

The SLL Resilience Programme: fostering wellbeing skills at the University of Reading

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The SLL Resilience Programme: Fostering Wellbeing Skills at the University of Reading.

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Summary

Aronin and Smith state that ‘more than a quarter of students (27%) report having a mental health problem of one type of another’ (Aronin & Smith, 2016). In 2016, the issue of student wellbeing became a pressing concern for colleagues in the School of Languages and Literature (SLL) at the University of Reading. Reflecting Aronin and Smith’s statistics, we were seeing an increased incidence of anxiety and depression amongst our undergraduate population of 1000 students. The concerns this raised were two-fold:

- (i) student retention, welfare, and success were at risk
- (ii) our administrative systems were struggling to cope with the increasing numbers of extension requests and special provisions. Senior Tutors in the School were under particular pressure

The SLL Senior Tutors decided to intervene. In November 2016 we developed the idea for a ‘Resilience Programme’ which would help our students manage stress and anxiety, and which would encourage students to take responsibility for their own wellbeing. We felt that the latter emphasis was necessary in order to avoid the impression of perpetuating what Gray terms a ‘helicopter society’ where young adults look to family or institutional structures to remove obstacles and to solve all problems (Gray, 2015). The Planning Group felt strongly that we wanted to help students develop the resources to manage stress, anxiety and pressure for themselves. However, where Gray’s argument clearly works within a ‘deficit discourse’ (Shaw, 2017), we were keen to foster an inclusive environment where diverse needs could be identified, understood, and addressed. We planned and wrote Programme content between November 2016 and January 2017, and the first sessions were held in February 2017 and May 2017. This Case Study presents an outline of our planning and implementation principles and evaluates the Programme’s impact through qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Description of project

Growing concerns for our students’ wellbeing and success, and concerns about Senior Tutors’ unsustainable workload, motivated our development of the SLL Resilience Programme. In 2016, the Senior Tutors of the School devised two interactive sessions based on our own experience and on researched material (Brown and D’Emidio-Caston, 2001, Roffey, 2014, Shotton & Burton, 2008, Simon, 2013). The sessions were designed to provide a proactive response to students’ anxiety and to help them manage their studies more effectively. The Planning Group was initially comprised of the three Senior Tutors of the School, but we felt that it was essential to draw in expert guidance from a qualified counsellor to ensure that our programme content was appropriate and effective. The Head of Counselling and Wellbeing at the University of Reading subsequently became central to our plans as we designed a Programme that would respond to the needs of SLL students.

From the beginning of the project, ‘Resilience’ was understood as the development of strength, perseverance, and the ability to recover from setbacks. Our use of the term connected with what Shaw would later define as ‘individual empowerment and positive transformation’, particularly

as it ‘fundamentally supports academic learning at HE level’ (Shaw, 2017). Simultaneously, we agreed that the Resilience Programme needed to be in conversation with a new Teaching and Learning initiative at the University titled, ‘The Curriculum Framework’ (University of Reading, 2016). The aims of the Curriculum Framework are expressed as:

- the knowledge, competencies and skills that we want our graduates to attain
- a set of academic principles upon which our curriculum is based
- a set of pedagogic principles which underpin our curriculum
- processes for programme design, approval and review

The ‘knowledge, competencies and skills’ that inform the Framework’s emphasis on graduate employability depend upon mentally fit students who have been actively engaged in their studies. The skills associated with student success (for example, organisation, goal-setting, perseverance, responsiveness to feedback, positivity) are also those connected with professional success, and we remained mindful of the connected aims of the Resilience Programme and the Curriculum Framework as we planned the Programme. Our intention was to build skills for life.

The Planning team spent two months designing and producing content. We then disseminated the plans to SLL colleagues, set up a Doodle Poll registration link, advertised the first session on our Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and also sent an information message to every SLL student’s email account. The first Resilience session was delivered in Week 5 of the Spring Term 2017. This is a recognised pressure point of the year, particularly for final year students who are managing intensive modules as well as their dissertations. For first year students, University exams are only weeks away while, for second year students, the Week 11 assessed essay deadlines are in sight. As a result, students are particularly anxious, and the Senior Tutors are under heightened pressure, mid-way through the Spring Term. The first Resilience session was timed to provide support at this challenging time.

The 2-hour Week 5 session resisted a ‘deficit discourse’ by focusing on building students’ confidence in their ability to manage and overcome setbacks, and by exploring what is meant by ‘stress and anxiety’. The session included the following emphases:

- (i) at what point do stress and anxiety become impediments to success?
- (ii) feedback and how to use it constructively
- (iii) motivation, perfectionism, and procrastination: embracing risk, reframing attitudes towards disappointment, and developing new attitudes towards study
- (iv) building self-esteem
- (v) the relationship between good physical health and good mental health
(see ‘Related Publications and Resources’ for our sources).

Three ‘student ambassadors’ led group-work discussions where our students were asked to reflect on questions including, ‘What challenges do I find most difficult to negotiate and what positive steps can I take to help?’, and ‘how can I take feedback less personally and use it to improve my work?’. We also included exercises to be completed in pairs: students participated in a ‘self-esteem’ test which triggered lively discussion, and they were asked to reflect on ways they could embed positive thinking and wellbeing habits. We were frank in discussing our own struggles with stress and the tactics we use to deal with personal and professional pressure.

The second Resilience Master-Class was held immediately prior to SLL exams in May 2017 and it focused on managing exams-related anxiety. Our emphasis was on demystification so we included information about what to expect in the exam room, revision methods, and our marking system. We discussed the importance of perspective and wellbeing during exams season, and we also shared techniques to calm nerves. A free flow of information, conversation and practical support defined the content of this second session. All materials from both sessions were subsequently uploaded onto our VLE so that students would have permanent access to the resources we had developed.

Evidence of effectiveness and impacts

The feedback from both Resilience sessions was overwhelmingly positive. We distributed a student questionnaire at the end of both sessions and the results are presented below:

Feedback from Resilience Session 1 (85 student responses)

	Agree	Not sure	Disagree
The content of the session reflected my concerns	77	6	2
I will find it easier to manage my anxiety after the session	78	5	2
I have a better understanding of the positive steps I can now take to develop my resilience	75	7	3

Feedback from Resilience Session 2 (82 student responses)

	Agree	Not sure	Disagree
The content of the session reflected my concerns	80	1	1
I feel more confident about the exams after the session	70	10	2
I feel equipped with the information that I need to manage the exams	80	1	1

Both questionnaires included a space for further comment; students could suggest topics that they would like to see addressed in future sessions, or they could offer a more general response. The feedback we received was highly positive: 'This class actually helped – I feel that I can do this now'; 'It's made me regain perspective'. The suggestions we received for enhanced content were also useful and were fed into the second iteration of the Programme (see below, 'Follow up and Future Plans')

The impact of the Programme can be measured by comparing the number of Part 2 (second year) and Part 3 (third year) students applying for coursework extensions through the ‘Extenuating Circumstances Form’ (ECF), or for exam exemptions through the ‘Deemed Not to have Sat’ (DNS) policy. Focusing on Part 2 and Part 3 data produces degree-related statistics: at the University of Reading, first year results relate only to progression and not to final results. The statistics below compare the number of SLL ECF and DNS requests for the Summer Term 2016 (before the implementation of the Resilience Programme) and for the Summer Term 2017 (following the implementation of the Programme).

	SLL ECF requests for extensions on coursework (Parts 2 and 3)	SLL DNS requests for exam exemptions (Parts 2 and 3)
Summer Term 2016	57	16
Summer Term 2017	19	4

Following the implementation of the Resilience Programme in the Summer Term of 2017, one of the three participating departments did not present a single Part 3 DNS request. I was told subsequently by a Teaching and Learning Dean that SLL had returned the lowest number of DNS requests of any School at the University of Reading in the summer of 2017. This is a notable achievement because SLL is one of the largest Schools in the University. We cannot claim that the Programme alone accounts for these results; equally, however, it would be difficult to argue that the Programme played no part in the significant decline in SLL ECF and DNS requests in the Summer Term of 2017. Student feedback via our questionnaires suggests a connection between the Resilience Programme and a more confident management of stress and anxiety.

Reflections on the project

Reflecting on the genesis of the Programme, the Planning Group needed more time to prepare the first session, particularly as the Autumn Term involves a daunting workload. Owing to the seriousness of the situation we faced in 2016 when our administrative and tutoring systems were under threatening strain because of the increased incidence of student distress, we had to intervene swiftly. From the inception of the idea to the delivery of the first session, we had only 8 weeks for research, discussions about content, and for the organisation of timetabling, room bookings, and registration. More time may have produced a more refined product. Conversely, more time may have caused the contributors to speak more from researched material than from experience. The latter, we found, was the most appropriate approach we could have taken; as Jenny Willis indicates, ‘pointing out your own mistakes and acknowledging how you felt at the time’ (Willis, 2016) can prove to be of enormous benefit; the assertion of shared vulnerability removes any suggestion that the session leaders are somehow ‘blaming’ participants for their perceived ‘weakness’.

Funding would have been extremely helpful, not least because we could have arranged teaching alleviation to release some of our time, and we would have been able to resource coordinated administrative support. This would have relieved the pressure on the Planning Group and allowed us to concentrate on Programme content rather than on logistical details. The SLL Senior Tutors had to rely on the goodwill of our colleagues in the administration team to assist

us. Without teaching buy-out, the Senior Tutors committed themselves to even longer working hours during the preparation period. Working as a team helped us to manage this, but anyone planning an initiative of this kind needs to seek funding to deploy staff time efficiently. Staff wellbeing is as important as student wellbeing.

Compensation for the additional workload was registered in terms of reduced ECF and DNS requests in the Summer Term of 2017 (see above, ‘Evidence of Effectiveness and Impacts’). Each request we receive constitutes a significant strain on Senior Tutors’ time during workload-heavy periods, and generates the need for re-sit papers, high levels of administration, and prolonged communication with the equally over-stretched Counselling & Wellbeing Service. The dramatic reduction in requests following the implementation of the Programme repaid the work we put into the sessions, and we also enjoyed greater peace of mind knowing that our students were managing their anxiety more effectively.

We did not sufficiently address issues of self-esteem and personal confidence in the first session. We only realised how important an emphasis this is when students fed back to us following a group-work discussion and reported a sharp decline in their self-confidence when they moved from school to University. We have directly addressed this issue in the 2017-18 iteration of the Resilience sessions (see below, ‘Follow up and Future Plans’).

Follow up and future plans

In the 2017-18 academic year, the first Resilience session was placed in Week 4, early in the Autumn Term, to target transitional students at university for the first time. Retaining the interactive emphasis of the 2016-17 sessions, we included a new conversation about the fear of failure. A YouGov report indicates that 77% of students struggle with this anxiety (Aronin & Smith, 2016) so we were keen to address it. We also added a new session in Week 8 of the Autumn Term called ‘Finding Your Voice’ where we asked a Linguistics Professor to help students develop a confident ‘voice’ in speech and in writing: drawing on a wide pool of in-house expertise guarantees varied content and high-quality material. The third session on Exams Resilience remained unchanged, but it was moved to the latter end of the Spring Term (Week 9), prior to the revision period.

Following internal dissemination of the Resilience initiative, colleagues have consulted me about implementing the Programme in their Schools. I advise tailoring the Programme to the specific requirements of their cohorts because these vary widely. The proportion of international students, commuting students, and even the gender balance of a student population may play a role in the nature of reported issues (see McIntosh & Shaw, 2017). In SLL we have a largely Reading-based, female cohort and issues with stress, anxiety and eating disorders prevail. However, though there may be evidence to suggest that female students ‘are more likely to say they have mental health problems’, this does not mean that the incidence is necessarily lower in male students who may simply be less ‘likely to say’ (Aronin & Smith, 2016). The content and delivery of the Resilience Programme needs to be adapted by each School to respond effectively to the needs of their students.

The collaboration between the SLL Senior Tutors’ in delivering the Resilience Programme will be sustained going forwards. The emphasis on resilience in education is not a surrender to a perceived ‘helicopter society’ but is instead an acknowledgement of the connection between good mental health and learning. The SLL experience confirms the view that ‘a more proactive, preventative approach must surely be better for students than waiting for the crisis point to be

reached', particularly when a 'proactive, preventative approach' enhances student engagement, learning, and wellbeing (McIntosh & Shaw, 2017).

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