

Academic Stressors and the Mediating Role of Self-Efficacy: A Quantitative Study of State Universities in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Previous studies indicate that a considerable number of students frequently experience academic stress arising from various stressors during their undergraduate studies. Consequently, using 359 respondents, this quantitative study examines key stressors that lead to academic stress among undergraduates in three selected state universities in Sri Lanka. It further assesses the mediating effect of self-efficacy on the impact of stressors on perceived academic stress. Results reveal that bullying and social discrimination, pressure to excel academically, and heavy academic workload significantly impact on academic stress. Among these independent variables of the study, academic workload emerged as the strongest predictor of undergraduates' academic stress. Moreover, findings revealed that self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable, academic stress. When undergraduates encounter these stressors, their confidence and belief in their abilities and capabilities to overcome stressors tend to decline. Accordingly, universities are required to implement necessary policies and strategies to reduce academic workloads, such as limiting the number of continuous teaching weeks, introducing a central workload management system, and enforcing zero-tolerance policies against bullying and discrimination.

Keywords: *Academic stress, Self-efficacy, Stressors, State universities, Undergraduates*

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Introduction

Universities are among the most influential institutions responsible for enhancing a nation's intellectual capacity and the quality of its human resources. As primary stakeholders, ensuring students' well-being is essential to empower them to compete successfully in the dynamic industrial environment. In addition to acquiring knowledge, students must also develop essential skills and abilities (Deng et al., 2022). Contemporary studies indicate that university students frequently experience pressure from various sources during their academic journey, leading to significant stress (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2022; Limone & Toto, 2022; Yousif et al., 2022). Upon entering university, students face multiple scheduled tasks, the challenge of adapting to new social and academic environments, and increased academic demands compared to their previous education, including different work rhythms, schedules, and academic expectations (Olivera et al., 2023). These factors create considerable pressure, requiring students to balance academic and personal responsibilities while adapting to their new educational environment. Therefore, examining the factors influencing academic stress is essential for mitigating stress's negative effects and enhancing students' ability to manage academic pressures (Aina & Wijayati, 2019; Lau et al., 2021). Understanding academic stressors can help reduce their impact on academic performance and overall physical and psychological well-being (Freire et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2019; Ruus et al., 2007). Consequently, this research aims to identify the key factors contributing to academic stress among management undergraduates.

In this study, researchers selected three management faculties of three leading universities in Sri Lanka where English is the medium of instruction. The curricula and study programs of these management faculties are designed to develop skilled professionals, producing future managers and entrepreneurs equipped for both local and global markets. Students specialize in

various management disciplines, including Accounting, Finance, Marketing, Operations, Human Resource Management, Information Technology, and Economics, as well as general management, ensuring versatility across different business sectors. This study, focusing on the three leading universities in Sri Lanka, provides valuable insights into how management undergraduates from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds experience and manage academic stress. Given that these universities cater to large student populations with varying first languages but share English as the medium of instruction, the study sheds light on both common and unique stressors students face. By examining academic stressors—bullying and discrimination, pressure to excel academically, and high academic workload—this research contributes to enhancing student well-being, improving academic performance, and informing university administrators and policymakers about necessary interventions. Accordingly, the objectives of this study are:

- To examine the impact of bullying and social discrimination, pressure to excel academically, and heavy academic workload on perceived academic stress among undergraduates in three selected universities in Sri Lanka.
- To assess the mediating effect of self-efficacy on the impact of stressors on perceived academic stress.

Although extensive research has examined academic stressors such as workload, performance pressure, and discrimination (Limone & Toto, 2021; Paudel et al., 2024), limited empirical evidence exists on how these factors operate within Sri Lankan management faculties where English is the medium of instruction. Prior studies highlight the influence of cultural, psychosocial, and institutional contexts on stress (Olivera et al., 2023), yet little is known about how multilingual student populations in leading Sri Lankan universities experience these stressors. Moreover, despite evidence that self-efficacy buffers stress (Gao, 2023), its

mediating role remains underexplored in South Asian higher-education settings.

Literature Review

Academic stress and stressors

Stress, in broad terms, refers to the pressure individuals experience in their lives (Mohajan, 2012). It encompasses physical, emotional, and mental responses and can arise from one's work environment, thoughts, or bodily reactions. Stress occurs when the body responds to situations that evoke fear, irritation, confusion, danger, or excitement, placing demands on an individual (Mohajan, 2012). According to Robbins (2001), stress is a dynamic condition that emerges when an individual faces pressures related to their job, as well as the demands associated with their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Ehsan and Ali (2019) further explain that stress arises from an imbalance between external demands and pressures and an individual's capacity to meet them.

The terms 'stress', 'anxiety' and 'worry' are used interchangeably in literature as if they referred to the same phenomenon, and the domains of 'examination stress' and 'academic stress' are not clearly defined (Putwain, 2007). Conversely, Bisht (1989) defines academic stress as the pressure associated with academic demands that

surpass an individual's internal or external resources, as perceived cognitively by the student. Researchers demonstrate various causes and sources of academic stress. For instance, Olivera et al. (2023) indicated self-inflicted stress as the most significant stressor among undergraduate students. Accordingly, students' self-demand and self-efficacy perceptions are essential factors in the development of high academic stress levels (Olivera et al., 2023). Limone and Toto (2021) identified academic stress among university students arises from multiple factors. As per their study,

Academic factors for academic stress include heavy workloads, challenging subjects, poor grades, and uncertainty about future careers. Social factors for academic stress encompass loneliness, social isolation, poverty, discrimination, and bullying. Psychological risk factors for academic stress contain childhood trauma, long-term stress, and mental health conditions. Lifestyle factors for academic stress incorporate the factors such as alcohol and drug use, poor diet, and lack of physical activity. Physiobiological factors include genetic predisposition, sleep disturbances, and chronic illnesses. (p.7-10).

Table 01 summarises the different factors which influence the academic stress levels among undergraduate students.

Table 01: Academic stress factors

Stress factor	Author/s
Perfectionism	Lau et al., 2021
Sense of isolation	Wang et al., 2023
Career and professional uncertainty	Guzmán et al., 2023; Joseph et al., 2021
Lower self-efficacy	Lau et al., 2021; Olivera et al., 2023
Imposter syndrome (where they doubt their abilities and feel that they do not deserve to be in university)	Cokley et al., 2017
Pressure to excel academically/ perform well in examinations	Bashir et al. 2019; Cokley et al., 2017; Paudel et al., 2024

Balancing studying and finding income	Lopes & Nihei, 2021; McCloud & Bann, 2019
Social anxiety/Lack of social coping skills	Lau et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023
Heavy academic workload	Barbayannis et al., 2022; Paudel et al., 2024; Satpathy et al., 2021
Language barriers	Alam et al., 2024; Ali et al., 2020
Bullying and social discrimination	Limone & Toto, 2021; Mahmood et al. (2023)

Source: Authors compiled based on literature review

Academic stress has significant physiological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences for university students. Physiological responses to stressors include increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, respiratory changes, headaches, body aches, and sleep disturbances (Fuente et al., 2021). Cognitively, students experiencing academic stress often report negative thoughts, worry, perceived uncontrollability, and heightened anxiety (Garett et al., 2017). Emotionally, stress can lead to irritability, agitation, fear, and guilt, while behavioral responses may include crying, self-harm, aggression, or substance abuse (Reddy et al., 2018).

The adverse effects of academic stress extend beyond immediate psychological distress, significantly impacting students' academic performance and overall well-being. Stress and depression are key risk factors that contribute to cognitive impairments, substance abuse, learning difficulties, and poor academic outcomes (Fauzi et al., 2021; Limone & Toto, 2022). Furthermore, academic stress has been linked to suicidal ideation, with higher resilience helping to mitigate this risk (Okechukwu et al., 2022). Sleep disturbances, including insomnia, further exacerbate stress levels, leading to long-term negative consequences for students' mental health and academic success (Gardani et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these issues, particularly among students in health-related fields, where the sudden shift to virtual learning contributed to increased anxiety, sleep problems, depressive symptoms, and, ultimately, psychological burnout (Alhamed, 2023). These findings highlight the need for

effective stress management strategies to safeguard students' academic performance and mental health.

In this study, researchers examine the impact of bullying and social discrimination, pressure to excel academically, and heavy academic workload on perceived academic stress. Additionally, the mediating effect of self-efficacy on these relationships is assessed.

Bullying and social discrimination

Bullying and social discrimination are significant psychosocial stressors that adversely affect students' academic and psychological well-being. Discrimination refers to the unfair or biased treatment of individuals or groups based on attributes such as race, gender, or other social identities, and it is particularly prevalent among minority populations (Williams et al., 2019). Bullying, on the other hand, is a form of aggressive behavior characterized by the intentional infliction of harm or distress on others (Olweus, 1999). Both bullying and social discrimination have been found to contribute to adverse mental health outcomes, leading to decreased academic performance and long-term psychological distress (Limone & Toto, 2021). Empirical evidence suggests that individuals who experience such discriminatory and bullying behaviors report symptoms including sleep disturbances and difficulty concentrating, which intensify even weeks after the incidents (Liu et al., 2022). Furthermore, Mahmood et al. (2023) revealed that bullying and social discrimination have a significant positive relationship with academic stress. Therefore,

bullying and social discrimination act as critical stressors that elevate students' vulnerability to perceived academic stress and impair their overall academic functioning.

Pressure to excel academically

Pressure to achieve academic excellence has been widely recognised as a major determinant of academic stress among students. Excessive academic demands and performance expectations often lead to heightened levels of stress, which, when surpassing an individual's coping capacity, negatively affect academic achievement and overall well-being (Ma, 2023). Research has consistently shown that study-related pressures are significant contributors to various mental health issues among school-aged children and adolescents (Sun et al., 2013). Cruz et al. (2025) identified key components of academic pressure, including peer performance comparison, anxiety regarding future outcomes, and academic performance-related stress, all of which significantly influence the level of academic stress experienced by students. Similarly, Benjamin (2015) emphasised that academic pressure is a strong predictor of stress, anxiety, and depression among students. Thus, the persistent pressure to excel academically creates a stressful learning environment that undermines students' mental health and academic functioning. Moreover, Bashir et al. (2019), Cokley et al. (2017), and Paudel et al. (2024) empirically evidenced that pressure to excel academically has a significant positive relationship with academic stress.

Heavy academic workload

Heavy academic workload is a significant determinant of academic stress among students. It encompasses the wide range of interrelated activities that students undertake to advance academically, socially, and physically within the school environment (Ibrahim & Mohamed, 2023). Academic workload typically includes the amount of time students devote to studying, the time allocated in the curriculum, and the quantity

and complexity of the study material (Karjalainen et al., 2016). According to Ibrahim and Mohamed (2023), many students experience stress primarily due to the heavy academic workload they face.

Empirical evidence suggests a significant positive relationship between academic workload and academic stress, indicating that higher workload levels are associated with increased stress among students (Koudela-Hamila et al., 2022). Similarly, Agolla and Ongori (2009) identified excessive workload as a major source of stress among college students in Botswana. Findings from Azizova et al. (2025) further confirm that various dimensions of academic load are closely linked to students' psychological well-being. Moreover, Wahyuni and Triyogoreveal (2025) found that most students feel overwhelmed by the volume and difficulty of their assignments, leading to symptoms such as mental fatigue, anxiety, and reduced motivation to study. Moreover, Barbayannis et al. (2022) and Paudel et al. (2024) empirically revealed that heavy academic workload has a significant positive relationship with academic stress. Collectively, these findings highlight that an excessive academic workload not only heightens academic stress but also undermines students' psychological health and academic engagement.

Mediating role of self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to exert control over challenging situations and regulate their own behaviour and functioning effectively (Schwarzer & Luszczynska, 2023). Within the academic context, academic self-efficacy is defined as students' confidence in their capability to accomplish specific academic tasks and succeed in their studies (Bong & Clark, 1999). High levels of academic self-efficacy enable students to approach demanding academic situations with resilience and persistence, thereby reducing the detrimental effects of academic stress (Gao, 2023). Empirical evidence indicates that academic self-efficacy significantly

mediates the relationship between academic stress and academic burnout, with higher self-efficacy buffering the negative consequences of stress (Gao, 2023).

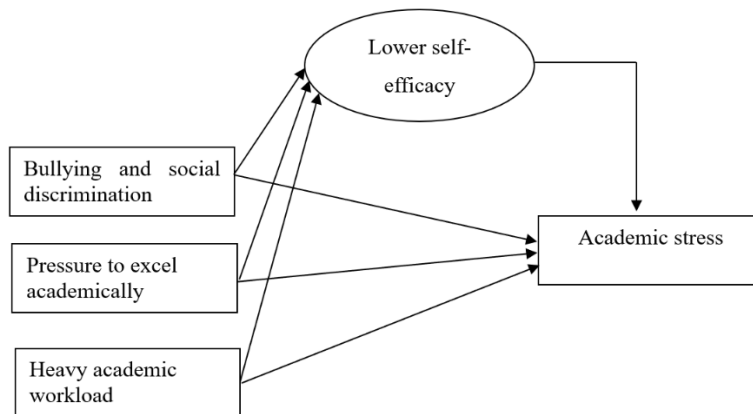
Similarly, in professional settings, Grau et al. (2001) found that individuals with lower levels of generalised self-efficacy experience greater emotional exhaustion when job autonomy is high, while those with low professional self-efficacy exhibit higher levels of cynicism and reduced organisational commitment under conditions of routine and role conflict. Collectively, these findings underscore the critical mediating role of self-efficacy in mitigating the impact of stressors across academic and

professional contexts, highlighting its importance in promoting psychological resilience and sustained performance.

Conceptual framework and hypothesis

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study. In this model, bullying and social discrimination, pressure to achieve academic excellence, and heavy academic workload are identified as the independent variables, while academic stress serves as the dependent variable. Self-efficacy functions as a mediating variable that mediates the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

Figure 01: Conceptual framework



Source: Authors

The following hypotheses were derived, based on the above conceptual framework.

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between Bullying and social discrimination and Academic stress.

H2: There is a significant positive relationship between Pressure to excel academically and Academic stress.

H3: There is a significant positive relationship between Heavy academic workload and Academic stress.

H4: Lower self-efficacy mediates the relationship between bullying and social discrimination and academic stress.

H5: Lower self-efficacy mediates the relationship between Pressure to excel academically and Academic stress.

H6: Lower self-efficacy mediates the relationship between Heavy academic workload and Academic stress.

Methods

Research approach and strategy

This study is rooted in the positivist paradigm, which upholds the concept of a singular, objective reality. Accordingly, a survey strategy was adopted to collect quantitative data on the academic stressors experienced and the stress coping

mechanisms employed by management undergraduates. To achieve this, a university-wide survey was conducted across the management faculties of two selected universities between February 1, 2025, and March 1, 2025.

Sample and recruitment

The study employed convenient sampling strategy to gather survey responses. Through these efforts, the researchers successfully obtained a total of 359 completed responses. Table 2 illustrates the sampling framework, providing an overview of the population and the sample size for each university included in the research.

Table 02: Sample frame

University	Sample
University X	233
University Y	78
University Z	48
Total	359

Source: Survey data

Instrumentation

To ensure the validity of the data collection instrument, the questionnaire was developed following an extensive literature review. The survey was created using Google Forms and distributed via WhatsApp through personal contacts. Respondents were required to complete the survey in English. The questionnaire included demographic questions covering university, gender, degree year, and the specialisation area of the respondent's degree. To measure academic stress, participants responded to 5 items on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating their level of agreement with statements (i.e., Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, or Strongly Agree).

Validity and reliability of data

To assess the reliability of the independent and mediating variables, the Cronbach's alpha test has been employed. As per the test results, Cronbach's alpha values for the variables Bullying and social discrimination ($\alpha = 0.854$), Pressure to excel academically ($\alpha = 0.703$), Heavy academic workload ($\alpha = 0.781$), and Lower self-efficacy ($\alpha = 0.855$) are higher than 0.7. Therefore, the questions comprising each part of the questionnaire satisfactorily meet Cronbach's required reliability.

In order to assess the validity of the variables, the KMO & Bartlett's Test of Sphericity has been employed. As per the results of the analysis, KMO values for the variables Bullying and social discrimination (0.713), Pressure to excel academically (0.726), Heavy academic workload (0.812), and Lower self-efficacy (0.731) are higher than 0.7. Furthermore, the p-value for Bartlett's Test of Sphericity for the variables Bullying and social discrimination ($p = 0.000$), Pressure to excel academically ($p = 0.000$), Heavy academic workload ($p = 0.000$), and Lower self-efficacy ($p = 0.000$) are less than 0.05. Hence, all the variables show a sufficient level of validity.

Data analysis process

Before proceeding with data analysis, researchers conducted a frequency analysis for all the demographic variables and Likert scale questions to confirm that there are no missing values in the data set. Subsequently, a percentage analysis was conducted for the demographic variables. Then the validity and the reliability of the variables were assessed, and after that, before testing the hypothesis, preliminary analyses were conducted to satisfy the key assumptions, namely, Normality, Linearity, and Multicollinearity. Then, multiple regression analysis was used to test mediation using the Hayes PROCESS macro.

Ethical considerations

Regarding ethical consideration, before collecting the data from the students, researchers have provided a clear explanation regarding the purpose of this study. Students were given the full autonomy to decide whether to participate in this study or not. Moreover, they were allowed to withdraw from the study at any point if they felt that they wanted to be removed from the study. Also, the researchers did not provide any financial or any other type of inducement to obtain the participation of the students. The researchers took all necessary steps to protect the privacy of the data provided by the respondents and use it only for the purposes of the study.

Data Analysis

The demographic analysis of the sample is depicted in Table 3. Among 359 respondents, the highest number of respondents were

management undergraduates from the University X, with a frequency of 223. The second-highest frequency amount of 78 was from the University Y, and a frequency of 48 was from the University Z. The percentage of the respondents in the sample from the three public universities was similar to the student enrolment in these three universities for their management faculties. The University X enrolled around 1300 students, while the University Y and the University Z enrolled approximately 600 and 300 students, respectively. Moreover, out of 359 students, 119 were male and 240 were female; a statistic shows that there is a higher number of female students in the sample than male students. Regarding the year of study, the majority of the students in the sample belonged to the final year, with a frequency of 157, and the second highest number was third year students, with a frequency of 103. The lowest frequency of 37 was from the first-year students.

Table 03: Demographics of the sample

Description	Frequency	Percentage
University		
University X	223	64.9
University Y	78	21.7
University Z	48	13.4
Gender		
Male	119	33.1
Female	240	66.9
Degree year		
First year	37	10.3
Second year	62	17.3
Third year	103	28.7
Final year	157	43.7

Source: Survey Data

Preliminary statistical analysis

Before proceeding with the hypothesis testing, the researchers have satisfied the key assumptions, namely Normality, Linearity, and Multicollinearity. In order to test the normality, Skewness and Kurtosis values have been observed for the Likert scale items belonging to all the variables. The

observation revealed that skewness statistics range from -0.500 to +0.594, and kurtosis statistics range from -0.836 to +0.242. Since all the skewness and kurtosis statistics fall into the +1 to -1 range, researchers could conclude that the data are normally distributed.



To assess the linearity, the Mean Procedure Test (MPT) has been employed in the present study. As per the results, the f-ratio value for the linear component is significant ($p\text{-value} \leq 0.05$) for all four variable Pairs {BSC*AS ($F = 49.410$, $p = 0.000$), PEA*AS ($F = 101.352$, $p = 0.000$), HAW*AS ($F = 158.116$, $p = 0.000$), SE*AS ($F = 152.944$, $p = 0.000$)}. Further, the f-ratio value for the non-linear component is insignificant ($p\text{-value} \geq 0.05$) for all four variable Pairs {BSC*AS ($F = 0.992$, $p = 0.453$), PEA*AS ($F = 0.655$, $p = 0.781$), HAW*AS ($F = 0.578$, $p = 0.832$), SE*AS ($F = 0.972$, $p = 0.472$)}.

Tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) were used as a statistical method to evaluate multicollinearity. As per the statistical results, the tolerance values of the

variables are greater than 0.1 (BSC = 0.794, PEA = 0.663, HAW = 0.651, SE = 0.761) and the variance inflation factors (VIF) are also less than 10 (BSC = 1.259, PEA = 1.509, HAW = 1.536, SE = 1.315) indicating no significant issues with high correlations among these variables.

Hypothesis Testing

Proposed relationships in the conceptual framework were tested using the PROCESS macro version 5.0 for SPSS. The macro uses ordinary least squares (OLS) regression-based path analysis in order to determine the direct and indirect effects using bootstrapped confidence intervals. The results of the analysis are depicted in Table 4 below.

Table 04: Results of the multiple regression analysis (Hayes PROCESS macro)

Relationship		Bullying and social discrimination -> Lower self-efficacy -> Academic stress	Pressure to excel academically -> Lower self-efficacy -> Academic stress	Heavy academic workload -> Lower self-efficacy -> Academic stress
Total Effect		.2565 (.0000)	.4028 (.0000)	.4790 (.0000)
t-statistics		7.0301	9.9349	12.6495
Direct Effect		.1340 (.0001)	.2497 (.0000)	.3485 (.0000)
t-statistics		3.9407	6.2441	9.4036
Indirect Effect		.1226	.1531	.1304
Confidence Interval	Lower Bound	.0811	.1038	.0877
	Upper Bound	.1666	.2080	.1777
Conclusion		Partial Mediation	Partial Mediation	Partial Mediation

Source: Survey data

As depicted in Table 4, the direct effects of all the variables are significant ($p < 0.05$), proving that Bullying and social discrimination, Pressure to excel academically, and Heavy academic workload have a significant impact on students' Academic stress. Moreover, mediation

analysis revealed that low self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship between all three variables.

Findings and Discussion

Hypothesis number one (H1) assessed the relationship between Bullying and social discrimination, and Academic stress. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between Bullying and social discrimination and Academic stress ($b = 0.1340$, $P = 0.0001$, $t = 7.0301$). Research findings from Liu et al. (2022) and Limone and Toto (2021) are empirically supported by this direct link. According to them, Bullying and social discrimination have detrimental effects on mental health, including disturbed sleep and difficulties with concentration, which ultimately result in increased academic stress. Hypothesis number two (H2) assessed the relationship between Pressure to excel academically and Academic stress. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between Pressure to excel academically and Academic stress ($b = 0.2497$, $P = 0.0000$, $t = 6.2441$). This impact also empirically confirms the research findings presented by Ma (2023) and Benjamin (2015). They identified that pressure to excel academically arises from both external and internal sources, such as high expectations from parents and lecturers, comparisons with peers, and anxiety about future outcomes. Consequently, this constant pressure to excel creates a stressful learning environment for students. Hypothesis number three (H3) assessed the relationship between Heavy academic workload and Academic stress. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between Heavy academic workload and Academic stress ($b = 0.3485$, $P = 0.0000$, $t = 9.4036$). This direct relationship empirically confirms research findings revealed by Koudela-Hamila et al. (2022), who found that there is a strong positive relationship between Heavy academic workload and Academic stress. Agolla and Ongori (2009); Ibrahim and Mohamed (2023), and Azizova et al. (2025) further confirm that Heavy academic workload is a major determinant of students' academic stress.

Hypothesis number four (H4) assessed the mediating role of lower self-efficacy on the

relationship between Bullying and social discrimination and Academic stress. The results revealed a significant indirect effect of bullying and social discrimination on academic stress ($b = 0.1226$), supporting H4. A bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect was also entirely above zero (BootLLCI = 0.0811 to BootULCI = 0.1666). Furthermore, the direct effect of bullying and social discrimination on Academic stress in the presence of the mediator was also found to be significant ($b = 0.1340$, $P < 0.0001$). Hence, lower self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship between bullying and social discrimination and academic stress. Several previous studies also proved that the individuals who have experienced bullying suffered a reduction in their self-efficacy. Students internalise the psychological distress and social rejection caused by bullying, which lowers their confidence in their own abilities (Romera et al., 2016; Sartika, 2024; Solas-Martínez et al., 2025). As a result of this lower self-efficacy, students believe that they are less capable of handling their academic tasks as well, and they perceive those academic tasks as threats, which finally leads to a higher level of academic stress (Mahmood et al., 2023).

Hypothesis number five (H5) assessed the mediating role of lower self-efficacy on the relationship between pressure to excel academically and academic stress. The results revealed a significant indirect effect of pressure to excel academically on academic stress ($b = 0.1304$), supporting H5. A bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect was also entirely above zero (BootLLCI = 0.1038 to BootULCI = 0.2080). Furthermore, the direct effect of pressure to excel academically on Academic stress in the presence of the mediator was also found to be significant ($b = 0.2497$, $P < 0.0000$). Hence, lower self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship between pressure to excel academically and academic stress. The previous studies have revealed that pressure to excel academically arises from external pressure like high expectations from parents and lecturers, as well as from internal pressure like perfectionism, peer

performance comparison (Chang et al., 2004). When students appraise high academic excellence—especially which was created by these external and internal pressures—against their own perceived abilities and capabilities, it creates greater academic stress for them (Kristensen et al., 2023). Further, studies identified that for students who have low self-efficacy, consistent pressure to perform well academically further diminishes their belief in their capabilities and competencies, resulting in higher academic stress for them (Tuastumban & Naparota, 2025).

Hypothesis number six (H6) assessed the mediating role of lower self-efficacy on the relationship between heavy academic workload and academic stress. The results revealed a significant indirect effect of heavy academic workload on academic stress ($b = 0.1531$), supporting H6. A bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect was also entirely above zero (BootLLCI = 0.0877 to BootULCI = 0.1777). Furthermore, the direct effect of heavy academic workload on academic stress in the presence of the mediator was also found to be significant ($b = 0.3485$, $P < 0.0000$). Hence, lower self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship between heavy academic workload and academic stress.

Several previous studies confirm that when students are faced with a heavy academic workload, they feel that it decreases their self-efficacy. This happens because the academic workload is greater than their perceived resources, such as the time and energy they have to put in (Acosta-Enriquez et al., 2025). This mismatch of the demand and the resources leads to lower confidence and belief in their ability to succeed. This low self-efficacy creates anxiety and stress, leading to avoidance-oriented coping behaviours like procrastination. This procrastination makes the academic workload even worse and further skyrockets students' academic stress (Liu et al., 2020; Acosta-Enriquez et al., 2025).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this research is to examine the factors that impact perceived academic stress among undergraduates in three selected universities in Sri Lanka. The statistical analysis revealed that all three variables—bullying and social discrimination, pressure to excel academically, and heavy academic workload—have a significant impact on students' academic stress. The results revealed that Heavy academic workload ($b = 0.3485$) was the strongest predictor, followed by Pressure to excel academically ($b = 0.2497$) and bullying and social discrimination ($b = 0.1340$). The results are aligned with empirical research findings that also revealed that all three predictors have a significant impact on students' academic stress. This provides strong validation for the findings of the present study. Therefore, it can be identified that heavy academic workload, such as too many continuous assessments and extensive early preparation for classroom activities, acts as a primary cause for academic stress. This excessive workload leads to other behavioural consequences like procrastination, a higher number of classroom absences and poor sleep quality, subsequently increasing academic stress. When it comes to pressure to excel academically, both internal and external causes like expectations from parents and lecturers, perfectionism and peer performance comparison are the major sources that enhance academic pressure. The third variable, bullying and social discrimination, also proved that academic stress is not a problem solely of academics (i.e. workload). Findings highlighted that academic stress also happens as a result of social and environmental problems like bullying and social discrimination. Therefore, bullying and social discrimination create a huge detrimental impact on students' performance, psychological and emotional well-being.

The second research question of the study was focused on examining the mediating effect of self-efficacy on the impact of stressors on perceived academic stress.



Mediation analysis showed that Lower self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between all the independent variables—Bullying and social discrimination, pressure to excel academically and heavy academic workload and the dependent variable, Academic stress. The related literature confirms that students with low self-efficacy, when confronted with stressors, will experience higher academic pressure when compared to students with high self-efficacy.

Moreover, this self-efficacy provides several crucial psychological resources, such as strong belief in their own capacities and abilities, improved motivation, and willingness to take on challenges, etc. Lower self-efficacy leads students to believe they are less capable of handling their academic tasks. Also, consistent pressure to perform academically can also diminish the student's belief in their capabilities (self-efficacy). Additionally, psychological distress and social rejection caused by bullying and discrimination also cause students to disbelieve their own capacities and abilities. As a result, they perceive these academic tasks as threats, which creates anxiety and procrastination, ultimately worsening their academic stress.

As per research findings, academic workload has been identified as the strongest predictor of student academic stress. Many universities focus on providing counselling and student mentoring as systematic approaches to reduce students' stress levels. However, providing counselling support alone is not enough to reduce students' academic stress. Therefore, universities are required to implement necessary policies to reduce academic workload. One initiative can be powered by using information technology to implement a central workload management system. Through this system, course coordinators can get real-time updates on deadlines of other courses followed by students. Due to this monitoring, 'deadline clustering' can be prevented, and workload stress can be managed as students get a manageable time period to complete their assessments. Another initiative that can be implemented is that universities can set two

or three reading weeks in between a twelve or fifteen-week semester. As a result of that, it limits the number of continuous teaching weeks. This reading week allows students to rest, catch up on missing academic work, reflect or do their continuous assessments in a relaxed manner, resulting in less stress and increased involvement following the break.

The study confirmed that bullying and social discrimination is not just a social issue but also that it significantly impacts undergraduate academic stress and leads to the deterioration of their well-being. Therefore, universities should focus on further strengthening the zero-tolerance policies against bullying and discrimination. Moreover, the pressure to excel academically is supposed to be an entirely positive thing, but it is a double-edged sword: some gain, but at some cost in well-being. Therefore, universities should focus on creating balanced academic approaches and targeted support systems that promote both academic achievement and student well-being.

Further, mediation analysis showed that self-efficacy was a key mediator. When students experience stressors, it causes them to lower their confidence and belief in their abilities and capabilities to overcome stressors. Therefore, universities should focus on conducting workshops, training programs or introducing new course modules to build this psychological resource. Moreover, universities could make students aware of different coping strategies they can use—such as time management, exam-preparation techniques, and mindfulness practices—to manage their stressors. After having a sound knowledge about those stress coping strategies, students will have a belief and confidence (self-efficacy) in their ability to manage academic stress successfully.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

One of the primary limitations of this study is that it focused on the stressors encountered by the management undergraduates of public universities. Hence, there is a limitation in



generalising the findings to other student populations, institutions, or geographical contexts. The primary data required for this study were collected via a self-report questionnaire from management undergraduates. Therefore, this data collection method might be vulnerable to biases, as students might underreport the stressors or bullying. Since this study was conducted in Sri Lanka, specifically focusing on public universities, the national cultural as well as sub-cultural (university culture) factors may significantly influence students' perception of stressors and academic stress. This study was mainly focused on examining the stressors faced by management faculty students across three state universities in Sri Lanka. Therefore, future researchers can test whether these findings are the same in other faculties, such as humanities and social

sciences, applied sciences, engineering and medical science faculties. Other researchers can do a comparison using public and private universities to check whether private university students may experience different types of stressors when compared to the findings of the present study. Researchers suggest using triangulation methods in order to further prove the findings of this study. The findings revealed that Bullying and discrimination acts as a major stressor. Therefore, to comprehend how and why it is appearing in Sri Lankan management faculties, conducting qualitative research is more worthwhile. Future researchers can also test the mediating impact of other variables such as perceived social support, resilience and organisational skill by incorporating them into this three-factor model.

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