The Relationship Between Student's Stresses and Census Variables at Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman

Suad Sulaiman*   *Monther Al- Damen**

Abstract

This study aims to investigate students stress at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. As we know students in their university life face stress and strain resulting from different kinds of stressors such as academic work, interpersonal relations and high expectations from significant people in their life, this of course will effect their achievement.

The objectives of the study are:

(1) Asses students perception of their own levels of stress within the undergraduate student population at SQU.

(2) Arrive at recommendations to improve the student counseling services at the university.

To conduct this study the researcher constructed a questionnaire consisting of fifty-four likert scale. The design of the survey includes basic demographic component such as gender, college and GPA as independent variables and stress as dependent variable. The validity and reliability of the questionnaire was high.

A sample of 433 undergraduate students was

polled in order to obtain a significant sample size, reflective of the entire population. The survey was distributed to select classes within the following colleges: Education, Arts, Commerce & Economic, Science, Medicine, Engineering, and Agriculture.

Statistical analysis were performed on data differences between males and females in their answers to survey questions appeared to be pertinent. ANOVA and T-Test have been used in data analysis.

The study revealed that students experienced high levels of academic stresses followed by psychosocial stresses. With respect to gender the results showed a significant difference in stress between male and female for the favor of female. It is believed that women are twice as likely to exhibit anxiety and depression in response to different stressors. Concerning GPA the study showed that students with higher GPA have high level of stress compared with students with low achievement. This may reflect their anxiety to keep their high standard.

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The study recommended improving counseling services at the University via conducting guidance programs such as stress management, study skills, time management, and other related subjects. In addition, the study encouraged faculty members, Student Deanship, and administration people to understand the students problems in order to minimize their stresses.

Introduction

Stress is a common human phenomena and part of life for College students at Sultan Qaboos University. Stress has been defined as "the inability to cope with a perceived or real (or imagined) threat to one's mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being which results in a series of physiological responses and adaptation. In addition to responding physiologically, people may respond cognitively and emotionally to stress. Studies indicate that 20-80% of all disease and illness is stress-related (Seaward, 1997, p.5). Stress is any situation that evokes negative thoughts and feelings in a person. Concerning undergraduate students, they react to College in a variety of ways. For some students, College is stressful because it is an abrupt change from high school. For others, separation from home is a source of stress. Although some stress is necessary for personal growth to occur, the amount of stress can overwhelm a student and affect the ability to cope. (Whitman, Neal et al,

1985). Stress comes at us from all directions. It may be related to negative events (e.g. failing a class, break up of a relationship, etc.) to positive events (e.g., graduation, marriage, etc.). Without some stress life would be boring. People react to stress in different manners by coping with it successfully if very important. In the short term, stress can cause disruption in everyday life (e.g., headache, difficulty studying, etc.) Stress comes from change and change cannot be avoided. Change itself is changing and becoming faster. So we have to acknowledge that we live in a time of rapid change.

College life can be very stressful to students currently attending College. The competition for grades, the need to perform, relationships, career choice, and many other aspects of the college environment cause stress. The problem, as we know, comes from the student experiencing too much stress.

Sultan Qaboos University was officially opened on the 9th November 1986, and the first batch of students was enrolled. The University started with five Colleges. The number of colleges has increased to seven. These Colleges are: Education, Medicine, Engineering, Science, Agriculture, Art and Commerce and Economics. In 2002, there were more than 10,000 students in the Diploma, Bachelors and Masters Programs. The University represents the crowning achievement of the development of the educational system in Oman. It exerts intensive efforts to educate and train Omani youth to participate in the modernization and development of Oman.

Stress signals fall into four categories: Thoughts, Feelings, Behavior and Physical Symptoms. When you are under stress you may experience: (See Figure 1).

Figure (1) – Stress Signals

Feelings	Thoughts	Behavioral	Physical
Anxiety, irritability, fear, moodiness, embarrassment.	Self-criticism, difficulty concentrating or making decisions, forgetfulness or mental disorganization, preoccupation, with the future, repetitive thoughts, fear of failure.	Stuttering or other speech difficulties, crying, acting impulsively, nervous laughter, "snapping" at friends, teeth grinding or jaw clenching, increased smoking, alcohol or other drug use, being prone to more accidents, increased or decreased appetite.	Tight muscles, cold or sweaty hands, headaches, back or neck problems, sleep disturbances, stomach distress, more colds and infections, fatigue, rapid breathing or pounding heart, trembling, and dry mouth.

Further, it is known that stress-filled lifestyles make it difficult for a person to make or maintain resolutions to lead a healthy life. Instead of exercising to relieve stress, some people respond by overeating, eating unhealthy foods, smoking, feeling inadequate, pressured, exhausted, bored, dissatisfied, tense, frustrated and overwhelmed. Your personal stress requirements and the amount which you can tolerate before you become distressed varies with your life situation and your age. As a college student, the greatest sources of events you experience as stressful are likely to be academic, and social situations, environment, relationships and lifestyle.

Statement of the Problem:

Students at Higher Education face pressure, tension and difficulties due to several conditions. Such as their transition from high school to the University, that makes them face new experiences and different types of problems. They have much preparations and a lot of academic work they have to do. They also have adjustment problems to the new environment, that create additional stress which reflects on their behavior in specific, and their life in general. Briefly, this study will answer these two following questions:

1- What are the resources of stresses that students have at Sultan Qaboos University?
2- Are there any mean differences between sex, GPA, and the type of college (Humanities or Scientific) on these stresses?

Objectives of the Study:

The objective of the study is to assess the students' perception of their own levels of stress within the undergraduate student population at Sultan Qaboos University. Moreover, is to find out the mean differences between sex, GPA, and Colleges on stress.

Importance of Study:

This study is important because it assesses the stressors' resources that student convey or suffer. Knowing and acknowledging these stressors help students to overcome their problems and give them the opportunity to adjust academically, psychologically, and socially to university environment.

Study Variables:

Independent Variables: Gender, GPA and College.
Dependent Variable: Students Stress.

Focus of the Study:

The Focus of Study is limited to the undergraduate student population at Sultan Qaboos University. It would be an enormous task for this research if the sample included the entire population within the University (i.e. undergraduate, graduate, faculty staff).

Study Terminology

Stress is any situation that evokes negative thoughts and feelings in a person. The same situation is not evocative or stressful for all people, and all people do not experience the same negative thoughts and feelings when stressed. (Whitman, 1985). The operational definition of stress in this study is what the stress instrument measures.

Literature Review:

Ross and others (1999) used the student stress survey (SSS) to determine the major source of stress among college students. The scale addressed interpersonal, intrapersonal, academic, and environmental sources of stress. Participants were 100 students at a Mid Western University in the United States. The students varied in year, in school, age, gender and major. Overall, interpersonal sources of stress being the most frequently reported source. The top three results of stress were: changing in sleeping habits, vocational/breaks, changing in eating habits.

Coppock (1997) administered a survey questionnaire to assess the degree of stress experienced by students at Texas A&M International University (TAMIU), located in Laredo, USA. The Survey questionnaire was completed by 301 students, two-thirds were females. About half of respondents felt overwhelmed during their freshman year. Over half found it hard to balance their responsibilities, 69 percent had more to do than they could get done, and 92 percent thought the University should have a Counseling Center. Over 60 percent did not exercise regularly, eat balanced meals, or get enough sleep.

Concerning gender differences, Gadzella (1994) studied a sample of 290 undergraduates to assess types of stressors they face. He used a student-life stress inventory. The result of the study revealed that stressors were frustration, conflicts, pressures, changes, and self-imposed. Reactions to stressors were physiological, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive. Women reported significantly higher scores on Pressures and Changes, and on Physiological, Emotional, and Behavioral Reactions. Men reported higher scores on cognitive appraisal.

Kandel and Davis (1982) in a random sample of 8206 adolescents age 14-18, in a public school system in New York State; found that 19.7 percent reported feeling very sad or depressed in the previous year. The prevalence was highest among females.

In a study that was conducted by (Coletti, et.al, 2000) to assess the effects of stress on the general well being of the undergraduates at the University of Toronto. Findings from interviews with seven (7) mental health professionals who counsel students responded that approximately 25% visit them for stressors related to a University student lifestyle. Of these students, 30-40% of students that seek help in study skills claimed to have experienced high levels of academic stress. Also, approximately 25% of students seeking counseling diagnosed with depressive disorders, about 10% of students display symptoms of anxiety disorders and approximately 5% of students counseled are diagnosed with eating disorders. Overall the respondents felt that the most stressed individuals are those that are isolated. These individuals have a small number of people in their social support groups and live off campus by themselves. It also was noted that stressful situations increased as the academic semester progresses. The top three stressors reported by students were exam preparations, course work deadlines, and future career planning (p.26)

Concerning a year of study variable (Whatley et.al, 1988)

noted that there were particular stresses experienced by first year university student that stemmed from feelings of perfectionism and inadequacy in achieving exaggerated goals.

Gadzella (1994) analyzed responses of 290 undergraduates (aged 17-54 years, 184 females) to a student-life stress inventory, and assessed the significance of differences by gender and stress. He found five types of stressors and four reactions to these stressors. Types of stressors were frustrations, conflicts, pressures, changes and self-imposed. Reactions to stressors were physiological, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive. Analyses showed that women reported significantly higher scores on pressures and changes, and on physiological, emotional and behavioral reactions. Men reported higher scores on cognitive appraisal.

With regard to the relationship between disturbances and courses taken by students, there is a recent evidence to suggest that psychological disturbance in students at University is apparent prior to the commencement of courses. Springett and Lekarz (1986) showed that students enrolled for arts courses are more likely to have psychiatric morbidity than those enrolled for science courses.

in a survey of 261, 217 college freshmen at 462 two-year and four-year institutions concerning lifestyle and stress. Reisberg (2000) found that increasing numbers of students, especially women, report feeling overwhelmed and under stress. Also more students disengaged by academics, and a decline in social activism. With respect to gender, all of the respondents encountered no differences in stress levels between genders, but all professionals noted that women commonly sought their help. It is believed that women are twice as likely to exhibit anxiety and depression in response to different stressors. (P26).

Bolger (1997) conducted an exploratory investigation of college student stress. Study participants consisted of 9 undergraduate male and female college students enrolled full-

time in a 15-week Spring Semester. The result of the study showed that academic pressure was that most commonly lead to high stress, although interpersonal difficulties and student organization responsibilities were also commonly experienced stressors. Exercise was found to be an effective means of stress management and provided additional benefits highly valued by the participants.

Methods and Design

The design of the study initially includes demographic components such as gender, college and GPA. The population of the study was all students from Sultan Qaboos University. A sample of four hundred and thirty three students was polled in random order to obtain a significant sample size, reflective of the true population. Based on the literature on students stress, a structured fifty four item stress questionnaire has been systematically designed by the researchers to represent the various aspects of stress. Besides this, students were asked to answer this question: What are the most stresses you suffer from in your daily life? The literature and the and the responses of the students were taken in considerations when the questionnaires were build up. The items were constructed in a 4-point Likert-type scale (0 = never; 1 = rarely; 2 = sometimes; 3 = mostly; 4 = always). It takes from 10-15 minutes to complete.

To find out its face validity, and item clarity it was distributed to faculty members in the Psychology Department. The responses showed that the questionnaire is valid and reliable. This questionnaire provides scores ranging from 0 to 270. To examine the interval consistency and the external reliability, a sample of 30 students responded to the questionnaire, and were retested after a 2-week interval. The reliability coefficient was ,85.

Cronbach Alph was also computed to examine the internal consistency, it was ,95. Results showed that the questionnaire has high internal consistency and external validity. The survey was distributed to selected classes within the following colleges: Art,

Education, Science, Commerce & Economic, and Engineering.

Statistical analysis were performed on data differences between males and females in their answers to survey questions appeared to be pertinent. ANOVA and T-Test have been used in data analysis.

Result of the Study

The objective of the study is to assess the students perception of their own levels of stress and to find out the mean differences between sex, GPA and Colleges on stress. To answer the first question: What are the resources of stresses that students have at Sultan Qaboos University? Means and standard deviations were extracted for the items. See (Table 1). Items who have mean three and above were considered stressful after ranking the means decently.

Table (1):
Means and Standard Deviation Of (N =433)
on Stress Items

No	Items	M	SD
1	Exam Difficulties	4.00	0.98
2	Excessive Study Requirements	3.97	1.07
3	Difficulties of Some Subjects	3.95	1.08
4	Test Anxiety	3.94	1.15
5	Several Class Exams	3.74	1.10
6	Difficulties of Time Management	3.61	1.14
7	Difficulties in Finding Leisure Time	3.59	1.20
8	Parents High Expectations	3.55	1.24
9	Difficulties in Registering Classes	3.48	1.26
10	Fear of Not Finding Jobs After Graduation.	3.48	1.31
11	Teacher Preference Some Students	3.40	1.54
12	Feeling Exhausted	3.36	1.37
13	Low Achievement	3.33	1.29
14	Heavy Duties	3.30	1.36

No	Items	M	SD
15	Feeling Anxious About My Abilities (Self-Concept)	3.28	1.21
16	Ignorance of Correct Readings	3.26	1.29
17	Feeling Depressed	3.24	1.31
18	Lack of Cooperation Between Students	3.18	1.29
19	Feeling Anxious of Talking in Front of Opposite Sex	3.18	1.31
20	Lack of Motivation Toward Study	3.14	1.27
21	High Competitions Among Students	3.13	1.41
22	Suffering from Sleep Disturbance	3.11	1.24
23	Shyness of Asking Questions	3.09	1.17
24	Lack of Confidence in Competing With My Friends	3.06	1.5

To answer the first question (1) what are the resources of stresses that students at Sultan Qaboos University have? Means and standard deviations for the study sample on the stress items were extracted (Table 1). The means were ranked from High to Low. We notice from (Table 1) that the highest means of the ten items were: Exam Difficulties, (mean = 4), Excessive Study Requirements (mean = 3.97), Several Class Exams (mean = 3.74), Difficulties of Time Management (mean = 3.61), Difficulties in Finding Leisure Time (mean = 3.59), Parents High Expectations (mean = 3.55), difficulties in registering classes (mean = 3.48) and Fear of Not Finding Jobs After Graduation (mean = 3.48). We can notice from the Table that the most stresses effect students life are academic in nature, such as difficulties of exams, test anxiety, and time management, beside the high expectations of their parents. In item No. 10, we notice the worry of students about their failure "Fear of Not Finding Jobs After Graduation" which is acceptable as many studies refer to that.

In regards to gender differences, we see in Table (2) that

female students ranked their stress as follows: Exam Difficulties (mean = 4.08), Test Anxiety (mean = 4.06), Excessive Study Requirements (mean = 4.06), Difficulties in Some Subjects (mean = 4.00) and so on. On the other hand if we seek Table (3) we notice that male students ranked stressed as: Exam Difficulties (mean = 3.83), Difficulties of Some Subjects (mean = 3.81), Excessive Study requirements (mean = 3.71), Several Class Exams (mean = 3.73), and Test Anxiety (mean = 3.67). in general we notice that academic stresses come on the top of stressors in both male and female.

Table (2):
Means and Standard Deviation of Female Students

No	Items	M	SD
1	Exam Difficulties	4.08	0.94
2	Text Anxiety	4.06	1.09
3	Excessive Study Requirements	4.06	1.03
4	Difficulties of Some Subjects	4.00	1.08
5	Several Class Exams	3.74	1.12
6	Difficulties in Finding Leisure Time	3.70	1.17
7	Parents High Expectations	3.66	1.24
8	Difficulties of Time Management	3.65	1.11
9	Inconvenient Exam Timing	3.53	1.24
10	Feeling Exhausted	3.47	1.25
11	Difficulties in Registering Classes	3.46	1.36
13	Feeling Anxious About My Abilities (Self Concept)	3.41	1.28
14	Lack of Cooperation Among Students at The University	3.37	1.23
15	Feeling Depressed	3.35	1.30
16	Low Achievement	33.31	1.39
17	Excessive Shyness When Presenting in The Class	3.30	1.30
18	Teacher Preference of Some Students Than Others	3.20	1.37
19	Heavy Duties	3.27	1.26
20	High Competition Among Students	3.23	1.20
21	Lack of Proper Study Skills	3.20	1.24

22	Feeling Shy to Ask Questions	3.20	1.31
23	Lack of Motivation Toward Study	3.18	1.29
24	Suffering From Sleep Disturbance	3.16	1.47
25	Feeling Anxious of Talking in Front of Opposite Sex	3.14	1.39
26	Communication Difficulties with Teachers	3.05	1.35

Table (3):
Means and Standard Deviation of Male Students

No	Items	M	SD
1	Exam Difficulties	3.83	1.04
2	Difficulties of Some Subjects	3.81	1.08
3	Excessive Study Requirements	3.75	1.13
4	Several Class Exams	3.73	1.06
5	Text Anxiety	3.67	1.25
6	Inconvenient Exam Timing	3.62	1.23
7	Difficulties in Registering Classes	3.54	1.21
8	Difficulties of Time Management	3.51	1.21
9	Teacher Preference of Some Students Than Others	3.50	1.35
10	Difficulties in Finding Leisure Time	3.34	1.23
11	Fear of Not Finding Jobs After Graduation	3.31	1.44
12	Low Achievement	3.28	1.31
13	Heavy Duties	3.28	1.06
14	Feeling Anxious of Talking in Front of Opposite Sex	3.10	1.44
15	Lack of Money	3.09	1.49
16	Parents High Expectations	3.09	1.49
17	Lack of Motivation Toward Study	3.04	1.22
18	Feeling Exhausted	3.01	1.30
19	Feeling Depressed	2.99	1.31
20	Feeling Anxious About My Abilities (Self Concept)	2.90	1.25

To answer the second question "Are there any mean differences between sex, GPA, and type of Colleges on these

stresses?" Univeriate Analysis of Variance was used (2x4x2) for this purpose. (See Table 4). The result of the study shows that sex is statistically significant (δ = .,000) and F value 913.368) for the Favorite of Female Students. Which means that females have more stress than males. The result of the study is consistent with . .The study also shows that **GPA** is significant (δ = .013) and F value (**3.644**). Post Hoc test was used for multiple comparisons between the means of GP1 (1-1.5), GP1 (1.51-2), GP3 (2.5 -3), GP4 (3.1 - 3.9). The result shows that the higher the GPA of the students the higher the stress they do have. It might be explained that high achievers have high expectation, and they are more ambitious than others, and they always look to have high grades. This makes them feel anxious and face a lot of stresses in their daily life.

Table (4):

Analysis of Variance by Sex, GPA, and College with Stress

Source	S.O.S	DF	MS	F	SIG.
Corrected Model	22000.568a	44	500.013	2.630	.000
Intercept	528383.25	1	528383.25	2778.767	.000
SEX	2541.968	1	2541.968	13.368	.000
GPA	2078.932	3	692.977	3.644	.013
COL	2261.946	6	376.991	1.983	.067
SEX * GPA	497.805	3	165.935	.873	.455
SEX * COL	1025.117	5	205.023	1.078	.372
GPA * COL	4011.608	18	222.867	1.172	.282
SEX * GPA * COL	2422.826	8	302.853	1.593	.1235
Error	67503.329	355	190.150		
Total	2983075.0	400			
Corrected Total	89503.898	399			

According to College as variable, it was found no significant differences between the means of Colleges of Humanities and Colleges of Science ($\delta = .067$).

According to College as variable, the study shows means differences between (Colleges of Humanities and College of Sciences), but the differences are not statically significant, ($\delta = .067$). The Colleges having stress were ranked as follows: Science, Medicine, Commerce & Economics, Engineering, Agriculture, Art and Education. That means Colleges of Sciences have more stress than Colleges of Humanities. This explains the difficulties that the students face in these type of colleges compared with other colleges.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

The recommendations are:

1. To encourage students awareness of their stresses and how to deal with them.
2. Understanding of students' problems by faculty members, Student Deanship, and administration personal to minimize their stresses.
3. Informing students during academic advising in advance of what difficulties they might face and encouraging them to develop their own strategies to achieve personal goals.
4. Organizing Peer Counseling and Self-help Groups.

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العلاقة بين الضغوط التي يواجهها الطلبة مع
مجموعة من المتغيرات في جامعة السلطان قابوس

الملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء الضغوط النفسية التي يواجهها الطلبة في جامعـة السـلطان قابوس ، سواء كانت هذه الضغوط ناتجة عن عوامل أكاديمية أو إجتماعية أو نتيجـة التوقعـات العالية من قبل الاسرة. كما تهدف الدراسة أيضاً الإجابة على السؤال العام وهو: ما الضغوط التي يتعرض لها طلاب جامعة السلطان قابوس وعلاقة ذلك بمتغيرات الجنس، والمعـدل التركمـي، والكلية؟

ولدراسة هذا الموضوع فقد تم تصميم استبانة لهذه الغاية وتم ليجاد صدقها وثباتها حيث بلـغ معامل الثبات عن طريق الإختبار وإعادة الإختبار ٠،٨٥ وكرونباخ ألفا ٠،٩٥ ، وتم تطبيقها على عينة من ٤٣٣ طالب وطالبة من المستويات الدراسية المختلفة. وشملت كليات التربيـة، والآداب والعلوم الاجتماعية، والتجارة والإقتصاد، والعلوم، والطب، والهندسة، والزراعة .

وقد أظهرت نتائج التحليل الإحصائي إن أكثر الضغوط عند الطلاب كانت تتمحـور حـول الضغوط الأكاديمية لصعوبة الإمتحانات وصعوبة بعض المواد الدراسية وكذلك عملية تنظيم الوقت بالإضافة إلى الضغوط النفسية المتعلقة بقلق الإمتحانات والشعور بالإجهاد.

وفيما يتعلق بإختلاف الضغوط لدى الجنسين فقد أظهرت نتائج إختبار ت إن الطالبات يواجهن ضغوطاً أكبر من الطلبة. أما فيما يتعلق بالمعدل التراكمي فقد أظهرت نتائج الدراسـة أن هنـاك فروقاً ذات دلالة إحصائية على مستوى (= ٠٥.) لصالح أصحاب المعـدلات العاليـة. أي أن الطلبة الذين معادلتهم عالية كان القلق لديهم عالياً وهذا القلق يعكس حرصهم على الحصول علـى معادلات عالية. أما فيما يتعلق بمتغير الكلية (الكليات الإنسانية و الكليات العلمية) فلقد أظهـرت نتائج الدراسة وجود فروق جوهرية لصالح الكليات العلمية: كلية العلوم وكلية الطب وكلية التجارة وكلية الهندسة ولكنها ليست دالة إحصائياً.

ويعد هذا النوع من الدراسات على درجة كبيرة من الأهمية إذ أن نتائجها ستسهم فـي إيجـاد الحلول لمشكلات الطلاب من قبل القائمين على شؤون الطلاب، والأسـاتذة، وسيسـاعد مركـز الإرشاد الطلابي في عمل برامج توجيهية نمائية تساعد الطلاب على التوافق الأكاديمي والشخصي والإجتماعي بشكل خاص والتوافق مع بيئة الجامعة بشكل عام.