

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Understanding graduate resilience in context: A framework for future research

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Abstract: Drawing on the findings from a systematic review of the literature, this paper considers what resilience means in the context of the graduate labour market. Whilst there are insights from previous research, we highlight how the specific experience and context in which graduates will need to ‘apply resilience’ need to be unpacked; this includes: economic hardship, social discomfort and the friction between goal re-setting and underemployed status. In the absence of current theoretical models to consider graduate resilience, we argue that the heuristic application of theories used in complementary research on graduate employment (the late modern approach, the Bourdieusian approach and the identity perspective) will allow for a greater critical analysis of graduate resilience. Informed by a systems perspective, we present a framework for exploring resilience as a system of interconnected influences in context. We consider the implications of our research for academics, practitioners and policy makers.

Paper: Through the development and establishment of the knowledge economy, there is a general acceptance of the assumption that access to education – in particular, higher education – will provide increased life chances and greater employment opportunities (Case, 2014). However, there is a growing body of research that questions the meritocratic realities students face when they enter the graduate labour market (Burke, 2016). There are increasing reports of graduates being disillusioned with the realities of work, their career expectations being unmet and increasing numbers describing themselves as underemployed. When graduates find themselves in such circumstances they may come to frame their experience in ways which might have long term negative effects, reducing the likelihood of them achieving a ‘graduate career’ and prevent them from engaging with the career behaviours which would help them to capitalise on the experiences in some way (Burke, 2016). Within general discourse, there is an emergence of the term ‘resilience’ in relation to graduates generally and graduate careers more specifically, with resilience a focus on graduate employer surveys and a feature that HEIs should develop within students. Within the press and practitioner literature, graduate resilience is presented as being a key ‘attribute’ for a successful career – something that can and should be developed; however, surveys of employers suggest that they

perceive graduates as 'lacking' in resilience when they enter employment. The concept has received limited critical attention. Although researchers have begun to examine the notion of resilience in careers generally (Lyons et al., 2015) and graduate resilience more specifically (Morgan, 2016), this paper maintains that, as an analytical concept, its application is quite broad, therefore dulling the precision that such a concept can offer empirical research.

This paper which is based on a funded systematic literature review on graduate resilience will begin by providing an overview of definitions of resilience. Beginning with the development of the term "resilience" in psychological research and the shift toward a more positive psychology of how individuals deal with trauma, the paper will highlight a number of attempts of providing a definition including adaptability and recovery. In addition, the authors will provide their own definition of resilience as a composite model between adaptability, goal re-setting, recovery and self-efficacy. The paper will then move on to discuss traditional forms of measuring resilience and in particular the application of psychometric testing and the limitations of such an approach. This portion of the paper will conclude with a review of an emerging systems or ecological approach to resilience, which incorporates structural and agentic elements. The paper will discuss the benefits of this conceptual development through the shift away from a highly agentic individual trait model of resilience.

This paper then extends the arguments from Windle *et al.* (2011) that the vast majority of research on resilience, from more agentic/individualistic forms to a systems approach, is under-theorised. The paper will unpack two theoretical models which were applied by research included in the review underpinning this paper, namely: Savickas' (2012) theory of life design and Lent *et al.*'s (2000) social cognitive career theory. The paper will discuss the limitations of these theoretical approaches including lack of consideration for structural contexts stemming from the "middle-range" nature of the theories, i.e. theoretical concepts that focus on addressing specific phenomena rather than placing theory within an abstract tradition.

Finally, this paper advances arguments from Stevenson (2016) that while resilience has received a significant focus at secondary level, both from academic research and policy attention, a similar level of focus has not been provided to higher education appreciating the specific context of this level of education. In the pursuit of understanding of graduate resilience this paper argues that a similar exercise is required for graduate resilience. As such we put forward specific issues, identified from previous literature, concerning resilience within the graduate labour market:

- Economic hardship
- Social discomfort
- Goal re-setting

Stemming from the under-theorised accounts of resilience, we argue that we need to turn to the application of social theory in related areas of graduate (under)employment – namely navigation of the market:

- Holmes (2013) graduate identity formation
- Tomlinson (2007) gradueness
- Bourdieu (1977) theory of practice

The paper will conclude with discussing how each of these theories may be used when thinking about graduate resilience and provide a clear theoretical starting point which is based on the competition between structure and agency.

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