

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN UNIVERSITY STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND ACADEMIC FUNCTIONING

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Abstract

The influence of teachers on student well-being and performance is well documented in elementary and secondary education, but less attention has been given to the role of university teachers. The goal of this research was to examine the role of teacher social support in students' mental health (symptoms of anxiety and depression, and life satisfaction) and their academic functioning. In total, 685 university students (aged 19–28; 79 % female) completed an online survey including the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS); the Stress Source Questionnaire; the Academic Functioning Questionnaire, and ratings of life satisfaction and perceived social support from teachers, family, and friends/partners. Findings revealed elevated levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, with only 36% of students scoring in the normal range for anxiety and 38 % for depression. Students reported academic functioning and life satisfaction at the moderate level. They perceived the highest social support from family and friends/partners and the lowest from teachers. The results of hierarchical regression analysis showed that lack of teacher support significantly contributed to higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, whereas family and friend support had significant contribution only for depressive symptoms. Teacher support also emerged as the strongest positive contributor to life satisfaction. Furthermore, symptoms of depression, but not anxiety, were a negative predictor of academic functioning. After controlling for psychological symptoms, perceived support from family, and especially from teachers, had the strongest positive effect on academic functioning. These results highlight the critical role of university teachers in supporting both the psychological well-being and academic functioning of their students. Universities should therefore prioritize strengthening teachers' capacities to provide effective support throughout students' academic journeys.

Keywords: *Mental health, university teachers, university students, academic functioning, social support.*

1. Introduction

Mental health problems are common among university students. Recent findings from the Healthy Minds Study indicate that about 60 % of college students meet the criteria for at least one mental health problem (Lipson et al., 2022), with anxiety and depression being the most prevalent. Social support has consistently been identified as one of the strongest predictors of psychological adjustment, typically operationalized as mental health and adaptive academic or work functioning, across age groups and cultures. According to the General Benefits Model of Social Support, social support exerts positive effects by enhancing well-being and promoting beneficial psychological states such as self-worth, purpose, and positive affect, while also reducing negative affect (Rueger et al., 2016). Moreover, perceived support appears to be more strongly associated with psychological adjustment than received support (Zell & Stockus, 2025). The role of social support in the prevention of mental health problems is particularly important during major life transitions, such as emerging adulthood, and in periods of increased stress. Social support can serve multiple functions: it may buffer the negative impact of stress on mental health, attenuate biological stress responses, and facilitate adaptive coping strategies. The strength of the association between social support and lower levels of psychological symptoms may also vary depending on the source of support (Auerbach et al., 2011). While the influence of teacher support on student well-being and performance has been well documented in elementary and secondary education (e.g., Mazer & Rickwood, 2014), much less attention has been devoted to understanding the role of university teachers in fostering student mental health and adjustment.

2. Objective

The main goal of this research was to examine the role of teacher social support in the level of anxiety and depression symptoms of university students, as well as their life satisfaction and academic functioning.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

In total, 685 university students (19 to 28 years, 79 % female) participated in the study.

3.2. Measures and procedure

Students fulfilled the following measures through an online questionnaire: Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS- 21, Henry & Crawford, 2005); Academic Functioning Questionnaire (Zivcic-Becirevic at al., 2021; five items rated on the scale from 0 to 4); Stress Source Questionnaire (developed for the purpose of this study with 10 items rated on scale from 0 to 4); 1-item rating of life satisfaction (scale from 1 to 7); 1-item ratings for each source of social support (family, friends/partners, and teachers; rated from 0 to 4).

4. Results

Findings revealed elevated levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, with an average relative score of 0.91 (SD = 0.75) for anxiety and 1.05 (SD = 0.79) for depression. Only about one third of students scored within the normal range. Academic functioning and life satisfaction were at moderate levels (M = 2.27, SD = 0.99; M = 4.32, SD = 1.40, respectively). Students reported the highest social support from family and friends/partners and the lowest from teachers.

The contribution of social support to levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and life satisfaction, after controlling for age and gender in the first step, and sources of stress in the second step, was assessed using hierarchical regression analysis. For academic functioning, the contribution of depressive and anxiety symptoms was additionally controlled for in the third step. The results from the final step of the four hierarchical regression analyses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Social support as predictor of mental health and academic functioning: Results of final step of hierarchical regression.

	Depression	Anxiety	Life satisfaction	Academic functioning
Gender	.06*	-.12***	.05	-.04
Age	-.09**	-.12***	.01	-.01
Sources of stress	.44***	.46***	-.32**	-.25***
Depression	-	-	-	-.19***
Anxiety	-	-	-	.03
Support – family	-.08*	.03	.07	.13**
Support - friends/partner	-.16***	-.05	.19***	.03
Support teacher	-.12***	-.11**	.24***	.15***
R^2	.37***	.28***	.34***	.27***
ΔR^2	.06***	.01**	.12***	.04***

Legend. Gender 0 - female, 1 - male; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Results showed that a lack of teacher support significantly contributed to higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, whereas support from family and friends significantly contributed only to depressive symptoms. Along with support from friends and partner, teacher support emerges as a positive contributor to life satisfaction. Hierarchical regression analysis indicated that depressive, but not anxiety symptoms, were negative predictors of academic functioning, while family and teacher support emerged as significant positive predictors.

5. Discussion

It is not surprising that students in our sample reported elevated levels of anxiety and depression, as the assessment was conducted in the post-pandemic period, when symptoms had not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. This finding is consistent with global data indicating a continuing decline in university students' mental health (e.g., Lipson et al., 2022). At the same time, students evaluated their academic functioning and life satisfaction as moderate. Benítez-Agudelo et al. (2025) similarly found that students often prioritize academic success over psychological well-being. Despite notable distress, their academic performance improved, suggesting the use of maladaptive coping strategies that harm mental health. Our results also highlight an imbalance in perceived social support: while students reported higher support from their families and friends, they perceived relatively low support from teachers and the university environment. This is particularly relevant as teacher support has the consistent contribution to students' well-being (the level of anxiety and depressive symptoms, and especially life satisfaction), as well as student academic functioning. Although family support can help students cope with academic stress and function more effectively, insufficient teacher support may contribute to the development of anxiety and depressive symptoms, as well as poorer academic engagement. Our previous research has also indicated that inadequate or negative teacher feedback can increase students' cognitive vulnerability to depression. Consistent with our findings, other studies have shown that students who perceived higher levels of support from their teachers and institutions maintained greater academic motivation and experienced lower stress during the pandemic (e.g., Marler et al., 2021).

6. Conclusions and implications

Taken together, these findings emphasize the significance of supportive academic environments in promoting students' psychological resilience and academic adjustment. Therefore, universities should recognize and utilize this important resource to help students manage challenges and flourish during the critical developmental period of emerging adulthood. Even at the tertiary level, teachers can exert a significant influence: they can encourage and motivate students, enhance engagement, and contribute to their academic success.

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