ANZSSA Inc.

DETERMINED TO SUCCEED

Student Stories of Resilience

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The *Determined to Succeed Art Competition* was designed to offer an opportunity for ACU students to create an artwork reflecting the *Determined to Succeed* theme. The winning art work from Zoe Friend has been used in this booklet.

Cover Artwork: Zoe Friend

Title: *Sticks and Stones may break my bones, but your unkind words will never break my spirit.*

Description by the artist: *The random application of paint poured directly onto canvas communicates a deep visual dialogue with the viewer. My work reconstructs the emotions felt during times of painful endurance, that have helped shape the direction of my practice over the past decade.*

"The position or state of resilience can be under valued, underestimated. Self-belief and the ability to heal, recover, dig deep are fundamental to (psychological) well-being..."

- Participant comment

1. RESEARCH PROJECT OVERVIEW

The three co-researchers on this project work at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) as student counsellors in the Office of Student Success. It is in that role that we hold a privileged position to witness what we view as student stories of resilience. We have seen many examples of students continuing to study despite having experienced significant challenges and we were keen to have these stories recorded. We were hopeful that such a process would both acknowledge and validate the achievements of these students, and also assist in encouraging others who might be facing significant challenges during their study period.

We were interested in exploring the following questions:

- Do students who have experienced significant challenges and continue studying regard what they have done as 'resilience'?
- What words would students use to attribute meaning to this?
- When students experience significant challenges, what supports them to continue studying at university?

To look at these questions and to develop a book of student stories, a qualitative research project was designed inviting students from the ACU North Sydney and Strathfield campuses to be involved. ACU and the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association (ANZSSA) funded the research, and following ACU Ethics approval the project began in February 2011 with completion in November 2011. A Research Advisory Committee oversaw the project. This book is one of the research outcomes. Its publication affirms students lived experiences and gives testimony to their capacity to continue to succeed not only in academic study but in dealing with the pressures and challenges of life.

The 28 stories you will read include student experiences of refugee life, having been a victim of crime, living with grief and loss, trying to balance work, life and study, dealing with financial pressures, and managing mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety. Some participants talk of facing family stress including caring for children whilst studying and/or when a separation occurs. Others speak of experiencing health issues, bullying situations and adjusting to university. Read on to hear the determination in every story.

The name "Determined to Succeed" comes directly from the words students used in their research interviews.

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I keep reminding myself, I am not a quitter.
I have learnt that I have a fairly good stock pile of resilience.
It's well worth it in the end.
It has been good to have someone to talk to.
I would say I'm a determined person.
I have gained knowledge that I can use in the community.
I've come a long way in the last year.
Making it better for them than it was for me.
What has kept me going is the desire to succeed.
I did a lot of learning along the way.
Try to keep doing things then you will get it.
It is important to build who you are as a person.
Being at university builds your identity.
I always make myself show up.
You just have to do it.
Coming to university was a big change.
I keep going by not giving up.
I fell in love with my profession and that has helped me with my resilience.
It was a big positive to know that someone had faith in me.
There's that goal down the end there and I can aim for that.
I just survive and keep going. It is only next year.
I have learnt that I have the will power to overcome stress.
I really have always wanted to get my degree.
Uni became my escape.
It's huge working full time and doing a course.

STUDENT STORIES

I KNOW I WILL REAP THE BENEFITS LATER

S

S. is a school leaver who is currently completing her final of year of full time study. She moved from her family home in rural Australia to complete a double degree; Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Teaching.

S's mother suffers from Parkinson's disease, making it very hard for her to leave her family during her first year of university. During her second year at university, S's mother became very ill which lead to the decision to return home, take a year off and support her sister who is fulltime carer to their mother. Given her personal situation, it was difficult for S to return to study, but she realised what her life could be like with the opportunity that university provided. The balance of work, study and social commitments away from her family is tough, but S. is determined not to quit.

I keep reminding myself, I am not a quitter.

"I grew up on a bee farm, my family are farmers and I was raised to work hard to get somewhere, to get money to get a job. I was taught you won't get anything unless you put the effort in. Watching cows grow, I know how much effort you put in to sell one cow, so I know I am not going to get anywhere unless I put the effort in.

I keep reminding myself, I am not a quitter, I am not going to quit, I don't want to be a quitter. I am not going to walk away, even if I am tired. I tell myself, you have got to do it, you have to hand something in. Sometimes I can hear myself saying I can't do this, it is too hard. Then I will just try to tell myself just calm down, breath. I will ring a friend, have a cry and everything is just clearer. I don't want to quit. I don't want this to be a waste of time. Being away from my family is really hard for me, being away from my farm is really hard. Some of my family are unwell but I don't want to waste this time.

I can see what life can be like for people who don't get these opportunities and I want to do something that I am passionate about. I want to finish so that I can feel the pride from within myself that I did complete it and it was hard but I know I will reap the benefits later."

HOT TIPS FROM S

- Try and put things into perspective
- Don't judge other people, you don't know what challenges they are facing
- If you are really stressed, try to breathe to calm down
- Don't be afraid of failing, the great news is that if you fail once, you can always try again

I CAN DO THIS . . . OF COURSE I CAN DO THIS!

SARAH

Single mum Sarah made the decision that she wanted both work experience and a formal qualification on her CV a long time ago. Since then and during her 11 years at university, she has battled with anorexia nervosa, had a relationship re-arrangement, experienced over two years of intense chronic pain resulting in brain surgery and become full time carer to her brother's children after his sudden death.

None of these things have stopped her ambition to complete her undergraduate degree in Education. Sarah is determined to keep studying.

"University has acted as a rudder. After hearing myself speak it has made me realise that without placing the emphasis on the pursuit of an undergraduate degree, attending university or attending university life, it actually has become a bit of a rudder.

In all the pockets of turmoil, if I take the difficulties away, I am still that same person that can demonstrate resilience, so that in a bad day at work, or a big week, university has become a bit of a constant, a reference point - a rudder to it all.

I have learnt that I have a fairly good stock pile of resilience.

It places much more value – it is not just about me showing the world that I have got my piece of paper, now that it is 11 years of university it is so much a part of who I am.

And I am still going. Who would have thought it would take me 12 or so years, to do what I thought I would knock over in four, not knowing that all those things would happen.

I have learnt that I have a fairly good stock pile of resilience and that I have probably developed it by necessity. I am pleased that I have developed it. It is like an everydayness, it is a bit of a strong quality of stick-to-it-ness, a bit of, I can do this, of course I can do this.

I can do this!"

HOT TIPS FROM SARAH

- Know the value of speaking to your course co-ordinators
- Spend time building allies
- Look after yourself with balancing life and study
- Remind yourself "I can do this"

IT'S BEEN A LOT OF DETERMINATION & WANTING TO SUCCEED IN LIFE

JAYNE

Jayne is doing a dual post-graduate degree after previously graduating with a degree in another discipline. Her decision to return to university to do related post graduate studies was based on increasing her career opportunities and her realisation that she had no alternative but to leave an oppressive job situation. The experience of work-place bullying and the associated effects of depression have been significant challenges for Jayne and she sees this as impacting on her studies.

What has helped Jayne to keep going is her own goals to succeed, the practical aspects of the course, support from family and accessing ACU and other external counsellors for help. Jayne has also made her own efforts to be pro-active around managing her health.

It's well worth it in the end.

"I think coming back was an escape from the full time job I was at, as I felt that there was no other avenue to take. It's been a struggle and it's been a lot of determination and wanting to succeed in life I suppose. It's been a big effort. One of my lecturers keeps telling me P's make degrees.

It's been ridiculous the challenges I've had. Depression is the biggest thing there. It's been a hard semester. There's been a time when I was ready to walk out on it. There are so many opportunities (that) I'll have after completing this degree, that is what has kept me here and having the practical experience is what kept it going.

Having encouragement and support (on placement) was something I never experienced in my old work and being my first full time job (in the placement) was really reassuring and encouraging. The positive atmosphere was what got me through.

The fact of it is if I did drop out, what would I do and where would I go? If you are suffering from depression your mind isn't thinking logically and it doesn't work, so talking to someone and getting someone's objective opinion on life in general and your situation I suppose is the biggest thing that can help. They don't know anyone that you know, although it's hard talking to someone you don't even know, but it's well worth it in the end.

Learning to recognise the factors that cause the depression, just implementing strategies to fix - not to fix but to walk myself out of that mode that I get myself in has helped. My partner has been a big motivating factor. Just having someone there to tell me - did you look at it this way, or you're looking at it the wrong way is really what's kept me going."

HOT TIPS FROM JAYNE

- Look at the positives and negatives of leaving and not leaving uni
- Talk to the counselling service, talk to psychologists, get an objective opinion

IT'S A WAY OF COPING

BETH

Beth, the mother of four kids has always wanted to attend university. When she was younger starting work, getting married and having kids meant that there was never time nor opportunity to further her education. Beth said that when her husband tragically died a few years ago, she needed to find a focus to help her cope and university became just that.

Beth's challenges have included experiencing significant grief and loss and some associated depression, becoming the sole parent of four kids also experiencing grief, working part-time, studying as a mature age student and financial issues. For Beth the support that has helped her keep going with her studies has been her family, having some good friends around her age at university and seeing the Academic Skills Unit and Counselling Services on campus.

"I've got four kids. The death of my husband affected us all. I find other people think that I'm very brave but it's been the way I've coped - having uni has helped me.

I have always been very quiet and shy and the thought of coming to uni has been scary but because it was a focus it helped me not dwell on other things. I had two choices. I could have just done nothing and just fallen apart and that would be the end of things or throw myself into uni and cope and that's what I did.

It has been good to have someone to talk to.

I have seen a counsellor here at times when it has been extra tough. It has been good to have someone to talk to. Even with your friends you can tell them so much but there are other things you don't want to – but with the counsellor it's warts and all.

I did suffer with depression years ago and I think I've always been a bit more aware and worried that it would happen again so I am on the lookout cause once you go down too deep, it's just so hard to get out again. Just staying focused on uni helps me to cope.

It's been hard juggling time because I work part-time, I'm studying and I've got the family's needs and I don't think it would have been possible without support from my Dad. I think I am showing quite a bit of resilience. It goes up and down. Some days you feel more brave, more together. It's sort of like a wave."

HOT TIPS FROM BETH

- Making friends is really important
- Use Academic skills at the beginning and Counselling is good too
- If you start to go down, learn to stop and refocus and use any help that is out there
- Mature age students might not have a lot of academic knowledge but you have life knowledge, and realise that and have confidence in yourself

I'M NOT BACKING DOWN

LIMTEK

After spending many years living in a refugee camp in Africa, Limtek moved to Australia. Now a full time student completing an undergraduate degree, Limtek still is faced with anxiety related to being separated from his family who are back in Africa, financial hardships, health problems and the strain of raising his own young family.

Limtek found that the first thing that made him keep going when he came to Australia was getting enrolled into TAFE and to do a Tertiary Preparation Course. Now Limtek has a strong drive to improve the life of his family and hopes to create new opportunities for them by completing his degree, and moving forward in his chosen career.

I would say I'm a determined person.

"To get to Uni is to actually gain access to what I lost in my country. Before I was discouraged and I went to the refugee's camp and I stayed there for a long period of time. Then I got the chance to come to Australia and I wanted to use that chance to further my education and get a career in life. And probably help both myself and my family, and other people who are left back home there.

I was trying to fix things one at a time to make sure I'm also advancing and at the same time I was helping my family at home back in Africa. My father had surgery and my mother also had broken limbs and I make sure I finance that. It took me a long time to get settled. I had to come out of the Tertiary Preparation Course for one year for that and I had to go in again and finish it up.

The thing is that I felt that I still have the opportunity of doing something if I want to, but there is some other emotional thing that I could not cope with it, and that's what challenged me most because when I get into an examination I feel like I can't do anything and my head just blocks up. But with the counselling that I got, then that does help because it does help me keep going. And seeing some other interaction with other friends as well it makes me going because they said 'you will get over it' and 'do something- think what you want to be in life'.

I would say I'm a determined person, I love challenge and I will not draw back. I want to stick to what will happen in life. I never turn against my studies because I knew that after doing this, things will change. Showing resilience, it means persevering even if its stressful, but still continuing to do it. I'm not backing down. I want to be a model to my kids. That's why I am doing it."

HOT TIPS FROM LMITEK

- Try to exchange things with students to save money, like text books or equipment you aren't using anymore
- Getting to know your friends is the best thing to do because then you can work out things together
- Showing resilience means persevering even when its stressful

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS CAN'T

HOURI

Houri is an Indigenous family woman who was inspired by her mother's commitment to education and her saying that there's no such thing as can't. Completing her course by attending four residential schools on campus each year suits Houri. Living and working in country NSW Houri describes as being blessed, and she values being part of the local community and caring for her family.

Houri has had to survive some hard times in her early years, and has faced some extended family challenges. As well as this she is balancing life, work, and study demands. Houri identified the support of her husband, four children, her workplace and tutor as making a difference to her keeping on studying at university, plus the people around her in her community and her own efforts to survive.

"I've been in the education system for nearly 20 years as a teacher's aide and I see the rewards of working in the school because I see it through the growth of my own children and I do believe in the education system. Having my own mother, grandmother and great uncle who are all teachers I went to school from birth more or less and I was raised in the classroom and I saw the rewards.

I have gained knowledge that I can use in the community.

For the residentials, we arrive in Sydney on a Friday night and we get to our room about 8pm. We are in school Saturday and Sunday and right through until the next Thursday night then we fly home either that night or the following morning. Then I go straight back to work because I can't afford not to work. The course suits me.

Once I'm in there at Uni and it clicks I start to enjoy it. I have gained knowledge that I can use in the community. I do my own study once they (the children) are in bed about 8.30pm I sit down and study sometimes until the early morning.

When I was younger I was told that I would never amount to anything, and then I realised that I wasn't the one who had the issue. I am trying to get on with it and survive.

I've come through that and done prac and I'm still doing assignments but I know that I can do it even if it takes me a long time. Studying Education at uni is not about the money or the holidays - it's about what I know and what I love and what I enjoy. There's no such thing as can't – you can only do your best."

HOT TIPS FROM HOURI

- Never give up. Just keep going. You are put in certain situations for a reason. They are learning experiences. There's a reason why you have to learn that cause there's someone else waiting to hear, or gain some knowledge from what you have learned.
- Receive support from uni

WHEN I HAVE COMPLETED... I WILL FEEL LIKE I'M STANDING SO TALL

THEO

Theo said that studying for a degree was a 'done thing' in his family, but then later on, he began to see studying as a way to gain financial independence through a career path.

Theo is studying for a post graduate qualification in spite of having experienced financial and mental health challenges and significant stress which affected his health. Theo commented that what has helped him to keep going was the smaller size of the ACU campus, the actual design of the course, seeing the disability adviser and counsellor on campus and having support from community services and family.

I've come a long way in the last year.

"My current studies have taken a long time compared to my undergraduate studies. I knew I was just going to have to slog away even if it was only for one subject per semester and that's probably what has happened.

It's been a struggle. I've had to learn to just let go. A lot of my mental condition came about from being wound up. When you're carrying too much and you're finding it hard to let go, you're not released. Whenever I get a negative thought or feeling, I have had to learn to ignore it.

When you've had a mental condition and been unemployed for a long time, I think people can't help but look down on you, they don't really realise they're doing it, but you don't get held in high regard. Apart from getting fit again and losing weight, I know that when I have completed this course inside I will feel like I'm standing so tall. I am so close to finishing

I'm nearly there and when I do get through this course it will be the biggest milestone. I've come a long way in the last year."

HOT TIPS FROM THEO

- Don't allow the past to dictate right now and don't worry about the future
- Have physical exercise
- Have a routine and stick to it

I ALWAYS FELT LIKE THINGS WERE DIFFERENT...

GABRIELLA

Gabriella, a school leaver, is passionate about teaching. Gabriella's parents were born and raised overseas and she is the first member of her family to attend university. Growing up Gabriella always felt like things were different for her. In her first year of university Gabriella reported that she worried a lot about assignments and said that she found she was always worried about basically everything. After seeking treatment for her worry she was diagnosed with Generalised Anxiety Disorder.

Gabriella experienced significant challenges that came with the severity of the anxiety and the worry. Even though it is difficult, she is determined to succeed and wants to complete her professional qualifications and avoid the financial challenges that she faced growing up.

"My parents ask how everything is going, they try to understand but they have come from a background where study wasn't such a big thing, so for them even during my early schooling, they had a completely different education experience than I did here.

They have been quite supportive and want to know how they can support me at university however it is quite difficult for them to understand how the whole schooling education thing works, and because of that I sort of grew up with their thinking mentality.

Making it better for them than it was for me.

Late high school was quiet difficult for me, I was bullied a bit and it was difficult. Getting out of that environment helps me keep going with my studies because with becoming a teacher, I want to help, not only the student who have been bullied, but all students to make sure they are growing up in a safe environment - making it better for them than it was for me."

HOT TIPS FROM GABRIELLA

- If you do have an issue, like anxiety, it is ok to see someone and speak about it
- There are websites that can help with anxiety and depression (eg: www.beyongblue.com.au)
- Even if you are facing a challenge, there is always something you can do about it. Don't dig yourself into the ground, it is the worse place you can be
- Make sure that you take regular breaks, take time to see your family, call a friend, make sure that you do some nice things for yourself

I KNOW HOW TO DEAL WITH OTHER THINGS IN THE FUTURE

CATHERINE

Catherine is in her final year of an undergraduate degree. After finishing high school Catherine explored what her options were for expanding on her strength in art and design work, looking at courses on offer through private colleges, TAFE and university.

Catherine has faced many challenges with her health and personal life that have at time interfered with her studies and career planning. She credits her persistence, motivation, diligence, and support as providing her with the determination to complete her degree.

What has kept me going is the desire to succeed.

"Throughout my time at university there were ups and downs and there were challenges that I faced for the first time. But these came and went. They were at one point seemingly overwhelming but looking back on them now they really only occurred for a minor fraction of my entire life compared to other things.

So, yeah, these things are dealt with now and I've totally moved on. I find they don't get in the way, I've found I now know through experience with them. I know how to deal with other things in the future. And that really helps.

At university I find you learn a lot more skills in other areas, not just the degree and researching, but people skills, career skills, interpersonal relationship skills, all things related to that. I often consulted peers as well as family members and staff members at the university who were really able to help me in many ways. I saw one particular counsellor in my first year and she was really great with listening when I needed it.

What has kept me going is the desire to succeed, continued inspiration from people and role models, and the desire to complete the course and get my degree at the end- that has pushed me forward."

HOT TIPS FROM CATHERINE

- I believe that students and young people who find they are experiencing difficulties are not alone - this happens to all of us at some point. So if you feel overwhelmed by problems it's nothing to feel embarrassed about
- There are plenty of resources available to deal with problems. The earlier that they're dealt with the better. That's my advice
- Try to balance your academic life with things that you enjoy to boost your self esteem. If you make time for yourself you'll be able to enjoy more, and you'll feel better about things as a result

THE STEEPNESS OF THE JOURNEY HAS INCREASED

JULIA

The life change Julia was looking for has been easier said than done.

Julia, who is currently in her third and final year of part time, post graduate study, previously worked in the corporate world at senior level in the IT industry. After having children she realised that her career wasn't as important anymore and when her children were old enough to give her a little more independence, she decided she wanted to go back to work but no longer desired the corporate lifestyle. Her best option was to retrain at university.

As a mother of two young children, one in kindergarten and the other now in year two, balancing the commitment of being a mum and engaging in post graduate study, has brought along some challenges. Julia's husband works interstate during the week, so although he is able to provide emotional support, he is not able to help with practical things like dropping off the kids at school in the morning, while Julia prepares for placements, lectures and tutorials.

As a post graduate student Julia has found it logistically challenging to meet for group work activities and assignments, and says it is hard to find the time between work and family commitments as well as find lectures and tutorials that fit in with family life. Despite these challenges, Julia has used self talk to keep going. She has persevered, shown determination and tolerance and a great capacity to problem solve.

"The steepness of the journey has increased. I found that it has become more and more an uphill battle. The major reason has been that as my children get older, they need more support. When you have a baby, you can put them in a pram, however when they are older, three or four, or sick, you need more support.

I did a lot of learning along the way.

There have been times when I have felt I can't do this, I need more support and then I look at my HECS debt and just think… oh, that $7000… no, I will finish it off and I keep on going!

Even though I attended orientation which was helpful, I did a lot of learning along the way. There has been a great investment in time and money and I am not prepared to lose that. It pushes me to keep finishing."

HOT TIPS FROM JULIA

- Be aware of the supports that are available
- There are online services and the library conducts tours to support students
- Become familiar with blackboard, it is very helpful to your studies

GIVING UP IS NOT AN OPTION...

Bx

Bx, an international student, is happy about the opportunities that study in Australia will open. Bx came to ACU as a member of her extended family had previously studied here and this was influential in her decision to attend university.

Although Bx reported significant challenges with language, finances and figuring out how to balance part-time work and studies, Bx says she is determined to apply herself and try her best.

Bx is thankful for the family support she receives and says that they comfort me and say "just try to do the best". Bx also gains support and strength from her friends, most of whom are also international students. Bx acknowledges the strength of this support because they understand some of the challenges and pressures that come with studying in another country.

Try to keep doing things then you will get it.

"Try my best to study, try to pass an exam and understand all the things. Apply yourself. The overseas student can go to a language school but it is very expensive. Not all overseas students can afford it. I think just do what you can by yourself and try your best.

One of the problems for overseas students is we can't get help from the family. For me and my friends I have to do some part time work. We can only do 20 hours in the study time so it is not easy but in the holidays you can try your best to do more.

You have to do it and you do. I think...never give up. I have met some students through nursing, local students. Some of them moved to other units/majors, but I think never give up and I tell yourself try to keep doing things then you will get it."

HOT TIPS FROM Bx

- If you can get help from your friends, don't be shy to ask them questions
- Ask questions to the tutor or lecturer in charge and they will be happy to help
- Access services like Academic Skills and Counselling, when they know about your situation they can give you some suggestions and advice to help you to relieve it yourself

IT WAS JUST WHAT I HAD TO DO

WILL

Studying a post graduate degree, Will came to university to achieve his goal to be well qualified in his chosen field.

Will has experienced some legal issues that he described as being quite challenging and stressful at the time. This included increased financial pressure as well as dealing with a diagnosis of depression.

Will said that what has kept him going in his studies, is his enjoyment of study and the university environment, wanting to achieve his goals, having medical support and the legal situation being resolved.

"Sorting out the whole legal thing took pretty much two full years and during that time it was very stressful because I didn't know whether I was going to bother to continue working for something at Uni. Granted my grades didn't do as well as before because of the stress and things like that. It was really difficult. I kept going. It was just what I had to do.

It is important to build who you are as a person.

I was diagnosed with clinical depression which I've had for a long time and I still have, but it comes and goes. The legal situation finished in March 2010 and I have moved on. It is important to build who you are as a person and surround yourself with things of what you want to become."

HOT TIPS FROM WILL

- Have a goal to finish and try to get on with your life
- Plod on and try to keep on going
- The only mistakes are the ones you don't learn from

IT'S A FLAME BURNING INSIDE OF ME THAT KEEPS ME GOING

MARY ELIZABETH

Mary Elizabeth's passion has always been social work. Growing up overseas Mary Elizabeth said that her culture has strongly influenced her, and from the age of nine, she was active in helping others and was inspired by her Mum's resilience.

Mary Elizabeth is a sole parent of three children and she was well qualified with two degrees that focused on dealing with technology and numbers. However, as Mary Elizabeth felt social work was her calling she enrolled in post-graduate degree in Social Work which she has almost completed.

During this time of study, Mary Elizabeth has faced some significant challenges including a relationship breakdown, difficulty in balancing work and family demands, financial concerns, and some times of experiencing depression. Through all this, Mary Elizabeth says she "just hangs in there" and keeps going.

Being at university builds your identity.

"It wasn't easy growing up; there were a lot of hurdles.I lost my father at an early age and my mother was the only one, and she survived, and I saw it (resilience) in her. She was the only one and she was able to raise us and I saw that and I appreciated it. Probably I learned in silence, I observed it. I saw lots of lives being affected and I saw people there still smiling even though they didn't know where they would get their food tonight. I value those things, so what I'm undergoing at the moment is nothing. Like this is my share so probably I've valued this in a lot of things I've had to overcome in life.

I always go back to where I came from when I was growing up. My whole life has been like that. Every time I've done reflections I will sit down and think about the direction and the lives of people around me and I always go back to when I was young and think about how they and I survived.

Using personal reflection, accessing support from the uni counsellor and calling on my resilience has kept me going. I can see the light at the end of the tunnel and I think this is a big thing that's kept me going. Being at university builds your identity. I want to be a Social Worker and that's in my mind. It's a flame that is burning inside of me that keeps me going."

HOT TIPS FROM MARY ELIZABETH

- Just hang in there
- Don't allow this particular incident (significant challenge/s) in your life to destroy the other side of your life, especially if that's the one that holds your identity
- See the uni counsellor for support

I'M HERE, I MIGHT AS WELL LEARN A LITTLE BIT

TINA

Fulltime student and recent school leaver Tina has set her goal to complete an undergraduate Health Degree in two and a half years.

Motivated by the difficulties her brother experienced in finding employment and being the first in her family to attend university, Tina is determined to complete her degree and forge a career. But it isn't easy. After having experienced hardships and challenges with her family and in her personal life, Tina needs to push herself to keep going.

"I wanted to get on with a career. I didn't really want to do a gap year I just wanted to get the degree over and done with so I could get into the work force as soon as possible. I've just had a bit of a rough family and social life in the past and it certainly affected my emotional well-being and I just didn't feel motivated to show up for uni.

I always make myself show up.

I accept that I'm feeling upset or I don't want to study but then I realise that I'm paying for this degree so I just sort of kick myself in the pants and make myself do it. I always make myself show up and I bribe myself if it gets really bad. Like I say 'look, if you study for another hour, then you can sit in front of the TV for an hour'.

The knowledge that it's over in two and a half years and I get a degree out of it keeps me going. Some of the subjects I really enjoy, so I make sure I schedule them so that I have one of the good subjects each day so I don't try and skip a day. And I usually put tutorials one per day, so I don't try and skip a day there as well. And I just try and have lots of friends around and call them if I'm upset. Often if I really don't want to go to Uni I just show up and sit there and it's sort of 'I'm here, I might as well learn a little bit'."

HOT TIPS FROM TINA

- Just keep showing up, you're allowed to feel terrible but just as long as you show up you're still doing the degree
- If you need help just call someone

IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT STUDY

ODETTE

Odette has made a career change from doing accountancy work, where she felt there was no way forward, to education where she feels there is a way to contribute to young people and to the future. Doing this within Catholic schools with Christian values Odette said is important to her so studying at ACU fitted.

Odette has experienced significant challenges around anxiety and procrastination and having high expectations of herself. What has helped Odette to keep going with her studies is her attitude that she has chosen to be at university and just has to do the "hard stuff to get there, to get my goal".

Drawing on family experience to come through adversity, combined with family support and her own commitment to faith and prayer, have helped Odette to keep studying.

You just have to do it.

"I want to cry a lot but that's not going to help me so I have to reason it through. It's not going to help if I procrastinate, it's not going to help if I sit and think about it and dwell on it, and you just have to do it and I think a lot of that helps you get through. Prayer too. And I talk to people, and I get their feedback too, so I ask for help.

I haven't been in school for 10 years. I didn't know where to start. I felt that my writing skills were highly inadequate so I chose to pick up another unit recognising my area of weakness and my areas of strength and then I got one of the top marks. That was really hard work - to prove to yourself that you can do it, so I think recognising your weaknesses and strengths and going with that.

My family help out when they can and say 'why don't you go out for a walk? Because it's not all about study which is what it's like when you're in the zone and you're just so focused. The ultimate goal in the end is to help students live a good life through my example and through what I teach, not just in the subject but in helping them if they have questions or anything like that. So what keeps me going is the thought of doing this hard stuff for someone else's benefit later on."

HOT TIPS FROM ODETTE

- Recognise your weaknesses and strengths and go with that
- Do what you can now and get it over and done with because you don't know what will happen later
- Organise yourself and don't leave anything to the last minute
- Talk to people like the uni counsellors. Ask for help

...I JUST NEEDED SOMEONE ELSE TO BOUNCE THINGS OFF

ADAM

Adam is passionate about Education. He decided to come to university because he believed this would open the door to better his life chances. After leaving high school Adam tried a number of different jobs until finally he realised he wanted a career with security that he was passionate about.

Moving away from full time work brought with it some financial challenges and significant changes to his lifestyle and he found it hard to balance work demands, study and seeing friends and family. Despite having experienced significant challenges, Adam found that by refocusing, setting goals and holding onto a sense of determination he has kept going.

"I left high school, didn't really know what I wanted to do, was going to be a photographer at first, but then that course became too expensive, so couldn't afford to do that anymore. Then I started working in a warehouse for a few years, and then managed a café for about four years after that. Then the owners were selling up and I decided I couldn't make coffee for the rest of my life that I couldn't really go any further. And I just needed some more security, I wanted a career and I thought the best way was to get a degree and so I decided to do teaching.

Coming to university was a big change.

Somewhere between first and second year it got a bit much having to balance work, uni and having a social life. I had to cut back on work to get uni stuff done, and that caused some financial problems.

Before university I was working full time, had weekends off and was able to do something different, was able to eat properly and had better accommodation. Coming to university was a big change. I was also worried because I didn't do very well at high school, I was a bit worried that I was going to get caught out, because I can't spell properly.

I am not very big about talking about my problems to other people but it came to a point that I was going to leave uni, I actually came to see one of the counsellors and that was a big help because even though I am quite good at breaking things down, I just needed someone else to bounce things off with."

HOT TIPS FROM ADAM

- Seek out someone to talk to –definitely just find someone you can talk to, it doesn't have to be a friend; I found that speaking with friends was a little too close, so talking to someone who I didn't know, didn't' see again after that one hour session helped a lot

I WANT TO GET MY CAREER

CHLOE

Chloe came to ACU after finishing school and experiencing some tough times when her Mum was very ill. Chloe had good support during that tough time from the school teachers and school counsellors, so she knew that these kinds of services existed and how helpful the support can be. Because of this previous experience, Chloe accessed the Counselling, Academic Skills and Disability Services at ACU when she was diagnosed with generalised anxiety and some depression.

For Chloe, being a part of the ACU Early Achievers Program gave her a head start in knowing her direction and has made her goal of always wanting to be a teacher possible. Chloe sees her perseverance and resilience as being very important in not giving up.

I keep going by not giving up.

"I had motivation to come. I always wanted to come here and I've always wanted this uni. The motivation to want a career at the end of it, to be a teacher is something that keeps me going.

Friends, my family and my parents are really good helpers. Sometimes at stages I feel like dropping out but I say no, I want to get my career and I want to do this even if I have to drop one unit off and do it a bit later, I'd rather do that than drop the whole course. I've got my goals set.

I think believing in yourself is very important cause I find that hard sometimes. If I fall back I try to come back and use this to motivate me and say no, I have to do it and I try to be positive about what I have to do.

It's important to persist with it and make sure you get help if you need it. That's something I made a mistake of and I backed out of getting help when I needed it most and I just kept getting worse. So if you need a counsellor or someone to talk to try to see someone.

I keep going by not giving up and I try to be resilient as well. That really helps."

HOT TIPS FROM CHLOE

- Believe in yourself
- Manage your time well and don't leave things to the last minute
- Break assignments down into bits, do one section at a time
- Get help if you need it

I CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN SOMEONE ELSES LIFE

B.

B. is a full time student in her final year of university studies. Her adult years have been tough, having experienced serious mental health issues that saw her hospitalised in 2008 when she became suicidal. B found it hard to keep going with her studies due to the depression and anxiety "all I wanted to do was sleep", but has shown incredible perseverance and drive towards her goal of completing her degree.

B's drive to achieve has been significant. She no longer needs to take medication, has not needed to seek support for over a year and is commencing a graduate program with a prestigious company.

"It has been really up and down and round and round. I was going to give up, I was ready to jump ship but if I did then I don't know what I would have done…. I fell in love with my profession and that has helped me with my resilience.

It is kinda weird, it was kinda like I never wanted to do this job and then you fall in love with it and it is awesome. Yesterday I was working with a client who didn't recognise me because I had changed my hair. They said, "I didn't recognise it was you, but I am so glad to see you, I missed you". It makes all of it so worthwhile.

I fell in love with my profession and that has helped me with my resilience.

The fact that I can talk to people is a really good thing. The fact that I can say to someone, 'hey I need help', you need to be able to do that. If I wasn't able to do that I don't know what would have happened that day that I was really suicidal, I don't know what would have happened but I did say to someone, hey I need help.

Just don't be afraid of the hospitals, I know it seems scary, and I know it seems scary to ask for help. I was petrified, there is so much stigma, when you think of mental hospital and mental illness, but there shouldn't be a stigma. And that is the main thing you need to do, don't be afraid, no-one is going to bite you for asking for help."

HOT TIPS FROM B.

- You need to be able to say to someone, "hey I need help"
- Don't be afraid, no-one is going to bite you for asking for help

I AM DOING MY BEST

PENNY

After working in the community sector for over 25 years, Penny enrolled in university as part of a plan to consolidate her career options. She experienced unemployment during the global economic crisis and her love of learning and the opportunity to upgrade her skills led her to do a post graduate Social Work degree.

Penny is married with one teenager and a supportive husband. Penny said that she has experienced some depression that was made more difficult by a diagnosis of a benign brain tumor requiring neurosurgery, leaving her with some residual health issues. Additional to this, financial worries were another of Penny's challenges.

Penny said that what has kept her going in the course has been her strong quest for learning, her tenacity and stubbornness, support from her family, great support from lecturers and other student colleagues and "being around positive people".

It was a big positive to know that someone had faith in me.

"I had been encouraged by the Head of School to apply and I was very happy to be accepted into the Course, it was a big positive to know that someone had faith in me. The subjects looked really interesting and there was recognition of prior learning.

The operation has definitely impacted on my cognitive abilities. To process information I'm a lot slower and I need a lot of time for all the assignments at uni and I certainly underestimated this. The course does have quite a high workload and it makes it very hard for anyone who has a family.

I've been on anti-depressants for many years. Whilst I can monitor my moods and work though any dark times I was very troubled by the finances last year. I kept the worry to myself so I became very stressed out. It took me a while to talk to anyone about it. Being prone to depression I don't need a lot of triggers.

Eventually I came and saw some of the counsellors here and the Equity and Disability Adviser too. I have tried to ease up on myself and do what I can to the best of my ability. I keep my lecturers informed. Sometimes that's hard as I am an internal person and I hate the thoughts that I should be able to keep up, but I try not to think about that and say to myself …I am doing my best."

HOT TIPS FROM PENNY

- Use the counselling unit as the counsellors are great and they know the pressures that are on at Uni
- Certainly talk to lecturers about where you are at and what is happening
- If there's some emotional or physical difficulty see the Access and Equity Service

EVERY TIME I GET KNOCKED DOWN I GET UP STRONGER

JANE

Indigenous student Jane is a family woman who lives in rural NSW. Jane has 17 years of experience in the education field and realised that it was time to look at doing something at university for herself and for her future happiness, stability and independence. Jane said that it helped knowing some other people who had been to ACU and were happy with the course (done as residential schools) so she enrolled.

Jane has been challenged by a separation after a long marriage, becoming a sole parent, dealing with her youngest daughter being diagnosed with cancer and some experiences of depression. Jane's determination and strong attitude to achieve her goals has helped her to keep studying.

"Every time I get knocked down I get up stronger. The more people knock me down the harder I get up and think no, there's that goal down the end there and I can aim for that. I think a lot of that came around when my daughter was sick because you had to fight, you had to really fight.

I want to be a teacher. I actually like the idea of going away to res (residential school) - it's full on. There are two speeds, flat out and stop. You get there and you just get a massive overload and every time (I'm easing off now) I ask myself what the heck are you doing this to yourself for? Sometimes we have classes from 9am to 6pm. Sometimes we start at 8am and travelling in too. It's so busy. The lecturers are very good and do understand.

There's that goal down the end there and I can aim for that.

There might be times when you feel like you want to give in, probably this time last year I thought this is too hard, and I thought why am I doing this to myself? And then I said, I know why, because I want to have a future, I want to better myself, to prove that point that I can do this, I am capable. I am doing this for a reason - future happiness, stability, and independence.

If I make a mistake it's not for the want of trying. It's not for lack of effort, it's because I've misunderstood and I need to say alright I need to approach it in a different way and look at it in a different view and this works for me. My aim is to get the qualification and to have achieved it. I'll be 49 and I think that's a nice age to be starting a new career. I've always wanted to do something and I just didn't realise what it was, and now I have."

HOT TIPS FROM JANE

- A lot of times you just have to look at yourself and think how can I look at this differently
- Remember that you are doing this for a reason and that even if it is a struggle at times, don't give up, don't quit and keep going
- If you need a break, speak to someone; see if you can get support from a classmate, or a counsellor on campus, or a GP
- Get support from anyone

THIS WILL BE DIFFERENT

KUYBYAN

Kuybyan is completing a post graduate qualification to gain provisional professional registration. The professional registration is what attracted Kuybyan to this course, and that he can "get it knocked over quickly" which is important to him as he is at the end of his career. Kuybyan brings extensive work experience to his course that he feels is valued by the School. Kuybyan has experienced some health challenges and also having to juggle responsibilities such as work, study and providing for his family.

Kuybyan sees perseverance as important, as well as knowing that the workload is achievable.

I just survive and keep going. It is only next year.

"It's a two year course and I get most of my work knocked over first semester of each year and I don't have a full time workload. I've been exempted from two of the subjects so basically it means that I can fit the thing (university) into my schedule at work. I'm a full time worker, and I do shift work. I work for a large charity. I also work with other agencies on their research, that takes time, and I have to balance that. My word for this is perseverance.

One of my challenges is making sure I do all the things a husband should do. My wife is a full time worker and cares for her parents, and we have a son, who has finished his degree. My wife has had enough of me doing studying over the last few years. I did stuff at UNSW and didn't finish that, and then Macquarie Uni, and I didn't finish that. She doesn't think I finish anything, but this will be different. I have a form of narcolepsy, which is a health problem. Tiredness does have a role (in narcolepsy) as does working shift work, especially on the end of a four day shift roster. It is hard to stay awake but I just survive and keep going. It is only next year."

HOT TIPS FROM KUBYAN

- Put your head down and make sure you actually do the assignments on time
- Read the instructions for assignments carefully
- See that it is not that hard to do
- Seek advice

I FEEL PROUD OF MYSELF

ROSE

Rose is an international student and wanted to come to study in Australia because all her siblings are here, and she wanted to join them. She already has an undergraduate degree and is currently doing a post graduate degree in Education.

Rose has experienced significant family challenges that have impacted on her quite a lot, but she has learnt to keep going by keeping in mind that she has wanted the benefits of permanent residence for three to four years. This goal drives her and so does her family.

Her Christian faith and being able to attend the Chapel on campus for peace of mind has been important to Rose. She also feels supported by her friends and has sought the help of the university counselling service during challenging times.

"Sometimes when I think of all these issues and all the assignments I say this is not going to kill me and it's not going to be the end of the world and I still have to live after that so why should I give up. That's what I feel.

I met the counsellor here not because I'm stressed but because I wanted to share with someone. My mind was so full and I wanted to let it out, I can't share with my friends as it has to be confidential and I don't want my friends to look at me in any way, I don't want any sympathy. The counselling was a support for me and I would see the counsellor again if I need to.

I have learnt that I have the power to overcome stress.

The family stress was there throughout the semester, but the academic demands have been so full it didn't give me the space to think about the issues, and I think this was a good factor to be busy. I was never free.

I have learnt that I have the will power to overcome stress. I don't know how I did it because I had to show a different face of mine altogether because I had to be cheerful and happy even though I was really sad inside. I don't know how I managed but when I think back I feel proud of myself."

HOT TIPS FROM ROSE

- Try to get a few good friends who will inspire you
- See the counsellor if you need to for confidential support
- If you want to achieve something just focus on what you want to get, rather than the problems around you

THERE'S A LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

LOUISE

Louise is completing a dual degree part time, is a wife and a mother to four and is also working. Louise said that she "always envisaged that I'd be at University and then continue a career and it didn't quite work in that format".

Louise reflected that with this degree she will have a new career and a passion for something that she wants to do, which brings in all her experience. In her eyes family comes first and juggling work, family life and study along with the unpredictable things that happen in life have sometimes been a challenge. One of the strategies Louise uses during the challenging times is to "tell myself that it's only so many weeks and then its back to normal".

I really have always wanted to get my degree.

"I really have always wanted to get my degree. I think it gives a focus to my children that I'm putting the effort in - it inspires them. I've had a lot of support. Every time by the last couple of weeks of the semester when I say I'm not going anymore, my children and my husband say 'just finish it' and 'you're going'. I work with a lot of professional people who are amazed I am studying. I feel as though I would be letting down more people than myself if I didn't keep going.

Blood, sweat and tears would come to mind to describe what I have done in studying at Uni. Because there's many a time when I've felt the challenge, felt my age, and there's many sleepless nights because I take out from my sleep for my study. In any of this equation the study counts as the last spot for me.

There are four children so with us it's six people and to run a household smoothly you've got to give a lot of yourself even if others do as well. There's still mother's commitment. I have to go to work because we have financial commitments so this study is the last on the peg. There are many times when I am sitting at the computer after midnight, and my head is falling off my shoulders so blood, sweat and tears would well describe it."

HOT TIPS FROM LOUISE

- Have shortcuts / get yourself through the essentials / time management
- Just focus on the things that matter in that study period and remember that anything else you need to focus on can happen after the 12 – 13 week semester period
- See that there's a light at the end of the tunnel

UNI GAVE ME AND MY LIFE A PURPOSE

SARA

Sara's enrolment at ACU came after several experiences at other larger universities and in courses with quite a different focus than what she is doing now.

Married with a supportive husband and the mother of four children, Sarah has had her fair share of challenges including almost losing a baby to serious illness, balancing family and parenting responsibilities, some financial stress and a caring role to her sick Mum and Dad.

For Sara her thoughts during difficult times were around how university gives her a purpose and how she has become "more than just a Mum."

"Having the kids just grounded me and brought me back to what I really wanted to do. Uni became my escape I think. I think it became the thing that made me get through everything else that was hard, because it was sort of my pathway, my stepping stone to what is hopefully going to be an easier happier life, perhaps. This degree fits, and this is one of the biggest things that keeps me going. If it wasn't something I really wanted to do it would be a lot easier to stop.

Uni became my escape.

The other thing that kept me going was that it really was an escape. I could come here and leave all of that (worries) behind, it stayed in the car when I got out to come here and just be a student. I think for people who have a busy life and tough times, coming to uni can be your quiet place, and a chance to enjoy that 'on my own time'. I come in here and this is my quiet time because my life is so busy.

Uni gave me something, it gave me a purpose and my life a purpose and I became more than just a Mum. I became a person with sort of an identity as well. That's what sort of kept me going anyway, knowing that (if I left) I wasn't just giving up on a degree I was giving up on me. This is my escape to get a better life."

HOT TIPS FROM SARA

- Try to connect with someone at uni each semester to have a coffee with and to share the experience with and then uni becomes fun
- Maybe you can make it your quiet time at uni, your 'self care' place and your 'down time' place

HAVING STARTED THIS I DON'T WANT TO NOT FINISH THIS

JAMES

James sees the value in studying a course that will enhance his professional skills, over and above his existing qualifications. James appreciates his work supporting his study both financially and in time off, but also says this brings with it some pressure, along with his own self pressure to succeed.

Being a family man James has experienced challenges around life, work and study demands. He said that because he is older he "didn't want to squander this opportunity" and that has helped James to keep going.

It's huge working full time and doing a course.

"It's huge working full time and doing a course. It's a very significant challenge because there are certain expectations that exist when you're in paid employment but by the same token you also have a responsibility to your education, to do the tasks you have agreed to do, because none of us are conscripted into enrolling into a course.

It really does become difficult from a time management point of view. In terms of juggling things, you can't get home from work and think I've got three hours I can do my study because study happens after the family things have been attended to and you've made sure your family is OK.

I have had very supportive academics that are running the unit, who've been open to discussion and negotiation. One of the gratifying things I've found is when I have had those discussions, I have been treated as an adult with a problem, and I've been helped to sort through that. I've enrolled in a couple of degrees before and not been able to manage it and then I've withdrawn and I hate not finishing stuff, but having started this I don't want to not finish this."

HOT TIPS FROM JAMES

- It's really important to communicate with academics when you've got issues
- Own the situation you're in, accept responsibility and move on
- Have time management skills

IT'S SOMETHING I WANT TO DO FOR MYSELF

ALICE

Alice has always been academic in school and is now enrolled in a post-graduate professional course. Job stability and fulfillment are important to Alice and this is good motivation to progress.

During her studies Alice has had the significant challenge of experiencing major financial stress. This has been a huge burden for her which affects her health. Alice has continued studying in spite of this by calling on her own resilience and perseverance.

"It's been very difficult. It does get very tough, you have to look after yourself and juggle University. It is very much perseverance to get through the struggle, especially when you're supporting yourself like I am, but you just kind of have to, like an internal thing you just have to do it.

The financial stress is always a major, major burden. Supporting yourself and going to University is not easy, especially if you're a full time student. That's the worst thing. Most students only think about uni, but when you're stressing about money, rent and bills because you don't live at home, that stress becomes so great as it's compounded already by the stress from uni. That affects your health.

If I start something I want to finish it.

What has kept me going is that I don't like failing. If I start something I want to finish it and if I want to put my name to something I have to do it the best I can. Seeing the end goal keeps me going, it keeps me persevering through my hardship.

It is important to me. Not just because at the end of it I want to achieve what I want to achieve, and get to where I want to get to, but if I start something I don't want to quit. I don't want to be like oh you gave up, you dropped out, you failed. It's not just because of how other people might judge you, but how you judge yourself, I've failed, I'm not good enough. It's not a nice feeling.

It's something I want to do for myself."

HOT TIPS FROM ALICE

- Pre-plan a support network before you start at uni so it's there when the times get tough
- Try to develop a mentality of perseverance
- It is helpful to try to find someone that you can vent to when you're stressed

JUST KEEP GOING AND YOU'LL GET THROUGH

EMILY

Emily came to ACU after completing the HSC. She decided on a professional health career because of the many options it offered, and her success in the Early Achievers Program to gain entry to ACU was a great start for her.

Since starting university, Emily has had some medical issues that have impacted not only on her health but on her independence, confidence, her work and her financial situation. Dealing with this and continuing to study for Emily has been about keeping on going and being motivated with support of family and friends.

I think if you get more involved then you get more out of it.

"I know a couple of other students who have medical issues and they kind of just hide away like I did in the first year. I usually came to Uni and after my class I'd just like run off. But I think if you get more involved then you get more out of it.

Now I have Specialists involved, I can't drive. I've gone from being a very independent kind of person to having everyone else drive me round. I couldn't do my part-time job. It kinda sucks a lot - sometimes. And not having money to get around and everything.

There was a time that I was thinking - how am I going to be able to support myself and go to uni, do you go to uni and have nothing, I don't know? I also thought that if I did defer or pull out for a semester I probably wouldn't have come back. I stayed and in the long run I can look back and I think I would have regretted it if I had taken time off. So knowing that, I thought … just keep going and you'll get through.

Not everyone I've told, but most people around just sort of make you feel like you belong. It was good talking to the Campus Life Co-ordinator and she gave me the option of coming to counsellors but I thought - I seem to be OK now. Last year I did really, really well academically. That's the surprising thing. I did better than the first year. I don't know how that worked out. I think it puts more stress on you but that stress in the long term made me study harder with a good outcome. I have good friends. It's been alright."

HOT TIPS FROM EMILY

- Talk to the people that are available and use the resources that the Uni offers
- Turn it round into something good and make use of it
- If you get more involved then you'll get more out of it
- If you have the momentum and keep going, you'll get through

DETERMINATION, THAT IS THE THING

ZAINABU

Zainabu was born overseas and is completing her final year of her degree. Once she has completed it she will be able to continue a career as a nurse in Australia.

Prior to arriving in Australia Zainabu had done a course in nursing and wanted to upgrade her skills and further develop her career. During her time as a full time student Zainabu was a victim of a crime, which had a significant impact on her capacity to continue with her degree.

Despite this significant challenge her determination and focus; along with support from some good friends, she has been able to persevere and complete her degree.

"I have had some issues, but I have always wanted to study. When I decided to go to university I said, I must achieve my degree.

I think it is even having the... I don't know how to say it, I just said, I must finish my course, I must finish my course. Determination, that is the thing.

I also think that students should share their problems out with someone they trust, because someone can give you good advice and that will help keep you going."

When I decided to go to university I said, I must achieve my degree.

HOT TIPS FROM ZAINABU

- Have a focus
- Share your problems, not with everyone, but with someone you trust
- Seek out counselling

"I am just
so thrilled to have been
acknowledged as an
individual."

- Participant comment

SUMMARY RESEARCH RESULTS

4. SUMMARY RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1 Results from the research questions

In response to the specific research questions we can confidently say that:

- All participants did regard what they have done as being evidence of their resilience, but they would not ordinarily use this word.
- The word determination and words similar to this were more reflective of the language used by students to attribute meaning to what they had done.
- In terms of what supported students to stay at university, participants consistently identified:

  - Self-belief and determination as being vitally important.
  - Having support from friends / family.
  - Accessing University support services such as counselling, academic skills and disability and equity services.
  - Making contact with academic staff.
  - Maintaining a positive attitude.

If you are interested in gathering more information about this research, a full article will be published in 2012 in the Journal of Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association (JANZSSA). For any enquiries please contact Judy Wright (Principal Researcher) at: Judy.Wright@acu.edu.au

4.2 Participant evaluations

Participants were asked to complete an evaluation of the experience of being involved in this research. We asked participants the following questions and we have included some of their comments here.

1. **Do you think your story is important to others?**

   - *"These types of stories may work as a motivation to others. People can clearly see that they are not alone!"*
   - *"I think many people suffer but can't share with others, this may help."*
   - *"It could be an inspiration to others like me."*
   - *"It is very relevant to other students as this is coming from a current ACU students (myself)."*
   - *"People learn from experience and by hearing other people's stories we can learn and make the right choice for us."*

2. Was it was beneficial telling your story?

- *"Yes, it was. It provided me with an insight into how far I've come, and made me reassess where I'm going and what I wish to achieve in the near future."*
- *"I believe that it helps to put things into perspective. (What really matters and what doesn't)."*
- *"It reminded me of how much I have changed to be in relationship with the past."*
- *"I am comfortable telling my story, but it is still a difficult part of my life and does bring some feelings with it."*

3. Was it beneficial reading your story?

- *"I realised why I am still here."*
- *"Yes, I was amazed at reading about this very resilient person I didn't realise I was!"*
- *"It allowed me to reflect on what had happened and remember that I've come far."*
- *"It renewed my spirit to continue."*
- *Good to reflect back on recollection."*

4. Has being a participant in this research project been a validating experience for you?

- *" It was indeed worth the experience, rewarding."*
- *"It made me realise that I am tougher than I appear to others."*
- *"I feel that the university has valued my contribution as a student. I'm glad I participated."*
- *"I hope it gives courage to those who are beginning , and determination to those who feel alone or out on a limb."*
- *"Recognising that my life and its problems are not insignificant and the effort I make daily is worthwhile."*
- *"I feel like I can make a difference to other peoples lives."*

5. SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY PARTICIPANTS

Significant challenges	Pages
Adjustment	10
Anorexia	7
Anxiety	10, 13, 20, 22, 23
Bullying	8, 13
Childhood issues	11
Depression	8, 9, 17, 18, 22, 23, 24, 25
Family and relationships issues	6, 7, 11, 18, 19, 25, 27, 29
Financial stress	9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 24, 28, 29, 31, 32
Grief and Loss	6, 7, 9, 10, 25, 29
Health / Medical issues	7, 10, 14, 24, 26, 32
International student issues	16, 27
Language issues	16
Legal issues	17
Mental health condition	12
Parenting / carer responsibilities	7, 9, 10, 15, 18, 25, 26, 28, 29
Personal issues	14, 19
Pressure to succeed	16, 20, 30
Procrastination	20
Refugee issues	10
Stress	6, 9, 12, 15, 17, 24, 27, 31
Suicidal thoughts	23
Victim of crime	33
Work / study / life balance	6, 7, 9, 11, 15, 16, 18, 20, 26, 28, 29, 30

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"It was refreshing to have someone express an interest in my personal hardships with the intent to make things easier for those behind me."

- Participant comment