

REASONS FOR STRESS AMONG STUDENTS STUDYING BUSINESS STUDIES IN LITHUANIAN AND LATVIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract.

The purpose of the study: *To identify reasons for stress among students studying business studies in Lithuanian and Latvian higher education institutions.*

Methodology: *The study covers two culturally close countries, as students studying business programmes at two higher education institutions in two countries were included. A quantitative research approach was used. Students' stress level was assessed on 34 attributes. A 5-point Likert scale was used, with 5 being the highest level of agreement and 1 the lowest. Statistical analysis of the data was performed using SPSS 21 and Windows Microsoft Office software. Statistical methods used: descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, Student's t-test, Anova test.*

Main Findings: *The study revealed that business students at Lithuanian and Latvian higher education institutions experienced the highest stress due to various academic factors. Stress among business students during their studies was a topical issue, and the expression of stress related to socio-demographic factors.*

Originality: *The survey was conducted using an authentic standardised questionnaire developed by the researchers, and the psychometric quality of the questionnaire was high.*

Implications: *The results of the study are useful for Lithuanian and Latvian higher education teachers and administrators to improve the psychosocial conditions of studies and reduce students' stress related to their studies.*

Keywords: *business students, higher education institutions, stress.*

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Introduction

Student stress in higher education is an area of increasing research worldwide, as it is associated with a range of negative consequences. Academic stress can affect not only the individual student but also wider sectors of society. On a personal level, stress can affect a student's motivation, self-esteem and learning outcomes, and in extreme cases can lead to dropping out of university. Some students are unable to cope with the demands due to excessive stress and choose to leave higher education without completing their programmes. The consequences of stress in higher education can also have an economic impact, as the state or family investing in a student's education expects a long-term return. If students do not complete their studies, their education is not translated into the final product - a skilled professional in the labour market. This can lead to wasted investment, reduced productivity and long-term negative impacts on both the individual and society. Academic stress can also lead to psychological problems such as anxiety, depression and exhaustion, which can further impede students' ability to succeed in their studies and socialise. It is therefore important to realise that student stress management is not only a personal problem but also a social and economic problem that requires attention and preventive measures from higher education institutions and the government.

Aim – to identify reasons for stress among students studying business studies in Lithuanian and Latvian higher education institutions.

Tasks of the research:

1. To identify reasons for stress among students studying business studies.
2. To compare reasons for stress among students studying business studies by socio-demographic groups.

Novelty. There is little research on stress among students in higher education. The study covers two culturally close countries, as students studying business programmes at two higher education institutions in two countries were included. A universal survey instrument with high psychometric quality has been developed to assess the causes and expression of stress among students studying at higher education institutions.

Hypothesis: 1. Students' stress is influenced by factors related to their studies.
2. Student stress expression varies according to socio-demographic characteristics.

Research results and discussion

Literature review

The authors Í. J. S. Ribeiro et al. (2018) conducted an analysis of 142 scientific articles and concluded that the results of the review showed a negative association between stress and quality of life in university students, as various aspects related to physical and mental health deteriorated. It also suggests that factors such as burnout, sleep disturbances and depression may increase this negative association, further impairing quality of life. It is pointed out that there are few studies that address the issues raised together (i.e. stress and quality of life in university students), and that these studies are mainly limited to medical students, and there are few studies - only one identified study - on master or doctoral students from knowledge areas.

In our stressful age, the number of people suffering from stress, anxiety and negative emotions is increasing daily. One of the groups at risk of psychosocial stress is higher education students who often experience high levels of psychosocial stress. The prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression is high among university undergraduate students in developed and developing countries (Mofatteh, 2021). Stress is a phenomenon faced by people in various professions and by students studying in higher education. Changing from a general education school environment to a higher education environment is considered a major life challenge (Hassel et al., 2018). As Acosta et al. (2021) argue, HE is a competitive place where people have many duties and responsibilities. It has been found that 54% of higher education students experience a high 39% lower level of stress. A study by Nakie et al. (2022) showed that the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress was 41.4, 66.7, and 52.2% respectively. According to Tsang et al. (2021), a high academic workload, high demands placed on the assessment of students' performance, the abundance of quizzes and exams, and the large amount of study materials are the main causes of student stress. The most frequent cause of psychosocial stress in our students (79.8%) is academic stress due to a high academic workload (Baranauskas et al., 2020). Academic stress is associated with examination demands, school staff and parents (Tsang & Lian, 2021). The psychosocial learning environment is an environment that encompasses psychological and social factors that can influence students' satisfaction, health and access to learning. Psychosocial factors have a close relationship with academic achievement. The psychosocial environment can have a positive impact on students' self-esteem, self-efficacy and motivation. Conversely, an

unfavourable psychosocial learning environment, unfriendly relationships with fellow students, conflicts with lecturers, lack of support from lecturers, a high academic workload, etc. can increase stress, promote harmful coping styles and provoke health problems (Bendžiūtė & Stanisloviėnė, 2021). The social environment also has a significant impact on the level of stress of the students. According to Alkhaldeh et al. (2023), students who are living alone use the “avoidance” method more significantly and the “social support” method significantly less compared with students who are living with their families and friends. According to Kötter et al. (2017), stress has a negative impact on academic performance and can also lead to a vicious circle in which stress is continuously increasing and learning outcomes are decreasing. The data was collected through the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS). One of the consequences of student stress is sleep disturbance. Poor sleep quality, a predictor of sleep disturbance, was found in 50% of the students in the study. Between 9.8% and 34.4% of students used unhealthy coping methods such as frequent eating, cigarette smoking, medication and alcohol use (Baranauskas et al., 2020).

Methodology

Research methods. A quantitative research approach was used. Student stress was assessed on 34 attributes. A 5-point Likert scale was used, with 5 being the highest level of agreement and 1 the lowest.

Statistical analysis of the data was performed using SPSS 21 and Windows Microsoft Office software. Statistical methods used: descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, Student's t-test, Anova test.

A high Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0,954 was found, indicating excellent internal consistency and reliability of the measurement instrument used in the study.

The survey was conducted among students of Kauno Kolegija/Higher Education Institution (N=87) and Rezekne Academy of Technologies (N=41). The participants from Kauno Kolegija/Higher Education Institution: 57 (65%) female, 27 (31%) male, and 3 (3.4%) did not want to disclose their gender. The participants from Rezekne Academy of Technologies: 26 (63,4%) female, 10 (24,4%) male, and 5 (12,2%) did not want to disclose their gender. However, due to the unequal sample, statistical calculations was performed only between male and female groups.

The participants of business studies from Kauno Kolegija/Higher Education Institution were distributed as follows:

- 1st-year students 62 (71.3%).
- 2nd-year students 14 (16.1%).
- 3rd-year students 11 (12.6%).

The participants of business studies from Rezekne Academy of Technologies:

- 1st-year students 7 (17.1%).
- 2nd-year students 12 (29.3%).
- 3rd-year students 17 (41.5%).
- 4th-year students 4 (9.8%).

The questionnaire was placed on the Kauno kolegija HEI online LimeSurvey system. The survey was carried out during 1 February - 30 March, 2024. The approval of the Kauno kolegija HEI Applied Research Ethics Compliance Review Committee was obtained for the study (Protocol No. 13-14 of 29 January 2024). It was stated that the survey is anonymous and participation is voluntary.

Research results

The business students studying at Lithuanian and Latvian higher education institutions experienced a variety of stressors. Fig. 1 shows the causes of study-related stress.

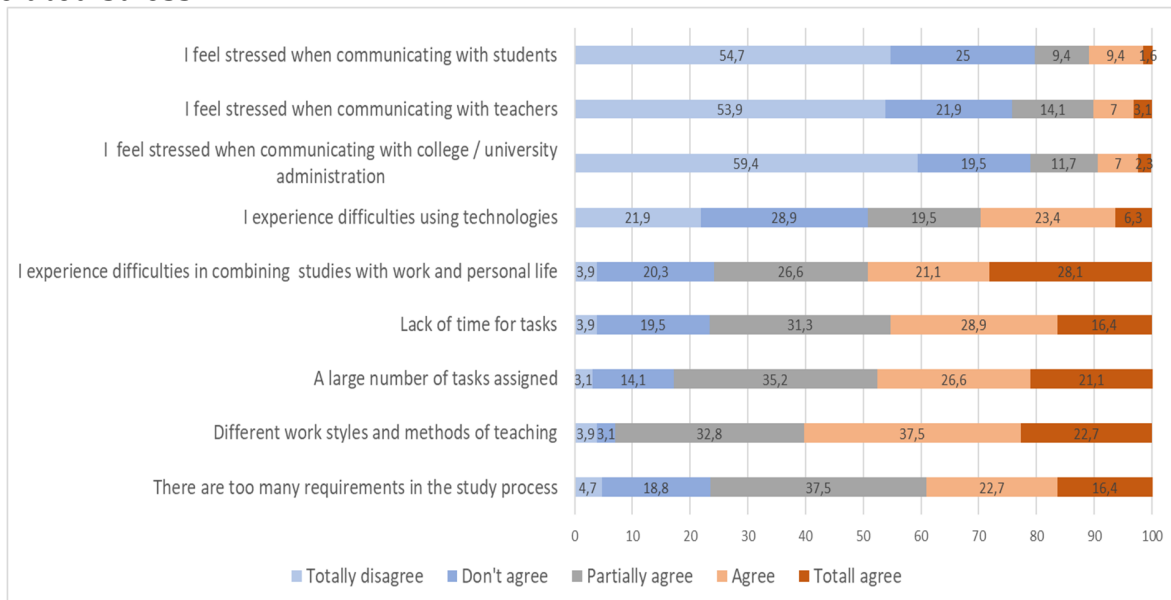


Fig.1 Reasons for stress among students studying business studies in Lithuanian and Latvian higher education institutions (N=128) (compiled by the authors)

The most stressful for students was too many requirements in the study process (partially agreed 37.5%, 22.7 agreed and 16.4 totally agreed). The students were also disturbed by different work styles of teachers and methods of teaching (partially agreed 32.8%, agreed 37.5% and totally agreed 22.7%). A very similar percentage of business students in the study believed that there was a lack of time for tasks and they experienced difficulties in combining studies with work and personal life. Half of the students in the study indicated that they found the use of technology in their studies stressful. The least stressful was communication with administration, lecturers and students. Less than one quarter of students reported this (Fig.1).

A study conducted at one of Lithuania's largest universities found that the most common cause of psychosocial stress among students was a heavy study load (79.8%). Our study shows that half as many students experienced stress for this reason. However, the students from Kauno kolegija HEI and Rezekne Academy of Business Studies who participated in the study experienced several times more stress related to difficulties in combining studies and work.

Table 1 Reasons for stress by gender (N=128) (compiled by the authors)

Causes of the stress	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	Statistic al sig.
There are too many requirements in the study process	Female	3.19	1.109	p≥0.05
	Male	3.39	1.103	
Different work styles and methods of teaching	Female	3.78	1.001	p≥0.05
	Male	3.58	0.967	
A large number of tasks assigned	Female	3.49	1.141	p≥0.05
	Male	3.42	0.937	
Lack of time for tasks	Female	3.4	1.115	p≥0.05
	Male	3.17	1.028	
I experience difficulties in combining studies with work and personal life	Female	3.65	1.254	p≤0.05
	Male	3.06	1.04	
I experience difficulties using technologies	Female	2.46	1.213	p≤0.05
	Male	3	1.195	
I feel stressed when communicating with the college / university administration	Female	1.59	0.988	p≤0.05
	Male	2.06	1.264	
I feel stressed when communicating with teachers	Female	1.66	0.979	p≤0.05
	Male	2.17	1.342	
I feel stressed when communicating with students	Female	1.6	0.962	p≤0.05
	Male	2.08	1.156	

The Students' t-test showed statistically significant differences, indicating that the students differed by gender in their difficulties in balancing studies, work and personal life as well as difficulties in using technology (Table 1). They also felt stressed when dealing with the administration, lecturers and students ($p \leq 0.05$). Females experienced more difficulties in combining studies with work and personal life, but males seemed to feel more stressed when using technologies and interacting with the college/university administration, lecturers and students ($p \leq 0.05$).

Studies around the world show that women are more stressed during their studies. Graves et al. (2021) report that female students are more likely to experience study-related stress. In our study, only one case confirmed that females experienced more stress when their work-study balance was assessed, but in all other cases, male students were the ones to experience more stress. Using technology during their studies and interacting with lecturers and the administration was more stressful for them than for women.

An ANOVA test was used to show that there is a significant difference between the causes of stress and years of study.

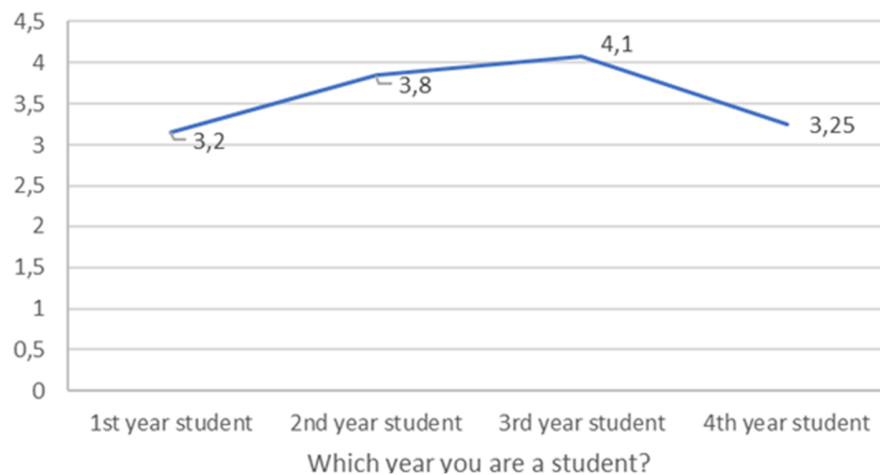


Fig.2 Students experience difficulties in combining studies with work and personal life (N=128) (compiled by the authors)

The business students in their second and third years of study experienced the most difficulties in combining studies with work and personal life (ANOVA test, $p \leq 0.05$). According to the LIKERT scale, the average score for students in the third year was 4.1, for those in the second year 3.8 and for those in the first year 3.2 (Fig. 2).

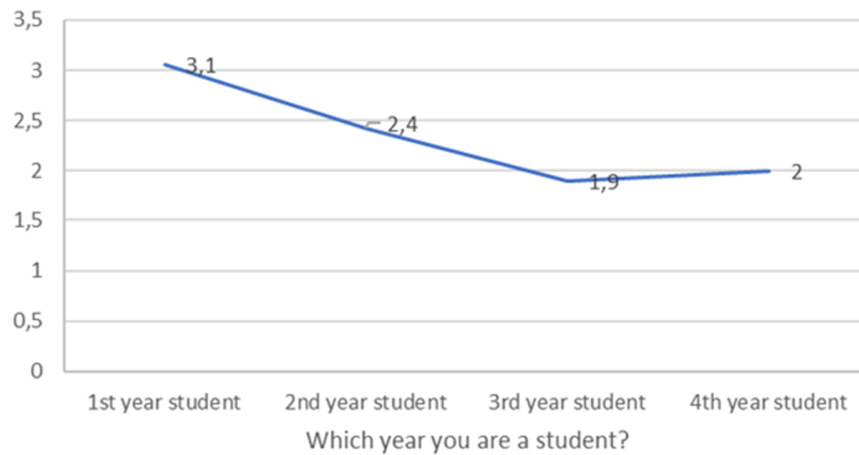


Fig.3 Students experience difficulties using technologies (N=128)
(compiled by the authors)

The business students experienced the most difficulties in using technology in their studies in the first (mean 3.1) and second (mean 2.4) years of study. These difficulties decreased as the years of study increased. In the third year, it reached 1.9, and in the fourth year similarly (ANOVA test, $p \leq 0.05$).

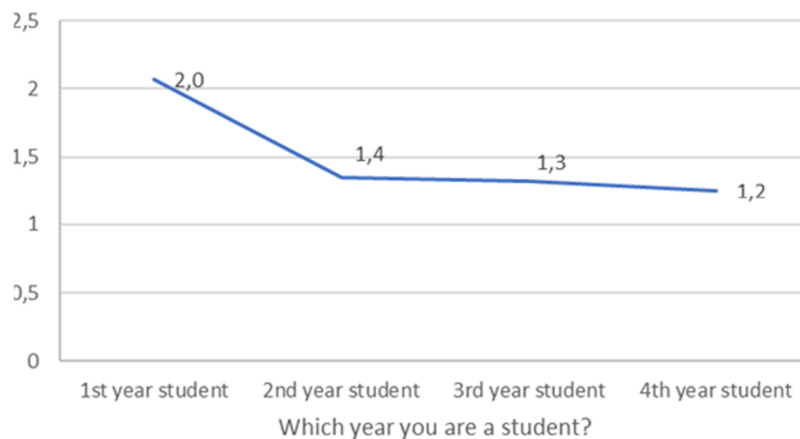


Fig.4 Students stress in communicating with the college/university administration (N=128)
(compiled by the authors)

The students participating in the research experienced most of the stress in communicating with the administration in the first (mean 2) and second

(mean 1.4) years of study. These difficulties decreased with every study year. In the third year, it reached 1.3, and in the fourth year 1.2 (ANOVA test, $p \leq 0.05$).

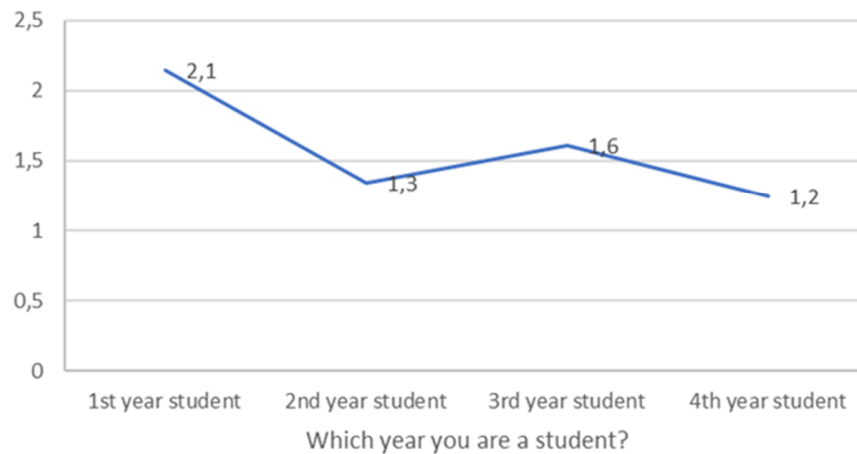


Fig.5 Students' stress in communicating with students (N=128)
(compiled by the authors)

Similarly, interacting with students was most stressful in the first year (mean 2.1) and least stressful in the fourth year (mean 1.2). This finding is statistically significant (ANOVA test, $p \leq 0.05$).

There are many reports emphasising levels of stress among students in the final years of secondary school (Wuthrich, 2020). However, little is known about university students' stress varying by study year. Therefore, it is particularly difficult to compare the results of our study with the results obtained by other researchers. In the scientific literature, there is a lack of studies that purposefully analyse the stress of students of business study programmes during their academic years.

Conclusions

1. Stress adversely impacts physical and mental health, often leading to burnout, sleep disturbances, and depression, which further impair quality of life. These issues are exacerbated by high academic workloads, assessment pressures, and competitive environments typical in higher education.
2. The study revealed that the business students at Lithuanian and Latvian higher education institutions experienced the highest stress due to various academic factors. The most prominent stressors were the high number of

requirements in the study process and the different teaching methods used by lecturers.

3. Gender differences showed that females found it more difficult to balance their studies, work and personal life, while males experienced more stress due to the use of technology and interaction with the university administration and colleagues.
4. The business students in their second and third years of study experienced the most difficulties in combining studies with work and personal life. The students experienced most of the difficulties in using technology in the first and second years of study. It was also found that the lower the course, the more stress students felt in their interactions with the university administration and lecturers.
5. To reduce stress factors among students, the authors recommend that higher education institutions offer classes on time management and study planning, especially for first-year students who face difficulties in adjusting to the demands of higher education, as well as academic mentoring programmes in which senior students help junior students with academic and personal problems.
6. It is important for higher education institutions to tailor gender-specific support, for example by developing programmes that specifically address the communication skills and technology support needs of male students. For female students, they need to provide support to manage work-life balance effectively, such as workshops or support groups.
7. It is necessary to continue the research to compare data and analyse the stress of business study programme students by study year. The university management and lecturers should consider the most frequent causes of stress discovered as a result of the research to reduce stress for students during the study process, to encourage the completion of the studies that have been started and to encourage the student to be satisfied with his/her performance.

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