

Academic Stress among University Students in Pakistan: Causes and Consequences

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Abstract



This descriptive study aimed to explore the causes and consequences of academic stress among university students. A stratified random sampling technique was used to draw 660 students as a sample of the study out of 1018 population from Hazara Division, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. A self-developed survey questionnaire was used as a data collection tool from both male and female students of three selected universities in Hazara division. The first part of the questionnaire explored the causes of stress while the second examined the consequences of stress. The data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics, t-test and analysis of variance (ANOVA). The results indicated a considerable proportion of the university students who faced academic stress due to a variety of reasons including fear of examination, unpreparedness and parental pressure; however, there was no significant difference found in the stress level of gender. The study also suggested developing a guidance and counseling cell/platform in universities for inculcating stress management strategies among students for better performance.

Keywords: Academic Stress; Causes of Stress; Consequences of Stress; University Students

Introduction and Background

During the last decade, there has been a growing focus on investigating stress risk factors and well-being consequences among university students. Stress has become part of students' academic life due to the various factors and responsibilities on them. Students are at more risk to face the problems associated with academic stress (Gallardo-Lolandes, Alcas-Zapata, Flores, & Ocaña-Fernández, 2020; Reddy, Menon, & Thattil, 2018).

Stress is a physical reaction of an individual to any external stimulus regardless of any stage (Scott, 2022). Stress refers to the body's reaction to external challenges (Yaribeygi, Panahi, Sahraei, Johnston, & Sahebkar, 2017) and a feeling of an individual when he/she is unable to fulfil personal and social demands (Bhargava & Trivedi, 2018). Stress is a complex phenomenon, depending on the individual's adaptation to different circumstances. It has a greater impact on our physiology, behaviour, thinking and feelings. It comes into contact when individuals fail to handle all demands due to a lack of abilities (Shahsavarani, Azad Marz Abadi, & Hakimi Kalkhoran, 2015).

Previous research has implied mental health related problems and stress among students in higher education (Ward et al., 2022; Ansari, Oskrochi, & Stock, 2013). Academic stress refers to the stress related to the studies and work that goes beyond the capacity of the students (Safarzaie, Nastiezaie & Jenaabadi, 2017) and continuous stress leads to anxiety and depression causing mental health problems (Roy, Thomas, & Joy, 2021; Patias, Von Hohendorff, Cozzer, Flores, & Scorsolini-Comin, 2021). Research has revealed increasing levels of academic stress during the last few decades and depicts girls to be more vulnerable for facing these problems (Graves, Hall, Dias-Karch, Haischer, & Apter, 2021). Stress is related to social-cultural, personal, and environmental reasons that are both academic and non-academic factors among undergraduate and graduate students (Brand & Schoonheim-Klein, 2009). However, academic reasons are the principal factors among students that also include emotional, social, and physical stress. Majority of the students having stress were reported to having poor self-esteem and increased levels of depression (Baste & Gadkari, 2014). The predominant factors that increase stress and anxiety are the examination, its time period, extensive course work and lack of physical exercises (Harikiran, Srinagesh, Nagesh, & Sajudeen, 2012).

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Students' fear of less academic grades and a sense of failure in the test or examination may also create anxiety and stress among learners which may affect their health in addition to their performance. According to Bhargava and Trivedi (2018), daily and long assignments, meeting their deadlines and fear of fewer scores create anxiety and stress among students. According to Jayanthi, Thirunavukarasu, and Rajkumar (2015), parents' expectations play an important part in causing or reducing academic stress among students. The focus and pressure of parents and family for achieving high grades have a greater impact on increasing stress levels (Aselton, 2012). Some of the reasons for academic stress among students include lack of study skills for example time management, organisation, and preparation for tests/examinations. However, few students also face the fear of getting good grades and failing in any subject in examination. The stress level increases if the students' past performances are not commendable. Stenger (2018) relates stress with more school/college assignments because the students feel overburdened with daily assignments. The university students who underestimate or overestimate their abilities face more stress and anxiety than the ones who continuously work hard with confidence. The major stressors of university students that were unique in nature were a transition from being only a student who was dependent on parents to the role of complete individual living independent academic life, meeting new people and having a different social circle (Houghton, Wu, Godwin, Neck, & Manz, 2012). Besides this, high expectations in university life cause academic stress and emotional and mental pressure (Hj Ramli, Alavi, Mehrinezhad & Ahmadi, 2018). This transition from school/college to university, having multifold academic responsibilities than school creates stress and results in low performance. Although a small level of stress is useful in the sense that students strive for better performance and success. However, greater stress may result in fatigue, sadness, and other health problems (Owusu & Essel, 2017). Stress results in poor sleeping habits of female students studying at the university level in the United States (Wallace, Boynton, & Lytle, 2017). Students feel fatigued, have stomach disturbance, headaches, and lack of concentration. It has been reported on the basis of several studies, that students having problems on daily basis are more likely to exhibit psychological symptoms like insomnia, depression, and anxiety (Weiner & Carton, 2012; MacCann, Fogarty, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2011). Academic stress may result in physical illness, lack of sleep and depression (Yan, Lin, Su, & Liu, 2018), finally producing negative academic performance, and with worst results may thrust students into a situation where they may not complete their graduation (Maheshwari & Shaukat, 2019; Pascoe, Hetrick & Parker, 2020).

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were:

1. To assess the level of stress among university students.
2. To examine the causes of academic stress among university students.
3. To investigate the consequences of academic stress among university students.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design and a survey method was used to get insight into objectives. This design was considered the most appropriate design for the current study as the focus was to find out the causes and consequences of students' stress.

All the 1018 (514 males and 504 females) students of BS programs enrolled in 7th and 8th semesters in the universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa constituted the population of this study. The researcher used a proportionate stratified sampling technique for drawing a sample of 602 (304 males & 298 females) students. These students had ages in the range of 22-24 years. For collecting data, a questionnaire was constructed in the light of related literature. The questionnaire consisted of 29 statements which were divided into two parts: "causes of academic stress, and "consequences of academic stress" There were 15 statements for academic stress causes and 14 statements for academic stress consequences. This questionnaire was based on 5-point Likert-type scale. For this study, expert opinion was used for the validity the research instrument. The researchers presented the questionnaire to the experts with a request for review and validate in the light of the research objectives. After this the questionnaire was administrated to 20 students of Hazara University who were the part of population but were not included in the sample of the study. The data obtained through this pilot-testing was used for calculating reliability coefficient Cronbach alpha and its value was found to be 0.74. that was useful in carrying out research on causes and consequences of academic stress. For collecting data, the researchers administrated questionnaire among sample students from three

universities of Hazara division (Hazara University Mansehra, University of Haripur, and Abbottabad University of Science and Technology). The researchers considered the aspects of respondents' willingness, unanimity, and confidentiality while collecting data in order to maintain research ethics. The collected data was quantified in the light of responses, and was analyzed using mean score, percentage, and ANOVA and post-HOC tests.

The scores of causes and consequences of stress were used to determine three levels: low, moderate/average, and high. For determining these levels, the cut-points to be used were: 3.34-5.00= high level, 1.67- 3.33= average level, and 0.00-1.66= low level as suggested by Hassan, Samah, Shaffril, and D'Silva (2011).

Results

The results and interpretations are presented in the following tables by keeping the objectives of the study.

Table No. 1

University Students' Views About Academic Stress levels

Statements	Frequency						
	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
1 I feel restless when I have to take surprise test.	160 26.6%	141 23.4%	43 7.1%	45 7.5%	56 9.3%	56 9.3%	101 16.8%
2 After taking examination, I feel the state of depression.	185 30.7%	144 23.9%	53 7.1%	30 7.5%	37 9.3%	67 9.3%	86 16.8%
3 I am in the state of worry when I think about the consequences of failing in examination.	175 29.1%	145 24.1%	35 5.8%	39 6.5%	49 8.1%	64 10.8%	95 15.8%
4 Lower performance in test through me in a fear of having negative comments.	183 30.4%	142 23.6%	37 6.1%	38 6.3%	38 6.3%	56 9.3%	108 17.9%
5 Assignments in University bring me in a state of being overburdened.	158 26.2%	110 18.3%	36 6.0%	25 4.2%	40 6.6%	87 14.5%	146 24.3%
6 I feel worried about my grades.	129 21.4%	127 21.1%	37 6.1%	37 6.1%	54 9.0%	98 16.3%	119 19.8%

1= Never, 2= Rarely, 3= Once in a month, 4= Once in Fortnight, 5= Once a week, 6=Once a day, 7= Every day.

Statement No.1 presents the analysis of surprise test related stress. It shows that 35% of the students had feelings of restless with low frequency, 15% students had stress with average frequency, and 54% students had stress with high frequency due to surprise test.

Regarding stress after taking examination, 35% of the students had feeling of depression with low frequency after taking examination, while 15% students had this feeling with average frequency, and 55% of the students had this feeling with high frequency.

Regarding stress related to thinking about consequences of failing in exams, 35% of the university students had feelings of worry with low frequency, 12% had this feeling with average frequency, and 53% had this feeling with high frequency.

Regarding fear for having negative comments on low performance in test, 34% of the university students had these feeling with low frequency, 12% of the students had this fear with moderate level frequency, and in 54% students this fear prevailed with high frequency.

For the stress caused by overloaded assignments in the universities, 45% university students had a feeling of being overloaded with low frequency, 10% of the students felt it with average frequency and 45% of the students felt it with high frequency.

Regarding stress about grades, 45% of the university students were worried in this regard with low frequency, 12% students were worried with average frequency, and 42% students were worried with high frequency about their grades.

Table No.2
University Students' views about Causes of Academic Stress

S. No.	Statements	Frequency					Mean
		1	2	3	4	5	
1	I cannot attend my classes regularly.	223 37.0%	195 32.4%	3 5%	94 15.6%	87 14.5%	2.38
2	I can't understand teachers lecture.	148 24.6%	237 39.4%	14 2.3%	115 19.1%	87 14.5%	2.59
3	Heavy academic workload makes me depressed.	129 21.4%	186 30.9%	13 2.3%	171 28.4%	103 17.1%	2.89
4	My teachers are not supportive.	164 27.2%	229 38.0%	12 2.0%	119 19.8%	78 13.0%	2.54
5	Teachers biased behavior makes me irritated.	118 19.6%	233 38.7%	18 3.0%	146 24.3%	87 14.5%	2.78
6	An excessive assignment during the exam makes me worry.	115 19.1%	199 33.1%	17 2.8%	187 31.1%	84 14.0%	2.87
7	I think library facilities are inadequate.	142 23.6%	215 35.7%	22 3.7%	142 23.6%	81 13.5%	2.67
8	I take pressure of exams too much.	154 25.6%	194 32.2%	12 2.0%	136 22.6%	105 17.4%	2.75
9	Unjustified punishment by teachers makes me angry.	137 22.8%	190 31.6%	11 1.8%	166 27.6%	98 16.3%	2.84
10	Incorrect responses in class make me guilty.	135 22.4%	200 33.2%	18 3.0%	155 25.7%	94 15.6%	2.78

1= Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Undecided,4=Agree, 5= Strongly Agree

The analyzed data of statement No.1 revealed that 69% of university students do not feel a cause for stress that they cannot attend their classes, while for 30% of students it is the cause of stress.

According to the data reflected in statement No.2, 64% of the students disagreed that they were not able to understand teachers' lectures while 45% students agreed with this statement.

Analysis of statement No.3, 52% of the students did not have feeling of depression due to the heavy workload at the university level while 45% students did feel depressed due to this reason.

Data of statement No.4 regarding non-supportive behavior of teachers as a cause of stress reflects that 56% of students negated this reason while 33% of the students agreed with this cause of stress.

Analysis of statement No.5 shows that 58% of the university students disagreed about teachers' biased behavior as a cause of stress while 39% students agreed with this cause.

According to the statement No. 6, 52% students disagreed about excessive assignments as a cause of stress during exam while 45% students agreed with this view.

Results of statement No. 7 regarding inadequate library facilities as cause of stress, 59% of the students disagreed while 37% of the students agreed with this cause.

Result of statement No. 8 regarding too much pressure of exam as a cause of stress, 58% of the university students disagreed while 39% students agreed.

Statement No. 9 regarding unjustified punishment by teachers as a cause of stress, 54% of the students disagreed, whereas 44% of the students showed agreement about this cause.

Analysis of 10th statement regarding feeling guilty due to incorrect response in the class as a cause of stress, 56% of the university students disagreed while 41% students agreed that it was a cause of stress for them.

Academic stress consequences

Table No. 3
University students' views about Academic Stress Consequences

S.No.	Statements	Frequency					Mean
		1	2	3	4	5	
1	I have headaches mostly.	157 26.0%	198 32.8%	16 2.6%	137 22.7%	94 15.6%	2.70
2	I have low academic performance.	157 26.0%	230 38.1%	16 2.6%	137 22.7%	63 10.4%	2.58
3	I cannot concentrate properly on	132	224	12	164	72	2.58

	my studies.	21.2%	33.3%	2.2%	30.0%	13.0%	
4	I have lost the potential to do creative work.	138	238	11	143	74	2.63
		22.8%	39.4%	1.8%	23.7%	12.%	
5	I cannot make adequate preparation of examination.	132	224	12	164	72	2.70
		21.9%	37.1%	2.0%	27.2%	11.9%	
6	I like being isolated.	134	217	28	144	88	2.71
		22.2%	35.9%	4.6%	22.7%	14.6%	
7	I have depression.	175	201	10	140	76	2.57
		29.0%	33.3%	1.7%	23.3%	12.6%	
8	I cannot participate in classroom activities.	182	217	10	118	77	2.43
		30.1%	35.9%	1.7%	19.5%	12.7%	
9	I am under the burden of unnecessary thoughts.	168	200	8	130	98	2.65
		24.8%	32.5%	1.3%	21.5%	16.2%	
10	My heartbeat increases suddenly.	146	216	11	146	84	2.68
		24.2%	35.4%	24.2%	13.6%	2.2%	

1= Never, 2=Rarely, 3= Sometimes, 4=Frequently, 5= Always

Analysis of statement No. 1 shows that 59% university students have no headaches while thirty-eight (38%) university students have headaches mostly.

Data regarding statement No.2 shows that 64% students' academic performance is not low, whereas performance of 33% university is low.

Data regarding statement No.3 indicates that the only 36% of the students cannot frequently concentrate on their studies while 71% of the students have these symptoms with very low frequency.

Statistical values regarding statement No. 4 indicate that 62% university students rarely lose the potential of performing creative work while 36% of the students frequently have these symptoms.

Analysis of statement No. 5 shows that 59% university students had rarely a symptom that they could not make adequate preparation for exams while 39% of students had frequently this symptom.

Analysis regarding statement No.6 shows that only 37% of the university students had liking for being isolated with high frequency while 58% of the students had this liking with low frequency.

Analysis regarding statement No.7 shows that 36% of the students frequently had depression while 62% of the students rarely had this symptom.

Analysis of statement No.8 shows that only 32% of the students frequently faced a situation that they could not participate in classroom activities while 66% students faced this situation rarely.

From the analysis of statement No.9 it is clear that only 38% of the university students frequently faced the situation of being under the burden of unnecessary through while 61% of the students faced this situation rarely.

From the analysis of statement No.10 it is evident that only 16% of the university students frequently faced sudden increase in heart beat while 60% of the students rarely faced this situation.

Table No.4

ANOVA showing difference of consequences for students having different levels of stress causes

Comparison of group	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p
Between group	4227.39	2	2113.6	160.8	.00
Within group	7857.67	598	13.140		
Total	12085.07	600			

The analyzed data of the table No.4 indicates the consequences of stress among the groups of students having different levels of stress causes. It shows that there was a significant difference ($F=160.8, P<0.05$) among the consequences of stress of the students having different causes of stress. The difference between different pairs of groups has been highlight in following table of post-HOC test.

Table No.5

Post-hoc Test showing effect of academic stress causes on consequences

Comparative levels of stress		Mean difference (I-J)	Std. Error	p
L.TAS (I)	L.TAS (J)			
Low level of academic stress	Average level of academic stress	-2.87618	.34222	.00
Average level of academic stress	High level of academic stress	-3.88659	.40629	.00

High level of academic stress	Low level of academic stress	6.76277	.37930	.00
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Table No.5 indicates a significantly greater stress among students with average causes of academic stress ($i-j=2.88$, $P<0.05$) than the students with low level causes of academic stress. Similarly, the stress among the students with a high level of causes of stress resulted in significantly greater consequences of stress than the students with average causes of stress ($i-j=3.89$, $P<0.05$) and the students with low causes of stress ($i-j=6.76$, $P<0.05$).

Discussion

This study explored university students’ stress causes and consequences. Regarding the causes of stress, the study revealed that the majority of students frequently faced restlessness due to surprise tests, felt depression due to being unprepared for surprise tests, depression due to examination, fear of failure and lower grades in examination, and overloaded assignments. These findings were in concordant with the findings of the studies by Stenger (2018) and Bhargava and Trivedi (2018) found academic workload and failure to achieve good grades as causes of high stress.

Moreover, the findings of this study indicate that excessive assignments, teachers’ biased behavior and academic workload, and pressure of exams are academic stress causes for the majority of university students. Similarly, studies by Pitt, Opreescu, Tapia, and Gray (2018) and Moksnes, Løhre, Lillefjell, Byrne, and Haugan (2014) also showed excessive assignments, high academic workload, the pressure of exams as causes of students’ stress.

As consequences of stress causes, the study revealed that a substantial proportion of the students had symptoms like headache, low academic performance, loss of potential to do creative work, failure to make adequate preparation for exams, like to be isolated, depression, failure to participate in classroom activities, having the burden of unnecessary thoughts, and sudden increase in heartbeat. These findings are also supported by studies conducted by Ansari et al. (2013) and Maheshwari and Shaukat (2019) who reported similar symptoms among students as a result of academic stress. The findings of the current study and previous studies indicate that students face similar causes and consequences of academic stress without any distinction between culture and region. This study covered the population of Hazara Division of Province Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), therefore the findings of this study can neither be generalized to Province KP nor to the whole country. Therefore, there is a need to conduct further studies that may cover the population of the whole province of KP and the whole country.

Conclusions and Recommendations

University students face academic stress because of surprise tests, an overload of assignments, and exam results. Besides these, non-supportive behavior of teachers, biased behavior of teachers, the pressure of exams, lack of library facilities, and unjustified punishment from teachers are also the causes of stress among students. The consequences of academic stress for university students are demotivation for learning, low grades in test and exams, loss of the potential to do creative work, and isolation. Depression, lack of participation, overthinking, sudden fast heartbeat, and defective preparedness for exams are also the product of academic stress.

A substantial proportion of university students feel depressed, feel worried about exams result, feel an overload of assignments and they are worried about grades. Therefore, parents are recommended to support students in the preparation of examinations, and provide an environment at home that is conducive for learning. Furthermore, it is recommended that teachers may arrange bimonthly counseling sessions for one weak in order to identify the problems of students and formulate and take measures to overcome the academic stress.

Keeping in view the different causes of stress (i.e. excessive assignments, lack of library facilities, pressure due to exams, unjustified punishment etc.) the university teachers may consider the consequences of stress and take measures to minimize stress causes e.g. they may treat equally with all students, and assign group assignments to avoid academic workload. Furthermore, the university administration may arrange proper library facilities for students. In addition, considering the consequences of academic stress, teachers and parents may provide guidance and counseling services in order to minimize the causes as well as consequences of stress.

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