

# GILE Journal of Skills Development

## Cultivating Resilience in Part-Time Doctoral Students

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### Abstract

In an increasingly competitive world, master's degrees are becoming the new common educational currency, leading to a markable increase in the number of students pursuing Professional Doctorates to stand out, boost their professional standing, and increase their income. The rise of Professional Doctorates is eclipsing the growth of traditional PhDs, and the academic intakes of the future look to be built of part-time professionals, who must also balance additional stressors such as family and personal life and their day-to-day careers. As such, this author recommends academic institutes promote the skills of resilience to help part-time students manage day-to-day stressors and embark on a more successful doctoral journey. This is an opinion-based paper that utilises lessons learned from the author's own academic journey and the classic underpinning literature on resilience to recommend three sets of skills and mindsets that could help boost part-time doctoral students' resilience.

**Keywords/key phrases:** resilience, doctoral students, skills, well-being, early careers.

### 1. Introduction

The global work environment is changing, and along with it, so grows the ever-evolving landscape of higher education. In 2021, the Higher Education Student Statistics Office (HESSO) revealed a staggering 51% increase in students pursuing master's degrees since 2016. Such increases have led the Institute of Education Sciences (2016) to proclaim that master's degrees are now perceived as the new bachelor's degree and are thus essential for standing out in a competitive workforce. With online learning now making education more accessible to broader demographics (Institute of Education Sciences, 2016), we are also seeing a consistent expansion in the number of students enrolled for Professional Doctorate degrees in Western countries (Kot & Hendel, 2012; Institute of Education Sciences, 2016). This trend is likely a result of students wanting to stand out further and distinguish themselves from an increasing pool of master's degree graduates. Scholars also note that students are pursuing Professional Doctorates to boost their income potential and enhance their professional status (Zusman, 2017) or fill a research gap from a practitioner perspective (Wellington & Sikes, 2006). However, as the number of Professional Doctorate places rises, scholars have found this comes at the expense of traditional PhDs (Jones, 2018). This would suggest that as Professional Doctorates become more common, a high percentage of the student population now consists of working professionals, studying alongside other commitments such as their day-to-day work and family life.

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It is well known that doctoral-level studies are associated with high degrees of stress and burnout (Cornwall et al., 2019; Wellington & Sikes, 2006). For example, in their study of 152 post-doctoral students, Cornwall et al. (2019) found that participants experienced stress in the form of poor student-supervisor relationships, lack of communication, financial stress, and the overwhelming experience of transitioning into a doctorate. Older studies from Wellington and Sikes (2006) also highlighted the solitary nature of a doctoral degree. Considering the additional stressors that part-time students bear, including career demands, family responsibilities, and enhanced time constraints, it is reasonable to anticipate that these pressures will be experienced at an even higher intensity. Such dynamics have led to scholars calling for further research into the effects of stressors on doctoral students (Cornwall et al., 2019). Furthermore, the global environment has transformed at a staggering level these past several years. Part-time students will now have to juggle the traditional doctoral stressors alongside the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Murphy & Turnbull, 2023), and the changing technological landscape, creating uncertainty about the future of work (Murphy, 2023). Thus, as the academic landscape continues to shift towards Professional Doctorates, likely to consist of working professionals, it becomes more imperative to delve into the nuanced motivations, challenges and personal traits which enable part-time students to succeed. This paper suggests that resilience theory could be applied to help build traits which enable part-time students to have a successful and enjoyable doctoral journey.

## **2. Resilience**

Resilience is a topic that has garnered attention across a wide array of disciplines, from psychology to engineering. In historical underpinnings and classical studies, the psychological perspective on resilience believes that resilience can be learned through life experiences (Shin et al., 2002). Scholars in the psychological domain suggest that people with resilience can regain a positive emotional state after or during significant adversity (Garmezy, 1991; Kiziela et al., 2019; Luthans, 2002; Rogerson & Emes, 2008; Southwick et al., 2014), enabling a return to their desired functioning (McCray et al., 2016). Resilience thus enables people to recover their desired performance after trauma and maintain it over a period of time.

On a personal level, scholars have found that numerous variables contribute to building resilience, many of which could be considered necessary for doctoral studies. For example, Bandura (1982) found that self-efficacy, or a person's ability to succeed, is a trait found in those with high resilience. Other scholars, such as Dias and Cadime (2017) and Werner and Smith (1992), spoke of how family and peer-support environments can deliver the emotional and supportive structures to guide people through adversity, and build their resilience. Such social structures can also be useful in providing opportunities to develop self-esteem and efficacy through taking on social roles (Elder & Caspi, 1987). Finally, scholars have also noted how active goal setting (Dias & Cadime, 2017), or a person's innate desire to achieve a goal (Resnick, 2014), can also build resilience. While further research is needed to enhance our understanding of doctoral students' resilience, traditional resilience theory could be used to recommend skills for part-time doctoral students to put into practice, aiming to succeed in the degree journey.

## **3. Recommendations**

The below recommends a package of skills and mindsets for universities to help students put into practice in order to enable a successful and enjoyable doctoral journey. These

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recommendations are based on the authors' own doctoral experience and from linking in lessons from resilience theory.

**1. Foster Personal Resilience:**

- a. Focus on building self-belief and motivation:
  - i. Encourage students to cultivate self-belief by acknowledging their capabilities, celebrating current progress, and reflecting on past successes.
  - ii. Foster motivation by envisioning the benefits of completing their doctoral degree and reinforcing a positive mindset.
  - iii. Encourage students, where time allows, to share their work through posters, conferences, or publications to boost their self-belief and efficacy.
  - iv. Encourage students to set short- and long-term goals within their doctoral journey and to monitor and celebrate success when each goal is accomplished. Thus, making the journey feel more tangible, structured, and achievable.
- b. Create coping strategies:
  - i. Encourage students to reflect and draw from past experiences of overcoming challenges to promote effective coping strategies for new challenges.
  - ii. Emphasise stress-reducing activities such as regular physical exercise, creative hobbies, or interests to maintain mental well-being.

**2. Strengthen Social Support:**

- a. University Networks:
  - i. Promote positive relationships with colleagues and students within the university, offering emotional and peer support during challenging times. Help students to build 'study buddies' within their cohort.
  - ii. Help allocate mentors from previous doctoral intakes and have the students act as mentors of newer intakes to build a sense of community and cultivate self-efficacy and belief.
  - iii. Promote extra-curricular events for students, such as peer study days, writing days, or study groups.
  - iv. Promote stress management and mental well-being workshops within the university, and provide accessible materials focused on building resilience.

**3. Supportive Supervisory Relationships:**

- a. Encourage students to establish open and transparent communication with supervisors regarding needs and expectations.
- b. Encourage students to digest and perceive feedback as a gift versus a necessary change in course, whilst being mindful of the other stressors existing in their professional and personal lives.
- c. Encourage students to practice basic project management techniques to be able to adequately prepare their studies around supervisory meetings to ensure they receive the most benefit from the sessions.

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## 4. Conclusion

As the work environment grows ever more competitive in the face of unprecedented technological advancement and an increasingly virtually connected world, the landscape of higher education evolves. Master's degrees look to be the new common currency in education, with more students now embarking on doctoral studies to stand out as practitioners and build their professional standing and income. With this rise in pursuit of professional Doctorates, it is likely that new intakes are made up of predominantly working Professionals studying part-time, alongside other family and work commitments. This group of students will be more susceptible to the risks of doctoral stressors, and, in this author's opinion, could benefit most from building increased skills in resilience. This paper suggests a number of ways students can focus on building such skill sets, alongside recommendations on how academic institutions can support part-time students. By empowering doctoral students with the tools and support they need, we contribute to the creation of a resilient community that fosters academic success and personal well-being. This paper is opinion-based and built on resilience theory. Thus, this author recommends future studies to contribute to and enhance our understanding of doctoral student resilience in our ever-changing world.

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## **Declaration Statements**

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors report no conflict of interest.

### **Funding**

The authors received no financial support for this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

### **Ethics Statement**

No dataset is associated with this article.

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