

Attention deficit disorder among Sri Lankan university students: have we turned a blind eye to a treatable condition?

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The burden of ADHD

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) affects approximately 5% of children worldwide (1). Recent studies indicate that the prevalence rate among primary school students in Sri Lanka stands at 6.5%, aligning with global trends (2). However, it is crucial to recognise that ADHD is not limited to childhood; it significantly impacts adults as well, affecting an estimated 200 million individuals globally (3). Most of the adults with ADHD had not been diagnosed in their childhood years, leading to a lack of awareness about the condition's persistence and implications. Research conducted over four decades has shown that only 10% of children diagnosed with ADHD continue to exhibit symptoms into adulthood, highlighting the complexities of the disorder and its relevance across different life stages (4).

ADHD in university students

Now comes the question – why does ADHD seem like a vital disorder to assess among university students? The transition from advanced-level studies to university can be particularly challenging for students with ADHD. They often need more independence and reduced parental oversight, which can exacerbate their difficulties in managing academic responsibilities. While many students with ADHD demonstrate remarkable resilience and determination and successfully secure admission to university, they frequently encounter academic challenges that hinder their performance. Previous studies have confirmed significant proportions of ADHD traits in university students, including lower levels of impulsive decision-making, impulsive speech and communication, and reduced feelings of underachievement (5). At the university, undergraduates of both genders with greater

inattention symptomatology at the start of their academic program showed consistently poorer long-term academic achievements (6). The findings show the importance of targeted screening, tailored interventions, and personalised support services for undergraduates.

Comorbidities of ADHD

Compounding these challenges are co-occurring conditions that are frequently observed in individuals with ADHD. Substance abuse is a significant concern that can further complicate the academic and personal lives of university students with ADHD. A study from Northeast India reported alarming rates of opioid use among ADHD patients aged 18 to 29, a demographic that often overlaps with the typical university student age range (7). The prevalence of substance abuse can lead to a downward spiral, making it increasingly difficult for these students to succeed academically and socially. Identifying and supporting students with ADHD is crucial to mitigate these risks and ensure that they can thrive in their academic environments.

Mental health issues are also prevalent among university students with ADHD. Depression and anxiety are common co-morbidities, with many affected individuals reporting a diminished quality of life. Research indicates that more than half of adults diagnosed with ADHD experience depression, and this heightened vulnerability to mental health disorders may lead to an increased risk of suicidal behaviours (8). Universities need to be aware of these concerns and implement supportive measures that address the needs of students with ADHD. Creating an environment that fosters open dialogue about mental health can encourage students to seek help when needed.

ADHD and functional impairment

Additionally, students with ADHD often encounter practical challenges that affect their quality of life. Issues related to unemployment and financial instability can lead to significant stress, which further exacerbates their difficulties in academic settings (9). These challenges may ultimately contribute to a cycle of adverse outcomes, including criminal behaviour in some cases. Research has shown that students with ADHD tend to report lower life satisfaction compared to their peers, emphasising the need for targeted interventions to improve their overall well-being (10).

Recommendations

To effectively address these issues, targeted screening for ADHD symptoms and developing coping strategies tailored to the unique needs of university students with ADHD must be done. There are validated screening tools for Sri Lanka, such as the Swanson, Nolan, and Pelham rating scale (SNAP-IV), that could be adapted to students entering universities after school (11). While the challenges can be daunting, research has demonstrated that effective study habits and organisational skills can significantly enhance academic performance for students with ADHD, sometimes even allowing them to outperform their peers without the disorder (12). Unfortunately, despite the availability of support services at many universities in high-income countries, only about one-third of students with ADHD take advantage of these resources (10). This underutilisation of support services highlights the need for more effective outreach and engagement strategies to connect students with their needed assistance. For students treated with medications, it is important to arrange proper follow-up through university medical services to prevent potential abuse of prescription drugs by others.

Effectively addressing ADHD among university students is crucial for enhancing individual academic performance and building a productive workforce for the country. Universities can significantly improve these students' overall quality of life by creating supportive environments and implementing targeted interventions. This comprehensive approach benefits not just those with ADHD but also strengthens the academic community, promoting inclusivity and understanding that will contribute to a more capable and resilient workforce.

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