Identifying the Dimensions and Components of Overcoming Organizational Trauma in the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad

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Purpose: This study aimed to identify the key dimensions and components necessary for overcoming organizational trauma within the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative research design with a descriptive phenomenological approach was employed. Twelve faculty members from the Faculty of Fine Arts, familiar with organizational dynamics and trauma, were selected through purposive theoretical sampling until data saturation was achieved. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, each lasting between 50 to 70 minutes. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method, supported by MAXQDA 2020 software. The credibility of the findings was enhanced through member checking and thematic validation.

Findings: The analysis yielded 105 initial codes, which were synthesized into 59 core concepts grouped into six major dimensions of overcoming organizational trauma: managerial, structural, psychological, cultural, technological, and environmental. Each dimension contained secondary components such as ethical leadership, process simplification, mental health services, inclusive policies, digital infrastructure, and safe physical environments. The findings underscore the multidimensional nature of trauma in academic institutions and emphasize the interrelation between leadership practices, institutional structure, and psychological well-being. Participants emphasized that organizational recovery requires both emotional and systemic interventions tailored to the context of post-conflict higher education environments.

Conclusion: Overcoming organizational trauma in academic institutions demands a holistic and context-sensitive framework addressing not only psychological and emotional healing but also structural, cultural, and environmental reform.

Keywords: Organizational trauma; Faculty of Fine Arts; qualitative research; trauma recovery; higher education; phenomenology; leadership; institutional resilience.

1. Introduction

Organizational trauma, as a deeply embedded psychological and systemic disturbance, has become an increasingly critical issue in contemporary institutions—particularly in academic settings where creativity, culture, and institutional legacy intersect. In post-conflict or unstable socio-political environments, such as Iraq, the persistence of traumatic organizational experiences has created multilayered challenges for educational structures, especially those rooted in cultural identity like the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad. Organizational trauma is not limited to a single catastrophic event but often results from accumulated stressors such as leadership failures, bureaucratic rigidity, systemic neglect, and emotional suppression within the institution (Venugopal, 2016). These experiences shape the emotional and behavioral responses of organizational members, impeding trust, collaboration, and innovation (Hormann & Vivian, 2013; Vivian & Hormann, 2013).

Traumatized organizations, particularly in public institutions, exhibit signs such as widespread cynicism, silence, distrust, emotional fatigue, and withdrawal (Ebrahimi et al., 2019; Faiz et al., 2019). Within the Faculty of Fine Arts—where creativity and emotional expression are foundational—such trauma undermines both pedagogical processes and the social climate essential for intellectual development. Trauma not only affects the psychological well-being of faculty and staff but also cascades into organizational culture, reducing performance, weakening identity, and fostering a cycle of dysfunction (Rahmani & Ghanbari, 2022; Zare & Sepahvand, 2019). Scholars note that in higher education institutions, organizational trauma is often rooted in persistent leadership failures, unresolved interdepartmental conflicts, and neglected mental health concerns, creating a toxic loop of pain and disengagement (Amirian et al., 2023; Rahimi & Aghababaei, 2019).

In academic settings with prolonged exposure to systemic instability or political interference, trauma can become normalized. This normalization desensitizes members to dysfunction, making trauma invisible and thus more difficult to address (Shahbakhsh & Nasti Zai, 2023). Over time, unresolved organizational trauma can lead to social burnout, moral disengagement, and internalized feelings of grief and envy among employees (Shahbakhsh & Nasti Zai, 2023). According to Steinkamp (2014), leaders often wear "masks of silence," which prevent open dialogue about institutional pain, inadvertently reinforcing a cycle of re-traumatization (Steinkamp, 2014). These silent leaders, while appearing calm and composed, suppress collective emotional acknowledgment and hinder healing processes. Especially in the Faculty of Fine Arts—where self-expression, critique, and collective engagement are central to educational and artistic practice—this cultural silence can have devastating consequences for faculty identity and organizational resilience.

Trauma in organizations is not merely a psychological concern but also a structural and cultural one. Research has demonstrated that unresolved trauma correlates with high turnover rates, emotional exhaustion, and weakened employee performance across both civilian and military institutions (Doulati & Diehim Pour, 2017; Sarlak & Koulivand, 2015). Among these effects, organizational silence and cynicism have emerged as key mediators in the relationship between traumatic exposure and employee disengagement (Ebrahimi et al., 2019; Moezinejad et al., 2023). In the context of educational institutions, such disengagement compromises both the academic mission and organizational sustainability. For this reason, scholars like Ghafouri et al. (2022) advocate for a diagnostic approach that prioritizes identification of trauma-inducing factors at cultural, psychological, and systemic levels (Ghafouri et al., 2022).

The emergence of toxic leadership and its role in institutional trauma is especially alarming in public sector organizations, including universities. Empirical research confirms that authoritarian and inconsistent leadership behaviors foster emotional suppression, fear, and low morale among faculty and staff (Rahmani & Ghanbari, 2024; Zare & Sepahvand, 2019). These effects are further exacerbated by the mediating roles of organizational cynicism and silence, which act as emotional defense mechanisms but ultimately degrade team cohesion and institutional trust (Moezinejad et al., 2023; Rahmani & Ghanbari, 2024). In this regard, the findings of Mahdi et al. (2021) are notable: psychological resilience plays a crucial role in buffering the impact of trauma on employee mental health and enabling adaptive responses in toxic organizational climates (Mahdi et al., 2021). However, in fragile academic systems lacking institutional support, even resilient individuals can succumb to cumulative stress.

A growing body of literature also highlights the link between emotional intelligence, ethical leadership, and recovery from organizational trauma. Leaders who are emotionally aware, supportive, and transparent foster a safer organizational climate where members are more willing to

voice concerns and engage constructively with institutional reforms (Amirian et al., 2023; Faiz et al., 2019). Emotional intelligence, in this context, acts as a buffer against traumatic fragmentation, enabling the organization to rebuild coherence and purpose. Similarly, ethical leadership is essential in reshaping norms, values, and professional identity, especially in settings where mistrust and injustice have historically prevailed (Amirian et al., 2023; Vivian & Hormann, 2013). A trauma-informed leadership model emphasizes accountability, empathy, and relational repair—qualities that are essential for rebuilding morale and fostering collective healing in post-traumatic institutions.

Despite these findings, organizational trauma in academic contexts remains an under-researched phenomenon in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq. The post-war and post-sanction context of Iraqi universities has created a unique landscape where bureaucratic stagnation, loss of institutional memory, and deteriorated infrastructure converge with unresolved psychological trauma. In the Faculty of Fine Arts, such challenges are intensified due to the institution's reliance on affective labor, symbolic creativity, and cultural stewardship. Research by Khoshhal (2024) identifies deeply rooted structural and interpersonal dysfunctions as key contributors to academic trauma in the region (Khoshhal, 2024). Moreover, Morshedi Tonkaboni (2021) points to the correlation between deviant employee behavior and organizational trauma in educational institutions, highlighting how normalized dysfunction perpetuates a cycle of institutional decline (Morshedi Tonkaboni, 2021).

Within this complex and interdependent system, the path to recovery necessitates a multidimensional approach that addresses managerial, structural, psychological, cultural, technological, and environmental dimensions of trauma. As Sepahvand et al. (2020) argue, successful trauma intervention must be rooted in participatory methods and flexible strategies, informed by both internal diagnostics and stakeholder feedback (Sepahvand et al., 2020). Such an approach allows for a customized, responsive model of healing that reflects the unique institutional identity and socio-political reality of each academic entity. The importance of integrating healing processes into policy design, resource allocation, and performance management is further emphasized in studies on resilience, job performance, and organizational ethics (Mahdi et al., 2021; Rahimi & Aghababaei, 2019).

The present study, therefore, seeks to identify the core dimensions and components that facilitate recovery from organizational trauma within the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad.

2. Methods and Materials

This qualitative research employed a phenomenological approach to explore the dimensions and components essential for overcoming organizational trauma within the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad. The study was designed to capture the lived experiences and expert perspectives of individuals who are both familiar with the organizational structure and directly affected by trauma-related challenges in academic environments.

The study population consisted of all faculty members and professors affiliated with the Faculty of Fine Arts who were familiar with the institutional context and its traumatic issues. The sampling strategy followed a purposive theoretical sampling technique, which is particularly well-suited for phenomenological studies aiming for depth rather than breadth. The selection was guided by the principle of theoretical saturation, whereby data collection continued until no new themes emerged from subsequent interviews. Ultimately, twelve participants were selected for the study, each chosen based on their expertise, professional insight, and representational relevance to the academic culture and trauma-related experiences within the faculty. The inclusion criteria were confirmed by the advisory board of supervisors, ensuring that participants were sufficiently knowledgeable and capable of articulating accurate and insightful perspectives on the organizational trauma prevalent in their context.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. These interviews were designed to be flexible and responsive, allowing for deep exploration of the participants' experiences while following a core set of guiding questions. In preparation, a preliminary interview guide was developed to direct the conversation, but the researcher adapted additional probing questions in real time to enrich the data and clarify responses. During the interviews, the researcher also used follow-up clarifications to validate interpretations and ensure the accuracy of meanings derived from participants' narratives. Each interview session lasted approximately 50 to 70 minutes and was conducted in a private and conducive setting to allow participants to speak freely and in detail. Throughout the interview process, the researcher analyzed responses iteratively, using new interviews to supplement incomplete or emerging concepts until theoretical saturation was

achieved. The interviews not only focused on the identification of indicators for overcoming organizational trauma but also elicited detailed reflections on both major and minor contributing factors that could be used to develop a conceptual framework tailored to the specific needs of the Faculty of Fine Arts.

The data analysis was carried out using a descriptive phenomenological framework grounded in Colaizzi's seven-step method. This approach was selected for its rigor and compatibility with in-depth qualitative exploration. The analysis began with reading all interview transcripts thoroughly to gain a general understanding of the participants' experiences. Following this, significant statements relevant to the phenomenon under study were extracted and coded. These key phrases were then formulated into meanings, which were grouped into clusters of themes. Through this process, major themes and subthemes were identified, capturing the essence of the participants' shared experiences. Phenomenological descriptions were crafted to reflect the structure of each theme, accompanied by direct quotations from participants to enhance authenticity and depth. The thematic analysis culminated in the development of a conceptual model that encapsulated the essential structure of organizational trauma and the process of overcoming it within the academic

context. To establish the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, member checking was conducted, where participants reviewed and validated the proposed model. All stages of data organization and analysis were facilitated using Maxqda 2020 software, which provided an effective platform for managing complex qualitative data and enhancing analytical transparency.

3. Findings and Results

The analysis of interview data in this qualitative study yielded a total of 105 initial meaning units or significant statements related to overcoming organizational trauma in the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad. Through iterative coding, thematic refinement, and conceptual synthesis, these raw statements were distilled into 59 core concepts. These concepts represent the participants' perceptions, lived experiences, and expert insights regarding the psychological, structural, procedural, and cultural dimensions necessary for addressing and mitigating organizational trauma. The resulting themes reflect both individual-level interventions and broader organizational strategies aimed at fostering psychological safety, professional support, inclusive participation, and infrastructural improvement within the academic setting.

Table 1

Sample of Primary Concepts for Overcoming Organizational Trauma in the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Baghdad, Iraq

Open Codes	Open Codes
Transparency	Effective communication
Staff support	Justice and fairness
Accountability	Conflict management
Decision-making	Problem solving
Emotional intelligence	360-degree evaluation
Individual feedback	Employee surveys
Process simplification	Reducing bureaucracy
Increased flexibility	Delegation of authority
Proper budgeting	Recruitment of qualified staff
Provision of facilities and tools	Educational programs
Research development support	Career advancement
Individual and group counseling	Stress management workshops
Resilience-building programs	Reducing social stigma
Mental health awareness	Creating a supportive environment
Flexible working hours	Medical leave
Wellness programs	Cultural sensitivity training
Promoting mutual respect	Ensuring equal opportunities
Encouraging dialogue	Active listening
Respect for differences	Policy and procedure review
Promoting new values	Behavioral role modeling
Acquisition of new hardware/software	Internet improvement
Bandwidth enhancement	Training workshops
Online courses	Technology use guides

Formation of tech support teams	Emergency aid services
Timely problem resolution	Proper lighting
Air conditioning	Noise reduction
Ergonomic design	Safety inspections
Hazard elimination	Safety training
Garden creation	Tree planting
Outdoor space design	

As demonstrated in Table 1, the findings from the semi-structured interviews resulted in 59 refined conceptual elements that participants identified as vital for overcoming organizational trauma in the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad. These elements span a wide range of organizational practices, including structural reforms (such as reducing bureaucracy and enhancing flexibility), human resource strategies (like recruiting qualified staff and supporting professional growth), psychological and social interventions (including resilience-building programs, counseling, and mental health education), and environmental improvements (such as ergonomic design and noise reduction). Moreover, the data highlight the importance of cultural and communicative components—transparency, mutual respect, active listening, and inclusive dialogue—as well as technological and infrastructural enhancements, including upgraded internet bandwidth and accessible tech support. This comprehensive list underscores the multifaceted nature of organizational trauma and illustrates the breadth of systemic change required to foster recovery and resilience in academic institutions.

Table 2

Primary Conceptual Themes, Secondary Components, and First-Order Codes for Overcoming Organizational Trauma in the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Baghdad

Main Concept	Second-Order Concepts (Components)	First-Order Codes (Statements)
Overcoming Managerial Trauma	Ethical and Behavioral Principles at Work	Transparency, Effective communication, Staff support, Justice and fairness, Accountability
	Leadership and Management Skill Training	Conflict management, Decision-making, Problem solving, Emotional intelligence
	Feedback Systems	360-degree evaluation, Individual feedback, Employee surveys
Overcoming Structural Trauma	Organizational Restructuring	Process simplification, Reducing bureaucracy, Increased flexibility, Delegation of authority
	Resource Allocation	Proper budgeting, Recruitment of qualified staff, Provision of facilities and tools
	Human Resource Development	Educational programs, Research development support, Career advancement
Overcoming Psychological Trauma	Psychological Services	Individual and group counseling, Stress management workshops, Resilience-building programs
	Mental Health Promotion	Reducing social stigma, Mental health awareness, Creating a supportive environment
	Work–Life Balance	Flexible working hours, Medical leave, Wellness programs
Overcoming Cultural Trauma	Promoting Diversity and Inclusion	Cultural sensitivity training, Promoting mutual respect, Ensuring equal opportunities
	Safe Expression Environment	Encouraging dialogue, Active listening, Respect for differences
	Organizational Norms Change	Policy and procedure review, Promoting new values, Behavioral role modeling
Overcoming Technological Trauma	Technological Infrastructure Enhancement	Acquisition of new hardware/software, Internet improvement, Bandwidth enhancement
	Technology Training	Training workshops, Online courses, Technology use guides
	Technical Support	Formation of tech support teams, Emergency aid services, Timely problem resolution
Overcoming Environmental Trauma	Physical Space Improvement	Proper lighting, Air conditioning, Ergonomic design
	Workplace Safety Enhancement	Safety inspections, Hazard elimination, Safety training
	Green Space Development	Garden creation, Tree planting, Outdoor space design

Table 2 presents a structured overview of the six main categories of organizational trauma identified in the study, each of which was broken down into second-order components and associated with a cluster of specific first-order codes derived from the qualitative interviews. The concept of overcoming managerial trauma encompasses elements such as establishing ethical workplace behavior, equipping leaders with essential conflict resolution and emotional intelligence skills, and implementing structured feedback systems. Overcoming structural trauma emphasizes organizational reforms through process simplification, strategic resource allocation, and workforce development. The domain of psychological trauma reflects the need for accessible psychological services, mental health promotion, and initiatives supporting work–life balance. In terms of cultural trauma, efforts include fostering diversity and inclusion, creating safe spaces for dialogue, and shifting institutional norms through policy revision and role modeling. The category of technological trauma addresses the need to upgrade infrastructure, provide digital literacy training, and offer continuous technical support. Finally, overcoming environmental trauma highlights the importance of ergonomic workspaces, enhanced safety measures, and green space integration. These categories and their detailed subcomponents provide a comprehensive and systemic roadmap for addressing trauma in higher education institutions through multidimensional and context-specific strategies.

Figure 1

Final Model of the Study
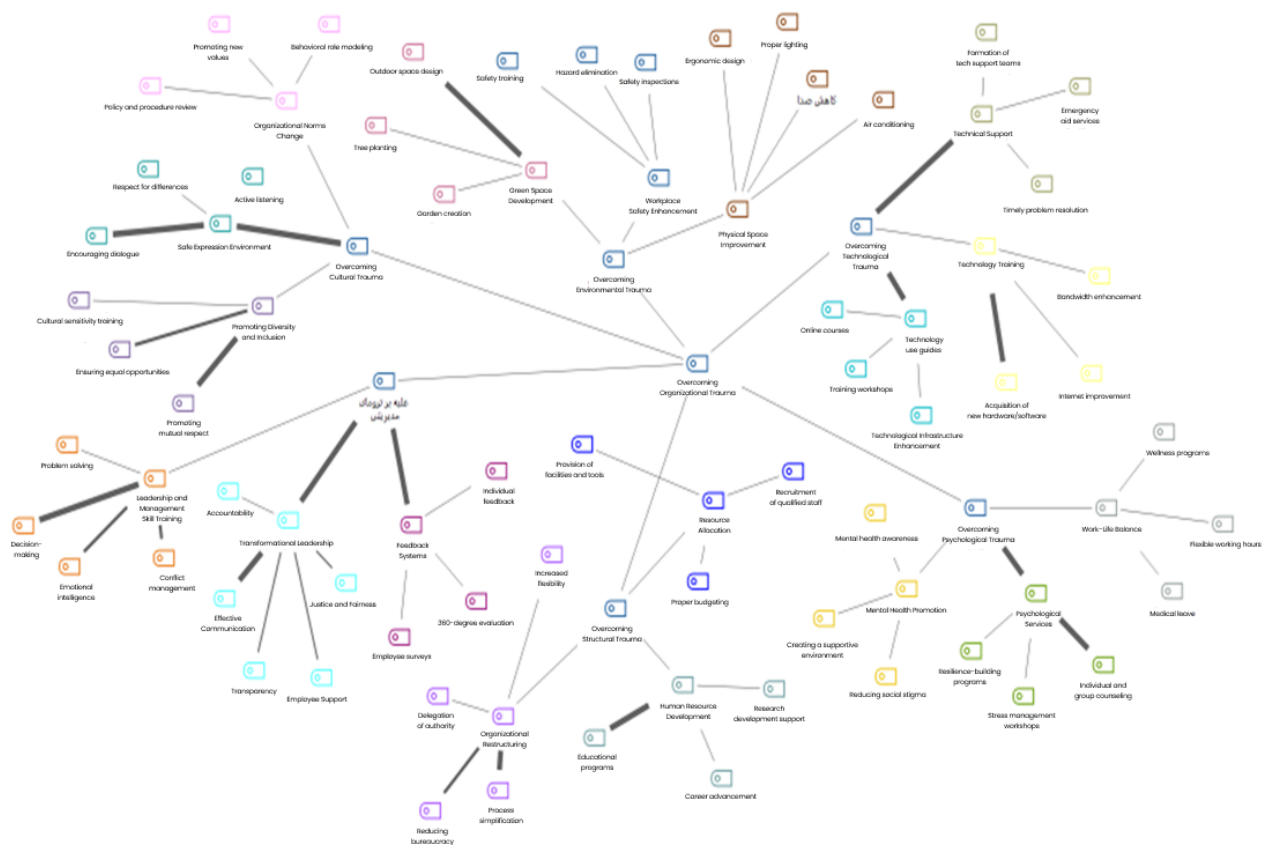
4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify the dimensions and components necessary for overcoming organizational trauma within the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad. The findings of the qualitative data analysis, using Colaizzi's phenomenological method, yielded six major conceptual dimensions: overcoming managerial trauma, structural trauma, psychological trauma, cultural trauma, technological trauma, and environmental trauma. These categories were further broken down into secondary components and first-order codes, representing actionable strategies perceived as essential by faculty members for mitigating trauma. The emerging framework underscores the

complex and multidimensional nature of organizational trauma and highlights the need for integrated, systemic approaches to healing in post-conflict academic institutions.

The results demonstrate that managerial trauma is perceived as one of the most significant contributors to organizational dysfunction. Components such as ethical leadership, emotional intelligence, accountability, transparency, and structured feedback systems were repeatedly emphasized by participants. These findings strongly align with prior research suggesting that toxic or incompetent leadership contributes substantially to the development and reinforcement of trauma in organizations (Rahmani & Ghanbari, 2024; Zare & Sepahvand, 2019). Research conducted by Amirian et al. (2023) also supports this, emphasizing that ethical leadership can serve as a powerful mediator in reducing social idleness and organizational inertia, which are often consequences of prolonged trauma (Amirian et al., 2023). Similarly, Moezinejad et al. (2023) highlight the moderating role of emotional intelligence in reducing organizational cynicism, indicating that emotionally aware leaders are better equipped to identify and address the emotional consequences of organizational stress (Moezinejad et al., 2023).

The dimension of structural trauma in this study reflects concerns related to bureaucracy, rigidity, lack of flexibility, and poor resource management. Faculty members emphasized the importance of organizational restructuring, simplification of administrative processes, and adequate budget allocation as crucial steps for healing. This dimension corresponds with findings by Ghafouri et al. (2022), who argue that the inability of educational institutions to adapt structurally to changing needs significantly exacerbates trauma, particularly among teaching staff (Ghafouri et al., 2022). Doulati and Diehim Pour (2017) also suggest that structural inefficiencies, especially in public and military institutions, lead to elevated turnover rates and emotional burnout, both markers of chronic organizational trauma (Doulati & Diehim Pour, 2017).

Psychological trauma was another prominent dimension, where participants cited the need for mental health services, counseling, and resilience-building programs. These findings echo prior research confirming the psychological toll of organizational trauma and the necessity for emotional recovery infrastructure. Mahdi et al. (2021) demonstrated that the mental health of employees is significantly affected by trauma, especially when compounded by low levels of psychological resilience (Mahdi et al., 2021). Moreover,

Ebrahimi et al. (2019) showed a clear relationship between trauma and the emergence of organizational silence and cynicism, symptoms that hinder open communication and healing (Ebrahimi et al., 2019). In the academic setting, where emotional labor is often invisible yet constant, the absence of supportive psychological services creates a void that perpetuates feelings of helplessness and disengagement.

Cultural trauma emerged as a fourth key dimension, with a strong emphasis on diversity, inclusion, respectful dialogue, and revision of institutional norms. Participants emphasized the importance of creating psychologically safe spaces where differences are respected and individuals can express concerns without fear. These themes are supported by Vivian and Hormann's (2013) theory of organizational healing, which identifies open dialogue and cultural renewal as essential for recovery (Hormann & Vivian, 2013; Vivian & Hormann, 2013). In line with this, Shahbakhsh and Nasti Zai (2023) show that suppressed grief and envy—often caused by a lack of cultural safety—contribute significantly to social burnout, especially in academic communities (Shahbakhsh & Nasti Zai, 2023). Steinkamp (2014) also highlights that institutions often maintain a "culture of silence," which hinders acknowledgment of trauma and delays healing (Steinkamp, 2014).

Technological and environmental traumas, though often overlooked in trauma literature, were strongly present in the narratives of faculty members. Poor internet access, lack of technical support, outdated tools, inadequate lighting, poor ventilation, and unsafe working conditions were repeatedly mentioned as triggers of chronic stress. These findings support the observations made by Koulivand and Sarlak (2016), who found that insufficient infrastructure in hospitals and public institutions not only hampers performance but also perpetuates trauma by exacerbating feelings of neglect and frustration among staff (Koulivand & Sarlak, 2016). Similarly, Faiz et al. (2019) reported that physical discomfort and lack of tools in healthcare settings diminished job performance and emotional well-being (Faiz et al., 2019). These parallels underline the fact that trauma is not only a psychological construct but also a material one, rooted in the physical and technological context of the organization.

Overall, the findings suggest that the trauma experienced by faculty members at the University of Baghdad's Faculty of Fine Arts is systemic and interconnected. It stems not from isolated events but from a chronic accumulation of managerial negligence, structural dysfunction, cultural suppression, and environmental degradation. This aligns

with Zarei and Tavakoli Benizi's (2017) assertion that trauma in organizations is multifaceted and requires equally multifaceted responses (Zarei & Tavakoli Benizi, 2017). The consistency between participants' insights and prior research from both regional and international sources validates the comprehensiveness of the conceptual framework developed in this study. In particular, the study affirms that recovery from trauma requires more than psychological interventions—it demands systemic transformation rooted in ethical leadership, participatory decision-making, environmental upgrades, and cultural renewal.

This study was qualitative and context-specific, focusing solely on the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad. While the findings offer in-depth insight into the experience of organizational trauma in a post-conflict academic setting, they are not necessarily generalizable to all faculties, universities, or organizational cultures. The relatively small sample size of 12 participants, though appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, limits the breadth of perspectives captured. Furthermore, cultural and political sensitivities may have influenced the openness of some participants, potentially affecting the full disclosure of traumatic experiences. The use of semi-structured interviews also means that some aspects of trauma, particularly unconscious or unarticulated responses, may not have been captured in full.

Future studies should consider expanding the scope of analysis to include multiple faculties or universities across Iraq or other post-conflict regions, allowing for comparative analysis and broader validation of the proposed framework. Longitudinal research could explore how interventions designed from this model impact trauma recovery over time. In addition, incorporating quantitative tools alongside qualitative methods would allow for statistical testing of the relationships among identified trauma dimensions. Another promising direction is the study of student perspectives on institutional trauma, especially in fields like the arts, where emotional and cultural engagement are integral to education. Finally, exploring the role of national policies and higher education governance in either perpetuating or mitigating trauma could yield valuable macro-level insights.

Institutional leaders in higher education, particularly in fragile contexts, must adopt a trauma-informed approach to governance and policy-making. This involves creating platforms for open dialogue, offering psychological and emotional support services, and ensuring ethical, transparent leadership. Investments should also be made in modernizing technological infrastructure and enhancing physical workspaces to reduce daily stressors. Training programs for academic and administrative leaders on emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and inclusive management are essential. Finally, organizational healing should be embedded in institutional strategy through regular feedback mechanisms, participatory planning, and the promotion of shared values that foster safety, dignity, and belonging.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards (Ethics Code: IR.IAU.R.REC.1404.009).

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