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Sisu-per Power: The Art of Not Giving Up. Applying Finnish Resilience to Enhance University Students' Well-Being

University life presents both personal and academic challenges, often testing students' resilience and emotional strength. The Finnish concept of *sisu*, which embodies grit, perseverance, and the courage to endure, offers valuable strategies to foster student well-being in higher education. This paper explores *sisu* as a psychological tool adapted to the academic context, with practical applications for students aiming to enhance their resilience, manage stress, and maintain motivation. As two academics from the University of Gdańsk – a psychologist at the Academic Psychological Support Centre and a lecturer in Finnish language – we aim to present *sisu* as a framework for improving student well-being.

Keywords: perseverance, mental health, grit, Finnish culture, everyday psychology, academic life, academic success, counselling

1. Introduction

University students frequently encounter challenges that test their mental and emotional resilience, from academic pressures to personal development hurdles. In recent years, university students' mental health has become a growing concern worldwide, reflecting a global trend of increasing psychological distress among young people in higher education (Pedrelli et al. 2015; Auerbach et al. 2016; Dave et al. 2024). Numerous studies highlight alarming levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout, demonstrating that the pressures faced by students globally significantly impact their well-being (Wang et al. 2024). These issues are particularly pronounced among students transitioning into academic life, as they navigate heightened expectations, social pressures, and financial burdens (Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer 2016; Worsley et al. 2021).

Additionally, research indicates that feelings of isolation and a lack of institutional support exacerbate these challenges, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rudnik et al. 2021; Hagedorn et al. 2022). The stigma surrounding mental health issues further compounds the problem, discouraging students from seeking professional help due to fear of judgment or unawareness of available resources. Furthermore, the limited availability of mental health services at universities often leaves students without adequate support. Consequently, there is a pressing need to identify protective factors that can buffer against these mental health challenges and enhance students' psychological resilience.

One potential concept that may play a critical role in promoting students' mental well-being is *sisu* – a Finnish psychological strength concept that refers to sustained determination, perseverance, and inner fortitude in overcoming adversity (Lahti 2019). This article explores the concept of *sisu* and its potential benefits within the academic context.

2. The Concept of *Sisu*

People interested in Finland often encounter the short, powerful word *sisu*. It frequently appears alongside other Finnish cultural markers such as Sibelius (the famous Finnish composer), sauna, and *salmiakki* (salty liquorice) in guidebooks introducing key elements of Finnish identity to foreigners. Historically, *sisu* has been associated with soldiers in wartime, athletes pushing their limits, and Finns enduring harsh winter conditions in remote areas.

When the Institute for the Languages of Finland organized a name contest in 2017, during Finland's centenary of independence, Finns voted *sisu* as the most representative word for their nation (Helminen 2019). Over three thousand Finns bear *sisu* as their first or second name (Digital and population data services agency 2024). The word appears in various contexts, from politics – where individuals are encouraged to rely on their *sisu* in times of economic downturn – to business and marketing, where numerous products proudly bear the name *Sisu* (Helminen 2019).

Clearly, *sisu* plays a crucial role in Finnish culture. However, systematic academic interest in the concept has emerged only recently (Henttonen et al. 2022). A search in the Helsinki University database of theses and dissertations reveals that *sisu* is studied across disciplines, from medicine to the humanities. Researchers have explored its connection with well-being and work-related stress (Salo 2023), its darker aspects – such as stubbornness contributing to male mortality in the 20th century (Kirveskoski 2017) – and its frequent appearance in public naming competitions for institutions, animals, coffee brands, and shopping malls (Sirén 2018).

Although *sisu* is often described as ‘untranslatable,’ it is commonly interpreted as endurance, stamina, or inner strength. Although deeply embedded in Finnish identity, the concept of inner strength and refusal to give up is not uniquely Finnish but resonates across various cultures.

2.1. Definitions of *Sisu*

Sisu is a cultural concept deeply embedded in Finnish heritage, evolving over time. While often associated with positive traits, its historical connotations were not always favourable. This section explores its meaning, historical significance, and modern applications.

The Institute for the Languages of Finland defines *sisu* as “tenacious, indomitable willpower, perseverance, boldness, and courage.” However, it also has a more complex side, linked to a “fierce, hard nature” (Kielitoimiston sanakirja n.d.). The term originates from *sisus*, meaning “guts” or “interior,” dating back to the 16th century (Lahti 2019). By the late 19th century, it became associated with Finnish national resilience (Helminen 2022).

Sisu took on a distinctly positive meaning in the 1920s–1930s, shaped by Finland’s historical context. Following the 1918 civil war, ***sisu*** was redefined as a unifying force, reinforced through sports and national defense (Helminen 2002). During the Winter War (1939–1940), it became emblematic of Finnish heroism (Lahti 2019).

2.2. Positive *Sisu*

Emilia Lahti (2019) identifies three core aspects of *sisu*: extraordinary perseverance, an action-oriented mindset, and latent power.

- **Extraordinary perseverance** refers to exceeding personal limits in both imposed and self-chosen challenges, from overcoming illness to academic or athletic pursuits.
- **Action-oriented mindset** is the resolve to persist despite uncertainty, often involving stepping outside one’s comfort zone.
- **Latent power** represents a hidden inner strength, activated when perceived mental or physical capacities are exhausted.

Each of these themes reflects *sisu*’s depth, ranging from tangible outcomes to intrinsic personal growth. In this paper, we highlight these aspects as protective factors contributing to resilience, adaptability, and psychological strength.

2.3. Negative *Sisu*

While *sisu* can be a powerful force, Lahti also examines its potential downsides, categorizing them as harm to self, harm to others, and harm to reasoning.

- **Harm to self** includes physical and mental strain, such as burnout, due to relentless perseverance.
- **Harm to others** occurs when goal obsession leads to neglecting relationships and dismissing others' contributions.
- **Harm to reasoning** results from an inability to adapt, leading to tunnel vision, poor decision-making, and resistance to help.

While recognizing these potential risks, our primary focus is on *sisu*'s empowering qualities, equipping individuals with resilience needed to navigate adversity and promote long-term well-being.

3. The Finnish Spirit of Resilience in Academia

Recent research explores the Finnish concept of *sisu* and its relationship to well-being, particularly among university students.

Studies suggest that *sisu* is closely linked to mental toughness, resilience, and overall physical and mental health. Strukčinskienė (2021) examines *sisu* as a lifestyle ideology that fosters a balanced, enduring, and harmonious personality. Using a qualitative research approach – including literature analysis and discourse studies – the study identifies key elements for cultivating *sisu*, such as mindfulness of nature, physical activity, positivity, relaxation, stepping outside one's comfort zone, and breaking tasks into smaller, manageable steps. The review indicates that *sisu* enhances both physical and mental well-being and can be consciously developed on an individual and societal level to strengthen resilience and overall health. These findings support the application of *sisu* as a well-being model beyond Nordic cultures, particularly in addressing contemporary public health challenges.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, managers faced unprecedented challenges that tested their resilience and well-being. Vuori and Määttänen (2024) investigated the role of *sisu* – a Finnish concept of inner strength and perseverance – in managerial experiences during this crisis. Through qualitative interviews with 15 managers from Finland's hotel, manufacturing, and retail industries, the study identified a dual nature of *sisu*: while adaptive *sisu* fostered resilience and a proactive mindset, excessive reliance on *sisu* led to exhaustion and harmful cognitive distortions. The findings highlight a crucial tension in crisis management – knowing when to persist and when to step back. Additionally, the study introduces the concept of collective *sisu*, emphasizing the role of shared perseverance in workplace resilience. These insights suggest that organizations should balance the promotion

of resilience with an awareness of its potential drawbacks to effectively support managerial well-being (Vuori and Määttänen 2024).

This perspective is particularly relevant for university students, who often navigate academic pressures that demand both endurance and self-care.

Delahunty and O'Shea (2024) offer a compelling perspective by examining *sisu* as a framework for understanding the persistence of first-in-family (FiF) university students. Unlike individualistic notions of resilience or grit, *sisu* encompasses perseverance rooted in both personal determination and collective support. Analyzing qualitative data from 376 Australian FiF students, the authors identify three ways *sisu* manifests in their academic journeys: enduring adversity (navigating financial, health, and emotional hardships), doing the impossible (overcoming societal and familial discouragement), and persisting despite 'failure' (reframing setbacks as part of growth). Their study challenges the dominant neoliberal view of persistence as an individual trait, instead emphasizing the role of external support systems. By recognizing *sisu* as both a personal and communal force, the authors advocate for higher education policies that move beyond deficit models and foster structural support for equity students. Their work positions *sisu* as a powerful framework for understanding and promoting student success in complex educational landscapes (Delahunty and O'Shea 2024).

Sisu, often translated as 'determination beyond reason,' embodies a profound inner strength that surpasses short-term motivation. For university students, understanding and applying *sisu* can mean the difference between succumbing to stress and thriving despite it. Its qualities – courage, perseverance, and commitment to long-term goals – can help students build resilience amid the unique pressures of university life.

The question remains: how can we cultivate *sisu*?

4. Enhancing *Sisu*: Strategies for Strengthening Perseverance and Well-Being

Based on the findings in Strukčinskienė's (2021) summary and the book *Sisu: The Finnish Art of Courage* by Joanna Nylund (2018), several key strategies emerge for cultivating and strengthening *sisu* at both individual and societal levels.

- **Developing Nature Mindfulness**

A crucial factor in building *sisu* is maintaining a strong connection with nature. Interaction with natural environments – through activities like forest therapy, outdoor recreation, and immersion in quiet, green spaces – helps to reduce stress, enhance mental clarity, and build inner strength. This practice fosters resilience by aligning individuals with the natural world, improving both physical and mental well-being.

- **Encouraging Positivity**

A positive outlook plays a significant role in perseverance. Cultivating strategic optimism – the belief that challenges can be overcome – enhances resilience and supports mental toughness. Positivity extends beyond personal attitudes; it influences social connections, problem-solving abilities, and emotional regulation, all of which contribute to strengthening *sisu*.

- **Prioritizing Rest, Relaxation, and Recreation**

Sisu does not mean constant struggle; rather, it requires balance between effort and recovery. Implementing structured rest periods, engaging in activities that recharge mental and physical energy, and ensuring adequate sleep are essential for sustaining long-term perseverance. The Finnish model of eight hours of work, eight hours of rest, and eight hours of sleep exemplifies this balance.

- **Promoting Physical Activity**

Engaging in regular movement and exercise is another pillar of *sisu*. Physical activity not only builds endurance but also enhances emotional resilience. Activities such as cold-water immersion (ice swimming), sauna use, and outdoor sports encourage the ability to withstand discomfort and strengthen perseverance.

- **Practicing Withdrawal and Stepping Back**

An essential aspect of *sisu* is knowing when to conserve energy and withdraw from unnecessary struggles. This does not mean giving up, but rather focusing effort on winnable battles. Learning to prioritize tasks, set healthy boundaries, and avoid burnout ensures that energy is directed effectively.

- **Implementing Task Fragmentation**

Breaking large, challenging tasks into smaller, manageable parts prevents overwhelm and promotes sustained progress. This strategy is particularly useful in educational and professional settings, where resilience is required for achieving long-term goals.

- **Encouraging Small Challenges and Exiting the Comfort Zone**

Gradually exposing oneself to controlled discomfort – such as trying new experiences, tackling difficult tasks, or pushing beyond self-imposed limits – helps develop mental toughness. Engaging in small, consistent challenges fosters adaptability and builds confidence in handling adversity.

- **Spreading and Radiating the *Sisu* Mindset**

The cultural transmission of *sisu* occurs through storytelling, role modeling, and community reinforcement. Encouraging parents, teachers, and leaders to demonstrate perseverance and resilience ensures that future generations inherit and embrace *sisu* as a way of life.

- **Rewarding Effort and Achievement**

Recognizing and celebrating personal and collective achievements reinforces motivation and persistence. While the sense of accomplishment itself is rewarding, tangible incentives – such as personal time, social gatherings, or nature retreats – can further strengthen the drive to persevere.

To enhance *sisu* among university students, the following methods can be applied:

- **Nature Connection** – Encourage time in nature for stress relief and mental clarity (e.g., outdoor study sessions, mindfulness walks).
- **Positivity** – Foster a growth mindset by emphasizing perseverance and optimism in academic challenges.
- **Rest & Balance** – Promote structured rest, adequate sleep, and relaxation techniques to prevent burnout.
- **Physical Activity** – Integrate regular exercise (e.g., yoga, running, or sports) to build resilience and endurance.
- **Strategic Withdrawal** – Teach students to set boundaries, prioritize tasks, and manage workload effectively.
- **Task Fragmentation** – Break assignments into smaller steps to improve focus and productivity.
- **Leaving the Comfort Zone** – Encourage new challenges (e.g., public speaking, leadership roles) to build confidence.
- **Peer Support & Mentorship** – Create a culture where perseverance and resilience are shared through role models and peer encouragement.
- **Recognition & Reward** – Celebrate progress and achievements to reinforce motivation and long-term resilience.

By integrating these principles, university students can develop mental toughness, perseverance, and a balanced approach to challenges, strengthening their overall well-being and academic success.

Conclusions

Incorporating *sisu* into daily life can lead to profound improvements in well-being. As a cultural asset, *sisu* offers valuable insights into resilience and life satisfaction, demonstrating that perseverance and mental strength are not merely innate traits but qualities that can be consciously developed. By embracing *sisu*, individuals are empowered to confront challenges with determination, fostering a fulfilling life grounded in endurance and adaptability.

Rather than being a fixed trait, *sisu* is a dynamic mindset that requires intentional cultivation. By integrating key elements such as mindfulness of nature, positivity, rest, physical activity, strategic withdrawal, task fragmentation, small challenges, cultural transmission, and reward systems, individuals and societies can enhance their resilience, perseverance, and overall well-being. The Finnish model of *sisu* provides a valuable framework for fostering a more balanced, determined, and psychologically resilient life.

For university students, *sisu* serves as a powerful tool for navigating the pressures of higher education. Incorporating its principles into daily routines can help

students manage stress effectively, maintain commitment to their goals, and cultivate meaningful relationships. By consciously adopting *sisu*-oriented strategies, students can develop a sustainable approach to well-being that supports both their academic success and personal growth.

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