Chapter 3
The Resilience Enhancement Programme for Students (REP-S): Evaluating an Online Intervention for Boosting Resilience in Students

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ABSTRACT

The Resilience Enhancement Programme for Students (REP-S) is an intervention that has been designed to boost resilience in students. The current study involved the remote delivery of the REP-S via an online platform to students, and an empirical evaluation of the intervention via a pre-post one-group quantitative design over one month and a post-intervention qualitative element. Fifty-six students from the University of Greenwich qualified for inclusion in the study. Results indicated that perceived stress and trait neuroticism decreased over the month of the study, while resilience increased. Engagement with the intervention also predicted a reduction in neuroticism. Students reported experiencing a complex range of difficulties over the duration of the pandemic and that 80% of participants found the workshop to be effective in addressing these problems. Overall, participants found more positives than negatives in the online delivery of the workshop. If rolled out on a wider basis, the REP-S has the potential to improve wellbeing and mental health across the higher education sector.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7991-6.ch003

INTRODUCTION

Universities are increasingly recognising that they have a central role in supporting students to develop broad transferrable skills that promote positive wellbeing. This task of actively promoting student wellbeing has been strengthened in importance by the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the duration of the pandemic, students have had to overcome the challenges of studying remotely (Chhetri, 2020), while managing the stress and loneliness stemming from social disconnection from friends, family, tutors and lecturers (Varga et al., 2021). A study conducted on student stress and coping during the pandemic found that 70% of university students reported levels of stress that were disrupting their quality of life, academic progression, and degree attainment (Son et al., 2021). The current study was developed in the context of this environment of heightened study stress; it investigated the efficacy and outcomes of an online resilience intervention within a UK university, aimed at helping students cope with the stressors of university life within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Stress, Mental Health Problems and Resilience in Students

Prior to the pandemic and the stressors that it initiated, stress in students was already at a high level, mainly caused by fears surrounding exams, worries about finances, and by concerns about career prospects (Mental Health Foundation, May 2018). Evidence points to a problem with mental health difficulties in students that has been growing for some years. A report by the Institute of Public Policy Research found that in the UK there has been an increase in mental health problems among young adults from 2003 to 2017 (Thorley, 2017). Moreover, the student population is especially prone to experiencing such problems, having lower levels of wellbeing and life satisfaction than the adult population (Stallman, 2010). Between 2010 and 2015 a dramatic increase of 201% has been observed in drop-out rates amongst students due to mental health problems (Thorley, 2017).

With an increase in mental health disorders, and a decrease in the levels of general wellbeing, mental health services at universities are under pressure. In the last ten years, among higher education counselling services, there has been an increase in demand and also in the severity of the students' presenting conditions (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2021). Ninety-four percent of higher education institutions in the UK claimed there has been an increase in demand for mental health services, with one in 4 students either using such a service or waiting to do so (Thorley, 2017). Due to the heightened demand, time spent on waiting lists has increased and counselling services can now only provide short-term help for issues such as adverse life events, with more complex interventions being unavailable (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2021).

A solution for lessening the stress and mental health difficulties that undermine student wellbeing and achievement is cultivating resilience among students (DeRosier et al., 2013). Resilience is the ability to effectively adapt to, and recover from, stressful situations (Smith et al., 2008). In students, this ability predicts higher grades over the course of a year (Allan et al., 2014), and also increased the likelihood of completing a degree (Bleasdale & Humphreys, 2018), life satisfaction (Kjeldstadli et al., 2006) and positive mental health (Hartley, 2011). For example, a study with medical students found that those with low levels of resilience were less satisfied with their lives and with the academic environment, had poorer physical health, worse social relationships and had more negative perceptions of their academic performance (Tempski et al.,2015).