Review Article

Academic Stress among Faculty and Students in Higher Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Academic stress refers to all kinds of things that trigger tension, otherwise known as stressors, that can be interpersonal, intrapersonal, social, health-related, environmentally related that impede academic growth in educational institutions. Stress in a mild measure is said to spark the fire of motivation and hard work in individuals. However, excessive academic stress that is beyond the coping resources of students and faculty staff stifles their academic and professional progression and can be detrimental to their health. If not well managed, unbridled academic stress can trigger physiological, mental, emotional and physical consequences. This paper comprehensively presents a review of current studies on academic stress. It thoroughly explains the concept of stress, the common academic stressors, their negative implications and stress coping or management mechanisms. Using the research methods, desk survey and document analysis, a systematic search was carried out. The study contends that academic stress when well managed, can help in promoting academic work, elicit good academic outcomes from students and ensure high professional output from faculty staff in higher institutions.

Keywords: Academic development, academic stress, higher institutions, stressors, stress coping mechanisms, stress management

INTRODUCTION

Academic stress has been classed as one of the disturbing cankers in higher institutions of learning that decreases the academic output of students and faculty or staff (Kadapatti & Vijayalaxmi, 2012; Wani

et al., 2018). Students and faculty are required to adapt to this very demanding educational environment (Ramachandiran & Dhanapal, 2018). The word 'stress' is originally traced to the Latin word 'Stringere' which paints the imagery of pain, hardship or affliction (Dhanalakshmi & Murthy, 2018). Proponents who laid the scientific groundwork for the stress theory such as Canon (1914), Mason (1971), and Selye (1965) based the condition on physiology. However, recent definitions of stress focus largely on the interaction between a situation and an individual (Michie, 2002). Selye (1965) made a clear distinction between beneficial stress (eustress) and harmful stress (distress). Many scholars have admitted that mild stress promotes motivation and assists in achieving successes (Ng et al., 2016; Saqib & Rehman, 2018; Yikealo et al., 2018). On the other hand, excessive stress leads to severe health and mental problems (Azila-Gbettor et al., 2015; Essel & Owusu, 2017; Jain & Singhai, 2018; Reddy et al., 2017). The main objective of the review was to examine extensively the subject of academic stress, common academic stressors, the effects of academic stress and the effective coping mechanisms for academic stress. Thus, the research questions were:

1) What is academic stress?
2) What are the commonplace academic stressors?
3) What are the effects of academic stress?
4) What are the effective ways of managing stress?

Embarking on this review was crucial as it would help in maximizing the academic output of students and the professional performance of faculty in higher institutions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The researchers employed document analysis (Bowen, 2009) and desk survey (Travis, 2016) for the comprehensive review of academic stress in peer-reviewed journals, reports, and newspapers (Creswell, 2009). A systematic search was undertaken using the keywords 'academic stress', 'stress', 'stress management', 'academic stressors', 'higher institution stress', and 'stress-coping mechanism' from online databases such as Springer, JSTOR, PubMed, EBSCO, ProQuest and Google Scholar. The empirical studies that were included in the review were from the last two decades though priority was given to recent studies on academic stress published in the last three years from 2015-2019. In all, a total of 59 articles were examined. The articles were carefully reviewed and analyzed to understand the concept of stress, common academic stressors, negative effects of academic stress on academic performance of students and the professional growth of faculty in higher institutions of learning (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The key qualities in the interpretive document analysis that guided the review were authenticity, credibility, and representativeness (Hefferman, 2013). The documents were perused severally to understand thoroughly the contents of the papers in relation to the main theme of the paper (Creswell, 2009). The main ideas in

the reviewed materials were summed up and discussed based on the research questions for the study. The new understanding was subjected to verification to validate the claims, assumptions, and theories made by scholars (Peshkin, 1993). Finally, a concise, persuasive discussion on the various themes on academic stress was written.

The Concept of Stress and Academic Stress

Stress has become an issue of research and discussion in the academic world due to its effect on the daily social and academic lives of students and staff (Dimitrov, 2017). The current competitive nature of our world among the young generation increases stresses (Bhargava & Trivedi, 2018). Human development from adolescence to maturity, schooling period and general life journey trigger stress as a result of the demands of the various stages (Lin & Huang, 2014). Fundamentally, stress is associated with mental health distress which triggers physical hypertension, headache, anger, depression, anxiety, stomach upset, stroke and other illnesses (Aafreen et al., 2018; Oduwaiye et al., 2017). Stress can be seen as a health challenge and it is a fundamental problem for students in the 21st century in their everyday life events (Gulzhaina et al., 2018). The researchers further alluded that stress is what happens when an individual faces internal and external pressure and challenge. Stress can be defined as a psychosocial, mental distress, physical and emotional depression (Dimitrov, 2017). Stress is worries that start

when the demand is overwhelming and the individual cannot cope (Oduwaiye et al., 2017). This means that stress happens when an individual's coping mechanism is unable to overcome the demands of work often resulting in serious health risks.

Saqib and Rehman (2018) described stress in two ways; the psychological and body. The psychological stress happens when the demand to act is activated and pressure to achieve steps in. The individual body results in "physical stress" which reacts to the fears of outcome/s or perception of danger (Saqib & Rehman, 2018). Stress exists in the social environment but occurs in an individual's head in the form of anxiety, worry, fear, regrets, discouragement, loss of interest, low self-esteem among others (Gulzhaina et al., 2018). Stress can be regarded as 'human body wear and tear' to get acquainted with changes that occur around the environment (Bakhsh & Sayed, 2015). Academic stress is a form of stress that happens within the academic environment on the part of faculty and students in educational institutions.

The academic journey involves individual mental, social, psychological, financial, personal commitments, and hard work and a lot more. The journey also involves emotions. The academic environment is filled with courses and syllabuses whose contents must be covered in a short period (Oduwaiye et al., 2017). Staff and students are expected to perform effectively and deliver desired results. These components can lead to stress if not managed well. In other words, the complexity of the academic environment triggers stress. Stress

affects the mind, spirit, body and social environment of students and staff.

To Saqib and Rehman (2018), academic stress is the fundamental problem of the academic journey as it impacts learning institutions. Bakhsh and Sayed (2015) believed that it was an "emotional imbalance" with many causes. Academic stress can occur as a result of low academic performance. Different researchers have defined academic stress differently. However, for this study, academic stress can be viewed as stress which happens, as a result, of academic work overload of an individual beyond personal capacity (Khan et al., 2013; Kiani et al., 2017). The researchers hold the position that academic stress is relational or transactional and is dependent on an individual's appraisal of the environment (stressor) s/he faces. This psychological stress which hinges on the relationship with the environment (stressors) that a person appraises as significant for his or her wellbeing and in which the demands tax or exceeds his or her coping resources at disposal. However, the researchers conceptualize academic stress as any form of negative stress triggered by all kinds of stressors such as interpersonal, intrapersonal, social, work, institutional and domestic, that impedes the academic output of students as well as the professional performance of faculty in academic institutions (Figure 1).

Academic stress can be associated with one's culture, ethnicity, gender, age, as well as his political inclination and socioeconomic status (Kiani et al., 2017). The stages in academic life trigger stress which can be regarded as academic stress (Prabu, 2015). Academic stress is increasing at an alarming rate (Reddy et al., 2018). According to Saqib and Rehman (2018), academic stress includes educational anxiety, pressure, and stress that is associated with preparing for assessments like exams, tests, quizzes, homework, reading and academic work overload. The academic journey should transit into mental skilfulness but to some, it turns to be a challenge that affects their mental development and illness (Hystad et al., 2009). For many, although schooling is the best memory of their life, this period
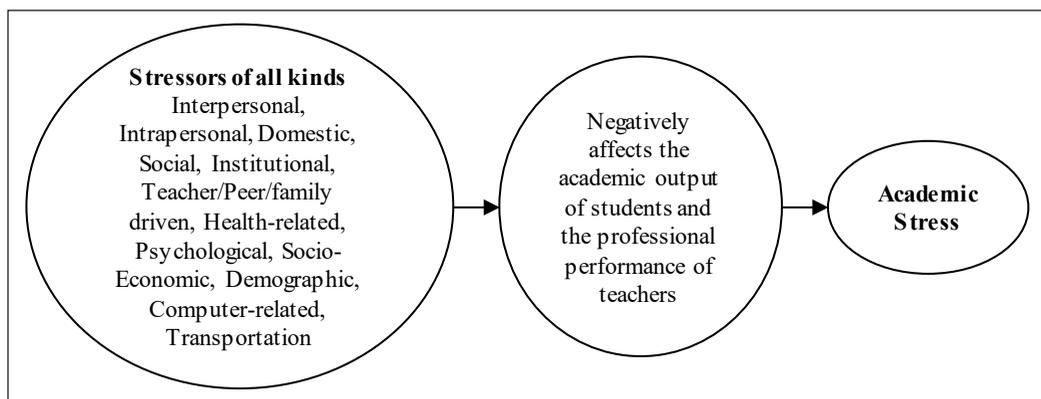

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for academic stress

can be challenged by depression, tensions, anxiety as a result of stress (Aafreen et al., 2018). Stress is necessary for everyday living and there are many stressors in the daily lives of everyone, including students and staff (Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2011).

Causative Agents and Common Academic Stressors

Stress can occur in everyday human life which produces worries and anxiety. Our world is witnessing stressful events but stress is regarded as part of human life (Subramani & Kadhiravan, 2017). According to Khan et al. (2013), stress is part of academic life and common among university students. Academic stressor happens when the internal and external pressure is above the coping capacity of an individual (Aafreen et al., 2018; Bhargava & Trivedi, 2018). Academic stress has increased because of internal and external expectations of students and staff which must be satisfied (Reddy et al., 2018). Academic pressure is thus the fundamental causes of academic stress.

The cause of stress is regarded as a stressor. Academic stressors can be attributed to the high amount of assessments, lack of resources, competition among students and staff alike, poor association and collaboration among students and between lecturers (Bakhsh & Sayed, 2015), adjustments by students to academic demands, university environment and culture, independently living, social life demands, economic challenge (Lin & Huang, 2014; Mason, 2017), time management and

balancing academic and social life activities (Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2011). Dimitrov (2017) as well as Bedewy and Gabriel (2015), added that family, financial, learning, school and environmental challenges, socio-cultural, psychological issues can cause stress or academic stress. Gulzhaina et al. (2018) reported that students suggest that academic activities and demands were regarded as their main stressor as indicated by 6 to 10 of them having experienced stress in their study career. Another study showed that students were academically stressed because of curriculum overload, increased assessments to do over a short period, preparing for exams, competition with peers, low grades, no leisure time with friends, disappointment, and language barriers (Bakhsh & Sayed, 2015; Gulzhaina et al., 2018). Bakhsh and Sayed (2015) added that continuous eagerness to excel brought about academic-busyness which in return caused academic stress. From all these authors, as long as academic stress is involved, then mental, social, behavioural, psychological and personal well-being is stressed. This implies that an effort for staff and students to deal with social, academic, economic, personal and political issues can trigger stress (Lin & Huang, 2014).

Furthermore, there are two main kinds of stress: eustress (good or positive stress) and distress. Positive stress is often felt when one is confronted with a challenging situation that one is capable of handling like a job promotion, getting employed, being in a competition and working on new projects and many others while negative

stress can be news of death, entrenchment, and others which mainly have negative implications (Gulzhaina et al., 2018). The most causes of stress are lack of balancing social and academic life activities (Prabu, 2015).Individuals are unable to manage and balance between their families, academic, personal, friends and other life activities hence stress. This lack of balance on the part of faculty and students often leads to academic stress that impedes academic progress.

Effects of Academic Stress

The effects of stress can be both positive and negative (Oduwaiye et al., 2017). However, positive stress does not last long, though it improves an individual's attitude, behaviour and performance, creates excitement, and motivates; negative stress, on the other hand, causes anxiety, lasts long, creates fear, panic, disturbs, reduce one's morale and productivity and many more (Gulzhaina et al., 2018). Stress affects the mental and physical well-being of individuals. Stress, in general, can affect the social, emotional, financial and physical behaviour of an individual (Saqib & Rehman, 2018). Stress has a serious negative effect on the academic journey (Lin & Huang, 2014). Stress can cause serious harm to an individual if not handled and treated well. The effect of stress and academic stress is a serious problem which can cause poor performance and attainment for staff and academic problems for a student, contribute to depression, illness, high level of suicidal intention, exhaustion, anxiety, and other physical and

mental illnesses (Gulzhaina et al., 2018; Hystad et al., 2009; Kiani et al., 2017). According to Mason (2017) and Oduwaiye et al. (2017) the negative effect of stress can affect students' academic performance, social and physical well-being, absenteeism from class and school activities. It is noteworthy that the effect of academic stress differs from one individual to the other (staff and students). Female staff and students are more emotionally affected daily both in schools than their male counterparts (Saqib & Rehman, 2018). Since the effects of stress have long-lasting consequences on an individual, it is proper that it should be managed very well.

Managing Academic Stress

The effects of stress depend on how it is handled. Following Bakhsh and Sayed (2015), managing academic-related stress should include but not limited to building a student support system, social support, not procrastinating, and having leisure tasks or hobbies. The management of stress should involve adequate coping mechanisms. Alharbi and Smith (2018) opined that coping mechanisms could be seen as ways individuals handle stressful issues within the internal and external environment while Mason (2017) regarded coping as a "cognitive and behavioural" mechanism to handle over-powering situations beyond personal capacity. The coping strategies are necessary for defending the mental and physical effects of stress. There are different coping mechanisms for stress depending on the stressor/s and geographical

location of an individual. Among the coping mechanisms is self-understanding, building a support system, having mentors or advisors and seeking help (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). Coping is functional in two ways: (1) govern emotion "(emotion-focused coping)", it deals with internal mode by applying avoidance, "wishful thinking" and "minimising" strategies while (2) problem-focused coping adopts strategies by addressing, altering, modifying and managing stress using external means (Mason, 2017). Emotion-focused coping strategies are appropriate in managing stressors that cannot change while problem-focused coping is for changeable stressors, for example activating support systems (Mason, 2017). Both kinds of stress coping mechanisms are necessary for defending the mental and physical effects of academic stress on individuals.

To Saqib and Rehman (2018), managing stress should be a collaborative responsibility between the staff (lecturer), students, parents, and the education institution/s. For example, staff should adopt a teaching methodology that will engage and improve student learning abilities and not overload students with a lot of school tasks. Besides, counselling units must be established in all educational institutions so that students and staff could report eventual stressors to receive counsel and other remedial assistance. Assessment guidelines in educational institutions should be given to the students on time (Saqib & Rehman, 2018) and the consultation time provided. The students should be able to manage their time

effectively and work hard to avoid working under-pressure and procrastination (Azila-Gbettor et al., 2015). Parents should provide their children with learning materials and mentor them, monitor, motivate and assist them to balance their other life and school stuff (Ng et al, 2016). Parents should also teach their children self-coping mechanisms (Wani et al., 2018). Similarly, the education institutions should provide workshops, seminars, training and a conducive learning environment for the students (Taraj, 2013).

To curb psychological health challenges, proactive measures should be in place at different levels of learning institutions in the form of trained mental health practitioners' to manage and address stress-related issues (Gulzhaina et al., 2018). Also, staff and students should be trained on soft coping mechanisms to identify and handle academic stress (Dimitrov, 2017). Overall, managing academic stress is very effective when an individual activates a matured mindset by being optimistic against being pessimistic; this allows one to visualize stressors as opportunities for personal growth and development (Mason, 2017). Also, academic stress or stress can be minimised or overcome by disassociation from unnecessary stressing situation/s, accepting situations one cannot control or change and create relaxation and fun time.

CONCLUSION

Stress is a psychosocial, mental and physical condition that has both positive and negative consequences depending on its gravity on an individual and his/her coping resources

available. In higher institutions of learning, excessive academic stress depreciates the progress of academic work and stifles academic development. Students and faculty must identify the academic stressors that are behind their academic stress and apply appropriate stress coping mechanism(s) to deal with the stress. Due to the 'thievery' nature of academic stress in the academic and professional lives of students and faculty, the university administrative team must organize seminars and workshops to sensitize students and faculty on the ever-emerging academic stressors as well as their efficient ways of managing them. Stress management as a course of study can be factored into the university curriculum for all programmes to constantly equip both students and faculty on the high risks of excessive and poorly managed stress.

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