

From Pixels to Pressure: Perceived Stress and Use of Mental Health Support Resources among Fully- Online Postgraduate Students

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Abstract

Introduction:

The increase in online learning has transformed educational landscapes, offering unprecedented accessibility but also introducing novel challenges. One critical factor influencing student well-being and academic performance is stress. Stress, a physiological response to external pressures, can significantly impact cognitive functioning and overall mental health. Students who learn fully online face unique stressors, including technological issues, a lack of personal contact, and the struggle to maintain self-discipline. Stress can manifest as fatigue, irritability, and diminished work quality, among others. Fully online students have specific needs as they cannot easily access on-campus resources for mental health, and as a result, are dependent on online resources. This study explored the perceived stress of a group of fully online students and their help-seeking behaviour.

Methods:

An analytical cross-sectional study was conducted among fully online Postgraduate Diploma in Public Health students. All students enrolled in a large online module in the programme were invited to participate. An online questionnaire included the 10-item Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and self-developed questions to explore students' help-seeking behaviour. The PSS has 10 questions that use a four-point scale for participants to indicate how often they found their lives unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded in the previous month. Four of the items are reversed when calculating the global score and stress levels are defined as 'low' (0-13), 'medium' (14-26) or 'high' (27-40).

Results:

The response rate was 75% (569/761). Thirty-six responses were discarded as the participants had not completed all the questions in the PSS. The remaining 533 participants had a moderate stress score (64.0%) while 12.7% had a high stress score. The majority (84%) were aware of

the online mental health resources available in the module. Over three-quarters of the participants (who answered the question or n=183) reported a form of help-seeking behaviour, with the biggest group (28.4%) opting for self-help. Among the rest, 45.4% made use of one of the three options available within the university.

Conclusion:

The substantial proportion of students who reported moderate to high levels of stress highlights the need for targeted interventions and support mechanisms. Importantly, the study identifies a substantive level of awareness and utilisation of available resources. The prevalence of self-help strategies and utilisation of university resources underscores the importance of incorporating mental health support into online learning platforms. Institutions should take note and develop and promote online mental health resources to foster a conducive learning environment and promote overall student success.

Keywords: online; learning; postgraduate; stress