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Investigating Stressors and their Impact on Emotional Well-Being Among KPU Students

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Abstract

Despite extensive research on stress among Canadian university students, few studies have examined how intersecting academic and socio-economic stressors affect emotional well-being in diverse populations. This study examined the relationships between these stressors and emotional distress in students at Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU). We hypothesized that academic pressure (H1a), financial stress (H1b), and work stress (H1c) would be positively correlated with poor emotional well-being. Secondly, we hypothesized that social support from family (H1d) and support from friends (H1e) negatively correlate with emotional distress. Finally, we hypothesized that, whereas students who employed the use of positive coping strategies (H2a) negatively correlate with distress, the use of maladaptive coping strategies (H2b) positively correlates with distress. Data was collected from 93 KPU students using an anonymous, one-time Qualtrics survey distributed through a school-based website, SONA, which is primarily aimed to recruit psychology and arts students. A correlational cross-sectional design was employed, and analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS). Significant relationships emerged between key stressors and coping strategies and emotional distress, such as academic stress with distress ($r = .55$, $p < .001$), work stress with distress ($r = .56$, $p < .001$),

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avoidant coping with distress ($r = .54$, $p < .001$), and financial stress with distress ($r = .41$, $p < .001$), whereas family support showed a negative association ($r = -.36$, $p < .001$). These findings may inform interventions for improvements to KPU's mental health and academic support services and promote a more inclusive and responsive campus environment.

Keywords: stressors, coping strategies, emotional well-being, undergraduate students

Investigating Stressors and Their Impact on Emotional Well-Being Among KPU Students

University students face a range of stressors that can negatively impact their well-being. These include academic demands (Linden et al., 2020), financial pressure (Moore et al., 2021), work responsibilities (Levenstein et al., 1993), and difficulties in coping with stress (Carver, 1997). Undergraduate students have stressors that may be compounded by unique circumstances from different domains, such as part-time work, family commitments, and commuter lifestyles.

Although individual stressor domains, such as academic workload, have been examined in Canadian samples (e.g., Linden et al., 2020), there is limited work exploring how different stressor domains influence emotional distress in Canada. To address this, the present study examines this gap by investigating the relationship between six stressor domains (academic, financial, work-related, environmental, social (family and friends), and coping (adaptive and maladaptive)) against emotional well-being among KPU psychology students. The goal is to understand how these stressors influence mental health to improve student support services and promote a healthier, more inclusive university environment.

Academic and Financial Stress

An academic demand is a requirement or expectation in an educational area that takes significant effort, time or special skills. Two examples of this would be writing a research manuscript or requiring intense studying for high stake exams. Academic demands are reported as leading sources of emotional distress in university students. Linden et al. (2020) found that academic workload, exams, and grades were primary stressors in Canadian post-secondary settings. Similarly, Moore et al. (2021) found that financial insecurity significantly affected students' academic performance and emotional well-being, often forcing students to prioritize work over school and leading to social isolation. Chen and Yur-Austin (2016) expanded this view by showing that economic uncertainty led students to delay graduation due to employment instability and financial anxiety. Together, these studies emphasize the burden financial strain places on students' academic success and psychological health.

Work Stress

Research has shown a very clear connection between work stress and emotional well-being. A systemic review of 59 studies found job strain alongside having little decision over work, and workplace bullying predict future depressive symptoms, which confirms a negative correlation between work stress and emotional health (Theorell et al., 2015). Christina Guthier et al. (2020) looked at 48 studies in a meta-analysis that showed burnout increased job stressors quite significantly, which is called the strain-effect, and job stressors also increased burnout, which is the stressor-effect. This vicious cycle significantly impacts emotional distress, which was moderated through job control and support resources. This further suggests the negative effect of work stress on emotional health can be mitigated through job resources.

Social Support From Family and Friends

Social support through family and friends can significantly improve students' mental health (Ruihua et al., 2025). A systemic analysis of 51 studies over fourteen years shows that family and friends support directly leads to reduced stress and better health behaviour with less negative emotions and greater life satisfaction (Fowler et al., 2024; Ruihua et al., 2025). Strong family support is associated with lower anxiety and higher happiness, with less harmful effects from stress (Parungao, 2024; Ruihua et al., 2025). As well, certain studies show family support having significance in anxiety and depression, with friends' support not significantly affecting anxiety nor depression. Overall, research confirms that creating stronger relationships in both family and friendships can be essential for adding to student well-being.

Coping Strategies and Emotional Distress.

While stress exposure is common, rather than using maladaptive coping strategies such as giving up handling an issue, students who use used adaptive coping strategies such as mindfulness or help-seeking reported lower levels of anxiety and depression (Nurius et al., 2023). Similarly, Petruzzello and Box (2020) showed that physical activity helped buffer the impact of stress, suggesting that structured, accessible coping options are essential for reducing distress. These findings underscore the importance of proactive, institution-supported strategies to build positive emotional well-being.

However, research illustrates that maladaptive coping, such as avoidant coping or giving up, link to higher anxiety and depression level for students, showcasing the

ineffectiveness of managing stress and mental health through these coping strategies (Li et al., 2022). As well, Rastogi et al. (2025) furthers the idea that avoidant or passive coping mechanisms are ineffective to manage stress, anxiety and depression rather than healthier coping strategies.

General Stress and Emotional Distress

Several studies support the broader link between stress exposure and emotional outcomes. Othman et al. (2019) found that most students reported moderate to severe symptoms of depression or anxiety, and nearly 80% experienced significant stress linked to personal, academic, and financial factors. Slimmen et al. (2022) similarly showed that perceived academic stress had the most negative effect on mental health, with social and financial pressures contributing to anxiety, depression, and low life satisfaction. These findings reinforce the urgency of addressing stress-related challenges in post-secondary education.

Despite these findings, few studies have examined how multiple similar stressors influence emotional well-being in a diverse, commuter university setting. The current study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between six stressor domains (academic, financial, work-related, social (family and friends), and coping) with emotional distress in students at Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

Purpose of the Present Study

The present study examined patterns of emotional well-being in relation to multiple stressor domains reported by undergraduate students at a small, Western, undergraduate-focused university in Canada. The researchers addressed two primary hypotheses: First, that specific types of student stressors (academic, financial, work-related, environmental, social (friends and family), and coping) are significantly associated with emotional distress. Secondly, work and financial-related stressors demonstrate the strongest correlations with reported distress among stressor categories. Whereas previous research often focused on a limited number of stressor types or small departmental samples (Linden et al., 2020), the present study implemented a broad selection of validated psychological measures across six different types of stressors. In addition, a custom-developed section of environmental stressors was created to reflect the unique experience of students at Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU). It was hypothesized that higher levels of stressors

related to higher levels of emotional distress. Specifically academic (H1a), financial (H1b), and work (H1c) stress will be positively correlated with emotional distress. However, social support of family (H1d) and support from friends (H1e) will negatively correlate with emotional distress. Finally, the researchers hypothesized that adaptive coping strategies (H2a) negatively correlate with emotional distress, whereas maladaptive coping strategies (H2b) will positively correlate with emotional distress.

Method

Sample

Participants were 93 undergraduate students from Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU), primarily enrolled in psychology and arts programs. Recruitment was conducted through the university's Psychology Research Pool (SONA), where students voluntarily accessed a one-time, anonymous survey via Qualtrics to receive bonus course credit. Demographic information was collected for descriptive purposes. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 52 years (M = 21.7, SD = 5.36). Gender was self-reported. Of the 93 students who participated, 90 (96.8%) of students provided gender identity: 15 identified as male (16.7%), 72 as women (80.0%), 1 as transgender (1.1%), 2 as non-binary/third gender (2.2%); 3 participants did not report (3.2%). The three most common ethnicities were South Asian (33.7%), White (29.2%), and Asian (22.5%). This study has been approved though institutional REB with the following protocol number: REB-#2024-03 CBR.

Power analysis using SPSS determined that a minimum of 64 participants would be needed to detect a large effect size (r = .50) with 80% power at α = .05. The final sample of 93 participants provided 91% power.

Instrument

The survey consisted of standardized self-report measures and custom-developed items presented via Qualtrics. Academic stress was assessed using the Perception of Academic Stress (PAS) Scale (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015; a = .83). Work-related stress was measured using the Work Stress Screener – Form B (WoSS-B; Sweetman et al., 2022; a = .79), while financial stress was measured using the Financial Anxiety Scale (FAS; Archuleta et al., 2013; a = .88). Social support stressors were assessed with shortened versions of the Procidano and Heller (1983) Social Support scales for Friends (PSS-Fr; a = .87) and Family (PSS-Fa; a = .90). Coping strategies were measured using a shortened

version of the Brief COPE Inventory (Carver, 1997; a = .90) and a = .83 (avoidant coping). Emotional distress, the primary outcome variable, was assessed using the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12; Goldberg & Williams, 1988; a = .86).

In addition to these validated instruments, a custom 7-item Environmental Stressor Scale was created to assess issues related to discrimination, accessibility, and perceived mental health support on campus (α = .84). While these items were not pilot-tested or validated, they were reviewed for clarity and relevance to the KPU student population. All scale items (except demographics) were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Demographic items included age (open-ended), gender, and ethnicity (categorical response options).

Scale Reliability

Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the standardized scales ranged from α = .65 to α = .90, indicating borderline to excellent internal consistency. Although almost every scale had good to excellent consistency, the lowest Cronbach's alpha was stress with coping, a subsection of the general health questionnaire (GHQ-12) scale.

The environmental stressor scale produced an alpha of α = .84, which reflects strong internal consistency, supporting its inclusion in the final analyses.

Assumptions Check

Assumptions for Pearson correlation—normality, linearity, and absence of outliers—were assessed through SPSS using histograms, Q-Q plots, and skewness and kurtosis values and were determined to be met. No issues with overlapping or highly similar variables, and no statistical violations were detected.

Design

This study used a cross-sectional, correlational design. After providing informed consent, participants completed the demographics section, six stressor scales (five validated and one custom), and the GHQ-12. Data was collected in one sitting and analyzed in SPSS.

Each stressor domain was treated as a predictor variable. Emotional distress, measured using the GHQ-12, served as the outcome. Although Likert-scale items are ordinal, each stressor total was treated as interval-level data, consistent with standard psychometric practice. Pearson correlations were used to examine the strength and

direction of relationships between each stressor domain and emotional distress. Age was treated as continuous. Gender and ethnicity were categorical.

All SPSS analyses were conducted by the course instructor, Dr. Amanda Champion, using output based on the student-designed dataset. Following the initial analysis, Reesha Sidhu and Dr. Champion held a debriefing via Zoom to review the analytic steps and confirm the accuracy of results interpretation.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The mean GHQ-12 scored across all participants was $M = 4.72$, $SD = 2.09$. The highest average stressor score was seen in the perception of academic stress domain ($M = 51.0$, $SD = 9.59$), followed by work-related stress ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 3.61$).

Correlations Between Stressors and Emotional Distress

Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine the association between each stressor domain and emotional well-being scores. Our first set of hypotheses looking at academic pressure (H1a), financial stress (H1b), and work stress (H1c) all had significant results with a positive correlation for poor emotional well-being. Social support from family (H1d) had a negative correlation, whereas support from friends (H1e) showed no significant correlations in either direction. The second set of hypotheses, discussing positive coping strategies (H2a) did not have any significant correlation with distress, while maladaptive coping strategies (H2b) illustrated a significant positive relationship with distress.

Significant positive correlations were found for H1a between emotional distress and academic stress ($r = .59$, $p < .001$), work stress ($r = .56$, $p < .001$), avoidant coping ($r = .45$, $p < .001$), and financial stress ($r = .41$, $p < .001$). These results indicate that students experiencing higher levels of academic stress, work stress, avoidant coping, and financial stress also reported poor emotional well-being.

In contrast, a significant negative correlation was observed between emotional distress and family support ($r = -.36$, $p < .001$). This indicates that students with stronger family support reported lower levels of emotional distress.

The strongest correlation was seen between academic stress and emotional distress scores, followed by work stress, avoidant coping, and financial stress. Visual inspection

suggests a positive linear relationship between each variable. The findings partially support the hypothesis with several key stressor domains, particularly academic stress, work-related stress, financial stress, and family support. These show significant associations with emotional distress. Friend support showed no significant relationship in this sample.

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between six types of student stressors with emotional distress among undergraduate students at a mid-sized, undergraduate-focused university in Canada. While the analysis revealed clear data patterns supporting the relationship, the strength and direction of these associations varied across domains.

The findings were mixed: The previously stated hypotheses saying academic (H1a), financial (H1b), and work-related stressors (H2c) would be significantly linked to emotional distress, were true. The results specified academic, financial, and work-related stressors were positively associated with distress, alongside avoidant coping (H2a). Family support (H1d) was also significantly associated with emotional distress, but in the negative direction, while friends support was not significantly related (H1e).

These results suggest that both emotional and interpersonal resources play a role in shaping students' well-being outcomes, and that certain stressors may have a greater impact than others. One possible explanation for the non-significant effect of friends' support is that students experiencing high distress may withdraw from social interactions, limiting the benefits of available support. According to Cohen and Wills (1985), social support buffers stress only when individuals can access and use it effectively. Carver et al. (1989) also noted that avoidant coping can reduce social engagement, which may explain why friends' support was not significantly associated in this sample. These interpretations remain speculative and require further investigation.

Interestingly, KPU inclusion feelings, measured on a 5-point Likert scale, showed a significant negative correlation with perceived academic stress, indicating students who feel less included at KPU often may experience higher levels of academic stress. Further, the relationship between academic stress and emotional distress showcases that students who report higher levels of academic stress are more likely to have emotional distress. This combination of KPU inclusion feelings with academic stress shows a more complete picture of how students' academic environment contributes to their overall distress level.

Students who feel less included at KPU may experience more stress related to their studies, in turn adding more emotional distress.

These observations suggest how emotional and interpersonal resources factor in shaping students' mental health outcomes. The relationships were supported by scatterplots illustrating positive trends between emotional distress against both academic and work-related stress (see Figures 1 and 2). These visuals reflected the statistical findings and offered insight into how closely distress may align with perceived academic and work demands in students' lives. This pattern mirrors Linden et al.'s (2020) identification for academic workload as the key predictor for undergraduate's distress level, and Levenstein et al. (1993) finding that work-related pressures intensify emotional strain.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the use of convenience sampling from a single university may limit generalizability. Second, although self-report measures directly capture the students' perception, they remain vulnerable to recall bias, social desirability effects, and individual differences in interpreting questionnaire items (Jhangiani et al., 2019). Third, we administered the full 7-item Environmental Stressor Scale developed for this study; however, this measure lacks formal validation and may benefit from further psychometric evaluation and item refinement. As well, the cross-sectional design prevents conclusions about causality between stressors and emotional well-being. Finally, the lowest alpha range was stress with coping, a general health questionnaire (GHQ-12) subscale had the Cronbach alpha at $\alpha = .65$, which is a limitation and a variable that should be interpreted with caution.

Implications for Student Support

The variability in stressor impact observed in this study underscores the need for flexible, student-centred mental health support. Since not all students are affected equally by every stressor, a one-size-fits-all approach may be insufficient. Firstly, KPU should implement a formal process for evaluating and tailoring its current financial literacy workshops, time-management training, and adaptive coping strategy sessions, adding direct student feedback to see what works, for whom, and where the gaps remain. Secondly, rather than generic check-ins, we recommend semesterly, structured or scheduled check-ins between students and academic advisors, school counsellors, or

learning specialists, using brief online surveys, prompts, or emails to flag emerging stressors early on. Finally, incorporating required peer-led discussion groups or micro-learning modules for first-year classes could help students practice adaptive coping in context. This student-driven model could help KPU, and other learning institutions, assign resources to emerging stressors more effectively.

Future Directions

Future research should consider using longitudinal or factorial designs to examine how relationships between stressors and distress change over time or across populations. Including students from multiple institutions would improve generalizability and allow for comparative analyses across demographics. Qualitative methods, such as interviews or open-ended survey responses, could also offer richer insights into how students interpret and manage stress. The custom Environmental Stressor Scale would benefit from continued psychometric development, and future studies could also examine the role of coping styles using moderation or regression to determine whether they buffer or exacerbate emotional distress.

Overall, these findings highlight key areas of concern for mental health support in post-secondary education and reinforce the importance of tailored, evidence-informed programming to meet the diverse needs of students.

Conclusion

By employing validated scales and self-report data, this study extends existing research by investigating how academic, social, and institutional stressors correlate with emotional stress among post-secondary students. The findings for the hypotheses are mixed, with the first set of hypotheses being mostly supported as academic stress (H1a), financial stress (H1b), work-related stress (H1c) were all supported. In addition, the hypotheses of family support (H1d) showed a significant negative emotional distress correlation whereas friends' support (H1e) showed no significant association in this sample. In the second set of hypotheses, maladaptive coping strategies (H2b) was significantly linked to elevated emotional distress. Although isolating specific psychological factors remains a challenge, these results offer insight into how universities might approach mental health more systemically.

Future implementation of similar research should focus on increasing scale reliability, expanding population diversity, and improving the tools used to measure institutional and environmental pressures. Rather than relying solely on academic performance indicators or broad mental-health statistics, students' well-being ought to be assessed by a range of valid, student-centred measures that reflect the complexities of campus life (Slimmen et al., 2022). Continued research in this area is needed to guide meaningful, evidence-based improvements to post-secondary mental-health initiatives.

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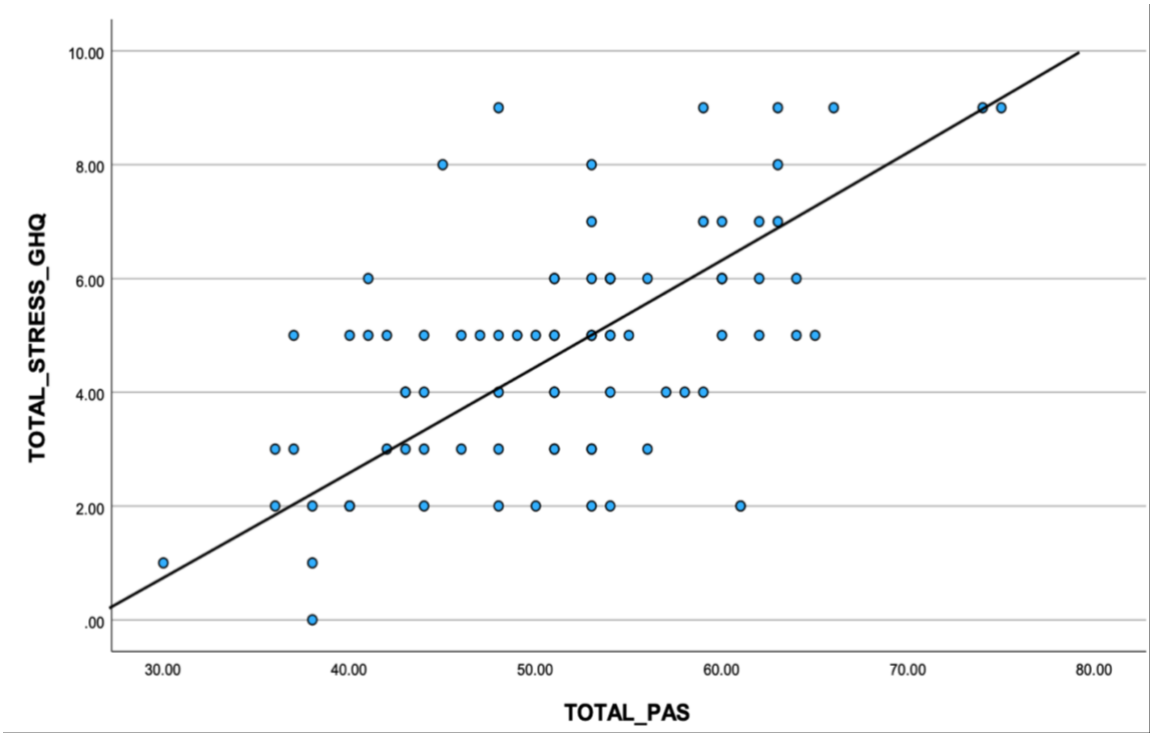
Wo, N. K. H., Anderson, K. K., Wylie, L., & MacDougall, A. (2020). The prevalence of distress, depression, anxiety, and substance use issues among Indigenous post-

secondary students in Canada. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, *57*(2), 263–274. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461519861824

Figures

Figure 1

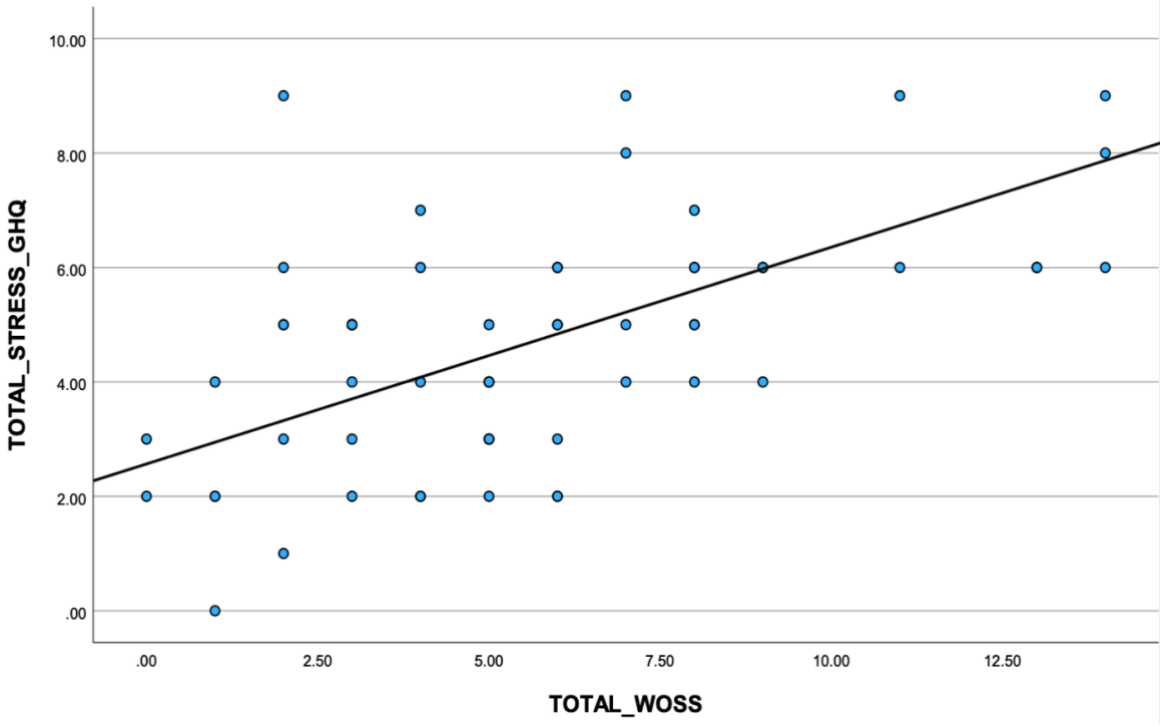
Scatterplot of emotional distress (GHQ-12) and academic stress (PAS)



Note. $N = 87$. Higher perceived academic stress scores indicate greater emotional distress scores. A positive correlation was observed, $r = .594$, $p = .001$.

Figure 2

Scatterplot of emotional distress (GHQ-12) and financial stress (FAS)



Note. $N = 87$. Higher emotional distress score indicates greater work anxiety. A positive correlation was found, $r = .557$, $p = .001$.

Appendix

Custom Created Environment Scale Used in Survey

A1. Custom Environmental Stressor Scale (KPU-specific)

This scale measured students' perception of their environment-related stress levels, using the 5-point Likert scale

Q1. Do you like KPU's environment?

Q2. Do you feel included at KPU?

Q3. How satisfied are you with your decision to attend KPU?

Q4. Has KPU provided enough support for you related to mental health?

Q5. Has KPU met your academic expectations?

Q6. Has KPU met your social expectations?

Q7. Do you feel discrimination (race, gender, disability, etc.) has impacted both your academic and social experience at KPU?

Note. Item Q2 was reverse coded. All items were created collaboratively for this study. Developed by first author and reviewed by course instructor; full reference appears in the References section.