# UDL 3.0 in Action: Reducing Stress and Enhancing Inclusion for Students in Higher Education

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## Acknowledgement of Country

I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we join from today and recognize their valuable contributions to Australian and global society. I pay my respects to their Elders, Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country. I acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participating in this event.

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## Students’ Academic Stress

Academic stress is stress students experience in relation to academic studies (learning, achievement, navigating university life, managing study alongside other commitments).

## What’s the Challenge?

### Impact of academic stress

For higher education students, on its own, high academic stress can impact:

* Physical health
* Mental health
* Quality of life
* Learning capacity
* Academic achievement (see Pascoe et al., 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2018)

### Context

* Pre-COVID-19 pandemic
  + 84% of students reported high stress compared to 29% of the general population (Stallman, 2010)
* Since the onset of the pandemic
  + Increased stress (von Keyserlingk et al., 2022)
  + Decreased ability to cope (Headspace, 2021)

### Emerging Research

* Students with accessibility requirements or disability may experience higher stress than their peers
* No statistically significant difference in stress between those who have and have not sought support from student support services (Ardell et al., 2016; Hitches et al., 2023; 2025 forthcoming)
* Overall, we know very little about the experiences of students who aren’t registered with student support services

## Knowledge Seeking

### Current Doctoral Research

* Phase 1: A systematic literature review of stress reduction interventions for students with accessibility requirements and/or disability in Higher Education internationally. Findings: a UDL approach is lacking!
* Phase 2 Stage 1: Information Gathering. Understanding students’ academic stress and how we might reduce this in an accessible and inclusive way. Goal: Viewing stress through a UDL lens.
* Phase 2 Stage 2: Designing. Co-designing an accessible and inclusive stress prevention/reduction intervention. Goal: Planning to prevent/reduce high stress through a UDL lens.

This presentation focuses on Phase 2 Stage 1.

### Students’ Voices Through the Lens of UDL

Students’ voices on what is contributing to academic stress and the themes in the data that emerge from this are then viewed through the lens of UDL:

* Multiple means of engagement
* Multiple means of representation
* Multiple means of action and expression

Examples of student experiences related to assessment and participation barriers, highlighting challenges to engagement, representation, and action/expression are now explored.

### Assessment-Related Stressors Through a UDL Lens

Assessment with Barriers to Engagement:

* Quote 1: "There was not any feedback on my assessment, just a mark. I emailed the subject coordinator and the response I got was that if I wanted a remark (which I didn’t, I just wanted to know how I could improve for part 2) then this could reduce my mark. These things may seem small, but when combined they feel huge." (**Engagement:** **Action-oriented feedback is absent or inconsistent**)
* Quote 2: "Wasted our time on the meaningless/repetitive assessments." (**Engagement:** **The relevance, value, and authenticity of assessment is not optimized**)

Assessment with Barriers to Representation:

* Quote 1: "Assessment details are unclear and ambiguous, requiring reading between lines or ‘winging it,’ and then teachers are surprised when neurodivergent students fail or perform badly repeatedly and as a collective." (**Representation:** **Assessment instructions that are difficult to comprehend**)

Assessment with Barriers to Action and Expression:

* Quote 1: "Having exams, being approved for use of computers yet being made to write and hurt self or overwhelm student. No use of expected extra time." (**Action and expression: Lacking access to accessible assessment, including assistive technologies and tools**)
* Quote 2: "All the assignments are writing essays, which I think is terrible." (**Action and expression:** **Limited modes of assessment or modes that do not account for variability**)

As a summary of the subthemes within assessment and how these are mapped to the UDL guidelines, Table 1 is provided.

Table 1: Assessment-related stressors through a UDL lens

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Engagement** | **Representation** | **Action and expression** |
| * Action-oriented feedback is absent or inconsistent * The relevance, value, and authenticity of assessment is not optimised | * Assessment instructions that are difficult to comprehend\* | * Lacking access to accessible assessment, including materials and assistive technologies and tools * Limited modes of assessment or modes that do not account for variability\* |

### Participation-Related Stressors Through a UDL Lens

Participation with Barriers to Engagement:

* Quote 1: "Being a mature-aged student, I feel quite isolated and don’t fit in or belong due to my age. When it comes to group assessments, I am very worried about not finding a group to join." (**Engagement:** **Lacking belonging and connection**)

Participation with Barriers to Representation:

* Quote 1: "I find it hard to focus… reading 30+ pages is frustrating as a lot of those readings do not have defined points and no conclusion to the questions or issues it arises. My attention span is taking a toll." (**Representation:** **Difficulties focusing on information dominated by one media (i.e. text) and when it is not optimized for perception and building knowledge**)
* Quote 2: "The lack of accessible course content has been an ongoing issue for me. White backgrounds on everything and no closed captions on lectures with poor sound quality meant I could not access course content." (**Representation:** **Information not presented in accessible ways**)

Participation with Barriers to Action and Expression:

* Quote 1: "Not being offered online tutorials… Online tutorials worked better for me with my disabilities, and I got much better grades without going into campus and getting sick as much. More time for hospital appointments where I could watch the tutorial whilst getting treatment, whereas on campus, the distance, parking, walking to class, dealing with the social stress and actively participating with stresses of other students attending unwell were too overwhelming." (**Action and expression: Mode of attending/participating does not align with student needs**)
* Quote 2: "Desks/tables constantly changing/layout change every week = very stressful for an Autistic person!!" (Action and expression: **Physical spaces lacking accessibility**)

As a summary of the subthemes within assessment and how these are mapped to the UDL guidelines, Table 1 is provided.

Table 2: Participation-related stressors through a UDL lens

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Engagement** | **Representation** | **Action and expression** |
| * Lacking belonging and connection | * Difficulties focusing on information dominated by one media (i.e. text) and when it is not optimised for perception and building knowledge * Information presented in accessible ways | * Mode of attending/participating does not align with student needs * Physical spaces lacking accessibility |

## Impacts of Academic Stress

* **Health:** “Due to academic stress I have had headaches, stomach ulcer/gastritis, poor sleep, depression, anxiety, panic attacks. Also then when health is impacted, wellbeing declines. I become anxious and depressed. Small things feel bigger, I am teary and short fused. I isolate myself from my friends and family in order to concentrate more time on my studies. This can cause the academic stress to worsen as you have no other outlets or positive influences.”
* **Motivation:** “it can go both ways, either [stress] motivates me to do better or i sometimes just give up”
* **Depth of learning:** “[stress] makes me focus on getting assessment tasks done on time instead of really learning and exploring the content”
* **Achievement:** “I just shut down if it gets too much. This has resulted in two failing grades and my WAM has suffered because of it.”

## What Can We Each Take Away?

* Many stressors contribute to students’ stress in higher education, affecting their health and learning.
* Some stressors could be reduced by UDL-informed actions.

## What’s Next?

**Stage 2**: Designing. Co-designing an appropriate, accessible, and inclusive stress prevention/reduction intervention. Goal: Planning to prevent/reduce high stress through a UDL lens.

**Interested in Being a Part of It?** Staff working in accessibility or wellbeing are warmly invited to:

* Share insights by participating in the co-design phase
* Share the flyer
* Hear updates on the findings

## Contact

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