

# Effect of Academic Distress on Academic Performance of Undergraduate Students

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This study examined academic distress and its effect on academic performance of male and female undergraduate students studying in Natural and Social Sciences disciplines. For this purpose the data was collected from 480 students selected through simple random sampling from public sector universities of Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa, Pakistan. Data was collected through a questionnaire. The data was analysed through mean score and regression. The findings showed that university students experience moderate academic distress and it is affecting their academic performance. It was suggested that students be encouraged to engage in a variety of social activities and advised to consult with the students' counselling centre to overcome academic distress related problems and issues.

**Key words:** *Academic Distress, Academic Performance.*

## INTRODUCTION

Academic distress is a combined effect of academic-related requirements that exceed the individual's accessible adaptive resources. Academic stress occurs when academic related requirements surpass the resources available to a person that he/she adapts to (Wilks, 2008). Kadapatti & Vijayalaxmi (2012) and Lal (2014) described academic distress as a state when the demand for academics exceed the available internal and external resources of a student's cognition. He further stated that academic pressure, academic conflict and academic anxiety are the associated factors of academic distress. Other causes of academic distress are: bad

time management (Macan, Shahani, Dipboye & Phillips, 1990); preparation for exams (Bartram, Yadegarfar & Baldwin, 2009); coursework or syllabus (Robotham, 2008); transition during the adjustment period (Baker, 2003); high student competition and information overload (Sinha, Shrama & Nepal, 2007); research and study pressure (Dahlin, Joneborg & Runeson, 2005); requirement to meet assessment deadlines (Misra & McKean, 2000); students admission process in colleges (Busari, 2012); and course load (Talib & Ziaur-Rehman, 2012) problems encountered by institution's environment (Adesola and Arowolo, 2014). Beside this other stressors specified by different studies are: overcrowded lecture halls; inadequate resources; heavy work load due to course/s; academic pressure; restricted opportunities; high competition (J. E. Agolla & Ongori, 2009; Awino & Agolla, 2008; Erkutlu & Chafra, 2006; Ongori, 2007; Scott, 2007; U. Sinha, Sharma & Mahendra, 2001); and since create fear, tension and anxiety and affect the academic achievement of students. Pressure to perform well in examinations and tests and time allocated are the academic stressors for students (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2006; Misra & McKean, 2000; Polychronopoulou & Divaris, 2005).

The consequences of academic stress are health issues. The demands of everyday life, even in high school, have caused the development of this disease in children and adolescents more and more frequently, where both endogenous and exogenous demands combine to adversely affect academic performance and student achievement (Pozos-Radillo, 2014).

The academic distress occurs when stress exceeds the willpower of students. Extreme and prolonged form of stress badly affect the academic performance (Richlin-Klonsky & Hoe, 2003). Researchers (Keinan & Malach-Pines, 2007; Topper, 2007; Vermunt & Steensma, 2005) explained academic distress caused due to the imbalance between environmental pressure (stressors) and the ability of individuals to handle it. Students are vulnerable to experiencing academic distress in educational institutes i.e., university (Smith, Johal, Wadsworth, Smith & Peters, 2000). Distress depends on the time limit and difficulty level of tests or exams. Researchers (Agolla, 2009; Agolla & Ongori, 2009; Kadapatti & Vijayalaxmi, 2012; Keinan & Malach-Pines, 2007; Ongori, 2007) have recognised symptoms of stress such as energy loss, depressed mood, increased blood pressure, increased cravings, concentration trouble, impatience, nervousness, and low academic performance strain.

Misra & McKean (2000) indicated in Person-Environment Model that extremely stressful experiences can be considered as demanding or scary for people. Understanding educational objectives as a task brings tension, and in turn, this stress produces a sense of competence and increases learning capacity. However, Khan, Altaf & Kausar (2013) stated that sometimes stress becomes futile and the predictable sense of failure decreases the level of academic achievement. Stress is the part of life and especially academic lives and, in conjunction with the demands of academic life, can influence students' coping strategies. Academic work is often stressful tasks (Agolla & Ongori, 2009) and students recorded their experience of high academic distress while class competition, planning and taking exams, and grasping

enormous amounts of the syllabus in a comparatively short period of time (Rawson, Bloomer & Kendall, 1994).

Dwyer & Cummings (2001) reported that stress was the most prevalent factor of all health factors influencing the academic performance of undergraduate students and contributing to a lower grade point average (GPA). Stress not only affects physical health harmfully but also causes many social and psychological issues (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). According to Williamson, Birmaher, Ryan & Dahl (2005) stressful life experiences are substantially increased, leading to poor academic results, anxious and depressed young people.

Excessive homework, intense classroom competition, fear of educational failure, and a shortage of pocket money have all been reported as major sources of student academic stress, (Fairbrother & Warn, 2003). Academic stressors include poor interpersonal relationships in class or with lecturers, as well as family problems. Overcrowded classrooms, semester system practices, and lack of resources for academic activities are among institutional level stressors (Ongori, 2007; Robotham, 2008). Kumar & Jejurkar, (2005) found academic factors i.e. time management issues, financial issues, coordination with professors, individual purposes, social behaviour, lack of support system adjustment in the academic community are the causes of academic stress among students. Students go through a variety of stress situations. Admissions process, high parental expectations, complex content in curriculum, unsuitable school timings, unrealistic ratio of student-teacher, classroom environment, unhealthy interaction between student-teacher, harsh rules of discipline, number of difficult assignments, pedagogy of teachers, indifferent attitude of teachers, and more focus on academics are sources of stress (Fletcher & Scott, 2010; Wilks, 2008; Masih & Gulrez, 2006). This stress should not be underestimated as it adversely affects overall adjustment of students (Hussain, Kumar & Husain, 2008).

Academic distress pervades students' lives and appears to negatively affect their emotional and physical health and their academic success (Akgun & Ciarrochi, 2003; MacGeorge, Samter & Gillihan, 2005). Previous research indicated that individuals with a high degree of learned resourcefulness cope with induced stress and it is important to avoid the degradation of students' performance by preventing the harm to their cognitive skills more effectively (Caldera et al., 2007; Misra & Castillo, 2004; Struthers, Perry & Menec, 2000).

Several studies have found an association between academic stress and low academic performance (Linn & Zeppa, 1984; Rayle & Chung, 2007; Wilks, 2008). Felsten & Wilcox, (1992b) and Blumberg & Flaherty (1985) found an important adverse association between college students' stress levels and their academic success.

Struthers et al., (2000) also indicated that lower course grades were correlated with academic distress. Owing to tests, tasks, time pressure, grade pressure, and confusion, students

experience academic distress. To sum up, this tension has a negative impact on the academic performance of students.

## Methodology

The study adopted descriptive design, to examine the current situation of undergraduate student's academic distress and its effect on their academic performance. The study population was university students enrolled in different social and Natural Sciences disciplines in public universities of Khyber Pakhtoon Khwa, Pakistan. Private sector universities were excluded from the study. The academic session was autumn 2018. For this purpose 480 students were randomly selected through simple random sampling techniques. An academic distress questionnaire was developed and it was validated. The reliability of questionnaire was 0.87. The researchers personally collected the data and was analysed through mean score and regression.

**Table 1: Academic Distress in undergraduate student**

S.No	Sources of academic distress		A	O	ST	S	N	Mean
1	lack of confidence for academic success	f	97	71	125	92	95	2.96
		%	20.2	14.8	26.0	19.2	19.8	
2	not able to concentrate as usual	f	46	151	153	55	75	3.08
		%	9.6	31.5	31.9	11.5	15.6	
3	hard to stay motivated for taking classes	f	52	115	141	55	117	2.85
		%	10.8	24.0	29.4	11.5	24.4	
4	unable to keep up with class work	f	39	97	178	78	88	2.84
		%	8.1	20.2	37.1	16.2	18.3	
5	worry about understanding lectures	f	50	154	148	61	67	3.12
		%	10.4	32.1	30.8	12.7	14.0	
6	get depressed after taking a test	f	53	118	170	68	71	3.03
		%	11.0	24.6	35.4	14.2	14.8	
7	freeze up during final exam	f	71	71	156	92	90	2.88
		%	14.8	14.8	32.5	19.2	18.8	
8	feel worried about result	f	108	98	133	51	90	3.17
		%	22.5	20.4	27.7	10.6	18.8	
Cumulative Mean Score								2.99

Categorisation of mean score: 5.00-3.50 high stress, 2.50-3.49 moderate stress and 1.00-2.49 low stress.

Table 1 shows undergraduate students' academic distress. The results shows that students have moderate level of academic distress due to: lack of confidence about their academic success ( $M = 2.96$ ); not able to concentrate as well as usual ( $M = 3.08$ ); hard to stay

motivated about taking their classes ( $M = 2.85$ ); unable to keep up with the class work ( $M = 2.84$ ); worried about understanding lectures ( $M = 3.12$ ); get depressed after taking a test ( $M = 3.03$ ); freeze up during final exam ( $M = 2.88$ ); and feel worried about their result ( $M = 3.17$ ). The cumulative mean score shows the students have moderate level of academic distress.

**Table 2: Effect of Academic distress on student's academic achievement**

Variable	Model 1 B	Model 2	
		B	95% CI
(Constant)	2.699		(19.687, 0.000)
gender of respondent	0.228	0.222	(5.004, 0.000)
department of respondent	-0.069	-0.069	(-1.552, 0.121)
academic distress	-0.084	-0.127	(-2.445, 0.015)
R Square	0.071		
F	12.081		

Table 2 shows that academic distress for male and female students from Natural and Social Sciences departments contributes ( $R^2 = 0.71$ ) 7.1% variation in the academic achievement of students at the university level. The statistical values  $F = 12.08$ ,  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$  (gender),  $p = 0.015 < 0.05$  (discipline) indicate that significant difference for the gender and academic distress as predicting variable for academic achievement of students. While discipline (Natural and Social Sciences)  $p = 0.121 < 0.05$  is insignificant contributor of academic achievement of university students.

## Conclusion and Discussion

The study was conducted to examine the academic distress of university students and its impact on their academic achievement. It was found that there is a moderate level of academic distress among university students. Academic distress effects the academic achievement of university students. The finding of Ali, Khan & Majeed, (2020) and Ezekiel (2015) and Khan et al., (2013) also showed significant academic stress on the performance of students.

The study findings are matched with Saipanish (2003) and Sadock, Kaplan & Sadock (2000) and who claimed that academic stress can inhibit and suppress learning. Sohail (2013) conducted the study to find out the effect of academic stress on academic success on the medical students and he concluded that there was a significant negative relationship between academic stress and academic success. Ali et al., (2020) indicated that the students experience

significant stress in their academic life which has a negative effect on their academic results. Jones (2018) reported that anxiety of students may leads to academic concerns. Owusu & Essel (2017) reported that academic stress leads to low academic performance. Shukla, Tombari, Toland & Danner (2015) also concluded that parental support acts as a booster for academic success. Akgun & Ciarrochi (2003) revealed that academic stress was correlated negatively with academic outcomes.

However Chua, Ng & Park (2018) found that university students did not expect low academic performance with high academic distress. While Bataineh (2013) also found no significant effect of academic stress on students' academic achievement. This negative correlation was moderated, as predicted, by acquired resourcefulness. The grades of low-resourceful students were adversely affected by high academic stress but had no impact on high-resourceful students.

Results showed a significant impact of academic distress on students' academic achievement. This result is consistent with previous research findings that suggest an inverse relationship between stress and academic success (Felsten & Wilcox, 1992a; Struthers et al., 2000). There is a clear relationship between decreased academic performance and stressful life events among college students, as well as a link between health-related quality of life and stress (Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Shelley & Whalen, 2005; Misra & McKean, 2000).

The study found a moderate level of academic distress among university students. Gender is a significant contributor of academic distress and effects their academic achievement. Similarly Misra & Castillo (2004) found differences in the perception and reaction to stress in male and female. Jogaratnam & Buchanan (2004) found differences between male and female students regarding the time pressure factor of stress. Backović, Ilić Živojinović, Maksimović & Maksimović (2012) also found difference in the level of perceived academic stress between male and female students and further reported that male students have higher level of academic stress. According to Sulaiman, Hassan, Sopian & Abdullah (2009) there is gender wise differences in different level of stress and they supported it with the explanation that females are more emotional than males. Similar results were reported by Calvarese (2015); Dhull & Kumari (2015); Ebrahim (2016), and Sulaiman et al., (2009), they reported that female students recorded higher academic stress than male students, The study's findings, however, support Mishra's (2018) assertion that male B. Ed students experience more academic stress than females. Males are assumed to be academically superior to females by parents, teachers and students themselves. Attempts to meet these standards or pressure to perform better than others, especially women, can lead to stress and anxiety. It may also be due to males' proclivity to procrastinate and be less serious about their studies than females.



These findings contradict the findings of Farhan & Khan (2015; Gonmei & Devendiran (2017); Yikealo, Yemane & Karvinen (2018); and Khan et al., (2013) who found that sex does not have any influence on reported experience of stress among the students. Although Khan et al., (2013) discovered that academic stress has a negative impact on student success and that there is no substantial difference between males and females on the Perceived Stress Scale, academic distress is not a significant contributor to the academic achievement of Natural and Social Sciences disciplines university students.

The results contradict with Aihie & Ohanaka (2019) who found that Physical Sciences students experience higher levels of academic stress than Social Sciences and Education undergraduate students. Similarly, students in the Science discipline had higher academic stress levels than students in the Humanities and Commerce streams (Kauts, 2016). Science students had higher levels of academic stress than Arts students in secondary school (Prabu, 2015).

Similarly Kauts (2016) found Science stream had higher academic stress levels than students in the Humanities and Commerce. Secondary school students in Science subjects had higher levels of academic stress than Arts students (Prabu, 2015).

One of the potential causes of this inconsistency is that they were concerned about their lessons and results. They believe they will not be able to excel in school. It's difficult to remain motivated to attend their classes. They are usually exhausted after taking a test, and during the final exam, they are unable to concentrate and complete their classwork.



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