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Research Paper

Unveiling: The Cause of Academic Stress Among University Students

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ABSTRACT

This cross-sectional study investigates academic stress among university students. It explores the role of demographic factors and, motivations for course enrolment in influencing, stress levels. Data from 129 respondents reveal nuanced insights, with notable variations in stressors among different age groups and motivations for course selection. While the findings underscore the importance of tailored support mechanisms, further research is recommended to comprehensively understand gender-related academic stress degrees. The implications extend to educational institutions and policymakers, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions. The study provides a foundation for future research, urging a comprehensive examination of the root causes of disparities in academic stress levels and the development of effective solutions.

Keywords: *Academic Stress, University, Gender, Age, India*

Thriving in the contemporary world while evading the impacts of the rat race poses a formidable challenge. Universities, beyond their role in education and conferring higher degrees, serve as arenas where students engage in fierce competition to secure a spot in their preferred programs, excel academically, and secure the most coveted jobs with optimal benefits and prospects for advancement. Many students join esteemed universities with the aspiration to break free from this relentless cycle.

The ramifications of this competitive cycle on society are substantial. A significant portion of the population grapples with the challenges of daily life and loses sight of its purpose, subsequently influencing academic pursuits. Over time, this phenomenon has been accepted as the new normal, with students enduring considerable stress to succeed in the fiercely competitive realm of life.

Understanding the magnitude of academic stress experienced by students is crucial. Educational institutions stand to gain valuable insights into the primary stressors and their impact on academic performance and overall well-being. This knowledge can shape future policies and enable the provision of targeted support to help students thrive academically

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and unlock their full potential. As students pursue education beyond the foundational level, they encounter various financial, physical, and social hurdles.

This research aims to identify and comprehend the stressors faced by university students, intending to contribute to the enhancement of the academic environment. A comprehensive understanding of students' experiences empowers institutions to provide the necessary assistance and high-quality resources for academic and personal success throughout the educational journey. Drawing from over forty relevant reviews and numerous investigations on similar themes, this research strives to shed light on the challenges faced by university students.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Students pursuing their master's degrees and undergraduate degrees at a central institution in India make up the study's population. For this study, the researcher gathered replies from 129 students, of whom 50 (or 39%) were female and 79 (or 61%) were male. The students ranged in age from 18 to 32 years old and came from 21 different departments.

Instrument

An adapted version of the Students' Academic Stress Scale was employed, and it was administered using the Academic Stress Questionnaire by Rajendran and Kaliappan (1990). There are forty items on the academic stress scale. Each response received one of the following scores: 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. There were five areas with eight items each among the objects that were categorised. There were forty total items. The five areas were Inadequate study facilities, Teacher-pupil relationship / Teaching methods, Personal Inadequacy, Interpersonal difficulties with teachers, and Fear of Failure. As a result, the highest score on each factor would be 32 (4×8), and the maximum possible score would be 160 (4×40). The number of items in each factor is equal. There is more academic stress with a higher score, and vice versa.

Procedure

The students received access to an electronic survey that was generated using Google Forms, an online cloud-based data gathering tool. The students were requested to circulate the link to their classmates. There was assurance given to the students about the privacy of the information they disclosed. With two sections and forty-six items in all, the anonymous questionnaire was constructed. The first section (6 questions) addressed questions about personal information, while the second section (40 questions) was based on Rajendran and Kaliappan's Academic Stress Questionnaire (1990). Out of the five options, the respondents were required to select one. The participants were informed that they could choose their own response at their own pace and that there were no right or wrong answers. They were additionally instructed not to focus too much on any one task for too long. They were told it would take them about ten minutes to respond to all the questions.

Statistical Analysis

In the present research, we utilized the following statistical techniques to analyze the data. We represented descriptive variables as numbers and percentages. The normality of the data underwent testing using the Shapiro-Wilks Test. Factor-wise average stress scores were presented as Median and Interquartile Range (IQR). To compare stress scores among different demographic factors, we employed the Independent-Samples Nonparametric Test

(Kruskal-Wallis 1-way ANOVA). A P value of 0.05 was deemed statistically significant. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 19.

RESULTS

Demographic data of the current sample

Table 1: Gender of students who participated in this study

Male	Female	Total Number of Students
79	50	129

Data was gathered from 129 students from various departments of the University. 50 female students (39%) and 79 male students (61%), out of 129 total, provided their consent.

Table 2: Number of students by different departments in this study

Department	Number of Students
Applied Psychology	5
Bioinformatics	2
Biotechnology	2
Chemistry	2
Computer Science	3
Earth Sciences	2
Economics	1
English	2
Food Science and Nutrition	2
Food Science and Technology	6
French	2
History	1
Mathematics	3
MBA	9
Nanoscience and Technology	1
Performing Arts	6
Physical Education & Sports	68
Physics	4
Political Science and International Relations	2
Statistics	4
Tamil	2
Total	**129**

The educational departments of the 129 participants were, 5 students were from Applied Psychology (3.89%), 2 students from Bioinformatics (1.55%), 2 students from Biotechnology (1.55%), 2 students from Chemistry (1.55%), 3 students from Computer Science (2.32%), 2 students from Earth Sciences (1.55%), 1 students from Economics (0.78%), 2 students from English (1.55%), 2 students from Food Science and Nutrition (1.55%), 6 students from Food Science and Technology (4.65%), 2 students from French (1.55%), 1 students from History (0.78%), 3 students from Mathematics (2.32%), 9 students from MBA (6.98%), 1 students from Nanoscience and Technology (0.78%), 6 students from Performing Arts (4.65%), 68 students from Physical Education & Sports (52.70%), 4 students from Physics (3.10%), 2 students from Political Science and International Relations (1.55%), 4 students from Statistics (3.10%), and 2 students from Tamil (1.55%).

Table 3: Age brackets of the students in this study

Age Bracket	Number of Students
18-22 years	44
23-27 years	80
28-32 years	5

The number of students aged between 18 and 22 years was 44 out of 129 (34.11%), 80 between 23 and 27 years (62.02%), and 5 between 28 and 32 years (3.87%).

Table 4: The reason students took up their respective courses in this study

Reason the Students took the Course	Number of Students
Self Interest	67
To Get a Job	51
Getting a Degree to pursue higher education	7
Out of Pressure or luck	4

The reasons the 129 students gave to join the course they are pursuing are: 67 students joined out of self-interest (52%), 51 students to get a job (40%), 4 students to enroll for a Ph.D. (3%), 3 students for the sake of getting a degree (2%), 3 students joined out of pressure (2%), and 1 student joined out of luck (1%).

Table 5: Students have thought of discontinuing their studies due to stress

Thought of Discontinuing due to Stress	Number of Students
Yes	36
No	93

Out of 129 students 36 students have thought of discontinuing their studies due to stress (27.90%), whereas 93 of the students did not think the same (72.10).

The academic stress levels among the students in various factors among 129 students.

Table 6: The level of academic stress scores among the students in respect to Gender, Age and the Reason for Joining the Course

	Inadequate Study Facilities (Factor 1) Median (IQR)	Teacher Pupil Relationship/ Teaching Methods (Factor 2) Median (IQR)	Personal Inadequacy (Factor 3) Median (IQR)	Interpersonal Difficulties with Teachers (Factor 4) Median (IQR)	Fear of Failure (Factor 5) Median (IQR)	Academic Stress (Total Score) Median (IQR)
Gender						
Female	19.50 (10)	18.00 (13)	19.00 (10)	19.00 (13)	18.00 (12)	96.00 (54)
Male	17.00 (12)	14.00 (12)	16.00 (13)	16.00 (15)	15.00 (12)	77.00 (52)
P Value	0.931	0.839	0.404	0.895	0.074	0.646
Age						

	Inadequate Study Facilities (Factor 1) Median (IQR)	**Teacher Pupil Relationship/ Teaching Methods (Factor 2) Median (IQR)**	**Personal Inadequacy (Factor 3) Median (IQR)**	**Interpersonal Difficulties with Teachers (Factor 4) Median (IQR)**	**Fear of Failure (Factor 5) Median (IQR)**	**Academic Stress (Total Score) Median (IQR)**
18-22 Years	18.00 (12)	18.00 (16)	19.00 (10)	17.00 (13)	19.00 (11)	96.00 (60)
23–27 Years	18.00 (12)	15.00 (13)	16.00 (11)	17.50 (14)	15.00 (11)	80.50 (54)
28–32 Years	16.00 (15)	15.00 (17)	14.00 (18)	19.00 (18)	17.00 (17)	79.00 (84)
P Value	0.072	0.014*	0.013*	0.074	0.015*	0.013*
Reason for Joining the Course						
By Pressure or Luck	25.50 (15)	24.50 (12)	25.50 (17)	21.00 (24)	27.50 (5)	123.50 (61)
Getting a Degree to Pursue Higher Education	15.00 (11)	13.00 (9)	14.00 (9)	16.00 (10)	13.00 (5)	71.00 (40)
Self Interest	17.00 (12)	15.00 (14)	17.00 (12)	15.00 (14)	16.00 (11)	80.00 (57)
To get a job	19.00 (11)	17.00 (14)	18.00 (10)	18.00 (13)	17.00 (11)	88.00 (45)
P Value	0.231	0.076	0.053	0.401	0.018*	0.068

The data represents the median and interquartile range (IQR) for each factor and the total academic stress score, as well as the p-values. The results encompass demographic data, age distribution, reasons for course selection, thoughts of discontinuation, and academic stress levels in various factors.

DISCUSSION

This study delves into the levels of academic stress among students at a Central University, examining various demographic factors such as gender, age, and motivations for course enrolment. The insights gained from the findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of academic stress within this specific student population.

1. Gender Distribution:

The gender distribution among the participants reveals that 61% were male and 39% were female. While this suggests a slight gender imbalance, the p-value of 0.646 indicates that this difference is not statistically significant. The distribution aligns with the gender demographics of the university. Despite the gender similarity, it is essential to note that both male and female students experience academic stress, emphasizing the need for gender-neutral support mechanisms.

2. Academic Departments:
The diverse representation of academic departments among the 129 participants highlights the multidisciplinary nature of Pondicherry University. This diversity is crucial when considering the impact of academic stress, as different departments may have varying stressors and demands. It is essential to consider department-specific interventions to address academic stress effectively.

3. Age Distribution:
The age distribution shows that a significant majority (62.02%) of the participants fall in the 23-27 age bracket. The results indicate that this age group experiences a slightly higher median academic stress score, with a p-value of 0.014* showing statistical significance, it reveals significant variations in academic stress factors among different age groups. Factors such as "Teacher Pupil Relationship/Teaching Methods," "Personal Inadequacy," and "Fear of Failure" exhibit notable differences across all age categories. These findings emphasize the necessity of tailored support and interventions to address the unique needs of students at various stages of their academic journey.

4. Reasons for Choosing Courses:
The reasons students provided for joining their courses highlight their motivations, which can contribute to their stress levels. Students who joined out of self-interest, to get a job, or for higher education purposes reported relatively lower stress levels. Conversely, those who joined due to pressure or luck reported higher stress levels. However, the "Fear of Failure" factor stands out with a significant difference for students who joined "By Pressure or Luck." This underscores the importance of further investigation to understand the reasons behind this group's elevated fear of failure and how it can be effectively addressed.

5. Thoughts of Discontinuation:
A notable finding is that 27.90% of the participants considered discontinuing their studies due to stress. This statistic is concerning, as academic stress can have a substantial impact on students' well-being and educational pursuits. Universities should take this data seriously and implement strategies to provide adequate support for students facing such stress.

6. Academic Stress Levels in Various Factors:
The study examined academic stress levels across various factors, including inadequate study facilities, teacher-pupil relationships, personal inadequacy, interpersonal difficulties with teachers, and fear of failure. While the results provide insights into these factors, it is essential to note that academic stress is multifaceted and influenced by numerous variables. Therefore, interventions should consider a holistic approach to address the diverse sources of stress.

This study sheds light on the intricate and multifaceted nature of academic stress among students. While certain demographic factors may influence the experience of stress, it is crucial for educational institutions and policymakers to utilize this knowledge in developing targeted strategies for support and stress management. Further research, including qualitative exploration, is recommended to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying dynamics of academic stress in education, facilitating the development of effective interventions benefiting all students, regardless of their gender, age, or reasons for course selection.

Implications:

This study unveils the levels of academic stress among students in an Indian University. The analysis focuses on five key stress-contributing factors: Inadequate Study Facilities, Teacher-Pupil Relationship/Teaching Methods, Personal Inadequacy, Interpersonal Difficulties with Teachers, and Fear of Failure. The study also explores how these factors correlate with gender, age categories, and the reasons behind students joining their respective courses.

The findings carry several implications for academic institutions and policymakers:

- **Gender and Academic Stress:** The study suggests no significant gender-based differences in academic stress factors, except for a borderline significant difference in the "Fear of Failure" factor. Institutions should consider offering additional support to students experiencing stress related to the fear of failure, irrespective of gender.
- **Age and Academic Stress:** Significant differences across age groups in academic stress factors highlight the need for tailored support and interventions for students at different stages of their academic journey.
- **Reasons for Joining the Course and Academic Stress:** While the study indicates broad consistency in academic stress factors among students with different motivations, those enrolling "By Pressure or Luck" exhibit higher levels of fear of failure. Further investigation is crucial to understand and address the unique needs of this subgroup.
- **Education Policy Implications:** Institutions can refine their support systems based on the findings, offering targeted programs for students in age groups where stress factors are more pronounced and adopting a proactive approach to assist students reporting higher fear of failure.
- **Further Research:** This study provides a foundation for future research, encouraging a deeper understanding of variations in academic stress levels and exploring the experiences of students in different age groups or those enrolled due to pressure or luck. Such research can inform the development of effective interventions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study delves into the intricate landscape of academic stress among university students, providing valuable insights into demographic influences, motivations for course selection, and stress factors across different age groups. The findings underscore the need for tailored interventions that address the unique challenges faced by students at various stages of their academic journey. The call for targeted support, especially for those motivated by external pressures or luck, highlights the proactive role institutions and policymakers can play in fostering a conducive academic environment. As we navigate the complexities of academic stress, it is imperative to consider the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon. By implementing comprehensive strategies, institutions can contribute not only to the academic success but also the holistic well-being of their student body. This study sets the stage for future research endeavors, encouraging a deeper understanding of the intricacies of academic stress and the formulation of effective interventions. Acknowledging the interconnectedness of demographic factors and stressors, institutions can pave the way for a more supportive and enriching educational experience for all students.

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Conflict of Interest

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