

Building resilience IN A CHANGING JOB MARKET



RACHEL BEAUCHAMP, Faculty Careers Coach and DIANE RICHARDSON, Careers Student Engagement and Quality Manager from Lancaster University outline how integrating resilience-building with flexible career guidance can help students navigate uncertainty and thrive in their professional and personal lives.

At Lancaster University, we've been exploring ways to help our students build resilience, equipping them with the mental tools to remain positive and proactive. This is especially crucial as they enter a job market defined by rapid technological changes, evolving industries and economic uncertainty. Graduates today are likely to experience career changes, layoffs or unexpected disruptions, and resilience provides the mental framework to stay positive and proactive.

STUDENT MOTIVATION

Over the past few years at Lancaster, we have noted a significant shift in the motivations of our students. No longer are they driven by just salary or job titles, they are seeking careers that allow them to maintain their personal wellbeing, pursue meaningful work and integrate their personal passions with their professional lives.

This notion is called 'work-life integration' and unlike the traditional concept of work-life balance, where work and personal life are kept separate, work-life integration acknowledges the fluidity between these areas. For students entering the workforce, being able to blend their career with personal passions and values can significantly improve their sense of fulfilment, reduce burnout and strengthen their resilience.

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GUIDANCE FOR WORK LIFE INTEGRATION

One-to-one appointments offer us a platform for addressing students' challenges and helping them develop their resilience. By fostering deeper self-awareness through reflective exercises, such as exploring what brings students joy or what they are passionate about, we can help students better understand how their careers can align with their broader purposes. This process not only builds confidence in their decision-making but also enhances their resilience as they face inevitable workplace challenges.

Promoting flexible career planning is a crucial aspect of building resilience. Given the increasingly non-linear nature of career paths, students must be encouraged to embrace flexibility in their professional journeys. During appointments, we can discuss alternatives to traditional career trajectories such as freelance work, side projects or volunteering, that align with students' personal interests. By highlighting diverse career routes, we empower students to explore multiple pathways to success, thereby building resilience as they adapt to an evolving professional landscape.

Time management and boundary setting are equally important in fostering resilience through work-life integration. These consultations provide a space for offering practical advice on how students can structure their day, manage deadlines and allocate time for personal activities. Teaching students how to set boundaries, such as turning off work notifications after hours or prioritising self-care, can prevent burnout and sustain their long-term resilience.

By encouraging self-reflection, promoting flexible career planning and teaching boundary-setting skills, we can play a crucial role in helping students navigate the complexities of the modern workplace while maintaining personal well-being and professional success.

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GROWING RESILIENCE

We also trialled offering resilience workshops with a careers focus, but poor attendance and the blurring of professional boundaries prompted us to explore alternative provision.

We identified a local social enterprise running programmes that support learners to develop a mental health toolkit that they can use in challenging situations. We commissioned them to develop a five-day programme, linked to success in the graduate recruitment market, focusing on:

- Self-awareness, conflict, consequential thinking and self-direction
- Five ways to well-being / Healthy body, healthy mind
- Chaos: Coping with a bad day – making every day good
- Developing interpersonal skills through volunteering.

PROGRAMME EVALUATION

Initially we only offered the programme to students based in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences with widening participation characteristics. We immediately faced challenges as only 22 students expressed an interest and 12 students eventually signed-up. In hindsight, the day-long workshops were a deterrent for students with busy academic schedules.

Also, in trying to link employability and resilience, we may have been attempting to cover too much. A shorter programme, focused purely on developing a mental health toolkit, with less of a time commitment, may have worked better. We had a revolving door situation of students having to dip in and out of the sessions due to other commitments, disrupting the flow of the programme.

Of the students who signed up, all bar one saw the programme through to the end and overall, we were pleased with the feedback, including:

‘The meditation and positive mindset activities could help anyone with their future plans’.

‘Tips for coping with stress and overwhelm were so useful’.



Going forward, we still believe there is scope for this kind of activity in our careers portfolio but with less time commitment required on the part of the student, and potentially being delivered in-house by the university’s student wellbeing teams, who can then signpost back into appropriate support services where needed.

The practical toolkit idea was well received by students but maybe these sessions could be scheduled as part of a more general 90-minute career session so that the students are still getting the very tangible career support they are looking for, but with the addition of practical tips from wellbeing experts. Our experience suggests that whilst students are telling us they need this kind of support, standalone resilience activities in a careers context may not be the way forward.

A NUANCED APPROACH

In navigating the complex landscape of student resilience and career preparation, a nuanced approach is essential. While standalone resilience programmes, in our experience, have faced challenges, integrating resilience elements into broader career services shows promise. By adapting our methods, we can better equip students for the evolving demands of the modern workplace.



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