

# At Breaking Point: An Intervention On Resilience Within The UK Academy

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## Abstract

Resilience has become something of a buzzword within and beyond the academy, with the concept being applied to diverse contexts of endurance, particularly related to national security, climate change, and more recently Covid-19. However, despite the growing popularity of 'resilience approaches', considerably less work has accounted for the role of resilience within the context of academia itself. In the wake of Covid-19 and in light of the ongoing University and College Union (UCU) strike actions across the UK, this commentary reflects upon how resilience manifests within the academy, specifically focusing on our own institution, Royal Holloway.

Through this commentary, we contribute to resilience scholarship by employing a feminist geographical approach that accounts for multi-scalar power relations and acknowledges that multiple resiliences co-exist. We begin by thinking about resilience at the institutional level (the university and its departments) before considering resilience at the individual level (staff, students, their physical/mental well-being, and the role of unions), drawing out how these multiple forms of resilience interact. In doing so, we seek to subvert traditional narratives of resilience that are often romanticized under patriarchal capitalism (and within the neoliberal university) which reduces resilience to purely individualistic endeavors and equates personal value to research outputs and academic results. We conclude with a hopeful reflection on a more just and equitable academic future that is built upon and fostered by, the collective resilience of student-staff solidarity.

## At Breaking Point: An intervention on resilience within the UK academy

By drawing on Weichselgartner and Kelman (2015), we define resilience as "the ability of materials, individuals, organizations ... to withstand severe conditions and to absorb shocks." (p.251). We explore resilience at both the institutional and individual level to outline two key interventions while adopting a feminist geographical approach. Firstly, we challenge the romanticization of resilience as a positive endeavor that perpetuates the neoliberal status quo. Secondly, we expose the multiple manifestations of resilience that exist in the academy. We recognize that while our commentary is specific to RHUL we hope it may resonate with(in) other institutions across the UK and beyond. Moreover, we emphasize that this work only scratches the surface of these important debates and is by no means comprehensive: instead, we hope that it will provoke further discussions and actions regarding resilience within the academy.

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## Feminist Geographical Approach

This commentary contributes to resilience scholarship by employing two key tenets of feminist geographical thinking. Firstly, it is essential to pay attention to scale. Acknowledging that the 'big global' and 'intimate local' are not separate, binary entities but co-constituted (Mountz and Hyndman, 2006), this enables us to trace multi-scalar connections between different spaces and actors while making visible lived experiences (Massaro and Williams, 2013). Furthermore, in line with feminist thinking that challenges binaries more broadly, we can expose the multiple forms and subjectivities of resilience as situated, dynamic, and embodied (Vrasti and Michelsen, 2017; MacLeavy et al., 2021), to consider how different manifestations of resilience co-exist and interact with one another in the academy.

Secondly, feminist geography compels us to be continuously reflexive of our positionalities when writing this commentary as all knowledge is situated and embodied (Sultana, 2007). We are first-year PhD researchers, who receive funding, and have completed previous studies together at RHUL. Although we have our own experiences of resilience, we acknowledge that these will be different to staff who are employed on either casual or permanent contracts and we do not have to fear reprisal in the same way.

### Institutional

The onset of Covid-19 and subsequent shutdown of many sectors have seen discussions of resilience come to the fore and academia has been no exception. In line with traditional resilience narratives, the external 'shock' of Covid-19 has undermined the security and general functionality of universities and academic institutions. Our institution sought to mitigate disruption to students' learning by implementing measures including shifting to online learning; issuing blanket extensions for coursework; and, introducing alternative assessments instead of in-person exams.

These short-term adaptations showed the university's ability as a whole to absorb unexpected shocks and continue running effectively, essentially demonstrating its resilience. Indeed, the efforts of the staff were regularly praised by senior management, with the Senior Vice Principal (Education) stating that "[a]s a college, we were agile, innovative, and flexible and it is to everyone's credit... that the year was so successful." (Knowles, 2021). The language within this quote, as well as that contained within other statements, is consistent with wider narratives which position resilience as a purely positive endeavor. However, in line with both Critical Resilience scholars who reject resilience as an inherently normative and conservative concept deeply aligned with the neoliberal status quo, and feminist geographical thinking that centres on a scale to reveal multiple resiliences, we seek to challenge such framings concerning the university (Joseph, 2013; MacKinnon and Derickson, 2013; Slater, 2014).

Firstly, the resilience of the neoliberal university is predicated on the ability to endure and survive external changes but ultimately return to and maintain pre-existing systems (Raco and Street, 2012). In other words, rather than using the 'shock' of the pandemic as an opportunity to deploy new and more radical teaching models and organizational structures, the majority of measures introduced were seen as only temporary, to eventually return to the pre-pandemic 'business as usual'.

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Online (and later hybrid) learning ensured the remote delivery of lectures and seminars which, although not without drawbacks (e.g. technology divide, lack of a safe/quiet environment to work, difficulties in adapting content for online teaching), has been praised as an accessible alternative, particularly for those who struggle with mobility on/to campus, are clinically vulnerable, have care responsibilities, and/or commute long distances. Yet, as society continues to adjust to living with Covid-19, RHUL is encouraging (and in some cases, mandating) a return to face-to-face learning under the guise of providing 'high-quality education', inadvertently undoing previous efforts to facilitate accessible learning and working. We cannot ignore the financially driven motivations behind this decision as students and staff contribute to the campus economy. Although we do not wish to ignore the varying preferences of both students and staff, the resilience of RHUL building back and returning to 'normal' perpetuates existing inequalities (Harrison, 2012).

Secondly, resilience in the neoliberal university is multiple, with different forms and manifestations co-existing, interacting, and, at times, conflicting with one another, which compels us to confront who is resilience for and to what end (Cretney, 2014; Cutter, 2016; Wilson, 2018). We recognize that the resilience of the university as a whole cannot be viewed in isolation: this resilience is co-constituted by, and grounded in, the diverse resilience(s) of departments, services, and unions within.

In June 2021, we were informed of 'academic realignments', targeting the six smallest departments on campus for mass staff redundancies (Layzell, 2021; RHUL UCU, 2021). These revelations came following the extensive adjustments and adaptations performed throughout the pandemic, with departments expected to deliver teaching that paralleled pre-pandemic standards. These decisions were (dubiously) portrayed as necessary to ensure that RHUL could withstand the economic disruption of Covid. In other words, the resilience of the university came into conflict with the resilience(s) of specific departments, with institutional interests around efficiency and finance prioritized over the livelihoods of staff. Here, we see how the concept of resilience, contrary to being a positive endeavor, can be exploited, being used to justify cutbacks and cast off people who are ostensibly resilient to maintain, and even deepen, the neoliberal status quo (Slater, 2014).

### **Individual**

In line with our feminist geographical approach, we now attend to resilience at the individual level. Within academia, the so-called resilience of individuals is praised, encouraged, and romanticized with the ability to persevere through adverse conditions and shocks, and the personal sacrifices made to enable this, are cast as desirable and necessary. However, tied up with this are problems involving individualism, isolation, competition, and entrenched hierarchies that create and deepen existing inequalities. Given that universities are "centred around whiteness and masculinity" (Oliver and Morris, 2020: 765), and we would also argue ability, cis-normativity, and Anglophone/Global North epistemologies, those of us who do not 'belong' are continuously excluded from these spaces in ways which necessitate additional and different kinds of resilience(s).

There is an expectation that minorities must perform resilience in the same way and to the same standard as able-bodied cis white men in the face of external shocks and

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conditions. For example, we might consider how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the gendered nature of care labour within the university, with women staff often taking on more childcare and household responsibilities than their male counterparts whilst continuing to work from home (Augustus, 2021). In other words, we as minorities must undergo the additional work of being resilient to internal institutional environments which are not built for us and, in many ways, actually work against us. As we struggle to exist within these spaces, we are continuously exposed to institutional violence (Ahmed, 2012) and made to feel “uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different when [we] take up space” (Ahmed, 2007: 158), raising questions of how and when we distinguish resilience from survival. This was emphasized by an anonymous participant in an online survey we conducted:

*“It is those [of us] subjected to violence who must show ongoing resilience in the face of multiple forms of oppression ... we do not get a break, [...] we are expected to be constantly high achieving through it all.”*

This once again illustrates that resilience, despite its romanticization as a positive endeavor, for many of us is a difficult, lonely, and painful struggle that is a prerequisite of being in academia. Indeed, academia relies and thrives upon these individualistic and, at times, competing resiliences, often at the expense of personal wellbeing (Lashuel, 2020).

Multiple studies have revealed widespread mental health issues amongst both staff (Guthrie et al., 2017; Bourgeault, Mantler and Power, 2021) and students (Rawlins, 2019; Cage et al., 2021) within Higher Education, with anxiety, depression, and burnout particularly common. This was further highlighted by two anonymous participants reflecting on their experiences of resilience:

*“Experiencing burnout over and over again, and having no choice in the matter, otherwise you fail, and everyone is pretty much expected to do it.”*

*“[My] resilience is dwindling and I don’t want to be resilient anymore but I also love and enjoy researching”*

Resilience alone is not a solution and there is widespread agreement that robust action needs to be undertaken to tackle these systemic conditions: we wholeheartedly agree with the rallying cry that ‘staff working conditions are students’ learning conditions’, as these struggles are fundamentally interlinked.

This feeds into wider industrial action from UCU, specifically the Four Fights dispute which ties together pay, equality, casualization, and unmanageable workloads (see UCU, 2022). While we acknowledge that all staff continue to juggle both formally recognized responsibilities (e.g. teaching, research outputs, tutoring, admin), and more informal, ‘invisible’ labor (e.g. mentoring, caregiving, pastoral support), the burden of the latter predominantly falls upon minorities, demanding them to be (more) resilient. And yet, it is the very same staff taking on these additional responsibilities who are on precarious, short-term contracts, compromising their ability to be resilient (Mason and Megoran, 2021). As Ahn et al. (2021) argue, there is a need to move beyond individualistic resilience (as it serves to maintain and uphold oppressive

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structures) to instead pursue a collective, community-based resilience or perhaps even resistance.

## Conclusion

We have sought to subvert traditional narratives of resilience, which are romanticized under patriarchal capitalism and within the neoliberal academy, demand adaptations to fit and maintain this (broken) system. These structures, which reduce resilience to a purely individualistic endeavor and equate personal value to research outputs and academic results, must be countered. We believe there is scope to move beyond resilience and instead consider when and where it must become resistance. Rather than us being resilient to the existing conditions and struggles of the academy, academic conventions and institutions themselves should be challenged and reworked to fit our individual and collective needs for how we want to study, do research, and teach. Accessibility, flexibility, and equality for *all* staff and students should be prioritized over the metrics, outputs, and profit which are fundamental to current framings of resilience, something which can only be achieved by collectively resisting the current and oppressive structures we are subjected to.

To conclude, we briefly outline two interventions which could act as starting points towards securing a more just and equitable academic future, and we hope might provoke further thought, discussion, and action.

1. Challenge the entrenched hierarchies and rankings within the academy, both between institutions and within them. Abolish the Research Excellence Framework and other metrics which pit departments and institutions against each other and perpetuate the need to be resilient and competitive.
2. Listen to staff and students by addressing the demands of the UCU, eliminating precarious contracts and tackling unmanageable workloads in order to cultivate a careful and care-full academy without the existing barriers which undermine survival and wellbeing.

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