

Building Resilience From Adversities: Perspectives From A Final Year International Student

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Abstract

With my doctoral studies coming to an end, I find that a recurring theme of my journey so far is probably resilience. To me, being resilient means that you are able to endure and overcome hardships, which in turn allows for a greater scope for personal growth and development. In this short article, I reflect upon two personal stories as an international student. The first one happened at the early stage of my study, when I struggled to narrow my research topic and plagued with constant self-doubts. The second story came much later after the Covid-19 outbreak. Whilst adapting to this 'new normal', I had to contend with the anxieties of thesis writing coupled with the constant barrage of negative news headlines and homesickness. These were the moments that almost made me give up, but I am glad that I did not. Looking back now, these experiences have taught me to be resilient, especially through tough times. Finally, I would like to tell my fellow PhD students who may be in a similar position to me: you are not alone, do not give up and do seek help if things become too overwhelming. I believe we can all overcome the challenges we are facing now, hang in there and these experiences will in turn build your resilience and serve you well in the future. Just as Friedrich Nietzsche's (1888) famous saying goes, 'what does not kill you makes you stronger'.

Main text

Resilience can mean different things to different people. In the higher education context, although no shared definition of resilience exists, resilience can be seen as 'a dynamic process of positive adaptation in the face of adversity or challenge' (Brewer et al, 2019, p1114). In line with this, from an educational psychology perspective, there are two crucial elements when defining resilience, one is the exposure to severe adversities or threats, and another is the evidence of positive adaptation to these adversities or threats (Toland & Carrigan, 2011). However, I would like to add that successful adaptation also builds an individual's resilience. Therefore, to me, being resilient means that you are able to endure and overcome hardships, which in turn allows for a greater scope for personal growth and development. This reflection piece is based on two personal stories which I considered have shown resilience.

I still remember the sizzling summer a few years ago when I was working non-stop as an English teacher in Nanjing, China. Earlier that year, I had just returned to China after obtaining my master's degree in Northern England. Just like many graduates, it seemed that I was either looking for a job or looking to continue my studies. I tried both. My teaching career started off quickly after I passed my probationary period, but I was getting no luck with PhD applications. However, an email caught my attention in one of those busy days; it was a reminder asking if I am going to accept my PhD offer. The decision did not take long to

make. A month later, I arrived in the UK. Although it is said that international students could be faced with unique challenges such as language barriers, adjustment to the host country's academic expectations and social-cultural integration (Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017). I was adapting fine thanks to the 'rehearsal' of my master's study experiences in the UK. However, the first couple of months of my doctoral study was less than satisfactory: I was struggling with the work, in particular, narrowing down my research topic. The struggle was most likely coupled with the drastic shift from being a novice teacher to a PhD student. Or perhaps it was the homesickness. At that time, all these adversities made me question myself – Why did I want to do this PhD? Was this a bad decision to return to academia? Would it be better if I stayed in my job and lived in my comfort zone in China? Am I really good enough for this? Emotionally, I found myself feeling lost and in constant self-doubts. Academically, I seemed unable to pin down my research topic which made me worry further about my PhD probation results. However, thankfully I decided not to battle this by myself but talk to my colleagues about my thoughts and worries. It turned out I was not alone, even the change from a teacher to a PhD student is not rare, many people have had working experiences before. After these conversations, I was feeling less stressed and continued to work towards my goal. I eventually bounced back with a refined research proposal way ahead of the deadline and passed my probation review. Now I know it is common for early-stage PhD students to experience the feelings of being 'lost'. If anything, by facing those difficulties, it forced me to make positive adaptations and in turn built my resilience. This was the very first moment of my doctoral study that I made a positive adaptation by communicating with my peers and staying consistent despite facing challenges.

Fast forward to present, the Covid-19 pandemic has greatly impacted our lives in one way or another. Even now, the third year into the pandemic, we are still experiencing its aftermath. As an international student, I have not been able to visit my family back in China since the outbreak. During this time, international students were faced with greater challenges than domestic students due to being far away from their support system (Koo, Yao, & Gong, 2021). What was even worse, the racial discrimination towards Chinese and people of East Asian origin increased globally (Devakumar, Shannon, Bhopal, & Abubakar, 2020). Whilst suffering from loneliness and isolation during lockdowns, I was bombarded with negative news about people who looked like me getting attacked, even in the UK (Gao & Sai, 2021). All of this had a negative impact on my mental health. Meanwhile, my doctoral study entered another important phase - writing up. However, by this point, I was anxious to the point that I often fell behind my writing schedule, which resulted in a vicious cycle of worrying. Although it is said that many PhD students were struggling with mental health problems such as anxiety (Van Der Heijde, Douwes, & Vonk, 2019). I was not aware of how 'ill' I was mentally until much later. Thankfully, I am in a better place after receiving professional help. Although my academic progress is delayed, it does not mean I am bound to 'fail.' Reflecting back, I am glad that I did not give up on my studies even though I was exposed to the challenge of completing my PhD during Covid-19 with my impaired mental health. I made a positive adaptation by seeking professional help for my wellbeing despite the stigma of help-seeking may still exist in today's society. Moreover, the experiences I have gained and the lessons I have learnt from my battles with these difficulties probably helped to build my resilience. If I ever found myself in similar situations again, I would be able to face it with a better mentality.

This was the second moment I have shown resilience as a doctoral student, my positive adaptation made me more confident and resilient.

Lastly, as suggested in the literature, resilience plays a vital role in higher education students' success (Brewer et al, 2019). We doctoral students could be in extra need of resilience building as it is possible for us to encounter all kinds of adversities during the long PhD journey. Through my two personal stories, I showed the moments of me as an international doctoral student being resilient despite facing challenges: one at the beginning of my study and one at the final stage of my study. Even though I experienced these adversities, I made positive adaptations to tackle them. In addition to the two important aspects of resilience Toland and Carrigan (2011) proposed, I further emphasised that the experiences of the achievement of the positive adaption from adversities will in turn help to build your resilience. Moreover, while not everyone in our community as PhD students or researchers would be willing to discuss their mental health publicly, by sharing my own struggles, I hope to raise mental health awareness and make it a reminder to look after your wellbeing. I would also like to uplift my fellow PhD students' spirits, to whom may find themselves in a similar circumstance as me – you are not alone. Remember it is like the famous Friedrich Nietzsche (1888) saying, 'what does not kill you makes you stronger' and I believe these challenges will better equip us with resilience to tackle bigger challenges in the future.

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