

# Distributed resilience? A networked approach to fostering student resilience

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## Introduction

The concept of resilience has taken root across a wide range of research, practice and policy contexts over the past decade, with everything from bacteria to ecosystems to ideologies being re-framed and re-imagined in terms of their ability to bounce back from shocks and withstand ongoing pressure. From these roots a body of work on what it means to be resilient, or seek to foster it in others, continues to grow; indeed, this concept, which originated in “ecological thought”, has “in the last decade become one of the key political categories of our time” ([Neocleous, 2013: 3](#); see also [Chandler, 2014](#)). It is now a truly “influential and society-wide construct” ([Martin, 2015: 117](#)). That one concept can be operational in so many different contexts inevitably raises questions about exactly how we coherently define the term and the extent to which meaning, interpretation and application can be shared across such different contexts (see [Sehgal, 2015](#)). This paper represents an attempt to critically explore the basic contours of ‘resilience-thinking’ in higher education, focusing particularly on the potential it represents and the problems we might pay heed to when considering its use in part-time and distance learning contexts. Reflecting largely on a critical engagement with the literature and then briefly on aspects of development work with students and staff at the Open University, this paper outlines a case for a relational interpretation and networked application of resilience in higher education.

## What is resilience?

The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that resilience is the “capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness”. A little more texture on this is offered by [Luthar et al \(2000: 543\)](#), when they write that resilience is “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity”. It’s clear from such a definition why resilience has piqued the interest of many within higher education. As [Wells and Claxton \(2002: 28\)](#) argue, resilience is now considered “one of the key qualities of the effective real-life learner”. “Resilience”, they continue, allows a learner to “stay intelligently engaged with a complex and unpredictable situation ... persist with learning despite temporary confusion or frustration, and to recover

from setbacks and failures” ([Wells and Claxton, 2002: 28](#)). While thinking around resilience is far from coherent or consistent – [Kooken et al \(2015: 1\)](#) are not alone in noting that “there does not seem to be a consensus on the definition of resilience or how to study it” – there are a few recurring themes permeating research and practice in the area.

Firstly, and most importantly, it is widely argued that resilience is “not a quality that is innate or fixed. Rather, it can be learned and acquired” ([Gu and Day, 2013: 25](#); see also [Jindal-Snape, 2015](#)). Secondly, it appears that resilience can operate at different scales and different intensities in relation to the same individual or group within the same context, apparent both in moments of temporary crisis and over more sustained periods of stress ([Walker et al, 2006](#)), in response to both minor and/or major events ([Martin and Marsh, 2009](#)), and that this is determined by the interplay of a series of internal and external ‘risk’ and ‘protective’ factors ([Richardson, 2002](#)). Resilience is, therefore, commonly conceived of as an inherently “dynamic, contextual construct” ([Walker, 2006: 256](#)). Lastly, it is widely assumed that resilience is a marker of strength and toughness, largely, and sometimes exclusively, to be found within the individual, and that such qualities are necessarily ‘good’ ([Martin, 2015](#)).

That “recent approaches have moved away from both universalistic and deterministic conceptions of resilience as ‘inherent’ or ‘pre-existing’ personal traits of an individual or group” is important, and, even more vital, is that this move has been accompanied by a shift in focus towards “the recognition of locality, communities, and the continuous development and negotiation of identities and autonomous selves” ([Caruana et al, 2011: 2](#)). The definition offered by the [UK Higher Education Academy \(2016, no pagination\)](#) confirms this, and tentatively begins to flesh out some of the factors which can influence the development and function of resilience in students; noting specifically the importance of “the creation of their adult identity”, “examinations”, “everyday peer pressure” and “the long-term uncertainty of their careers”. Being resilient, then, is about constructive adaptability in the face of *multiple and concurrent* challenges. In essence, it’s about negotiating *transitions* (see Pegg, forthcoming).

### **Multiple and concurrent resiliencies**

Transitions are a “fundamental feature of life” ([Field et al, 2009: 2](#)) for part-time and distance learners, experienced on multiple fronts concurrently, at different scales and intensities, by individuals as they enter, negotiate their way through, and leave higher education (see Pegg, forthcoming). If we accept that resilience is about positive adaptation in response to

challenging situations, then it is impossible to disentangle the concept from the notion of transition set out above.

Most part-time and distance learners juggle a number of roles, with 'student' being only one among many ([Butcher and Rose-Adams, 2015](#)). They experience challenging transitions as they (re)enter formal learning, move between levels, teaching styles and subject matters, engage with study materials when and where they can around their other commitments and obligations. While it is important to challenge the often unnecessary binary segregating part-time learners from their full-time colleagues ([HEPI, 2014: 27](#)), it remains true that the former are more likely to be mature, female, in full-time employment during study, and/or have substantial caring responsibilities ([HEPI, 2014: 23](#)). Such differences matter.

Rendering the concept of resilience useful in the context of part-time and distance study requires us to think of it in the same terms as transitions; as something which is *plural* rather than singular, as a *process* to be negotiated, as something *mutable* and *dynamic*, always *contextual* and *contingent*, and as something which relates as much to *capacity* as it does to capability (*cf.* [Gale and Parker, 2014](#)). [Walker et al \(2006: 256\)](#) acknowledge this when they write that resilience is inherently "unstable", noting that "success factors at any point in life may not be mutually facilitative of positive or 'protective' resilient behaviours later". The concept needs to be handled with careful criticality. Thoughtlessly throwing the notion of resilience around in higher education leaves many uneasy. Paying heed to the cautions emerging from debates around resilience in different disciplinary contexts is essential for forming a useable, productive and genuinely enhancing construct.

### **Some notes of caution on resilience fostering in higher education**

The cautions of [Walker et al \(2006\)](#) and others around how resilience is conceptualised are important. Before outlining the relational approach developed here, which fully acknowledges said cautions, it is worth briefly summarising some of the problems that could arise in too hastily or uncritically engaging the idea of resilience in the context of part-time and distance higher education.

Firstly, it is worth pointing out, since it is so rarely done, that resilience is not an inherently good thing nor is it politically neutral. To take a recent example, Black Lives Matter activism

emerged across the USA because institutional racism stubbornly persists, and thrives in some places, despite significant efforts to address this issue over a number of generations now. Indeed, as [Martin \(2015: 119\)](#) puts it, “the negative aspects of resilience may be as equal in magnitude as the good”. To take a hypothetical, entirely common, example, a student may enter higher education with fairly engrained ways of learning and approaching study, not all of which will work for them in their new context, but rewiring or refining these habits of thought and practice can take some time and a lot of effort. They can be very resilient in their commitment to these unhelpful ways of thinking and doing things. [Martin \(2015: 121\)](#) goes on to outline why such an acknowledgement is important:

Against a contemporary background that generally perceives the concept of resilience as an almost universal good, the opportunity to consider carefully and proportionately ... [the idea that we need to be more critically engaged] ... is valuable, not only in introducing balance into the debate, but also in terms of the translation of our own thoughts, insights and beliefs about the concept within our own workplaces.

Resilience is something of a vessel, a ship to be outfitted and loaded with detailing appropriate to a given context. With its roots drawing from wells across academic, policy and practice spaces, it is impossible to neatly define and delimit the concept beyond the kind of simple principles noted above. It is open to interpretation, and it is *how* it is interpreted which makes *all* the difference (hence the focus of this paper).

Secondly, one of the pit-falls awaiting those who engage with resilience is highlighted by [Cavelty et al \(2015: 10\)](#) when they write, in an examination of resilience-thinking in security studies, that: “Resilience approaches put emphasis on local reactions, responsabilizing the smallest sensible units and populations to address insecurity”. Many find this ‘gaze’ on the individual, and the consequent attribution of responsibility, unsettling and problematic. Looking at the rise of resilience-thinking in international development debates, [Neocleous \(2013: 4-5\)](#) wryly observes that the “beauty of the idea that resilience is what the world’s poor need is that it turns out to be something the world’s poor already possess; all they require is a little training in how to realize it”. The point here is that a focus on the *individual* resilience of a particular agent forces our gaze onto them alone and (arguably, deliberately) away from the structural factors which can govern and limit access, engagement and attainment for individuals and groups. As [Martin \(2015\)](#) and others have noted, at its logical conclusion, resilience-thinking might also result in the implicit or explicit attribution of responsibility or blame.

The difficulty with this is revealed in recent work by [Stevenson \(2016\)](#) on the learner journeys of students, including some who are refugees and others who are care experienced.

[Stevenson \(2006\)](#) suggests that within these patently resilient groups, there remains significant differences in response to *academic* pressures and stresses. They are resilient, more so than most, and their desire to engage in higher education despite the barriers erected by their circumstances, is testament to this, but this was not enough. Similarly, in work on working-class 'drop-out', [Quinn \(2004: 68\)](#) notes that it is "difficult, if not impossible, to foster belief in oneself when the frameworks of opportunity for a confident actualised working-class self-esteem seem to be disintegrating locally". The problem, [Quinn \(2004\)](#) acknowledges, is more about inequality than anything like resilience, in that individual outlook and outcomes are not only determined or shaped internally; external circumstances really matter. Here [Gale and Parker's \(2014\)](#) point about capacity mattering more than capability with respect to transitions within higher education resonates. [Walker et al \(2006: 254\)](#) also warn against overly individualistic approaches to resilience:

... celebrating independence and autonomy as virtues over everything else, only serves to heighten vulnerability at times of difficulty ... if the dominant discourse of pressure while at university is one of dealing with it individually as a rite of passage through academia, perceptions of the need for a more relational approach to coping are often conflated with a lack of resilient spirit, particularly in the academic sense.

In other words, privileging a version of resilience that centres on individual toughness can marginalise other, more effective, more relational approaches.

A final note of caution is that the evidence for resilience fostering initiatives is not clear cut. As [Evans and Hardaker \(2015: no pagination\)](#) have noted, while there are some who claim that "resilience has been proven to impact learning and the development of individuals and groups" (e.g. [Nolan et al., 2014](#)), translating the concept, however it is defined, into "effective educational strategies" remains a real challenge (e.g. [Sriskandarajaha et al., 2010](#)). This is as true for particular strands of resilience thinking as it is for the notion as a whole. For example, while the idea of promoting 'growth mind-set' ([Dweck and Yeager, 2012](#)) is central to much of the work on resilience in higher education, the efficacy of such interventions is contested in the literature (e.g. [Niiya et al, 2010](#)).

### **Applying resilience-thinking: A relational framework for learning resilience**

The main purpose of this paper has been to outline and reflect upon the underlying approach to resilience being developed at the Open University in Scotland. Drawing upon insights and learning from the body literature introduced here, The Open University in Scotland are developing framework for encouraging a thoroughly relational approach to the fostering and

development of resilience among part-time and distance learners. Underpinning this framework is a commitment not only to some of the key tenets and approaches of the resilience literature, including, for example, an emphasis on encouraging the critical development of growth mind-set ([Dweck and Yeager, 2012](#)) among our students, but to embedding this within a flexible structure which foregrounds connection and support rather than individuality and autonomy. As the work of [Martin \(2015\)](#), [Walker et al \(2006\)](#) and others has shown, it is critical that resilience fostering initiatives do not focus on individuals in isolation.

This framework, shown below as fig.1, contains seven relatively simple principles. These principles or ideas serve as useful lenses on our student engagement, and provide a structure for thinking about how particular activities or interventions might incorporate a resilience fostering element. Crucially, this framework is designed so as to minimise the additional work required by both staff and students. For most part-time and distance students, capacity can be an issue, so making sure that this is not something extra or additional is quite important, and as with the development of other kinds of skills (e.g. see [Wingate, 2006](#) on study skills), the fostering of resilience is likely to work best and make the most difference if it is embedded in routine practice of both educator and learner.

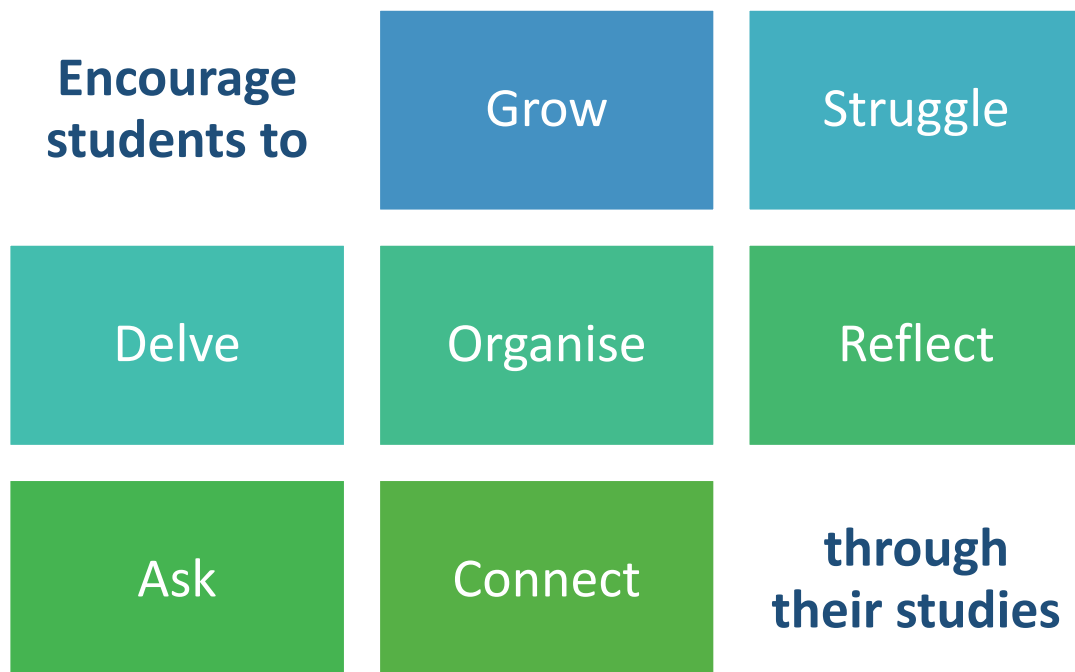


Figure 1: Learning Resilience Framework (Open University in Scotland)

The seven principles offer a fairly comprehensive (though not necessarily exhaustive) series of focus points for fostering resilience through interactions, interventions and routine practice. The framework is primarily aimed at the OU's Associate Lecturers, and asks them to find ways of encouraging their students to:

- **Grow** by helping them to develop a growth mind-set. This centres on the idea that students understand and believe that they can develop their abilities through time, effort and engagement, and that these abilities are not fixed or pre-given.
- **Struggle** by ensuring that they take on challenges and understand the role of failure in learning (i.e. it's both normal and essential!) and guide them in learning from mistakes and set-backs.
- **Delve** by pushing them to learn things at a deeper level, to actively engage with and apply their learning in ways that make sense to them. The idea is that, if they are an active learner they will be more secure in their learning and better positioned to deal with emerging difficulties.
- **Organise** by helping them discover how to organise their study space, time and materials, so that they are prepared for challenges over the short and long term, and especially during difficult transitions.
- **Reflect** on what really works for them, and ensure that they have healthy perspective on their progress and reasonable expectations of themselves and the institution.
- **Ask** for help when they need it, by normalising 'being stuck' or demotivated or confused, and by ensuring that they understand the breadth and depth of support available to them, how such support can be accessed.
- **Connect** by encouraging your students to make social and practical connections with others, by fostering a sense of community and inclusion, and by highlighting the different ways students can support each other.

Early indications are that this kind of framework for resilience can have positive impacts on student experience and teaching practice across different kinds of intervention and interaction. For example, this framework sat at the heart of rewriting and re-orientating the face-to-face welcome and learning skills workshops offered by the OU in Scotland to new students. Acting on feedback from students and support staff, the new welcome and induction workshop shifted from a focus on learning skills to a focus on student and institutional expectations, how support systems work and the qualities of effective learning. This shift matched the expectations and desires of the students, who were asked to indicate the relative importance of different factors facing them as they began their studies with the OU. Before starting the session, more than

90% said that understand how student support works was important, whereas 67% said meeting tutors was important and 74% said meeting other students was important to them. The tone and substance of the induction, shaped by principles outlined above, resonated with the students and shows clear signs of resonating with some of the key concerns of the resilience thinking outlined earlier in this paper. A selection of student comments on what they will take away from the session illustrates this:

- “To not strive for perfection and get TMAs in on time and get support if required.”
- “A better understanding of what is expected and feeling that I am not alone.”
- “Comprehensive understanding of OU systems, online classrooms and how to get help.”

The importance of understanding how support works and how and why you might use it is too often underestimated or ignored, but the resilience framework outlined above actively encourages staff to incorporate these principles into their practice.

Another finding worth noting is that many of the teaching staff involved in developing and working with this framework have been: (a) pleased by the challenge of thinking differently about their practice; (b) encouraged by a focus on consolidation and review of practice as opposed to reinvention and ‘endless innovation’; and (c) enthusiastic about the possibilities of such a framework for structuring, maintaining and enhancing connection with students over time, which can be crucial to student success in part-time and distance learning contexts.

Such reflections, coupled with encouraging signs from initiative such as our induction workshops, demonstrate some of the potential for shaping and focusing attention on developing resilience in a part-time and distance context through a framework which focuses on enhancing existing channels and mechanisms, rather than introducing something new and potentially onerous into a context where capacity really does make a bigger difference than capability.