

Stress

Stress has been high on the agenda in recent years. This applies to all aspects of our society, including the educational sector. For this reason, the topic has been addressed both in AU's previous study environment surveys (SMU) and in the extensive student survey conducted¹ by the Ministry of Higher Education and science every two years – most recently in the autumn of 2020.

In the above-mentioned surveys, students at AU were asked whether they have experienced severe stress symptoms in connection with their daily life as well as whether they have experienced severe stress symptoms in connection with exams. This year, a new question was added about the extent to which students have felt pressurised by a variety of different conditions recently. The conditions about which students were asked include both degree programme-related issues and non-degree programme-related issues.

In 2020, the results of the survey may be affected by coronavirus restrictions and the periodic physical shutdown of AU. The survey was conducted from 20 October to 15 December 2020. During this period, the university was subject to a number of coronavirus restrictions that impacted teaching, but was not physically shut down.

Main findings Stress:

- 20% of the respondents indicate 'Often' or 'Always' feeling stressed in their everyday lives. More female respondents (23%) experience this than male (16%).
- The percentage of respondents who experience stress increases significantly in connection with exams (39%). There are also significant differences between the sexes in this regard, with 45% of female respondents compared to 30% of the male 'Often' or 'Always' experiencing severe stress symptoms in connection with exams.
- The respondents selected their own expectations with regard to their academic performance degree programme as the most important source of perceived pressure during the survey period.

The percentage of students who indicated that they experience stress in their everyday lives and in connection with exams has remained virtually unchanged in the last three surveys.

Stress in everyday life

Table 1 shows that 20% of the respondents feel stressed in their everyday lives. They indicated that they 'Often' or 'Always' experience severe stress symptoms in connection with their degree programme in everyday life. Half of the respondents indicated that they 'Often' or 'Always' experience severe stress symptoms in connection with their degree programme in everyday life. The table shows that the distribution of responses is quite similar at the five faculties. However, there are differences between male and female respondents. Among the female respondents, 23%

¹ The student survey is carried out by the Ministry of Higher Education and Science. The study consists of a number of sub-elements, including the Learning Barometer (which measures the students' experiences of the learning environment on their degree programme and their own approaches to learning), Degree Programme Zoom (digital admissions tool that allows students to compare degree programmes), Teaching Environment (under the auspices of Dansk Center for Undervisningsmiljø (the Danish centre for the teaching environment)).

indicated that they 'Often' or 'Always' experience severe stress symptoms; this applies to 16% of the male respondents.

Table 1: Have you experienced strong stress symptoms* in connection with your study in the everyday life?

Have you experienced strong stress symptoms* in connection with your study in the everyday life?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
AR	23%	27%	31%	17%	3%
BSS	23%	27%	29%	17%	4%
HE	24%	26%	30%	18%	3%
Nat	21%	27%	29%	19%	4%
Tech	25%	28%	28%	15%	4%
AU	23%	27%	29%	17%	3%

*The response 'Unsure/not applicable' is not included in the calculations, n=111045

(*): *Strong stress symptoms could be seclusion, palpitations, stomach ache, muscle tension, depression, restlessness, difficulty in relaxing, headache, anxiety, insomnia"

Stress in connection with exams

Like previous surveys, the 2020 survey showed that more people experience severe stress symptoms right before their exams than they do in their everyday life (cf. Table 2), which is to be expected. In connection with exams, the proportion of students who indicated that they 'Often' or 'Always' experience severe stress symptoms increases from 20% to 39% for AU as a whole. In relation to stress during the exam period, the proportion is also relatively uniform across the faculties.

There are relatively significant differences between male and female respondents with regard to the experience of severe stress symptoms. Among the female respondents, 45% indicated that they 'Often' or 'Always' experience severe stress symptoms in connection with exams; this applies to 30% of the male respondents.

Table 2: Have you experienced strong stress symptoms* in connection with your study up to exams?

Have you experienced strong stress symptoms* in connection with your study up to exams?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
AR	16%	19%	28%	21%	15%
Aarhus BSS	14%	19%	26%	22%	18%
HE	12%	18%	27%	24%	18%
Nat	16%	20%	26%	21%	16%
Tech	18%	20%	26%	22%	15%
Grand total	15%	19%	27%	22%	17%

The response 'Unsure/not applicable' is not included in the calculations, n=11133

(*): *Strong stress symptoms could be seclusion, palpitations, stomach ache, muscle tension, depression, restlessness, difficulty in relaxing, headache, anxiety, insomnia"

Trends in perceived stress symptoms

There was little variation in the percentage of students who reported severe stress symptoms in the period 2017 to 2020.

With the proviso that the response categories in AU's 2017 study environment survey were slightly different (see note under Table 3) than in the Ministry's student surveys in 2018 and 2020, we see that responses are more or less identical are more or less in all three surveys.

Table 3. Perceived severe stress symptoms Degree Programme Zoom 2020, 2018 - SMU 2017

Year	'Always' or 'Often'	'Sometimes'	'Never' or 'Rarely'
Have you experienced strong stress symptoms in connection with your study in the everyday life?			
Degree Programme Zoom 2020	20%	29%	50%
Degree Programme Zoom 2018	19%	31%	51%
SMU2017	20%	29%	52%
Have you experienced strong stress symptoms in connection with your study up to exams?			
Degree Programme Zoom 2020	39%	27%	34%
UddannelsesZOOM (Degree programme zoom)	38%	28%	35%
SMU 2017	38%	27%	35%

Note: The response categories are slightly different in SMU 2017 – almost always, often, sometimes, rarely, almost never.

The response 'Unsure/not applicable' is not included in the calculations.

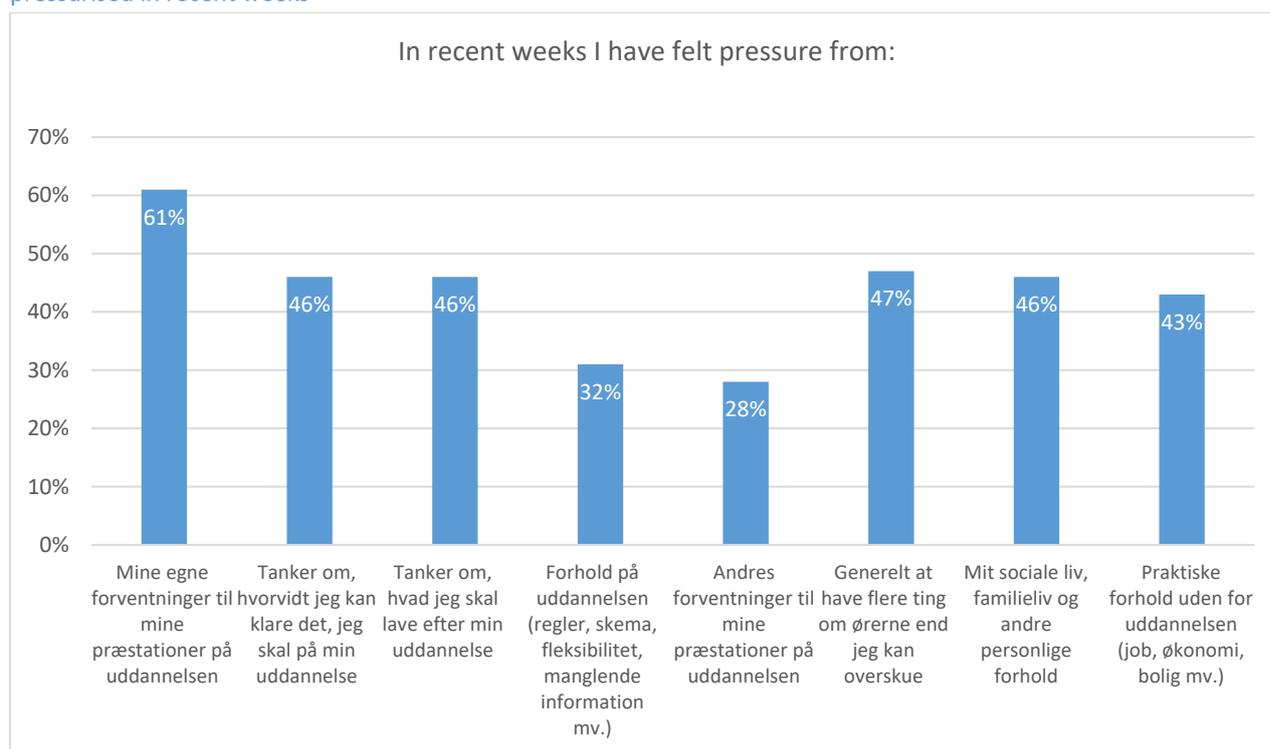
(*): *Strong stress symptoms could be seclusion, palpitations, stomach ache, muscle tension, depression, restlessness, difficulty in relaxing, headache, anxiety, insomnia”

Pressure in recent weeks – eight selected factors

As a new feature, the Ministry's 2020 student survey 2020 contains questions about the extent to which the respondent has felt pressurised in recent weeks weeks with by eight different factors. The students were asked to evaluate each factor separately and indicate the extent to which whether each of them had contributed to making the student feel pressurised. 95% of the respondents indicated that one or more of the specified factors had made them feel pressurised in recent weeks.

Figure 1 shows an overview of the percentage of respondents who indicated that the factor in question had made them feel pressurised in recent weeks.

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents who replied 'Yes' that the factor in question had made them feel pressurised in recent weeks



N=11133

Factors related to the degree programme

Pressure due to the student's own expectations regarding their academic performance:

Of the factors listed in the survey, students indicated that pressure due to their own expectations regarding their academic performance was most significant. 61% of the respondents indicated that this had made them feel pressurised in recent weeks. More female respondents (64%) than male respondents (55%) indicated that they felt pressurised by their own expectations regarding their academic performance.

Pressure due to thoughts about whether I can keep up with my studies:

With regard to thoughts about their ability to keep up with their studies, 46% of respondents indicated that they had felt pressurised by thoughts of this kind. There are no major differences between the faculties, but there are gender differences once again: 50% of the female respondents indicated that they feel pressurised due to thoughts about their ability to keep up with their studies. The percentage for male respondents is 40%.

There is a slightly greater difference between respondents from Bachelor's degree programmes relative to respondents from Master's degree programmes – especially among new students on Bachelor's degree programmes who were admitted in 2020. 60% of these respondents indicated that they had felt pressurised by thoughts about their ability to keep up with their studies in recent weeks.

Pressure due to thoughts about what I will be doing after graduation:

46% of the respondents indicated feeling pressurised by their thoughts about what to do after graduation. In particular, respondents from Master's degree programmes indicated feeling pressurised by these thoughts (57%); this applies to 40% of professional Bachelor's degree student respondents and 38% of Bachelor's degree student respondents. There are large differences

between respondents from different faculties: 63% of respondents from Master's degree programmes at AR and 62% from Master's degree programmes at BSS reported feeling pressurised by their thoughts about what do to after graduation – while this only applies to 35% of Master's degree respondents from HE and 55% percent of Master's degree student respondents from both Nat and Tech.

Pressure due to practical issues at my institution (rules and regulations, schedule, flexibility, lack of information, etc.)

Almost one-third of respondents (32%) indicated that they had felt pressurised due to practical aspects of their degree programme. These conditions include rules, timetabling, flexibility, lack of information and so on. 43% of the respondents from HE indicated that they felt pressurised due to practical aspects of their degree programme. The other faculties are slightly above or under the average of 32% for AU as a whole.

Pressure due to my own expectations about my academic performance

Of the factors included in the survey, respondents rated pressure due to other people's expectations about their academic programme lowest. 28% indicated that this had made them feel pressurised in recent weeks. While there are no major differences between the faculties, there are gender differences. Thus 31% of female respondents indicated that they felt pressurised due to other's expectations of their academic performance, while this only applies to 23% of male respondents.

Factors outside the degree programme

Pressure due to generally having more things on my mind than I can manage

47% of the respondents indicated that they had felt pressurised by having more things on their mind than they could manage in recent weeks. Here again there are gender differences in the responses: 51% of female respondents indicated that they had felt pressurised by having more things on their mind than they could manage in recent weeks, whereas this applies to 38% of male respondents. There are no significant differences between Bachelor's student respondents and Master's degree student respondents.

Pressure due to my social life, family life and other personal relations

46% of the respondents had felt pressurised in recent weeks due to their social life, family life and other personal relations. Newly enrolled Bachelor's degree student respondents in particular (52%) indicated that their social life, family life and other personal relations had made them feel pressurised.

Pressure due to practical circumstances outside my studies (work, economy, housing, etc.)

Overall, 43% of respondents indicated that they had felt pressurised in recent weeks due to practical circumstances outside their degree programmes, such as jobs, finances, housing and so on. With regard to the faculties, responses fell into two categories: respondents from AR (48%) and BSS (46%) indicated that practical circumstances had made them feel pressurised – which applies to 36% of respondents from HE and Tech and 35% from Nat. There are no major differences between Bachelor's degree students and Master's degree students or related to gender.

FACTS about the 2020 survey:

AU's study environment survey is based on data collected by Epinion for the Danish Ministry of Science, Higher Education and Aarhus University. The results of the survey form the basis for the university's teaching environment evaluation, which is conducted every three years.

The survey is carried out every other year and was most recently conducted in the autumn of 2020.

The questionnaire was sent to 33,381 full-time students at Aarhus University and 11,133 students took the survey, which results in an overall response rate of 33.40%.