

# **STUDENT’S STRESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF FOREIGN LITERATURES AND THE ONES IN ALBANIA**

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## **Abstract**

This aim of this paper is to establish a theoretical approach of student’s stress issue. This article provides an overview of the literature regarding the definition of stress, the sources of student’s stress, and a summary of the main academic stress. This theoretical article also highlights and explains the importance of the studies undertaken in this area with the aim of obtaining a better knowledge of the sources of stress among students and the strategies to counter-attack it. This paper explains some theoretical models that analyze stress in terms of resources conservation and recovery of the individual. It presents some of the main instruments that are used to measure the degree of student’s stress. Also, this paper studies the issue of stress in the context of academic performance. The novelty that this article brings consists of the emphasis on the importance of increasing the focus of the study of student’s stress on the students in our country (Albania). Hence, this is a starting point for developing policies and coping strategies to reduce stress on students. Also, this is in a view of increasing student’s performance and their academic achievements. This type of approach has many benefits, especially in research, with the possibility of finding new ways to explain these psychological issues. However, I discover this theoretical approach to be useful, by combining the resources on stress from foreign literatures and literatures in our country, Albania.

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**Keywords:** Student’s stress, sources of stress, academic performance

## **Introduction**

Complete and convincing data from various studies show that high levels of stress among students can affect their memory, concentration, and their ability to solve problems thus reducing their learning abilities and their academic performance (Al-Kandari & Vidal, 2007; Dixon & Robinson

Kurpius, 2008; Dyson & Renk, 2006; Misra, McKean, West, & Russo, 2000; Wells, 2007).

Consequently, numerous quantitative research which are mainly focused on students who are enrolled full time, or who are living in dormitories or not, shows that stress takes a significant part of a student's life (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Robotham & Julian, 2006). Thus, studies show an increase in stress for students, especially in recent years. This growth is associated with a decrease in the student's progress; thus, women are the ones who experiences higher levels of stress (Akgun, 2004; Dixon & Robinson Kurpius, 2008; Gadzella, 1994b; Gadzella & Carvalho, 2006).

Moreover, higher education is one of the main factors that enable individuals to become successful in obtaining a profession in order to face the different challenges of life. College life can be challenging and difficult for a new student. However, it requires a higher degree of student initiative, determination, and self-monitoring. A huge amount of research has attempted to identify important factors of student's success by assessing the relations among many psychological and academic variables. Few studies have used different methods to propose and test models that can be used to understand the relations among factors that influence student's academic success (Momanyi, Ogoma, Misigo, 2010; Peterson, Milstein, Chen & Nakazawa, 2011). Furthermore, an important part of the mission statement of most universities is the education of students to prepare them for a lifelong learning. According to Mbathia (2005), education supplies people with specific skills and enables them to perform their tasks effectively. Therefore, the better the performance of an individual, the more competitive and rewarded the individual will be. Nevertheless, many factors have an impact on student's academic performance. Owiti (2001) describes that attitude leads to achievement and abilities are needed for successful performance. In addition, Bandura (1997) confirmed that intellectual capability and motivation are significant factors on academic performance.

### **Theoretical Approaches to Stress**

Consequently, stress is a major theme in the literature used in social sciences, behavioral studies, and those who focus on the study of life. According to Cohen, S, Karmack, T & Mermelstein, R. (1983), stress is defined as a process in which demands that comes from the environment or threaten the adaptive abilities of the individual organism, derive psychological and biological changes, which may cause the individual to be infected with various diseases. Stress is defined as a special relationship between the person and the environment being evaluated by the individual due to lack or excess of his/her inputs, which endangers his/her welfare

(Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Hans Selye (1974, 1976) and the coping model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), focus on the interaction between people and their external environment and defined stress as an imbalance between requirements, external sources, and the individual. However, stress is present when the pressure exceeds the perceived ability to confront it.

The notion of “stress” has entered the current language along with the studies of the famous biochemist Hans Selye. The idea of “stress” has bothered Hans Selye in his entire life. However, this famous scientist dedicated his life to study “stress” which brought about a revolutionary concept in the field of medicine and humanities. Selye’s work (1976) on general adaptation syndrome (GAS) is considered nowadays as a highly important research made on stress description.

Hans Selye (1976) reminds us that there can be two different reactions to stress: a positive reaction and a negative reaction. Therefore, a particular level of stress is necessary to help being more motivated. This kind of stress is called Eustress. Subsequently, the genesis of the thought of studying stress in the context of medicine and biology represented by Selye (1976), consisted of the use of the term “Eustress” referring to curative stress and the term “distress” referring to unpleasant situations that produce stress.

Furthermore, the study of Lazarus & Cohen (1999) and Lazarus (1966: 25) on psychological stress and enduring process began to shift the focus from stress to endurance. Without doubt, the most influential theoretical perspectives about psychological stress and endurance were directed by Lazarus and his colleagues (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus & Launier, 1978). This perspective explicitly grew from the need to understand individual differences that characterize an individual in stressful situations to the way they handle these situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Therefore, stress is regarded as an incentive, as a response, and as a process (Baum, 1990; Cooper, deWe & O’Driscoll, 2001; Lazarus & Cohen, 1999).

Seeing it as a stimulus, stress is focused on environmental factors that threaten our internal balance. In addition, seeing it as a response, it refers to the way someone reacts to a particular stressed situation. Stress as a process involves a series of interactions and adaptation of the individual with the environment where he lives. It is considered as a transition, which means an exchange between the resources that an individual possesses and the demands that comes from the environment.

### **Sources of Student’s Stress**

University students are subject to several types of stressors, mainly related to the entrance into a new developmental stage, i.e. young adulthood (e.g., Pillow, Lovett, & Hill, 2008). At this stage according to Erikson

(1968), young adults are faced with issues such as intimate relationships, choice of a career, moving away from home, getting a first job etc. Therefore, the transition from high school to college or university is often accompanied by efforts to cope with the high stress levels in adaptive or maladaptive ways (e.g., alcohol drugs) (Millstein & Halpern-Felsher, 2002; Webb, Bray, Getz, & Adams, 2002; Young, Morales, McCabe, Boyd, & D'Arcy, 2005).

Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that stress is noticed not only in major life events (e.g., beginning of studies at the university, starting a new job etc.), but also, daily hassles (e.g., time pressure, arguments with colleagues etc.) are important stressors among university students (Goff, 2009; Le May, 2011; Ong & Cheong, 2009; Ross et al., 1999).

Numerous studies (Lindsey, Lionit, Hendricks, Butler, 2011; Matheny, Ashby & Cupp, 2005; Misra, McKean, West & Russo, 2000; Ukeh, Aloh & Kwahar, 2011) have ranked in the category of academic stress. Hence, this includes overload through tests, exams, challenging courses, the different educational system, and the making of decisions about future career plans. In addition, difficult courses are referred to as demanding programs. In these programs, students are unable to understand and apply the concepts they have learned; and are unable to obtain good grades. Students were also under constant pressure between the self-imposed expectations for higher grades and lower results than they expected.

Several efforts have been made to identify the types of stress most often experienced by college and university students (Abouserie, 1994; Dill & Henley, 1998; Edwards, Hershberger, Russell, & Markert, 2001; Hudd, 2000; Pengilly & Dowd, 2000; Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999). However, factors that stresses students should be evaluated and identified continuously and competently, to explore the patterns of the stress at students referring to the social trends and cultural norms of the country. Stress is a part of students' existence and can impact how students cope with the demands of college life. Unfortunately, very few studies on stress in general and the student's stress in particular have been taken so far in our country. This raises the urgent need to develop studies in this direction in order to recognize the sources of stress specifically in Albanian students and to design programs for the management of stress. Thus, the application of these programs in practice will lead to a higher student academic performance.

### **Stress Impact on Student Academic Performance**

Stress is the foremost impediment to academic performance. Thus, it outranks the other top 10 impediments to learning which include cold, flu, sore throat, sleeping difficulties, concern for a troubled friend or family member, and relationship difficulties (Abid, H. C. 2006).

However, research as shown that there is a relationship between stressful life events and poor health-related quality of life among college students. In the spring of 2003, the NCHA showed that respondents identified stress as the highest impediment to academic performance for the past school year. Thus, this can be attributed to many of the emotional and physical symptoms common in the college population, such as fatigue, hypertension, headaches, depression, anxiety, and the inability to cope with stress. Furthermore, excessive stress reduces work effectiveness, contributes to bad habits, and results in negative long term consequences including addictions, crime, absenteeism, poor academic performance, school dropout, professional burnout, and ultimately, career failure (Kuhn, 2005).

Academic performance is the only indicator of the quality of time that a student spends in college. Over the years, academic performance at different levels of study is measured by the results of their exams (Kyoshiba, 2009). Various studies have highlighted the fact that good average grades always serves as an important indicator to open a new window in life for a better job opportunity, better pay, and more educational attainment (Ang & Huan, 2006). In addition, college students experience higher stress in predictable time each semester due to academic commitments, financial pressures, and management capabilities due to lack of time. When stress is perceived in a negative way or becomes excessive, it can affect the student's academic performance and state of health (Campbell & Svenson, 1992).

Students also face emotional problems, physical, and family issues, that may affect their learning ability and their academic performance. Excessive stress can cause mental and physical health problems, can reduce self-esteem, and can affect students' academic achievements.

Several studies examine academic performance in the general population of students at the university using their average grades to measure their academic performance (Mani V., 2010; McKenzie, K & Schweitzer R., 2001; McNabb, R, Pal, S & Sloane P., 2002).

In general, stress regarding university has been revealed to be connected in reverse to student's academic performance at their first year in particular (Krause, K, Hartley, R, James, R & McInnes, C. 2005).

Furthermore, reducing stress is a goal for many persons. This is because stress can either hinder or motivate one's performance. The direction of its effect depends on the perception of the individual. When stress is perceived negatively or becomes excessive, it may become linked to physical and mental illness. The process of university education evaluates the student constantly and causes a reevaluation of their self-image. However, as the session progresses, stress rises with every paper and examination. Stress can affect both health and academic performance. Among other health

risks, it may result in increased blood pressure, a stress-related condition leading to an elevated risk of disease (Talib, N & Zia-ur-Rehman, M. 2012).

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to establish a theoretical approach of the student's stress issue and to provide an overview of the literature regarding the definition of stress and the sources of student's stress. It summarizes the main specific academic stress. Till this present-day, stress remains a topic which requires more attention. However, some studies underlines that the lack of satisfaction and fulfillment leads to increased distress (Vasile & Albu, 2011). Consequently, the sources of student's stress that comes from literature can serve as a starting point for conducting important studies focusing on the stress of Albanian students, specifically analyzing what is stressing them. Likewise, the presentation of data coming from different studies on the impact of stress on academic performance, serves as a greater awareness of the leading actors of higher education in the development of programs to manage stress in students with the main purpose of improving student's academic performance. Through this knowledge and by spreading this information about stress, we can contribute to a healthier and balanced society.

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