

Exploration of Support Needs of Newly Recruited Undergraduates of the Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka

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The newly enrolled undergraduates experience challenges due to various reasons such as separation from their families, adaptation to a new socio-cultural environment, change in peer groups, learning methods, financial self-management, and relatively limited social experience. There were changes to the student-teacher interactions, teaching and learning styles, and academic activities due to COVID-19 pandemic in the recent years at the Faculty of Allied Health Sciences (FAHS), KDU. Accordingly, there can be new challenges and support needs among undergraduates that are not being explored. Therefore, a qualitative study was conducted to explore challenges and support needs of newly recruited undergraduates of FAHS. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted online among 34 first-year undergraduates (till the data saturation was achieved) representing all degree programmes at FAHS. Socio-demographic information were assessed using an interviewer-administered questionnaire. Data analysis was done using mainly the thematic analysis method. The emerged themes of support needs are; adjustability, academic support, institutional behaviour and processes, family support and psychological support. Students reported that online teaching and learning methods, lack of computers and network facilities, inadequate library use, less interactions with peer groups increased their psychological distress and support needs. The English language barrier was a leading challenge experienced by most undergraduates. Students' awareness of counselling and mentoring services provided at the faculty was at a lower level and majority said such services provided by the faculty were not satisfactory and inadequate during the pandemic. Therefore, it is necessary to take actions to improve the efficacy and consistency of the existing support services at FAHS in order to achieve better academic outcomes.

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