**The University and the World: Restoring Wholeness in Fragmented Times**

The University Chaplaincy re-ignited its long-running *What’s the University for?* Series in May 2025 to ask: How can we respond to conflict as a doorway to positive transformation?

This event recognised how the many conflicts and traumas to which we are exposed as a university community, land in our individual nervous systems and also our collective nervous system.

The University, after all, is a microcosm of the world’s pressures, and at times a body in collective trauma. Corporately (i.e. bodily), the University has felt in fight, flight or freeze mode since Covid, and the many polarising dynamics that play out across the world stretch us thin communally.

The University Chaplain, Revd Dr Harriet Harris, and interdisciplinary Lecturer in One Health and Conservation Medicine Dr Glen Cousquer, have collaborated with others at the University to explore the value of bringing collective trauma studies into teaching and research. This work has benefited from, and been informed by, participation in a series of events run by the Pocket Project, including the annual Collective Trauma Summit and Climate Consciousness Summit. These online forums have highlighted the need to bring collective trauma studies and the integrative practices they offer, into our teaching so that we are able to address the fragmentation that occurs when working on the polycrises we face.

In planning this event, we reached out to the CEO of the Pocket Project, Kosha Joubert, and were delighted when she agreed to visit Edinburgh and help facilitate a workshop looking at the journey from trauma denial into trauma awareness and integration.

The invitation that we articulated and circulated drew together people from across the University community. The room was full on the day, with a diverse and highly engaged group of participants. On multiple occasions, we were told that the University needs more opportunities to have these sorts of gatherings; gatherings that recognise and seek to address the very issues we stumble over and struggle with daily, and that impede our effectiveness as a University community.

The event was top and tailed by two powerful performance poets from the University community, whose stirring contributions have generated on-going interactions: Augustus Nathaniel, PhD student in Counselling and Psychology, and Pepita Mwanga, Impact Coordinator with the Scholars Network.

‘**Gates to academia’, by Augustus Nathaniel**

*As I walk through the gates of academia*

*I wear the cap and gown of grief.*

*I lower my head to the loss of the old me………The loss of my best friend Nathaniel*

*The loss of my uncle Paul………*

*Upon this staggering entrance*

*I knock into a Stewart former Celtic*

*dressed as a professor………who stopped me in my stride.*

*Provided me with a warning………*

*I questioned whether he had provided this same warning to another.*

*Or was it just me because of my colour?*

*They corresponded………To an email which included my proposed thesis*

*"This is a traditional white and Anglocentric university, are you sure you want to bring your research here".*

*They may have thought they were being kind………but, that kindness had a taste of otherness, apprehension, and anti-blackness………*

*………which was bitter and hard to digest.*

*Although……… I guess their internal rationale………*

*Would have been my proposed research interest:*

*The Black experience……… hold on! Thinking about it again……… isn’t Black a colour to some.*

*The opaque view that others have of the black shade.*

*………Can be a ball and chain………*

*holding one and a group of people back………*

*………into a murky fade*

*The Benevolent are like “what do we say” and “what shouldn’t we say”………*

*Whilst the malevolent are like “I’m not sitting next to him”………*

*“What is he doing here?” or “I bet you he is a token to the university topping up their scales on diversity”………*

*Imposter syndrome is colourblind yet, unfortunately society is not.*

*So, if you are non-Black, yes because racists are not all white………*

*Please imagine your feelings of imposter syndrome encaged with the colour of Black skin………*

*Recognise your internal bias, internal micro-aggressions from within………*

*………And support our walk-through academia holding our heads up high………*

*………rather than your anti-Black palm placing our heads down – Because we just want to grow, rise & shine!*

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Kosha then spoke on the latest findings in collective-trauma studies, including the role of global social-witnessing practices in processing the enormity of the conflicts and crises playing out around the world. This helped us appreciate the need for us to learn to hold spaces for integrating our challenges as we bear witness to the world. This set the ground for us to move into groupwork. Working together, in small groups, we explored the following questions, specifically chosen to support us in reimagining the University in a world that is imploding within and beyond campus life:

* **How can we cultivate the University’s collective responsive capacity**with collective presence, ethical responsibility, and emotional regulation?
* **How can we be well, creatively**being a place where people become not unwell, but increasingly and creatively well, with mental-health literacy and trauma-informed, resilience-building approaches?
* **How can we reconnect with the University’s values and purpose**as a space for inquiry and societal contribution, fulfilling its purpose as a beacon of wisdom?

Pepita Mwanga’s rousing poem ‘Imposter Syndrome’ that ended the session can be found here: [Home - Pepita Mwanga](https://www.pepitamwanga.com/)

Some outcomes

We recognised:

* the need to grow trauma literacy across the organisation and community. This involves building capacity and competency that extend beyond awareness of trauma into lived experience of and confidence in integrating trauma. Realising such needs involves nurturing somatic (embodied) practices and attitudes (embodied compassion) for supporting ourselves communally.
* that when people feel trauma or lack of recognition or are alienated through lack of welcome, we collectively miss the wisdom of those who are disengaged/resisting because of how we react to them.
* that many of us need time away/apart from the University in order to see what we value in it, and also to see what value we can bring to it.
* The Village initiative has arisen out of this meeting, and will meet quarterly at the Chaplaincy, to help make and foster the connections for re-imagining future cultures, purpose, and community. Our first meeting will be 2.30-4.30pm on 25 September. If you would like to know more, and all are welcome, please email Susie.feest@ed.ac.uk

Further blogs inspired by this event

<https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/breakingboundaries/2025/05/26/the-power-of-welcome/>

[Gratitude to Realisation to Rebellion – my changing relationship with Imposter Syndrome – Breaking Boundaries – Broadening Perspectives on Research Leadership](https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/breakingboundaries/2025/07/21/gratitude-to-realisation/)

[Imposter Syndrome: Who else should be the protagonist to my story? – Breaking Boundaries – Broadening Perspectives on Research Leadership](https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/breakingboundaries/2025/07/29/imposter-syndrome-who-else-should-be-the-protagonist-to-my-story/)

For Pocket Project trainings and resources, see:

<https://pocketproject.org/global-social-witnessing-training/>

[https://pocketproject.org/trauma-informed-leadership-essentials-self-study-course/](https://eur02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fpocketproject.org%2Ftrauma-informed-leadership-essentials-self-study-course%2F&data=05%7C02%7C%7Cfd4a159a051944f5dbb908dda34d3e4b%7C2e9f06b016694589878910a06934dc61%7C0%7C0%7C638846274345401439%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJFbXB0eU1hcGkiOnRydWUsIlYiOiIwLjAuMDAwMCIsIlAiOiJXaW4zMiIsIkFOIjoiTWFpbCIsIldUIjoyfQ%3D%3D%7C0%7C%7C%7C&sdata=VFFBmnHdZnGtaaMHRzoWrwfq%2B2R7omUrh7%2FVJcIYJTc%3D&reserved=0)