

Exploring the root causes of academic stress among undergraduate students in Durban, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The conditions being faced by university students have deteriorated, while the institutions of higher learning are enrolling a massive number of undergraduate students. This article looks at factors that make undergraduate students suffer from academic stress, which leads to their underperformance and not focus on completing their degrees on time. The theoretical framework used was narrative therapy and ecosystems perspective to connect the researcher to the existing knowledge. Data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews. Fifteen undergraduate students were sampled, utilising convenience sampling. Academic stress does not always have negative consequences but can bring positive outcomes for undergraduate students if it is well managed. A collaborative effort among structures in universities is vital in addressing the negative impact of this phenomenon. This article recommends the skills reinforcement of students, counsellors, lecturers, mentors, and tutors on non-educational methods (such as continuous psychosocial support), which could assist academically stressed students to overcome social challenges that have a negative impact on their academic life: a student-friendly strategy to monitor and assist mischievous students; collaborative engagement among student structures in fighting the stigma of academic stress; the establishment of student support groups; the involvement of students in policy formulations on issues like stress; and broader academic discussions about academic stress. Since empirical evidence on challenges students face at universities and colleges during post-Coronavirus (COVID-19) is inadequate, this article fills that gap.

Keywords: Academic stress, higher education, teaching and learning, undergraduate students

INTRODUCTION

This article presents empirical evidence on the root causes of academic stress among undergraduate students in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. The findings of this research enhance the body of literature in this area. In other words, it gives the findings of a research study that was conducted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). It was guided by the narrative therapy and ecosystems perspective and thus concentrated on academic and non-academic factors affecting students' performance, particularly undergraduate students. It offers

recommendations applicable from the micro (individual) to the macro (institution) level. Presenting such academic and non-academic difficulties, the author has sought to give an understanding of challenges faced by students and measures to be taken to address the academic stress that students face since institutions of higher learning are a choice to many young people who want to pursue their ideal careers.

The uncertainty caused by political-driven transformation in South African universities brings an element of disillusionment and makes it harder to be a student currently. Academic life as a student is very challenging (Agolla and Ongari 2009; Bhujade 2017). Students must perform many responsibilities and tasks during their academic years at university. They must meet compulsory tasks such as attending lectures and tutorials, conducting practicals, writing assignments, and preparing for presentations, tests, and examinations. While they endeavour to perform academic duties, they often face unanticipated pressure, leading to health-related problems, such as academic stress. This type of stress is the primary psychological challenge that often determines the academic achievement of many university students. Politically motivated contestations are other dimensions which engulf universities, and they affect students in many forms (Habib 2022). Recently, there have been arguments about structural reforms that South African universities need to implement to ensure inclusivity. This has left some academics adamant about the campaign for the decolonisation of higher education as they viewed that it might bring uncertainty and instability to many universities since this movement was endorsed by radical motives rather than developmental transformations. While this was debated extensively, the COVID-19 outbreak shifted the processes of teaching and learning and forced the instant implementation of virtual teaching and learning methods which required one to be technologically capable. The swift move towards technological advancement¹ in countries like South Africa required students to adapt to the system quickly, despite the technological challenges experienced by those in remote areas.

This study explores the root causes of academic related stress faced by undergraduate students at UKZN; understands the challenges facing students, which lead to academic stress; determines the extent of academic stress that students experience and assesses the effectiveness of the university in assisting students to deal with academic stress. This article is organised as follows: The initial introduction is followed by a section covering the theoretical framework and literature review. Then there are findings, discussion, recommendations, and conclusion.

¹ Some students already know the opportunities that the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) brings to the academic fraternity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The narrative therapy² and ecosystems perspective³ were used to gain insight into the root causes of academic stress among undergraduate students. Narrative therapy is concerned with how people narrate their stories. This theory gave undergraduate students a space to voice their experiences in the university environment. Narrative therapy adopts a non-blaming, respectful approach, which puts people as experts in their own lives (Morgan 2000; Payne 2006). It posits that problems are separate from people and accepts that individuals have various skills, abilities, beliefs, values, and commitments that should help them in addressing problems in their lives. Therefore, narrative therapy assisted the undergraduate students in seeing that they were not a problem, but that a problem was the challenge they were facing, which was the seasonal academic stress caused by various internal and external factors that left them confused in the university setting.

The ecosystems perspective perceives the person as evolving inside a multifaceted system of relationships affected by various levels of the immediate environment (Berk 2001; Northen and Kurland 2001). The nature of this approach recognises the completeness and reciprocated dependence of living organisms. The central principle of the ecosystem perspective is that the institutions of society vital in regulating and governing social relations. The author used micro, meso, and macro levels to understand fully the root causes of stress among undergraduate students at UKZN. The concept of academic stress is broad, and the literature reviewed shows no accord among academics on the definition of this phrase. While the argument is continuing, academic stress among students has long been studied, and scholars have recognised stressors owing to various problems, with the highest stressors experienced by students being environmentally related (Alsulami et al. 2018; Almojali et al. 2017). Watson and Watson (2016) and Agolla and Ongari (2009) emphasise that finances, poor interaction with other students and lecturers, and problems at home result in academic stress for students.

Even the universities' operations, in some cases, have an impact on the ongoing academic stress for students, since they must learn in overcrowded classes (Marais 2016; Chingos 2013). According to Misra and Castillo (2004, 2): "high student enrolment results in inadequate resources to perform academic work and an inability to provide financial aid to students". Again, Agolla and Ongari (2009) conclude that, when this occurs, a student becomes confused, disorganised, and unable to survive, thus consequential in academic stress which brings many questions about the future. Joseph et al. (2021) notes that fear of failure results in academic

² It was posited in the 1970s and 1980s by White and Epston; and was later developed by scholars such as Bruner, Vygotsky, and Foucault.

³ This perspective originated from general systems theory in about 1967, which Bertalanffy developed. It also derived from ecology theory, which was developed by Du Bois in 1972.

stress and hopelessness for undergraduate students. Once they fail, they suffer from a full range of psychological problems, including anxiety and depression, which could result in alcohol and drug abuse as a means to ameliorate the condition.

METHODOLOGY

The author adopted a qualitative approach to uncover the root causes of stress for undergraduate students adequately. Adopting a qualitative approach allowed participants to share their thoughts and life stories in an unlimited way. The flexibility of this technique helped the scholar in probing participants more to obtain rich, in-depth data. A qualitative approach permits participants to tell stories about their experiences, and it is appropriate for a narrative inquiry (Tomaszewski, Zarestky and Gonzalez 2020; Ford 2020). This approach allowed the investigator to understand the root causes of academic stress among undergraduate students while reinstating their confidence by providing counselling and referral for support services. Using a qualitative approach, the research employed interpretivism as its paradigm and case study as its research design.

Convenient sampling was used, which involved considering the cases at hand, meaning, those connected to the issue under investigation, existing to the investigator and suitable to access (Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter 2006). The author identified students after lectures and tutorial periods and conducted in-depth interviews. Since UKZN has five campuses, the researcher selected three undergraduate students (18 years old and above) per campus, which led to 15 undergraduate students in total. The reason for selecting participants who were above 18 years was that people in these age groups are adults, and obtaining their permission was easy and within ethical bounds. The author told students the aim and objectives of the study. Another data gathering method that was adopted in this study was observation, since the researcher performed this method at libraries, Local Areas of Networks (LANS), points of gathering, lecture halls, residences, and corridors.

Due to the sensitivity of this topic (academic stress), the author depended on the preparedness of students to share their narratives. During the research, the author was an honours student at UKZN, Howard College Campus, and authorisation to conduct the study was granted (Protocol reference number: HSS/1368/016H). Williams (2020) views consent from gatekeepers of participants, in this case the University Registrar, as vital but not substitutive of a participant's informed consent. In upholding the ethical obligation, the author attained permission from both the university's gatekeepers and the participants concerned. For this research, a thematic analysis was adopted. First, the author had to comprehend the data by

scanning and cleaning it. Second, he categorised the research questions to ensure that they had been answered. This led to the third step, categorising the information by coding the data through identifying themes and patterns based on the participants' responses. Fourth, the author arranged the responses into categories. After all these steps had been processed, a detailed analysis and interpretation of the data were executed.

FINDINGS

Poor performance

The article aligns with the studies by Pillay and Ngcobo (2010), and Licayan et al. (2021), which found that undergraduates, especially first-year students who have classmates repeating a core module, tend to experience stress because of fear of getting poor marks for that module owing to negative remarks about hardships in that module from those who failed the course previously. This is because some undergraduate students –especially first-year students– are unfamiliar with academic writing and tend to compare themselves with returning students who have been in a similar situation and have yet to progress to the next level. The following expression shows the academic encounters that new university students usually face:

“I got 49 per cent in my first test at university, that was an abysmal mark, and I became anxious because there was a girl that I knew that was repeating the same module although she was a genius at high school ... after scoring this mark I was very upset ... when I consulted my tutor, I was told that my references were not properly done...I had used first person and tautology in my paragraphs; I was generalising and waffling and never provided facts –which is non-academic.”

The transformation from high school to tertiary level stresses some first-year undergraduate students since they are not familiar with teaching and learning approaches used at institutions of higher learning. The way classes are conducted at universities makes some first-year undergraduate students confused and disoriented, which adds to academic stress (Bhujade 2017). As a result, their academic performance is affected. This is how one student narrated the challenge he faced as a new student:

“I feel like I am on an island...how we are taught here is very different from what we are used to... actually, we are not taught, the lecturer just summarises a single chapter in a paragraph (laughs)... I cannot learn independently since high school; my teachers reminded us to prepare for tests and exams in groups ... I am on my own here ... I am disillusioned; I answer more during lectures and tutorials, but I fail some of my assignments and tests ... this stresses me and brings suicidal thoughts.”

This account shows that the university setting creates anticipated demands and needs independent, self-directed students to progress educationally. As the ecosystems perspective

explains, a micro-systemic transformation occurs as soon as a person, a student in this case, becomes mentally affected owing to academic demands and that might lead to negative thoughts and behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1990). At the individual (micro) level, academic stress often results in a loss of hope, which has difficult effects on the student's academic success. This is what one of the students said:

“A module is every expensive here ... at high school, I was not paying school fees at all... but here I owe R55 000 this year as NSFAS defunded me in the middle of this year... I once got a supplementary examination, and I could not believe it because I had done everything necessary to pass that module. So now, I fear to fail even one module because it is too expensive ... I do not want to disappoint my father at home because I am the last hope of the family ... when I am done, I should improve the living conditions of my family members.”

The first-year undergraduate students indicated that they even fear failing one module because it is expensive –especially those from lower quintile schools, since some were from no-fee schools. That is why many African students from the working class promoted the #FeesMustFall movement (Habib 2022; Bramsen 2022). Fear of failing stressed them because failing at university might lead to exclusion, indicating that first-year undergraduate students are frequently worried about failing a module and, consequently, this leads to academic stress.

Financial constraints

In this study, financial problems were faced more by African undergraduate students than those from other races. Webber and Burns (2022) also note that, even in America, African-American students at universities are excessively affected by academic debt. Usually, students' families raise the funds needed or take out loans to settle tertiary education fees for students. The family incomes of White and Indian students interviewed were higher than those of the African students. Most African households face financial problems when settling university fees, which stresses many African students because university education is too expensive. The following sentiments are from one of the participants:

“My mother is a domestic worker, and my father was retrenched from work two years ago. In high school, my fees for a year were just R200 ... here at tertiary, my university debt for this year is nearly R40 000, excluding residence accommodation ... My parents' savings are not even that much.”

As a result of the income gaps, many students, particularly those from disadvantaged families, seek funding elsewhere, such as institutions that offer bursaries and study loans from banks. Banks require sureties for these loans, and government scholarships and bursaries are scarce

because of competition. Academic debt harms the mental health of many African students (Jackson and Mustaffa 2022). This forces many undergraduate students to pursue other means of paying for their studies. This is what a student had to say:

“My family cannot settle my university fees... I usually engage in transactional relationships with monied people (called blessers) to pay my fees ... It is immoral, I know, but I also want to get my degree certificate, get a nice job and make my parents delighted of me one day... (sobs). I have no choice because I have never received any positive feedback from bursaries that I applied for... university fees are too expensive.”

A male student shared these sentiments:

“Although I have a girlfriend back home. I am in a secret relationship with a gay guy ... he buys me food. He pays my university fees, since no one is working from my family... so when I say jump, he just says how high? He gives me everything I want but my family does not know about this... we do everything a couple does. I literally do not regret or feel bad.”

Since the demand for NSFAS support is more than what is available, the government gives students partial financial support. This is one of the contributing factors to financial problems and related stress experienced by students, notably those from poor households. Zungu (2022) mentions that limited financial assistance from NSFAS contributes to socioeconomic and academic challenges confronted by African students from poor households. As mentioned in the earlier narrations, some students allow transactional relationships because they want to get something to eat and settle their fees. However, this could jeopardise their lives.

Sexually related difficulties

Sexually linked problems are also a root cause of stress among undergraduate students. When they arrive at university, they become self-regulating, as there is partial parental guidance. Some students back home were taught to desist from sexual activities until they get married, but some begin to be active when they arrive at university. During the interview, one of the participants stated this:

“... ladies are so attractive here... I would woo them in every university building and take them to res parties and usually engage in sexual activities with them after acquiring their permission... I ensure I use a condom since my family and friends back home know me as celibate.”

Ngubane (2010, 2) states that this happen because: “... adults usually think that young people are too young to talk or be worried about sex while they are sexually active secretly.” Therefore, some young persons, typically when they are far from their parents, get involved in sexual

activities with inadequate information and while they are not ready mentally and physically, and this might jeopardise their well-being. Moreover, Woldeyohannes et al. (2017), and Misao et al. (2020) point out that the frequency of HIV among undergraduate students is low at the commencement of their initial year but becomes higher at the end of the academic year.

Bunking lectures and tutorials

This study perceived that some undergraduate students miss some classes and spend much of their time on non-academic duties. They habitually fail to attend tutorials and lectures since they are no longer around their parents. This shows that some students partially take their academic work seriously. Thus, when a due performance (DP)⁴ certificate publication time approaches, they suffer from stress. On another note, Misra and Castillo (2004, 44) stated: "...universities accept many students than what the lecture rooms can contain in terms of undergraduates enrolment." This makes some students unwilling to attend lectures since lecturers do not pay enough time to every student. One student had this to say:

"I think there is no need to attend tutorials and lectures because some tutors and lecturers just waffle, and I easily fall asleep... hence, I choose to go to the shopping centre and do some window-shopping or go to the coast and relax there... rather than going to an overcrowded lecture that becomes stuffy and congested... I cannot concentrate nor study while sitting on the floor."

Another one added:

"There is a module I no longer attend because of an overcrowded lecture venue... We have requested our lecturer to find a bigger venue for us... but he told us that other venues are occupied. Even the SRC does not seem to worry about what we experience weekly... although we have classmates who are SRC members."

Some students perceive relaxations as imperative than attending classes. As stated above, some undergraduate students spend time in recreational activities than academic activities because of inadequate resources and infrastructure within the university. Therefore, they dodge lectures and tutorials, which affects their performance. This also conveys that they are likely to fail more than one module.

Maladjustment to the university environment

Environmental causes of stress are problems that happen because of the settings where a student lives. Some undergraduate students stated that they had once felt the disconnection in

⁴ The due performance (DP) system determines who may or may not sit for the exams in a module. It makes a student work hard during the semester to score a mark allowing them to write the exam.

the university environment and felt as if they were in a foreign land. Some first-year undergraduate students are originally from remote areas and must get residence accommodation nearer to campus (Pillay and Ngcobo 2010; Hitches, Woodcock and Ehrich 2023). Nevertheless, student's financial limitations might make it hard to get student-friendly residence that is in good condition. Some students stay in communes and residences different from their household settings. According to Murff (2006), undergraduate students, mostly first years, often face stress because of the modifying environment of university lifestyle. One student said:

“My first day on campus was boring as I was lonely... I felt like I was on another planet... I really missed home... campus was like an island to me... I was part of the students' demonstration and was incarcerated... we were demanding better residences, since the one we stayed in was leaking and had poor internet connection... It was located next to shacks, and we were mugged daily by strangers... some would forcefully enter inside the residence and steal our belongings.”

A number of first-year students find themselves in students' partisan quarrels, and they are simply recruited since they trying to adapt in the environment and are unaware with the university students' politics. This makes students struggle educationally as they must focus on cases of illegal protests and malicious damage to property that the university routinely opens against them. Students' protests, created by a failure to meet students' demands in many South African universities, have put many undergraduate students under stress since there were stories that universities might be closed. Again, those arrested for violent protests, intimidation, and malicious damage to property during fees and decolonisation protests such as #FeesMustFall⁵ campaigns were stressed because of incurring criminal records when a court of law found them guilty of the charges laid against them.

Online teaching and learning

The outbreak of COVID-19, which led to the lockdown in 2020, unexpectedly brought drastic changes in teaching and learning processes at the tertiary level. Hofer, Nistor and Scheibenzuber (2021) mention that processes of teaching and learning at universities and colleges internationally had to be conducted online within a short space of time. Many lecturers were compelled to conduct classes virtually to train and teach students to be independent, critical thinkers and to ensure that the curriculum addresses the emotional, spiritual, and physical aspects of students' lives. This prepared students across all syllabus areas and scholarship stages with abilities to succeed in a swiftly changing and volatile world. Likewise,

⁵ A social justice movement whose primary concern is to promote free access to higher education for the poor (Habib, 2022).

lecturers had to understand each student's needs and challenges to ensure that no one was left behind. A student had this to say:

“The outbreak of COVID-19 taught me technological skills since I had to adopt social media platforms to carry on with my studies. My lecturers were supportive and responsive when I texted them via WhatsApp on academic-related issues and sometimes about personal issues that might hinder me from progressing academically.”

Lecturers had to incorporate non-conventional approaches to teaching and learning with classic and contemporary teaching and learning methods. They used platforms such as social media (e.g., WhatsApp, etc.), music (hymns or songs with academic contexts), and poetry to teach and learn specific modules, making teaching and learning processes effective, as most students were fond of the media. This suggested that teaching and learning could be done in classes and in any other place or platform that lecturers and students find conducive to teaching and learning.

Death of students

Moawad (2020) states that the passing of a close friend or classmate also causes stress for undergraduate students. This is because of the shocking death rate in universities and colleges, especially the incidents of femicide, which had not been happening previously at the rate they are now. Perhaps one might say that those incidents were happening before in the institutions of higher learning but were not properly reported in public. However, another cause of death among students is the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) because of promiscuity and multiple partners where, in some instances, alcohol and drug abuse had an influence. Therefore, the escalating death rates among students also causes stress among them. This means that moral regeneration programmes encouraging students to graduate alive and in good health, should be implemented and monitored properly. A student expressed the following sentiments:

“When I hear about bereavement, I become anxious and too much stressed... I become not sure whether I will finish my degree or not. Since the year started, I have lost three classmates because of unknown sicknesses. I do not know what is happening; we need to ask God and ancestors for guidance and protection because living is hard nowadays.”

Feven, Sheldon and Ivor (2007) show that one of the causes of stress faced by undergraduate students is about the loss of classmates or household members (intrapersonal relationship). Based on this, students lose courage when they see the university communique (passing messages of condolences) informing them that one of their fellow students has died in an accident or because of sickness.

Stress and health

This study noticed that academic stress is related to health difficulties faced by students. Some undergraduate students suffer from mental illness, including depression and anxiety, which could lead to substance abuse. Similarly, Bhujade (2017), and Damush, Hays and DiMatteo (1997) also argued that academic stress in undergraduate students relates to body pain, depression, and schizophrenia. They further mentioned that changes in eating and sleeping behaviours are also academic stress symptoms. This is what was stated by an undergraduate student as symptoms of academic stress:

“When I am academically stressed, I usually feel discomfort in my stomach... like pains... headache... I become sleepless, I eat less healthy food but more junk... and I lose weight; I typically feel this way during exam time. I become sick... when I think a lot about academic work, I hardly sleep at night... my roommate says I sometimes sleepwalk.”

Academic stress might lead to weight loss, which might stress students as some individuals might assume they suffer from chronic diseases such as HIV and TB. This adds more stress for students as they usually eat fast foods since they do not have enough time, because they must study, and some are not used to cooking healthy meals.

Expressed needs of students

The study also investigated measures that the university implements into supporting students in dealing with academic stress. The students in the study showed various strategies to manage academic stress. Most students who once suffered from academic stress stated their diverse needs as follows:

“I think there must be more counsellors to offer us psychosocial support... I once went to counselling unit, and I could not be assisted then; I had to book a month before... I was told that psychologists were fully booked, which exacerbated my condition as I had no other place to get counselling.”

Another student complained about food security:

“I used to attend tutorials and lectures hungry... this was stressing me... I could not focus at all. I was told I had not received NSFAS, although I am from a poverty-stricken household. I get food from a religious organisation that comes every Thursday at Howard College Campus and dishes for students. They often give me a provision in a lunchbox to eat during the weekend.”

Since students are from different family backgrounds, some need extra financial assistance to buy enough food since they often send money home as well. This conveys another dimension, which shows that NSFAS plays a significant role not only for the beneficiary but also for the household back at home. However, once the money for students to buy food is spent, they do not have other stable means to get more money. Therefore, the university and other structures should develop initiatives to assist such students to be food secure. Prabu (2015) mentions that academic stress is also connected to food insecurity, which affects the well-being of students.

Survival and coping strategies

Students in the study mentioned several strategies that they practise to manage academic stress. Nevertheless, some of those strategies assist undergraduates in forgetting about academic trials that result to stress. Students stated using spirituality as a surviving strategy in the subsequent manners: “I attend church often, and I find peace when singing in the choir.” “I often study the Bible.” “Yoga is the best for me when I am stressed.” This connects with Kendler, Karkowski and Prescott (1999), who state that students get courage, resilience, and peace from their spirituality. This sense of confidence was articulated by a female student during the interview in this way: “...when the Lord is with me, I shall not fear stress, failure...”

Five undergraduates in this study mentioned that spirituality is assisting them to overcome academic stress. Nevertheless, the support they acquire from religious groups was unclearly stated since some confessed that they became afraid to declare academic stress to members of religious organisations. It was not explicit whether the support they received was due to recognisable signs of stress or their consistent religious involvement. Another method of managing academic stress was told as follows: “I just become busy by cleaning my apartment though it is small, since when I clean it, I just ignore what stresses me.”

Keeping occupied with non-academic duties was a method used by other students in the study. These students specified that such activities helped them in circumventing stressful fatigue. This finding agrees with a study by Weintraub et al. (2020), where extracurricular activities bring to students a “sense of meaning”. Participants spoke about this in this way: “I am player of... (names the soccer team), and we practise every day there. I find happiness and peace.” “I am part of... (names of the support group), and we support each other...”

As stated previously, partaking in support groups or sports assists undergraduate students in sharing their sufferings and challenges to get help in overcoming academic stress. A study by Agolla and Ongari (2009, 22) mentions that students “regain their sense of identity, feel less stigmatised and more “normal” when engaging with other empathetic students.” One

participant mentioned how she willingly revealed her academic problems in the support group and was helped:

“When I am educationally stressed, I approach other group members who are postgraduate students, and they support me often... I like to keep alone, read newspapers, magazines, and books and share what I have read with others after reflecting on my personal life. This helps to network with other students who have been at the university for quite some time.”

Students who devote time alone voiced their need to concentrate on their individualistic desires. As Misra and McKean (2000) discussed, students view private time as giving them an opportunity to reason about individual problems and plans for the future. One student in this study appreciated private space and time for numerous reasons. Another student stated the worth of time she spends unaccompanied as follows:

“Occasionally, I wait for my roommates to go to campus, and I just yell and weep, knowing that no one will disturb me... perhaps after few hours I feel better (moans). Probably I am weak, but weeping assists me handle with stress... crying is a way of venting pain... It helps me to reboot my mind.”

A student expressed weeping as a technique of managing stress. One student viewed assisting other students battling with stress as a method of showing humanity. She then expressed this as follows: “When I see somebody stressed, I usually reference how I overcame the academic struggles and how I almost failed in first year because of academic stress...” These generous acts described by a student are similar with Rojano’s (2005) description of citizen therapist, where he mentions that “you grow when you give”. In this study, this student stated her reason to be open about academic problems she once encountered; thus, making other students to feel self-assured and to search for psychological intervention early. Other students mentioned that they “talk about it” to somebody. Contrary to the previous participants’ method of managing academic stress, he revealed that he speaks to individuals he trusts. For him, being heard supports him in overcoming academic stress. But for the following student it is just the opposite. He said this: “I do not tell anyone my academic challenges... I only speak with senior students and disclose all... After that, I will feel much assured...”

The above narrations showed that students have implemented various approaches to deal with academic stress. Five participants used spirituality as a surviving strategy. One student mentioned how her participation in yoga assisted her to stop thinking about academic problems, while other students saw participation in sports activities and being an affiliate of a support

group as allowing for honesty about academic problems. It is evident from the students' comments that undergraduates use various techniques to deal with academic stress.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Guided by various levels of the ecosystem perspective, the following recommendations on addressing academic stress among undergraduate students were drawn from students' perceptions:

Recommendations at the micro level

The students emphasised the need to reinforce the skills of counsellors, lecturers, mentors, and tutors at tertiary level to assist undergraduates in dealing with academic stress. The cognitive, social, and behavioural interventions are efficient for stress reduction on students, and institutions of higher learning are encouraged to make such programmes accessible extensively to students (Regehr, Glancy and Pitts 2013). Counsellors must offer educational and therapeutic programmes to stressed undergraduate students intending to increase their self-esteem. Furthermore, continuous psychosocial support should be given to students: emotional support (counselling, bereavement, and assisting students to do memory boxes); physical support (ensuring that needy students are offered cooked meals or food parcels and referred to relevant organisations for assistance with bursaries); and social support (disclosure, adherence support, ensured staff (lecturers, tutors and mentors)), render educational support (support for assignments, tests and examinations) to students, encourage students to establish income-generating projects, establish and strengthen support groups.

To address mischievous students, the universities ought to have a full record, including criminal record, for every student. This will ensure that those who once went to disciplinary hearings are monitored, supported, and guided in a student-friendly manner that ensures academic and moral development. Moreover, there should be programmes on life and assertiveness skills to empower students to be self-dependent (Agolla and Ongari, 2009). A collaborative engagement among youth structures is needed to address the stress myths at universities and broader society, and to advance strategies to reduce negative mindsets in undergraduate students, particularly the faint-hearted. Ongoing therapy must be available to deal with problems that may arise during stress or depression diagnosis to students until a student completes a degree. A hardcopy and electronic manual written in English and African languages about mechanisms for dealing with stress must always be updated with available

counselling services and be available to students and staff members to reduce problems that result to academic stress.

Recommendations at a meso level

Since stressed students are regularly stigmatised by some people, which might result to isolation (Brown 2018), partaking in a support group can sustain a sense of belonging and be a stand for venting feelings. For this reason, students must be advised to become affiliates of students' support groups. University communities, comprising undergraduates, should be capacitated with knowledge on academic stress lessening tactics to destigmatise academic stress and inspire stressed students to excel academically. In other words, the encounters faced by students should be well known by fellow students, lecturers, tutors, residence assistants, and mentors. The involvement of students' movements in stress consciousness campaigns must be supported as the student organisations play a significant role in assisting students to adapt to the university environment and to overcome the maladjusted environment they usually encounter. Student leaders must raise debates of academic stress and encounters that students usually face; discussions conducted to bring student-friendly solutions. The intervention of lecturers, tutors, and mentors might ensure immediate referral of stressed students to relevant stakeholders who might intervene. Lecturers, mentors, and tutors must also be trained in dealing with academic stress so that they can identify stress symptoms in students and refer them to counselling immediately to prevent depression and other psyche-related problems.

Recommendations at the macro level

In all South African universities, student-centred structures should be created that would address the challenges of stressed students and be put in the formation of university policies. In addition, students should be part of the policy formulation since "nothing is about them without them". The inclusion of students in some decision-making is vital and should not be ignored (Shahabul, Muthanna and Sultana 2022). More governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) should be encouraged to sponsor programmes that address stress in colleges and universities. Professionals in the area of psychotherapy should have their skills developed regularly, which should be budgeted for every academic year. Last, the outcomes of such research studies should be deliberated in meetings and conferences of officials and experts in the area of students' counselling services at institutions of higher learning.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the root causes of academic stress among undergraduate students at UKZN, South Africa. The needs and surviving tactics of students were also presented. The study adopted a qualitative approach and used an exploratory design. The theoretical framework used was narrative therapy and ecosystems perspective to connect the researcher to the existing knowledge. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews, and an in-depth interview method was also employed. Furthermore, 15 undergraduate students were sampled through convenience sampling. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 27. Seven of them were repeating a first-year module.

Inasmuch as the university was assisting students to overcome the negative impact of stress to students, this article noted that there are gaps that remain unfilled. Therefore, the article recommended the skills reinforcement of the counsellors, lectures, mentors, and tutors of students on non-educational methods (such as continuous psychosocial support), which could assist academically stressed students to overcome social challenges that impact negatively on their university life: A student-friendly strategy to monitor and assist the mischievous students; collaborative engagement among student structures in fighting the stigma of academic stress; establishment of students' support groups, involvement of students in policy formulations on issues like stress; and broader academic discussions about academic stress. Thus, the article posits that the university ought to strengthen the interventions at micro, meso, and macro levels to address academic stress.

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