by Soheil Davari | Oksana Gerwe

Educating for Hope, Resilience and Agency in a Time of Uncertainty

Students today are surrounded by unrealistic narratives, often spread through social media, that make wealth and success appear effortless. At the same time, they face rising living costs that shape everyday choices. As a result, many juggle part-time work alongside full-time study, often not for experience, but to pay off debts and cover everyday expenses.

Political instability, climate change and the rapid pace of artificial intelligence add further pressure, raising difficult questions about how long skills will remain relevant. Terms such as existential crisis, climate catastrophe and job disruption are no longer headlines, but part of everyday life for many students. The widening gap between aspiration and reality creates lasting anxiety, fuelling doubt about where they fit in a fast-changing labour market.

Overwhelm

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The contradiction between being urged to change the world and struggling to afford everyday living costs can feel overwhelming. In a labour market shaped by AI, concerns about job prospects can make students feel replaceable and lose hope. When students constantly hear about global problems but see few ways to act, these problems start to feel insurmountable. This deepens the gap between caring and feeling capable of making a difference. Higher education builds resilience when institutions create learning environments that give students hope and real opportunities to act. Hope in this context is not simply optimism. It reflects the belief that effort can still lead to outcomes, even when conditions are difficult. It combines a sense of direction with a belief in one's capacity to act.

Students face challenges that create feelings of powerlessness and desperation. Hope has to be credible. Students lose trust when it feels like spin. Overly optimistic framing can undermine trust and deepen cynicism. A "la vie en rose" view of the world, where problems are briefly acknowledged and then pushed aside, does not connect with students who already feel under pressure.

Within universities, some everyday practices can deepen these feelings. Heavy assessment loads and constant performance monitoring leave almost no room for reflection and exploration, which are central to learning. With limited feedback and a focus on grades rather than development, students quickly retreat into compliance rather than genuine engagement, which weakens confidence and motivation.

Students need to understand how systems operate, how decisions are made, and how small changes can still matter when addressing complex challenges. Helping students identify where they can have some influence within larger systems restores a sense of agency and possibility. Learning should help students face uncertainty directly, rather than avoiding it. Through real case studies, students can see how progress in public health and workers' rights emerged during past crises, and that change is possible even in difficult conditions.

It requires asking students to engage with difficult problems instead of merely learning about them. Rigorous education, when it truly challenges students, trains the mind to confront complexity rather than retreat from it.

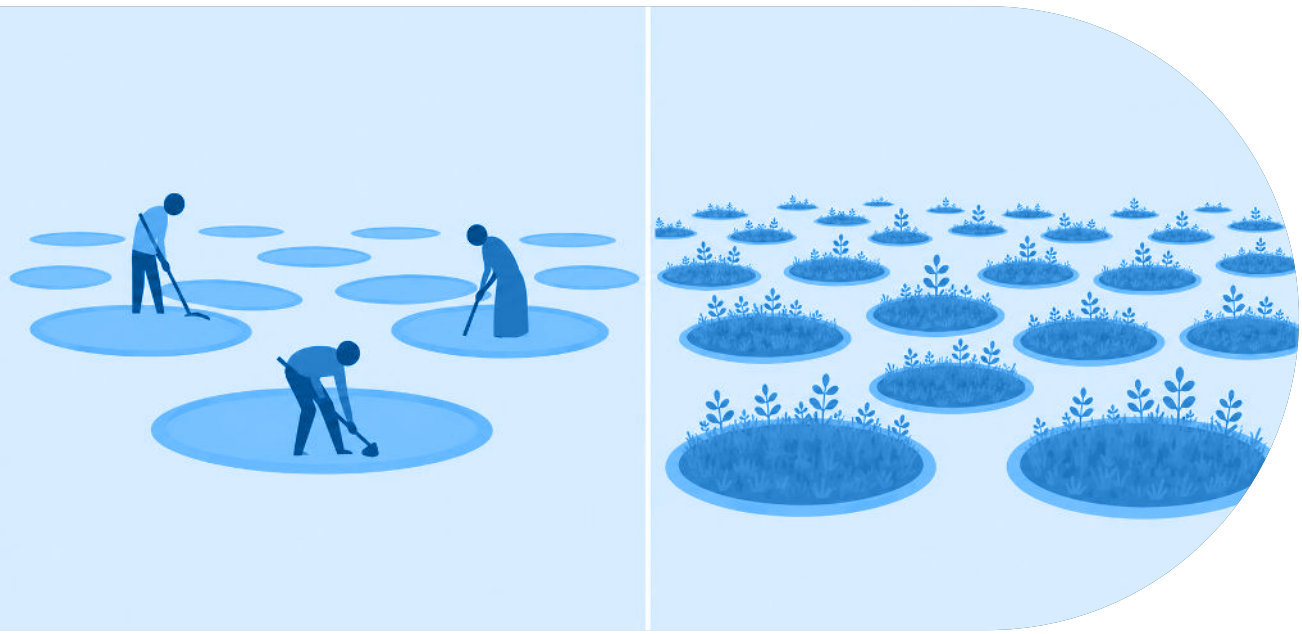
By progressively engaging students with increasingly demanding problems, universities strengthen confidence and resilience. This is about cultivating the discipline to work through ambiguity, test ideas, revise assumptions, and carry solutions through to completion.

Universities can also help students build practical thinking tools to manage uncertainty. Courses that introduce methods such as scenario planning and horizon scanning give students concrete ways to think about uncertainty and to imagine realistic pathways for action. Such approaches do not eliminate risk, but they enhance students' confidence in navigating it. Inter-generational mentoring programmes offer another route, connecting students with people who experienced earlier periods of disruption and providing a perspective on how careers and lives unfold over time.

Hope is also shaped by how universities frame progress. When global challenges are presented as ever-worsening, it breeds a sense of inevitability instead of possibility. A realistic approach is to show that transformation is slow and imperfect, yet achievable through sustained collective effort. Tracing how social rights and policy reforms took decades to happen helps students recognise that change can be slow, yet possible. This perspective supports the idea that progress can be made through persistent engagement and not by sudden breakthroughs.

What happens in classrooms matters deeply. The problems lecturers set, the feedback they offer, and the space they create for debate shape whether students feel capable or overwhelmed. Beyond the classroom, departmental and institutional choices regarding workload, assessment, and reward systems send strong messages about what really matters. University leaders contribute through resource allocation, aligning promotion and reward criteria, and expanding student support services. Policymakers also play a role by introducing flexible funding models, supporting lifelong learning and easing financial pressures on students.

Students need curriculum adaptations as well as everyday practices and support to help build confidence and resilience in the face of uncertainty. There is evidence that when students feel supported and part of a larger community, they are less likely to experience isolation or frustration and more likely to engage well with their studies and confidently plan for a better future. These pressures are not felt equally across different student cohorts. Students from lower income backgrounds, international students and first-generation students are often at greater risk of financial strain and uncertainty. For these students, uncertainty is not only about the future, but about day-to-day survival while studying. Financial stress and unfamiliar institutional cultures can make it harder to engage fully with learning and to take academic risks. Without targeted support, higher education may unintentionally widen gaps in confidence, opportunity, and long-term outcomes. Universities can offer support and help students build professional networks and alumni ties that strengthen their prospects.



This means showing students through everyday interactions that they matter and are valued, and not just graded towards a degree. Actions such as mentoring and opportunities to connect with others can gradually build confidence and motivation.

Hope grows when it is linked to collective efforts rather than individual aspirations. Universities can strengthen this through collaborative problem-solving, interdisciplinary projects and partnerships with businesses that aim to address real challenges. They position students as contributors who can already make a difference, instead of future leaders. Agency grows when students experience how their knowledge and skills, however small, can be significant when dealing with real problems. Working alongside others also reduces feelings of isolation and shows how shared responsibility is key to addressing complex challenges.

These educational shifts are recognised by international policymakers. The OECD's Future of Education and Skills 2030/2040 and UNESCO's Future of Education agenda both call for rethinking how education prepares learners for economic and technological change. The implications extend beyond curriculum design. Decisions about assessment, partnerships, funding priorities and institutional incentives shape whether students experience higher education as empowering or exhausting.

In a world shaped by uncertainty, universities cannot promise stability, but they can empower students to understand complexity. Educating for hope prepares students to contribute, lead and adapt in a world that urgently needs resilience. This responsibility

COMPLEXITY

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extends beyond universities to governance and regulatory frameworks that shape students' lived realities. Policies on hours worked and minimum wages affects young people and how they experience higher education. The recent UK government policy paper entitled Lifelong Learning Entitlement aims to provide more flexible access to post-18 education. This highlights the need for policy support, alongside institutional reform. Hope gives direction, and agency allows students to act with confidence. Together, they form the foundation of responsible leadership in an age of disruption.

About the authors

Soheil Davari is Director of Accreditations and an Associate Professor at the University of Bath School of Management. He has more than two decades of experience in industry and higher education as a consultant and educator, with a background across sectors including healthcare, logistics and the public sector. His research has evolved, shifting from quantitative optimisation to a current focus on organisational behaviour and organisational culture, and on how rankings and accreditation influence the culture and behaviours in business schools.

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