

A Qualitative Comparative Study of Academic and Personal Stressors Among Students in Albanian Public and Private Universities

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Abstract: *Stress is a widespread phenomenon affecting university students worldwide. The transition to higher education involves academic, social, and personal challenges that can lead to significant psychological strain. This pilot research study aims to identify and compare the sources of stress experienced by students in public and private universities in Tirana, Albania. This study explores academic and personal sources of stress among students from public and private universities in Albania. Using a qualitative exploratory approach, data were collected from 200 students (100 from each university type), aged 18–25 years, through an open-ended question. The most commonly reported stressors among private university students were academic pressure and fear of failure (73%), financial difficulties (39%), and work-related concerns (52%). Public university students reported more stress related to lack of academic support and social situations. Although academic pressure was also a major stressor for public university students (66.1%), financial concerns were less emphasized. The results demonstrate differences in the nature and intensity of stress between university types. Identifying sources of student stress is essential to develop targeted interventions that reduce stress and enhance coping strategies. The comparison indicates that students at public universities experience greater psychological burden, while those at private universities face more stress related to self-financing and personal pressures. These findings can inform future educational policies and mental health programs tailored to the Albanian higher education context.*

Keywords: sources of stress, academic stress, fear of failure, personal stress, public university, private university.

INTRODUCTION

University life is often perceived as a time of personal growth and academic development. However, a substantial body of evidence, including meta-analyses and epidemiological studies indexed in PubMed and Scopus, indicates that this period is also marked by significant psychological stress—often linked to academic pressure, financial concerns, and uncertainty about the future (Beiter et al., 2015; Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Lund et al., 2010) . These stressors can negatively affect academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being among students.

In transitional societies such as Albania—where public and private universities coexist within a rapidly changing socio-economic and educational environment—understanding the specific sources of student stress is particularly critical (Alkhawaldeh et al., 2023). Research indicates that the nature and intensity of stressors vary according to institutional setting, students' socio-economic background, and individual coping competencies (Misra & McKean, 2000; Lund et al., 2010). In Tirana, students in public and private universities encounter distinct challenges. Public university attendees often face financial strain, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient academic support (Zgaga et al., 2013). In contrast, private university students report stress related to performance expectations, tuition costs, and future employability (Dyrbye et al., 2005; Alkhawaldeh et al., 2023).

Socio-cultural and economic inequalities intensify stress experiences in vulnerable student groups, emphasizing the importance of situating stressors within Albania's unique cultural framework (McCloud & Bann, 2019; Lund et al., 2010). Given these dynamics, this doctoral thesis prioritizes the comparative analysis of stress sources among students in public and private universities in Tirana, seeking to identify both structural and psychological determinants that influence well-being in each context.

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

Study Design

This pilot research project study serves as a crucial initial step by providing an in-depth understanding of the primary sources and dimensions of stress experienced by university students in both private and public institutions. This pilot study utilized a qualitative exploratory approach as part of a broader investigation aiming at identifying the sources of stress among university students in Albania, with a particular emphasis on comparing academic and personal stressors among students from public and private universities. This design was chosen as it allows for a deep exploration of students' subjective experiences and enables the identification of stressors that might not emerge through structured quantitative instruments.

Sample

The study involved a total of 200 undergraduate students (100 from public universities and 100 from private universities) in Tirana, Albania, aged between 18 and 25. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, academic year, and field of study within the health sciences (e.g., medicine and dentistry). Data collection was conducted online using the Google Forms platform. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents.

Data Collection

Data were collected through an open-ended exploratory question: “What are some of the factors that you believe have caused you stress during your university studies and outside of them?” This question aimed to elicit rich, spontaneous responses from students regarding their academic and personal stress experiences, without restricting them to predefined categories.

Variables:

The variable of this pilot study are as follow:

Source of stress: Refers to the specific academic, financial, social, or personal factors contributing to psychological strain during university life.

University type: Categorizes respondents based on the institution attended—public (state-funded) or private (privately funded).

Demographic characteristics: Includes age, gender, and socio-economic background, which may influence the intensity and nature of stress and coping mechanisms.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis process used to identify stress factors among university students (based on Braun & Clarke, 2006).

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generation of initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the final report

Two independent researchers coded the data separately. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus to enhance credibility and reduce researcher bias.

Ethical Considerations: This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. Participants were fully informed about the aims of the study and gave informed consent before participation. All data were treated confidentially and anonymously, and were used solely for research purposes.

RESULTS

Demographics: The study included 200 undergraduate students (N=200), with an equal distribution between public (n=100) and private (n=100) universities in Tirana, Albania. The sample was predominantly female (69.9%), with males representing 30.1% of the participants. The majority of participants (over 90%) were aged 18–20, representing a typical undergraduate cohort.

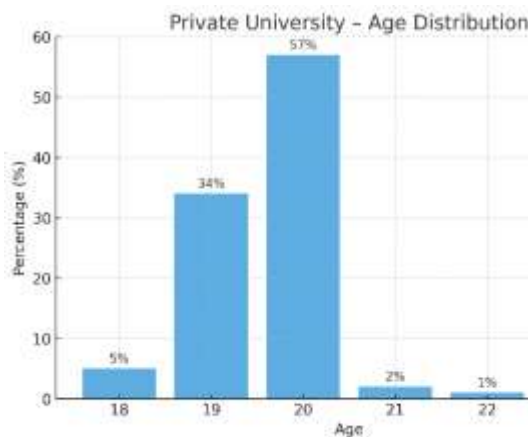


Figure. no 1

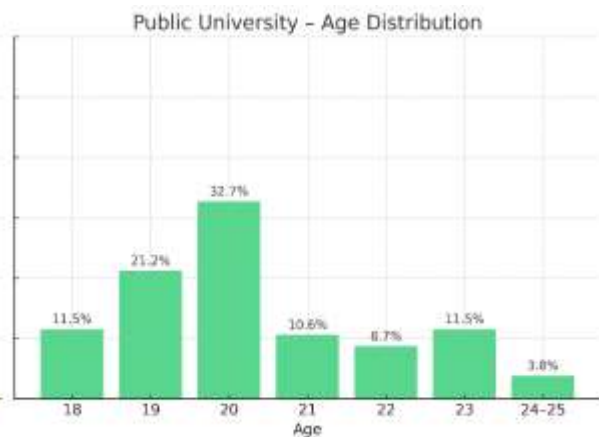


Figure no. 2

Figure 1 and Figure 2. Distribution of Students by Age Group (in %)

Age distribution among students from private universities showed that the majority (57%) were 20 years old, followed by 34% aged 19, and 5% aged 18. Only a small proportion of students were older, including 2% aged 21, and 1% each aged 22 and 25. Overall, 91% of private university students were between 18 and 20 years of age, indicating a relatively homogeneous and age-appropriate cohort for early-cycle university studies. In contrast, students from public universities presented a more diverse age distribution. The largest group was still 20 years old (32.7%), but the presence of older students was more notable: 21.2% were 19, 11.5% were 18, 10.6% were 21,

8.7% were 22, 11.5% were 23, and 3.8% were 24–25 years old. These findings suggest that the public university cohort includes a higher proportion of non-traditional or late-entry students compared to their private university counterparts.

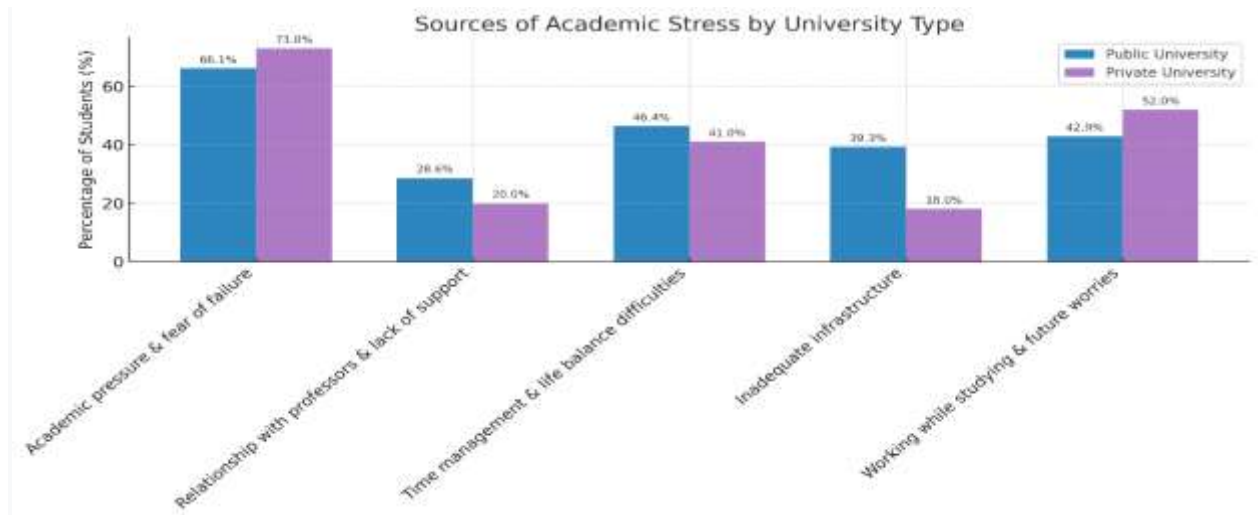


Figure 3. Academic Stressors in Public and Private University Students (N=200)

Figure 3 demonstrates that academic pressure and fear of failure are the most prevalent academic stressors among both student groups. While 73% of private university students reported academic stress—often tied to maintaining scholarships and fulfilling high expectations—66.1% of public university students cited academic workload as their primary concern, frequently linked to overcrowded classrooms and less individualized attention.

Concerns related to job insecurity and future prospects were reported by 52% of private and 37.5% of public university students. Time management and maintaining a study-life balance were also major challenges, with 41% of private and 46.4% of public university students reporting difficulties.

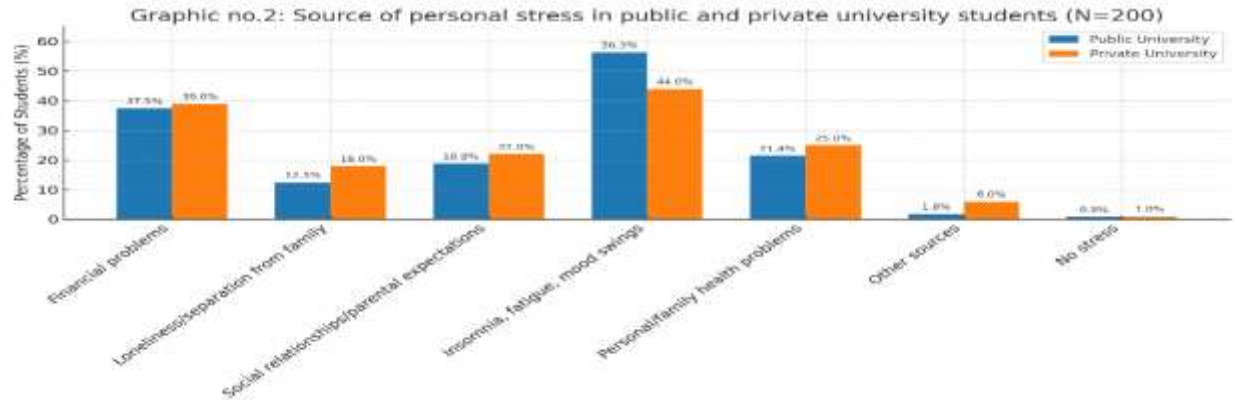


Figure 4. Personal Stressors in Public and Private University Students (N=200)

Figure 4 illustrates the primary personal stressors. Financial pressure was reported by 39% of private and 28.6% of public students, indicating that tuition and living costs are more burdensome in the private sector. Health-related issues—both personal and familial—were cited by 25% of private and 18.8% of public students. Emotional distress such as insomnia, fatigue, and mood swings was similarly prevalent in both groups (44% and 42.9%, respectively). Social and relationship issues, including unrealistic parental expectations and peer pressure, were reported by 22% of private and 18.8% of public students. Environmental stressors, such as long commutes and inadequate infrastructure, affected around 18% of both groups. A smaller portion of students (6% private, ~2% public) also mentioned ideological or existential concerns, indicating that internal conflicts and value uncertainty can contribute to personal stress, albeit less frequently.

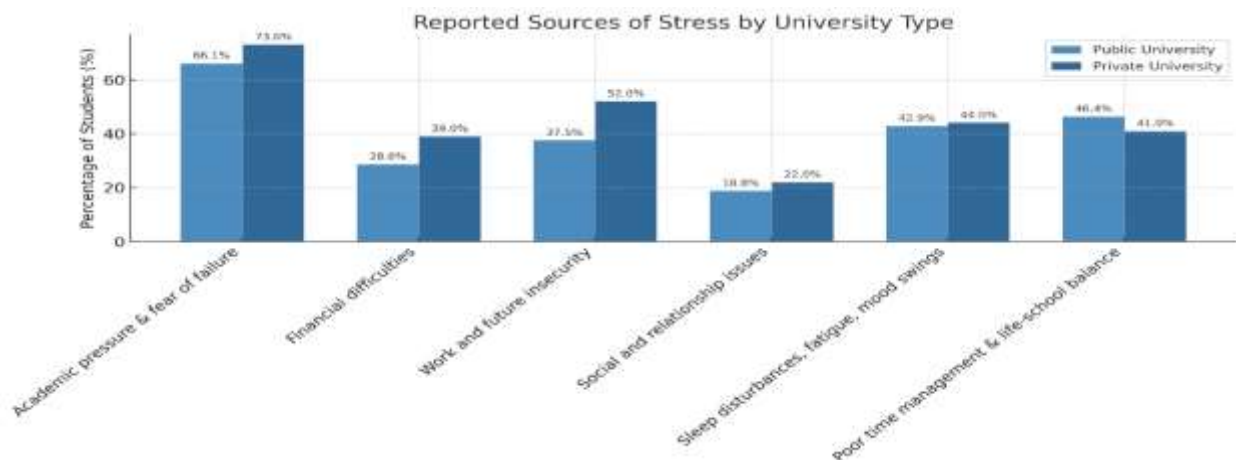


Figure 5. Most frequently reported stressors among Public and Private University Students

The data indicate that financial concerns are more pronounced among private students, while psychological burdens related to academic workload are significant in both groups. Higher reported stress levels were correlated with lower self-assessed academic performance ($r = -0.45$, $p < 0.01$). Private students reported slightly higher levels of financial stress, which was associated with increased anxiety and mood disturbances.

The result of this pilot study showed that academic workload and fear of failure emerged as predominant concerns in both university types. Private university students: 73% cited academic pressure as a major stressor, often linked to the need to maintain scholarships and fulfill high parental expectations. Meanwhile, 66.1% of public university students reported academic workload as stressful, often associated with larger class sizes, generalized instruction, and limited personalized support. These findings align with international literature indicating that academic demands and institutional expectations are central to student stress, though their expression may vary based on educational context and available resources.

Analysis of Correlation

The results revealed no statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$) across most variables, suggesting that while the prevalence of certain stressors varied descriptively between the two groups, these differences were not strong enough to be considered statistically meaningful. This may be one reason why no statistically significant relationships were identified: the relatively small sample size ($N=200$), especially when broken down by individual stressors and institution type, may have reduced the statistical power needed to detect subtle group differences. Additionally, the complex and multifactorial nature of stress—shaped by both individual and contextual factors—may not be adequately captured by the categorical variables used in this analysis.

The comparison of major stressors between students in private and public universities is illustrated in Table 1 below. Although some differences in percentage are noted, only career-related stress showed a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.046$).

The table below presents the comparison of reported stressors between students in private and public universities. Although some descriptive differences are observed, most results are not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$), with the exception of career concerns ($p = 0.046$), which showed significance.

Table 1: Comparison of Stressors Between Private and Public University Students

	Stressor	Private (%)	Public (%)	Test P-value (Chi-square)
1.	Financial stress	39	28.6	0.084
2.	Academic pressure	73	66.1	0.192
3.	Sleep and mental fatigue	44	42.9	0.841
4.	Career concerns	52	37.5	0.046
5.	Work-life balance	41	46.4	0.488

$p < 0.05$ indicates statistical significance.

-Hypothesis0: Students in private universities experience higher financial stress compared to those in public universities.

- Hypothesis1: Academic workload and fear of failure are significant stressors in both groups but more pronounced in private institutions.

DISCUSSION

This pilot study aimed to explore and compare the academic and personal stressors experienced by students in public and private universities in Albania. Currently the majority of participants (over 90%) were aged 18–20, representing a typical undergraduate cohort. The gender distribution was predominantly female (69.9%) and male (30.1%) and this study included 200 undergraduate students (N=200), with an equal distribution between public (n=100) and private (n=100) universities in Tirana, Albania. The data indicate that financial concerns are more pronounced among private students, while psychological burdens related to academic workload are significant in both groups. Psychological and Academic Impacts: Higher reported stress correlated with lower self-assessed academic performance ($r = -0.45$, $p < 0.01$). Private students reported slightly higher levels of financial stress, which was associated with increased anxiety and mood disturbances.

The result of this pilot study showed that academic workload and fear of failure emerged as predominant concerns in both university types. Private university students: 73% cited academic pressure as a major stressor, often linked to the need to maintain scholarships and fulfill high parental expectations. Meanwhile at the public university students, 66.1% reported academic workload as stressful, often associated with larger class sizes, generalized instruction, and limited personalized support. The finding of this pilot study consistent with the study of Kumaraswamy's (2013), study which found that 73% of students in private university reflects identification of performance pressure in competitive, fee-paying institutions and Misra & McKean (2000) reported similar findings among U.S. students . In another study, public university students

reported academic stress (66.1%) often related to large class sizes and limited support—an issue documented by Robotham & Julian (2006).

From the results of our study financial pressure was reported by 39% of private and 28.6% of public students, indicating that tuition and living costs are more burdensome in the private sector. Financial concerns were significant across the board but especially so for private students (39%). Scoping reviews in Australia and New Zealand have shown that 8–68% of students experience substantial financial stress. Both groups expressed high rates of sleep disturbances, mental exhaustion, and mood swings (44% private vs. 42.9% public). These symptoms reinforce prior studies linking academic pressure to poor sleep quality and emotional fatigue (Lund et al., 2010; Regehr et al., 2013). Health issues—whether personal or familial—were reported by 25% of private and 18.8% of public students, echoing Dyrbye et al. (2005), who find health concerns to impair academic performance. Also an important source of stress are social integration tensions that were cited by 22% of private versus 18.8% of public students. Alkhawaldeh et al. (2023) show that students living alone or with chronic illness suffer higher stress levels. The result of our study showed that stress is a nearly universal experience among university students in Albania, with notable differences in the intensity and type of stressors between public and private institutions.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the need for targeted support strategies to address both academic and personal stress among university students, regardless of institution type. While statistical significance was not achieved, the descriptive findings suggest that interventions should consider the unique challenges faced by each student population. Future research with larger and more diverse samples is essential to deepen understanding and inform evidence-based policy and mental health initiatives within higher education.

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