

## **Prevalence of Psychological Distress Among First-Year University Students in Tanzania**

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### ***Abstract***

*This study investigated the prevalence of psychological distress among first-year university students in Tanzania. The objective of this study was to measure the magnitude of psychological distress among university students in Tanzania and to explore the association between psychological distress with institution, gender, and intimate relationships. A cross-sectional design was used to attain the study objective. 374 first-year students from selected universities in Dodoma were sampled using stratified random sampling. Psychological distress was measured using the K10 scale questionnaire and interviews. Data from the questionnaire were descriptively analysed to generate frequency and percentages, while those from interviews were thematically analysed. Inferential statistics, such as the Pearson correlation coefficient and the Chi-test of association, were also used to assess associations between PD, institution, intimacy relationships, and gender. Results revealed that 38% of first-year university students had severe psychological distress, 46.5% had medium levels of psychological distress; only 15.5% were found to have low psychological distress. It was also found that the nature of the institution, interpersonal relationships, gender, family background, and economic status were associated with psychological distress among students. This study recommends that universities prioritise students' mental health by providing adequate resources and support to address these challenges.*

**Keywords:** *Psychological distress, mental distress, mental health, mental illness*

### **Introduction**

The transition from high school to university is crucial to ensure resilience or a reduction in students' failure and dropout rates within the university. Universities need to ensure an effective transition of students from where they come from to university (Stallman, 2008).

The transition phase is often accompanied by challenges that trigger psychological distress among students. These challenges encompass a range of stressors from the weight of academic workloads, pressure to meet academic demands, parental expectations, intrapersonal struggles, financial burdens, demanding teachers, adaptation to an unfamiliar learning environment and fear about the future (Alfiyan et al., 2021). Furthermore, students are confronted with new teaching methodologies such as assignments, article preparations, term papers, examinations, research paper presentations, and frequent quizzes designed to assess and evaluate their learned skills and knowledge (Arjanggi & Kusumaningsih, 2016). Collectively, these circumstances can take a ring on students' mental well-being and emotional and cognitive performance and may lead to heightened levels of psychological distress (PD) (Mboya, 2020; Alipio, 2020; Alfiyan et al., 2021).

Psychological distress can be understood as the consequences of prolonged stress that affects an individual's mental and emotional well-being (NCI, 2012). They occur when the body's coping mechanism against bad stress becomes ineffective (NCI, 2012). Distressed individuals may manifest symptoms such as depression, anxiety, or stress as a response to life events or ongoing stressors from the environment (APA, 2013). Studies show that a significant portion of the global population, ranging from 15% to 30%, faces psychological distress (Monteiro, 2015). This issue is not limited to any specific region, as evidenced by its prevalence among various populations. For instance, in South Africa, a proportion of 28% of individuals experience psychological distress (Pillay & Edward, 2019), while in Ghana, the rate is 21%. In Somalia, the prevalence ranges from 21.6% to 49.1% (Canavan et al., 2013). A study conducted in Tanzania among caregivers of patients with chronic illnesses such as cancer revealed a strikingly high prevalence rate of 66.7% for psychological distress in the context of this country (Malangwa & Mangi, 2022). In the context of the students' population group, empirical research, including studies like Mboya et al. (2020), has indicated that university students tend to experience higher levels of psychological distress than the general population. However, this phenomenon is not limited to a specific geographic area, although it appears to be a world concern. For instance, a study conducted in Australia by Stallman (2008) on the prevalence of psychological distress in university students revealed higher levels of psychological distress

among university students, particularly in the medical field, as compared to the general population.

Similarly, African countries, as evidenced by Hakami (2018), have also reported elevated levels of psychological distress among their students. In one remarkable example, he found that as many as 71.9% of medical students at Jazan University experienced psychological distress. Other studies have corroborated these findings. Kelemu (2020) discovered a prevalence of 53.2% psychological distress among students at Samara University in Northeast Ethiopia. In Tanzania, Onditi et al. (2024) emphasised that a substantial percentage (70%) of student-teachers at Dar es Salaam University College of Education (DUCE) had experienced stressful situations during their time on campus, regardless of gender. However, Mboya et al. (2020) had contrasting findings. He found a lower prevalence of psychological distress, only 14%, among undergraduate students in Northern Tanzania. Thus, it can be argued that the prevalence of PD varies from country to country but also across studies and student populations, which highlights the need for speculation. Higher levels of psychological distress among university students are linked to a range of negative consequences, including poor academic performance, learning difficulties, impaired cognitive functioning, and difficulties with social adjustment within college and university environments (Rothon et al., 2009; Mundia, 2011; Vertigo, 2021). Further studies suggest that persistent feelings of anxiety, restlessness and worry are common manifestations of psychological distress (Jackson et al., 2019; Xiang et al., 2019; Yassin et al., 2021). These factors are linked to first-year students' inability to cope with the new learning environment, financial problems, limited social support and a family history of mental illness (Alipio, 2020; WHO, 2012; Chandel et al., 2017).

In the context of African universities, psychological distress among students has been associated with a variety of challenges. These encompass economic disadvantage, living off-campus, gender-related factors, lack of close friendships, adjustment difficulties, fear of academic failure, lack of motivation, and issues with interpersonal relationships. Others are academic overload, assignment timings, loneliness, procrastination, home detachment, language of instruction, gender, lack of family support, poor socialisation, and time management (Gust et al., 2017; Hersi et al., 2017; Othieno et al., 2014; Muna & Atinkut, 2018).

With such challenges, students are exposed to a distressing environment in which they are unable to adjust correctly academically, socially, and emotionally, consequently leading to psychological distress. Despite the global prevalence of psychological distress and its potential impact on students' well-being, there is insufficient empirical evidence regarding its magnitude among first-year university students in Tanzania. Existing studies (Onditi et al., 2014; Mboya et al., 2020; Lugata et al., 2020; Rugira et al., 2013; Mbatia, 2010; Kaaya, 2014; Onditi, 2014; Mboya et al., 2020) focused on specific mental health issues such as depression/psychological distress in the general population, leaving a gap in understanding the unique challenges faced by university students in Tanzania. If this gap is not addressed, most first-year university students will drop out, have immature academic, social, and emotional development, and poor academic achievement at universities. For example, as the enrolment trend in university increased from 117,652 students in 2018/2019 to 183,098 students in 2021/2022, statistics show 4,318 students were discontinued due to abscondment, examination irregularities, disciplinary proceedings, and postponement of studies (TCU, 2022). Social, academic, and personal reasons facilitated this. These circumstances are linked to students' limited capacity to adapt to university life's academic and social demands (Tarico, 2010). In the long run, these unsolved effects may lead to a shortage of experts for various national developmental sectors. As a result, the primary research assessed the magnitude of psychological distress and explored its associations with institution, gender, and aspects related to intimate relationships. By focusing on these dimensions, this study pursued to contribute valuable insights into the mental health challenges faced by first-year university students in Tanzania.

### **Methodology**

The study involved 374 sample sizes. The sample involved first-year undergraduate students enrolled in the academic year 2022/2023 at two prominent institutions in Dodoma, Tanzania, and the university wardens who were involved since they were dealing with students' welfare at the university. Thus, they were expected to share rich information about the incidence of psychological distress with their students. This study used a purposive sampling technique to choose the University of Dodoma (UDOM) and St. John's University of Tanzania (SJUT) as the study area. Stratified random sampling was used to obtain respondents and

participants. Simple random sampling without replacement (SRSWOR) was used to select samples of colleges from a pool of university colleges. 79.4% of respondents were from UDOM, and the remaining 20.6% were sampled from SJUT. To achieve this objective, the study employed an institution-based cross-sectional study design with the aim of assessing the prevalence of psychological distress among first-year university students in Tanzania. Kessler's psychological distress scale-K10 was used to measure the level of psychological distress experienced by a student over the past 30 days.

In addition to the questionnaire, interviews were conducted to complement the quantitative data. Three hundred seventy-two out of the 374 sample population were first-year university students who filled in the questionnaire, and two individuals were college/university wardens. Three students from the same group were picked randomly to be involved in the interview, the same as the college wardens. The interviews aimed to determine the participant's inner feelings and emotions about the phenomenon. Data obtained were subjected to IBM SPSS Statistics 21 software for analysis. The analysis included descriptive statistics (percentages and frequency) and inferential statistics, including Pearson coefficient correlation and a chi-square association test to examine the relationship between variables. Thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the quantitative data. All ethical considerations were considered throughout the study; voluntary participation, confidentiality, and protection of the participants' rights were ensured.

## **Results**

This section presents the research findings on demographic characteristics, the prevalence of psychological distress, and the association between institution, gender, intimacy relationship, and psychological distress among first-year university students.

### **Demographic Characteristics**

The data related to demographic characteristics of the respondents were classified on the basis of their gender, age, year of study, name of the institution they belong to, college, and state of their family education, economy, and work. Almost an equal number of male and female respondents were involved in the study, with a slight majority being females (50.3%). On the basis of the institution, a total of 374 respondents were sampled from two universities, whereas 79.4% of

respondents were from the University of Dodoma, who were sampled from two colleges, and 20.5% of respondents were from St John's University of Tanzania. 69.5% of the sampled respondents from both universities were from the field of Education, and 30.5% were in the department of Biology.

Moreover, the majority of respondents reported coming from peasants' families, with a small percentage of them reporting coming from families with higher levels of education or a different occupation. 48.1% of respondents' parents' educational backgrounds were primary school level, 31.3% had secondary education, and only a small percentage had a higher level of education such as a degree (8.3%) and master's (1.6%). A relatively small percentage of respondents (30.5%) reported having a fiancé while a majority (69.5%) did not. Accordingly, these demographic features were considered to have the ability to influence individuals' psychological distress.

### **Prevalence of Psychological Distress Among First-Year University Students**

As noted in the introduction section of the study, this study sought to establish the magnitude of psychological distress among first-year university students in Tanzania. Data revealed indicators of psychological distress among students. Table 1 provides a summary of the findings obtained through questionnaires.

**Table 1: Prevalence of Psychological Distress among First-Year Students**

	Frequency of Psychological Distress Occurrence				
	None of the time	A little of the time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time
PD Items	n(%)	n(%)	n(%)	n(%)	n(%)
PD1	29(7.8)	106(28.3)	147(39.3)	63(16.8)	29(7.8)
PD2	70(18.7)	121(32.4)	94(25.1)	65(17.4)	24(6.4)
PD3	106(28.3)	88(23.5)	82(21.9)	71(19.0)	27(7.2)
PD4	79(21.1)	101(27.0)	92(24.6)	60(16.0)	42(11.2)
PD5	63(16.8)	96(25.7)	119(31.8)	58(15.5)	38(10.2)
PD6	98(26.2)	103(27.5)	87(23.3)	47(12.6)	39(10.4)
PD7	69(18.4)	101(27.0)	100(26.7)	60(16.0)	44(11.8)
PD8	33(8.8)	87(23.3)	65(17.4)	81(21.7)	108(28.9)
PD9	76(20.3)	117(31.3)	97(25.9)	46(12.3)	38(10.2)
PD10	104(27.8)	111(29.7)	73(19.5)	39(10.4)	47(12.6)

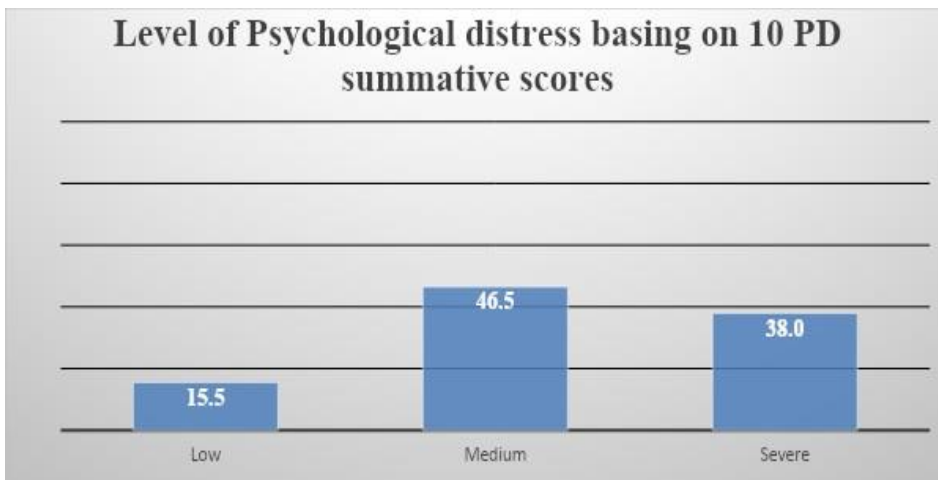
**Key:**

- PD1: In the past 30 days, how often did you feel tired out for no good reason?
- PD2: In the past 30 days, how often did you feel nervous?
- PD3: In the past 30 days, how often did you feel so nervous that nothing could calm you down?
- PD4: In the past 30 days, how often did you feel hopeless?
- PD5: In the past 30 days, how often did you feel restless or fidgety?
- PD6: In the past 30 days, how often did you feel so restless you could not sit still?
- PD7: In the past 30 days, how often did you feel depressed?
- PD8: In the past 30 days, how often did you feel fatigued?
- PD9: In the past 30 days, how often did you feel so sad that nothing could cheer you up?
- PD10: In the past 30 days, how often did you feel valueless?

Table 1 above revealed a significant percentage of first-year university students who reported experiencing psychological distress in the past 30 days. The commonly reported symptoms were feeling tired out for no good reason (39.3% some of the time), feeling nervous (25.1% some of the time), feeling so nervous that nothing could calm them down (21.9% some of the time) and feeling hopeless (24.6% some of the time). Additionally, a sizable minority of them appeared to be feeling restless or fidgety (31.8% some of the time), feeling depressed (26.7% some of the time), feeling of fatigue (21.7% some of the time), feeling so sad that nothing could cheer them up (25.9% some of the time), and feeling valueless (19.5% some of the time). These results indicate that Tanzanian students are not free from the effects of psychological distress. This suggests the need to establish intervention programmes to mitigate the problem.

**Levels of Psychological Distress Based on the K10 Scale**

This study found a substantial prevalence of psychological distress among first-year university students in Tanzania, as highlighted in section 3.3. Therefore, this section presents the level of psychological distress among the selected students. The magnitude of psychological distress was extracted through K10 scale scores. The outcomes of this examination are synthesised in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1: Level of Psychological Distress based on 10 PD Summative Scores**

Results in Figure 1 indicate that a significant amount of first-year university students, approximately 38%, had severe psychological distress, while 46.5% of them reported a medium level of psychological distress. This suggests that the majority of respondents involved in the study experienced a moderate level of psychological distress. In contrast, 15.5% of the involved first-year students were apparently well-adjusted, indicating a low level of psychological distress as compared to their peers exhibiting higher and medium levels of psychological distress. Conversely, similar information concerning the prevalence and severity of psychological distress among students was obtained from interviews. When inquired about the existence of indicators of psychological distress at their university, a college warden provided the following responses:

*Students at our college come in good condition from home but start to suffer after they arrive. Some of them get involved in issues of romantic relationships, others face economic challenges if they run out of loans from HESLB, and some get involved in alcoholism, smoking marijuana or the use of drugs. All of this leads to an impact on their mental health, and probably, they become unable to continue with their studies. (Interview with Warden 1).*

In the same line, students have revealed difficulties in academic and social adjustment. They greatly feared the new university learning environment, such as academic timetable, teaching methodology, nature of assignments, staying with roommates in hostels and language of instructions. One student had the following to say:



*I was very scared as soon as I joined the university; it was the first time I was separated from my parents, and I started living away from them. Those who came before us threatened us that studying at university is difficult. Then, many of us stay in hostels, something that I am not used to at all. When I think about these things, I feel so confused that I want to go home. (Interview with student 1).*

Based on the quotations above, it is argued that students experience challenges related to emotional disequilibrium, separation anxiety, peer influences, new living arrangements, homesickness, adjustment problems and detachment from family. These consequently lead to the emergence of psychological distress, which hinders their academic progress at the university. Overall, these findings emphasise the multifaceted nature of challenges students face in the university environment and the importance of early intervention, clear communication, and support systems to address and mitigate the impact of these challenges on students' mental and overall well-being.

### **Association between Institution and Prevalence of Psychological Distress**

In this study, the chi-square test was employed to examine the link between institutions and psychological distress among first-year students. As noted earlier, the study involved two universities, UDOM and SJUT. At UDOM, COED and CNMS were involved, while at SJUT, two faculties, FANAS and FAHE, were involved. Results of this aspect are summarised and presented in Table 2 below:

**Table 2: Association between Institution and Prevalence of Psychological Distress**

University	College/ Faculty	Psychological Distress			X2-test	P-value
		Low n(%)	Medium n(%)	Severe n(%)	X2-test	P-value
UDOM	COED	27(58.7)	99(71.2)	96(77.4)	5.863	0.053*
	CNMS	19(41.3)	40(28.8)	28(22.6)		
ST. John	FANAS	7(58.3)	17(50.0)	10(55.6)	0.477	0.800
	FAHE	5(41.7)	18(50.0)	8(44.4)		

Source: Field data (2023)

The findings presented in Table 2 displayed notable variation in psychological distress across institutions. Factors attributed to this unique feature were nature, the environment, and the demand for

specific universities. Students from UDOM, basically those enrolled in COED, were found to have the highest rate of severe psychological distress, weighing 77.4%, while those in CNMS reported a significantly lower rate (22.6%). The difference in the prevalence rate of psychological distress between COED and CNMS was found to be statistically significant ( $X^2$ -test = 8.502,  $p = 0.037^*$ ). This suggests that students in COED are more susceptible to experiencing psychological distress than those in CNMS. Nevertheless, there was no significant difference in the prevalence of psychological distress between students in FANAS and FAHE at St. John's University of Tanzania. Both faculties had relatively high percentages of students who reported PD. FANAS consisted of 55.6%, and FAHE had 44.4%, with FANAS having marginally higher percentages in all categories.

The variation in psychological distress across institutions, notably higher rates in COED compared to CNMS at UDOM, suggests that the nature and demands of specific university faculties contribute to varying mental health challenges among students, emphasising the necessity for tailored support systems. The lack of significant differences between FANAS and FAHE at SJUT suggests a shared prevalence of psychological distress in these faculties, underscoring the need for targeted interventions recognising distinct challenges in various academic contexts. In addition, the key informant (interview) revealed reasons related to the association of institutions between psychological distress and institutions. Warden 1 provided the following response:

*In fact, instructional features such as strict academic rules/requirements, university environmental-related issues, strict university rules, and social-related issues can be linked to psychological distress. The college environment can either be good or bad; this means if it is not conducive to learners, it will lead to distress compared to when it's good. If the environment to help students psychologically is not good, then psychological distress will continue to be high. On the other hand, in an institution with high-achieving students from where they came from, its students grow up with the stress of how they will be able to remain as people with good academic results even when they are in college. If they fail, stress will be increased. The other thing is that the location of the university can also impact students' mental well-being; for example, those institutions located in rural areas might lack some access to sufficient resources than those in urban areas. (Interview with Warden 1.)*

The above quotation shows that different institutions may have varying conditions, with some universities having more demanding academic programmes and expectations than others. High academic and social

demands can be significant sources of stress for students, leading to psychological distress. Factors such as social support, campus culture, and access to resources such as counselling services can vary across institutions, leading to differences in the prevalence of psychological distress and its intervention mechanisms. Similarly, the quotation suggests that the location of the institution is associated with the prevalence of psychological distress. It revealed that a university location, be it in urban or rural areas, may have varying impacts on students' mental health. Those from urban may have more access to resources and opportunities but may also be more stressed and competitive, leading to higher rates of psychological distress. Conversely, those in rural areas may have less access to resources and opportunities but may also provide a less stressful and more supportive environment, leading to lower rates of psychological distress. Furthermore, the assertion made in the previous discussion was corroborated by the insights shared by students during the interview sessions. This student had this to say:

*As far as I can see, the environment of the college contributes a lot to students being stressed. For example, here in our college, there are some sessions where students compete for seats. Our class has more students than the allocated room. Thus, if you are not strong enough to compete, you will end up attending lectures while standing all the time. So, it is good that the learning environment be improved (Interview with student 2)*

### **Influence of Gender on Psychological Distress among First-Year Universities**

One of the findings of this study shows the relationship between gender and psychological distress among first-year university students. The findings indicated a significant association between gender and psychological distress. Female students appeared to experience higher rates of severe psychological distress as compared to male students across all universities. More findings are summarised and presented in Table 3:

**Table 3: Interplay between Gender and Prevalence of Psychological Distress**

Gender	University	College	Psychological distress				
			Low	Medium	Severe	X <sup>2</sup> -test	P-value
			n (%)	n (%)	n (%)		
Female	UDOM	COED	19(76.0)	59(78.7)	53(84.1)	1.004	0.605
		CNMS	6(24.0)	16(21.3)	10(15.9)		
	ST. John	FANAS	3(50.0)	3(25.0)	4(57.1)	2.232	0.328
		FAHE	3(50.0)	9(75.0)	3(42.9)		
Male	UDOM	COED	8(38.1)	40(62.5)	43(70.5)	6.984	.025*
		CNMS	13(61.9)	24(38.0)	18(29.5)		
	ST. John	FANAS	4(66.7)	14(60.8)	6(54.5)	0.255	0.880
		FAHE	2(33.3)	9(39.2)	5(45.5)		

Source: Field Data (2023)

The findings presented in Table 3 indicate that in the College of Education (COED) at UDOM, 84.1% of female students who were involved in the study were likely to have severe PD compared to 70.5% of male students. This trend was consistent with the rest of the colleges and faculties from both selected universities, where female students appeared to be consistently experiencing higher psychological distress than their male counterparts, with a higher proportion of females reporting low, medium, and severe levels of distress. In contrast, males were more likely to be well and have lower rates of psychological distress. Remarkably, the results were statistically significant for male students in the COED with a P-value of .025, which suggests that gender may play a role in the prevalence of psychological distress among first-year university students. These findings are aligned with the insight gathered from the key informant who provided the following responses during the interview:

*Students who seek counselling often come with cases related to romantic relationships, and most of them are female students. These are being stressed by various people, especially those present in the college, including fellow students, college staff, and the community around the college, such as motorcycle drivers, who are famous for their names as "BODABODA" and "BAJAJI" drivers. However, this doesn't mean that male students do not have this problem! They do not report much and are not bothered often like the female students. (Interview with Warden 2)*

The quotation above suggests that gender has a direct implication for the prevalence of psychological distress among university students. The warden's statement highlights that student, particularly females, seeking counselling often present cases related to romantic issues. The stressors stem from various sources within the college environment, including fellow students, college staff and external factors such as motorcycle drivers. The findings suggest a gendered aspect, indicating that while male students also face similar challenges, they tend to report less frequently and are not as bothered as their female counterparts. This insight underscores the need to address gender-specific stressors and promote an inclusive and supportive environment for all students.

### **Association between Sexual Relationships and Prevalence of Psychological Distress**

This study also examined the relationship between intimacy relationship and psychological distress. The study sought to find whether first-year students' involvement in sexual relationships could either exacerbate or mitigate the probability of experiencing psychological distress. The assessment was carried out on both male and female students involved in the study. The findings of this assessment are summarised in Table 4 below.

**Table 4: Association between Sexual Relationship and Prevalence of PD among Males and Females in Universities**

Gender	Fiancée	University	College	Psychological Distress			X <sup>2</sup> -test	P-value
				Low	Medium	Severe		
				n (%)	n (%)	n (%)		
Female	Yes	UDOM	COED	4(80.0)	23(76.7)	19(86.4)	1.339	.720
			CNMS	1(20.0)	7(23.3)	3(13.6)		
		ST. John	FANAS	1(100.0)	1(33.3)	2(50.0)	2.000	.572
			FAHE	0(0.0)	2(66.7)	2(50.0)		
	No	UDOM	COED	15(75.0)	36(80.0)	34(82.9)	1.413	.703
			CNMS	5(25.0)	9(20.0)	7(17.1)		
		ST. John	FANAS	2(40.0)	2(22.2)	2(66.7)	4.447	.217
			FAHE	3(60.0)	7(77.7)	1(33.3)		
Male	Yes	UDOM	COED	3(37.5)	8(72.7)	13(72.2)	3.567	.312
			CNMS	5(62.5)	3(27.3)	5(27.8)		
		ST. John	FANAS	1(33.3)	5(83.3)	2(66.7)	3.000	.392
			FAHE	2(66.7)	1(16.7)	1(33.3)		
	No	UDOM	COED	5(38.5)	32(60.4)	30(69.8)	7.658	.054 <sup>a</sup>
			CNMS	8(61.5)	21(39.6)	13(30.2)		
		ST. John	FANAS	3(100.0)	9(50.0)	4(50.0)	3.103	.376 <sup>a</sup>
			FAHE	0(0.0)	9(50.0)	4(50.0)		

Source: Field Data (2023)

The data presented in Table 4 indicate that a female group who reported having fiancées did not differ significantly in terms of the likelihood of PD compared to those who were not in a relationship. This was irrespective of the university, college, and faculty they attended. The implication drawn from this group is that being in a relationship does not count for the prevalence of PD. Thus, it can be argued that other factors can contribute to PD. In the male group, those who were reported to have fiancées were found to have a higher likelihood of experiencing higher psychological distress as compared to those who were not in a relationship. This disparity was statistically significant solely in COED at UDOM ( $p=.312$ ).

Notably, among the male students who were not engaged in a sexual relationship, there was a consistent trend towards a higher prevalence of PD across universities and colleges, with significant emerging only in COED at UDOM ( $p=.054$ ). This implies that first-year male students at the College of Education UDOM who reported not being in a sexual relationship faced a greater chance of psychological distress than those who reported being in a relationship. Remarkably, this trend did not hold among female students who were not involved in a sexual relationship, as evidenced by the absence of significant differences in the likelihood of psychological distress across universities and colleges.

## **Discussion**

### ***Prevalence of Psychological Distress and Association with Institution, Gender, and Intimacy Relationships among University Students***

This study discovered that first-year university students experience psychological distress at varying levels of severity. However, the majority of them have been proven to experience medium and severe levels of PD. Emotional disequilibrium, separation anxiety, peer influences, new living arrangements, economic challenges, homesickness and detachment from family are influence factors for students falling under psychological distress. This study's findings are different from those of Australia, as stated by Stallman (2010). This study reported a PD rate of 67.4%, whereas a study in Saudi Arabia revealed 71.9% of psychological distress (Hakami, 2018), and a report by the World Health Organisation (2018) showed that the USA had a PD prevalence of 76.5%. The variation found here could be due to economic, social, cultural, and environmental factors. Still, other factors could be that these studies are primarily

done in highly developed countries with sound economic status. These findings are also below that of Malanga and Mangi (2022).

They found that almost 66.7% of students in the university in Tanzania. Accordingly, there might be variations due to differences in the study population, the time of the study, and the sample size. However, the prevalence of psychological distress among first-year students in the current study was higher compared to the study by Mboya et al. (2020) in Tanzania at 14%, Pillay and Edward (2019) in South Africa at 28%, and Ghana at 21.6% (Canavan et al., 2013). Saudi Arabia 30.1% (Hakami, 2018). A study in China found that one-third of university students reported experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety (Zhang et al., 2019). Another study conducted in Ethiopia by Kelemu et al. (2020) found that a significant number of students had mental distress. Thus, studies have shown that the pandemic has a significant impact on the mental health of university students, with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and stress reported (Cao et al., 2020; Son et al., 2021). Therefore, this implies that psychological distress is a global concern, and thus, it should be taken into consideration by universities and other educational stakeholders. Furthermore, this study found that the nature of the institution has a great chance of influencing psychological distress among first-year students in various universities. This may imply that variations in academic structures, environments, or support systems among universities may significantly increase or reduce the likelihood of mental health problems among students.

These institutions' supportive environments for their students will enable them to adjust academically and socially fully; they will also develop skills for coping with complex university demands. In contrast, in any institution with a complicated learning environment, too many demanding and strict rules can significantly affect students to the point of developing psychological distress. Institutions that set a welcoming environment for students will experience fewer students who are struggling with psychological distress compared to those with higher demands and complicated rules and regulations. This finding concurs with a study by Richardson et al. (2017), who revealed that students attending universities with higher levels of academic competition, such as those ranked higher in national and the world league tables, were more likely to experience psychological distress. Similarly, a study in Australia found that students attending universities with higher levels of academic and



financial stress experienced symptoms of mental distress (Stallman, 2010). These results imply that the institution's academic and social environment can substantially affect students' mental well-being. In contrast to these findings, Oswalt et al. (2018) found that universities with higher support for students' mental health are associated with lower levels of psychological distress among students. Therefore, social support can be among the measures to reduce the prevalence of psychological distress among first-year students in universities. Indeed, the study found a significant association between gender and psychological distress, where female students appeared to experience higher rates of psychological distress compared to male students across all universities. This may suggest that gender may play a role in the prevalence of psychological distress. The situation of being a man or female may constitute how much an individual may experience distress. These findings were similar to Zhang et al. (2018). This study found that 94.07% of female students had higher levels of psychological distress compared to males who had 89.11%.

Oladeji et al. (2020) suggested that social and cultural factors may play a role in shaping the mental health experiences of men and women as they may experience greater levels of stress compared to men. This situation increases the risk of PD among women. Similar findings were identified in a study on the prevalence of psychological distress among Australian university students by Stallman (2018). These findings highlight the significance of considering gender when assessing the risk of PD and designing interventions to address the phenomenon. Moreover, there was no association between sexual relationships and psychological distress among the female group who reported being in intimate relationships and those without, which implied that being in a sexual relationship does not count for the prevalence of psychological distress. Thus, this problem might be attributed to other factors. However, there was a trend towards a higher severe psychological distress among the male group who were not in a sexual relationship. Mentioning of statistically significant being only in COED at UDOM may imply that male students from this college who reported having no sexual relationship had a greater chance of experiencing psychological distress than their counterparts' female students. This means that intimate relationships among male students contribute to reductions of distress among partners who are relations as they support each other and reduce loneliness by inculcating romantic counselling and partnership in solving

emerging problems. The current findings differ from Jin et al. (2021), who revealed that almost 35% of sexually active participants involved in risky sexual behaviour participated in risky sexual behaviour, and the results of logistic regression showed that mental health problems were associated with risky sexual behaviour after adjusting for confounders. Again, Shifren et al. (2020) found that sexual difficulties were associated with higher levels of psychological distress among women, while Arafat et al. (2018) found that sexually active male students had higher levels of psychological distress compared to those who were not sexually active. The variation observed was due to the fact that these reviewed studies just focused on the negative side of intimate relationships rather than the positive side. However, it is essential to note that the relationship between sexual behaviour and psychological distress is complex and may be influenced by various factors such as cultural norms, relationship status, and individual differences. Therefore, further research is needed to understand the nature of this relationship fully. Interestingly, this study found that having a romantic partner may be beneficial for individuals' mental health and well-being. Individuals without a fiancé are likely to have severe distress compared to those with a fiancé. Thus, being in a healthy, intimate relationship can reduce the chance of psychological distress among first-year students. These findings were consistent with Drapeau et al. (2012), who show that social support, such as support from a romantic partner, serves as a protective factor against psychological distress. However, individuals without a fiancé may be experiencing distress due to other factors, such as financial difficulties or job stress, rather than solely due to their relationship status. Future research could explore the underlying reasons for the observed differences in psychological distress between those with and without a fiancé. Again, it is essential to remember that healthy relationships are characterised by mutual respect, communication, and support. Unhealthy relationships can negatively impact mental health (Whisman et al., 2014). Therefore, individuals should prioritise building and maintaining healthy relationships to support their mental health.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study on the prevalence of psychological distress among first-year university students in Tanzania reveals significant insight into the mental health challenges faced by this population group. The findings revealed a substantial prevalence of psychological distress, with the majority of

students experiencing medium to severe levels of distress. Factors such as emotional disequilibrium, separation anxiety, peer influences, new living arrangements, economic challenges and homesickness contribute to the emergence of psychological distress among students. Moreover, institutions were found to be among the factors influencing the prevalence of psychological distress. Institutions with supportive environments tend to have fewer students experiencing distress, emphasising the importance of tailored support systems in addressing mental health challenges among students. In addition, gender may influence the prevalence of psychological distress. Female students are more vulnerable to a higher rate of PD compared to male students; thus, interventions and support systems should be gender to effectively reduce the overall prevalence of psychological distress among all students. The study found that healthy sexual relationships among students may reduce the likelihood of experiencing psychological distress. Overall, the study underscores the need for comprehensive interventions and support mechanisms to address the multifaceted challenges faced by first-year university students and promote their mental well-being. Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that comprehensive mental health support programs should be established, strengthened and promoted. These support systems should be tailored to the unique needs of first-year students. These programs could include counselling services, peer support groups, stress management workshops, and awareness campaigns to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues.

The study also recommends that educational institutions should enhance their support systems to create a conducive environment for students' mental well-being. This may involve revising academic policies and procedures to reduce academic stressors, providing adequate social support and procedures to reduce academic stressors, providing adequate social support networks, improving access to recreational facilities and extracurricular activities, and fostering a culture of open communication and collaboration among students, faculty and staff. Given the gender difference observed in this study on the prevalence of psychological distress. This study recommends gender-sensitive interventions. Interventions should be gender sensitive and address the unique stressors faced by male and female students. Moreover, the university may provide opportunities for open dialogue and education on gender equality and mental health to foster understanding and empathy among students and faculty members. The results of the current study also highlight the need

to conduct further research into factors that contribute to psychological distress among university students in Tanzania in order to develop more effective interventions to address this problem.

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