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Life Skills Among Higher Education Students: An Analysis Based on Gender, Locale, and Educational Level

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Abstract

The present study examined life skills among higher education students in Murshidabad district, West Bengal, with specific reference to gender, locale, and educational level. The primary objectives were to determine whether significant differences exist in life skills across these background variables. A quantitative descriptive survey method with a cross-sectional design was employed. Using purposive sampling for district selection and simple random sampling for participant selection, data were collected from 120 undergraduate and postgraduate students through the Life Skills Scale developed by Ahmad and Parveen (2021). Descriptive statistics and independent samples *t*-tests were applied for analysis. The findings revealed statistically significant differences in life skills based on gender, locale, and educational level. Female, urban, and postgraduate students demonstrated significantly higher life skills scores compared to their counterparts. The results highlight the influence of socio-cultural context, institutional exposure, and academic engagement on life skills development.

Keywords: Life Skills, Gender Differences, Rural-Urban Disparities, Higher Education

Introduction

Life skills constitute a set of psychosocial competencies and interpersonal abilities that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 1999) ^[17], life skills include critical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, effective communication, interpersonal relationship skills, self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation. In the contemporary globalized and knowledge-driven society, these competencies are considered essential for academic success, employability, and responsible citizenship. Higher education institutions are not only centers of intellectual development but also critical spaces for shaping students' socio-emotional and adaptive capacities.

The transition from adolescence to young adulthood, particularly within higher education settings, represents a crucial developmental stage. Scholars such as Goleman (1995) ^[7] and Bar-On (2006) emphasize that emotional and social competencies significantly influence academic achievement, leadership potential, and overall well-being. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ^[4] ecological systems theory suggests that individual development is deeply embedded within environmental contexts, including family, educational institutions, and broader socio-cultural systems. Therefore, life skills development cannot be understood as purely individual traits; rather, they are shaped by structural, institutional, and socio-cultural conditions.

In the Indian context, the importance of life skills has gained renewed attention under the National Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 2020) ^[14], which advocates holistic, multidisciplinary, and competency-based education. The policy underscores the need for fostering critical thinking, communication, creativity, and adaptability among learners. However, despite policy emphasis, disparities in access to educational resources, socio-economic background, gender socialization patterns, and rural-urban infrastructural differences may create uneven opportunities for life skills development.

Research indicates that gender socialization processes influence emotional expressiveness, communication styles, and interpersonal competencies (Eagly, 1987) ^[6].

At the same time, Hyde (2005) ^[10] cautions against essentialist interpretations by arguing that gender differences are often contextually shaped rather than biologically predetermined. Likewise, rural-urban disparities in educational infrastructure, digital exposure, and institutional engagement may influence developmental outcomes (Conger & Donnellan, 2007) ^[5]. Educational level also plays a significant role, as prolonged academic engagement often enhances cognitive complexity, autonomy, and social maturity (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) ^[15].

Murshidabad district of West Bengal presents a particularly relevant context for such an investigation. Predominantly rural with emerging educational expansion, the district reflects broader developmental contrasts observed across India. While initiatives promoting girls' education and institutional access have increased enrollment rates, structural inequalities in infrastructure and socio-economic conditions continue to persist. Examining life skills across gender, locale, and educational level within this context offers valuable insights into how structural and developmental variables interact in shaping student competencies.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to analyze life skills among higher education students in Murshidabad district with specific reference to gender, locale, and educational level. By employing both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, the study aims to contribute empirical evidence to the discourse on equitable and holistic educational development.

Rationale of the Study

In the contemporary global landscape, nations are increasingly interconnected through expanding trade networks, social exchanges, and technological advancements (Mandal *et al.*, 2023) ^[12]. Within such a rapidly evolving and interdependent environment, individuals are required to possess strong life skills—such as critical thinking, effective communication, adaptability, and problem-solving—to navigate complex social and professional contexts successfully. Consequently, life skills have become essential competencies for meaningful participation and sustainable success in a globalized society.

First, life skills are increasingly recognized as multidimensional constructs influenced by socialization processes, environmental conditions, and educational experiences. The capability approach proposed by Sen (1999) argues that individual competencies are shaped by access to enabling conditions and freedoms rather than merely internal attributes. Therefore, examining variations in life skills across gender, locale, and educational level provides a framework to understand how structural and institutional factors influence psychosocial development. Empirical investigations at the district level contribute to refining broader theoretical debates concerning equity, opportunity, and developmental outcomes.

Second, there exists a contextual gap in localized empirical research within districts like Murshidabad. While national-level policies emphasize competency-based education, limited micro-level data are available regarding how life skills vary among subgroups within higher education populations, particularly in predominantly rural districts. Rural-urban disparities in infrastructure, digital literacy, and exposure to extracurricular opportunities may create differential developmental environments. Similarly, the

expansion of female participation in higher education necessitates systematic inquiry into whether increased access translates into enhanced psychosocial competencies. Without such evidence, policy implementation risks remaining generalized rather than context-sensitive.

Third, from a policy and institutional perspective, the findings bear significant implications for curriculum design and educational planning. The National Education Policy (2020) advocates integrating experiential learning, communication skills, and critical thinking into higher education curricula. However, if disparities exist across gender, locale, or academic level, targeted interventions become necessary. Identifying statistically significant differences enables stakeholders to design gender-responsive pedagogy, strengthen rural institutional capacities, and embed structured life skills training within undergraduate programs.

Furthermore, higher education serves as a transformative stage that shapes employability, leadership readiness, and civic responsibility. In districts characterized by socio-economic challenges, strengthening life skills may contribute not only to individual advancement but also to community development and social mobility. Therefore, this study is justified as both an academic inquiry and a developmental necessity.

Delimitations of the study

1. The present study was delimited to only one district i.e., Murshidabad surveyed.
2. The study was delimited to only Bengali medium higher education students selected.
3. The study delimited to only undergraduate and post-graduate level 120 students as sample.
4. Delimited to three background or independent variables i.e., gender, locale, and educational level.

Objectives of the study

- i. To know the life skills among higher education level students by their gender.
- ii. To find out the life skills among higher education level students by their locale.
- iii. To examine the life skills among higher education level students by their educational level.

Hypotheses of the study

H₀₁: There is no significant mean difference in life skills among students by gender.

H₀₂: There is no significant mean difference in life skills among students by locale.

H₀₃: There is no significant mean difference in life skills among students by educational level.

Method

The present study adopted a quantitative approach using a descriptive survey method with a cross-sectional research design. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select the district, while students were selected through simple random sampling. The final sample comprised 120 undergraduate and postgraduate students.

In this study, gender, locale, and educational level were treated as independent variables, whereas life skills among higher education students in Murshidabad district, West Bengal, served as the dependent variable.

Tools for data collection

The present study employed the Life Skills Scale developed by Anjum Ahmad and Saba Parveen (2021) as the primary instrument for data collection. The scale is structured on a five-point Likert response format ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” It comprises 40 items distributed across ten dimensions: self-awareness, empathy, critical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving,

effective communication, creative thinking, interpersonal relationships, coping with stress, and coping with emotions. The instrument has demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with a reported Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.765, indicating acceptable reliability. The total possible scores on the scale range from 40 to 200, with higher scores reflecting greater life skills competencies.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 1: Descriptive statistics based on different independent variables

Dependent Variable	Independent Variables	Categories	N	Mean	Sd
Life skills	Gender	Male	50	108.32	10.022
		Female	70	120.75	9.181
	Locale	Rural	69	110.84	9.821
		Urban	51	121.97	10.52
	Educational Level	UG	61	108.99	9.765
		PG	59	122.37	8.460

Interpretations

Table 1 showed that the independent variables wise mean distribution based on life skills among higher education students. Gender wise, female students ($m=120.75$; $sd=9.181$) showed higher life skills than male ($m=108.32$; $sd=10.022$) students. Locale wise, urban ($m=121.97$; $sd=10.52$)

areas students showed better life skills than rural ($m=110.84$; $sd=9.821$) areas students. Educational level wise, post graduate ($m=122.37$; $sd=8.460$) level students showed better life skills than undergraduate ($m=108.99$; $sd=9.765$) level students.

Inferential statistics

Hypothesis testing

Table 2: Inferential statistics based on H_01 to H_03

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	t-value	df	md	Sig (2-tailed)	Remarks
Life skills	Gender	-7.038	118	-12.432	0.000	*Significant Rejected H_01 ($P<0.01$)
	Locale	-6.077	118	-11.132	0.000	*Significant Rejected H_02 ($P<0.01$)
	Educational Level	-8.013	118	-13.383	0.000	*Significant Rejected H_03 ($P<0.01$)

Interpretations

The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in Life Skills scores between gender groups, $t(118) = -7.038$, $p < .05$. The mean difference (MD = -12.432) indicates that the average Life Skills score differed by approximately 12.43 points between males and females. Therefore, gender has a significant influence on Life Skills levels among the participants.

Another, result a statistically significant difference was also found between rural and urban participants in terms of Life Skills, $t(118) = -6.077$, $p < .05$. The mean difference of -11.132 indicates that the two locale groups differed by approximately 11.13 points on average. Another, results further showed a significant difference in Life Skills scores based on educational level, $t(118) = -8.013$, $p < .05$. The mean difference (MD = -13.383) indicates that the two educational groups differed by approximately 13.38 points.

Major findings

1. Female students have showed better life skills than male students and the difference was found to be statistically significant.
2. Urban students have showed better life skills than rural students and the difference was found to be statistically significant.
3. Post-graduate level students have showed better life skills than undergraduate level students and the difference was found to be statistically significant.

Discussion

In the contemporary era, countries are increasingly interconnected due to rapid developments in trade, communication systems, and technological innovation. This heightened global integration is largely driven by the process of globalization, which has enhanced cross-border mobility

and intensified economic interdependence through the expansion of international trade and commercial activities (Mandal *et al.*, 2023; Adak *et al.*, 2024; Mandal *et al.* 2025) [12, 1, 13].

The finding that female students demonstrated superior life skills competencies requires careful interpretation. From a socio-emotional perspective, Goleman (1995) [7] and Bar-On (2006) argue that emotional intelligence components—such as empathy, interpersonal sensitivity, and emotional regulation—are often more pronounced among women due to socialization processes rather than innate biological differences. Social role theory further suggests that gendered expectations shape behavioural development, encouraging girls to cultivate relational and communicative competencies (Eagly, 1987) [6].

However, it would be reductionist to attribute the observed difference solely to gendered traits. Scholars such as Hyde (2005) [10] have challenged essentialist interpretations, arguing through the gender similarities hypothesis that psychological differences between males and females are often small and context-dependent. Therefore, the statistically significant difference observed in the present study may reflect structural and cultural conditions rather than inherent gender disparities.

In the context of Murshidabad district, female educational participation has expanded significantly over the past decade due to state-level initiatives promoting girls' education and financial support mechanisms. Increased institutional engagement may foster self-efficacy, autonomy, and decision-making capacity among female students. Thus, the higher life skills scores observed among women may reflect an intersection between empowerment policies and evolving socio-cultural norms within West Bengal rather than purely individual-level psychological traits.

The urban advantage in life skills aligns with structural and ecological theories of development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) [4] posits that individual competencies are shaped by environmental systems, including institutional infrastructure, social networks, and community resources. Urban environments typically provide greater access to digital literacy, career guidance, extracurricular exposure, and peer diversity—all of which contribute to problem-solving and adaptive functioning.

Conger and Donnellan (2007) [5] further highlight the impact of socio-economic conditions on psychological development, noting that resource availability significantly shapes cognitive and emotional outcomes. Urban institutions often operate within more resource-rich ecosystems compared to rural colleges, where infrastructural limitations, digital divides, and socio-economic constraints may impede exposure to experiential learning.

Murshidabad, being predominantly rural, continues to face developmental disparities compared to metropolitan districts of West Bengal. Although rural students may demonstrate resilience and strong community bonding (Howley & Howley, 2010) [8, 9], limited institutional exposure may restrict competencies associated with modern life skills frameworks, particularly digital communication and career-oriented decision-making.

From a capability approach perspective (Sen, 1999), life skills represent not merely internal traits but the freedoms and opportunities available to individuals to convert resources into functioning outcomes. Thus, the observed rural-urban difference should not be interpreted as a deficit in rural

students, but rather as evidence of unequal capability-enhancing conditions.

The higher life skills scores among postgraduate students are theoretically consistent with student development models. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) [15] argue that higher education significantly influences cognitive complexity, autonomy, and interpersonal competence. Similarly, Astin's (1993) [2]

involvement theory suggests that sustained academic engagement fosters psychological growth and social maturity.

However, a critical lens requires questioning whether postgraduate education itself causes improved life skills or whether students with stronger pre-existing competencies are more likely to progress to advanced academic levels. Selection bias cannot be entirely ruled out. Moreover, Lumpkin (2008) [11] contends that life skills development depends more on structured experiential learning than on academic level *per se*.

In Murshidabad, progression to postgraduate study often entails greater academic rigor, research engagement, seminar participation, and exposure beyond local communities. These experiences likely enhance analytical reasoning, leadership capacity, and communication competence. Nevertheless, the findings also imply that undergraduate education may not sufficiently integrate life skills training into its curriculum.

Within the framework of India's National Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 2020) [14], which advocates holistic, competency-based education, this gap underscores the urgency of embedding structured life skills programs at the undergraduate level to prevent developmental disparities.

Educational Implications

From a policy perspective, the findings advocate for:

1. Gender-responsive pedagogy that supports emotional literacy and communication skills among male students while sustaining empowerment initiatives for female students.
2. Rural capacity enhancement, including digital infrastructure development, mentoring programs, and experiential learning platforms to bridge the rural-urban life skills gap.
3. Curricular restructuring at the undergraduate level, embedding life skills modules aligned with the WHO (1999) [17] life skills framework and NEP (2020) competency-based objectives.

Life skills education should move beyond theoretical instruction toward participatory, experiential, and community-based learning models that promote critical thinking, adaptability, and social responsibility.

Conclusion

The present study sought to analyze life skills among higher education students in Murshidabad district with reference to gender, locale, and educational level. The empirical findings clearly indicate that statistically significant differences exist across all three variables. Female students demonstrated higher life skills competencies than male students, urban students outperformed rural students, and postgraduate students scored higher than undergraduates. These differences were not marginal but substantial, suggesting the meaningful influence of social, environmental, and academic factors on life skills development.

However, the findings should not be interpreted as inherent or fixed group characteristics. Rather, they reflect the broader socio-cultural processes, institutional exposure, and structural opportunities available to different groups. Gender differences may be shaped by socialization patterns and empowerment initiatives. Rural-urban disparities likely stem from unequal access to educational infrastructure, digital resources, and experiential learning opportunities. Similarly, higher scores among postgraduate students may be linked to prolonged academic engagement, greater autonomy, and increased institutional participation.

The study therefore reinforces the understanding that life skills are dynamic competencies influenced by ecological and developmental contexts. Strengthening undergraduate curricula with structured life skills modules, enhancing rural institutional capacity, and promoting inclusive pedagogical strategies are essential steps toward reducing disparities. In the context of ongoing educational reforms emphasizing holistic and competency-based learning, integrating life skills development into mainstream higher education becomes both an academic and social imperative.

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