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Stress and Academic Life: Experiences and Stressors During the First Year of University in Lima, Peru

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Abstract

Background: University students are exposed to multiple stressors that increase the risk of poor academic adjustment and higher education dropout. However, previous research has largely examined academic stressors in isolation, providing only a partial understanding of the complex challenges students face during the transition to university. Integrating academic, personal, and social stressors may offer a more comprehensive perspective on this critical period.

Objective: This study aimed to identify the academic, personal, and social stressors experienced by first-year university students in Lima, Peru, as part of a broader doctoral research project on university adjustment and dropout intention.

Methods: A qualitative design was employed. Twenty-one university students (18–25 years old) from diverse sociodemographic backgrounds and academic disciplines participated in semi-structured interviews validated by a panel of experts. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using Atlas.ti version 7.5.4.

Results: The analysis revealed that academic performance, time management, and forming and maintaining friendships were the most salient stressors during the first year of university. Beyond academic demands, participants described personal and social challenges that shaped their adaptation to university life, highlighting the interrelated nature of these stressors.

Conclusions: By adopting a multidimensional perspective, this study extends the predominantly academic focus of previous research and provides a more holistic understanding of the stressors influencing students' early university experiences. These findings contribute to the development of a comprehensive measure of first-year stressors and offer evidence to inform institutional strategies aimed at promoting student well-being, successful adjustment, and dropout prevention.

Keywords: Academic stressors, personal stressors, social stressors, higher education, university life, first-year university students