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The perception of stress and quality of life of university students in student housing

A percepção de estresse e qualidade de vida de universitários de uma moradia estudantil

La Percepción del Estrés y la Calidad de Vida de Universitarios Residentes en una Vivienda Estudiantil

Nathália Fontella Sturbelle
Universidade Federal de Pelotas (UFPel). Pelotas – Rio Grande do Sul – Brazil

Fernanda Capella Rugno
Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR) – Paraná – Curitiba – Brazil

Rodrigo da Silva Vital
Universidade Federal de Pelotas (UFPel). Pelotas – Rio Grande do Sul – Brazil

Estela Cristina Carneseca
Proestat - Consultoria Estatística. Araraquara – São Paulo – Brazil

ABSTRACT

Objective: To assess the stress and quality of life of university students living in student housing at a public university. Method: This is a cross-sectional, descriptive study with a quantitative approach. Data collection took place in September 2019 at the student residence. The Perceived Stress Scale (EEP-10), the WHOQOL-bref, and a structured questionnaire were used to characterize the students' profile. The data underwent descriptive analysis, univariate analysis (prevalence ratio), and multivariate analysis (cluster and correspondence analysis). Results: 118 undergraduate students with an average age of 22.16 years participated in the study. The majority were male (63.5%) and single (99.1%). The average perceived stress was 24.6, with 58.5% having a high perception of stress. The quality of life was considered average, with the lowest score in the environment domain. There were no significant differences between stress and the variables investigated. However, four association profiles were obtained: (1) low/moderate stress, high quality of life, Humanities area, initial period of the course, non-full-time shift; (2) intermediate quality of life, male gender, Biological Sciences area, final period; (3) high stress, Exact and Earth Sciences area, full-time shift, intermediate period of the course; (4) high/very high stress, low quality of life and female gender. Conclusion: The results indicated association profiles that help in understanding the characteristics of students who face higher levels of stress, instigating the implementation of institutional policies aimed at psychological support and student well-being.

Descriptors: Psychological stress; Quality of life; Student health; Universities.

RESUMO

Objetivo: *Avaliar o estresse e a qualidade de vida de estudantes universitários residentes em uma moradia estudantil de uma universidade pública.* ***Método:*** *Trata-se de um estudo transversal, descritivo com abordagem quantitativa. As coletas ocorreram em setembro de 2019 na moradia estudantil. Foram utilizados a Escala de Estresse Percebido (EEP-10), o WHOQOL-bref e um questionário estruturado para caracterização do perfil dos estudantes. Os dados passaram por análises descritivas, análise univariada (razão de prevalência) e multivariável (análise de cluster e de correspondência).* ***Resultados:*** *Participaram do estudo 118 estudantes de graduação com média de idade de 22,16 anos. A maioria constitui-se do gênero masculino (63,5%) e solteira (99,1%). A média de estresse percebido foi de 24,6, sendo que 58,5% encontra-se com percepção alta de estresse. A qualidade de vida foi considerada mediana, apresentando a menor pontuação para o domínio meio ambiente. Não houve diferenças significativas entre o estresse e as variáveis investigadas. Contudo, obtiveram-se quatro perfis de associação: (1) estresse baixo/moderado, qualidade de vida alta, área de Humanas, período inicial do curso, turno não integral; (2) qualidade de vida intermediária, gênero masculino, área de Ciências Biológicas, período final; (3) estresse alto, área de Ciências Exatas e da Terra, turno integral, período intermediário do curso; (4) estresse alto/muito alto, qualidade de vida baixa e gênero feminino.* ***Conclusão:*** *Os resultados indicaram perfis de associações que auxiliam na compreensão das características dos estudantes que enfrentam níveis mais elevados de estresse, instigando a implantação de políticas institucionais voltadas ao apoio psicológico e ao bem-estar dos estudantes.*

Descritores: *Estresse psicológico; Qualidade de vida; Saúde do estudante; Universidades.*

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RESUMEN

Objetivo: *Evaluar el estrés y la calidad de vida de estudiantes universitarios residentes en una vivienda estudiantil de una universidad pública.* ***Método:*** *Se trata de un estudio transversal, descriptivo, con enfoque cuantitativo. La recolección de datos se llevó a cabo en septiembre de 2019 en la residencia estudiantil. Se utilizaron la Escala de Estrés Percibido (EEP-10), el WHOQOL-bref y un cuestionario estructurado para la caracterización del perfil de los estudiantes. Los datos fueron sometidos a análisis descriptivo, análisis univariado (razón de prevalencia) y análisis multivariable (análisis de conglomerados y de correspondencia).* ***Resultados:*** *Participaron en el estudio 118 estudiantes de grado, con una edad media de 22,16 años. La mayoría eran del sexo masculino (63,5%) y solteros (99,1%). La media de estrés percibido fue de 24,6, y el 58,5% presentó una percepción elevada de estrés. La calidad de vida fue considerada mediana, con la puntuación más baja en el dominio del medio ambiente. No se observaron diferencias significativas entre el nivel de estrés y las variables investigadas. Sin embargo, se identificaron cuatro perfiles de asociación: (1) estrés bajo/moderado, calidad de vida alta, área de Humanidades, inicio del curso, turno no integral; (2) calidad de vida intermedia, sexo masculino, área de Ciencias Biológicas, etapa final del curso; (3) estrés alto, área de Ciencias Exactas y de la Tierra, turno integral, etapa intermedia del curso; (4) estrés alto/muy alto, calidad de vida baja y sexo femenino.* ***Conclusión:*** *Los resultados indicaron perfiles de asociación que contribuyen a comprender las características de los estudiantes que enfrentan niveles más elevados de estrés, lo que motiva la implementación de políticas institucionales orientadas al apoyo psicológico y al bienestar estudiantil.*

Descriptores: *Estrés psicológico; Calidad de vida; Salud del estudiante; Universidades.*

INTRODUCTION

Entering university is marked by various situations, physical and psychosocial changes that can favor or aggravate the emergence of mental disorders in the university population[1]. The young person is designed to adapt to a new context, where they are faced with professional demands that can harm their quality of life and affect their academic performance[2], in addition to producing stressful situations.

Stress refers to the body's natural response to dangerous or threatening situations. This reaction of the organism consists of a biological behavior necessary for adapting to a new situation, leaving it in a state of alert or alarm, causing physical and emotional changes[3]. Furthermore, it can compromise health and harm the individual's quality of life and productivity[4].

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines quality of life as "an individual's perception of his or her place in life, in the context of the culture and value systems in which he or she lives and concerning his or her goals, expectations, standards and concerns"[5]. It consists of a broad concept which involves physical, mental, psychological, emotional, spiritual well-being, social relationships, health, education, and other important characteristics for the individual [5].

Studies show that stress is within a large portion of the academic population. One survey revealed that 73.6% of students reported a high perception of stress[6]. Another study found that 90.22% of students had a moderate perception of stress[7].

For students in economically and socially vulnerable situations, there are educational barriers, such as the lack of study opportunities in their regions of origin, discrimination, and poor teaching conditions[8]. Thus, there is a need to expand institutional resources to meet the specific social, economic, cultural, educational, and health demands of each university student. Among the resources is student housing, which aims to accommodate students with low incomes and who come from cities other than the institution where they study[10].

In 2024, Law No. 14,914 was enacted, establishing the National Student Assistance Policy (PNAES) and including the Student Housing Program. The objective of this initiative is to guarantee decent housing, support the permanence of students in universities in situations of socioeconomic vulnerability, prevent dropouts, and encourage the development of social relationships[11].

In this context, the student housing population tends to experience situations of insecurity due to being away from their families and living with strangers[12].

A study found the effects that student housing can have on students, organizing them into three domains: personal, social, and academic. The positive effects were greater in the social domain, while the negative effects stood out in the particular domain, demonstrating the importance of assisting this population[10].

Another study conducted with university students in student housing investigated the presence of stress during the academic term, pointing to academic-extracurricular activities, lack of infrastructure, and administration as the principal sources of stress[13]. Therefore, the university plays a fundamental role in health promotion actions, and the planning of these initiatives must consider the specific demands of the academic community[14].

Stress has affected many university students, as demonstrated in several studies (6,7,13). However, there is a lack of specific studies on stress in students living in student housing. Furthermore, there is a gap in the literature regarding the relationship between stress and the quality of life of university students. Hence, the research topic is relevant, as understanding the impact of stress in the housing context is fundamental, as such a condition can lead to harm to mental and physical health, as well as academic performance. Furthermore, stress can affect students' quality of life, influencing their satisfaction with academic life and their ability to achieve their goals.

The present study has the general objective: To evaluate the stress and quality of life of university students living in student housing at a public university.

METHOD

It is a cross-sectional and descriptive study with a quantitative approach.

The location chosen for conducting the research was the new student house at the Federal University of Pelotas (UFPEL), inaugurated in the second semester of 2017. This location was chosen because the target population constitutes a portion of the university population in a social and economic vulnerability situation, which may be indicative of higher levels of stress.

The UFPEL student house offers three meals a day (breakfast, lunch, and dinner), a communal cafeteria, a leisure area, a study space with a mini library, and a games room, with capacity for 300 students[15]. Overall, the environment is pleasant and clean, but it lacks resources, especially in the leisure area, mini-library, and games room, which are not equipped.

According to data provided by the institution, the total number of students residing in student housing in August 2019 was 208, including 168 undergraduate students, 22 postgraduate students, and 18 exchange students. The inclusion criteria adopted in the research were UFPEL undergraduate students, aged 18 or over, who receive student housing resources. The exclusion criteria were graduate and exchange students. Therefore, the 168 students residing at the unit were invited to participate in the study.

Data collection took place in September 2019. The questionnaires were administered in the student residence hall. Due to the lack of a private space, some instruments were self-administered collectively.

The sample was characterized through a sociodemographic questionnaire containing information regarding gender, age, marital status, place of origin, course, semester, shift of course, and number of subjects taken in the current semester.

To assess the perception of stress in the sample, the Perceived Stress Scale (EEP-10) was used, created by Cohen, Kamarck and Mermelstein and validated for Brazilian university students by Dias et al.[16]. The instrument consists of 10 multiple-choice questions, six negative items (1, 2, 3, 6, 9 and 10) and four positive items (4, 5, 7 and 8). The questionnaire is answered on a Likert-type scale, containing five response options, and the score ranges from 0 to 40. In other words, the higher the score, the greater the perception of stress[17]. The scores obtained were divided into four categories: low stress - 0 to 10, moderate - 10 to 20, high - 20 to 30 and very high - 30 to 40[18].

The instrument used to assess quality of life was the WHOQOL-bref, which contains 26 questions. The first two are analyzed separately and relate to the individual's overall perception of their quality of life and health[19]. The remaining questions are divided into four domains: physical (covering pain and discomfort, energy and fatigue, sleep and rest, mobility, activities of daily living, dependence on medication and treatments, and work capacity); psychological (assesses positive and negative feelings, thinking, learning, memory, and concentration, as well as self-esteem, body image and appearance, spirituality, religion, and personal beliefs); social relationships (covering personal relationships, support, and social support, as well as sexual activity); environment (considering physical safety and security, home environment, financial resources, health and social care, the availability, quality, and opportunities to acquire information and skills, as well as recreation or leisure and transportation)[20]. Each domain is scored separately, with scores ranging from 0 to 100 points, where higher scores indicate better quality of life.

Initially, the data were described by absolute and percentage frequencies (qualitative variables) and by means of measures such as mean, standard deviation, minimum, median, and maximum (quantitative variables).

To estimate the prevalence ratios for high/very high levels of stress, the log-binomial regression model was used[21], consisting of a univariate analysis, which allows estimating the relationship of each variable with the outcome itself.

To group participants according to their responses to the four domains of the WHOQOL-bref, cluster analysis was proposed. This methodology aims to divide the sample elements into groups that are heterogeneous among themselves and homogeneous within the same group (concerning the characteristics of interest). The dissimilarity

measure applied was the Euclidean distance, and the hierarchical clustering technique was performed using the Ward method[22].

After defining the number of clusters, an adjustment was performed using the non-hierarchical "k-means" method. This method allows the grouping of students with similar characteristics, since this method allows the students to change clusters according to the homogeneity of the groups[22].

The joint relationship between student characteristics, stress, and quality of life was analyzed using multiple correspondence analysis, a multivariate exploratory technique for simplifying the structure of data variability. It uses categorical variables arranged in contingency tables, considering correspondence measures between the rows and columns of the data matrix. It is a method for determining a system of association between the elements of two or more variables, seeking to explain the association structure of the factors in question. Thus, graphs are constructed with the main components of the rows and columns, allowing the visualization of the relationship between the sets where the proximity of the points referring to the row and column indicates association and distance[23].

The graphic process initially generates a cloud of points contained in a multidimensional space, which can be projected onto planes chosen for their ability that most faithfully represent the original distances of the points. In the plans, the points are distributed naturally based on their representativeness, according to the value of the profiles, row or column, which represent the data set. Thus, points resulting from similar profiles are located closer together on the plane than points resulting from profiles with different characteristics. It allows correspondence analysis to uncover patterns of associations between the variables under study and their respective categories[23].

The level of statistical significance considered was 0.05. The analyses were performed using SAS 9.2[24], R[25], or SPSS 21.0 software[26].

This study was approved by the university institution and submitted to Plataforma Brasil for review by the Research Ethics Committee (CAAE Process 05666818.9.0000.5317, opinion no. 3,165,980). To guarantee the anonymity of the participants, as well as to clarify the research objectives and voluntary participation, a Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF) was made available

RESULTS

127 undergraduate students living in student housing at the Federal University of Pelotas participated in the study. Of these, nine students were excluded for not completing the questionnaires completely. Thus, the sample consisted of 118 students, corresponding to 70.2% of the total number of undergraduate students residing in the residence hall.

The majority of university students are male (n=75; 63.5%), followed by female (n=42; 35.6%) and non-binary (n=1; 0.9%). The average age was 22.16 years (SD 3.73 years), with a minimum of 18 and a maximum of 36 years. Regarding marital status, 99.1% (n=117) were single and 0.9% (n=1) were married.

There was a predominance of students from the Southeast (n=48; 40.7%) and South (n=44; 37.3%) regions of Brazil, followed by the North (n=12; 10.2%), Northeast (n=7; 6%), Central-West (n=6; 5%) and Haiti (n=1; 0.8%).

The researcher searched the university website in question to verify the number of semesters for each course reported by the participants. Therefore, three categories were created, according to the percentage of semesters completed at the time of data collection: initial (0 to 33%), intermediate (34% to 67%), and final (68% to 100%). Academic information is presented in Table I. Study participants take an average of 6.07 courses, with a standard deviation of 1.6, ranging from 1 to 10 courses.

Table I: Distribution of students' academic data (n=118), Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, 2019.

Variable	Absolute frequency N	Relative frequency %
Area of knowledge		
Linguistics, Literature, and the Arts	27	22.9
Health Sciences	18	15.2
Exact and Earth Sciences	15	12.7
Engineering	12	10.2
Applied Social Sciences	12	10.2

Human Sciences	11	9.3
Agricultural Sciences	10	8.5
Biological Sciences	4	3.4
Other	9	7.6
Shift		
Integral	80	67.8
Evening	21	17.8
Afternoon	11	9.3
Morning	5	4.2
Semi-Full-Time	1	0.9
Period		
Initial	65	55.1
Intermediate	38	32.2
Final	15	12.7

Source: Table prepared by the research authors.

The data obtained through the Perceived Stress Scale (EEP-10) revealed that the average stress in the sample was 24.6 (SD 6.49), with scores ranging from 2 to 36 and a median of 26. Regarding the categories, most students presented high levels of stress (n=69; 58.5%), followed by moderate levels (n=27; 22.9%), very high levels (n=19; 16.1%), and low levels (n=3; 2,5%).

Regarding the sample's quality of life, as shown in Table II, the domain of social relations obtained the highest average (59) among the participants. In contrast, the domain over the environment (consisted of questions related to physical safety and protection, the home and physical environment, financial resources, health and social care, opportunities for new information, leisure and transportation) presented the lowest average (49,4).

Table II: Average scores obtained in each domain of the WHOQOL-*bref.* Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, 2019.

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Median	Maximum
WHOQOL-*bref*					
Physical Domain	55.2	17.3	19	56	94
Psychological Domain	52.3	19.3	0	56	94
Social Relationships Domain	59	22.7	0	62.5	100
Environmental Domain	49.4	15.2	19	50	88

Source: Table prepared by the research authors.

The cluster analysis, represented in Table III, indicated three categories of students in relation to the average WHOQOL-bref scores: low quality of life (category 3), intermediate quality of life (category 1) and high quality of life (category 2).

Table III: Categories related to the means obtained in the four domains of the WHOQOL-bref, after cluster analysis - K-means method. Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, 2019.

Domain	1		2		3	
	n	Mean (SD)	n	Mean (SD)	n	Mean (SD)
Physical	51	59.03 (14.17)	23	70.5 (15.31)	44	43.43 (11.5)
Psychological	51	55.72 (13.23)	23	74.64 (11.58)	44	36.65 (14.75)
Social	51	66.67 (16.07)	23	75 (18.97)	44	41.29 (19.1)
Environmental	51	51.9 (13.57)	23	56.93 (12.74)	44	37.79 (12.48)

Source: Table prepared by the research authors.

The prevalence ratios in relation to high/very high stress levels are represented in Table IV. Through this analysis, it was identified that there is no evidence of a difference in the prevalence of high/very high stress between the variables analyzed.

Table IV: Estimated prevalence ratios for high/very high stress among students and the variables analyzed. Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, 2019.

Effect	Prevalence ratio	Confidence interval (95%)		p-value
Gender				
F vs M	1.03	0.79	1.33	0.84
Area of Knowledge				
Biology vs. Exact Sciences	1.00	0.71	1.40	0.98
Biology vs. Humanities	1.01	0.73	1.39	0.96
Exact Sciences vs. Humanities	1.01	0.65	1.59	0.96
Shift				
Full-time vs. Morning/ Afternoon/ Semi-Full-time	1.03	0.70	1.50	0.89
Full-time vs. Evening	1.00	0.74	1.36	0.99
Morning/Afternoon/Semi-Full-time vs. Evening	0.98	0.68	1.40	0.90
Period				
Initial vs Intermediate	0.99	0.77	1.27	0.92
Initial vs Final	0.97	0.72	1.32	0.87
Intermediate vs Final	0.99	0.69	1.41	0.94
WHOQOL-*bref*				
Physical	1.00	0.98	1.01	0.71
Psychological	1.00	0.99	1.01	0.65
Social	1.00	0.99	1.01	0.83
Environmental	1.00	0.99	1.01	0.99

Source: Table prepared by the research authors.

The correspondence analysis, presented in Figure 1, allowed the identification of four association profiles: ((1) low/moderate stress, high quality of life, Humanities, initial period of the course, non-full-time shift; (2) intermediate quality of life, male, Biological Sciences, final period; (3) high stress, Exact and Earth Sciences, full-time shift, intermediate period of the course; (4) high/very high stress, low quality of life, female.

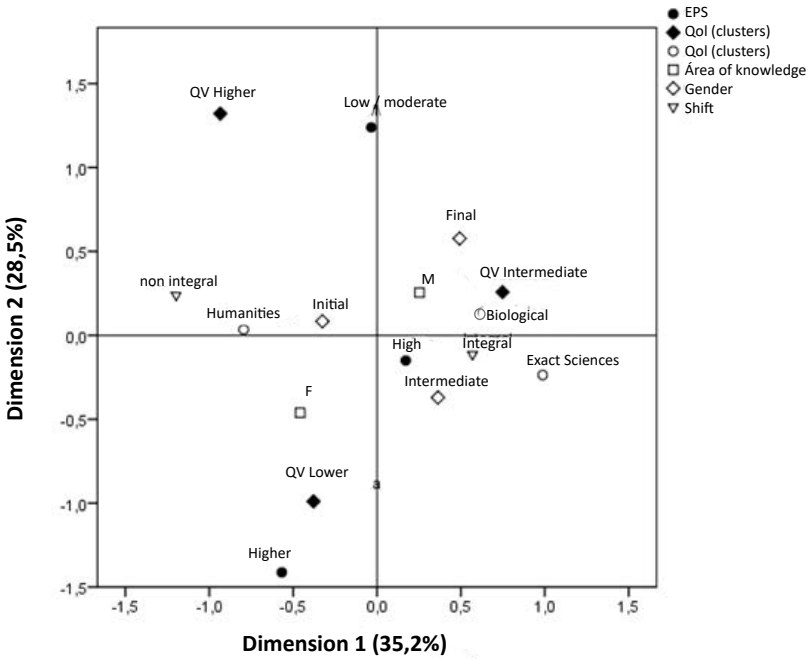

Figure 1: Association profiles according to correspondence analysis between the variables stress, quality of life, and sociodemographic data. Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, 2019.
Source: Figure generated through multiple correspondence analysis.

DISCUSSION

The study demonstrated a perception of stress in the majority of undergraduate students residing in student housing. This result differs from the research carried out by Araujo[13] in student accommodation, in which he observed stress in 19.75% of second-year students.

However, the sample characteristics differed in the studies. In the present study, discrepancies were found between genders and areas of knowledge. Therefore, the sample of Araujo's study[13] was composed of a balance between genders, and the predominant area of knowledge was Agricultural Sciences.

It is also worth noting that students in student housing have vulnerabilities and find themselves in a sociocultural context different from their origin, making the adaptation process challenging and stressful. Furthermore, the literature highlights the prevalence of stress among university students, pointing out factors such as adaptation to academic life, the overload of activities, and the need to reconcile different occupational roles[27].

The average perceived stress found in the present study was 24.6, similar to that of a study published with undergraduate students (23.34)[7], indicating the presence of stress in the university environment.

It is relevant to emphasize that the collections took place between the beginning and the middle of the semester. According to Costa[28], stress increases throughout the semester due to academic pressure and physical and emotional exhaustion. Therefore, the final period of the semester can influence stress levels.

The data obtained through the WHOQOL-bref allowed us to verify that the quality of life of the study population is average, with values close to 50 points. The lowest score presented was in the environment domain, and the highest in the social domain, which allows us to infer that although the environment is not favorable, there is a positive perception concerning support and social support. Furthermore, a study carried out in student housing also identified lower scores in the environment domain[29].

In the present study, there was no difference between high/very high levels of stress and the variables investigated. However, association profiles were identified between these variables. These data are significantly relevant for understanding the characteristics of students who face higher levels of stress, as the literature still lacks in-depth studies on the subject.

Low and moderate levels of stress were associated with students in the humanities, those at the beginning of their studies, and those who do not study full-time. Mussi et al.[30] found in their study higher levels of stress in final-year nursing students compared to first-year nursing students. These indicators may be related to lower academic demands in the initial periods of the course.

Regarding the second association obtained, the intermediate quality of life was related to male students in the area of Biological Sciences, and in the final period of the course. Literature indicates that women have a lower quality of life when compared to men[31]. Furthermore, research mentions that quality of life tends to be lower in the middle and at the end of the course[32].

An association was identified between high levels of stress and students in the Exact and Earth Sciences area. Although most research is conducted with health students, one study demonstrated higher stress levels in students in the Exact Sciences area[33]. Exact Sciences courses often involve an overload of academic activities, requiring complex cognitive skills. These aspects can lead to students experiencing higher levels of stress.

High levels of stress were also observed in students studying full-time and in the intermediate period of the course. According to a literature review, a higher percentage of stress is observed among students who study full-time [27], which can be attributed to the greater workload of activities.

Although no significant difference was found between genders, female students showed higher stress levels. This finding corroborates data found in the literature, revealing that stress is more prevalent among females [7,34]. Women face a greater overload of activities, requiring simultaneous management of their academic and domestic tasks, which constitutes a stressor[35].

Students who experienced higher levels of stress had a lower quality of life. The literature shows a scarcity of studies linking stress to quality of life in university students. However, studies that present such an association have demonstrated similar outcomes[7,36]. It is therefore noteworthy that university students are more susceptible to mental health problems and reduced quality of life[37].

Therefore, it becomes essential to investigate the effects of the academic context on the health-disease process of the university population, to implement public policies that favor healthy and health-promoting spaces[38].

The limitations of the study were mainly the scarcity of data in the literature, which prevented the comparison of relevant points found in the results, such as the characteristics of students concerning stress. However, the research is innovative because it brings new data that allows reflection on the subject and encourages the carrying out of new studies that include students in student housing.

CONCLUSION

The data presented in this study indicate that stress is present in the majority of undergraduate students residing in student housing at the Federal University of Pelotas. No significant differences were found between stress and the variables investigated. However, four profiles of associations were observed between stress, quality of life, and student characteristics, highlighting the higher levels of stress present in females, presenting low quality of life.

Studies of this nature encourage the implementation of institutional policies that provide psychological support, appropriate living environments, and activities that promote student well-being. Furthermore, research contributes to the development of a healthy academic environment, integrating education and health, and ensuring that the academic trajectory is conducive to learning and personal and professional growth.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there were no conflicts of interest in the development of this research.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Nathália Fontella Sturbelle and **Fernanda Capella Rugno** contributed to the conception and design of the work, analysis and interpretation of data for the work, preparation of the work, critical review of important intellectual content and final approval of the version to be published. **Rodrigo da Silva Vital** contributed to the conception and design of the work, preparation of the work, critical review of important intellectual content and final approval of the version to be published. **Estela Cristina Carneseca** contributed to the analysis and interpretation of data for the work, critical review of important intellectual content and final approval of the version to be published.

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First author and correspondence address
Nathália Fontella Sturbelle
Rua dos Cravos, 220
Bairro: Pedra Branca
CEP: 88137-410 / Palhoça (SC) - Brazil
E-mail: sturbellenf@gmail.com

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