**Introduction**

Gazelle (2020) describe resilience as the ability to manage difficult situations and to positively learn from the experience. Resilience in nursing students is an important concept to understand because of the high levels of stress associated with pre-registration nursing. Pre-registration nursing programs in the United Kingdom (UK) are level 6 (degree) programs validated by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). Education providers must meet NMC standards in order to be an approved provider. Student nurses must successfully complete an NMC approved program to be able to join the register of nursing practitioners (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2022). Pre-registration nursing programmes are demanding, with mental health problems common in nursing students (Quina et al., 2020). Academic distress can impact negatively on students’ mental wellbeing (McDermott et al., 2020) so exploring the internal and external factors that contribute to it and how it is mitigated is key. This knowledge will ensure that academic programmes are designed with effective models of support, so that learners can successfully complete their studies.

The concept of resilience has evolved over recent decades. Psychological resilience is described as an ability to adapt and cope in the face of challenge and adversity (Riley and Masten, 2005). In the context of education, the term academic resilience encompasses all that a learner does to overcome challenges that could be seen as a threat to academic achievement and educational development (Martin, 2013).

Some theoretical work (Richardson, 2002) has described resilience as being able to effectively manage adversity so individuals increase the protective factors associated with it. Evidence suggests that nursing students regularly experience academic distress leading to poor clinical performance or individuals leaving ([Shin and Hwang, 2020](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S8755722321000272?via%3Dihub" \l "bb0210)) A study undertaken by Corelett and McConnachie (2021) suggested communication skills and high self-esteem promote academic resilience. Understanding how these factors contribute to the development of academic resilience will ensure that academic staff and students are aware of what influences academic success. It is important to facilitate students’ capacity for academic resilience and in order to provide a supportive environment for successful learning, there is a need to effectively understand the role of academic resilience among nursing students. Therefore, this study aimed to explore nursing students’ understanding and experiences of academic resilience.

**Methods**

The study was carried out in one university with nursing students from an undergraduate (UG) and a postgraduate (PG) degree programme.

**Design**

This study was conducted using a qualitative, descriptive, phenomenological approach to better understand students’ experiences of academic resilience (Engelland, 2020). In qualitative studies, phenomenology is used to understand how individuals construct their world view and to identify what it is like living this experience. The experience has a meaning for the individual who has lived it and therefore the first-person narratives from the participants is used as the data source (Matua, 2015).

**Recruitment**

Participants were recruited from the UG and PG nursing programmes using purposive sampling. All eligible students on both programmes (n=210) were emailed and invited to participate in the study by the programme leads who acted as the gatekeepers, providing information and inviting students to contact the researchers. The study recruited 13 participants (PG=4 and UG=9) in total.

**Data Collection**

The research team allocated UG participants to the relevant year specific focus group so year 1, year 2 and year 3 whilst one to one interviews were arranged with PG participants. Due to availability a focus group interview was not possible for the PG students. The research data were collected during June and July 2021. A few open questions developed from previous studies on resilience, where the interviewer then used probing questions to further the dialogue was adopted by the research team. The aim of the interviews was to elicit the students’ experiences and encourage the them to speak openly about academic resilience. It was acknowledged by the research team that whilst there was no formal pilot testing of the interview schedule, there would be some flexibility with the questions in response to participant answers during the interviews. Interviews lasted between 31 minutes and 46 minutes. Questions focused on what students thought influenced their academic performance, how they managed the challenges associated with academic expectations and what they understood about academic resilience.

The interviews were conducted online via zoom, digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by an external transcribing service. During transcribing, participants were identified using a number coding system with each interview assigned a unique identifier, so undergraduate focus group year 1 (UGFGY1) and postgraduate 1 (PG1) and so on. Following the interviews participants were invited to review their transcripts.

**Data Analysis**

All members of the research team participated in the analysis process. Criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) was used to report the study. The interview data were analysed using inductive content analysis to interpret the participants’ experiences of academic resilience. Data analysis was informed by the descriptive nature of the research and based on the transcripts alone (Samuelson et al., 2012). The inductive process began by the members of the research team reading and re reading transcripts, followed by the use of a thematic map (National Voices, 2012) to develop emergent themes. The transcripts were read and re-read for understanding, then significant sections were selected to generate initial themes. Recurring words and themes in text were drawn out and categorised. These themes were discussed by the research team and agreed. To determine that the data analysis was valid and reliable thematic analysis was compared across all members of the research team. To strengthen trustworthiness with the findings an audit trail was created to detail each step in the data analysis to establish a rationale for accurately portraying participants’ responses.

**Ethical Considerations**

Prior to starting the study, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Liverpool Research Ethics Committee (Date: 14/05/21, Reference Number: 9929). Informed, written consent was gained from all participants prior to starting the study. Two of the researchers were known to some of the participants as lecturers.

**Results**

Analysis from the focus groups and one to one interviews resulted in the identification of 6 main themes representing student nurses’ experiences of academic resilience. Each theme will be discussed in detail.

**Defining resilience**

It was apparent that for some participants resilience was something they associated with challenging times, perseverance and determination. The responses highlighted an awareness that motivation was a key factor in promoting resilience. Participants referred to the analogy of a bouncy ball, associating it with resilience while others described it in terms of a coil like mechanism. For one participant resilience was described as being able to deal with difficulties but being able to get back on course.

*I always sort of imagine it a bit like a bouncy ball but something that like springs back into shape. So, you can cope with pressures and spring back and adjust to things and still keep your shape.* (UGFGY1)

It was evident when asked about what they thought academic resilience was, some participants found it difficult to provide an example of when they had demonstrated it. Additionally, participants explained how they dealt with the academic challenges they faced and the role of resilience in relation to academic success while others associated dedication with successfully completing their academic programme.

One participant described it in terms of accepting feedback and improving academic work. Its association with recovering from difficulties was clear, together with a sense of how this impacted on others.

*I understand it to be the process of learning and improving yourself or the people or area around you through adversity and being able to bounce back (*PG1)

**Obstacles and challenges**

The narrative of the participants provides an insight into the competing demands associated with academic resilience. When asked what factors influenced academic resilience one participant associated it with strong emotions. There was a suggestion that time management was key to any academic success due to working and studying at the same time. This was not unique to post graduate students. It was mirrored by undergraduate students. Participants highlighted their experiences of vulnerability and their concerns in terms of successfully completing their academic studies.

*Especially for a student nurse, it’s really hectic. You feel like you’re juggling like a million things at once and you have a lot of stuff to remember and do (*FGY3).

*I think at the minute, doing work on top of work is hard. You’re already tired from your week at work and then you’ve got your days off, which you want to enjoy but you’ve got work to do as well* (PG3).

Low self-belief and self-doubt appear to have been an influence for one participant who admitted that they are more likely to apply pressure on themselves in terms of their academic performance, rather than it coming from others. Some described how they compared themselves academically to fellow students.

*I think sometimes I find that it’s myself that puts the stress and the pressure on with the academic work. So, in terms of like performing under stress and things, it’s more me that does it rather than what’s going on around me. I just worry about it all the time. Even though it might be something that I’m quite confident about and I feel like I know what I’m doing I still question myself* (FGY3).

Some participants expressed a feeling of guilt when they were not focusing on their academic work or they became anxious when they thought about assessments. One participant described a feeling of depression relieved only by reassurance and advice from module leaders. It appeared some participants were seeking encouragement by obtaining support that would help them during difficult times. The association between academic resilience, motivation and emotions was evident as some participants reported the feelings that they associated with their academic work.

*I felt like I could never fully relax because if I was relaxing, I felt guilty because I thought I should be working (UGFGY3).*

*I think emotion will affect my academic work because sometimes the bad emotion will just make me feel depressed but if the module leader gives me guidance or encouragement, then the emotion will be relieved (PG2).*

**Past experiences**

A number of participants suggested that academic resilience developed over time and was related to effective time management. Experiences of academic study and balancing demands had enhanced their ability to perform academically. As one participant noted

*I think because of my work that I’ve done for the last 10 years or so, it’s been very time management wise. I’ve just always sort of had that in me* (UGFGY1).

Interestingly, one participant attributed it to being lucky, appearing to suggest it wasn’t influenced by anything they did.

The ability to learn from past experiences in enhancing academic resilience was manifested in examples of when post graduate participants admitted that by not asking for help, they made situations worse. They described how they had learned over time what strategies enhanced their academic performance and acknowledged it would be different for everyone. As one participant described how their experiences of nursing had enhanced their ability to perform academically.

*I think it comes back to understanding how to write and having nine years of nursing behind me (*PG3).

There was a sense that their ability to be resilient in practice positively impacted on their academic resilience.

*I think we’ve all got different sorts of resilience that we’ve got built in or learnt over the years by just being nurses (*PG2).

**Coping Strategies**

Some participants described strategies they knew helped them cope with their academic work including starting their work well ahead of deadlines and using an assessment time table. One participant suggested that being aware of when they felt they would be more productive helped manage their academic workload.

*I think it’s also about knowing when you’re most productive and allocating learning time for that too. It’s about being flexible so if I’m knackered I might say well I’ll have some time off and allocate time somewhere else (*UGFG2).

Some participants recognised that exercise and time away from studies helped them cope with academic pressures. Participants described needing time to switch off from their academic work to cope with the anxiety associated with it. There appeared to be an understanding that this would enable them to work more effectively and to have a more positive outlook towards their studies. Participants described how they would reward themselves by taking time away from academic work, which enabled them to deal with feedback from tutors that were not always positive.

*I would agree that exercise really helps. I always take myself out on a walk and that’s really good. I love like cooking and baking, so just things like that as well can give you a break, which makes your headspace a lot better to deal with academic stuff (UGFGY2)*

*I find that if I like get up early and go for a run or something, then come back and do academic work. I always feel a bit more able to deal with feedback from academic work (*UGFGY3).

**Attitudes**

The ability to exert self-discipline was apparent for some participants who were willing to get their assignments done albeit at the expense of missing out on things. There appeared to be a defiant approach to not giving up motivated by achieving good results.

*There’s three of us in the house and if they’re all going out, I’d feel like I want to go out with them but I want to get my work done as well. You need to be resilient in the fact that sometimes you do need to just get on with your work and you are going to miss out on some stuff* (PG1).

Participants described how proud they were of being able to manage their academic work and how they admired the fact that they had a positive attitude associated with the drive to do well. Some participants felt their personality had a positive impact on their ability to deal with academic pressures and that being more relaxed about their work helped.

*I think I’m quite positive, I’ll always see like the positive side of things. I’m determined. If I’m doing something, I want to do it well including my academic work. I like that about myself (*UGFGY1).

*I think with the right support, you can develop that academic resilience but I think*

*there is an intrinsic element as well. It’s that sort of strength of character (*UGFGY1).

One participant recognised that stress impacted on their academic work and how they were feeling influenced the effort they devoted to studying. Another participant accepted that being a post graduate student represented a greater determination to study.

*I think it depends on like how well I’m coping with the stress at the time. The effort I put into academic work is dependent on the mindset that I’m in at that moment (*UGFGY3).

**Connectiveness**

The importance of maintaining support from family and peers as well as academics was evident from almost all participants, with a sense of belonging being linked to a positive attitude towards academic work. The participants highlighted the importance of maintaining supportive relationships with others to strengthen their ability to cope with academic demands and to develop their academic resilience

*I’ll wake up in the night thinking about something to do with my academic work. So, if I’ve spoken it through with someone then it makes sense in my head. I can relax a bit more and not have to worry (*UGFGY3).

Academic members of staff (academics), teaching on the pre-registration nursing programme, appeared to be an important source of support as participants expressed the significance of them as a factor in building academic resilience. Almost all of the participants reported that the support they received from academics was crucial to reducing academic distress.

*If you just talk it through with someone, especially because it is your tutor, then it’s not such a big deal. They really help, they can give tips and advice and tell you where you went wrong, if you’re on the right lines. I think that helps academic resilience having that support* (UGFGY1).

For some participants it was the need to engage with their peers that influenced their attitudes towards their assignments and enabled them to increase their self-confidence. Informal peer support was considered to be essential to them having confidence in their ability and to provide the motivation to manage academic challenges.

*If I have a classmate, we can do it together. I think we can do the supervision for each other* *and encourage each other with our assignments. This definitely helps with the motivation we need for carrying on and bouncing back when maybe one of us has had a disappointing grade (*PG1).

**Discussion**

The findings from this study reveal the stressors nursing students face in their studies. Evidence suggests that the main attributes of nurse resilience are effective social support, self-efficacy and a positive outlook (Cooper et al., 2020). Brown et al. (2018) suggest that although resilience enables nurses to successfully adapt to stressors and adversity, it is a highly complex process which fluctuates and which is context driven dependant on personal attributes and external factors. Findings reveal that as well as being important in nursing students’ academic lives, resilience is a significant and influential factor in their successful adaptation to academic challenges. This study has highlighted the conceptualization of academic resilience as a personal attribute or a characteristic resulting from previous academic experiences. Academic resilience in the context of nurse education for some appears to be linked to personal features, including low self-esteem and self-doubt while for others the stress and anxiety associated with their academic work is mitigated by maintaining strong personal and academic connections. The study confirmed that those students interviewed encountered academic challenges throughout their academic lives but some were more readily able to deal with them than others.

The challenges nursing students face are evident ([Farzi](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/?term=Farzi%20S%5BAuthor%5D&cauthor=true&cauthor_uid=30271800) et al., 2018). Jowkar (2014) has suggested that the continuous requirements placed on nursing students implies that resilience is an essential trait to enable them to successfully adapt to adversities, as well as being a predictor of academic achievement. In previous studies, resilience has been described as a characteristic which is not fixed but something that alters over time (Pitt et al., 2014). This resonates with the findings from this study where the complex nature of resilience suggests that it is an unstable phenomenon and one which can be improved or strengthened. This implies that resilience is more learned than being an intrinsic attribute and therefore indicates that it can be increased by the adoption of certain strategies.

Some participants described strategies they had developed which they knew would help them complete their academic work; such as starting assignments early and recognising when they would be productive. Using their own coping strategies, participants protect themselves against the pressure of academic study. Alvord et al. (2011) suggest that such strategies cushion against the impact of stressful situations. The relationship between resilience and an ability to mitigate positively against the negative impact of coping is complex. Effective resilience is affected by personal protective factors consisting of internal features such as problem-solving skills, autonomy and a positive view of the world and external protective factors including the reliance on social support and personal attachment (Andarge et al., 2012).

Masten (2015) identified that these protective factors do not function on their own but they are interconnected in order to mitigate the risk factors associated with being resilient. In this study, participants provided examples of protective factors that strengthened their ability to deal with academic distress including maintain connections with family, their peers and academics. This corresponds to a study (Ramalisa et al., 2018) where nursing students identified those sources that strengthened their resilience, reflected in their need to feel a sense of belonging and maintaining positive, personal connections.

**Limitations**

The study was conducted in one university and the findings cannot be generalized to all nursing students. The number of participants was small due to time limitations for recruitment and the length of some of the one to one interviews were short owing to the time available for some students to participate. Kruger and Casey (2020) suggest that one to one interviews should generally last from 30 minutes to one hour.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study and the associated literature highlight the need to consider the importance of academic resilience in nursing education. All narratives identify the significance of academic resilience and its role in academic success. Comparisons between the findings of this study and others appear to confirm that academic resilience is impacted by both internal and external factors. Participants described their views on how their personality, their emotions and their confidence affected their ability to deal with academic challenges. Others confirmed a sense of belonging or connectiveness as essential for academic achievement. Academic resilience appeared to be something that developed over time and matured for some participants; while for others learning from past academic experiences and affording themselves rewards was key.

In conclusion, it appears that academic resilience is a personal and unique experience, influenced by a myriad of complex factors. It is evident that supporting and facilitating academic resilience in nursing students, should be a priority for education providers. Academic resilience is the capacity of nursing students to perform well and achieve academic success despite the challenges they face. As equal partners in the learning experience, both academic staff and students should be aware of the potential positive impact of academic resilience on success. This study has identified specific examples of responses to the stress associated with academic requirements and suggests that specific training and support will offer the opportunity to maximise how nursing students respond positively to academic distress. This presents another aspect of resilience to consider which will enhance a more targeted approach to the interventions aimed at allowing nursing students to manage the demands of academic life. The findings from this study have illustrated the need for a deeper awareness of how academic resilience is developed, how it can be nurtured and importantly what the role of the academic institutions is in relation to this. This includes fostering a culture where an individual and a purposeful approach to academic resilience is adopted.

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