

University Students and Their Concerns: Prevalence and Degree of Severity

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Abstract. Since undergraduates are moving from adolescence to young adulthood, they face many changes in this transitional period. It is argued that they still need support to “grow” and cope with all the “unbearable” stresses. The aim of this study is to assess the prevalence and degree of severity of students’ concerns during their university career. Participants ($N = 1,279$) were students from two universities, who volunteered to complete self-administered questionnaires. Results reveal that academic-related problems were the most widely experienced and the most serious concerns for students, compared to other areas. With regard to the prevalence of concerns, problems related to academic, self, depression and mood change, romantic relationships, welfare, other relationships, anxiety, loss, and transitions, were experienced by more than 50% of students participating in the study. Detailed findings, implications of results, and the recommendation for improving the quality of university students life are further discussed.

Keywords: prevalence, degree of severity, career.

Abstrak. Karena mahasiswa S-1 adalah remaja yang menuju dewasa muda, mereka menghadapi banyak perubahan dalam masa transisi ini. Diasumsikan bahwa mereka masih membutuhkan dukungan untuk “tumbuh” dan mengatasi berbagai stres yang berat. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah menilai prevalensi dan beratnya keprihatinan mahasiswa selama masa studinya. Partisipan penelitian ini ($N = 1,279$) adalah mahasiswa dua perguruan tinggi, yang bersedia mengisi kuesioner tentang pribadinya. Hasil mengungkapkan bahwa masalah terkait-akademik merupakan yang paling banyak dialami dan paling serius bagi para mahasiswa, dibandingkan hal lain. Menyangkut prevalensi keprihatinan, masalah terkait-akademik, pribadi, depresi dan perubahan suasana hati, hubungan romantis, kesejahteraan, hubungan lain, kecemasan, kehilangan, dan peralihan, dialami oleh lebih dari 50% partisipan. Diba-
has lebih lanjut temuan rinci, implikasi hasil, dan rekomendasi perbaikan kualitas kehidupan mahasiswa.

Kata kunci: angka kejadian, derajat keparahan, karier

Wittenberg (2001) points out that being at university can be a “time of growth” but can also involve “unbearable” stresses. This is true since undergraduate students are in a transitional period in their life. They move from adolescence to young adulthood, which makes them face many changes in their lives. Brown and Ralph (1999) also assert that although students may experience eustress or positive stress which can help to promote personal growth, they have the potential to experience dis-

tress. Therefore it is argued that supports should be provided for undergraduate students in order to help them move through their transitional period and achieve growth.

However, the support given to university students cannot be effective without understanding the common problems they encounter during their university career. Several studies (for instance Cook et al., 1984; Carney, Peterson, & Moberg, 1990; Grayson, Clarke, & Miller, 1995; Rudowicz & Au, 2001) have been conducted to investigate problems experienced by students. Carney et al. (1990) conducted a survey amongst students and faculty members in a university in the Midwest of the USA to discover their perceptions of common problems amongst students. It was found that both students and faculty ranked self-support finances, career indecision/job

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search frustration and academic performance difficulties as the areas of most common concerns to students. Study by Cook et al. among students in a large, midwestern, urban campus in the USA showed that education achievement and anxiety came as the most frequently cited problems. Grayson et al. researched students' everyday problems by conducting a qualitative study among students from a university in the UK. By clustering the problems listed by participants, there were five superordinate clusters of problems, including problems with finance, course-related, domestic, interpersonal and personal crisis, and the management of resources and facilities.

Beside the above studies which were conducted in the Western contexts, some studies were also carried out outside the Western contexts. Soliman (1993) investigated problems among college students at Kuwait University. The top five most encountered problems were "need for support in a stressful situation," "need to achieve a goal," "having problems with grades," "needing money," "wanting to understand oneself better." Meanwhile, Rudowicz and Au (2001) did similar investigation in Hong Kong and found that problems related to study was the one experienced most by students, apart from problems related to health, emotional life, peer relationships, and love relationships.

As human beings are influenced by their environments (Lewin, 1952), it is argued that students from different cultural contexts would have different problems. The economic and political situation as well as cultural values in Indonesia might be supposed to lead students to experience different problems, which may not be shared with students from other countries. Therefore, research into students' concerns in the Indonesian context need to be carried out.

Method

Quantitative approach was adopted in this study. A total of 1,279 undergraduates (846 male, 432 female, one unreported) volunteered to participate in the questionnaire survey. Ages ranged from 17 to 26, with a mean age of 19.7. The students were from the study programmes of Electrical Engineering, Computer Science, and Industrial Engineering in two private universities which are situated in an urban area in Indonesia.

The self-administered questionnaire used in this

study was constructed based on the categorisation of client concern developed by the AUCC (AUCC, n.d.), and the factor analysis of problem checklist scales used in a university counselling service (Zalaquett & McManus, 1996). It seems that the categorisation of concerns in both of these sources was built based on the actual problems students brought to university counselling services. The questionnaire consists of 14 areas of concern. The problem areas include academic, transitions, welfare, parental relationships, romantic relationships, other relationships, loss of someone significant or part of personal life, physical health, self, depression and mood change, compulsive behaviour, abuse, and sexual issues. A sheet describing each area of concern was also given to students so that students have the same understanding about each problem area before they rate for the degree of severity. Participants were asked to rate 1 to 4 for each problem area to indicate the degree of concern they were facing at that time (1 = showing no concern, 2 = showing concern at a slight degree, 3 = showing concern at a moderate degree, 4 = showing concern at a strong degree). The split-half reliability coefficients of questionnaire were 0.995 ($p < 0.001$).

Results

The findings of students' concern are differentiated between the prevalence of concerns and the degree of severity of concerns. The prevalence of concern refers to the percentage of students who experienced a certain area of concern. The degree of severity of concern refers to the extent to which a problem caused a concern to students.

Prevalence of Concerns

To indicate the percentage of students experiencing certain areas of concern, the total number of students with scores of 2, 3, and 4 were calculated. Students who scored 0 meant that they did not experience a certain area of concern. Therefore they were not included in the calculation of prevalence of concerns.

Figure 1 represents the prevalence of concerns which is shown by the percentage values which are presented in descending order (Setiawan, 2004, p.100).

As presented in Figure 1, academic-related problems were the highest reported problems in this study. Most of the students (87.2%) reported that they experienced academic-related problems. The other areas of concern which were also high in prevalence included problems related to self, depression and mood change, romantic relationships, welfare, other relationships, anxiety, loss and transitions. These areas of concerns were reported by more than 50% students participating in the study. Problems related to physical health, parental relationships, compulsive behavior, sexual issues, and abuse accounted for smaller proportions of students.

Degree of severity of concerns. Figure 2 represents the degree of severity of concerns experienced by students (Setiawan, 2004, p.101). The degrees of severity of concerns are shown by the mean scores of each problem area. As shown in the figure, the degrees of concern ranged from 1.3 to 2.5. It is shown in Figure 2 that academic areascored the highest degree of severity compared to other problem areas. Other areas of concern which need also to be noticed were problems related to romantic relationships, loss, depression and mood change, self and welfare. abuse and sexual issues achieved the lowest degree of severity compared to others.

The calculation of mean of degree of severity using all samples seems not to give clear information regarding the exact degree of severity of concern as it also calculates those who are not experiencing any concerns in the area. Therefore it is necessary to calculate the degree of severity of concern by excluding participants who reported no problems in the area. Figure 3 (Setiawan, 2004) represents the degree of severity of each concern area among those who reporting any concern on those problem areas.

It is shown in Figure 3, the degree of concern ranged from 2.4 to 2.8. The highest degree of concern was academic and loss which got a mean score of 2.8, followed by romantic relationships and depression and mood change, which achieved a mean score of 2.7 and 2.6 consecutively.

Discussion and Recommendations

With regard to the prevalence of concerns, the study showed that problems related to academic, self, depression and mood change, romantic relationships, welfare, other relationships, anxiety, loss, and transitions, were experienced by more than 50% of students participating in the study. Amongst the

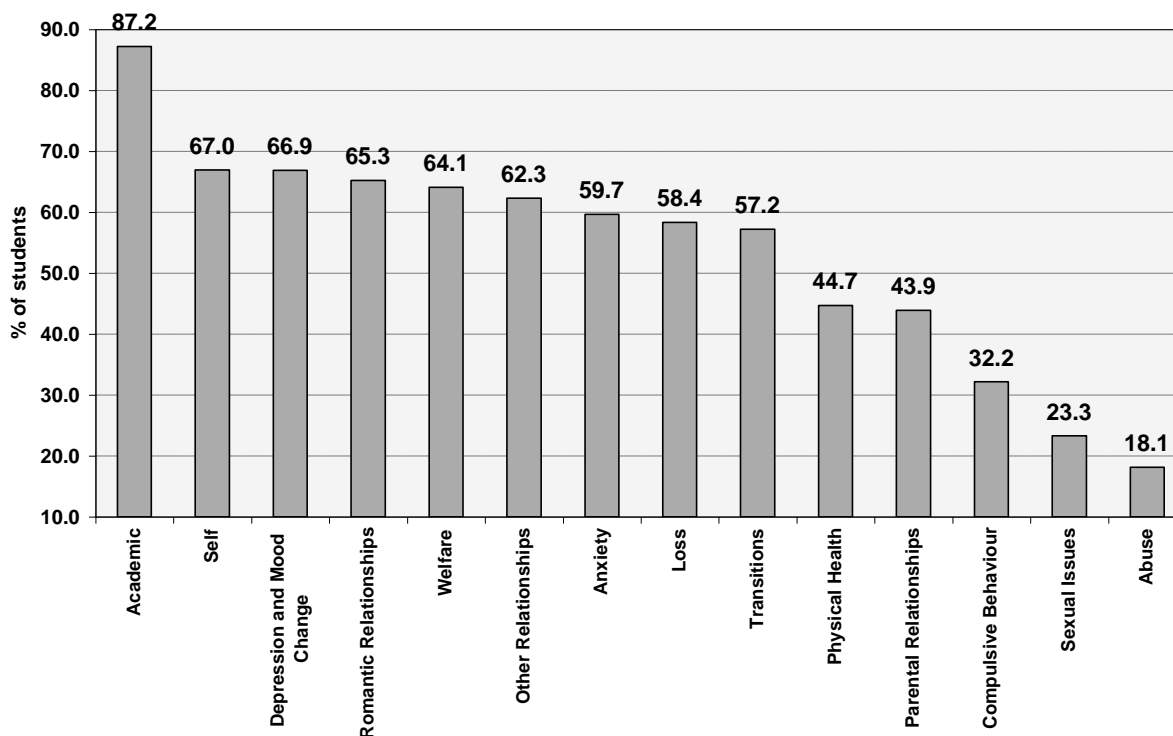


Figure 1. Prevalence of concerns

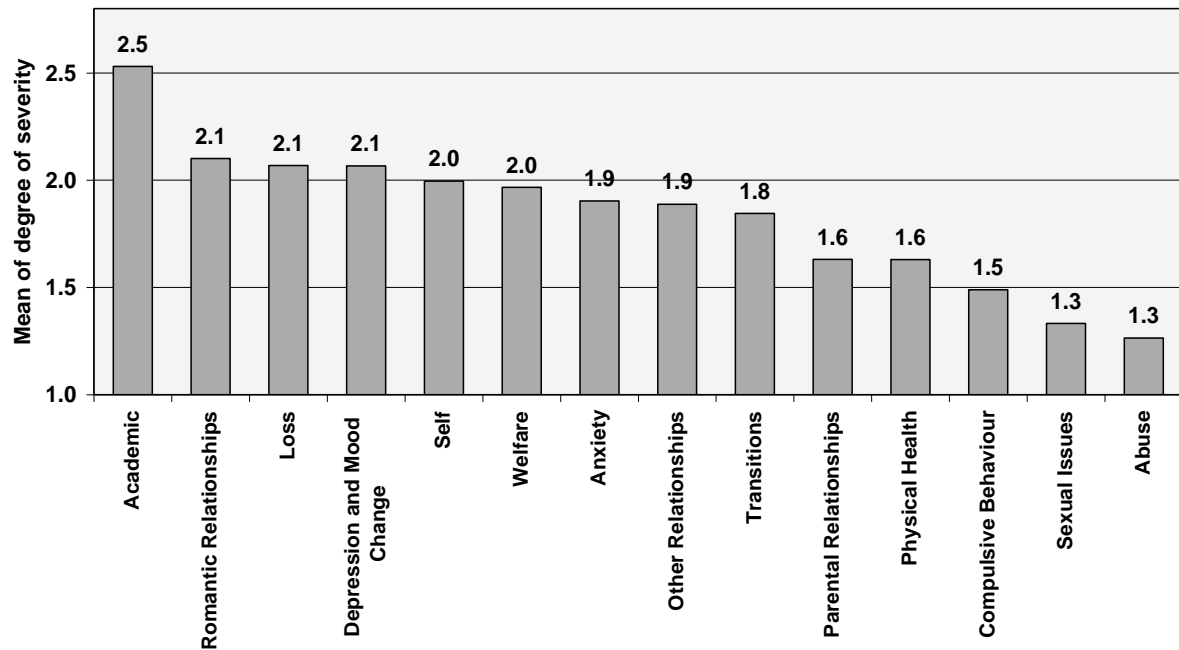


Figure 2. Degree of severity of concerns all sample

fourteen areas of concern listed, Academic-related problems were the most widely experienced by students (87.2%). In terms of the degree of severity of concerns, students generally rated slight to moderate degrees of concern for the problems listed. Compared to other areas of concern, academic-related problems and loss scored the highest degree of severity.

Thus, it is clearly shown that academic-related problems were the most widely experienced and the most serious concerns for students, compared to other areas. The results that academic problems were the most common problems echoed findings from the study by Cook et al. (1984) and Rudowich and Au (2001). However, this does not mean that problems in other categories can be ignored. It is possible that academic-related problems were the most frequently selected, as the students were more aware of the problems, and they were not aware of other problems which might underlie academic problems. Lago and Shipton (1994) argue that academic-related problems are complex and may be connected to other kinds of problems.

Depression and mood change and romantic relationships were also found to have high prevalence

and tend to achieve higher degree of severity compared to other areas of concern. Lago and Shipton (1994) assert that problems related to romantic relationships are commonly experienced by older adolescents or young adults. It is understandable as part of their developmental tasks is to choose a partner and explore the possibilities of establishing relationships (Santrock, 2002). Depression and mood change which was experienced by students may also be consequences of problems related to academic, romantic relationships, or loss.

Considering that problems related to academic and romantic relationships is the most widely experienced by university students and tend to be serious problems for them, it is recommended that university counsellors and other university staff explore and prepare programs which can help students deal with academic demands at the university level. Students might need to improve their study skills or manage themselves in order to cope with their required academic tasks. University counsellors are also recommended to hold programs which help students deal with various problems related to romantic relationships such as selecting partners, maintaining relationships and managing conflict with partner.

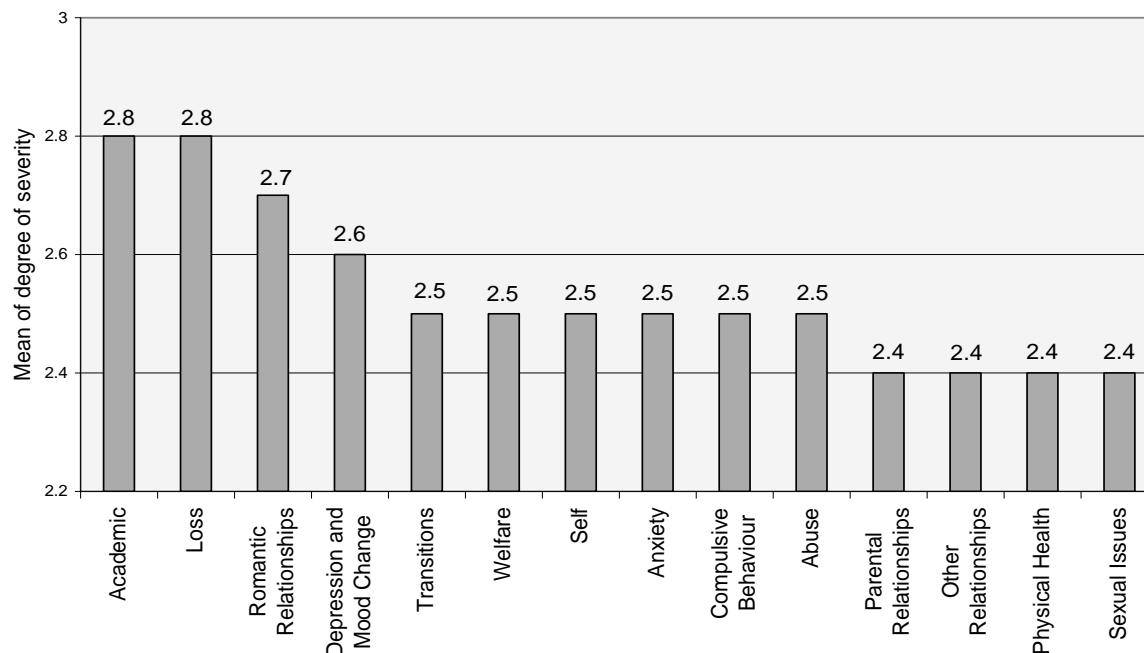


Figure 3. Degree of severity of concerns amongst students who showed any form of concern

The findings of the current study provide important information for university counsellors as well as other university staff. It is argued that information derived from the study will serve as feedback for university staff in evaluating academic curriculum and operation. The information will also help counsellors to anticipate problems experienced by students and prepare some programmes to equip students with knowledge and skills which may help them pass through their university career. However, findings of the current study did not give clear information regarding the exact and actual problems experienced by students in each problem area. Therefore, a further study which explores the actual situations and problems experienced by students is recommended.

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