# Resilient Academic Leadership: Collaborative Cluster Final Report

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**With thanks to the members of the Principal Fellow Network Scotland who formed the intrepid travellers on the exploratory journey of this Collaborative Cluster**

# Exploring Resilient Academic Leadership through the PFHEA lens: A Kaleidoscope of Metaphors

## Introduction

The aim of this Collaborative Cluster was to build on the outcome of the 'Beyond the metrics: identifying, evidencing and enhancing the less tangible assets of higher education' collaborative cluster from the last Enhancement Theme; specifically, the Evidencing Value Framework (EVF) (**Figure 1**). We planned to explore the construct of 'resilience' as an intangible asset that impacts on teaching quality and which, in responding to COVID-19, may be a more appropriate and timely focus than one based on 'excellence'. As such, the Cluster sought to contribute to the topic *student and staff wellbeing* through a consideration of what is 'good enough' in managing the student learning experience.

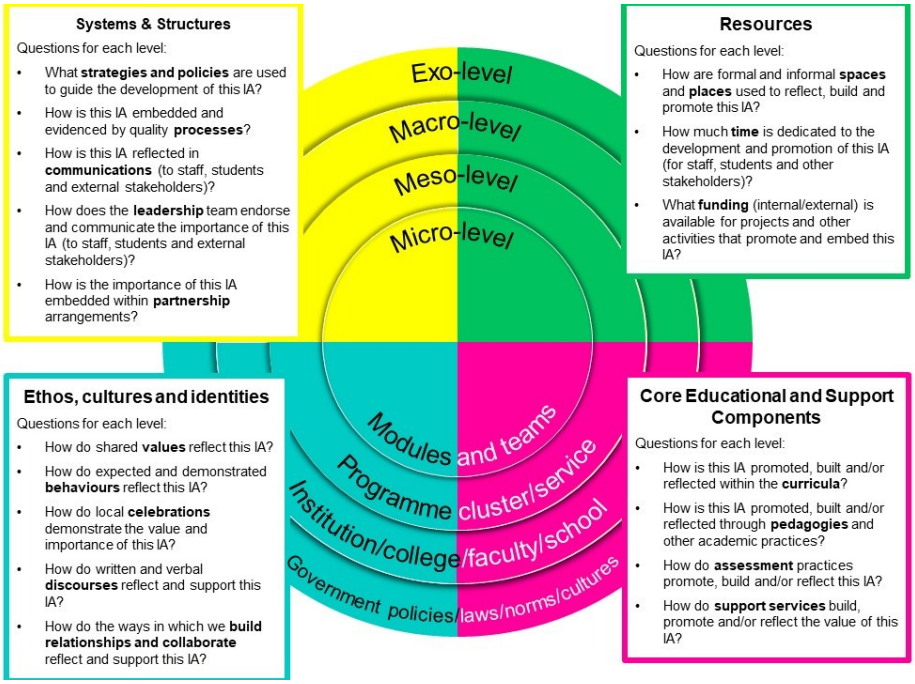



**Figure 1: Evidencing Value Framework (IA stands for Intangible Asset)**

Our project engaged a cluster of HEA Principal Fellows based in Scotland. As a collective, we determined to use the EVF as a tool and process to probe the strange and nebulous construct of resilience as an intangible asset. We were keen to explore the potential value to the Scottish sector in revealing the influence of resilience on the creation of successful groups of communities that can lead, and effect change in the HE context.

Our guiding questions were:

1. What do resilient learning communities mean for those who lead strategic change to enhance the student learning experience (specifically, HEA Principal Fellows), and how can these resilient learning communities be nurtured as an intangible sector strength?

2. How can resilience as academic leadership practice be perceived through, not what Principal Fellows have by way of qualities, but what Principal Fellows do by way of practice? (Barton, Christianson, Myers & Sutcliffe, 2020)

3. How can the concept of resilience, rather than excellence, offer a more appropriate proxy or symbol as the sector strives to maintain the quality of the student learning experience in these turbulent times?

4. Can perceiving academic leadership as an intangible asset of resilience create and nurture an institutional culture that supports the wellbeing of staff in response to COVID-19?

Data were gathered in five online gatherings which took place between January 2021 and April 2021. Jamboards and Padlets were used as devices to further enhance collaboration and the sharing of ideas. Each online gathering led to the creation of an online blog (published on the Enhancement Themes website). These five blogs have been re-represented in this report as word clouds (**see Appendix 1**) and mind maps (see Appendix 2). It is through the blogs and the mind maps that the kaleidoscope of metaphors has emerged enabling us to critically reflect on resilience generally, and resilient academic leadership more specifically, and to propose next steps (see conclusions and recommendations).

Before presenting our findings, we offer contextual information in the form of a premise and an assumption which underlie the project. After this, we overview in brief what we mean when we speak of resilience and why it might be considered an intangible asset.

## 1.1 The Project's Underlying Premise and Assumption

Our project is premised on an understanding that the United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework's (UKPSF) Descriptor 4 - Principal Fellowship - presents a sector interpretation of successful academic leadership (**Figure 2**). Specifically, it speaks to:

'Identifying the need for and taking evidence-based action to implement strategic actions that impact on policy, processes and/or practice to positively enhance the quality of the learning and teaching practice, the student learning experience and the staff development experience at institutional and/or (inter)national contexts.'

From this premise we worked from the assumption that our fellow collaborators in the cluster were aligned with PFHEA expectations because of the requirement to remain 'in good standing'. Embedded within the HEA Fellowship Code of Practice is its value-based positioning. Therein we assumed that as we came together to learn, explore and challenge, we shared a value base which speaks to respectful practice (V1), seeking to promote equality and diversity and inclusiveness in HE (V2), promoting research and evidence-based approaches to L&T developments and initiatives (V3), cognisant of the context in which HE operates (V4).

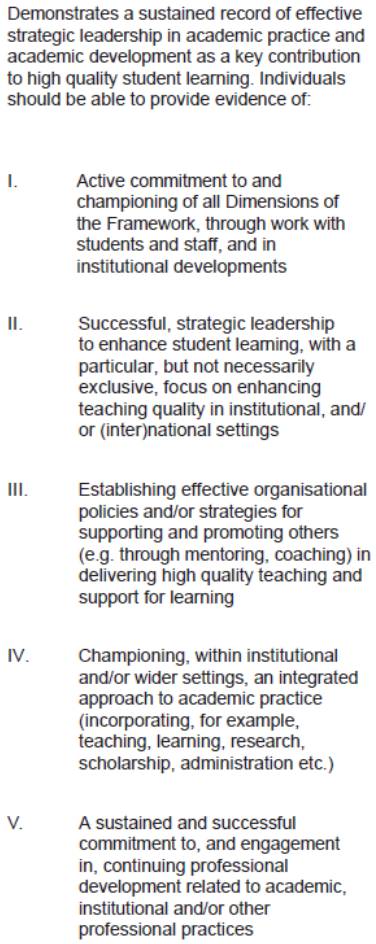



**Figure 2: UKPSF 2011, PFHEA (Descriptor 4)**

## 1.2 Resilience

As we planned our work as a collective, it was necessary to consider a starting place for our exploration of resilience, and from there, resilient academic leadership. To do this, we looked at both individual resilience and at resilience found in learning communities and organisations such as universities.

### 1.2.1 Individual and Organisational Resilience:

In our reading, we were led to a view that resilience might be summarised as the ability to recover from, or adjust easily to, misfortune or change. Put differently it might be described as the:

'Ability to withstand adversity and bounce back from difficult life events. … overcome hardship'[1]

We also considered not just individual resilience, but asked how a resilient learning community such as a university it made manifest? This was our starting point. Organisational resilience as:

> 'the ability of an organization to anticipate, prepare for, respond and adapt to, incremental change and sudden disruptions in order to survive and prosper'[2]

[1] www.everydayhealth.com/wellness/resilience
[2] www.bsigroup.com/en-GB/our-services/Organizational-Resilience

As we examined the literature and its many descriptions and definitions, it seemed that in some way they all pointed to the need for communities and organisations to not just bounce back and survive, but to prosper and flourish. The indication was that just getting through was not enough. Resilience was more than this. And if resilience was more than this, what then for resilient academic leadership and our determination to better understand it, through a particular lens – that offered by a small group – n.12 – of Scottish-based PFHEAs? Simple. Perhaps not.

Resilience is a word, and there is a dictionary that explains all words. And words are important. They offer a way to make sense of the world so that we can share our view with others in an orderly way. Words are a way of coding our intended meanings; we learn the code from an early age so that we can communicate with others, develop shared norms, behaviours and ways of living in our communities. We are social animals, and having this shared understanding is important to us; it makes us resilient as individuals and social groupings. Words also help us to define social situations – they cue in our intended actions and signal our expected responses to others who in turn do similar. Turn taking, and conversations… all is well when we know what the words mean – we point, and we name.

But there are words we have given to things that are not tangible things which cannot be directly pointed at. Resilience, for example - as you read this report, you will be forming your own view as to what it means, and from there, how to recognise it in yourself and in others. Perhaps, like us, as you contemplate, you have begun to question the word resilience. What does it signify? What is its code?

### 1.2.2 On Intangibles

We suggest that resilience is one of those words, the meaning of which is nebulous – vague, imprecise, hazy, indefinable, tenuous, unclear, unformulated… hard to get hold of. Intangible, perhaps.

Robertson, Cleaver and Smart (2019) refer to the rise of the intangible economy. The setting for their argument is an HE sector context, in which metrics predominate in the value ascribed to them – if it can be counted it matters – with the consequence being that those things which are harder to grasp and cannot readily be measured slip sideways, risking obscurity. To establish their case, they cite Duxbury, Garrett-Petts & MacLennan (2015, p.18) who state:

'Methodologically, if one accepts that the intangible, the subjective and the immaterial are important to what culture is as an object of study, then quantitative methods alone are inadequate. This interest in making the intangible visible heightens the importance of drawing on cultural research traditions that are primarily qualitative in nature.'

From here, Robertson at al (2019) progressed their thinking, drawing from data, to create what they named the Evidencing Value Framework (EVF). It provides a means to map in context the intangible asset of interest so it might be better understood, and arguably better valued, alongside more ready-to-access metrics.

And so it was that we decided to adopt the EVF so we could begin to ‘map’ resilience and resilient academic leadership specifically in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As intrepid explorers, we determined to find the meaning of resilience, and to understand how it is made manifest in the quadrants and across the levels which form the EVF. Our quest focused on creating a picture, a map which would offer insight into resilience and resilient academic leadership as we had experienced it. We imagined the opportunity to get hold of something which we believed to be slippery, elusive even, by glimpsing what it looked like, and felt like, in our own academic leadership practices as PFHEAs, and in our universities’ practices as we had weathered, and were still enduring, the pandemic.

## Our paradigm, design and methods

Our research paradigm was interpretive and qualitative in seeking meanings and understanding about practices that could be termed resilience and resilient academic leadership. Within this we elected to adopt a collective autoethnographic design, an approach which centres on personal experiences and perspectives, enabling understanding to develop in context, both social and cultural (Wall 2016, cited by Henderson, 2019). It is a design which seeks to elicit stories of experience believing them to be sources of learning for individuals and collectives (Conlon et al., 2020). We recognised that the process of collective autoethnography would also provide an opportunity to create connections in the Scottish PF community (Moon and Fowler, 2008). Our intention was to use what emerged in dialogue to co-create an enhanced narrative which would offer insight and possibly challenge thinking – ours and in the wider sector. However, we never sought to use our data and their analysis to generalise or make claims to validity and reliability in traditional terms (Ellis and Adams, 2014).

In terms of method, COVID-19 restrictions forced us to adopt an online space for our data collection. These – the online gatherings (five in total) - were the key means through which our data were created, primarily through field notes, recorded independently by the two cluster leads, supplemented by notes and comments contributed Teams Chats. As our exploration deepened, we introduced a digital tool, a Jamboard, to capture the non-textual contributions and we added in Padlets as additional collaborative spaces which supported pre and post gathering work.

After the first gathering in January 2021 which explored the EVF as a whole using resilience as the intangible asset in view, we focused on each quadrant of the EVF in turn, starting with Ethos, Culture and Identities (Gathering 2) and ending with Systems and Structures (Gathering 5). It was our enabling tool, the mediating artefact which we used to frame the conversation.

After the first gathering, prior to subsequent meetings, each PF was asked to reflect on and provide examples from their and their university's experience to the questions we had devised to facilitate the exploration of each quadrant in turn. These questions were posted in the Jamboard as online sticky notes. Then in our online gatherings we were able to use the pre-work in the Jamboard to position and reposition the sticky notes across the different levels of each quadrant as illustrated in **Figure 3.** All contributions, both sticky notes and comments on the Chat, were anonymous.

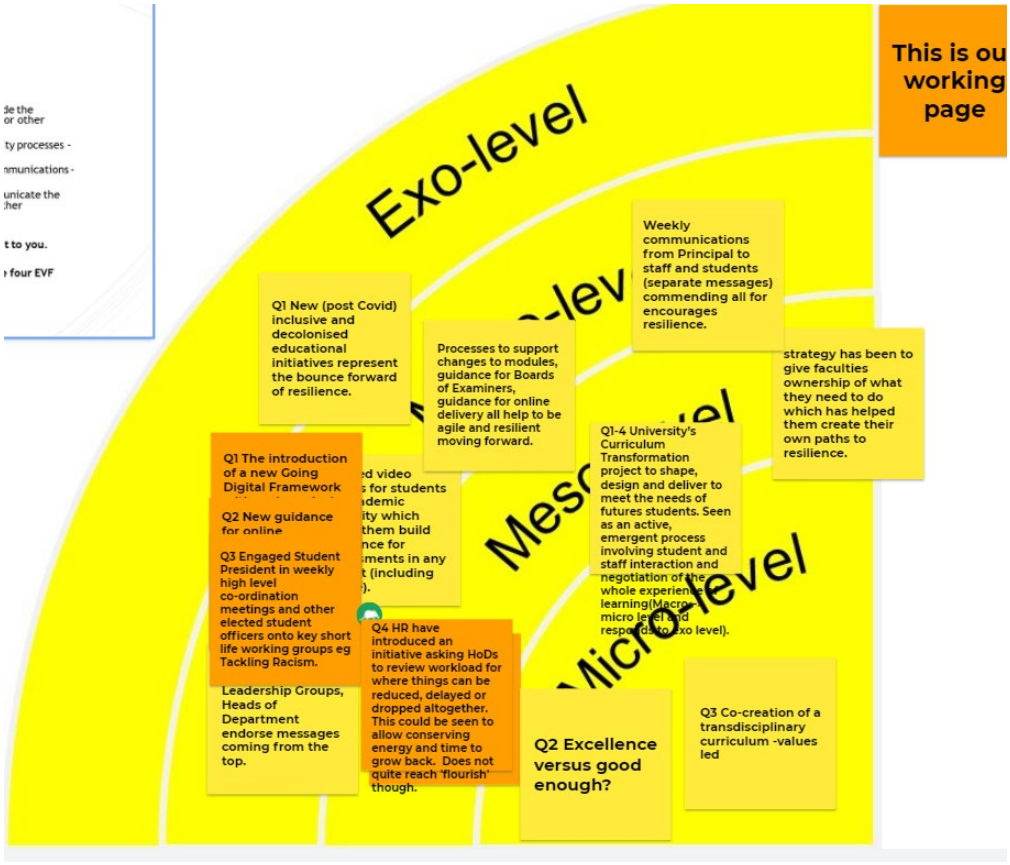



**Figure 3: An example of a JamBoard for illustrative purposes**

In making sense of the dialogue after each online gathering, we used our field notes, the participant Chat notes and Jamboard post it notes to create an Insight Blog. In essence each of the five blogs sought to synthesise the dialogic, enabling sense making and reflection.

In writing the blogs, although we did not set out to find them, we became aware of emergent metaphors which we realised we were using as proxies for resilience and resilient academic leadership – in effect, establishing bridges that connected us, in our thinking and discussions, across our different university settings and different experiences of dealing with COVID-19.

Once all of the gatherings had taken place, we returned to the blogs to create mind maps described by Kinchin and Winstone (2017) as tools enabling narratives to be framed, providing structure and boundaries, thus facilitating data management. For us, the mind maps (Appendix 2) served to amplify our understanding of resilience and resilient academic leadership and invited the revisiting of the metaphors revealed in our gatherings. It was in the process of returning to our blogs, creating the mind maps and stopping to reflect, that we came to understand that emerging from our data was a kaleidoscope of metaphors.

## Findings

And this is where we choose to start, by presenting our kaleidoscope of metaphors (Figure 4) organised as a mind map.

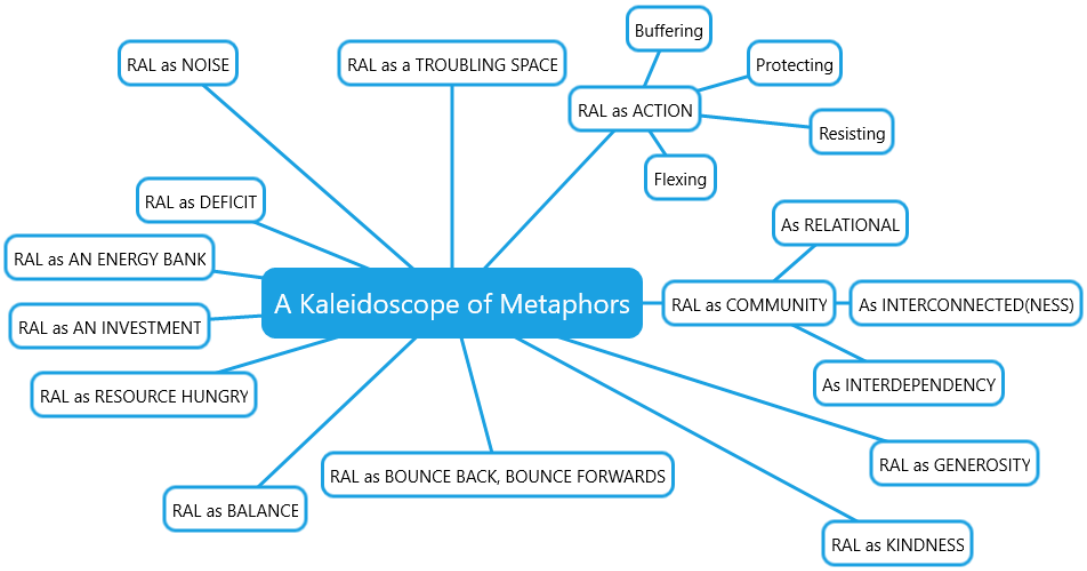
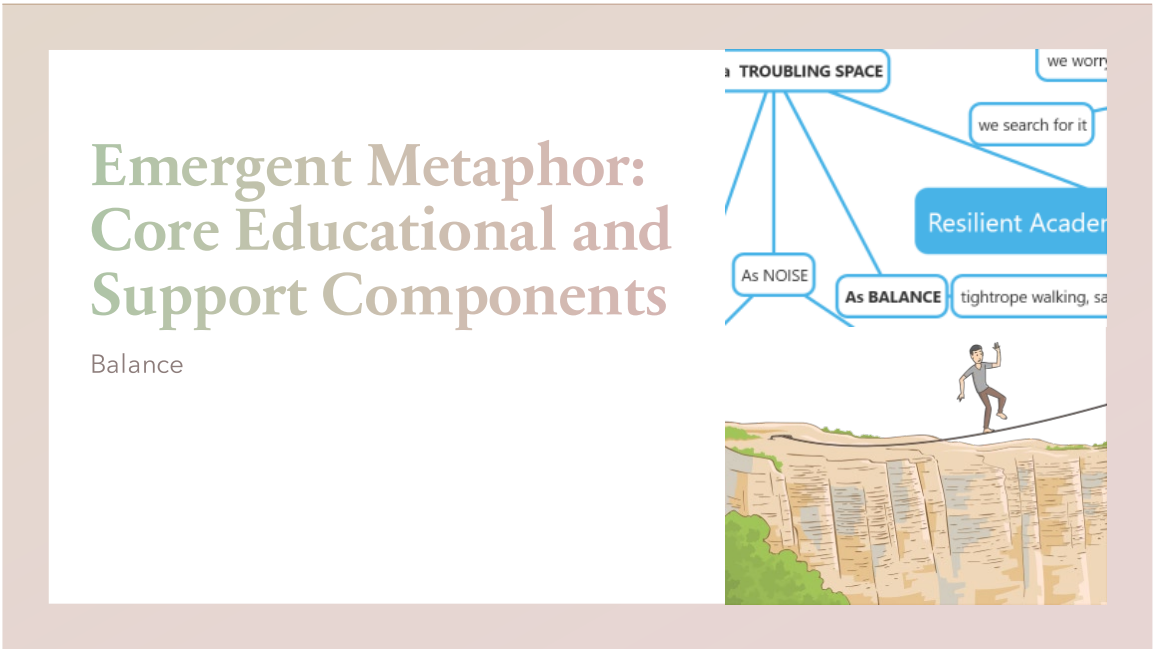



**Figure 4: The Kaleidoscope of Metaphors**

As you look at the mind map, try to recall using a kaleidoscope perhaps as a child. Remember holding it up to your eye and twisting the base, watching with fascination as the image changed in front of you. With the lightest of touches, always in movement, always changing, individual to you, yet capable of being shared. As you look at Figure 4, you may well see different patterns in the map to that which we have created. Some of the labels may feel awkward, but they came forward from a careful process of reflecting on our five online gatherings and the conversations therein. From our map we have selected four metaphors to explore, each emerging from one of the quadrants, thus enabling the EVF in the context of resilient academic leadership to come to life for you, the reader. We elect to present a fifth metaphor – one which we initially found disturbing as it emerged, dark and somewhat troublesome, but which on giving our kaleidoscope a last turn took on a brighter hue.

### 3.1 Metaphor 1 – Resilience as Balance




As we explored the EVF's **Core Educational and Support Components** quadrant, we questioned whether resilience, as an intangible asset, is embedded, hard to see or maybe even hidden in the Core Educational and Support aspects of our universities – the curricula, the pedagogical and academic practices, and the support services. We drew into the conversation postings from the Padlet issued following the previous gathering in which we had invited participation:

'One way to unlock this is to think about something that represents what it feels like, looks like or sounds like to be a resilient PF – it could be a poem, an image, a piece of music… anything… whatever works for you. Please post it here with a few words to explain your selection and what it represents. You can post more than once'.

This was one of the posts.

**Resilience and risk**
'This image speaks to me of balance, of challenge, of working (slowly) towards an end point. Imagining failure but pushing on. And then there's the question of who or what is the safety net?'

As you look, you see a person walking on a high wire above a gaping canyon; the person looks to be about halfway along. This picture of a tightrope walker got us thinking about how resilience and *balance* might be related; how *balance* could in some way symbolise and represent that intangible concept. We postulated how this insight might inform how we could design in *balance* where we wanted or needed to develop resilience in our ourselves, in our students, in our curricula and in the core educational and support components of our universities (across the levels of the EVF and into the wider sector).

As we talked, we drew in the COVID-19 crisis and the emergency move to online teaching and remote working and our determination as a sector to enable students to continue to study. We spoke about approaches which had sought to maintain 'good enough' standards, in other words, taking a *balanced* approach to online teaching which did not actively strive for excellence, but sought instead to do what was needed to safeguard the student learning experience. In the face of this crisis through this metaphorical lens it seemed we struck a *balance* between excellence and collapse so as to survive – enabling teaching and student support to continue, facilitating learning, assessment and graduation.

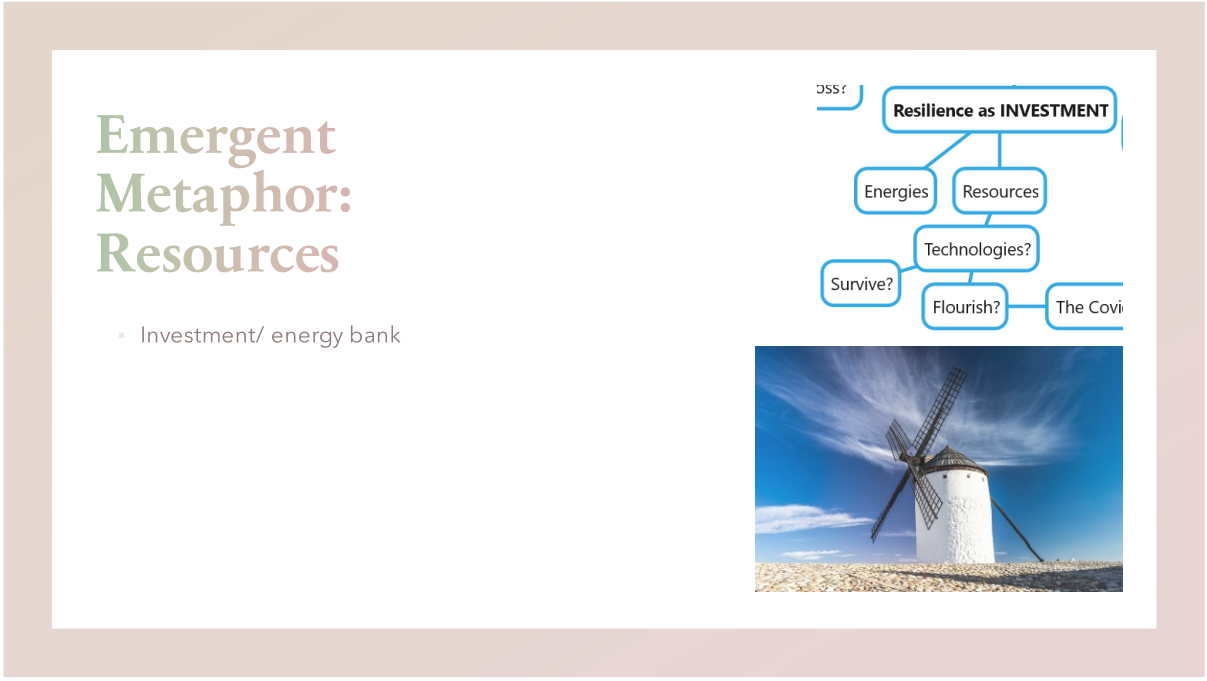
In exploring the metaphor of *balance* in the EVF's Core Educational and Support Components we glimpsed resilience and resilient academic leadership as an intangible asset in our pedagogical approaches, digital and blended curricula design, alternative assessment adaptations and refocussed student services. In so doing we symbolised HE sector's ability to "… respond and adapt to… sudden disruptions in order to survive…" (Barton et al, 2020). And we saw that taking a *balanced* approach supported both student *and* staff resilience, so that together we could bounce back and forward in the face of the digital pivot.

Rather like the tightrope walker, in the earlier months of the pandemic – March, April and May 2020, we wobbled, fearful of looking up, looking ahead, always tempted to look back. But as the weeks went on, gradually we gained a sense of *balance* – not looking down at potential chaos, not looking back at what we used to do, but facing forwards knowing we could change and adapt – in other words, we kept our *balance* and kept going. *Resilient academic leadership shows balance.*

Thinking now, we ponder on the safety net in the Padlet image – who or what was it? For us, as PFs, quite possibly it was having sufficient self-belief to keep going in the face of the unknown. Or metaphorically academic leadership as the ability or the energy (see Metaphor 2) to stay *balanced* in the middle of the tightrope for some time, to be content, albeit not entirely at ease, in the middle, wobbly place, knowing the end of the tightrope is still some way away.

Before closing this section, we acknowledge that we were not wholly agreed as a group about a *balanced* approach focusing on 'good enough' rather than excellence. As such, we underline the value in our narrative of different, competing views.

### 3.2 Metaphor 2 Resilience as Investment/Energy Bank




Focusing on the EVF's **Resources** quadrant, featuring large in our first gathering and again in the second, tracking through to the final time we came together was the metaphor of resilience as *energy,* as an *energy bank*, more broadly, as an investment. At face value this is hopeful – *energy* is resilience. As might be anticipated, the emerging picture was more complex than this. So, while for us, resilience might be conceived as *energy,* or as an *energy bank,* we recognised that the resource is limited with risk of depletion, without renewal or the opportunity to recharge (Gathering 1). As such it raises the question of who or what is investing in it. Moreover, we saw resilience as resource hungry.

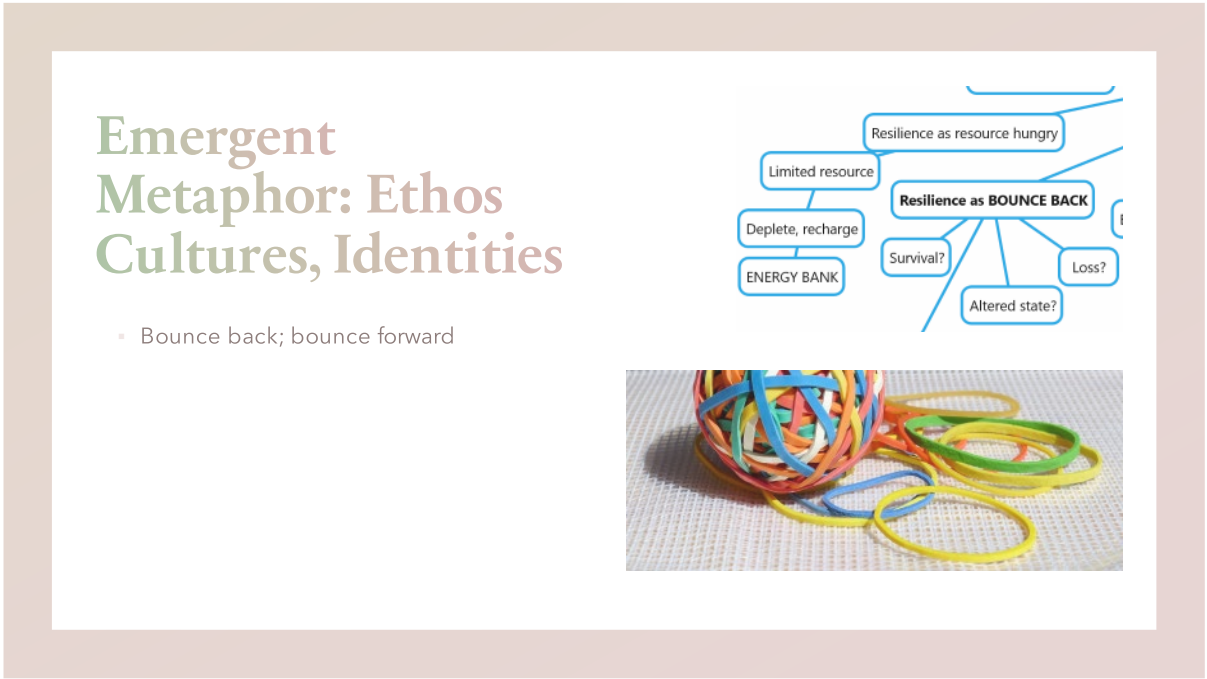
We returned to this metaphor in Gathering 2 speaking again of *energy* in the context of being nourished or depleted, exploring the need/potential to resist the draw of what presented as a precious resource which is all too easily lost, especially in times of elongated crisis – COVID-19, for example. This led on in the dialogue to a conversation about micro and macro action. At a micro level we spoke of 'digging in heels' to preserve *energy* as a scarce resource. We talked of 'no' and our (in)capacity to use it, openly or less obviously. And while we valued micro action as a resistor enabling resilience, we spoke too of macro action variously exemplified in the sector by 'no-meeting Fridays', flexible working and additional annual leave. And it was here that we seemed to sigh – collectively. It was not that we did not value macro action, such as these measures, but it led us to examine the truth as we had experienced it. In the context of COVID-19, everything was different, everything was the same. This was the paradox which led us to muse in our second blog on the impact on *energy* and *energy banks* of expectations which did not go away because COVID-19 had arrived (and stayed). We talked of the drive to keep recruiting students, of satisfying their expectations and meetings targets (a range!). And while we could espy resilient academic leadership in micro and macro spaces, we were left in Gathering 2 reflecting on the irony of extra days off at Christmas being welcomed, knowing that nothing had been taken away, resulting in people still marking with mince pies in hand. Everything changed, nothing changed.

By Gathering 5, the tone of our dialogue seemed to alter. While we were still using *energy* as a metaphor for resilience, we introduce another – resilient academic leadership as being

overwhelmed. We talked of tipping points, *energy* as diminishing and of it running out. Like the sector seemed to be screaming, or quietly pleading, we too were tired. Again, the emergent question loomed – who or what is investing in *energy,* in the *energy bank* so it does not peter out.

Reflecting back now, speaking of resilience as *energy,* as an *energy bank* is a powerful metaphor (pun unintended). Arguably it is especially so because it speaks to the potential for action variously taken at any level in the ecosystem to resist its loss but points also to the particular context in which we were all living. At the time when we were gathering data despite the vaccination programme, our lives in their normal sense remained curtailed. The things which nurtured *energy,* enabled its replenishment were still, for some of us, in some ways, out of reach. While true, there is still room to think about *energy* as something to actively invest in in more 'normal' times in the sector (Gathering 5). *Resilient Academic Leadership needs an energy bank.*

### 3.3 Metaphor 3 Resilience as Bounce Back and Bounce Forward




The EVF's **Ethos, Culture and Identities** quadrant saw us taking a metaphorical lens to the values, behaviours, discourses and celebrations in our institutions to spot or magnify expectations of, and expectations for, resilient academic leadership action. We discussed how elastic is a common metaphor for resilience; for example, elastic can *bounce back* to the form held previously and can survive under great strain and pressure. We explored this metaphor questioning what we had been doing and planning in our programmes, faculties and universities – things which represented our ethos, culture and identities - to withstand the adversity which came with COVID-19 and to *bounce back* from it to our previous form(s).

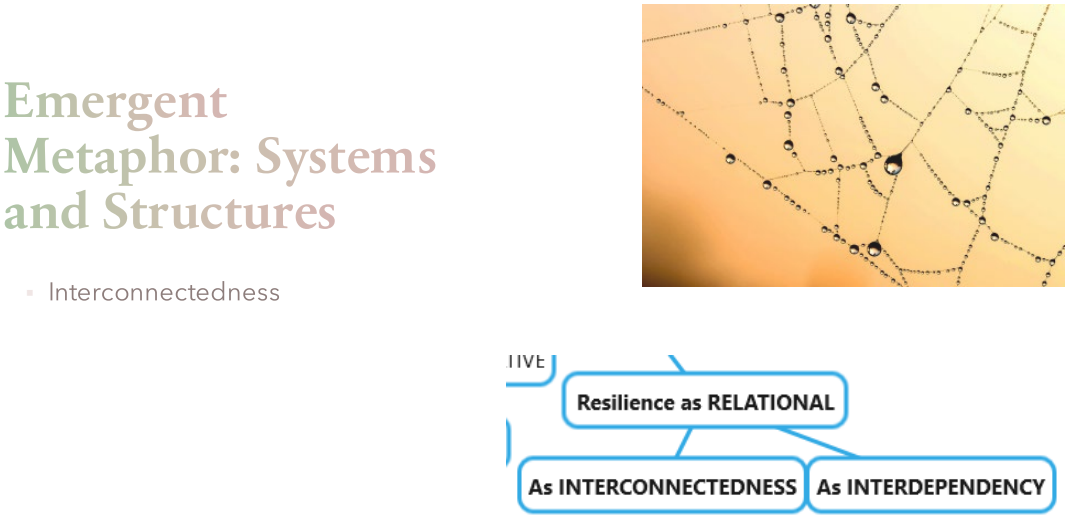
In our own search for understanding, many of us had stories to tell of rallying calls in our staff communications, messages to be kind to one another, and frequent communications celebrating how successful we had been at supporting our students initially through the first trimester, then the first online assessment period and then onto the second trimester. Phrases like the aforementioned 'digging in our heels' conveyed resilience and visions of a tug of war with COVID-19 at the other end of the rope pulling toward chaos. It did seem that the prevailing discourse at macro or institutional level was to reinforce resilience as a desired asset to help us to *bounce back* by defending and protecting our ways of working.

But as we trudged through this quadrant, we increasingly found that the common metaphor of resilience as elastic which can stretched to capacity, but which will *bounce back* to its original shape rather troublesome. For, as we mused, sometimes elastic bursts, snaps or indeed is stretched beyond its original shape or size - most commonly recognised as the burst knicker elastic scenario resulting from having been washed too hot. And so, the metaphor of *bounce back* to normal metaphorically fell down somewhat.

This led us down the path of exploring how taking an ecosystem metaphorical view could symbolise resilience not just as *bounce back* to the previous shape but *bounce forward* to take up a different shape, an altered state. This ecosystem interpretation of *bounce back, bounce forward* carries an implicit sense of loss and an acknowledgement that in surviving a crisis some parts of a damaged system will not, or cannot grow back but might be replaced by an adaptation, possibly even an enhancement. Ironically, this takes us back to Darwin and his assertion that it is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but rather the one that is most adaptable to change.

*Bounce back* being limited on its own, we extended our deliberations informed by some of our pedagogical thinking to ponder, akin to Cowan's (2006) reflection on action, in action and for action by thinking, about *bounce forward.* As such, we continued with that sense of not looking back to defend and protect our previous ways of working, but of looking forward, to grow and flourish in the growing realisation that across our universities we would need to look to the horizon and prepare for a 'new norm'. The person on the tightrope focusing forwards with a steady gaze came back into view. *Resilient academic leadership can bounce back and bounce forwards.*

### 3.4 Metaphor 4 Resilience as Interconnectedness




The EVF's **Systems and Structures** quadrant invites exploration of what might be described as things. And yet in what was our last gathering we ended up talking about people. This focus was not new. Resilience as relational, as *interconnectedness* and interdependency emerged in our first online gathering and was revisited in the third when we talked of resilience as community.

In speaking of it as community, we played with the metaphor drawing in ideas about protection, strength and the mitigation of risk. However, it was as if we waited until the last gathering when we had tasked ourselves to explore systems and structures, that people and relationships came to the fore. And we chose to talk about us – PFs – in that system, within those structures. As we talked, we recognised a commonality in our practice, that of being *interconnected* with the system, and thereby people. We spoke of being the 'go to' people, able to make quick sprints to resolve immediate crises and of being able to undertake marathon-type work (which we did link with tipping points and being overwhelmed). In exploring resilient academic leadership as PFs, just in case there is a misinterpretation here, we were not saying that we were the only 'go to' people, but that we saw that we were. The word lynchpin emerged. Resilient academic leadership as people or things that are vital to an organisation, that hold it together.

Imagine a chain of *interconnectedness* and its potential. As we prepared to draw our final gathering together, we realised that a chain of interconnectedness had been created through

our gatherings. The image below represents that word and illustrated the metaphor of interconnectedness. The image also speaks to strength. The chain is held by something else. That is its construction, and its power.

And within that, rather than imagining a chain of *interconnectedness* uniting PFs each practising in the space where you might have thought they would be – macro/ exo levels - within the system, we now knew that PFs operate with effect and impact across all the levels of the EVF and within its quadrants. Becoming a PF does not restrict you to action as a strategic leader in a particular locus; rather it empowers you to take action where it is needed. *Resilient academic leadership emerges from interconnectedness of universities.*

### 3.5 Metaphor 5 Resilience as Deficit

Quiet in our data but nonetheless evident was a sense that resilience can be conceived as deficit – as lacking. Something we do not have enough of, and must have more of, without which we are lacking. We reflected on this in our first online gathering when we considered the extent to which resilience is deemed to be within the person – in the genes – so to speak - or is nurtured by the environment. However, we quickly moved away from the 'old' nature-nurture argument reflecting instead on resilience in its absence, evidenced perhaps by an institutional focus on mental *ill* health (macro) and ineffective practice on the part of staff and students in online spaces (micro/meso). In saying this the picture which emerged through our collective autoethnographic approach was far more hopeful. While resilience as deficit is troublesome, and disturbing, it is more than outweighed by metaphors which represent our capacity to bounce forward, to flourish, to be good enough and to be together, connected with and through systems and structures.

### 3.6 A Kaleidoscope of Metaphors

We selected five of the metaphors which emerged in our online gatherings for focus in this report. We deliberately selected one which connects with each quadrant forming the EVF, and then the fifth referred to in 3.5. But we now seek to deepen insight into what we found when we explored resilience, and resilient academic leadership in our PFHEA cluster. To do this we return to Figure 3 and the image of a kaleidoscope alongside the mind map which draws together all of the metaphors into one location.

First, what is a kaleidoscope

**Kaleidoscope**, optical device consisting of mirrors that reflect images of bits of coloured glass in a symmetrical geometric design through a viewer. The design may be changed endlessly by rotating the section containing the loose fragments. The name is derived from the Greek words *kalos* (“beautiful”), *eïdos* (“form”), and *skopeïn* (“to view”).

A kaleidoscope pattern.
*Image: © Llddı1/Dreamstime.com*

More importantly here, what does it symbolize? In considering this, we chanced upon the idea that a kaleidoscope is itself a metaphor.

‘The beauty and magic of thinking of life as a kaleidoscope is that you take all of the moments of your life, the good, the bad, and even the ugly and shuffle the sparkly bits and pieces together to create a spectacularly beautiful image, singularly unique and precious because we understand that the slightest shift can quickly change the picture.

However, you have the power to embrace the nature of the kaleidoscope, to keep moving, growing, and seeing the beauty in each new perspective as a natural part of our journey to becoming the person you are meant to be.’[3]

‘He said, “When you look into a kaleidoscope, you see something beautiful. But after you shake it up, destroying what is there, and hold it up to the light again, you will see something new and different, but equally beautiful. Life is much the same as the kaleidoscope”, he emphasized. “After being shaken, it will always reveal something new and beautiful, but only if we take the time to hold it up to the light and look inside.”

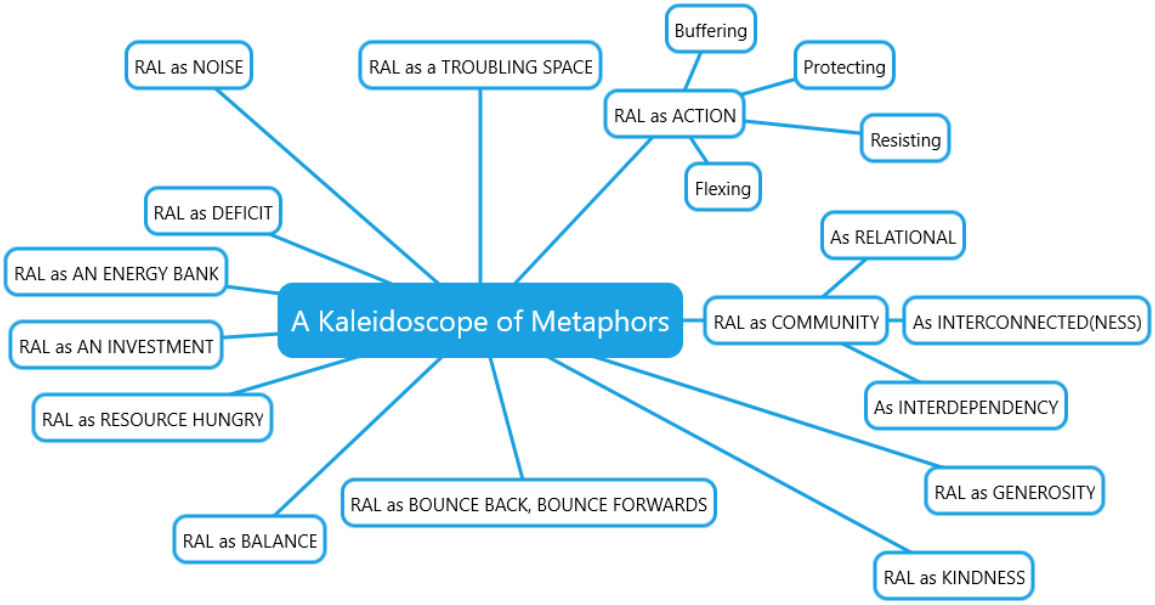
Thus, the kaleidoscope has taken on a new meaning for me. It represents the initiative we all must take to sustain beauty in our lives and land in the right place, as life continues to change, and we are continuously challenged. Things fall apart sometime, but they can always be put back together again, achieving ultimate beauty with a new look, but only if we “hold it up to the light and look inside.’[4]

[3] www.emotionallyresilientliving.com/reflections-kaleidoscope-life
[4] https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenmakovsky/2013/06/06/what-kaleidoscopes-communicate/?sh=775d0dd636c9

With these thoughts in mind, the metaphor of a kaleidoscope can start to be seen for what it is, that is, as a starting point for individuals and communities to explore resilience and resilient academic leadership as an intangible asset *in their own context.* The metaphor of the kaleidoscope invites the turning of the tube to create different connections between the metaphors which emerged in our conversation. Thus, our data serves the purpose of starting conversations elsewhere (more of this to come). The picture we have created in the form of the mind map is not fixed in the form it is here but is capable of shifting perspectives to reflect lived experience. And it can be added to.

Therein sits a key point. We never intended our data to define resilience as a single truth, as an unarguable thing. Indeed, while it is the case that all of us in the gatherings shared a single experience – working in the context of COVID 19 in Higher Education in Scotland – those experiences were markedly different, and arguably owed everything and nothing to sharing an identity as an HEA Principal Fellow. We have more thinking to do in that respect in understanding that the outcome of PFHEA recognition does not result in one pathway of academic leadership practice going forwards.

And, misquoting Robert Frost, it is not a simple as saying that two paths present as diverging to the PF once recognised – academic leadership practice embedded in the discipline, and that which locates in academic/educational development. Whether on the path 'bent in the undergrowth' or on that which is 'grassy and wanted wear', our data spoke to the complexity of our individual academic leadership practice, and it was the EVF and its adoption which helped us explore this in our gatherings. However, we are at risk here of veering away from the focus for this Collaborative Cluster, and so we head back to it and what we set out to do.



### 3.7 Contextualising the Evidencing Value Framework

Our Collaborative Cluster set out to produce a contextualised EVF, tailored to understanding resilience and resilient academic leadership specifically in our universities during the period from March 2020, but with wider potential. In working with the EVF, through the process enabled by our collective autoethnographic approach, we 'tested' its capacity for flex in two ways.

First, as its creators had intended, we found it capable of adaptation in that to ensure focus on resilience and resilient academic leadership all we needed to do was to develop prompt questions (**see Text Box 1**). In that sense we were able to contextualise it and speak with confidence to its capacity to elicit conversation in the quadrants and across the levels.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Systems and Structures**<br><br>How has/can academic leadership, viewed through a resilience lens, help us to develop strategic leadership appropriate for the HE sector in/post COVID-19? | **Resources**<br><br>How can learning spaces – online and physical - use resilience as a design feature as we look at how institutions have/can respond to e.g., the need for dual/hybrid teaching in/post COVID-19? |
| **Ethos, Cultures and Identities**<br><br>What does/can resilience look like when it is underpinning a positive ethos and institutional culture in/post a COVID-19 context? | **Core Educational and Support Components**<br><br>How is/can curricula be designed to embed resilience as an intangible asset that can be leveraged for strategic impact e.g., on graduateness/employability in/post a COVID-19 context? |

**Text Box 1: Prompt Questions adopted in the Online Gatherings**

The second way we tested it was by using it differently. As explained earlier, after the first gathering when we explored it as a whole, each of the subsequent gatherings focused on a quadrant at a time. As we had intended, this allowed for a deepening of understanding by staying with the quadrant's focus, exploring the levels within each of the four EVF themes. What this suggests is the capacity of the EVF for adaptive use without losing its primary goal which seeks to afford insight into intangible assets in context so they might be better valued and invested in.

So, building a resilient University can be depicted in a contextualised form of the original EVF framework with specific questions to explore resilience in each quadrant and across all four levels as illustrated in **Figure 5.**

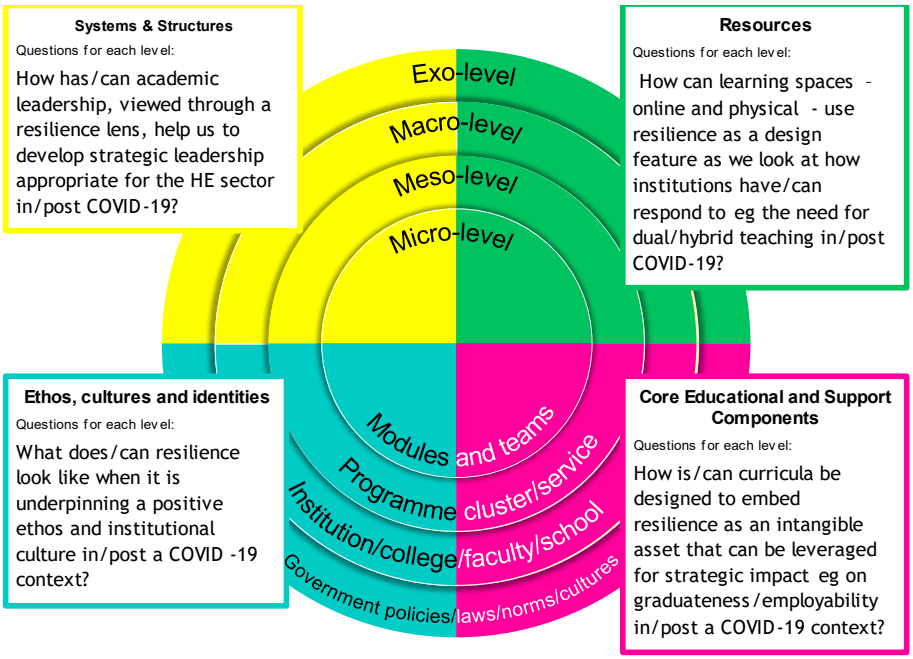



**Figure 5: The Contextualised EVF: Building Resilient Universities**

The other surprise which we probably should have foreseen was the way in which the EVF helped us to understand 'where' PFs find themselves (or take themselves to) in times of crisis (e.g., COVID-19). For more discussion on this see especially our 3rd Blog: Places, Spaces and Resilient Academic Leadership. What is clear to us now, because of the EVF, and our playing with it, is that we better understand that the PF community - networked as it is over the Scottish HE sector - is probably stronger, more resilient because its members locate in all the quadrants and across the micro, meso, macro and exo levels and are able to move in and out of those spaces. There was a sense of agility in our data; PFs as a responsive asset equipped to be where needed in times of crisis. We tentatively suggest, based on the finding of this modest Collaborative Cluster, that having PFs as the 'go to' people scattered across a university at the micro, meso, macro and exo levels builds a strong learning community, an interconnectedness, a resilient university. Embedded then in this contextualised EVF for Building Resilient Universities is the notion of academic leadership practiced through a distributive network acting as a substructure to safeguard again any challenging external forces.

## 3.8 Extending the Evidencing Value Framework

What we had not anticipated was the emergence of metaphors in the four quadrants of the contextualised EVF for Resilient Academic Leadership. These helped us to get hold of resilience and resilient academic leadership, and to represent it to ourselves and to others. Our view is that this extends the potential of the EVF when viewed through a metaphorical lens.

There are two paths of extended travel for those seeking to explore the intangible assets of resilience, and resilient academic leadership in their universities, department or programmes.

Path 1 offers a well-trodden direction of travel for others to pick up our kaleidoscope of 5 metaphors and explore how these resonate in their own local contexts.

Path 2 leads to unfamiliar territory, where others can follow the same exploratory steps of our collaborative cluster to play with the EVF and capture *their* discussions, *their* written

textual comments and their non-verbal representations, and analyse these to discover new metaphors glittering in *their* own local context. In so doing, they might discern *their* own kaleidoscope of metaphors for resilient academic leadership.

## Evaluation of our Exploratory Collaborative Cluster

Our gatherings spanned 7.5 hours and with the pre/post work associated with them, totalled no more than 10 hours. And yet, we formed a cohesive group, talked, shared and listened. And we laughed too and offered support just by being there. We created blogs, and legacies for conversations another day. Here we reflect on our questions posed back in November 2020 when we were still hoping our HE world in the wider social context would have reverted to a normality (or something like the way it was).

Our questions were:

1. What do resilient learning communities mean for those who lead strategic change to enhance the student learning experience; specifically, HEA Principal Fellows, and how can these resilient learning communities be nurtured as an intangible sector strength?

2. How can resilience as academic leadership practice be perceived through, not what Principal Fellows have by way of qualities, but what Principal Fellows do by way of practice (Barton, Christianson, Myers & Sutcliffe, 2020)

3. How can the concept of resilience, rather than excellence, offer a more appropriate proxy or symbol as the sector strives to maintain the quality of the student learning experience in these turbulent times?

4. Can perceiving academic leadership as an intangible asset of resilience create and nurture an institutional culture that supports the wellbeing of staff in response to COVID-19?

In response to the first question, as indicated in Section 3.7, it seems that in its creation we were imagining that because PFHEAs have by definition been recognised as strategic leaders that in times of crisis they will be part of the vanguard, visible and impactful, in roles which align with Descriptor 4 of the UKPSF. We have needed to reflect on this and to re-consider this as an expectation. Organisations may be made more resilient by PFHEAs operating across the spaces which form the institution - there 'in a heartbeat' to enact practice as suggested in the metaphors we were able to bring to light. Put differently, in the battle against COVID-19, if all strategic leaders – by dint of title or recognition – were engaged in deciding strategic priorities who would be left within the mass of the troops who were engrossed in the operation of the digital pivot? For us, we are left contemplating the requirement for good standing from an Advance HE perspective. What should it look like for PFHEAs, in times of relative quiet and in crisis?

Focusing on our second question, we are confident that the metaphors which emerged in our gatherings speak to resilience and resilient academic leadership as observed, and also as enacted by us, as PFHEAs. For example, we were able to see and value resilience as generosity, in the behaviours of others, and in our determination, for example, to give and not to expect in return. There was the fascinating discussion in our fifth, and final gathering, captured in our 5th blog, about PFHEAs as lynchpins in the institutional community, being the go to people, with questions posed about sustainability of this role.

Our third question centred on resilience rather than excellence generated possibly the most contention in our conversations. The need to keep striving to be the best was matched by

views which indicated that being good enough had to be good enough in times of crisis. In truth, we did not reach a conclusion, a fact which speaks to the fact that PFHEAs will have different views, which are equally valid there frequently being no one truth.

Finally, we see that we have done much to answer our fourth question. The EVF helped us to illuminate resilience and resilient academic leadership and pointed to the potential for the enrichment of the culture of the University. However, we are convinced that as important as they are, metaphors alone will not effect change of value in the sector in 'normal' times, and days (months) of crisis.

As we draw the report towards its close, we make brief comment about our design – the adoption of a collective autoethnographic approach. We know that it has its detractors, those who suggest that it is solipsistic, an indulgence of little value to others (Henderson, 2019). We would argue to the contrary that it created a space to speak, to listen, to share, to value, to learn and resulted in what we intended – a collective narrative represented by the metaphors we found ourselves using. The emergence of a kaleidoscope of metaphors has the potential to offer insight beyond the collective who created it, and as we now suggest can do something even more across the levels of the ecosystem.

## Recommendations

### Recommendation 1 – Promote the contextualised Evidence Value Framework: Building Resilient Universities as a conceptual tool to support universities as resilient academic leadership communities in the rapidly changing environment created by COVID-19

As a result of our extensive deliberations in our collaborative cluster, we recommend that the contextualised Evidencing Value Framework: Building Resilient Universities has great practical value as a tool to create dialogue around what resilience and resilient academic leadership looks like in our universities. As our relatively modest project has shared, the EVF can be used as a conceptual tool to support different stakeholders in a university to explore *in their own context* what shape or form resilience takes in their own systems, practices, resources, ethos and identity, and core educational and support components of their institutional systems. The potential to reveal and share where there are glimmers of resilience and resilient academic leadership can empower stakeholders in a university, in a Faculty/School or in a programme to consider how they can recognise, value and grow the contribution of this intangible asset when they look to enhance organisational culture, performance and sustainability.

Once revealed, an intangible asset can signal where investment is needed to sustain good practice, or where good practice is vulnerable and less resilient, lacking in any sense of interconnectedness and where it may be, for example, reliant on disparate, small donations of energy and individual good will.

Revealing the presence and impact of resilience located in the four EVF quadrants using the prompt questions can lead to some questioning of how, and if resilient academic leadership practice is truly being nurtured and invested in. Developing resilience to build back better will only be successful if the investment is made in the right bricks, the proper mortar to connect the bricks, and arranging the interconnectedness of the bricks, each balanced one on top of two abutted bricks. As a conceptual tool the contextualised resilient academic leadership EVF can help reveal who are the real bricks in a university, how are they interconnected and whether there is sufficient investment across the systems, resources, culture and components across the micro, meso and macro layers.

## Recommendation 2 – Promote the power of the metaphor in creative approaches to building resilient learning communities

The power of the metaphor in our story shows new and different ways to open up strategic thinking. Rotating our kaleidoscope of metaphors again we can use their interconnectedness for future planning. COVID-19 was the incidental backdrop for our collaborative cluster, but we would contest that the COVID-19 legacy has and continues to leave an imprint on the resilience of our universities. The depth of this imprint is such that it will need sustained resilience for universities to push against the depression and to stamp that imprint out. We suggest that it will need university communities and all their stakeholders to stay positive, not to overbalance or sink under the weight of the new and necessary approaches to learning and teaching. It will require university communities to consciously plan for and create greater interconnectedness across their institutional structures, processes and systems. It will require investment to effectively profit in the longer term from that imprint, and to then replenish and sustain the energies of staff and students to build back better, to prosper and to flourish.

How we measure success as we move forward - as argued from the outset - may need a different approach. From our explorations we can see benefit from a consideration of the less tangible, measurable performance indicators and their value in sustaining our success – if we need to bounce back what does that mean in practical terms? If we need to develop greater interconnectedness, where first do we need to focus our attention, and how? If our student feedback is still high, what do we continue with, and where do we prioritise injecting investment and energy into our support services to develop resilience among our students as individuals and as learning communities? Rotate the kaleidoscope again see the metaphors reflect a different pattern or sequence of colours, what questions arise next to provoke strategic thinking now?

This EVF framework offers up one approach to revealing where it would be profitable to explore – across the 4 quadrants and levels - intangible assets that may be contributing, or which may offer the potential to contribute to the enhanced performance of a university and within that inform strategic investment and thinking and operational actions. In other words, to go back to one of our original definitions of organisational resilience, the potential of the EVF as a design tool to enhance “the ability of an organization to anticipate, prepare for, respond and adapt to, incremental change and sudden disruptions in order to survive and prosper.”

## Recommendation 3 – Develop new design principles for building resilient learning communities through further extension of the contextualised EVF

We contend that to really drive forwards meaningful transformation of the way it is, our kaleidoscope of metaphors warrants development.
Our metaphors we argue could, with some additional thought, be transformed into design principles to guide our thinking around how to create new resilient forms of practice. A transformation into design principles that will guide how we re-think, re-shape and re-value practices which matter by using the power of the metaphor to reflect and reveal the intangible assets in our universities.

For example, as we currently anticipate the need to develop hyflex learning we could use one of our metaphors for resilience in guiding our hyflex curriculum design and delivery approach. We might question how we can design for a *balanced* curriculum that weighs up both student and staff development needs … we could go on and we are interested to go on. The power of these colourful metaphors lies not purely in their ability to act as descriptive proxies for an intangible asset like resilient academic leadership. The power lies in taking an Intangible Asset through a transformative turn from a descriptive, symbolic, passive

metaphor then twisting, rotating this into a design principle for concrete, measurable action and in turn making the intangible asset seem tangible, capable of being seen, held and valued.

Somewhat fanciful? Perhaps, but we think we want to pursue this because we are beginning to see something that glistens here that might be a new treasure, a new finding. We fancy that we can, even now, perceive the glistening of a design principle in each of the four quadrants of the contextualised EVF (**Figure 6**):

| | |
|---|---|
| **Systems and Structures**<br><br>How can we embed balance as an aspect of our systems and structures to make our academic leadership more resilient in/post COVID-19?<br><br>What does imbalance in our systems and structures look like? | **Resources**<br><br>How could we create balance in our online and physical learning spaces to make them more resilient in/post COVID-19?<br><br>What does balance in our resources look like from the perspective of our key stakeholder? |
| **Ethos, Cultures and Identities**<br><br>How can we introduce balance as an expectation of our organisation values, ethos, identity and culture in/post a COVID-19 context?<br><br>What does a balanced culture look like? | **Core Educational and Support Components**<br><br>How can we design balance into the design of our curricula to develop resilient graduates?<br><br>How can we embed balance as an intangible asset that can be leveraged for strategic impact e.g., on graduateness/employability in/post a COVID-19 context?<br><br>What does a balanced/unbalanced curriculum look like for the perspectives of our different stakeholders? |

**Figure 6: Balance Metaphor as a Design Principle in the contextualised EVF**

We suggest that the potential to build design principles for building resilient learning communities from metaphors is extensive; this is but one example from one of our metaphors emerging from one small scale collaborative cluster project.

In closing, there is so much more here to think about, but we have come to the end of this particular journey and a rollicking one it has been. We finish then on a harmonious note.

## So long, farewell, auf wiedersehn, goodbye …

“There’s a sad sort of clanking from the clock in the hall…” and so it is time to share our last resource which we think can help you to unlock an intangible asset like resilience. As you contemplate our musings, we invite you to listen to our resilient academic leadership playlist. These are the ‘go to’ songs of the individual PFs in our collaborative cluster when we need to boost those energy levels, find that balance, feel that sense of interconnectedness, or indeed to be soothed. These are the tracks which make us, the ‘go to’ people, feel able to bounce back and bounce forward when times are tough.

This resource, our playlist, represents resilience in a format which we suggest adds another layer to our troubling of a slippery construct that we argue to be an intangible asset worthy of continued exploration. The work of our collaborative cluster might be complete; the conversation is not.

And so, we leave you… listening to the sound of… resilience..

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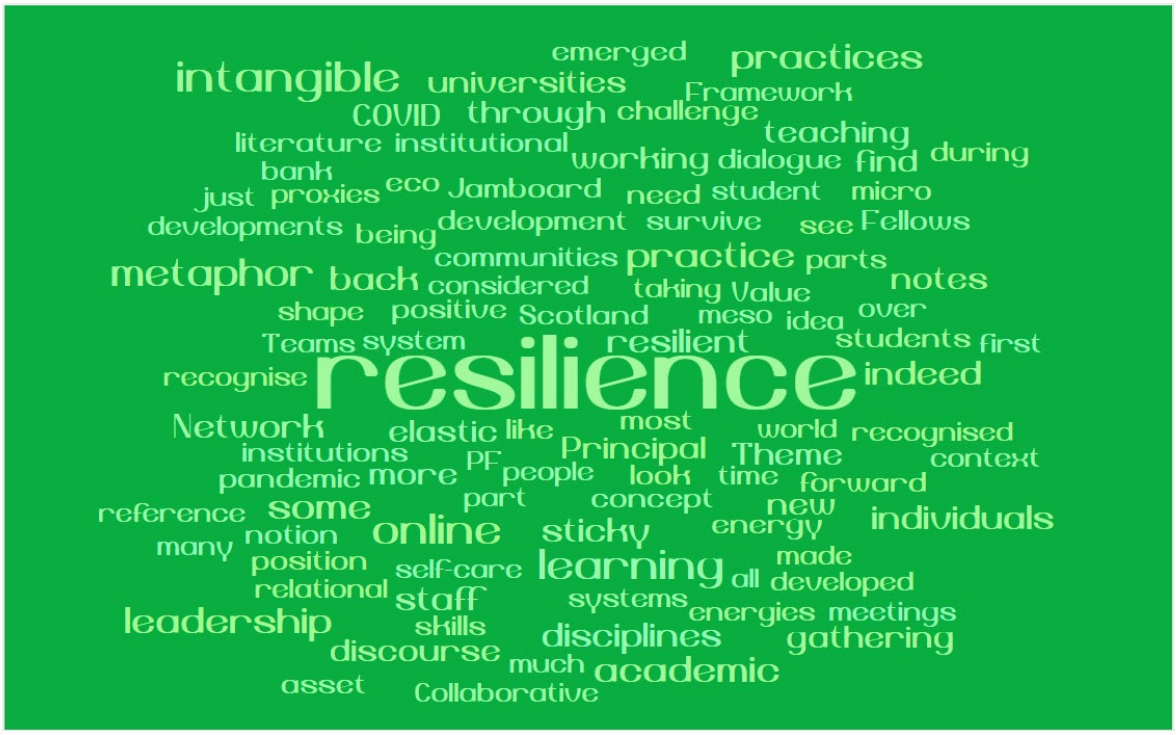
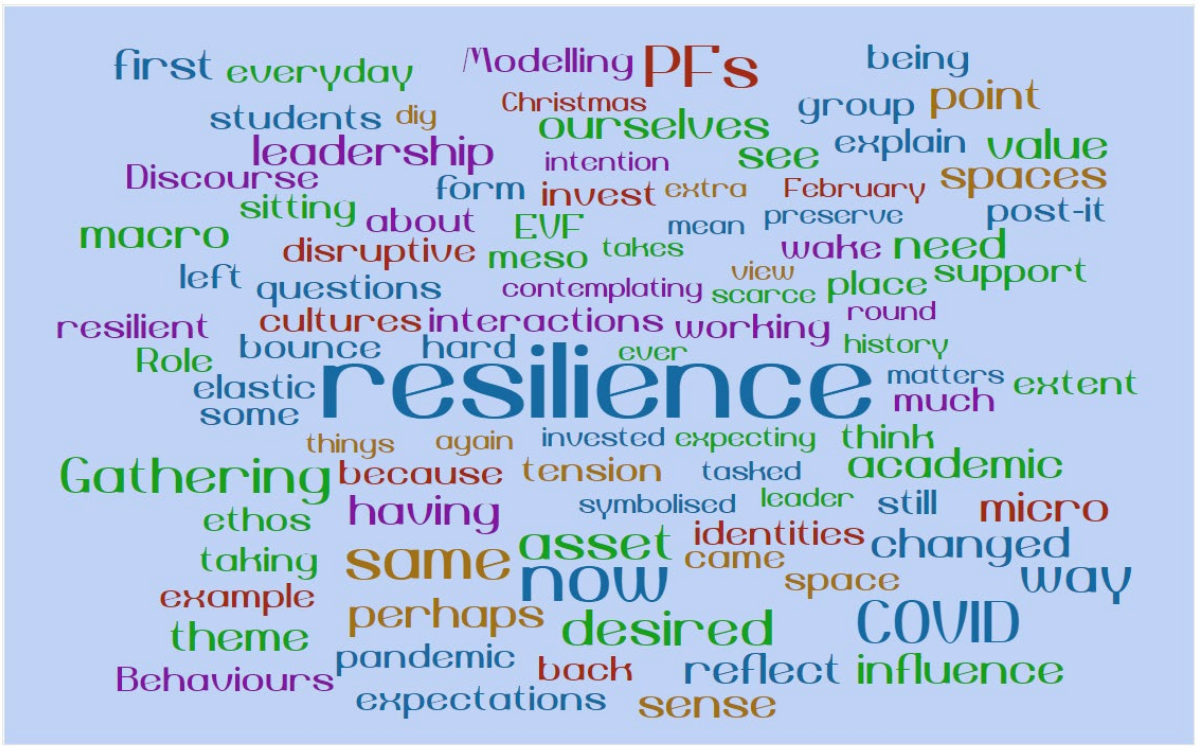
## Appendix 1: Wordclouds of online gatherings



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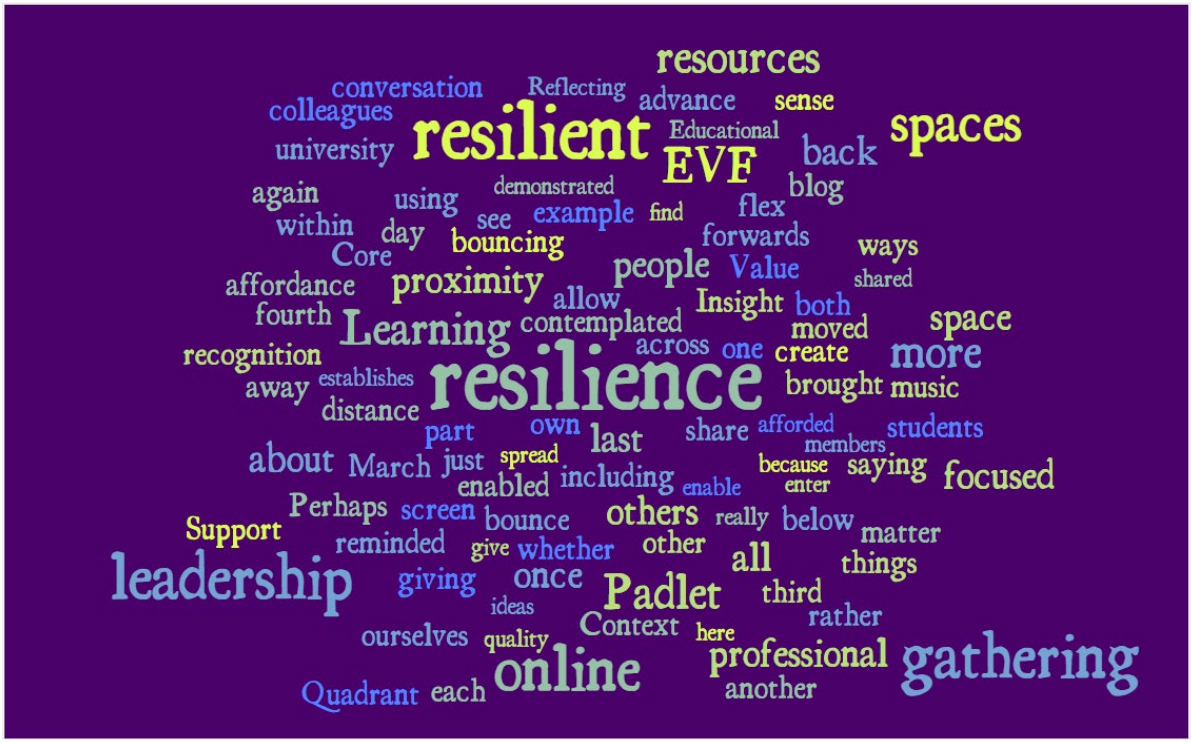
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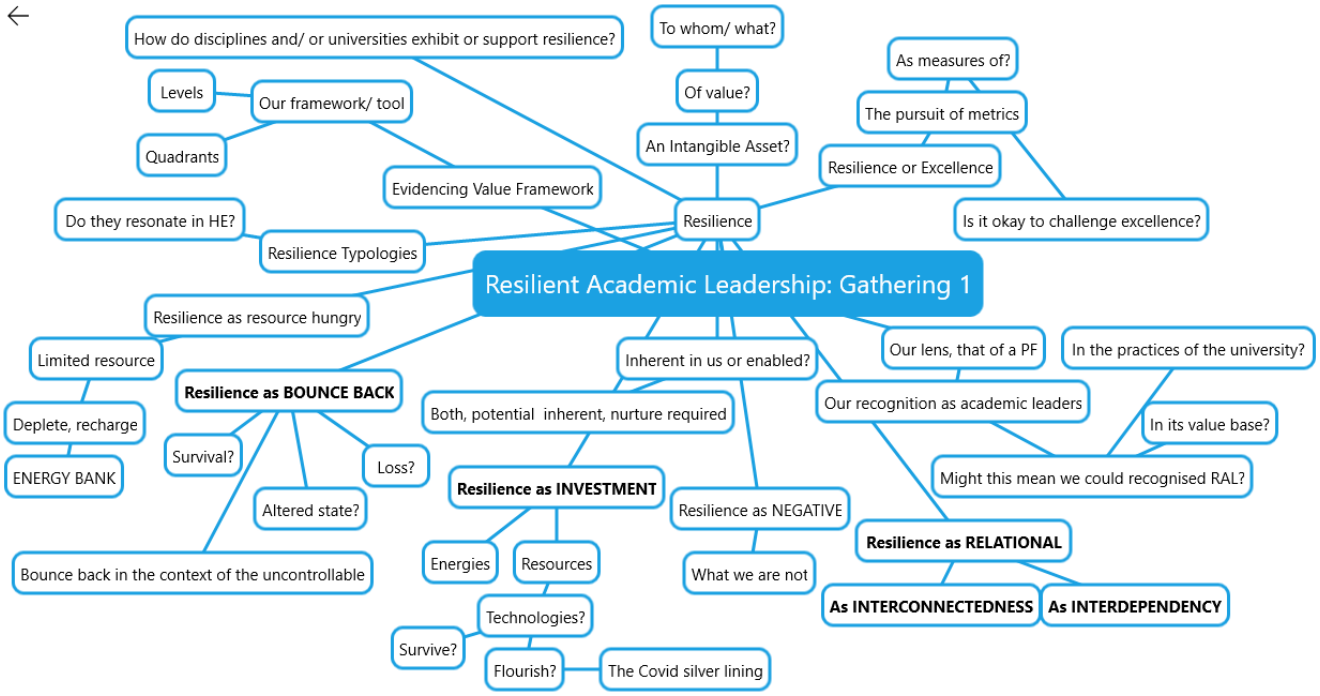
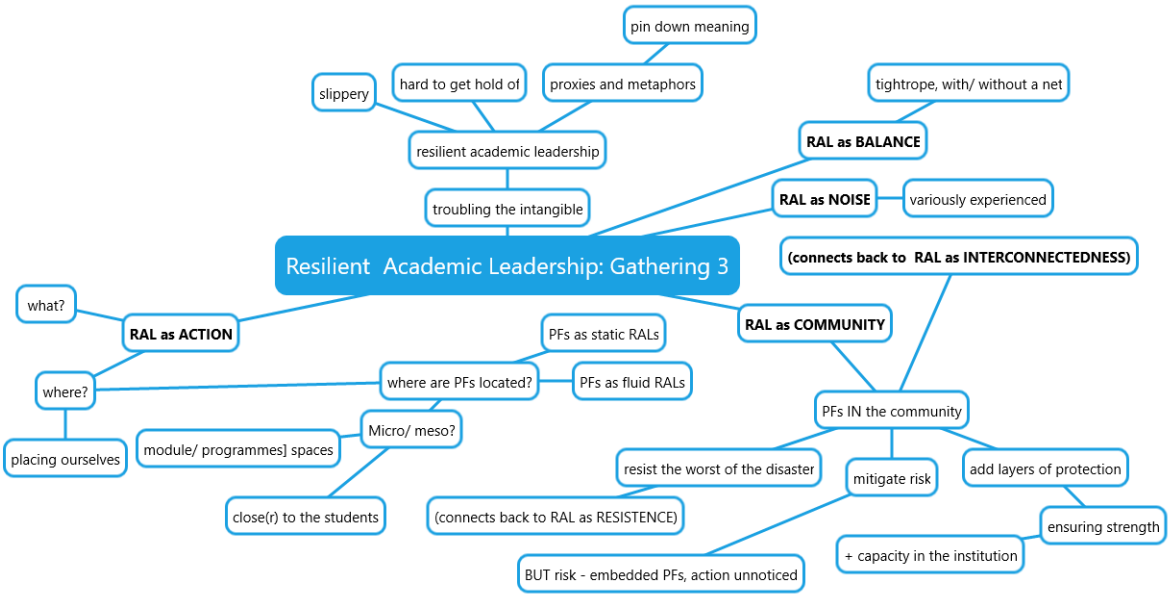
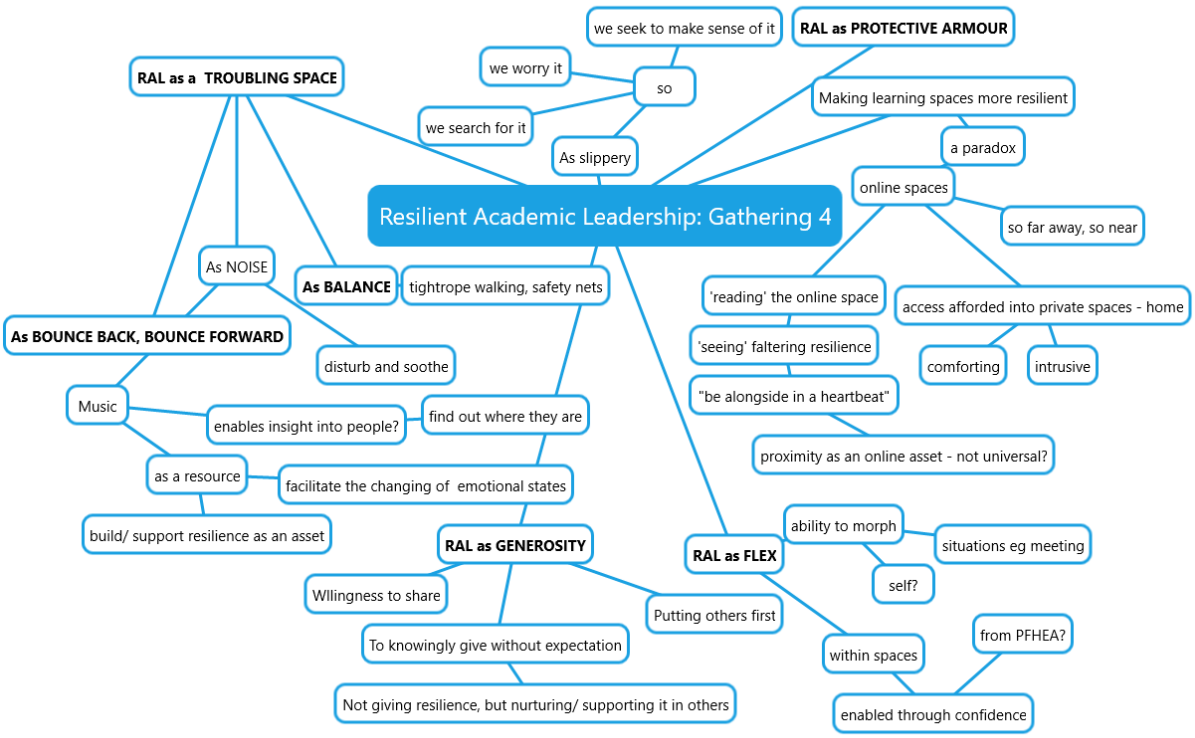
# Appendix 2 Mind maps from online gatherings




Resilient Academic Leadership: Gathering 3
pin down meaning
slippery
hard to get hold of
proxies and metaphors
resilient academic leadership
troubling the intangible
tightrope, with/ without a net
RAL as BALANCE
RAL as NOISE
variously experienced
(connects back to RAL as INTERCONNECTEDNESS)
what?
RAL as ACTION
where?
placing ourselves
PFs as static RALs
where are PFs located?
PFs as fluid RALs
Micro/ meso?
module/ programmes] spaces
close(r) to the students
RAL as COMMUNITY
PFs IN the community
resist the worst of the disaster
(connects back to RAL as RESISTENCE)
mitigate risk
add layers of protection
ensuring strength
+ capacity in the institution
BUT risk - embedded PFs, action unnoticed


Resilient Academic Leadership: Gathering 4
we seek to make sense of it
RAL as PROTECTIVE ARMOUR
RAL as a TROUBLING SPACE
we worry it
so
we search for it
As slippery
Making learning spaces more resilient
a paradox
online spaces
so far away, so near
As NOISE
As BALANCE
tightrope walking, safety nets
As BOUNCE BACK, BOUNCE FORWARD
disturb and soothe
'reading' the online space
access afforded into private spaces - home
'seeing' faltering resilience
comforting
intrusive
"be alongside in a heartbeat"
proximity as an online asset - not universal?
Music
enables insight into people?
find out where they are
as a resource
facilitate the changing of emotional states
build/ support resilience as an asset
RAL as GENEROSITY
Wllingness to share
To knowingly give without expectation
Not giving resilience, but nurturing/ supporting it in others
Putting others first
RAL as FLEX
ability to morph
situations eg meeting
self?
within spaces
from PFHEA?
enabled through confidence

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