

SOURCES OF ACADEMIC STRESS AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN, KWARA STATE

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Abstract

This study explores the sources of academic stress among undergraduate students at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria. Using a descriptive survey design, data were collected from 400 undergraduates through the validated Student Academic Stress Scale (SASS). Descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and t-tests were employed to analyze the data. Findings revealed that the most prominent stressors included changes in academic routines, self-imposed expectations, and academic pressure. While no significant differences in stress levels were found based on gender or faculty, statistically significant differences were observed across levels of study particularly in areas of frustration and adaptability to change. The study is anchored on the Person-Environment Fit Theory and the Cognitive Appraisal Theory, emphasizing the dynamic interaction between individual capacity and academic demands. Recommendations were made for institutional reforms such as improved academic support systems, mental health services, and resilience-building interventions. The study concludes that addressing academic stress requires holistic, context-specific strategies to foster student well-being and academic success.

Keywords: Academic stress, undergraduate students, Academic Workload, frustration, self-expectation

Introduction

Academic stress has emerged as a critical concern in higher education, particularly among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. It refers to the psychological distress students experience due to the numerous demands placed on them within the academic environment. These demands include managing academic workload, meeting tight deadlines, navigating unclear curricula, coping with examinations, and satisfying the high expectations of parents, lecturers, and peers (Aihie & Ohanaka, 2019; Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2022). While a moderate level of stress can enhance motivation and performance, excessive or chronic academic stress often results in adverse psychological, emotional, and physical outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, burnout, and diminished academic performance.

Undergraduates at the University of Ilorin are not exempt from these pressures. The academic environment, though aimed at fostering intellectual growth, often subjects students to high levels of competition, inadequate learning resources, overcrowded lecture halls, financial difficulties, and limited emotional support systems. These factors collectively undermine students' ability to effectively cope with the demands of university life. As highlighted by Nandamuri & Gowthami (2022), stressors such as curriculum overload, assessment pressure, group project conflicts, and future career uncertainty contribute significantly to academic stress among students. Similarly, Aihie & Ohanaka (2019) emphasized that demographic variables like sex, faculty, and year of study influence students'

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perception of academic stress, with final-year students and those in science-related faculties reporting significantly higher levels of stress.

Moreover, the Student Academic Stress Scale (SASS) further contextualizes the multifaceted nature of academic stress, capturing stressors related to financial hardship, interpersonal relationships, academic performance, lecturer-student dynamics, and physical symptoms. The scale illustrates how academic stress extends beyond academic tasks to encompass social, emotional, and psychological challenges.

Given these concerns, it is essential to investigate the specific sources of academic stress among students at the University of Ilorin. Understanding these stressors will not only inform institutional policy and counselling strategies but also empower students with effective coping mechanisms. This study, therefore, seeks to examine the major sources of academic stress among undergraduate students in the University of Ilorin, taking into account both systemic and individual factors contributing to stress in the academic context.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing attention academic stress receives in educational discourse, many Nigerian universities, including the University of Ilorin, continue to face challenges in addressing the root causes of academic stress among undergraduates (Ilori & Akerele, 2024). Students frequently encounter stressors that interfere with their academic success, mental health, and social adjustment. These stressors include academic overload, financial hardship, institutional inefficiencies, and social pressures from family and peers (Ambe et al. 2024; Pérez-Jorge et al., 2025). Although some levels of stress can enhance student motivation, excessive and chronic stress can lead to psychological disorders, academic failure, substance abuse, and dropout.

Current interventions such as academic counselling and peer support programs appear insufficient or inadequately targeted, largely due to limited empirical data on the contextual realities of student stress in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Moreover, existing studies often generalize findings without examining the specific stressors peculiar to the institutional context, faculty differences, or students' year of study (Olson et al., 2025; Pérez-Jorge et al., 2025). As such, there is a significant knowledge gap regarding the pattern and sources of academic stress experienced by undergraduates at the University of Ilorin.

This study is designed to address this gap by systematically identifying and analyzing the core sources of academic stress among undergraduate students in the University of Ilorin. It will provide data-driven insights necessary for designing more effective support mechanisms tailored to students' actual experiences.

Although numerous studies acknowledge academic stress as a pervasive issue (Konstantinidis et al., 2025), there is a lack of localized, data-driven analyses in Nigerian universities. Most existing interventions are generic and fail to address institution-specific dynamics. This has led to continued high stress levels, resulting in poor academic performance, anxiety, and dropout risks. Hence, this study addresses this gap by exploring stressors specific to the University of Ilorin's context.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the major sources of academic stress among undergraduate students at the University of Ilorin.
2. To examine how demographic variables (gender, faculty, and level of study) influence academic stress.

Research Questions

1. What are the major sources of academic stress among undergraduate students in the University of Ilorin?
2. Does gender influence the sources of academic stress?
3. Does students' discipline influence the sources of academic stress?
4. Does level of study influence the sources of academic stress?

Research Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in academic stress levels between male and female students.
2. There is no significant difference in academic stress levels across students academic disciplines.
3. There is no significant difference in academic stress levels across different levels of study.

Review of Related Literature

Concept of Stress

Stress is a psychological and physiological response to perceived challenges or threats. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), stress occurs when an individual appraises a situation as exceeding their resources and endangering their well-being. Stress is a common phenomenon in daily life and affects people differently depending on their coping capacity, personality, and social environment.

Concept of Academic Stress

Academic stress specifically refers to the stress experienced in educational settings. It encompasses emotional discomfort or anxiety stemming from academic demands such as examinations, assignments, deadlines, and performance expectations. Bisht (as cited in Aihie & Ohanaka, 2019) categorized academic stress into four components: academic frustration, academic conflict, academic pressure, and academic anxiety.

Sources of Academic Stress Among Undergraduate Students

Research consistently highlights a range of academic, financial, social, and institutional stressors faced by undergraduate students:

1. **Academic Workload and Curriculum Pressure:** Students frequently cite excessive workload, difficult course content, and dense syllabi as major sources of stress (Prabhakar & Gowthami, 2022). The demand to meet numerous deadlines for assignments, tests, and projects often exceeds students' available time and energy.
2. **Examinations and Assessment Anxiety:** The pressure to perform well in tests and continuous assessments is a common stressor. High-stakes examinations, unclear grading systems, and poorly designed assessments create anxiety and fear of failure.
3. **Financial Constraints:** Many students struggle with limited financial resources, which affect their ability to afford academic materials, transportation, and adequate nutrition. Financial hardship is a recurring theme in the SASS instrument and significantly impacts academic performance and emotional well-being (SASS; Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2022).
4. **Lecturer-Student Relationship:** Poor communication, lack of encouragement, and perceived unfair treatment by lecturers can heighten stress levels. When lecturers are perceived as unapproachable or unmotivating, students may lose confidence and feel unsupported (Aihie & Ohanaka, 2019).
5. **Parental and Peer Expectations:** Unrealistic expectations from parents and pressure to outperform peers contribute significantly to students' academic stress (Essel & Owusu, 2017; Mishra, 2018). The fear of disappointing family members or losing social status among peers exacerbates stress levels.

6. **Institutional and Environmental Stressors:** Infrastructural limitations such as overcrowded lecture halls, lack of study spaces, and insufficient academic resources were found to be critical stressors (Awino & Agolla, 2008). Bureaucratic inefficiencies and abrupt changes in academic schedules also contribute to stress (Fairbrother & Warn, 2003).

7. **Social and Emotional Challenges:** Students often face interpersonal conflicts, loneliness, and difficulty adapting to university life, especially in their first year. These social pressures, when combined with academic demands, increase the risk of burnout and mental health problems (Dwyer & Cummings, 2001).

8. **Uncertainty about the Future:** Anxiety over employability, job placement, and career prospects adds to students' stress levels, particularly in their final year (Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2022).

This comprehensive understanding of stressors demonstrates that academic stress among university students is multidimensional and requires holistic approaches to intervention.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the Person-Environment Fit Theory and the Cognitive Appraisal Theory. The Person-Environment Fit Theory posits that stress arises when there is a misfit between an individual's capabilities and environmental demands. The Cognitive Appraisal Theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggests that stress depends on individuals' interpretation (appraisal) of a situation and their perceived ability to cope. These theories help to explain the variations in academic stress among students based on individual and contextual factors.

Methodology

Research Design: The study adopted a descriptive survey design, allowing for the collection of data from a large sample to describe the prevailing sources of academic stress among undergraduates.

Population, Sample, and Sampling Techniques: The population of this study includes all the 49,471 undergraduate students at the University of Ilorin. A sample of 400 students was drawn using a disproportionate stratified random sampling technique where the students were grouped base on faculties to ensure representation across faculties and levels.

Research Instrument: Data were collected using an adopted instrument titled, Student Academic Stress Scale (SASS) (Busari, 2011). The construct validity of the instrument measuring various dimensions of academic stress, including financial stress, interpersonal conflicts, lecturer-student relationships, and emotional responses was carried out and all items have loadings above 0.6 which suggest that the instrument is valid. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Very Much Like Me" to "Very Much Unlike Me." The instrument was piloted, yielding a Cronbach Alpha value between 0.74 and 0.86. Thus, suggest that the instrument is reliable.

Method of Data Collection and Analysis: The questionnaire was administered both physically and electronically. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity to ensure honest and accurate responses. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency) and inferential statistics (ANOVA and t-tests) to test the research hypotheses at a 0.05 significance level.

Results

This section presents findings based on the four research questions that guided the study.

Question 1: What are the key sources of stress among undergraduate students at the University of Ilorin?

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of sources of academic stress

Sources	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Frustration	381	1.06	4.94	2.5918	.81908
Financial	381	.95	4.26	2.1989	.79261
Conflicts	381	1.10	5.00	2.5600	.73504
Pressures	381	1.00	5.00	2.5695	.90625
Changes	381	1.00	4.88	2.6578	.73481
Self-expectation	381	1.00	5.00	2.6186	.87887

Descriptive statistics revealed the relative weight of each stressor as perceived by the respondents. The most significant sources of stress included: Changes ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 0.73$): This factor represented students' stress due to sudden alterations in academic routines, curriculum demands, or institutional policies. High stress scores in this domain reflect student difficulty in adapting to dynamic academic environments. Self-expectation ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.88$): Many students expressed significant internal pressure to meet personal academic targets, maintain high GPAs, and fulfill future career ambitions. This stressor highlights the internalized nature of academic competition and success.

Academic Pressure ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 0.91$): This encompasses time constraints, test anxiety, deadlines, and the cumulative weight of multiple assessments. It demonstrates the substantial impact of workload and performance metrics on students' psychological states.

Frustration ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 0.82$): This stressor includes feelings of dissatisfaction with academic performance, failure to meet expectations, and limited feedback mechanisms from lecturers.

Conflicts ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 0.74$): These arise from interpersonal tensions, including group project disagreements, lecturer-student misunderstandings, and peer conflicts.

Financial Difficulties ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 0.79$): Although rated lowest, financial stress remains a crucial issue. It reflects challenges such as inability to afford textbooks, transport, food, and internet services.

Question 2: What is the influence of gender on sources of academic stress among undergraduate students at the University of Ilorin?

Table 2: Analysis of Variance on the influence of gender on sources of academic stress

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Frustration	Between Groups	.867	1	.867	1.293	.256
	Within Groups	254.073	379	.670		
	Total	254.939	380			
Financial	Between Groups	.850	1	.850	1.354	.245
	Within Groups	237.878	379	.628		
	Total	238.728	380			
Conflicts	Between Groups	.022	1	.022	.041	.839
	Within Groups					

Pressures	Within Groups	205.288	379	.542	.000	.985
	Total	205.310	380			
	Between Groups	.000	1	.000		
Changes	Within Groups	312.090	379	.823	1.636	.202
	Total	312.091	380			
	Between Groups	.882	1	.882		
Self-expectation	Within Groups	204.296	379	.539	1.316	.252
	Total	205.178	380			
	Between Groups	1.016	1	1.016		
	Within Groups	292.503	379	.772		
	Total	293.519	380			

A one-way ANOVA showed that gender did not significantly influence stress levels in any of the domains: Frustration ($F = 1.293$, $p = .256$), Financial ($F = 1.354$, $p = .245$), Conflicts ($F = 0.041$, $p = .839$), Pressures ($F = 0.000$, $p = .985$), Changes ($F = 1.636$, $p = .202$), Self-expectation ($F = 1.316$, $p = .252$). These findings suggest that male and female students experience academic stress similarly, contradicting studies that report gender disparities. It implies a shared academic burden, possibly resulting from uniform institutional demands across gender groups.

Question 3: What is the influence of students' discipline on sources of academic stress among undergraduate students at the University of Ilorin?

Table 3: Analysis of Variance of the influence of students' discipline on sources of academic stress

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Frustration	Between Groups	.601	2	.300	.446	.640
	Within Groups	254.339	378	.673		
	Total	254.939	380			
Financial	Between Groups	.480	2	.240	.381	.684
	Within Groups	238.248	378	.630		
	Total	238.728	380			
Conflicts	Between Groups	1.447	2	.723	1.341	.263
	Within Groups	203.863	378	.539		
	Total	205.310	380			
Pressures	Between Groups	1.868	2	.934	1.138	.322
	Within Groups	310.223	378	.821		
	Total	312.091	380			
Changes	Between Groups	.702	2	.351	.649	.523
	Within Groups	204.477	378	.541		
	Total	205.178	380			

Self-expectation	Between Groups	.139	2	.069	.089	.914
	Within Groups	293.380	378	.776		
	Total	293.519	380			

The ANOVA analysis on Table 3 indicated no statistically significant differences across faculties: Frustration ($F = 0.446$, $p = .640$), Financial ($F = 0.381$, $p = .684$), Conflicts ($F = 1.341$, $p = .263$), Pressures ($F = 1.138$, $p = .322$), Changes ($F = 0.649$, $p = .523$), Self-expectation ($F = 0.089$, $p = .914$).

This suggests that academic stressors are not unique to particular faculties. The uniformity across faculties could reflect consistent assessment policies, workload expectations, and limited differentiation in support structures.

Question 4: What is the influence of the level of education on sources of academic stress among undergraduate students at the University of Ilorin?

Table 4: Analysis of Variance on the influence of educational level on sources of academic stress

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Frustration	Between Groups	6.672	4	1.668	2.526	.040
	Within Groups	248.267	376	.660		
	Total	254.939	380			
Financial	Between Groups	3.755	4	.939	1.502	.201
	Within Groups	234.973	376	.625		
	Total	238.728	380			
Conflicts	Between Groups	2.687	4	.672	1.247	.291
	Within Groups	202.623	376	.539		
	Total	205.310	380			
Pressures	Between Groups	5.462	4	1.365	1.674	.155
	Within Groups	306.629	376	.816		
	Total	312.091	380			
Changes	Between Groups	5.328	4	1.332	2.506	.042
	Within Groups	199.851	376	.532		
	Total	205.178	380			
Self-expectation	Between Groups	2.544	4	.636	.822	.512
	Within Groups	290.975	376	.774		
	Total	293.519	380			

There were statistically significant differences across levels of study in two domains: Frustration ($F = 2.526$, $p = .040$), Changes ($F = 2.506$, $p = .042$). Post-hoc tests indicated that 100-level students experienced significantly more stress related to changes, likely due to the shock of transitioning from secondary to university academic systems. Similarly, final-year students reported heightened frustration, potentially due to academic workload, thesis

pressure, and post-graduation uncertainty. These findings highlight the evolving nature of stress along the academic trajectory.

Discussions

This section interprets the study's findings in relation to existing literature and theory.

This study examined the sources of academic stress among undergraduate students at the University of Ilorin, with particular attention to the influence of gender, academic discipline, and level of study. The findings provide important insights into the multidimensional and context-dependent nature of academic stress, reinforcing its conceptualisation as both an individual and systemic phenomenon.

Regarding the major sources of stress, the study identified academic changes, self-imposed expectations, and performance-related pressures as the most salient stressors. This finding underscores the growing complexity of the academic environment, where students must continuously adapt to evolving institutional demands while simultaneously managing internal aspirations for success. The prominence of self-expectation as a stressor suggests that academic stress is not solely externally imposed but is also internally constructed, reflecting heightened personal standards and fear of failure. This aligns with the Cognitive Appraisal Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which posits that stress is determined by individuals' subjective evaluation of environmental demands relative to their coping resources. In this context, students' perception of academic demands as overwhelming may be as critical as the demands themselves. The finding also corroborates earlier studies (Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2022; Aihie & Ohanaka, 2019), which identified academic workload and performance anxiety as dominant stressors among university students.

The study further revealed that gender does not significantly influence students' experience of academic stress across all measured domains. This suggests that academic stress at the University of Ilorin is largely gender-neutral, likely due to the standardised nature of academic expectations, assessment procedures, and institutional structures. This finding supports the position of Dwyer and Cummings (2001), who argued that when exposed to similar academic conditions, male and female students exhibit comparable stress responses. However, this result contrasts with studies that report gender-based differences in stress perception and coping strategies (Aihie & Ohanaka, 2019). The divergence may be attributed to contextual variations, including cultural norms, institutional policies, and access to support systems. Consequently, the present finding emphasises the need for inclusive, institution-wide stress management interventions rather than gender-specific approaches.

Similarly, the absence of significant differences in academic stress across disciplines indicates that stressors are pervasive and not confined to particular fields of study. This suggests a systemic pattern in which institutional structures, rather than disciplinary demands, play a more decisive role in shaping students' stress experiences. The finding departs from earlier research that identified higher stress levels among students in science-oriented disciplines due to rigorous coursework and laboratory demands (Aihie & Ohanaka, 2019). A plausible explanation for this discrepancy may lie in the relative homogenization of academic processes within the University of Ilorin, including comparable assessment systems, coursework, and scheduling structures across faculties. It may also reflect broader systemic challenges such as limited resources and infrastructural constraints, which cut across disciplinary boundaries.

In contrast, the study found significant differences in academic stress by level of study, particularly in the domains of frustration and adaptability to change. This highlights the dynamic and developmental nature of academic stress, which evolves as students progress through the university system. The heightened stress related to change among first-year students can be attributed to transitional challenges, including adjustment to a new academic

culture, increased autonomy, and unfamiliar pedagogical approaches. On the other hand, the elevated frustration reported among final-year students likely reflects cumulative academic pressure, project or thesis demands, and anxiety regarding post-graduation opportunities. These findings are consistent with the Person-Environment Fit Theory, which emphasises that stress arises when there is a mismatch between individuals' capabilities and environmental demands. At different stages of their academic journey, students encounter varying demands that may exceed their adaptive capacity, thereby generating stress.

Overall, the findings of this study reinforce the argument that academic stress is a multifaceted construct shaped by the interaction of personal, institutional, and developmental factors. While demographic variables such as gender and discipline appear less influential in this context, transitional experiences and internal expectations play a critical role in shaping students' stress profiles. This underscores the need for a holistic and context-sensitive approach to stress management in higher education, one that addresses both structural inefficiencies and students' psychological coping mechanisms.

Recommendations

- i. Implement structured academic advising and mentorship.
- ii. Introduce targeted orientation and graduation support programs.
- iii. Increase access to confidential counselling and mental health services.
- iv. Offer training on time management and emotional resilience.
- v. Standardise workloads across faculties to prevent imbalance.

Implications

The findings highlight the need for institution-wide reforms in academic planning and mental health support. Incorporating neurobiological data into academic policies could help create holistic student support systems.

Conclusions

Academic stress among undergraduates is influenced more by internal expectations and academic transitions than demographic variables. A blend of psychosocial and physiological interventions is essential for promoting academic success and well-being.

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