

Frequency of emotional disorders among university entrants of a university in Sri Lanka.

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Abstract

The objective of the study was to assess the frequency and correlates of emotional disorders among entrants to the University of Sri Jayewardenepura.

Entrants to the faculties of Arts, Management Studies, Science and Medical Sciences at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura in 1996 were assessed using self administered, previously validated General Health Questionnaire and a study specific questionnaire (GHQ), within three months of entry.

Emotional disorders were observed in 63% (n=1362) of the entrants. Out of the 120 Medical, 242 Science, 500 Management and 500 Arts Students, 38, 63, 63, and 68 percent respectively had emotional disorders. Correlates for emotional disorders were different in the four faculties.

In the Faculty of Arts, students from underprivileged districts (76%), students who perceived themselves as having financial (83%) and domestic problems (82%) had higher frequency of emotional disorders.

Students from underprivileged districts (77%) at the Faculty of Management Studies also had higher frequency of emotional disorders. Those with very high (75%) and very low (73%) parental income had a positive correlation with emotional disorders.

In the Faculty of Science, students from under privileged districts (75%), and those who obtained higher marks in Advanced Level examination (Physics 53%, Bio-Science 65%) were in more distress. Those who perceived themselves as having domestic problems (81%) had a higher frequency of emotional disorders. Female students (70.7%) have more emotional distress compared to the males.

In the Faculty of Medical Sciences, students who perceived as having domestic problems (75%) had a higher frequency of emotional disorders. This Study Confirmed the High frequency of emotional disorders Observed among university entrants.

Correlation of the occurrence of emotional disorders with psycho-social factors varied between Faculties.

Key Words: emotional disorders university entrants

1. Introduction

The number of undergraduates, including first year students, seeking relief for emotional distress at the medical center, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, has increased over the past years. (personal communication, Chief Medical Officer, University of Sri Jayewardenepura)

The intense competition to gain entry to the universities, the prolonged waiting period before the commencement of the course and the low economic status of the students, have been identified previously as contributory factors for the onset of emotional disorders among university students. (1). High expectation to follow professional courses due to prestige and employment opportunities, inability to enter into desired fields, overcrowding in universities, the incidence of ragging and recorded emotional distress experienced even before entering into the university are also identified as co-factors (1).

In another study conducted in the University of Colombia, academic and school related issues as well as love affairs had been identified as factors influencing the student's mental health needs. (2)

Problems in the area of self-satisfaction had been identified as major issues for students who sought psychological services in a College in the United States (3).

This study was designed to assess the frequency of emotional disorders and to identify the causes for emotional distress among the entrants to a University in Sri Lanka, which is a destination of many successful school leavers in the streams of Arts, Management Studies, Science and Medicine.

2. Method

During the first three months at the university from the batches of students entered in the year 1996, randomly selected new entrants were given a previously validated screening test (General Health Questionnaire - GHQ 30) adapted in Sinhalese, together with a study specific questionnaire. The study specific questionnaire was used to identify the student's sex, socio-economic status, area of residence, performance at the Advanced Level examination, type of school and problems that they encountered during the pre-university period. A score of 6 or greater in the GHQ 30 indicated psychological morbidity, at entry to the university.

3. Results

Out of the 120 Medical 38%, 63% of the 242 Science, 63% of the 500 Management and 68% of the 500 Arts students had a score of 6 or above in GHQ. Among the students in Science, Management and Arts Faculties, students from the University Grants Commission (UGC) designated underprivileged districts had a high prevalence of emotional distress ($P < 0.05$). Those who were perceived as having domestic problems had a high prevalence of emotional distress ($P < 0.05$), among the students in the Medical, Science and Arts Faculties.

Among the Science Faculty students, the marks obtained at the Advanced Level Examination and the stream (Bio-Science or Physical) showed a significant relationship to the frequency of emotional distress. ($P < 0.05$)

Those who obtained higher aggregate marks to enter the Applied Sciences Faculty were in distress than those who obtained lesser marks. Those who are studying in Bio stream were in more distress than those of the Physical stream. ($P < 0.05$)

In the Management Faculty, parental income showed a significant relationship to their emotional distress. Students from very high and very low income families had high prevalence of emotional distress. ($P < 0.05$)

Amongst the Arts Faculty students, the students who had financial and social problems and the students from under privileged districts, had higher prevalence of emotional distress. ($p < 0.05$).

Male students of the Faculty of Management Studies had more emotional disorders, compared to the female students ($p < 0.05$), whereas the opposite was found to be true in the Faculty of Applied Sciences ($p < 0.05$).

4. DISCUSSION

This study confirmed high frequency of emotional disorders among new entrants to universities (1,4). The statistically significant correlates are different in the four faculties.

Faculty of Arts

The highest frequency of emotional disorders was found in students from the Arts Faculty (68%). The identified cofactors were, coming from under-privileged districts and having domestic and personal problems. This observation needs to be explored more to understand students problems in a socio-economic background. Understanding the socioeconomic background and social and financial problems and the origin from under privileged districts, will help the policy makers to provide more support in finances and help students in adjusting to a new demanding environment. The emotionally disturbed students need a confidential environment to discuss their problems.

Faculty of Management Studies

Students from the Faculty of Management Studies had a 63% frequency of emotional disorders. The University where the study was conducted has a wide recognition for undergraduate studies in the field of management studies. Male students have more emotional distress than their female counterparts ($P < 0.05$). This observation need to be explored more to understand psychodynamics of the two groups in relation to emotional distress. The high frequency of emotional distress seen among very high and very low - income groups may have been due to the difficulty in adjusting to the demands of the courses conducted by the Faculty. Again this observation needs to be explored to understand students specific problems.

Faculty of Applied Sciences

Frequency of emotional disorders amongst students of the Faculty of Applied sciences is 63%. Students from underprivileged districts and those who have domestic problems have a correlation with emotional disorders. Female students had greater emotional distress than the male students ($p < 0.05$). Female students with psycho-social problems may find it difficult to cope with demands of the new environment.

The students who obtained higher marks and those who gained entry to the university in Bio-Science stream were in more distress. This needs further study to understand the basis of these factors.

Faculty of Medical Sciences

Comparatively medical students had a low degree of emotional distress (38%) than students of the other faculties.

Since Medicine is a much valued discipline that the students seek, it is surprising to note the relatively low frequency of emotional disorders among medical entrants. Previous studies have shown a high frequency of emotional disorders among medical undergraduates (58%), using the same study instrument, in the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. (4)

The only correlation with statistical significance was that students with domestic problems had a high degree of emotional disorders. Again this observation needs to be further explored to understand the students problems.

5. Conclusion

This study confirmed the high frequency of emotional disorders among entrants to universities in Sri Lanka (1,4). This observation leads to the need of further studies to understand the socio-economic and cultural factors, which lead to student distress in a new demanding environment. Establishing support systems and appropriate counselling services within the university system is beneficial for students. Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Sri Jayewardenepura has commenced a moral tutor scheme where each student is given a chance to meet with an academic staff member at the entry to the faculty to discuss their problems. They are expected to continue the relationship throughout the course (5). However, the significance of such interventions need to be verified with students feedback.

Having provided student services, measures to improve awareness on the available services need to be considered. In a study conducted in an urban Australian University, more than half of the students population was not aware of support services available and only 20% of students reported having used university counselling or career services (6). University students in USA have responded to brief psychological interventions including psychodynamic therapy, crisis intervention, mental health consultation and managed referral (7).

The statistically significant correlates of emotional disorders varied between Faculties of Arts, Management Studies, Applied Sciences and Medical Sciences. This observation is of special significance. It could be due to the diverse cultural and family backgrounds of students, as well as different coping strategies, personalities, support systems, financial situations and emotional intelligence.

This observation needs further studies focusing on these specific areas, to understand the student needs in a meaningful manner.

The University needs to focus on cost effective, student friendly support systems and appropriate counselling services, which could cater to the specific needs of student communities in all Faculties. Further, these services need to be informed to students and measures should be taken to facilitate enhance utilization of such services.

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