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"THE IMPACT OF ACADEMIC STRESS ON PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AND PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT AMONG OPEN LEARNING STUDENTS"

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the interrelation between academic stress, psychological well-being, and perceived social support within the framework of open learning. Given the escalating demands of higher education, it is especially important to understand the influence of academic stress on students' mental health and the role of social support in mitigating its adverse consequences. The emphasis on students in open learning arises from the specific obstacles they face in distance education, which may create unique demands.

The primary objective is to comprehend the impact of academic stress on students' psychological well-being and the role of perceived social support in mitigating these effects. A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating survey data with insights derived from interviews. Students from diverse academic levels and backgrounds participated by completing a self-constructed questionnaire that assessed their stress levels, well-being, and support systems. A designated cohort also engaged in interviews to convey their coping strategies and personal narratives.

The study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between academic stress, mental health, and support networks in the context of distance education by integrating statistical data and human views. The results are anticipated to inform enhancements in support services and foster improved mental health within higher education settings.

Keywords: academic stress, psychological well-being, perceived social support, open learning, distance education, mixed-methods research, coping strategies

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 OVERVIEW

Recently, there has been a rise in academic pressure, necessitating students to navigate numerous activities, including assignments and examinations. Teachers and parents exert significant pressure on students to achieve high GPAs, in addition to the design requirements. These expectations compel students to work tirelessly, ultimately leading to increased stress. In addition to academics, parents and institutions encourage students to engage in extracurricular activities. The current expectation is that students will be well-rounded. Despite their diligent academic endeavours, numerous students find it challenging to make career decisions due to insufficient career counselling, which leads to heightened confusion.

1.2 CONCEPT OF ACADEMIC STRESS

Academic-related stress and poor interpersonal relationships with friends and family significantly influence the psychological well-being of adolescents. Among other factors, having social support from important individuals significantly reduces feelings of frustration and the pressure to perform well in school (Demaray, M. K. 2002).

1.3 TYPES OF ACADEMIC STRESS

Academic stress manifests in various forms and impacts each student uniquely. The most prevalent categories encompass:

1. Stress Associated with Examinations:
This is among the most commonly cited sources of academic pressure. It arises when pupils have a pressing desire to succeed in assessments, frequently leading to anxiety, fear of failure, and emotional turmoil stemming from elevated performance expectations.

2. Stress Induced by Academic Demands:
Juggling many academic responsibilities, such as assignments, homework, and projects under constrained timelines, can be daunting. The aggregate weight of these obligations substantially exacerbates mental tiredness and stress.

3. Time Management Stress:
Managing academic obligations alongside other tasks necessitates proficient time management. Students who encounter difficulties in planning and organising their calendars may feel increased stress, resulting from missed deadlines or diminished productivity.

4. Pressure from Performance Expectations:
Academic pressure can originate from external influences such as parents and instructors or internal self-imposed expectations. The continual need for excellent academic performance may result in chronic stress and psychological distress.

5. Stress Affected by Peer Interactions:
Interpersonal and social comparisons among peers might exacerbate academic pressure. Students may feel pressured to equal or exceed the accomplishments of their peers, perhaps leading to feelings of inadequacy and stress.

6. Stress Induced by Perfectionism:
Students with perfectionistic inclinations may establish excessively high academic objectives. The failure to meet these norms may lead to self-criticism, discontent, and emotional turmoil.

7. Stress Arising from Competitive Academic Environments: In highly competitive educational contexts, students frequently engage in constant comparisons of their performance with that of their peers. The relentless drive to surpass others might result in heightened anxiety and adversely impact general well-being.

Undergraduate and postgraduate students frequently experience academic stress stemming not only from their schoolwork but also from many non-academic factors, including cultural expectations, social dynamics, environmental circumstances, and psychological pressures (Brand & Schoonheim-Klein, 2009). For many, this stress escalates during examination periods, perhaps presenting as symptoms of anxiety. Research indicates that exam-related anxiety impacts around 10% to 35% of university students, substantially disrupting their regular functioning. The perception and response to anxiety among individuals vary significantly. Results from the German Student Union’s Social Survey indicate that around 15% to 20% of students experience significant emotional distress attributable to exam-related stress (Neuderth et al., 2009).

Stress is the way our body and mind respond to the demands or pressures we face in our surroundings. In humans, it is caused by interactions between the individual and their environment, particularly when situations are perceived to be straining or exceeding one's capacities, thereby endangering well-being. Stress has become a major issue in modern society (Allen, 1983, as cited in Stress – Reasons and Solutions, n.d.), with an estimated 77% of physical illnesses being stress-related. For instance, two of the main causes of mortality, cancer and heart disease, are exacerbated by stress. Furthermore, stress-related illnesses cost American industries billions of dollars per year. Every year, approximately seven billion tranquilliser pills are prescribed in the United States, and while stress cannot be precisely quantified, it is thought to play a role in widespread emotional disturbances such as unhappiness, irritability, and dissatisfaction.

Everyone feels stressed, whether at home, work, in an organisation, school, or other social and economic settings. Stress and worry have grown prevalent in modern life, and they are a major source of concern for many individuals. Everyone, especially open learning students, must deal with stress daily.

These stress responses are part of our body's natural mechanisms, and if we strive to do our best, try new things, or push our limits, we will undoubtedly be challenged and stressed. Today, job security is limited, with many people working on temporary or short-term contracts. According to research, we now have fewer friends than in the past and live in a more fragmented, isolated society with lower levels of social support—an important stress buffer.

The complexity, confusion, and prevalence of anxiety are encapsulated in the multitude of English terms that denote anticipated distress: tension, feeling on edge, uptight, hassled, nervous, jumpy, wound up, scared, terrified, insecure, pressured, alarmed, anxious, worried, dreading potential outcomes, uncertain, vulnerable, apprehensive, edgy, troubled, among others.

In a contemporary urbanised environment, numerous individuals adopt sedentary habits, engage in suboptimal dietary practices, and are often subjected to pollution, crime, and different everyday pressures. Research indicates that individuals residing in urban settings have elevated levels of anxiety and sadness relative to their rural counterparts. The mental health issues are exacerbated by escalating substance use, constant media exposure to troubling global occurrences such as wars and natural catastrophes, rising financial pressures on people, and the progressive decline of conventional sources of spiritual and communal support.

According to the Ministry of Health Malaysia's National Health and Morbidity Survey (2011), 1.8% of adults suffer from depression, while 1.7% experience anxiety. Furthermore, the study discovered that mental health issues among open learning students rose from 19.4% in 2006 to 20.0% in 2011.

The World Health Organization's (WHO) research anticipated a 15% increase in mental health issues by 2020, identifying teens as the most vulnerable demographic. Mental health pertains to an individual's well-being in all aspects of their lives. The pursuit of pleasure in modern society is intricate, often hindered by psychological and cultural barriers.

Global wars and persistent economic crises have profoundly impacted individuals' lives, depleting their vitality and reducing happiness, as seen by the increasing prevalence of depression and burnout (WHO, 2009).

Although stress impacts individuals of all ages, the specific factors contributing to stress differ by age group. Teens may experience stress due to various factors, including puberty, changing relationships, new demands, family responsibilities, negative thoughts, parental separation or divorce, and financial difficulties.

Major causes of stress among college students:

1. Academic workload.

2. Exam percentages.

3. Romantic relationships.

4. Problems with friends.

5. Issues with siblings.

1.4 PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Psychological well-being signifies the calibre of life experiences. It combines well-being and optimal functioning (Ryff & Singer, 2008; Seligman, 2011). Sustainable well-being does not require constant good sensations; painful emotions are a natural part of life, and the ability to regulate these negative emotions is essential for long-term well-being. Extreme or sustained unpleasant emotions impair an individual's daily functioning, jeopardising their psychological well-being.

Effective life functioning entails acknowledging one's intrinsic capabilities, exercising autonomy in decision-making, establishing significant personal objectives, and cultivating robust, supporting connections.

Psychological well-being includes an individual's total feeling of happiness, personal development, life contentment, and emotional fulfilment (Burris et al., 2009).

Academic stress may significantly impact the mental health of students in open and distant learning systems. It affects psychological well-being in several significant ways:

1.5 INFLUENCE OF ACADEMIC STRESS ON THE MENTAL WELLBEING OF OPEN LEARNING STUDENTS

1. Anxiety and Depression: Academic stress may result in increased anxiety and depression levels. The pressure to excel in examinations, adhere to assignment deadlines, and manage academic workload can be overwhelming, resulting in mental health challenges.

2. Diminished Self-Esteem: Ongoing academic pressure, particularly when students encounter challenges in their coursework, may result in diminished self-esteem. A feeling of failure or inadequacy can influence students' self-perception.

3. Physical Health Issues: Chronic stress may present as physical health complications, including headaches, sleep disorders, and potentially severe conditions such as cardiovascular diseases. These physical health problems can further aggravate psychological distress.

4. Social Isolation: Students experiencing significant academic stress may retreat from social engagements and isolate themselves. This social withdrawal may result in feelings of isolation and further aggravate mental health conditions.

5. Academic exhaustion: Extended exposure to academic stress can lead to academic exhaustion, which is characterised by emotional and physical depletion due to continuous educational duties. This condition is often linked to diminished intrinsic motivation and a sense of disengagement or lack of interest in academic endeavours.

6. Influence on Relationships: Stress may negatively impact relationships with loved ones. Students may exhibit irritability or detachment, impacting their interpersonal relationships.

7. Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms: Certain students may engage in detrimental coping strategies, such as substance abuse or overeating, to manage academic stress. Such behaviours can adversely impact physical and emotional health.

8. Decreased Academic Performance: Paradoxically, heightened academic stress might negatively impact academic success. Excessive stress can impede focus, memory, and problem-solving abilities, hence challenging academic success.

1.6 PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support is commonly used to describe the functions that are performed for an individual by significant others (such as family members, relatives, and friends) and individuals from extended relationships (such as neighbours, classmates, and colleagues) (Thoits, 1994). Perceived social support is the degree to which individuals believe that they have the resources necessary to engage in social relationships. Family members, friends, and significant others typically fulfil these provisions.

Social support that is desperately needed is provided by parental support for children (Brehaut et al., 2004). In response to life crises or adversity, support is a critical factor that fosters positive behaviours and contributes to positive outcomes in terms of mental health and well-being. This support can be found in the form of friends, family, and the community at large.

This support is crucial for establishing the positive psychological changes necessary to preserve an individual's mental health. Research has demonstrated that individuals who perceive themselves as having higher levels of social support experience improved mental health and fewer symptoms of distress.

1.7 OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

• Academic Stress: This represents the emotional and psychological strain students encounter as a result of academic obligations, including examinations, assignments, grading standards, and total workload. Psychological Well-Being: It is a condition of mental health characterised by good feelings, self-acceptance, a defined sense of purpose, and the capacity to manage obstacles effectively.
• Perceived Social Support: This word refers to an individual's conviction that they are valued, esteemed, and bolstered by their social network, including family, friends, or peers.
• Open-Learning Students: These individuals participate in non-traditional educational frameworks, such as remote learning, online education, or correspondence courses, which provide flexibility beyond conventional classroom settings.

1.8 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study, "The Impact of Academic Stress on Psychological Well-being and Perceived Social Support among Open Learning Students," transcends its immediate academic framework, providing wider implications for educational systems and student mental health. This research focuses on the unique obstacles faced by open learning students, offering valuable insights into the specific demands of distant learners, a demographic sometimes overlooked in conventional academic studies.

This study examines the interplay between academic stress, psychological well-being, and perceived social support while emphasising the interrelationship between students' mental health and academic achievement. Recognising the inherent link between educational attainment and psychological well-being is essential for institutions worldwide. The findings of this research can significantly aid in the formulation of policies and practical tactics for both open universities and traditional on-campus educational settings.

The study highlights the significant impact of the academic environment on student mental health. Colleges are important because they promote intellectual and personal growth, regardless of whether they operate in traditional environments or open learning frameworks. Therefore, cultivating a positive and supportive educational atmosphere is essential for improving students' well-being and academic performance.

The study emphasises the socio-economic factors influencing academic success. A student's academic progress is significantly affected by their parents' educational attainment and socio-economic standing. This perspective adds complexity to understanding the relationship among academic stress, mental health, and social support.

The study's findings may assist educational officials in developing targeted interventions for children from economically or educationally disadvantaged homes, thus promoting inclusivity and equity within the education system.

1.9 ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter examines the background, significance, and objectives of the study. The primary objective is to comprehend the impact of academic stress on the psychological well-being of open learning students and the extent of assistance they perceive from others.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

This chapter includes a comprehensive assessment of the relevant research from Indian and foreign sources. It focuses on previous research findings on the essential variables—academic stress, psychological well-being, and perceived social support—which serve as the foundation for the current study.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology:

This chapter explores the research strategy and methodology employed in the study. It clearly describes the population, sampling methodologies, tools for data collection, and the overall procedure in a comprehensible manner.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion:

This chapter presents the acquired data systematically in tables and analyses it using suitable statistical methods. The results are comprehensively analysed, encompassing an assessment of the study hypotheses. A discussion follows, comparing the study's results with prior studies to extract meaningful conclusions.

Chapter 5: Summary:

This chapter summarizes the research investigation and presents the key conclusions drawn from the findings. It also contains practical recommendations based on the findings, which are useful for mental health professionals, educators, politicians, administrators, and aspiring researchers. The goal is to enhance the psychological well-being and academic experiences of open learning students.

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

In conclusion, the study on academic stress, psychological well-being, and social support among open learning students extends beyond its specific context to highlight broader issues within the educational system. Promoting mental health and cultivating a positive learning environment is vital for general development and academic accomplishment, not only for open learning students but also for other educational settings worldwide.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review is a crucial process that involves a comprehensive analysis and critical assessment of previous research pertinent to a certain subject. The primary motive for doing a literature review is to minimise redundancy in research endeavours; yet, the fundamental aim is to assist researchers in gaining familiarity with the existing body of work in their chosen field. Furthermore, it offers a chance to get new insights on the procedures, metrics, topics, and strategies employed by other researchers. This literature review aims to offer assistance and foster a greater comprehension of the problem under investigation. This bibliography includes previous research relevant to the study of "The Impact of Academic Stress on Psychological Well-Being and Perceived Social Support among Open Learning Students," since this inquiry is essential for enhancing understanding in the discipline.

A thorough literature evaluation is essential for identifying research issues and establishing hypotheses; it also necessitates the selection of suitable methodologies and equipment for the study. The investigator has compiled a significant collection of pertinent material to guide this attempt since such sources are essential.

2.1 STUDIES ON ACADEMIC STRESS

1. Reddy et al. (2018), in their study, found that a stream-wise disparity in stress exists among students. Addressing stress is crucial at the personal, societal, and institutional levels. Interventions such as feedback, yoga, life skills training, mindfulness, meditation, and psychotherapy have been effective in managing stress. Identifying the primary cause of stress is essential for managing it. Professionals can customise stress management strategies. The holistic well-being of students is essential for both the person and the institution. The results from Reddy et al. can be understood using Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of stress and coping, which suggests that how a person reacts to stress depends on how they view the stressor and the coping resources they think they have. In this environment, students encountering varying degrees of academic stress across disciplines may assess academic expectations differently, shaped by personal, institutional, or social support variables. Nevertheless, the literature remains ambiguous about the functioning of personalised coping strategies within open-learning contexts, particularly where institutional and peer support may be inadequate, underscoring a deficiency in context-specific research.

2. Dimitrov (2017) asserts in his study that prioritising students' wellness may mitigate stress. Key areas of concentration include nutrition, physical activity, employment, and leisure. He also found that the school system prioritises academic qualifications over the overall development of children. The emphasis on academics, rather than fostering a proactive mindset, can sometimes condition students to fear impending obstacles. Options for educational media are limited. The exclusivity of English as the sole choice might impede pupils from rural backgrounds. There are a few courses available that concentrate on employment outcomes. Recent graduates require enhancements to their communication skills to improve their employment prospects.
This viewpoint embodies the transactional model proposed by Lazarus and Folkman, in which the student's assessment of stress is influenced by their perceived level of control or choice within their educational context. Students may perceive the absence of comprehensive growth opportunities, inadequate alignment with student requirements, and restricted systems as threatening, thereby elevating their stress levels. There is still a significant lack of understanding regarding how changes in schools or different learning methods might alleviate this sense of threat, particularly for students from rural areas or those in flexible learning environments, where assistance may be even more difficult to obtain.

3. Subramani and Kadhiravan (2017) elucidated the correlation between academic stress and mental wellness in students. He asserted that academic stress and mental health are interconnected and that students are constrained by the academic framework. Parents and schools exert excessive pressure on pupils to get higher grades, which discourages them; also, there is little help from both parents and schools about advice. The pupils exhibit mental well-being when they engage productively in academic settings. They also asserted that kids from private schools experience greater pressure than those from government schools owing to an

abundance of homework and other academic tasks. We observed a notable disparity in the mental health of children from private and public schools. He said that pupils from private schools receive distinct nurturing and broader exposure compared to government school students from impoverished socioeconomic backgrounds who lack such exposure. Such exposure is a contributing factor to the intensification of stress. The study's results correspond with the transactional model, highlighting the direct relationship between students' mental health outcomes and their perceptions of academic pressure and the accessibility of coping options. Specifically, socio-economic background and institutional expectations may affect the perception of academic problems as either manageable or insurmountable. Nevertheless, a significant portion of this study concentrates on traditional educational systems. There is a clear difference in how these factors show up for students in open or remote learning, as their academic structures and support systems work differently and can have special effects on their mindset.

4. Misra and McKean (2000) examined the correlation between academic stress and variables like anxiety, time management, and leisure pleasure in college students. Their research revealed that inadequate time management and insufficient leisure activities correlated with increased academic stress and anxiety, while students who efficiently controlled their time and participated in regular physical and recreational activities experienced reduced stress levels. These findings underscore the necessity of reconciling academic obligations with personal well-being methods. The research is based on the stress buffer model introduced by Cohen and Wills (1985), which posits that protective variables like efficient coping mechanisms and organised routines can alleviate the adverse psychological effects of stress. This research provides important information about managing stress for college students, but we still need to understand how these findings apply to students in open and distance learning, particularly in places like Kashmir, where academic difficulties are influenced by personal issues and outside pressures like conflict, isolation, and lack of support from institutions. This study aims to examine the impact of academic stress on psychological well-being and assess the efficacy of structured techniques, such as those proposed by Misra and McKean, within the open learning environment.

5. Prabu (2015) conducted a study on higher secondary students and suggested that male students experience greater stress than female pupils. The scholastic stress of urban students exceeds that of their rural counterparts. The stress levels of government school students are lower than those of private school students. Students in the science stream experience greater stress than those in the arts stream. The transactional model elucidates these disparities, as students' gender, geographic region, kind of school, and topic stream affect their perception of academic difficulty. These demographic characteristics influence their stress assessment and the resources available for coping. However, current research often misses looking at differences within specific groups in open-learning settings, where factors like gender, income level, and course type can affect learning styles and stress levels in different ways, highlighting an area that hasn't been studied enough.

6. Deb, Strodl, and Sun (2014) conducted a study involving 400 male students from five private secondary schools in Kolkata, namely those in grades 10 and 12. 35% of pupils exhibited elevated academic stress, while 37% demonstrated significant anxiety levels. Students with subpar grades reportedly experience a higher amount of stress compared to those with superior marks. Furthermore, pupils participating in extracurricular activities exhibited higher stress levels compared to their non-participating counterparts. Deb et al.'s findings demonstrate the influence of academic performance and extracurricular obligations as sources of stress. According to Lazarus and Folkman's theoretical framework, students with borderline grades may perceive academic settings as scarier due to apprehension about failure or underachievement. Similarly, managing several tasks without efficient coping mechanisms might elevate perceived stress levels. However, the relationship between extracurricular activities and stress is rarely studied in open-learning environments, where these activities are limited or self-managed, leading to a lack of understanding about how performance pressure appears in less structured academic settings.

2.2 STUDIES ON PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

1. Iqbal and Khan (2020) conducted a study to examine the influence of spirituality on the psychological well-being of consumers engaged in reuse as a sustainable consumption behaviour (SCB). A total sample of 286 participants was recruited using a purposive sampling approach, including 42% males and 58% women, from many cities in Punjab and the capital city of Pakistan, Islamabad. The participants' ages varied from 21 to 51 years, and their incomes ranged from PKR 30,000 to over PKR 70,000. The measures employed are spirituality, SCB-reusing, and the psychological well-being scale. Subsequent findings indicated that spirituality exerts a positive and substantial influence on psychological well-being. Moreover, reusing (SCB) emerged as a substantial mediator, and the moderating influence of religion on the connection between spirituality and reusing was both significant and pronounced. This study enhances the current knowledge by focusing on factors that detract from psychological well-being. Additionally, it examined the moderating effects of religion on the association between spirituality and reuse behaviour. The research findings bear significance for researchers, politicians, marketers, ecologists, social activists, and practitioners. This contribution will provide research students with a fresh route for future investigation. Managers will discover assistance in managing elements that promote reuse and enhance psychological well-being. This study also illustrates elements of Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model, wherein spirituality is regarded as a crucial internal coping resource that affects individuals' appraisal and response to life situations. The discovery that spirituality improves psychological well-being via sustainable consumption behaviours indicates that personal belief systems may facilitate the re-evaluation of obstacles in more significant ways, resulting in improved psychological consequences. Nevertheless, although the study examines urban Pakistani populations and consumer behaviours, it fails to address the influence of spirituality and religiosity on stress and well-being in academic settings, particularly among open-learning students. There is potential to

investigate if sustainable practices, such as reuse, serve as mitigators of stress in other areas, like education, where mental health issues are escalating.

2. Kumar, Mandal, and Bharti (2020) investigated the association between perceived stress and psychological well-being in Indian university students, demonstrating a substantial negative correlation between the two variables. Their findings highlighted the significance of proactive coping as a moderating variable, indicating that students who actively strategized and handled stressors demonstrated improved psychological outcomes. However, their research did not look into the importance of perceived social support, which is a key part of the Stress-Buffering Model by Cohen and Wills (1985), stating that social support helps reduce the harmful effects of stress on well-being. Although both proactive coping and social support are mechanisms that affect stress management, social support is inadequately examined among open and distance learning students, especially in conflict-affected areas such as Kashmir, where academic difficulties are exacerbated by political instability, resource scarcity, and social isolation. This study aims to fill the research gap by exploring the correlation between academic stress and psychological well-being while also assessing the moderating effect of perceived social support among open learning students in Kashmir.

3. Adyani, Suzanna, Safuwan, and Muryali (2019) examined the relationship between perceived social support and psychological well-being in a sample of 105 interstate students at Malikussaleh University, utilising the Multidimensional Perceived Social Support Scale and Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale. Their survey, along with group discussions, showed a strong positive link ($r = 0.40$, $p < .001$), indicating that students who feel they have more social support usually report better psychological well-being. The findings are fundamentally based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, which asserts that social support serves as an essential coping resource that aids individuals in managing stress more efficiently. The study, however, did not consider open and remote learning students, who may encounter restricted access to institutional and peer support, especially in conflict-affected areas. Consequently, a distinct study gap exists: the influence of perceived social support in mitigating academic stress and improving psychological well-being is not adequately examined within open learning programs, particularly in areas such as Kashmir.

4. Idris, Khairani, and Shamsuddin (2019) conducted a study examining the impact of resilience on the psychological well-being of Malaysian university undergraduates. Psychological well-being is essential for the general health of undergraduates, particularly in their ability to confront university obstacles. A total sample of 200 undergraduates was recruited using a random selection approach, including 90 males and 110 females, who participated in this exploratory study. The results revealed two notable discoveries. We used the Adolescent Resilience Scale (ARS) and the Flourishing Scale (FS) to assess Psychological Well-Being (PWB) (Diener et al., 2009). The results reveal a substantial positive correlation between resilience and PWB. Thus, increased resilience correlates with elevated psychological well-being (PWB). This study shows that

resilience is a strong predictor of students' psychological well-being, accounting for 48.2% of the variation in this construct. This corroborates Lazarus and Folkman's perspective that personal resources, such as resilience, facilitate stress management and improve well-being. This study concentrates on typical undergraduates, excluding students in open-learning environments, highlighting a gap.

2.3 STUDIES ON PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT

1. Jailani and Lourdunathan (2021)

Jailani and Lourdunathan carried out a study to understand how perceived social support might influence depression symptoms in undergraduate students. The researchers used a convenience sampling method and invited participants to voluntarily take part in an online survey. Their final sample consisted of 100 students from different academic backgrounds—9 males and 91 females—between the ages of 18 and 25. To assess the level of support students received from family, friends, and significant others, they used the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS). To measure depression symptoms, they used the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI).

Once the data were collected, the researchers applied descriptive and correlational analyses to interpret the results. They found a clear pattern: students who felt they had strong support networks reported fewer symptoms of depression. This emphasizes how critical emotional and social backing can be in protecting students' mental health. The researchers suggested that improving support services in academic settings could play a major role in future mental health interventions.

Their findings are in line with Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of stress, which views social support as a buffer against psychological distress. Still, the study didn't explore academic-related stress or include students in open or distance learning, pointing to the need for more inclusive research in those areas.

2. Dar and Dar (2021)

In their study focused on young people in Kashmir, Dar and Dar explored how certain life experiences and emotional resources impact mental health. Specifically, they looked at how adverse childhood experiences and exposure to conflict (as risk factors) related to hope and social support (as protective factors). The study used a cross-sectional correlational design and included 693 students from colleges and universities across Kashmir, selected using a multistage sampling method. Participants responded to several standardised tools, including the Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale and the Mental Health Inventory.

The data were analysed using Spearman's rank-order correlation, which revealed some telling connections. Students who had experienced trauma or conflict tended to show higher levels of sadness, anxiety, and behavioural issues, along with lower levels of overall mental well-being. On the other hand, those who reported stronger support networks and greater levels of hope showed better emotional health and more positive mental states.

This research highlights just how important it is to foster emotional support and build resilience in young people, especially those who've faced trauma. The findings reflect the principles of the transactional model, which suggests that how individuals cope with stress—shaped by both risk and protective factors—determines their psychological outcomes. That said, the study mainly focused on trauma and did not delve into academic or virtual learning environments, leaving space for further exploration.

3. Matud et al. (2020)

Matud, Díaz, Bethencourt, and Ibáñez (2020) turned their attention to older adults in Spain, aiming to uncover how gender differences affect psychological well-being later in life. The study involved a large sample of 1,201 people—572 men and 629 women—between the ages of 65 and 94. The researchers gathered demographic data and used a set of four standardised tools: the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scale, the York Self-Esteem Inventory, the Bem Sex Role Inventory, and the Social Support Scale.

Data analysis was carried out using SPSS (version 22.0), applying statistical techniques like t-tests (MANOVA), Pearson's correlation, and mean scores. Results showed that men generally scored higher in key areas such as self-acceptance, autonomy, purpose in life, and environmental mastery. In addition, both self-esteem and social support emerged as strong indicators of psychological well-being for men and women alike. The study also found that both masculine/instrumental and feminine/expressive traits were beneficial to well-being, with masculine traits having a slightly greater influence.

Rooted in Ryff's theory of well-being and supported by Lazarus and Folkman's stress-coping framework, this study offers meaningful insights for promoting healthy ageing. However, because it focuses on older individuals, its findings might not apply directly to younger populations—especially those in online or non-traditional learning settings—when examining how gender identity and support systems influence mental health.

SUMMARY

The present study, titled *"The Impact of Academic Stress on Psychological Well-Being and Perceived Social Support among Open Learning Students,"* aims to explore the intricate relationship between academic stress, psychological well-being, and perceived social support within the context of distance and open education. With the rise of open learning platforms, especially in regions where traditional education may not be easily accessible, it becomes essential to understand how these students experience and respond to academic demands.

This research investigates how the pressures of academic life—such as assignment deadlines, examination anxiety, and self-directed learning—affect the mental and emotional health of students in open learning systems. Furthermore, it examines the role of perceived social support from family, friends, and significant others in shaping students' coping abilities and emotional resilience.

A central focus of the study is the correlation between academic stress and psychological well-being, and whether perceived social support can buffer or moderate this relationship. By doing so, the study aims to provide a clearer understanding of the challenges faced by students outside the traditional classroom setting—challenges that are often overlooked yet significantly impact their well-being.

Ultimately, the research seeks to bring attention to the psychological needs of open learning students and offer insights that could inform mental health interventions, support services, and policy decisions aimed at improving their educational experience and overall quality of life.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter focuses on the study's design and the nature and selection of the sample, and provides a concise overview of the investigative instruments and their criteria. The text outlines the methodology employed for data collecting, scoring, classification, and the intended statistical analysis for hypothesis testing.

3.1 TITLE OF THE STUDY

"The Impact of Academic Stress on Psychological Well–Being and Perceived Social Support among Open learning Students."

3.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Based on the title mentioned above, the following objectives have been formulated for the research study:

1. To examine the degree of academic stress experienced by open learning students.
2. To evaluate the correlation between academic stress and psychological well-being.
3. To assess the correlation between academic stress and perceived social support.

3.3 HYPOTHESES

Based on the objectives mentioned above, the following hypotheses have been formulated for the research study:

1. Increased academic stress correlates with lower psychological well-being among open learning students.
2. Increased academic stress correlates with lower perceived social support among open learning students.
3. A significant positive correlation exists between psychological well-being and perceived social support among open learning students.

3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a quantitative, non-experimental, correlational research approach to investigate the links among academic stress, psychological well-being, and perceived social support in open learning students. Data were gathered with self-constructed questionnaires aimed at assessing the three psychological constructs.

The study used a cross-sectional methodology, recording answers at a singular moment without variable manipulation.

3.5 VARIABLES

This study investigated three main variables: academic stress, psychological well-being, and perceived social support.

Independent Variable:

Academic stress was regarded as the independent variable. The assessment used a modified version of Praveen Bhanu's Academic Stress Questionnaire, comprising five items evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Elevated scores indicated increased levels of perceived academic stress.

Dependent Variables:

Psychological Well-Being: This was one of the dependent variables, assessed via a simplified version of Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale. The assessment comprised five items evaluated on a 6-point Likert scale, with ratings from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree). Elevated scores signified enhanced psychological well-being.

Perceived Social Support: The second dependent variable, perceived social support, was evaluated using a modified version of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) created by Zimet et al. This section comprised 5 items assessed on a 7-point Likert scale, with ratings from 1 (Very Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Very Strongly Agree). Elevated scores indicated an enhanced perception of support from family, friends, or significant people.

3.5 PARTICIPANTS OF THE STUDY

a. Sample size:

The proposed study will involve 110 open learning students (75 males and 35 females from each stratum), ensuring adequate power for statistical analysis.

b. Sampling technique:

The research employed a purposive sample technique to choose participants who fulfilled the designated inclusion criteria. The sample consisted of male and female undergraduate students aged 21 to 24, enrolled in open learning programmes at colleges.

Convenience sampling was employed at the institutional level to access participants. Classrooms that were unoccupied or accessible on the data-collecting day were chosen, and students present in those classrooms were solicited to participate. This method was practical because of the adaptable and decentralised characteristics of open learning education systems.

The integration of purposive and convenience sampling ensured that the participants were relevant to the study's aims, while facilitating quick data collection.

3.6 INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Out of the 120 participants initially approached, 116 met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis. The following criteria were employed to determine participant eligibility:

Inclusion Criteria:

1. Participants were aged 21 to 24 years.
2. Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in open learning programmes at educational institutions.
3. Participants expressed their willingness to provide informed consent and complete the entire questionnaire.

Exclusion Criteria:

1. Individuals who had a self-reported history of mental illness were excluded from the study.
2. Incomplete or inconsistent questionnaire responses were not considered for the final analysis.

Criteria for Participant Selection:

The following are the criteria that were considered for participant selection in the study:
1. Age Requirement: Participants were required to be between the ages of 21 and 24.
2. Residency Condition: Participation was restricted to residents of Jammu and Kashmir.
3. Gender Inclusivity: The study sought to guarantee inclusivity and representation by enrolling participants of both male and female genders.

3.7 TOOLS TO BE USED IN THE STUDY

This investigation employed a self-organised questionnaire that included a demographic information form and three standardised scales. The variables of academic stress, psychological well-being, and perceived social support among open learning students were measured using these instruments.

1. Demographic Information Sheet

The personal information of participants, such as their age, gender, place of residence, and educational background, was collected using a demographic questionnaire. The collected data facilitated the establishment of participant eligibility and the context for the analysis.

2. Academic Stress Scale (Modified Version–Parveen Banu, 2000)

The researchers employed a modified version of the Academic Stress Scale (ASS), developed by Parveen Banu (2000) and referenced by Sam (2001), to quantify academic stress. The modified scale comprises five items that evaluate tension associated with academic responsibilities, including the inability to concentrate during lectures, the inability to comprehend class content, and the sensation of strain while studying.

The participants were asked to respond on a five-point Likert scale, with a value of 1 (Strongly Disagree) and 5 (Strongly Agree). Elevated scores suggest that academic stress is elevated. Cronbach's alpha of 0.83 is reported by the original instrument, which suggests that it has a high level of internal consistency.

3. Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff's PWBS, 1995)

The modified Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being (1995) were employed to evaluate psychological well-being, which encompasses six dimensions of well-being:

Independence
Environmental Proficiency
Personal Development
Positive Interactions with Others
Life Purpose
Self-Acceptance

The original scale comprises 42 objects, with seven items per dimension. This investigation implemented a condensed version that included five selected elements. Each item was evaluated by participants on a six-point Likert scale, with a possible score of one (Strongly Disagree) to six (Strongly Agree). Negative items were reverse-scored, while positive items were rated directly (1–6). The scale has been validated across multiple cultural contexts and has exhibited excellent psychometric properties, with an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.88 (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Springer & Hauser, 2006).

4. Perceived Social Support Scale (MSPSS – Zimet et al., 1988)

A modified variant of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) by Zimet et al. (1988) was employed to assess perceived social support. The original scale includes 12 items, evenly distributed among three subscales: support from family, acquaintances, and significant others.

Participants evaluate their level of agreement on a seven-point Likert scale, with a scale of 1 (Very Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Very Strongly Agree). This study captured the essential aspects of emotional and practical support using a condensed version that included five selected items. Greater perceived support is indicated by higher scores.

The MSPSS has exhibited both high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88) and test-retest reliability ($r = 0.85$).

AREA OF SAMPLING

The investigation was conducted at Study Centre 1210 of an open learning college situated in Baramulla, Jammu and Kashmir. It has been acknowledged for a long time that this region is one of the most conflict-affected zones in the Kashmir division, predominantly because of its proximity to the Line of Control (LOC) that borders Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

Dasgupta (2009) has observed that regions such as Baramulla are particularly susceptible to conflict-related violence. Residents, particularly students, have experienced elevated levels of psychological distress as a result of repeated exposure to sociopolitical unrest, ambiguity, and violence.

High-pressure environments can significantly impact students' academic performance and mental health. In light of this context, the researcher implemented a purposive sampling approach to document the experiences of students who are not only a part of an open learning system but also reside in an environment that presents a significant psychological risk. The objective was to investigate the influence of academic stress on the psychological well-being and perceived social support of this distinctive and vulnerable demographic.

3.7 PROCEDURE

The data collection process began following the acquisition of requisite approvals from the respective college principals. Upon obtaining permission to perform the study, the researcher engaged with the participants in their classes.

A package containing an information page, a consent form, and a set of questionnaires was distributed to each participant. The researcher instructed them to carefully review the information page and sign the consent form, ensuring the confidentiality of their responses and their voluntary participation. Participants completed the surveys truthfully under the oversight of the researcher. The researcher did not provide any financial remuneration, including gifts, money, or food, in exchange for their involvement. Participants who encountered distress when recounting traumatic memories were urged to withdraw from the study and were recommended to seek support from the research supervisor to address their concerns. Upon completion, participants submitted the questionnaire sets to the researcher.

3.8 STATISTICAL ANALYSES

Means, standard deviations, and Pearson's correlation coefficients were employed to examine the relationships among academic stress, psychological well-being, and perceived social support.

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to examine the correlation between academic stress and psychological well-being, as well as other positive variables such as perceived social support, among open learning students in Kashmir. This chapter outlines the research methods employed to fulfil the objectives of the study. It offers comprehensive details regarding the research strategy, data sources, and measuring instruments employed in the study.

This chapter delineates the instruments utilised, the methodology implemented, the ethical considerations adhered to, and the statistical tools employed to evaluate the research hypotheses and achieve the study objectives. The study participants were college students enrolled in open learning programs at various institutions in the Kashmir Valley. The statistical technique employed to evaluate the given hypotheses comprised descriptive statistics and correlation analysis.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter offers a thorough statistical analysis that was conducted to examine the impact of academic stress on the psychological well-being and perceived social support of open learning students in Kashmir. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 21.0, was employed to analyse the data. Participants completed a demographic data questionnaire to document pertinent information, including their gender, age, and residential area, in addition to the primary psychological measures.
In this investigation, the following statistical methodologies were implemented:
1. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarise the means and standard deviations of the study variables.
2. Pearson's correlation coefficients were employed to investigate the correlations between perceived social support, psychological well-being, and academic duress.
The stated hypotheses were tested, and the research objectives were fulfilled through the execution of these analyses. The subsequent section details the findings obtained through these statistical procedures.

Table 4.1 *Demographical details of participants (N = 110)*

VARIABLE	CATEGORY	n	%
GENDER	MALE	70	63.6%
	FEMALE	40	36.4%
AGE GROUP	21-22	72	65.5%
	23-24	38	34.5%
YEAR OF STUDY	1ST YEAR	78	70.9%
	2ND YEAR	32	29.1%
AREA OF RESIDENCE	RURAL	73	66.4%
	URBAN	37	33.6%

The demographic characteristics of 110 participants in the study are summarised in Table 4.1.

70 participants (63.6%) were male, while the remaining 40 participants (36.4%) were female.
As for the age distribution, 72 respondents (65.5%) were between the ages of 21 and 22, while 38 respondents (34.5%) were between the ages of 23 and 24.
Regarding residential background, 73 participants (66.4%) were from rural regions, while 37 participants

(33.6%) were from urban areas. In terms of the study year, 78 participants (70.9%) were in their first year of open learning programs, while 32 participants (29.1%) were in their second year.

Analysis and Interpretation:

The scores for each participant were derived from self-reported surveys. The gathered data underwent statistical analysis utilising SPSS version 21.0. Means and standard deviations were calculated for all principal variables. The data were subsequently analysed employing Pearson's correlation coefficient to investigate the relationships among academic stress, psychological well-being, and perceived social support. The analysis results are detailed on the subsequent pages.

Table 4.2

Correlation between Academic Stress and Psychological Well-Being (N = 110, df = 108)

VARIABLES	***M***	***SD***	***r***	***df***	***p***
Academic Stress	17.85	3.22	—	—	
Psychological Well-Being	22.14	4.10	-0.56	108	< .01

Note. *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation; *r* = Pearson correlation coefficient; *df* = degrees of freedom

INTERPRETATION:

A statistically significant moderate negative correlation exists between academic stress and psychological well-being (r (108) = –.56, $p < .01$). This finding corroborates Hypothesis 1, which posited a significant negative relationship between the two variables. The negative correlation signifies that heightened academic stress corresponds with diminished psychological well-being. This outcome corresponds with Ryff's six-factor model of psychological well-being and the transactional model of stress proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), both indicating that when stress surpasses coping capacity, well-being is undermined. Students engaged in open learning in Kashmir frequently encounter academic instability, restricted access to educators, and insufficient emotional support, resulting in elevated stress levels that can impair emotional regulation, diminish life purpose, and reduce overall psychological functioning.

Table 4.3

Correlation between Academic Stress and Perceived Social Support (N = 110, df = 108)

VARIABLES	*M*	*SD*	*r*	*df*	*p*
Academic Stress	17.85	3.22	–	–	
Perceived Social Support	28.42	5.38	-0.48	108	< .01

Note. *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation; *r* = Pearson correlation coefficient; *df* = degrees of freedom

INTERPRETATION:

A statistically significant moderate negative correlation was identified between academic stress and perceived social support (r (108) = –.48, p < .01), thereby validating Hypothesis 2. This suggests that students experiencing elevated academic stress perceived diminished emotional, informational, and instrumental support from others. This corresponds with the stress-buffering hypothesis proposed by Cohen and Wills (1985), which elucidates that social support mitigates the detrimental effects of stress. In the conflict-affected educational landscape of Kashmir, students participating in open learning programs may experience a deficiency of direct interaction with educators and fellow students, thereby exacerbating their isolation. This perceived absence of support can exacerbate stress, leading to feelings of disconnection, lack of support, and increased psychological vulnerability. Institutions must prioritise virtual support systems and counselling outreach to mitigate academic stress and enhance mental health.

Table 4.4

Correlation between Psychological Well-Being and Perceived Social Support (N = 110, df = 110)

VARIABLES	*M*	*SD*	*r*	*df*	*p*
Psychological Well-Being	22.14	4.10	–	–	
Perceived Social Support	28.42	5.38	+0.61	108	< .01

Note. *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation; *r* = Pearson correlation coefficient; *df* = degrees of freedom

INTERPRETATION:

A strong and statistically significant positive correlation was observed between psychological well-being and perceived social support ($r(108) = +.61$, $p < .01$), which supports Hypothesis 3. Students who reported higher levels of social support also tended to experience greater psychological well-being. This relationship is consistent with previous research (Adyani et al., 2019; Matud et al., 2020) and highlights the role of emotional and social connection in sustaining mental health. In distance education systems, especially in conflict zones like Kashmir, enhanced peer and family support may serve as a vital protective factor in maintaining student well-being.

DISCUSSION

This investigation aimed to examine the influence of academic stress on psychological well-being and perceived social support among open learning students in Kashmir. Using standardized instruments and correlational analysis on a sample of 110 undergraduate students, the study explored the interplay between these three psychological variables in a region affected by educational disruptions and limited institutional support.

The results revealed a statistically significant moderate negative correlation between academic stress and psychological well-being ($r = –.56$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 1. This indicates that students experiencing higher academic stress are more likely to report lower psychological well-being. Such stress may manifest as difficulty concentrating, managing responsibilities, and feeling overwhelmed by self-paced learning without regular academic interaction. This aligns with Ryff's six-dimensional model of well-being and the transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which posit that prolonged stress impairs emotional functioning, reduces autonomy, and undermines life satisfaction. These effects are likely intensified in Kashmir, where political instability and technological disruptions may compound students' stress levels.

In support of Hypothesis 2, the study also found a statistically significant negative correlation between academic stress and perceived social support ($r = –.48$, $p < .01$). Students who reported higher academic stress tended to perceive less support from family, friends, and significant others. This pattern aligns with the stress-buffering model (Cohen & Wills, 1985), which proposes that social support mitigates the negative effects of stress. However, high levels of stress may reduce a student's ability to seek, recognize, or value available support. This can lead to social withdrawal and a sense of disconnection. In remote open learning settings, particularly in Kashmir, limited peer interaction and weak institutional touchpoints may diminish students' perceptions of being supported during times of academic strain.

Further, supporting Hypothesis 3, the study found a strong positive correlation between psychological well-being and perceived social support ($r = +.61$, $p < .01$). This finding reinforces the well-established role of emotional and instrumental support in maintaining psychological health. Students who feel emotionally connected and supported by others tend to report higher levels of well-being. This is particularly relevant in the sociocultural context of Kashmir, where family and community networks traditionally offer emotional buffering. However, conflict-related stressors, internet restrictions, and limited access to campus resources may weaken these support systems, increasing students' emotional vulnerability. These findings are consistent with prior research emphasizing the role of support systems in enhancing self-worth, emotional regulation, and coping capacity among students (Adyani et al., 2019; Matud et al., 2020).

In conclusion, the results have important theoretical and practical implications. They confirm that academic stress significantly reduces both psychological well-being and perceived social support among open learning students, while social support strongly enhances well-being. These relationships highlight the urgent need for targeted institutional interventions such as virtual mentoring, academic counselling, peer support groups, and flexible academic schedules. Especially in conflict-affected settings like Kashmir, where physical learning spaces and interpersonal interaction are limited, structured psychological and academic support can play a vital role in reducing stress and improving student mental health outcomes.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY

This study sought to investigate the correlation between academic stress, psychological well-being, and perceived social support among open learning students in Kashmir. The research focused on understanding the distinct academic and emotional challenges faced by students in distance education—particularly those in conflict-affected areas such as Baramulla. It aimed to explore how academic stress impacts students' mental health and how perceived social support might serve as a protective factor.

A total of 110 undergraduate students, aged 21 to 24 years, were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using well-established psychological tools: a modified Academic Stress Scale (Parveen Banu, 2000), Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (1995), and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988). Responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation through SPSS.

The results revealed a significant moderate negative correlation between academic stress and psychological well-being. This suggests that students experiencing high levels of academic pressure reported lower levels of mental well-being. Many of these students struggled with difficulties such as focusing on studies, managing academic tasks independently, and coping with exam pressure—all without the immediate support of peers or teachers. These findings reflect what has been observed in earlier research: that prolonged academic stress can lead to emotional fatigue, anxiety, and a reduced sense of purpose. In regions like Kashmir, where educational continuity is often disrupted by conflict, the academic burden may feel even more overwhelming, leading to feelings of isolation and helplessness among students.

Another key finding was the negative correlation between perceived social support and academic stress. Students who experienced higher academic stress also reported feeling less supported by the people around them, whether family, friends, or significant others. This aligns with the stress-buffering theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985), which suggests that support systems can reduce the impact of stress. However, in real-life situations, stress can also prevent students from reaching out or recognizing the support that is available. Some may withdraw, lose motivation to connect, or feel misunderstood by their loved ones. In the context of open learning—especially in remote or underserved areas—this perception of "being alone" can become even more intense due to fewer opportunities for social and academic interaction.

The study also highlighted a strong positive correlation between psychological well-being and perceived social support. In simpler terms, students who felt emotionally supported were more likely to report better mental health. This reinforces the idea that having someone to talk to, feel understood by, and rely on emotionally can significantly uplift a student's sense of self-worth, confidence, and emotional balance. Especially in Kashmir, where family and community bonds are culturally strong, this kind of emotional safety net is crucial. But when communication is disrupted or families themselves are stressed, even this traditional support can become fragile. This shows how important it is for educational systems to step in and provide organized, consistent sources of encouragement and connection.

In conclusion, this research emphasizes that academic stress is not only an academic concern—it is a real psychological burden that affects how students think, feel, and function. For students in open learning programs, especially those in sensitive regions like Kashmir, the absence of a daily academic structure and social engagement makes these challenges even more profound. To truly support them, academic institutions must do more than deliver content—they must create emotional scaffolding. This includes accessible counselling, regular check-ins, peer support circles, and flexible academic policies. When students feel seen, supported, and understood, they are not only more likely to succeed academically but also to thrive emotionally.

CONCLUSION

This study enhances comprehension of the psychological experiences of open learning students, especially in the conflict-affected region of Kashmir. This research has elucidated the relationship between academic stress, psychological well-being, and perceived social support, demonstrating how academic pressures can adversely affect mental health and how supportive environments can mitigate these obstacles. The findings confirm the necessity of perceiving academic success and emotional well-being as interconnected facets of student life, particularly in remote education settings.

In contrast to conventional college environments, open learning frequently secludes students from direct academic and social support, rendering them more susceptible to psychological stress. This study concludes that academic stress transcends academic challenges and constitutes a significant mental health issue. Perceived social support is not merely a consequence of interpersonal relationships; it is a crucial determinant of emotional resilience. These conclusions necessitate immediate attention from educational planners and mental health advocates engaged with distance learners.

Furthermore, the research illustrates the importance of context in educational psychology. In regions such as Kashmir, where socio-political instability prevails, stress levels are exacerbated by fear, disturbance, and uncertainty. Local realities must influence the design and support of open learning programs. The results offer important insights but also highlight the need for more long-term and varied studies to explore the causes and cultural differences in academic stress research.

This research emphasises the need to cultivate both the intellect and the emotional environment in pupils. The efficacy of open learning relies not alone on accessibility and adaptability but also on its capacity to facilitate the comprehensive growth of learners in demanding contexts.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study provides significant insights into the effects of academic stress on psychological well-being and perceived social support among open-learning students in Kashmir; however, it is essential to recognise several limitations that may affect the interpretation, generalisability, and application of the results.

1. Sampling Limitations and Generalizability:

The research used a purposive sampling method, selecting 110 undergraduate students participating in open learning programs in the Baramulla district of Jammu and Kashmir. This planned approach to targeting a specific vulnerable demographic unavoidably restricts the generalizability of the results to wider populations.

Students from various geographies, distinct academic environments (e.g., conventional universities), or diverse socioeconomic origins may encounter academic stress and social support in fundamentally disparate manners. Furthermore, the density of participants in a conflict-prone region may have brought distinct contextual variables that are not indicative of open learning students in other contexts.

2. The Cross-Sectional Design of the Study:

This study was cross-sectional, collecting data at one specific moment. This approach is economical and suitable for examining correlations between variables, but it limits the capacity to make causal inferences. For instance, whereas academic stress has been shown to have a negative correlation with psychological well-being, it cannot be conclusively determined whether stress induces low well-being or if students with diminished well-being are more vulnerable to stress. Longitudinal studies are essential to evaluate the temporal evolution of these variables and to ascertain directionality with more precision.

3. Self-Report Instruments and Social Desirability Bias:

All measures included in the study were self-report questionnaires, which are susceptible to certain biases. Participants may have answered in a manner they deemed socially acceptable, rather than offering entirely candid responses, especially concerning sensitive subjects such as emotional health and perceived support. In areas such as Kashmir, where mental health stigma endures, students may underreport psychological discomfort or exaggerate their levels of social support. This social desirability bias may skew findings and restrict the accuracy of the assessed constructs.

4. A restricted range of variables:

The study concentrated on three primary psychological constructs—academic stress, psychological well-being, and perceived social support—yet it failed to consider other significant confounding variables that may affect these associations. Factors such as economic adversity, exposure to trauma, parental expectations, internet access (for open learning), and physical health were excluded, yet may have significantly influenced students' stress levels or overall well-being. The lack of such controls may result in an oversimplification of the psychological difficulties encountered by these students.

5. Cultural and Regional Specificity:

The research was carried out in a culturally distinct and politically delicate setting – Kashmir. This setting enhances the research's depth and urgency, but it also renders the conclusions highly context-dependent. The social, emotional, and intellectual experiences of kids in this region are influenced by persistent conflict, limitations, and community dynamics that markedly differ from those in other areas. Consequently, the findings may have limited relevance for open learning students in stable or metropolitan environments.

6. Utilisation of Altered Scales:

This study employed abbreviated or altered versions of original standardised instruments (e.g., Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale and the MSPSS) to accommodate the time limitations and reading proficiency of participants. Although attempts were made to maintain validity, the reduction of scales can affect their psychometric characteristics and perhaps diminish the reliability or sensitivity of the assessments. This modification may have affected the accuracy of the assessment of intricate psychological constructs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's findings yield various pragmatic recommendations for educators, politicians, and mental health practitioners engaged with open learning students, especially in high-stress places such as Kashmir.

1. Incorporation of Mental Health Assistance in Open Learning Initiatives:

Open learning institutions ought to incorporate mental health services into their academic structure. This entails granting access to qualified counsellors, helplines, online therapeutic services, and peer support networks. These services assist students in managing academic stress and enhancing psychological well-being.

2. Formation of Student Mentoring and Peer Support Groups:

Structured peer mentoring programs should be implemented to address the emotional and intellectual disparities that result from the absence of face-to-face interactions in open learning environments. Consistent virtual or in-person group discussions, student organisations, and mentoring frameworks help foster a sense of community and collective resilience.

3. Integrating Stress Management Workshops and Skill Development Training:

Institutions should implement frequent workshops on stress management, time management, mindfulness, and emotional control. Skill-building workshops can enable pupils to manage academic pressures more efficiently and sustain mental balance.

4. Policy-Level Interventions for Vulnerable Populations:

Education departments ought to prioritise psychological assessments and support initiatives for children from conflict-affected or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Customised treatments can comprehensively address kids' intellectual and emotional needs.

5. Improving Communication and Tutor Involvement:

A primary contributor to academic stress in open learning is the absence of consistent communication with professors. Consequently, schools ought to promote regular virtual check-ins, question-and-answer sessions, and academic feedback mechanisms to mitigate academic uncertainty and enhance motivation.

6. Modifications to the Curriculum for Psychological Resilience:

Curricula in open learning systems must be revised to incorporate modules that enhance self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and psychological resilience. A mental health component, especially within electives, helps normalise discussions on stress and the pursuit of support.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has enhanced the comprehension of academic stress, psychological well-being, and perceived social support among open learning students, thereby presenting multiple opportunities for additional investigation:

1. Conduct Longitudinal Research:

The present study employed a cross-sectional design, which constrains causal inferences. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine temporal changes in academic stress and psychological well-being, as well as the reciprocal influence of these variables over several academic years.

2. Incorporating Supplementary Psychological and Environmental Factors:

Subsequent research ought to investigate the influence of supplementary elements like self-efficacy, trauma exposure, parental pressure, financial stress, internet accessibility, and coping mechanisms. These may provide a more refined comprehension of student mental health in open learning contexts.

3. Comparative Analyses between Open Learning and Traditional Students:

A comparative analysis of open learning students against typical college students can elucidate the impact of academic formats on stress and social support. This research could inform curriculum development and student welfare initiatives in various educational systems.

4. Qualitative and Mixed-Methods Approaches:

Qualitative studies, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, can enhance quantitative findings by examining lived experiences, attitudes, and cultural impacts on stress and support systems. Mixed-method designs can add both statistical and narrative richness to the results.

5. Expanded Geographical and Cultural Sampling:

This study exclusively examined students from Baramulla, Kashmir. Future studies should include a wider range of students from different districts or states to make the findings more applicable and to explore how social and political factors affect student well-being in open learning systems.

6. Empirical and Intervention-Oriented Research:

Research ought to evaluate the efficacy of targeted interventions, like mindfulness training, peer-support platforms, or academic coaching. Controlled trials could yield empirical evidence regarding the most effective support strategies for alleviating academic stress.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Demographic Details Form:

Please fill out the following information honestly. Your responses will be kept confidential and used solely for academic research purposes.

1. Personal Information

a. Name (optional): ___________________

b. Age:

☐ 21 ☐ 22 ☐ 23 ☐ 24

c. Gender:

☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other (Please specify): ______________

d. Area of Residence:

☐ Rural ☐ Urban

e. Year of Study in Open Learning Program:

☐ First Year ☐ Second Year

f. Are you currently enrolled on an open learning university?

☐ Yes ☐ No

2. Academic Background

a. Stream of Study:

☐ Arts ☐ Commerce ☐ Science ☐ Other (Please specify): ______________

b. Have you ever repeated a year in your academic journey?

☐ Yes ☐ No

3. Psychosocial Background

a. Do you live with family or away from home for study purposes?

☐ With Family ☐ Away from Family (e.g., hostel/rented accommodation)

b. Do you face regular internet issues that affect your studies?

☐ Yes ☐ No

c. Do you have any diagnosed psychological or physical health conditions?

☐ Yes ☐ No

(If yes, please specify): ________________________________

APPENDIX B

Participant Profile and Information Sheet:

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a study titled "The Impact of Academic Stress on Psychological Well-Being and Perceived Social Support among Open Learning Students." This study is being carried out as part of academic research in psychology. The goal of this study is to learn how family challenges affect children's emotional well-being, coping strategies, and behavioural responses. Participation is entirely voluntary, and all information will remain strictly confidential. Your identity will not be revealed in any part of this report. You can skip any question or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you agree to participate, please fill out the demographic information and answer the questionnaire honestly. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated and will make a significant contribution to this research.

Researcher: Sehrish Nazir

JAIN (Deemed-to-University)

APPENDIX C

RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

A self-report questionnaire was administered to evaluate the three main variables of interest in the study: academic stress, psychological well-being, and perceived social support among open learning students. The study comprised three sections, each containing a modified and culturally relevant adaptation of established psychological scales. The questionnaire encompassed a concise demographic data form (provided separately) to gather participants' background information.
Participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and anonymous, and they were urged to respond with utmost honesty. Standardised Likert-type scales were employed for all items, with varying point ranges based on the original scale format.

Section A: Academic Stress Scale (Adapted from Parveen Banu, 2000; Sam, 2001)

This section assesses the academic stress of students by examining the most prevalent academic issues encountered in open learning environments. The scale consists of five items, each of which is rated on a five-point Likert scale, with the range being:

1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree

Participants were requested to specify the frequency with which they encountered academic challenges or experienced stress associated with their academic pursuits.

Items:

1. I struggle to maintain focus during my lectures.
2. I experience tension when I contemplate my academic responsibilities.
3. I frequently experience a sense of incomprehension regarding the concepts that are being introduced.
4. I experience stress when I am preparing for exams or assignments.
5. I believe that I have limited control over my academic performance.

Section B: Psychological Wellbeing Scale (Adapted from Ryff's Psychological Wellbeing Scales, 1995)

This section assesses participants' psychological well-being on six dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. A modified short form of the original scale was used, consisting of six items, each rated on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree.

Two of the items (Items 3 and 5) have negative wording and were reverse-scored during data analysis.

Items:

1. I believe in my opinions, even if they differ from others.
2. I believe I am in control of my life circumstances.
3. I believe I am not growing as a person.
4. Most people describe me as loving and affectionate.
5. I embrace each day without worrying about the future.
6. I enjoy most aspects of my personality.

Section C: Perceived Social Support Scale (Modified from MSPSS, Zimet et al., 1988)

Scale: 1 (Very Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Very Strongly Agree).

Please respond to each item based on how you feel.

Items:

1. My family genuinely tries to assist me.
2. I can rely on my friends when things go wrong.
3. There is a special person in my life who is concerned about my feelings.
4. I have at least one person who can offer me emotional support.
5. I receive social and emotional support from those around me.

SCORING OVERVIEW:

This study used three standardised instruments to assess academic stress, psychological well-being, and perceived social support. All instruments employed a Likert scale format, and the scoring methodology was meticulously adhered to to guarantee consistency and validity in data analysis.

The Academic Stress Scale comprised five items, each evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). All items were phrased positively and scored directly, with total scores varying from 5 to 25. Elevated scores indicated increased levels of academic stress encountered by the respondents.

The Psychological Well-being Scale, derived from Ryff's model (1995), consists of six items evaluated on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree). Two items, specifically Item 3 and Item 5, were negatively phrased and consequently reverse-scored to preserve scoring integrity. Reverse scoring involved transforming a response of 1 to 6, 2 to 5, 3 to 4, and so on. The total score for this scale varied from 6 to 36, with elevated scores signifying enhanced psychological well-being.

The Perceived Social Support Scale (adapted from Zimet et al., 1988) comprises five items assessed on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Very Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Very Strongly Agree). All items were positively framed and scored directly, with total scores varying from 5 to 35. Elevated scores signified increased levels of perceived social support.

This scoring system ensured accuracy in manual coding and entering data into SPSS, matching the way the raw data from the 110 participants was organised.