

STRESS AMONG UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATES: A CASE STUDY OF UNIVERSITY OF COLOMBO, SRI LANKA

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Abstract: *The main objective of this study is to investigate the academic, personal, socio-cultural and economic factors that cause or increase stress among university students, in Sri Lanka.*

An explorative and qualitative methodology was adopted for the study. Undergraduates of the Faculty of Medicine, Arts, Education, and Management of the University of Colombo are selected as the sample. Twenty semi-structured interviews and four focus group discussions were used as data collection tools based on purposive sampling. The data were analyzed qualitatively based on themes and narration of respondents.

Internal academic workload and different personal relationships as well as external socio-economic and political dynamics always create and increase the preconditions for stress among undergraduates. There some leading factors that directly and subjectively cause and increase the stress among undergraduates of the University of Colombo. They are (1) Academic workload, (2) Economic hardships, (3) Personal relationships, (4) Ragging or collective students' behavior, (5) Hostel life, (6) Cultural shock or pressure. However, these causes are more or less dependent on the financial status of the student's family, faculty and course of study, gender imbalance, knowledge of English and Information and Technology.

The study was conducted only one university of Sri Lanka due time and access constrains.

The study will be useful to understand the issues and challenges faced by university undergraduates and how they lead to stress condition among students. The finding will provide comprehensive knowledge on the personal grievances of students and differences among the students in terms of facilities and opportunities they enjoy in the university life. This study will also generate new knowledge and open platform for critical discussion on students' stress.

The research will be helpful academics and administrators to restructure academic programs to minimize the academic work-related. Universities will promote students' friendly curriculums by introducing more and more language and technology-based infrastructure. This study will also help to identify the personal and political issues ragging and gender-based violence and they will be solved by university administration.

Key Words: *Higher Education, Undergraduates, Stress.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Sri Lankan universities are located around the country and are having their own university sub-culture depending on factors such as history, geographical location, regionalism, size and residential pattern of university and political ideology. Even if school education promotes some socio-economic discrimination among students based on language, ethnicity, religion, and class, higher education has minimized many of these discriminations to a greater extent. Youth in universities are still free from ethnic tension and religious clashes compared to other youth groups. Youth in the higher education sector are strongly integrated and function as a powerful force of the student movement. However, the students' integration in the university is challenged mainly by internal students' political ideology which is supported through the external drives and social class crack based on rural and urban differences and English led lifestyle.

University students face a great deal of pressure and challenges that pose a variety of physical, social and

emotional difficulties. As a result of changing social and emotional pictures of university students, they become more vulnerable to developing mental health problems. Many kinds of research have focused on the study of the prevalence of mental health problems among the university population and the findings suggest that throughout the world, a substantial number of university students experience mental health problems. Studies have also shown that mental health problems among university students are increasing in number as well as in severity (Rodgers & Tennison, 2009).

There are different ways to view the nature and causal factors of mental health problems that may determine the definition of what is mentally healthy and what type of counseling and intervention procedures are appropriate to manage mental health problems (Katherine, 2000). College students struggle with developmental issues and some are struggling with more multifaceted and chronic problems. The most common problems faced by university students are mood disturbances, destructive behaviors,

interpersonal problems and impairment of self-concept. According to Grayson (1989), University students often claim to experience stress, anxiety, symptoms of depression, eating problems and other psychological issues, which have a significant negative impact on their academic performance and their mental health. During the last decade, university and college counseling centers have reported a shift in the needs of students seeking counseling services from different kinds of developmental issues to more severe psychological problems.

According to Mahmood & Saleem (2011), one-third of the university students had a diagnosable psychological problem and one-fourth of entering college students are disturbed and in need of mental health care. A study was conducted by Drum, Brownson, Denmark, and Smith in (2009) on 26,000 students from 70 colleges and universities. Results showed that 6% of undergraduates and 4% of graduate students had seriously considered suicidal ideations and especially the male graduates were at high risk of committing suicide. Moreover, female students were found to be more prone to develop severe depression and symptoms of anxiety disorders.

It is generally acknowledged that students are more vulnerable to mental health problems than the general population. This is due to not only the stress of academic pressures but also several factors like growing up to adulthood, the demands of impending practical life, developing and maintaining relationships and other extraneous factors. One. Some of the problems experienced by students early in life may become long-lasting and even affect psychosocial functioning far into later years. Others are more of transitory nature and most students grow out of it over time. In measuring the severity of such problems, researches have usually taken rather a nomothetic approach the higher than average level of intensity of symptoms is equated with the severity of the symptom. However, the presence of symptoms is not the same as having a disorder (Mahmood & Saleem, 2011).

Students with the highest qualification or intelligence from the advanced level are selected to Sri Lankan state universities. The university selection exam is one of the most competitive and stressful exams and the students who earned the highest Z score¹ are selected to the metropolitan university of Colombo. The competition to be the best among the highest intelligent group and have a balanced life through many social-cultural and economic needs is a new challenge for the students. The undergraduate students of Colombo University encounter challenges due to their academic workload, issues emerging from family life, changing consumption patterns, problems related to infrastructure, collective students' behavior and personal relationship. These challenges or issues often become stressful conditions among undergraduate students.

Therefore, this study explores the factors that cause or increase stress among university undergraduates.

2. OBJECTIVES:

The primary objective of the study is to investigate the academic, personal, socio-cultural and economic factors that cause or increase stress among university students. Here, this qualitative study was mainly focused on academic works, economic hardships, family background, hostel life, personal relationships and collective students' activism in terms of causing stress among university undergraduates. The University of Colombo was selected as the case study for this purpose. The specific objectives are as follows;

1. To identify the nature and types of stress experienced by university students
2. To evaluate the correlation between the stress of university students and the academic workload of undergraduate programs.
3. To identify the impact of economic hardship of undergraduates on their stress condition.
4. To examine the correlation between personal relationship and stress among undergraduate students

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS:

This was an exploratory and qualitative study of stress conditions of university students based on academic works, family background, economic problems, student's politics, and personal relationships. This study attempted to identify and analyze the underlying and subjective meaning and experiences of university students with regard to their stress conditions as undergraduates during university life. The University of Colombo was selected as the field of study. It is a metropolitan university located in the heart of Colombo city and it is a multi-cultural university. There are around 13,000 undergraduate students in seven faculties Arts, Science, Law, Medicine, Management, and Education, Nursing, Technology, Aesthetic Studies, School of Computing, and Institute of Indigenous Medicine. Around 70% of undergraduates are female and there are around one hundred active students' organizations. There is Faculty of Graduate of Studies and two other postgraduate studies institutes attached to the University of Colombo. Although the University of Colombo is not a residential university because of its location right in the middle of the city and land limitation, there are 15 hostels. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The secondary data was collected from the relevant books, studies, journal articles internationally and locally published. The primary and

¹ A cut of marks to select students to university based on Z-score is calculated by subtracting the raw mark of the subject by the mean mark of the subject, and then dividing by the standard deviation

qualitative data were gathered from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The sample for both data collection was based on purposive sampling to cover broader and different aspects of respondents.

The semi-structured interview method was the major data collection technique used to gather qualitative aspects of the psychological problems of university students and their stress conditions. Twenty (20) in-depth interviews were carried out based on the purposive sampling method. When selecting a sample for an interview, the heterogeneous background of the student was taken into consideration and some officers and teachers were also included. Criteria such as faculty, course, mode of communication, nature of residence, native place, ethnicity, and gender were considered in selecting the sample for the interview. The major objective of using focus group discussion in this study is to collect contradictory ideas and views of university students on socio-cultural and academic factors that influence the stress. Four focus group discussions were conducted, and each group consisted of 06 to 08 respondents. The groups were selected based on hostel and non-hostel students, gender differences, urban-rural background, faculty, and ethnicity. The qualitative data and information collected from the in-depth interview and focus group discussions were qualitatively analyzed. This study was carried out with maximum validity and reliability in terms of data collection and writing reports. All the students as the respondents of the study were empowered and free to come out with their opinions and experience without any influence or violation of any ethical consideration. Since this study was partial fulfilment of Postgraduate Diploma in Counselling offered by Faculty of Education, University of Colombo, the study was ethically found accepted.

4. LITERATURE:

Several authors have argued that the educational policy in Sri Lanka further deepened the rural/urban divide, and the polarisation of the 'educated' population into two groups; one, urban and English educated and the other, mostly rural and vernacular educated (Uyangoda, 2000). On the English/ non-English divide, the Youth Commission (1990) went further, asserting that it had been a factor contributing to student unrest. Similarly, Serasundara (1998) contends that youth that joined the JVP (People's Liberation Front) came mostly from monolingual educational backgrounds.

According to (De Silva & Peries, 1995) students' own characteristics and personal factors, peers, family, education institutions and society have been identified as the common and frequent reasons for the problems. Personal characteristics commonly reported in the literature include hardiness which refers to the ability to withstand a reasonable amount of stress and resiliency. Further, research carried out in a national university in Sri Lanka, revealed that the highest percentage of students have been facing psychological, economic and social

problems. In the circumstances, university students come across various problems during their studies. Consequences of all problems such as social, economic, cultural and education can affect a student's mentality and may persist for a long period and eventually be converted into psychological problems. Mostly, psychological problems cannot be easily identified. There is evidence of students' attempts to commit suicide in Sri Lankan universities.

The stress refers to some stimulus resulting in a detectable strain that cannot be accommodated by the organism and which ultimately results in impaired health or behavior. The term stress is used to connote a variety of meanings both by the common man and psychologists. Psychologists of different persuasions have given (a) stimulus-oriented, (b) response-oriented (both physiological and behavioral) definitions of the term, and (c) depth psychologists have treated the concept from the aetiological and psychodynamic viewpoints. It appears that under these circumstances the essential features of the stress experience have not received the attention they deserve (Pestonjee, 1999).

Stress is caused not only by psychological factors but also by social and cultural conditions. Hussien and Hussien (2006) defined it as the state by which the individual undergoes substantial and mental hypertension resulted from aspects that can't be gripped which exceed human aptitude to deal with. Weightman (1999) categorizes stressors into three major categories: 1) sudden trauma, 2) chronic stressors and 3) daily irritation. Based on this ideology there are three chief trends in revising stress. First, stress is a stimulus that threatens the individual's life, so stress is a self-governing variable invented from the person's interior surroundings that are within the body of the person. Second, stress is a retort to the exterior situations, so stress is treated as a dependent variable that affects the physiological, emotional and cognitive body functioning of an individual in all ways. The third trend is the transactional approach which is a blend of the two earlier trends independent and dependent variable.

4.1 Theories of Stress:

Stress is explained by psychological and socio-cultural theories. The psychological stress theory was mainly developed by Lazarus (1991) is presented based on two concepts central to any psychological stress theory:

1. Appraisal (individuals' evaluation of the significance of what is happening for their well-being)
2. Coping (individuals' efforts in thought and action to manage specific demands).

The Lazarus stress theory has undergone several essential revisions. Stress is regarded as a relational concept and stress is not defined as a specific kind of external stimulation nor a specific pattern of physiological,

behavioral, or subjective reaction. Lazarus (1991) developed a comprehensive emotion theory that also includes a stress theory. This theory distinguishes two basic forms of appraisal, primary and secondary. Primary appraisal concerns whether something of relevance to the individual's well-being occurs, whereas secondary appraisal concerns coping options. Coping is intimately related to the concept of cognitive appraisal and, hence, to the stress relevant person – environmental transactions. Most approaches in coping research follow Folkman and Lazarus (1980), who define coping as 'the cognitive and behavioral efforts made to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts among them.'

The resource theory of stress is based on a bridge between systemic and cognitive viewpoints. The resource theories of stress are not primarily concerned with factors that create stress, but with resources that preserve well-being in the face of stressful encounters. Several social and personal constructs have been proposed, such as social support, sense of coherence, hardiness, self-efficacy or optimism. Within the social support field, several types have been investigated, such as instrumental, informational appraisal, and emotional support. According to Hobfoll (et al. 1996), the recently offered conservation of resources theory assumes that stress occurs in any of three contexts: when people experience loss of resources, when resources are threatened, or when people invest their resources without subsequent gain. Four categories of resources are proposed: object resources (physical objects such as home, clothing, or access to transportation), condition resources (employment, personal relationships), personal resources (skills or self-efficacy), and energy resources (means that facilitate the attainment of other resources, for example, money, credit, or knowledge).

Culture can affect the stress and coping process in four ways. First, the cultural context shapes the types of stressors that an individual is likely to experience. Second, culture may also affect the appraisal of the stressfulness of a given event. Third, cultures affect the choice of coping strategies that an individual utilizes in any given situation. Finally, the culture provides different institutional mechanisms by which an individual can cope with stress. According to Leonard (1989), the existing social structure of any society such as economic institutes and education and political institutes will always create social inequalities or social stratification based on class, income, gender, urban-rural differences and mode of communication. These structural differences always create stressful conditions among people. Even Pierre Bourdieu (1990) argues that the contemporary world is introducing serious new social stratification through the education system as a special mode for the cultural capital of society. As a result, the present education system all over the world has created many issues and problems which have caused many stresses among the students attached to these educational institutes.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS:

The study on stress disorder among university undergraduates was carried out at the University of Colombo (UoC) based on qualitative approaches. A qualitative study always brings more qualitative information and the underlying meaning of stress disorders. This discussion is based on the results and findings generated from the unstructured interviews and focus group discussions. According to the interview and focus group discussion, stress-related disorders among university students cause many mental and physical problems. These are the most common such problems identified among the undergraduate in UoC: headache, loss of appetite, no sleep, sweating, difficulty in breathing, vomiting, nausea, dreaming in sleep, difficulty in motions (constipation), various muscle or joint pains, increase of palpitation and allergic conditions.

Most of these mental or physical problems were mainly found in students who stay at hostels specially among girls. It was further revealed that stress or stress-related disorders are high during the first few months of the first year, the exam period or higher academic workload. Six key factors cause or increase stress among the undergraduates according to the qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interview and focus group discussion done among the undergraduates in UoC.

5.1 Academic works:

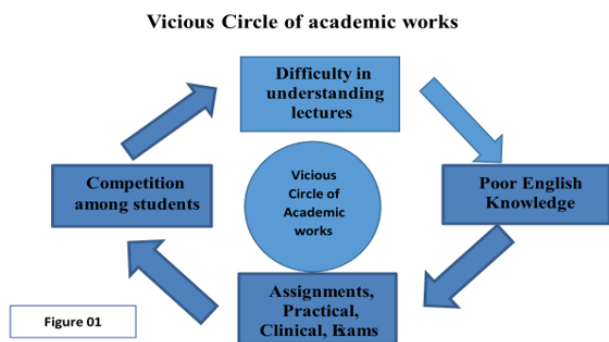
According to Khan et al, (2013) and Chen et al (2012), the academic workload in universities and colleges always creates more stress among the students based on two studies in Pakistan and China universities respectively. When it comes to Sri Lankan universities, as pointed out by Damayanthi (2014), and Amarasinghe (2013), the academic work that undergraduate students undertake or are assigned have become the leading factor in causing or increasing stress among the undergraduates of Sri Lankan universities. In the study of stress among the undergraduate students of the UoC, it was further clearly proved that students mostly go under stress due to overload or complicated academic work by the interviews and focus group discussions. Here, the academic work refers to attending lectures or practicals, sitting mid-semester or semester exams, class presentation, assignments and clinical or internship work.

According to the primary data collected from students, the following are key academic reasons that cause or increase stress among students.

1. Rigid or complicated lecture schedules
2. Difficulty in understanding lectures
3. Poor English knowledge
4. Social phobia towards the presentations

5. Too much of assignments, practical and fieldwork
6. A busy schedule of clinical or internship work
7. Fear of sitting the mid-semester or module exams
8. Poor interaction with academic counsel or personal tutor
9. Compulsory attendance procedure
10. Competition among students for higher GPA
11. Need for technological support (laptop or internet) for academic work

The gravity of issues related to academic work varies depending on the socio-economic and family background of the students. Students who have a poor economic background, poor knowledge of English and no access to technology, easily go under stress. Sometimes some students become the victim of the vicious circle of stress as shown in figure 01.



According to figure 01, it is clearly explained that undergraduate students in the university are subject to a kind of vicious circle of academic workload and students who have a strong psychological capacity or personality with the support of others manage to cope up with this situation. However, those who have a weaker capacity in this regard easily go under stress due to the academic workload. These findings can be further substantiated with the relevant theories of stress proposed by the Psychologist Lazarus.

Stress is one of the major facets of our contemporary university life, resulting from the swift changes and modernity in the education system or mechanization of education. This period is called the age of stress in higher education. Undergraduate students undergo many stressors like academic stress resulting from tests and exams, practical, assignments, presentations and other work that may go beyond their abilities.

5.2 Economic Hardships:

According to resource stress theory discussed in the literature, loss of resources is the primary source of stress. This principle contradicts the fundamental assumption of approaches on critical life events that stress occurs whenever individuals are forced to readjust themselves to situational circumstances. These circumstances may be positive or negative. In an empirical test of this basic principle, it was found that only loss of resources was related to distress. Resources act to preserve and protect other resources. Self-esteem is an important resource that may be beneficial for other resources. It is observed that women who were high in self-esteem made good use of social support when confronted with stress, whereas those who lacked self-esteem interpreted social support as an indication of personal inadequacy and consequently, misused support (Hobfoll, 1989).

Even if the students from all socio-economic backgrounds are selected to the university, all the students do not equally enjoy all the resources needed for a fairly better life in the university. According to the interviews and focus group discussions carried out with students of the UOC, it was revealed that students who join the university from economically poor families encounter some financial constraints in university life comparing themselves with other students. These economic hardships pressurize them, and they go under stress. Sometimes some students who do not receive either Mahapola² or bursary grant due to the permanent monthly income of their parents suffer a lot without having being selected for the financial grant or residential facility. Although their parents are government employees with a permanent monthly salary, the family undergoes many economic hardships with the expenses towards the studies of other children or sick persons in the family. Even in the university, these students become helpless before the consumer culture which always promotes different fast food outside the university, modern dress codes and mobile phone use among the students. These students are under dual pressure of academic workload and new consumer culture.

The students who were interviewed were of the opinion that there are many reading materials to be photocopied. Moreover, students have to spend money on taking print outs, computer typing and buying important books. When they have to do their assignments at the hostel, those who do not have personal computers (laptops) find it extremely difficult to complete their work. Students in the university hostels state that food in the canteen is not tasty and many students opting for the change and different tastes, buy dinner from outside the university, but economically poor students lose these opportunities and go under stress. Financially created stress due to family economic problems and new expenditure at university lead these students to go for some part-time jobs. Both boys and girls specially from the faculty of arts, management, and law engage in many

² Government financial grant given to student coming from poor families

income-earning activities such as sales helper, security work, tuition classes and running three-wheelers. When a student experiences an attack with the stress by both, the academic workload and financial crisis, it could lead to many serious negative results.

5.3 Personal Relationship:

When analyzing the factors related to stress among the students, the personal relationship of the undergraduate is very crucial and one of the most leading determinants of stress. Here, according to the interviews with undergraduates, the personal relationship refers to the following.

1. Any extreme personal bond or affection with parents or family
2. Any deep friendship or interaction in the university
3. Any love affairs in the university or outside the university
4. Any socially unaccepted sexual relationship
5. Any mental bond or attraction towards persons of the opposite sex

For a better and healthy university community, there should be four different lifestyles for students, they are (1) academic life (2) aesthetic & sports life (3) political life (4) personal life. The personal (life) relationship is very influential to all other lifestyles of each undergraduate. The psychological theory of Lazarus based on appraisal and coping is important to understand the stress of university undergraduates caused by the breaking down of a personal relationship. It is generally observed that the imbalance of sex ration in universities (70% of female students) has been challenging the healthy function of the student community. This sex imbalance is believed to be a challenge to the personal relationship of students.

5.4 The collective students' behavior:

University students are not like school children, they are adults and they are free to behave as they wish in accordance with the rules and regulations of the country and by-laws of the university. The university always attempts to safeguard the autonomy of the university community. The collective students' behavior functions not only for constructive matters but also for dysfunctions or disintegration.

As Uyangoda (2000) and Weeramunde (2008) states, university students have engaged in much violent behavior due to some kinds of stress caused by politically motivated factors. Students are motivated by the external political environment based on state policies and free education. According to the qualitative data through interviews and focus group discussions, most of the female

undergraduates are under severe stress when the university is closed due to collective student behavior which occurred as a result of internal or external problems. For example, students from the medical faculty are under stress because of not having lectures for a long time.

Whenever there is a closure of a faculty or university due to student politics, female students are extremely stressed out, because they never behave violently or engage in any active student politics in the university. Although the student politics of UoC is not that bad compared to other universities in Sri Lanka, it varies according to the nature of the faculty and academic programs. Ragging is another form of collective political behavior which also cause or increase stress among undergraduate students. Almost all the students from all faculties except medicine say that they were under great stress during the first few months as a result of the ragging against first-year students. The interviews revealed that students' behavior is influenced by many internal and external factors. The political perspectives of some academic staff, the general political ideology of external political parties and the sub-culture of a particular university or faculty always influence the positive or negative students' behavior. The neighborhood of the students (rural or urban) and their former school attended are crucial in determining student politics which is one of the leading causes of stress among the undergraduate students. The factors that influence students' collective or political behavior is illustrated by the figure 02.

Interaction theory in sociology draws its attention to study individuals and how they act within a society. This theory focuses on individuals and shows how they form interpretations of the world around them. Sociologists of education attempt to understand the interactions between group peers, teacher-student, teacher-principal on students' attitudes and achievements, students' values, self-concepts and their effect on aspirations, and on socioeconomic status as it relates to student achievements.

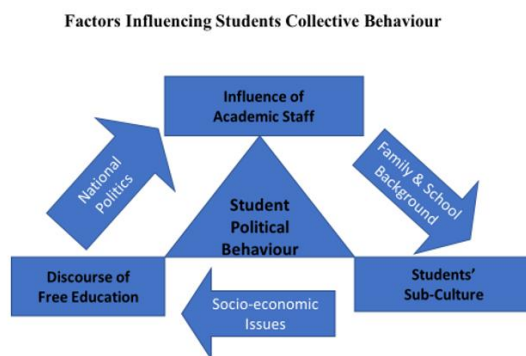


Figure 02

5.5 The Socio-cultural Pressure:

Stress is very much based on sociological factors such as culture and cultural patterning of normative function. According to Mechanic (1975), the patterns of stressors

that individuals are likely to face are profoundly affected by their (sub) cultural context. There are two ways in which culture can affect the experience of stress. First, certain stressful life events can be seen as normative that is, most individuals in a given culture or cultural subgroup will experience a particular event at specified times in their lives. Second, by differently allocating social resources, cultures, patterns of the types and levels of stress that individuals are likely to experience.

Even though students are selected to university and they are expected to enjoy the freedom of studying during the university period, they cannot be totally independent of the social and cultural pressure that is external to them. As sociological theories have mentioned, the structural or institutional pressure on an individual can create some form of stress depending on the nature of sub-culture or religion into which a student belongs. According to the views of Muslim and Tamil undergraduates both in the interview and focus group discussion, the family or the local community which is closely associated with them always indirectly influences the personal life of female undergraduates.

It was revealed in the interviews carried out with Muslim undergraduates that the family or the native local community informally or indirectly pressurize them to go for a marriage life soon. Since there are a limited number of male graduates or qualified male partners in the community, this pressure is made on unmarried undergraduates considering their well-being of family and community. This kind of social or cultural pressure on Muslim female undergraduates has caused additional stress.

6. CONCLUSION:

The undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities experience various issues and challenges due to the student's personal life and problems in the education systems. Psychosocial problems are the leading problems among them, and these psychosocial problems are not properly addressed compared to other academic or material needs of the students. The main objective of this paper was to explore the factors that cause or increase stress among university undergraduates and was based on a case study of the UoC. This study was carried out by using both literature reviews on psychological and sociological research done on stress among students and qualitative primary data collection in the UoC through interview and focus group discussion. The qualitative and explorative study on stress among different faculty students revealed many factors that are causing or increasing stress. Excessive academic workload, economic hardships, problems in personal relationships, issues of family background, ragging, student politics, poor infrastructure facilities in hostels and external social or cultural pressure on students are the major factors that affect the determining of stress among students. However, academic workload and personal relationships are found to be the most crucial factors

compared with other causes. The modernized curriculum and higher education reforms with lack of substantial academic support offered to students create more stress. The stress conditions vary depending on the nature of the academic program, financial conditions of students, English knowledge, gender and collective behavior of students in the faculties. Students coming from rural areas and staying at hostels are more stressful than students in urban or suburban areas. Female students are easily subject to stress led by a loss of personal relationships and gender imbalance. The rationalized social relationship among students and between students and teachers make an indirect foundation for stress. Poor student-teacher interaction and competition among students also lead to stressful conditions. Students who engage in sports and aesthetic activities are less likely to be under stress. Students who are under pressure of changing consumer culture and job insecurity after graduation also frequently go under stress. Finally, this study will be useful the academics and university administrators to restructure academic programs and implement new students welfare schemes in order to minimize the stress of university undergraduates.

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