

## STRESSFUL EVENTS AND SOLUTIONS: A CASE STUDY WITH B.SC. UNDERGRADUATES OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA.

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### INTRODUCTION

Human beings, like other organisms, are vulnerable to outside pressures, and the coping ability of an individual varies with time, space and the intensity of events (DeBord, 1996). Mental health is clearly linked to retention and academic performance of undergraduates (Backels & Wheeler, 2001). Undergraduate students' perceptions of the level of distress they experience at transition points *viz.*, first year entry and final year completion, and the impact of this distress on their academic performance were described by Rickinson (1998). Although a large number of former studies on the Open University of Sri Lanka have emphasized student drop-outs (Ismail, 1992), characteristics of open distance learners (Jayatilake *et al.*, 1997), and quantification of English as a second language difficulties, no studies have documented the distress and stressful events experienced by the Open University students. Therefore, the main objectives of this study were to:

- rank the main stressful events in the personal and academic lives of Open University students.
- Collect students' feedback on possible remedial measures.

### METHODOLOGY

The survey method was used for gathering information according to Kuruppuarachchi *et al.* (2002). The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-30) and a Piloted and Validated Questionnaire were administered to 10% (156 students) of the target population using the stratified random sampling method. The items of the GHQ-30 are usually represented as a single score which provides a measure of the number of psychiatric symptoms (Huppert *et al.*, 1989). The Piloted and Validated Questionnaire consists of two parts. Items 1 to 16 of the questionnaire were related to personal information and items 17 and 18 focused on the main stressful events which were ranked by students in their personal and university lives, respectively. The open-ended items of the second questionnaire describe the stressful problems (item 19) and remedial measures taken (item 20) to overcome the problems by the students. Both questionnaires were personally administered during academic activities after the first semester. The qualitative data was coded and used for statistical analyses (Beck *et al.*, 1997). The responses of open-ended items (items 19 and 20) were used for descriptive purposes. The frequencies and percentages were calculated using a SPSS® (Version 4.0, IBM, USA) computer software package.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study reveal that undergraduates consider economic problems (22.6%) as the most serious issue in their personal lives. Conflicts between the roles of family and education are much less (4.5%) than the conflicts between employment and education (21.1%). More than one-fourth (28.6%) of students reported that they face problems in university life, which they perceive as personal problems. 23.3% of undergraduates face problems due to future uncertainty and all are in distress (Table 1).

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(18.8%), difficulties in practical classes (12.0%), reading materials (10.5%), evaluation systems (8.3%), student-teacher relationships (6.8%), lack of awareness of the ODL system (6.9%) and finally accommodation problems as distressing (Table 2).

Table 1: Distress related to most stressful events in personal life (Items ranked by students)

Most stressful problems in day today life	Frequency	Percentage	% Distress
Economic problems	30	22.6	83.0
Problems due to future uncertainty	31	23.3	67.7
Conflict between role in the family and education	6	4.5	66.6
Conflit between job and education	28	21.1	57.1
Problems in university life	38	28.6	52.6

The responses for open ended item 20 were categorized according to the information given by respondents (Table 3). The results showed that the B.Sc. undergraduates were distressed about the OUSL grading evaluation scheme (14.2%), day schools (13.3%), student teacher relationships (13.3%) and difficulties in practical classes (11.6%). They were least distressed about conflicts between home and education (0.6%). Exam distress was caused by a higher number of exams which are out of self study packages, weekday exams, and exams that overlap with other activities. The students suggested solutions to exam distress, including offering weekend exams and making gaps between tests. The distress over day school and practical classes was caused by scheduling day schools throughout the week, enrolling a large number of students for day schools, and allotting limited space. The students suggested solutions such as the introduction of more self assignments, decentralization of day schools, and arrangement of day schools and practical classes on weekends or holidays with making sufficient time gaps. The distress over student-teacher relationships is caused by no availability of a responsible person on weekends to get advice, and teachers maintain wider relationship gaps. Students suggested solutions are included an increase in extra curricular activities, willingness to communicate, and academic works focusing on student's other problems in a friendly manner. The distress over printed materials includes disorganized materials, language barriers, course materials that do not cater to self study, and untimely delivery. Further, students emphasized solutions are revising course materials in a user friendly manner and providing the complete study package at registration.

Table 2: The key factors of university education that cause distress

Key factors	Selection (%)	Distress (%)
Accommodation	5.3	100.0
Communication	5.4	85.0
Language	18.8	80.0
Time management difficulties	26.3	62.9
Reading materials	10.5	57.1
Lack of awareness on ODL	6.9	55.6
Problems in evaluation system	8.3	54.5
Practical classes	12	50.0
Student-teacher relationship	6.8	44.4

The majority of undergraduates suggested solutions to decrease stress created by day schools (17.9%), practical classes (15.4%), evaluation systems (10.5%) and problems in student teacher relationships (9.0%). However, their suggestions for improvement of printed materials (4.8%) were lesser than the suggestions for traveling and accommodation (6.6%), administration (6.4%), finance (5.5%), physical space (5.1%) and language problems (4.8%).

In general, the ODL students are expecting conventional teaching methodologies because they are less aware about the ODL methodologies.

The contribution of economic difficulties to the students' distress is considerably higher because the majority of students are unemployed (55.0%) and depend on parents for financial requirements as has already been pointed out by Brown and Yulle (1983). Furthermore, financial factors increase the risk of high distress and are likely to take on more importance as the participation rate of socio-economically disadvantaged students increases (Cvetkovski *et al.*, 2012).

Table 3. Open responses of the undergraduates' identified frequencies of causes of distress and suggestions made

Causes	Causes (%)	Suggestions (%)
Evaluation	14.2	10.5
Day school	13.3	17.9
Student-teacher relationship	13.3	9.0
Practical classes	11.6	15.4
Printed materials	10.6	4.8
Administrative problems (system errors)	9.5	6.4
Traveling and accommodation	7.4	6.6
Physical space	6.3	5.1
Language	5.7	4.8
Economic difficulties (high cause fees etc.)	3.8	5.5
Conflict between education and job	2.5	-
Future uncertainty	0.9	1.0
Conflict between home and education	0.6	0.6

activities (Jayatilake) is an indication of an University has no and students needs. sidered as activities at as "facilitators" perceive that the

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The following remedial measures could be proposed in which staff and students should be provided a thorough knowledge on the ODL system. The OUSL learning materials should be revised and produced in a student friendly manner to decrease distress. Decentralization of all academic activities and development of an efficient way of handling assignments is also suggested. It is beneficial for B.Sc. undergraduates if more weightage is given to home assignments. Two-way communication systems using audio-visual multimedia would be an advantage for the ODL system. It will be more feasible to initiate a single center for academic communication within the faculty.

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