



CAREERS SERVICE BRIEFING

Enhancing students' career resilience

Research findings

Inspiring futures

What question were we trying to answer?

We have undertaken this research to explore students' thinking around resilience and their experiences of and responses to failures and setbacks. The impetus for the project came from a confluence of factors:

- A perception that some students struggle to navigate the demands of a highly competitive and increasingly globalised job market.
- The expansion of higher education, new fee structures, have instilled a more consumerist orientation amongst students with attendant effects on behaviour, attitudes and expectations. The 2:1 threshold imposed by many graduate employers has further amplified this trend.
- A gap in the existing literature, very little of which addresses resilience from a careers perspective, situating it more generally in a mental health and wellbeing context.
- Recognition that students are urged to "be more resilient" without signalling how to achieve this.
- A supposition that university structures and processes often create and perpetuate a protective environment that cushions students from risk and failure, potentially impeding the development of resilience.

The intended outputs were: a full project report, workshop materials, strategies for building resilience and recommendations for the wider university.

How did we approach this?

We adopted a mix methods approach combining secondary and primary research, including:

- A literature review to explore intersections between careers and resilience in the student and graduate populations.
- 3 Focus groups (24 students) to explore students' attitudes to and experiences of failure, resilience and perseverance. Unable to recruit a broad cross-section of students, the focus groups were composed exclusively of ECA students.
- 5 semi-structured interviews with key staff across a range of functions – academic, student support and student representation.
- Developed a resilience-themed workshop, drawing on the themes surfaced through focus groups and interviews.

What did we find out?

- Given prevailing assumptions about students' resilience it was interesting to note the high levels of resilience and maturity exhibited by students in the focus groups. Far from expecting a smooth and seamless transition into the job market, they were prepared for prolonged periods of uncertainty, short-term contracts and the prospect of multiple rejections. It seems that overcoming early obstacles had instilled a sense of determination, and drive to succeed.
- Creative disciplines deviate from the institutional norm in a few key ways: students have often overcome early obstacles (e.g. parental resistance) before embarking on their course of study; within many ECA degree programmes there is a greater emphasis on experimentation and risk-taking; students face a particular set of challenges entering this sector of the labour market and students' work is frequently and openly critiqued by tutors and peers.

What did we find out [cont.]

- All research participants acknowledged the benefits of exposing students to failure, and creating opportunities within the curriculum for students to experiment but uncertain how to initiate change.
- Although hard to deal with at the time, failure and challenge can present valuable learning and motivational experiences.
- An exclusive focus on 'success narratives' within an institution can be alienating and limiting for many students. The University of Edinburgh strongly identifies as an institution that encourages, celebrates and exemplifies success. Students would welcome a more inclusive culture that accommodates 'failure' and setback and sees both as integral to (future) success.
- There is a paradox at the heart of the research findings: many of the interview and focus group participants advanced the need for a more open discussion about failure, and how to challenge the dominant narrative of success. However, the willingness to engage with the debate privately did not translate into the public sphere. When asked about using the language of failure and setbacks, there was very real resistance – "students wouldn't engage with that".
- Staff and students both conclude that resilience – and resilient behaviours – can be acquired and nurtured, but over time and through experience. Resilience-themed workshops may stimulate thinking, but a single 'intervention' is unlikely to instigate real change in attitude or approach. A whole institution approach is necessary if we are to truly develop resilient behaviours in students.

What do we recommend?

The project team made a number of recommendations for the Careers Service (and sector) but for the purposes of this briefing, will concentrate on those most applicable to the wider university.

- Review assessment structures and create more space for risk-taking and experimentation in early years. Enable students to fail without compromising their academic progress, so limiting formal, summative assessment to some extent.
- Counter a dominant narrative of uncomplicated success by encouraging a more open culture that acknowledges failure as an essential part of the learning process.
- Propagate the view that challenge and stretch are part of the university experience, and resist the temptation to 'cushion' students. Achieve the requisite balance between supporting students (particularly on arrival through induction activity) and fostering greater independence.
- Instigate more opportunities for inter-disciplinary and experiential learning, bringing together students with different mind-sets and approaches. Not only does this enrich the learning experience, but better reflects the professional work environment and demand for agile, resourceful and resilient graduates
- Promote the progressive, developmental aspect of university. A first year student does not have the intellectual maturity of a final year student, and may take time to adjust to the rigours of degree level study. Students should be supported through this period of change so that they can re-calibrate their exam and assignment performance.

Interested in finding out more?

The full report can be accessed from the AMOSSHE website:

<https://www.amoshe.org.uk/resources/Documents/AMOSSHE-Insight-2016-17-Edinburgh.pdf>

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