Swimming Upstream: Identifying student anxieties and solutions

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Abstract

This study explores some of the sources of stress faced by students in higher education. Research identifies an association between stress levels and students' academic performance. This study aims to determine the sources, level and impact of perceived stresses among students in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, years of study and degree major.

Participatory action research was explored as a means of developing strategies and solutions for students experiencing stress-related problems. Eleven undergraduate students were recruited initially as co-researchers with four academic staff and one research assistant. One student continued throughout the cycle with two others having to withdraw because of academic work pressures. A collaborative process took place using narrative storytelling and discussions alongside extra-sessional research.

A range of outcomes is anticipated related to the students' experience and academic achievements. Academic staff responsiveness and concern for student wellbeing and successful achievement will contribute to increased student satisfaction. Identification and development of systematic and effective ways of managing anxieties and sharing this with other HEIs will contribute to student wellbeing. In terms of academic outputs, a paper based on the pilot will be developed and acknowledgement of co-authorship appropriately made. A wider research proposal - inclusive of other universities and programmes can be developed for the future.

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Executive Summary

Recognising the increasing numbers of students on our sociology programmes reporting symptoms of stress, the sociology team developed a participatory project to explore potential causes and symptoms of stress in higher education for these students and ways of coping or helping.

Eleven students were recruited, four students participated briefly but only one continued throughout the life of the project.

Five face-to-face sessions took place with a further session undertaken outside of the established session times.

Session aims and objectives were negotiated and agreed by the co-researcher team. This included researching and collecting data on specific aspects of stress, determining the potential parameters of stress among the student group, identifying coping strategies and techniques, and determining a way forward to monitor the effects of stress and ways of coping.

Outcomes and recommendations:

1. A questionnaire was agreed as a means of collecting more data across the student group. This was developed by the team and will be piloted among the original collaborative team before seeking further ethical and faculty permission to deliver the questionnaire to the student group. Ethics approval would be sought in the new academic year.

2. An introduction to stress factors, means of coping and support services will be developed by the team and disseminated to the new student cohort at Induction.

3. An academic paper will be developed.

Introduction and background to the project

The Sociology academic team noted an increasing number of students on the programmes presenting with anxiety-related issues affecting various life-dimensions including:

- Academic studies
- External paid work
- Family relationships

- Financial problems
- Personal lives, relationships
- Leisure activities

It was also been noted that there appeared to be a gendered aspect to these experiences with more female students presenting with anxiety problems than male students. The reasons for increased reporting of anxiety-related issues and the gendered presentation are not fully understood, although we recognize that a diverse array of social characteristics including age, health status, caregiving responsibilities, ethnicity, class and so on are likely to be involved.

Consequently the academic team and students developed a collaborative project to address student anxiety issues with a view to ensuring successful study completion, enhancing the student experience and developing constructive strategies to manage contemporary life. We were also concerned to explore the range of social variables at play within this context.

Therefore, it was proposed to develop and implement a participatory action research project in which solutions and strategies were sought to address the challenges to students that resulted from anxiety and stress-related issues. To achieve this the academic team invited students to register interest in becoming part of a participatory action research team to set consensually agreed aims and plans for a 4-6 session action research cycle that would be repeated following evaluation and revision (from Feb '15). Working processes would be established in a preliminary session and models of cooperative inquiry and participatory action research (following Heron, Reason and Bradbury's work) would be introduced.

Students received a generic invitation, followed by the opportunity to speak with a member of staff in confidence about the project, participation and any issues arising, prior to joining the project.

It was anticipated that 6-8 students would be recruited (Jan-Feb '15) and additional interest would be logged in anticipation of further work subsequent to the preliminary action research cycle. Eleven students elected to be involved after a preliminary call for collaborative participants. However, only three students could attend and/ or contribute to the first meeting and following this two of these three had to withdraw to concentrate on their academic studies.

Five members of the academic team acted as co-researchers with the student recruits, reflecting a balance in terms of gender, ethnicity and subject interest: Dr Hyun-Joo Lim, Chris Willets, Prof Sara Ashencaen Crabtree & Prof Jonathan Parker, and Yadigar Alus (intern and research assistant). The academic members of the team took responsibility for completing ethics permissions through the BU ethics review, and assisted in the facilitation of action research sessions and the evaluation alongside student co-researcher.

We anticipated a number of outcomes that related to 1) the student experience, 2) academic outputs.

1) The student experience

a. Student satisfaction – in terms of recognition of staff responsiveness and concern for student wellbeing and successful achievement, hopefully contributing to increased NSS scores.

b. Student wellbeing – an increase in student wellbeing through the identification and development of systematic and effective ways of managing anxieties.

c. Student co-production – in respect of research development, working together with staff, and developing published output.

d. Student retention – relating to the above.

2) Academic outputs

a. Published output – a paper based on the pilot will be developed and acknowledgement of co-authorship appropriately made.

b. Attendance of one student recruit and one academic at a higher education conference.

c. Wider research proposal development – inclusive of other universities and programmes

d. VC scholarship PhD – linked to 2) b.

e. Identifying more effective and systematic ways of assisting students with anxiety-related concerns and developing ways of sharing this with other HEIs.

The process of the project meant that these initial outcomes were necessarily adapted partly to anticipate student benefits in the future, while due to time constraints academic outputs could not all be realised within the timeframe.

Six sessions were held in total and being a participatory endeavour these were fluid and open to manipulation and change. The first session explored the notion of collaborative action research and agreed the terms of operation based on equal respect for the participation of all involved, together with setting research tasks for completion prior to the second session.

In the second session the materials and areas researched were presented and discussion took place concerning the direction the project should now take. The student researcher, with backing from his colleagues, said that a questionnaire should be developed for seeking the opinion of the student cohort looking at the causes of stress, coping strategies and ways of reducing stress. A draft questionnaire was produced, circulated and discussed at subsequent meetings where it was revised (see appendix 1 for draft copy). The questionnaire was to be put into SurveyMonkey with a view to piloting amongst those students who agreed to participate in the original study before seeking further ethical and faculty permissions to send to all students taking Sociology courses.

Alongside the report of the project the following outcomes and recommendations were agreed:

1. A questionnaire was agreed as a means of collecting more data across the student group. This was developed by the team and is to be piloted among the original collaborative team before seeking further ethical and faculty permission to deliver the questionnaire to the student group. Ethical permissions to be sought in the new academic year.
2. An introduction to stress, ways and means of coping and places of support would be developed by the team and disseminated to the new student cohort.
3. An academic paper will be developed.

The following information in the report collates the materials collected, presented and debated by members of the project team. The relevant information will be presented in accessible form for student use over the forthcoming academic year, monitored for usefulness and revised where appropriate as a 'living' document. The report covers the following:
   - A definition of the complex and contested concept of stress
   - A review of stress among Higher Education Institute (HEI) students: action research cycles and stress reduction strategies

- The social context of stress, anxiety and depression amongst students, including a personal reflection by our continuing student researcher
- The social context – globalisation and neoliberalism
- An examination of student participation in clubs and societies

The information will be used to develop a short, accessible explanatory leaflet for students to consult and understand when they arrive at university. The leaflet will need to be informed also by the current student welfare provision on offer.

1. Defining stress

Stress, a contested concept, is a common issue in most people's lives regardless of age, ethnicity and gender, culture and class. Stress has impact on every part of society, albeit differentially perceived and responded to. However, 'stress' means different things to different people depending on their internal characteristics and make-up and the ways in which experience has influenced them as well, as their external environmental conditions. Differences between individuals, therefore, mean that a stressful situation for one person may not be stressful for another (Omura, 2007). Stress is subjectively experienced and, accordingly, there is no agreed or universal definition of it.

The term is derived from the Latin word *stringere,* which it means 'to bind tightly'. Other sources indicate that the term is derived from the French word *destresse*, and translated as 'distress' (Humphrey et al., 2000). Hornby (1995) describes stress as a form of pressure, tension or worry resulting from problems in one's life. Dahlin (2007) identifies three factors resulting in stress; including external factors inducing stress, physiological reactions and psychological responses to one's living environment.

There are some stress related terms that also create confusion such as 'anxiety, pressure, distress, tension, depression, depressed, burnout, suicidal ideation and mental health' amongst others. These terms are mostly considered as outcomes or approximations of stress. Therefore, it is important to understand the semantic differences of these basic and essential components of stress to cope with it effectively; and to create and deploy effective stress management strategies.

Hornby (1995) provides a range of definitions for terms related to, associated with or resulting from stress. In general, stress results in *anxiety* – a state of worry and irritability

caused by a fear that something bad is going to happen. *Pressure* can be defined as a strong need or behaviour of a certain kind that causes anxiety or difficulty, whereas *distress* demonstrates a great pain, sorrow or suffering caused by the lack of or removal of something. Most of the time, pressure can trigger a *tension* in which various internal forces, elements, influences are in opposition to each other. An on-going tension may be a precursor to a possible *depression* - that is the state of being depressed. Depressed is being sad and without enthusiasm or hope. Working too hard over a period of time can cause physical or mental collapse that is called *burnout*. One of the consequences of stress is *suicidal ideation* that is explained as a notion likely to lead to suicide, suicidal tendency or being in a suicidal state, extremely depressed (Hornby, 1995). Stress is associated also with *crises* at the point at which an individual can no longer cope with the experience and situation using her/his usual coping mechanisms (Parker, 1992; 2007).
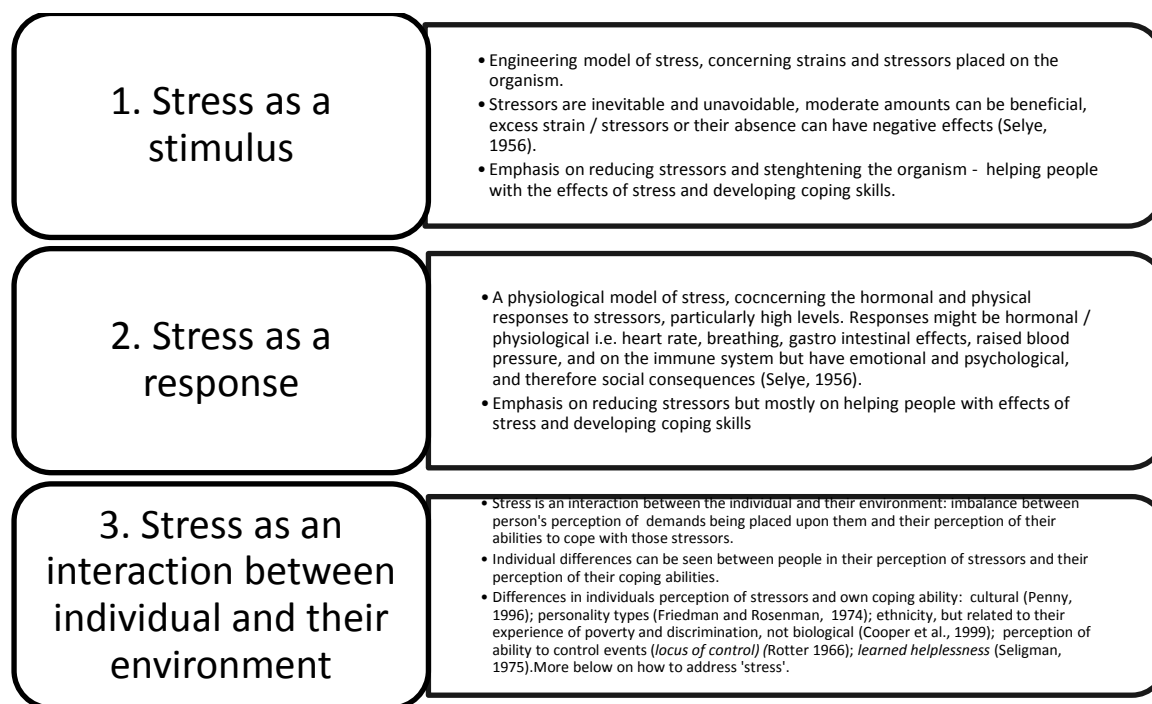
The World Health Organization emphasizes that the concept of health can be considered a co-existence of physical and mental wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. In this case mentally healthy people are expected to be aware of their own potential, to cope with the stress they encounter in daily life, work efficiently and be beneficial to the community in which they live (WHO, updated 2014). It is important to be aware of stress phenomena so we might understand students' reactions and behaviours, the reasons for these, and the impact stress reactions have on relations with others.

So, what is stress?

As we have seen, defining stress is contentious, and there are differing theoretical approaches to it. Much of the literature relating to stress comes from psychology, especially health psychology, and associated disciplines. In Bartlett's (1998) work three categories of stress are identified to assist in defining stress. These are:

1. Stress as a *stimulus*
2. Stress as a *response*
3. Stress as an *interaction between individual and the environment*

Identifying stress using these categories gives rise to three different models that aid our understanding of and ways of explaining stress (Cox 1978):

1. Stress as a stimulus	• Engineering model of stress, concerning strains and stressors placed on the organism. • Stressors are inevitable and unavoidable, moderate amounts can be beneficial, excess strain / stressors or their absence can have negative effects (Selye, 1956). • Emphasis on reducing stressors and stenghtening the organism - helping people with the effects of stress and developing coping skills.
2. Stress as a response	• A physiological model of stress, cocncerning the hormonal and physical responses to stressors, particularly high levels. Responses might be hormonal / physiological i.e. heart rate, breathing, gastro intestinal effects, raised blood pressure, and on the immune system but have emotional and psychological, and therefore social consequences (Selye, 1956). • Emphasis on reducing stressors but mostly on helping people with effects of stress and developing coping skills
3. Stress as an interaction between individual and their environment	• Stress is an interaction between the individual and their environment: imbalance between person's perception of demands being placed upon them and their perception of their abilities to cope with those stressors. • Individual differences can be seen between people in their perception of stressors and their perception of their coping abilities. • Differences in individuals perception of stressors and own coping ability: cultural (Penny, 1996); personality types (Friedman and Rosenman, 1974); ethnicity, but related to their experience of poverty and discrimination, not biological (Cooper et al., 1999); perception of ability to control events (*locus of control) (*Rotter 1966); *learned helplessness* (Seligman, 1975).More below on how to address 'stress'.

<u>About stressors – (particularly relevant to engineering and response models of stress).</u>

Life changes and life events have long been known to lead, under certain circumstances and amongst certain people, to stress (the most famous of these descriptions is contained in the 43 item *Social Readjustment Rating Scale* SSRS, Holmes and Rahe,1967). Stressful life events include bereavement (especially of a partner, spouse or family member), relationship breakdown and divorce, work-related changes, moving jobs or changing work tasks, or moving home.

However, Holmes and Rahe's (1967) scale assumes that all life events are, or are perceived as being negative (stressful); or that everyone experiences those stressors in the same way (Penny, 1996). Such a position ignores the individual's context and situation and is, therefore, flawed as a model (Foreshaw, 2002). The model does not allow for duration factors in respect of the stressor, which may also be important.

Kanner et al. (1981) took issue with Holmes and Rahe's life event rating scale (SRRS) because it fails to reflect everyday life and events. Accordingly they developed an alternative scale based on everyday 'hassles' but which can be mediated or buffered by 'uplift' factors, (Kanner et al., 1981).

The 'Hassles' And 'Uplifts' Of Everyday Life. (Kanner et al 1981).	
Everyday 'Hassles'	'Uplifts'
Annoying practical problems i.e., • Arguments, • Financial problems, • Family worries • Losing item, • Traffic jams, • Adverse weather, • Crime • Excess or difficult workload etc. • Health and weight problems *(117 items in scale)*	Positive experiences i.e., • Manifestations of love and affection, • Pleasurable experiences i.e. music, hobbies, sport • Receiving some good news • Good night's sleep, • Food and sensual pleasures • Positive social experiences • Good weather. • Feeling 'healthy' *(135 items in scale)*

Uplifts can mediate negative effects and the impact of the everyday 'hassles'. However, there is less research undertaken on 'uplifts'. Kanner et al. (1981) propose that the cumulative effect of everyday 'hassles' produces higher stress responses that can lead to a negative reaction.

It is recognised that sudden or unexpected events can often be more difficult to adapt to, again, especially in the case of significant loss (Parkes, 1993). Anticipation or forewarning of stressful events, on the other hand, allows the individual to prepare emotionally and to draw upon tried-and-tested or available support mechanisms, as well as developing novel coping strategies in having time to prepare accordingly. Feelings or perceptions of being able to control events can lessen stress and its negative effects (Rotter, 1996)

The transactional / phenomenological model of stress:

Stress represents an interaction between individuals and their environment: an imbalance between a person's *perception* of the demands being placed upon them and their *perception* of their abilities to cope with those stressors.

In a critique of 'Life Event' scales and 'Hassle and Uplift' models, Lazarus (1999) suggests that a stressor itself acts as a *distal* cause of stress, whereas of much greater significance are the *proximal* causes – that is, an individual's perception of those stressors and their perception of whether they can cope or adapt to the distal stressor.

Therefore, stress appears to be concerned with subjective *perceptions* of stressors and individual *perceptions* of the ability to cope with them (Lazarus, 1966: 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Reactions and responses to stressors is a cognitive appraisal (transaction) process. Here the individual considers what has happened before and what might affect a particular situation, along with an evaluation of that individual's belief in their self-efficacy to effect change.

Transactional Model Of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman 1984).
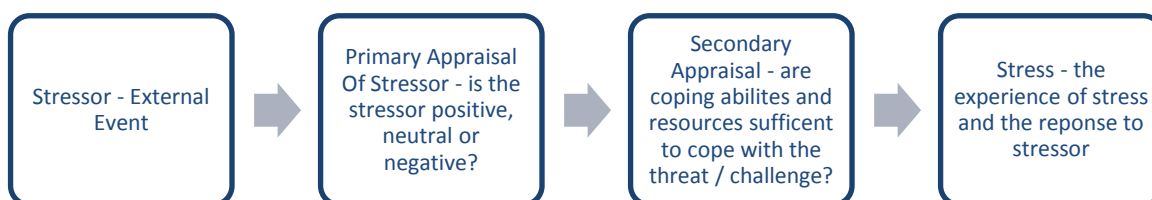
Implications For Coping With Stress:

Engineering and response models of stress tend to focus on reducing stressors but in human life these are unavoidable. These models do, however, suggest some ways of developing coping strategies.

The *Transactional Model of Stress and Coping* offers more detail regarding coping strategies. This model gives rise to two broad approaches to managing and dealing with stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These are problem-focussed and emotion-based.

Cohen and Lazarus (1979) summarise five key approaches to coping, as shown in the table below:

1. Direct Action Response - individual acts on the stressor to remove or reduce it

2. Information seeking - individual seeks information, tries to understand the stressor or seeks information about future events

3. Inhibition of action - individual does nothing, can help in short term stressors

4. Intra-psychic coping - cognitive reappraisal of situation, individual uses 'defence mechanisms' i.e. denial or rationalisation, playfulness or regression. Use of drugs and alcohol to change internal psychological environment.

5. Using social support mechansism - individual uses family / friends for help or for emotional suport.

2. A review of stress among higher education students: action research cycles and stress reduction strategies

Stress among higher education students

Research shows that HEI students may often be significantly exposed to the adverse effects of stress in academic life. In a study that examined the level of stress and burnout in professionals and undergraduate students, it was found that students ranked in the middle to upper levels of the burnout scale (Aronson et al., 1981). Students faced stressors ranging from the demands of academic coursework to interpersonal relationships (Houghton, et al., 2012). Stressors included beginning college, transfer to university, change in living conditions, feelings of uncertainty about the future and future career, job plans, exams, leading to text messaging, procrastination, concerns about assignments and doing well at school (Bland et al., 2014).

Stress has impact on students majoring in different academic areas. In their study, Pryjmachuk & Richards (2007) particularly emphasized the enormous influence of stress on nursing students. When stress becomes intense students can experience cognitive, psychological and physical strains. Furthermore, stress can result in higher absenteeism, lower motivation to do required work, and a higher percentage of dropouts (Meier & Schmeck, 1985). Depression and suicidal tendency are also indicated as factors here (Oswalt

& Riddock, 2007). A disturbing trend in student health problems is the reported increase in stress amongst students nationally (Sax, 1997). Although, numerous quantitative and qualitative research studies have been conducted to identify the elements leading to stress among college students, each study focused on specific cases. Consequently, this has led to the emergence of different findings making a systematic evaluation more difficult.

 A study addressing intrapersonal, interpersonal, academic, and environmental sources of stress with the items of either daily hassles or major life events reported that daily hassles were more frequently associated with intrapersonal sources of stress (Ross, et al., 1999). The same indicated that the top five sources of stress were changes in sleeping habits, vacations/breaks, changes in eating habits, increased workload, and new responsibilities. Students in transition from adolescence to adulthood are still developing the skills they need to overcome daily problems. Thus they face numerous stressors including the transition to the role, adjusting to academic needs, living independently, and immersion into a novel social network (Hicks & Heastie, 2008).

Research articles published between 2000 and 2012 show changes in stressors experienced by students, e.g., increased financial stressors, work-family conflict, mental health and technological advancements (Carrie et al., 2013). Studying, examinations, the transition to the university, being in a different country, financial issues, student responses to stress and stress management are highlighted in a different study by Robotham (2008). Lester (2013) focusing on college-related variables, found that students living on campus were more depressed than those who live off-campus or with parents, but other college variables (such as grade point average, being a transfer student, or working to support college expenses) were unrelated to depression, and suicidal ideation. In recent study Lester (2014), indicated that the daily life stress is more a predictor of depression and suicidal ideation than college-related stress. As can be seen, the classifications made about the sources of stress emerge into different categories.

Given that this research was carried out in the US, there may be clear difference in transferring these findings to other contexts.

Academic-related stressors

Studies related to stress variables have found statistically significant and relatively strong associations with depressive symptoms (Dahlin, et al., 2009). Students apparently are facing

the fear of failure and becoming overwhelmed by deadlines for assessments and presentations, excessive workload demands, individual reports and, reportedly, unclear assignments. Examinations and the subsequent wait for results are also found to be a significant source of stress for some students (Abouserie, 1994). Hurst et al. (2013) also reported that exams were a source of stress for students and often time-constrained exams appeared to be the primary source of stress. The National Union of Students (Scotland) (NUS, 2011) measured 90.5 per cent of college students who reported that they felt stressed by exams and assessments. The desire to complete their degree with a good grade and on time created significant stress in students. Other sources of stress related to academic life, including dissatisfaction with faculty members, quality of education, distance education and changes to classrooms due to technological advancement. Transitions, as noted, are important source of stress. The transition from a foundation degree programme to an honours programme creates difficulties for students adjusting to the new environment (Hurst, et al., 2013) and we may surmise the same holds true for the transition from school and college to university.

Financial Issues

According to National Union Students (Scotland) (NUS, 2011) 70 per cent of students who were surveyed reported financial stress. Changes to the higher education system especially financial changes from the 190s onwards created difficulties for students. The amount of expenditure on higher education, changing priorities within higher education, sources of funds, and mechanism of resources allocation added to these uncertainties (Williams, 1992). Achinewhu-Nworgu, at al. (2014) go so far as to suggest that students' educational progress and career development have been negatively affected by the increases in fees and that institutional policies are in breach of the UK 1998 Human Rights Act. Based on these findings it is apparent that many students had financial problems that prevented them from completing their education and worried about how to repay debt after their studies. Another issue for some students was not qualifying for student loans because of parental income. Many students, therefore, need a part-time job to provide additional income whilst studying (Robotham, 2008). Some other research studies showed that financial issues were a growing phenomenon among full time students (Hodgson & Spours, 2001). Nevertheless, Bennett (2003) indicated that no relationship was found between stress and being employed or working hours. On the other hand, the NUS survey (2011) determined that 50 per cent of

students found working while studying very stressful and a New Zealand study found that working part-time had adverse effect on students' study (Manthei et al., 2005).

Time management

There is an important correlation on between time management behaviours, stress and poor academic performance. Students with purpose and structured time have better psychological wellbeing, are more optimistic about the future, have more efficient study habits, fewer physical symptoms, less depression and hopelessness to those with poor time management skills (Macan et al., 1990). However, it is possible to encounter a reverse correlation between time management and stress depending on setting and reaching the goals.

Whilst students with good time management and goal orientation may be more successful, it does not mean these students have less stress or anxiety. Goal-oriented students may demonstrate their ability to achieve their goals through great effort. In terms of stress and coping with anxiety, performance-oriented students and learning-oriented students can differ. It is claimed that a learning-goal orientation is more desirable due to having most focus and perseverance on solving problems and understanding the situations (Roedel & Schraw, 1994), whereas performance-oriented students display abilities avoiding obstacles or challenging tasks in order to prevent any negative evaluation, thus leading to anxiety (Cetin & Akin, 2009).

Female students seem to manage their time more efficiently than males (Misra, et al., 2000) and may be in better control of their time with consequently improved goals and plans, and appear more organized. Nevertheless, female students experience higher level of stress and more psychological and physiological reactions to stressors than males. Misra et al. indicated that, male students can reduce their stress when they are in control of their time, and set goals or are organized. Good time management does not mean hard and long studying hours, but ensuring the most efficient studying environment, knowing how to study and what kind of study strategies to use. Academics providing time-management seminars and designing stress-intervention programmes may help students.

Some basic recommendations by Newman & Newman (1995) for time management are seeking to identify needs, ranking them in regard to priority, and allocating time and resources accordingly.

Ethnicity

Sources of stress differ from country to country. Fan (2000) concluded that Chinese students perceived higher stress in academic life than in their social life or in terms of their finances. A study conducted in Taiwan indicated that students worried about their future, self-identity and interpersonal stress, and that whilst academic stress predicted student academic burnout, stress and emotional stress were not significant predictors of such (Lin & Huang, 2014). Stress levels among university students is significantly higher than the stress level among the general population, and is correlated with poor academic performance (Sanders & Lushington, 2002), substance abuse (Park, et al., 2004), poor psychological health (Bovier, et al., 2004), and reduced social involvement (O'Brien, et al., 2008).

Mancevska et al., (2008) reported that in the Republic of Macedonia students from low-income families had the highest prevalence of depressive and high anxiety symptoms. However, first-year students from high-income families had a higher prevalence of depressive symptoms and higher trait anxiety than second-year students. Anxiety among these students mostly related to homesickness, adaptation to university life, and difficulties in relationships with new friends. It was found that majority of the students who participated in the study used alcohol, followed by nicotine and benzodiazepines.

Another study focused on student stress in Turkey (Aktekin, et al., 2001). Here a significant rise of stressful life events was associated with dissatisfaction with social activities, worrying about the future, sexual relations, risk of educational failure, worrying about exams, financial problems, dissatisfaction with the quality of education, dissatisfaction with lecturers and examinations (Aktekin, et al., 2001).

Students from Argentina and Sweden differ in both lifestyle and perceived study stress. Argentinean students present a more 'traditional' profile, with a high endorsement of religion, a closer financial bond with parents and less alcohol and drug use (Dahlin, et al., 2009). First-generation students were perceived to have little experience in preparing for the transition to university life and getting support from siblings or friends (Hurst, et al., 2013). Andrews and Wildig (2004) found that UK-based students show significantly high anxiety levels in their second year. The same study showed that South Asian international students reported considerably higher stress scores than their African counterparts.

Gender

Gender represents a different variable acting on levels of anxiety as is shown in a comparative study of student stress in Argentina and Sweden (Dahlin, et al., 2009). Accordingly, gender was significantly associated with the increased risk for female students of depression (Dahlin, et al., 2009). Similar results were shown by Lin and Huang (2014) where female students were more liable to experience stress than male students. Explanations for this include gender normativity in relation to the assumption that greater displays of emotion are a feminine trait rather than being one that fits easily into normative masculine characteristics. At the same time it raises a thought that even though male students do not show emotions caused by stress it does not mean they do not encounter high level of stress.

Year and Level

Owing to a lack of social support, and maybe inexperience of dealing with stress or not being able to detect the best coping mechanisms, it is anticipated that stress will have more impact on first- and second-year students (D'Zurilla & Sheedy, 1991). According to D'Zurilla and Sheedy, by the end of the first academic year students will be able to solve a significantly greater number of their adjustment problems, have better problem-solving skills and lower stress levels (see also Misra, et al., 2000). The findings obtained in the studies vary depending on the types of university and the country in which the research was conducted. For example, the opposite finding emerges from Lin & Huang's (2014) study, which reported that upper year students have higher values of life stresses. Guthrie, et al. (1995) also found similar rates of psychological morbidity in the first year of study and the last.

Relationships

The social and cultural environment acts on stress and perception. This includes relationships between family members, intimate partners, peers and other people in the faculty (Hurst et al., 2013). It is a challenging situation for students to leave their family behind, to live away from the family home for extended periods of time, to be required to make all kinds of decisions alone and also to try to meet family expectations. This is particularly the case, when students go to a different country, or enter an unfamiliar environment and culture. Some students may feel obliged to look after and support their family financially, which, alongside achieving academic success, may create a major strain.

Stress can affect intimate relationships for a variety of reasons including concerns about the relationship surviving the distance between partners, the effort exerted to maintain and develop the relationship, the potential for starting a new relationship or ending the existing one, and subsequently dealing with emotional trauma related to relationship break-up.

In terms of peers, leaving friends, being isolated from or judged by peers can create stress for a student (Hurst, et al., 2013). Relationship with faculty members is also important for students in terms of getting support and responses for their problems.

The role of social networks within the framework of stress theory can be seen as having a twofold dimension Cohen (1992):

1. Social networks may help individuals to avoid the occurrence of stressors
2. Influence the process of appraising the perceived stressor

Gerich (2013) suggests that social networks can provide relevant information or actual support (emotional, physical, economic), which can help avoid potentially demanding situations. Additionally, if faced with a demanding situation, social networks can support the individual's ability to cope with the situation by enhancing personal resources (self-esteem, optimism or self-efficacy). Furthermore, enhanced personal resources and perceived social support may contribute to the individual re-evaluating the stressor as being less relevant or demanding.

Cohen & Wills (1985) argue that social support is believed to contribute to the reduction of stressful events and their consequences. Other findings indicate that social support is also perceived to contribute to positive health outcomes independent of stressful situations, suggesting that social support is mainly efficacious to through emotional support (Thoits, 1985). Furthermore, the absence of (emotionally satisfying) social relationships act as stressors, regardless of whether other stressful situations exist (Thoits, 1985).

Lack of resources

A reverse correlation was found between stress and lack of time, money, support, skills, technology, and sleep (Hurst, et al., 2013). Students fail to feel confident if they perceive a lack of one of the above essentials. Lack of time, for instance, prevents students from

engaging in more leisure activities and negative self-esteem may be experienced when students do not get enough time to relax, sleep or have time off studying. Lack of support from classmates and teammates, especially on collegiate sports teams is often a subject of complaint amongst students (Hurst, et al., 2013). Being in an unfamiliar and international environment can be stressful for college students because of the potential for discrimination or exclusion or the perception thereof. A perceived or actual lack of language skills, technology, or emotional support is a concern for many international students. Additionally, students with additional learning needs in the UK reported seeing themselves different from the others and therefore often felt isolated (Hurst, et al., 2013).

The influence of perceived stress, loneliness and learning burnout on university students' unsurprisingly carried ramifications for students' educational experience (Stoliker & Lafreniere 2015)

> 'University is a pivotal period in a young adult's life; however for some university may be a recipe for disaster due to the stress and pressures that come along with university education' (Stoliker & Lafreniere 2015: 146).

Stoliker & Lafreniere 2015 sought to examine students' experiences of stress, loneliness, and levels of learning burnout in order to determine if these factors are related to academic coping abilities, overall academic performance, and educational engagement. An online, self-reported survey of 150 undergraduate psychology students in Canada indicated that multiple experiences, challenges and life events, allowed for the development of independence, changes in social systems; as well as the acquisition of life skills by individual students investing in the opportunity of creating future gains.

Previous research literature reveals that stressors such as loneliness and burnout have become common problems among students and something they may encounter during their academic career (Arkar et al., 2004; Lin & Hang, 2012; Ponzetti, 1990; Wiseman et al., 1995). Loneliness among the student body is duly considered by Wiseman et al. (1995) in terms of deficiencies in an individual's social network and relationships. In turn Pinquart & Sorensen (2001) consider the phenomenon of loneliness, not only in relation to a lack of social interaction, but also in terms of experiencing loneliness among others; with the .possible consequence of impeding students' learning abilities and levels of achievement (Benner, 2011).

The concept of 'burnout' among students is also considered and defined as a negative emotional state characterized by feelings of exhaustion, cynicism and inefficiency (Maslach et al., 2001). Burnout may occur among students in terms of perceived overwhelming academic pressures, or individual psychological factors such as emotional exhaustion, the development of negative attitudes or feelings of low personal accomplishment (Lin & Huang, 2012: 232).

Cohen et al. (1983) note that the impact of stress is determined in part, by an individual's perception of stress according to the findings of a study reviewing the validity and reliability of the PPS (Perceived Stress Scale) using a sample of university students. Findings suggested that students who already experience poor physical and psychological symptoms (depression, high blood pressure, lower immunity to infection as well as social anxiety) were more likely to perceive demanding situations as stressful than other students.

Benner (2011) found that social support systems acted as a mediator against negative social relations of loneliness and academic success. In turn, Schaufeli et al. (2002) tested the relationship between academic burnout and educational engagement using MBI-SS (Maslach Burnout Inventory-Student Survey). The correlation between the two was found to be negative: where higher-level educational engagement was associated with lower levels of academic burnout (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

It should be noted that the current literature, relies on models associated with psychology, with the above studies relying typically on self-reported questionnaires with samples typically being recruited from undergraduate psychology students who have volunteered for participation (and may benefit from this in terms of credit rewards).

Leisure activities

People with higher stress tolerance are those who are deemed to handle more stress and cope better with it. Engaging with leisure activities is one of the most effective means of reducing stress and anxiety. Engagement in leisure activities may help students who are under constant stress by taking them away from the stressful environment, helping them to enjoy university life, and also contributing to developing their social life. As we have seen, however, the converse also holds with Aktekin et al. (2001) indicating that a lack of social activities can lead to stress.

Ragheb & McKinney (1993) found a negative association between academic stress and leisure satisfaction. Their study demonstrated that students who participate more in recreation activities experienced less academic stress. Baghurst and Kelley (2013) indicate that physical activity is an effective way of reducing stress and anxiety. Commensurately Smith (2013) noted that anxiety significantly decreased from a baseline after physical exercise. Indeed, people, who are more active demonstrate lower level of stress (Smith, 2013). Downs and Ashton (2011) also reported that participating in physical activity may have a positive effect on mental health. Bland, et al. (2014) comments that students use a variety of stress-coping mechanisms to deal with stress, including listening to music, relaxing, using substances, sexual activities, shopping, singing, praying, journal writing, surfing the internet and eating. Some of these mechanisms may, however, exacerbate stress rather than reduce it. Protective coping mechanisms include support from friends, family and tutors, engaging in social interaction and being active. The same study confirms the importance of a variety of physical activity modes, such as vigorous physical activity, stretching exercises and physical strength training.

Personal characteristics

Stressors may be related to personal characteristics, physiological, psychological, habitual and temperamental and where undesired behaviour plays an important role in the emergence of stress, leading to more serious problems when not taken into consideration. Mental and physical wellbeing, eating and sleeping habits, exercising, self-discipline, ethics, behaviour and attitudes are decisive to the development of stress. Unhelpful characteristics may include substance abuse (Park et al., 2004), mood disorder (Beautrais, 2003), mental illness, a family history of mental illness or suicidal behaviour. Furthermore, 'dysfunctional' family backgrounds such as divorce or socioeconomic factors form risk factors for suicide among young people (Agerbo, et al., 2002).

Coping strategies

There are different strategies for coping with stress. One of which is to expand an individual's social capital by taking part in team sports, participating in excursions, engaging with the fine arts in addition to going to recreation and leisure centres. Additionally, effective time management, positive reappraisal, healthy eating habits, and having enough sleep can help to reduce stress. In addition, making good use of vacation time and findings methods of controlling and managing anxiety may also be useful, whilst for those

experiencing significant stress some kind of effective cognitive behavioural therapy in the form of self-help techniques can be recommended (Papadopoulos & Ali, 2013).

Most universities have support and counselling services for students. However, an NUS (2011) report found that the majority of students would not come forward to seek professional help; and only 30% felt comfortable disclosing their concerns. A key reason for not seeking professional support was reported by 80% of students as the perceived stigma that is attached to mental illness. Collaboration between HEIs and respective students' associations may help to remove barriers and create environments free of stigma.

Students may not feel comfortable talking to academic mentors because they lack a strong relationship with them or do not wish to be seen as bothering them. However, for those who are in regular contact with academic mentors the experiences can be very helpful for students (NUS, 2011). Some recommendations offered are the benefits of additional or substitute support in the absence of academic mentor. Additional ideas provided are offering seminars, presentations or workshops to advise students on time management, budgeting and finance, study strategies, leisure activities, creating stress coping strategies and mindfulness, and how to seek professional help.

3. Social context of stress, anxiety and depression amongst students

Personal reflection by Harry Farmer (1st Year Student)

This section is based on my own personal experience in relation to making the transition from home life to university life.

After applying to university, and going through the bureaucratic measures required (student finance, enrolling and so forth) I was initially faced with my first major stressor. This concerned finding my own accommodation since the university had ran out of spaces in the Halls of Residence. I not only had to come to Bournemouth to find, view and place a deposit on a house, but to compound the worries had to find housemates to live with, people I didn't yet know, but had to live with for the forthcoming year. This is perceivably one of many hurdles when transitioning to university: all students are faced with having to spend the next nine months living with people from various backgrounds and personalities, some of which are conflicting. This is a crucial issue that universities should be actively involved in to ensure as smooth a process as possible, as relocation is a critical point for all students, let alone first-year students.

Once settled into university, there are a number of challenges involved in living on your own and away from all known social networks of support (such as friends and family). The only solace can be that most students are in a similar situation.

Managing your own personal finances for the first time, can perceivably be the second major stressor – having to set up (and probably the first time in a student's life) billing accounts for utilities, internet, rental payments, alongside the additional expenditure of travel and social activities. This set of economic stressors or challenges could be perceived as harsher on students from a lower income background; it is quite conceivable that individual students may feel this is all too much to cope with.

Thirdly, the initial onset of induction week, a week of a surging torrent of potentially useful and often essential information, becomes almost useless as the sheer volume passed on to students is hard for them to retain; an issue that can cause yet more stress.

Then, once 'settled' comes the challenge of learning on a course at an advanced level, with deadlines for assignments and reading, and the need to work out who can provided support in relation to academic learning.

These stressors act collectively upon students, who have to manage new social relationships, finances and run a household, while learning to accept they are away from home and family support, along with dealing with a huge quantity of new information about both the university and their individual course. This represents a large amount of pressure that individual students have to deal with when first starting university. In my opinion, this experience will either shape the individual student to deal better with such stressors in the future or exhaust those students who cannot cope with the rush of demands from the onset.

Summary of pressures for transitional students

- Finding accommodation
- Managing personal finances
- Finding/living with unknown students
- Understanding how the university works
- Knowing where university support is accessed
- Managing studies and assignments

4. Social context – globalisation and neoliberalism

Higher education is a global commodity with universities competing to recruit student internationally as a profitable revenue and to enhance their international credentials, influence and global footprint. In respect of this study, as can be seen, student stress is also a global phenomenon interrogated and informed by an internationalised research canon.

Here we consider sociological theorisation of the angst-driven, existential question of the human condition in late modern societies as fluid and shifting terrain offered by globalisation, detraditionalisation and reflexivity (Giddens (1991).

> 'Globalisation...is not just 'out there' - to do with very large-scale influences. It is also an "in here" phenomenon, directly bound up with the circumstances of local life'. (Giddens, 1999: 12)

These phenomena are explored by Giddens (1991) as forming a tension between the individual's ontological security (a sense of continuity and order in events, including those not directly within the perceptual environment of the individual) and existential anxiety. Here lies the prospect of being overwhelmed by angst that reaches down to the very roots of our coherent sense of 'being in the world'.

For Bauman (1998: 2) globalisation 'divides as it unites' and affects individuals in terms of their identities, subjectivities and material conditions of life. The polarities of poverty and wealth, freedom and oppression, power and powerlessness form the precarious uncertainties for all classes (not just the working class) and where we find

> 'The "new middle class", oscillating between the two extremes – bearing the brunt of that opposition and suffering acute [..] uncertainty, anxiety and fear as a result' (Bauman, 1998: 4).

Beck (2000: 62) in turn examines The Brave New World of Work where

> 'A smaller and smaller number of well-educated, globally interchangeable people can produce more and more goods and services. Economic growth, then, no longer triggers a reduction in unemployment but, on the contrary, presupposes a reduction in the number of jobs – what has been called a "jobless growth"'.

The 'Brazilialisation' of Europe as a concept adds to our understanding of the impact of non-stable, fluid employment markets on individuals and communities where in semi-industrialised countries, such as Brazil, secure full-time employment is reserved for only a minority of people. Thus, precarious employment market becomes the norm for the majority of people. The Nation-State as united common weald is viewed as no longer viable and individual interest groups protect their own; and where the impact of supporting the global rich weight heavily on tenuous local communities.

> 'If global capitalism in the highly developed countries of the West dissolves the core values of the work society, a historical link between capitalism, welfare state and democracy will break apart. [….] Everything we have is at stake. Political freedom and democracy in Europe is at stake' (Beck 2000: 62).

A further analysis on these lines posits that individualisation/detraditionalisation leads to increased autonomy and choice but at the cost of insecurity. In this scenario individual biographies are removed from traditional ties and certainties. Leading to the growth of generalised anxiety as well as increased levels among individuals.

5. Student Participation in Clubs and Societies

SUBU Figures:

- **120** registered clubs and societies at the University
- at least **5** members each
- **2300** students in participation compared to over **16,000** in the student population
- **700** member drop from 2013 to now (Stood around 3000)

Why so few participants?

SUBU staff were nor aware of any specific reasons given by students for a lack of participation as there has been no previous research into the lack of student engagement. However, SUBU they recognised that this is an issue that needs to be addressed.

They did, however, offer some suggestions:

- Many students use their free time for **part time work** and therefore do not have time to participate – related perhaps by the need to work for a living alongside studying due to the rise in student fees?
- **Cost** of joining certain clubs – For example the BU Boat Club costs £140 to join and has incurring costs all year for race fees, kit and accommodation at races etc. The same can be said for many of the sports teams, however.
- **Time away from studies** – some students with heavy workloads may not feel they have time to partake in any other activities that may affect their grades
- Already **committed to charity work** or **work outside in the community** which limits student time to partake in any other activities

* Unfortunately the Officer for Clubs and Societies who could have been more informative has resigned, and therefore information was limited.

6. Support Services for Students at BU

Service	Telephone	Email	Address
Additional Learning Support	65663	als@bournemouth.ac.uk	The Sir Michael Cobham Library, Talbot Campus, S212, Studland house, Lansdowne Campus
AskBU	69696	askBUenquiries@bournemouth.ac.uk	Ground Floor, Royal London House, Lansdowne Campus
Careers Team	61663	careers@bournemouth.ac.uk	The Edge, The Sir Michael Cobham Library, Talbot Campus
Chaplaincy	65383 07894 598915	None	T135 Talbot House, Talbot Campus
Child Care	65576/65577	talbotwoods@brighthorizons.com	Talbot House, Talbot Campus
Duty Call Out Officer	524111	None	None
Head of Student Services	61076	MBarron@bournemouth.ac.uk	DL111, The Sir Michael Cobham Library, Talbot Campus
Student Counselling Services	65020	scounsel@bournemouth.ac.uk	Talbot House, Talbot Campus
Medical Centre	65378	None	Talbot House, Talbot Campus
Student Union Advice Centre	65778/65779	studentadvice@bournemouth.ac.uk	Student Centre, Talbot Campus, SG02 Lansdowne Campus
Residential Services Letting Service	61678	None	The Base, Poole House, Talbot Campus, Melbury House, Lansdowne Campus
Resident Welfare Advisors	None	accommodation@bournemouth.ac.uk	Located in each Halls of Residence
Samaritans	08457 90 90 90	jo@samaritans.org	1 Durrant Road, Bournemouth BH2 6lE
Security/Serious Incident Officer	62222	None	None

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Appendix 1 Draft Questionnaire

<u>**Questionnaire**</u>

PART I About you…

This survey is confidential and your anonymity will be preserved. Nothing you say will be attributable to you. We would like, however, to collect some information about you to help us understand better how stress affects students.

1. What is your gender?

- Male

- Female

2. What age are you?

< 20

21-25

26-30

31-35

36-40

>41

3. What is your ethnic group?[2]

Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background

White

1. English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British

2. Irish

3. Gypsy or Irish Traveller

---

[2] Using ONS agreed categories.

4. Any other White background, please describe

Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups

5. White and Black Caribbean

6. White and Black African

7. White and Asian

8. Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background, please describe

Asian/Asian British

9. Indian

10. Pakistani

11. Bangladeshi

12. Chinese

13. Any other Asian background, please describe

Black/ African/Caribbean/Black British

14. African

15. Caribbean

16. Any other Black/African/Caribbean background, please describe

Other ethnic group

17. Arab

18. Any other ethnic group, please describe

4. Are you from a 'low participation neighbourhood' in university terms?

Yes

No

Don't know

5. Are you living at home with family?

Yes

No

6. What is your annual (family) household income?

 Up to £10,000

£10,000-19,999

£20,000-29,999

£30,000-39,999

£40,000-49,999

> £50,000

7. If applicable, what are your parents'/guardians' occupations?

Mother …………………………..

Father ……………………………………

Guardian 1 …………………………………..

Guardian 2 …………………………………..

8. Are you currently working?

      If yes a. what is your job?

      b. how many hours do you work a week?

9. Do you have any caring responsibilities?

      If yes, please specify what this is.

10. Are you:

A home student

EU student

International student?

PART II Causes of stress

11. Can you name three biggest causes of stress for you?

1.

2.

3.

What would make these worse?

12. Please rate your current level of stress – 0 not stressed at all to 10 being completely stressed.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

13. Has stress affected your health and wellbeing?

Yes

No

14. Do you believe that stress has ever affected your academic work?

Yes

No

15. Has stress ever made you consider leaving your course?

Yes

No

Any other comments please.

……………………………

PART III Coping strategies

16. Please list all the ways you cope with each of the stressors you identified and rate them as first second and third etc most helpful.

17. Where or from whom did you learn about these ways of coping?

18. Who are you most likely to turn to for support?

19. Have you received any support from outside of the university?

Yes

No

Please describe….

PART IV What can the University do to help reduce stress?

20. Do you know what services the university offers to help reduce stress? Please list all you know.

21. Have you used any of these?

Yes

No

Please list all those you have used

Any further comments?

22. How do you rate these services 0 not helpful at all to 10 very helpful.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

23. Would you use these services again?

Yes

No

Any further comments?

24. In dealing with student stress, what should lecturing staff do?

25. In dealing with student stress, what should SUBU do?

26. In dealing with student stress, what should other students do?

27. What support does your family give you?

28. What support do your friends give you?

29. If appropriate, what support does your partner give you?

30. If appropriate, what support do your housemates give you?

And finally…

Is there anything we haven't asked? Any other comments please.