

Stress Levels and Management Strategies among Distance Education Students

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Abstract

Stress is a universal element and persons from nearly every walk of life have to face it. The purpose of the study was to investigate the stress level among distance education students and the management strategies in coping with the stress. The study was delimited to University of Applied Management, a specialized distance education institution in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. One hundred (100) students who were selected based on simple random sampling technique from all the departments of the university were involved in the study. The questionnaire which was adapted to suit the study environment was pre-tested on some distance education students of the University. The results of the study showed that the prevalence of stress among distance education learners is high. Stress levels differ among gender and working status of students. Also the major source or cause of stress among student identified were excessive assignment, inadequate time to study, work, financial fears and family issues. Again on the effect of stress, the findings showed that anxiety, headache, poor sleep patterns and loss of appetite were the main effect of stress on students. The results indicated that the coping strategy mostly used by students is positive reinterpretation and growth while the least used strategy by students is seeking social support for instrumental reasons. It was recommended from the findings that the Counseling Unit of UAM should strengthen its services by having social support groups that consist of lecturers and students, so that supportive skills, such as talking and sharing, can be developed and students may then become very comfortable to let out their feelings.

Keywords: Stress, Stress levels, Stress management, Strategies, Distance Education.

Introduction

The Collins English Dictionary (2000) defines stress as, “emotional or physical strain or tension”. Stress can also be explained as the result of any emotional or physical, social, economic, or other factors that require are sponsor change. Robbins (2001) also defined stress as a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint or demand related to what he or she desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important. Similarly, Kreitner, Kinicki and Buelens (1999) opined that stress is an adaptive response, mediated by individual characteristics and psychological processes that places special physical and psychological demands upon a person. This definition can be broken down into three interrelated dimensions, namely; environmental demands, referred to stressors, an adaptive response, and Individual differences. The word stress was derived from a Latin word ‘stringere’ meaning to draw tight. From the view point of physical science, stress is evident in all materials when they are subjected to “force, pressure, strain or strong-front”. Every material steel, rock, or wood has its own limit upto which it can withstand stress without being damaged. Similarly, human beings can tolerate certain level of stress. Stress is highly individualistic in nature. Some people have high levels of tolerance for stress and thrive very well in the face of several stressors in the environment. In fact, some individuals will not perform well unless they experience a level of stress which activates and energizes them to put forth their best results.

The 21st century is being regarded as the period of incredible change in human history. Philosophers and scientists have given various names to this period. Stress has become the 21st century buzzword, from the high pervading corporate echelons bassinet to teaching infants in nursery we find this word liberally used. Stress is part of a modern life. Various events in life cause stress, starting with the birth of a child and enduring with the death of a dear one. Urbanization, industrialization and the increase scale of operations in society are some of the reasons for rising stress. It is an inevitable consequence of socio-economic complexity and to some extent, its stimulant as well. People experience stress as they can no longer have control over what happens in their lives. For example, when the telephone goes out of order, power is shut down, water supply is disrupted and even children performing poorly at school. We feel frustrated and then stressed. For every individual there is an optimum level of stress which he or she performs to full capacity, if the stress experience is below the optimum level, then the individual gets bored, the motivational level of work reaches a low point and it results in careless mistakes, for getting to do things and thinking of things other than work during work hours and also leads to absenteeism which may ultimately lead to too many conflicts with the supervisor or lead to increases in error, bad decision making and psychosomatic illnesses.

Stress is an all pervading modern phenomenon that takes a heavy toll on human life. Different situation and circumstances in our personal life and in our job produce stress. These can be divided into factors related to the organization and factors related to the person, which includes his experience and personality trait. Job related factors are work overload, time pressure, poor quality of supervision, insecure political climate, role ambiguity, difference between company values and employee values.

Most of the workers in the African continent especially Ghana have the desire to upgrade their knowledge and also see a rise in their income. In view of this, they opt to study on a part-time basis thereby enrolling in distance education. Distance education allows individuals the flexibility to take classes they would otherwise not be able to due to family, work commitments, or geographical constraints (NCES, 2011 in Hoang, 2015). However, distance education students are faced with numerous challenges as part of their schooling experience. Studying and at the same time working is a challenge and can create difficulty for students as they are facing demands from multifunction roles: work, family and study and these can

cause frustration and stressful situation to them (Nor & Saharudin, 2011). These students have to deal with the difficulty of stress to the point of defeat, which is generally derived from the related factors such as work stress, family stress and high self-efficacy. Other burdens that produce stress among distance learning students are examinations, project work, project paper, thesis, fear of academic failure, or any other related factors such as conflict with faculty, conflict with lecturers and communication failure with the administration (Rafidah, Azizah & Noraini, 2009; Kumar & Jejurkar, 2005). Research has shown that college students, including nontraditional graduate and distance learning students, are prone to stress (D'Zurilla & Sheedy, 1991 in Ramos & Borte, 2012).

Causes of Stress among Distance Education Students

Owusu-Mensah and Amoah (2015) investigated sources of stress among distance education students of the University of Education, Winneba and the strategies they employ to manage it. Quantitative methodology which made use of questionnaire was employed to collect data from 105 students at Accra study center, selected through stratified and simple random sampling techniques. The study found that the main sources of stress among the students were travelling over long distances to attend tutorials, financial challenges, and multiple responsibilities, coping with studies, lack of study skills and poor attitude of their tutors. The study has also shown that the students employ variety of stress management strategies some of which are regular exercises and being humorous. Based on these findings it was recommended among others that comprehensive workshop on stress and its management should be organized for the students at the start of every semester and also that periodic training should be organized for the tutors to equip them with the skills of handling distance education students effectively.

Further Taylor and Owusu-Banahene (2010) identify the sources and levels of stress among part-time students in a Ghanaian university. A total of 300 part-time business students were selected for this study. The Student Stress Survey Scale and the Overload Assessment Test were adopted and adapted as the main instrument for the study. It was found that "change in sleeping habits", "change in eating habit" and "combining job and schooling" were the three most common sources of stress reported by the students. Again, the students are reported that they perceived the part-time programme to be stressful.

According to Snyder and Tate (2010) cited in Ramos (2011), there is a number of stressors non-traditional students experience while attending graduate school that traditional students do not experience. These common stressors are employment demands, time constraints, financial problems, academic workload, and family obligations (Snyder & Tate, 2010). Thus, non-traditional graduate students must juggle different roles to succeed in graduate school. More and more students must effectively cope with the stressors of parenting, work, and finances in addition to coping with the rigorous stressors of graduate school (Snyder & Tate, 2010).

Bataineh (2013) conducted a study on academic stress among undergraduate students. The results showed that academic overloads, course awkward, inadequate time to study, workload every semester, exams awkward, low motivation, and high family expectations were some of the stress among students. It was also found that fear of failure was the major source of stress among undergraduate students. Another study by Ross et al. (1999) on stress among part-time students revealed that working was a source of stress to them. They explained that the working students have to combine their student role and work role which gives them limited time for their studies.

Macan et al. (1990) shared a similar view with the findings from Ross et al. (1999). The authors noted that working students enrolled in distance education often experience stress

because of the limited amount of time available to them and their jobs come with more responsibilities (Macan *et al.*, 1990). Furthermore, a study by Dunkel-Schetter and Lobel (1990) revealed that financial fears were a common cause of stress as working students cannot resign from their work in order to upgrade their education.

Evidence from literature suggests that academic sources of stress such as grades, assignments, examinations, long hours of study, and lack of free time have continued to exist during the past several years, these sources have increased, and new sources of stress have surfaced (Gigliotti, 2004; Lindop, 1999; Murphy & Archer, 1996; Robotham & Julian, 2006). Changing college student demographics, rising tuition, and balancing school, family, and work have created increased personal stressors for college students (Gigliotti, 2004; Nicholl & Timmons, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Vanhanen & Janhonen, 2000; Zeitlin-Ophir *et al.*, 2004).

It could be deduced from the literature that sources of stress among distance education which students in the traditional universities are unlikely to encounter includes travelling over long distance for tuition, employment demands, balancing school, family and work etc. The present study adds to this knowledge by identifying the sources/causes of stress among distance education students.

Effects of Stress on Distance Education Students

Rajasekar (2013) remarked that the human body's reaction to stress is natural. He cited an example that when a person is nervous, there is an increase in his or her pulse rate. According to Rajasekar (2013) further stated that stress affects a person's thinking ability and emotional balance which can result in heart attack or a nervous breakdown. Too much of stress can tell upon a person's health and if neglected, it can lead to serious health disorders at a later stage. McEwen (2005) indicated that the direct physiological effect of stress can be observed in biological damage that results from a prolonged stress response.

Feld (2011) opined that stress affects brain regions that are responsible for complex cognitive functions, and persistent stress can seriously harm neurons. Brain function, hormone production and immune responses are all vulnerable to the deleterious effects of stress on the brain (Sapolsky, 1996; McEwen, 2005). Feld (2011) again noted that the effects of stress on the brain are transmitted to the rest of the body through the activation of two pathways. The rapid pathway is the sympathetic neuroendocrine signal transduction pathway, which releases noradrenaline from nerve endings and adrenaline into the bloodstream. The release of these hormones increases arousal and energy and inhibit functions not immediately necessary for survival, such as digestion and growth. The slower pathway involves the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which releases cortisol into the blood. Elevated levels of cortisol have pervasive metabolic and psychological effects.

Lund *et al.* (2010) posited that academic stress is likely to contribute to poor sleep. They explained many students consistently fail to sleep because of the excess of homework and stress. McEwen (2006), however, noted that the consequences associated with too little sleep are cognitive impairment, interpersonal difficulty, and reciprocally higher stress. Additionally, stress is associated with increased prevalence of harmful behaviours, such as drinking, drug abuse, or smoking (Field & Powell, 2007). Studies have found an association between stress and damage to psychological and emotional well-being (Feld, 2011). For example, stress is a significant risk factor for many mental health disorders, such as anxiety and depression (Jaser *et al.*, 2005; Brooks *et al.*, 2002). Liselotte *et al.* (2005) further pointed out that chronic and excessive stress leads to physical, emotional, mental health problems, reduced self-esteem, affects students' academic achievement, personal and professional development.

Herbert and Wetmore (2002) identified some short-term and long term effect of stress. The short-term effect of stress includes: mind becoming alert-ready to act or react, dilated pupils, dry mouth, tension in neck and shoulders, faster breathing, faster heart rate, high blood pressure, sweaty palms, feeling sick or having a 'butterfly' stomach, increased need to urinate and constipation or diarrhoea. The long term effect includes: headaches, dizziness, blurred vision, ulcers, hyperventilation, asthma, palpitations, high blood pressure, heart and artery disorders, sweating more than normal, high blood sugar, nervous indigestion, disturbed sleep patterns, difficulty swallowing, neck and back problems, bowel disorders, rashes, allergies and sexual difficulties.

Stoppler (2007) is of the opinion that manifestation of excess or poorly managed stress can be extremely varied and that, while it has been reported by many people that stress brings about headaches, sleep disturbances, feelings of anxiety or tension, anger or concentration problems, others complain of depression, lack of interest in food, and increased appetite, among others. Stoppler (2007) further noted that in severe cases individuals experience loss of interest in normal activities. According to Riches (1994), the effect of stress could be internal or external. Internal effect includes experiencing headaches, being moody and feeling sick, while external symptoms may involve throwing things, shaking with rage, and weeping. He explained that it was possible for many people to experience different levels of stress even under the same conditions.

Coping With Stress among Distance Education

Anspaugh et al. (2003) argued that there are various ways in which people react or respond to stress. According to Anspaugh and colleagues, coping with stress means attempting to manage or deal with stress and coping does not necessarily result in success. Amirkhan et al. (2007) agreed to the assertion that coping does not necessarily imply success with dealing with the stressor.

Myers (2005) also defined coping strategies as how a person react or respond toward a stressor. According to Folkman and Lazarus (1984), coping strategies can be grouped into two general types; problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. They explained that problem-focused coping is aimed at problem solving or doing something to alter the source of stress while emotion-focused coping is aimed at reducing or managing the emotional distress that is associated with the situation. They further explained that even though most stressors elicit both types of coping, problem-focused coping tends to predominate when individuals feel that something constructive could be done while emotion-focused coping tends to predominate when people feel that the stressor must be endured.

Anspaugh et al. (2003) suggested that successful coping includes becoming aware of incidents and situations that one perceives as being stressful, and recognizing stressors means being aware of how your body responds to stress. A report indicated that students tend to adopt a number of harmful coping behaviours such as drinking or drug abuse (Field & Powell, 2007; Suldo et al, 2008). Though this approach can be used as a coping mechanism, it can later increase the level of stress. Feld (2011) stated that the type of coping behaviour a student employs largely depends on the environment in which the student is experiencing the stressor, the type of stressor the student is reacting to, or individual characteristics of the student that cause them to respond to that certain stressor in a particular way.

Robbins (2004) also suggested two approaches in managing stress; the individual and organisational approaches. According to Robbins, individual approach include exercise such as walking, riding bicycles, attending aerobic classes, practicing yoga, jogging, swimming, playing tennis and swatting squash balls. This helps in reducing student's heart rates, blood pressure and other physiological indicators of stress. Again, he stated that a person can

manage stress through relaxation such as meditation, hypnosis and biofeedback. Relaxation also helps to reduce tension. He explained that when a person relaxes, the response for stress is reserved in the human mind body system. He further stated that one way of reducing individual stress is to open up. That is confiding in others though it might not be easy to discuss difficult personal traumas with others. Also honest entries on a regular basis in a diary may be helpful.

Ramos (2011) explored the differences in perceived stress and coping styles among non-traditional graduate students in both on-campus and distance-learning programs. The study employed a quantitative causal-comparative design that involved collecting survey data. The sample consisted of 36 non-traditional graduate students who enrolled in distance learning classes along with 36 non-traditional students attending traditional on-campus courses in a graduate program. For statistical analyses, t-test and multiple linear regressions were conducted to simultaneously assess the effects of group membership and all demographic variables on each of the dependent variables (stress level and coping style). An alpha level of .05 was used to test statistical significance. Overall, no significant difference between the coping styles and the perceived stress levels of non-traditional graduate students who enrolled in distance-learning and on-campus programs was observed.

Wiesenberg (2001 cited in Hoang, 2015) examined how graduate students coped with stresses of distance learning over the course of three to five years in which they were enrolled in their Master of Continuing Education program. In total, fifteen students completed three sets of measures, including the Mattering Scale for Adult Students in Higher Education, the Transition Coping Questionnaire, and demographic data was collected. It was found that as students transitioned into their programs, they coped with stressful and unfamiliar situations through using emotional focused strategies and reported that they felt their personal resources were low and that they did not have as strong of a support system as they desired (Wiesenberg, 2001 cited in Hoang, 2015).

A study by Yusoff (2010) revealed that the top five coping strategies that students frequently used were religion, active coping, positive reinterpretation, planning, and use of instrumental support. Yusoff however noted that the main coping strategy was religion. Skinner et al. (2003) divided the most commonly reported strategies into three categories: Problem solving (strategies aimed at eliminating the source of stress), Avoidance (managing stress by withdrawal), and seeking social support (minimizing stress through attempts to maximize human contact).

Two studies conducted in an IB College Preparatory environment identified some coping strategies students display (Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010; Suldo et al. 2008). The study reported that the most consistent coping strategy adopted by the students were sleeping and taking deliberate steps to address problems. The study, however, found that students do not often adopt the following coping strategies: seeking professional help, seeking spiritual support and venting feelings in response to stress. From the study students, reported other coping strategies which include actively managing time to allow for a balanced life, fixating on problems without taking action, sharing assignments with peers, and renegotiating schedules and deadlines.

In light of the literature, the purpose of this study is to investigate the level of stress and the management strategies implemented by distance education students of University of Applied Management (UAM) who are currently working and also have families to take care of at the same time.

Statement of the Problem

Everyone is at the same risk of stress for the simple reason that stress is ‘anemotion’. Hattingh (2003, p.143) noted that “emotions represent are lease of energy that leads to actions or reactions”. Generally, students at all levels experience some forms of stress depending on their academic work load and environment. Distance education students of UAM, frequently complain about being stressed out at their companies and school and having to work for longer hours at their company and then attend lectures on weekend. They also complain about stress created in trying to balance work and school life.

Many researchers have indicated that stress linked with academic activities has been simultaneously related to various negative outcomes such as poor health, depression, and poor academic performance (Pietromonaco, Manis & Lane, 1986; Vaez & Laflamme, 2008). It is also learnt that too much stress leads to the consequences of physical and mental problems (Shirom, 1986). Even, various studies found association between stress level and psychological conditions of students (Nor & Saharudin, 2011). Students usually show stress induced behaviours in the middle of the semester when academic work coupled with other demands cause them to break down physically and emotionally.

It is in this view that this study is being conducted to identify the stress levels and management strategies adopted by distance education students in coping with stress.

Purpose of the Study

The main objective is to examine the stress level of distance education students and their coping strategies. The specific objectives are to:

1. Assess the stress levels in distance education students.
2. Identify causes of stress among distance education students.
3. Examine the effect of stress on distance education students.
4. Ascertain the coping strategies employed by distance education student in handling stressful situations.
5. Ascertain gender dimension on stress level of distance education students.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study:

1. What is the level of stress among distance education students?
2. What are the causes of stress among distance education students?
3. How does stress affect distance education students?
4. What are the coping strategies employed by distance education students to handle stressful situations?
5. How does stress affect different gender?

Research Hypothesis

H1: There is a significant difference between the stress level and gender of distance education students.

H2: There is a significant difference between the stress level and working status of distance education students.

Methodology

Research Design

Survey research design was employed for the study. Questionnaire was the main instrument used to collect the data. The questionnaires consisted of both open and closed ended questions. The study focused on only quantitative techniques (that is statistics and quantifiable information) in achieving its set objectives.

Population, Sample and Sampling Procedure

The population of the study consisted of all distance education students. For convenience purposes, the target population was all distance education students of University of Applied Management in the Greater Accra Region. The student population is approximately 500 (University Registrar). A *sample size of 100* was randomly selected from the students' population using the *simple random sampling technique*.

Instrument

Questionnaire was the main instrument for the data collection. The questionnaires were in four sections. The first section dealt with the demographic variables of the study. The second section, which was designed on a 5 point Likert scale, focused on the causes of stress, the third section elicits responses on the effect of stress and the last section focused on the strategies used by respondents to cope with stress. The third and fourth sections were designed on a four-point likert scale.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were administered to the selected students in their lecture halls, after permission has been sought from the University authorities. The researchers ensured that the phone numbers and emails of selected students were taken to ensure appropriate follow up. Such follow-up ensured that the questionnaires were returned on time, though it must be admitted this was nearly impossible as the students failed to return the questionnaires on time and hence delayed the work greatly.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed quantitatively using descriptive and inferential statistics. Research questions were analysed using descriptive statistics tools such as mean score, standard deviations. The hypothesis was tested using the independent t-test. The results were finally presented using graphs and tables.

Results and Discussion

Gender Distribution of Respondents

The outcome of the study revealed that 54.7% of the respondents were female and 45.3% were male. From the figure above it can be deduced that more female are pursuing higher education through the distance learning programme than men. It also shows that there is fair representation of gender in the study conducted.

Age of Respondents

Table 4.1: Age of Respondents

Age	Frequency	Percent
20-25	41	54.7
26-30	22	29.3
31-35	6	8.0
36 years and above	6	8.0
Total	75	100.0

Source: Fieldwork (2014)

The age of the respondents ranged between twenty (20) and thirty-six years (36) above as represented in the table 4.1. From the table majority of the respondents (representing 54.7 percent) are in the age category of 20-25 years. 22(29.3%) are between the ages of 26-30 years, 6(8%) are between the ages of 31-35 years and 6(8%) are above 36 years.

Programme Offered by Respondents

Table 4.2: Programmes offered by respondents

Programme	Frequency	Percent
BA	25	33.3
MBA	20	26.7
MA	15	20.0
Pre-MBA	15	20.0
Total	75	100.0

Source: Fieldwork (2014)

From Table 4.2, 25(33.3%) were BA students, 20(26.7%) were MBA students, 15(20%) were MA students and 15(20%) were pre-MBA students. The result suggests that there is a fair representation of distance education students in the study.

Working Status of Respondents

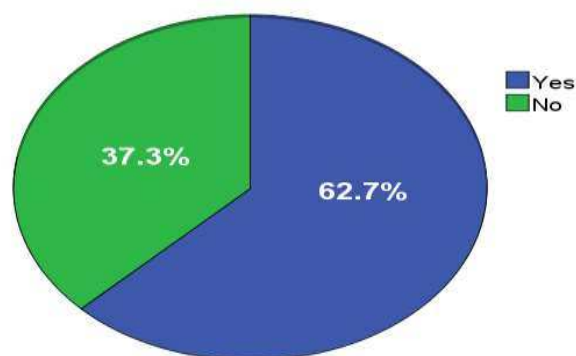


Figure 4.2: Working Status of Respondents

Source: Fieldwork (2014)

The analysis on the working status of respondents indicated that 62.7% percent of the respondents work at the same time schooling while 37.3% of the respondents do not work. Based on the results obtained it is clear that majority of the students are workers which means that they are highly prone to stress compared to students who are not working.

Analysis of Research Questions

Research Question 1: Perceived Stress Level among Respondents

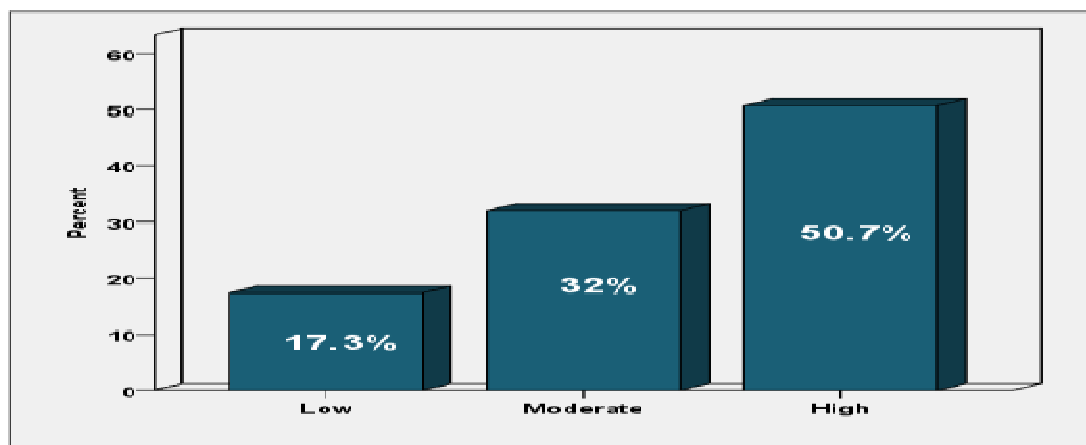


Figure 4.3: Stress Level among Respondents

From Figure 4.2, majority of the students (50.7%) indicated that their stress level is high. Also, 32% of the respondents indicated that their stress level is moderate and 17.3% of the respondents indicated that their stress level is low. The result shows a tendency of high stress among students. These findings support the report by Pierceall and Keim (2007) that about 75% to 80% of college students are severely stressed and 10% to 12% are moderately stressed. This finding suggests a sense of growing pressure among distance education students hence active measure should be taken as soon as possible to minimize the potential impacts of distress on the students' wellbeing.

Research Question 2: Causes of Stress Levels

Statement	Not at all stressful	Rarely stress	Sometime s stressful	Fairly stressful	Extremely stressful	Mean	Rank
1. Final grades	16(21.3%)	7(9.3%)	27(36%)	11(14.7%)	14(18.7%)	3.00	9
2. Excessive assignment	7(9.3%)	5(6.7%)	23(30.7%)	17(22.7%)	23(30.7%)	3.59	1
3. Term papers	14(18.7%)	16(21.3%)	26(34.7%)	10(13.3%)	9(12%)	2.79	14
4. Examinations	9(12%)	16(21.3%)	25(33.3%)	15(20%)	10(13.3%)	3.01	8
5. Studying for examinations	6(8%)	23(30.7%)	15(20%)	18(24%)	13(17.3%)	3.12	6
6. Waiting for graded tests	26(34.7%)	19(25.3%)	14(18.7%)	12(16%)	4(5.3%)	2.32	17
7. Fast-paced lectures	9(12%)	20(12%)	20(12%)	15(20%)	11(14.7%)	2.99	11
8. Incomplete assignments	20(26.7%)	11(14.7%)	17(22.7%)	15(20%)	12(16%)	2.84	13
9. Unclear assignments	11(14.7%)	18(24%)	16(21.3%)	11(14.7%)	19(25.3%)	3.12	6
10. Unprepared	12(16%)	14(18.7%)	25(33.3%)	16(21.3%)	8(10.7%)	2.92	12

to respond to							
11. Unannounced quizzes	28(37.3%)	13(17.3%)	10(13.3%)	10(13.3%)	14(18.7%)	2.59	16
12. Missing class	11(14.7%)	6(8%)	31(41.3%)	14(18.7%)	13(17.3%)	3.16	5
13. Arriving late for class	17(22.7%)	18(24%)	23(30.7%)	12(16%)	5(6.7%)	2.60	15
14. Course awkward	12(16%)	12(16%)	21(28%)	24(32%)	6(8%)	3.00	9
15. Inadequate time to study	7(9.3%)	9(12%)	20(26.7%)	18(24%)	21(28%)	3.49	2
16. Working	11(14.7%)	11(14.7%)	14(18.7%)	12(16%)	27(36%)	3.47	3
17. Financial fears	13(17.3%)	11(14.7%)	12(16%)	14(18.7%)	25(33.3%)	3.36	4

Source: Fieldwork (2014)

Table 4.5 shows the sources or causes of stress among distance education students. From the table it is clear that excessive assignment is the major source or cause of stress among students with mean = 3.59, closely followed by inadequate time to study with mean = 3.49, work with mean = 3.47, financial and fears with mean = 3.36. Also the respondents indicated that missing class with mean = 3.16, unclear assignment with mean = 3.12, studying for examination with mean = 3.12, examinations with mean = 3.01, final grades = 3.00, course awkward with mean = 3.00, fast paced lectures with mean = 2.99, unprepared to respond to questions with mean = 2.92, incomplete assignment with mean = 2.84, term papers with mean = 2.79, arriving late for class with mean = 2.60 and announced quiz with mean = 2.59 are some of the sources or causes of stress among students. On the other hand, from the table the least source or causes of stress among student is waiting for graded tests with mean = 2.32.

It can be deduced from the result that the major source or cause of stress among distance education student is excessive assignment. However, the result also shows that there are differences in stress among students and thus most of the students are experiencing stress in their daily academic activities differently.

When respondents were asked what other factors causes in their lives, 26(34.7%) of them said combining family issues with studies and 21(28%) of them said failing to meet deadline for a project or assignment. The findings on the major source of stress which is excessive assignment is in close agreement with Ongori and Agolla (2008), who reported that (81%) of the students agreed with the statement that academic work load is stressful. Also it is consistent with earlier findings by (Fair brother & Warn, 2003; Stevenson & Harper, 2006). With challenging assignments, difficult tests and other academic obstacles, many students find themselves studying long, hard hours.

Furthermore, regarding the findings on financial fears is consistent with the findings of Fair brother & Warn, (2003) where they reported that financial fears lead to failure in academic pursuits. It also confirms the position of Dunkel-Schetter and Lobel (1990) whose study revealed that financial fears is a common cause of stress as working students cannot resign from their work in order to upgrade their education. Again the finding of inadequate time to study emphasize the study of Bataineh (2013) who found that inadequate time to study is a source of stress among student. This is particularly the case for students especially those who working as they have to perform their office duties at the same time attend lecture and find sometime to study.

The study further revealed that a family issue is another cause of stress among students. This

finding confirms the findings of Nor and Saharudin (2011) who found that family issues is a major source of stress. According to them family issues includes money constraint, having too much debts and bills to pay, family members' health problems, insufficient time with family, and burden with household tasks. It has been noted that many people are distressed by efforts to juggle work and family demands, such as caring for sick or aging parents or children (Wiersma & Berg, 1991; Home, 1998; Young, 2007). It is obvious that working will be one of the sources of stress since students have to combine their duties at the office with their studies and this gives them limited time to study. This study finding is congruent with the study of Ross *et al.* (1999) where they found that working was a source of stress among part-time students.

Research Question 3: Effect of Stress

Table 4.6: Effect of Stress among Students

Items	Never	Sometime	Often	Always	Mean	Rank
1. Headache	17(22.7%)	34(45.3%)	15(20%)	9(12%)	2.21	2
2. Blood Pressure	51(68%)	21(28%)	3(4%)	--	1.36	13
3. Poor sleep patterns	15(20%)	37(49.3%)	17(22.7%)	6(8%)	2.19	3
4. Anxiety	14(18.7%)	36(48%)	16(21.3%)	9(12%)	2.27	1
5. Depression	24(32%)	35(46.7%)	12(16%)	4(5.3%)	1.96	5
6. Heart disease	64(85.3%)	8(10.7%)	3(4%)	--	1.19	15
7. Constipation	44(58.7%)	21(28%)	9(12%)	1(1.3%)	1.56	11
8. Back pains	22(29.3%)	40(53.3%)	12(16%)	1(1.3%)	1.89	7
9. Neck pains	20(26.7%)	41(54.7%)	14(18.7%)	--	1.92	6
10. Loss of appetite	29(38.7%)	23(30.7%)	12(16%)	11(14.7%)	2.07	4
11. Low self confidence	30(40%)	38(50.7%)	2(2.7%)	5(6.7%)	1.76	8
12. Skin rushes	57(76%)	9(12%)	8(10.7%)	1(1.3%)	1.37	12
13. Erratic moods	44(58.7%)	20(26.7%)	4(5.3%)	7(9.3%)	1.65	9
14. Indigestion	41(54.7%)	27(36%)	4(5.3%)	3(4%)	1.59	10
15. Hair fall	70(93.3%)	4(5.3%)	--	1(1.3%)	1.09	17
16. Drinking	56(74.7%)	18(24%)	1(1.3%)	--	1.27	14
17. Drug abuse	69(92%)	5(6.7%)	1(1.3%)	--	1.11	16

The table 4.6 presents the responses on the effect of stress among distance education students. The result obtained indicate that anxiety is the major effect of stress among distance education students and it recorded a mean = 2.27. Also respondents indicated that headache with mean = 2.21, poor sleep patterns with mean = 2.19, loss of appetite with mean = 2.07, depression with mean = 1.96, neck pains with mean = 1.92, back pains with mean = 1.89, low self-confidence with mean = 1.76, erratic moods with mean = 1.65, indigestion with mean = 1.59, constipation with mean = 1.56, skin rushes with mean = 1.37, blood pressure with mean = 1.36, drinking with mean = 1.27, heart disease with mean = 1.19, drug abuse with mean = 1.17 and hair fall with mean = 1.09 are some of the effect of stress among students. It can be deduced from the result that the major effect of stress among distance education students are

anxiety, headache, poor sleep patterns and loss of appetite. However, it was also revealed that heart disease, drug abuse and hair fall were the least effect of stress among students.

This finding is consistent with the findings of Harajyoti et al. (2012). Their study revealed that headache, anxiety, loss of appetite and poor sleep patterns were the main effect of stress among students. However, their findings suggested that were more predominately observed among females. Headache and anxiety were more predominately observed among females while poor sleeping patterns and loss of appetite was found to be more often in males. The result clearly points out that the main effect of stress among the student is anxiety. This finding is congruent with the findings by Herbert and Wetmore (2002) where they reported that anxiety is long term effect of stress among students. Blumenthal (2003) also found that anxiety is a subjective effect of stress.

The finding on poor sleep pattern is also consistent with study of Lund et al. (2010) where they found that academic stress is likely to contribute to poor sleep. Students consistently fail to sleep because of the excess assignment and especially during examination. McEwen (2006) rightly reported that the consequences associated with too little sleep are cognitive impairment, interpersonal difficulty, and reciprocally higher stress.

It was however refreshing to note that drinking of alcohol and drug abuse was the least effect of stress among students. This finding is in contrast with the findings of Field and Powell, (2007) who indicated stress is associated with increased prevalence of harmful behaviors, such as drinking, drug abuse, or smoking.

Table 4.7 shows mean ratings of coping strategies from never, seldom, sometimes, often and always.

Research Question 4: Coping Strategies

Table 4.7: Mean Ratings of Coping Strategies

Mean Rating Range	Usage/Interpretation
0.0-0.9	Never
1.0-1.9	Seldom
2.0-2.9	Sometimes
3.0-3.9	Often
4.0-5.0	Always

The Table 4.8 shows that positive reinterpretation and growth recorded the highest mean of 3.59 while the lowest mean of 2.32 for seeking social support for instrumental reasons. Respondents indicated that active coping with mean 3.49, positive reinterpretation with mean 3.59, acceptance with mean 3.47, denial with mean 3.12, restrain coping with mean 3.16, mental disengagement with mean 3.36 and religion with mean 3.00 are the strategies they often use in coping with stress. Likewise, respondents indicated that planning with mean 2.60, self-distraction, humor with mean 2.79, Seeking social support for emotional reasons with mean 2.59 and seeking social support for instrumental reasons with mean 2.32 are the strategies they sometimes adopting coping with stress. It can be inferred from the result that the most used strategy by students in coping with stress is positive reinterpretation and growth while the least used strategy by students is seeking social support for instrumental reasons.

Table 4.8: Coping Strategies of Stress among Students

Coping Strategies	Mean	Rank
1. Active coping	3.49	2
2. Positive reinterpretation and growth	3.59	1
3. Planning	2.60	9
4. Self-distraction	2.79	7
5. Acceptance	3.47	3
6. Humor	2.79	7
7. Denial	3.12	5
8. Seeking social support for emotional reasons	2.59	10
9. Restrain coping	3.16	4
10. Seeking social support for instrumental reasons	2.32	11
11. Mental disengagement	3.36	4
12. Religion	3.00	6

Source: Fieldwork (2014)

The result implies that distance education students mostly manage their stress by looking for something good in the problem at hand, trying to set the stressful situation in a different light to make it seem more positive, drawing some lessons from the stressful experience and trying to grow as a person as a result of the experience. This supports the view of Low (1997) that students mostly solve their problems by creating a positive meaning in terms of personal growth. To Low, instead of facing the stressful situation with a negative attitude, students feel that the problems they face could change them in a good way.

The findings on the coping strategies often used by students includes active coping, positive reinterpretation, acceptance, denial, restrain coping, mental disengagement, and religion, and all these in line with the findings from other studies. Esia-Donkoh, Yelkpien and Esia-Donkoh (2011) in their study found that active coping and positive reinterpretation and growth were the two most predominant coping strategies adopted by students. Similarly, Yusoff (2010) found that the most frequent coping strategies used by students are religion, positive reinterpretation and growth and active coping. It was, however, noted that despite the positive coping strategies used by the students, the stress prevalence is still higher from the students. Perhaps, it will be interesting to explore on this matter further in the future studies.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1: Gender and Stress Level among Respondents

Table 4.9: Summary oft-test for Gender and Stress Levels

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	Mean difference	t-test	p-value
Stress level of respondents	Male	34	2.53	0.662	0.359	2.082	0.041
	Female	41	2.17	0.803			

Table 4.9 show same an difference of 0.359, t-value of 2.082 and p-value = 0.0410. Since the p-value is less than $\alpha = 0.05$, we reject the null hypothesis which state that there is no significant difference between the stress level and gender of students and conclude that there is a significant difference between the stress level and gender of students. This implies that

the level of stress among male differ from that of females. This finding supports the report of Harajyoti et al. (2012), who indicated that stress levels are different among students and also difference between male and female. Also the finding supports the research findings of Cheng (2012) whose findings suggested that male students feel stronger stress from family factor than female ones. Further it is consistent with the findings of Amponsah and Owolabi (2011) that female students had significantly higher perceived stress levels than their male counterparts.

This is in line with Nolen-Hoeksema (1990) report that women face a number of chronic burdens in everyday life as a result of their social status and roles relative to men and these strains could contribute to their higher rates of anxiety. Hence culture and society may shape what events are perceived as stressful, what coping strategies are acceptable to use in a particular society.

Other Findings Observed

Working Status and Stress Level among Respondents

Table 4.4: Summary of t-test for Working Status and Stress Levels

	Are you presently working and schooling at the same time?	N	Mean	SD	Mean difference	t-test	p-value
Stress level of respondents	Yes	47	2.45	0.775	0.304	1.689	0.000
	No	28	2.14	0.705			

The independent t-test was used to determine whether a significant difference exists between the mean stress of students working and those who are not working. The table below shows a mean difference of 0.304. Since the p-value = 0.000 is less than $\alpha = 0.05$, we reject the null hypothesis which state that there is no significant difference between the stress level and working status of students and conclude that there is a significant difference between the stress level and working status of students. This implies that students who are working are likely to have high stress level compared to students who are not working. This finding is consistent with other findings like Cochran (2001), Lambert (1993), and Patricia (1987). For instance, Lambert (1993) found that part-time students' jobs play a role to more stress to their students' function which required long, unpredictable, or inflexible hours, demand exclusive devotion and are intolerant of interference from other roles. Furthermore, Patricia (1987) findings also support that stressful events at work such as adjusting to a new job, poor job-person fit, or inability to perform satisfactorily can produce fatigue, worry, or frustration that can distract from pursuing a satisfying on-work life while Cochran (2001) examined that working students are exposed to more occurrence of stress.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the level of stress and the management strategies implemented by distance education students. It could be concluded from the findings that the stress level among distance education students is high and the stress level varies with respect to gender and working status of students. Also the major cause of stress among distance education students is excessive assignment. Further the major effect of stress among distance education students is anxiety. Finally, out of the eleven (11) coping strategies the most

predominant strategy adopted by distance education students was positive reinterpretation and growth.

Recommendations

The researcher made the following recommendations based on the research objectives findings and analysis in line with others who have written on the same research.

1. It is recommended that the Counseling Centers of distance education institutions should put in place improved services such as social support groups made up of lecturers, administrators and students. This will help to reduce if not eliminate the stress level among distance education students.
2. To further mitigate stress among distance education students, the issue of workload thus excessive assignment should be tackled.
3. It is also recommended that employers should create a working environment which aims at reducing the stressful nature of the work. This can be achieved through increasing employees' autonomy in their job, increase or decrease personal responsibility, allow more flexible working hours—by the used of flexi—time, job rotation and transfers, provide better working conditions, including social/fitness clubs etc., and institute a counseling service.

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