



# **Re-imagining resilience for taught postgraduate students**

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## Background to the project

Taught postgraduate students represent an increasing proportion of the UK higher education sector. In 2018-19, almost one in every three new students enrolling on a higher education programme was a taught postgraduate, with numbers increasing by 5% from the previous year (HESA).

Higher education in Scotland is undergoing a period of challenges - temporary ones, such as COVID-19, as well as longer-term and more welcome ones, such as commitments to widening participation and an increased focus on wellbeing.

There is also an increased focus on the concept of 'resilience', although this is a somewhat contentious idea. In some circumstances, the idea that students and staff must become more 'resilient' has led to a situation where students and staff as individuals feel they should be responsible for 'thriving', rather than addressing the structural and pedagogic issues which those individuals face.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, staff can feel that their wellbeing has been forgotten - many of the solutions to student wellbeing focus on staff going above and beyond in order to meet student needs. For example, the concept of the 'relentless welcome'<sup>2</sup> has positive origins, but often means staff are expected to be available at all times. It is important to read 'staff' widely and include the impact on professional services and other support staff as well as academic colleagues.

When considering taught postgraduate (PGT) provision, the very tight timelines involved in one-year, full-time programmes and, in other cases, high numbers of part-time students, add in an extra layer of complexity to this idea of resilience. The group involved in this work aimed to identify what resilience looks like in a pragmatic context - by considering resilience in different groups, and the contextual factors likely to promote resilience, the project team established a shared vocabulary which they used to develop the following ideas, which can then be used to support effective strategies to improve resilience in universities, programmes and among groups such as students and staff.

The resources in this document are intended to be flexible enough to accommodate different forms of PGT provision, and be applicable to both students and staff. The project team hope to encourage a national conversation in which all our higher education community feel able to contribute.

## Introduction

We have split the guidance into three parts to highlight important factors for consideration at institutional, programme and individual level, and encourage you to think about which of these levels might be most relevant to you and your context.

As a summary, the three parts are as follows:

- Institutional - this section is aimed at senior leadership teams and senior individuals within institutions, and has a focus on considering the culture in which students and staff exist, and how to ensure that this culture supports individuals to thrive.
- Programme - this section is aimed at academic and professional services colleagues who have responsibility for design and delivery of PGT degree programmes.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2016/jan/12/science-resilience-how-to-teach-students-persevere](http://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2016/jan/12/science-resilience-how-to-teach-students-persevere); [www.unite-group.co.uk/sites/default/files/2017-05/student-resilience.pdf](http://www.unite-group.co.uk/sites/default/files/2017-05/student-resilience.pdf); [www.amoshe.org.uk/news/5712303](http://www.amoshe.org.uk/news/5712303)

<sup>2</sup> See [www.teaching-matters-blog.ed.ac.uk/creating-a-relentless-welcome](http://www.teaching-matters-blog.ed.ac.uk/creating-a-relentless-welcome)

- Individual level - this may be staff (programme directors, personal tutors and professional staff) or students, and focuses on questions to consider in resilience.

As a group we have tried to view resilience holistically and in context (wider and narrower). The group's thinking and presentation of this guidance was influenced by Professor Kevin Orr's article - *Local Government Chief Executives' Everyday Hauntings: Towards a Theory of Organisational Ghosts* (Orr 2014) - which led to the idea of 'ghosts' past, present and future. This is reflected in the images, created by Graham Ogilvie from the group's discussions, that we have used in the resources.

Ghosts can be seen as alarming, rooted in the past and haunting. They can also help understand our present, help shape the future and 'haunt' us with niggling good ideas.

From the project team's discussions, and looking across the sector, there was a common theme that building resilience is not solely an individual responsibility and we see dangers in making it so. Resilience is not a quality that may be lacking in some, rather it is something which can be strengthened or weakened by circumstances and prevailing culture.

There is value in the notion of 'good resilience' (for example, the necessary challenges of studying at PGT level) versus 'bad resilience' (for example, poor programme organisation, lack of needed support, assuming all students are the same, unclear expectations/instructions). After all, PGT study is about growing and developing as a learner and a researcher - and growth often requires challenge. This reflects discussions around the concepts of 'Eustress' and 'Distress' - usually thought of as good or bad stress, although recent works indicate that the discussion may be moving towards a view that there is just stress, and how it is reacted to is what makes it positive or negative (Beintertova et al, 2020).

Additionally, we note that 'resilience' may be heading towards buzzword status like 'excellence' and 'student experience' which can be problematic as it can reduce meaning and usage to things that can be measured (especially where 'metrics' often equals 'evidence'). The McNamara fallacy is named after Robert McNamara, the US secretary of Defence during the Vietnam War, and was described by Daniel Yankelovich (1972). In summary, it means the assumption that what is measured is what is important, and that what is important can be easily measured. For example, in education the discussions around resilience will often focus on satisfaction scores or student retention rates, rather than the more nebulous ideas around wellbeing or community. Challenging this reliance on 'easy metrics' was the focus of another QAA Scotland quality cluster - 'Beyond the Metrics: The Intangibles'.<sup>3</sup> The cluster website has downloadable resources that are likely to be useful in helping understand some important aspects of resilience within a local context.

'Resilience' may best be seen as a quality of a mutually supportive, yet appropriately challenging community. In this case - PGT programmes that are well designed in terms of learning, teaching and assessment, supporting and working together with students.

At institutional level, we need to think about how we can resource 'resilience' within PGT programme communities, and how an institution's culture supports or diminishes positive resilience. This may be especially so in relation to staff workloads.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/completed-enhancement-themes/evidence-for-enhancement/defining-and-capturing-evidence/the-intangibles-beyond-the-metrics](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/completed-enhancement-themes/evidence-for-enhancement/defining-and-capturing-evidence/the-intangibles-beyond-the-metrics)

## Institution

As noted in the introduction, PGT education is a complex and growing area. PGT cohorts are often an underserved community, that are not well understood. It is important to recognise that PGT students are different in their needs and development as independent learners, than undergraduate (UG) or doctoral cohorts.

PGT students bring a wide range of experience to their studies, and PGT teaching can be a locus for innovation where students are nurtured to explore their discipline in-depth, and become an integral part of our academic community. It can be a space where staff can co-create learning with their students, and has the potential to drive forward research.



Growth in PGT student numbers is often perceived to be tied to concepts of 'The Market', and to concerns around marketisation of higher education. This leads to a number of tensions:

- Tensions between research and teaching (and whether PGT is the place to bring these two together)
- Tensions between a business model of higher education versus a collegial/community model, including:
  - tension between the idea of HE as commodity rather than as a community
  - the growth of student numbers and the effect of this on staff: student ratios and how this can influence community formation
  - the desire for diverse PGT communities of students which will not only make the programmes more sustainable, but also enhance the learning experience.

Resilience can have negative connotations when it is seen as tolerating what should not be tolerated, and increasingly there is resistance to the concept because of how it has been used. While individual resilience training is not without use, it should not be the default response.

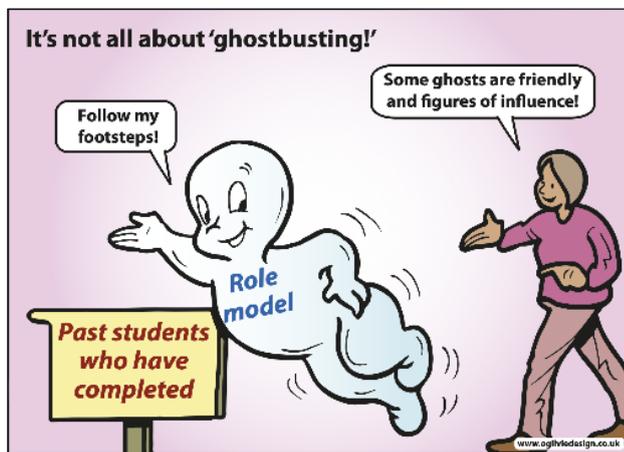
Senior leaders within institutions can have a role in reframing resilience as a positive attribute related to the ability to grow, and in developing a culture in which individuals can thrive. The following questions/discussion points may help start this thinking:

- What is the 'place' of PGT within an institution? What is its purpose? And does it have to have a purpose beyond developing the next generation of students?
- What is sustainable for an institution? Does your PGT provision reflect the strengths

of the institution?

- Be clear on what is needed to help sustain communities at programme level and for integrating PGT students into the wider university community. Some possible suggestions which may help are included below:
  - Implementing an enrichment week in the middle of Semester 1 (autumn term) which allows space for reflection; study skills support; and discussions of the student experiences.
  - Having specific PGT spaces across the university where students can meet people from their own programme and from different disciplines.
  - Specific transition support (for example, to support the transition from UG to PGT, or back into higher education for mature PGT students) - a previous QAA Enhancement Theme led to the production of 'Mastersness' cards which can be used to facilitate discussion on what different groups of people (for example, programme directors, potential students, employers) think are the key attributes of PGT study. These could be used to facilitate university-level discussions on what the concept of postgraduate education means, and guide work on how to build community, and increase resilience systems. The cards can be found on the QAA website.<sup>4</sup>
- Support programmes in making pedagogically-led enhancements, including changes in programme structure that might be outside normal timeframes - for example, would it be possible to extend the timeframe for a master's programme if requested by a discipline?
- How do senior leaders hear the voice of staff who work with PGT cohorts? How can you hear the student voice?
- Stability of staff is vital at all levels, but especially PGT due to the short timelines. How can universities ensure teaching staff remain consistent across the year, and over longer periods of time, allowing them to get to know their students?

## Programme

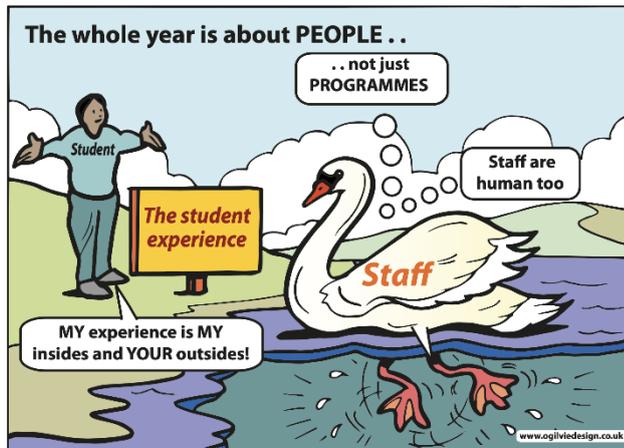


Programme directors (PD) may, or may not, be heavily involved in teaching on PGT programmes, and may lead other colleagues (both academic and professional services) in ensuring the programme runs effectively.

Programme level is not just about pedagogical design: it is a good level for thinking about how a tangible community can be formed. Community and 'resilience' relate to all members

<sup>4</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/enhancement-and-development/mastersness-toolkit-handbook.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/enhancement-and-development/mastersness-toolkit-handbook.pdf)

(staff and students) and require space and time to develop - this would likely require sufficient support at institutional level. The nature of a community can be connected to how students work and their sense of agency (Macleod et al, 2020).



A common theme in discussions is that students and staff are **'humans, not numbers'** which suggests that one feature of a 'resilient' PGT learning community might be one where a diverse range of individuals can find their own space within the programme structure and community. This would include programme workload not precluding students taking part in wider university life.



This leaves us with the issue of working out what is the best level of 'level' of community to work with and what a positive form of resilience 'looks' like and how it can be developed. Our discussions ended with the thought that: 'The aim should be for flourishing communities, not just 'functional' communities'. This is likely to have some 'family resemblance' between communities but also each community will have its own unique aspects.

- What kind of academic community would you want to have on your programme/ discipline?
- How can we promote cohesion and sustain a sense of community at cohort level for PGT students?
- What is needed to help integrate PGT students into the wider university community?

- What is the pattern of assessments on your programme? Are students aware of what the aim of the assessment is. For example: What is it allowing them to show about their learning? How can the assessments you set connect with and contribute to the student's future ambitions (for instance, future work, further study, personal development, reflective practice)?
- What could facilitate a positive environment for learning on your programme? What could facilitate 'eustress'/resilience? What might hinder this?
- Feedback is often a challenging area for students and staff - what will it look like on your programme? Is there potential for making it a dialogic process where staff know students have understood their feedback, and been able to incorporate it into their future work?
- How can a focus on learning, community, student diversity and programme diversity be retained in programme development?
- What is 'resilience' in your discipline?

## Individual

It is important that we do not focus on using an individual deficit model of resilience (seeking to 'fix' individuals). We need to recognise PGT programmes and students as different from UG study and students, and think about how we can help students engage with a new way of learning.

There are consequences of feeling isolated and a sense of advancing commodification of experience and lack of community. It is not enough to simply support students to cope; 'coping is not resilience' - the focus ought to be on helping people thrive and not just survive.

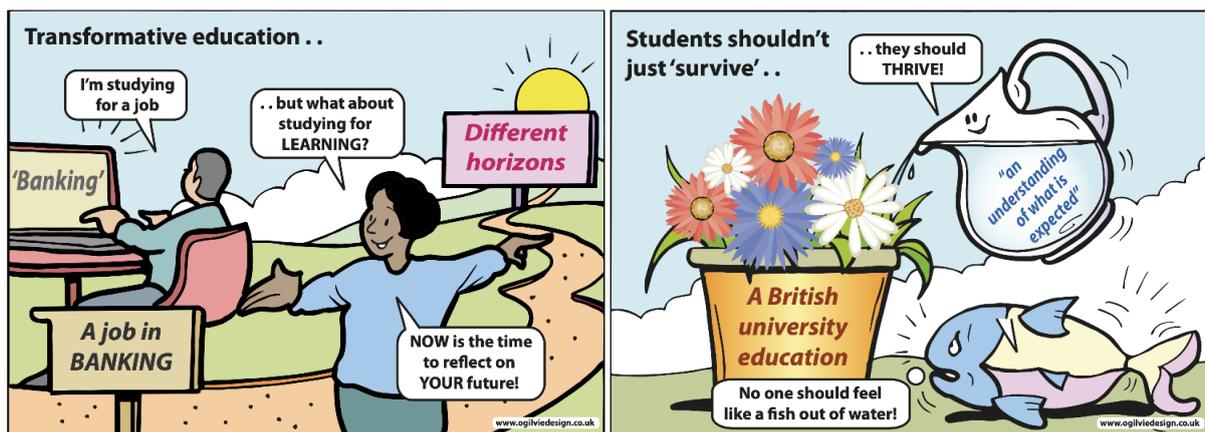
A focus on 'humans, not numbers' suggests a feature of a 'resilient' PGT learning community may be one where a diverse range of individuals can find their own space within the programme structure and community.

The ghosts of grading past and present are not only a programme concern; they can haunt students too. Some of the assessment aspects of a resilient community are likely to be constrained by embedded practice and thinking at disciplinary and/or institutional level. For students, this can be a focus on individual ranking/grades. Some of this challenge is at programme level (see above) but how will you help your students work with these and how can a resilient community help?

The following prompts may be useful for starting discussion with PGT students:

- What is the most important thing for you to achieve in your time on the programme and what things can we do to help you achieve this?
- When thinking about how you are managing with studies and life in general, to whom do you compare yourself? Why do you make this comparison and are others potentially more helpful?
- Part of master's-level study is being an independent learner, what does this phrase mean to you? What do you need from us to support you to become an independent learner?
- What kind of learner were you in previous studies? Which of your strategies do you think will be useful for PGT study? Which might have to adapt?
- What one change would make the most difference to your learning this year (this can be about you, the programme, or the university)

- Imagine you are at your graduation in x months' time. How do you feel? What are you most proud of? What has helped you get there?
- When you encounter challenges, are you the kind of person who tries to solve them alone? Or do you get support from a community?
  - If a community, then who is your community and how do you nurture those connections?
  - If you solve things alone, are you confident you can recognise when you may need to ask for outside help?
- There are different kinds of communities - academic, social, beliefs and values, shared interests. Think about which you belong to and what you give to and get from each.
- Education often changes people - in what ways do you think this experience has already changed you? And in what ways do you hope it might change you in the future?
- Some students are focused on getting their degree in the hope that it opens doors. Others enjoy the learning journey and don't worry so much about the final outcome or marks. Some programmes/universities encourage one approach more than the other. Which approach is most like yours? Which do you think your programme encourages?



## References

Beintertova, J; Lenart, P and Scheringer, M (2020) Eustress and Distress: Neither Good Nor Bad, but Rather the Same? *BioEssays* 42/7

Macleod, G; Lent, N; Tian, X; Liang, Y; Moore, M and Sen, S (2020) Balancing supportive relationships and developing independence: an activity theory approach to understanding feedback in context for master's students. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 45/7

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Yankelovich, D (1972) *Corporate Priorities: A continuing study of the new demands on business*. Stanford, CT: Yankelovich Inc

# Appendix 1: How the project worked

## Participants

The project team consisted of four universities (Edinburgh; Heriot-Watt; St. Andrews; University of the West of Scotland), with a mixture of participants from staff and students reflecting the different voices from different sectors of Scottish higher education.

Cluster Lead - Donna Murray, Head of Taught Student Development, The Institute for Academic Development, University of Edinburgh ([donna.murray@ed.ac.uk](mailto:donna.murray@ed.ac.uk))

- University of Edinburgh - Gale MacLeod, Neil Lent, Janek Mamino, Ian Normile, Wendy Ugolini
- Heriot-Watt University - Margaret King, Anna Sedda, Rob Daley, Ethar Mohamed, Kieran Robson
- University of St Andrews - Julie Brooks, Lucy Wishart, Lauren Charter, Shona Russell, Ryan Thorne
- University of the West of Scotland - Anne Pirrie, Stephen Day, Matthew Crammond

## Meetings

The team met four times; each meeting was hosted by one of the universities, with control over the format of the meeting as follows:

### Meeting 1 theme - What is resilience?

Hosted by: University of Edinburgh

Format: two presentations from specialists in the area of resilience on the topic of: 'Is resilience an individual responsibility? Or related to systems?'. Followed by discussions on what resilience means in higher education in general, and then discussions on resilience in each of the universities.

Themes which emerged from this meeting:

- 'Resilience' = neo-liberal buzzword
- Resilience as tolerating what should not be tolerated
- Notions of good resilience versus bad resilience
- Mutually supportive cultures and practices: asking for help is normal, not weak.

### Meeting 2 theme - Resilient people

Hosted by: Heriot-Watt University

Format: Group discussions, presentations and interviews with students

Themes which emerged from this meeting:

- 'Resilience' can have personal consequences
- Not about personal deficit
- Individuals are in relation with communities
- Focus on PGT communities (programme and higher education institution?)
- 'Humans not numbers'.

### **Meeting 3 theme - Resilient systems, cultures and practices**

Hosted by: University of the West of Scotland

Format: Consideration of 'The Listening Project' and group discussions

Themes which emerged from this meeting:

- Less standardisation and more appreciation of individuals and diversity
- Scale and demographic of higher education.

### **Meeting 4 theme - Guidelines for developing resilient communities of practice**

Hosted by: University of St Andrews

Format: Thinking about 'ghosts' in organisations, hauntings (positive or negative) from previous experiences and the way they influence practice. What does this mean in the context of PGT education?

Themes which emerged from this meeting:

- Higher education should be a community, not a commodity
- PGT programmes should be transformational not transactional
- We should be ensuring our students thrive, not just survive (coping is not resilience)
- We should call out the hauntings from the past which are not a positive influence on current practice and support colleagues to move forward, but equally recognise the 'friendly ghosts' that have contributed to good practice and ensure it is developed sustained.

At the final meeting, there was an artist present (Graham Ogilvie) who drew images to reflect our discussion.

### **Summary of key learning points**

Overall, key learning points from the work of this cluster were that PGT programmes should provide a space where students thrive. Thriving is dependent on students and also the staff who work on PGT programmes feeling part of a community where they are seen and heard. Thriving requires awareness of ghosts from the past that can shape our experiences. Finally, the learning and experiences of the PGT programme continues beyond graduation and often relates to relations and experiences more than simply the grades achieved.

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