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Psychological Distress and Self-Reported Counseling Need Among University Students: Evidence of a Help-Seeking Gap in Higher Education

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Abstract

Psychological wellbeing plays a critical role in students' success in tertiary education, yet many students experiencing distress do not engage with formal support systems. This study examines psychological distress and perceived support need among 6,300 undergraduate students in a Vietnamese university using a cross-sectional survey. More than half of students reported moderate-to-high distress, while only a small proportion expressed a direct need for counseling. However, supplementary indicators showed that many students reported difficulty coping without support and were willing to seek help under appropriate conditions. Structural equation modeling indicated a significant but modest relationship between distress and perceived support need. These findings suggest a mismatch between distress, support recognition, and service engagement. The study highlights the importance of proactive, context-sensitive institutional strategies to support student wellbeing and success.

***Keywords**:* Psychological distress; student success; higher education; student wellbeing; help-seeking behavior; student support systems.

Introduction

Student success in tertiary education is increasingly understood as extending beyond academic achievement to include students' wellbeing, engagement, and capacity to navigate the demands of university life. Contemporary higher education research emphasizes that learning experiences are shaped by the interaction between academic, social, and psychological factors, with wellbeing playing a central role in sustaining engagement and persistence (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Thomas, 2012). Within this perspective, psychological distress is not only a health concern but also a critical dimension of students' lived experiences that may influence participation and success in higher education.

The transition to university involves substantial academic, social, and personal adjustments. Students must manage academic workloads, adapt to new learning environments, and cope with uncertainty about future careers, often alongside financial and social pressures. These demands may exceed students' coping capacities, leading to elevated levels of psychological distress (Beiter et al., 2015; Pascoe et al., 2020). Psychological distress has been associated with reduced wellbeing, impaired academic functioning, and increased risk of disengagement and attrition (Auerbach et al., 2018; Ibrahim et al., 2013; Stallman, 2010), potentially undermining students' ability to remain engaged and progress successfully through their studies (Tinto, 1993).

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High levels of psychological distress among university students have been reported across diverse contexts (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Ramón-Arbués et al., 2020). Similar patterns have been observed in Southeast Asia, where students often experience substantial distress alongside limited access to formal support systems (Dessauvagie et al., 2022). Evidence from Vietnam reflects comparable trends, with studies reporting elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and stress among university students, particularly during periods of heightened uncertainty (Minh & Tran, 2025; Pham et al., 2019). While these studies provide important prevalence data, they offer more limited insight into how students interpret these experiences and whether they perceive a need for professional support.

Help-seeking is a key process linking psychological distress to student outcomes, but it is not a single behavior. Rather, it involves multiple stages, including recognizing psychological difficulty, perceiving a need for support, developing willingness to seek help, and engaging with available services (Rickwood & Thomas, 2012). These stages do not necessarily align. Students may experience distress and recognize difficulties without expressing a direct need for counseling or accessing formal support. As such, self-reported counseling need captures only one aspect of a broader process and may not fully reflect underlying support needs.

Research indicates that many students experiencing psychological difficulties do not engage with formal mental health services, even when these services are available (Eisenberg et al., 2007; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Cheng et al., 2018). Barriers such as stigma, limited mental health literacy, and concerns about social evaluation may discourage help-seeking (Gulliver et al., 2010; Vogel et al., 2007). Cultural expectations emphasizing self-reliance may further shape how students interpret psychological difficulties and whether they consider formal support appropriate. Consequently, students may rely more on informal coping strategies than on institutional support systems.

This discrepancy between psychological distress and engagement with formal support is often described as a help-seeking gap. From a higher education perspective, this gap may reflect not only individual behavior but also a misalignment between student experiences and institutional support mechanisms. When institutions rely primarily on self-referral or academic indicators to identify students in need, psychological difficulties that are not explicitly recognized or reported may remain under-identified.

Despite increasing attention to student mental health, evidence from low- and middle-income contexts remains limited. In Southeast Asia, and particularly in Vietnam, research has largely focused on describing levels of distress rather than examining how students perceive and respond to their experiences (Dessauvagie et al., 2022; Minh & Tran, 2025). This limits the ability of institutions to design contextually appropriate support strategies aligned with students' perceptions and needs.

In rapidly developing higher education systems such as Vietnam, psychological wellbeing is closely linked to broader goals of human capital development. Students' ability to engage in learning and develop competencies may be affected when psychological distress is not adequately recognized or addressed (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). From this perspective, the gap between distress and perceived support need represents not only an individual challenge but also a systemic issue for institutions seeking to enhance student success.

This study addresses these gaps by examining psychological distress and self-reported counseling need among university students using a large institutional dataset of more than 6,000 participants. Rather than assuming that distress directly leads to help-seeking, the study focuses on the relationship between distress and perceived need for support, providing insight into how student experiences align with institutional support systems.

The study makes three contributions. First, it provides large-scale empirical evidence on psychological distress and perceived support need in a Vietnamese higher education context. Second, it conceptualizes the gap between distress and perceived need as a student success issue. Third, it offers implications for the development of proactive and context-sensitive support strategies to enhance student engagement, retention, and overall success.

Methods

Study Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey to examine psychological distress and students' perceived need for counseling. Cross-sectional designs are widely used to assess mental health conditions and support-related perceptions in student populations (Beiter et al., 2015; Pascoe et al., 2020; Auerbach et al., 2018).

Study Setting

The study was conducted at Hanoi University of Industry in Vietnam during the 2024–2025 academic year. The institution offers diverse academic programs and provides a range of student support services, including counseling. Universities represent important contexts for examining student mental health due to the multiple academic and psychosocial stressors experienced during this stage (Pascoe et al., 2020).

Data Collection

Data were collected through anonymous online surveys distributed via institutional communication platforms during the 2024–2025 academic year. Participation was voluntary, no personally identifiable information was collected, and all data were analyzed in aggregated form to ensure confidentiality. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's quality assurance unit. The primary dataset was obtained from the main survey, which focused on psychological distress and perceived counseling need. A total of 6,321 responses were initially collected. Data cleaning involved the removal of one duplicated header row and 20 repeated responses, resulting in a final analytical sample of 6,300 valid cases.

To strengthen the robustness of the measurement model and reduce the risk of overfitting, the primary dataset was randomly divided into two approximately equal subsamples. The first subsample was used for exploratory factor analysis (EFA), while the second was used for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM).

In addition to the main survey, supplementary support-related items were collected through a separate survey administered during the same academic period. This supplementary survey involved a different subset of students from the same institutional population (n = 7,282) and was designed to capture broader perceptions of support needs, including perceived difficulty coping without support and conditional willingness to seek help. To minimise respondent burden, these items were not included in the main instrument. The supplementary data were not linked at the individual level to the primary dataset and are therefore used descriptively to provide contextual insight rather than being incorporated into the main analytical model. Further details are provided in Appendix A, Appendix B, and Appendix C.

Measures

Psychological Distress

Psychological distress was measured using a 14-item scale informed by the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS) framework (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). The instrument combines items adapted from the DASS stress subscale (with minor wording adjustments) and additional items developed to capture academic-specific stressors. It is therefore interpreted as a context-specific measure rather than a replication of the original DASS. A validated Vietnamese version of the DASS-21 was not used, as the study aimed to capture institution-specific stressors. The full set of items and their sources are provided in Appendix A.

Direct Self-Reported Counseling Need

Perceived need for counseling was assessed using a single dichotomous (yes/no) item indicating whether students felt they required professional psychological support. This item reflects explicit recognition of need rather than broader help-seeking processes (Rickwood & Thomas, 2012).

Supplementary Support-Related Indicators

To provide a more nuanced understanding of support-related perceptions, a small set of supplementary items was included in the survey. These items captured:

(1) perceived difficulty coping without support,

(2) perceived need for psychological assistance, and

(3) willingness to seek help under appropriate conditions.

All supplementary items included in the analysis (A3, A4, B1–B5) are reported to enhance transparency and to provide a more comprehensive overview of support-related perceptions. These items were collected through a separate survey administered

during the same academic period. In the present study, they are used to complement the binary measure of counseling need and to provide additional context for interpreting support-related patterns. The survey items used in the analysis are reported in Appendix A and Appendix C.

Academic Performance

Academic performance (Grade Point Average [GPA]) was obtained directly from the university's academic management system rather than self-reported by students. This approach enhances the accuracy and reliability of the academic performance measure and reduces potential reporting bias.

Data Analysis

Data analysis included descriptive statistics, reliability testing, factor analysis, and structural equation modeling. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise sample characteristics and key variables. Internal consistency of the distress scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha.

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted on the first subsample to examine the underlying factor structure. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was then performed on the second subsample to evaluate the measurement model using standard fit indices (χ^2, Comparative Fit Index [CFI], Tucker-Lewis Index [TLI], Root Mean Square Error of Approximation [RMSEA]).

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to examine the relationships between psychological distress, perceived counseling need, and academic performance. Given the simplicity of the binary measure of counseling need, supplementary support-related indicators were analyzed descriptively to provide additional context rather than being incorporated into the structural model. Additional statistical results are reported in Appendix B.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. No identifiable data were collected, and all analyses were conducted on aggregated data.

Results

Participant Characteristics

A total of 6,321 responses were collected, of which 6,300 valid cases were retained after data screening. The sample characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Characteristics of study participants (N = 6300)

Variable	**Category**	***n***	**%**
Gender	Male	4034	64.03
	Female	2266	35.97
Current study year	Year 1	2348	37.27
	Year 2	2250	35.71
	Year 3	1702	27.02
Program type	University-level	6059	96.17
	Bridging program	149	2.37
	College-level	92	1.46

Measurement Model Validation

Reliability Analysis

The internal consistency of the stress scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The 14-item stress scale demonstrated excellent reliability, with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.962$. Corrected item–total correlations ranged from 0.603 to 0.853, indicating that all items contributed meaningfully to the overall construct. These results indicate very high internal consistency of the stress scale.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

To examine the underlying structure of the stress scale, EFA was conducted on the exploratory subsample. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.963, indicating excellent suitability for factor analysis. Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2(91) = 39675.349$, $p < .001$). Using principal axis factoring, a single-factor solution emerged with an eigenvalue of 9.336, explaining 64.26 per cent of the total variance. Factor loadings ranged from 0.583 to 0.875, indicating strong convergence of all items on the latent stress construct. These results support the unidimensional structure of the stress scale.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

CFA was conducted on the validation subsample to evaluate the measurement structure identified in the EFA and to examine construct validity. The initial one-factor model showed acceptable incremental fit but did not fully meet recommended thresholds for overall fit. Model refinement was guided by modification indices and standardized residuals, with a limited number of correlated residuals added between conceptually related items. The final model retained all 14 indicators, with standardized factor loadings ranging from 0.584 to 0.883 ($p < .001$).

The refined model demonstrated acceptable incremental fit (CFI = 0.956, TLI = 0.944), while absolute fit indices indicated limitations ($\chi^2/df = 51.02$; RMSEA = 0.089). The high χ^2/df ratio is likely influenced by the large sample size and residual item dependencies, reflecting overlapping content and the hybrid structure of the scale. These sources of localised misfit should be considered when interpreting the results. Accordingly, the model is regarded as adequate for the purposes of this study rather than a definitive representation of the construct. Detailed CFA results are provided in Appendix B (Tables B7–B9 and Figure B1).

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity of the stress construct was assessed based on the results of the CFA using composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). The results indicated that the composite reliability of the construct was high (CR = 0.962), exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. In addition, the AVE reached 0.643, which is well above the minimum acceptable level of 0.50. These findings suggest that the observed indicators share a substantial proportion of variance in common and adequately represent the underlying latent construct. Overall, the results provide strong evidence supporting the convergent validity of the stress scale.

Prevalence of Psychological Distress

The mean stress score for the full sample was 2.97 (SD = 1.05), indicating an overall moderate level of self-reported psychological distress among students. For descriptive purposes, stress scores were grouped into four categories based on the 1–5 response scale: low (<2), mild (2 to <3), moderate (3 to <4), and high (≥4). These categories are used for interpretation only and do not represent clinical thresholds. As shown in Table 2, the largest proportion of students fell within the moderate stress category (34.54%), followed by the mild group (30.97%). A smaller proportion of students were classified in the high (18.63%) and low (15.86%) categories. Overall, 53.17 per cent of students were in the moderate to high range of stress scores, suggesting that elevated stress is common within the sample.

Table 2

Distribution of stress levels among students (N = 6300)

Stress level	***n***	**%**
Low (<2)	999	15.86
Mild (2–<3)	1951	30.97
Moderate (3–<4)	2176	34.54
High (≥4)	1174	18.63
Total	**6300**	**100.00**

These findings suggest that psychological distress is a common feature of the student experience.

Differences in Stress Scores by Year of Study

To examine whether psychological distress varied across academic stages, stress scores were compared among first-year, second-year, and third-year students using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The results indicated no statistically significant differences in stress levels across study years, $F(2, 6297) = 0.039$, $p = .962$. Mean stress scores were highly similar across groups (Year 1: 2.97 ± 1.05; Year 2: 2.97 ± 1.03; Year 3: 2.96 ± 1.06). These findings suggest that psychological distress is relatively consistent across different stages of university study.

Differences in Stress Scores by Level of Education

To examine whether psychological distress differed across levels of education, stress scores were compared among students in college-level, university-level, and bridging programs using ANOVA. Table 3 presents the distribution of mean stress scores across different levels of education.

Table 3

Mean stress scores by level of education

Level of education	***n***	**Mean stress score**	**SD**
College-level	92	3.49	1.21
Bridging program	149	3.42	1.13
University-level	6059	2.95	1.04

ANOVA: $F(2, 6297) = 26.38$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = .008$

A statistically significant difference in stress levels was observed across levels of education ($F(2, 6297) = 26.38$, $p < 0.001$). Students in the college level ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.21$) and bridging programs ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.13$) reported higher stress scores than those in the university level ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.04$). Post-hoc comparisons indicated significant differences between college-level and university-level students, as well as between bridging and university students, while no significant difference was observed between college-level and bridging groups. However, the effect size was small ($\eta^2 = .008$), suggesting that level of education explains only a limited proportion of variance in psychological distress.

Direct Self-Reported Counseling Need

Among 6,299 valid responses, 5.27 per cent of students reported a need for professional counseling, while 94.73 per cent reported no such need. Although psychological distress was relatively prevalent, direct self-reported counseling need remained low. This pattern should be interpreted with caution, as the binary measure captures only explicit recognition of need and may not reflect broader support-related perceptions.

Supplementary Indicators of Support-Related Perceptions

To provide additional context, supplementary indicators were examined. A substantial proportion of students reported difficulty coping with psychological pressure without support and indicated a perceived need for psychological assistance. Specifically, 57.3 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they struggled to cope without support, while 53.8 per cent reported that they needed psychological assistance. In addition, 63.4 per cent of students indicated that they would be willing to seek help if appropriate services were available, and 67.9 per cent stated that they would consider using support services if these were accessible, trustworthy, and confidential. These findings suggest that while explicit recognition of counseling need is limited, broader indicators of perceived difficulty and conditional willingness to seek support are more prevalent. This provides a more nuanced context for interpreting the relationship between psychological distress and perceived support need.

Help-Seeking Patterns Across Stress Levels

To further examine the relationship between psychological distress and self-reported counseling need, counseling need was cross-tabulated by stress level. As presented in Table 4, the proportion of students reporting a need for counseling tended to increase with stress severity. Specifically, 3.81 per cent of students in the low-stress group reported counseling need, compared with 3.43 per cent in the mild group, 5.61 per cent in the moderate group, and 8.94 per cent in the high-stress group. However, even among students experiencing high stress levels, the majority (91.06%) did not report a need for professional counseling services.

Table 4

Self-reported need for professional counseling support by stress level (N = 6299)

Stress level	No counseling need, *n* (%)	Counseling need, *n* (%)
Low (<2)	960 (96.19)	38 (3.81)
Mild (2–<3)	1884 (96.57)	67 (3.43)
Moderate (3–<4)	2054 (94.39)	122 (5.61)
High (≥4)	1069 (91.06)	105 (8.94)

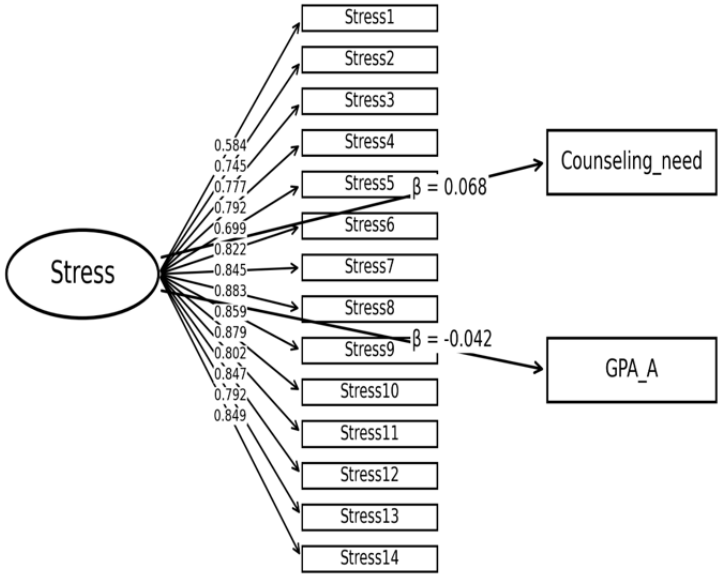
These findings suggest that although higher stress levels are associated with an increased likelihood of reporting counseling need, the magnitude of this relationship remains limited. This pattern should be interpreted with caution, as the binary measure of counseling need captures only explicit recognition of need and may not reflect broader support-related perceptions.

Structural Equation Modeling

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted to examine the relationships between psychological stress and key outcome variables, including perceived counseling need and academic performance. The structural model is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Structural equation model of the relationships between stress, counseling need, and academic performance



Note. Standardized coefficients are presented. All paths are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

The results indicated that psychological stress was significantly but weakly associated with perceived counseling need ($\beta = 0.068$, $p < .001$), suggesting that students experiencing higher levels of distress were slightly more likely to report a need for professional support. Stress was also negatively associated with academic performance (GPA), although the effect size was small ($\beta = -0.042$, $p = .023$).

Overall, both relationships were statistically significant but of very small magnitude, indicating that psychological distress explains only a limited proportion of variance in both perceived counseling need and academic performance. These findings should therefore be interpreted with caution. In particular, the weak association between stress and counseling need suggests that psychological distress alone may not fully account for students' perceived support needs.

Similarly, the weak relationship between stress and academic performance suggests that academic indicators may provide only a partial reflection of students' psychological experiences. This interpretation is consistent with supplementary findings, which indicate that broader perceptions of support need and conditional willingness to seek help are more prevalent than suggested by the direct measure alone.

Discussion

Overview of the Findings

This study examined psychological distress and perceived counseling need among university students using a large cross-sectional dataset. Several key patterns emerged that have important implications for understanding student experiences and supporting student success in higher education.

First, psychological distress was highly prevalent, with more than half of the students reporting moderate to high levels of stress, suggesting that emotional strain is a common feature of the student experience. Second, despite this high prevalence, only a small proportion of students reported a perceived need for professional counseling. This pattern suggests a potential mismatch between students' psychological conditions and their explicit recognition of support needs. However, this interpretation should be considered with caution, as perceived counseling need was measured using a single-item indicator and may not fully capture broader support-related perceptions. Finally, although higher stress levels were associated with increased perceived need for support and slightly lower academic performance, these relationships were weak. This indicates that psychological distress explains only a limited proportion of variance in both perceived support need and academic outcomes.

Psychological Distress as a Student Experience in Higher Education

The high prevalence of psychological distress observed in this study is consistent with previous research documenting mental health challenges among university students globally (Pascoe et al., 2020). Academic pressure, workload demands, and the need to adapt to new learning environments have been widely identified as key sources of stress. From a student success perspective, these findings highlight that psychological distress should be understood as a core component of students' lived experiences in higher education rather than as an isolated or exceptional condition. The persistence of stress across academic years further suggests that distress is not limited to transitional periods, such as the first year, but represents an ongoing challenge that may influence students' engagement, motivation, and learning processes throughout their studies. This reframing is important because it shifts the focus from viewing distress as an individual deficit to recognizing it as a systemic feature of contemporary higher education environments. As such, universities need to consider how academic structures, assessment practices, and learning expectations may contribute to sustained psychological strain.

The Help-Seeking Gap as a Student Success Challenge

A central finding of this study is the apparent discrepancy between psychological distress and perceived counseling need. Although many students reported moderate or high levels of stress, only a small minority indicated that they required professional support. This pattern is consistent with previous research showing that students often do not utilize available mental health services even when experiencing significant difficulties (Eisenberg et al., 2007; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). However, this interpretation should be approached with caution, as perceived counseling need was measured using a single binary item that captures only explicit recognition of need. Supplementary findings provide additional context. In the supplementary data, 33.6% of students reported a current perceived need for psychological support. A substantial proportion of students reported difficulty coping without support (57.3%) and perceived a need for psychological assistance (53.8%). Furthermore, many students expressed willingness to seek help if services were appropriate (63.4%) or accessible and trustworthy (67.9%). However, these findings are derived from a separate sample and were not linked at the individual level to the primary dataset. They should therefore be interpreted as complementary patterns at the aggregate level rather than as reflecting differences within the same group of students.

From this perspective, the observed gap may reflect not only individual reluctance but also limitations in how support needs are captured and recognized. From a student success perspective, these patterns may indicate potential constraints in systems that rely primarily on student-initiated help-seeking. Students experiencing psychological distress may not explicitly recognize or report a need for professional support, which may reduce the effectiveness of reactive service models. Rather than being interpreted solely as a behavioral gap, these findings may also reflect a misalignment between students' experiences and the ways in which support needs are assessed and addressed within institutional contexts. This highlights the importance of developing more proactive and context-sensitive approaches to student support.

Psychological Distress and Academic Performance

The analysis identified a statistically significant but modest negative relationship between psychological distress and academic performance. This suggests that while distress may influence academic outcomes, the relationship is limited in magnitude. Many students appear able to maintain acceptable academic performance despite experiencing emotional strain. From a student success perspective, this finding suggests that academic performance may provide only a partial reflection of student wellbeing. Students may continue to meet academic requirements while experiencing underlying psychological difficulties, which may not be readily visible through academic indicators alone. These findings should be interpreted with caution. While they point to potential limitations in relying solely on academic metrics to understand student experiences, they do not imply that academic performance is unrelated to wellbeing. Rather, they suggest that incorporating additional indicators of student wellbeing may offer a more comprehensive perspective on student success.

Differences Across Educational Pathways

The study also identified small but statistically significant differences in psychological distress across educational pathways. Students in college-level and bridging programmes reported slightly higher stress levels than those in standard university programs. Although the effect size was modest, this pattern suggests that variations in academic pathways and learning contexts may influence students' experiences of stress. From a student success perspective, this finding highlights the importance of recognizing heterogeneity within the student population. Different groups of students may face distinct challenges related to academic expectations, transition demands, and career uncertainty. As such, a uniform approach to student support may not be

sufficient. Instead, institutions may benefit from adopting more differentiated and targeted support strategies that take into account the specific needs of diverse student groups. This aligns with broader calls in higher education to design inclusive and responsive support systems that address the needs of different student cohorts.

Strengths of the Study

This study has several strengths that enhance the credibility and relevance of its findings. First, the large sample size provides strong statistical power and allows for robust analysis of student experiences. Second, the inclusion of students from multiple disciplines increases the relevance of the findings across different academic contexts. Third, the study employed a rigorous analytical approach, combining reliability analysis, exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling. This multi-stage process strengthens confidence in both the measurement model and the structural relationships examined. Importantly, the study contributes to the literature by linking psychological distress with perceived support needs within a student success framework, offering insights that are directly relevant to institutional practice in higher education.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the data were collected from a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other higher education contexts. Second, the use of self-reported data may introduce reporting bias, particularly in settings where mental health remains a sensitive topic. Third, psychological distress was measured using a context-specific, hybrid scale combining adapted DASS items and newly developed items. Although reliability and validity were acceptable, overall model fit was modest, and further validation is warranted. In addition, stress level categories were used for descriptive purposes only, which may limit comparability with standardised thresholds. Fourth, perceived counseling need was assessed using a single-item measure, which captures only explicit recognition of need and may not fully reflect the complexity of help-seeking behavior. Although supplementary indicators were included to provide additional context, these data were collected from a separate subset of students and were used for descriptive purposes only, and are not directly comparable to the primary dataset. As such, these findings should be interpreted as contextual.

Finally, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation of the relationships observed. Longitudinal approaches would be needed to better understand how psychological distress and support-related perceptions evolve over time. Further research should also develop multidimensional measures of help-seeking and explore data-informed approaches, with careful attention to ethical and privacy considerations.

Conclusion

This study examined psychological distress and perceived counseling need among university students using a large dataset from a multidisciplinary higher education context. The findings suggest that psychological distress is relatively widespread, while only a small proportion of students explicitly recognize a need for professional support.

This discrepancy should be interpreted with caution, as perceived counseling need was measured using a single-item indicator and may not fully capture broader support-related perceptions. Supplementary findings indicate that perceived need and willingness to seek help may be more prevalent than suggested by the direct measure alone.

The relationships between psychological distress, perceived counseling need, and academic performance were statistically significant but of very small magnitude, suggesting that psychological distress explains only a limited proportion of variance in these outcomes. In particular, the weak association between distress and academic performance indicates that academic indicators may provide only a partial reflection of students' psychological experiences.

These findings highlight the complexity of understanding student wellbeing in higher education. Rather than indicating a simple gap between distress and help-seeking, the results suggest that support needs may be shaped by a combination of psychological, perceptual, and contextual factors. This points to the importance of developing more nuanced and context-sensitive approaches to understanding and supporting student wellbeing.

Policy and Practical Implications

The findings of this study suggest several implications for understanding and supporting student wellbeing in higher education.

First, the observed patterns indicate that reliance on voluntary help-seeking alone may limit the reach of support services. Students experiencing psychological distress may not always explicitly recognize or report a need for professional support, suggesting the potential value of more inclusive and proactive approaches.

Second, mental health promotion may benefit from being more closely integrated into the broader educational environment. Embedding wellbeing-related activities within teaching, learning, and student engagement processes may help normalize discussions around mental health and reduce barriers to support.

Third, improving mental health literacy may support students in recognizing and responding to psychological difficulties. Providing accessible information and ongoing awareness initiatives may enhance students' capacity to interpret their experiences and seek appropriate support.

Fourth, institutions may consider exploring approaches to early identification and support that extend beyond academic performance indicators. While academic data may provide useful signals, the findings suggest that they offer only a partial reflection of student wellbeing.

Finally, digital and flexible support options may complement existing services by increasing accessibility and reducing practical barriers. However, the design and implementation of such approaches should be considered carefully in relation to ethical and contextual factors.

Overall, these implications should be interpreted as indicative rather than prescriptive, given the modest effect sizes observed and the measurement limitations of the study.

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Appendix A

Stress Scale Items Used in the Survey

Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements using a five-point Likert scale:
1 = Strongly disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Neutral
4 = Agree
5 = Strongly agree

The items were designed to capture common experiences of psychological stress among university students.

Item Code	**Stress scale statement**
Stress1	I often feel confused about trivial matters.
Stress2	I tend to overreact to situations.
Stress3	I find it difficult to relax.
Stress4	I feel that I am thinking too much.
Stress5	I find it difficult to remain patient when I have to wait.
Stress6	I become easily irritated.
Stress7	I feel tense most of the time.
Stress8	I find it difficult to feel calm.
Stress9	I become easily annoyed or frustrated.
Stress10	After becoming upset, I find it difficult to calm down again.
Stress11	I feel mentally overloaded by my daily responsibilities.
Stress12	I feel mentally exhausted because of academic pressures.
Stress13	I find it difficult to stay relaxed even during free time.
Stress14	I feel that small problems easily make me stressed.

Note. Stress scores were analyzed as continuous variables; categorical groupings used in the main text were created for descriptive purposes only.

Appendix B

Supplementary statistical results

This appendix provides detailed statistical results supporting the reliability, validity, and additional analyses reported in the main text.

Table B1

Overview of the survey data collection process

Stage	Description	Sample size
Survey responses collected	Online questionnaire completed by undergraduate students	6321
Data cleaning	Removal of duplicated responses	−21
Final analytical dataset	Valid responses included in the statistical analysis	6300

Note. Standardized factor loadings are presented.

Table B2

Reliability analysis of the stress scale

Statistic	Value
Number of items	14
Cronbach's alpha	0.962
Range of corrected item–total correlations	0.603–0.853
Range of Cronbach's alpha if item deleted	0.958–0.963

Note. The 14-item stress scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency.

Table B3

Corrected item–total correlations for the stress scale

Item	Corrected item–total correlation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Stress1	0.603	0.963
Stress2	0.745	0.960
Stress3	0.774	0.960
Stress4	0.799	0.959
Stress5	0.713	0.961

Item	Corrected item–total correlation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Stress6	0.805	0.959
Stress7	0.818	0.959
Stress8	0.853	0.958
Stress9	0.830	0.958
Stress10	0.846	0.958
Stress11	0.798	0.959
Stress12	0.827	0.958
Stress13	0.789	0.959
Stress14	0.822	0.959

Table B4

Exploratory factor analysis results (exploratory subsample)

Indicator	Value
Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO)	0.963
Bartlett's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(91)$	39675.349
p-value	<0.001
Extraction method	Principal Axis Factoring
Number of factors extracted	1
Eigenvalue (Factor 1)	9.336
Variance explained (%)	64.258

Note. Results support a unidimensional structure of the stress scale.

Table B5

Factor loadings and communalities (EFA)

Item	Factor loading	Communality
Stress1	0.583	0.340
Stress2	0.748	0.560

Item	Factor loading	Communality
Stress3	0.790	0.624
Stress4	0.805	0.648
Stress5	0.706	0.498
Stress6	0.816	0.666
Stress7	0.839	0.705
Stress8	0.875	0.765
Stress9	0.847	0.718
Stress10	0.866	0.750
Stress11	0.803	0.644
Stress12	0.845	0.714
Stress13	0.806	0.649
Stress14	0.845	0.715

Table B6

Convergent validity of the stress construct

Index	Value	Recommended threshold
Composite Reliability (CR)	0.962	>0.70
Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	0.643	>0.50

Table B7

Model fit indices for the CFA measurement model

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
14-item model	3673.18	72	51.02	0.956	0.944	0.089

Note. While incremental fit indices were acceptable, RMSEA indicates some limitations in model fit.

Table B8

Standardized CFA loadings of the refined stress model

Item	Standardized loading
Stress1	0.584
Stress2	0.745
Stress3	0.777
Stress4	0.792
Stress5	0.699
Stress6	0.822
Stress7	0.845
Stress8	0.883
Stress9	0.859
Stress10	0.879
Stress11	0.802
Stress12	0.847
Stress13	0.792
Stress14	0.849

Table B9

Correlated residuals retained in the refined CFA model

Residual pair	Correlation
e1 ↔ e2	0.243
e2 ↔ e3	0.184
e4 ↔ e5	0.326
e11 ↔ e13	0.496
e12 ↔ e14	0.201

Note. Correlated residuals were specified between conceptually related items based on modification indices and theoretical considerations.

Table B10

Post-hoc comparisons for stress scores by level of education

Comparison	**p-value**	**Interpretation**
College-level vs University -level	<0.001	Significant
Bridging vs University -level	<0.001	Significant
College-level vs Bridging	0.657	Not significant

Table B11

Structural model results (SEM)

Path	**Standardized coefficient (β)**	**p-value**
Stress → Counseling need	0.068	<0.001
Stress → GPA	-0.042	0.023

Note. Higher stress was associated with greater perceived counseling need and slightly lower GPA.

Table B12

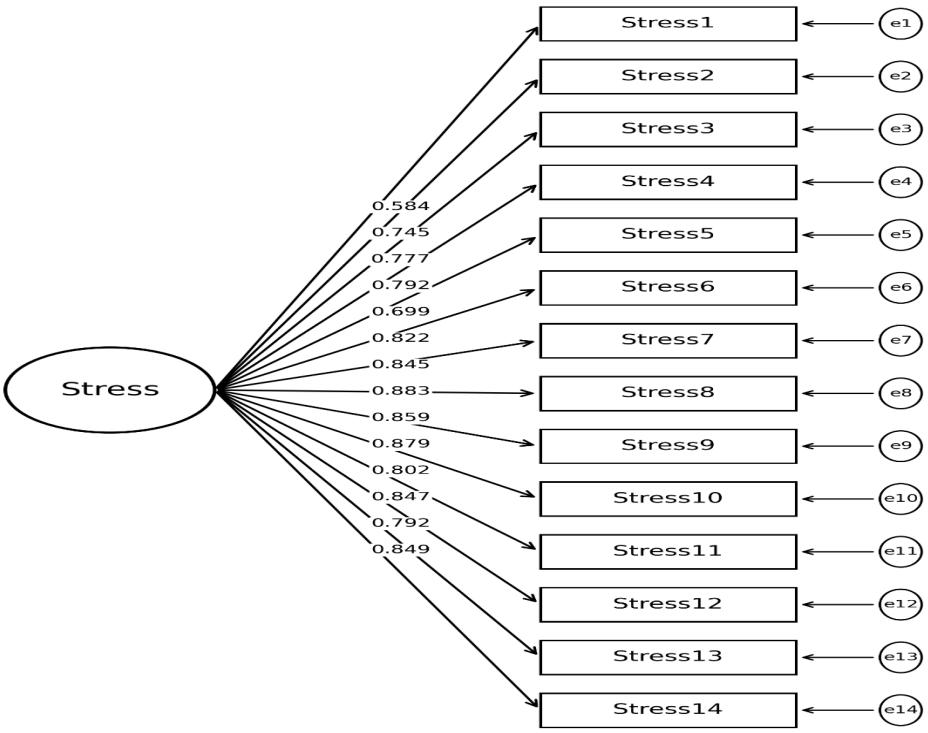
Descriptive results of supplementary support-related items (n = 7,282)

Item Code	**Description**	**Agree/Strongly agree (%)**
A3	Difficulty coping without support	57.3
A4	Perceived need for psychological support	53.8
B2	Willingness to seek help if appropriate services are available	63.4
B3	Willingness to use services if accessible and trustworthy	67.9

Note. Percentages represent the proportion of respondents selecting “Agree” or “Strongly agree”.

Figure B1

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model of the 14-item stress construct with standardized factor loadings.



Appendix C

Supplementary support-related measures

Perceived counseling need was measured using a single dichotomous item (Yes/No), capturing students' explicit recognition of the need for professional psychological support.

In addition, a set of supplementary items was used to capture students' perceived need for support and willingness to seek help. The items were designed to capture perceived difficulty coping without support, perceived need for assistance, and conditional willingness to seek help. These items were not included in the primary measurement model and were used for descriptive purposes only.

Participants responded to these items using a five-point Likert scale:

1 = Strongly disagree;

2 = Disagree;

3 = Neutral;

4 = Agree;

5 = Strongly agree.

Item Code	**Support-related item statement**
A3	I find it difficult to cope with psychological pressure without support
A4	I feel that I need more psychological support at present
B1	I currently feel a need for psychological support
B2	I would be willing to seek help if appropriate services were available
B3	I would use counseling services if they were accessible and trustworthy
B4	Seeking psychological support is necessary when facing difficulties
B5	Timely psychological support can improve my academic and personal life

Note. For descriptive clarity, a subset of representative items was selected for reporting in the main text.