PERCEIVED SOURCES OF STRESS AMONG UNDEGRADUATES: A STUDY OF PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN COLOMBO DISTRICT

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INTRODUCTION

Education system is considered the stamina of any nation where universities play a vital role by prospering lives of people through knowledge in variety of disciplines. In Sri Lanka only 17.2% of students (Central Bank Annual Report, 2010) can get the chance to be an undergraduate in a national university among those who sat for the G.C.E A/L examination. An undergraduate is a student in a university who has not taken the first degree yet, but reading for the bachelor's degree. Students in universities have different expectations and goals that they want to fulfill, which are only possible to fulfill if the students' expectations and goals are integrated with the university system (Gokhan, 2008). Since both number and the percentage of university students in Sri Lanka have been gradually increasing, now the concern on mental health of undergraduates has become more focused than ever before.

Public universities are considered the most prominent place of higher education system in Sri Lanka, where valuable and quality graduates are being produced. Students those who enter to the national university system are the best performers in G.C.E. A/L examination. They enter to the university system with higher expectation/s. On the other hand public university is a place where huge amount of academic works are to be completed successfully by entrants. Following variety of professional courses or doing part time or full time job/s while reading for the degree creates unmanageable pressure on students in today's ever competitive learning environment (Gokhan, 2008). Thus, it is very significant to investigate the stressors and gravity of each stressor among undergraduates in Sri Lankan public universities, as it will help to initiate policy decisions to manage stress among students.

It is important to notify that there is a slight difference between stress and the term distress though some writers have recognize these two concepts as the same. Stress can be cumulative and that accumulated stress could be identified as distress which is harmful. Thus, distress is negative and leads to the reduction of academic performance of students (Gokhan, 2008).

University students show a greater level of psychological stress than their non-university peers (Sayiner, 2006). Stress leads undergraduates to make suicide, drug abuse, depression, anxiety and so many other physical disorders if it isn't treated well at the right stage before it accumulated within the student. Academic stress among students have been researched on, and have identified stressors as, too many assignments, competition, fear of failure, lack of pocket money, poor relationships, problems at home (King, et al., 2011). According to Acharya (2008) the institutional/university level stressors are overcrowded lecture-halls, semester system, and inadequate resources to perform academic work/s.

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An undergraduate should worthwhile to the society to contribute for the betterment of economic and social development. Thus, the prosperity of any nation highly depends on the quality of the graduates. That is why in recent years the increasing effects of stress experienced by undergraduates have received much attention. Hence, it is evident that studying the sources of stress among undergraduates is significant. This research study concentrates on perceived sources of stress among Sri Lankan undergraduates as stress among undergraduates has become a pressing social theme in many countries now.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study was to recognize the perceived sources of stress among undergraduates in Sri Lankan state universities.

Further two specific objectives were established in order to accomplish the above mentioned main objective.

1. To measure and identify the gravity of each stressor
2. To prioritize top ten stressors as per their gravity

METHODOLOGY

The study can be regarded as an explanatory research and at the same time this can be seen as a causal study. In this study researcher interference was minimal, and this can be regarded as a cross sectional study. The unit of analysis was an individual undergraduate. The population for the study comprised all the undergraduates who are studying in public universities located in Colombo district. According to the University Grant Commission (2010), it is about 31744. Convenience sampling was applied to select the sample. Researchers surveyed 509 undergraduates from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, University of Kelaniya, University of Moratuwa and University of Colombo. In the sample 41% was represented by the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. Moreover the selected sample includes equal amount of male and female undergraduates. The sample indicated that 98% of respondents were unmarried while 60% of the respondents were following a professional course other than the degree. This study was mainly based on primary data, collected through a survey. A self - administered questionnaire was used to collect data. Used questionnaire was pre - tested through a pilot survey, and it met the acceptable standards of validity and reliability. Collected data were analyzed using the package SPSS 16.0. Descriptive statistics were used to present the demographic information of the sample and statistical measures such as mean, standard deviation and percentages were used to identify top ten stressors and the gravity of each.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ten factors which show higher mean value have recognized as top ten stressors out of 42 stressors identified in literature. Table 1 exhibits the top ten stressors with the mean and standard deviation of each. Nine out of top ten stressors are academic related and this is consistent with the research findings of Yusoff et al. (2010). Huge work load of undergraduates is the major factor of stress. Sri Lankan universities are still following some traditional modes of learning & teaching rather than going for latest & updated techniques used in developed countries. This typical academic cycle can be another reason to have academic related stress.

It is found that lack of time to review what have been learnt is the most influential factor affecting to stress of undergraduates in Sri Lanka. Large amount of contents to be learnt and heavy work load have been ranked as the second and fourth respectively. Yusoff et al. (2010) identified, lack of time to review subjects was at the third place. When consider the Sri Lankan undergraduates this slight difference may be due to high work load for students. In Sri

Lankan universities, a semester includes 5 months coupled with 5 or more than 5 course units. Those large course units need more time to learn. More than half; 60% of students were following other professional courses. Having huge work load to handle in a short period is validated again through this. That's why they perceive lack of time to review what have learnt in the university and other professional courses and larger amount of work as key stressors.

Table 1: Top ten stressors

Rank	Stressor	Degree of Stress	
		Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Lack of time to review what have been learnt	4.02	0.910
2	Large amount of contents to be learnt	4.01	0.904
3	Tests/Examinations	3.94	0.973
4	Heavy workload	3.90	0.990
5	Getting poor marks	3.79	1.094
6	Need to do well (higher self expectation)	3.78	0.991
7	Assignments	3.76	1.147
8	Inflexible academic schedules	3.64	1.020
9	Lack of time for family and friends	3.46	1.039
10	Having difficulty of understanding the content	3.43	1.094

Source: Statistical Data

Yusoff et al. (2010) revealed that tests and examination are the top ranked stressors among Indian undergraduates. But in this study tests and examinations rank at the third place. After 5 months of the start of each semester undergraduates have to sit for their end semester exam/s. Meanwhile they have to sit for the mid semester exam/s as well. Always undergraduates are exam minded. Thus, they selected the tests and examinations as a prominent determinant of stress. But for some open ended questions they have motioned that if they have more time to review, they can manage their stress up to a favorable extent. That may be the reason for selecting lack of time to review as the top stressor rather than selecting tests and examinations as the first. Researchers found that assignments also exert stress. When doing assignments Sri Lankan undergraduates who are following courses in English medium, find some difficulties in managing English. Presentation of assignments may also a severe burden to them due to lack of presentation skills and language proficiency. These findings are in consistent with the findings of Misra and McKean (2000). He found that academic workload, short semesters coupled with too many assignments, tests and quick preparations for the end semester examination is stressful to university students.

Getting poor marks is ranked as the fifth and this is in line with the findings of Yusoff et al. (2010). Marks are the key performance indicator of undergraduates. Class of the degree depends on their marks or Grade Point Average (GPA). Thus, students are really worrying about academic results and ultimately poor results lead to higher stress. Ongori and Agolla (2009) identified financial problems as one of the three main stressors among university undergraduates. But financial problems were ranked at 32nd by Sri Lankan Undergraduates. This may be due to "Bursary" & "Mahapola" scholarship programs which grant financial assistance to undergraduates on monthly basis.

Poor relationship with girl friend or boy friend was identified as one of the most prominent key stressors by Ongori and Agolla (2009) which is totally different in the tested domain, and undergraduates ranked love affairs and broken love affairs at 33rd. It is noticed that lack of foods is somewhat stressful to them as it shows the mean value of 2.91. This may be due to

inadequate cafeteria facilities and low quality of foods available in canteens and shops in and nearby universities. In conclusion it can be mentioned that academic related factors are the major stressors among undergraduates of state universities in Colombo district.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was conducted with the intention of investigating the perceived sources of stress among a sample of 509 undergraduates studying in Sri Lankan state universities. Convenience sampling was applied to select the sample. Investigation was carried out in all the four state universities in Colombo district. Data were collected via a self - administered questionnaire which met the validity and reliability standards. Mean and Standard Deviation were used to rank identified sources of stress from highest to lowest in terms of their gravity. It is found that, lack of time to review what has been learnt, large amount of contents to be learnt, examinations, heavy workload, getting poor marks, assignments, inflexible academic schedules are among the major determinants of stress. 90% of top ten stressors are academic related. It is hoped that, these findings will help the individual students, lecturers, counselors and university administrators to initiate stress alleviation mechanisms. As same, duration of study leaves, amount of work load and assignments given, amount of contents of subjects plus the way it delivers, and the flexibility of academic schedules / time tables in state universities must also be frequently reviewed.

As the findings of the study are based on survey data gathered only in state universities in Colombo district results may not be valid for other universities. Other intervening and moderating factors affecting to stress are not considered and sample size also may not be significant. However, within its limitations the research study has achieved the set objectives and opened new avenues and directions for future researches. Hence, as a concluding remark it could be stated that, conducting more studies relating to this theme in other universities will help to put additional insight to this research work to a certain extent.

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