

Correlation between psychological distress and academic self-efficacy of Assiut University students

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Abstract

Psychological distress has a negative impact on academic self-efficacy of university students. **Aim:** To assess the correlation between psychological distress and academic self-efficacy of Assiut University students. **Design:** A descriptive correlational design was utilized. **Setting:** The study was carried out at six faculties were chosen at random method, four of them were practical (faculties of nursing, agriculture, computers and information and sugar industry technology) and two of theoretical (faculties of education and faculty of early childhood education). **Methods:** Stratified sampling technique was used. Accordingly, 400 students were included in the study. The tools included demographic characteristics of students, kessler psychological distress scale and academic self-efficacy scale. **Results:** The findings revealed that 33.25 % and 35.25 % of students had high and very high levels of psychological distress respectively, while 72.0% of students had a moderate degree of academic self-efficacy. There was a negative non-statistically significant correlation between psychological distress and academic self-efficacy ($r=-0.061$, $p=0.222$). **Conclusion:** Psychological distress was negatively and non-significantly correlated with academic self-efficacy of Assiut University students. **Recommendations:** Designing and implementing psychoeducational program interventions for students to reduce psychological distress and improve their academic self-efficacy.

Keywords: Academic self-efficacy, Psychological distress & Students.

Introduction

Studying at university can be a life-changing experience however; it can also be a stressful experience for many students (Thomas et al., 2019). Compared to the overall population, university students had greater rates of psychological distress. However, there is very little research looking into the mental health of students (da Silva et al., 2023).

In this respect, Slavinsk et al., (2021) stated that university students often had to deal with increasing independence as well as possible separation from family and friends. It has been frequently demonstrated that stress has a negative effect on college students' academic performance.

Psychological distress is an adverse reaction to stress. An unfavorable situations are perceived and interpreted as the cause of this emotional reaction. This reaction can cause unpleasant emotions or physical symptoms like discomfort, pain, or worry. When combined with other symptoms like feeling helpless, experiencing emotional changes and feeling uneasy, it can be extremely dangerous for a person (Mahyub-Rayaa & Baya-Essayahi, 2021).

Zbidat et al., (2020) reported that depression and anxiety frequently decrease memory and concentration, making it more challenging to acquire new knowledge and handle exam situations. This will

often serve to reinforce feelings of helplessness and inadequacy and for many people, it will continue in a cycle of worry and depression.

Self-efficacy is a cognitive judgment of abilities based on mastery criteria in which people's perceptions of their own self-efficacy have an impact on their behavior choices, including what they pursue, how much effort they put into it and how long they persist after experiencing setbacks and difficulties (Capa-Aydin et al., 2018).

In this respect, Tus (2020) reported that the way people feel, think, behave and motivate themselves is influenced by their level of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is not defined by actual power or ability, but rather by the conviction that one has the potential to affect one's own outcomes. Academic self-efficacy, or confidence in one's capacity to conquer academic difficulties, has been recognized as one such important attribute (Abood et al., 2020). Academic self-efficacy at the academic level has an impact on both academic performance and academic aspirations. (Alhadabi & Karpinski, 2020).

Ruz et al., (2018) reported that, stress can have a major negative impact on a student's academic performance (e.g., reduced ability to pay attention or to memorize, less dedication to study and more absences from college). Also, Morales-Rodriguez &

Pérez-Mármol (2019) revealed that stress and anxiety decrease self-efficacy judgments of students and other general self-efficacy measures were not found to be predictive of any college outcomes while academic self-efficacy has been consistently shown to predict grades and persistence in college. On the other hand, **Mahoney & Benight (2019)** stated that, self-efficacy influences how people perceive external demands, regulates the relationship between external stressors and psychological stress and has been found as strategy for coping with stress. Students with low self-efficacy are more likely to stress over their academic achievement (**Travis et al.,2020**).

Significance of the study:

Psychological distress has a negative effect on academic self-efficacy of university students. It was found that students with high psychological distress have lower academic achievement than students who have less psychological distress (**Abid et al., 2021**).

A study conducted by **Fawzy & Hamed (2017)** reported that Egyptian undergraduate medical students had a significant prevalence of psychological stress (59.9%) which led to depression (65%) and anxiety (73%). A study with 442 medical students from Fayoum University (Egypt) also revealed higher estimations of depression (60.8%) and anxiety (64.3%) (**Wahed & Hassan, 2017**).

A growing body of research shown that psychological distress can negatively affect academic achievement, academic performance and college dropout rates (**Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018**).

Also, **Sharp & Theiler, (2018)** reported that it is important to determine the level of psychological distress and develop appropriate intervention strategies. So, the present study was carried out to assess the correlation between psychological distress and academic self-efficacy among university students which essential for developing efficient screening and intervention programs to prevent psychological distress among them.

Aim of the study: The current study aimed to assess the correlation between psychological distress and academic self-efficacy of Assiut University students.

Research questions: The following questions were addressed in this study:

- Q1.** What are the psychological distress and academic self-efficacy levels of Assiut University students?
- Q2.** Is there correlation between psychological distress and academic self-efficacy of Assiut University students?

Research design:

A descriptive, correlational design was utilized in the current study.

Setting:

The current study was carried out at six randomly chosen faculties in Assiut University, included (theoretical faculties as faculty of education and faculty of early childhood education and practical faculties as faculty of nursing, agriculture, computers and information and sugar industry technology). Before the study began, administrative approval was obtained from the deans of the faculties involved.

Sample size:

During the academic year 2021–2022, Assiut University had 83427 students in total. While there were 14451 students in the selected faculties, the estimated sample size was found to be 383 students using the software EPI/Info, (version 3,3) with a 95% confidence interval (CI). The total sample size was 400 after adding 20% more students to account for dropouts.

Sample technique

Assiut University includes (20) faculties divided into (14) practical colleges and (6) theoretical colleges; this study was conducted at (6) faculties which selected randomly.

- Proportional sample was taken according to students' number in each faculty.
- A stratified sample was used for this study for the selection group of students from the four academic years during the academic year 2021-2022, then the group of each academic year was selected randomly by lottery method which included firstly, the researcher wrote the numbers of desks in the small piece of papers and mixed it before beginning to make selection then picking the piece of papers randomly, until reached to the selected sample size.

Inclusion criteria:

Students who agree to participate in the study.

Data Collection Tools: The following tools were used to collect data:

Tool (1): Demographic characteristics of the students:

This tool was developed by the researcher in an Arabic language, it included age (years), gender, residence, name of faculty and academic years.

Tool (2) Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10):

The Kessler psychological distress scale; was created by **Kessler et al., (2002)** in an English language and translated into an Arabic language by **Lahcene & Chafika, (2020)**. It consists of 10 items with each item having five responses (1-5) on a likert scale. It estimates psychological distress based on depression and anxiety that a person has experienced within the last four weeks. The range of total scores is 10 to 50 to determine the degree of psychological distress, by using the following scores are classified: 10 to 15

scores as "low distress," 16 to 21 as "moderate," 22 to 29 as "high" and 30 to 50 as "very high".

Tool (3) Academic Self-Efficacy Scale of the students (ASE):

The academic self-efficacy scale is an instrument created by (Shalol, 2021) in an Arabic language to measure academic self-efficacy. It contained 26 item, each item on the ASE was scored along a five-point likert scale, ranges from score 1 (Very low degree) and score 5 (Very high degree). The total score ranges from 26 to 130. Arithmetic averages to determine the level of academic self-efficacy as follows:

- From 1 to less than 2.33 = low level.
- 2.33 to 3.66 = moderate level.
- 3.67 to 5 = high level.

Validity and reliability of tools

- Content validity was established by panel of five experts from faculty members in the nursing and medical field from Assiut University to test their face and content validity of the tools.
- Reliability of tool (2) was carried out using the Cronbach alpha test. It was found to be $r = (0.91)$ and for tool (3), it was found to be $r = (0.88)$.

Method:

The study was conducted throughout the following:

Administrative design

An official approval letter from the dean of nursing faculty was received before conducting the study and it was given to the vice president for student affairs at Assiut University as well as the dean of each chosen faculty.

Pilot study:

Before beginning data collection, a pilot study was conducted on 40 students (10%) to assess the tools' feasibility, consistency and clarity as well as to determine how long it would take to complete the tools. No changes were done for the tools so the students from the pilot study were added to the overall sample.

Ethical consideration:

The research proposal was accepted by the Faculty of Nursing ethical committee at Assiut University. There was no risk to the study subjects during application. The researcher affirmed the confidentiality and privacy of the collected data. Also, the researcher explained the study's purpose to the students and assured that the participated students have the right to decline their participation in the study. Before the study, the researcher obtained written approval from students.

Field work:

- The data collection process lasted for two months, from the middle of March to the middle of May 2022, two days per week and the number of students were 20–25 student per day.

- The researcher obtained the students' schedules for all grades at the faculties that were participating in this study and described the nature and goal of the study to the vice-deans of students' affairs at each selected faculty.
- The researcher obtained verbal consent from the instructors who were in charge of the lectures or sections depending on their persuasion, according to the nature of each faculty. At the beginning or end of the lectures or section.
- The researcher made an introduction; described the goals, methodology and tools of the study. Following that, the students received the tools.
- The average time to complete a tool was between 10 and 15 minutes.
- The researcher concluded by thanking the students and teaching staff for their participation.

Statistical analysis

The study using SPSS version 22 for both data entry and analysis (Statistical Package for Social Science). Information was displayed as a number, percentage, mean and standard deviation. Comparing qualitative variables was done using the Chi-square test. Quantitative variables were correlated by using Pearson correlation to predict high levels of dependent variables. P value is thought to be statistically significant when $P < 0.05$.

Results:

Table (1) Distribution of demographic characteristics of students at Assiut University (N=400):

Demographic characteristics	No. (400)	%
Age: (years)		
18 – 20	219	54.8
> 20	181	45.3
Mean ± SD (Range)	20.41 ± 1.33 (18.0-25.0)	
Gender		
Male	107	26.8
Female	293	73.3
Academic year		
First	92	23.0
Second	119	29.8
Third	93	23.3
Fourth	96	24.0
Faculty type		
1-Theoretical faculties	233	58.3
2-Practical faculties	167	41.8
Residence		
Urban	207	51.8
Rural	193	48.3

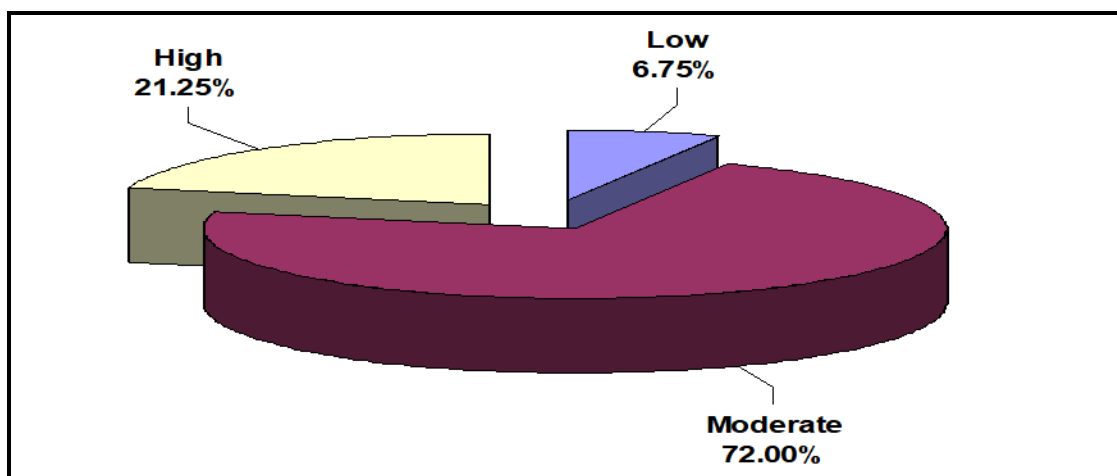


Figure (1): Distribution of students according to their level of psychological distress.

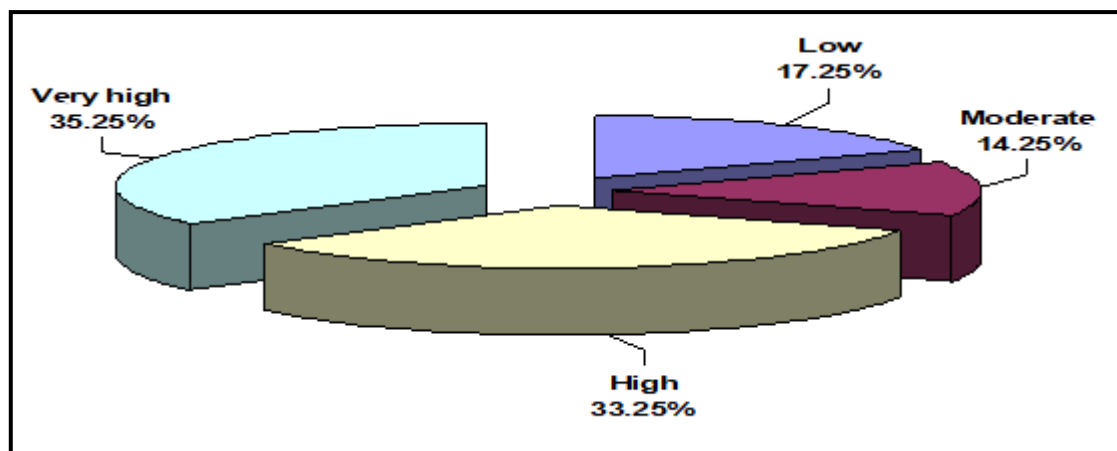


Figure (2): Distribution of students according to their level of academic self- efficacy.

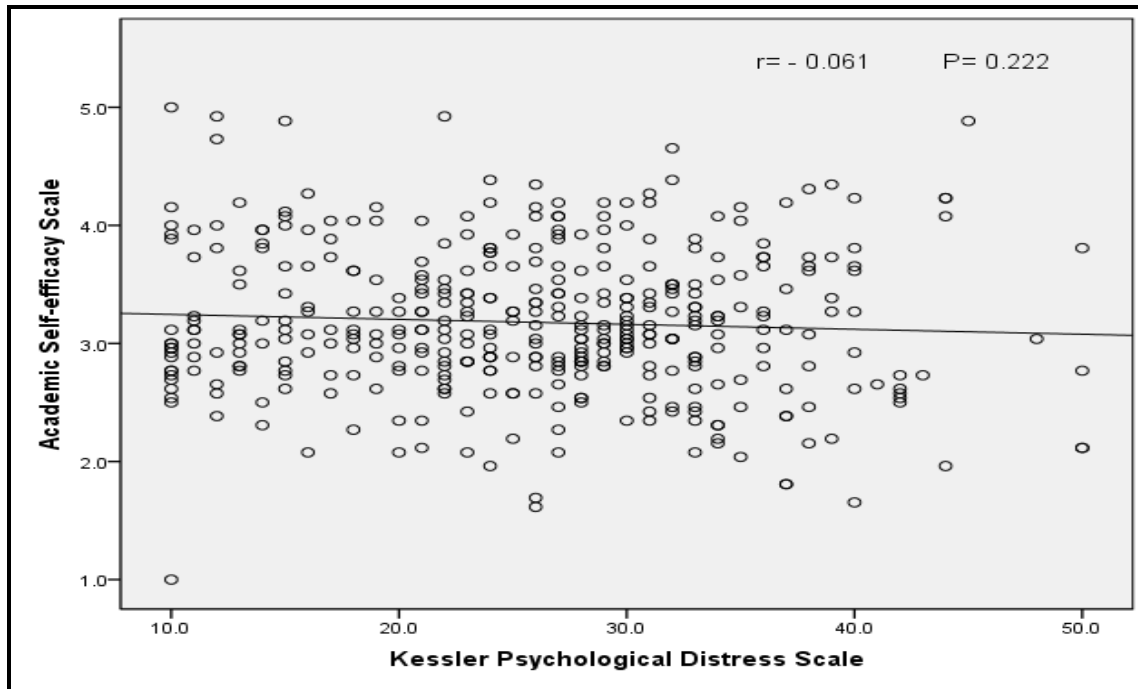


Figure (3): Correlation between psychological distress and academic self- efficacy.

Table (2): Relationship between demographic characteristics and psychological distress levels among university students (N=400):

Demographic characteristics	Psychological Distress levels								P-value
	Low		Moderate		High		Very high		
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Age (years)									
18 – 20	24	11.0	31	14.2	78	35.6	86	39.3	0.003**
> 20	45	24.9	26	14.4	55	30.4	55	30.4	
Gender									
Male	33	30.8	10	9.3	31	29.0	33	30.8	0.000**
Female	36	12.3	47	16.0	102	34.8	108	36.9	
Academic year									
First	10	10.9	11	12.0	36	39.1	35	38.0	0.021*
Second	20	16.8	19	16.0	33	27.7	47	39.5	
Third	11	11.8	12	12.9	38	40.9	32	34.4	
Fourth	28	29.2	15	15.6	26	27.1	27	28.1	
Faculty type									
Theoretical	50	21.5	34	14.6	71	30.5	78	33.5	0.056
Practical	19	11.4	23	13.8	62	37.1	63	37.7	
Residence									
Urban	35	16.9	33	15.9	71	34.3	68	32.9	0.629
Rural	34	17.6	24	12.4	62	32.1	73	37.8	

Chi-square test

* Statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$).

** Highly statistically significant difference ($p < 0.01$).

Table (3) Relationship between demographic data and academic self-efficacy levels among university students (N=400):

Demographic characteristics	Academic Self-efficacy levels						P-value
	Low		Moderate		High		
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Age (years)							
18 – 20	16	7.3	159	72.6	44	20.1	0.759
> 20	11	6.1	129	71.3	41	22.7	
Gender							
Male	7	6.5	80	74.8	20	18.7	0.735
Female	20	6.8	208	71.0	65	22.2	
Academic year							
First	7	7.6	67	72.8	18	19.6	
Second	9	7.6	82	68.9	28	23.5	0.954
Third	5	5.4	67	72.0	21	22.6	
Fourth	6	6.3	72	75.0	18	18.8	
Faculty type							
Theoretical	11	4.7	176	75.5	46	19.7	0.083
Practical	16	9.6	112	67.1	39	23.4	
Residence							
Urban	12	5.8	157	75.8	38	18.4	0.207
Rural	15	7.8	131	67.9	47	24.4	

Chi-square test * Statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$). ** Highly statistically significant difference ($p < 0.01$).

Table (1): Shows that, more than half of students (54.8%) were in the age group ranged (from 18-20 years old) and 73.3% of students were females. Regarding to academic year, it was found that 29.8% of them were at second year. Regarding the type of faculty, it was found that, more than half of students (58.3%) were in theoretical faculties. In accordance to residence, it was found that, more than half of students (51.8%) are from urban areas.

Fig. (1): Clarifies that 17.25% of students have low level, 14.25% have moderate level, 33.25% have high level and 35.25% have very high level of psychological distress.

It was illustrated that, only 6.75% of students have low level of academic self- efficacy. However, 72.0% have moderate level and 21.25% have high level of academic self- efficacy a clarified in **fig.(2)**.

Fig.(3): Clarifies a negative and non significant correlation between psychological distress and academic self -efficacy of studied students ($R = -0.061$, $p = 0.222$).

Table (2): Reveals the relationship between demographic characteristics and psychological distress among university students. There were highly statistically significant differences among age, gender and psychological distress ($p = 0.003$, 0.000) respectively and there was statistical significant difference between academic year and psychological distress ($p = 0.021$). While there were no statistically significant differences among faculty type, residence and psychological distress ($p = 0.056$ and 0.629) respectively.

Table (3): Shows that the relationship between demographic characteristics and academic self-efficacy of university students. There was no statistically significantly differences between demographic characteristics and academic self-efficacy levels.

Discussion:

College students are subjected to a large number of stressors, such as stressors from within and external demands of the environment **Seedhom et al., (2019)**.

Academic self-efficacy of the students is negatively impacted by psychological distress. It was discovered that students with high psychological distress perform worse academically than students with low psychological distress (**Abid et al., 2021**).

According to psychological distress, the study revealed that, more than two thirds of students have high and very high level of psychological distress. This may be due to fear of academic failure, courses demanding, electronic exams , study burden, thinking about future plan upon graduation and many of students reported that feel of tired without any reason and depressed all of time. This result was in the same line with **Al-Tammemi et al., (2020)**, **Arias-de la Torre et al., 2019**, **Romeo et al., (2021)** & **Knapstad et al., (2021)** who found that, psychological distress was common among university students.

The current finding showed that, less than three quarters of students had moderate level of academic self- efficacy. This could be explained by the

university students are exposed to more stressors generated by the academic context as overload of tasks and frequent evaluations could lower expectations of self-efficacy. Also, negative emotions such as tension and a high level of concern could decrease the levels of achievement and academic self-efficacy. This finding was matched with **Saini, (2004), Shalol, (2021) & Albalawi, (2022)** who reported that, university students had moderate level of academic self- efficacy. This might be attributed to lacking of counseling services and guidance offered by the university, which may increase their academic self-efficacy and give them the knowledge and skills they need to excel and succeed in a variety of academic tasks, as well as the students' fear of the university stage and its challenges which has an impact on their academic self-efficacy. However, these findings are contradicted with the study that reported by **Al-Shalwi, (2018), Nader& glam AL-Aubrey, (2018) (Firth et al., 2019) &Williams, (2020)** who found that the students had high level of academic self- efficacy. This finding could be due to individuals with high level of self- efficacy can overcome the obstacles they face. Also, students receive high scores in exams relative to their actual levels, which boost their self-confidence and academic self-efficacy.

As regard the correlation between psychological distress and academic self- efficacy, the present study revealed that psychological distress was negatively & non significantly correlated with academic self-efficacy. This means that, the increase level of psychological distress leads to reduction of academic self-efficacy. Students with a high level of self-efficacy can deal better with psychological distress which leads to better academic performance than students with low level of self-efficacy; also the high level of self- efficacy can counteract the negative effect of distress. These results were partially confirmed by **Saadat et al., (2015) & Carranza Esteban et al., (2022)** who showed that there was statistically significant negative correlation between academic self- efficacy and psychological distress. This result could be due to students' psychological distress may influence other variables such as professional development and it seems to negatively affect academic performance and contribute to academic dishonesty and substance abuse. In addition, **Aleman-Arrebola et al., (2019)** reported that the pearson's correlation coefficients indicated moderate and significant relationships between increasing anxiety and reduced academic self-efficacy. Also, **Kristensen et al., (2023)** found that association between psychological distress and academic self-efficacy was negative and moderate. This finding could be due to psychologically

distressed individuals frequently act in ways that put themselves in difficult situations. Students might behave in ways that make it more likely for them to find school and homework burdensome. Also, students who are extremely psychologically distressed may avoid their academic work or even physically withdraw from school.

Regarding to relation between demographic data and psychological distress. The current study revealed that there is statistical significant difference among age, gender, academic year and psychological distress of students except faculty type and residence. This results might be due to psychosocial stressors that face students as lack of leisure time, lack of social support, difficulty finding of job opportunities after graduation, difficulty of faculty courses, poor contacts with teaching staff, financial problems and worries about the future success. This result was consistent with the study finding of **Fawzy &Hamed (2017)** who reported that, there were statistical significant difference among gender, academic year and psychological distress of students.

In accordance to the relation between demographic data and academic self-efficacy, the present study reported that there were no statistically significantly differences in demographic data and academic self-efficacy of the students. This might be due to presence of other factors rather than demographic factors affecting academic self-efficacy such as mastery experience (developed after completing a task or achieving a goal); vicarious experience (occur when observing other people's succeeds at completing a task or engaging in a certain activity); verbal persuasion (achieved when receive feedback and judgment about their talents or potentials from others); and emotional and physiological state (involves their feelings of anxiety, stress and tension that influence person's ability to finish a task). This finding was in agreement with the study findings of **Nader& glam AL-Aubrey (2018) & Grøtan et al., (2019)** who discovered no statistically significant differences among gender, faculty type and level of academic self- efficacy. However, the results of the current study do not agree with **Bulfone et al., (2021)** who found a statistically significant relationship among age, gender, academic year and academic self-efficacy. Similarly, **Kumar & Lal (2006) & Huang (2013)** found that significant relationship between gender and academic self-efficacy.

Conclusions:

According to the study's findings, the following conclusions can be made:

Over two thirds of the students experienced high and very high levels of psychological distress and less than three-quarters of them reported having a

moderate level of academic self-efficacy. Additionally, psychological distress was negatively & none significantly correlated with academic self-efficacy of university students.

Recommendations:

In light of results of this study, the following recommendation(s) are suggested:

1. Designing and implementing appropriate interventions, such as counseling and life skills training program to reduce the level of psychological distress among students and improve psychological wellbeing.
2. Further studies are essential to examine variables that could influence the relationship between psychological distress and academic self-efficacy.

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