



Strand B Case Study: Resilience training sessions for postgraduate researchers (Student Services Sessions)

Lead: Ben Marshall, Student Services (benjamin.marshall@uea.ac.uk)

A) Overview

The second of eight key strands of work under the Courage Project considered providing resilience upskilling of postgraduate researchers, in order to better equip and enable them to meet the varying and sometimes unexpected demands of doctoral study.

B) Action taken

In response to focus groups held at the beginning of the work, and then to the most common requests we received from postgraduate researchers who engaged with other aspects of the project, the following sessions were produced and delivered by the student services project lead (a former PhD student with lived experience of mental health issues during studies, also a psychologist and mental health first aider), with input from student union colleagues on key sessions:

- Psychological flexibility and common cognitive biases experienced in research work.
- Practical meditation techniques for early career researchers.
- Wellbeing fundamentals for doctoral students (only delivered internally to project placement holders so far, but suitable for wider use).
- Self-care and wellness action planning (wider session open to undergraduates too, but with postgraduate research specific materials for the activities available)
- Responding to failures and setbacks, in three formats:
 - Standalone session.
 - Wider co-delivered sessions with careers on failure as a part of research careers.
 - Wider co-delivered sessions with student union collaboration, covering both setbacks and imposter syndrome.

In addition, a small amount of material on 'considering and creating a resilient relationship' was inserted into the curriculum for the MA Higher Education Practice module on supervision undertaken by new staff, and into the content for dedicated mental health workshops delivered to staff by student services.

C) Impacts and outcomes

Assessing impact

Standard Courage Strand B outcome measures were used. Participants reported that:

- Challenges to engagement were minimal, and only focused around maintaining attention in the meditation sessions and minor content queries.
- Clear benefits to knowledge and skills were evident across a substantial majority of feedback forms, and people found the psychological frameworks that were applied useful in helping them pay attention to and gain understanding of their wellbeing.
- Participants consistently reported having tangible techniques that they could take away and practice.
- Further cross-session qualitative feedback emphasised that participants found it refreshing to have a space to talk about their mental health in a supportive environment.

Surprising impacts?

Participants said they would appreciate a regular meditation group.

Participants appreciated that the group organisers disclosed, where appropriate, that they had experienced mental health and wellbeing issues too.

What worked well / not - overcoming challenges?

For some sessions turnout was low, greater and more coordinated promotion will be undertaken for future provision, and more explicit incorporation of the content into researchers' training pathways.

Room bookings are an increasing difficulty across the university with implementing regular sessions. Greater advance booking of allocated space should occur in future.

Recommendations for future use, and other unis: What do differently / for next time?

It is recommended that universities consider whether they have, or need to develop, support for students in the identified areas and beyond.

Promotion of these workshops is key and incorporation of them into school, faculty and institutional training pathways may be helpful.

Across all strand B work in Courage it was noted (anecdotally) early in the project that sessions tended to attract greater engagement when they had an upskilling-focused title, rather than one that centred on mental health.