

Academic Stress During Pandemic: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

One temptation of sharing the findings of the case studies related to academic stress may be to reveal both positive and negative aspects of students' experiences. The main purpose of this case study was to examine the potential academic stress that the students were encountering during the pandemic. The investigator used the case study of five participants to bring out the challenging issues of academic stress into the limelight. The major concern was the non-availability of mobile device, smartphones, tablets, PC and laptop during their online classes' timings. The internet connectivity issue is the most emphasized cause for not attending the online lectures. And the teachers are not flexible in taking online classes in the evening. Visually challenged students are facing impediments in the online teaching-learning process because the teachers are not sensitive to their educational needs. Those teachers who were practicing 'inclusion' in their teaching are not applying it in online classrooms. The students are unaware of how their online assignment submission and other academic activities are causing them to commit academic dishonesty in the form of plagiarism and collusion practices. The implications of the findings are also drawn out and discussed in this research paper.

Keywords: Pandemic, Academic stress, Anxiety, Guidance and counselling

We do find veritably that students' stress is a major concern for all educators specifically when it culminates before its manifestation. Stress is inevitable, no matter if one is powerful, happy, or wealthy. It can take different forms according to the circumstances and individual's perception.

According to Garret (2001), college students have a unique cluster of stressful experiences or stressors. Ross *et al.* (1999) in their study, gave several explanations for increased stress levels in college students like adjustment issues, the pressure of studies, strain because of interpersonal relationships, housing arrangements and lifestyle changes. In addition to it, they also emphasised that college students' stress is also related to academic requirements, support systems, and ineffective coping skills. It often happens when the self-imposed stressors collide with the academic demands causing tipping the balance and ultimately

resulting in disequilibrium and excessive stress (Michie, Glachan, & Bray, 2001)

Stressors alone do not produce anxiety, depression or tensions (Mckean *et al.* 2000). Instead, the interaction between stressors and the person's perception and the reaction to these stressors cause stress. The findings of his research are that the first year of undergraduate students are stressful when they miss out on lectures and classroom activities. Female students appeared to experience a greater degree of stress than their male peers due to the increased class work overload, pressure, and financial difficulties, having many hours of studies, fighting with their friend(s), lack of university support, missing some lectures etc.

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Similar research by Misra *et al.* (2000) concluded that it might not be the stressor but the perception of a stressor which impacts more negatively on females' stress. Furthermore, according to him, females who tried to find perfect solutions to problems lead them to experience higher distress (Misra *et al.* 2003). Oliver *et al.* (1998) identified internalising disorders such as anxiety, depression, and physical symptoms which were frequently diagnosed in university students. The prevalence of internalising and eating disorders was higher for females, while alcohol problems were more common in males (Oliver *et al.* 1998).

Research Questions

The objective of this study is to highlight the academic stress faced by the students in formal education system, especially during this uncertain time. The investigator used the case study of five participants to bring out the challenging issues of academic stress into the limelight. The case studies in this paper are restricted to Aligarh city and students studying at Aligarh Muslim University and schools. The questions that drove the investigator to pursue this case study are: what are the possible common academic concern of students? Does this academic stress differ with gender and their education level?

Methodology

The investigator made a humble attempt to analyze individual case studies. The willing participants were narrowed down to five, where the subjects were carefully selected, giving due importance to the sub-sample on the basis of their age, gender, educational level and differently-abled individual. The interaction with the participants was online where a semi-structured interview was followed by an informal discussion with them. The participants were students studying at Aligarh Muslim University and schools. Interestingly, the school students and undergraduate students who participated in this research were willing to discuss quite frankly and explicitly about their perceptions of potential sources of academic stress during the pandemic. The participants of the case study were also willing to share their experience only if their identity would be kept confidential. Therefore ensuring their end of the bargain, the investigator has discussed their views and narrations as follows:

Analysing the Cases

Case I: The first participants was a school student who was promoted to class VIII According to her, ever since the lockdown, she has lost interest in studies. She misses talking and playing with her friends. As she is not allowed to have her own mobile phone, 'I miss my online classes as my parents' mobile phone is not available to me during my online classes.' Because she is missing her online interactions, she is facing difficulty in understanding lessons. 'I am convincing my parents to arrange a tutor for me' she added. Copying the questions, answers and exercises from the PDF files in the notebooks is just routine mechanical work. Even the assignments given to her is creating a lot of anxiety as most of the students have the device, they click an image or make a PDF file and upload it on the Whatsapp group. 'Those who have good expensive mobile devices, make impressive assignments with the help of different apps and submit it.' This disheartens her as she does not have the resources to make such impressive assignments. She emphatically told 'You never know the parents themselves are making the projects and assignments. How can a teacher ensure that the child is not cheating?' She also revealed a piece of very important information that friends studying in private schools and belonging from a low socio-economic status are facing social and economic problems because of the economic recession caused by this pandemic. In order to cut down expenses, some of the parents are planning, and some have already executed their plans by applying for a Transfer Certificate and removing their wards from the schools.

Case II: The second participant was a student from secondary school. According to her, the unique academic stress she is facing is related to the entrance test. 'It looks like time has stood still for me. My friends in private schools are promoted and pursuing their next grade. But I have to wait for the entrance test in order to get admitted in class XI'. With passing time, even the parents are also in a dilemma and stressed up regarding when the university will conduct the entrance tests. Online coaching is gaining popularity. 'I find it difficult to focus on competitive preparation, as I am not yet enrolled as a student in any school.' She added that academic decline or the 'academic stagnation' is making her think that 'life is a

burden'. And that is how highly depressed students become prone to 'suicide ideations' she retorted.

Case III: The third participants of the study was a male undergraduate student from the Faculty of Arts, who is differently-abled. He opened up by saying 'I am visually challenged, and the whole online teaching is not considering my needs.' 'We need assistance in downloading the app, writing and uploading the assignment'. When teachers are using the PPT or any visual aid, it is not helping us unless we are able to hear them uninterrupted. 'In the hostel, I always had academic help from my hostel mates, but at home, I miss this academic help.' When it came to contacting authority, 'I am facing a problem in contacting the authority, the helpline numbers are busy and are not answered easily. I don't understand whom to contact.' When it came to communicating their needs to their parents, he said bluntly, 'I come from a humble background, I know the financial constraints that my parents are going through. The online classes are with internet price, and it is adding to our expense. I cannot ask them to purchase for me any additional gadgets or upgrade my mobile apps. I am scared they might ask me to discontinue my studies.'

Case IV: The fourth participant was a female undergraduate student from the Faculty of Social Science. She has something new to add that 'Parents are insensitive when it came to online teaching. They are not taking our online teaching-learning seriously.' 'Sometimes, I have to teach my younger siblings and prepare their assignments and projects that leaves little room for my self-study.' 'Many of my friend's parents are looking for a suitable bridegroom. Two of my friends are engaged, and one got recently married.' She added humoredly that ironically there are marriages that are taking place inspite of social distancing probably because of the huge reduction in marriage expenses. 'The pandemic has made us students not worthy/valuable in the eyes of our parents. They think if we are not studying by the old textbook method, we are not studying at all.' 'The parent's idea of being productive by staying at home is different than ours.' Parents are expecting that girls should help them with household chores. Any slight disturbance in the home environment decreases her self-efficiency, and she finds it hard to overcome daily domestic battles. She expressed her fears regarding the assessment process and whether it will be justly done by the teachers. When asked regarding her perception of academic integrity, she

frankly said, 'Many of us who do not know how to make PPT or type an assignment in other languages we seek help from others.' 'I help my friend by sharing my note and submitting the assignments, especially those who live in remote areas and face internet connectivity issues.' 'As we are burdened with online classes from morning to late afternoon and writing assignments and projects, I find myself irritated, and as a result, I am picking fights with my siblings, friends and arguing with my parents.' The pain was apparent when she gushed that 'the academic stress is also straining my romantic relationship.'

Case V: The last participants was a male postgraduate student from the faculty of Sciences. He made the first impression by stating, 'The student in me died during the quarantine.' On further discussion, he expressed that the problem is still lurking and is causing a lot of stress in him. 'I am constantly being judged by my parents. I miss my independence as a residential student in AMU.' Parents are forcing me to work and help them in their business, and 'I am not able to attend my online classes. And if I insist they think that I am finding an excuse for not getting the work done and helping them.' When it came to whether the academic homework and tasks are being effectively communicated and how he is responding to it, he said 'Assignments are not at all interesting. It is just a formality. Honestly, telling I forget how many assignments were given, when do I have to write and submit?' He finds it hard to find privacy at home for self-study. The stressors at home like the health condition of any of the family members dominate the academic stress. As a result, he sometimes ignores and forgets that he is even enrolled in a course.

Highlights of major concerns derived from the case studies

The investigator has derived the following findings by analyzing the responses from the participants. The major concern was the non-availability of mobile device, smartphones, tablets, PC and laptop during their online classes' timings. The school children are not given the phones, and mostly their parents are controlling their school activities. In some cases, children are forcing parents to buy them a separate mobile device. This is adding to their expense, and the misuse of mobile is also becoming rampant. The internet connectivity issue

is the most emphasized cause for not attending the online lectures. And the teachers are not flexible in taking online classes in the evening.

With the passage of time, parents and their ward are stressed out regarding what will be the policy formulated regarding the entrance tests and their admission to the next level/stage. Parents are applying for a transfer certificate and removing their ward from the school as a cost-cutting measure. Parents feel that their children at home are not productive at all. And are addicted to their mobile devices. Some may also think that online classes are only an excuse and a nuisance. Parents are also pressurizing their wards in household chores and other outdoor activities. They are not taking online classes seriously. Financial difficulties faced at home are making the students not communicate their needs to parents, fearing that the parents will remove them from their course.

Visually challenged students are facing impediment in the online teaching-learning process because the teachers are not sensitive to their educational needs. Those teachers who were practicing 'inclusion' in their teaching are not applying it in online classrooms.

Female students are facing emotional stress because they are missing their 'girlfriend time' that they had before the pandemic. It is perceived that few of the female students are being pressurized by their parents for marriage or at least getting engaged because of societal pressure.

Those students who are in a relationship are facing personal problems which are affecting their academic work. Though online dating is becoming widely popular during the lockdown, but the relationships are just like walking on eggshells (Lehmann, 2020). The online academic classes and assignment are affecting and straining their relationship with friends and their romantic relationship.

The routine followed during pre-pandemic is challenging to implement and follow during these times. Suicide ideation usually comes into being because of academic problems and an unsupportive environment at home. A study by Arun & Chavan (2009) concluded that Academic decline significantly correlated with the feeling of "life as a burden" and suicidal ideations.

Problems of residential students are different, especially when it comes to being independent, spending time with friends, self-study time, maintaining the romantic relationship and group study. These are the areas in which a residential student is missing immensely by staying home.

Stressful events in life are very personal. Students from broken homes, having single parent, no siblings, overprotected parents or neglecting parents had decreased their self-efficiency when it came to academics. Taiwan, Kai-Wen (2009) study pointed out that the most potent stressors for the students were lack of sleep, lack of concentration, lack of family support, getting along with siblings, parents' excessively high expectations, lack of interest in certain subjects, having trouble getting along with peers, and considering life and their future. The study also showed the difference between the genders; that is, male students were more stressed by family factors than were female students.

Academic procrastination has also become popular during pandemic times.

The investigator feels compelled to being a very crucial issue that is still at its nascent stage. The issue is related to academic integrity. The students are unaware of how their online assignment submission and other academic activities are causing them to commit academic dishonesty in the form of plagiarism and collusion practices. The technology they are blessed with is also opening doors for them and easing them into these practices.

Suggestions for Stakeholders (Parents and teachers)

1. Teachers should not assume that all students learn at the same rate, pace and way. The diverse need of the students should be incorporated into their online interaction class.
2. Flexibility in timings to conduct online classes. Separate interaction with students with special problems. He/she should use easily accessible apps and a combination of apps and adopt the multimedia approach. Don't make one particular media/app as your favourite app.
3. Assignment/projects should be interesting. Have a variety of questions ranging from

knowledge to application level. Give the students a choice to attempt the questions. The multimedia approach to teaching and learning is encouraged. For differently abled students, explore the apps that will promote 'inclusiveness' online.

4. Teachers have to be trained in academic integrity to teach the students about the practices that can lead them to academic dishonesty. The students should be made aware of different types of plagiarism and collusion practices. And they should also know how to own the responsibility for their actions (Ahmed and Firdous, 2020).
5. Students are facing socio-emotional, psychological problems. This is a high time as a teacher; we sharpen our skills and apply guidance and counselling in an actual real setting. Every teacher has learnt about guidance and counselling when they undergo rigorous training in the teacher training institutions. This pandemic has given us the opportunity to execute online guidance and counselling. For this, we have to allot time and cater to their needs individually. For those who do not have the knowledge regarding guidance and counselling there are faculty development programmes that are aiming at inculcating these skills in the faculty members. Moreover, there are short courses that are being provided online for all. (Ahmed and Firdous, 2020)
6. There are a set of skills that we as parents and teachers should inculcate like listening skills, asking thought-provoking questions, using humour, laughing with the others, assuring and giving them hope.
7. We should not criticize by comparing our children with anyone. Have an open mind and be more understanding and caring exemplifying how you too are adjusting to this social change.
8. Parents should value the essence of education. By merely removing the ward from the school is not solving the problem, but it will be adding more to their problem. It is a sheer wastage of time, money and resources and will gravely affect the future of their ward. It is the progressive section of society's responsibility to look up into this matter and extend their financial assistance and aid to these families. If we take the responsibility for one child belonging to low socio-economic status, it will make a massive difference to our minority community.
9. Parents should themselves and convince their children to cut down on expenses by changing their priority. For example buying new clothes, shoes, online shopping for games, toys and prioritizing spending on educational resources.
10. Parents should realize the importance of making their children self-independent, skillful enough to lead a successful and independent life. Early marriage is not the solution to this. Parents and teachers both are responsible for setting an example and being role model for young adult about what it is to be happily married life. If young adults are revolting against the marriage as an institution and there is a growing inclination of 'live in' relationship, it may be because the healthy and virtuous side of married life is becoming rare. Marriage should not be treated as a punishment. But in fact, young girls and boys eligible for getting married should be counselled that marriage does not mean the end of your independent life and all your dreams come to a halt.
11. Parents should also realize that their wards residential life is different and putting demands on them, and enforcing a change in their routine will make matter haywire. Give them privacy and a time that they want to spend online with their friends. Also, as a parent, we should understand how online interaction is essential for the students to hold on to their students' life. And these online lectures, webinars are keeping all the teaching fraternity hopeful and mentally engaged especially during pandemic times.
12. Parents have to be friends with their children, the void felt by most of the children must be filled by us as a parent. This pandemic is the best time to mend our relationship with our children. It's now, or never, that we can get to re-live our childhood with our kids.

13. Some students may use behavioural and emotional avoidance to avoid thinking or having feelings about their stress. Therefore as a teacher, it is pertinent for a teacher to understand this since such behaviour can easily mask a students' need for help (Gibson, 2004). There are researches that have shown that engaging in avoidance type coping may result in more severe psychological symptoms (Hayes *et al.* 1996; Spira *et al.* 2004; Ramya & Parthasarathy, 2009)

CONCLUSION

One temptation of sharing the findings of the case studies related to academic stress may be to reveal both positive and negative aspects of students' experiences. The main purpose of this case study was to examine the potential academic stress that the students were encountering during the pandemic. The results have revealed interesting facts and confirmed the prediction of my research questions. Academic stress is out there and is affecting the students irrespective of their gender and education level. This stress is straining their relationship with teachers, family members and friends. However, it will be interesting to explore in future research academic stress with a larger sample. Many unforeseeable causes and consequences can be uncovered. With the help of these findings, the teachers and parents can be geared up for what to expect in a child and how to manage them effectively.

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