

The Learner Engagement Podcast Episode

English Transcript

Interviewer: Zarqa Hussain (Int1), Emma Howells (Int2)

Respondent: Cathy Simon (Res1), Deb Roberts (Res2)

INT1: Welcome to our podcast series which will take you on a journey around Wales to learn more about what people and organisations working with the ACE Hub Wales are doing to become trauma and adverse childhood experience informed organisations, also known as TRACE. I am Zarqa Hussain, I'm a project manager at ACE Hub Wales. We will be hearing about how they're using our toolkit to drive real change and through sharing their experiences, inspiring others to join them on this journey to become a trauma and ace informed nation. The ACE Hub Wales is delighted to be collaborating with Wrexham University to bring you this discussion.

One of the series that will bring together people from around Wales working with us to support Welsh society to become aware of the importance of understanding the potential impact of ACES. In today's discussion, we are meeting Deb and Cathy from Wrexham University, who are going to share with us the inspirational work to involve students in the TRACE journey. So firstly let's do some introductions. With me we have:

INT2: Emma Howells, I'm a project manager at ACE Hub Wales.

RES1: My name is Cathy Simon and I've been at the University as a student for seven long years of study. For five of those I've been a student ambassador and also during that five years as I became a student ambassador I became involved with the TRACE projects that we have here and evolved with it I would say.

RES2: Hi, I'm Deb Robert. I am a graduate associate on the TRACE project following being a student here. I started studying psychology five years ago and became involved with the project as a student ambassador and now work as a graduate associate.

INT1: Thank you both. Just to allow all our listeners to understand, we will be using the words learner and student interchangeably today because of the conversations we're going to be having. Sometimes we do lapse into calling either learner or student. They both mean the same thing and it's the same context around that. This discussion is focused around learner involvement and what we wanted to do is talk about the toolkit and talk about how Wrexham University embarked on the journey, asking for learners to be involved in the TRACE work. So I wanted to ask you directly how you've approached involving learners.

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RES2: Yeah, so I think it's fair to say for us learners are at the heart of the project and obviously at the heart of our organisation, so it's really, really important that they were included. The toolkit kind of highlights leadership and governance and we feel students are partners, we collaborate with management and student voice is integral to our work. It's not an us and them approach, it's a whole system cultural shift. So we really felt it was really important to get learners involved from the start.

INT1: Thank you for that Debs. So just wanted to add here, Wales is leading the way in tackling, preventing and mitigating ACEs and in development of our National Trauma-Informed Framework, it's taking on that societal approach to become trauma-informed. We've developed a Trauma-Informed ACE-Aware Organisational Toolkit, which we'll be referring to today as a TRACE Toolkit, which is a key resource for organisations implementing the framework and embedding the principles of trauma-informed practice in everything that they do. So to get started, if we can start from the beginning then, how did Wrexham approach involving students or learners?

RES1: Of course, to get that student conversation going, we needed to approach it in a place where we're going to have a high involvement of students. So right from the start, we thought we should have a stall at Threshers Fair, where we have a trace stand and we have banners, if you like, and really attract students who are walking past to start having conversations and start to gather information about how we were going to approach it. We were not asking any students about trauma, but asking if they'd heard about the project. I mean, in the beginning stages, we were expecting not very many to say yes, but we just mainly wanted to start the conversation with students. Since then, it has evolved, which we'll talk about a little bit later on, but our first initial steps were to just start having those conversations to see where we could go and how far we could lead it. From that point, after having those conversations, we had a lot of response, good responses from students who were really interested. We understood that the students who were interested did want to get involved and advocate the project and we decided that they could champion this for us and that is where we sort of developed the Students Champion which do have a lot of involvement with the project now and this is where it began if you like. From that point we developed some information sessions, there was an hour workshop and from that point we allow students to make an informed decision if they would like to go ahead and advocate the project. We could ask nothing more from them but to come to an information session because these information sessions were really integral to planting those seeds about trauma-informed practice. We've allowed them to go away and reflect on that

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and if they would like to advocate then they would get involved which we've implemented things in place since then to grow the champion community if you like.

INT2: So why was it important to engage and include learners?

RES2: Obviously learners are at the heart of everything we do as we keep stating and it was a really good opportunity to have a platform of collaboration, so collaboration in action and actually hear what students wanted, needed. There was opportunities for innovation, creativity and lots of real-life experience if you like and becoming involved in a project that thought a little differently and it was quite empowering for students to have that involvement so we thought it was really, really important that the voice was heard. And what we found was we've kind of evolved as we've progressed and we now have levels of engagement for students. So we have a basic level whereby students who attend a workshop are then given a badge as a representation, a visual, that they are advocating the approach that they've gone through some of the trauma-aware training and that they're happy to have these conversations on a lower level. We then have a second level whereby students can come along to stalls and help us promote the approach, help us engage in them conversations. This is always at a level they're comfortable with and very flexible, they can move between each. And then the top level is students might want to present to their cohorts. They might want to present to other projects they're involved with. So we've really tried to implement that three-tier process.

INT1: It's important to say here that both Debs and Cathy were learners when they came into the TRACE journey with the university. So it's really nice to hear you both talking about how it's continued with other learners as well as students across the university.

INT2: So what did this work give to the TRACE project at Wrexham that otherwise would have been missed?

RES2: I think it's provided a lot of opportunities, opportunities for students to get involved, opportunities for staff and students and the community to work together. So I think that's been really, really important across the student body.

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INT1: So anyone that's giving time to something like the TRACE approach, we want to know what difference it's made and the work that's been done. So how did you go about doing this with the learners and what difference do you feel that it's making and made?

RES2: We have a broad demographic and we're trying to achieve a real inclusive learning environment. Providing students with these opportunities is kind of improving engagement levels, retention rates, those kind of recordable measures if you like. As well as that, we're providing students with transferable skills that they can take with them into the workplace. We love the idea of planting seeds and whatever field students are going into, then they have these skills that they can carry forward and utilise.

INT1: Navigating the storm animation produced by learners at the University is now a fantastic global resource. How did that actually happen?

RES1: A student who were on their PhD at the time, Tegan Brioli-Solas, she had the opportunity to present a part of her thesis to a group of people which they call open house research within the University. They give PhD students the opportunity to present a part of this to other researchers and they may feedback on what they discuss and at that time she'd basically spoken about navigating the storm which wasn't navigating the storm at that point and part of the feedback she received was how it should be visualized and put into visual research as part of her PhD and basically that's how it was born. They got other students within the University and other parts of the University and other departments, you know, say graphic design, that kind of thing. And then they put it together and now basically her whole PhD has become navigating the storm and she's so knowledgeable, she's now Dr. Tegan Brioli-Solas as a result of that and I think it's absolutely wonderful. It really brings trauma-informed practice into context and it's very age appropriate and it just can be utilised anywhere and everywhere.

INT2: So how did it feel for everyone involved to see the animation launched by the Welsh Government Deputy Minister for Health and Wellbeing and with panellists including Benjamin Perks from UNICEF dialling in from New York?

RES2: It was fantastic. It was just so special to be part of. It was a really incredible experience and I think it was kind of at that moment I realised that this was more than just a tick

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box kind of exercise, more than a transactional piece. It was actually going to create this culture shift and make us think differently. So yeah, it was really exciting to be at the launch and see it unfold.

INT1: For those of you who are interested in watching the animation Navigating the Storm, it's available on Wrexham Uni's YouTube page and it's available in both English and Welsh. From what we've heard, the students at Wrexham are passionate about the work they are doing with Trace. That also brings along some challenges no doubt. How did you approach to responding to suggestions that were strongly held views that were included or excluded from your decision making please?

RES1: Quite early on in our conversations we came to realise that there are a lot of people who are quite open with their conversation and every experience is very, very individual. So we always bear in mind actually listening as opposed to wanting to give that opinion when somebody's talking. When we created our workshop we made sure from the onset that the students had a safe space, that understood that everyone in that room will have experiences, one very different to another and to have that respect for each other. We even like make sure that the environment they that they were sitting in was not in any way formal, that we were all very equal in our discussion. Just because we were standing up there and presenting didn't mean that we weren't feeling the same or had the same kind of experiences. We were appreciative more than anything and creating that space where we could make sure that everything was covered. Of course they're all very different, you know, sometimes we can have workshops where not many people speak because they don't feel that they can at that point or they don't wish to divulge but it's also about understanding that too, about allowing that non-judgmental space that says it's okay if you don't agree, you disagree, your experience is different and so on and so forth.

RES2: Yeah, I think we're not naive to the challenges. We have encountered challenges across the way and we embrace that because if people are challenging us then they're questioning their own thinking. So we welcome challenge, we want to hear people's opinions, we remain open-minded and respectful of their opinions, that's really, really important to us. And sometimes I feel like I can almost see a lightbulb moment, there's a flicker of a little bit of changing the way people are thinking and approaching this. So change can't happen without challenge.

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RES1: Absolutely and we reflect on every single session, stall, conversation and we are with the journey, we are the journey in the student, in respect of the student community.

INT1: Sounds like it's a lot of learning as you go along as well so that makes it a lot more easier to have that foundational trust and safe space agreed at the beginning.

INT1: So just going on from that really so if you were to ask you top three things that went well in the whole engagement process and the three areas you might think you want to do differently, what would you say?

RES2: So I think, thinking about the top three, I think the way we went about it in this open conversational approach was really powerful. So we held these stalls at any events that were going on across the uni, we'd have a little pop-up stand with our banners and a tablecloth and some leaflets and literally just welcome people to have conversation and we often think of conversation as a really undervalued tool in this approach. People want to conversation as a really undervalued tool in this approach. People want to talk, they want to learn more.

So it was definitely a really good way of engaging people and sparking interest. The workshops, we spent a lot of time over them and how they were going to run and we didn't want to make it too heavy, we wanted to make it kind of interactive and really allow people to engage with it. So they were fab, people really got on board with it, didn't they? They were engaged, they wanted to learn more, they were open to different ways of thinking and all the workshops really did kind of set our sights if you like, didn't they? And then I think the final thing I would think was our relationships with management. So we have had from the beginning a really, really good foundation. The leadership has been fabulous. We don't feel an us and them approach, we feel like we are equal. You know, from associate dean, we have that real, we feel valued and respected, and we feel that actually our suggestions go forward. So forming them relationships was really beneficial.

INT1: So just to sort of think about the things that you would do differently, what three things?

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RES2: Thinking back, reflecting on how, where we began, I think more accurate record keeping would definitely be something we change. We're a little naïve to how big it would get and how fast it would grow and as it has progressed we've been asked for more kind of evidence, everybody wants you know evidence-based quantifiable kind of data and that's not always possible so I think record keeping and monitoring, evaluating, feedback, we would have really promoted that a little bit more. We've got there now, thankfully, we're learning as we go. And I think possibly the third thing I would change is curb our enthusiasm a little. We wanted to get involved with everything, we wanted to be a part of everything, we wanted to get in every avenue. And we were students, working, family, so perhaps we soon learnt we needed to focus on maybe one or two things at a time, put more effort into that.

INT2: So you've talked about learners in the higher education setting. The ACE hub hosts a trace community of practice where we have a broad range of sectors engaging with the trace toolkit. Could this approach be applied in other sectors?

RES1: Absolutely, I think it's obviously you need that groundwork to somewhere to start from and then it's good to know your audience as well. So that bit of knowledge together, start having conversations, start knowing what it is that the people in your sector are going to need and then grow from that. Reflect. There's a lot of reflection needed within this and it's continuous. Once you've got those bare bones, it's then beginning to spread the word even more by having those sessions, asking them to reflect to you what is it that they need in their particular environment and just allowing to be open to that and having those conversations that you're an equal, we're all the same, we're all human. Having that environment where once you've got that groundwork, you can then absolutely work and that's bringing, use the toolkit, utilise the toolkit, that's what it's for, those five practice principles. If you've got all that groundwork there, then you can continue and grow and just grow. You know, we've been doing this for quite some time and we've learned a lot of skill from that. But it always comes back to what we reflect and what works and what doesn't. And it's important to know that, you know, if it doesn't work, that's okay too, because it's part of your research and how you have to move forward.

INT1: The 5 practice principles as mentioned earlier, the first one is a universal approach that does no harm, person centred approach, being relationship focused, being resilience and strength focused, and also inclusive. Those are the 5 practice principles. We have 6 domain areas of a toolkit, and then we have 4 practice levels. The trauma informed wales framework is also known as a societal approach to understanding, preventing, and supporting the impacts of trauma and adversity. If you want to know more information, please go to the website for ACE Hub Wales to get more details.

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INT2: Safety is a really important element of being trauma informed. Can you tell us a bit more about how these conversations were approached?

RES1: Absolutely, no matter whether it's in a reception area with a stall and one of our campuses maybe or in an actual workshop itself we always create that safe environment and ensure that everybody's happy to be there, allows that opportunity to leave if they feel like they need to, that that's okay, that it's okay to feel an effect, because we don't know what's going to happen within these sessions, I mentioned before that they're all very, very different. They were just caught with a very, very open mind and a listening ear and they are skills that we've continued to expand on as we've moved forward.

INT1: So thinking about safety and just picking up what you've just said there, they may be different when you're engaging with younger learners of course, and in further education the age is from 14, in some areas and sometimes the starting point is 16. There's been some concerns from further education about re-traumatisation or not having the right support in place when they're having these conversations. How did you as a university overcome this?

RES2: Yeah so obviously we have a broad demographic here at Wrexham Uni. We're first for social inclusion in the UK and we have a real mixed student body. So we have young learners, we have older learners and I think it's really important to actually think beyond age. Whatever age you are, you can learn to be kinder, you can learn to be more compassionate. And I think one of the core kind of elements of this is how we converse, the language that we use. So we don't always have to use the word trauma. Trauma in itself can be traumatising. So actually we need to think more about reframing our language, difficult times, adversity, things, past experiences that may actually influence how we think, feel and behave right now. So we can really change the language about how we're discussing this with people, especially younger people, and really emphasise that we're not judging, we're trying to reduce stigma and reduce discrimination around this and learn to really embrace this approach.

INT1: I think you may have already answered the next question, but what I wanted to ask you a little bit more about was any specific learning that the further education sector can take apart from that kindness and compassion and the language, especially when they're working with younger learners?

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RES2: Yeah, I think it's really important to actively listen. We're always waiting for our turn to talk, aren't we? We actually respond in to what somebody's told us can be so powerful. So let's listen more, actively listen. And I think it might be worth even considering starting with maybe student reps or student voice to kind of start to interweave the approach throughout students.

RES1: Yeah absolutely and an echoing on what Deb said, the terminology is extremely important. You know for us from a HE perspective that we are very aware of how we discuss trauma with them and it's not only about being compassionate to others whilst having these conversations but that can be age-appropriate as well. You know we can all adjust our personalities depending on who we're talking to so we can also learn the skill of compassion which is age-appropriate and terminology that goes along with that.

RES2: And self-compassion.

RES1: Absolutely and it's important to have that self-compassion as well isn't it because you know we have to know where our boundaries are as well. It's just about looking after each other, essentially, and making sure that we're okay too.

INT2: So we thank you for taking the time to listen to us today and hope that you found this information useful. We would like to extend a special thank you to Debs and Cathy at Wrexham University for hosting us today and talking about some of the amazing work that they're doing.

INT1: Please visit www.acehubwales.com to find out more information on the TRACE toolkit and how you can get involved with the national trace community of practice. Please keep the conversation going on social media. You can find us on Instagram @AcehubWales or LinkedIn @AcehubWales or on X, also known as Twitter, @AcehubWales and if you want to connect with Wrexham University following this podcast their handle on X is @Wrexham Uni.