UNDERGRADUATE RESILIENCE RESEARCH PROJECT
Project Report

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Executive summary

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 the 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 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, and when considering the educational and broader experiences students should have during their time as undergraduates, universities should reflect upon the question ‘what needs to be difficult and why?’. 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.
1. Introduction

The aim of the research discussed in this report was to establish which educational and/or student support factors might support or hinder students as far as their resilience was concerned, alongside considering broader matters such as how the term ‘resilience’ is understood by staff and students, and how students interpret other phrases (such as ‘snowflake generation’) commonly used in discussions about undergraduates. In seeking to do so, a year-long research project funded by the Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence (LITE) examined second year undergraduate student resilience across six sites within the University of Leeds (Law, Music, Biological Sciences, Medicine, Mechanical Engineering, Geography).

The term ‘resilience’ is increasingly used in a range of contexts, including in connection to individuals, schools, communities, cities and the environment. It is seemingly adopted as shorthand for ‘bouncing back,’ ‘adapting,’ or ‘withstanding pressure’ and is frequently employed to describe a set of attitudes and behaviours a number of individuals and institutions would like themselves and others to be able to demonstrate. The concept is, at first glance, an attractive one. If individuals were ‘more resilient’ then they would better cope with adverse and unexpected events which occur in their lives; young people facing major academic adversity would have improved outcomes (Martin, 2013), patients would recover better from health interventions (Chan et al, 2006), and professionals in demanding roles would withstand the stresses of their job more (e.g. social workers and nurses (Grant and Kinman, 2013; McAllister and McKinnon, 2009)). There is, however, no universally agreed definition of this phrase which is so commonly used, which makes the ubiquitous use of the term all the more fascinating, as well as potentially problematic. If resilience is a desirable trait, and if individuals and communities are being encouraged to improve their resilience, then it is important to understand what it is intended to mean, particularly when used in describing what they ought to ‘be like’.

Despite several decades of resilience research, there is no consensus on what ‘resilience’ is, or indeed the factors which affect the resilience of an individual. It is not the intention of the authors to provide an extensive review of the resilience literature here, but it is important to highlight some of the themes from resilience research which have influenced the project, and have shaped the authors’ approach to researching resilience in the undergraduate population at the University of Leeds.

Santos (2012), in his review of literature concerning resilience, identifies some studies which appear to characterise resilience as an individual trait, citing Higgins (1994), who described resilience as the ‘process of self-righting or growth’ and Wolins (1993), who defined resiliency as the ‘capacity to bounce back, to withstand hardship, and to repair yourself.’ However, resilience is now largely understood as a more complex characteristic, related to aspects of the individual but also to the environment they are in. McAllister and McKinnon (2009) summarise a range of studies from the 1980s and 1990s which examine the responses of young people to extreme stress and adversity. These studies show that factors external to the individual are important in aiding their ability to cope with stressful situations; ‘protective’ factors such as social connections and positive role models improve outcomes whereas converse factors are potentially deleterious to wellbeing. This interpretation of resilience sees it as something which is malleable and open to influence by those ‘internal’ and ‘external’ factors, such as self-care strategies, motivations, optimism, relationships, and access to formal and informal support systems. Stevenson (2016) discusses these concepts in the context of higher education, summarising internal resources / characteristics (cognitive factors and competencies) and external factors (family, community) which affect resilience. She warns against a purely personal understanding of resilience, stating ‘locating change only WITHIN students is unacceptable,’ highlighting instead the ecological model where resilience depends on many factors which influence the individual, including relations with family, their local community and wider society.

As well as resulting from a combination of internal traits and external influences, resilience is also widely regarded as variable across time and situation. Aburn et al (2016) identify common themes underpinning definitions of resilience across a range of empirical studies. As well as ideas of ‘bouncing back’ and adaptation and adjustment, they identify the concept of resilience as a contextual and dynamic process as common across the literature. An individual’s resilience may differ in different settings, for example their ability to cope with adversity at work may contrast with their response to personal setbacks, or they may become more or less resilient over time across all aspects of their lives. The dynamic nature of resilience may be understood as a response (or series of responses over time), to external events and to external protective factors (or lack thereof), rather than simply as a strand of personal development. Windle (2010) summarises: ‘Resilience is the process of effectively negotiating, adapting to, or managing significant sources of stress or trauma. Assets and resources within the individual, their life and environment facilitate this capacity for adaptation and ‘bouncing back’ in the face of adversity. Across the life course, the experience of resilience will vary.’

For the purposes of this report, resilience was given the more modern, broad definition which extends beyond the individual student. Rather than the individual being solely responsible for their own levels of resilience, and rather than resilience being viewed as something which is innate (‘you either have it, or you do not’), in this context resilience is seen as an umbrella term covering behaviours, decisions and strategies which are contextual.

1 The research was conducted between September 2016 and September 2017 and had approval from the ESSL Ethics Committee (reference AREA15-165).
If resilience is viewed as a combination of dynamic internal and external factors then universities can influence the levels of resilience amongst their students. An institution will ‘get what they get,’ because students will arrive with a level of resilience which has been shaped by their past. Universities can, however, guide students to develop internal factors supportive of resilience and to recognise, understand and utilise external resources which will support their resilience during, and after, university. While it is not possible for a university to influence every aspect of a student’s life which might affect their resilience at a particular point of time (nor should it), it is possible for universities to consider whether the educational and student support context in which students are operating during their time there supports or hinders their resilience. University is a particularly stressful time due to multiple, contemporaneous changes.

Students coming into higher education face a range of challenges including new living arrangements, financial pressures, formation of new social networks, and academic pressures, which may have deleterious effects on their mental health (Pidgeon et al, 2014). While this has long been the case, the number of students entering higher education has increased significantly over recent decades; whereas only 19% of young people went to university in 1990, in 2013 this had increased to almost 40% (UK Government White Paper, 2016). The Governmental drive to widen participation means that not only are universities working with more students, they are also working with a more diverse population; individuals are arriving with different prior experiences, a wider variety of support needs, and varying levels of social support which may impact upon their ability to cope with the challenges of being at university. Just as importantly, a university degree alone is not necessarily regarded as the clear route towards ‘good’ jobs and higher earnings it once was, adding (alongside an education system focused heavily upon assessment from an extremely early age) to the sense of pressure to excel that young people and their parents / carers feel. Such contextual factors cannot be ignored when seeking to understand more about the ability of young people entering universities to manage the challenges they face. Higher education institutions need to consider how to best support all of their students so they may be successful, however success is defined, and it seems the promotion of resilience as a characteristic to support this will only increase.

In optimal conditions, university graduates would emerge as able to withstand periods of pressure; to recognise (through reflection, and in a timely manner) the challenges of a particular situation, and to take appropriate action; as well as to recognise the external and internal factors (including relationships and self-care strategies) which act as protective factors as far as their resilience is concerned. Graduates with such attributes are more likely to be able to protect their own resilience, and to support that of others when they are in a position to do so (for example, as managers of the future). In an era of political and economic uncertainty, a resilient graduate may be one who can not only cope with, but perhaps influence, change in society. In considering how best to prepare graduates to emerge into an uncertain world with those attributes, 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 more personal level – but rather considering whether any existing challenges are unnecessary (e.g. university processes); whether some challenges might require additional support to be attached to them, due to the changing nature of the student body (e.g. preparation for the transition into the workplace); or whether new challenges need to be created within the university environment (e.g. activities to prepare students for failure).

Finally, alongside understanding what resilience is and how it ought to assist students, it is also important to understand that the authors do not consider it to be synonymous with wellbeing and / or mental health (a conflation that is not uncommon in popular discourses about resilience). Extreme caution must be exercised when discussing low resilience, anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns within the same breath: simply suggesting that someone experiencing a mental health condition is ‘low in resilience’ is inaccurate and undermines the seriousness of such conditions; someone with a long-term mental health condition may have developed high levels of resilience to cope with this; equally a person may be mentally well but low in resilience. Additionally, interchanging ‘mental health’ with ‘resilience’ has the potential to be confusing for an individual with concerns in either area and offers little tangible guidance as to appropriate actions they might take in their individual circumstances. It also neglects the broader contextual matters which might contribute to that person’s condition, offering a purely individualistic ‘responsibilisation’ approach to an issue which could well have several underlying causes.

1.1 About the report

Section 2 considers the methodological approaches adopted within the report, providing an overview of the three stages of data collection and the methodological limitations of the study.

Section 3 considers information which emerged from interviews with staff. These interviews were designed to gain a sense of the ‘educational landscape’ for undergraduate students within each site, in order for the researchers to understand more about what students might encounter during their programme, challenges they were perceived as facing by staff, the requirements of their programme of study, and what the relationship between students and others within the University was. Staff were also asked to reflect upon how they would define resilience, and how they considered it could be better supported at university level. In total, 35 staff were interviewed across the six sites.

Section 4 considers the internal and external resilience factors which students were asked about at interview, alongside other themes...
which emerged from those interviews. It is anticipated that the questions students were asked about their experiences at university will be of interest and use not only to those concerned with their resilience, but also to those with a broader interest in the student experience, for example the transition students experience between school and university. In total, 55 students were interviewed across the six sites.

Section 5 explores the data which emerged from the survey conducted with the students. The authors were assisted by a PhD student from the School of Law, Ms. Longjie Lu, in considering whether there were any correlations between the resilience scores of individual students, and their background or characteristics (e.g. gender, previous educational experience, caring responsibilities).

Section 6 contains recommendations which focus upon the University of Leeds, but which ought to be of broader relevance and interest to all higher education institutions.

1.2 About the authors

Lydia Bleasdale is an Associate Professor of Law and Director of Community Engagement at the School of Law, University of Leeds. During the 2016-17 academic year she was seconded to LITE on a 0.8FTE basis to be the Principal Investigator (PI) on this project.

Sarah Humphreys is the School of Law’s Clinics Co-ordinator who came to the University of Leeds from an adult education background, working with learners from non-traditional backgrounds. Sarah is Chair of the School of Law’s Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee, and a member of the Faculty Equality and Inclusion Committee. In the 2016-17 academic year she was seconded to LITE on a 0.2FTE basis as a Co-Investigator on this project.

Both authors are members of the Centre for Innovation and Research in Legal Education (CIRLE), within the School of Law. The authors would like to thank a number of people for their support with this research. They are extremely grateful to LITE and its team for providing them with the resources and support to undertake this research project, and particularly to Rafe Hallett (LITE’s Director) for his guidance throughout. They would also like to thank colleagues in the School of Law for supporting them in undertaking this secondment, not least for arranging to cover all of Lydia’s teaching for an academic year. The authors are very grateful to the Project Sounding Board (Martha Clowes; Jane Harris; Marika Hildebrandova; Tess Hornsby Smith; Imogen Jones; Terence Kee; Andrea Kerslake; Andrew Mearman; Aradhna Tugnait; and Christopher Warrington), whose members voluntarily provided feedback and advice throughout the project, and to the University of Leeds Student Counselling Centre staff who helped to identify additional areas to explore through both the surveys and the student interviews.

Most importantly, the authors give heartfelt thanks to all the staff and students of the University of Leeds who contributed to the research, through the completion of surveys and participation in one-to-one interviews. We are particularly grateful to the students who entrusted us with their stories and experiences.
2. Methodology

The three stages of data collection, along with the limitations to be borne in mind when considering the findings, are discussed below.

2.1 Phase one (staff interviews)

The first set of data collected came through interviews with staff members within each site, with those staff being asked to take part on the basis of their roles within the School (e.g. responsibility for elements of a School strategy, responsibility for providing student support, or another role of interest within the programme) and / or on the basis of a recommendation by a ‘gatekeeper’ within the site. In all except one site, there were some staff who did not respond to the invitation to be interviewed. While the number of staff interviewed did provide the researchers with an opportunity to gain the required overview of the programmes in question, the possibility of participant bias exists. Staff may have self-selected into the study on the basis of a particular interest in the areas raised by the interview, for example, and it should be noted that most interviewees were in a role where they typically do think about education and / or student support matters in some detail. The potential therefore exists that the researchers gained a ‘skewed’ view of how students – and their experiences – are viewed within each research site from a staff perspective.

The interview questions (provided within Appendix A), were designed to provide the researchers with an understanding of what sorts of experiences students might have within that particular site (including of student support, assessment, feedback, and co-curricular activities).\(^2\) Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were transcribed, once the staff withdrawal period had ended. The interviews were semi-structured and were conducted by either the PI or the Co-I: allowing for follow-up questions can increase the amount of information available to the researchers, but can also skew the results of the sample due to that information which is followed up on, versus that information which is not.

Interviewees were given numerous opportunities to withdraw from the study, should they wish to, which nobody across any of the sites did, and all interviewees were assured of the anonymity with which their data was to be treated. Nevertheless, there is a possibility that some interviewees were not as candid as they might have been had their views not have been recorded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Staff interviewed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biological Sciences</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>35</strong></td>
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2.2 Phase two (student surveys)

Stage two of the data collection was an online survey of second year undergraduate students within each site.

A number of different scales have been used in resilience studies. In some studies one scale has been used; others have combined scales (e.g. Pidgeon et al, 2014), and the choice of scale indicates something about what the author(s) perceives ‘resilience’ as being. Some scales, such as the Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al, 2008), ask participants how they recover from difficult times e.g. ‘It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event.’ Others measure factors which may be considered to impact upon resilience – sometimes referred to as ‘resilience resources’ – such as the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al, 1988), which asks about family, friends and a significant other. An alternative approach is to ask about perceived results of a lack of resilience, for example the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (Pidgeon et al, 2014). Several scales have been developed to measure personal characteristics or protective factors which may promote coping strategies or resilience, for example the Wagnild and Young Resilience Scale (1987) asks participants to rate themselves

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\(^2\) Within the University of Leeds, ‘co-curricular activities’ refer to any activities taking place outside the curriculum.
against statements such as ‘I am determined’ and ‘I keep interested in things;’ and the Ego Resilience Scale (Block and Kremen, 1996) uses statements such as ‘I enjoy dealing with new and unusual situations’ and ‘I am regarded as a very energetic person.’ While there are many varieties of tools to measure resilience, not all of these tools have been tested on a large sample representative of the population as a whole, and some were specifically designed with regards to a discrete section of the population (e.g. the Multidimensional Adolescent Functioning Scale, Wardenaar et al, 2013). The Connor-Davidson resilience scale (2003) adopted for the purposes of this research has been used on an international basis across many sections of society (e.g. both older and younger members of the population). It has consistently been regarded as a reliable survey tool by which to measure the self-perceived resilience of participants in relation to situations of stress, but it must be noted it is a scale based upon self-perception (as opposed to there being an objective standard of measurement). Participants are also only asked to reflect upon the past month when responding to the situations described within the survey, so the responses cannot be taken as indicative of a more generalised period of time.

The survey students were issued with consisted of two parts: the first contained ten questions about how respondents perceived themselves as ‘bouncing back’ and adapting in situations of stress, using the Connor-Davidson 10-point resilience scale. This cannot be reproduced in full due to licensing restrictions, but participants were asked to respond to ten statements, some of which are detailed further in Section 5. In addition to responding to those ten statements, students were asked seven background questions: their gender; their age; their entry route into university (‘standard’ entry, or coming through e.g. a Foundation degree; Access to Leeds); what they were primarily doing prior to being at university; whether they had a disability; whether they had any caring responsibilities; and whether they were a Home, EU or International student.

Participants for the survey were selected on the basis of their year and programme of study. In Law and Medicine students were all on the same programme, whereas in the other sites students from across several programmes were sampled (e.g. in the Mechanical Engineering site students were either on an undergraduate programme or one with an integrated Masters; in the Music site students were either on the BA programme or the BMus programme, which focuses more upon the performance element of Music). Students were invited to take part in the survey by email (initially from the PI, with a final call for participants being issued by a gatekeeper within each site), having had an in-person announcement from the PI (within a lecture on a compulsory module). As far as the representativeness of the survey results specifically is concerned, it should be noted that those completing the survey represented a cross-section of the student body. Of the 185 students who completed the survey, 120 were female; 160 were aged between 18-21; 153 were Home students; 143 were primarily completing A-levels prior to their entry to university; 131 entered university via a non-access route; 171 did not identify themselves as being carers; and 165 declared that they did not have a disability. The full data sets for each research site are available in Appendices C to H.

The survey was disseminated towards the end of semester one, which could affect the self-perceived resilience of the participants. There is an anecdotal belief that this period of the term can be a ‘low’ point for students from a wellbeing perspective, which could mean some of the Connor-Davidson 10-point resilience scale statements (such as ‘I think of myself as a strong person when dealing with life's challenges and difficulties’) might be answered differently to how they would be at other points in the academic calendar. However, it is worth noting that there are many other potential points of difficulty for students throughout the academic year, meaning there is no optimal time to survey students on this subject.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Students contacted</th>
<th>Students completed</th>
<th>% Available participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biological Sciences</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>951</strong></td>
<td><strong>185</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3 Phase three (student interviews)

Stage three of the data collection consisted of interviews with students who had completed the online survey and expressed a willingness to be contacted again by email, with a view to being interviewed in exchange for a £10 Amazon voucher. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were transcribed, once the student withdrawal period had ended. No students who took part in the interviews withdrew their data. The questions students were typically asked are contained within Appendix B: unlike with the staff interviews, through which the intention was to gain a broad overview of the student experience, students were generally each asked as many of these questions as possible. This was because the student interviews had a different purpose to the staff interviews – here, the focus was upon each individual’s experiences, and conducting an ‘audit’ of the resilience-supporting or reducing opportunities within those experiences. The questions were primarily selected on the basis of prior research concerning factors which can support or undermine the resilience of individuals, with some additional questions (including about the ‘snowflake generation’ and trigger warnings) being included to gain an insight into students’ views on other topics of current interest. Section 4 provides insight into the theoretical basis on which these questions were asked.

Across all of the research sites an attempt was made to interview as representative a sample of students as possible. Priority was given to recruiting student interviewees who would form a representative sample of their programme. For example, more male than female students were deliberately recruited within the Mechanical Engineering site, to reflect the programme’s make up. Similarly, in the Law research site it was important to recruit interviewees who had entered the University via an alternative access route, in order to reflect the student body on that particular programme. Across the sample, students who presented for interview were typically female (36/55); were aged 18-21 (47/55); had not entered the University via an ‘alternative access’ route (38/55); were completing A-levels immediately prior to entering the University (41/55); did not declare a disability (47/55); and did not declare themselves to be carers (51/55). As with the surveys, indications from the research sites are that these students are broadly representative of their overall student body (certainly as far as the demographics are concerned).

Priority was also given to recruiting students at the lower and upper ends of the resilience scale. Survey respondents who left their contact details and scored at the lower end of the resilience scale spectrum (e.g. under 10) did not typically respond to requests for an interview. Within Biological Sciences, those interviewed tended to be towards the middle end of the scoring sample, scoring between 18-29. Within Law and Music, those who presented for interview came from a similarly limited spectrum of resilience scores (20-32 and 17-26 respectively). Within Mechanical Engineering and Geography, those who presented for interview came from across a wider range of the resilience survey scale spectrum (scoring between 18-39 and 19-37 respectively). Finally, within Medicine, those who presented for interview came from across the spectrum of resilience scores (21-40). It is notable that the lowest scores of the Medicine students who took part in the survey were 5 (the lowest seen at any site), and 19: all scores beyond that were 21+, with the highest score in any site being seen in this site (40).

Students, of course, self-selected for interview by leaving their contact details on the survey. Students who self-selected to provide those details and to take part in the interview might have done so for a variety of reasons, some of which could result in participant bias within the findings. For example, participants might have chosen to be interviewed because they considered themselves to be particularly resilient (although, it must be noted that the survey participants did not discover their resilience score); because they have experience of reflection upon their emotional wellbeing through e.g. counselling and considered the interview to be an opportunity to continue upon that ‘journey;’ or because they were interested in resilience for some other personal reason.

Finally, the same limitations of semi-structured interviews and of recorded interviews discussed within the section concerning staff interviews apply here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Number contacted</th>
<th>Interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biological Sciences</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>85</strong></td>
<td><strong>55</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Information from staff interviews

This section considers the information gained from interviews with thirty-five members of staff across the six research sites in question. The questions staff were asked can be found in Appendix A and were designed to give the researchers a picture of what students might experience during their time at the University. The questions covered a range of areas of a student’s life, including assessment, feedback, employability opportunities and student support mechanisms, for example, with not all staff being asked all of the questions: the intention was to gain an overall picture, rather than to compare the answers of staff in different roles within the School.

A number of themes / common observations emerged from those interviews, whether across all sites or only across a selection of them.

3.1 Student transitions

Multiple stages of transition into and through University were recognised by staff across numerous sites.

3.1.1 The transition into university

Staff in a number of sites (Music, Medicine, Law) referenced the ‘small fish, big pond’ issue (or equivalent), whereby students accustomed to being at or near the top of their group of peers academically now find themselves amongst students with similar (or better) academic records. This was perceived as a source of concern for some students, with the adjustment to the realisation that they would no longer be ‘at the top’ academically taking longer for some students than for others. A number of sites (Biological Sciences, Medicine, Geography) also referenced the difficulty some students experience with the shift in emphasis from being taught (at school / college) towards independent learning (at university), as well as the fact that students are more accustomed to being given clear guidance about the nature of any assessments, and how those will be marked. Students were perceived in some sites as being more uncertain of what was required of them at university, with that uncertainty being a source of anxiety.

Staff in three sites placed particular emphasis on the non-academic element of transitions into university. In Medicine, staff suggested that challenges experienced by first year students included making friends and adapting to new accommodation. Staff in Law also referred to the challenge of making friends alongside feeling overwhelmed with work, uncomfortable with the academic challenges faced, homesick, or worried that everyone else is having a good time and they are not. Mechanical Engineering staff referred to difficulties students can experience with accommodation, as well as with general transition difficulties between school and university (both in terms of the support they have access to, and in terms of the level of independent learning expected). Staff interviewees in most sites referenced support given through relationships as an aid in helping students to transition into university, with very few referencing utilising technology as one way of doing so (although, at the time of interview, Medicine were trialling an additional app to assist students with workload planning, for example).

In some sites, it was suggested that there were particular challenges associated with the transition into university for students of that discipline. In Music, for example, it was suggested that students are accustomed to having a close relationship with music teachers at school and having a real sense of belonging through those relationships. Such relationships cannot always be guaranteed within the university context where student numbers are far greater. In that same site, three interviewees talked directly about the identity many of their students have as musicians and the challenge that can pose for staff, as well as for the students themselves. For those students discovering that their musical ability now no longer places them at or near the top of the class, their identity as a musician (first or foremost, or as a key aspect of ‘who they are’), can make it particularly challenging for them to receive negative feedback (even if delivered in a constructive manner). That identity can also make the transition into university particularly complicated, it was suggested, because ‘not only are they having to settle in, they’re having to recalibrate their perceptions of themselves.’ Some students therefore require additional support which was perceived as specific to Music students, namely to change their identity if they want to or need to (e.g. from that of a performer to something else). Finally, Music students were perceived as encountering a particular challenge of having to dedicate so much free time to the subject, because music making is a huge part of who they are.

Interestingly, some of those issues perceived by interviewees as being specific to students from that site were actually recurring themes e.g. adjustment to styles and content of learning arose within Music (getting students to recognise a Music degree is about more than just playing an instrument); Biological Sciences and Medicine (getting students to appreciate that science can be more uncertain than they have been accustomed to); and in Geography (getting students to adjust from ‘facts’ and case studies to processes and skills).

3.1.2 The transition through university

The second year was perceived as a challenging year for students across a range of sites. In Music and Law, it was suggested that the level of academic support was perhaps less intensive in second year than that experienced in first year. In Law it was also noted that workload and time management are points of concern for many students, and that those who did not learn to manage their work in first year face greater problems in second year. Perceptions of certain Law modules can also be a challenge, particularly as there is a substantial compulsory element to the programme (necessitated by the requirements of the current Qualifying Law Degree framework).

In addition to academic work, Law students were also seen as trying to manage an intense range of co-curricular and employability activities, due to the desirability of a stellar CV when applying to law firms.
In the Medicine site, year two was regarded as a particularly important year for transitions: this was the time when professionalism amongst students should now be embedded, and students should largely have learned how to cope with the degree (although it was noted that later on in the course, particularly around year four, students might face some difficulties associated with the degree: that was perceived as being more a matter of their own motivation (or fatigue), rather than ability). Third-year Medical students were regarded as being more prepared for the working world, and as being more mature. That maturity was perceived as something which they develop over time, which helps with professional requirements such as reflection, and with being more open when experiencing difficulties.

More generally, Medicine students were perceived as having changing expectations of themselves over time. They were perceived as setting out with the idea of doing as well as they can, but some of them modify what that expectation means over time (e.g. they become happy to pass, rather than focusing upon attaining A and B grades throughout the time on the programme). Similarly, in Music, it was suggested that some students have a decision to make about their aspirations within their first year: when they arrive it was perceived that they generally collaborate rather than compete but the small fish / big pond issue referenced earlier can challenge their identity. That can force them to make a decision, according to staff – either they will ‘raise their game’ to pursue particularly challenging careers or pathways in Music, or they will decide they are not prepared to put the required effort in and will do something else.

3.1.3 Careers and employability transitions

Staff across all of the sites were asked about the employability support and guidance offered to students within their particular discipline. Staff in Geography and Music reflected upon the ways in which students transitioned through different ideas about future jobs or careers. In Geography, students were described as generally wanting ‘good’ jobs (reflected in pay) although a range of ambitions were identified including postgraduate studies or the charity sector. A number of interviewees seemed keen for students to consider roles where they could make a positive impact, rather than just focusing upon salaries. A range of employability activities in all levels of undergraduate modules were identified, including workshops, talks and a compulsory module in second year, with both academic and administrative time dedicated to employability support. The year in industry was reported to be beneficial, not least as students return to their final year of study with the skills and maturity to achieve highly academically (although it was also stated that it is the ‘best’ students who go into these placements). This view was echoed in the Mechanical Engineering site, where students who went on placement for a year were regarded as returning to university with a more mature outlook, and as more accustomed to dealing with uncertainty.

In Music there was no sense that students arrive with a clear idea of what they want to do post-graduation (although they all love music); rather, those students were perceived as adapting their employability / careers goals over time, as the breadth, flexibility and diversity of the programme becomes clearer (‘What they come in thinking is rarely what they come out thinking’). There was a strong sense from staff that the School offers a growing range of opportunities for students to try activities out, and that students just trying those out is perfectly acceptable. However, it was suggested some (University-wide) employability messages do not always make that clear. It was also reported that students have indicated that it is powerful to hear that not knowing what you want to do is ok.

As in other sites, in Music it was suggested that not all students are willing to engage with employability initiatives, careers talks, or alumni events (although the year in industry is popular), and that there is no ideal time to engage students with them. The term ‘employability’ was perceived as potentially alienating for students. Similarly, in Biological Sciences, employability initiatives were seen as being developmental, and were linked to interest in the discipline i.e. if students were interested in the discipline, they would engage with whatever was on offer. In-house employability initiatives were perceived as being helpful in making students feel like they have a home.

Students of Medicine and Law were perceived as being more focused upon a narrower range of careers than students in other sites were. In Law, interviewees reported that many students choosing to do a law degree had the possibility of being a lawyer in mind, although certainly not all – some are choosing law as they see it as an interesting or ‘good’ degree; others experience pressure from family or school towards certain courses. The majority wanting to be a lawyer will be thinking about being a solicitor, but a significant proportion want to be barristers. Although students will often express a preference for a career in law, interviewees felt many students had not given their future career much thought at all at the point of entry to university. It was felt that uncertainty around careers can be a source of anxiety, particularly in the second and final years when students can feel that everyone else has a plan.

Students of Medicine were perceived as tending to want to study the subject because of an altruistic sense of wanting to help others, and that this altruism (alongside wanting to be interested and engaged in their work), extended to their motivations for pursuing a medical career. Nonetheless, Medical students were regarded as transitioning in terms of employability and their interest in potential careers within that field (e.g. working within a particular branch of medicine; becoming a General Practitioner). This interest changes over time, with students typically being open-minded at the beginning of the course, according to most interviewees who reflected upon this. There was a sense of students being in a liminal period at university – not yet doctors, but not ‘just’ students.

Students are specifically supported to enter the Medical profession, not only through the academic and clinical training, but also through an emphasis upon other skills required within the profession. There is a clear sense of the characteristics a graduate of the
School ought to have, and there is a particular focus upon professionalism, ethics, values and wellbeing within the course. There is an emphasis on professionalising students from day one of year one, which was perhaps reflected in some of the language used by interviewees e.g. students and their ‘colleagues;’ in emphasising to students that professionalism is ongoing and not a coat you take on and off; and in emphasising that their signature is a powerful tool. Professionalism seemed to be about the identity students have as medical students and as future doctors. As far as becoming a doctor was concerned, it was noted that the students need to become resilient (because of the regular experience of death, for example, as well as the heavy workload and the lack of sleep); lifelong and independent learners; and not necessarily a ‘finished doctor’, but something near enough that can be finished off at later training stages. There was also some reference to the need for students to know how to take care of themselves in order to be able to take care of patients (in the context of discussing the School’s ‘Safer Medic’ scheme).

Finally, enhancing the employability of Medical students can, it was observed by one interviewee, be a challenge when students do not want things in the curriculum (e.g. learning a language), which they do not perceive as directly contributing to them becoming doctors.

### 3.2 The student body

#### 3.2.1 Student support needs

Staff were asked to reflect upon the reasons why students commonly sought support from tutors and other staff members, particularly for non-academic matters. In keeping with evidence from elsewhere (e.g. Thorley, 2017; Neves and Hillman, 2017), anxiety and depression were perceived as being amongst the most common types of problems students would present with, although some interviewees were unsure as to whether the incidence of such conditions was increasing, or whether there was greater willingness to discuss mental health than previously. Staff interviewees across the sites attributed the rise in students presenting with anxiety and depression to a number of possible factors, including social media, fees, the focus upon poor graduate prospects within the media, a greater willingness to declare mental health problems, pressure to be at university against an individual’s will, and parental expectations. Staff in some sites (Geography, Law and Biological Sciences) also referenced one or more of bereavement, illness, family problems, and disability as particularly common issues they have experienced arising.

Several sites, including Music, Medicine, Geography and Law, referenced non-attendance as one means through which staff might initially become aware that a student was experiencing academic and / or personal difficulties, thereby emphasising the importance of a robust attendance monitoring system through which staff can recognise whether a student has actually attended classes. Staff in Geography also noted that support needs may emerge through e.g. plagiarism investigations, concerns about standards of academic work, or problems with group work. Staff in that same site felt that students were more aware of support staff and wider support services than they had been in the past but that this was not universal and information was not always communicated to students in a way they hear. Many felt that there needed to be more resources available centrally for mental health services in particular.

There was some difference between the interviewees in the Mechanical Engineering site as far as how staff perceived the resilience of students. Those staff who emphasised that time spent with students was enjoyable and who reflected most upon the challenges students face during their time at university, including why they might not always engage with staff over those challenges, were more likely to regard the students as already exhibiting a high level of resilience. Those staff expressed surprise at how much students cope with, and how much of that is sometimes unseen (because the students do not always immediately come forward). They reflected upon reasons why students do not always approach staff with issues, including gender (females were perceived as more likely to be forthcoming in a timely manner with problems than males were); expectations of others (e.g. not letting team down in group work; parents); and the fact that students will not always know what the system for getting support is until they actually need it (and will not absorb the relevant information at the point when they do not need it, for example within Introduction Week). However, not all staff interviewees were in agreement over student support: for example, in discussing support with placement opportunities one interviewee said ‘We have great support here and there’s nothing to stop them from going to ask for help,’ before suggesting that immaturity (and not wishing to face difficult choices), was perhaps one reason why they do not. Another interviewee said that the School broadly created a good environment for the student to study and to feel like they belong, and that the rest really ‘depends on each individual student, and how they use it.’ Those staff were more likely to regard students as primarily being focused upon having a good time at university and not managing their time well as far as e.g. assessments and getting work experience were concerned.

Staff in other sites also reflected upon reasons why students might not approach staff for support. In Medicine it was suggested reluctance to seek support, particularly for mental health problems, could in part be attributed to a perception that it was a sign of weakness to admit to having a problem (‘Doctors don’t get sick’); as well as to concerns associated with their academic progression, and with cultural expectations. Similarly, in Law a wide range of reasons were given as to why students might not engage with pastoral support opportunities, including cultural concerns about discussing mental health; gender (male students were perceived as being less likely to come forward for pastoral support than females); mature students (who perhaps feel they should be more resilient, and will often go to members of staff of the same age or older); use of alcohol or drugs. It was seen to be important that students are able to access support in different ways – talking to someone face to face can be difficult, so many students will initially report concerns
via email. Alongside the personal tutor system, interviewees in Law also referenced academic support hours, which were seen as underutilised in the main. It was suggested that students were reluctant to use academic support hours for various reasons, including concerns about how they would be perceived by staff (in some cases, because of the negative experiences of friends who had sought support); underestimating their usefulness; concerns about academics being too busy; feeling like an imposition or that professors are too important; lack of confidence; lack of motivation; or poor time management. It was felt that a good first experience of using academic support hours led to students being ‘repeat customers,’ whereas they would remember a negative experience and be put off from going again (as well as tell their friends). Again, interviewees emphasised the importance of repeating messages about the availability of support.

3.2.2 Generational changes

Differences between current and previous student cohorts were reflected upon in a number of sites. Interviewees across all of the sites referenced the tension between being sympathetic to student needs at particularly difficult times, and preparing them for the realities of the working world after graduation. Determining where to draw the line between assisting students and requiring them to tackle issues independently, with minimal or no assistance, was a particular dilemma for some of those interviewees. In some cases, this related to how much guidance to give as far as assessments were concerned; in others it concerned the clarity of university messages regarding how to apply centralised regulations (relating to e.g. extensions, or further attempts).

Current medical students were perceived as being different to previous generations in a number of ways. Some changes related to support, broadly conceived e.g. being more open to discussing mental health than previously; being more likely to re-sit a year, and less likely to drop out as early; being accustomed to taking part in structured opportunities at school, meaning they would not experience failure during those school years, and could ‘tick boxes’ as far as admission into university was concerned; finding what were ‘normal’ aspects of university study challenging e.g. taking lecture notes, having long days of lectures. Other changes related to the student demographic, for example being more likely to be older and to have caring responsibilities than previously; increasing number of students undertaking the MBChB as a second degree without a loan; being more likely to have a disability than previously (partly because of greater support at school and college, and therefore being more likely to transition into university); and a greater gender balance than was previously seen. As far as the future was concerned, students were considered by one interviewee to be viewing the degree in a different way to previously, perhaps being more likely to view it as any other degree, with transferrable skills. They were also thought to be more likely to take account of multiple factors when choosing their future employment within the Medical profession, including work-life balance (although this was regarded as being at odds with the ongoing difficulty in filling General Practitioner vacancies).

Changes amongst the student population were also referenced in Mechanical Engineering by all interviewees, including the increased tariffs students were entering the programme with, which several interviewees suggested affected the approach and experiences of students (albeit in differing ways). One interviewee wondered if the increase in students with mental health problems might be attributable to this increase in tariff (suggesting students were ‘burned out’); another suggested this might explain the increased willingness of students, in that interviewee’s experience, to complete optional assessments, as well as perhaps explaining why students are increasingly focused upon every last percentage and mark in assessments. The fees students now pay were referenced in connection with several issues (e.g. pressure to gain those grades; a consumer mentality); as well as with the increase in students presenting with anxiety problems (which one interviewee suggested was a society-wide problem, with students entering a ‘rat race’ of education at a very early age). One interviewee referenced the increasing number of students who go out on placement, in connection with a comment about students undertaking the MBChB as a second degree without a loan; being more likely to have a disability than previously (partly because of greater support at school and college, and therefore being more likely to transition into university); and a greater gender balance than was previously seen. As far as the future was concerned, students were considered by one interviewee to be viewing the degree in a different way to previously, perhaps being more likely to view it as any other degree, with transferrable skills. They were also thought to be more likely to take account of multiple factors when choosing their future employment within the Medical profession, including work-life balance (although this was regarded as being at odds with the ongoing difficulty in filling General Practitioner vacancies).

3.2.3 Diversity of the student body

The demographics of the student body varied between some of the research sites. For example, in Geography, several interviewees reflected on the homogeneity of the student body: most come straight from school or have perhaps had one gap year; there are very few mature students and international students; many students are privately educated and have significant economic privilege; there are not many widening participation students. It was noted that a significant number of students are involved in sport, which takes up a lot of their time and can affect attendance, although it was felt that many of these are, by their very nature, disciplined individuals who can then keep up with their studies. In Mechanical Engineering, the programme is heavily dominated by male students, whereas in Law the programme has more females than males. As noted previously, in Medicine changes have been seen towards a greater gender balance, and more mature student entrants.

In the Law research site, interviewees described a diverse student body, with that diversity being perceived as perhaps contributing to variability in levels of engagement with curricular and co-curricular opportunities. Interviewees emphasised the importance of avoiding generalisations but suggested that a student’s background can affect how they participate in university and their ability to take advantage of opportunities open to them (including for example, because they have family and / or caring responsibilities; are
living at home or at some distance from the University and are commuting in; and / or need to undertake paid work). More generally, interviewees suggested that, across the student cohort (regardless of background), students might not engage with opportunities because of uncertainty as to what they wish to do; immaturity; and low confidence. Some interviewees also suggested it was a challenge for the School to ensure international students feel part of the community. However, many students were perceived as being engaged to a great extent, for example taking advantage of the opportunity to attend multiple employability workshops; attending Head of School suppers; and making use of academic support hours to clarify academic queries, or to seek pastoral support.

3.3 Assessment

Three themes which arose most prominently across all of the sites under this heading were group work, students dealing with risk or uncertainty, and the generalised anxiety experienced by students around assessments.

3.3.1 Group work

Staff in almost all of the sites (Biological Sciences, Mechanical Engineering, Music, Law, Geography) suggested that students dislike group work, primarily because of the difficulties they can experience in ensuring parity of work within the group, and the consequent effect on marks (particularly where that mark is awarded on a group, rather than individual, basis). In some sites efforts had been made to try to ensure more cohesive group working was achieved: in Mechanical Engineering, for example (where there is a particularly heavy emphasis upon group work), two interviewees reflected in a detailed way upon how they facilitated group work and ironed out problems in collaboration with students.

3.3.2 Risk and uncertainty

All of the sites also reflected upon risk aversion and / or difficulty dealing with uncertainty as a common assessment-related issue. In Geography, several interviewees discussed the attitude and approach students had to assessment. It was felt perfectionism was displayed by some, and that some were aspiring to Firsts or other very high grades, but this was not universal. It seemed the School valued independence, creativity and original thought, but students were often viewed as risk averse, wanting there to be a ‘right answer.’ Risk avoidance was seen as particularly evident in third year where two interviewees stated that students will avoid exams if they can. Similarly, in Biological Sciences, it was suggested that the focus on the attainment of a 2.1 could inhibit students’ choice of modules, making them unwilling to take risks in unfamiliar subject areas, or with unfamiliar forms of assessment. It was suggested that Discovery modules might be engaged with to an even greater extent if they were not credit-bearing.

In Mechanical Engineering, students’ views of assessment were regarded as intertwined with how ‘useful’ they considered that assessment to be to their overall marks. Several staff in this site referenced fees as an underlying reason why students have particular expectations as far as the overall certainty of their university experience is concerned: ‘... as soon as you ask them to do something outside that framework they don’t think they’re able to do that ... I think they come here as clients or customers paying for university and expecting back a lot, so if we ask them to do something outside the typical framework they feel that it may be unfair that we ask too much.’ Students were also perceived by some to be reluctant to undertake independent work to the extent required by university, and as requiring absolute clarity in terms of assessments: ‘they like very clear instructions which they can follow and there is not much space for them to make mistakes.’ One interviewee suggested students also want all assessments to be similar to those which they have experienced at a formative stage (i.e. in terms of content). Another interviewee suggested that student queries about assessment are founded in a concern with wanting to make sure they are on the right lines, and wanting reassurance that they are doing what they are supposed to be doing. That interviewee suggested this was not specific to students: the suggestion was that anyone in the position of completing a large task might check that what they were doing was correct: ‘... if you’re sent off to do something ... you know, in general, like, not just students ... “Here’s a task, quite a big task.” You know, you don’t just want to go through it and if you’re not 100% sure you’re doing the right thing so they usually just come and ask ... just to check that they’re doing what they think they should be doing’. Finally, one interviewee suggested that the students are not always risk averse, and would try things out in group work projects for example.

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4 See Thomas and Jones (2017) for a comprehensive account of the challenges facing commuter students.
5 The University of Leeds’ term for modules taken by students outside their home department.
3.3.3 Generalised assessment anxiety

In Law, Medicine and Biological Sciences in particular, staff reflected upon the anxiety students seemingly experienced during assessment periods, and how those might be addressed through changes at programme level. In Geography, most interviewees reflected on changes to assessment in the School made as part of the curriculum review, particularly as far as diversifying assessments, reducing the overall assessment load, and avoiding ‘assessment bunching’ were concerned. Staff in Law highlighted the variety of assessments, which was seen to play to different strengths, build confidence and resilience (especially presentations), and to ‘balance the stress.’ Some points of assessment stress were identified, including ‘essay panic’ (it was suggested some Law students see this as ‘what you do at university’).

Finally, in Medicine, it was noted that changes made to assessments to reduce anxiety can have the opposite effect, because the assessment is then comparatively unknown.

3.4 Student relationships

3.4.1 Relationships between staff and students

Staff-student relationships were particularly emphasised by most interviewees within most sites. Interviewees referenced multiple ways in which students could engage with staff, and student support opportunities (e.g. student support officers; personal tutors; online forums; email; academic support hours; other drop-in sessions; social media; and activities outside of ‘traditional’ teaching time in the case of Music, Law and Geography, including partaking in bands, and in field trips). Although some sites emphasised a clear line of responsibility towards approaching either a personal tutor or a student support officer, staff in most sites emphasised the importance of students being able to approach whoever they feel most comfortable with.

The personal tutoring system was referenced by all sites as a potential source of support for students, particularly where staff and their personal tutees also have contact through academic tutorials (rather than only personal tutee meetings a handful of times throughout an academic year). Regularity of contact as a theme in how close students were likely to be to staff was a recurrent theme within the research, with interviewees in Geography and Medicine in particular referencing tutors who their students would see very regularly as a particular source of support.

Staff interviewees in a number of sites (Law, Geography, Music, Mechanical Engineering) suggested that training for personal tutors could be improved: university-level training was generally not known about when staff interviewees were asked about it and, where it was known about, it was considered to be lacking (in terms of regularity, and opportunities for updating). In some sites, such as Geography and Music, personal tutors are provided with refresher updates and/or training, but many interviewees felt that further support and guidance would be welcome and useful. In the Law site, interviewees considered it important that personal tutors understand both the requirements and limitations of their role, not least as it can be stressful for staff to deal with matters they are not equipped to deal with. They should be aware of how and when to signpost students to specialist support. Similarly, one interviewee in Mechanical Engineering referenced the effect dealing with particularly traumatic student cases can have on staff (although you do not want this to be visible to the student in question), imagining the difficulty that student is experiencing and how it would be if that was one of their own children. Finally, several staff interviewees across all of the sites reflected upon the appropriateness of expecting all personal tutors to approach the role in the same manner, with interviewees suggesting that not all staff would have the same ability to provide the correct type and level of support to tutees.

3.4.2 Relationships between students

Staff reflected upon relationships between students as having both positive and negative aspects to them. As noted previously, Music students were generally perceived as collaborating, rather than competing, while in Medicine, students were perceived as forming a ‘safety net’ for each other in many ways. In Geography, interviewees identified several ways in which students are encouraged to become part of the school community (including as course representatives and student ambassadors), and thought had been given to the best way to promote these to students. Staff in the Geography site generally felt that students were supportive of one another. It was felt that strong bonds can form in tutorial groups, and also on field trips. Extensive group work in first year was also seen as important in encouraging students to get to know each other. Students in Mechanical Engineering typically seemed to work well together, according to staff.

There were some references to competitiveness between some students across some of the sites (e.g. Geography, Medicine), but these seemed to be in the minority. This was different to how the Law students were generally perceived by staff: some interviewees described competitiveness between students as a source of stress, whether they were competing for employability opportunities, comparing grades, etc.

6 The School of Medicine provides its own training for personal tutors.
or comparing the amount of work they had done. Not all agreed however: one interviewee described it as a stereotype, stating that Law students tend to be supportive of each other; another said they mostly compete with themselves.

3.4.3 Facilitating strong relationships

Having designated areas for staff and students of a particular School to meet in was recognised as an important part of generating a strong community. In Biological Sciences, the absence of a designated social space and the fact that teaching is spread around campus was perceived as potentially being undermining to a community (“I think there is a sense that the students don’t really have a home”); similar comments were made in the Mechanical Engineering site. In contrast, in Music, the shared common room – which is heavily utilised by staff and students – was regarded as invaluable in helping students to feel part of a community. Music placed a particularly heavy emphasis upon the School community: a sense of community was valued, viewed as important, and bound up with the nature of the School. One interviewee commented that ‘what musicians do is work in communities.’ Several interviewees referenced the importance of students seeing familiar faces around the building, as a way of building community e.g. the School reception; and staff getting involved in the departmental music society (LUUMS). Community activities were described as both a link and a leveller, across year groups and between staff and students. Meanwhile, in Law, the building was used by students to host events e.g. an annual Silent Auction for charity, which both staff and students attended; as well as the place where regular ‘Head of School Suppers’ were hosted, to which all staff and students were invited at least once per term.

Interviewees in most sites were aware of the student society most closely associated with the students on their programme e.g. MedSoc for Medicine; GeogSoc in Geography; and LawSoc in Law. Nearly all of the sites engaged with those societies to a greater or lesser extent, particularly through social events (such as annual balls hosted by the society in question). Some were heavily involved e.g. Law staff reported meeting regularly with Law Society committee members, in order to offer advice and guidance when requested.

3.5 Specific questions

Staff across almost all of the sites were asked specific questions about resilience, in order to further our understanding of how the concept is used within the University.

3.5.1 How would you define resilience?

This question was asked because we considered it important to understand how staff are interpreting the phrase: as explained within the Introduction, there is no clear, agreed definition of the term, meaning that those using it might interpret it in varying ways. The definitions given across all of the sites are grouped under three themes, below.7

3.5.1.1 Perseverance, coping, or ‘bouncing back’

This was the most popular way of defining resilience amongst staff interviewees. Resilience as perseverance, keeping going, coping, or not giving up is potentially a positive message, if combined with advice about how to ensure you are best placed to be able to do so (e.g. advice regarding self-care strategies). One must, however, be cautious about resilience being viewed solely in terms of continuing through difficulties or challenges: there is arguably a balance to be struck between ‘carrying on’ and, on occasion, considering whether continuing with this path is ultimately in your best interests, or serving your goals. For example, the authors would argue that a student who leaves a programme of study might not actually be lacking in resilience, but may have been sufficiently resilient to accept that it was not right for them – perhaps even in spite of pressure from others to ‘stay the course’ – and to pursue an alternative path. Furthermore, ‘coping’ resilience in the face of ongoing stress or unhappiness is unlikely to be helpful to the long-term health of any individual, whether staff or student.

Resilience, then, is arguably not only about being able to continue through situations of adversity, but also about being sufficiently self-aware and reflective, in order to be able to accept when it might be best to pursue an alternative approach of action.

- Withstand complexity and trauma; cope in unfamiliar or complex situations [Music]
- Overcoming difficulties, coping [Music]
- Coping with and understanding circumstances, dealing with them as best you can; cope when things are unexpected or difficult; don’t have to cope alone but need the ability to get support [Music]
- The ability to cope when things don’t go the way you wanted them to go for whatever reason. Never really know who is resilient until that is tested [Medicine]
- Being able to pick yourself up after something’s gone wrong and keep going. From a student perspective, it can be an academic

7 Key phrases and / or points have been highlighted here rather than entire quotes being provided. This has been done to protect the identity of all interviewees, some of whom would have been identifiable to their colleagues (based on language use and / or references specific to their roles).
issue e.g. coming back from an exam failure, or from a more personal perspective e.g. a bereavement [Medicine]

• Take the knocks that life is going to give and then you get back up...how am I going to carry on with this. [Medicine]

• Ability to survive, get past difficulties with family or university, being able to survive at university and at home. Surviving, getting to the end, being cheerful about it [Biological Sciences]

• Dealing with the unexpected and difficult, bouncing back [Biological Sciences]

• Coping mechanisms to deal with what life throws at you – some students cope better than others [Biological Sciences]

• Being able to cope with peaks in workload and unplanned situations, including some of the more stressful periods of their time at university. Being able to cope with those more difficult times [Mechanical Engineering]

• The ability to bounce back, to get back on track. Bouncing back from something unexpected, rather than something which they ought to know will be expected of them [Mechanical Engineering]

• The ability to cope with setbacks or things that go wrong – references some modules as providing the opportunity for students to learn that [Mechanical Engineering]

• How do they recover after they’ve been knocked in some way e.g. how do they recover after difficult personal circumstances; how readily and quickly do they recover so they can function normally and get back on with their work [Geography]

• Try not to whinge, keep going, give it a go, don’t give up too easily, don’t take it too seriously, let it happen [Geography]

• Not be brought down by small bits of adversity during degree, learn the value of critical feedback, be able to move on [Geography]

• Bounce back-ability - that ability to take a knock back and come back stronger. Something knocks you and you get up and say so I am where I am, how do we deal with it, how do we move forward, how do we stop it happening again maybe. Keep coming forward is resilience, you’re not going to be stopped [Law]

• The ability to overcome setbacks - not let setbacks knock you off course [Law]

• Being able to keep going and take things in your stride. Don’t give up - keep going and keep trying with things. Not be afraid to fail and get feedback - see that they can improve. Being able to keep getting back up again if things go wrong - not overly dramatize things - a sort of calmness under pressure. Sometimes things will go wrong and when it goes wrong I can, not pick myself up straight away but I can pick myself up as best I can [Law]

• The ability to learn from what happens, but move forward from it and not dwell on it - go with it rather than hit those walls of worry and anxiety which means you don’t move forward [Law]

3.5.1.2 Resilience as a process

Interviewees who regarded resilience as being about a process saw it as a quality which might alter over time (for example, experiencing peaks or troughs), or as a multi-faceted quality which a number of characteristics and considerations contributed to.

• Stand up again after taking knocks; reflective capability; look at work objectively and not channel everything into self-blame; accept you can’t be perfect, accept help at times [Music]

• About understanding the complexity of the life course, you’re not always going to be happy, you’re going to have reverses and problems some of which might be of your own making. It’s how you deal with it and what support mechanisms you have and what you know to draw on within yourself or when you need to seek external help. Helped by being part of a community – need to create an environment in which we really aid health and wellness [Medicine]

• How you handle things going wrong. The more resilience you have comes with maturity actually. You don’t handle it in a rash way, it’s not devastating – focus on what can I do about it, what are my options or why am I feeling like this, you’re more reflective on circumstances and situations that happen [Medicine]

• Achieve at university despite sometimes horrendous personal circumstances, ask for support, study hard and play hard, have a good time in bits of university that aren’t so great [Geography]

• The ability to cope with the ebbs and flows of academic study, particularly being able to deal with adversity (whatever that is). Taking responsibility in some ways as well as being more proactive than reactive. Good to have a plan but then need to think about what happens if things don’t happen [Law]

• The ability to not take setbacks completely to heart and become so down that you can’t do anything. Understand that setbacks are part of life and you can learn something. Not taking one hit and then deciding that you’re completely useless at this and it’s never going to work for you and you may as well give up now. That would be the opposite of resilience. [Law]

• Be able to deal appropriately with what life throws at you whether it’s in your personal or professional career. It’s not just you have to deal with everything, the resilient person to me would be somebody who could step back and realise this isn’t for them or this isn’t the right environment for them to be working in. It doesn’t mean that they need to be able to stand up to everything, I think
that’s unrealistic for anybody [Medicine]

3.5.1.3 Resilience as a toolkit
Interviewees who regarded resilience as a toolkit thought of it as something which was made up of particular characteristics and qualities on which ‘resilient’ individuals would draw.

- Having the physical and mental capability to weather difficulty and not just in terms of your own endurance. Actively addressing and focusing change and being able to ask other people for help. I think it’s having that personal resilience that people go through troubles but it’s not necessarily the end of the world. A sort of toolkit, to handle changes and problems to help get you through or past things you find difficult [Medicine]
- Range of coping skills – plan, organise, manage yourself and your life; how you view challenges. How you perceive yourself and your relationship to the world - how well you manage challenges/things outside of your control [Biological Sciences]
- Having a sufficient sense of self, self-confidence, sufficient understanding of how to deal with things that will come along in life. Some people seem to have to deal with an awful lot more than others. That ability to cope [Law]

3.5.2 How might resilience be supported?
This question was asked of the majority of staff interviewees (where time permitted),\(^8\) in order to consider suggestions as to how resilience might be supported. The question also provided an opportunity for the researchers to gain further insight into how interviewees interpreted the phrase ‘resilience.’ It was again possible to group responses under particular themes, namely programme changes; relationships/community; messaging; failure; and central support services/training.

3.5.2.1 Programme changes
- ‘De-clutter’ – reduce assessments, try different things, think about balance, consider semesters, credits etc [Geography]
- Second years could be a focus for resilience. Induction can be overwhelming. Interaction combined with information can affect student outcomes e.g. plagiarism (if they’re told something they might not take it in early doors – too much going on) [Music]
- More personal time, less overloading at transition into university [Music]
- Possibly fewer assessments [Biological Sciences]

3.5.2.2 Relationships / community
- Relationship building; challenge them in particular ways [Music]
- Recognise some of them are used to pretending they’re coping, personalisation important (recognising faces at the School) [Music]
- Develop confidence academically – build a resilient community that supports each other – responsibility of the institution – do this in the classroom – challenge them, feedback – a process. Co-curricular stuff – understanding the world, their place in it and themselves. Sense of community – give people a voice [Law]
- Challenge in reaching students who don’t come and talk to anyone – maybe don’t even know they have a problem until it gets really bad – wants to get to them quicker, and increase awareness so they see things in themselves and others [Law]
- Helps to have a member of staff who takes a real interest in you – not everyone has time to, could we identify the students having problems and give them more/a different tutor [Biological Sciences]

3.5.2.3 Messaging
- Employability messages must be carefully managed – decide, plan, compete is problematic because it implies it’s easy. Also powerful, strong images which don’t match with an unsure student. To be able to embrace opportunities they have to be happy in themselves, whereas many have a sense of inadequacy [Music]
- Think about how the course is advertised; make sure students know what they are coming to [Geography]
- Fine line between helping and giving them a crutch – difficult to support resilience if help too much – have to have a line – point at which you say learn and move on. Need to encourage students to have a strategy – thinks the School is getting better at that but not clear message at a University level [Law]
- Sometimes can be one small thing which throws a student off track – need to be aware of bigger picture so one thing doesn’t matter so much [Law]

\(^8\) Staff in Mechanical Engineering were not consistently asked this question, so have not been included.
• Only some things get presented to the students as success but everyone is different. What we class as success and what gets celebrated as success may impact on people’s feelings and their resilience [Law]

• Thinking about what we say and how we say it - how we celebrate success. The type of students we put on a pedestal and say to have a look, this is what you’re aspiring to, when not everyone wants to aspire to that. Maybe just celebrating diversity in the ways of achieving happiness [Law]

3.5.2.4 Failure

• Help them if they ‘fail’ at something – failure is inevitable, it’s about how you deal with it [Law]

• There are students who have never been allowed to fail – need the culture that people can come and talk if they need to, look at whatever it is and think about the next time [Law]

• Manage expectations – not always going to be the top of the class anymore. Promote reflective practice – encourage them to think about what has gone well and what hasn’t. Talk to people about setbacks and failure – about learning from it, and that it’s normal [Law]

3.5.2.5 Central support services / training

• Additional counselling services, ensure University understands what student support staff do and make sure the right people are doing it or are able to cope with the pressures of the role [Geography]

• Self-care (could do more to help them become more resilient, rather than only being reactive to problems) [Music]

• Not to work too hard on making the individual resilient – if the University can do things they should [Geography]

• Consider resilience training e.g. within tutorials; counselling/CBT. Move from firefighting problems after they occur to teaching students skills to self-care. Need a range of interventions for different needs; from mature, resilient students through to those completely paralysed by anxiety and then some in the middle [Biological Sciences]

• Consider training for personal tutors in e.g. active listening, spotting warning signs more readily; perhaps resilience training/ workshops for students [Biological Sciences]

3.5.3 Success within each discipline

Within each site, staff were also asked the question ‘What does a successful graduate of the School look like?’ Staff were asked this question in order for the researchers to understand the messages students might receive about ‘success’ within their particular School, and as a point of information for each School to consider whether any messages they wished students to receive about success were being recognised within the student body.

Within Geography, staff focused upon the broader skills and understanding the students would hopefully have gained from their time at university, the enjoyment they would have had, and the sort of people they would be at the point of graduation. None of the staff referenced particular classifications; rather, references were made to, for example, being a good citizen; having done the best they can; being happy; having been inspired; being able to think critically; having the ability to make good choices and to make a difference. Similarly, staff in Biological Sciences largely focused upon graduate attributes (rather than referencing specific levels of academic attainment, or specific career routes, for example), such as being knowledgeable, responsible, and employable; others talked about the broader, ‘transformational effect’ the degree would hopefully have had upon students, including through engagement, volunteering, and enjoying their time at university. One interviewee noted that success is very much dependent upon the individual student – for some, leaving university in order to see an improvement in their health is a success; for others, persevering and achieving a 2.1 would be.

Within Medicine, staff were also more focused upon broader notions of success which could be personal to the individual. Overall, they were concerned with recognising that success is a personal matter, and reflected a view that success is about taking care of oneself as well as others. Several interviewees reflected the requirements of the General Medical Council that doctors be competent and professional, alongside suggesting the graduates should be reflective, know when to ask for help, balanced, happy in whatever they choose to do, and financially viable.

Staff in Music were similarly focused upon the ‘whole’ student in answering this question, typically reflecting upon success as something that is personal to each individual; and reflecting upon the type of person a successful graduate would be (rather than referencing e.g. specific levels of academic attainment, or specific career routes). They focused upon the importance of students having been engaged, having been able to ‘find their place,’ being able to do something with their life that is worthwhile to them, having the skills and confidence for later life, and being creative and open-minded.

Within Law, staff focussed on students’ transformation during the time they were doing their degree. They were concerned with students developing personal as well as academic skills, enjoying their time at university and thinking about what they wanted to do with their lives after graduation. One interviewee noted that students want a 2.1, but the experience they get is probably particularly valuable at
the time when they leave. Another interviewee said success would be the student attaining what they're capable of academically (which could be a First, or could be a 2.2), and none of the interviewees focused purely upon academic attainment. It was important to staff in this site that students left with a set of skills which would equip them well for any career, that they would leave to do the job they want to do, and that they were people who it would be pleasurable to work with.

Within Mechanical Engineering, two staff focused upon marks (‘good’ marks; a 2.1 or a First), alongside broader skills and experiences. Two interviewees discussed where the effort put in by the students might hopefully lie: one suggested a successful graduate was someone who achieved good marks – not necessarily top marks, but reasonable marks, and had fun achieving them. That interviewee suggested the student might be putting in 70-80% of the effort to get a good mark and ‘doing it with a smile on their face and being happy at the same time.’ The interviewee referenced the student being able to do it ‘naturally,’ without an ‘extra push’ or ‘extra stress.’ Another interviewee placed importance on students putting effort into their academic work and into gaining at least one expert skill, which might not be gained on their programme (but part of a broader set of interests related to the programme). The interviewee went on to say that this was only rarely seen, and gave the example of one former student.

The final two Mechanical Engineering interviewees suggested success was personal to the student in question, and could be quantified by student engagement and enjoyment during their time at university (particularly if they felt like they were part of a ‘family unit’).
4. Student interviews

As explained in the Introduction, the questions for the semi-structured interviews with students were drawn up in reference to current knowledge of factors affecting resilience. McIntosh and Shaw (2017) assert that ‘resilience’ is best understood as an umbrella term encompassing both individual characteristics and external conditions which need to be present to cultivate student success. Existing and developing levels of resilience are linked to this combination of internal personality traits and external influencing factors (see e.g. McAllister and McKinnon (2009), Ponce-Garcia et al (2015)).

It is difficult to completely separate internal and external factors due to the complex relationship between them, but an attempt has been made to divide the themes emerging from the student interviews into internal factors related to student resilience and external factors affecting student resilience. There are, of course, overlaps between the two. Following the summaries of internal and external factors, themes relating to times and events which test student resilience are reviewed, with information about how students reported responding at these times. Finally, interwoven throughout this ‘audit’ of resilience are themes which were not directly asked about during interview, but which commonly arose during those interviews (related to e.g. competence).

It is important to note that these are the summaries of the students’ reflections, and are not intended to convey a view of the authors on the sites in question.

Internal factors affecting student resilience

Students were asked to describe themselves, to explain about their regular activities and routines, and how they manage their time. They were asked about their route to university and their motivation for choosing their programme of learning. Throughout the interviews students were asked about their approach to a range of academic and personal occurrences, and themes were extracted to demonstrate cognitive styles and responses to challenge and change.

It is important as an institution to understand that students come with a range of individual experiences and it is not desirable to make generalisations about particular populations. Instead, it is desirable to be aware of some of the internal factors affecting student resilience which may then inform curriculum planning, support structures etc.

4.1 Motivation for studying

At the beginning of each interview, students were asked about their pathway to studying at Leeds. A student’s level of motivation and commitment will affect engagement and resilience: engaged students tend to see personal meaning in their learning and will be able to transfer their learning (McIntosh and Shaw, 2017).

Students across the sites had a variety of motivations for studying on their chosen programmes. Mechanical Engineering students typically had a long-held interest in making things and establishing how things were constructed, and found that Mechanical Engineering was a suitable setting for them to explore those interests to a greater extent. Biological Sciences students had typically had an interest in Sciences at school, and had considered a range of degrees at the point of application. There was less of a sense of the degree having been deliberately targeted in a strategic way, as compared with the Mechanical Engineering students. Geography students had typically targeted that course, with their reason for doing so often being that it was their preferred A Level (and the one they could most see themselves continuing with at university). Students on the Medicine programme referred to a variety of reasons for choosing the programme (parental influence or coercion being a notable absence in this sample), with their interest in the subject matter usually developing somewhere between the ages of 10 and 16. Work experience – of a paid or unpaid nature – had confirmed their interest in the programme (parental influence or coercion being a notable absence in this sample), with their interest in the subject matter usually developing somewhere between the ages of 10 and 16. Work experience – of a paid or unpaid nature – had confirmed their interest in the programme. Students on the Law site we were more likely to see vague references to having an interest in it and having undertaken some interesting work experience, with some interviewees referring to particular drivers for choosing the degree (e.g. a career with financial stability). Family members in the profession featured quite heavily in that site. Finally, the Music students were most likely to ascribe their decision to apply for and study Music to their passion for it (four of the six interviewees did so).

Interviewees referenced a variety of motivations for choosing the University of Leeds in particular, including the opportunity to study abroad; the feel of the city; a good experience on open days; the location (including being both far away and close to home); the reputation of the institution (in the case of Music, four of the six interviewees expressed a concern with the type of place they wanted to study at e.g. non-conservatoire, definitely red brick); and recommendations from family and friends.

4.2 Goal-setting

Students may be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. McIntosh and Shaw (2017) describe ‘engaged students’ as those who see...
personal meaning in their learning. These students are likely to demonstrate more effective learning practices and higher levels of resilience as they have internal motivation to succeed and so will persist even when presented with challenges.

Students were asked about their career goals, notions of personal and academic success and how they see their future.

4.2.1 Employability / careers

Students in Mechanical Engineering, Medicine and Law were, in the main, focused upon entering the profession aligned with their discipline choice. Some knew a broad field e.g. working in the NHS, or practising as a commercial solicitor, but they did not necessarily know specifically which part of that profession they wished to focus upon. Others were less clear about what they might wish to do. 

Music and Biological Sciences students reported quite vague ideas about future careers, although they were generally related to their degree in some way. The greatest variety in intended areas of employment was reported by Geography students, where there was no clear theme for career ambitions.

4.2.2 Academic Success

There were some interesting differences in what students considered would represent academic success for them. In Biological Sciences, four of the five interviewed said a First was what they would consider to be academic success for them personally, with only one of those (S26) referring to broader indicators of success (wanting to enjoy the time at university) alongside achieving a First. S23 referred to wanting to ‘beat’ everyone, in addition to getting a First. S21 described herself as needing to be perfect and linked it to academic attainment. When discussing her desire for a First in her degree: ‘If I don’t get a First I’m not going to be happy.’ She went on to describe her previous reactions to [subjectively] ‘bad marks’ – ‘if I got a bad mark I would loathe myself for a week.’

Similarly, in Music ‘academic success’ was defined as obtaining a 2.1, or First (C22); a high degree, high grades (C30); a First, as well as doing better than expected on certain pieces of work, with good marks in performance especially (C25); a First or high 2.1 (C23). Interviewees did also reflect upon other benchmarks of academic success e.g. C26 being a successful composer; C22 being involved in co-curricular activities alongside getting a good grade; C30 being healthy and doing ‘other stuff’ as well as getting high grades.

In contrast, in Geography there were four students (of eleven) who referred to a First as being their indicator of success, but they – alongside those who named a 2.1 referred to broader factors of importance to their view of academic success. Y36 referenced the overall importance of improving: ‘... academic success is just a grade, like to me I know that I've learned things at university so whatever grade I come out with I know that it's bettered me...’. Y24 explained that he would like a First and a good dissertation mark, because the dissertation is the pinnacle of your research. Y35 referenced wanting to enjoy the course, and not just to get through it because of exams; Y33 said it was not really about a grade for him: ‘I think it's more if I’m just happy with how I did it... ‘cause I know that it wouldn’t be particularly like myself if I was to work every single day 9 to 5 to get a First when I’m more interested in sort of like getting my own personal views out there in the form that I can do so I think that would be, I’d be happy with a 2.1.’ Y29 said it was important that staff and students had a good impression of her in e.g. group work; and Y25 wanted to know that he deserved his score.

Y23 referenced wanting to complete a degree (she was the first in her family to go to university), and being able to look back and say she has enjoyed it.

Some students in Mechanical Engineering also referenced a broader range of indicators of academic success, alongside a particular grade (which, for four of the ten, was definitely a First). G28 referenced having a good project that works; G37 spoke of achieving something impressive in third and fourth year projects – ‘real engineering’; and G29 referenced wanting to ‘beat’ everyone, in addition to getting a First. S21 described herself as needing to be perfect and linked it to the overall importance of improving.

Law students were focused on a range of marks: of the fifteen interviewed, four specifically wanted a First; three wanted at least a 2.1; four referenced a 2.1; and three referred to a broader range of indicators of success e.g. W25 wanted to get through the degree knowing that she could not have worked any harder and wants to come out with a degree which reflects the work she has put in; W35 said she wanted something she would feel proud telling her Mum about (and referenced feeling ashamed if she does not get good grades). Some of the Law students reflected upon how they had modified their academic expectations of themselves during their time at university, having initially intended to consistently achieve Firsts, but they did also reflect more consistently than students in other sites upon their competence to undertake the degree e.g. W21: ‘I’ve always had very high standards and I’ve always wanted to get the top grades because that’s what I’ve got before coming to university, but coming to university sometimes makes me feel very average. I’ve lowered my standards a little bit, but I know that when I know that I can do very well, and I don’t do as well as I know that I could have done, that’s when it gets me disappointed and that’s when I try and go and get feedback about it...when I first came to university I was a bit, like, ‘Oh, do I deserve to be here?’ because you sit there and everyone in your seminar, for example, is talking about really complicated things and I’m just, like, ‘Oh, what’s going on?’ So, I think it stemmed from there really, but especially in the second year, when, like I said, getting rejected from these law firms and things like that, as well as getting a grade or two that I’m not very happy with. It’s all accumulated for me to think I’m very average, which I know I’m not, but it just feels like that, if you know what I mean.’

Students interviewed in Medicine were not fixated upon achieving As and Bs throughout their degrees (such that they would graduate
with Honours): none of those interviewed identified grades as important in measuring success. Initially, success for many of the students was passing the degree and graduating. Students spoke of ‘getting through’ the course (E31, E25); of doing the best they could, that it was not always realistic to expect top grades (E26); or of not being bottom of the rankings (E23). After that, students articulated academic success as achieving enough to allow them to do what they wanted to do; making a difference (E31); becoming a doctor (E30); getting into training for their chosen speciality (E23); having some choice out of the jobs they would like (E29); or doing research which could change the lives of many (E26), going on to explain it was about making a difference to people, not about the grades (E26). Nevertheless, these students were not exempt from the experiences articulated by some Law students of having to modify expectations (E30); getting into training for their chosen speciality (E23); having some choice out of the jobs they would like (E29); or doing research which could change the lives of many (E26), going on to explain it was about making a difference to people, not about the grades (E26). Nevertheless, these students were not exempt from the experiences articulated by some Law students of having to modify expectations of themselves e.g. E21 reported that they were learning to take on board the School’s ‘D is for Doctor’ message, but was still finding it difficult because she was used to expecting very high marks for herself.  

### 4.2.3 Personal success and future aspirations

Being happy was the key indicator for personal success across almost all of the sites (S21, S22, S23, S24, S26, Y36, Y33, Y28, Y25, Y23, G21, G34, G27, C22, C23, C20, C30, C25, W33, W23), with every student in some sites (Music, Biological Sciences) naming it as the most important measure of personal success. Those interviewed in Medicine did not reference it, but ‘balance’ was identified by half of those interviewees as important in personal success (E30, E25, E26, E29) – balancing work and life or work and friends. Personal relationships were identified as important by six of the eight interviewees and included maintaining relationships with family and friends; ideas about future partners; and perhaps children. Similarly, in Music relationships were also identified, whether that be family or friends (C20, C22, C25). In Biological Sciences, friendships were particularly important as far as personal success was concerned (S24, S23, S22, S26). Relationships were also important to students in Law, although across that sample students identified a wide range of indicators of personal success with few strong themes emerging from the fifteen people interviewed (having the opportunity to travel, for example, was mentioned by the most number of students, but that only arose in four interviews). Across all of the sites, many students referred to wanting a family of their own in the future.  

### 4.3 Strategies for challenge and change

The resilience of an individual when faced with challenging times, or failure, is thought in part to be related to a number of cognitive matters, including self-efficacy (a person’s belief in their ability to achieve what they wish to within a particular situation); and optimism and hope; as well as to perceived or actual levels of control and autonomy the individual has within those times.  

One’s sense of self-efficacy can play a major role in how one approaches goals, tasks, and challenges (Gillespie et al, (2007); Cassidy (2015); Schwarz and Warner (2013)). If a student values a goal highly (e.g. achieving a First) but has low self-efficacy in relation to that goal (i.e. does not believe that they will achieve that First) then that could be problematic in terms of their resilience and broader wellbeing. Low self-efficacy can increase fear about negative consequences (Maddux (1995), cited in McKinney (2002)), which may mean students do not wish to take risks in assessments, for example (cf. McIntosh and Shaw (2017, p25), who reported that half of the respondents to their survey had avoided doing something due to fear of failure). If we can increase self-efficacy, then we can increase the chance of students succeeding and even excelling. Of course, there is a balance to be struck here: it might not be realistic for every student to have high self-efficacy in relation to their ability to achieve a First (simply because it is unlikely 100% of students will achieve that standard), so the cultivation of high self-efficacy must be balanced against messages regarding the importance of viewing academic success in broad terms.  

Control and its close cousin, autonomy, are also both associated with higher levels of resilience. An individual who is able to feel as if they are exerting some level of control over their lives, and as if they have some level of autonomy as far as the future direction of their lives is concerned, is more likely to exhibit higher levels of resilience (Martin and Marsh, (2006); Gillespie et al (2007)). In the academic context, students who understand that their effort in, and their strategy towards work, can affect their academic outcomes, are more likely to feel a sense of control over those outcomes (Martin and Marsh, 2006). Furthermore, individuals whose need for autonomy is met through the circumstances in which they are operating (who are, for example, able to determine their own desired career path), are considered under the positive psychology theory of self-determination theory to be more intrinsically motivated to achieve their goals, and therefore more resilient to obstacles along the way, as well as to have a higher subjective level of wellbeing (see further Sheldon and Krieger, 2007).  

Finally, optimism and hope are considered to be important from a psychological wellbeing and strength perspective (Souri and Hasanirad (2011), Gould et al (2002), Gillespie et al (2007); Bar Council (2015)), with some research supporting the hypothesis that it forms part of a ‘resilient personality’ (see Skodol, 2010).  

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11 The website [http://selfdeterminationtheory.org](http://selfdeterminationtheory.org) – which is managed by some of the leading authors in this field – provides an excellent overview of self-determination theory.
Although it is important to understand the cognitive styles displayed by students and how this may impact on their behaviour, it is vital that less resilient students are not seen as deficient in some way. Internal protective factors can be developed, but equally the protective environmental conditions must be considered and the complex relationship between the student’s personal traits and coping strategies and the environment they are in.

Before moving on to discuss particular aspects of challenge and change, it is worth pausing to consider how the students described themselves when asked to do so. Their responses are listed below, in order of resilience score (highest to lowest). Some patterns in how students responded were evident; in both Geography and Medicine higher scoring students were more likely to describe themselves in positive terms; this was not so evident in other sites but it was of note that in Biological Sciences several of the interviewees were reluctant and/or unable to describe themselves coherently, and where they did describe themselves tended to do so in quite negative ways.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resilience score</th>
<th>Individual descriptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>E31: quite irritating – talks a lot even if other people don’t want to hear it, will carry on telling people things.</td>
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<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>G29: passionate about engineering and about teaching young children so that things can be better in the future. E30: positive now – try to see the best of a bad situation, caring.</td>
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<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Y31: helpful, quite outgoing, I always am trying to make conversation if I’m with someone and they’re really quiet I just try to talk to them, motivated, hardworking.</td>
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<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>E29: positive, people person, understanding, encouraging of others.</td>
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<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>E26: been lucky, come a long way from where they were, doesn’t give up. W33: very determined, set standards possibly too high, beats self up over things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Y29: driven and ambitious, able to channel that more now that she knows what she’s particularly interested in. Tenacious – doesn’t like to give up. G31: hard worker, always has a task in mind – likes to be organised, well rounded, work and fun. E33: positive, not very confident in some situations, confident with friends. W32: friendly, likes anyone who is different, approachable, likes to help people, doesn’t judge, happy to talk about things outside of her areas of interest, does like own company too, control freak.</td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Y28: hard working, determined, geography, arty. W30: outspoken, quite organised, quite conscientious, hard on myself with academic grades, don’t suffer fools gladly, quite irritable. W31: driven, talkative, hard on self, closed – people have to earn trust. W28: happy, someone who brings life to gatherings, quite organised, quite analytical, can be serious when needed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Y36: determined. Not hard-working enough...my dad always says that I’m talented. I’ve got ability, I’ve got potential, I don’t have talent, you get talent from hard work with ability, so I guess it’s like I’ve got potential. Y26: shy. Reliable, I suppose. I don’t know, just that I suppose. Y35: ditzy, motivated, perfectionist with work – checks every last detail. G26: stubborn, careful with what he says, has a strong mind but knows when his opinion needs to be kept to himself, quite outgoing in meeting new people. Quite selfless. E25: different in different situations. S26: ‘I don’t know. I’d probably say all those things as well, but then I don’t know, I can be quite difficult sometimes and jump to conclusions about things that I probably shouldn’t.’ (had suggested others would probably say she was say quite intelligent, a fairly nice person, quite friendly as well, approachable hopefully). W27: opinionated, assertive, direct, caring, helpful, extrovert, outgoing, vulnerable side that not many people know about. Still incredibly lonely at times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>C26: ‘I think I’m pretty laid back, I don’t like to make people feel uncomfortable … I’m not sure, it’s a tricky question because of my depression and anxiety. I’ve got a lot of negative thoughts about myself.’ W26: very stubborn, quite confident in some areas but not in others, hardworking.</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Y25: quiet, slapdash, enjoys travelling alone. G23: ‘I always prefer to see myself as not being a good person because then at least I’ll try to be one. Whereas if see myself as a good person then maybe that’s because I’m being arrogant.’ Tried to not be annoying. E23: stressed a lot of the time for no reason, find it hard to calm down. C30: ‘I know I’m good friend, I’m a good listener, I’m very loyal, I think I’m hilarious, I can laugh at my own jokes … caring … committed.’ W25: extremely positive person, extroverted, optimistic about everything.</td>
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4.3.1 Perceptions of levels of control/reference to control and uncertainty

Interviewees were not asked directly about control, but instead were asked questions which would provide the researchers with an insight into their approach to control. Across the sites, control emerged particularly strongly as an issue as far as group work was concerned, Students across the sites referenced control in different ways, with particular points of concern arising in different sites (although, it should be noted that it was less prevalent in the Geography site than in any of the others). A common theme was control in respect of relationships, typically within group work (particularly in Biological Sciences, Mechanical Engineering and Law). As discussed in section 4.6.6, almost no interviewees objected to group work on a principled basis, but rather found the difficulties associated with getting equal contributions from all group members to be a particular frustration. Interviewees typically controlled this situation by completing work in groups in the future, they perceived the workplace situation as being different (the assumption being that it is different once you are being paid to perform a role).
more of the work themselves – it was rare for an interviewee to reference trying to get staff involved.

Law interviewees in particular referenced more general levels of control away from group work e.g. W32 described herself as a control freak; W24 as a perfectionist; and W26 referenced a housemate who was controlling towards other housemates on the same Law course (controlling when they would undertake group work, and asking them to explain why they had been absent from lectures).

Control over assessment criteria was a particular theme across all sites, with interviewees referencing a desire for greater clarity as far as assessment criteria in particular forms of assessment were concerned, and for more opportunities to be reassured that they were approaching tasks in the appropriate manner.

In many of the sites, students perceived themselves as being able to exert control in key domains of their lives, in a way which allowed them to function in a healthier, more productive manner. This was particularly true in Medicine, where many of the interviewees were able to articulate changes in their thought processes since coming to university (i.e. something which they had exerted control over in a strategic manner). These most commonly related to changes in attitudes to study, for example E21 described themselves as a perfectionist, stating that it was drilled into them at school that they had to aim for the top. They attributed their change in thinking in this regard to the fact they are now with a whole year of students who were at the top: they are having to learn to modify their expectations of academic results; now a pass is enough; that you want to do the best you can but the ranking does not matter as long as you have tried. E33 stated that sometimes you have to accept you just will never understand something and you move on; and they have realised that they can sometimes do the bare minimum (‘tick the boxes’), although they still described this as ‘weird’.

Some interviewees were able to identify thought processes which had worked for them: E29 stated that they had not considered the possible downsides before they started university and had experienced problems in halls and with making friends. They described their internal dialogue during the difficult times – they told themselves ‘give it another two weeks’, that it would get better, and they got through the first year that way. They also reported thinking ‘you can’t live your life like that’ and they took practical steps to keep busy and be away from the living situation they were unhappy in. Another student (E33) also reported valuing keeping busy, stating they have a lot of hobbies and they do not know what people without hobbies do. Hobbies were viewed as important to them to have perspective, and to keep motivated.

In Mechanical Engineering interviewees were often able to point to ways in which they felt they had control over their own studies although again this varied. For example, G21 stated that they would try to prepare for third year through extra work over the summer (under his control) but that he was doubtful about whether his revision technique was working for him (seemingly without taking steps to address this). G27 said he obsessively plans time and that it gets on his nerves when things unexpectedly happen; he said he tries to ‘pre-emptively strike as far as deadlines are concerned’ so that he can ‘skirt around every given opportunity’ to be under pressure. G37 seemed to view addressing feedback as a student’s responsibility – ‘if you bother to make an appointment with the lecturer you can get more feedback.’ Interviewees did suggest that they had control over their future or more general aspects of their life: G31 stated that it is ‘all down to you’ how much effort you put in; G23 said ‘I always prefer to see myself as not being a good person because then at least I’ll try to be one;’ G21 referred to ‘getting out what you put in’ on a number of occasions and said as long as he works hard he will have a good future and find something he is happy with; G29 seemed to have some choice with where she ends up working (part of a condition of her scholarship) but also said ‘it depends on what they assign me to.’ Interestingly though, in this site interviewees referenced ‘luck’ far more than in any other site: luck was referenced in relation to making friends; on the programme (G26) or in first year accommodation (G23); and as a key factor in group work (G21, G23). These interviewees did not appear to think there was anything they could do which could influence the outcome of those relationships e.g. planning further ahead, seeking advice from staff members, or utilising the opportunity to penalise group members through the peer assessment method.

In the case of some interviewees, the control they had started to exert over themselves e.g. in taking more regular breaks, and not comparing themselves to others as much, arose because of particularly profound experiences e.g. W32: ‘[in]The first year I started to feel kind of unwell. I started to feel lost. I sort of spent a lot of time in the Michael Sadler building, up in the roof area, there is a staircase, just so I could sit up there on my own. I started to feel unwell about the situation. I thought if I am going to last I am going to have to do something about this, I’ve got to start breaking things down. That is what I did. I think taking time out, which I didn’t do in the first year.’

4.3.2 Optimism and Pessimism

Generally students described themselves as optimistic about their future; several students described optimism as under their control or referenced the importance of being positive in shaping their future – ‘if you think positive things you’re more likely to make them happen’ (C25). This was particularly evident in Mechanical Engineering although students who scored higher on the resilience scale in that site were more likely to describe themselves as optimistic. Law and Medical students frequently linked optimism to perceptions of future employment: Medical students were generally optimistic, reflecting that the profession was respected and people would always need doctors, although some expressed concern about the future of the NHS; Law students described themselves as being optimistic all or most of the time, with any doubts expressed tending to be related to the competition for jobs in law.
4.3.3 Failure

As outlined previously, students will approach experiences of failure in different ways. A student may display a ‘growth mindset’, they may be able to learn from their experience and apply this learning to new situations in a way which is advantageous to their academic and personal development. Alternatively, for a ‘fixed mindset’ student the experience may prompt them to develop coping mechanisms which are deleterious to their wellbeing and learning, e.g. losing enthusiasm for the task, devaluing effort or blaming the setback on their lack of ability, or external factors. (Adams-Schoen, 2014, describing maladaptive behaviours in law students).

The interviewees were asked if they had ever failed at anything which mattered to them (it did not have to be limited to academic performance), and what their response to this was.

The overwhelming majority of students had experiences of failure, with those examples typically being of failing a driving test or performing less well than expected in an AS Level (there were some notable exceptions, including feeling responsible for the death of someone); in short, those were experiences which could be navigated around relatively easily e.g. by taking the test again, or by dropping the AS-Level. The responses interviewees had to failure differed quite significantly between students, as well as across sites.

In describing their responses to failure, the interviewees in Medicine could be described as exhibiting a growth mindset (Dweck, 2012), meaning they had a belief that it was always possible to improve. Most interviewees described failure as a learning experience; including learning to be more organised (E25), to reflect on feedback (E26) or to be more prepared (E23). E29 reported that her experience of failure at university made her realise what others went through when in sixth form. Most of the interviewees said they had used failure, or the idea of failing, to motivate themselves to work harder or do better next time. (E31, E25, E29, E33, E21, E23). One example of this was E31 (the interviewee with the highest resilience score – 40 – across all sites) who reported ‘Whenever I have wanted something, if I keep trying for it eventually you do get it. It’s very satisfying.’ ‘If I make a mistake of it, I’m not going to make the mistake again...for me, it’s an effective way of learning.’

Within Medicine, while some of the medical students interviewed reported a fear of failure, it appeared that many felt failure was within their control, most commonly attributing failure to lack of planning or preparation (E31, E23, E25). Across other sites, some students did discuss a fear of failure e.g. in Biological Sciences, S21 reflected a great deal upon herself when addressing questions around failure, stating: ‘I’ve never really failed at anything because I don’t like letting myself fail. But I think that’s the problem because sometimes I feel like I’m too scared to go for something in case of rejection. I’ve got a really big fear of rejection...I’ve never really failed at anything that I needed for something else; ’it (failure) was because I was bad, I’d failed, it was my fault, it was all on me.’ Four of the five students in that site had experienced failing at something which mattered to them, with at least three of those relating the question to prior academic failures (one of the four students did not want to explain what the failure was). ‘Failure’ in this context is subjective, however e.g. S23 ‘I don’t like saying that I got an A* and two Bs, even if it was A* A and B I think I would be a lot happier.’ Failure was also often intermingled with a) a concern about external perceptions/judgements (S23 and S21 – presenting to groups who will judge you, even if not performing the role of assessor; S21 – did not want to let parents down by dropping out in first year; did not want to go to Oxford but hated telling everyone at school she did not get in); and b) exceptionally high expectations of themselves as individuals (as explained within section 4.2.2). S22 did not give a specific example of failure, but has tried to rationalise it so that the impact will not be overwhelming. S24 also rationalised his experience of failure linked to academic achievement, explaining that he had not really enjoyed his AS subjects so was not surprised he had not done well.

In Mechanical Engineering, there was a mixed response to the question of failure. In many cases interviewees described ‘failure’ in terms of academic progress and went on to say they were learning from their experiences and working to do better in the future e.g. G21 had failed some exams, and had sought support from the School and the University in response: ‘Having to suddenly realise that I’m not as good as I thought I was, it was crushing, but I’ve accepted that now and tried to move on from it really.’ G34 had reflected on the thing which she had failed, what went wrong, and the outcome – and then how she can overcome it in the future. Some interviewees, however, did not seem to view failure as a developmental experience or appeared to try and forget about or ignore the occurrence altogether e.g. G28 did not get a placement post-interview; he thought he should just get on with it because ‘sulking is not going to change anything’. He reported trying to almost forget about it because he cannot rectify it, so dwelling on it is not going to help him to move forward. G37 referenced some social and some academic failures e.g. not getting an interview. She found this to be a troubling personal setback, but felt better when she asked for and got feedback which was positive: ‘I’m not really used to failing at things and so I don’t really know what my coping mechanism is ... I don’t think I have a coping mechanism, I just kind of get on and do the next thing.’

In Music interviewees were able to point to a number of occasions on which they perceived themselves as having failed, including auditions (C22, C25, C23); applying to other universities (C23); underperforming at AS Level or A level (C25, C23); and musical performances (C23). C30 said she had been disappointed, but would not say she had failed. Several students reflected upon the personal value of failure. C23 suggested that he had put too much pressure upon himself to perform well at A Level and that might explain his (relative) failure at that level; C25 felt more relaxed about failure, having experienced unexpected results at AS level – she can simply do better next time; C20 said that failing at an audition gave perspective to things, it is not the end of the world and things
can still work out. However, such failure does feel personal – ‘that’s your voice and if your voice isn’t good enough, like you’re not good enough in a way.’ C22 noted that previous failure had made her more relaxed – things can still work out fine. She reflected that you can tell who has and who has not been rejected before, suggesting that people tend to be more pragmatic if they already have that experience, adopting a more dogmatic ‘why wasn’t I picked?’ approach if not.

In Law the interviewees had typically failed a driving test, an AS level, or a first year exam, with many of them unable to articulate a clear strategy for overcoming such disappointments. Some were able to do so in a way which is commensurate with personal reflection e.g. W31 stated that the response is to reflect and to learn, to look inwards after the grief stage and to think what else you could do differently next time; W23 referenced not dealing with failure at university at all initially, but once she realised other problems were emerging she sought guidance and help from the counselling service, and from her parents. Other students reflected upon the challenging nature of failure e.g. W22, who did not initially achieve the A Levels which would normally be required to study Law: ‘And I am someone that prided myself on my academic achievement. That was the only thing I really had. That is all you have. You don’t have much else. You are not working or anything. You don’t have any other achievements. Your academic achievement is all that you have and that was just really awful.’ She retook the exams, after feeling depressed, and got better grades.

Finally, in Geography the interviewees were likely to ask for extra support with their challenge, or to rely upon hard work to do better next time. Y36 pointed to the value of team sports in teaching people how to fail, as did W31 in Law.

4.3.4 Competence and identity

In this context, ‘competence’ was taken to broadly cover how interviewees spoke of themselves and their academic ability to achieve what they wished or needed to.

Students in some disciplines were more likely than those in other disciplines to refer to themselves (or to reflect upon others having this opinion of them), as intelligent, smart, talented or gifted. In a lot of interviews across five of the sites such descriptions did not arise at all: students in Medicine did not in general use these terms, although many did, or course, reference the importance of being a ‘competent’ doctor in the future (reflecting the language used by the General Medical Council); whereas in Biological Sciences for example three of the five interviewees referenced themselves as being ‘gifted’, ‘talented’ and ‘intelligent’ enough to achieve what was desired (S23, S22, S21). Two students also reported hearing these messages from family: ‘Mum would say I’m quite intelligent’ (S26); mum ‘big me up’ telling her she is clever when she is panicky or stressed (S22). The belief in innate talent or intelligence can be challenging from a resilience perspective within university education as it can run counter to a belief in the possibility of self-improvement: a fixed belief about what one is capable of or not could see an impact upon e.g. attitudes to particular forms of assessment, revision techniques, module topics. An example of this was S26 who reflected that people at the top of the class may be ‘naturally smarter.’ Similarly, three of the Music interviewees either described themselves as intelligent or talented, or said others would describe them in that way (C23, C30, C25). Finally, in Engineering G37 said her mum will reassure her, saying things like ‘you’re a clever girl;’ G36 described herself as ‘fairly clever;’ G28 described himself as ‘always having been talented at maths’ and said that other people would say he was clever.

Students in Music tended to have a strong sense of identity, which was bound up in them being involved with and/or committed to music in some way. The potential difficulties with this were highlighted by some staff at interview, and were encapsulated by C25 and her reflections upon an academic struggle experienced at A-level: ‘that kind of knocked my identity, like if I don’t always get As, maybe I’m not as clever as I thought I was….I’m like the clever one, I get straight As, I’m a straight A student, that’s what I am. Then when I wasn’t, I was like oh my goodness, what if that was wrong, what if who I think I am isn’t who I actually am.’ C25 went on to suggest ‘I think I’ve got a bit less of myself riding on it’ now, and has learned she can just do better next time. Some of the Law students similarly referenced concerns with how they were now performing as compared with marks they were more accustomed to receiving at school (e.g. W21), but on the whole students in that site were concerned with how competent they were in comparison to other Law students. Competent role models were particularly important to these interviewees, who referenced a number of ways in which individuals had a positive effect on their belief in their ability to achieve what they wish to. For example, W22 reflected upon the very poor statistics around Afro-Caribbean women in the legal profession, alongside seeing people in that position in law firms when she went on careers event – entering the legal profession feels achievable as a result: ‘I think one thing that I like to see at the events, like networking events is to see the diversity itself rather than read your annual report and see the really disappointing figures. Because even if the figure is disappointing, if I see it for myself then I know it is achievable, whereas if I look at the number I really don’t know how likely it is that I am going to be that 1% that is in the firm.’ Later on she reflected upon the experience of hearing partners at a particular law firm give their experiences, including one who was a porter at a hotel whilst supporting himself studying – this was inspirational to her. This student also discussed other factors which affected gaining employment in law firms: ‘there is like an unspoken culture which you kind of have to get. There are things that you just have to pick up and if you didn’t grow up in that atmosphere, like maybe if you didn’t grow up in that middle-class atmosphere, there are just things that you need to pick up. It can disadvantage you a bit but it also motivates you to work harder to stand out because you already stand out, you might as well stand out for the right reasons.’
W26 referenced a mentor who had put her mind at ease about failing a first year module (the mentor also did not excel academically, but was now a Partner in a law firm); and W32 explained that marshalling for a judge who was personable really helped her: ‘It made the law degree realistic. It put it into perspective what you could actually achieve. Whereas you just sort of lose focus, you kind of think where am I going with this? I’ve said it many times, should I even be here, but when I spoke to her and we engaged, I saw something there that I could cling onto I suppose.’

Students in Biological Sciences and Law displayed particular issues with their self-confidence and/or ability to achieve what they wished to. In Biological Sciences, S23 referenced something she had recently achieved and stated she never thought she would (despite it not being something unexpected of a student in her position). S21, in discussing herself, stated: ‘I’ve got very low self-esteem and low self-worth’; ‘I hate myself as such. There’s part of me that hates everything about myself and yet there’s part of me that knows I can do well.’

In Law, W32 alluded to feelings of competence (or lack of) at various points in her interview; ‘there are times that I am sat in lectures and thought what am I doing here, I am here, I can’t believe this is real, a star struck kind of situation.’ She perceived other students as feeling the same way – unable to believe that they are here, and not knowing what to do. She described various academic challenges, including writing style and the fact she does not yet understand how to articulate arguments: ‘I think oh, we are going into third year and I still haven’t got this down. I should be in a different position at this point. But what can you do? I’m just doing my best with it.’ She did not always seem to feel that academic achievement was a result of her competence, when she did unexpectedly well in assessment she referenced markers ‘having a good day’ or ‘being sympathetic’. As discussed above, W32 was, however, encouraged by marshalling for a judge who was personable and had really helped her.

4.3.5 Response to personal challenges

Interviewees were asked how they responded to personal challenges, and students reported making use of formal and informal sources of support. Seeking family support was mentioned most often and was important to students across the sites; the type of support valued by students included emotional support, advice and a sense of perspective on a situation. Support from friends was also seen as important by many but the choice of which friend depended on the situation, for example flatmates were valued as being close and available for support but could also be the cause of personal challenges. Similarly, course mates were seen as understanding of the pressures of the course, particularly in Medicine, but could also be a source of competition (Law), and some students appreciated spending time with students outside of their degree.

There was the sense amongst many students that staff would not be approached with personal issues for a variety of reasons e.g. S22 said staff are too academic focussed; E30 wanted to keep personal concerns personal. Some students identified that they found studying difficult if they were facing personal challenges, and so might choose to spend time away from their School. At least one interviewee at every site had experience of mental health problems and had sought formal support from either their GP, counselling services, or telephone helplines.

Some students identified activities which would distract them from concerns; common activities included watching films or TV, taking part in sports or exercise, addressing their mindset (e.g. reflection or positive self-talk), or other enjoyable hobbies and activities.

There were students at every site who either were uncertain about their strategy for dealing with personal challenges or would try not to think about them. Some students described withdrawing at difficult times, sometimes retreating into work or isolating themselves from others, and in many cases this included ignoring their concerns, even if they knew this was detrimental to their wellbeing e.g. S24 said ‘I pretend they’re not there;’ W23 described ‘falling off the face of the earth’ (and getting depressed as a result)

4.3.6 Response to academic challenges

Interviewees were also asked how they responded to academic challenges. As with personal challenges, many interviewees referenced seeking support from others. Students would approach academic staff in these circumstances (W24, Y36, Y31, Y29, Y28, Y23); they would use support hours (W33) or ask questions in lectures or seminars (E29, E23, W30), although some suggested that if you did not ask in class you had missed your opportunity (E30, W30). A disappointing grade in an assessment was often a prompt to seek support. Students also used university support systems outside of academic staff including the student support service (G21), Skills@Library (W35) and lecture capture (W32) to respond to academic challenges.

While many students were happy to approach staff, many identified reasons that they would be reluctant to ask for support with academic challenges including: concern that staff were too busy (G26); a previous poor experience of asking for support (W36); concern that you would look stupid (C30); feeling that if you had not understood it the first time then they was little point asking again (W25); or feeling awkward that you did not have a specific questions (Y33). Some described feeling that they needed to have an existing, positive relationship with a staff member before they approached them (S31, E30, W31). Many students would rather do independent research (G29, E29, E30, E23, W28) or ask friends (W34, G23, G26, G28, G29, E23, E26, E29).
There was a sense from a number of students that academic challenge was to be expected at university (S21, S22, S23, C20, C26) and that they would ‘power through’ (G37, E29) or do more work (G27). Other students described adapting to the learning requirements of university including improving time management, making use of previous feedback and developing effective study skills.

4.4 Self-care strategies

‘Self-care strategies’ cover those behaviours and approaches which are connected to resilience and broader wellbeing, such as planning and time management to facilitate an effective work/life balance (Martin and Marsh, 2006), and having a variety of interests, commitments or hobbies (see e.g. Lovell (2016), discussing the application of self-complexity theory to surgeons. See also Rafaeli and Hiller (2010) for an examination of a broader range of existing research regarding the same theory).

4.4.1 General leisure activities

A wide range of leisure activities were identified during the interviews. These included a mixture of individual and group activities and both structured (e.g. society involvement or sports teams) and more casual activities (e.g. TV/film, art, going out with friends). Music and Medicine students were similar in that student interviewees in both sites referred to structured co-curricular activities forming a large part of their lives away from the classroom. It is of note that for Medics those activities were relatively diverse and not necessarily focused upon their discipline, whereas for students of Music their structured activities – predominantly focused upon being members of bands, and other musical endeavours – were interwoven with their studies. Self-complexity theory would suggest that this is problematic, because the more identities an individual has, the more resilient an individual will be to challenges to one of those identities.

Students at other sites were, in the main, able to describe what they did with their leisure time but there was not the widespread involvement in regular, structured activities that was seen in Music and Medicine. Instead, they were typically unstructured or casual, in that they did not generally require students to commit to maintaining them during e.g. pressurised periods. This is of relevance to resilience because unstructured activities are more likely to fall by the wayside at times of particular stress, unless the individual recognises the importance of maintaining them from a self-care perspective.

There appeared to be a reluctance amongst some students to join their departmental society. There was a perception amongst some (particularly in Law and Geography) that they were different to the majority in the society (class or ethnicity), while others pointed to other specific barriers e.g. G37 said they were not in the departmental society as ‘people assume it’s not going to be fun;’ G26 was not in the departmental or any other society, as he did not like the emphasis on drinking which he perceived as being at the core of all societies.

The leisure time of some students was impacted by their need to do paid work alongside their studies; this was reported most commonly in Law.

A significant minority of students did not find it easy to discuss what they did in their leisure time, either because they did not have any hobbies (S22) or because they did not feel they had any leisure time. S22 described feeling guilty if she was not working; W36’s immediate response was ‘What do I do? I don’t even know what I do;’ W34 did identify some activities but also referenced sometimes feeling lost in her spare time because she is not studying; W35 felt unable to take on activities during term time due to time pressures. This sentiment was echoed by W23 who said ‘I don’t think I just randomly have free time to just do things.’

4.4.2 Managing time

When asked how they managed the various demands on their time interviewees would typically point to a number of strategies, with lists and diaries being the most popular. In some cases, these were used in a very detailed way, including everyday tasks such as washing hair and having breakfast, and plenty of colour co-ordination of diarised activities. Interviewees typically either referenced this approach, or a more pragmatic approach which saw them prioritise activities, with an understanding that things might need to change due to unexpected events. For some interviewees, such unexpected events were particularly challenging e.g. G27 referred to being ‘very obsessive’ about planning, planning quite far in advance and changes getting on his nerves (including having to suddenly go to hospital because of an injury): ‘I try at every given opportunity not to put myself in a position of pressure.’ G27 was an exception within the Engineering site, however: in that site interviewees typically did not have a clear time management strategy (and the extent of this was peculiar to this site): when asked about how they managed time, responses included; ‘poorly’ (G34) and ‘very badly’ (G34) and ‘I don’t know’ (G36 – although this was a common response for this student across all of the questions). G36 continued by saying that she wastes a lot of time but does a lot of activities too. G23 referenced the fact that previously he spent too long worrying about long he was working for and not what he was doing with the time he had. In many cases interviewees spoke of responding to deadlines in order to get work done (G21, G34) and G28 said although he managed time poorly he had no incentive to change his approach as he still manages to get the work done. G37 said she had dropped a lot of hobbies to make time for study.

All respondents in Medicine referenced the pressure of a large workload; there was the sense that the work would never be finished – the ‘never ending to-do list’ (E30). Many took a pragmatic approach to this, fitting work in where time was available and accepting
that you can only do so much. This constancy of work was also identified by students in Biological Sciences although a number of them felt overwhelmed by the work, and found it hard to separate study and leisure time. Several Law students similarly struggled with implementing a clear work/life balance and it was noticeable that students in this site were more likely to reflect upon their pressured timetable and academic schedule than interviewees in other sites.

Amongst the Music students there was the sense that there was little down-time which was not associated with music – either study or co-curricular activities – but many recognised the importance of balance and the need for self-care. This was referenced alongside the understanding that the life of a musician can work against the implementation of a regular schedule.

4.4.3 Dealing with difficult emotions

As well as being asked about responses to challenging situations, students were also asked about how they dealt with difficult emotions such as sadness, fear or anger. For the purposes of self-care, it is interesting to note that many of the interviewees referred to things they typically did at times when they were experiencing difficult emotions.

Many students reported seeking the support – or simply the company – of others during difficult times. All the Music students and about half the students in Law, Geography and Biological Sciences said they would connect with friends and / or family when experiencing difficult emotions. In contrast, but in line with their responses to challenge, several of the Mechanical Engineering students described trying to avoid negative feelings. It is of note however that very few of the students here described experiencing extreme emotions; this is in contrast to other sites where students described some difficult emotions in great detail. The most extreme feelings described across the sites tended to be related to stress and some individuals described stress impacting significantly on their lives; in one case a student reported being unable to complete relatively straightforward tasks such as preparing food.

While some students reported trying to avoid difficult emotions altogether, some described feeling that they sometimes had to wait until an appropriate time to deal with the emotion and would not think about it until that point. For example, W32 had been advised to seek counselling related to a series of family events but was of the view that there was too much for her to deal with at the moment alongside her studies: ‘I feel like I am going to open myself wide and I am not really ready or have got time to deal with it. I would like to sort of go there after I’ve done this and keep that all stored where I need to store it for now.’ There were also some students who did not speak to others about their feelings as they perceived friends and family as having enough things of their own to deal with.

Other students felt they benefited from trying to consciously affect their thoughts and thought patterns; examples of techniques included seeking sources of inspiration such as books or YouTube videos (C23); taking a break from social media (W24); sleeping on the problem and addressing it again when feeling fresher (Y35); or using positive self-talk and reminding herself what she was grateful for (W28).

Other commonly referenced actions for dealing with difficult emotions were crying (especially in Medicine), taking part in physical activity, or giving themselves a treat (e.g. food or social activity).

External factors affecting student resilience

While each student comes to university with their own individual traits, there are a number of common external factors which may protect or enhance student resilience.

4.5 The student in the community

Personalised relationships with staff have been recognised as important for the broader enjoyment of students during their time at university (e.g. Burland and Pitts (2007)), and have very recently been identified as one of the top three things students want from their relationships with their universities (Universities UK, 2017). Close relationships with staff, friends, and family are also key to the resilience of individuals (Burdick (2014); Cope et al (2016); Wilks and Spivey (2010) Robinson et al (2015)), as well as to their broader wellbeing (e.g. Reis et al (2000)).

4.5.1 Relationships with students

Students typically had several groups of friends, most commonly made through their programme, their accommodation (in both first and second year), societies and volunteering. In the Law, Medicine, Geography and Music sites friends were frequently named as a source of support during academic and/or personal challenges – this was less the case amongst those interviewed from Biological Sciences and Mechanical Engineering.

Students in Law and Medicine particularly valued the opportunity to be around students not on their discipline, because of the constancy of subject-related discussions within those discipline groups:

W21: ‘My Law friends seem to just constantly talk about law and university and applying for Vac Schemes and things like that. It’s just nice to go home and not have to talk about that and talk about something different and listen to someone talk about business or something. It’s refreshing and it gives you a break from Law for a while. I think, for me, it’s important to have that balance there.’
E29: ‘I am the person in my house that’s always been like, ‘Got to not be so medic-y’, or like, ‘Medic chat after 7, probably not’, because 7 o’clock, I’m done with my work and when you’re just chilling and you get a text from someone like, ‘Oh, have you got number seven on the class work?’ I’m just like, ‘Please no.’ So I say it in a jokey way. Some of them are a lot more into being a medic, spending all of their time with medics, doing everything to like further themselves as a medic but I am less so, so that’s where my other groups of friends come in because it’s nice to go out and not talk about medicine. People are sometimes interested, like as I am in their courses, so you talk about it a little bit but to the extent of, ‘Oh yeah, we do anatomy. Like we get to look at cadavers’, that’s sort of the extent of it whereas with like friends who do medicine, it’s so easy to slip into the, ‘We do anatomy with cadavers’. Ooh, what’s yours like? Did you see this? Did you do this?’ And I’m just like, ‘It’s Friday night. We’re in the pub, like can we not?’

E30: ‘there’s very much a thing of the medic bubble…because we spend so much time, we have so many contact hours in uni and things like that and then often, you know, if it’s someone’s birthday, because you have so many friends on the course, everyone gets invited and things like that and, you know, the medic bubble tends to neglect other students if you know what I mean, from different courses. But I don’t particularly like that because I don’t like eat, sleeping, breathing medicine if you know what I mean, like it’s nice to go home and be able to say to my housemates ‘oh, so how was your day and how was it different to mine.’ So that’s quite nice.’

Mature students and international students interviewed across the sites referenced feelings of being different to other students, and of encountering more barriers to developing friendships. Not all sites had international or mature students within the interview sample, so the following comments are drawn only from select sites. W27 referenced the difficulties mature students encounter in first year accommodation (being placed with those who are much younger and who have different life experiences to those who are older), as well as the fact that mature students on his course did not have an engineered opportunity to meet each other. Prior to university, W32 (another mature student) was someone who would always talk, but she now acted like the other students: ‘The silence that I found at university, I ended up doing it myself. I don’t speak to people and I’ve never been like that, never. My first ever report at school was has a vocabulary and knows how to use it and I went to primary school and I left when I was 8, so, from a very young age I’ve been able to talk but I just haven’t here. It is just days of silence.’ E26 noted that ‘…as a mature student initially on the course it can be quite isolating…and you have to make extra efforts that maybe I wouldn’t have had to do if I was just a couple of years younger. And I really do have to do that and maybe have to change my approach as well when talking to people, that’s an interesting one so I guess I have to change my behaviour with regards to that.’ He went on to discuss the expectations people have when he is on placement as being higher than those expected of someone who is evidently younger, the assumption seemingly being that he is more qualified than he is in reality.

Involvement in societies were one way in which some international students in particular navigated around these barriers, such as joining societies focused upon particular groups of international students. W22 was one of those who had done so, and reflected upon a broader subject-specific student society which she had not felt able to become more involved in: ‘I don’t find it to be very welcoming, personally. And a few of the people that I have spoken to sort of feel the same, some people in third year, just some people in my year as well. I don’t know. It is just not inclusive. It is for a very specific crowd, like your middle-class, white, male crowd or like middle-class, white, female crowd and I am not middle-class, white. I am not either of those things and I have noticed that with the international students and with other home students as well, ethnic minority students, like it doesn’t … I don’t feel like I can really get involved.’

4.5.2 Comparing self to other students
Proponents of self-determination theory would suggest competition between others will not support resilience, if that competition results in an individual becoming more extrinsically motivated, as opposed to being intrinsically motivated and working hard for its own sake/ because of personal enjoyment.

The interviewees were not asked to compare themselves to others, but throughout the interviews there were times when they did so for a variety of reasons (particularly as far as group work was concerned – all of our interviewees regarded themselves as ‘unproblematic’ members of groups working together, with others not committing themselves as fully to the work). There were some notable differences in how the students compared themselves to others though. In Law, students were far more likely than in any other site to compare themselves to others, and when they did so the majority of those comparisons were negative. Eight of the fifteen Law students interviewed compared themselves negatively with others, including concerns about not being as ‘smart’ as the other students (W22); ‘feeling lost’ and not understanding as much as everyone else, particularly in the first year of study (W33, W23); having less of a support network (financial and otherwise) compared to the Home students (W28); being a mature student and therefore struggling to understand things as quickly as younger students (W27), or feeling different to those younger students because they ‘go into meltdown’ around some of the Professors and are more concerned with socialising (W32). One student interviewee talked about ‘feeling average’ and reflected upon his widening participation background: ‘I’m obviously the first person in my family to go to university, but I personally don’t feel like I faced any barriers in coming to university, because it’s something that I always wanted to do and I never had any barriers coming here. But I know that some students might very well have barriers…I think it’s more of a confidence thing as well, for students like that because it’s, kind of, like, what I said earlier. ‘Do I deserve to be here coming from a background like this?’ I, in a background sense, realise that I deserve to be here as much as anyone else does, but some students don’t realise that, so I think it’s important in
that sense, to support them in that way, to make them think that, you know, ‘I do deserve to be here,’ because they do.’

W36 reflected upon the bravado that Law students perhaps display, stating ‘a lot of people in law I think, I don’t know they all seem very confident, I think that’s maybe a thing that’s just in my head, but they all seem like they’ve done it before and they’re maybe from bigger areas, they seem like they’re used to this lifestyle I think. Or maybe it’s just they’re confident people, that might be it… it’s probably more of a display I think, probably there’s a lot of people feeling exactly the same and I think it took until this year that I thought everything was fine, everyone wasn’t struggling with any academic, and the fact we had seven modules and it was very stressful. And it wasn’t until I saw that girl coming out of the office crying and I was like wow maybe people are finding it difficult. And I think I always have this thing where I think it’s just me, so I think I’m reassured if other people feel the same, it’s not just about my personal feelings, it’s about how everyone’s feeling if you know what I mean.’

Several students also noted how Law students seem to compare themselves to each other and compete with each other, even if they did not do so themselves (W25; W35), and the difficulties which can arise from that e.g. making it harder to be open with friends in group work if you do not understand something (W23 – people fear judgement).

Such levels of comparisons and competitiveness might be attributed to the nature of the industry many of those interviewees wished to enter: it is notoriously competitive for students wishing to get a Training Contract or a Pupillage (the next stage of training for students wishing to become a solicitor or barrister respectively), but it was interesting to compare the Law students with the Mechanical Engineering students. Students in both sites were encouraged to apply for work experience (Law students wishing to become solicitors will apply for vacation schemes; Mechanical Engineering students for year-long internships), and that work experience is difficult and competitive to get (this formed part of the discussion with students in both sites). Yet, the response of the students was broadly different: while the Law students typically became bound up in competition and comparisons with each other, the Mechanical Engineers reported supporting each other through the application and interview process. This support extended to helping fellow students applying for the same placement, which seemed an unlikely occurrence within the Law site.

Students in Mechanical Engineering were more mixed than the Law students in their reports of comparisons. Some interviewees described comparing marks with other students but this was often to understand the marking, rather than any sense of it being competitive (G31, G34, G23). Confidence was, however, an issue for some interviewees in comparing themselves to others. G21 finds it too daunting to ask questions in front of people (in lectures); G34 said students do not like to admit if they do not know something and are afraid to look silly. Confidence issues seemed to arise particularly where interviewees had had time out of studying, or had come to university from a route other than A-levels: G21 felt other students were more accustomed to exams than he was; G36 suggested that others had more confidence when they were in the first year of university than she did and that those who had not taken a gap year were more used to the maths. In contrast, some students compared themselves favourably due to time out: G27 said a year away from learning had been advantageous, because he had realised he does not have to carry on working to the same level and in the same way as he did at school – he thought others were less aware of that. G27 also suggested he might be more emotionally stable than other students (in the context of discussing trigger warnings). G26 felt that, as he was older than most of the other students, he was more mature. Finally, the gender split on that particular degree gave rise to reflections by female students about their experiences of group work: G36 said she thought group members treated her differently due to gender but that she could probably ‘get away’ with more; G37 felt there was a little bit of competition and that female students ‘all want to beat the boys and prove that we’re worth being there.’ She thought males had done a lot of practical stuff that females had not, so can ‘take over’ but concluded that they will not tell you that you cannot do it. G34 said she had had discussions with female friends about how they are perceived and treated by peers in group work and they feel it is harder for women.

Biological Sciences students similarly reported mixed experiences, with some students finding comparisons unproblematic e.g. S23 perceived herself as better able to cope with university education due to her not having been privately educated; she saw others as needing more support as they are used to receiving more academic help. She also commented that others can be ‘bitchy’ ‘childish’ ‘girly’ and she is better at that now. Others reflected upon the difficulties comparisons can cause e.g. S26 stated a lot of people are open about their grades, going on to reflect that because the marks are published you are going to see where you are in relation to others: ‘I’ve just tried to remember that you shouldn’t really compare yourself to other people, but it’s quite a difficult thing to do because it’s… I don’t know, I think it’s quite natural to just look at what other people are doing and just compare yourself to them. I wouldn’t say it’s something that I deal with that well, but – I don’t know.’

In the Geography site, meanwhile, students did compare themselves to other students, but tended to compare themselves (with some exceptions) in such a way as to be superior to others (without conveying a sense of arrogance). Y36, for example, talked at length about his experiences prior to university, and how those seemed to have prepared him for the independence: other students seemed less prepared for university, whereas he was used to traveling alone across London to school, and had learned to structure his days through his experiences of boarding school.

On academic matters, Y36 suggested that other students might achieve more in terms of grades, but he perceives himself as having broader skills than they do; while Y29 suggested her friends are perhaps more limited in how they see themselves and their
opportunities – they think they have to choose a career much more linked to their degree, whereas she regards it as offering a broad range of opportunities. Y29 and Y25 both said there was not competition as such within friendship groups, although they will discuss their marks and whether they agreed with them. Y29 said her friendship group did not particularly share marks and feedback, but when they did do so it was in order to improve.

Only two students in the Geography site referenced concerns about their position vis-à-vis other students: Y37 had friends from home who were ‘clever’ and were describing their grades in first year – hers were quite low, and she thought she was not doing as well. Y23, meanwhile, stated ‘I don’t like getting to the end of the day and people being like, ‘Oh, I did this, I did this’, and it feels like I’ve not been doing anything.’

Finally, Y28 noted that it was rare for someone on her course to have a job alongside studies, and that many of them seem well-off (in keeping with staff reflections on the demographic of students within this site): ‘It’s like a general impression because on Facebook you see them wining and dining with a £40 bottle of Champagne ... right okay I’m going to go back [home] and go to Wetherspoon’s thanks so that’s the general impression I get ... it doesn’t mean that I won’t be friends with them it’s just I can’t really relate to what they do. They’re still really nice but they don’t quite get where I come from and I don’t quite get where they come from, it’s not really that big of an issue.’

In Music the students were more likely to compare themselves across the two Music programmes which were examined within this study than with each other directly, while in Medicine interviewees were as likely to discuss how other students perceived Medicine students, as they were to make comparisons between each other. This was often related to academic work: E21 reported that they enjoyed being amongst dedicated students who do not judge one another for studying (as opposed to being a ‘geek’ at school). There was the sense of some comparison between individuals, for example E29 said they sometimes compare their own work levels to those of friends (e.g. friends managing to cover all of the syllabus for revision purposes), but overall felt that while they saw themselves as ‘middle to average’, that ‘average is fine when you look at who you’re average amongst’. E21 echoed this sentiment, stating there is no need to prove yourself in comparison to how it was at school. Mainly the interviewees were not concerned about being competitive amongst themselves or for the purposes of the final rankings Medical graduates are placed on at a national level (E31, E33) – that would only be a concern if you wanted to get into a really competitive speciality (E33) or in a specific field such as surgery (E29).

4.5.3 Relationships with staff

Across all sites, there were references to both positive and more problematic relationships with staff. Students on most programmes reported busy timetables during which they would have a good deal of contact with staff, with students on some programmes reporting contact with staff outside of formal teaching time (e.g. Music students sometimes had contact with staff in bands; Law students referenced activities such as the staff-student talent show Law’s Got Talent, and the Head of School suppers). Students on the Geography and Music programmes were particularly likely to refer to multiple members of academic staff from whom they would seek support of a variety of types, with students on the Law and Mechanical Engineering programmes being comparatively less likely to approach academic staff. In the case of Law students, students particularly expressed concern about whether they ought to know the answer to their questions, and might be viewed unfavourably by staff as a result. This particularly tied in with the Law students’ overall concern about how they compared with others, and whether they were ‘good enough’ (as explored in the previous section).

Not all students knew that they had a personal tutor (in some cases this was because personal tutors had been taking academic tutorials, and students were unclear as to what happened when those academic tutorials finished), and those who did were not generally of the view that the personal tutoring system performed as they would wish it to.12 There were some very clear examples of students regarding their personal tutor very highly because of e.g. support which had been given, but many of the interviewees either discussed an absence of structured, regular meetings with their tutor, or suggested those meetings did not serve the purpose they would wish them to. It was not uncommon for interviewees in Medicine and Law to refer to other members of academic staff who they might approach in place of their personal tutor, whereas in other sites interviewees would not necessarily approach any staff with any issues they were experiencing. Students who had been in contact with support services, whether at a School, Faculty or central University level (or all of those), generally reported having very positive experiences. Some of the mitigating circumstances procedures were regarded as causing unnecessary anxiety (e.g. needing to provide a programme from a funeral to prove the death of a grandparent; being unsure about whether an extension would retrospectively be granted and a late penalty removed), but overall interviewees who had experienced particularly difficult times were aware of where support could be accessed and how to do so. Interviewees who were aware it might be beneficial to talk to someone were less clear about those support services and how they might be accessed, or whether they were for problems such as those the students were experiencing. This is interrelated with a sense on the part of some students that you would

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12 It is worth noting that HEPI’s research has found that applicants considered lecturers and tutors as the most likely source of support for mental health and other support from the University itself (50%), with the University counselling service just behind them at 47%. (2017:17)
only approach staff with a defined problem or question. Finally, all of the interviewees who had accessed the University’s counselling service were of the view that it had been of great value in helping them to progress with their personal problem, and (by association), in helping them academically. There were, however, several references to the fact it is very oversubscribed, with many referring to the fact there was a long waiting time.\textsuperscript{13}

4.5.4 Family relationships

The overwhelming majority of students reported very positive relationships with their parents and siblings (although, in some cases, relationships with siblings had only recently improved, and in some sites students were more likely to refer to a close relationship with their mother in particular). Family relationships did arise as a pressure point for some students, which is explored further under section 4.7.5.

4.5.5 Other relationships at home

Interviewees in Mechanical Engineering and Law were much more likely than interviewees in other sites to refer to partners (boyfriends, girlfriends and, in one case, husband). Some interviewees also referred to friends from home – for most, those relationships remained positive (if slightly distant as compared to previously), but for others those relationships were more difficult than previously experienced (e.g. because the interviewee felt their friends had not made an effort to maintain contact).

4.6 The student as scholar

This section of the report covers various aspects of the interviewees' lives within the university context, some of which have already been discussed elsewhere. The relevance of each of these to resilience is considered within each sub-section.

4.6.1 Motivation for study

This can be found in the ‘internal factors’ section.

4.6.2 Support prior to university

Interviewees were asked about the process they went through prior to entering university, including who they discussed possible options and decisions with, in order to establish the extent to which the decision to study this discipline was theirs. As discussed previously, autonomy (in this context, the autonomy to dictate which subject to study and (in some instances) by analogy, which discipline to focus upon for future careers), is an important component of resilience. While it is always possible interviewees were hiding (or unaware of) the extent to which they were influenced by others in making their choice, the authors nevertheless considered it worth exploring during interviews.

Across all sites, the students typically reported a range of ways in which they had received support with their application decisions, most commonly from parents and school careers advisers (although, for a significant number of students, school had not been a particularly helpful source of support). Students had typically visited the University prior to applying, or before accepting an offer, and had usually done so with a family member.

Family members who had previously attended the University were particularly referenced as a source of support, which highlights the ongoing positive effect upon recruitment a happy student experience can have.

4.6.3 Enthusiasm for subject

As would be expected, enthusiasm for an endeavour is more likely to be accompanied by a resilient approach when difficulties are encountered in the pursuit of that endeavour and/or its goals, provided that enthusiasm is attributable to intrinsic motivation to succeed at the task in hand (see e.g. Sheldon and Krieger, 2007, and self-determination theory more generally).

Across the majority of sites, students referenced their enthusiasm for their subject. In Mechanical Engineering, enthusiasm for the subject came through strongly, where many of the students spoke of having a passion for the subject (G21, G23, G29) or of enjoying particular aspects of the course (including interest in the information covered (G27); focusing on doing what you want (G31); or the practical/project work (G37) – fun to get together, make something tangible, G28 – ‘exciting’, G23). Specific comments referencing enthusiasm for the subject included G21: ‘saying engineering means nothing almost, it’s such a broad term, it’s beautiful,’ and G29: the impression he had of engineering as a career is that ‘it’s really awesome’, and he referred to his passion for the subject several times: ‘every moment I spend at the University of Leeds is really rewarding.’

\textsuperscript{13} As noted previously, the interviews were conducted prior to the restructuring of the counselling support services, which may have affected the feedback from both staff and student interviewees.
In Music, three of the six interviewees referenced their enthusiasm for the subject in a very direct way e.g. passion; performance as being the best part of the course. All students spoke positively about some aspect of their studies e.g. the course (C22, C26), the department (C20), or playing music (C23, C25). C23 noted that his enthusiasm was sometimes undermined by the studying of it – he reflected upon the need to continue finding ways to keep himself interested and inspired.

Interviewees in the Geography site were less overt in their enthusiasm for the subject, although a number of students referenced their enthusiasm for the subject matter specifically: Y35 has 'always loved Geography;' Y29 'loves the course'; Y28 referenced her passion for the subject and her desire to continue using her degree post-graduation because she is so passionate about it; Y36 referenced the expense of University but says it is all paying off because he is doing something he loves. He referenced being 'teased' for going to classes, but would not want to be annoyed about having to go to a lecture. Students in this site did talk about particular aspects of the course which they really enjoy, including being able to tailor the programme to your specific interests beyond year one.

In Medicine, learning and the course itself were described as enjoyable (E23, E26, E33), with many particularly liking being on placement; learning clinical skills (E23); seeing patients (E26, E30); ‘solving a puzzle’ with patients and seeing them progress (E31); and studying what they want to do as a profession (E30). Passion for the subject was also important: E26 referenced passion for the subject several times in their interview, and as being in a ‘privileged position’ and ‘really lucky.’ They stated several times that they wanted to improve themselves and learn more in the area. E31 also described themselves as privileged to be studying on the course, stating that they needed to make the most of the opportunity and would ideally speed through the degree at a greater pace, without holidays, as they feel they are wasting time during the holidays in a job they do not enjoy. E21 was enjoying being on a programme with many other students just as enthusiastic and dedicated as herself.

In Biological Sciences, most of the five students interviewed seemed to enjoy aspects of, if not all, of their course. S26 stated they had a ‘passion’ for biology. S23 had experienced accommodation and friendship problems in first year and stated they probably would have dropped out of university if it had not been for the course. S22 described a high personal regard for the science professions but felt that they do not get enough recognition in popular discourse.

In Law, the students were less likely to point to the course as a particularly enjoyable aspect of their time at university (although many referenced particular modules which they really enjoyed, for example, and suggested that the number of contact hours and group work activities were a good way of making friends – W33, W24, W31, W26). The impression was not that students actively disliked the course – although aspects of assessment were repeatedly referenced as particularly challenging – but rather that students viewed it as a means to an end. W23, for example, perceived the Law degree as being different to other degrees because others are about ‘being really good at what you are interested in and then moving into a field that you are interested in, and then for us it is not really about that.’ W31, when asked whether there had been anything less enjoyable about university, answered: ‘I think law, to a certain extent. But I knew I wasn't going to enjoy it. It was a means to an end. That's how I knew. My sister told me and I knew other people who did law and they said, 'Unless the option modules you choose you might not enjoy it...I won't say I don't enjoy it but it's like I'm aware that I don't enjoy certain topics because it's not my kind of thing but it's a means to an end. I want to be a lawyer. Law is just something to do to get to that point.'

4.6.4 Engagement with curricular opportunities

Student engagement with a School more broadly – whether on a co-curricular basis, or on the basis of e.g. supporting mentoring schemes or open days – is likely to be supportive from a resilience perspective, indicating as it does that students are sustaining positive relationships within the School (relationships being an important protective factor from a resilience perspective, as previously explored). Interviewees were therefore asked several questions relating to their free time, both inside and outside of term-time, in order to ascertain how they connected with each other and with the School more generally.

Across all of the sites there was some evidence of engagement with curricular activities by the interviewees, with the nature of that engagement varying according to the site. In Mechanical Engineering, Biological Sciences and Geography, for example, it primarily took the form of applying for internships and placements, or to study abroad, whereas in Law it was common for interviewees to reference taking part in a career mentoring scheme which the School runs, or in some form of ambassador role (whether open days, or away from the University e.g. role modelling to hard-to-reach school pupils). Interviewees in the Medicine site did not focus upon a particular type of curricular activity, but a number were involved in e.g. assisting with research, or working part-time within a healthcare setting.

4.6.5 Engagement with co-curricular activities

There are several benefits of being involved with co-curricular activities which could be experienced from a resilience (and broader wellbeing) perspective. Not only does engagement with broader hobbies provide individuals with an opportunity to ‘switch off’ from a significant focus of their lives (in this case, studying), it could also help individuals to guard against becoming solely focused upon the academic work, which can become a source of anxiety and cause students to neglect the multi-faceted nature of their identities (see e.g. Lovell (2015))
Across most of the sites, students were involved in a range of co-curricular activities, including volunteering, University societies, sporting activities and – in a small number of cases – term-time employment. It was noticeable that students in Mechanical Engineering named fewer such activities when asked to describe what they did during their free time, and across most of the sites those activities which were named were not always particularly structured (as was seen within section 4.4.1, where leisure activities were described). The notable exceptions to this were Medicine and Music, where interviewees pointed to a range of structured activities focusing upon sport in teams, and musical activities with groups: such structured activities are important from a resilience perspective in that they are a commitment the student is more likely to continue with during particularly challenging times, because they are not individual activities (such as playing video games, or occasionally going to the gym). Interestingly, however, the Medicine and Music students did not necessarily make a link between those activities and their self-care, and the activities undertaken by the Music students were largely focused upon their discipline. From a self-complexity perspective, this is potentially troubling: an individual’s resilience might be better supported through engagement with a variety of unrelated activities, through which the individual can develop and support their identity and values.

4.6.6 Assessment

Students were asked a general question about assessments on their course, with a view to ascertaining what their expectations and experiences were (particularly in relation to group work, in light of that theme arising during staff interviews). Students need to be resilient to cope with assessment workloads, with their inability to control individuals within a group work setting, and with the uncertainty which can come with certain forms of assessment e.g. unseen examinations. Despite the fact that methods of assessment varied across the sites (due to the nature of the individual disciplines), questions about assessment elicited broadly similar responses from the interviewees. Where preferences were expressed for particular types of assessment this was largely down to the individual: some students preferred exams, others essays, or other forms of coursework. Many students did state they appreciated a variety of assessment, and there being more than one assessment for a module, as this plays to different strengths and gives them a chance to improve if they do not get the mark they want in the first assessment.

Criticism arose where students felt there was a lack of clarity around assessment. Students wanted to understand the purpose of the chosen method of assessment; they wanted a clear assessment brief, and they wanted clarity in the marking scheme. There was a strong sense of students wanting to know what was expected of them – and in many cases feeling there was a ‘right’ way of doing something. Managing their workload was also a concern: criticism was made of assessments where interviewees felt the amount of work expected of them was disproportionate to the credit weighting, and students in some sites were concerned about assessment bunching. Across all the research sites, group work was not regarded as negatively as expected, with many students reflecting on positive experiences of group work. Geography students were particularly enthusiastic with more than half saying they enjoyed group work, but students across the sites identified a range of benefits including meeting new people; being pushed to work harder by others, and learning from others. Interviewees differed in their preference for choosing their own group and working with friends, or being allocated groups and working with strangers, but the composition of the group seemed key to their experiences. This was most obvious in Mechanical Engineering where the practical aspects of the course require extensive group work.

While students could identify the benefits of group work, particularly in learning how to work in a team, there were concerns expressed. The most common concern was that a group assessment could negatively impact on your grade, but there were also practical difficulties with arranging meetings, and with the amount of time spent organising the work rather than doing it. Interactions with other people were particularly problematic for some individuals who identified personal traits that meant they found group work difficult, for example W24 described herself as a ‘perfectionist’ who does not like group work as it does not always go the way she wants; Y33 felt he had a different method of working to many people; S23 struggled to work with people who do not achieve as highly as she does. There were also a number of inclusion concerns identified by the report authors during the interviews: there was reference made to problems working with international students for whom English is a second language, and some female students in Mechanical Engineering felt that they were sometimes perceived by male students as being less able with practical activities.

Finally, three of the five Biological Sciences students interviewed identified issues of performance anxiety, predominantly linked to giving presentations. S26 said she does not handle pressure well,ough exams and presentations. She particularly identified feeling a lot of pressure in presentations where she has to answer questions in front of people, and ‘tries to avoid those situations like the plague.’ S21 and S23 both had anxieties around public speaking in front of their peers. S21 said it was better in front of strangers because ‘they don’t know you, they’re never going to see you again.’ She also said ‘If you do it in front of people you know, they’re going to see you around and if you mess up they can … In the back of your mind you’re thinking that they’re thinking about it, even though they won’t be’. S23 worried about standing up in front of people who are ‘basically just judging you.’ The only other site where performance anxiety arose as a particular theme was Music, where three of the six interviewees referenced it (C30, C23, C26). C23 regarded himself as being a perfectionist, and said he would welcome more School support with performance anxiety underpinned by perfectionism. C30 experiences performance anxiety to the extent that they are unable to do solo performances.
C26 noted a sense of being comfortable with performing if it was not being assessed.

4.6.7 Feedback

Feedback can be important from a resilience perspective because it is a means through which students can learn how to improve for future assessments. However, in order for it to be effective for learning, they have to believe they can improve, and the feedback has to be delivered in such a way that they understand what is required of them (and how they might act upon that feedback next time). Students who approach feedback with a ‘growth mindset’ (namely, the belief that it is possible for them to improve, and that their performance or ability is not a fixed entity – see Dweck (2012)), could have more to gain from positively and proactively engaging with feedback.

Students were, therefore, asked broad questions about their feedback, in order to provide the authors with a sense of what their experiences of it, and approaches to it, had been. It is of note that in response to questions about feedback students generally talked about feedback on summative assessments and feedback from staff members.

Some students stated that they would like more feedback; the suggestion was made at more than one site that the feedback received varied according to the individual staff member (inconsistency was an issue as students compare feedback with their friends), and also the type of assessment. Exams in particular were identified as an area that interviewees wanted more feedback in, and they also wanted individualised feedback on group work. Most, but not all, students were aware that they could approach staff members to discuss their feedback in more detail, however while some students felt confident and willing to approach staff regarding feedback, this was not the case for everyone.

There were students at all the sites who did not understand how to engage with feedback, or the reasons for doing so. Many students described reading the feedback to see if they agreed with the mark they had received and would only approach staff if they were unhappy with that mark – either because they were disappointed with their results and wanted to achieve a higher mark in future, or because they did not agree with it. While for some this was a prompt to address an issue they were aware of, others perceived a barrier; it was suggested that the message was you go and see staff if there is a problem, which makes it harder to approach someone if there is not a problem.

It was evident that some students were unable to engage with feedback as a way of informing future work, for example. G21 would not engage as the work is ‘finished’ now; S21 said they did not see how feedback helped as they were ‘not going to get that question again;’ C22 also felt that it was ‘gone’ – you just need to work harder next time. Where students did understand how to use feedback to inform future assessments they described making notes of what to repeat next time, finding areas for improvement and filing feedback to review before their next assessment. Generalised feedback was identified as useful by some. In contrast, assessments where they did not know where they had gone wrong, particularly multiple choice exams, were identified as frustrating as they do not know what they need to work on.

Some students reported making use of wider support available through the University in response to feedback, including seeing the literary fellow in their School, or making use of Skills@Library for example.

4.6.8 Most enjoyable parts of university

Interviewees were asked this question partly as a way of ‘easing’ them into the interview (coming, as it did, fairly early on within the hour most interviewees and interviewers spent together), and partly to see which aspects of future students’ university experience might be particularly supported (enjoyment being linked to resilience – see 4.6.3). It was also thought that this would be of broader interest to the Schools taking part in the project.

Across the sites responses most commonly referenced some aspect of the independence of university life including; living independently and gaining relevant skills (e.g. cooking, financial management); independent study; being able to do what you want without someone checking in on you; and managing your own time.

Aspects of study, including co-curricular activities, were also identified as enjoyable, including specialising in one subject area and working with others who are passionate about that subject; learning more about what their career might be like; and taking advantage of a wealth of opportunities to get involved in things. Students in Medicine were particularly likely to reference aspects of their studies as the most enjoyable part of university.

Interviewees were also enjoying the social side of university, particularly the opportunity to meet people from different backgrounds and cultures.

4.6.9 Employability

Engaging students with resilience-enhancing or -supporting exercises and environments is potentially of value to them not only during their time at university, but also in assisting them with their transition to the workplace. A recent Student Minds Report (2017) found
that the transition between university and the workplace was a challenging one, and that most graduates in their sample did not feel they had received advice on that transition from their university. Preparing students for employment in a way which encourages them to think not only about their future desired career, but also about how they will manage that transition, could be a resilience-enhancing activity for those graduates once they enter the world of work.

There follows an overview of responses given to broad questions about employability activities and messages across the sites:

Geography students had the broadest range of career ambitions of any of the research sites (4.2.1) and generally reported that advice and support for employability was available to them if they wanted to make use of it, referring to a range of employability initiatives by the School. Music students similarly referred to examples of School activities to support their decisions about future careers. These Schools were not generally perceived as pushing a particular career route.

Students in Biological Sciences were aware of information and support provided by the School but those who had ruled out a career in science seemed to perceive initiatives from the School as being of less interest to them. Two interviewees also discussed negative messages they had received about science as a career, referring to the low public opinion of scientists, research being a struggle financially, and some sexism in science.

Mechanical Engineering and Law were, probably unsurprisingly, seen by students as closely aligned with particular careers and, while students still felt there was a lot of employability support available, they tended to view School initiatives as focussed on those careers. Mechanical Engineering students reported that the School placed a lot of emphasis on the year in industry and Law students felt a push towards commercial law. Students in both Schools spoke of the competitive nature of these professions and the need to take early action during your university years to gain relevant experience, but this was felt much more keenly by Law students.

Following discussions in the staff interviews about ‘what it means’ to be a medical student, specific questions around this aspect of employability were asked of the student interviewees from the School of Medicine. Two aspects of this were mentioned repeatedly: professionalism and privilege. Professionalism referred mainly to standards of behaviour expected outside of the School, predominantly around drinking and social media. Interviewees saw themselves as privileged to be on the course; that they should not take the position for granted and have to adhere to higher standards than other students.

4.7 Malleability of resilience

As discussed within the introduction, resilience could best be seen as something which is not static, but rather open to change over periods of time: ‘The transactional and dynamic nature of resilience suggests that it is malleable across different developmental periods’ (Luecken and Gress, 2010:248). During the interviews, a number of points at which a student’s resilience might be malleable were identifiable: some of these have previously been highlighted elsewhere in the report, but all of those possible points are collected here as a point of reference.

(a) Transitions

4.7.1 From school / college to university

The challenges associated with students transitioning into the first year of university study are well-documented (e.g. Burland and Pitts (2007); Barron and D'Annunzio-Green (2009); HEPI and Unite Students (2017)). The most common challenges experienced by interviewees when reflecting upon their transition into university related to the different relationships with staff at university as compared with school (where they typically felt they were known in some way); the different way of learning and of being assessed; and difficulties with first year accommodation. There was a sense of loneliness and isolation experienced by many interviewees when they reflected upon their first year living arrangements, despite the fact that independence was cited as the most enjoyable aspect of university by an overwhelming majority of interviewees. Interviewees made vague references to those who they shared accommodation with ‘being unlike them’ (without further expanding upon what they meant by that), and discussed adopting a variety of tactics to avoid the setting (most commonly, going home a lot at weekends, but also wandering around the city and working excessively).

4.7.2 Transition throughout university

Where interviewees referenced the transition through university it was typically in a positive manner, with interviewees reflecting on getting to know people more (both staff and students); better understanding the requirements of their course; adapting to more independent working and managing their time better; and gaining confidence. One positive identified by a number of students was the opportunity to specialise more as they went through their programme and so were focussed on the subject areas that most interested them. Many interviewees had also learnt to manage expectations of themselves and felt they had gained perspective on their studies. Students who had experienced problems in their accommodation in first year had usually moved into shared accommodation with...
friends in second year and so, while shared living was not without problems, they were much more settled in their homes than before.

Some students did identify problems with the transition from first to second year; most commonly this was feeling the difference in work (both quantity, and the standards required). It was also suggested that because of the focus on supporting first years academically and personally, second years can feel such support is lacking once they progress beyond that stage.

4.7.3 Transition to post-university life

In the main, reflections on what happens after university were related to careers and employability. While most interviewees had some idea about the sort of work they wanted to do, they did not generally seem to have given much thought to other aspects of post-university life. While some students were concerned about the competitiveness of the career they sought to enter or the perceived implications of making long term decisions, they were not, in the main, worried about ‘what is next’. A minority of students were considering further study post-graduation but their motivation for doing so varied; S22 was looking to ‘avoid going into the real world,’ C30 was considering postgraduate study to prolong the student lifestyle; and Y33 suggested that studying abroad was a way for him to avoid having to get a job for another year. In contrast, while Y35 wanted to do a PGCE, she was clear that she wanted to avoid student life during that year.

Some interviewees described awareness of the limited time that they have at university: C22 was conscious of the range of opportunities open to them and that they are ‘not going to get this many opportunities again’; W24 felt pressure to make the most of their time here: ‘it’s only going to be three years and you never get that time back.’

In the School of Medicine the transition to post-university life was not really on the radar of interviewees. This could be due to the extended length of their studies, or because the nature of their course meant they did not have the same concerns about seeking employment.

4.7.4 Transition to independent living

Many students identified independent living or moving away from home as one of the most enjoyable aspects of being at university, including because of the freedom to make decisions for oneself, and feeling like this presented an opportunity to grow up (S21, S22, S24, S26, G21, G31, G23, G28, E23, E25, E29, E33, C22, C26, C30). There were, of course a number of common issues which arose in respect of that transition to independent living.

4.7.4.1 First year friendship / accommodation problems

Some students reported positive experiences in their first year accommodation: G23 perceived himself as being quite lucky as he had got on really well with his first year housemates; G34 had moved into second year accommodation with people from first year halls; and G36 also had made friends in halls. However, as might be expected, other interviewees complained about the noise and mess associated with living with other students (W26), particularly during exam periods (W26, W21); while the Medicine students particularly focused upon personality-related conflicts (not sharing interests with other students (E30), having different personalities (E21), living with students with less busy timetables (E21, E29), concerns about a ‘hostile’ environment in halls (E29), and different expectations for socialising and sleep (E21)). Finally, accommodation in general was a source of stress / unhappiness for many Music students, either in first year (C20, C23) (to the point of considering dropping out – C20), or in the second year (transition to living independently, large number of people, house care – C25, C23, C26).

Moving into second year was largely seen as a positive step: for example, several of the Biological Sciences interviewees were living with other science students who they saw as supportive, while many Medical students chose to live in a mixed or non-medic household.

4.7.4.2 First year isolation

Social isolation in first year was a theme for students in particular sites, notably Biological Sciences. Three of the five interviewees had experienced social isolation in first year. S23 did not particularly get on with her housemates or with the friends she initially made, so spent time in her room, or focused upon work: ‘I found it really hard, just because I came thinking that, because everyone always tells you it’s the best time of your life and you meet all your lifelong friends and you have a fabulous time, and I just kind of, came thinking that me and my housemates that were in my flat would be really good friends and that we’d all get on really well and we’d do loads of things together and…you know, if it wasn’t for the course, to be honest I probably would have dropped out…I knew nobody here, I mean like, nobody. There were two people who were supposed to come, but they both didn’t make the grades, so they went elsewhere, so I came and I just didn’t know anyone and I fell in with a, not the wrong group, but I was friends with people in pretty much the most the first and part of second semester who weren’t really the kind of people that I wanted to be friends with, we just, we were just very, very different…and so I found it quite hard, I just felt like I was away from like, my friends and my family and my boyfriend and I was in this new place and I just spent a lot of time in my room, like you know, I tried to do sort of, activities, but it’s quite hard to do things on your own.’
It is of note that despite feelings of isolation in first year, S23 still reported that it was ‘nice being away from home’ due to difficult family circumstances. S22 was not close to her flatmates in her first year and did not have any good friends in accommodation, so she spent a lot of time in her room and would go home a lot more in first year as a result. S21 felt left out by her flatmates quite a lot in first year, so she spent a lot of time seeing her boyfriend or going home (which she now regrets, because she did not get to spend time doing things with people in Leeds).

W27 also reported isolation in first year, while G29 had experienced loneliness in first year as they had lived alone (second year was less lonely as they were living with one other person). Students in the Geography site did not refer to the same feelings of isolation in first year, although one (Y37) had found the first year experience difficult because of a rather transient population in her halls. This interviewee was of the view that your experience in halls goes a long way to determining how much you enjoy your overall experience at university: if you are happy where you live, you are more likely to enjoy everything else.

4.7.4.3 Practical challenges

Finally, a number of interviewees reflected upon an array of practical challenges associated with independent living, including managing finances (S21, G28, E25); or organising and managing a household (G27, E25, Y33, C20 – noted the amount of time it takes just doing ‘adult things like washing’). S21 and S22 both identified occasions when ‘mum’ had helped out with practical aspects of independent living: S21 had found preparing food difficult when stressed about other things and mum had calmed her down; S22 said her mum comes over to help with shopping as she ‘can’t be bothered carrying fizzy drinks back from the shop.’

Finally, G36 generally felt there was less of a support network at university.

4.7.5 Family / home relationships

The majority of students reported supportive, positive relationships with family members or others at home. There were a number of themes around those relationships though, and these themes can help to provide some context for some of the issues which might arise through e.g. mitigating circumstances. Understanding that family and other home relationships are fluid and often part of a larger process can assist universities in understanding the basis of particular family/home-related anxieties which might, on the face of it, appear to be relatively minor when initially presented by a student.

4.7.5.1 Relationship tensions

A number of interviewees reflected upon tensions within their relationships with family members, most of which meant that ‘home’ was not necessarily the place of respite and recuperation that it might be presumed to. W25, for example, had a long-standing poor relationship with her Mum, including a two-year period when they did not communicate at all. She said they still did not get on but they do at least speak, since she left home. S23, meanwhile, did communicate with her family but home was not always an easy place to be outside of term-time. She described the family relationship as having been poor when she was younger and had felt she was responsible for emotionally supporting her younger brother, giving an example of a time she helped him (then aged four or five): ‘...this one time my parents were having this massive row and it was really upsetting him, and we sat in a different room and I had my hands over his ears and I was just sitting there and thinking he’s got someone to put hands over his ears and I don’t have anyone to do that. So that was really hard to deal with that myself and then look after him a bit.’ Family dynamics were still affecting this student and she reported that it can be stressful going home as a result, even just for a weekend. She stated that her family lose all ability to organise themselves when she is there, she ends up getting involved with the arguments her parents have, acts as a mediator, and takes on a lot of the stress of the situation. Some of this would also encroach on her university life: during term-time she had received an email from her mum, who was unhappy with their relationship. They had sorted this out but she said there is always ‘drama or work’ with her family.

Two of the international Law students reflected on the changes which had come from moving a long way from home. W34 said that, prior to arriving in Leeds, she was compelled to live at home by her ‘strict’ parents, she said her Mum was not enjoying her being away from home and referred to communications at a distance – she knows if dad rings that she is ‘in trouble.’ She felt pressure from them academically but also suggested that, after experiencing problems at A Level (when she had initially been forced to study particular topics), they were learning to compromise and find a solution. W23 had not felt able to ask anyone for help when she was struggling early on in her degree, including her parents, having spent a lot of time telling them she wanted to be independent and to move away. Finally, W35 described changes in her relationship with her sister: initially it had worsened since coming to university as her sister had taken her (bigger) bedroom and she had wanted it back when at home, which was a cause of arguments.

4.7.5.2 Relationship transitions

Although relationships were sometimes strained because of interviewees having left home, various interviewees did also reflect upon
improvements seen in some of their relationships. G23 had seen an improvement in his relationship with his family now that he has space from them; he found it less stressful as they could not check on when he is working and said that the respect has improved both ways; C20 and C22 both referenced their relationships with family (siblings and parents) as having improved since they left home; S22 reported that she gets on better with her sister when they live apart; E29 reported getting on better with family due to not being at home (fewer arguments).

Two interviewees were distancing themselves from home for separate reasons: Y28 stays in Leeds over the holidays, referring to the fact her bedroom is bigger here and there are no siblings to annoy her. Similarly, Y33 noted that he and his girlfriend now stay in Leeds over the holidays, including over Christmas, because they have found it difficult to be in someone else’s house now that they are used to independence.

4.7.5.3 Adapting to different relationships

Some interviewees reflected upon the tensions between home and university life, particularly around families missing each other (S21, E33, E21, Y36, W23, W21, W35). For many of these interviewees, there were particular reasons why they missed those family members e.g. E33 was missing out on a younger brother growing up; E21 was used to being the baby of the family and always having people around, while being at university means now being alone; W23 struggled with how much her siblings are spread out they are around the world; W21 had found it difficult to leave his mum (a single parent) and had chosen Leeds as it was not too far from home; W35 also felt bad leaving Mum at home as she was the last to go (Mum and Dad having separated); Y36 said he found it strange in his first year when his sister was studying abroad: he found it difficult having her so far away, particularly because she suffers from anxiety. E26 meanwhile, did not reflect upon missing family members, but upon having to adapt to balancing university with caring responsibilities for a dependent.

Some students saw a contrast between home and university relationships. W32 referenced being different at home to elsewhere: she felt more comfortable in family company, and thought people elsewhere might think she is ‘stuck up’ because she does not say much. W36 had found that she has changed in comparison with other friends at home since coming to university.

Finally, W24 said family ties may affect her choices after university: she may stay in Leeds to look after family (due to cultural expectations or norms), although she described them as supportive if she does go to London.

4.7.5.4 Bereavements and relationships

Four students placed particular emphasis upon how bereavements experienced during their time at university had impacted upon their family relationships. W24 had spent a lot of time with family members recently after a bereavement; W23 referenced the death of a family pet at home and the fact she struggled with it – felt she could not talk to her family because they were all upset, and did not want to mention it to friends because it is not a ‘big deal’ to most people and they would not understand if they do not have pets. G37 referenced a bereavement in the family and having to evidence the fact someone had died, in order to be granted an extension: she had to ask her Dad to email the University and he had questioned why she was getting an extension; she felt he – and the process for gaining that extension – did not help her at a difficult time.

(b) Pressure points

Throughout the interviews students identified a range of pressure points which could impact on their wellbeing and test their resilience. Key pressure points included independent living (see section 4.7.4), experiences of dealing with failure or disappointment, some of which occurred at university (see section 4.3.5), assessment periods (see section 4.6.6), and academic challenges (see section 4.3.8). In addition to these previously explored pressure points, there were a number of others of note.

4.7.6 Less enjoyable parts of university

Having been asked about their favourite parts of university, interviewees were also asked about their less enjoyable parts of university towards the beginning of the interview. Those matters referred to were not necessarily a major focus of the remainder of the interviews for individual students, but there were nevertheless themes which emerged across the data set as a whole:

Academic challenges were a concern in many cases including the volume and constancy of work (S24, W34); some course content (S22–has not enjoyed/been interested in some modules; G21-maths focus; E23-particular modules academically challenging; W31–but knew he would not enjoy it all; C23-focus on the academic to the detriment of training to be a musician; Y26-first year not very interesting and no choice); teaching and learning activities (E31-does not like just sitting in lectures; W30-some approaches to teaching, particularly opinions being stated as fact); group work (W24, G37-sometimes); difficulty in asking for help (W32), and trying to fit in academic work and co-curricular activities (Y31 – can become an ‘overload of stress’). Several interviewees particularly cited aspects of
assessment as one of the less enjoyable parts of university including general difficulty in motivating oneself to complete assessments (C22, C30); volume, bunching or constancy of deadlines (S24, Y36, Y29, W24, C26); exams (G23, G26-exams all at end, G21-learning how to revise for exams); absence of assessments/contact time to target reading towards (Y35); unfamiliar forms of assessments (Y29); inconsistency in staff behaviour, whether in returning feedback or in giving guidance about assessments (Y23, Y28); having to submit assessments without having drafts looked at (W35).

In some cases, students referenced issues of transition in their academic life including having different relationships with staff in previous educational experiences (G26-less staff contact than foundation degree; W35-no-one checks up on you, W22-not much interaction with personal tutor; W32-lecturers more intimidating than at college-difficult to ask for help); used to being top of the class and suddenly you are not (S26); course much more difficult than A-levels, feeling like you are always catching up (W23); overwhelming number of people compared to foundation year (E30); ‘culture shock’ – did not know what they were coming to – would have liked to have been more prepared but does not blame anyone for this (G21). Some students were finding the transition from first into second year more of a challenging transition (W36-more pressure, less support; W26-workload/stress).

Several interviewees referenced accommodation and independent living challenges; getting used to living away from home (Y33); first year accommodation (S21, Y37); money management (S21, G27, G28), and no access to a car (G27 – described this as an inconvenience, rather than not enjoyable). This seemed part of a broader pattern of interviewees finding the transition to university difficult for personal as well as academic reasons. Several students had found forming relationships difficult initially and several described themselves as having been lonely or as generally finding making friends difficult (W32, W26); having difficulty forming friendships on their course (W22, Y26-finds peers ‘pushy and bossy’); difficulties as a mature student (W27); finding people can be difficult to engage with – ‘I found that a lot of people are quite frightened of talking, quite frightened to engage;’ (W32). G29 had lived alone in first year, and although they live with one other person this year they spend 40 minutes per day commuting to university (on foot) alone.

Other less enjoyable aspects of university were identified as the weather (W28, Y25, G31); concern for others – seeing people she is close to struggling with the workload (W25); disappointments, particularly in respect of being rejected for e.g. vacation schemes – upsetting and disheartening (W21); lack of structure sometimes experienced on wards; having to ‘wing it’ (E26); alcohol consumption amongst other students (Y25); and depression and anxiety issues impacting upon ability to work and study within certain settings (Y24).

W33 said there was nothing really that was less enjoyable, and referenced being ‘lucky’ with their course and friends.

4.7.7 Dealing with expectations of self and others

Expectations might impact upon resilience in a negative way if combined with other features. For example, self-determination theory would suggest that an individual who is primarily extrinsically motivated is less likely to persevere with a task than if they are intrinsically motivated. In the context of students and the expectations of others, if they are, for example, undertaking a particular degree because it is expected of them, or if they are undertaking a number of activities alongside that degree because they are expecting to please others by doing so (e.g. undertaking work experience in a particular field because it is desired by family members), they are less likely to be fundamentally happy about doing so (and could, potentially, persevere less in the face of difficulties). Similarly, students whose burden of expectation comes from within could encounter difficulties from a resilience perspective if they are expecting high things of themselves but have low self-efficacy (belief in their capacity to achieve them).

It is notable that students in Law were far more likely to refer to the expectations of their parents or family than students in any other site: more than half of the Law interviewees reflected on family expectations and how family dynamics affected them. Parents were perceived as being pro-higher education in some cases (W21-Mum (single parent) has referenced how she has worked in order for him to be able to go to university; W35-parents see her as the driven one, she is going to be the successful one compared to her sister – feels shame if she does not do well) but less supportive in others (W25-parents were not supportive of her studying law – does not discuss university with them; W27-parents did not understand him coming back to study, fine with it now but do not discuss it with him). Expectations around academic achievement were discussed in several cases: W35 reported that she will feel that she has let her parents down if she does not achieve as they have high expectations of her – they were proud when she came to university and are proud when she gets good grades; W22 was feeling the pressure of doing well for her family, not least because her sister had done well; W34 (international student) was conscious of the financial cost of her studies to her parents and felt they subsequently expected good results; W30 attributed how hard she is on herself academically to her parents (if she got 95% on a test they would ask what happened to the 5%), and to the fact that academic performance is an area of her life where she has not ‘messed up.’ W32 was the first in her family to attend university and was finding the pressures of family expectation difficult to handle ‘that just gives you a further height to fall from ... it is a big pressure when everybody is relying on you to do well.’

It also appeared that for some Law interviewees career choices were influenced by families; W34 had been pushed to study science as her Mum wanted her to be a doctor and had had to renegotiate university plans after doing poorly in her A-levels; W22 said her Mum...
would not understand why she did Law if she did not then become a lawyer; W35 described the ‘job’ that her sister did and wanting a ‘career’ for herself; W36 felt influenced by watching her sisters struggling with ‘intense’ jobs – she wanted more balance. In contrast, W24 felt her family were supportive of learning for learning’s sake, although she reflected this was unusual in her culture where many young people faced family barriers to attending university, unless they chose a subject with clear links to employment.

Parental or family expectation was not reflected to the same extent at the other research sites. Parental expectations were referred to in a few cases by Mechanical Engineering students, but there was no sense that these were viewed as particularly problematic: G34 had been influenced to do a professional course of some ‘standing’ (limited job opportunities through e.g. studying languages, art); G23 reported that when he had failed an exam in first year his parents attributed it to him messing around; G29 said Dad was proud of him because he shares the same interests. In Biological Sciences S26 referred to a sense of pressure to do a prestigious course (defined for her as science rather than arts), and the pride her Mum and Grandad had for her doing the course. Two Geography students referred to the expectations of parents: Y36’s Mum had high expectations of him, and Y31 said her parents were ‘alright’ with her doing Geography because they think she might end up working for the UN or something similar.

There were interviewees across the sites who referenced having high expectations of themselves (G36, G37, E29), describing themselves as ‘perfectionists’ (E21, W21, W30); and ‘obsessed’ with grades (W33). Several described having to modify their expectations of themselves since studying at university, both in terms of academic grades, and in terms of volume of work (W21, W30, W32) and some reflected on academic achievement as part of their identity. W22 had not achieved the grades required to study law initially at A Level and had found this really affected her, stating: ‘I am someone that prided myself on my academic achievement. That was the only thing I really had. That is all you have. You don’t have much else. You are not working or anything. You don’t have any other achievements. Your academic achievement is all that you have and that was just really awful.’ Similarly, S21 spoke of nearly dropping out of University- ‘I’m the sort of person where I don’t like not being good at things or being perfect. It sounds really bad but if I don’t get a first I’m not going to be happy...It’s the thought of failing and I don’t really like that.’

Expectations from others outside of the family were minimal; some students had experienced pressure during their statutory education from schools who they felt had pushed them towards a particular course of study, for example Y37 had been dissuaded from studying fashion as her school thought it was ‘for people that aren’t academically clever;’ W25 said her school were very academic – ‘it was law or medicine.’ G34 was working under expectations set by her sponsor, and potential future employer: she faces financial implications if she does not achieve a certain academic level as would have to pay back funding. W26 described the behaviour of a housemate who does law and has expectations about what everyone else will be doing – including questioning absences from university or the amount of work they have done. In the main, students did not feel pressure from staff in their Schools.

Students in the Music site did not reflect upon ongoing expectations of others in a negative or burdensome manner. Staff were generally perceived as wanting students to do well (save for by C23, who questioned that in light of perceived problems with marking), and parents or friends were not reflected upon as having expectations which were difficult to meet.

**4.7.8 Other / personal or specific support needs and challenges**

Interviewees were not asked to specifically provide examples of their particular support needs or challenges, but over the course of the interviews a number of such challenges were referred to, either directly or indirectly.

Three of the five interviewees from Biological Sciences reported specific mental health needs; these were predominantly related to issues with stress and anxiety, but also low self esteem and self worth and family problems. Two of these students had made use of counselling services/CBT; one had been prescribed medication by her doctor. S21 had considered leaving in first year as she was not happy but had told herself that she had to do it – ‘don’t like not being good at things or being perfect’ – the thought of dropping out and not finishing something they had started was upsetting, as was letting parents down.

In Law, two of the fifteen interviewees referenced periods of depression (without indicating whether there was a clinical diagnosis – W34, W23); two of the interviewees referred to making use of the student counselling service (W21, W26); one of the students was a carer to her partner and also referenced having poor eyesight (W32); and four of the interviewees referenced a recent bereavement (W24, W33, W26, W24).

Of the eleven interviewees in Geography, one (Y36) referred to depression in a vague way when discussing the need to be able to speak to people; two had mental health problems which they were receiving support for (Y24, Y31); one had a specific need for which she received formal support with a worker at the University (Y23); one was dyslexic (Y26); and one had recently suffered a bereavement (Y28).

Two of the six students interviewed from Music stated that they had diagnosed mental health problems and had undergone treatment, one for anxiety and the other for anxiety and depression. Of particular note is the resilience scores of these two students: while mental health and resilience may be linked they ought not be conflated, and in this instance they represented the highest and lowest scores from the research site.
In Mechanical Engineering two of the ten students interviewed had mental health problems (G21, G26); two had recently suffered bereavements (G37, G26); and one made a vague reference to things going on at home during A-levels which he perceived as perhaps having affected his performance.

Finally, in Medicine, one of the eight interviewees (E33) had caring responsibilities; one of the interviewees had experienced a personal issue which affected her academic studies, for which she accessed support outside of the School (E25); and E23 and E30 had both had periods of illness but had accessed support from the School to make sure they did not fall behind.

4.7.9 Reasons not to talk to someone

It is important to understand that some students choose not to talk to someone else about their concerns: some of the interviewees identified particular times that they had not sought support (without prompting from the interviewers). This is particularly relevant in helping the University to further understand why students might not seek academic, employability or pastoral support – rather than attributing it solely to an unwillingness to accept responsibility for oneself at university, or a failure to be proactive in planning ahead, we can see that there are multiple reasons for students not to engage with university support structures, or indeed with wider support structures.

A number of interviewees referenced concerns about how they might be viewed if they were to approach people with issues of concern. E29, for example, had not wanted to talk about a particularly difficult situation in her halls of residence with either staff or fellow students in case they judged her (despite the fact she had done nothing wrong). Interviewees across most of the sites also referenced a concern with burdening others, particularly family and friends, who they perceived as having their own issues to deal with. W34 referenced a specific concern about how her parents might view her, if she were to discuss her academic concerns, because they have such high expectations of her.

More broadly, some interviewees expressed concerns about how they would be viewed by academic tutors if they were to approach them about things they had not understood (although this was specific to particular sites, it was raised by multiple students within those sites) e.g. W22: ‘With the international students I speak to, I think some have said to me I think maybe he will just think I am stupid, that I wasn’t listening in the lecture or something, like, if you were listening surely you would know at least a little bit of what I am talking about. There is that let me read a bit more before I go to him or go to her;’ and W23: ‘everybody else seemed like they were doing ok...I know I’m supposed to ask for help but I can’t shake the feeling that I’m supposed to know these things, like I shouldn’t be struggling with these things.’ Similarly, she had found that students were not always willing to disclose that they were struggling academically in group work if working with people who they knew: ‘I think people fear judgement maybe. I think also because the course is so competitive I think people don’t want to feel ... I don’t know because it is just the way we are.’ As far as academic members of staff were concerned, Y33 mentioned feeling that approaching someone requires a definite question – again, this is in keeping with what a number of interviewees referenced.

The need for a personal relationship with someone from whom you seek advice and guidance was (understandably) a particular requirement for interviewees e.g. Y28 and Y23 both referenced not speaking to people who they did not know.

4.7.10 Summary of coping strategies identified throughout interviews

The most common coping strategy identified across the sites was seeking the support of family during times of challenge or difficulty. Interviewees generally chose to speak to family, but several also went to see family or arranged for family to visit them. After speaking to family, speaking to friends or partners was the next most commonly employed coping strategy. Some students would seek support from staff but this tended to be a minority of interviewees, particularly for personal challenges. Other sources of support identified included the Union and professional mental health support services (including counselling, CBT, telephone helplines and prescribed medication from GP).

Students identified the need for time out as a coping strategy, this often meant taking a break from study if that was the cause of stress. Several students reported that physical activity or exercise would be beneficial for them. Other activities which helped included sleeping; creative pursuits such as writing a journal/diary; drawing or painting; taking part in social activities; or pursuing enjoyable activities or ‘treats’ such as food, reading, listening to music, watching films or TV, or gaming. A number of interviewees said they just needed to have a cry to get it out of their system and would then feel better.

Some students reported that immersing themselves in work was a coping strategy, often as it served as a distraction. Also, where study was the source of stress some students wanted to ‘just do it’ to remove the pressure, or chose to record clear goals or create an action plan.

Sometimes students wanted to be alone, or wanted to be with people other than those causing them problems, and some identified that a change in environment would help how they felt. This most commonly was their physical environment, but avoiding the online world was also referred to. Consciously changing thought patterns was useful for some and interviewees’ techniques included rationalising a
situation, positive thinking or 'self-talk,' reading inspirational books or guidance from their religion or spirituality. Not all of the students were able to identify coping strategies however. A significant number of students described trying to avoid negative thoughts or challenges or identified that they would ‘bottle up’ their problems; some described maladaptive coping strategies such as going without meals, going without sleep, smoking or drinking, or committing to an extremely strict diet and exercise regime.

4.8 Students in the current age

Students could be thought of as being impacted by different factors than their predecessors, for example in wider use of social media. There is ongoing discussion in public forums about the differences between the modern youth generation and previous generations so (where time permitted), interviewees were asked about their views on these discussions, particularly about the terms ‘snowflake generation’ and ‘trigger warnings’.

4.8.1 Social media references

Interviewees were not asked directly about social media, and it did not arise a great deal during the course of the interviews. Where it did, it was typically in relation to maintaining contact with family and friends, and as a support mechanism for academic-related matters e.g. in Geography Facebook groups – mainly course related – were reported on positively (Y23, Y25, Y28, Y29). These were used to e.g. share thoughts on work and what they had done in relation to assessments; help each other to find buildings on campus; and generally keep on top of course matters. Similarly, in Music, C30 referred to the fact Facebook chats can be a source of communal support for students on most modules, as they can ask e.g. a third year for help, and in Biological Sciences S23 said they would use WhatsApp or Facebook for mentoring first year students. In Law, several students also referenced the usefulness of Facebook as a means of connecting with people on the course (W23, W24).

There were more isolated instances of students referring to social media in a negative way: C20 referenced Facebook as a problematic medium through which students might compare themselves, particularly in first year; and G23 referenced social media as a possible source of increased anxiety for people – comparing self to others.

G28 referenced social media containing disturbing footage e.g. of terrorist attacks.

In Medicine, social media arose in relation to the expectations placed on those students: virtually all of the interviewees explained the (higher) standards of professional behaviour that are expected of them, particularly in reference to public alcohol consumption (E21, E23, E33, E29) and social media (E21, E26, E29, E30).

In the Law site, multiple students referenced the negative aspects of social media e.g. W30 suggested that students are addicted to social media, constantly flicking between things; W23 said social media puts pressure on people, because it is more visible if you make a mistake; and W24 mentioned that she does not put achievements on social media herself, but that seeing them from others can make you feel worse at down periods. She deletes her social media accounts when she is not in a happy place emotionally (describing social media as ‘really toxic,)’ and is trying to check Facebook and emails less regularly as a time management strategy. Finally, W25 perceived social media as presenting a skewed image – ‘you’re not going to post on the internet that you’re having a breakdown.’

4.8.2 Tuition fees

It was noticeable that very few interviewees referenced fees (7 of the 55 interviewed), and those that did referenced particular reasons why they thought the fees were relevant to their point. Y23 and Y25 both referenced fees in connection with deadlines for marks and feedbacks not being met; S23 referenced the stretched support services – specifically the counselling service – in connection with fees, whilst also referring to the fact this is their home for a long period of time and they should expect to be able to see someone sooner; G36 mentioned finding it strange to pay £9000 and to sit in a lecture theatre with over 200 other students, without being able to ask questions; Y36 mentioned the general expense of university, but said it was all worth it because he was doing something he loves; W27 referred to the fact his personal tutor had not yet met him and then referenced fees as a reason for expecting that tutor to make the expected contact with him; and W34 referenced the academic pressure she faced because of the fees her parents were paying.

4.8.3 Views on ‘snowflake generation’ and ‘trigger warnings’

In many cases students had not heard of trigger warnings and needed a definition before they were able to offer an opinion; once given an explanation they were often aware of the concept but had not necessarily heard the term in relation to the educational arena. Many interviewees typically regarded trigger warnings as something which might be of some value within their academic work, but only for providing students with the opportunity to prepare themselves for the discussion, rather than giving permission for a student to ‘opt out’ of key course areas. Interviewees at Biological Sciences, Law and Medicine could identify particular aspects of their course that they felt would benefit from trigger warnings, whereas at other sites students did not generally see them as relevant to their discipline.
Many of the interviewees in Medicine presented a balanced view on trigger warnings, giving broadly similar opinions that it was good for people to be prepared and they may wish to cover the material in their own time but that they needed to cover the material for the subject they were studying (E31, E30, E23, E33). Similarly, many Law students felt that advance warnings of topics would allow individuals to be mentally prepared, rather than shocked when a particular topic came up (W28, W23), or to be proactive in finding support (W30), or their own way of dealing with the material to be covered (W34, W35). One student referenced the fact they ultimately had to study what was on the syllabus (W21).

Students across the sites displayed awareness that the diverse university population meant others might have had experiences that meant they would welcome trigger warnings (W33, Y35, Y28, G23) and that people who did not need them were not harmed by hearing them (C26, C25). Some students were critical of staff who joked about trigger warnings (Y26) or seemed to revel in showing graphic images (S26), and some pointed to particular examples of topics which may be difficult for some students to hear about without warning e.g. cancer, divorce, bereavement. One student shared a personal experience of having had an abortion a few months previously and then unexpectedly sitting through a lecture on abortion.

Some interviewees were firmly against trigger warnings. Some suggested that they could, in themselves, be triggering (C20, E25); that they treat people as mentally unstable (C23); that students just need to ‘get on with it’ (W26); or that dealing with difficult material or challenging viewpoints is part of learning and part of life (C23, W22, W32, Y24). W27 said they were in favour of freedom of speech and that people have to get outside of their bubbles and realise the world is harsh. Y33 could understand trigger warnings in certain circumstances but did not believe that students should be warned about controversial opinions, stating that they should just be prepared for the fact that not everyone agrees with each other and they should not be used to subdue free speech.

Similarly to ‘trigger warnings,’ many of the interviewees had not heard the term ‘snowflake generation’ and required an explanation (given as the suggestion that is sometimes found in the media, or on social media specifically, that students belong to a generation who are reluctant to be challenged by situations or viewpoints), before they reflected on whether the current student generation is much different to those which had gone before. The response was mixed across the sites. Overall, interviewees were likely to say they could see some truth in it, but that it was an unfair, sweeping label for an eclectic group of people.

Students who were critical of the term frequently felt that it was a generalisation which may be fair for some but did not represent all students (W21, Y37, W28). Some referenced examples of friends who were pushing themselves to do things outside of their comfort zone (C30, S26, W33, W21) or were working hard to get where they want to be (Y29), and some reflected on aspects of modern life which they felt were more difficult for the current generation of young people e.g. employment pressures; social media and the constant connectivity; terrorism; property prices (W25, W28, G23, G28, C22, C23, C26, S21). Interviewees in Medicine were particularly likely to reflect on their own experiences of studying medicine and did not feel that this term applied to them, or to their peers (E30, E23, E33).

Some students felt that older generations had faced things that they would not face e.g. Grandad was a miner (W26); or living through wars (C22, Y24); or that the current generation stayed ‘younger’ for longer (W35, W36); but they also pointed to the fact that younger people have always been viewed as problematic (G28), or generalisations which could be made about other groups, e.g. older people being grumpy (S24). It was suggested by other interviewees that people had always faced similar issues but that the younger people are more aware of wellbeing and mental health, and are more prepared to talk about it (W23, W25, C22, C26).

Students who did agree with the notion of a ‘snowflake generation’ often reflected on the place of the individual within society (Y24, G21), particularly the desire of individuals to avoid controversial opinions (W32, C23), and felt that it was important for students to engage with different points of view or do things that they might not immediately want to do (G27). However, W22 suggested that the University was already progressive in encouraging different opinions and it was not a problem to avoid having controversial speakers on campus as these could be explored outside of campus. Y28 also reflected on what challenges were appropriate: they welcomed debate around science, politics or religion, describing these as ‘open discussion,’ but felt there could be more emotional, personal matters which were different and people should not be forced to confront these.

There was some criticism of the Students’ Union and this arose more in Geography than in other sites. Some interviewees were critical of the Union banning certain things, suggesting that this resulted in others having the view of students as being ‘snowflakes’ (Y33, Y26), and that it was important for people to hear alternative viewpoints (Y33). Y26 was particularly critical of some Union decisions: ‘it’s the actions of like a few people that have managed to label a whole generation as snowflakes.’

4.9 Specific questions
These questions were asked of every interviewee and their responses are summarised below to allow comparison.

4.9.1 How would your School define success?
Student interviewees typically referenced multiple indicators of success from the perspective of their School. Most of these focused
upon academic and career indicators, including specific degree classification (First / 2.1) requirements (S26, Y36, Y28, W21, W34, W25, W27, G23, G26, G37, G34, E29, W23), and type of job or career (S26, W21, W34, W35, W36, W25, W26, W28, G21, E29, C30, C25, G23, G27). Others referred to working, or being employable more generally (Y36, Y28, Y26, Y25, C22, G28, G36, C25, S24), while some focused upon gaining internships (S26, G34, Y37, G37), and studying at postgraduate level (S21, G37, S22, G21, C26). A handful of students referred to the banners around the University campus displaying famous, successful alumni, suggesting that was what was expected of them (e.g. C25, E26, S26). Y33 suggested ‘Triathletes but that’s just ‘cause of the Brownlee brothers ‘cause they’re the only ones that you hear about. Or I don’t know. I don’t really know really like the individual cases. They’re sort of more interested in getting people to get a First and then to move on I suppose.’ Later on the same student referred to the posters of alumni around the University campus: ‘you know they had those like posters around the uni and they were just like CEO of this company or like head of the branch for this department and there doesn’t really, like I’m not sure if that would really be a success for me but clearly the university’s celebrating that.’

Students in Law, Engineering and Medicine reported particularly narrow versions of success, even when they referred to multiple indicators of it. Law students perceived the School as being particularly focused upon careers in Law, and particular types of legal careers at that (working as a solicitor in a large, corporate firm – one interviewee, W28, suggested that if you did not work in a big law firm you might be viewed as successful if you won a Nobel Peace Prize instead).

Medical students were particularly focused upon the requirements of the General Medical Council in their responses (e.g. E21: meeting the GMC’s requirements; being able to communicate to people; knowledgeable; being able to work under pressure; expected to come out relatively uniform and able to do things to exactly the same standard), although there were some exceptions to this e.g. E31 referred to the need for an ‘overflowing CV,’ E26 referred to a student who is ‘internationally renowned. Overflowing CV. Extracurricular stuff, published papers, head of every society,’ and E29: ‘They get the highest grades in the county. They defeat graduates of every other medical school...graduates Leeds with honours...it feels like my IDEALS tutor maybe is interested in your personal wellbeing and what personal success is to you...whereas I think the school...they want their graduates doing like the top thing...I matter to them in the statistics but I don’t matter to them on the level that I matter to myself.’

Engineering students regarded a successful graduate of the School as being primarily reflected in academic attainment, the acquisition of internships, and being employed, although some also referred to ‘softer’ skills (e.g. G23 – someone who is not ‘on the edge’ all of the time; G37 – has done interesting projects in third and fourth years and put a lot of work into them; G34 – been involved in some university projects, received awards, placement in good companies, also be a bit different – maybe created new programs).

Such narrowness contrasted with students of Geography and Music in particular, where students typically regarded the School as wanting them to develop in a variety of ways as people (not just academically), and to feel as if they had options in the future. Having said that, a range of interviewees thought the focus was on emerging from the degree having had positive academic experiences (Y36, Y23, W23); to have developed oneself and/or one’s skills (E33, G29, G31, W30, W23, Y35, Y29); to have ‘good marks’ (S24, Y35, Y23, W30); to have done the best they can (Y35, Y31); and to be doing a job you enjoy (C20). Some referenced a perception that Schools wanted them to be happy with their choices and life (G23, Y23, C23, C22).

4.9.2 How would you define resilience?

Student interviewees, like staff, were asked to provide their own definition of resilience, in order that we might begin to identify how this nebulous term is understood amongst the student body. The definitions given across all of the sites were analysed and grouped under three headings. Although some responses might have been categorised under two separate headings, they have been categorised according to the theme which seemed to be at the core of what they were conveying in their answer.

4.9.2.1 Perseverance, coping, or ‘bouncing back’

In keeping with definitions given by staff, students overwhelmingly favoured a definition of resilience commensurate with ‘keeping going,’ or ‘carrying on.’ In Music and Biological Sciences, all student interviewees defined resilience in this way; there was a little more diversity across the other sites. It is particularly worth noting how few of the student interviewees referred to seeking external support – resilience seemed to be viewed as about the individual.

- C20: pick yourself up, get back on the horse, put things behind you, move on.
- C22: keep going if you get knocked back, not let it bother you and just keep going.
- C25: bounce back, not let it get you down, not think ‘oh, I can’t do this and then not deal with it.’
- C26: stay functioning, carry on, maintain a level of whatever you deem to be successful.
- C23: keep going whatever life throws at you, how you respond, personality, upbringing, get through it, struggle, getting back to what you want to do, adapting to a change to what you want to do, strength of character, ride out the storm, unwavering conviction, Winston Churchill.
• C30: not breaking down when things go badly, cope with hard situations.
• S24: coping, moving on from situations.
• S23: cope, adapting to situations, keep who you are constant by being resilient whatever situation you’re in.
• S22: put up with something, not let something bother you, relates to how you put up with situations.
• S21: bouncing back after something goes wrong, coping with things.
• S26: how well you’re able to cope with certain situations.
• G23: how you deal with something unexpected, how well you cope with it or handle it.
• G28: the ability to carry on through hardship.
• G37: ability to spring back after taking a knock, pull yourself together and keep going with life, stay happy instead of suffering, going on.
• G36: the ability to jump back on your feet after something difficult and be ready to do it again.
• G34: ability to withstand challenges, stand up, try to fight back, try again.
• G31: how well you bounce back from something, how well you feel in yourself.
• Y36: I think resilience is your ability to overcome a challenge, how you deal with it, whether the challenge changes you or whether you carry on like you were but you just climb over the obstacle or whether you adapt to be able to get through it I guess.
• Y33: Just being able to handle a lot of stuff that isn’t positive I suppose. Just if you’re strong, which is sort of synonymous with like strong and withstanding.
• Y31: how you withstand or try to overcome certain obstacles or certain difficulties that you come across.
• Y28: I think it’s how well you handle negative things happening and how you pick yourself back up again and keep yourself going, get it rolling again after it’s been taking a blow.
• Y35: I feel like it almost to do with perseverance in a sense ... I don’t know, like more like your approach to persons ... So I’d say it’s about like about how your attitude to commit to something so kind of to do with perseverance, like I feel it’s not necessarily that you would persevere but it’s not that you wouldn’t -- I feel like it’s quite dependent on individuals. Like for some people it would be to completely drastically change something whereas some people would persevere and push through.
• E31: Get up, do what you need to do and keep doing it. Find a new way, do it again tomorrow if there’s a barrier. Keep chipping away at it and eventually you’ll get there. (Separately to the direct Q, referenced family members as being resilient because they ‘get up, keep going. It’s alright, sort it out later, worry about one thing at a time’.)
• E23: the strength or will or skill you have to come back up after being knocked down for whatever reason, to carry on with your life as normal if things go wrong.
• E25: how well you cope with unexpected situations, not acting out of emotions rather than logic.
• E21: ability to bounce back after knocked down, whether academically or personally, being able to deal with things as they come, not giving up, bouncing back and dealing with the next thing.
• W21: facing challenges and keeping going, making sure you do not just give up, try and make the best out of the situations which you might feel are not going to your advantage.
• W35: bouncing back, come back from hard times stronger and better, achieve even though you have been challenged.
• W23: ability to go through the ups and downs of life without them stopping you from progressing, moving forward, ability to keep progressing, even when things push you back.
• W24: bouncing back from something, could be internal rather than external, overcoming something.
• W36: ability to pick yourself up and how long it takes.
• W25: just keeping going, strong mentality, having a strong support system. Keeping going. ‘You are going to be sat on a railway station and you are not going to go anywhere.
• W28: how well you put up with the hard times, how well you pull through in situations.
• W30: being able to withstand and move on from sort of rejection and negative experience and, you know, marks that were not as good as you expected.
• W32: How you come back from something, how you dust yourself off and start again and how you work through things and what you learn from them.
• W33: withstanding challenges, picking yourself up and dusting yourself off and not letting it bother you to a great extent. Using it as
a learning curve.

4.9.2.2 Toolkit / strategy / situational

- G29: how tough the person can be before they get a mental breakdown or just give up on anything, someone who is more resilient will be more logical about the problem rather than crying.
- G27: would link it to studying, the commitment people have to their studies and the drive that they pursue that commitment with. A truly resilient student would have a genuine interest in what they were doing, and wanting to do well (not necessarily in the sense of wanting to outperform others). Students forced into a particular degree might struggle more.
- Y26: Using strategies to manage situations. I don’t know, like feelings and personal situations like group situations, like what you do.
- Y25: The ability to positively overcome a challenge or something that is, that makes you unhappy and, for example, by asking for help or do it your own way or, yeah. Having like the motivation I think ... like maybe just try to improve it but like don’t get stuck in your mind for too long, which might affect your other things, other ability to work.
- Y24: I’d probably frame it in terms of trying to stay objective and rational in the face of every reason to be emotional and vulnerable. A path to being resilient is probably trying not to be vulnerable to external factors when it’s unnecessary. Sometimes, it’s necessary to forge relationships or whatever but facing hardships is probably best dealt with by putting things in context and being objective. I’d probably define that in terms of how to tackle it, rather than what it is, per se.
- E30: your ability to bounce back when things don’t go your way, think about other options or ways you can go about it.
- E26: set of traits, some of which are learned and some of which are innate – a set of traits which enable you to deal with things. I think it’s situation based, and based on the amount of training, and it’s in response to how you deal with things.
- E29: being able to forget something if you’ve had a bad day and have a good day the next day. Being able to realise if something goes wrong it’s not the end of the world and other things are still going to go right.
- E33: deal with difficult situations, move on from them. Come back from failure. Have motivation long term and keep going even if there are ups and downs.
- W26: how you deal with situations, how strong you are, are you proactive in dealing with things or are you just going to fall to the ground and struggle to get back up.
- W27: being able to deal with difficult situations and get on with them, whether on your own or seeking help. Working your way through that difficult situation and getting out the other end.

4.9.2.3 ‘Small steps’

- Y29: Your ability to kind of keep moving forward. It might not always amount in a positive outcome but just able to keep moving through things and whatever that might be ... there’s lots of different things at different times aren’t there. So it’s not like you just get hit with one bad mark, it’s, there’s lots of little things, you know, like as simple as you might have had a really bad run that day or something. I think it’s just about being able to deal with those things, take one day as it comes and just keep going and how well you’re able to respond to that as well.
- Y23: if you’re at a certain level and you get knocked down, it’s not necessarily about being better but working towards getting back to where you were. And I think you don’t always have to bounce back to exactly where you were but as long as you’re working towards getting there then I think that’s good enough ... always moving forward I think when you’re knocked back as opposed to just accepting it.
- W22: the ability to keep going, doesn’t mean you should always be strong but you are always willing to keep going. Not giving up. Adaptability – being able to change under the circumstances. What can I do in order to achieve my goal.
- W31: gave a definition of what it is not – not being able to take a punch, not having self-confidence, not brushing stuff off and to the back of your mind. Then resilience is getting up and continuing, taking the knocks, getting up and continuing – taking one step forward and society pushing you back three steps and you continuing to make progress. experiencing the pain, accepting what you did wrong but taking it as it builds character.
- G21: being able to continue with things no matter what it is and to get on with it. Might not mean doing a lot, but at least continuing with some element of it, not just giving up when things get too much.

4.9.3 Question: How could resilience be supported?

Similarly to staff, students within each site were asked how they considered resilience might be supported within the University. The
responses to this question were typically quite long, hence the responses have been summarised in all except one case.

4.9.3.1 Mental health and general support

A large number of students associated resilience with mental health support, or broader wellbeing-related support, when answering this question. For example, three of the six Music interviewees referenced the possibility of specific support for mental health, which provides further – worrying – insight into what students are ‘hearing’ when the word resilience is used. Whilst resilience does overlap with wellbeing – both physical and mental – it is concerning if students consider support for ‘resilience’ as predominantly being about support through mental health initiatives. Support for resilience is broader, encompassing a wide range of relationships and activities, and we would not wish students to interpret messages about the need for them to ‘increase their resilience’ as being about needing to ‘reduce mental health problems’, for example. Interestingly, students in Medicine were more likely to take a broader view of the phrase than students elsewhere were, which is perhaps linked to the tutoring they receive on resilience as part of their programme of study.

- Y25: Links to mental health and the oversubscription of counselling services at the university. Maybe the chaplaincy could advertise the support they offer. Spread out deadlines more. Later suggests that perhaps students expect more support from e.g. counselling now because of tuition fees.
- Y24: Lengthy discussion of how torn he was over whether the University should be involved in the personal lives of students. Sees university as a setting where students should be treated like adults in the real world that have to tackle their own problems, and if your academic life is going well then your personal life should be separate to the university – perhaps more for the NHS to deal with: ‘I think it starts to bleed into each other when the halls, the lecturers, the rooms and the tutors that you’re seeing for your emotional wellbeing is tied up in your academic life ... I just think it’s very strange that at university, the period of your life that you have for three years, is designed to set you up for a career life but makes every attempt to make it as an extension of school.’
- W25: stress relief technique classes.
- W28: More wellness and mental health sort of programmes, or just fun things.
- S23: Linked to mental health. University counselling service needs to be improved (unclear as to why, then referenced medical practice and staff being off sick); mental health support at University and national level criticised – nine-month waiting list; references tuition fees and the fact University is their home for a long time in support of expecting more services; compared to housing for which there is plenty of support. Found the system of having to have anxiety – experienced at school – re-verified for University off-putting and therefore didn’t go through the process: ‘they made it really difficult for me to do that’, long process to gather letters and other evidence ‘you’ve already had to justify yourself so many times before and then, people are just questioning you’. Supportive of FBS: ‘FBS really does well to look after us, like even if it’s not through actual structured things’.
- S21: vague awareness of stress-busting class; more anti-stress measures throughout the year, not just at exam time; don’t make everything something which has to booked onto; reinforce the message that it’s ok to be stressed – ‘I think there’s something wrong with being stressed out and overcome by stress’.

4.9.3.2 More general support

- C25: more support if get negative feedback – people take knocks with e.g. performance feedback which is quite negative.
- G36: challenging people to the right level makes them more resilient – practicing overcoming things.
- G34: mitigating circumstances – believes students are allowed to misuse them – allows students to slack off, doesn’t help resilience – ‘babies’ students and they get weaker rather than stronger.
- G31: hasn’t had personal experience of mitigating circumstances but has heard from friends that School has been helpful.
- Y31: I think they already do a lot – refers to students support officers, mental health teams and medical teams. Suggests some specific support for BME students – culture and upbringing makes them less likely to talk about problems.
- Y38: More support with financial assistance in some way, an awareness of the background of students who might struggle financially.
- Y26: aware of lots of helplines but wouldn’t ever use them – they haven’t been made personal to the students through introductions, for example. Could do more to link ‘themed’ weeks such as disability week to support services available.
- W22: more explicit and regular advertising about the support which is available through the Student Support Office.
- W36: Sees shift from ‘come and see me if you have problems’ to ‘problems with the work’ – does not know who she would go to if there were personal problems she needed to discuss.
- W26: being more understanding of illness and of trying to balance seminars across the weeks, maybe do stress relief classes (although says they are already done and it is difficult to fit in with other commitments). Motivational videos on the VLE, rather than
just academic matters – references the student group Women Breaking Barriers talk as really motivational. More information about assessments.

- W27: more awareness of support services which are in existence, being aware not just of who the student support officer is but also what their role is. Maybe getting a booklet about welfare in the first year of university.

- W31: a lot of it has to be innate – it's how much mental toughness you have. Refers to counselling services, academic support hours – those help, but also about you needing to work on yourself.

- S22: University should raise awareness of things which are available; mitigating circumstances process within the School added to stress of being ill at the time when requesting it (unclear if it would be granted; passed around from person to person; if you're off-campus it's difficult to get help and know who to talk to).

4.9.3.3 Relationships

A large number of interviewees also referenced relationships as a key aspect of being able to support the resilience of students. In this context, relationships referred to staff relationships, but also to relationships between students.

- G23: perhaps extend mentoring to years beyond year one (NB – not taking part in it this year).

- G29: peer support important, teaching students to spot particular problems, raising awareness of support which is available through e.g. posters.

- E31: Medicine does student mentors (MUMS) – referenced positively as a scheme which could be used elsewhere, but suggested it shouldn’t be compulsory. Should be for those who are motivated and want to do it.

- E30: keep doing what they're already doing. Stressing the importance of the personal tutor system. Suggests not everyone gets on very well with their personal tutors and thinks the meetings are simply random – if you engage with what they have, they're useful.

- E23: tutor meetings can be helpful, but a lot of people don’t really go to their personal tutor for help – more likely to approach their IDEALS tutor because we don’t really know the personal tutor (regularity of contact). Maybe it would help if we got to know our personal tutors a bit better.

- Y37: have more than one personal tutor in case you don’t get on with one.

- Y36: references the ‘paternal’ nature of his personal tutor who has helped him a great deal through illnesses for example. LeedsforLife system is good due to the fact it’s online and discreet, gets good email response times from staff in Geography too.

- Y28: I think they could seem more friendly like with the tutor it’s more academic ... I wouldn’t even think of talking to my tutor, he’d be the last person I’d speak to if I had a personal issue so I think that would be good as well. Has had one personal tutor meeting.

- Y26: Promote the availability of the student support officer more, have reminder introductions in lectures.

- Y23: having opportunities to talk to staff about the feedback, maybe through having mass drop-in session. Refers to the fact staff won’t have time to see people individually – would help to support resilience because students would know how to improve for next time.

- W34: important to have regular meetings with personal tutors to ensure people talk – links to mental health (suggested regular meetings where you’re ‘forced’ to talk). School doing well, e.g. mental health week.

- W35: relationships – either there or not – cannot force the personal tutor relationship – felt awkward, needs to be work on it but not sure how that would happen. Would like to feel tutor knows her – always seem to talk about the same things – does not remember things about her. Law school does not understand that some people need to work.

- Y29: important to have staff who you can approach – there’s a good few she can go to. Not the same for all of her friends on other courses. The Union is also important – impartial support.

- W25: have a personal contact person – says you do not know student support officers really. Need to have someone you know to talk to – e.g. comes into lectures. Refers to people going to one staff member because they know him and he is nice.

- W33: relationships between staff and students key. Her personal resilience during a bereavement would have been better, she thinks, had her personal tutor or someone else known her better. Talks of being unsure of who else she would have spoken to about it, particularly because she feels she would have had to have known them.

- W28: maybe encourage students to talk to personal tutors more because it sometimes feels like it’s obligatory on both sides.

- W27: Personal tutors taking interest in their students – actually booking meetings they’re supposed to have.
4.9.3.4 Amendments to the programme / broader School

Some interviewees reflected upon possible changes to their programme, or to other aspects of the School in which they were from e.g. feedback, class sizes.

- G23: tailoring module choices to the individual’s preference of assessment could also help (but accepts this wouldn’t be realistic across all of the modules and students).
- E26: maybe need a clearer definition of resilience – ‘how it’s taught within IDEALS is different to how I described it.’ Could test it more at admissions stage e.g. through forcing people to diffuse a situation. IDEALS is also a good way of building resilience because it makes you aware of certain traits you have or need to have – should be repeated in later (clinical) years and demonstrate it in CPD.
- E21: possibly do teaching on it – had one IDEALS session but timing meant people weren’t really paying attention (just before Christmas) and will have forgotten it later. Teach people it’s OK to be knocked down, it’s the getting back up that counts. Have to just know how to improve next time if e.g. only get a bare pass on an essay.
- E33: perceives fellow Medical students as being apathetic towards their work at particular times of year – says accounts for lecture attendance. Lectures not always the best way of learning – a means to an end – you don’t connect it to patients. Perceives apathy as being bad for resilience because if you’re not motivated you won’t strive to constantly improve yourself. Shouldn’t drift through a medical degree.
- Y37: smaller group teaching – unlikely to ask questions in front of large groups of students. Wouldn’t ask afterwards because it seems like everyone is in a rush to go.
- W36: first year amazing but big step up to second year – almost too much support first year and the ‘dropped in the ocean’ in second year.
- G28: feedback which focused upon what you need to do better for next time will better able students to carry on and do it.
- S22: School should be clearer about what it wants from students – comparison with school where there were clear outlines and past pieces of work, examples.
- S24: more feedback on work, more meetings to talk about work.
- S26: more response to module feedback, feels like it’s not addressed.
- S24: more contact time to make it easier – practically – to get support, so that you ‘don’t have to go out of your way to do something about it’.

4.9.3.5 Messages

In this context, ‘messages’ referred to communication between students and the University, with some interviewees reflecting upon how those messages would already be supportive of resilience.

- G27: clearly articulated the challenges of keeping students at university who might not want to be here, and trying to enhance their resilience. Suggests perhaps reducing guidance on placements – suggests students are made to feel guilty if they haven’t got a clear plan.
- G37: focus on making things enjoyable, it’s meant to be hard and you have lots to learn but should also be enjoyable. References employability messages – pressure on internships – try to make it more light hearted.
- G34: thinks that School should listen to student feedback – but that students don’t always give feedback as they may look silly / feel like a failure.
- E29: seems we have to accept the pressure of the course. Maybe acknowledge this isn’t normal, it is different, and it’s okay to not be okay. You – as a student – only look at the students who are doing well and you don’t realise that nobody’s doing well at everything.
- E33: Recognises has lots of hobbies – perceived as supporting resilience – so not sure what students who don’t have those would say. They give her perspective on the wider world (and help her to relate to people).
- W21: Perhaps focus on students who are not going for top training contracts – might make them feel more valued and so increase resilience.
- W23: welfare not seen as something that only people with certain conditions need – should be part of life – all have welfare things we need to discuss – need to change how we talk about things. Messages need to be clearer – emphasise what a personal tutor is for, what office hours are – perhaps get other students to talk about it – feels more real.
- W30: compares her experience of starting her last degree with this one – staff member eased them into it by talking about when
they might start to feel miserable, trying to encourage them to learn from mistakes. Difficult given the age of students you’re typically dealing with to get them to take messages of failure on board and learn from mistakes – need life experience to be able to see beyond it. Was already impressed hearing that a bad mark is not the end of the world.

4.9.3.6 Continuation of current approach

Finally, a handful of student interviewees suggested there was little else which could be done to support the resilience of students – for them, a great deal was already being done.

• C20: University supports resilience through the opportunities to students – if you e.g. don’t achieve something, like the orchestra audition, ‘the world doesn’t stop for you.’

• E31: University already does a lot – lots of opportunities for support reaching out to students. Students have to make a decision themselves about whether to engage, should perhaps focus more on those students who want to excel. Seem to be fewer opportunities for those students.

• W24: would have recommended a lecture on overcoming rejections, but that had recently been done. School open to listening to students and to try to do something about it. Mentions deadlines being moved to assist with bunching.

Finally, W32 gave a particularly comprehensive answer covering a range of ways which resilience might be supported at university, which it is worth repeating in full:

"I think maybe sometimes being mindful of how they (teaching staff) come across sometimes, whether that is easy to do, because everybody is a natural character and you don’t always realise how you are being perceived but having kind of … an air about a person when you feel they are approachable or feel that they are not being judgemental and also being mindful about the hierarchy of the relationships that they’ve got with students, I think that would be helpful. Lecturers, I don’t think it is even within their consciousness that they think that is a problem but there is always in the student’s mind, it is my mark, it is my mark, it is what they always think about. I think if they were mindful about that, I think if they would put themselves back into that position when they were students sometimes that might be helpful. Feedback I think could be slightly more in depth which would I think would be of benefit because sometimes it is so brief and the writing is so hard to understand and time passes, you don’t get time to go and speak to that person and sometimes you don’t feel like you can. I think if the written feedback was a bit more in depth … I think if there was a coherence across all the modules. Sometimes it feels like one person does one thing a particular way, even silly things, the way they show things on VLE or kind of the approach of expectations and feeling like the modules engage with each other, knowing the workloads of each of what they set for students, I think that would help people to get hold of the situation. I think that would help with resilience. Just to feel like everybody was on the same page sometimes because it doesn’t always feel like that. And a big thing, I did mention it to [staff member] last year actually, when we do seminars I think it would be helpful if you could do some stupid task like talk to the person next to you, I hate these things, I hate putting labels on yourself and putting your name tag on, I hate all that but I know from a [previous workplace] situation we used to have to do a check in every week and it was hell because you had to spend five minutes chatting to a big group and you had to say to them how you felt and people hated it but over the year or years I did it you kind of miss it, not being able to do that, just having everybody listening to you for that minute was absolutely fantastic. It is something that you grow into. I think it helps relationships, just knowing that there is something about that person other than law, there is something going on in their life, something different, it makes you connect. I think that is important. I don’t know anything about anybody. I know they do law and that is about it. And that is what you end up talking about. Whereas if you just knew they play guitar or they went to see a show, it is a point of contact, it is something to say. I think that would help a lot of people because they just look like rabbits in headlights, a lot of people just walk around. I just thought that was just how that age is because I never spent a lot of time with that age group. I don’t know what to do with them. I just wasn’t … when I was 20 I was running a house, I had a partner who was 17 years older than me, we engaged in a different level. I just thought it was me. I just thought it was this generation. I like to see myself as somebody from the 70s, I just thought it was this generation but no, I think it is fear. I think a lot of it, when I see people, and they are just hanging onto the phone, I think it is fear. They don’t know what to do. I’ve shook people’s hands and they look at me as if I’ve ruined Christmas. They’ve never done that before, they’ve never shook someone’s hand. That is how I was brought up to say hi, nice to meet you. And that does something to me. I think I’ve made a wrong move here. And that is it, loneliness sets in. That is as much as I can say on resilience."
5. Survey data

5.1 Mean resilience scores across the entire data set

The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale 10 items (CD-RISC 10) comprises ten statements, each of which is ‘rated’ on a scale of 0-4. A total resilience score is then calculated by summing all items, giving a total score range of 0-40, with a higher score indicating a greater level of resilience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>7.25</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>26.51</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.12</td>
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</table>

Previous research where the same resilience scale has been used in studies with university students have generated the following mean resilience scores (all are cited in Davidson and Connor’s manual for the CD-RISC scale):14

• Rahimi et al’s study of medical students in Canada reported a mean of 28.8 (females) and 31.2 (males)
• Campbell-Sill et al’s study of undergraduate college students in the United States reported a mean of 27.2
• Dental students in Montero-Marin et al’s study in Spain were found to have a mean score of 27.8
• Alofa et al found Nigerian student nurses had a mean score of 26.7
• Dutch undergraduate students in Markovitz et al’s study had a mean score of 25.7
• Notario-Pacheco et al found first year undergraduate students in Spain had a mean score of 27.4

The mean score of 26.51 places the respondents to this survey in line with some of the previous research with undergraduate students, which suggests that students within the University are not comparatively ‘deficient’ as far as their resilience levels are concerned. However, what is of particular interest is how students responded to individual statements within the resilience survey. As explained previously, licensing restrictions prevent us from providing the full resilience scale within this report, but we can provide information which will hopefully give the reader further insight into particular areas of concern as far as the resilience of their students is concerned.

The ten statements measuring resilience within the survey were each ‘rated’ on a scale of 0-4. For example, when addressing the statement ‘I am not easily discouraged by failure,’ respondents could select ‘Not true at all’ (scored at 0) ‘Rarely true’ (1) ‘Sometimes true’ (2) ‘Often true’ (3) ‘True nearly all the time’ (4). Respondents had free choice as to how to rate each statement (i.e. it was not necessary to rank only one statement as a ‘1’). On average, across all sites, the statement which was scored highest was ‘I believe I can achieve my goals, even if there are obstacles,’ (average score − 3.09/4) with the statement ‘Having to cope with stress can make me stronger’ scoring ninth on average across all sites (2.45/4).

Across the sample, then, it appears that respondents were particularly concerned with obstacles to future success which were related to failure (perhaps caused by them, depending upon how they interpreted the question). The ranking of ‘I believe I can achieve my goals, even if there are obstacles’ provides further support to the sense of optimism the students who were interviewed reported. It is, however, worth considering the individual data sets within each site, as these offer further insight into the particular nature of the survey respondents according to discipline, and the extent to which those are in line with results seen across the entire sample.15

14 Partly accessible at [www.cd-risc.com](http://www.cd-risc.com)
15 We must, of course, bear in mind that the sample size of 185 students makes it difficult to draw great distinctions between students in each discipline.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Highest ranking statements / score</th>
<th>Lowest ranking statements / score</th>
<th>Further comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Biological Sciences        | 1. I believe I can achieve my goals, even if there are obstacles (3.13/4)  
2. I am able to adapt when changes occur (3/4) | 10. Having to cope with stress can make me stronger (1.94/4)  
9. I am not easily discouraged by failure (2.25/4) | These rankings are in line with the overall rankings seen across all six sites suggesting that stress and failure – which could be perceived as internalised barriers to success – were more problematic than external challenges.                                                                                     |
| Geography                  | 1. I am able to adapt when changes occur (2.88/4)  
2. I believe I can achieve my goals, even if there are obstacles (2.85/4) | 10. I am not easily discouraged by failure (2.03/4) | While most rankings were in line with those seen at other sites, the statement regarding painful feelings was the lowest ranked of any of the sites.                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Law                       | 1. I am able to adapt when changes occur (2.94/4)  
2. I think of myself as a strong person when dealing with life's challenges and difficulties (2.85/4) | 10. I am not easily discouraged by failure (2.03/4).  
9. Having to cope with stress can make me stronger (2.27/4) | The statement which came first in every other site ('I believe I can achieve my goals, even if there are obstacles') scored third in this site (2.74/4 - the average across all sites was 3.09/4).  
It is worth noting that those who had entered via the University's access scheme (Access to Leeds) featured at both the top and the bottom of the scale, and the top end of the scale was not dominated by those who had been completing A-levels immediately prior to university (whereas the bottom end was). |
| Mechanical Engineering     | 1. I believe I can achieve my goals, even if there are obstacles (3.4/4)  
2. 'I think of myself as a strong person when dealing with life's challenges and difficulties' ranking second (3.16/4) | 10. I am not easily discouraged by failure (2.46/4) | The statement ‘I am able to adapt when changes occur’ was ranked third in this site, but with a higher than average score across the sites (3.08/4).                                                                                                                                                               |
| Medicine                  | 1. I believe I can achieve my goals, even if there are obstacles (3.45/4)  
2. 'I am able to adapt when changes occur' and  
‘I tend to bounce back after illness injury or other hardships’. (both 3.03/4) | Joint 9th and 10th:  
"Under pressure, I stay focused and think clearly' and  
"I try to see the humorous side of things when I am faced with problems." (both 2.52/4) | This was the only site where the statement 'I try to see the humorous side of things when I am faced with problems' was ranked so low.  
Another point of interest is that the statement ‘Having to cope with stress can make me stronger’ was ranked fourth in Medicine, whereas the average across all six sites resulted in it being ranked 9th overall. This suggests that there is something about the mindset of Medicine students which is different to that of many others (save for Music, where this question was ranked at the same level). Within the Medicine site, students are at least practicing self-care techniques which will be of assistance to them during particularly stressful or difficult periods (e.g. engaging in sport, and balancing studying with numerous hobbies), provided they recognise them as being such. Students who practice such techniques without recognising the value of making use of them during particularly difficult periods might not reap the benefits associated with them. |

Table continues overleaf ... / ...
### Site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Highest ranking statements / score</th>
<th>Lowest ranking statements / score</th>
<th>Further comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Music | 1. I believe I can achieve my goals, even if there are obstacles (2.83/4)  
2. ‘I am able to adapt when changes occur’ (2.78/4) | 10. I am not easily discouraged by failure (1.61/4)  
9. I tend to bounce back after illness, injury, or other hardships (1.94/4) | A point of interest is two statements which ranked much higher in Music than in other sites; ‘Under pressure I stay focused and think clearly’ was ranked third in Music, compared to eighth overall, and ‘Having to cope with stress can make me stronger’ was ranked fourth in Music, compared to ninth overall. This suggests that there is something about the mindset of Music students which is different to that of many others when dealing with stress and pressure.  
This site saw an unusually low score for ‘I tend to bounce back after illness, injury, or other hardships’. This was unusually low as compared with the other sites, where it placed between seventh and second, with an average score varying from 2.78 to 3.03. This suggests there is a particular issue for Music students in overcoming the issues described within that statement, certainly as compared with other students. |

### 5.2 Correlations between the resilience score and the variables across all sites

There was no correlation found between age, gender, access route to university, activity prior to university, caring responsibilities and resilience score.

When all the research sites were analysed together, non-disabled students demonstrated higher levels of resilience than disabled students. Additionally, across all the sites, EU and International students as a group were shown to have higher levels of resilience than Home students. However, these were based on relatively small numbers of each group, and thus it is difficult, based on this sample, to draw the conclusion that resources definitely need to be focused upon particular groups of students sharing particular characteristics.
6. Recommendations

Within this report, resilience has been approached as a characteristic dependent not only upon the individual, but also upon their surrounding circumstances. While it is incumbent upon the individual student to take ownership of, and responsibility for, their own learning, wellbeing and self-care, for example, universities and educators more broadly can influence the resilience of those students during their time in contact with them.

If we visualise an individual’s resilience as a spider’s web, with each section of that web relating to a core part of that individual’s life and identity (family, friendships, academic life, working life, home life, financial position, physical health, mental health, hobbies, and so on), then we can begin to see how many possibilities exist as far as both the support for, and the undermining of, resilience are concerned. An individual taking a ‘hit’ within multiple sites at the same or similar times will potentially begin to appear ‘less resilient’ to outsiders – and, of course, how quickly they take that ‘hit’, and how much it affects them, will vary from individual to individual.

Universities are, of course, able to influence all of those internal and external factors underpinning an individual’s resilience. Universities do, however, have influence over some of those factors including, but not limited to, the educational context in which the students operate; the university’s student support mechanisms; university accommodation; assessment and feedback; personal tutoring; and general relationships within the Schools which the students are part of. The recommendations discussed here focus upon those areas over which universities do exert some control, and specifically upon issues which arose particularly prominently during this research. Any recommendations acted upon will, of course, require careful evaluation, whether at School, Faculty, or University level.

In drafting these recommendations, the authors have adopted a guiding principle, namely ‘What do universities want to be challenging, and why?’ This principle requires reflection upon current educational and support practice, and reflection upon whether the approaches currently in place are a) challenging and, if so, b) necessarily so. University ought to be challenging: the transitions into, and through university, help to prepare students for future transitions they will experience in their lives; assessments ought to be challenging in such a way that maintains academic standards, and ensures students are stretched intellectually; the skill of time management ought to be refined through the challenge of maintaining academic work alongside the co-curricular activities which are not only expected by employers, but which also help to make students more rounded citizens. The question is whether all of the challenges currently experienced by students at this and other universities are necessary: do they serve a pedagogic purpose, or a purpose which in some way prepares students for graduate life?

6.1 Personal tutoring

Interviewees across all sites reported very mixed experiences of personal tutoring, and it is clear that consideration must be given to how best to address the absence of consistency in approach between personal tutors, absence of any contact between tutor and tutee and, in some isolated cases, an apparent absence of interest in tutees on the part of tutors. The University has an excellent online resource, LeedsforLife, which provides personal tutors with online information about each student; a system for recording attendance and meeting notes; and specific questions tailored to each meeting throughout the academic year. Tutees also have a pro forma to complete prior to each tutee meeting, with each meeting being focused upon particular aspects of the student’s life (tailored according to the stage of university the student is at). However, evidence from this research suggests that personal tutoring remains inconsistent and that, even where a relationship is established between the tutor and tutee, the regularity of meetings is insufficient to ensure that this relationship is as strong as it might legitimately be expected to be. Staff and student interviewees alike recognised the importance of regular contact between people in forming a meaningful working relationship, with students often focusing their attention on those staff who they saw most regularly (for example, within Medicine, students typically approached a tutor who they saw weekly for one course, as opposed to contacting their personal tutor). Such a situation creates difficulties for the students in deciding who they ought to be contacting about pastoral matters and references, and it also creates a disparity of work between members of staff. Staff who are primarily in place to teach those students (rather than to offer ongoing pastoral support), acquire additional work through the quasi-personal tutor relationship developed, leaving the actual personal tutor (whether engaged or not) less to do in respect of that relationship.

Although tutees bear some responsibility for ensuring their relationship with their personal tutor is a healthy one (through, for example, attending meetings), it was clear that the point at which relationships with tutors broke down (or rather, did not ‘get going’) was typically within the first semester of first year. This is not a point at time in which students can realistically be expected to challenge tutors and to request the correct number of meetings are held: not only are there obvious power dynamics at play in such a situation, tutees themselves are not always aware of the number of meetings they ought to be receiving (even where that information is provided, it arrives alongside a plethora of information about e.g. other forms of pastoral and academic support; their programme; and about specific modules). In short, expecting students to take responsibility for holding tutors to account at that stage of their university careers is both inappropriate and unrealistic.

One possibility would be to remove personal tutoring from the remit of academic tutors, instead creating dedicated ‘Personal Tutoring’ positions for staff with specialist experience and training in the fields of support, mentoring, coaching, and counselling, who could work alongside existing Student Education Services staff. Tailored support could be provided to individual students, including through more regular meetings, with academic staff being left to focus upon matters pertaining to their subject matter only. This would, however, not...
remove the possibility of academic staff with whom the students developed a good relationship (through regular contact in class), being approached for pastoral support.

If the current personal tutoring model is to be maintained, then ensuring absolute consistency in approach (particularly in terms of the extent to which personal tutee meetings are personalised to the individual student), is unlikely to be achieved. However, striving for greater consistency is a laudable and necessary aim. University investment and commitment to this area would send a strong message about the seriousness with which personal tutoring is approached at the University, with the LeedsforLife framework providing a solid base upon which to build a more consistent approach. In particular, consideration should be given to how personal tutors are currently selected and trained, and whether alternative models might be appropriate (such as allowing staff to ‘opt-in’ to becoming a personal tutor, with appropriate academic workload allocation; and moving away from presumptions – where they exist – that academic staff on Teaching and Scholarship contracts should be those with primary responsibility for being a personal tutor). All personal tutors (regardless of the extent of their prior experience) ought to be given compulsory training for their role, with additional ‘update’ training on developments within the LeedsforLife system, within the local and central student support structures, and in disability awareness (as just three examples of particular importance), being provided on a regular basis. Aspects of such training might feasibly be provided through online resources, rather than always being delivered face to face.

In addition to training and selection issues, consideration might be given to a personal tutoring model which incorporates additional meetings to those currently required under the Leeds system, and which moves beyond the current (primary) focus on academic and employability matters. One possibility, outlined below, could contain a mixture of individual and group meetings, as well as utilising the University’s ability to provide online support through the desktop capture facility (referred to below as ‘podcasts’). Through this example model, contact time could be increased across all of the years of study, in light of the transitions students typically experience when they enter university and as they move through the years. This example model is by no means uncontentious: the additional meetings, and expanded focus of those meetings, would require significant staff buy-in (which might be assisted through promotions criteria explicitly recognising the generation of a positive student education culture, of which personal tutoring could be a part), additional workload allocation, and additional personal tutoring training. Doing so would, however, send a powerful message about the significance of personal tutoring at Leeds.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting timeframe</th>
<th>Year one</th>
<th>Non-final years from year two onwards</th>
<th>Final year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductory week</td>
<td><strong>Group meeting (year one members only): welcome, introduction to the role of the personal tutor</strong></td>
<td><strong>Group meeting (year two and above mixed group): structured discussion around academic and personal aims for the year</strong></td>
<td><strong>Group meeting (year two and above mixed group): structured discussion around academic and personal aims for the year</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2/3</td>
<td>‘Getting to know you’ individual meeting: getting to know the student, not only in terms of academic and employability goals, but also e.g. family, hobbies, personality. What do they want to get out of semester one?</td>
<td>‘Personal reflection’ individual meeting: assessment and feedback from year one; values - who do they want to be by the end of year two; strategy for engagement</td>
<td>‘Personal reflection’ individual meeting: assessment and feedback from year two; who do they want to be post-graduation; what do they need to do to get there during their final year?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 7/8</td>
<td>Individual meeting: progression through semester one; checking on health and any accommodation (issues are not always known/appreciated in the earlier meetings)</td>
<td>‘Personal reflection’ podcast to the group: encouraging reflection upon week 2/3 strategy and reminding them of availability of additional meetings to discuss that strategy</td>
<td>‘Personal reflection’ podcast to the group: encouraging reflection upon week 2/3 strategy and reminding them of availability of additional meetings to discuss that strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 10/11</td>
<td>Individual meeting: reflection upon semester one and planning for the Christmas break</td>
<td>Offer of a non-compulsory individual meeting</td>
<td>Offer of a non-compulsory individual meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 14/15</td>
<td>‘Welcome back’, podcast to the group, including a reminder that individual meetings can be made outside of the formal, structured meetings</td>
<td>‘Welcome back’, podcast to the group, including a reminder that individual meetings can be made outside of the formal, structured meetings</td>
<td>‘Welcome back’, podcast to the group, including a reminder that individual meetings can be made outside of the formal, structured meetings; reminder of anything else Schools need finalists to be aware of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 6.2 Staff

The connection between resilience and relationships is clearly made out within the literature, as discussed within Section Four, and the reflections of both staff and student interviewees bore testament to the perceived link between relationships, and overall happiness and satisfaction within the University community.

The role of student education services staff, and their relationship with the students in their particular School/Faculty, is of particular importance to the resilience of the students. It is they who the students will frequently seek assistance from, including with regards to timetabling matters, mitigating circumstances, personal problems, employability support and advice, accommodation issues and study skills. Students in the sites focused upon for the purposes of this research shared some common characteristics (for example, many found first year isolating, and across all sites there were students who had not had a positive personal tutoring experience), but there were also multiple differences between them. For example, when defining academic success, Geography students were more concerned with the qualities and attributes they should be able to demonstrate at the point of graduation than Law or Biological Sciences students were; Mechanical Engineering and Medicine students demonstrated fewer competitive traits than Law students; Music students – unlike most of the other students – had structured leisure activities which typically revolved around their degree; Law students were more likely than any others to refer to the negative effects of social media, and the pressure of wanting to please others through academic and other achievements. Similarly, there were differences between the staff in the sites.

A detailed understanding of the specific learning environment and context in which students are operating is an invaluable quality in all staff, particularly those with whom the students will have a great deal of contact, for the aforementioned reasons. Such stored institutional knowledge is, however, at risk of being lost when Student Education Services (SES) staff leave a Department, School, or Faculty. While replacement staff can, of course, familiarise themselves with that environment, an emphasis upon retaining existing SES staff with that experience should be a priority for the University, including through a promotions structure which encourages staff to be promoted within their existing roles.

### 6.3 Messages – what are students hearing?

#### 6.3.1 Before university

The opening pages of this report referred to the fact that there is a limit to what we, as a University, can influence as far as the resilience of our students is concerned: ‘we get what we get’ was one of the guiding principles for this research project, reflecting the fact that students will arrive as they are, with the University then being able to exert influence over some aspects of their resilience (such as their personal and academic support networks; the configuration of the programmes, assessments, and feedback; and the messages they receive about ‘success’). It is nevertheless possible to exert some influence over who arrives at the University, certainly for those Schools and Faculties where competition for places is more acute. Sites are doubtless already conscious of their messaging to prospective applicants and their parents/carers on open days, for example, but this report could provide impetus for some sites to reflect upon whether the messages given at that point accurately reflect what they wish those applicants to hear and to act upon, once they become students of the University. For example, an excessive focus upon the help and support which is available, without appropriate reference being made to the need for each student to take responsibility for their own learning, could generate a perceived gap in the ‘support’ provision in the eyes of some applicants further down the line. A recent Higher Education Policy Institute Report (2017) illustrated the gap between what applicants expected of university and the reality of the typical undergraduate’s experience, with 60% of respondents anticipating that they would spend more time in lectures than they did in their classroom at school, and 53% of respondents expecting there to be more support for mental health issues at university than at school. These are just two examples of how the expectations of applicants do not reflect the majority of undergraduates’ experiences of university, and suggests that there is broad work to be done in
preparing those applicants for university. While such preparation can come from schools and colleges, as well as from contacts with prior experience of university, not all applicants will have access to such sources of information. Open days and promotional literature regarding university can therefore usefully ‘set the scene’ for how students might expect to support themselves, and to be supported, once they embark upon their undergraduate degree. This is discussed further in section 6.4.

6.3.2 Resilience

The term ‘resilience’ is frequently used within and outside of the University when discussing students but (as explored within the Introduction), there is no agreed definition of what the phrase is intended to encompass. Students are seemingly expected to be resilient in respect of adapting to new ways of studying; in adapting to changes within University systems; in becoming familiar with multiple forms of assessment; in managing their relationships with a range of people; in balancing employment with studying and other aspects of university life; and for their future, post-graduation, lives.

In light of this, and in light of the absence of any agreed definition of what it encompasses, it was important to see what students perceive the term to mean: section 4.9.2 demonstrated that students typically perceived ‘resilience’ as being about coping, persevering and keeping going. This can be seen as a positive quality: indeed, Duckworth (2017) places great emphasis on the importance of ‘grit’ as an indicator of success, both within the academic realm and outside of it.

However, the students’ reflections upon resilience were troubling for four reasons. Firstly, focusing upon an individualistic quality of ‘coping’, at the expense of considering wider contextual indicators and explanatory factors of success, does perhaps result in too singular an explanation of such success. Perseverance in this way has its limitations as a desirable quality, and not all of the research points to a clear link between ‘grit’ and academic outcomes (see e.g. Zimmerman and Brogan, 2015). Secondly, students did not typically see ‘persevering’ as being something they would do with support – in this regard, they appeared to view their resilience as something for which they were entirely responsible, and for which they could not currently seek support. Thirdly, a ‘resilient’ individual is arguably one who can reflect upon the need to alter one’s approach, and perhaps to accept that an alternative course of action is required. ‘Persevering’ or ‘keeping going’ do not imply that such reflection is taking place, but rather imply that there is a need to run through a metaphorical brick wall in order to demonstrate ‘resilience.’ Fourthly, the notion that resilience might be supported through mental health initiatives of some sort – as suggested by a large number of student interviewees – hints at a conflation between resilience and mental health. As noted previously, the conflation of mental health (with its specific focus) and resilience (which, the authors would argue, should encompass a broad range of behaviours and support mechanisms), is potentially problematic. It suggests some students are hearing ‘mental health’ when they hear the phrase ‘resilience,’ which could mean that, for some at least, there is an assumption that ‘to be more resilient’ equates to ‘having fewer mental health problems.’

The use of the term ‘resilience’ must therefore be exercised with some caution, and certainly alongside a clear explanation of what it is considered to encompass. It is therefore proposed that the University develop a working definition of ‘resilience’ for use within internal materials and training. A useful starting point would be:

“Resilience is an umbrella term encompassing the networks, support, skills, reflective practices, characteristics, and experiences students could draw upon to navigate a range of challenges during their time at University. Most students will experience such challenges – whether related to their university experience or not – and the resilience of each student in the face of such challenges will depend not only upon matters personal to them (for example, their prior experience of such challenges, or particular characteristics and skills which they might have), but also upon broader external factors, such as university and home relationships, the configuration of their programme, the student support mechanisms in place, and how transitions into and through university are managed.”

6.3.3 Success and failure

Interviewees within all of the sites were typically able to identify times when they had ‘failed’ at something which was of importance to them (although it was notable that responses typically related more to disappointment than to ‘failure’). Such examples were, as might be anticipated, typically ones which could be overcome (e.g. a failed driving test could be taken again), or navigated around (e.g. underachieving in a particular AS level saw students drop that subject). It was also notable that, across all of the sites, the statement on the Connor-Davidson resilience scale on which students typically scored lowest was ‘I am not easily discouraged by failure’, which suggests that students would benefit from reflection upon ‘failure’ (or perhaps ‘disappointments,’ with their less terminal implications), and exploring how to handle those. Resources focused on such matters are already in use at several universities, including Harvard.

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16 Indeed, the HEPI report noted the ways in which expectations of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and those who were the first generation to attend university, typically varied from those from higher socio-economic backgrounds, or who were not the first generation to attend university.
University, Stanford University, Princeton University, and Smith College. The authors propose the creation of bespoke resources for University of Leeds students (which the authors would be able to design and co-ordinate, in conjunction with relevant university teams), utilising consenting alumni, current staff, and (in exceptional cases) current students as the subjects of those resources.

In designing such resources, it would be important to be mindful of the privilege associated with failure: on a practical (if not necessarily emotional) level, it is easier to fail if you have a strong financial support network, no dependents, and/or other options available to you in order to assist in circumventing or overcoming that failure. ‘Modelling of failure’ resources must therefore reflect a broad range of staff, students and alumni, who can discuss failure from a range of perspectives, and bring a range of backgrounds to bear on those reflections.

In some sites, there was a disconnect between what staff seemingly wanted students to hear about ‘success,’ and what students were seemingly hearing (whether from the School itself, or from the University as a whole, communicated through the Alumni banners for example). Consideration should be given to institutional messages at School, Faculty and University level, potentially with a view to ensuring the desired messages are received by students, and the multitude of ways in which ‘success’ might be defined are communicated.

### 6.4 Support and self-care

In light of the challenges many interviewees identified with transitioning into university, particular focus should be paid to development of ‘Welcome to Leeds’ self-care resources for both students and their parents / carers. In addition to providing detailed information about programmes of study, assessment, feedback, accommodation, and other matters detailed at the standard ‘Welcome and Arrival’ page, students might usefully be provided with information about the ‘softer’ side of university, for example that it is normal to feel anxious and unsettled, and information about strategies which they might adopt to work through such challenges. Such strategies should include a reference to the importance of structured activities away from their programme of study, not least because (from a self-complexity theory perspective), having multiple identities or interests can support an individual’s resilience. Particular focus might also be placed upon maintaining broader wellbeing at university, not only through exercise but also through diet and sleep,

Finally, consideration might be given to how to support tutors and other staff who are in regular contact with students whose mental health (and/or other) conditions are such that existing or even enhanced services are unlikely to prove satisfactory. Although rare, there were examples of student interviewees in this sample who had been offered a range of types of support, including extensions or advice, particularly around mental health (both staff and students painted a picture of services stretched, although these interviews did take place prior to recent changes to the configuration of the services offered through the student counselling centre); drug awareness; and supporting BAME and widening participation students, whose needs might not necessarily be met by conventional approaches to support, and to support structures.

This research also suggests that there is a particular need for the University to consider how best to support students requiring specialist support or advice, particularly around mental health (both staff and students painted a picture of services stretched, although these interviews did take place prior to recent changes to the configuration of the services offered through the student counselling centre); drug awareness; and supporting BAME and widening participation students, whose needs might not necessarily be met by conventional approaches to support, and to support structures.

Finally, consideration might be given to how to support tutors and other staff who are in regular contact with students whose mental health (and/or other) conditions are such that existing or even enhanced services are unlikely to prove satisfactory. Although rare, there were examples of student interviewees in this sample who had been offered a range of types of support, including extensions and counselling, but had consistently perceived what was offered as inadequate. Supporting students in this position is likely to be a particular challenge, and consideration might be given to how to support tutors without specialisms in mental health to work with such students.

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17 [https://successfailureproject.bsc.harvard.edu/alumni-interview-project](https://successfailureproject.bsc.harvard.edu/alumni-interview-project)
20 [https://www.smith.edu/cwl/resilience.php](https://www.smith.edu/cwl/resilience.php)
21 [http://students.leeds.ac.uk/info/21503/welcome_and_arrival](http://students.leeds.ac.uk/info/21503/welcome_and_arrival)
22 A separate, small-scale study of first year students at the School of Law – conducted in 2015-16 – revealed that students experienced increasing amounts of sleep deprivation throughout their first year of study, frequently due to anxiety about work rather than because of excessive socialising, for example.
23 Although issues around drug consumption by other students rarely arose during these interviews, where it did arise students were typically concerned about telling anyone in authority e.g. a personal tutor, for fear of becoming ensnared in any criminal investigation. This tallies with anecdotal evidence from tutors, whose students have been reluctant to report issues at the time for the same reason.
24 See further the HEPI (2017) report, which noted that applicants from socio-economic groups D and E felt ‘less prepared both to make friends and to manage living with strangers. In addition, 22% of these applicants also expect more support resolving disputes, compared to 16% of all applicants’ (at 22). See also Hamilton (2016), whose study of forty-one female students and their families at one University in the United States found that parents in the middle or lower socio-economic brackets were more likely to be categorised as ‘bystander’ parents (as opposed to e.g. ‘helicopter’ parents), and that their daughters were more likely than others to experience difficulties during and after university. Hamilton suggests that this is due to a misalignment of parenting styles and institution type: ‘Having a bystander parent did not have to cost women so much. Things could have been different in a different institutional context … The problem was that bystander parenting approaches aligned poorly with Midwest University – a relatively expensive school with weak academic advising, an array of majors of varied quality and market value, and a seductive party scene. Students could not effectively navigate such an institution on their own, without encountering serious roadblocks to mobility’ (at 185).
6.5 University spaces and communities

A theme of isolation and loneliness within the first year of study emerged from the student interviews. Where that was experienced, it was typically connected to first year accommodation: while the condition of the accommodation itself was not a source of difficulty, the relationships students were (not) able to build was. The research reinforced the importance of future building priorities placing emphasis upon communal areas for students, and ideally a movement away from self-contained ‘pods’ (rooms with bathrooms in which students can cook, sleep and relax, without ever having to encounter another student): such communal spaces, in which students are compelled to interact with one another, are vital for students to have the opportunity to form relationships with their housemates. It is accepted that this might go against market demands within Leeds, although it was notable that the Higher Education Policy Institute (2017) reported that 88% of applicants expecting to live away from home said that living with people they liked would be more important to them than the specification of their accommodation.

Similarly, future building priorities for renovated or new School and Faculty spaces should include designated areas for student support officers, where students can be seen on a one-to-one basis and in an undisturbed manner (i.e. not an office which is ordinarily a shared one/used by someone else); as well as communal space for students and staff to utilise together. The opportunity for staff and students to meet in such an informal manner, whether in passing because it is an area used by students for working, or in an orchestrated manner (e.g. the social events Law and Music organised within their respective Schools), assists in contributing to the generation of a sense of community. Not only is this an important element of resilience, from an instrumental perspective it is also now one aspect of the National Student Survey. There was a notable difference between how engaged staff with such communal areas were with the student societies most closely affiliated with their programme: while such communal space is not entirely responsible for the culture which is built and maintained, it could certainly contribute to it.

On a related note, consideration should be given within Schools as to how engaged the management of the School currently is with the student society, and whether greater engagement (for example, through monthly meetings with committee members), might assist in generating a sense of community amongst the students and staff. Such engagement would also assist in ensuring such societies are representative of the broader student body within the School, rather than reinforcing stereotypes about what a student of a particular discipline is like (particularly for those students who, for a variety of reasons, might already regard themselves as ‘other’ as compared with their fellow students). More broadly, all university societies should consider inclusivity policies as a model of good practice.

6.6 The academic life of students

A particular theme amongst the students was that of failure, as noted in section 6.3.3. One response to the apparent concern about failure would be to place students into challenging situations from a very early stage of their programme, with and without academic credit being attached. For example, one alteration made to a module in Law as a result of these findings has been to put the students into groups in their first seminar in week two or three, and to (without warning) give them fifteen minutes to prepare a (non-assessed) five-minute presentation on a topic of their choosing.

Another theme was how students responded to, and used, feedback. Although some did reflect upon feedback when writing new assignments (in order to avoid previous errors), interviewees typically reported using their feedback as a way of checking that they agreed with the mark they had been given. Where they did agree, even if the mark was lower than they had expected, they would not necessarily see this as an opportunity to be learned from: instead, it was something that could no longer be changed, and was in the past. Furthermore, interviewees continued to regard feedback as something provided in writing and on formally assessed work, as opposed to understanding that feedback is continuous and given in a variety of ways. Learning that feedback is something received, overtly or otherwise, on a daily basis (whether through assessments, through requests to phrase emails in a more professional manner, through suggestions that independent research is required before seeking guidance on academic matters, or through comments made about contributions in class), could assist in altering the students’ approaches to written feedback. Although staff might think they are already making this message clear, the findings from this report suggest that those messages are not getting through. Just as we require students to reflect upon current approaches and to re-evaluate where those approaches appear to be deficient, the same must be true of those working within student education. Further research might usefully consider how to incorporate engagement with feedback into the curriculum and/or into the personal tutoring system (e.g. into class / meeting time; requiring students to write a reflective log about their feedback and what they have gained from it), particularly within a growth mindset framework.

25 For example, one alteration made to a module in Law as a result of these findings has been to put the students into groups in their first seminar in week two or three, and to (without warning) give them fifteen minutes to prepare a (non-assessed) five-minute presentation on a topic of their choosing.

26 Of course, it is acknowledged that the professional and other requirements of some programmes might not make this universally possible.
Finally, further research would usefully consider how to encourage students to engage with support over a range of matters (including, but not limited to, feedback). In particular, consideration could usefully be given to the language of academic and pastoral support invitations: interviewees noted that they were not certain about approaching staff if they did not have a question, but rather simply felt uncertain about a particular issue. As one example, the phrase ‘Come and see me if you have any questions,’ which would typically be used by staff at the end of classes, will not necessarily result in engagement with some support.

6.7 Conclusion
Attempts to further support the resilience of our students, both for their time at the University and for their future working and personal lives, must be regarded as an institutional (as opposed to entirely individual) responsibility. All staff bear some responsibility for this, whether they are, for example, teaching students; designing support mechanisms at an institutional level; responsible for student education and engagement strategies; responsible for Estates; supporting students within Schools; Heads of School; working within Human Resources; or designing staff training, all staff within the University have the potential to positively influence the resilience of our students. Students themselves also bear responsibility for doing so, particularly through better understanding self-care techniques, reflective practices, feedback, and the importance of engaging with opportunities available to them at university. There are numerous reasons why not all students will be on the same page as far as responding to such opportunities is concerned though, and it is important for the University to understand there is no magic bullet as far as the resilience of our students is concerned. Tweaking individual components of a student’s life at university will not necessarily result in a significant change in the experience of that student, just as attending a one-off workshop focused upon ‘resilience’ will not see that student emerge as at a point of ‘peak resilience,’ from which they will never descend. Rather, supporting and building resilience requires the investment of time and energy into the multifaceted arena that is a student’s life.
## 7. Appendices

### Appendix A – Staff interview questions

| Teaching and learning | Tell me about teaching and learning for first year students within your School: how many contact hours would they have each week? What would this be made up of (seminars, labs, lectures etc)? How big would groups be?  
Tell me how teaching and learning changes as students go into second year: how do contact hours, type of contact, class sizes change?  
How much choice do students have in modules – in first year? Second year?  
Do you have anything in place to help students transition to university – eg core module content, e-learning units etc. Is there an emphasis on independent learning within your School? If so, how do you instil that in the students?  
Which aspects of student education do the students respond most positively to, in your experience? |
| Assessment | Tell me about student assessment in your School – assessment methods, range, choice of assessment.  
How is feedback given to students within the School e.g. on paper, verbally?  
Please could you outline the mitigating circumstances and extensions processes within your School.  
How are students within your School classified at graduation? For example, does the final year ‘count’ for more? Are all summative assessments within the School graded? Are some pass/fail, for example?  
What have you observed about how students in your School respond to the assessment strategy in your School? |
| Pastoral support | Do you have personal tutor ‘weeks’ – how often? Do you know how many students see their personal tutor when they are supposed to?  
Which staff would a student go to in the school if they were encountering difficulties of any type?  
How are students made aware of what support is available to them in the School?  
What sorts of personal issues do students approach staff in the school about?  
What sorts of academic issues do students approach staff in the school about?  
How much / what sort of guidance is given to personal tutors about meeting with tutees?  
What sorts of reasons do students typically give for being absent from University, in your experience?  
What sort of training and what sort of support is available for tutors dealing with the additional needs of students? Does it exist only at University level, in your experience? |
| Success and employability | Tell us about employability initiatives / guidance in your School. – what happens, at what points in their studies, how much is embedded / co-curricular?  
Tell me about the aspirations your students have – is there a clear career path, how many of them do you think want this? How many don’t know?  
How would you define success for the students in your school?  
What does a successful graduate of your school look like?  
What factors contribute to the success of the students, in your experience?  
Have you observed any themes amongst students who don’t engage with the School, its students and/or its staff? For example, do they typically come from a particular programme of study, or are they a particular age? |
| Co-curricular activities | What co-curricular activities are promoted / arranged / supported by the School?  
Do you have an active student society – what do they do – how does this fit in with School activities? |
| Resilience | How would you define resilience?  
How do you think the resilience of your students could be enhanced? |
| General | What is Your School most proud of relating to teaching and learning? In general?  
How do you think your School (or the University) could improve the experience for your School’s students?  
What sort of opportunities are there for students to give feedback to the School, and how might that feedback be used? |
Appendix B – Student interview questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background questions</th>
<th>Can you tell me a little about your path towards studying (your programme) at the University of Leeds?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How did you choose this programme of study? Did you receive advice from anyone? Was it your choice to study it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What have you most enjoyed about University so far?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What have you found least enjoyable about University so far?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic life at University</th>
<th>Have you experienced any academic challenges on your programme so far? What coping mechanisms, if any, did you adopt?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What sort of relationship do you have with academic and support staff in your School?</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal life</th>
<th>How do you cope with your personal challenges, those outside of your degree? What coping mechanisms, if any, do you adopt?</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tell me a bit about your friendship group, or groups. What do you use those groups for? What’s your role within them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What kind of relationship do you have with your family?</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>What do you like to do in your free time, during term-time and outside of term-time?</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Employability and success</th>
<th>Which career or profession would you like to go into?</th>
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<td></td>
<td>What sort of impression do you have from your academic environment about that profession?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What would ‘success’ in your academic life look like to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What would ‘success’ in your personal life look like to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you think a ‘successful’ graduate of your school would look like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If I asked you to imagine your future, what would you say?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you feel optimistic about your future?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Co-curricular activities</th>
<th>Are you involved in any co-curricular activities at University? Can you tell me about them, and why you became involved with them?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do you manage your time at University, if you're involved in activities away from academic work?</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More about you</th>
<th>If I were to ask someone close to you, who knows you well, to describe you, what would they say?</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And how would you describe yourself?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have you ever failed at something which was important to you? If so, how did you respond to that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do you respond to situations of pressure?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How do you respond to negative feelings like sadness, fear and anger?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
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<th>Resilience</th>
<th>How would you define ‘resilience’?</th>
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<td>How do you think your resilience could be supported by the University?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student in the current age</th>
<th>Have you heard of the phrase ‘trigger warning’? What is your view of trigger warnings?</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have you heard of the phrase ‘snowflake generation’? What do you think of that phrase as a description of younger people, including students?</td>
</tr>
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</table>
**Appendix C – Biological Sciences site data set**

The full data set for students at this site can be found below. Those in **red** were interviewed. Those in **black** either declined an interview or did not respond to requests for an interview. Those in **green** did not leave their contact details for interview. All except for S26 were BSc students – S26 was the MBiol student.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Resilience Score</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Home / EU / International</th>
<th>Primary activity prior to University</th>
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Appendix D – Geography site data set

The full data set for students at this site can be found below. Those in red were interviewed. Those in black either declined an interview or did not respond to requests for an interview. Those in green did not leave their contact details for interview.

<table>
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Appendix E – Law site data set
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Appendix F – Mechanical Engineering site data set
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## Appendix G – Medicine site data set

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## Appendix H – Music site data set

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Appendix I – Bibliography


