

Samoan Student Resilience in Higher Education: what we can learn as we progress through times of uncertainty

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Abstract

Resilience amongst vulnerable groups of students in higher education offers insights into building resilience in times of uncertainty. This paper draws on findings from research on the perceptions of students of higher education at NUS where student resilience was a strong theme. This presentation sheds a light on how students develop their resilience and why. It also brings to light the case of the Nofo a’oga (the school boarder) as a vulnerable group on campus, who despite all odds are able to overcome adversity in their educational journeys. These lessons can teach us practical ways to overcome the many fears and anxiety of the global pandemic that we continue to face today.

Keywords: Student resilience, Higher Education, Samoa

Introduction

In this presentation, I focus on what we can learn about Resilience from our students in higher education. I draw on a study that I conducted in 2019 for my MA thesis titled Students’ Perceptions of higher education in Sāmoa: *Finagalo fa’aalia o alo ma fanau a’oa’oina i le lunivesetē Aoao o Sāmoa*. This was a qualitative study where 19 students and 1 support staff of the National University of Samoa were interviewed using a blend of Pasifika methodologies underpinned by Talanoa (Vaiolēti, 2006) and Fa’afaletui (Tamasese et al, 2005) in conducting the interviews.

At the heart of my study is the story of a Samoan student in higher education, who never left Samoa to be told. Most of the studies I had read about educational journeys in higher education were centred on Samoan students in higher education outside of Samoa. Below is a summary of the participants in his study.

Table 1: Summary of Participants

Gender	13 females		6 males
Age range	19 – 27 years old		
Faculties	Faculty of Arts: 7 students Faculty of Business and Entrepreneurship: 8 students Faculty of Science: 4 students		
Year of study at NUS	First year Year – 1	Second Year – 12	Third Year – 6
Scholarships	16 students sponsored		3 students not sponsored
First Generation student in University	Yes – 9		No – 10
Previous Secondary School	Urban– 17		Rural– 2
Island	Upolu – 16 students		Savai’i – 3 students

Defining Student Resilience

In defining the term or concept of student resilience and resilient students, the following can be offered. “Resilient students come from disadvantaged backgrounds yet exhibit high levels of school success” (OECD, 2011). An international Perspective defines a resilient student as “the one who outperforms her or his colleagues sharing the same socio-economic background” (OECD, 2011). Whereas, a within country perspective state that “resilient students as those who fall in both the bottom third of their country’s socio-economic background distribution and the top third of their country’s performance distribution on the PISA science assessment scale” (OECD, 2011). Mestre et al (2017) refers to resilience as a personality trait and resilience as a developmental factor. It is also a dynamic process, changeable over time and influenced by the environment (Lee et al. 2013). Consequently, resilience is a process of adapting well in the face of adversity (American Psychological Association, 2012).

Challenges identified by students (before the Pandemic)

The challenges identified by the students in this study included transitioning, which took place in two ways: from high school to foundation level and from foundation level to degree level. Secondly was the lack of resources and infrastructure which impacted on the way students perceived the university, particularly the lack of computers, and equipment for science students. The impact of scholarships impacted on the motivation of students to continue their education as well as the new found freedom university life offered them as young adults. And lastly, the frustration with lecturers, which in my study re-emphasized the importance of the role of the educator. This last challenge can be emphasized by the following quote from one of the participating students:

“I don’t know if I should say this like teachers, they’re not I can’t go into detail with this but sometimes I feel belittled rather than educated sometimes. I can’t really say.”

The case of the School Boarder (Nofo A’oga)

Of my sample three students were school boarders; a school boarder is usually from rural areas of Upolu and Savai’i far from the university, who live with people who are not their immediate families. The people they board with may be relatives or people with ties to the villages the students are from. Two of them shared the challenges they faced whilst attending university. They had unsupportive families who did not understand the expectations they had as university students which often caused misunderstanding and miscommunication with their host families. I argue that these students face a double struggle; the general struggles with other students, plus the unique struggles of being a boarder (*nofo a’oga*). Of the three students, two were females and one was a male. He had a successful transition experience compared to the two girls, who eventually moved to more supportive homes for the remainder of their studies.

Resilience of students in my study:

Although these challenges as identified by the students existed, the students themselves were able to cope and find ways to adapt to the reality of their institution of higher learning. I consider this resilience, and it was demonstrated in the following ways.

For the Science students, they showed resilience by working together, as a solution to the lack of resources for their labs:

“Even though lack of chemicals...we accept it, we share it, we go with it. Like our last lab. Some are doing it. [Some] observe and some are writing it. It’s a quicker way of doing things when there is a lack of resources.”

“My friends, working as a team doing assignments [together]. If we all get it wrong we all get it wrong together. If we get chased out of class, we get chased out of class together.”

The resilience towards lecturers was that they accepted that they were learning from the best in the field with high level achievements who were PhDs, and one was an Associate Professor.

“I know they’re kind of harsh sometimes but they give the best advice for you know on how to deal with my academic life. Kids see them as you know the strict ones, but then there is something about them that helps you move up, to try and reach their level. Yeah, um yeah. But the teachers are good.”

“Teachers have their own way of bringing out what they are, it’s our job as students to interpret it, interpret the information and make sense of it ourselves.”

The following quotes demonstrate how this student accepted the challenges he was facing as part of his learning experience. The same student seeks a higher standard of living as a motivation for success.

“Don’t expect too much from the school [be]cause some that’s why some students struggle because they complain too much...So I need them to work with... whatever NUS is gonna give you go through it I mean if it’s gonna be challenging for you especially with teachers (laughs) don’t worry their telling offs will eventually finish. But for you and your own benefit achieve what you came here to achieve.”

“I envy some kids. I envy the life of other people. I want that life. They don’t have to work outside. They have cars. I want to lift up what I have now if I achieve this goal. It motivates me to do well in my studies ... It will help me and my family.”

Other factors that contributed to building this resilience came from their role within their families, to be a role model (for those who were the eldest in the family) and to be a provider (succeeding means securing a good job to provide for the family). Solidarity with their peers was another one as demonstrated by the Science students earlier. The institutional support on campus provided by Student Support Services and student- led initiatives was also identified and lastly faith communities.

This resilience reaffirms what the NUS Strategic Plan 2017 – 2021 urges: to not be defined by campus boundaries (National University of Samoa 2017). This also aligns with Epeli Hau'ofa's plea to Pasifika people that "we should not be defined by the smallness of our islands but in the greatness of our oceans. We are the sea; we are the ocean. Oceania is us" (Hau'ofa, 1994).

Since the Pandemic:

Since the Pandemic shut down students on campus have organized themselves and provided activities that offer support to fellow students. I can document a few facilitated by the Peer2Peer Initiative Group at NUS in 2020 which included a Fun Day facilitated by students for students. In 2021, Soulful Weaver Fridays was launched as a safe space for fun educational activities to break away from studies (Ieremia & Ah Ching, 2021); one of these Fridays was to hold space when there was a suicide case that was a NUS student during study week. Later, Suicide Prevention Day was commemorated in semester 2, 2021 on the theme "Celebrate Life" to offer motivation to students. In 2020, funding through NUSSA was readily accessible to support such activities, sadly in 2021 most of these initiatives were funded by the students themselves. It is the hope that NUSSA will look at being more enabling and supportive of student-led initiatives on campus, as well as the university management.

Recommendations:

I offer the following recommendations in this presentation, and that is for NUS to:

- Identify and acknowledge vulnerable groups on campus: *such as the Nofoa'oga* and also the further impacts of the Pandemic on this group.
- Enable and support our student led initiatives on campus (with funding) – like the Peer2Peer program
- Create more opportunities for our students to build "solidarity" – NUSSA & NUS.

I conclude with the following quote from one of my participants in my study, who was a student at the time, demonstrating the resilience our students develop here NUS:

Do not give up easily. Nothing can be obtained with ease. If you don't sweat, you won't get a good future for your family. Always remember there are people waiting for you, there are people who look up to you...Put God first in everything that you do...Put God and family first in everything and always think about them then you won't give up

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