

## **“You Can’t Help Getting into a Heap about It.” Student Stress in Initial Teacher Education**

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### **Abstract**

*Stress among higher education students is of growing concern internationally particularly in terms of student health, well-being, academic performance and retention. Students enrolled in programmes of study which have practicum components such as teacher education are identified as particularly vulnerable to stress. All initial teacher education students (n=1041) at the University of Limerick in Ireland were invited to participate in a mixed method study comprising a survey and individual interviews to establish their self-reported stress and to determine the factors associated with stress. Students’ self-reported stress was assessed using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ). The factors associated with stress were evaluated using the Lifestyle Behaviour Questionnaire. Seven hundred and six students completed the survey yielding a response rate of 63.94%. In depth interviews were conducted with 30 students from the original sample. The purpose of the interviews was to qualitatively explore the participants’ experiences as students of initial teacher education and to explore in more depth the sources of stress for these students. The findings from the GHQ identified that 39% of respondents had scores above the threshold of 5 which indicates stress levels unlikely to remit without intervention and which may have implications for students’ physical and mental health. Gender differences were evident, with more females (52.4%) than males (31.9%) scoring in excess of 5 in the GHQ. Workload, assessment, exams, financial pressure and the teaching practicum were identified as the main sources of stress for these students.*

### **1. Introduction**

Stress among higher education students is of global concern [1-3] particularly as higher education students now experience greater psychological distress than the general population when compared with age-matched controls [2,3]. Stress has been defined by Lazarus and Folkman (p.19) as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” [4]. It is generally considered

an unpleasant emotional state [5, 6]. However, it is of note that stress can be both positive and negative in nature. It is a motivator which enhances performance amongst third level students; yet elevated stress is associated with negative physical health outcomes, emotional and psychological distress and the exacerbation of mental health symptoms [7, 8]. Consequently, stress is a serious concern for third level education providers because of its deleterious impact upon health and well-being of students and because it adversely impacts upon their educational attainment [9].

University students experience a myriad of stressors during their college years including the emotional demands of the transition from home. Additionally, the transition from second level education to the less structured college environment compounded by academic demands, grappling with self-directed study, time management issues, examinations / assessments, making new friends, peer pressure to use drugs and alcohol, financial pressures, plus the stress of family and work commitments also contribute to increased stress for students [3, 8, 9].

### **2. Stress in initial teacher education**

The teaching profession itself is well recognised as a high stress occupation leading to burnout [10] and high attrition rates [11]. Being a student teacher is also stressful [11- 15]. Canadian teacher education students specifically identify assessment and evaluation of their teaching as their main stressor, followed by workload interpersonal conflict, and academic issues [12]. American students categorize the factors that they perceived as stressful as comprising; teaching workload, time management and striking a balance between practicum and personal commitments [5]. Australian student teachers list evaluation by their university supervisor, having high expectations of their teaching, workload and balancing practicum and personal commitments as the most stressful elements of their training [14]. Behaviour management, perceived lack of support and heavy workload are identified as core stressors for student teachers in England [11].

The teaching practicum is a key stressor for many students as evidenced by 36% of student teachers in Nigeria suffering psychological distress on

placement [15]. Similarly student teachers in England deemed teaching practice as extremely stressful, with 38% psychologically distressed following their practicum experience [11].

Those unable to manage stress effectively often exit their education programme [16]. Those who remain in the profession are frequently subject to early onset of teacher burnout [17]. The international evidence points to the problem of teacher education student stress, particularly the sources of that stress as being rooted in their professional formation. It is therefore imperative that teacher educators are cognizant of this phenomenon as it has potentially far reaching consequences not only for the immediate impact on student health, wellbeing, learning and attrition rates but also for the health and wellbeing of subsequent teaching professionals.

### 3. Methods

This paper reports the findings of a mixed method study which used a combination of research approaches to examine student teacher stress. Specifically, the aim of the study was to establish the level of self-reported stress, to determine the sources of the stress and also to elucidate in more detail students experience of stress.

The quantitative component comprised a survey which combined three instruments, the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), the Ways of Coping which is not specifically reported in this paper and the Lifestyle Behaviour Questionnaire.

The GHQ is a standardised measure of self-reported stress which has been widely used with clinical and non-clinical populations including students. The 28 item version used in this study comprises four subscales which measure somatic symptoms, anxiety, social dysfunction and depression. Each item has four likert response options, typically being 'not at all', 'no more than usual', 'rather more than usual' and 'much more than usual'. The binary scoring methods (0, 0, 1, 1) was selected, with the total score ranging from 0-28. Any score exceeding the threshold value of 4\5 is classed as achieving 'psychiatric caseness' which suggests that if such respondents presented in general practice, they would be likely to receive further attention. For the purpose of this study a cut of score of 5 was used to determine 'caseness'.

The 37 item Lifestyle Behaviour Questionnaire (LBQ) was developed for the study to complement the GHQ. It was tailored specifically to the population under investigation to decipher the student teachers' sources of stress and their lifestyle and coping behaviours along with demographic details. The instrument was constructed following a review of literature and from an analysis of similar instruments. Experts in the field of mental health and health promotion reviewed the instrument. A pre-test

and pilot study (n= 178) to determine the completion time, accuracy of instructions, clarity, the best wording of the questions and appropriate distribution procedures preceded the main study. Face validity was established by conducting interviews with students and the student feedback was used to finalise the questionnaire

The qualitative component comprised in-depth individual interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to examine in more depth the participant's experience of teacher education as it pertained to stress, lifestyle and coping.

The interview schedule was informed by a critical analysis of the literature on stress amongst higher education students and teacher education students more specifically. The interview schedule was flexible and open to facilitate participants in sharing their experiences with the researcher. The interviews were conversational in nature, voice recorded with the participants consent and transcribed verbatim.

All current teacher education students in the University of Limerick in the mid-west region of Ireland were invited to participate in the study (n=1104). All were e-mailed an information briefing about the aims of the study and the participation requirements. Then during formal timetabled sessions the first author addressed the students, again informing them of the study aims and participation requirements and answering any questions the students had in relation to the study. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasised and confidentiality of information was assured. The anonymous surveys were then distributed to students who were willing to complete them. An email was sent to each year group to ensure that those not present on the day of distribution were also afforded the opportunity to complete the survey if desired. All students were also invited to self-select to be interviewed by emailing the first author of their intention to participate. Thirty students contacted the first author subsequently indicating their desire to participate in interview. All of these volunteers were interviewed.

The survey data were analysed with the assistance of SPSS (version 18). Data were entered, checked for data entry errors, explored and cleaned. Descriptive and inferential analyses were conducted. Information on demographic and social characteristics was obtained using descriptive statistics, frequencies, means for continuous variables and percentages for categorical variables. Cross tabulations were conducted among variables.

The interview data were analysed thematically using Newell and Burnards (2006) data analysis procedures [18]. Memo style notes were made after each interview. Following this, the interview transcriptions were read and reread to increase familiarity with the data and to identify general

themes. Open coding was first employed with initial codes written in the transcript margin to summarise and categorise what was being said. Subsequently, where categories were overlapping similar open codes were merged to form higher order codes. This resulted in a reduced list of codes. These codes were checked against the interview text again to ensure they accurately represented what was being said and were subsequently verified by an independent researcher. Data excerpts that embodied the themes relevant to this paper are represented in the findings section. The qualitative data were used to illuminate the quantitative data. In particular the analysis of the interview data facilitated the interpretation of the survey data related to the determinants of stress.

The University of Limerick Research and Ethics Committee granted approval for the study.

## 4. Results

Seven hundred and six students completed the survey yielding a response rate of 63.94%. The sample comprised 497 males (70.4%) and 209 females (29.6%). The majority of the respondents were under 26 years of age (95.6%), single (92.1%) and born in Ireland (83.2%). The sample represented student across all four years of the teacher education programmes; 28.5% from year 1, 20.4% from year 2, 19.8% from year 3 and 31.3% from year 4. Table 1 identifies the programme of study of the respondents.

**Table 1. Respondents programme of study**

<i>Teacher education programme</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>
B.A. (Education)	5.7	40
B.Sc. (Physical Education)	21.2	150
B.Sc. (Education)	23.9	159
B.Tech (Education)	48.3	341
Programme not specified	0.8	6

### 4.1. General Health Questionnaire Scores

As is evident in table 2 the self-reported stress of the respondents ranged from no stress to very high stress with a mean score of 4.42. Students scored highest on the somatic and anxiety subscales and lowest on the depression subscale. Many of the respondents (37.9%) had a GHQ score of 5 or greater which is deemed as an indicator of 'psychiatric caseness'. This reflected 31.9% of the male respondents and 52.4% of the females.

**Table 2. Respondents GHQ score**

<i>Subscale</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Mean</i>
<b>Somatic</b>	0	7	1.8
<b>Anxiety</b>	0	7	1.58
<b>Social functioning</b>	0	7	1.01
<b>Depression</b>	0	7	0.30
<b>GHQ total</b>	0	28	4.42

### 4.2. Sources of stress

Most respondents perceived that being a student teacher was stressful all the time (33.3%) or some of the time (62.3%) and very few (4.4%) indicated that being a student teacher was not stressful. The main sources of stress for the respondents were workload (73%), exams (71%), assignments (70%), financial pressures (47%) and teaching practice (35%).

Other stressors included commuting to college (12%), being away from home (11%), sharing accommodation (8%) lecturers/teachers (8%), making new friends (8%), lectures (7%) and the social life (7%).

Gender differences were evident in relation to the perceived stressors. More females than males rated the sources as stressful as evidenced in table 3. The biggest gender difference in perceived stressors was in relation to teaching practice and examinations.

**Table 3. Gender differences in stressors**

<i>Stressor</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Males</i>
Workload	75.9%	71.4%
Assignments	76.8%	66.7%
Exams	81.8%	66.9%
Teaching practice	45.3%	30.1%
Financial pressures	47.5%	45.8%

### 4.3. Assessment related stress

Examinations and assignments were reported by most students as stressful (71% and 70% respectively). As is evident in the following data the weighting placed on the end of term examinations plays a key role in the perceived stress. "I find it difficult that there is such a focus on exams all in one

day rather than maybe spreading it out. Now this semester is not as bad like there is more continual assessment...but there's still a significant amount of weight put on the exams. I think that puts a lot of pressure on people (Interview 17).

Others similarly pronounced the value of formative assessments in terms of reducing stress. "Obviously you get stressed about them but going in to the exam you might have 40% of the course done already and that's a really good thing because you are not as worried and you know that at the end of the day the likelihood is that you will pass... sometimes you are just so used to being stressed that it seems natural to you to get up in a heap about it (Interview 19).

For other students the time available to prepare for exams was problematic because of the proximity of assignment submission dates and scheduled exams. "I think the problem we've had in first and second year of our course is that we've got a lot of due dates in week thirteen (study week) and things like that and it takes away from your studying for exams. We really only have two or three days to study for our actual exams when they come around" (Interview 6).

Assignments were also perceived as stressful however, students acknowledged that stress could be minimised by being organised. "Assignments are ok once you stay on top of them (Interview 3); if I was to leave something to the very end assignment wise, yeah I'd be very stressed" (Interview 1); "they can be fairly tough but you can get organised as well" (Interview 9).

Oral presentations were underlined as an assessment method that was particularly stressful for some students. "There have been presentations, group presentations and they're daunting enough. When it comes to giving a presentation on my own I'm going to die altogether. I'm not going to be able to cope at all....it is very frightening. It's not too bad when its small groups you're giving it to but when everyone's there....it's the getting up and standing in front of people and trying to talk and trying to remember every step you take and if there's questions and answers, thinking that you're not going to be able to answer some question and feeling like a pure fool" (Interview 19).

Group assignments was a frequently used mode of assessment for the population studied and this created more stress for many of the interviewees. The stress emanated from the difficulty in coordinating and scheduling meetings with multiple groups. "The majority of all our assignments are groups so it's stressful having to meet with one group and then pulling out of that group and saying I can't meet now I have to go meet another group. We have seven different groups this semester. We have no individual assignments at all for this semester (Interview 26). Managing team work was a challenge

for several students. The effect of group work on grades was an additional stressor for some students as revealed in the following quote "You'll have the few people who'll sit back and do nothing which is really annoying...it [group work] has a negative effect on my grade" (Interview 3).

The final year project was also a significant stressor. "This year when I was doing my final year project I started in the first week in January, I was back in college doing it and it was taking up all my time and it took me 10 weeks to get it done but there was other things I was forgetting because it's the only thing at the forefront of your mind and all those other little projects that you're doing you would actually forget them and you actually would need to be constantly reminded of them because you're under so much pressure and there's so much emphasis placed on your final year project" (Interview 14).

#### 4.4. Financial pressures

The findings indicated that almost half (47%) of the students reported financial stress. Many students stated that the economic down turn in Ireland had impacted their financial situation. Some students reported that their parents were no longer in a position to provide financial support which increased the pressure on them to become more financially independent. "I'm working two jobs at the moment to give myself money because I know my parents don't have it really...they constantly talk about the fact that they are in debt (Interview 12). Other students reported similar circumstances. "Finances....it's always a lingering haunting thing, I worked flat out for the summer 50 and 60 hours a week and I have a grant that comes through as well. My parents would if they had to but they can't. I have three younger siblings and mam is working part time and dad wouldn't earn a whole pile either so I wouldn't ask them" (Interview 55).

Despite some students desire to be less financially dependent on their families, securing work and fitting work around their busy schedules was also a stressor as evidenced in the following narratives. "Money is a stress because we are in college five days a week, so really you can only work two days max at the weekend and that's if you have a job and can get the hours... it can be stressful...you want to be more independent it's just....you are not able because you don't have the time to work" (Interview 57); "Not being able to find time to work to earn money for yourself so you're still kind of dependent on family to give you money (Interview 21).

Students who secured employment found it difficult to balance work and college commitments. "I work during the week....when I have a lot of work to do that can be a bit stressful ... I do some work at the weekend ...but when you're working and you have assignments due in, that can be a bit stressful

*because... you can't kind of not work all the time otherwise they won't employ you" (Interview 31).*

The long hours worked often added to the stress and physical exhaustion. *"It makes you that much more tired; it makes it a lot harder during the week (Interview 25).*

#### 4.5. Course workload

Course demands and the heavy workload associated with teacher education programmes were cited as particular stressors. *"I am doing a very heavy course...a lot of hours, and a lot of time. It's very, very stressful at times, like really, really stressful at times and it's not just me, everyone on the course trying to get things in, meeting deadlines, you just feel like you just don't have enough hours" (Interview 2).*

The impact of the heavy workload on student wellbeing and learning was articulated by many students. *"It's difficult sometimes, last week I had a lot of things so I found myself being up until 3 o'clock... four o'clock in the morning trying to finish off things and then you go into labs during the day and you're just wrecked, especially if it's a three hour lab where you have no breaks, you've been up until about three or four in the morning and nothing is going in and then when you try to reproduce the stuff from that Lab you found that you haven't really learned a huge amount" (Interview 12).*

Another student similarly reported the adverse effects of a consistently high workload on her wellbeing and learning. *"I get so much work to do all of the time it can get you down....It is hard... I don't like the idea that you don't have time to study what you are learning because you are constantly doing work, so you still feel lost and you still feel behind because you are after spending a few hours doing an essay but you don't actually understand what you did in another class that might be more theory based you know, harder ....that is really annoying because you are actually working I don't know what else you can do (Interview 19).*

#### 4.6. Teaching practicum specific workload

The workload associated with teaching practicum was problematic for many of the students. The following narrative provides a description of the workload experienced.

*"I was out on TP before Christmas and I was working non-stop for the nine weeks because you have a lesson plans and post lesson appraisals and your weekly reflections so that all takes time but in the middle of that I do a bit of research on my own FYP and at the very end of my teaching practice I had a massive essay which was worth a lot of percentage to my education...you're so drained from*

*TP and the workload you have from that" (Interview 14).*

The practicum workload was a notable stressor for students. *"Teaching practice is definitely the most stressful part....I found it the most stressful..... Just the workload, constant lesson plans. Like I was constantly doing planning in school, teaching the lessons in school, it's just constant.... I was getting up at seven every morning and I was going in to the stress of...then you've Tutor visits which were bad, so I found myself, I'd get up at seven and go to bed at maybe half twelve, one every night and I'd be up again the next morning and I'd stop for dinner and that would be it" (Interview 3).*

Another student gave insight into their experience of a typical week on teaching practice. *"There were no hours off in the day in that ten weeks and then on Fridays I went straight from school to work, I got up the next morning and went straight to work and when I came home I had to start planning again and then the same thing Sunday, went to sleep, got up and went straight to work, came home and worked late into Sunday night and that was the case for ten weeks" (Interview 2).*

Students concern about the grade achieved for teaching practice added significantly to the stress of having their teaching evaluated. *"Our whole degree hinges on what grade you get and that as well. If you get a good grade it's brilliant for your CV ... TP is worth four modules so that's important especially in fourth year" (Interview 2).* The impact of teaching practice grade not only on the quality of the students degree but also on future employment prospects was an additional stressor. *"The QCA is bit of a stressor....there's no point in lying. It's a stress for everyone, because with the teaching jobs they way they are now you need to have a very high QCA to get a job unless you're willing to go abroad" (Interview 39).* Thus, stress was a motivator for students to do well on teaching practice. However, it also resulted in students setting high standards which they were not always able to achieve. *"I wanted to get an A in teaching practice and I got a B1 and I was just bawling crying, next day I was onto my tutor because I was aiming so high you know (Interview 3).*

The desire to secure a 'good' degree created competition between students. Such competition was noted by students in years three and four of their studies which coincides with the period when grades awarded contribute towards the measurement of students overall performance (QCA). *"Stress, especially in third year and now because the QCA counts I've noticed like everyone seems to be in competition, which is different to like second year, first year...We used to all rely on each other... we shared our work and now we don't share our work (Interview 26).* The perceived reason for the competition was clearly articulated by this student

*“They only hand out so many 1:1 degrees they can’t give it to everyone (Interview 31).*

#### **4.7. Teaching practicum tutors as stressors**

Tutors and tutor visits were central to the stress experienced by students on teaching practice. *“They [tutors] are the main source of stress to be honest with you, whatever happens in the school you can just forget about it but whatever they see on the day and what grade you get, that’s what it’s all about” (Interview 2).* The impact of perceived criticism and being the recipient of mixed messages was also stressful. *“Fourth year was absolutely horrible to the point where I nearly broke down in front of one of my teachers that was there. Two tutors had visited me and instead of any constructive criticism they hurled abuse more than anything and it was disheartening because the effort you put in....I got a C1 for mine....my principal said that I was A or B standard based on what he had observed and this guy saw more of me than the tutors did so it was very disheartening when they were cutting you constantly, there was no construction there wasn’t anything really building you as a teacher” (Interview 9).*

The absence of constructive feedback from individual tutors was also problematical. *“I had a tutor and he really annoyed me because like they would come in and go that great, great, great and they would give you all this feedback and he never gave me any constructive kind of criticism” (Interview 19).*

The success or otherwise of the initial assessment impacted on stress associated with future assessments *“Teaching practice is I think very stressful at times especially when ....if it’s the first visit or inspection doesn’t go well it kind of knocks you back a bit and you’ve got a bit of work to do but fourth year now its stressful as well” (Interview 6).*

The unpredictable nature of teaching practice added to the stress. *“The teaching practice itself can be stressful: I mean kids are completely unpredictable, you don’t know what they’re going to throw at you and then you have Inspectors coming in and you don’t know when the Inspectors are going to come in until last minute. I mean Inspectors, there are so many different Inspectors there’s no way to tell what they’re going to be like. I had nineteen classes a week so you’ve nineteen classes and they could come to any of them. They’re only coming to three classes each so the pressure is on, when they come you have to nail your lesson if you want to do well and there’s the pressure of resources then, you don’t know when they’re coming” (Interview 26).*

## **5. Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate that a significant number of the teacher education students

who participated in the study were experiencing high levels of stress and this was reflective of the international studies dealing with similar populations. The gender differences in reported stress are also consistent with international research.

Evaluation in terms of examinations and assessment were significant stressors experienced by these students and appeared to create an unhealthy imbalance and to fuel a performativity agenda in their studies. This can be explained partially by the frequent and rigorous nature of student teacher assessment [6]. This is problematic on a number of levels, not least because recent discourses in education are cautioning against the unhealthy and counterproductive over emphasis on assessment. These participants are the teachers of the future, if education is to break the cycle of assessment and performativity then teacher education needs to take an innovative and more health enhancing approach to assessment.

While much of the students’ experiences of stress was attributable to the academic demands of courses particularly assignments and exams, the practicum placement was also a significant source of stress for many students. The interview data in particular elucidated that the workload associated with teaching practice was a major source of stress. Teaching practice is considered central to teacher preparation as it facilitates student teachers to translate what they have learned into practice [14]. It is however, imperative that this is done in a manner that actively facilitates optimal student learning. The data here illustrate that workload stress got in the way of optimal reflective learning for several students.

The financial stress reported by the students in this study is consistent with similar reports in the United Kingdom (U.K) [3]. Many students in this study similar to their U.K counterparts work part-time in order to support their studies [3]. The need to work particularly for those who work fulltime hours is a concern because of its potentially negative impact on the time and energy available for academic study [3] and as was clearly the experience of some students in this study. In the current climate of fiscal rectitude, which is adversely impacting on the funding of higher education it is difficult to see what solutions can be put forward here. However, it is certainly a significant stressor that is adversely impacting on student health and wellbeing and as such requires careful consideration.

Student stress poses a number of challenges for third level institutions. Many students are reluctant users of support services and delay or avoid seeking help when experiencing symptoms of stress. Supports are now available in the majority of universities for students who are experiencing difficulties. However, these are not readily accessible to many of the students while on practicum placement (a key stressor interval) as these supports

are on the university campus and the students could be placed geographically in any school in the Republic of Ireland. Waiting to respond to student stress may not be the optimal strategy. Rather, given that the profession of teaching is particularly vulnerable to stress and burnout, actively incorporating preventative strategies within the curriculum may be a more deliberate and prime option. Initial teacher education providers need to be more creative and active in assisting student teachers to minimise and manage the stress associated with being a student teacher. Additionally, Ryan et al [19] have found that the internet is potentially an acceptable medium for psychological intervention for university students and may reach students who would be unlikely to seek other forms of help. Given the geographical isolation of many students while on practicum placement, this may indeed be a viable option. Proactive engagement with the practicum as a potential stressor for students is undoubtedly necessitated because students with high levels of emotional, psychological and social well-being have better educational, health, employment and relationships outcomes [20]. Therefore, being able to assess and reduce student stress is important for third level education providers particularly teacher educators.

Given the global concerns about higher education student mental health, there is little doubt of the pressing need to build health seeking capacity to enable students to engage more effectively with their stress and mental health and to de-stigmatise the accessing of mental health support services. Students need to be supported and provided with the necessary awareness, knowledge and coping skills to allay fears in order to encourage participation in preventive health measures. There is need to think creatively so as to maximise opportunities for universities to deliver proactive rather than reactive supports to students in ways that are less threatening, and in order to reach those who might not actively seek such supports. It is imperative that teacher education adopts a health promotion agenda in terms of student mental health by addressing the stress associated with assessment, workload and tutors supervisory practice. The first step is the acknowledgment of assessment, financial situation, workload and the practicum as real and problematic stress catalysts. Demystifying the help seeking process is also essential. There is urgent need to build resilience among students so that they actively address their stress experiences and seek support where necessary.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, teacher education has responsibility beyond subject and pedagogical expertise development. Welfare and student well-

being are also important considerations for teacher educators. Real acknowledgement of the stress and consequent adverse implications for health and academic performance is necessitated. However, acknowledgement is only an initial step and must not stop there. Active stress management strategies tailored specifically for teacher education student to address the determinants of stress that are identified here is urgently required. There is an ethical responsibility here. Teacher education programmes are providing the professional formation for the teachers of the future. The literature is clear that the teaching profession is one where teacher stress and burnout is a significant problem [10, 11]. Therefore, teacher educators should keep an eye to the future and ensure that the professional formation that they provide is aware of and mitigates the deleterious impact of stress wherever and whenever possible. Being a higher education student does not have to be this stressful. This is an area that warrants further research.

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