

RGC Ref. No.:
 UGC/FDS11/H09/20
 (please insert ref. above)

RESEARCH GRANTS COUNCIL
COMPETITIVE RESEARCH FUNDING SCHEMES FOR
THE LOCAL SELF-FINANCING DEGREE SECTOR

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT SCHEME (FDS)

Completion Report
(for completed projects only)

Submission Deadlines:

1. Auditor's report with unspent balance, if any: within **six** months of the approved project completion date.
2. Completion report: within **12** months of the approved project completion date.

Part A: The Project and Investigator(s)

1. Project Title

A study on the academic stress of social work students in their fieldwork placement

2. Investigator(s) and Academic Department(s) / Unit(s) Involved

Research Team	Name / Post	Unit / Department / Institution
Principal Investigator	Dr. CHU Cheong-hay/ Associate Dean	Felizberta Lo Padilla Tong School of Social Sciences, Caritas Institute of Higher Education
Co-Investigator(s)	Dr. KWOK LAI Sylvia Yuk-ching/ Associate Professor	Department of Social and Behavioural Sciences, City University of Hong Kong
	Prof. TSUI Ming-sum/ Dean	Felizberta Lo Padilla Tong School of Social Sciences, Caritas Institute of Higher Education
	Mr. LAU Sik-wai/ Programme Leader cum Lecturer	Felizberta Lo Padilla Tong School of Social Sciences, Caritas Institute of Higher Education

3. Project Duration

	Original	Revised	Date of RGC / Institution Approval (must be quoted)
Project Start Date	01/01/2021	N/A	N/A
Project Completion Date	31/12/2022	30/06/2023	20/09/2022
Duration (<i>in month</i>)	24	30	20/09/2022
Deadline for Submission of Completion Report	31/12/2023	30/6/2024	20/09/2022

4.4 Please attach photo(s) of acknowledgement of RGC-funded facilities / equipment.

Part B: The Final Report

5. Project Objectives

5.1 Objectives as per original application

1. identify the nature of the perceived academic stress of social work students and its manifestation in their placement;
2. examine the relationship between the level of perceived academic stress with their background and contextual factors;
3. study the coping strategies of students in relation to the perceived academic stress and the students' satisfaction towards the placement, their well-being and professional identity
4. assess the impact of students' perceived academic stress upon their coping capacity, satisfaction with the support received, their well-being and professional identity.

5.2 Revised objectives

Date of approval from the RGC: N/A

Reasons for the change:

- 1.
- 2.
3. ..

5.3 Realisation of the objectives

(Maximum 1 page; please state how and to what extent the project objectives have been achieved; give reasons for under-achievements and outline attempts to overcome problems, if any)

All the objectives that were set out have been accomplished. The study aimed to collect approximately 324 questionnaires and conduct 30 in-depth interviews to investigate the academic stress of social work degree students during their first placement. Ultimately, 399 questionnaires were collected and 30 in-depth interviews were conducted. The study participants were drawn from all local social work degree training institutes except one, covering almost the entire population.

The study collected data on the demographic background of students, their exhibited academic stress, their satisfaction with the placement and the support they received, their pressure during the placement, and the coping methods they adopted. Additionally, the level of well-being of the students and their extent of professional identity were measured. Objectives 1 and 3 were achieved by analyzing the data collected through statistical packages and identifying the themes emerged from the detailed elaboration of the placement experience of the above variables during the in-depth interviews.

Objectives 2 and 4 were achieved by tabulating the descriptive data of the variables, the correlation relationships among various variables, and analyzing and verifying the hypotheses and the mediation path postulated. The explanation over the correlation relationships identified is exemplified via the qualitative study.

5.4 Summary of objectives addressed to date

Objectives <i>(as per 5.1/5.2 above)</i>	Addressed <i>(please tick)</i>	Percentage Achieved <i>(please estimate)</i>
1. identify the nature of the perceived academic stress of social work students and its manifestation in their placement;	✓	100 %
2. examine the relationship between the level of perceived academic stress with their background and contextual factors;	✓	100 %
3. study the coping strategies of students in relation to the perceived academic stress and the students' satisfaction towards the placement, their well-being and professional identity	✓	100 %
4. assess the impact of students' perceived academic stress upon their coping capacity, satisfaction with the support received, their well-being and professional identity.	✓	100 %

6. Research Outcome

6.1 Major findings and research outcome

(Maximum 1 page; please make reference to Part C where necessary)

The study gathered 399 valid responses from social work degree students undergoing their first placement and conducted 30 in-depth interviews with those experiencing high stress levels. The quantitative data revealed that students experienced a moderate level of perceived academic stress (PAS), averaging 3 points on a 5-point Likert scale. The three sub-dimensions of PAS, namely the Academic Expectation Sub-scale (AES), Faculty Workload and Examination Sub-scale (FEW), and Academic Self-perception Sub-scale (ASP), had comparable median scores. The major stresses were coming from “too much assignments” and “excessive workload”. Interestingly, no correlation was found between PAS and age, gender, or educational background.

The PAS scores corresponded with the measures for placement pressure, with most items scoring around 3 (1 = least, 5 = greatest), except for “assignments” and “tackling placements and others simultaneously” (both scoring above 4). Furthermore, a majority (73.9%) of respondents reported an “overwhelming workload” during their placement (scoring 4 out of 5, where 5 = extremely excessive). Overall, the placement pressure was high, with a score of 7.8 out of 10.

Qualitative data supported these findings. Interviewees expressed difficulty managing their workload and assignments, feeling overwhelmed by the concurrent demands of study and placement. Some students felt their knowledge and skills were inadequate for the tasks assigned, leading to a loss of confidence and increased stress, especially when comparing themselves to others. In some instances, interviewees struggled to establish positive relationships with their colleagues or placement staff. The absence of agency guidance and insufficient support from family members and supervisors further intensified their stress.

Survey results indicated that students were generally satisfied with the placement arrangements, except for pre-placement training and school support. They employed three coping strategies equally: avoidance coping, task-oriented coping, and emotion-oriented coping. In-depth interview respondents reported that their mental and physical health were adversely affected, with disturbances in sleep, eating, and emotional stability. Common coping activities included seeking support from supervisors/teachers, chatting with peers, exercising, and eating. On average, respondents’ well-being, as measured by the General Health Questionnaire, slightly deteriorated, with scores falling between ‘worse than usual’ and ‘same as usual’.

Regarding professional identity, approximately 60% of survey respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that they identified as social workers. However, only about half felt adequately prepared for the role. This finding concurs with feedback from in-depth interviews: while respondents were keen to join the profession, they harboured doubts about their capability to perform the work effectively. Subsequent mediation analysis revealed that coping strategy effectively mediated between PAS and both placement satisfaction and professional identity. However, it did not significantly mediate between PAS and well-being.

All three hypotheses postulated in this study were confirmed at the 1% level of significance: higher student stress levels correlate with lower placement satisfaction, lower student well-being, and weaker professional identity.

The study results suggested that social work students undergoing their first placement require additional support in pre-placement training and school assistance. The substantial workload and the simultaneously handling of study and placement pose significant challenges. It is crucial to foster a positive placement experience for these students to nurture their professional identity. A collaborative effort is needed among supervisors, fieldwork co-ordinators and agency staff to review the placement arrangement and better prepare students for their professional journey.

6.2 Potential for further development of the research and the proposed course of action (*Maximum half a page*)

The study can be extended to cover students having their second placement to compare the results collected. Alternatively, a follow-up study can be conducted to investigate if the cohort of students exhibited similar issues of concerns in their second placement.

The current study focuses on the reasons/ concerns of student who were more stressed. Instead, the focus can be shifted to interview those who have successfully adapted to the placement and identify the factors contributing to their success.

There was a strong view from students that there were excessive assignment, and they were overloaded. They could not cope with the demands in handling the study and placement concurrently. It might be necessary to conduct a benchmarking study to determine the optimum level of study load by soliciting the feedback from different stakeholders, including students, teachers and fieldwork supervisors.

7. Layman's Summary

(Describe in layman's language the nature, significance and value of the research project, in no more than 200 words)

The study revealed that social work students exhibited a moderate level of stress in their first placement. The pressure in placement was also high. In general, students were satisfied with the fieldwork arrangement. However, they found that the workload was overwhelming, and it was demanding for them to handle study and placement together. The study also disclosed that different coping methods have been adopted by students to overcome the challenges and their well-being was slightly hampered. Students were able to develop their professional identity with social work, although they worried if they were well-equipped for the role. To better nurture the next generation of social workers, the pre-placement training and school support for placement should be strengthened. Apart from equipping students with skills in handling stress and time management, training institutes should review and enhance their support for placement students. Further studies by benchmarking and inviting different stakeholder to devise an optimum level of workload in placement to facilitate student learning should be explored.

Part C: Research Output

8. Peer-Reviewed Journal Publication(s) Arising Directly From This Research Project

(Please attach a copy of the publication and/or the letter of acceptance if not yet submitted in the previous progress report(s). All listed publications must acknowledge RGC's funding support by quoting the specific grant reference.)

The Latest Status of Publications				Author(s) (denote the corresponding author with an asterisk *)	Title and Journal / Book (with the volume, pages and other necessary publishing details specified)	Submitted to RGC (indicate the year ending of the relevant progress report)	Attached to this Report (Yes or No)	Acknowledged the Support of RGC (Yes or No)	Accessible from the Institutional Repository (Yes or No)
Year of Publication	Year of Acceptance (For paper accepted but not yet published)	Under Review	Under Preparation (optional)						
			2						

Two papers are still in the preparatory stage, which we hope to complete and submit by the end of 2024. The major reasons for the delay include challenges in collecting data during the COVID-19 and the turnover of the research assistants and supporting staff members. Additionally, we have encountered difficulties in reviewing the data and the path analysis. We are now editing the draft papers and seeking advice from the team for final review.

9. Recognized International Conference(s) In Which Paper(s) Related To This Research Project Was / Were Delivered

(Please attach a copy of each conference abstract)

We planned to attend three conferences to present the findings. However, due to delays in the data collection caused by COVID-19, the findings were not ready for presentation in 2021.

Consequently, we did not submit proposals to the Conference by Council on Social Work Education, 2021 (USA) and Asia-Pacific Joint Regional Social Work Conference, 2021(Asia-Pacific). As an alternative, we presented at two other conferences which are listed below:

Month / Year / Place	Title	Conference Name	Submitted to RGC (indicate the year ending of the relevant progress report)	Attached to this Report (Yes or No)	Acknowledged the Support of RGC (Yes or No)	Accessible from the Institutional Repository (Yes or No)
Mar 2021 Hong Kong	Sharing on Fieldwork Co-ordinating during COVID-19	Forum on Fieldwork Coordination	2023	No abstract as it was a discussion forum	Yes	No
Oct 2022 Seoul South Korea	Academic Stress of Social Work Students in Their First Placement During COVID-19	The Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education and Social Development 2022	2023	Yes	Yes	No
June 2024	Perceived Academic Stress in Social Work First Placement: Challenges and Opportunities	2024 EASP&FISS Joint Conference Best Practices of Social Policy in Turbulent Times	2024	Yes	Yes	No
July 2024	Perceived Academic Stress in Social Work First Placement: Challenges and Opportunities	Research Seminar	2024	Yes	Yes	No

10. Whether Research Experience And New Knowledge Has Been Transferred / Has Contributed To Teaching And Learning

(Please elaborate)

The study shed light on the design over fieldwork arrangement and also the concerns regarding fieldwork supervision. Based on the study, the arrangement for fieldwork and related preparatory workshops would be adjusted. The training for fieldwork supervisors would also be enhanced by strengthening the components over the factors contributing to academic stress and what and how support to students would be rendered.

11. Student(s) Trained

(Please attach a copy of the title page of the thesis)

Name	Degree Registered for	Date of Registration	Date of Thesis Submission / Graduation
	Bachelor of Social Sciences	2020	Date of graduation: 2024 No thesis
	Bachelor of Social Sciences	2020	Date of graduation: 2024 No thesis
	Bachelor of Social Sciences	2020	Date of graduation: 2024 No thesis

12. Other Impact

(e.g. award of patents or prizes, collaboration with other research institutions, technology transfer, teaching enhancement, etc.)

- The research is conducted in collaboration with a Professor in City University of Hong Kong
- The preparatory workshop for fieldwork will be enhanced by incorporating elements on managing academic stress and possible coping methods
- The component on identifying and providing support for students' academic stress would be strengthened.
- The workload of students in their placement would be reviewed to leave them more room for assignment completion and also reflecting over their learning experience.

13. Statistics on Research Outputs

	Peer-reviewed Journal Publications	Conference Papers	Scholarly Books, Monographs and Chapters	Patents Awarded	Other Research Outputs (please specify)	
No. of outputs arising directly from this research project	2 (under preparation)	2	1 book chapter submitted but not accepted		Type	No.
					Research Seminar for colleagues within the University (15/7/2024)	1

14. Public Access Of Completion Report

(Please specify the information, if any, that cannot be provided for public access and give the reasons.)

Information that Cannot Be Provided for Public Access	Reasons
NA	