TEACHING RESILIENCE SKILLS TO SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS AND OTHERS

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ABSTRACT

Social work as a profession is a growing area in many Indigenous community groups around the world. Students who choose to study social work have some strong voices and commitments to serve vulnerable families, individuals and community groups that are facing some social, health and political issues. Building resilience resources and skills for social work students who are studying social work course is part of the social work roles. In real life, social issues and health issues challenged many people in different levels which caused emotional challenges, feeling of uncertain and helpless. Therefore, teaching resilience skills to social work students is very important in order for students to be well-prepared and managed complex issues of their clients in the field of social work such as emotional reaction of clients and work pressures. This paper is a literature review of resilience that used Ubuntu concept from African Indigenous perspective in humanity and community. The paper first provided introduction of Ubuntu philosophy to reader. Second, the paper provided background of the research problem, which is the need of resilience skills in social work teaching. Finally, the paper summarised resilience skills that are suitable to social work practitioners, social work students and social work lecturers in their field of practice to support their clients and themselves while dealing with complex and emotional issues in the fields.

KEY TERMS: social work, resilience skills, students, emotional challenges, teaching, research, Ubuntu concept, African Indigenous

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INTRODUCTION

Like any other part of the world, social work education in Africa was influenced by the western philosophy and colonisation ideologies that does not considered the Indigenous thinking of humanity and practice. The paper is drawn from African a concept of *Ubuntu, which* is an African philosophical thinking of humanity that mean you are because of other people. In other word, '*being self through others'*. This is a recognition of support and resilience of the community as each and every individual have role to play in the society. This concept of humanity and supporting one another is a concept that is well suited with the commitment and values of social work. Ubuntu is philosophy is accredited and attributed to people of Africa, particularly in the Sub-Saharan region of Africa. Ubuntu is based on a set of values and norms that define society and life of Indigenous African based on the traditional values. The norms and values that considered extended family members and village settings are viewed as autochthonous cultural resources in Africa and some other places in the world (McAllister, 2009). This philosophy encouraged social support of individuals and community to bring function on the life of dysfunction individuals (Rankopo & Diraditsile, 2020). In some African countries, social work education emerging in 1950s and early 1960s because of Britain colonisation of some African countries. Some indigenous writers have argued that "social work was able to adopt an unambiguous commitment to the policies of social justice and equity in health care, relief and resettlement programs, education, and personal social services intended to be free of racial and discriminatory practices (Chogugudza, 2009, P. 2). There were many noticeable resilience skills and strengths among the indigenous trained social workers that are working closely with community populations that were deeply affected by many structural problems such as unemployment, racism and discrimination, poverty and chronic health issues (Chogugudza, 2009). Western practice of social work is deeply rooted in theoretical analysis of policies and culture of individualism, which is different from Indigenous perspective of community caring. For example, Indigenous people in African society considered their extended family members in any case that could involve social work practitioners such as child protection and case of a patient in hospital. Community case could involve clan, community elders and community leaders as mutual obligations and cultural practicing. This practice is similar to Indigenous Australians where culture practice, kinship, elders in community are well observed as part of the protocols (Gair et al. 2015; Kirmayer et al. 2009). This culture of communal society sharing some responsibilities from family line and society as collectively is very common in many African groups such South Sudanese community (Abur, 2019, Abur, 2018,). In the western countries, social workers employed by governmental and non-governmental organisations to work with Indigenous community and migrants may bring some specific biases in their practices and the way of seeing problems in the Indigenous community groups.

BACKGROUND

Resilience skills and soft skills are needed anybody who is working with vulnerable community members. We live and work in the society where many people face emotional challenges in their daily lives. There is often a gap in resources to address emotional challenges, which people faced. The emotional challenges include, but not limit to: poor self-care, lack of motivation, hopelessness in life, lack of focus to set goal for yourself and family, procrastination, agitation, anger, anxiety, lack of self-control when challenge by people around you and situation. Social work has significant role to play in promoting resilience skills and strategies that can assist people to remain resilience in their lives and in their works. This paper is contributing to existing resources and knowledge in area of resilience and role of social work as profession in supporting students and community in general. Therefore, there was a great to explore a concept of resilience and to develop some strategies that can be used by social work students, social work practitioners and other professional who are dealing with many responsibilities and complex issues in their fields. As a social worker and social work lecturer, resilience skills or strategies can be used anyone including, frontline social work practitioners, social work lecturers and other lecturers or workers in different fields as long as they are working with community or field of human service. As a lecturer, we know that some students struggle with academic and family issues such as family responsibility, job responsibility and medical related issues that may hinder some commitment to academic studies. These issues are very common with students and can lead to another layer of mental health problems such as depression, untidy and disorganisation when a pressure of these issues become unbearable. Therefore, the overarching question investigated by this research is that "what are resilience skills and strategies that could assist social work students and other professional workers in human service organisations to remain resilient in the face of difficulties"?

Through teaching experiences at university level, I came to realise that students do needed to learn resilience; soft and innovative skills that can be useful in their different fields of practice. In addition, students who come from complex family backgrounds required different levels of support in order to build their resilience skills and to achieve their positive education outcomes. Some students are more likely to face or struggle with either complex family issues or health issues on top of academic problems, particularly if they do not have academic writing

skills. Often, university students do come from different backgrounds including culture, language, political and social experiences. Some come from non-English backgrounds where academic writing skills in English can be more challenging. This paper is calling for support to build students' resilience skills and strategies that can support students to achieve their educational outcomes and dream jobs. In social work, we believe that building personal strengths in the face of chaos is a fundamental and a civil thing to do. This can help one to cope effectively with disruptions or problems that may emerging in life journey. In positive psychological term, it is called resilience building, rather than focusing on problems (Richardson & Waite, 2002). Supporting students by providing hope and resilience strategies is something, which many university lecturers often try to do as part of their roles in teaching. We know that some (if not all) university students have many responsibilities such as family and work commitments as well as other challenging issues in life. Some lecturers are very committed to support their students by fostering a culture of resilience and coping strategies in their teaching and to students who are struggling with difficult issues such as family responsibilities, work commitments and health issues.

Therefore, this paper presents findings from a literature review in the area of resilience with an aim of fostering resilience skills that are suitable for social work students and professional workers in the field of human service. It is self-evident that many professional workers and students at university level do have many responsibilities such as raising families, often with young children, working with complex individuals and families, studying or caring for their own parents with health problems. These are some examples of issues that often emerged in human service field and even lecturers at university levels do find themselves thinking about better strategies to support their students who are struggling with some the issues mentioned above while they are doing studies at university. In some cases, it is very difficult for students to concentrate and achieve their education outcomes in situations where there are no appropriate support services or encouragement to maintain their resilience while doing higher education studies. Therefore, creating an environment and strategies that can provide hope and support could assist them to persist with their studies and achieve their course outcomes. There is a subjective consideration that in some cases lecturers can be in a good space of providing hope and resilience to their students who are struggling with many competing demands such as those mentioned earlier. This study has undertaken a literature review in the area of resilience and social support and has identified some key strategies or skills that can be used to support mature university students.

Aim of study

- To explore some resilience skills and strategies that can be used by students, social work practitioners, lecturers to assist them while dealing with many responsibilities and complex challenges
- To examine better ways to support students to remain committed to their studies and achieve their academic outcomes.
- To assess and make recommendation about useful resilience skills or strategies that can provide hope and support to students on what support services will be crucial to assist people to remain optimistic in face of complex situation.

Statement of significance

This study makes a significant contribution to existing knowledge in the area of resilience and support services for university students and professional workers who are dealing with many responsibilities such as family responsibilities, job commitments, social and health problems. There are benefits in resilience including finding solutions to a difficult situation while maintaining a positive approach to the problem. Therefore, it is crucial to understand better ways to foster resilience and hope to university students and professional workers who encounter many difficulties and challenging responsibilities. The findings of this project will assist academic members to provide enough support strategies for students to thrive in their academic and job performance by maintaining high level of resilience. Fostering resilience does not eliminate the difficulties and challenging responsibilities, which people often have while dealing with real-life issues, but it is a powerful tool that assists people to be optimistic and remain positive in the face of difficult circumstances.

It is fundamentally important that mature university students be assisted with soft skills such as positive attitudes, adaptability, creative thinking, communication, motivation, flexibility, time management, critical thinking and conflict resolution in order to manage themselves and deal with complex issues. The findings from this literature review suggest that these soft skills need to be promoted in order for students to maintain capacity to make realistic plans and stick to them, to have control of their internal thoughts or discourses, to communicate with others positively and to view themselves as achievers rather than victims of difficult situations, to keep their emotions and intelligence at high levels by managing times and emotions effectively (Rutter, 1985; Taormina, 2015).

In teaching social work students, lecturers often promote social work as a profession that values life experiences and the cultural knowledge of clients, and always promotes hope and resilience in difficult situations.

Social workers understand the important of resilience when dealing with a confronting issue in society. Some of the confronting issues that social workers address frequently in society include, but are not limited to: child abuse, adult abuse, homelessness, injustice, depression, poverty, discrimination and racism. Working with social work students means that a social work lecturer brings their own experiences and knowledge to the teaching space and promotes resilience. At the same time, social work students bring cultural knowledge and experiences based on the difficulties and challenging circumstances of their own communities and families. For instance, some students have gone through difficult circumstances in the community or have witnessed government imposition of some decisions in the community or families.

Conceptualising resilience

The concept of resilience is increasingly adopted in the social work profession by using strength-based theory and practice. Yet it is not a difficult concept to contextualise in the social perspective, given many social issues that are faced by individuals, families and community groups. For instance, trauma, violence or family violence, child abuse or neglect, poverty, homelessness, unemployment, conflict or natural catastrophes such as bush-fires and earthquakes, as well as civil war in the students' countries of origin.
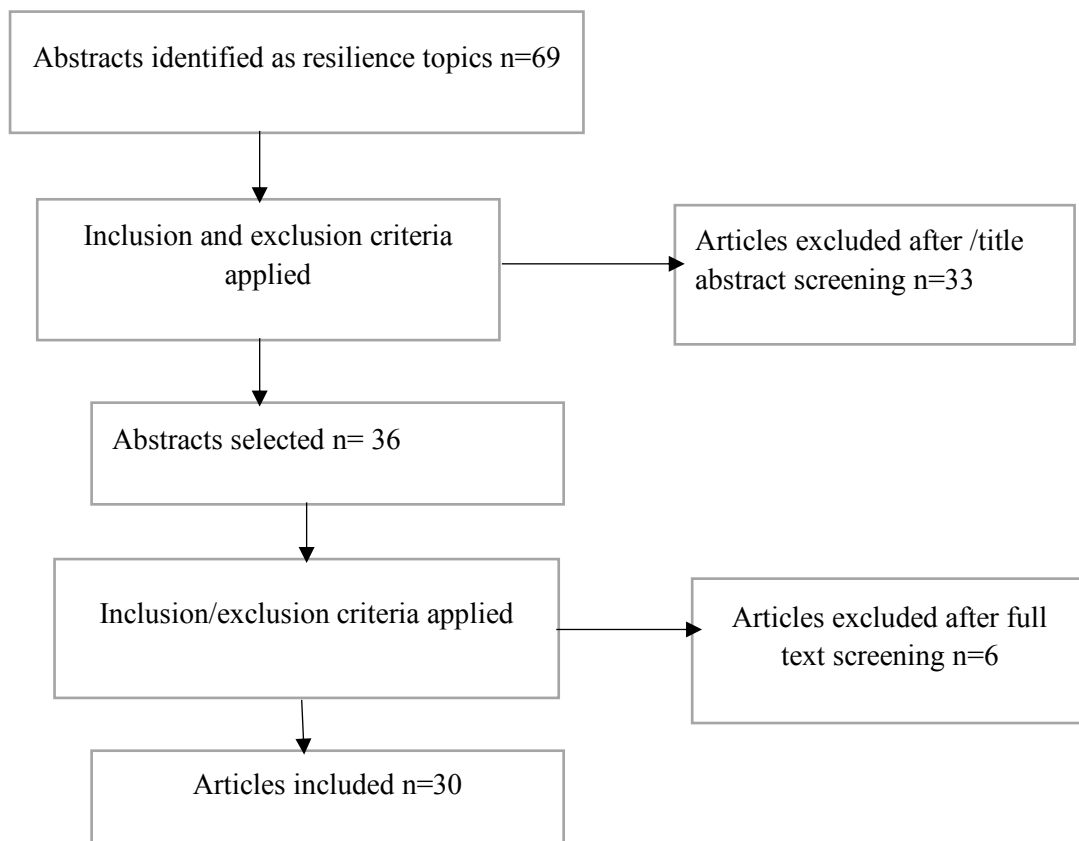
To make sense of the concept of resilience, there is a need to ask why some people seem to be maintaining calmness or remaining strong in very difficult situations, while others tend to suffer major panic when confronted by either one or many of the examples mentioned above. The main reason is that those who remain calm have a high level of resilience, which is an ability to cope with stress and hardship (Gilligan, 1997, Taormina, 2015). Resilience was first described in 1973 as a theoretical concept in medical and psychological research and is being used in various ways in social, behavioural and biological sciences (McGeary, 2011). These sciences commonly defined resilience as a process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. This means bouncing back from difficult experiences (Taormina, 2015; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004, 2007; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015). In other words, resilience is a process of adapting well in face of adversity such as trauma, tragedy, threats, serious health problems or stressful situations including family relationship problems (Gilligan, 1997). This definition of resilience emphasises having a coping mechanism, which reduces the vulnerability, resisting and adapting to change (McGeary, 2015).

Much research work concerning resilience has suggested the following as common features in the social and behavioural sciences (Gu & Day, 2013; Rutter, 1985). These include: the ability to avoid deleterious behavioural and physiological changes in response to chronic stress; a process to harness resources to sustain well-being; the capacity to resume positive functioning following adversity; a measure of the degree of vulnerability to shock or disturbance; a person's ability to adapt successfully to acute stress, trauma or more chronic forms of adversity; the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress; the ability to adapt successfully in disturbing circumstances that threaten one's capacity to function, viability or to develop (Taormina, 2015; Gu & Day, 2013). The concept of resilience studies was created or originated from psychological and psychiatry studies. This modern concept of resilience continues to evolve in area of psychological and social determinants (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). However, research about resilience did not pay consider the traditional concept of resilience. For instance, how many indigenous community groups live as a communal society and maintain their cultural practices or challenge the notion of colonisers who introduced different ways of doing things or even who robbed people of their own rich cultural heritage and imposed western cultures and practices on them.

METHODOLOGY

The method employed for this paper is a systemic literature review method in which a key word for search is "resilience or resilience skills " During the literature search, the author of this paper focused on scholarly academic works that are acceptable to general academic standards with rigorous peer review processes. The scholarly works were taken from journal articles and books using the search engines as the tool. Key words used in the search engines including resilience, indigenous people, student support and wellbeing. The author also used Google scholar, Taylor and Francis Online, Wiley Online Library, social work online. This process involved identifying eligible literature and excluded any literature that has few details about resilience, student wellbeing and coping strategies. The following flow chart demonstrates the screening processes for this systematic literature review study.

Systematic Literature review process

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│   Inclusion and exclusion criteria │───────▶│  Articles excluded after /title │
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Inclusion and exclusion

The selection criteria and eligibility of articles were based on abstract readings. A number of papers were rejected or excluded based on the author's judgment of abstracts. The excluded papers were screened out because the abstract said little about the resilience, wellbeing of students and support services for students in higher education. Years of publication were also considered as part of exclusion and inclusion. All reviewed articles were published from year of 2001 to 2020 with exception of two articles published in 1985 and 1997. The researcher tended to select articles that focus on resilience and support services for students.

Limitation

Similar to any research, there are limitations in this systematic literature review and this study is no exception (Mallett et al. 2012). Many papers discussed general resilience in different areas or disciplines, and they were excluded from this study. This study is a small project seeking to explore resilience skills and strategies that can assist students to be more motivated and remain resilient during their studies. Therefore, some information such as a table summarising the years of publication, author and country was left out because the table was too long and the project is just small project discussing resilience skills as a basic concept. The themes analysis was employed based on the common themes that emerged during literature searching of key words such as resilience or resilience skills.

FINDINGS

The findings supported the importance of promoting resilience and wellbeing for students. Multiple responsibilities and complex family situations often affected students' progress and wellbeing (Dunn et al. 2008). During the reviewed of 30 articles, there were key themes identified as relevant information for this study. These key themes are: social work education, resilience skills, coping strategies, support, seeking support, employment skills, training, trauma, stress, difficulties, frustration and uncertainty. From academic work, we know that some

students with resilient attitudes and organising skills can still do well in stressful situations. However, it is more difficult for students who already face a number of structural barriers or difficulties to remain resilient without appropriate support services in place. Learning resilience skills and attitudes can assist many university students who are facing challenging situations in their studies. Any support offer to individual students can reduce a level of stress or burnout. Therefore, any support and promotion of wellbeing for students can be handy for those students who are on the edge of dropping out or burnout from their studies due to stress. The findings suggest some benefits and useful strategies and skills that be taught to social work students, social work practitioners in order to support vulnerable individuals and families in community. These benefits come with the following fundamental skills.

- Ability to have a sense of control and choice in adverse and challenging situations.
- Ability to take charge of yourself, wellbeing and what you are doing, including preparation and time management.
- Creation of protective avenues that can assist during and after crisis or chaos.
- Being willing to identify the problem, to seek and accept help from family members/friends or others.
- Ability to focus on strengths and trying to avoid negative thinking/ thoughts.
- Ability to have a sense of purpose and direction in your life.
- Ability to be optimistic in adversity in situation by creating a positive attitude and a feeling of hope while eliminating fear of what could go wrong.
- Ability to build a sense of understanding of your values and caring for yourself and other people around you and in your environment.

From literature, concept of resilience is often drive by the balance of holistic state of a person's mind including cultural beliefs, emotional, spiritual and physical states (Gair et al. 2015; Kirmayer et al. 2009). Therefore, this concept is found to be very useful because it recognises strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses. For instance, culture and community connections provide a sense of self-esteem and ethnic connection or identity (Kirmayer et al. 2009; Simpson, 2001). The findings from this literature review suggest that people are culturally resilient and that their resilience must be understood or discussed in terms of adversity, trauma, family situations and other difficult issues that may have been experienced (Gair et al. 2015; Kirmayer et al. 2009)

> *Resilience is a dynamic process involving shifting balances of protective and vulnerability forces in different risk contexts and at different developmental stages (Johnson, 2008, p.386).*

Findings suggest that mature students who have some family responsibilities often achieve their education outcomes when they are well supported and listened to by their lecturers when they are in complex situations or need supports. These mature students are more likely to develop resilience skills in an environment where they feel that they are being supported and listened to when they raise their concerns on things that make them worry outside school or university (Johnson, 2008). Therefore, promoting wellbeing and self-esteem can raise the level of resilience for students in higher education as well as in the community and in the workforce.

> *Resilience refers to both a process and outcome of coping in response to risk, adversity, or threats to wellbeing* (Johnson, 2008: p. 386).

> *When an individual respond actively and constructively (as opposed to passively and destructively) to someone sharing a positive experience, better relationships ensue* (Reivich, Seligman & McBride, 2011, P. 30)

Resilience skills can assist people who are emotionally challenged by social issues and health issues to overcome. Resilience theory seeks to understand and promote positive change and transforming in individuals and community (Redman, 2005). Resilience theory assist people to have ability to engage in problem solving (Van Breda, 2001)

DISCUSSION

The resilience theory is about integrating the soul of an individual with a transpersonal nature as a human, and this includes the spirit as the key guiding force for the system (Richardson et al. 2002). Therefore, resilience is the process and capacity for adapting and succeeding during a challenging situation or, in a threatening situation, developing a positive perspective of reaching performance outcomes (Johnson, 2008). From critical social work teaching, the author fully understands the historical trauma and complex situations that students may be facing in

addition to job commitments and family responsibilities. Social work is a profession, valuing life experiences and the cultural knowledge of clients, and always-promoting hope and resilience in difficult situations. Social workers understand the importance of resilience when dealing with a confronting issue in society. Some confrontations that social workers address frequently include child abuse, adult abuse, homelessness, injustice, depression, poverty, discrimination and racism. Working with social work students mean that a social worker-lecturer brings their own experiences and knowledge to teaching and promotes resilience. At the same time, social work students bring their own cultural knowledge and experiences based on the difficulties and challenging circumstances of their community and families. For instance, some students have gone through difficult circumstances in their community or have witnessed government imposition of some decisions, including land issues. These decisions affect families and individuals in the long term.

Thus, resilience is a skill that can be learned and improved upon from time to time or even continuously. It has many benefits including health benefits such as lower rates of anxiety or depression, positive feelings and having a sense of control of one's life (Kent & Reich, 2013). Similarly, a lack of resilience can be associated with some health problems such as high blood pressure, depression and anxiety, insomnia, heartburn, heart disease and indigestion. For instance, lack of sleep or insomnia can reduce the immune function, which can lead to serious problems in memory, attention to detail and decision-making (David & Congleton, 2013; Kent, & Reich, 2013). The findings of this study reveal that a resilient attitude combines with other personal qualities that assist the individual to remain calm and positive in complex situations. Such positive attitudes often contribute to better psychological wellbeing. The findings also suggest that resilience is multidimensional which is characterised by different influences such as culture or upbringing including the family situation and the environment, age, gender, time, education and life experiences which individuals are likely to be subjected to (Connor & Davidson, 2003).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Social work education and social work practice is very useful to marginalised community groups, vulnerable families and individuals in those marginalised society. Social work as profession, fight for injustice practice and oppressive practice or policies. Therefore, resilience skills are critical for social workers and social work students in order to advocate on behalf of marginalised population and for them to deliver better service to vulnerable families and individuals. The need for social work support services such as advocating on behalf community, supporting vulnerable young people and families, empowering individuals to stand up for their human rights and social justice issues is something which is globally needed by Indigenous groups and migrants population.

From social work teaching and practice, gaining resilience skills is very important for individual learner and people that work with the learner. Therefore, author recommended resilience skills to social work students, social work practitioners, and other human service workers to engage in learning resilience skills for their personal and professional benefits. The resilience skills and strategies that recommended for people to learn and adopt in any difficult situation include, but not limit to the following: ability to set goals and achieve, ability to recognise your own emotions and other people's emotions, ability to remain optimistic in adversity situation, social skills, ability to interact and seek assistance from other people, ability to solve problem, self-esteem, understanding and acceptance, ability to reflect and learn from mistake, self-control, willingness to overcome difficulties.

The findings suggest that resilience comes with positive emotions, which are good for the psychological health and wellbeing. Therefore, this study has great benefits and impacts on the wellbeing of students that can lead to retention of students and course completion. Resilience is crucial in social work teaching and helps the mature students to come up with strategies that could assist them to remain resilient in the face of difficulties. Some of the challenging issues for students include job commitments, family responsibilities, health issues, lack of preparation time, lack of academic skills and time management. It is imperative that students can be supported and given hope, resilience skills and be motivated to do their best to overcome challenges. This paper has policy implications in relation the social work education and support for students to learn resilience skills. Human being required resilience skills to make decisions and actions for our lives, our families, our friends, our communities, our colleagues and for our clients who we work for, to provide services to them. The paper is highly recommending social work students and human service workers to learn resilience skills when possible for their own professional benefits. In the teaching context, university students who need support and encouragement will benefit from the strategies listed above in the bullet points. Social work and other lecturers will be welcome to use resilience strategies or to promote resilience strategies in their teaching to assist students who need motivation and encouragement. This can also lead to better health, thus contributing to better education outcomes for students and better job performance outcomes for social work practitioners in community when working with their vulnerable clients.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper is about resilience skills and useful strategies for social work students and other people that are seeking for resilience skills in their journey of work, studying, family and as well as dealing with social, political and health issues. My experiences of working as social worker with clients and teaching social work students at university, interacting with students and listening to community members on social issues affecting families and individuals, it is clear to me that resilience skills are very vital and clearly needed by everybody in order to function well. For instance, people in leadership also do need resilience skills in order for them to manage people that they lead and make right decisions on behalf of the group of people they are leading. Students also need to learn and expose to the resilience skills and positive mindset in order to thrill in their academic work.

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