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Enhancing students' career resilience

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Enhancing students' career resilience

Growing through failure: enhancing students' career resilience

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Project aims

The principal aim of this project is to explore ways in which students can be helped and encouraged to develop tools for career resilience. Resilience is something of a hot topic: graduate recruiters are keen to emphasise its importance (Isherwood 2015), while those in universities seem increasingly concerned that this is a quality lacking in the current generation of students (Gray 2015). Although oft-discussed, resilience remains a rather nebulous and often contested concept, and is considered by some (Binnie 2016, Husbands 2016) as something that is used to shift the blame onto students for the very real difficulties which some of them face. Indeed, much of the current literature and academic discourse emerges from a mental health and well-being perspective: this project, in contrast, aims to make a necessary and original contribution to research by focusing on the resilience of higher education students in a career context, and to develop ways in which students can be

supported to develop such resilience. The impetus for the project thus came from a confluence of factors:

- A perception – albeit anecdotal, but based on case observations – 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, and consequently a more consumerist orientation amongst students (and their families), with the attendant effects on student behaviour, attitudes and expectations.
- A gap in the existing academic literature, very little of which addresses resilience from a careers perspective.
- Recognition that students are urged to “be more resilient” without information on 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, thus impeding the development of resilience.

This project is designed to explore the factors above, and to establish commonalities and discrepancies between staff and student perceptions of resilience, and related concepts such as failure, perseverance, determination, optimism and adaptability. The aim is then to develop practical interventions (in the form of workshops, or learning that could inform other existing practice, such as one-to-one guidance, or employer and alumni events), which would enhance students' career resilience. The fact that it is both possible and desirable to design learning experiences that foster resilience has been demonstrated by Walker *et al* (2006). We aim to do this, drawing on information gathered during our own primary research, as well as drawing on existing literature on resilience and career guidance practice based in approaches such as experiential learning, narrative-constructivist theory, cognitive-behavioural therapy, and motivational or solution-focused approaches.

As practitioner-researchers, alongside developing our own resilience-building workshops, we also intend to recommend tools and strategies that could inform other pre-existing careers interactions with students, whether they be one-to-one career guidance interviews, employer or alumni events. Moreover, we hope to offer recommendations to all those working with higher education students who have an interest in developing students' ability to respond positively to failure or setbacks.

Methodology

The project is small-scale and multi-method in approach, drawing on a range of largely qualitative data collection methods. In summary, the methods adopted are as follows:

- Survey of existing literature.
- Semi-structured interviews with key staff and professionals.
- Student focus groups.
- A pilot version of a workshop.
- Pre- and post-workshop questionnaires.

Some background secondary research was conducted to help clarify the research question and methods and to produce a literature review that would support the project (included in full in Appendix I, and summarised in the 'background' section of this report). The focus of

this review was to examine intersections between resilience and careers, noting any practical strategies for developing resilience that have been adopted elsewhere. This background research confirmed our hypothesis that there was not a significant amount of material drawing on academic research that focuses on resilience in a careers-specific context, although there is much contemporary and more journalistic material, particularly in the form of blog posts and opinion pieces online.

The first phase of the primary research involved a series of focus groups with students. Three focus groups were held, with a total of 24 current students, to explore perceptions and experiences of failure, resilience and perseverance. We were also interested in their ideas about how resilience could be developed within the university environment, and were particularly concerned to explore students' perceptions of the world beyond university, and the degree to which they felt equipped to face this in terms of their career resilience. We encountered more difficulty than anticipated in recruiting focus group participants, so there has been a change in emphasis from the original project proposal, in which we intended to recruit students from a variety of contrasting disciplines. Instead, participants were drawn almost entirely from the caseload of one of the practitioner-researchers: Edinburgh College of Art (ECA, formally merged with the University of Edinburgh in 2011). In particular, we capitalised on existing contacts within the History of Art Society, the School of Design, and Graphic Design specifically (more information on participants is included in Appendix II). Students were recruited exclusively from undergraduate programmes to ensure a degree of commonality and consistency in understanding and experience. Furthermore, as the research is primarily concerned with students' experience of the UK graduate job market, focus group participation was confined to UK domiciled students.

The decision to focus on students from a narrower range of disciplines has of course had a significant impact on the research. We were not able to draw comparisons between the attitudes and approaches of students from different disciplines, as we had hoped. However, we were able to more fully explore the particular challenges faced by students from creative disciplines as they navigate entry to the job market. The students themselves were keen to emphasise the specificity of their experience of working within creative disciplines, so we have included this material in our analysis, and it suggests interesting conclusions about the challenges and benefits of their experience. An agreed set of questions and prompts were used to stimulate discussion and to ensure some thematic consistence across the different groups, and all focus groups were recorded and material transcribed, coded and analysed to inform workshop design as the broader project.

In parallel with the student focus groups, we carried out seven semi-structured interviews with key university staff and external professionals (see Appendix II for participant information). Staff were chosen to provide perspectives from across a range of functions – academic, student support and student representation – which were then complemented by interviews with external professionals (an employer representative from within the arts and cultural sector, and a performance psychology professional). These in-depth interviews were intended to:

- Reveal attitudes to resilience from staff.
- Explore staff perceptions of students' attitudes and behaviours in relation to the challenges of university life.
- Draw out perceptions of changes over time in students' approaches to failure and setbacks.
- Investigate the prevailing culture across the university and whether systemic change is required to foster greater resilience amongst students.

Information gathered from the background research, focus groups and semi-structured interviews was used to develop workshop materials designed to foster resilience. The original aim was to produce several different workshops (concentrating on activities from different perspectives), which would allow for greater experimentation with different learning strategies and interventions. However, the difficulties associated with focus group selection, and the narrow timeframe, necessitated a more pragmatic approach and a decision taken to condense three proposed workshops into one. We do not, however, feel that this has been a loss: there was a consistency in the findings, which did not necessarily lend itself to the development of contrasting workshops. Instead, we have chosen to focus on key messages, but to explore different ways of communicating these to students.

The workshop content and structure reflected several of the key messages from the student focus groups and staff interviews:

- It was essential to be able to discuss and normalise failure, particularly in an institution very focused on the celebration of success.
- Students found it helpful and empowering to realise that successful individuals experience failure and to hear these stories.
- Students could register their own feelings about failure and success, and use this experience to support others.
- Coping strategies included perspective, counter-narratives, reflecting on failure and adjusting behaviour and attitudes, and setting achievable goals (short and long term).

Despite active promotion and financial incentives, it proved difficult to attract students to the workshop in large numbers, so it was delivered to a group of eight students (from 16 sign-ups, reflecting our usual 50% to 60% conversion), again drawn predominantly from ECA disciplines. Timing was somewhat prohibitive, as scheduling overlapped with end of term assignments. These difficulties also speak to the paradox identified in the 'key findings' section, that, although students find it very useful to openly discuss their experiences of failure, it can be difficult to (persuade them to) start that conversation.

The effectiveness of the workshops was assessed by use of a pre- and post-workshop questionnaire (Appendix IV and V), the design of which was influenced by the MTQ48 (Mental Toughness Online 2017), but with a greater emphasis on careers-focused questions. The aim of the questionnaire was to gauge feelings of resilience and measure any change in attitudes that had occurred during the workshop, as well as to ask students to assess the effectiveness of the various activities included in the workshop.

Research findings

Literature review

The existing literature on resilience spans the fields of psychology, organisational behaviour, education and childhood studies, however there has been limited research investigating attitudes to resilience among the student population across UK universities. What has been done is often from a well-being perspective (Povah 2016), or focused purely on the academic domain (Walker 2006). There is little research with a dual focus on the resilience of higher education students and its relation to their future careers, though interest in this area is growing, prompted by perceptions that current students may lack the resilience required to navigate an increasingly competitive higher education environment and challenging labour market conditions (Gray 2015). Recent research commissioned by HECSU (Higher Education

Careers Service Unit) explored graduate resilience in more depth (Morgan 2016), seeking to understand the barriers faced by graduates during their early transition into the world of work. Resilience in a careers context is widely understood to be the capacity to 'adapt to change' (London 1997) coupled with the ability to bounce back or recover from challenges or setbacks, potentially learning to 'survive' change in a positive, developmental way (Bimrose and Hearne 2012: 339). This project draws on these concepts, but also more closely examines students' attitudes towards failure, rejection and risk during university life to explore any relationship between recent experiences and career orientation and outcome.

An exponential growth in UK student numbers over the past two decades (ONS Digital 2016) has arguably led to an increasingly crowded graduate labour market (Tomlinson 2012: 408), with a concomitant impact on students' career confidence. The nature and extent of this competition is contested with top UK employers predicting a rise in graduate vacancies in 2017, while the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) claims the number of graduates now "vastly outweighs the amount of high skilled jobs". Data gathered by HECSU (2016), an independent research charity, suggests the graduate job market is in a healthy state, with more graduates working in more professional roles, and the unemployment rate returning to pre-recession (2007) levels. Popular media outlets, however, continue to propagate a rather negative view, and we shall see that this shapes students' (and their families') perceptions of future labour market opportunities. Whether students' resilience has worsened in response cannot be definitively stated, but Morgan's research suggests a detrimental effect on confidence and career readiness (where many students are deemed "not ready for the graduate labour market").

Previous studies have assessed the benefits of certain strategies and techniques for building resilience. Willis (2016) discusses this particularly within an educational context. She defines resilience as being "about being able to persevere through setbacks, take on challenges and risk making mistakes to reach a goal". She discusses the importance of flexibility in goal-setting, and the necessity of breaking goals into manageable steps, as well as identifying a correlation between persistence and a personal investment in a goal. The aspect of risk-taking is perhaps most important here, since in a higher education environment that includes significant amounts of continuous assessment, we can posit that students become increasingly risk averse (and this is borne out through our contextual staff interviews). Willis contends that making mistakes – or even hearing about mistakes made by others – is essential:

"When you correct an error, your brain builds new wiring to guide you to make a better choice next time. So doing something wrong can actually be beneficial in the long-term, replacing misinformation with firm experience. The strongest understandings we have do not come from what we've memorised but rather from what we've learned from failure."

This is further supported by research carried out for Barnardo's, which concludes that "managed exposure to risk is necessary [...] [to] learn coping mechanisms", and that it is particularly important for young adults "not to be excessively sheltered from challenging situations that provide opportunities to develop coping skills" (Newman 2004). As Thomsen writes in her book, *Building Resilient Students*: "if we did not have adversity in our experience, we could not consider ourselves to be resilient" (2002: 23).

As well as having the opportunity to be exposed to a certain degree of risk and adversity, there is consensus in the literature about the importance of reframing in developing resilience. Drawing on the work of Wolin and Wolin (1993), Thomsen explores the process through which painful or difficult past experiences can be reframed to reveal resilience by

identifying the behaviours and attitudes that have served someone well in spite of the adversity they have faced. A process where one can “acknowledge the damage”, but also seek out “the strength that led to survival in spite of adversity” (Thomsen 2002: 23), can prove to be a deeply empowering one for individuals:

“When students consciously understand how they have overcome challenges in the past and how they can use these same factors to overcome current life problems, a sense of self-efficacy emerges that is more potent than any other self-esteem building I have seen.” (Thomsen 2002: vii)

This particular process is also supported by Willis (2016) and Newman (2004), who highlights the importance of recognising “the beneficial as well as the damaging effects” of adversity.

Another key facet of resilience building that emerges from the literature is the importance of providing an environment that supports this. Although a key aim of this project is to design a workshop that can help develop resilience, it is perfectly obvious that spending an hour or so in a workshop is unlikely to turn anyone from a fundamentally fragile to a resilient person. A workshop in isolation can only ever be of limited use, since “building resiliency is not done through one program or a specific curriculum” (Thomsen 2002: 45), but needs to be integrated into the environment so that it becomes the responsibility of all staff in an educational institution, who all “have the potential to impact a student’s academic and social growth” (Thomsen 2002: x).

Following Henderson and Milstein (1996), Thomsen outlines the characteristics of environments that foster resilience as follows:

- Provide care and support.
- Set high expectations.
- Provide opportunities to participate.
- Foster prosocial bonding.
- Set clear boundaries and expectations, and develop life skills (2002: 3).

At the least, this provides a useful model against which to measure our services and institutions: can we identify ways in which we do all of the above?

There is, thus, certainly scope to draw on existing practice from across disciplines and to adapt this for a university careers context. A strong seam running through the literature is the ability to accommodate and transcend failure. This is particularly evident in the realm of sport and performance psychology. Galli and Gonzalez have defined resilience as the “ability to respond positively to setbacks, obstacles and failures” (2015: 243). Similarly, Fletcher and Sarkar’s study (2012: 676) advocates for educational initiatives in resilience building that facilitate the (re-)evaluation of personal assumptions, minimise catastrophic thinking and challenge counterproductive beliefs. Attribution theory may be useful for understanding students’ reactions and responses to failure or rejection, and helping to devise interventions that heighten students’ sense of control. If individuals can recognise why they have experienced a particular outcome (such as rejection following an assessment centre) this could help guide future action. Attributional errors can compromise motivation (Harvey and Martinko 2009: 154), so resilience-building activities should encourage students to reflect on the causes of failure or rejection, and help promote a realistic, constructivist assessment of setbacks.

One note of caution that should be sounded at this point: there is some resistance to the use of the concept of resilience in evidence in the literature. This is in response to a perception that the urge to ‘be resilient’ often acts as an “excuse to shift the cause of the problem onto students” (Husbands 2016). Husbands argues that many students and young people face

real and significant challenges, which are belittled or denied by some resilience discourses. As Binnie (2016) adds: "I have rarely seen the term used to encourage self-improvement in an effective way." Although she praises the concept of resilience itself, she criticises the way in which it is often entwined with discussions of mental health. In this project, we seek to decouple resilience from questions of mental health, since, as Binnie argues:

"The most worrying aspect of this trend is the frequency with which resilience is referenced in discussions about mental health. It is not appropriate to tell anyone suffering with mental illness – be it anxiety, depression, an eating disorder or something else – that you can recover by becoming more resilient." (2016)

Both Binnie and Husbands are keen to emphasise that what students need is the tools to be more resilient, and it is this lack that we seek to address in this project. In this respect, a crucial way of becoming more resilient is to recognise when and where to ask for help, since "being resilient doesn't mean never asking for help or never being affected by difficult situations" (Binnie 2016). Such behaviour (seeking support, asking for feedback and attempting to use it in a developmental way) is to be encouraged and not deplored as needy attention-seeking, as it is, in fact, one way of exhibiting resilient behaviour (Thomsen 2002: 17).

The career paths of today's graduates are less linear, predictable and secure than for previous generations, and this is particularly true in the creative and cultural sector, which is the destination of choice for many of the participants in this study. If resilience is a cornerstone of success, then Careers Services have a vital role to play in preparing students for the challenges to come: "There are seeds of resilience in all of us. Sometimes they get nurtured, and sometimes they do not. [...] Our resiliency is always a work in progress" (Thomsen 2002: 170-1). Part of our role in universities is to assist students in building the skills of resilience they will need to face the world beyond higher education. Therefore, this project posits resilience as a behaviour that can be learned and cultivated, through a range of practical strategies and wider institutional initiatives that challenge the dominant narratives around success and failure.

Contextual interviews

Several themes emerged from the interviews, covering the following broad areas: the transition from school, expectations of university, attitudes to failure, transition into the labour market, and resilience.

Transition from school

For interviewees who have worked in the university environment for a sustained period, a growing sense emerged that students are less well equipped to manage the transition from school ("we have to train our students to be more independent again": Sabine) and that they expect university to be a more mediated experience, with ongoing support. Although it is difficult to validate personal anecdote, three of the interviewees comment on the differences between their own university experiences and what they perceive to be the norm nowadays. Sarah and Stewart both use the phrase 'sink or swim' and Kate develops this further, stating: "I came from an era where there wasn't support and you just got on with it". Interestingly, the voice of dissent comes from Jess, a recent Edinburgh Graduate and Sabbatical Officer, who expresses frustration at the (perceived) lack of support: "in university you have to do everything for yourself and not get help from anyone".

Edinburgh students are academic high achievers, and may find it hard to adjust to a new reality, where they meet equally bright and able peers. As Sabine observes: "University may be the first time where they actually have some setbacks. They get marks for the first time which aren't the highest". Stewart notes the negative impact this can exert on students'

confidence, which can then be (mis)diagnosed as a mental health issue, rather than a 'normal' behavioural response: "They've been bright at school and now they're averagely bright and that can really undermine their confidence... and I think it's labelled a mental health problem."

Students' expectations of the university environment

Academic interviewees were concerned about students' expectations of higher education, and the degree to which consumerist and instrumentalist behaviours have become ingrained. How far we can attribute shifting attitudes to growth in student numbers, changed UK fee structures and the 2:1 threshold imposed by many graduate recruiters is debatable, but there is clearly a consensus forming in university circles that students' expectations – of themselves, their course and their employment prospects – have changed. Both Sarah and Sabine consider the 'tick box' mentality ("If I do this... it naturally follows I will get a 2:1 / First") and Sabine observes a growing sense of entitlement amongst the student population: "I very, very often have the feeling that there's a sense of entitlement. That [...] the world owes them something [...] and if it's not fulfilled then they can appeal."

A question that emerges from the research is whether universities have helped perpetuate this culture, creating learning environments that are assessment-driven but that also try to limit risk (for example in the move towards increasing continuous assessment). Jess feels that "everything is very assessment driven... and the overriding thing in students' lives", a view in part echoed by Sabine:

"The way we set up degrees is at fault. We do not encourage experimentation but I think we could... everything in a way counts towards their final mark. I think we should provide more opportunity for failure."

This is perhaps symptomatic of the wider university environment – and is certainly supported by conversations outside the bounds of this research – but an interesting distinction can be drawn here with ECA. A number of the creative degree pathways provide space in the curriculum for students to develop skills, or receive feedback and criticism, without the associated pressures of assessment. In Architecture, the first two years do not count towards the final degree, and Kate acknowledges the benefits, stating: "There isn't just an immediate cliff face to fall off." It seems at least possible that the emphasis on continuous assessment impedes students' ability and willingness to experiment, stretch themselves, and risk failure.

Attitudes to failure and risk

The University of Edinburgh strongly identifies as an institution that encourages, celebrates and exemplifies success. Sarah talks about the pressure this exacts on students:

"We [the university] do give a very strong message that we are successful...look at our alumni, look at what they've done... so if you aren't quite where you want to be, how do you correlate the message of success, success everywhere, with your own thinking, 'I'm not being successful at the moment'."

Edinburgh students usually arrive with a track record of success, and coupled with the implicit and explicit messaging they encounter on arrival and throughout their studies, may be unprepared to manage and overcome failure. From Stewart's perspective this can mean:

"The measure of what is failing and what is not failing has become more acute. So you not doing as well as you think [you should] is a failure, even though it's not a failure. And I think there's a lot of catastrophic thinking."

Sarah affirms this view, commenting on the change over time: "I'm seeing more students now than say 10 years ago who struggle with failure". From her recent experience as

student, Jess recalls a degree of rigidity in students' attitudes towards failure, where they can have "very kind of rigid ideas of failure and success. So you get your mark... and it's 65 you've passed. You now put it out of your mind".

All the respondents advocate for change at the institutional level, so that failure becomes part of the conversation and students are routinely exposed to situations where they may risk failing, and from which they can thus learn and develop. However, in practice there is still collective unease with the term 'failure'. Jess encapsulates this neatly, saying: "no-one wants to admit that they failed. It's too concrete". This presents something of a conundrum and a potential barrier to change.

Transitions into the labour market

In an increasingly competitive and globalised job market, students face a number of hurdles in pursuit of career success – overcoming (job) rejection and adapting to the professional workplace, which is less cushioned than the school or the university environment. Jess suggests that students are particularly sensitive to negative messages about the UK job market:

"I think students expect to fail more in the labour market than they do at university... when you're at university you've earned your place. Whereas this rhetoric around there not being enough jobs... everyone expects not to do very well in their first few job applications."

Asked if students were prepared for the job market, Sabine comments:

"Some of them absolutely, yes... others not very well equipped... I think that is, to some extent, the university's fault or the fault of the structures... perhaps providing students with the answers before they've asked the questions."

Sarah draws associations between students' experience of and approach to learning, and their ability to transition smoothly into the job market. It is important that students have faced and coped with previous challenges, so that they recognise that they "might not know everything straight away. It's about learning and making mistakes". Although a strong champion for students, Sarah acknowledges the potential risk in extending too much support to students who may be struggling academically, since she is concerned about "how that translates into job market readiness".

Understanding that workplaces are not customised to suit individual needs, can – in Stewart's view – be difficult for some students: "It's about entitlement and everybody else has to change... I think it's possibly doing students a disservice if they're not disabused of that." At the same time, Devon discusses the sometimes unreasonable demands made of graduates within the creative sector, and the diversity limiting impact of expecting candidates to have undertaken significant amounts of unpaid work before they can access paid work.

Kate takes a counter view, asserting the readiness of Architecture students for the job market, part of which she attributes to their placement experience: "I would say they are fairly well equipped. And they come back after placement knowing a lot more" and expands on this to comment more broadly on the opportunities Design students have "to get involved in all sorts of... initiatives that prepare them or involve them in direct work that is commercial in nature".

Resilience

Resilience remains something of a contested term in the wider literature, but when asked to gauge students' levels of resilience in relation to their academic studies and general attitudes, all interview participants expressed their views with a degree of certainty and

clarity. Reassuringly in the context of this research and its wider application, Stewart asserts that resilience can be acquired: "I think it's often seen as an attribute and innate, which I would challenge". This is echoed by Devon who credits "real life experience" with strengthening resilience: "It's something that you learn as you become an adult".

Both Stewart and Sarah suggest that students from a widening participation background exhibit greater personal resilience, and a more mature outlook. This may be attributable to financial pressures and the need to combine academic studies with part-time employment, or the inherent challenges in navigating an educational landscape that is less familiar. As such, they may encounter more obstacles in their pursuit of higher education, and this can shape their attitudes in a positive way. As Sarah observes:

"This is anecdotal, but the students that I know that have got that very mature outlook have tended to have other issues in their life previously... and I don't know if that then gives them that maturity that having dealt with something before they're then able to translate that resilient outlook into their academic studies."

This is consistent with the notion that emerged strongly from our background research, as well as from the discussion with Ashley, that the experience of adversity is essential to developing resilience.

There is no clear consensus as to whether student resilience (or perceptions thereof) has waned in recent years, but there is division on generational lines – Ashley and Jess challenge the assumption that students lack resilience, in contrast to Sarah, Sabine and Stewart. However, all three of them agree that this is due to a combination of factors, and cannot be discussed in simplistic terms.

Focus groups

Several key thematic strands emerged from the discussions, which we shall now examine: definitions of resilience, transitions from school, future transition from university, competition and comparison with peers, negative aspects of failure, positive aspects of failure, feedback, advice, and subject-specific factors. We shall then cover suggestions students made for the workshop and wider implications for practice.

Definitions of resilience

Given the often negative media discourse urging students to 'be more resilient', and the much-reported mental health crisis amongst the current generation of students (see The Guardian 2017), we perhaps expected some resistance or negativity towards discussion of the concept of resilience. However, the students' conceptions of resilience were far more positive and nuanced than we might have expected. As well as mentioning the classic "bouncing back" (Katherine) and "perseverance" (Jon), students discussed resilience in terms of the impact of challenge on their future behaviour: as Claire states, it's not about not being affected by a failure, "it's how [...] you learn to deal with it". Or, as Liz describes: "it's not overcoming that impact, it's perhaps learning to live with that aftermath, to accept it", echoed by Molly ("not letting negative statements shape your actions"), and Finn ("resilience suggests that something has challenged you and you are trying to work past that challenge"). Moreover, some students conceived of resilience as being about the positive effects of failure: "Being aware that you can do better than the limit... you can always outdo what you've already done" (Orla), and even connected it to making positive use of negative feedback:

"It doesn't feel like a negative word, it feels like a really positive one. [...] It comes with connotations of a willingness to accept things and chance things... [I] feel it

comes with a willingness to accept information you've been given and to develop based on things you've been told." (Amber)

Transition from school

For some students, the transition from school to university provided their first significant experience of failure, particularly for those who did not get into their first choice of institution. Ella revealed that "I applied to Oxford and didn't get in and all my friends did". However, although this was upsetting at the time, both Ella and the other student who had had the same experience now viewed it as a positive thing:

"I think that actually what has ended up is the best option. Yes, I have ended up in the best parallel universe." (Liz)

This was echoed by Ava, who reported receiving disappointing results in her Highers, but that these results made her realise how much she wanted to go to university and so made her work harder for it. Of course, the student cannot know what the outcome would have been if they had been accepted into their first-choice institution, but these attitudes do indicate that where another path is taken (when there is a viable Plan B), it is easier to view challenging circumstances as positive in retrospect.

As well as these clear examples of rejection, this period was for others a time of challenge and adjustment to a new environment. Some described this in terms of a challenge to the identity they had developed in relation to a subject at school, so that they were no longer "the arty one", as now "everybody is that person" (Paula). Others figured it in terms of a realisation that they were now in a more competitive pool of people, with Anna saying: "You'll be the smartest person in your class at high school and you'll think you're amazing, and you'll come out of university and realise you're not even average." Whilst this sounds like an overly negative view of the student's likely situation (reflecting rather that she's now comparing herself against a smaller, better-qualified cohort), she figured this in terms of a necessary realisation of the competitiveness of the career direction she had chosen (animation).

In one group, pre-university experiences were perceived as having not been challenging enough. Indeed, Penny stated that she had chosen her particular course because "this was the one where you could experiment the most", in contrast to her experiences at A-level, where she described students' tendency to find a safe way of passing:

"Everything you produced counted towards your A-level grade and it meant that people had this kind of formula. [...] [They] stuck to that and they produced the same kind of work again and again and then, yeah, you just never failed because you knew how to pass."

Students across the groups emphasised the importance of a "safe place to fail", which we shall return to at the end of this section.

Another common theme that emerged was the challenge that students felt they had faced just to be accepted onto a creative course. Not only did they describe overcoming parental objections to studying a subject often viewed as a self-indulgent or frivolous option – "just to pursue art in the first place, you've got to be pretty headstrong" (Amber), but the actual admissions process was viewed as quite gruelling, involving a portfolio and often an interview over and above the usual UCAS form:

"I've always had a huge respect for people in this school because everyone's had to fight to get here, and [...] that shows resilience [...] – people who stick with it are [...] a force to be reckoned with." (Finn)

This point of view certainly chimes with our own experiences of working with this group of students, who had shown few of the characteristics normally associated with 'Generation Snowflake'.

Transitions from university

Whilst the transition from school was especially challenging in only a few cases, there was much more generalised anxiety over the forthcoming transition into the world beyond university. Some students reported mixed feelings, such as Anna ("I'm curious to see what comes out of it all [...] and, yeah, it's scary, but I'm curious"), Finn ("a mixture of excitement but also uncertainty"), or Jennifer ("it is exciting. I mean, I don't know where I'm going to be and that's kind of exciting in a way... it's also nerve-wracking cause [...] there's no plan").

Orla verbalised the most positive outlook on the future, viewing it as an "exciting new life... it's just like it's starting a new chapter and it's [...] a new challenge". However, many more participants were experiencing the approach of post-graduation life as a looming cliff edge:

"I think it's quite strange that from the age of four you're just like going through this progressive stage, you're like, I'm going to go to school, and then I go to sixth form, and then I go to uni, and it's like you're working towards graduating, then you're finished and it's like 'now what?' [...] it's like 'oh shit, I'm done' [...]. It's quite weird thinking that there's no-one there... that'll tell you what you should do after."
(Owen)

Poppy reiterated this feeling of going through a linear process, which then came to an abrupt end, whilst Paula said:

"I feel the world prepares you up until you go to uni... it's all about doing good in your exams and you have everything planned. And then as soon as you get to uni, you're just kinda dropped. Like the training wheels are taken off. [...] There's not a set route anymore."

These anxieties around life after university were often intensified by perceived pressure from parents. Ella reported feeling pressure to "have a life plan" for after graduation, as well as describing tension between her and her parents when she turned down a job offer after completing an internship with a finance company. Although work experience can be a useful way of finding out what you really like, as well as what you do not, it was more difficult for Ella to justify turning down the job offer to her parents in the absence of an equally secure and 'sensible' second option. The internship was a valuable experience for Ella though, allowing her to feel sure of her decision: "I feel happy 'cause I know I made the right decision". In this instance, Ella's resilience to anxiety about her future and to (no doubt well-intentioned) pressure from her parents was increased by having gained first-hand experience allowing her to make an informed choice. It is also worth noting that the anxiety around the labour market (and therefore her choices) came from external sources (her parents, the media) and not from her.

Financial concerns undoubtedly impact on parental attitudes. Gayle reports: "My parents are like 'if you're gonna go, it has to be worth all the money you're going to spend while you're there'", which also perhaps contributes to the more instrumentalist attitudes to education described by staff in our contextual interviews. Christmas vacation conversations with parents form the basis of many a January careers appointment; this was certainly the case for Anna:

"When I came home for Christmas my mum was 'we're getting you decided what you want to do – will it be a Masters, will it be a job?' She was like 'so, we're going to apply for a masters over Christmas', and I was like 'we are?'"

More positive and supportive attitudes were also reported from parents, though. Jennifer describes the reassurance offered by her mother, who tells her: "You need to make mistakes to learn – you can't be good at everything".

Both students' and parents' apparent anxieties are affected by media negativity surrounding the graduate labour market: "You hear stories of like graduates who have top marks and they can't get a job and they end up in like McDonald's or something, so I dunno, that is quite scary" (Jennifer). As students (and their families) are understandably affected by such worst-case scenario stories, the onus is on Careers Services to perpetuate a realistic, fact-based counter-narrative to such stories, and to highlight to students the agency they can exert over their future.

More common than this more catastrophic conception of the labour market was a feeling of intimidation in the face of employers' real or perceived requirements of students and graduates:

"Even those on-campus internships in graphic design [...] they want you to be so professional. [...] There's just a big expectation, you've got to just know it... I don't know, just so much and so many different topics." (Penny)

"I feel like they want you to be like I dunno like a rocket scientist at like the age of five, like have so many skills, like even [for] internships, they want you to know so much, and like you're probably up against like 200 other people, just for one [...] position." (Jennifer)

This feeling that they would not be up to the standard required extended even to the number of applications they might have to make. Lisa described feeling demoralised by a story of a successful fashion graduate who had sent over 100 speculative applications, but got an internship from this exercise, which then led to her first job in fashion: "that overwhelmed me so much... I'll get to the 99 and won't send off the crucial 100, so what's the point?" (Lisa).

More worrying, although perhaps easier to address, is the fact that students' perceptions of employers' requirements is that they are more rigid than they might actually be – Owen described meeting all of a job's requirements being necessary "to like save face and to save you from embarrassment", since, in his view, a job advert contained "the minimum of what they're like expecting". Evie supports this view: "I feel like I need to be able to do everything that they wanted in the [job] description", but Flora took a more balanced position: "I kind of feel even though they expect you to know loads of things, they also know you're human and you're not going to know everything, like if you say you do, then you probably don't!"

Interestingly, these more negative, fearful attitudes were far more in evidence in the younger students (second years) than in those closer to graduation, suggesting that as they neared the labour market their information was more accurate and their understanding of what they might have to do to succeed was better. This is not to suggest that these students viewed their situation through rose-tinted spectacles – they were under no illusions about the complex and challenging career landscape of their chosen sector – but that they had a more realistic view. Several recognised the need to be flexible, that you might have to do different related jobs before getting one in the exact area you really want, but that could allow time to "build up that aspect of your portfolio" (Finn). Others recognised that success was likely to take time, that it might be necessary to undertake (often unpaid) internships or other short-term experiences for a year or two before getting paid work within a certain sector, and that "in the creative industry, you might not get a big break until you're 40" (Jon), and "I haven't for a second even expected that two years is enough time to climb anywhere" (Amber). This process was likely to require a great deal of perseverance, since:

“If you don't go into a 100 places and give them CVs and then don't chase them up and follow them up three times, then you're definitely not gonna get anything.”
(Jon)

But at the same time, a certain stance had to be maintained in the face of getting turned down for a job, realising that “that job's maybe not right for me [...] maybe I'm not right for them” (Jon).

Competition

Competition and comparisons with their peers was considered as both a disabling and motivational factor by students. Some of the anxiety expressed about the future stemmed from real or envisaged comparisons with peers: “I don't wanna be left behind and then they're succeeding and suddenly it's too late” (Paula). But, at the same time, Paula recognised that whilst studying abroad, she had found a more positive and motivational atmosphere: “People just liked to be surrounded by successful people and people that were doing interesting things” – and this had made her now more likely to encourage peers to apply for things. A similar experience was recounted by Gayle, who exhibited an extremely positive and resilient attitude in the face of some of her friends succeeding in getting an opportunity she consequently did not:

“I was happy for them [...] because it was perfect for them. I consoled myself with the fact that, you know, I got onto a competitive course. I am here, like I am still doing it. And I have these friends who are doing these things and who knows, they might be really good contacts in years to come because they've done these things.”

Of course, such experiences are not always so positive, and even for Gayle, the response she describes was the one she came to after some time had elapsed – it was not her initial feeling. For us, however, resilience can never realistically be about responding positively to everything first time, but in how you cope afterwards, in how you choose to go forward, as with the Wolin model described by Thomsen (2002). Lisa was of the view that “All the toughness of getting on in life is comparing yourself to others”. In view of this, we might consider some students' emphasis on negative media stories of the graduate labour market as a protective strategy, since it might be comforting to identify someone who is doing worse, or a market context that somehow absolves the individual of responsibility. Although there is a degree to which our choices and realities are bounded by market and societal forces outside our control, we are also keen to emphasise to students the ways in which they do have agency and can exercise some control over their own outcomes. Finn describes the ways in which she has learned from watching her peers:

“It's not so much what you know, it's who you know... you can quickly work out who's gonna do well... how they interact with others and they seek other people's advice... they do all this networking even within the studio, and that comes in very handy for when you leave.” (Finn)

Encouraging thinking patterns like Ella's and Finn's, where the success of their peers is an inspiration and actually propels them to move forward, can only help students build their resilience in the face of competition with others.

Failure

Understandably, one very significant strand of discussion across the groups was around failure. Although students were often initially reluctant to admit to, or openly discuss, instances of failure, once the discussion had started, it became difficult to stop them, and, more than anything, it was this open discussion of failure that many of them identified as useful, cathartic, and an important step in them coming to realise how resilient they were. Failure was, of course, seen to have some negative aspects: as Claire tells us: “No one likes it

at the time". Others described feeling demotivated or discouraged after having failed at something (Jennifer, Evie, Ava), whilst Lisa described how even the fear of failure could be paralyzing:

"I'm less likely to do something if I don't think I'm gonna be able to like get it. [...] [This is] a bad thing for sure because I probably don't know my own abilities." (Lisa)

But, at the same time that Lisa acknowledges that this fear is a limiting factor, even some of those who described feeling discouraged after failure went on to describe how their next move would be to "try a bit harder. You could do better like the next time" (Jennifer).

This motivational aspect of failure, and its other positive aspects, unexpectedly constituted the bulk of the discussion. Paula describes failure as "a kick up the backside", since "I feel like when I've had significant failures, in your heart you kinda know [...] why". Ed echoes this, stating: "I think failure breeds success" and relates a story of trying to get into a county sports team and initially failing:

"After that [...] I just changed completely and started actually working hard and trying, and that's when I started moving up [...]. So it's kind of like the failure caused me to push myself more."

Sometimes, of course, it is not a matter of not having worked hard enough, but that you can learn to do things differently through failing. As Molly says:

"If you go through life like and you just get everything right, then you're not going to experience anything, so I think if you at least like learn from doing a few things wrong... that's more valuable."

This is then echoed by Penny:

"I think you have to experience it yourself to realise why it's wrong, or to learn certain lessons from it [...]. I think you have to go and do it yourself and do it wrong and try gain and figure out what's right for you."

Students also anchored this experience within their studies, describing how the art college environment encouraged them to take risks and experiment ("We are encouraged to make [...] messy sketchbooks", says Liz). While Amber describes "failing" at certain aspects of a project as being essential to the creation of a better end product:

"You have a very small idea and you get massive chunks kicked out of it [...] It's a real test of resilience because... you have to keep to that idea and stick with it... you have to allow them to pull it apart so it builds to something that's worth making in the end."

Other students identified the challenging experiences they had had as being an opportunity to learn more about themselves and their abilities (Ella). Liz identifies a series of extremely difficult experiences she had lived through as "train[ing] to be a stronger person", part of which was gaining an "awareness of when to ask for help". Although she admits previously considering resilience as an innate and immutable characteristic, she now believes this can be acquired through experience, since "I proved I was wrong". She continues:

"I can't say that I've been entirely strong and like immune to any of these [problems], but [...] I feel quite happy and proud of myself [...]. Being happy and proud and feeling satisfied with the progress is like one of the most important things." (Liz)

"Being immune" is not at all what we are aiming at, but Liz exhibits great resilience in her ability to take stock of her internal and external resources, and to identify progress she has made and to draw strength from it. The extent to which this was true was clear from the

way in which she contributed to the discussion, being the first participant willing to share any examples of adversity, and quite extreme examples at that.

Students' views, then, supported the contention that the actual, lived experience of failure or adversity is necessary to develop resilience (Thomsen 2002: 23). Indeed, too cushioned an environment can be counter-productive, as Amber relates:

"I benefit from having something to kick against. So I went to a really bad high school, and my art teacher was like 'you're never going to get anywhere', and I sort of went... 'I'll show you!'"

This type of experience, of course, cannot be easily integrated into a workshop, but it is worth bearing it in mind when considering the wider university environment and curriculum design. What was clear in students' discussions of failure, was the extent to which they felt that they had a choice in how to respond to this: "You can crumble underneath it or you could... rise to the challenge" (Amber).

Feedback

Another powerful theme was the experience of receiving feedback, and responses to that. Even more strikingly than with discussions of failure, the views expressed were quite one-sided. Not one student complained of a time they received bad or 'unfair' feedback; on the contrary, Katherine told us that critical feedback is "what you're paying for":

"You want as much critical feedback as possible. I think it's almost a waste of time to personalise it and take it to heart when they're trying to help you."

This view was expressed again by Ed:

"I think the best [feedback], it's not good feedback. [...] It's better when they tell you [...] what you're doing wrong, what could be improved, or give you some sort of feedback that tells you that you're not doing it right, [...] that makes you produce better work."

Flora supported this, arguing that good feedback was always in the form of "constructive criticism", though she also saw the merit in "general criticism" as she found it useful to gain "another person's perspective" on her work. Jon viewed feedback as more important than the grade:

"I'm like forget about the grades but look at the feedback [...]. I think it's approaching things as learning rather than obsessing over the fact that you've... you seem to have failed in some way."

Indeed, Ella reported that "most annoying is when you read through the feedback someone's given you and it's all positive". Students, then, were very keen to use feedback as a learning tool. There were perhaps slightly unrealistic expectations from some about how objective the assessment process could be: "You can't have a harsh marker – that shouldn't be a thing – everyone should mark at the same level" (Gayle). Whilst all institutions must ensure that the assessment process is as fair and transparent as possible, at the same time, it is perhaps valuable for students to learn to cope with some element of subjectivity and unfairness, which they will certainly encounter in the labour market. Indeed, one of the most difficult things students had encountered was in not receiving any feedback at all when applying for jobs. It is worth noting too, that the students coming from more practical art and design courses accepted as a matter of course that lecturers and tutors would have subjective responses to their work.

This did not mean that the process of receiving feedback was always easy, and some described experiences such as feeling "put down" when they had received critical feedback,

and Orla argues, particularly within a creative context, that: “you put a lot of yourself in what you do cause it’s your work, it’s your design”. Owen reported a strong reaction to negative feedback, saying: “My barriers would go up [...] – when someone’s like ‘I don’t like it’, I’m like ‘great, well I do’”. He then goes on to describe how resilience for him was just a front he could put on:

“You can put up a façade of being like yeah, happy, whatever, but you might feel a failure inside, getting that criticism. You’d be like ‘oh, ha, I know better’, but you’ll go home and feel like shit [...]. You might put on this façade that like you are resilient.”

On discussing this further, however, Owen agreed that he was perhaps more resilient than he thought. Although he was unwilling to exhibit anything he might perceive as weakness or defeat (not in itself resilient at all), the fact that he would then go home, think about the criticism, work on the project and then come back, demonstrated a certain resilience that he did not realise he had until we discussed it in the focus group.

A very strong message came through that students felt it was essential to be able to separate themselves from criticism of their work:

“I’m really quite good at separating the way I feel about my own work from the advice I get from my tutors, because I know it’s supportive, it’s not a personal attack.” (Amber)

“If you are hurt by it, the resilience comes in by, you know, realising that actually there’s no point getting hurt over it. It’s not personal... just reflect on what they’ve said.” (Finn)

This advice is easier to give than to put into practice, of course, but it is worth reflecting on this as a helpful thinking pattern to be encouraged.

What advice would you give?

The discussions often turned to advice that the participants would give to their former selves, or to other students in similar positions. Some of this echoed the discussion above, with the urge to “not take it personally ’cause there’s almost too many factors to isolate and blame yourself for” (Paula), or to not “focus too much on the failures [...], just learn from them” (Finn). The vast majority of it focused on perspective, however, whether this be of the type: “you’re not going to feel this way forever” (Evie), or concerning assessing the true scale and impact of whatever failure or setback was being dealt with:

“Take a step back and assess how much that failure actually affects you and assess what... if you’ve got a chance to do it again, how you do it differently... if you can’t redo it, then assess how much it actually affects your life and what you can learn from it rather than getting really sad about the fact that you’ve failed at it.” (Jon)

Some failures, which could feel devastating at the time, were seen as insignificant in retrospect. Eleanor describes how failing her driving test “felt like the biggest deal, but now it’s hilarious – it’s like really not a big deal at all”. Some students also felt it was also important not just to focus on the failures, but to realise that they made up only a part of the picture, and that “there’s still a lot of wins in there” (Amber). In a similar vein, Finn thought that alongside working towards an end goal, it was important “to remind yourself to revel in the little successes”.

Alongside this was advice that involved changing one’s perspective entirely on whether something was a good or a bad thing. Gayle urged others to “see other people getting a good thing as an ability to have a connection”, while she also questioned the exclusive focus on grades of some of her peers:

“Success isn't just good grades. Like you can come out of university with a first and if you've done nothing in terms of preparing yourself for the world, where is that first gonna get you?”

Their advice is often very sensible, and students were keen to volunteer it, so we decided to capitalise on this when designing the workshop.

What's so special about a creative degree?

Although it was initially a disappointment to us not to be able to include students from a wider range of disciplines, focusing on ECA students did mean that across the groups certain factors emerged, which in some way seemed to be subject-specific, often connected to the ways in which students were developing resilience through their studies. Before exploring this further, however, we need to sound a note of caution. There is of course a degree to which students in any discipline forge an identity based upon their ideas of other subjects (and thus what their subject is not), which may or not be accurate. They can also be given to assuming that they face a unique set of problems. What is often most interesting here is that their concerns, issues and assumptions could probably be found amongst students in many other disciplines too. What certainly is true is that the students exhibited much higher levels of resilience than we might have expected at the start of the project.

As was noted above, the process of applying to art college was itself seen as one that often required a certain resilience. The nature of studying a creative subject was seen to foster the same, partly due to the often subjective nature of assessing artistic work:

“Our subject's quite, like, subjective, so you're going to get people who like it and you're going to get people who don't like it and you kind of just have to deal with that.” (Jennifer)

“I think the structure of art school with, just like when we do short projects and you have something at the end of it. It might... be well received, it might not. [...] It builds you up to that kind of resilience in the workplace.” (Jon)

“Let's say if you're studying medicine, you know exactly what you need to study and there is a right or a wrong, but then in art there isn't.” (Penny)

A contrast can be drawn here between students studying purely creative subjects (those above) and the complaint of the art history student earlier about subjectivity in marking: to some degree these students accept that it is an imperfect process, and there was then some correlation with them being more willing to value the process and feedback, and being slightly less concerned with actual grades. Moreover, Finn argues that the fact that they are involved in producing creative material can itself be a source of resilience:

“I think we're quite lucky in a sense, because everything we work on [has] a material outcome... so if you ever feel you're losing your resilience, all you have to do [...] is look at what you did a year or five years ago. I think this perspective is key to resilience because you can see no matter what happens you're growing in some way.”

The comparison with medicine made above came up frequently, the general perception being that although that subject might be more academically challenging, and required a lot of work, that it led to a solid, secure, well-paid outcome, whereas these students felt they were also working hard (and putting in hours in the studio), but with no guarantee of any sort of employment at the end of it. As Finn says:

“I've known some students, like medical students, who, you know, they're stressed to the nines, but at least they've got a solid job at the end of it.”

Lisa H continues the comparison with friends studying business and finance:

“I found that when my friends were going for finance internships, they complained about how competitive it was. Like, yeah, but at least there are things in place for you!”

A similar attitude was in evidence amongst participants exhibiting a certain defensiveness about their subject, largely in response to the perception they felt was out there that their degrees were “easy” (Finn). Claire describes feeling very “put down” by these attitudes (which she had experienced from friends), before deciding: “it’s not my problem”. As Gayle explains at more length:

“As art students we’re constantly told ‘well, you’re gonna be lucky if you get a job out of this’. We’re constantly downgraded and belittled and patronised. [...] We probably all have quite a negative mind-set on employment.”

In counter to this, however, is the fact that their views (certainly as were in evidence during this research) were not usually overly negative, but tended rather to be realistic:

“I don’t think anyone really goes into art school or... design courses like thinking, straight off the bat I’m going to be earning millions... you have to go in with a sense of realism... you also have to think to yourself, it will eventually pay off if I just keep up with this.” (Finn)

The same student suggested that entering university with higher expectations of the outcome could be detrimental to someone’s mental health, so again saw this as an advantage of a creative path, which she also felt did not limit her to a creative career, since “you learn how to be a very hard worker in animation. You learn about resilience. [...] I think that could lend itself to other career options outside of animation”. At the same time, there is no denying that there are some very hard realities facing these students. As Amber explains:

“Art is seen as a hobby... people do it in their spare time [...] [this] helps feed the expectation that our talent [doesn’t need to be financially rewarded] and our career is easy.”

Whilst Jon talks about the difficulties of finding paid work (in fashion) and about the “expectation in the industry that graduates [...] will work for free – [...] ‘I did it, so you should have to do it as well’”.

Despite these realities, the students interviewed on the whole seemed extremely realistic about the labour markets they faced and what it might take to succeed in them, especially as they moved closer to graduation. Highly developed skills of resilience were in evidence alongside a range of mature and positive perspectives, which would enable students to elicit the learning from most experiences, to the extent that the lines between what might constitute failure and success became very blurred.

Impact on our learning

As part of the discussions, we asked students what they felt would help them and their peers to develop their resilience. They offered several concrete suggestions for this. The first was that it was extremely useful to hear other people’s (particularly alumni) career stories, especially when these included failures and setbacks as well as successes:

“When someone who is now in a successful position speaks to you about their failure, it really humanises the whole thing. And they’re not just this person who has done really well.” (Gayle)

"I think it would be quite good to see all like these successful people that you look up to and see like how they got there. [...] It seems like it's out of reach, so I think if you could see how they kind of... their whole process, then that would be quite helpful." (Ava)

Amber spoke particularly powerfully about a professional whom she had met, who had "sixteen years of knockbacks" before getting a big break. This story had not only helped shape her own expectations of entering her chosen industry, but had also inspired her to keep going when things looked tough.

Crucially, students cautioned against speakers at events who related stories that only involved their successes, since "the people who have got everything, it's quite difficult to then relate to them and think 'OK, how is this going to help me?'" (Ella).

In a similar vein, one student described coming across "CVs of failure" on the internet, and described how helpful she had found them:

"For me, when I first saw these CVs, that's when I realised that actually, there are loads of jobs, there are loads of opportunities [...]. When you think of failure, you think of one big catastrophic thing [...], but actually there's so many things that you didn't get." (Penny)

Although the "CV of failure" exercise has come in for some stinging below-the-line criticism where they appear on the internet, this centres largely around the fact that all those who have made their CV public are ultimately successful people. Whether or not producing a CV of failure can be seen as an exercise in 'humble-bragging', we ultimately want our students to be successful, so for our purposes (normalising the failures that necessarily occur along the way), they were to prove very useful.

Finally, students described meaningful support they had had from Personal Tutors and other academic staff (often taking similar forms to the suggestions above). Two students described instances of a tutor sharing a bad undergraduate essay of their own to reassure the students that the mark with which they were disappointed was not the end of the world: "He's a very successful professor and he got a 32" (Eleanor). Molly described having difficulty focusing on the present, since she was so concerned with the future. Her tutor offered the advice: "Just remember that uni's the start of you, it's not the end of you", which allowed her a healthier and more positive outlook: "I'm motivated to try and keep this up, but I'm also like content in where I am and trying to appreciate what I'm doing". This latter can be aligned with the advice students were giving on perspectives above. Students were unanimous in their view that they needed more opportunities to openly discuss their (and others') failures, and that a continual discourse of success could be limiting and demoralising rather than inspiring.

Key factors

The rich discussions provided by our participants clearly offered much learning that would impact on our workshop design, on the Careers Service, and on the broader University community. Some key factors that can be extracted from the focus groups are:

- **A safe space to fail** - it was very clear that the principal way in which students learned to be resilient (and so much beyond that), was through facing challenges and setbacks. A workshop cannot of course provide experiences of failure, but it can allow students to reflect on the experiences they have had, and equip them with a more enabling and positive attitude towards setbacks and challenges. Just talking about failure was seen to be beneficial by workshop participants (consider Owen above), or Evie, who said at the end of a focus group: "I wouldn't describe myself as resilient, [...] but it's quite easy in groups like this [...] to make [you] realise that [you]

are". Universities more broadly could usefully consider whether their course design and assessment practices encourage students to take risks and allow them 'safe' opportunities to fail.

- **Changing perspectives** - workshops could usefully offer the opportunity to reflect differently on experiences of failure (whether from the point of view of distance and time, on considering the successes occurring alongside the failures, or in trying to identify the possible positives of the bad experience).
- **Challenging unhelpful thinking** - negative thinking patterns (such as the tendency to over-personalise feedback, or to catastrophise) need to be addressed.
- **Concrete information** - students need concrete information about what to expect in the graduate labour market and what may be required to achieve success. They sometimes need to be educated about where and how to access such information.
- **Seeking help** - it is important that students are aware of the full range of support available to them and when and how they can access that support.
- **Advice-givers** - students had lots of useful advice for their peers, which we should capitalise on and encourage in the workshops. Being in the position of giving advice sometimes encouraged them to think differently about their own situations (since they could be much harder on themselves than they would be on a friend).

Workshop design and implementation

Drawing on the learning from the focus group session, we designed a workshop which attempted to reflect on the key messages:

- That it was essential to be able to discuss and normalise failure, particularly in an institution very focused on the celebration of success.
- That students found it helpful and empowering to realise that successful individuals experience failure, and to hear these stories.
- That students were not always aware of the range of support available to them.
- That students could thoughtfully reflect on their own and others' experiences of failure, and were willing and able to offer advice in these scenarios.
- Key coping strategies included: perspective, drawing out the benefits of a failure, reflecting on the failure and being able to adjust behaviour.

We also drew more broadly on theories around experiential learning, planned happenstance, motivational interviewing and goal-setting. A full plan of the original workshop is provided in Appendix III, but, in overview, it was comprised of the following activities:

- An ice-breaker involving students finding and discussing successes and failures they had in common.
- Presentation and discussion of examples of 'CVs of failure'.
- Group mind-mapping of 'my support network'.
- Discussing or role-playing scenarios designed around common student experiences of failure, and discussing the strategies / support that could be employed to deal with them.
- Discussion of motivational quotations and a goal-setting exercise.

The initial workshop was delivered to a group of eight students (from 16 sign-ups), again mostly drawn from ECA, but with representation also from Social and Political Sciences, Engineering and Geosciences, covering years two to four. Participants were required to complete a survey before and after the workshop, which attempted to assess whether any shift in outlook had taken place during the workshop. The full questionnaires are provided in Appendices IV and V.

Due to the small numbers involved, the results of the questionnaire must of course be treated with some caution. However, we were pleased to note that feedback was universally positive: all the students involved reported feeling more positive about ultimately achieving their goals after the workshop. Furthermore, they now viewed the potential impact of setbacks as more positive, and felt more encouraged to engage in goal-setting. In the free text comments, three themes emerged strongly:

- An increased awareness of student support services (when, where and how to seek help).
- The value of openly discussing failures and setbacks (which one participant acknowledged was “something we do not like talking about at uni”).
- Re-framing experiences of failure as potentially positive (students were now able to see that “setbacks are normal”, “failing to achieve goals is not the end of the world”, and that “everyone fails and this can in fact make you stronger”).

The questionnaires also asked for feedback on the individual activities included in the workshop, and all of the activities averaged a ‘largely helpful’ score (on the scale ‘not at all / somewhat / largely / very helpful’). Since it had come from a direct student suggestion (in the focus groups), we were pleased that the ‘CV of failure’ exercise was one of the highest scoring activities, but surprised that the other most highly-rated activity was the ‘my support network’ mapping exercise. From our point of view, much of what that covered was fairly obvious, and it was there more as an exercise we felt we ought to include rather than because we expected it to be particularly transformative. The fact that participants rated it so highly perhaps serves as a useful corrective to those of us who work within student support services that our offerings are not always as evident and transparent to students as we might expect or desire. In particular, for us, students’ notions of the type of support they could seek from a Careers Service were much narrower than what is in reality offered. This is a useful reminder that the work of explaining the service offering to students is necessary, worthwhile, and, indeed, needs to be extended.

Key findings

Here are the key findings from the research:

- The dominant view expressed was that, although often hard to deal with at the time, failures and challenges were valuable learning and motivational experiences.
- All research participants acknowledged the benefits of exposing students to failure, and creating opportunities within the curriculum for students to experiment. However, there is no clear consensus as to how this could be achieved. With academic transcripts recording marks from year one onwards, and the emphasis on continuous assessment, students have adopted increasingly instrumentalist behaviour, focussing energy and efforts on credit-bearing activity. Re-structuring academic curricula to increase the element of non-assessed work would enable

students to experiment and potentially risk 'failing' in a safe environment, without any negative impact on their academic record.

- Conversely, an exclusive focus on narratives of success within an institution is likely to be alienating and limiting for many students. It is important that stories of success also include the challenges that have had to be overcome in order to achieve the success.
- Knowing when, where and how to seek help and support is part of demonstrating resilient behaviour. We have to continue to educate students on the support available to them and on when it is appropriate to access this.
- Given the prevailing assumptions about students' resilience (or perceived lack thereof) it was interesting to note the high levels of resilience and maturity exhibited by students in the focus group discussions. 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 – and sometimes parental resistance to embarking on creative paths of study – had instilled a sense of determination, and drive to succeed.
- At least some of the resilience exhibited can in some way be attributable to the fact that participants were almost entirely from creative disciplines. These deviate from the institutional norm in a few key ways: students have often overcome early obstacles (such as parental resistance) before embarking on their course of study; within most 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, finally, students' work (particularly in the art and design field) is also frequently and openly critiqued by tutors and peers. Students credited this process with feeling more robust and equipped to deal with a variety of challenges.
- 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.

Recommendations

Here are the project team's recommendations for Careers Services (and the sector):

- Be more explicit about the range of support available to students. The focus group participants were a fairly engaged group, but still held a collective view of the Careers Service that was narrow and out-dated.
- Students are inspired and motivated by alumni career stories, but can also find them alienating. It is important that such stories contextualise success within a narrative that is open about the setbacks and challenges also faced (and overcome) along the way.
- Continue to challenge unhelpful and negative thinking, both in the context of one-to-one support and through group discussions. The tendency to over-personalise feedback (for example, from employers) can hamper students' progress through the selection process, as they dwell on the critical, not the developmental, aspects.
- Use scenario-based approaches to help change perspectives. Encouraging students to reflect on others' experiences and suggest ways to approach things differently, can be very empowering and confer a greater sense of agency.

And for 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 – this may be partially at odds with current induction activity, designed to smooth the path from school to university.
- Instigate more opportunities for inter-disciplinary learning, bringing together students with different mind-sets and approaches.
- 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.

Appendix I: literature review

Resilience in a careers context: Dina Papamichael

Enhancing resilience amongst students in a higher education setting has become increasingly important in recent years. University Careers Services seek to develop effective ways to create and strengthen feelings of resilience: for example, recent research by Morgan (2016) for HECSU has examined graduates' experiences of resilience during their transitions into working life. More broadly, the term 'resilience' is commonly used in discussions of career success in online blog posts and news articles (see, for example, The University of Manchester Careers Blog (2016), The University of Surrey's Employability and Careers Centre Blog (2017) and The Guardian Career Choices (Morton-Hedges 2017)). Students leaving university often face competitive job markets and periods of uncertainty as they engage in application processes for employment. Resilience in a careers context has been defined as the "ability to adapt to change, even when the circumstances are discouraging or disruptive" (London 1997: 34), but it can also be considered as the ability to cope with, bounce back from, or even develop through, periods of challenge or setback. Bimrose and Hearne note that career resilience relates to the ability to 'survive' change once it happens (2012: 339). Specifically, strengthening students' resilience involves encouraging the view that failure can be positive if setbacks are effectively utilised in learning and development.

The literature on resilience spans the academic disciplines of psychology, organisational behaviour, education and childhood studies. However, research on established techniques to bolster resilience in UK higher education environments remains underdeveloped. Careers Services have a vital role in preparing students to embrace the challenges they may face in their early careers and throughout their working lives. This project regards resilience as a characteristic that can be successfully nurtured amongst students; advancing research on successful interventions will contribute to establishing best practice in this field. This review contextualises the project 'Growing through failure: enhancing students' career resilience'. It examines pre-existing research and synthesises past approaches that have been employed to foster resilience to assert that appropriate interventions can and should play a role in preparing students to embrace setbacks in a careers context.

Competitive job markets and uncertain futures

Modern career trajectories are characterised by a level of uncertainty. Lyons *et al* (2015) emphasise the role of changing technology, flattening organisational structures and globalisation in increasing career-related pressures on individuals. Those leaving higher education are unlikely to experience a smooth entry into the labour market followed by a clear career path featuring successive promotions within one company or industry. These conditions give prominence to the concept of 'boundaryless careers' characterised by "mobility, flexibility, the development of knowledge and networks, and the taking of responsibility for one's own career" (Inkson 2009: 545). In addition, in the UK at present, "many personal careers comprise a portfolio of jobs that cut across different employers and sectors" (Docherty and Fernandez 2014: 14). Therefore, securing a rewarding career involves successfully navigating the range of opportunities available to those leaving university. The need for students to develop resilience in this context is crucial, both in the initial phase of applying for jobs, but also has relevance as young people progress through their careers. This is evident as a lower proportion of graduates in the 21 to 30 age category are in high skilled employment, compared with all other age categories, suggesting that it requires perseverance for graduates to "reach the higher levels in organisations that are captured by

the high skilled employment rate measure" (BIS 2016: 16). The development of the ability to utilise setbacks along these career paths serves to strengthen graduates' capacity to manage career pressure and embrace change.

Examining experiences of youth employment, France concludes that it is evident that there have been "dramatic changes taking place in young people's encounters with and experiences of paid work" in terms of job flexibility and insecurity (2016: 133-4). Additionally, the expansion in the proportion of young people pursuing university education has arguably led to an increasingly "crowded" graduate job market (Tomlinson 2012: 408). The nature and extent of competition for graduate jobs is contested. For example, while research on top UK employers has demonstrated that graduate vacancies will increase by 4.3% in 2017 (High Fliers 2017), organisations such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) have claimed that the number of graduates now "vastly outweighs the amount of high skilled jobs" (Kirton 2015). Overall, the experiences of those entering the labour market depend on a wide range of factors, including graduates' location, industry, sector, and qualifications. However, the broad themes in graduates' experiences discussed here (competition, flexibility and mobility) highlight the present need for university Careers Services to offer interventions to bolster students' feelings of resilience.

Are students becoming less resilient?

Debates around whether students have become less resilient in a careers context over recent years necessarily involve the operationalising of resilience and its measurement over time. In this regard, there remains a gap in the academic literature. However, anecdotally, ideas of worsening student resilience persist (for example, Gray 2015). Although it has not been established empirically that resilience amongst current students or recent graduates has declined, related findings are relevant for Careers Services when designing interventions. For example, survey research has demonstrated pessimism amongst students in terms of securing their dream job: students born in the mid- to late-1990s across the UK start university "with only 20% believing they will secure their dream job" - a figure that "drops to 10% as students progress into the second and third year of their degree" (EY 2017). This pessimism can be partially explained by popular media outlets in recent years being "awash" with stories about the graduate labour market being "affected hard by the recession" (Tholen 2014: 5). In addition, examining graduate resilience, Morgan showed that graduates are "under-confident in their own abilities": they "felt they lacked relevant work experience" and "were not ready for the graduate labour market" (2016: 2). Therefore, while it cannot be established that students' resilience is in decline, pre-existing research on student perspectives motivate interventions that target feelings of negativity about job prospects, boost confidence and increase readiness for graduate working life.

Resilience as a learned attribute

As this project emphasises the development of skills in resilience during adulthood, it is relevant to consider the ways in which resilience as an attribute can be learned. Examining the development of resilience in children, Perry suggests that some children are born "with a very high threshold for tolerating distress", while others are not. However, caregivers can nurture resilience in various ways, for example by encouraging the child's "unique sense of self" (2002: 34). To successfully develop resilience across a cohort of higher education students, Careers Services must work with individuals whose unique previous experiences will have shaped their current feelings of resilience. Waddell *et al* have established that offering students the "tools and resources to become confident, self-directed, and active in shaping their engagement in their academic programme to help achieve their career goals" through a process of career planning and development (CPD) served to increase perceptions

of career resilience (2015: 163). They used a longitudinal mixed-methods study to determine the impact of the CPD programme, comparing perceptions of resilience between nursing students who had experienced the intervention and those who had not. The intervention included activities such as a 'career-visioning exercise' where students imagined the ideal day in their 'perfect career', and with this vision in mind were asked to consider the significant "values embedded in their vision", their own strengths, and the ways in which they needed to develop to "progress toward their vision" (2015: 166–7). Previous successful interventions such as this 2015 study inform and contextualise the current research project.

Arguing for the need to examine the outcomes of careers courses at a time of their increased prevalence in the United States, Reese and Miller have researched the impact of a career development course: 'Discovery: Career and Life Planning' on students' confidence in "obtaining occupational information, setting career goals and career planning" (2006: 252). This intervention was informed by the cognitive information processing (CIP) model consisting of two parts: "a pyramid that contains four domains (self-knowledge, occupational knowledge, decision-making skills and metacognitions" and a five-stage cycle reflecting "information-processing skills as it applies to career decision making" (Reese & Miller 2006: 255). Determining the influence of the course on university student perspectives, it is concluded that: "statistically significant gains were found in the areas of gathering information, setting goals, and making future plans" (2006: 262). Similarly, Stanford's popular 'Designing Your Life' course uses a "design thinking approach" to help students to effectively plan their careers after leaving university (2017a). Those who have completed the course comment on its effectiveness, noting that it highlighted the importance of having "specific, intentional directives" (2017a). Overall, it is evident that careers services should engage with established theories, such as CIP and design thinking, when developing courses and workshops to strengthen resilience. Developing the skills to set goals, and crucially to "reset goals" in light of negative or unexpected experiences, is crucial to career resilience (Walker 2006: 58). Encouraging students to set realistic goals fosters their sense of direction and creates a path that can be followed despite challenges or setbacks.

Taken together, these studies serve to reinforce the perspective that career resilience can be learned by individuals in a higher education setting. Through assessing the impacts of career planning and development interventions, they demonstrated that resilience is not solely an attribute that is inherent in some individuals while lacking in others. Instead, interventions can be fruitfully applied by Careers Services to enable students to cope with challenges in their careers and develop the confidence to set and adapt career goals.

Managing expectations and contemplating failure

In addition to equipping students with the skills to collect information, set goals, and be proactive in planning and managing their careers, Careers Services can intervene to assist students by managing their expectations of job searches and working life. McKeown and Lindorff researched graduate expectations when entering the job market, and showed that graduates frequently described an initial belief that once they had completed their studies they would be able to secure their desired job, which was a "senior, permanent appointment with a high salary" (2011: 313). Graduates claimed that they had underestimated the competition for good jobs, and having a university degree had initially created "over-inflated expectations" of the ease of securing desired jobs (2011: 314-5). By designing interventions that encourage students to manage their expectations, Careers Services prepare graduates for the realities of the labour market. These interventions can include encouraging students to think about the likelihood of setbacks through hearing the lived experiences of previous graduates when looking for a job. Examining the perspectives

of 22,000 recent graduates, it is concluded that Careers Services should prepare students for the “realities of finding work” and that meeting alumni gives current students a valuable opportunity to “find out what graduates have gone on to do and, perhaps more importantly, how long it has taken them to get there” (Graduate Prospects 2011: 38). By thinking and talking about scenarios of success and failure, students' preparedness to develop through adversity when looking for jobs is enhanced.

The notion that students should consider and embrace failure has been supported by Stanford University in their Resilience Project. The project involves the combination of “personal storytelling, events, programmes, and academic skills coaching” to support students as they encounter setbacks (Stanford 2017b). Focusing on failure within a higher education setting, the project offers the opportunity for individuals to share personal stories of failure, and online resources showcase examples from both students and high profile professionals of setbacks they have experienced (Stanford 2017b). Similarly, at Harvard University, a ‘Resilience Consortium’ has been established to develop understanding around resilience in students' lives, create and implement interventions to encourage resilience, and “produce research”, “disseminate information” and “share materials” regarding topics related to student resilience (Harvard 2017a). Addressing the common and potentially beneficial experience of failure, Harvard's output on resilience includes speeches from high-profile figures, such as author JK Rowling (Harvard 2017b). It is evident that some universities are increasingly motivated to develop initiatives to discuss and promote resilience through discussion of challenges and failure. Recognition of the benefits of contemplating failure is widespread, particularly in the fields of business and entrepreneurship, where initiatives such as the ‘Museum of Failure’ or ‘F**k Up Nights’ provide spaces for entrepreneurs to share and answer questions about their experiences of failure (2017). The creation of spaces to contemplate setbacks and the encouragement of openness about failure ensures students leave higher education with realistic expectations about the difficulties they may face in their careers and how these can be overcome.

The perspectives of employers and resilience in the workplace

Graduates can demonstrate resilience to employers in a variety of ways. Morgan's HECSU investigation into graduate resilience in careers showed that employers understood the term resilience to incorporate several areas: “adapting to the workplace”, “dealing with stress” and “staying upbeat whilst making mistakes” (2016: 15). Exploring resilience from both graduate and employer perspectives, the report recommends that the development of confidence amongst students is an essential component when seeking to boost resilience in higher education settings (2016: 19). Understanding the range of circumstances in which employers recognise and value resilience in graduate employees is crucial in informing the designed interventions advocated for in this project. Resilience has become increasingly crucial to “job effectiveness” (Kossek and Perrigino 2016: 730). Developing the notion of “occupational resilience”, it is argued that individuals can exhibit resilience in the workplace by drawing on the following resources: “traits i.e. personal hardiness”, “capacities i.e. developing capabilities and coping strategies” and “processes i.e. appraisal of feedback and experiences with adaptation” (2016: 732).

Building on the work of Careers Services, employers have a continuing role in nurturing resilience in employees to ensure job satisfaction and productivity. Resilience training in the workplace can draw on Positive Psychology and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) approaches to encourage the maintenance of positivity in adversity and the challenging of negative thought patterns (Wilson *et al* 2014: 5-6). Ultimately, building resilience is a process that is of benefit both to students themselves when navigating complex job markets, and to employers who seek to retain dynamic employees. Resilience-building processes are ongoing

and successful techniques, which can be utilised both while students are at university and once they enter workplaces.

Resilience across disciplines: the development of successful interventions

Research on the ways in which universities can best promote and enhance students' resilience is essential from a careers perspective. However, Careers Services can make use of broader studies into resilience from a variety of fields, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, sports psychology and social psychology to inform interventions. Building on established techniques from other disciplines, Careers Services can successfully innovate to empower students to achieve the skills and obtain the tools necessary for resilience in their careers.

The use of cognitive and behavioural positive psychology in careers counselling and coaching has been elaborated on by Sheward and Branch (2012). They argue that CBT motivational techniques, for example to manage anxiety, focus attention and use positive imagery, can help clients to achieve career success (2012: xi). Specifically, the metaphor of a "resilience bank account" is put forward as a technique to encourage engagement with challenging activities: each time a client undertakes an endeavour that requires "effort and discomfort" they make a deposit into the account, while each time a client engages in "avoidant or self-indulgent behaviour, such as procrastination" they make a withdrawal from the account (2012: 10). The aim of this metaphor is to emphasise to those seeking careers guidance that the exercising of "high frustration tolerance" in routine challenges equips them to deal with the greater challenges they will face (2012: 10). Techniques such as these can be practised by students to increase their confidence in handling testing circumstances in their careers.

Within the field of sport and exercise psychology, resilience is a key concept, since "the ability to respond positively to setbacks, obstacles, and failures is essential for any successful athlete" (Galli and Gonzalez 2015: 243). In this way, useful parallels can be drawn between resilience within sports psychology and resilience from a careers perspective. Exploring athletes' experiences of resilience, Galli and Vealey interviewed ten "high-level athletes" and found that personal resources were an important factor in influencing how individuals coped with adversity (2008: 325). Interviewed athletes identified several positive outcomes of dealing with challenges, which included learning valuable lessons, gaining new outlooks or perspectives, and becoming stronger through setbacks (2008: 327). Practically, Gonzalez *et al* have sought to effectively utilise theory to guide interventions to develop resilience in elite sport (2016). Resilience is described as a process that consists of various stages: first "developing the abilities and skills needed to overcome adversity", then "the experience of adversity" and finally "subsequent positive adaptation" (2016: 159). It is argued that 'traditional' techniques such as relaxation training and confidence building should be explicitly linked with relevant adversities to best build resilience in a sports context (2016: 167). Of relevance in a careers context, Fletcher and Sarkar's study emphasises the necessity of educational initiatives in resilience-building that facilitate the evaluation of personal assumptions, the minimising of catastrophic thinking, and the challenging of counterproductive beliefs (2012: 676). While adversity in a sports setting may occur through injury or defeat in a competition, in a careers context it may arise through failing to secure a desired job opportunity. Despite these differences, an interdisciplinary approach to designing resilience-building initiatives is fruitful.

In addition, within social psychology, attribution theory can be used to develop resilience-enhancing innovations. Attribution theory examines the ways in which individuals understand the causes of events. Weiner describes the perceived causes of success or failure as having three common properties: "locus, stability and controllability" (1985: 548), that is, whether the event is caused by internal or external factors (locus), whether causes are unchanging (stability) and whether actors can have an impact on the event (controllability)

(Weiner 2010: 32). This is relevant for resilience, as Weiner claims that once “a cause, or causes, are assigned, effective management may be possible and a prescription or guide for future action can be suggested” (1985: 548). If individuals can accurately understand why they have experienced a career success or failure, this can help to guide future action; in other words, it could be argued that: “adaptation is not possible without causal analysis” (Weiner 1985: 549). In a careers context, this means enabling students to effectively reflect on why, for example, they failed to succeed in obtaining a position on a graduate work scheme, and how these causes can be modified to increase the likelihood of future success.

Practically, the theory can guide resilience enhancing interventions through “attributional retraining” (Luzzo, Funk and Strang 1996). The research of Luzzo *et al* involved examining whether an attributional retraining intervention had an impact on students' career decision-making self-efficacy (CDMSE) (1996). The retraining intervention consisted of showing students an eight minute video, featuring both a female and male college graduate describing several incidents in which, in the “face of repeated career-related failures”, they went on to “achieve substantial success in their eventual career choice”. The graduates emphasised the importance of effort and persistence for eventual career success (1996: 382). Following the intervention, it was found that the CDMSE of students who initially exhibited an external career locus of control “significantly increased” (1996: 378). This intervention therefore can be beneficial for students who overly attribute success and failure to external factors. An optimistic attribution style is biased toward internal attributions for positive outcomes and conversely a pessimistic attribution style is biased toward internal attributions for negative outcomes (Harvey and Martinko 2009: 150). For resilience-building in higher education this has relevance because research demonstrates that people with low levels of resilience “have a tendency to be overly external or internal in their attributions for negative outcomes” (Harvey and Martinko 2009: 154). For example, if a graduate with low levels of resilience fails to secure a desired job offer, they will overly attribute this failure to either their own personal failings or to the failure of others. These “attributional errors” can damage individuals' motivation and it is therefore essential that resilience-building interventions promote “accurate causal perceptions” (Harvey and Martinko 2009: 154). This can include encouraging students to reflect on the variety of reasons why failure may occur, including the influence of internal and external factors, to promote a realistic, constructive assessment of setbacks.

Conclusion

To conclude, university Careers Services have a vital role to play in building resilience amongst students as they begin their careers. Career trajectories are increasingly characterised by a degree of competition, flexibility and mobility, which enhance the necessity for graduates to be equipped to adapt to change and embrace challenges. Initiatives to target feelings of negativity about job prospects and to boost career confidence prepare students to effectively utilise experiences of failure for personal development throughout their careers. Resilience is posited as an attribute that can be learned, as demonstrated by the success of past interventions, and the impact of techniques to help students to develop accurate expectations of working life are advocated for. Within working environments, resilience is essential for job success and both employers and employees stand to gain from the conception of resilience-building as an ongoing developmental process. Overall, while the advancement of established strategies to strengthen resilience in higher education settings is essential, valuable lessons can be learned from a variety of disciplines regarding approaches to resilience-building.

Appendix II: participant information

Contextual interviews

- 'Sarah', Senior Academic
- 'Stewart', University Student Counselling Service
- Sabine, Senior Lecturer in German
- Kate Carter, Senior Lecturer in Architecture, ECA Director of Student Experience
- Ashley Ferkol, Performance Psychology Consultant, recent University of Edinburgh graduate
- Devon McHugh, Senior Partnerships Manager, Museums Galleries Scotland
- Jess Husbands, for VP Societies and Activities, Edinburgh University Students' Association

Student focus groups

Name	Year of study	Subject of study
Amber	Year 4	Animation
Anna	Year 4	History of Art
Ava	Year 2	Graphic Design
Catriona	Year 3	History of Art
Claire	Year 2	Graphic Design
Ed	Year 2	Graphic Design
Eleanor	Year 4	International Relations
Ella	Year 4	History of Art
Evie	Year 2	Graphic Design
Finn	Year 3	Animation
Flora	Year 2	Graphic Design
Gayle	Year 3	Fine Art
Jennifer	Year 2	Graphic Design
Jon	Year 4	Fashion
Katherine	Year 3	History of Art / English Literature
Lisa	Year 3	English Literature
Liz	Year 2	Graphic Design
Molly	Year 2	Graphic Design
Orla	Year 4	Performance Costume
Owen	Year 2	Graphic Design
Paula	Year 3	Animation

Name	Year of study	Subject of study
Penny	Year 2	Graphic Design
Poppy	Year 4	History of Art
Stephen	Year 3	History of Art

Appendix III: workshop outline

Objective: to support students in dealing with setbacks and failures

Aims:

- To provide students with the opportunity to articulate some of their own failures / setbacks.
- To see failure as a normal part of success.
- To enable students to hear about and learn from the experiences of others.
- To identify and explore various coping strategies.
- To identify further sources of support.

Time	Description	Aim	Equipment / notes
12:15 to 12:25	Introduction Participants asked to complete pre-workshop questionnaire. Participants asked to discuss what they hope to get out of the workshop.	To clarify expectations.	Sticky labels for names. Sign-up sheet. Pre-questionnaires. Whiteboard / flipchart.
12:25 to 12:35	Icebreaker In groups of two or three, find a success and a failure in common. Share some examples with the whole group.	To confront and normalise failure; articulation of own failures and successes.	
12:30 to 12:50	CVs of failure In groups of four to six, read through the examples given of CVs of failure. Discussion around set questions (to include consideration of goal-setting and revision).	To understand that failure underpins success for many people; to understand that setting goals is an ongoing process, which includes revision.	Examples of CVs of failure. Question sheets.
12:50 to 13:00	Support network Whole group invited to identify the different sources of support (formal and informal) around them. Prompting from us if necessary.	To identify sources of support	Whiteboard and pens (L to write).

Time	Description	Aim	Equipment / notes
13:00 to 13:25	<p>Scenarios</p> <p>In groups, work through the scenarios given, in which one person is struggling to deal with a recent failure and the other is a friend trying to support them. Work through at least two scenarios – role play them, with interjections / suggestions from others. Discuss the viewpoints / strategies / outcomes related to each scenario. Circulate and prompt if necessary. Summarise learning.</p>	<p>To learn from own and others' experiences; to identify and explore coping strategies.</p>	<p>Printed scenarios.</p>
13:25 to 13:35	<p>Motivational statements</p> <p>Discussion of the quotations on the cards: do we agree with the statements, what resonates most clearly? How could we use these going forward? Set yourself a goal to achieve by the end of this academic session or year: how will you go about this?</p>	<p>To summarise what has been learned from the workshops; to identify a goal to move forward with.</p>	<p>Quotes on cards.</p>
13:35 to 13:45	<p>Conclusion / questions</p> <p>What is the key message you would take from this workshop? Write it on a post-it note and stick it on the chart. Complete final questionnaire.</p>		<p>Post-it notes / chart. Post-workshop questionnaires.</p>

Appendix IV: pre-workshop questionnaire

Building your resilience: pre-workshop questionnaire

Student number:

Date:

1. How positive do you feel about your chances of career success post-university?

- | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Very negative | Somewhat negative | Somewhat positive | Very positive |

2. How confident do you feel about being able to handle the setbacks you may face when looking for a job?

- | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Very unconfident | Somewhat unconfident | Somewhat confident | Very confident |

3. Which three words would you use to best describe what you understand the term 'resilience' to mean?

-
-
-

4. Do you believe that resilience is something that a person can learn or develop?

- Yes
- No

Please explain why you have answered yes or no:

5. How important do you think it is to be able to deal effectively with failure when looking for jobs?

- Very unimportant Somewhat unimportant Somewhat important Very important

6. Do you feel that you have control over which job you will take up after graduating?

- Yes
 No

If no, why not?

7. How do you feel about applying for jobs?

- Very worried Somewhat worried Somewhat excited Very excited

8. Do you set yourself goals and plan how you are going to achieve them?

- Yes
 No

9. How comfortable are you in taking risks?

- Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

10. What do you think the impact of setbacks is?

Always negative

Usually
negative

Usually
positive

Always positive

11. How do you think the university could better prepare you to cope with challenges and setbacks?

Appendix V: post-workshop questionnaire

Building your resilience: post-workshop questionnaire

Student number:

Date:

1. How positive do you now feel about your chances of career success post-university?

Very negative

Somewhat
negative

Somewhat
positive

Very positive

2. How confident do you now feel about being able to handle the setbacks you may face when looking for a job?

Very unconfident

Somewhat
unconfident

Somewhat
confident

Very confident

3. Has your understanding of the term 'resilience' changed since attending the workshop? If so, in what way?

4. Do you believe that resilience is something that a person can learn or develop in themselves?

Yes

No

If your response has changed since attending the workshop, please explain why:

5. How important do you think it is to be able to deal effectively with failure when looking for jobs?

- Very unimportant Somewhat unimportant Somewhat important Very important

6. How do you now feel about applying for jobs?

- Very worried Somewhat worried Somewhat excited Very excited

7. Has the workshop encouraged you to set clear goals when planning for your career?

- Yes
 No

8. What do you now think the impact of setbacks is?

- Always negative Usually negative Usually positive Always positive

9. Since attending the workshop, do you feel more positive that you will ultimately achieve your career goals despite setbacks?

- Yes
 No

Please explain why you have answered yes or no:

10. Has your understanding of resilience changed as a result of this workshop? If yes, then please explain why:

Activity-specific questions

1. How helpful was each activity in enhancing your feelings of resilience?

CVs of Failure

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Very helpful	Largely helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not at all helpful

My Support Network

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Very helpful	Largely helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not at all helpful

The scenarios we worked through

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Very helpful	Largely helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not at all helpful

The motivational statements

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Very helpful	Largely helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not at all helpful

Please provide any other feedback you have on specific activities:

2. Please tell us any other comments you may have about the workshop as a whole or any suggestions you may have for future workshops or activities:

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