Institutional and pedagogical approaches towards supporting student resilience

**Dr Michelle Picard, Dr Jaime Hunt, English Language and Foundation Studies Centre
The University of Newcastle**

Abstract

This workshop explores lecturers' perspectives on the experiences that contribute to the educational resilience of students in enabling programs and their subsequent studies while working towards approaches for pedagogy and institutional structures to enhance student persistence, retention, and success. Work on developing educational resilience often places the onus on the individual student and their development or lack of personal qualities. However, research suggests that the bond/support that university teachers provide their students is vital to student success and the development of academic resilience; and that the effectiveness of these two elements is largely context dependent. Equally, wider institutional factors (e.g. policy and resourcing) affect the students' lived experience and ability to employ their innate resilience in the higher educational context. Through an exploration of narratives of academic resilience, participants will draw together those pedagogical and institutional factors that potentially influenced their own and their students' success.

Resilience and the enabling cohort

The transition of enabling students to undergraduate studies

Despite a growth in widening participation practices in higher education, "gaps between participation by the most advantaged and by the disadvantaged stubbornly persist in all countries" (Billingham, 2013, p. 9). In Australia, enabling education has served as an effective pathway for students who have not completed high school and/or who have not achieved the required grades to enter their chosen field of study. The enabling pathway is particularly popular amongst the following equity groups of students: mature-aged, low socio-economic background, first in their family to study at university, non-English speaking backgrounds, refugee background and Indigenous students (Pitman et al., 2016). Some studies have shown students who enter via enabling programs have a higher attrition rate than students who enter via traditional pathways (Bookallil & Rolfe, 2016). These results are not unexpected, since students in the equity groups strongly represented in enabling programs often need to deal with significant challenges to succeed in their programs and further undergraduate studies. However, it is unclear what assists some students to persist and succeed in their enabling and undergraduate studies despite these challenges, while others drop out and/or fail.

Resilience in higher education

Resilience or "the capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances… [such as] academic setbacks, stress, and study pressure" (Martin, 2002, p. 35) is often viewed as one personal quality that affects students' persistence and success. Enabling educators suggest that this cohort requires both general and specific academic resilience to cope with significant educational and personal challenges. Personal qualities of "persistence', "motivation", "confidence" and "resilience" have been described by

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lecturers as key elements to students' success (Burke, Bennett, Burgess, Gray, & Southgate, 2016) and the onus has been placed on students to develop these qualities. However, making the individual student the "locus of change" (Ungar, 2012, p. 13), removes "the responsibility from institutions and fails to address the problems of worsening mental health in students" (Binnie, 2016). It also fails to acknowledge that students may already be coping with significant personal issues and demonstrate strong resilience in their daily lives, yet still are unable to transfer this into the university context. Although recent research acknowledges the importance of factors such as "social support" and "social collaboration as predictors of persistence among undergraduate students" (Click et al., 2017, p. 1), these studies still take an individual or "psychological" approach. This individualised focus also fails to account for the broader social resources and structures that impact on resilience development in academic environments and there is therefore a need for a movement from emphasising the individual to the contribution of sociological systems (Ungar, 2012).

Resilience and enabling cohorts

Only a small body of literature has explored character development in enabling programs (e.g. Crawford, 2014; Debenham & May, 2005; Johns et al., 2014). These studies have shown that participants in enabling programs have increased self-confidence, self-esteem, greater tolerance of diversity, enhanced valuing of knowledge and enhanced self-reflective capacities as a result of their participation in the programs. Only one study has specifically mentioned the issue of resilience noting that participants who succeeded had highly developed "resilience and a strong sense of purpose" (Johns et al., 2014, p. 52). Likewise, one study has explored the role of the university teacher in developing academic resilience. Burke et al. (2016) note the following key elements of a learning environment capable of "building capability amongst students":

> … providing feedback, being empathetic and challenging assumptions, awareness and sensitivity to past limiting stereotypes of labelling of students as incapable, recognising pressures/contextual factors that impact on learning, connecting with students, providing safe space for learning, normalising struggle… support [and] flexibility (Burke et al., 2016, pp. 71-72).

Walker, Gleaves and Grey (2006) have theorised that undergraduate lecturers should draw on students' "resilience narratives" to develop their academic resilience. To date, no study has focussed specifically on how educators in enabling and undergraduate programs can teach and assess students from an enabling background in a way that develops their resilience at different stages of their academic careers. In addition, as noted by Stevenson, Clegg and Lefever (2010, p. 112), it is difficult for individual lecturers to embody a commitment to widening participation and support for an enabling cohort if the "institutional habitus" does not support this commitment. We wish to focus specifically on the policy, resource, and structural implications for universities to design a pedagogy of resilience development. These are important issues to address since students from enabling backgrounds often require a higher degree of resilience than traditional students do, since they are more likely to have family responsibilities, come from a low-socio economic background, and have a disability (Pitman et al., 2016).

Theoretical/conceptual framework

The theoretical underpinning of this project is an "ecological" (Ungar, 2012, p. 14) view of academic resilience. Following Ungar, our definition of academic resilience is broader than

that of Martin (2002) above and instead we define it as "a set of behaviours over time that reflect the interactions between individuals and their environments, in particular, the opportunities for personal growth that are available and accessible" (Ungar, 2012, p. 14). Like Click, Huang, and Kline, we consider "global well-being" and explore its relationship to measures of "resilience", and the academic "performance" of the students (Click et al., 2017, pp. 1-5) at various stages of their academic careers. However, in this project, we view resilience as "more than just a proxy for attachment, self-efficacy, self-esteem, neuroplasticity, positive peer relationships, or any of a number of protective factors that are centred on an individual's traits or behaviours" (Ungar, 2012, p. 27). Instead, we see these measures as secondary to more "[complex] reciprocal person-environment interactions" (Ungar, 2012, p. 15). Initial focus areas for exploring these interactions include "interactions between family, [university/enabling education], and community systems" and "indigenous coping strategies that are adaptive in contexts where there are few choices for other forms of adaptation" (Ungar, 2012, pp. 15-17). In addition to the "social ecologies" perspective (Ungar, 2012, p. 220) described above, we also draw on research in widening participation and equity (e.g. Clegg, 2011; Pooley & Cohen, 2010; Stevenson et al., 2010) and transition/enabling education (e.g. Devlin, 2013; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). Since little is available on this in relation to the enabling cohort, we take a more "explorative and iterative" approach and utilise the "configurative approach to synthesis" in our systematic review to identify "emergent concepts" (Gough, Oliver, & Thomas, 2013, pp. 20-21).

Workshop aims and objectives

The overarching aim of the research is to explore enabling and undergraduate lecturers' perspectives on the experiences that they believe contribute to the educational resilience of students in enabling programs and their subsequent studies. Another key aim is to contribute towards the development of a more "ecological" view of student resilience that values students' previous experiences and involves the whole institution (rather than blaming an individual's lack of persistence or motivation) and eventually a framework for resilience development.

The specific objectives are as follows: 1) introduce participants to theory on an "ecological perspective of resilience and to draw conceptual links between this theory and other widening participation, transition, and equity research; 2) involve participants in recounting personal narratives of resilience in higher education and linking these to the role of pedagogy and institutional structures; 3) map common threads between the various pedagogies and institutional experiences of the participants; 4) draw together potential participants for a national or even international research project on the role of an "ecological resilience" perspective in transition in higher education.

Workshop structure

Stage 1 (30 minutes): Literature exploration

Time: 0:00 – 0:15. Presenters provide a brief outline of the literature on educational resilience and the "ecological perspective" of resilience gained from their systematic review.

Time: 0:15 – 0:30. In groups of 4 or 5, participants map a series of key words from the widening participation/equity and transition literature against key issues in the resilience literature. They can also add themes/issues that they believe have not been addressed but are also pertinent to resilience and the enabling cohort. The aim is for participants to see the links between the literatures and to develop a deeper understanding of the issue.

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Stage 2 (30 minutes): Personal narratives

Time: 0:30 – 0:40. Participants note on a prompt sheet their own or (if they have none) their students' experiences of persisting in higher education despite setbacks, stress, and study pressure. They will also be prompted to think about what resulted in their (or their students') resilience.

Time: 0:40 – 0:50. In pairs, participants recount their narratives to each other and identify commonalities and differences in relation to the narratives and the sources of resilience.

Time: 0:50 – 1:00. Participants return to their groups and develop a poster under the following headings: 1) categories of setback; 2) how resilience was demonstrated; and 3) sources of resilience.

Stage 3 (30 minutes): Institutional influences

Time: 1:00 – 1:20. Each group creates a poster to illustrate their perspective of institutions that enhance resilience for enabling cohorts using magazines/newspapers, glue, pairs of scissors and felt-tip pens provided by the presenters.

Time: 1:20 – 1:30. Participants move around the room while each group describes their posters and their rationale. They then provide their contact details if they wish to join a national/international research project on the topic, which the presenters will collect.

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