ABSTRACT

Background: University education is stressful and demanding. Stress may affect students' health and their academic performance. A student's life is subjected to different kinds of stressors, such as the pressure of academics with an obligation of success, uncertain future and difficulties envisaged for integration into the system. Coping strategies are specific efforts that individuals employ to manage stress. Positive coping strategies help reduce stress while use of drugs and alcohol to manage academic stress may worsen the situation. This study aimed to assess the levels of stress among undergraduate students and their coping strategies.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted among 447 undergraduate students of all eight faculties of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. A simple sociodemographic questionnaire was used to collect relevant data. Stress was assessed by using DASS-21 questionnaire while the validated Brief COPE inventory was used to assess coping strategies.

Results: The majority of respondents were females (66.9%), 62.2% of students were Chinese and mean age of students was 22.46 (±1.20). Of the respondents 7.1% students had mild stress, 23.2% moderate, 19.6% severe and 35.9% extremely severe stress levels. In comparing stress by gender 35 male students (23.6%) and 63 female students (21.1%) had moderate stress and severe stress levels were shown in 21 (14.2%) males and 56 female students (18.7%). For ethnicity 14 Malays (20.0%) compared to 49 Chinese (17.6%). Out of the eight faculties, students from the faculty of Engineering reported the highest number of severe stress with 19 students (35.8%). Stress was significantly associated with faculty (χ^2=87.053, df=21, *p<0.01)* and year of study ((χ^2=51.047, df=9, *p*<0.01). Year four had the highest number of students with severe anxiety level (71.1%). Anxiety was significantly associated with gender ((χ^2=14.257, df=3, *p*=0.003), faculty (χ^2=105.565, df=21, *p*<0.01) and

year of study (χ^2=19.152, df=9, p=0.024). A total of 40 students had severe depression level (8.9%) and 18 had extremely severe level (4.0%). Depression was significantly associated with gender (χ^2=16.316, df=3, p=0.001), faculty (χ^2=113.425, df=21, p<0.01) and year of study (χ^2=23.802, df=9, p=0.005). The students in this study used various coping strategies such as religious coping, active coping, positive reframing and use of instrumental support more than avoidant strategies such as denial, self-blame and alcohol or substance use. Active coping was the most used strategy while substance use was the least used at 77.8% and 1.5% respectively.

Conclusion: Academic period can be exciting but it can also be very stressful as it is a transitional period from youth into adulthood. It is of paramount importance to know the causes of stress among students and methods used to deal with stress as it will help lecturers and university administrators to control these factors so as to reduce stress experienced by students. Stress levels among students of UNIMAS are high and there is a dire need to focus on students' problems and needs as this will help in preventing the harmful effects of stress on heath and academic performance in the long run.