

## Embedding Mental Wellbeing: Methods and Benefits Collaborative Enhancement Project 2021

### Cycles of Support: Student Wellbeing on Placement

Dr Laura Nixon, De Montfort University

#### Rationale

This work was initially designed for second-year undergraduate students who were completing year-long placements in industry. As Placement Tutor, I meet formally and informally with the students to support them during the year (pastorally and academically). There were no wellbeing-related resources available to students when I came into the role. Students would experience hardships during the year, but would not recognise the resilience needed to overcome these challenges, or the resilience that they developed as a result. The reasons students provided when they wanted to leave placements prematurely or break their contracts were also connected to this issue.

#### Method

I needed resources suitable for distance learning and independent learning, as students are on placement across the UK and abroad. As students work during the day, materials also needed to be permanently accessible on the Placement Year Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) shell. It was also important to adhere to the University's Universal Design for Learning principles.

I initially organised a meeting with Rachel Davies, Disability Officer for Student and Academic Services.<sup>1</sup> It was important that materials were consistent with the advice offered by the Disability Advice and Support Team. This first collaboration involved creating a Padlet entitled 'Take Care of Yourself on Placement,' featuring articles, videos, weblinks, etc.<sup>2</sup> As Padlets are interactive, we can amend them quickly as new resources are discovered and the online, visually interesting and 'bitesize' content means they are manageable for students who often struggle to engage with academic materials during the placement year, citing lack of time. I independently created a second Padlet for students completing placements abroad, having identified that some of their challenges were specific to being in different countries and cultures.<sup>3</sup>

Dedicated resilience resources were created for the Blackboard (VLE) shell in 2020. Again, Rachel was invaluable in offering guidance, suggesting amendments and providing resources. Material includes:

- Definitions of resilience (videos and written definitions, with external links)
- Theoretical models for resilience and change

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<sup>1</sup>Rachel has given permission to be cited in this submission. I am extremely grateful for her guidance and support.

<sup>2</sup>[https://padlet.com/DMUdisability/ADH\\_Placement](https://padlet.com/DMUdisability/ADH_Placement)

<sup>3</sup>[https://padlet.com/laura\\_nixon/me2qrhqcw3qh](https://padlet.com/laura_nixon/me2qrhqcw3qh)

- Tasks for students
- Resilient approaches to feedback
- Next steps and support

As this was a largely unfamiliar topic, it was important to create opportunities for broader student interaction, rather than relying on independent learning. I therefore added content to the Placement Year Induction session. This induction is designed to prepare students for placement – covering key information on structure and assessments, but also broader topics including workplace etiquette. It offered an opportunity to verbally explain resilience concepts and link to the Blackboard (VLE) content (the video and “6 domains of resilience” are on the Blackboard (VLE) shell and discussed in the induction). Students also worked through scenarios and gave advice to hypothetical placement students.<sup>4</sup> The induction session was recorded as another permanent resource.

One of the final resources is given to students towards the end of their placement experience, when their thoughts return to university. I developed a “Transitions” document from feedback received in second formal placement meetings, as some students had expressed anxiety about returning to university. The document is a simple concept, but aims to make connections between skills and experiences on placement and students’ final year of study, whilst also reiterating support available at DMU.<sup>5</sup> This is embedded onto the Blackboard (VLE) shell.

## Evaluation

Since implementing these changes, I have seen some positive impact and improvement, firstly concerning student feedback. This can occur informally in placement tutor meetings, e.g. when students comment on the usefulness of certain materials. There are also formal references to improvements in resilience, independence and confidence in their assessment work. This is also seen in anonymous survey feedback, from Spring 2021. Students did not mention specific documents; however, the survey was conducted in the first year of students having access to these resources. For example, when asked about Blackboard (VLE) resources, 88.89% found them helpful and appropriate. One student commented that ‘there were tips on how to navigate the workplace, which was helpful’ and another stated ‘there was clear guidance and help from my placement tutor.’ Additionally, Question 10 of the survey asked, ‘Did your placement year have an effect on any of the below (select the ones that apply)’. As shown below, the majority of students highlighted both skills and confidence/resilience as positive outcomes of their placement:

- Confidence and resilience: 88.89%
- Skills (technical and transferable): 94.44%
- Career plans: 61.11%
- Final year at DMU: 55.56%

This was also confirmed in anonymous comments provided:

*‘I have lived in difficult situations abroad and worked at a company that was challenging. I feel as though I have built resilience and confidence in myself.’*

*‘Knowing that I stuck with my placement means that my resilience really grew.’*

A final measure of success is that materials have been successfully shared across programmes and faculties. Academic colleagues in Drama have approached me regarding the wellbeing Padlets and how they could embed them on their taught courses. Additionally,

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<sup>4</sup>See Appendix 1

<sup>5</sup>See Appendix 2

the Business and Law Faculty Placement Tutors asked permission to use my Transitions document for their own placement students. On a personal level, it has also improved my confidence when supporting students and directing them to wider support.

**Take-away message**

A cycle of support is needed to encourage student resilience whilst on placement – particularly in the pre-and-during-placement stages, but also when assisting students with the transition from the office back to the classroom.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Slides from pre-departure PowerPoint Presentation (June 2021)



Image 1: Embedded video – 'What is Resilience?'

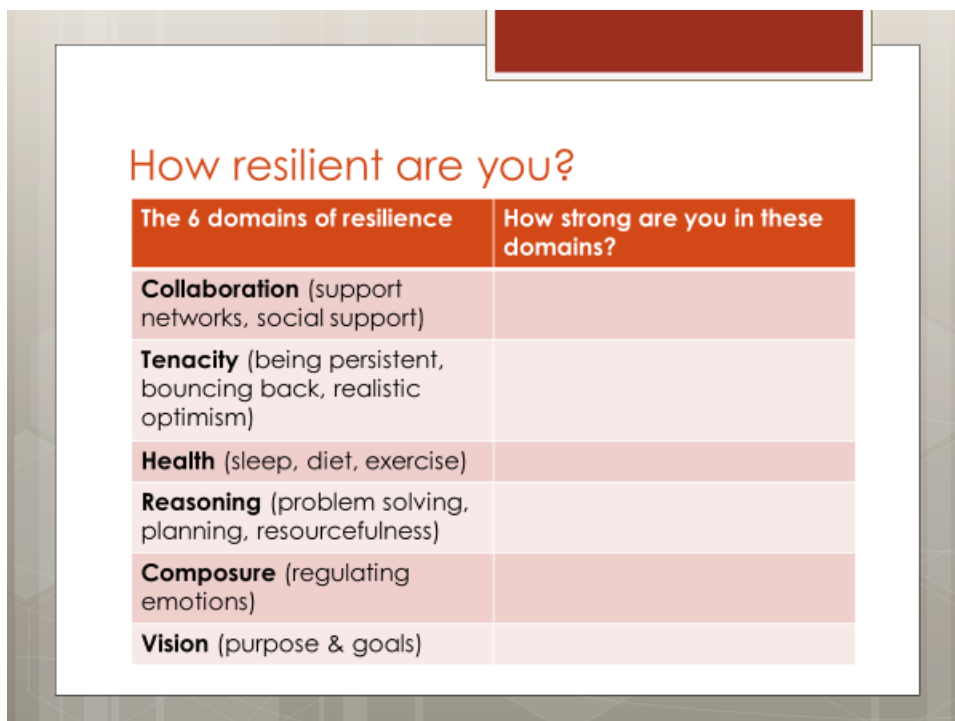
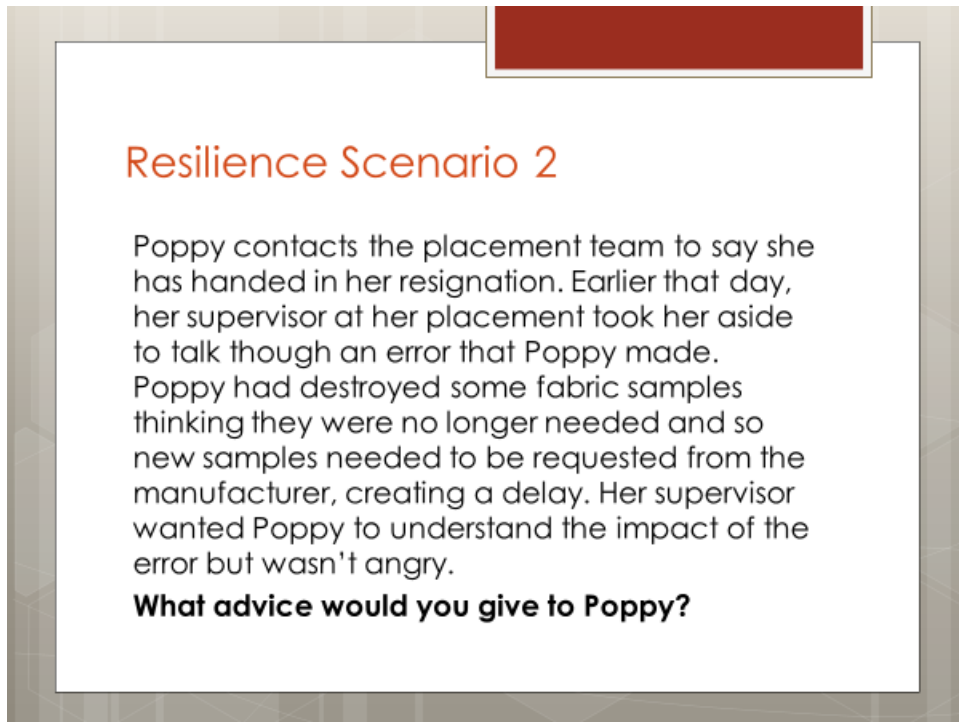


Image 2: The 6 Domains of Resilience – explaining theories, students invited to reflect and interact

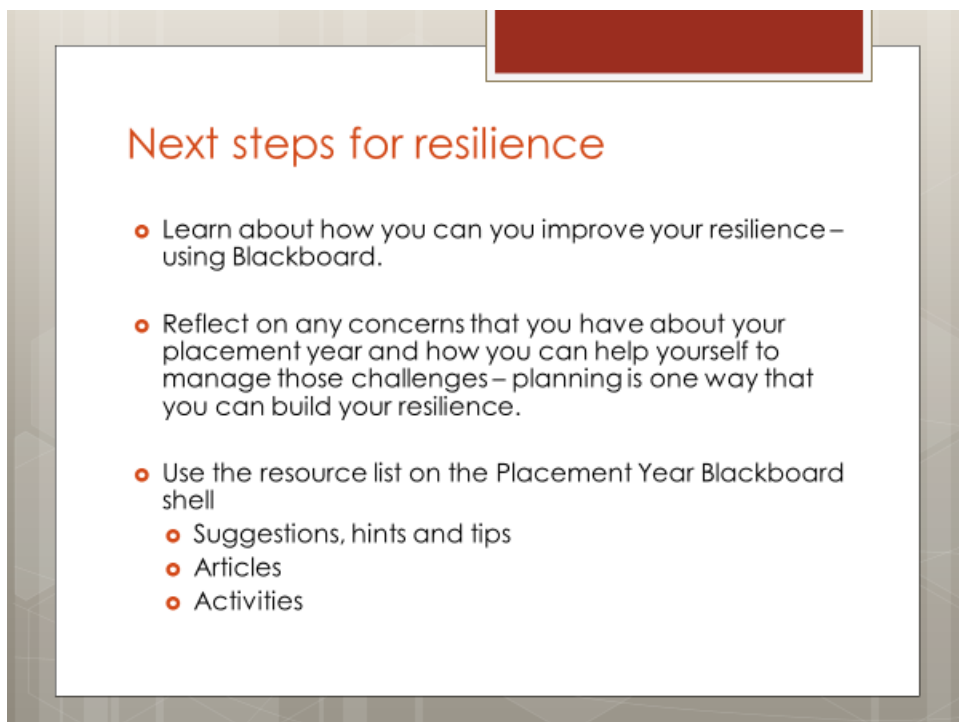
A presentation slide with a white background and a grey border. At the top right, there is a red rectangular box. The title "Resilience Scenario 2" is in orange. The text describes a scenario where Poppy resigns after an error. A question is posed at the bottom.

## Resilience Scenario 2

Poppy contacts the placement team to say she has handed in her resignation. Earlier that day, her supervisor at her placement took her aside to talk through an error that Poppy made. Poppy had destroyed some fabric samples thinking they were no longer needed and so new samples needed to be requested from the manufacturer, creating a delay. Her supervisor wanted Poppy to understand the impact of the error but wasn't angry.

**What advice would you give to Poppy?**

Image 3: Resilience scenarios for discussion

A presentation slide with a white background and a grey border. At the top right, there is a red rectangular box. The title "Next steps for resilience" is in orange. Below the title is a bulleted list of three main points, with the third point having three sub-points.

## Next steps for resilience

- Learn about how you can you improve your resilience – using Blackboard.
- Reflect on any concerns that you have about your placement year and how you can help yourself to manage those challenges – planning is one way that you can build your resilience.
- Use the resource list on the Placement Year Blackboard shell
  - Suggestions, hints and tips
  - Articles
  - Activities

Image 4: Next steps and links back to Blackboard (VLE) resources

## Appendix 2: PDF of Transitions document

### Transition: Placement to Final Year

- It can take time to settle back into University life – **don't put too much pressure on yourself.**
- **Read through notes from second year** to remind yourself of what you covered before placement, important information, how to reference, etc.
- **Contact your lecturers about summer work** – is there anything to prepare or work on before the start of term?

#### Access support

- **Try to create a structure** - having a routine (perhaps similar to your placement working hours?) might help your organization and management of deadlines.
- **Think about skills gained** from your time on placement and their usefulness for Final Year, e.g. using an Outlook calendar, a 'to-do' list, etc.
- **Consider using LinkedIn** to create a professional profile online and make industry connections. If you already have one, make sure it is up to date.

#### Speak up

#### Prepare

- Meet with the [Careers Team](#) to reflect on your placement, articulate the skills gained, and update your CV.
- **Attend the Careers Fair** to speak to graduate employers
- Go to [Centre for Learning and Study Support \(CLaSS\)](#) workshops and support, for help with academic work.
- Use the [#HealthyDMU hub](#) to find hints and tips for wellbeing as well as links, appointment bookings, etc.

#### Get into good habits

- **Speak to the Placement Tutor or Placement Team** if you have feedback on your placement year
- **Speak to your lecturers:** get advice, talk about structuring final year work, ask for feedback
- **Make time for friends and family.** Get to know new coursemates. Consider joining a society.

Produced by Dr Laura Nixon (laura.nixon:@dmu.ac.uk)

This document was produced as part of the [Collaborative Enhancement Project - Embedding Mental Wellbeing](#).