

Leeds Institute for  
Teaching Excellence



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

**UNDERGRADUATE RESILIENCE  
RESEARCH PROJECT**  
Executive Summary

Lydia Bleasdale  
Sarah Humphreys



## Introduction

This report considers the findings of a year-long research project into the 'resilience' of undergraduate students at the University of Leeds (UK). Focused upon second-year undergraduates in six disciplines (Biological Sciences, Geography, Law, Mechanical Engineering, Medicine, and Music), the project sought to understand more about existing levels of student resilience, and how their resilience might be supported within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). To this end, 35 members of staff and 55 students were interviewed, alongside 185 students completing a survey designed to measure existing levels of resilience.

Premised on the basis that resilience is a contextual, fluid concept (with the potential to be both supported and undermined by factors internal and external to the individual), this research concludes that there are opportunities for students themselves, and for the HEIs of which they are a part, to further support resilience, particularly through recognition of the importance of relationships, communities, and opportunities for failure.

There is a great deal that universities can do to support and even enhance the resilience of their students, not only during their time at university, but also post-graduation, particularly if staff involved with student education in its broadest sense recognise the importance of building relationships with the student cohort. Building and supporting the resilience of students ought not to be regarded as something which is achieved through sending students to one-off, stand-alone workshops: rather, doing so requires a whole institutional approach, for which both staff and students have responsibility.

## Key findings

- Existing levels of self-perceived resilience among the sample – measured using the Connor-Davidson 10-point resilience scale – were in line with those expected of undergraduate students. International and EU students were more likely to have higher levels of resilience than Home students, while students who declared a disability were more likely to have lower levels of resilience than those who reported having no disability.
- The relationships students hold with each other, with staff, and with family can be particularly critical in helping those students to feel resilient in the face of challenges, with the transition into university proving to be an especially challenging period.
- The students were not a homogenous group with identical perspectives on issues – rather, there were some similarities and some discipline-specific differences between them. Similarities between students of different disciplines included: concerns about the prospect of failure (whether academic or otherwise), with most only having experienced failures which could be 'navigated around;' challenges in adapting to both the social and academic aspects of university life; concerns about the assessment of group work; concerns about the personal-tutoring model; the way in which they defined 'resilience;' their understanding of self-care; and what they considered personal success to 'look' like. Differences between the cohorts included:

the extent to which (and how) they compared themselves to, or competed with, fellow students; how (if at all) they structured their time away from academic matters; and their perception of academic success.

- Student and staff interviewees highlighted several challenges associated with the transition into university, with many students seemingly unprepared for the range of challenges to which they would need to adapt. Student interviewees were also typically not engaged in structured leisure activities which could help to support their resilience and / or were unclear about the link between self-care and their overall feelings of resilience.
- Student interviewees were not necessarily immediately aware of terms 'snowflake generation' and 'trigger warnings,' which are commonly associated with the student population in popular discourse. Student interviewees typically held modest views on both phrases and their implications. For most, 'snowflake generation' was an unfair generalisation about students, while 'trigger warnings' (for academic classes containing potentially sensitive matters) were generally viewed as being of use only in serving to warn students about particular types of content. Students were typically keen to point out that it was necessary for certain topics to be studied at university, especially as part of courses such as Law and Medicine.
- Staff interviewees referenced fees as a cause of particular issues (such as student anxiety, student expectations, and student attainment), to a far greater extent than student interviewees did. When student interviewees did do so, it was not in connection with assertions of (objectively excessive) entitlement to academic (and broader) support.

## Recommendations

- In light of the importance of relationships to the resilience of individuals, combined with the difficulties many students experienced in their transition into, and through, their first year of university, universities should give particularly close consideration to their personal-tutoring model(s), and the regularity of meetings between tutors and their personal tutees. Utilising group sessions, individual sessions, and online support, alongside investment in ongoing training for tutors, is particularly critical. HEIs should also consider the extent to which university accommodation, communal spaces, office spaces, student societies, and staff-student events foster and support such relationships (including through the development of equality, diversity and inclusion policies for societies, where these do not already exist).
- The differences between the students across the six disciplines examined here highlights the importance of staff in those areas understanding the particular ways in which their students typically present and operate. Such stored knowledge can be preserved through measures designed, at an institutional level, to appropriately reward and promote student education services staff in particular.
- Students (and many staff) typically understood 'resilience' to involve 'coping' or 'persevering' in the face of challenges or difficulties, a definition which neglects the importance

of reflection, seeking support, and considering whether continuing to pursue the objective or goal in question is the right course of action for that individual. Furthermore, student interviewees often associated support for resilience as involving support for mental health, which suggests an element of conflation of what are two interrelated, but not synonymous, matters. It is suggested that universities develop a working definition of the term 'resilience,' in order to take ownership of the messages they wish students to receive when they hear it within the university context.

- In light of issues identified around student perceptions of (and attitudes towards) failure, universities could usefully seek to influence those perceptions and attitudes through resources dedicated to discussions of failure and setbacks. It is proposed that these take the form of online materials, utilising staff and alumni as role models for how to approach setbacks and failure. Conversely, universities should consider what messages they wish students to receive about academic and personal success, and how those messages are currently conveyed (whether overtly or otherwise).
- All students should be explicitly encouraged (through a combination of e.g. self-care resources and personal tutee

meetings focused upon wellbeing) to take ownership of their resilience through engagement with appropriate self-care techniques. However, individuals will be on a 'spectrum' of abilities to navigate through challenges (and may well find themselves at different points on that spectrum during different stages of their time at university). Universities must also recognise that not every student will possess the same internal and external resources to independently navigate their way through such challenges at all times. Universities must therefore continue to allocate appropriate levels of funding to central support structures (such as counselling services and mental-health teams), in order to ensure all students are best-placed to navigate such challenges.

- The current approach to conveying what feedback is, the variety of ways in which it is given, and what to do with it, is not working: students continue to see feedback as something provided in writing on a formal assessment. Further research into how such messages might be better communicated is required, alongside further research into whether the integration of a growth mindset approach to feedback within higher education would be desirable and feasible.

In considering how best to prepare graduates to emerge into an uncertain world, universities should reflect upon the question 'what needs to be difficult and why?' when considering the educational and broader experiences students should have during their time as an undergraduate. To be clear, this does not mean removing all challenges from the university experience – university should be a developmental challenge on both an academic and a personal level – but rather considering whether any existing challenges are unnecessary and whether some challenges need to be created within the university environment.