

## Using Q Methodology to Capture Attitudes about Academic Resilience in an Online Postgraduate Psychology Course

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**Abstract :** The attrition rate on distance learning courses can be high. This research examines how online students often react when faced with poor results. Using q methodology, it was found that the emotional response level and the type of social support sought by students were key influences on their attitude to failure. As educational and psychological researchers, we are adept at measuring learning and achievement, but examining attitudes towards barriers to learning are not so well researched. The distance learning student has differing needs from onsite learners and, as the attrition rate is notoriously high in the online student population, examining learners' attitude towards adversity and barriers is important. Self-report measures such as questionnaires are useful in terms of ascertaining levels of constructs such as resilience and academic confidence. Interviewing, too, can gain in depth detail of the opinions of such a population, but only in individuals. The aim of this research was to ascertain what the feelings and attitudes of online students were when faced with a setback. This was achieved using q methodology due to its use of both quantitative and qualitative methodology and its suitability for exploratory research. The emphasis with this methodology is the attitudes, not the individuals. The work was focused upon a population of distance learning students who attended a school on site for one week as part of their studies. They were engaged in a psychology masters conversion course and, as such, were graduate students. The Q sort had 30 items taken from the Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30). The scale items represent three constructs; perseverance, reflecting (including adaptive help-seeking) and negative affect. These are widely acknowledged as being relevant concepts underpinning psychological resilience. The q sort was conducted with 19 students in total. This is done by participants arranging statement cards regarding how similar to themselves they believe each statement to be. This was done after reading a vignette describing an experience of academic failure. Commonalities and differences between the sorts from all participants are then analyzed in terms of correlations and response patterns. Following data collection, the participants' responses were initially analyzed and the key perspectives (factors) to emerge were labelled 'persevering individuals' and 'emotional networkers'. The differences between the two perspectives centre around the level of emotion felt when faced with barriers and the extent that students enlist the help of others inside and outside of the university. The dominant factor to emerge from the sorts of 'persevering individuals' demonstrated that many distance learners are tenacious. However, for other students, the level of emotional and social support is pivotal in helping them complete their studies when facing adversity. This was demonstrated by the 'emotional networkers' perspective. This research forms a starting point for further work on engaging and retaining online students at university and can potentially provide insight into how universities can lower attrition rates on distance learning courses.

**Keywords :** academic resilience, distance learning, online learning, q methodology

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