

# Supporting students and staff during times of war and conflict: Guidelines for Australian Universities

When conflict erupts or escalates overseas, its effects reach into Australian university classrooms, offices and communities. Students and staff from affected regions – and those with family, cultural or community ties to conflict zones – can experience profound distress, grief and disruption to their studies and livelihoods.

This is not rare. Australia's universities are among the most diverse in the world, and at any given time, a conflict somewhere will be personally affecting members of your community. These guidelines offer practical, trauma-informed guidance applicable across all conflicts – and are not triggered only when a particular nationality makes headlines.

These guidelines apply to domestic and international students across all levels of study, as well as academic and professional staff.

## Rapid Response Checklist (First 72 hours)

### For immediate action when a conflict escalates

- Identify affected student and staff communities
- Send a timely acknowledgement message naming the conflict
- Activate academic flexibility (extensions, deferrals, reduced requirements)
- Publicise financial, housing and emergency support options
- Brief academic and professional staff on trauma-informed responses
- Promote wellbeing services through targeted outreach
- Monitor and respond to racism, discrimination or safety concerns on campus



## 1. Know your community

Many students and staff with forced migration backgrounds are invisible in university data systems. They may be domestic students who arrived as refugees years ago, permanent residents, or citizens – not 'international students'. Do not limit your response only to nationalities in the news: your campus will include people connected to multiple active conflicts worldwide.

Develop safe,  
voluntary disclosure  
processes

Consult the  
experts

Reach out  
quickly and  
show empathy

Remember to  
include other  
impacted cohorts

- Students and staff should be able to self-identify their background in ways that are non-stigmatising and culturally appropriate.
- Recognise that people's circumstances are unique and countries comprise of multiethnic community, meaning students (or staff) from the some country of origin may exhibit a range of different emotions and responses to the conflict.
- Work with multicultural student associations, community liaison officers and affected cohorts to understand who may need support.
- Proactively contact students and staff from affected communities to communicate that support is available and will be offered with compassion, not judgement – many will not come forward voluntarily out of shame, fear, or the assumption they will be turned away.
- Extend outreach beyond the primary conflict nationality: in connected regional conflicts, multiple communities may be affected simultaneously.

## 2. Academic flexibility without bureaucratic burden

When students are in crisis, administrative hurdles compound distress. Flexibility must be meaningful – not merely procedural. If a student needs to prove the impact of a conflict on their academic performance before receiving support, the good intentions of that support are already undermined.

Implement  
automatic  
extensions

No penalty  
deferral  
options

Pause  
options  
offered

Train staff  
to be  
trauma-  
aware

Provide  
flexible work  
options to  
affected  
staff

- Extensions without the need for documentation, evidence of impact, or proof of connection to the conflict.
- Offer deferred exams, take-home alternatives and flexible deadlines without academic penalty.
- Provide a one-semester pause option for students who need to step away temporarily, with guaranteed re-enrolment and no loss of scholarship or fee arrangements.
- Train academic and professional staff to proactively offer flexibility, rather than waiting for students to self-identify.
- Extend these considerations to staff members from affected communities, who may be managing significant personal distress while continuing to teach and support students.

This flexibility does not preclude supportive follow-up conversations where appropriate, but the onus must not be placed on students at the point of crisis.



### 3. Material and financial support

For students facing the sudden collapse of banking channels, intensified sanctions or the loss of family income due to conflict, financial hardship can be immediate and severe. Universities should not wait for students to reach a point of crisis before acting.

Create an  
emergency  
support  
fund

Offer no-  
interest  
emergency  
loans

Provide  
housing  
support

Ensure  
access to  
study tools

Connect to  
on-campus  
work opps

Use your  
voice with  
DHA

- Establish or activate an emergency support fund for food and essential living costs and publicise it proactively.
- Provide housing support, including subsidised accommodation or emergency housing brokerage for students at risk of homelessness.
- Offer no-interest emergency loans, repayable once financial access is restored, as an alternative for students who do not wish to access grants.
- Ensure access to essential study tools, including laptop loans and software access, for students who have lost financial access.
- Connect students with on-campus employment opportunities that work within their visa conditions.
- Advocate to the Department of Home Affairs for temporary flexibility in international student work-hour limits – as was successfully implemented during COVID-19 – when conflict creates exceptional financial hardship.

### 4. Wellbeing and trauma-informed responses

Students and staff connected to conflict zones are not simply 'stressed'. They may be managing acute grief, fear for the safety of loved ones, re-traumatisation triggered by news coverage, and the particular anguish of witnessing harm from a distance while feeling unable to help.

Culturally  
responsive  
counselling

Trauma-  
informed  
training

Amplify  
visibility  
of  
wellbeing  
services

Provide  
space to  
gather

Review  
curriculum  
for trigger  
content

Explicitly  
address the  
situation  
with  
empathy

- Ensure counselling services are culturally responsive, accessible and not hampered by long waitlists or complex referral requirements.
- Train student-facing staff – academic, professional and residential – in trauma-informed responses and in recognising signs of distress, including withdrawal, changes in behaviour or declining academic engagement.
- Make wellbeing services visible and actively promoted to affected cohorts, not just listed on a website.
- Create space for affected communities to gather and support one another – through student-led groups, community events or facilitated cultural spaces.
- Review curriculum content that references war, violence or displacement and ensure these topics are handled with care during periods of active conflict, offering students alternative approaches where needed.
- Acknowledge the situation explicitly – students notice when university life continues as if nothing has happened, and silence can feel like indifference.



## 5. Communicate with care and consistency

Timely, genuine  
messages of  
solidarity

Regular  
communication  
of support- not  
just one-off  
message

Zero tolerance  
of racism or  
discrimination

Be consistent  
across conflicts

- Issue a timely, genuine message of solidarity that names the conflict and acknowledges the pain it is causing – avoid generic or procedural language.
- Communicate regularly as the situation evolves, not just with a single initial statement.
- Actively enforce zero tolerance of racism, discrimination or harassment directed at students or staff from affected communities and make this expectation explicit.
- Be equitable: if your university responds publicly to one conflict, apply comparable visibility and resources to others.
- Ensure consistent messaging across faculties, student services and executive portfolios so students receive aligned guidance regardless of who they contact.

## 6. Support your staff

Check in daily

Recognise and  
reward cultural  
load

Proactively  
minimise  
vicarious  
trauma

Offer workload  
adjustments for  
affected staff  
members

- Check in directly with staff who have personal connections to the affected region and ensure Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are well-publicised and genuinely accessible – ideally, they will also include trauma specialists.
- Do not assume multilingual or bicultural staff are available to act as informal interpreters, cultural brokers or community liaisons – this places an unfair burden on individuals who may themselves be managing distress.
- Plan to minimise vicarious trauma: ensure staff doing frontline wellbeing work have access to debrief, supervision, and peer support.
- Consider workload adjustments for staff significantly affected by a conflict, consistent with the flexibility offered to students.



## 7. Australian referral pathways

Emerging or escalating conflict is likely to result in affected communities feeling desperate for family who are left in the impacted area/s. Watching conflict unfold will likely create/ increase pressure for people to find protection pathways for family members, which will in turn likely create/ increase stress and anxiety.

Universities cannot provide all support themselves – and should not attempt to. A warm, informed referral to the right service is one of the most effective things a staff member can do.

### Wellbeing and trauma support

- FASSTT network agencies provide specialist counselling for survivors of refugee-related torture and trauma in every state and territory: [www.fasstt.org.au](http://www.fasstt.org.au)
- STARTTS Witness to War Multilingual Hotline (free, national, bicultural workers and interpreting services): 1800 845 198 [www.startts.org.au/services/witness-to-war-multilingual-hotline](http://www.startts.org.au/services/witness-to-war-multilingual-hotline)
- Transcultural Mental Health Line: 1800 648 911
- Lifeline: 13 11 14
- International Organisation for Migration Crisis response: <https://australia.iom.int/crisis-response>
- STARTTS' Hints for Healing – briefing sheet for educators on supporting students with refugee experience during an international crisis: [www.hintsforhealing.startts.org.au](http://www.hintsforhealing.startts.org.au)

### Legal and visa support

Do not attempt to provide immigration legal advice. Always refer students to specialist services:

- Refugee Advice and Casework Service (RACS): [www.racs.org.au](http://www.racs.org.au)
- Refugee Legal: [www.refugeelegal.org.au](http://www.refugeelegal.org.au)
- Full list of migration legal services via RCOA: [www.refugeecouncil.org.au/migration-advice](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/migration-advice)

### Information and advocacy

- Refugee Council of Australia – general support information and advocacy letters: [www.refugeecouncil.org.au/support-for-people-fleeing-iran-gaza](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/support-for-people-fleeing-iran-gaza)
- Human Rights Law Centre – explainers on relevant legislation including visa and migration law: [www.hrlc.org.au](http://www.hrlc.org.au)
- Refugee Education Australia – sector guidance, resources and partnership: [www.refugee-education.org.au](http://www.refugee-education.org.au)





## **8. Build lasting capacity – not just crisis responses**

The most effective institutional responses to conflict are built before a crisis hits. Reactive, institution-by-institution responses are insufficient – and the absence of a national framework means too many students fall through the gaps.

- **Become an institutional member of Refugee Education Australia** for access to targeted resources, networks, and professional learning.
- Embed trauma-informed practice into standard staff professional development, not as a one-off training event.
- Develop a standing conflict response protocol that can be activated quickly and consistently, regardless of which community is affected.
- Maintain updated referral pathways so all student-facing staff know where to direct affected students without needing to search during a crisis.
- Nominate a central role or portfolio responsible for activating and coordinating conflict responses.
- Review responses after each activation to identify gaps and strengthen future practice.

**Developed by Refugee Education Australia (REA). Produced in collaboration with the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), STARTTS and sector partners.**

**REA acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and pays respect to Elders past and present.**