

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG B.SC. UNDERGRADUATES OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

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INTRODUCTION

As a special category, university students encounter a great deal of academic, personal and social stress during their educational endeavours. The secondary educational environment is characterized by little direct supervision and guidance from the school. Meanwhile, university life provides a new environment of more freedom, democracy, and self-decision-making opportunities to undergraduates (Kuruppuarachchi *et al.*, 2002). However, such independence or sudden exposure to new environment could be a challenge. Some students can cope with certain events, whereas others who cannot tolerate such events and may experience psychological distress. Such situations may eventually lead to drop outs, physical harm, clinical problems and, in the long run, a tendency towards suicide (The Students of Concern Assistance Team, 2010). It is estimated that by the year 2020, anxiety and depression will be the second most common cause of disability worldwide (Lopez & Murray, 1998).

Several studies have used the General Health Questionnaire-30 (GHQ) in screening the distress levels of university students (Kuruppuarachchi *et al.*, 2002; Tully, 2004; Hayasaka *et al.*, 2007). These studies have revealed that the most important deterministic factors of distress were financial and academic pressure (Cooke *et al.*, 2006) and adjustment difficulties (Kuruppuarachchi *et al.*, 1999; Kuruppuarachchi *et al.*, 2002).

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) relies upon the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) methodologies and students characteristically differ from conventional students (Jayatilke *et al.*, 1997). However, there were no studies conducted on the mental status (for example, distress levels) of this particular group of students. Therefore, we carried out a study using the GHQ-30 to screen the emotional status of OUSL undergraduates. The main objectives of the study were to:

- identify psychological distress levels of the target group.
- trace the underlying dimensions of psychological distress.
- find out possible remedial measures to decrease distress levels of the target population.

METHODOLOGY

The techniques used by Beck *et al.* (1997) and Kuruppuarachchi *et al.* (1999) were adopted for gathering information for this study. Two questionnaires *viz.*, the General Health Questionnaire-30 (GHQ-30) and the Piloted and Validated Questionnaire were administered to screen the level of psychological distress of OUSL B.Sc. undergraduates using a level-wise stratified random sample of 156 students. The GHQ-30 (Goldberg, 1978) is an internationally accepted and nationally validated for Sri Lankan populations (Kuruppuarachchi *et al.*, 1999; Rodrigo, 1988). A score of greater than or equal to six was considered as having psychological distress.

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A self-administered questionnaire (with 16 items) was used to trace possible underlying dimensions, which includes demographic and socio-economic characteristics of students during academic activities after the first semester.

Relevant GHQ-30 scores were ranked into two categories viz., distress and non distress. In addition, GHQ-30 scores were categorized into five subcategories and the Pearson Brown correlation with demographical information. The statistical analyses were carried out using the SPSS® (Version 4.0, IBM, USA) computer software package.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Distress levels of undergraduates of OUSL

The study revealed that 64.7% (≥ 6 GHQ-30 score) of B.Sc. undergraduates were emotionally distressed. It is a considerable matter of concern, especially when compared with previous studies by Kuruppuarachchi *et al.* (2002) and Nakandalege (2011) in which they reported that the distress levels of conventional university students of Sri Lanka were 39.8% and 49.7% respectively.

Underlying dimensions of psychological distress

The demographic data such as gender, age, civil status, year of study, source of motivation, employment, G.C.E. (A/L) qualifications and English language at G.C.E. (O/L) were identified as factors that do not influence the emotional status as shown by Guthries (1998). Similarly, we found no significant difference in distress levels of employed and unemployed undergraduates. In addition, the type of school attended and the source of financial support seems to be less influential ($P \geq 0.05$). The monthly family income directly indicated the students' social status, which in turn determined the psychological distress levels among the students.

The type of permanent residence ($P=0.01$) and monthly family income ($P=0.04$) were significantly associated with distress levels of undergraduates (Table 1). The possible reason for this scenario could be the changes in the background of individuals, which conflict with each other.

The students who come from rural areas with lower income are more distressed than the rest of the categories. We found that studying in a popular school is an advantage, because distress levels are lower. Results of Kuruppuarachchi *et al.*, (1999) and Benjaponpitak (1996) also support these findings by identifying the influence of mode of accommodation to the distress levels.

The results of univariate analysis of discriminant functions (DFA) indicated that the monthly income of students ($F=3.74$, $P=0.0065$) and mode of accommodation ($F=2.67$, $P=0.035$) were significantly associated with distress levels. Factor Analysis also identifies factors that might have caused variations of distress levels. For instance, the combined effects of mode of accommodation, type of permanent residence, monthly family income, and traveling distance from home to university were recognized as a single factor in the variation of distress levels (it explained 19.5% of the total variation in distress levels). This was further proved by DFA. Similarly, Ismail (1992) also stated that economic background and the distance from the university were the main reasons for student drop outs. These findings could be related to the fact that the ODL environment of the Open University is being developed and most of the academic and administrative systems seem to be less than sufficient to cater to the students' needs and requirements. Further more, the students of the university are not well exposed or aware of the ODL methodologies.

Table 1: Most significant parameters which determine the Distress levels.

Category	Distress (%)	P-value (χ^2)
Type of school		
Rural	66.66	0.13
Sub-urban	73.58	
Urban popular	55.35	
Permanent residence		
Rural	62	0.01
Sub-urban	76.78	
Urban	44.44	
Type of accommodation		
Home	6.38	0.06
Relatives house	50	
Outside lodging	85	
Monthly family income		
≤ Rs. 5,000	79	0.04
Rs. 5,001-10,000	72	
Rs. 10,001-15,000	51.35	
≥ Rs. 15,001	52.38	
Financial support for education		
Bursary	33.33	0.17
Self-finance	63.82	
Parent/relatives	68.35	

CONCLUSIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the study revealed that monthly family income, mode of accommodation, and type of permanent residence are the beams on which distress levels are balanced. Since there were a considerable number of distressed undergraduates (64.7%), we recommend that there should be an efficient and effective counseling service for students, and training for OUSL teachers on stress management. In addition, implementation of installment basis payments and similar bursaries systems are suggested. Moreover, proper accommodation facilities or decentralization of academic activities are also suggested for students who live far from the main university. As remedial measures, it is suggested that staff should be provided with a thorough knowledge of distance education technologies. Inclusion of a core course "Open Distance Learning (ODL)" is also suggested.

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