://www.traumainformed.ie/>
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# About the ReSTS project

The Fostering Safety and Trauma-Sensitivity in Research with Potential Emotional Impacts (ReSTS) project commenced in March 2025 and concluded in February 2026, with funding support from Wellcome through the second round of UCD's ReCLAIM Initiative.

The aim of the project was to generate recognition of the specificities of conducting emotionally impactful research and contribute to fostering a more positive research culture at UCD in support of such research. The project set out to create the first dialogue, exchange and networking among researchers in the college conducting research of this kind, and by so doing, identify and initiate the first steps to address skills gaps in support of research with emotional, safety and wellbeing impacts.

The ReSTS project was led by Dr Christie Nicoson (Sutherland School of Law), with support from co-investigators Prof Aisling Swaine (Sutherland School of Law), Dr Melanie Hoewer and Dr Caitriona Dowd (School of Politics and International Relations), and a wider network of colleagues across College of Social Sciences and Law (CoSSL) and beyond.

**Funded by Wellcome through the second  
round of UCD's ReCLAIM Initiative**

