

# Supporting resilience in first year of university: Curriculum, consideration and cooperation

Susi Woolf, Birut Zemits, Amanda Janssen and Scott Knight

*Academic Language and Learning, College of Education, Charles Darwin University, Australia*

Email: [susi.woolf@cdu.edu.au](mailto:susi.woolf@cdu.edu.au), [birut.zemits@cdu.edu.au](mailto:birut.zemits@cdu.edu.au), [amanda.janssen@cdu.edu.au](mailto:amanda.janssen@cdu.edu.au),  
[scott.knight@cdu.edu.au](mailto:scott.knight@cdu.edu.au)

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The diversity of people accessing university and the variety of modes to deliver learning requires innovative ways to support students. Resilience has been identified as being important to help overcome difficulties students often face as they adapt to their new academic cultural environment. To enhance resilience in undergraduates requires considered strategies. These include clear curriculum support and cooperation across various sectors of a tertiary organisation. Resilience supports are distinctive for regional institutions that have large external and international student enrolments. This research identifies effective supports developing resilience for all students, especially non-traditional students, as they transition through what is often a turbulent first year of study. It examines how students and staff perceive strategies for developing resilient learning. This study is informed by surveys and a focus group with students from multiple disciplines alongside reflective responses based on lecturer experiences. The authors conclude that adversity experienced by many students in first year can be prepared for, and adjusted to, by the conscious inclusion of content focussing on resilience or ‘how to bounce back from difficulties’ in curricular materials underpinned by effective support structures within a university.

**Key Words:** first year, university, resilience, support, retention, attrition curriculum, non-traditional student, international.

## 1. Introduction

Student attrition, particularly at the first-year level, is of considerable concern in the Australian tertiary context. Overall, attrition rates in higher education in Australia stood at 12.5% in 2009 and 14.8% in 2014 (Moodie, 2016), but these overall rates hide the fact that attrition for first-year students is almost double that of second year students, and about one third of first years become quite anxious about their learning journey (Kift, 2014). This is of particular concern, not only because of the financial costs that institutions and individuals incur from students who start but do not complete their studies (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018), but also because of how not succeeding in this venture may affect an individual’s self-perception and life. Furthermore, non-traditional students,<sup>1</sup> such as Indigenous students, part-time students, external students, those over 25 years, remote students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, are particularly at risk of non-completion (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2017;

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<sup>1</sup> In contrast, “traditional students” are conceived of as students who, in general, transitioned directly from high school to university, mostly came from middle or high socioeconomic backgrounds, and tended to study full-time as internal students attending classes on campus (Devlin, 2010).

Devlin, 2010; Edwards & McMillan, 2015). While some of this attrition is “positive”, in the sense that some students leave university because they discover that their true interests lie elsewhere (Kift, 2014), much is wasteful and represents a lost opportunity for students to develop their intellectual capital for greater success in the workforce and their personal ambitions.

Much research into attrition has been conducted, with a recent Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2017) providing a useful overview. This discussion paper identified several risk factors for higher attrition, including those mentioned above, as well as lower ATAR<sup>2</sup> scores, field of study, and being “first in family” to attend university. However, since the level of attrition for each factor varied considerably from institution to institution, the discussion paper concluded that institutional factors play a much more important role than each of these factors individually (see Table 10, p. 39). Furthermore, it was concluded that since the regression model presented in the discussion paper suggested that only 22.55% of the variance in student attrition can be explained by institutional factors and the above-mentioned student characteristics, “many student traits not measured in the regression analysis, *such as motivation and resilience*, ... might be thought to account for attrition” (p. 39) [italics added]. Both these conclusions, that institutional factors are important, and that student motivation and resilience can be expected to be very important, provided key rationales for the aims of the research presented in this paper. These aims were to clearly identify effective strategies to support resilience according to the views of students and staff in an Australian university, and to answer the question, *How can a common unit of teaching support students to develop strategies for resilience in the first year of study?*

To support these aims, section two reviews the notion of reliance in a university context. It provides some basic theoretical underpinnings of the concept of resilience and how it can be supported. It also includes an exploration of the specific needs of various cohorts as well as an analysis of the approaches which inform practitioners in supporting resilience of first year students to give a broad overview on current discourse related to this theme. Section three presents a case study where resilience is used as a focus to explore considerations of lecturing staff and students involved in one unit of compulsory study that focuses on cultural competence and capability. The discussion that follows the case study suggests how resilience may be used as a frame to focus on enhancing not only the first-year experiences in a small university with a diverse population of students, but also in a broader context.

## 2. Resilience

### 2.1. Theoretical underpinnings of resilience and how it can be supported

In general, resilience connotes a capacity to “maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity” (Herrman et al., 2011; see also Rutter, 2006), and to respond to new challenges in a positive, adaptive way. In the university context, challenges include not only adjusting to unfamiliar learning demands and expectations, but adversity can also come from the challenges of succeeding with studies despite considerable financial and other life pressures. Consequently, Herrera (2006, cited in Kovacic, 2012) states that resilient students are students considered to be at-risk who have been able to complete their studies within a set timeframe notwithstanding potential negative risk factors, be they physical or psychosocial.

Within the above definitions of resilience, interactions of three main factors for resilience are commonly emphasised (Este et al., 2009; Gunnestad, 2006; Herrman et al., 2011). These are the interdependence of social networks (as safe connections with family, friends and/or community), personal abilities and skills (as temperament, social and physical skills and sense of success in

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<sup>2</sup> Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank.

present or past activities), and an internal dimension as the positive values or beliefs that an individual may hold (as elements such as hope, love, and faith that give meaning). These factors combine in a process to develop a positive self-image, reduce the effect of potential risk factors, help the individual to be open to new experiences, and minimise negative impacts of challenging events (Gunnestad, 2006). How these factors emerge and can be supported need to be considered in a university context.

However, while resilience is often connected to childhood rearing practices and parenting style (McCann & Hicks, 2011), and the influence of social background, such factors are outside of the scope of influence by lecturers and tutors. Consequently, it is important for educators hoping to influence student resilience to understand factors associated with resilience that they might be able to influence. Since predictions of academic resilience can be made based on students' levels of 'self-efficacy, control, planning, ... anxiety, and persistence' (Martin & Marsh, 2006), this suggests that these are factors which could potentially be targeted by interventions. Support for this view comes from Stephens (2013), who highlights when considering nurse education that resilience can be learned or extended at any time during a life-time (citing Gillespie et al., 2007; Jackson et al., 2007). Furthermore, Habel (2009) has argued that helping to build students' self-efficacy beliefs is a core part of the work of academic language and learning (ALL) educators. In addition, Stallman (2011) embedded resilience training into an undergraduate psychology subject and reported long term gains from this project.

Another approach to developing student resilience discussed in the literature focuses not on students directly, but on how university staff members interact with students. The idea here is that since many students in university cohorts are non-traditional, often studying part-time and working, there is a clear requirement to embed social and emotional support in an academic journey for students who may not have university culture as an accessible physical space or as a tradition in their backgrounds. Thus, as concluded from a longitudinal study which recorded and analysed interviews carried out over three consecutive years with students who began their studies in a foundation program in a British University, Wintrup, James, and Huntrip (2012), using Mann's (2005) theories about learning, concluded that explicitly encouraging learning and teaching with a dialogic approach that includes respectful, emotionally engaging assessment and curriculum materials is essential for student success. This is particularly true not only for students who come from a non-traditional entry point, but also for students generally.

To better understand how the above factors might be supported, it is first necessary to more precisely identify the challenges which put different sub-cohorts of students potentially at risk in order to find ways to support them through their first year of university study. This is best done through conversations with students and staff about what they believe works best.

## 2.2. The need for resilience by different cohorts of students

The transition to tertiary study can be difficult for all students and requires adaptation to the new culture in the new educational environment and the academic challenges this often brings with it. Furthermore, Lawrence (2004, cited in Day et al., 2015), described 'the university (and academia) as a site of *multiple* sub-cultures, each with its own implicit literacies and discourses' (emphasis added). Like the exposure to any new culture, this transition into the culture of higher education can result in "culture shock",<sup>3</sup> and this can be very stressful,<sup>4</sup> sometimes causing mental health issues.

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<sup>3</sup> A student quoted in Reay et al. (2009) for example, felt that 'it [university] was like everyone was really weird ... it was a bit of a culture shock', and O'Shea (2016) reported the perception of a first in family student that she was in an institution with a completely different language.

<sup>4</sup> Caruana (2014), for example, found that international students in the UK reported that they had difficulty functioning in unfamiliar social and academic environments, often causing anxiety.

Flanja (2009) defines culture shock as ‘the state of discomfort experienced by the intercultural traveller, in a more or less profound way, once he or she is placed in an unfamiliar environment’. Based on Lysgaard’s 1955 culture shock u-curve, she describes the stages of culture shock starting from the excitement and happiness of the initial encounter with the new culture to the crisis stage, often with negative feelings, such as feeling anxious, inadequate, irritated and frustrated. Many people pass through this crisis stage of adjustment where they can function well in the new cultural environment. However, this is often difficult, requiring resilience<sup>5</sup> and persistence and it is at this stage in the university context that many students decide that they will not be able to succeed at university. Consequently, helping students to adjust to university cultural expectations in particular, and giving students strategies for coping with any type of cultural differences, can be expected to help with their development of resilience.

The idea of culture shock in the higher education context applies more broadly than to “just” adjusting to new educational expectations. In addition, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, students are not just moving from regional areas to city locations to study, but also from country to country. For example, in 2016, 269,379 international students were studying at Australian universities, representing 21.1% of total enrolments (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2016). Such students, for many of whom English is an additional language and who have moved from their parental home to overseas to study, find particular difficulties (Tweed & Delongis, 2009). The usual adjustments students make in moving from home and becoming used to new academic expectations are accentuated with the requirement to acclimatise to different cultural beliefs and, often, an unfamiliar language or accent of one’s own language. Gunnestad, Larsen, and Nguluka (2010) and Gunnestad (2006) also highlight some variation in resilience across cultural groups, but suggest that the responses and basic strategies to rebound from difficulties are similar.

Apart from academic issues, other non-academic areas of life, such as visa requirements and financial worries, and sometimes discrimination, are extra stressors for many international students who have never been away from home and never before had to live independently. To overcome the challenges they face, international students may require resilience training. Shifting from one culture to another requires particular strategies to support and develop resilience (Cheung & Yue, 2013). Nash (2011) suggests that international students need enhancement of their interpersonal skills to help them adjust socially, academically and emotionally. They must learn new skills and develop qualities to help them survive independently in a range of new settings (Gu et al., 2010). However, while ‘the raw material of resilience is intellect, physical robustness and emotional stability’, external support mechanisms contributing to motivation, often provided by parents, especially mothers, are mostly absent, and thus universities with high numbers of international students need to consider how to encourage resilience (Caruana, 2014).

It should be noted here, that while the preceding discussion has focused on international students, similar issues are faced by many domestic students. Financial stressors and having to cope with the challenges of living away from home for the first time can create problems with succeeding in studies at university. In addition, mature age and first in family students may in particular find the academic expectations of tertiary education “foreign” and hence challenging to adjust to (Devlin, 2013). Collier and Morgan (cited in Devlin, 2013 p.942) found that the first in family students they interviewed were very concerned they would make mistakes as they did not understand tacit behavioural expectations in the academy. Thus, such students are also likely to benefit from resilience training in a way that enlightens them of the culture that they are stepping into in an explicit way.

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<sup>5</sup> The relevance of resilience to intercultural adaptability has been considered to be important for more than 20 years, as evidenced by the fact that a widely used instrument to measure cross-cultural adaptability developed by Kelley and Meyers in 1995 includes resilience as one of the indicators.

Another group that have particular needs to develop resilience to succeed in university studies are Indigenous students. As a cohort within the domestic domain, Indigenous students require a particular sense of belonging and have a higher likelihood of having experienced events that would make study difficult. Toombs (2011) describes the qualities that resilient people have in a university setting. She suggests that those working with Indigenous students should pay particular attention to developing strong cognitive training. Students require the capacity to hold attention, develop memory, show effective judgment and solve problems, so their physical wellbeing, with well-managed exercise, diet and sleep, is paramount. Similarly, emotional balance needs to be supported by encouraging students to be realistic and flexible and to address problems as they appear (Toombs, 2011). Supporting the spiritual component, which entails ‘practicing and keeping in mind the concepts of forgiveness, acceptance, compassion, true meaning and purpose’, also improve resilience (Toombs, 2011). This correlates with the notion of wellbeing in everyday living. At the same time, according to Devlin (citing Lockett and Lockett, 2013, p 945), rather than working with a ‘deficit model’, it is important to focus on helping students, especially non-traditional students, develop agency to help them achieve success in their studies and build resilience.

The key conclusions that can be drawn from the preceding discussion are that many students have to make cultural adjustments when coming to university, potentially multiple, and potentially leading to various forms of “culture shock”, as well as potentially having a number of additional stressors to cope with. Consequently, resilience or the development of resilience, can be expected to play an important role in successful adaptation.

### **2.3. Approaches to supporting student resilience**

Generally, tertiary institutions actively develop strategies to encourage students to continue to completion by providing counselling, academic learning support from professionals and peers, as well as embedding support in study units (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2017). However, while personalised support is widely available to students who seek it, it is often reactive rather than proactive, and likely misses many students who could benefit from the support, especially external students of which there are a high proportion at Charles Darwin University (CDU). Consequently, since equity in academic access includes a commitment to assisting and supporting the participation of all students, approaches to supporting the development of resilience in *all* students are thus desirable. Kift et al. (2010) argue that academic ‘thinking and doing’ alongside emotional supports for difficult times within an institution are essential components in providing students with skills for resilience to help students feel, ‘inspired, supported, and (to) realise their sense of belonging’.

Here we contend that to reach all students, resilience building approaches need to be embedded in the curriculum, and especially in core first-year units where the risk of attrition is the highest. While several such approaches have been reported (e.g. Stallman, 2011), and ‘mindfulness training’ is gaining popularity as a means to balance pressures in student experiences (Galante et al, 2018), these strategies have tended to rely on supplementary measures. In contrast, the approach reported in this paper seeks to integrate methods to promote student resilience through course activities as well as with university support systems. This expectation is based on the key observation made previously that, for many students, commencing university studies is akin to a “culture shock”. Thus, for reasons that will be made clear in the next section, the compulsory ‘common unit’ at CDU, ‘Cultural Intelligence and Capability’ (CUC107), may be highly beneficial to help students successfully move through that culture shock, especially when linked to developing skills in academic culture.

### 3. Case Study Exploring Resilience

#### 3.1. Teaching unit and student cohort details

Charles Darwin University is a regional university in the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia, and the NT has a population of only 260,000 people with a high proportion of Indigenous and non-native English speaking migrant populations (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). The University relies on growth through enrolment by external students. Over 85% of enrolled students learn at a distance from all areas of the country, and the majority of students are over twenty-one when they start their course. The institution has a growing international student cohort and multiple national backgrounds are represented in both external delivery and on-site classes at the central campus in Darwin and its outlying campuses in Alice Springs, Sydney and Melbourne. In fact, the CDU higher education cohort 2016 consisted of high percentages of non-traditional students with 5.6% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, 13.9% Low Socioeconomic Status, 8.7% Remote or Very Remote, 28.2% Non-English Speaking Background, 22.4% International, and 70.8% Mature Age with 54% of students studying online (Charles Darwin University 2017).

The research team chose to explore 'Cultural Intelligence and Capability' (CUC107) for its content and because it is a compulsory 'common unit' for all first-year students to complete across all disciplines. The unit content combines theory and practice with experiential activities and moves from raising students' cultural awareness to developing cultural intelligence and finally to applying their growing cultural capabilities in a report based on a scenario. The unit brings together science, humanities, law, nursing and all other students in a face-to-face or on-line class, and materials must be accessible equitably to the external cohort. The unit aims to develop skills for academic literacy as well as intercultural communication in a way that integrates reflection and develops practical embedded understanding of how to approach cultural similarities and differences in professional life. It has maintained a high approval rate in the formal evaluation categories for two years. Within the unit there are many opportunities for all students, regardless of their background, to reflect on their personal cultural values and consider issues of adjusting to university life and the influences on their ways of thinking, knowing and doing. Given the diversity of the cohorts and the large number of non-traditional students at the institution, this unit must cover a broad range of participants' needs. This project aimed to review how a unit such as this can help students develop strategies to be successful and resilient as they adapt to their new academic cultural environment that may impinge on their studies.

Cultural Intelligence and Capability (CUC107), has two main aims. It aims to develop academic literacy through scaffolding, modelling texts and reference use training using a prescribed text (Rolls & Wignell, 2015). It also explores the content of important issues related to living, studying and working as a professional in the diverse social and cultural environments of contemporary society. The unit examines broad interactions between culture, knowledge, experience and behaviour and the way in which these interactions and perceptions of culture shape interactions at a personal, academic and professional level. The notion of cultural intelligence and the need for people to be capable of identifying and analysing the complex cultural dynamics of their interpersonal, academic and professional interactions and developing places for people to operate safely and effectively is key to the unit. The study program for this unit provides a structure for students to reflect upon, analyse and articulate how they respond to the complex cultural circumstances into which they are immersed as a student and as a graduate in their chosen professions while they learn the mechanics of reading and writing for university.

In this unit, there are three assessment tasks. The first is a mind map where students consider and represent aspects of their cultural backgrounds like habits and customs, objects, activities, beliefs and rituals, places and people, that they feel contribute significantly to who they are. The second is a critical reflection in which they reflect on some of their life experiences and write an essay to critically reflect on why cultural self-awareness is important to develop cultural intelligence. They relate their own experiences to the literature and draw on observations and experiences to discuss

how and why cultural self-awareness assists people to be more culturally intelligent. The final task is where students demonstrate their growing cultural capabilities by writing a report that analyses safe or unsafe spaces. Each of these tasks is carefully scaffolded using modelling and text analysis to support all students with their learning needs.

In CUC107, the teaching team members have noted that assignments and activities often help students to address personal issues and motivations in their studies, as well as providing insight into external relationships that influence their scholarly activity. While this is not a major learning outcome, CUC107 highlights the importance of cultural self-awareness, notes issues about culture shock, and gives hands-on creative opportunities for students to develop strategies to becoming resilient in their studies and future work-places. The unit has a strong focus on experiential learning with the aim of developing cultural awareness, cultural intelligence and cultural capabilities or cultural competence. For example, using Lysgaard's culture shock u-curve (as cited in Flanja, 2009), students are asked to reflect on their own experiences of crises they may have suffered after the original "honeymoon period" during their transition into academic life. In looking back on these crises, the students are encouraged to reflect on what helped them become resilient and to help them adapt to university cultures. Case study scenarios and working with critical incidents augment the theoretical underpinnings of the unit.

When the unit was developed, the focus was on attuning Australian students to local and international perspectives. However, while the majority of students (over 75%) are still external and domestic, our student demographic, particularly in the internal classes at the Casuarina, Sydney and Melbourne campuses, has shifted to a high proportion of international students whose visa requirements are that they attend classes, with 50% of all internal students being international in semester 2, 2014 when this study was completed. Consequently, the focus has to incorporate the broad range of learning and adaptation requirements of this diverse cohort to achieve retention and success for these students.

Currently the equity services team introduce themselves to the internal cohort (Aubrecht, 2012). They explain what they do in a session in week 4 when we explore the concept of 'cultural behaviour'. Student equity staff members communicate about access to their services to external students as well. The Academic Language and Learning Success Program (ALLSP) is also highlighted, and our lecturers encourage students to access the ALLSP services, particularly near assignment submission times. In addition, the library has a dedicated liaison librarian who provides support materials and delivers specialised sessions related to referencing and researching in the unit.

### **3.2. Methodology**

A participatory approach (Guijt, 2014) was applied to the research where the students, recruited from those who had recently completed the unit, were asked to reflect on the unit's impact and lecturers who had taught online classes, to reflect on what aspects of the unit they thought contributed to student's resilience and how they thought this could be improved. Our team was not looking for a large number of responses, but was seeking insights into the issues related to resilience in first-year study. The research questions were defined in consultation with the research team, members of student equity services, and interested staff in the school responsible for delivering this unit of study across the University. The survey and a plain language statement of the purposes of the study were sent to all students who had passed the unit CUC107 in Semester two 2014. The list of students was drawn from a central database, which was de-identified, and the questionnaire was administered through the Office of Teaching and Learning.

To provide greater insights into students' responses to the questions, a focus group was convened from volunteer students who had completed the survey. The researchers also convened a discussion group based on a presentation of initial data with twelve CUC107 lecturers, academic support staff and a student counsellor. These multiple sources provided a diversity of information. This

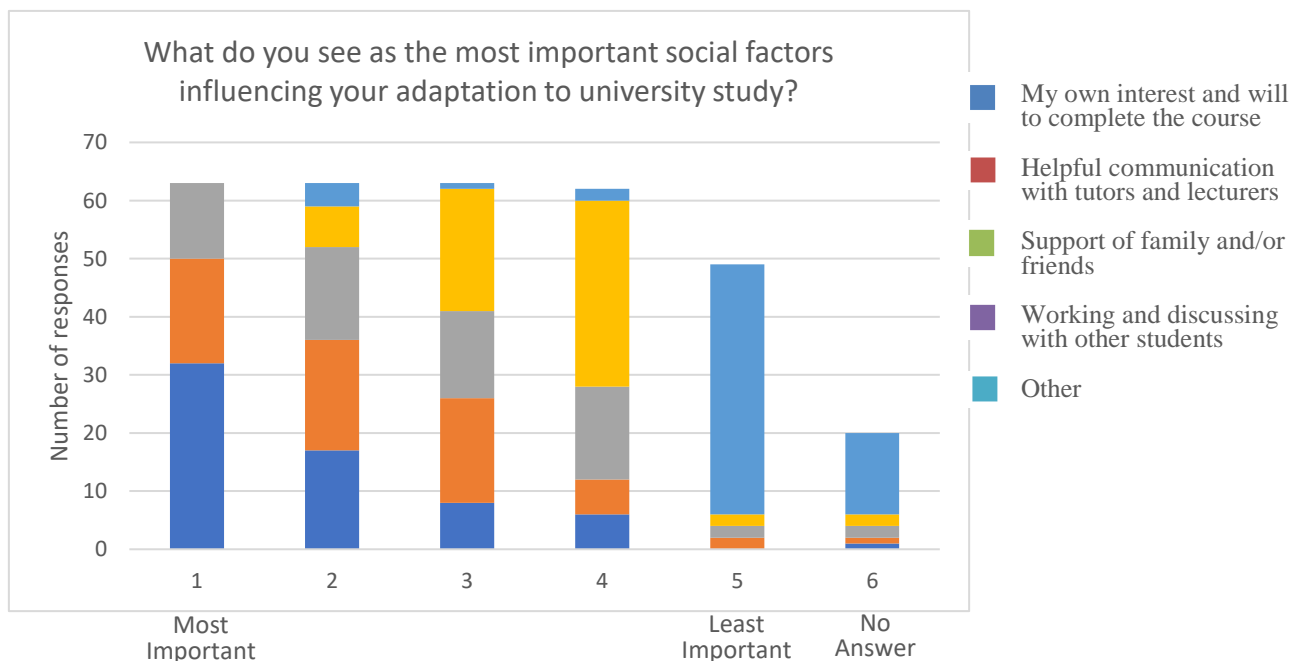
was in line with previously used strategies for researching resilience in universities (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). The responses to the survey were compared with the student evaluations from 2014 to examine correlations, similarities and differences. This information was used to extend questions for focus discussions with voluntary participants in stakeholder groups. These groups constituted students who were internal at Sydney and Casuarina and external students from all over Australia.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Questionnaire

Sixty-four internal and external students in their second year of study responded after being contacted to participate in a questionnaire. By asking students at this stage, they could reflect on their progress and how their study was affected by a range of factors. They would have had time to stand back and understand more clearly what influences have improved their chances of success.

When asked to reflect on reasons for success, Figure 1 shows that, consistent with the belief that student motivation plays an important role in student success (Section 1), the majority of respondents identified their “own interest and will to complete the course” to be the prime reason for progressing well into their second year. The secondary reasons identified for success at studies were fairly equally divided among “helpful communication with tutors and lecturers”, consistent with the research finding that institutional factors play an important role in student success (Section 1), and the “support of family and friends”, consistent with these sources supporting resilience (Section 2), with the former being ranked slightly higher than the latter. This suggests that all three of these aspects must be highlighted when planning to support resilience in students. Finally, “working and discussing with other students” was ranked as being somewhat important, though fairly important to a small subset of the students.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 1.** Perceived positive influences on adapting to university study.

<sup>6</sup> Note however, that students were asked to decide on the *relative importance* of options, not the *absolute importance*, so it cannot be determined how important the lowest ranked option is in fact to the students.



Comments related to this question included:

*Helpful communication with tutors and lecturers is important because they can directly guide you to what's expected and provide clarification.*

*Having tutors that are happy to explain concepts further when necessary & not feeling as though you are inconveniencing them.*

*A balance between work, life and study is very important.*

*Having others to talk to that are going through the same thing helps to get further understanding and get your head around what is being asked.*

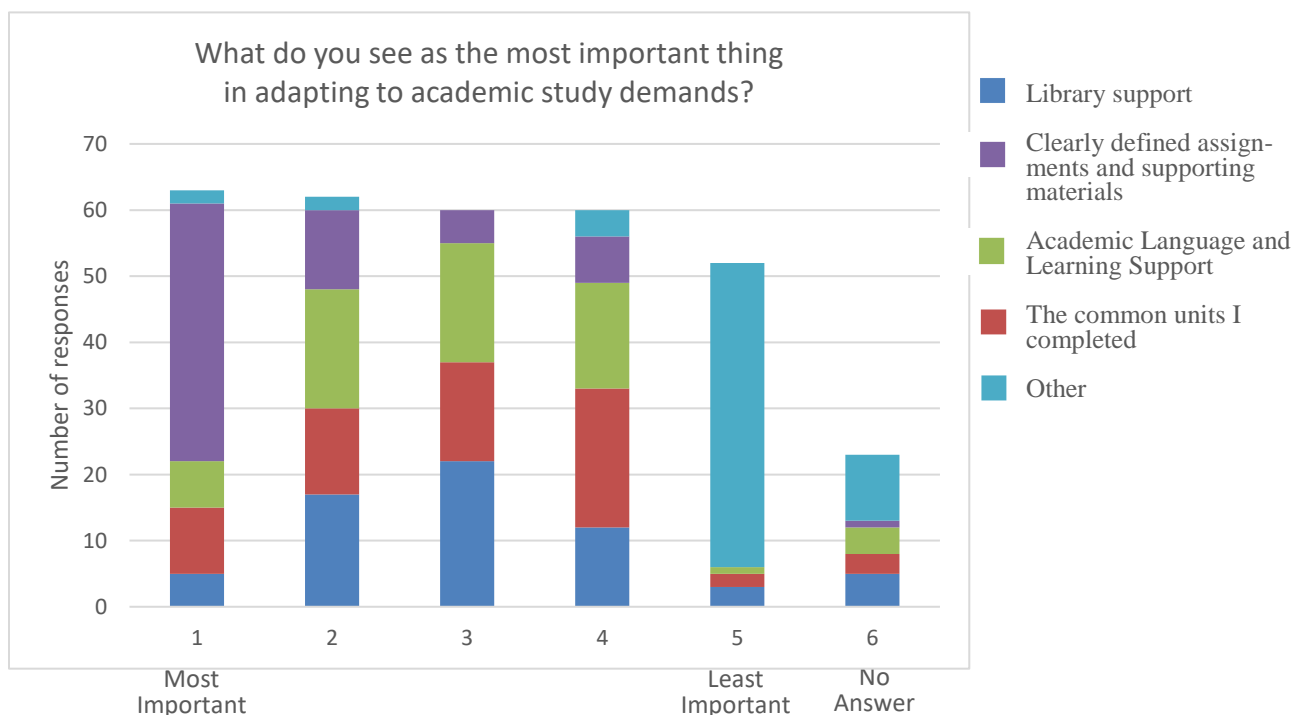
When asked to identify the most important things that helped them to adapt to academic study and diminish stress, the survey respondents gave the highest priority to clearly defined assessment tasks with supporting materials that assisted understanding of expectations. The support services linked to common units achieved similar acknowledgement (see Figure 2). Comments included:

*Speaking with tutors and lecturers, students that are interested, ALLSP has been valuable.*

*The common units liaison librarian gave us support when I was stressing about referencing and researching*

*With the help of the common units, it provided me with a good insight into "academic skills" and set me in good stead for the rest of the degree.*

These findings clarify at least some of the institutional factors which the regression analysis in Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2017) indicated play an important role in student success / attrition.



**Figure 2.** Perceived relative value of institutional support mechanisms.

In relation to the core research aim of determining how well CUC107 helped students adjust to university studies, 65% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the unit had assisted them aca-

demically. The student respondents highlighted the content aspects of the unit, and most importantly given the goals of the unit, considered that the concepts presented helped them in other subject areas. Comments included:

*It makes you more aware of your own culture and how it can impact on other cultures in the workplace.*

*I would like to think that our future work force and people who are leading the way in their current disciplines, has the attitude and awareness of selves and others that this unit influences.*

*Knowing who I am teaches me personal strengths and weaknesses.*

When asked whether the unit was applied in work or study, 90% responded in the affirmative. A number stated the unit had helped in their everyday interactions in the workplace as they had greater self-awareness. Using hindsight, one student claimed the cultural self-awareness training in the unit had raised his or her ability to “*interact effectively with people from different cultures.*” Another student was specific in their comment suggesting that in their work with mental health clients, “*CUC107 has helped me be sensitive and aware of my own prejudices, body language and communication.*” On a social level, one student noted that: “*At home when people comment on difference of manner among other cultures I happen to mention things I have learnt.*” Finally, from the perspective of a student who also works at a managerial level: “*It has helped me widen my perspective.*”

In responding about how this unit has helped with actively creating culturally safe spaces, a number of health care students confirmed they were better able to ensure patient and student cultural safety and were more “*aware of cultures and customs on placement*”. They saw it “*very relevant in working with diverse communities and multicultural backgrounds, especially in Darwin*”. A few students stated that their learning helped them reflect on personal difficulties they needed to overcome for success in their studies.

Students also suggested ways that the support for study already provided in first year through CUC107 or common units generally could be improved. Some students noted the need to improve teaching of referencing and academic writing, as well as assisting students with better time management and other study skills. Accolades for the lecturing staff (one year later) suggest that teaching style was an important factor in the students’ minds. This inference is supported in the frequent comments about teaching quality in each semester’s anonymous reviews.

#### **4.2. Academic staff experiences of supporting resilience (focus group)**

The focus group discussion by twelve staff concentrated on how the support systems (such as ALLSP and Library Services) are integrated into the common units to support resilience. These services were promoted through the on-line and internal classes in CUC107 as part of their content and learning in the unit. Staff noted that this was very useful for the many internal international students and external mature age students. The structure of the units having external and internal lecturers responsible for marking, communicating with and resolving issues to their respective student cohort (groups) was perceived as paramount.

The academic and professional staff focus group data listed a variety of processes contributing to student resilience. External lecturers explained their own approach to supporting the resilience of first-year undergraduate students to successfully complete CUC107 (and/or online/first year study) includes making themselves available to students and handling requests for assistance in an empathetic, positive, constructive, detailed and timely manner. As well, they noted, that standardized weekly student information emails serve to maintain regular contact and guide students assisting them in planning their ‘study week’. This provides a supportive, dependable and equitable contact for all external students which can be adapted to each external lecturer’s style to help students overcome the possible isolation online students can experience.

To improve their contribution to the enhancement of resilience of first year undergraduate students, external lecturers suggested carefully targeting and monitoring students who appeared at risk of dropping out. By increasing contact with them via email correspondence and phone contacts with referral to appropriate support services such as the academic learning advisor program, the library and counselling, they thought the students could be brought back to study. One also suggested setting up extra needs-based synchronous online sessions allowing external students to interact with each other in addition to the current discussion board on the unit's learning management system. One lecturer noted that external students do not necessarily have a network, such as those established by internal students, however their need to confer with a lecturer/tutor for the simplest of queries is no less diminished. Other lecturers were interested in incorporating ways of determining what support systems external students have so as to provide more support to those students with little support outside the academic environment.

Overall, the lecturers felt that kindness and empathy in all communications are essential in building relationships with external students, especially in helping them with realistic expectations of academic cultures which then facilitates the development of resilience.

### **4.3. Student experiences of support for resilience (focus group)**

Members of the small student focus group (made up of six internal and three external students who participated by phone) mostly supported the comments made in the survey, highlighting the importance of clear and consistent communication and access to their tutors and lecturers if needed.

The broader discussion amongst the group delved into the way the content of the unit CUC107 had assisted with their resilience. One student mentioned her appreciation of the advice she had received about how to contact the counselling support at the institution through the classes and that this had helped her get through a difficult time in her first year of study. Another student described how she had returned from overseas to study in Australia and claimed the content and activities of the unit had helped her refocus and adapt to the changes of culture she experienced. Others agreed that the 'culture shock' exploration in the unit was an effective and long-term backing for difficult situations in life and study.

## **5. Discussion of the case study and supporting resilience in university**

The main factors that combine to support an individual's resilience can be identified as interdependence of social networks, drawing on personal skills, and maintaining positive values, as discussed in Section 2 (Gunnestad, 2006). Reviewing the findings of this project, it becomes apparent that there are many factors that impinge on a student's capacity to succeed in their first year of university, and many of these can be linked to institutional supports to build learning networks alongside extending a capacity to be resilient by an individual. Many students considered that clearly defined and well-supported curriculum assists with lowering anxiety. This confirms the value of the academic literacy development strategies which are embedded in CUC107 in a practical way, which requires a consistency in approach across a staff team. This team has a good understanding of how various aspects can impact a student's resilience in completing first year. As James, Krause, and Jenkins (2010) suggest, there is a need for explicit unmasking of student rights and responsibilities in the higher education 'partnership'.

Limitations of the methods are recognised as the study focused on only one cohort of the student group and responses were voluntary. Also, since the students were asked to reflect eight months after completing the unit, there may be some differences with the real experience of the time and what they have experienced since, though the researchers considered the eight-month delay a useful way to have thoughtful reflection from the students. Another, more concerning limitation was that the students who had withdrawn from studies did not have the opportunity to comment on what it was that caused them to leave, but this is explored extensively elsewhere (Baik, Naylor,

& Arkoudis, 2015). A further limitation in the design of the study is that, while students' perceptions of the support offered to them through the content and delivery of the unit in the development of resilience were sought, the term *resilience* was not specifically addressed in the survey and focus groups. Consequently, inferences about the impact of various factors on student resilience could only be indirectly determined.

In addition, internal motivation was recognised as being most important in defining student success by twenty-eight per cent of the students who had continued to their second year (see Figure 1). This links to Klibert et al.'s (2014) recommendation that a strong end goal and pragmatism is needed for students to adjust to stress reactions that could be detrimental to their studies. By encouraging self-reflection and structuring learning so that pressure is minimised, universities are more able to retain students with lower confidence, as well as those who are perfectionistic high achievers. Within the unit CUC107, critical reflection is taught explicitly as a writing style and considered as a purposeful means of developing greater understanding of self (Smith, 2011). The task wherein this writing style is developed works on a transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2009), seeking to develop deep thinking about personal culture in relation to one's position in the University, a workplace or in a community setting.

All in all, the responses for the case study suggest that explicit focus on culture in the broad, yet personal sense in the unit CUC107 provides extensive opportunities to explore resilience and adjustment to academic culture. This approach is supported by Lawrence (cited in Devlin, 2009), who considers that students from diverse backgrounds, such as those represented in the CDU context, need to 'become enculturated into the ways of the university, while being cognisant of both the presence of more than one set of cultural assumptions' (p. 946). Even though Baik, Naylor, and Arkoudis (2015) found that students appear to be better prepared for university than in the past (possibly due to greater integration of academic learning expectations in secondary schools), there is still a need to consolidate ideas about the university culture for students who may be less resilient than those who gain direct entry from high school. This is a high percentage of the cohort that accesses study at CDU. Given this information, it would be useful for institutions which cater for a similar demography of students to consider embedding resilience building strategies in a first-year unit of study.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the notion of resilience in a university context, providing an overview of the theory and concept of resilience and how diversity needs to be considered when applying the concept to supporting first-year student success at university. The authors presented a case study to focus on how resilience can be explored in one Australian context. The discussion identified how the case study can be linked back to the broader ideas linked to resilience. In particular, this research highlights some of the complex variations that lecturers need to take into account in supporting first-year student resilience in content-based units.

Student responses showed that effective and helpful teaching practices for diverse internal and external students, systematically integrated into a program, can have positive effects when considered into the following year. Initially, we hypothesized that as students successfully deal with stress and adversity, they develop resilience, and as a result, are much more able to continue with their studies and deal with life issues, and that lecturing and support staff can have an active role in this alongside the curriculum content presented to the students. The principal aim of this research was to explore whether this hypothesis that curriculum content can facilitate opportunities to support emotional resilience in first-year student learning has validity in the context in which these authors work. This was supported from the student data. Equally, it was found that cooperation for structural supports for academic 'thinking and doing' alongside emotional supports for difficult times within an institution are essential components in providing students with skills for

resilience. This was shown to help students feel they are supported and have a sense of belonging to the institution and their learning.

These approaches to curriculum content and cooperation cannot be isolated from a systematically considerate and encouraging approach to first-year students to develop resilient attributes. Rather, they can be seen in the context of the following suggested institutional strategies taken from government directives to create ‘a healthy university culture that embraces diversity and flexibility, a supportive university learning environment that puts the student first and a culture that reinforces the importance of student success’ (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2017). As well, the systematically considerate and encouraging approach that the CUC107 program delivers demonstrates an institutional commitment to addressing the needs of first year students. Certainly, facilitating the development of students’ resilience within this form of curriculum can be considered as a relevant systematic pathway that focuses on student success.

Furthermore, this research may help to inform other teaching programs to facilitate support in core units. This process also provided opportunities for key stakeholders at an institutional level to come together to discuss the issue of embedding this form of support in first-year curriculum offerings.

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