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We Need To Talk About Resilience: The Case for a Pragmatic and Holistic Perspective

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Abstract

This essay offers a pragmatic and holistic perspective of resilience to assist careers and employability professionals in supporting university students and graduates. It examines the evolution of employability models from skills-based to capital-based frameworks, emphasising resilience as a key component of psychological capital. Drawing on the Employability Capital Growth Model (ECGM) and sustainable career theory, the essay critiques simplistic views of resilience grounded in positive psychology, advocating for a more nuanced understanding that considers personal, contextual, and temporal dimensions. Drawing parallels with physical strength-building through weight training, it underscores the importance of progressive challenges, mental fortitude, support systems, consistency, and recovery in developing resilience. These factors provide a practical framework for guiding university students and graduates toward sustainable careers, with an emphasis on health, well-being, and long-term productivity. Resilience, the essay argues, is not about unyielding strength but adaptability and recovery, accounting for external factors and systemic barriers. By integrating principles from weight training into career guidance, careers and employability professionals can offer a balanced view of resilience, equipping students and graduates to navigate contemporary career challenges. This approach bridges career development and employability theories, providing new insights for practice and research in higher education and beyond.

***Keywords/key phrases*:** career development, Employability Capital Growth Model (ECGM), graduate employability, higher education, resilience, sustainable career

1. Introduction

In the mid-to-late 2010s, graduate employability models shifted from skills-based approaches (e.g., Bridgstock, 2009; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Knight & Yorke, 2004) to more holistic capital-based frameworks (e.g., Clarke, 2018; Donald, 2017; Donald et al., 2019; Tomlinson,

2017). These capital-based approaches emphasise resilience as a critical component of psychological capital, within the HERO framework: Hope, Self-Efficacy, Resilience, and Optimism (Luthans, 2002; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017).

Luthans (2002) defined resilience as "the capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure, or even positive events, progress, and increased responsibility" (p. 702). Originating from the Latin resilire, meaning to jump back or recoil, resilience underscores a shift from purely educational development or employment progression to psychological growth within organisations (Luthans & Youssef, 2004). This perspective aligns with frameworks grounded in positive psychology and positive organisational behaviour (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017).

Recently, Donald, Baruch et al. (2024) introduced the Employability Capital Growth Model (ECGM), encompassing nine forms of employability capital—social, cultural, psychological, personal identity, health, scholastic, market-value, career identity, and economic capital—alongside contextual and temporal factors, leading to various personal outcomes. Their model recognises the limitations of emphasising personal agency alone, acknowledging the interplay of agency and external environments on self-perceived employability that plays out over time (Donald, Baruch et al., 2024; Healy, 2023; Tomlinson, 2017). It also responds to ongoing calls for an integrated perspective that bridges the graduate employability and career development literature (Healy, 2023; Healy, Hammer et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the multidimensional nature of the ECGM addresses critiques such as those by Sultana (2024), who cautioned against framing resilience as a simplistic mindset of uncritical positivity which places the burden of success or failure on individuals alone, attributing systemic failures to individual deficits and promoting an unrealistic heroic notion of resilience.

This essay seeks to highlight the importance of a nuanced understanding of resilience for careers and employability professionals supporting university students and graduates. By incorporating personal, contextual, and temporal dimensions of career sustainability (De Vos et al., 2020), this approach aims to promote health, happiness, and productivity (Van der Heijden, 2005; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). We introduce parallels with weight training to explore resilience within these dimensions and conclude with a call for careers and employability professionals to advocate for a balanced interpretation of resilience.

2. Lessons From Weight Training

The primary goal of weight training is to progressively challenge muscles, resulting in increased strength, power, and endurance. This training fosters physical development and raises metabolic rate, improving overall fitness even at rest. Additionally, weight training supports long-term health by enhancing bone density, joint stability, and proprioception. It can be tailored to individual goals, whether for hypertrophy, strength, performance, general fitness, rehabilitation, or healthy ageing. Parallels exist between building physical strength and developing psychological resilience since both processes involve gradually overcoming challenges and adapting to stress. We now present five examples of what can be learned from weight training.

2.1. Progressive Overload and Growth

In weight training, muscles grow stronger through progressive overload—gradually increasing resistance to stimulate growth. Similarly, resilience develops through exposure to increasing challenges, allowing individuals to strengthen their coping mechanisms. Just as consistent effort in weight training leads to muscle growth over time, regular encounters with manageable stress enhance resilience, enabling individuals to navigate future difficulties more effectively.

2.2. Mental Fortitude and Discipline

Mental toughness and discipline are essential in weight training, helping individuals to persevere through discomfort and achieve their goals. Likewise, resilience involves the mental strength to endure setbacks and persevere. Both processes require focus, motivation, and discipline to continue despite adversity, fostering growth and improvement over time.

2.3. Form and Support

In weight training, proper form is crucial to reduce the risk of injury and achieve optimal results. Similarly, building resilience benefits from external support, such as mentorship, coping strategies, and a strong social network. Just as a personal trainer can refine technique and maximise the benefits of weight training, the right support mechanisms can enhance resilience by helping individuals safely navigate challenges and recover constructively.

2.4. Consistency and Patience

Building physical strength through weight training requires consistency and patience, as progress is gradual and seldom linear. Resilience, too, is built over time through persistent exposure to challenges. Both processes involve setbacks and plateaus, but those who remain patient and committed will ultimately reap long-term rewards in strength—whether physical or emotional.

2.5. Recovery and Adaption

Lifting weights damages and weakens muscles in the short term. It is in the subsequent rest and recovery stage that muscles adapt to grow stronger than they were before. Similarly, resilience requires periods of rest and reflection. Constant adversity without breaks can lead to burnout, just as overtraining can cause injury. The recovery phase is essential for both physical and psychological growth, allowing adaption and long-term development.

3. Applying Weight Training Principles to Career Development

Weight training provides a metaphor for understanding resilience through the personal, contextual, and temporal dimensions of sustainable career theory (De Vos et al., 2020). This approach helps careers and employability professionals guide students and graduates towards a balanced view of resilience, incorporating growth, support, recovery, and adaptability. By adopting this holistic perspective, students and graduates are better equipped for sustainable careers that prioritise the indicators of health, well-being, and productivity across personal, contextual, and temporal dimensions of resilience and career development.

3.1. Personal Dimension

The personal dimension of resilience is influenced by various forms of capital—psychological, social, economic, health, and career identity (Donald, Baruch et al., 2024). Resilience involves more than just psychological traits; it integrates them within contextual factors. For instance, the overarching capital of career identity influences how one proactively navigates professional challenges. A strong social network can enhance resilience by offering support during job loss or enabling easier mobility between jobs, while economic stability can reduce stress by covering financial needs. Health capital is vital, as physical well-being supports career challenges while illness creates the risk of a vicious circle of stress, chronic ill-health, and career disruption.

Similar to how proper equipment and resources enhance weight training effectiveness, robust support systems, economic stability, and good health can strengthen resilience. However, resilience can become detrimental if it means at a personal level pushing through adversity without sufficient recovery time. For example, teachers and nurses face an increased risk of burnout if they persist through demanding conditions—high workloads, lack of breaks, long hours, and emotional investment—without addressing their own need for rest and recovery (Agyapong et al., 2022; Brewer et al., 2019; Dall'Ora et al., 2020).

As previously mentioned, the original meaning of the term resilience was to jump back or recoil, which centres on recovery from stress rather than the absence of it or the stoic refusal to bend in response to it. Thus, resilience should be viewed as the capacity to recover and adapt after being overstretched, not as unyielding strength. This view highlights the need to integrate various forms of employability capital and recognise the importance of recovery in sustaining resilience.

3.2. Contextual Dimension

Context plays a crucial role in shaping resilience and self-perceived employability, often overlooked in traditional approaches that emphasise individual agency. Many critique the responsibilisation of careers, which overemphasises personal merit while blaming failure on individual flaws, disregarding external factors and systemic barriers (Healy, 2023; Sultana, 2024). Such attributions are often misleadingly framed as empowerment, masking structural constraints (Endress, 2015). In the era of Industry 4.0, marked by rapid technological change, graduates encounter significant workplace disruptions (Coetzee, 2023). This landscape demands a broader understanding of resilience that includes external challenges and systemic influences that evolve with time (Pitan & Muller, 2023).

In this context, careers and employability professionals provide crucial personalised support, helping individuals navigate the balance between personal agency and systemic factors (Donald et al., 2019; Healy, 2021). Just as a weight trainer needs to avoid overloading and overuse of muscles to prevent injury, graduates must manage unrealistic expectations to avoid burnout. Careers and employability professionals, akin to personal trainers, play a vital role in guiding graduates through these challenges and promoting sustainable career development (Brewer et al., 2019; Donald, Van der Heijden & Baruch, 2024; Healy, Brown et al., 2022).

3.3. Temporal Dimension

The temporal dimension of resilience illustrates its dynamic and fluctuating nature, much like the progression observed in weight training. For example, Donald and Jackson (2022) found that self-reported resilience among 414 students and recent graduates significantly declined in September 2021, eighteen months into the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to March 2020, just before the initial lockdown and social distancing restrictions in the UK. Specifically, 41.97% (n=115) of students and 48.57% (n=68) of recent graduates reported decreased resilience in September 2021, while only 15.69% (n=43) of students and 16.43% (n=23) of graduates reported increased resilience. The value of this work is evidenced by its inclusion in the World Health Organization's COVID-19 Research Database of impactful research studies related to various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic [ID: covid-who-1884150].

These findings indicate that resilience is not static but fluctuates over time and among individuals in response to stress. Like weight training, which causes initial muscle soreness and systemic fatigue before strength gains, resilience can temporarily decrease under sustained stress, with growth occurring as individuals recover and adapt. Just as a weight trainer needs rest and fuel to recover and avoid injury, individuals require recovery periods between adversities to build resilience and prevent burnout. Holistic, sustainable, and emancipatory perspectives on careers and employability, such as those advocated by Donald, Van der Heijden, and Manville (2024) and Healy (2023), underscore the importance of integrated career and well-being support in moderating the relationship between employability capital and self-perceived employability, addressing both immediate and long-term resilience needs.

4. Conclusion

In this essay, we highlighted the importance of gradual growth, discipline, support, and recovery, drawing parallels between building physical strength and developing psychological resilience. This approach aligns with the ECGM and sustainable career theory, emphasising personal, contextual, and temporal dimensions in achieving outcomes such as career success and well-being. Our approach also addresses the need for integrating career development theories into graduate employability scholarship and pedagogical practice (Healy, 2023).

For career development professionals, these insights offer a practical framework to help students and graduates build resilience. A key takeaway is promoting a balanced view of resilience that acknowledges external factors and the need for recovery time, moving beyond simplistic heroic narratives of unyielding strength (Sultana, 2024).

Incorporating these principles into career education and support allows careers and employability professionals to adapt resilience strategies to individual circumstances and challenges. This approach is valuable for practice and research, offering a novel perspective on cultivating resilience in higher education and beyond. We encourage further exploration of refining career development models to better align with the evolving demands of contemporary careers and the external pressures faced by today’s university students and graduates.

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