

# The State of Academic Stress in the Higher Institutions of Ghana: The Way Forward

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**Abstract** Stress resulting from academic work among lecturers and students in Ghanaian higher institutions greatly affects their health and academic output. The study aimed at identifying the sources and causes of academic stress in the higher institutions in Ghana while suggesting effective stress coping mechanisms. The study was driven in the convergent parallel mixed method research with questionnaire administration, private interviews and focus group discussion as data collection tools. A total of 478 sampled respondents in three higher institutions in Ghana were involved in the study. This included 74 lecturers and 404 students in three higher institutions in Ghana. The findings of the study revealed that lack of planning of work schedule, unnecessary delays of work while striving to meet deadlines or procrastination, poor eating, sleeping and exercise habits as well as unrealistic academic goals were the main causes of academic stress. The study contends that the setting of healthy academic goals, good planning and schedule of academic work, giving room for exercise and relaxation at regularly planned intervals, meticulously following healthy eating and sleeping habits as well as Africultural coping mechanisms were the effective management strategies of academic stress. The study tasks the Ministry of Education and the regulatory bodies of higher institutions in Ghana to ensure the setting of guidance and counseling units as well as task welfare committees to periodically organize workshops and seminars to sensitize the members of the higher institutions on the dangers of academic stress and effective approaches in curtailing them.

**Keywords** Academic Stress, Stress Management, Stress, Teaching and Learning, Higher Education

## 1. Introduction

Stress is an inevitable body condition or experience that entangles every human being irrespective of their unique demographic characteristics [1, 2] as each tries to adjust to the ever-changing human society [3]. The word 'stress' is etymologically derived from the Latin word 'Stringere' which means to draw tight and it was used in the early 1700s to describe pain, hardship or affliction [1]. Early stress theorists such as Canon [4], Selye [5] and Mason [6] theorized stress on the physiological basis and defined it as the pressure an individual faces from the environment strain within himself or herself. However, today, stress is considered as the interaction between a situation and an individual [7]. It is seen as the perception of discrepancy between environmental demands (stressors) and an individual's capacities to cope with these stressors [8]. Stress is described as the response of mental action through hormonal signaling with the perception of danger setting off an automatic response system known as the fight and flight response [9]. Stress always presents itself when the internal and external pressures exceed the individual's resources to cope with the situation [10].

Many researchers posit that stress is not an entirely disturbing phenomenon [10, 2]. Wani, Nagar, and Buhroo [11] aver that stress is generally accepted by stress theorists as having two opposite effects which are positive stress (eustress) and negative stress (distress). Saqib [9] and Yikealo, Tareke, and Karvinen [12] contend that from an adaptive point of view, mild stress can be very beneficial for both faculty and students as it serves as a motivator for hardwork and eventual productivity. Avoiding stress completely is seen as leading to a very boring life [13]. However, high and uncontrolled stress can have dire mental, psychological and physical consequences [14-16]. This concurs with the view of Cooper and Quick [17] who described stress as the spice of life and the kiss of death.

Stress has become an important and urgent topic for academic research [18, 19] because academic stress has been an age-long canker in higher institutions [20] due to the high academic demands and professional expectations from students and faculty respectively [21, 22]. The pursuance and administration of higher education are stressful to students who are mandated to adapt to the new educational and social environments [1] and faculty who are expected to undertake very intensive faculty work [23, 24]. The existence of stress is a result of the presence of stressors [25], events or stimulus that propels a person to experience stress. The two most disturbing stressors in higher institution environments are academic-related stressors and institutional stressors [26].

Stankovska, Dimitrovski, Angelkoska, Ibraimi, and Uka [27] conceptualizes academic stress as a person's interaction with environmental stressors, his or her cognitive appraisal and coping mechanism of the academic-related stressors as well as a psychological or physiological response to the stressors. However, academic stress cannot be limited to only academic-related stressors [28]. All kinds of stressors (intrapersonal/self stressors, interpersonal/social stressors, time/balance stressors, institutional stressors, financial stressors, and others) that impede academic output of students and professional expectations of faculty, thereby causing unpleasant psychological and physical situations qualifies as academic stress [11]. Aam, Sara, and Adamu [29] concur that all forms of performance-related anxiety in academic institutions of learning constitute academic stress. Academic stress is a career stopper [30] as it stifles the professional growth of faculty. The position of the researchers is that every kind of stress that significantly inhibits the psychological wellbeing of students [2] and faculty, thereby negatively affecting their academic and professional outputs exemplifies the term academic stress.

The common stressors that impede academic and professional performance of students and faculty identified by researchers include academic and coursework overloads [27, 31]; financial difficulties [16]; poor eating and sleeping habits [32]; health problems [23]; college environmental situation [33]; poor time and resource management [2], domestic responsibilities [14], examination [34], social comparison and competition [1], lack of academic guidance [35], high expectations from family and teachers [12], pressure to secure a 'respectable' job from excellent academic performance [36], thoughts of failure [37], preparation for oral presentations [38] and lack of friendship and family support [39]. Stress negatively affects an individual's psychology, physiology, and sociology [40]; drastically reduce his or her learning and memory [41]; preempt suicidal ideation [42]; decreases one's productivity [16]; depression and cognitive worry [43]; lack of energy and sleeping disorders such as sleep-wake systems [1]; behavioral symptoms such as loss of appetite, increased consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and

food [36]; diminished students' motivation and enthusiasm [44]; reducing the cumbersome academic plan and procedures while teaching stress coping mechanisms through advocacy programmes [2]; risk factor for psychopathology [10] and low self-esteem [45].

Many ways of managing academic stress have been suggested by researchers. Some of these include the university administration offering avenues for student consultation with psychologists in addressing the negative effects of academic stress [46]; encouraging students and fostering good student-teacher relationship [11]; reading books, listening to music and watching movies [12]; social support systems [23, 36]; learning to set limits [10]; assigning academic mentors and counsellors for students [29]; implementation of mindfulness practices in the classrooms [34]; music therapy [23]; psychotherapy [15]; realistic assessment of students [18]; getting enough sleep and having regular exercises [3]; engagement in physical and extracurricular relaxing activities [21]; university management team creating a conducive learning environment with suitable teaching and learning methods [1].

Many of the studies on academic stress in higher institutions globally have generally focused on students with few assessments of the stress on faculty [47, 42, 27, 12, 10]. Also, many of the studies on academic stress are limited to particular year levels [48, 49] and single programmes of studies such as business students [26], pharmacy students [47], medical students [22, 50]. From the Ghanaian perspective, Duncan-Williams [36] investigated the relationship between the academic stress faced by Senior High school remedial students in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana and their psychological well-being. She utilized the Student-Life Stress Inventory (SLSI), Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS- 42), the Africultural Coping Systems Inventory (ACSI), Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) and the Academic Self-Efficacy Scale. Results from her analysis showed a positive relationship between academic stress and the psychological well-being of the remedial students with the Hierarchical Multiple Regression analyses indicating that social support, africultural coping, gender, and socio-economic status did not moderate the relationship between stress and psychological well-being though she noticed gender differences in the psychological well-being of the students. Azila-Gbetteo et al. [26] assessed stress sources and their effects on the academic performance of Business Students in Ho Polytechnic, Ghana using a cross-sectional research design. They found out that Total Environmental/ Campus/ Administrative/ transition Stressors and Total Academic Stressors were the dominant stressors that affected academic performance among the students. There is still a significant dearth of studies that focus on assessing academic stress faced by students generally and faculty in tertiary institutions of Ghana. If Ghana will be able to

achieve the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (16-25) [51] strategic objective nine which calls for the revitalization and expansion of tertiary education, research, and innovation to address the continental challenges and promote global competitiveness, there is the need to address the academic stress that hinders academic growth. Previous studies on academic stress in the Ghanaian tertiary institutions have been limited to one academic institution, students studying the same programme and in the same year as well as using only quantitative data set [52, 36, 26]. Essel and Owusu [16] suggested that for a more in-depth study on academic stress in higher institutions of learning, future researchers should approach the topic by using both quantitative and qualitative sets of data as they would yield a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the subject. This study utilizes the convergent parallel mixed method approach in soliciting for both qualitative and quantitative sets of data on academic stress. Dhanalakshmi and Murty [53] suggested the assessment of the academic stress of students studying various programmes. They argued that academic stress studies in higher institutions should not be limited to a particular programme of study. Based on this backdrop, this study assesses the academic stress of Ghanaian students in various faculties, academic levels, and programmes of study. More significantly, the study is the maiden in the Ghanaian context for assessing the academic stressors and coping mechanisms for faculty vis-a-vis the recent academic stressor to publish more research findings fuelled by the famous 'publish or perish' slogan in tertiary institutions globally. The study hinges on three research questions: 1. What are the sources of academic stressors

among faculty and students in the selected higher institutions of Ghana? 2. What are the causative agents of the identified academic stressors among faculty and students in the selected higher institutions of Ghana? 3. What are the effective ways of managing the academic stress identified among faculty and students in the selected higher institutions of Ghana?

## 2. Materials and Methods

The study adopted the convergent parallel mixed methods design (Figure 1). This was because the researchers wanted to have a holistic comprehension [54] of academic stress in the selected higher institutions in Ghana by obtaining both qualitative and quantitative data sets. Further, the researchers wanted to get mutual confirmation of the findings to bolster the validity of results from the study [55].

The descriptive study was utilized to systematically document the current state [56] of academic stress in the selected higher institutions in Ghana among students and faculty. The FGDs were video recorded to assist in easy association of the voices to the right people and ultimately to ease coding and final analysis [57]. On the other hand, the private interviews were audio-recorded so that the researchers could play them at different time to fully understand the import of the views of respondents. The remaining 386 respondents whose responses were recorded via the questionnaire administered were selected conveniently and then randomly in various departments in the selected higher institutions (Table 1).

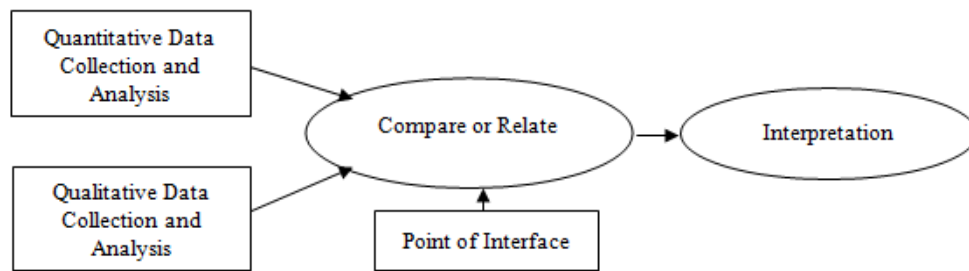


Figure 1. Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods Design (54)

Table 1. Sampling Breakdown

Tertiary Institution	Lecturers	Number of lecturers interviewed privately	Number of lecturers Questionnaire were administered	Students	Number of students who were administered with a questionnaire	Number of students who were engaged in the FGDs
Ghana 1	25	12	13	134	114	20
Ghana 2	25	12	13	134	114	20
Ghana 3	24	8	16	136	116	20
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>74</b>	32	42	<b>404</b>	344	60
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>478</b>					

The quantitative data were collected by administering both electronic (Google form) and hard copies of the developed questionnaire. The electronic questionnaires were administered randomly to students and lecturers from different faculties and at different academic levels and professional qualifications. The hard copies were administered conveniently in the various faculties aimed at targeting participants who had challenges with sharing their views electronically and as such preferred to share their views via writing on the printed copies. The respondents were instructed to complete the questionnaire by giving a response to every item on the questionnaire. Keeping in view the objectives as well as the design of the study, measures of central tendency and dispersion, coefficient of correlation and T-test were used for the analysis of the quantitative data set. Descriptive statistics, specifically, Mean and Standard Deviation were employed in the study. Pearson's product-moment Correlation Coefficient was computed to analyze the relationships between constructs. Inferential statistics such as an independent sample T-test was used to find the significance of the differences between the means with an alpha or significant value of 0.05 (5%) and confident interval (CI) of 95%.

On the other hand, the qualitative data set from the personal interviews and focus group discussion were analyzed using the data analysis spiral. The qualitative data generated was initially coded; relationships in the data were identified; emergent themes or patterns were created and generalizations from the emergent themes were made [58].

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Emergent Themes from the Qualitative Data

##### 3.1.1. Sources of Academic Stressors among Faculty and Students in Ghanaian Higher Institutions

##### 3.1.1.1. Excessive Academic Demands on Faculty and Students in Ghanaian Higher Institutions (Publication Demands, Examination, Oral Presentations, Student Assessment, Final Year Project Work/Thesis)

The students mentioned that excessive academic stress is a result of the intensive academic demands expected from students and faculty. In one of the group focus sessions, the students summarized the pressure imposed on them to perform diverse academic responsibilities as:

*'We have turned into thinking machines and stress is inevitable sometimes'* (ST-FGD-5, Personal Communication, 10/3/2019).

In terms of the academic stressors, both the faculty and student participants cited many of the demands of academic work. In terms of the order of academic work that

stressed the lecturers were student assessments, publication demands, and organizing students' field trips. In terms of research publication demand, one lecturer who is requiring a certain number of publications for his next promotion mentioned:

*I think the recent 'publish or perish' virus is causing the most stress among the teaching staff in tertiary institutions. Amid the large classes of students and numerous courses to teach, the lack of grants and the not forthcoming research allowance, undertaking breathtaking research is very difficult now. This accounts for the low standard studies published in predatory journals among some teaching staff in tertiary institutions* (LG3, Personal Communication, 12/3/2019).

On the part of the students, examinations, presentations in class, thesis preparation and excessive demands from teachers and parents to perform well triggered academic stress. The thought of failing an examination or being unable to finish their programmes of study due to their inability to write their final year thesis causes the most stress as it was noticed in the focus group discussions. Three postgraduate students who are financially supported by their family members shared similar thoughts:

*We must, by all means, submit our theses to be able to graduate and the demands of the thesis write-up, unsupportive supervisors and our work demands make it difficult for us to carry out our research on time* (ST-FGD-4, Personal Communication, 15/3/2019).

They added that the thought of disappointing their supportive families by being unable to finish their programmes of study is a great stressor to them.

##### 3.1.1.2. Psychosocial Sources of Academic Stressors among Teaching Staff and Students in Ghanaian Higher Institutions

The researchers noticed that other psychosocial factors such as parenting, child care, breakdown in romantic relationships and financial problems were cited by some of the lecturers and students as the sources of their academic stress. The female postgraduate students who were married and had children said that childcare had a heavy toll on their academic performance. Many of the students in the focus group discussion, especially the undergraduate students indicated that they had financial challenges with paying their tuition fees, buying pamphlets and undertaking assignments that required the purchase of items or performance of experiments. Also, breakdown in romantic relationships was cited by the teaching staff and students as the most psychosocial stressor that negatively impacted on their academic and professional demands. Some of the lecturers mentioned that quarrels and unstable peace with their spouses stressed them and thereby impacted negatively on their professional output. Likewise, the students disclosed that their colleagues who have been jilted by their partners in romantic relationships registered

poor academic performances.

### 3.1.2. Causative Agents of the Academic Stressors among Faculty and Students in Ghanaian Higher Institutions

The failure of students and faculty in skillfully managing their time for the excessive academic workload resulted in academic stress. Many of them resulted in procrastination even when the deadlines for projects on their timetables were due for execution. They are then entangled in the web of academic stress when they are required to submit student assessments and technical reports (on the part of lecturers), oral presentations, written assignments, practical projects and final year thesis (on the part of students).

### 3.1.3. Effective Ways of Managing the Academic Stress Identified among Faculty and Students in Higher Institutions of Ghana

#### 3.1.3.1. Good Management of Time and Organizational Skills

Academic stress is inevitable in higher institutions so the best option according to the respondents is to manage and organize the time resource and academic demands. One teaching staff who also held this popular view said:

*Management is a keyword here. Stress is inevitable. It is integral to existence itself. I guess you are talking about keeping stress under reasonable levels. To achieve anything you need to stretch and stress up yourself a bit but then find a way of unwinding periodically* (LG1, Personal Communication, 3/4/2019).

Similar views were shared by the other lecturers and students that proper planning and having a scale of preference for the academic and/or professional demands would help in avoiding stress.

#### 3.1.3.2. Regular Exercise

Exercising constantly was another popular view held by many of the respondents as an antidote for academic stress. One lecturer said that engaging in bodily exercise should be done regularly. Other lecturers suggested engagement in a sport such as playing football every weekend as a source of exercise to ease academic stress. Taking long walks every morning as a form of exercise was also mentioned as a stress buster. In one of the student focus group discussions, the students disclosed the health benefits of exercise. Three biochemistry students unanimously opined that:

*Exercise should be key as it produces endorphin and improves cognitive function* (ST-FGD-5, Personal Communication, 22/3/2019).

#### 3.1.3.3. Music Therapy

The students admitted listening to soulful music as 'a wonderful stress buster' in one focus group session. A lecturer said he played musical instruments as a stress reliever before resuming his busy academic workload.

#### 3.1.3.4. Mindful Meditation and Interaction with Nature

Four lecturers interviewed indicated that meditation has been a tool for relieving their academic stress. One of them advised:

*'Meditate if you can, imageless, wordless and thoughtless'* (LG3, Personal Communication, 18/3/2019).

Some of the students and lecturers mentioned that drawing close to nature through sightseeing or installation of a home-made aquarium reduced their academic stress. They disclosed that the watching of the animals engaging in their daily activities helped in reducing academic stress.

#### 3.1.3.5. Having a Strong Social Support

Maintaining supportive social relations such as family and friends was seen as a stress reliever by many of the respondents. The students admitted that having a supportive family and friends to lean on in times of distress speeds up the recovery processes. Thus, to reduce stress, a faculty member admonished:

*'Honor your relationships. Catch up with your family and friends. Be present with them and listen to them. It reduces stress'* (LG3, Personal Communication, 19/3/2019).

Other lecturers supported this view and said they engaged in domestic activities with their families to release the stress from academic work. The students whose family members were distant disclosed that they found solace, peace, and happiness anytime they looked at their family pictures. They added that it assured them that they were not alone in their academics and that they had the unflinching support of their family and friends. Psychologically, it freed them from academic stress, they admitted.

#### 3.1.3.6. Make Time for Relaxation

Due to the often busy schedules of both faculty and students, many of them suggested taking time off from academic work to relax as a coping mechanism for academic stress. One professor suggested that:

*'Schedule specific periods to relax, exercise or just disconnect is a good way to manage academic stress'* (LG2, Personal Communication, 21/3/2019).

Taking breaks from academic work, according to many of the teaching staff, was crucial in academic stress management. The students suggested going for a vacation for a period to ease academic stress and rejuvenate the mind.

#### 3.1.3.7. Setting Healthy and Realistic Academic Goals

One causative agent of stress mentioned during the interviews was being overly ambitious in one's academic expectations or professional achievements. However, those ambitious goals, according to the respondents, must be realistic. One junior lecturer advised, *'try to have limitations in dreaming'* (LG2, Personal Communication,

14/3/2019). The students also suggested that striving to achieve everything in perfection could trigger academic stress. They warned, '*Resist perfectionism*' (ST-FGD-5, Personal Communication, 2/4/2019). They added that complex tasks must be broken into simple tasks planned at regular intervals to minimize academic stress.

### 3.1.3.8. Healthy Life, Nutrition and Sleeping Habits

Under stressful moments, many academics forfeit good eating and sleeping habits which rather increases their levels of academic stress. Thus, it was suggested in the interviews that taking in more fluids, especially water, eating healthy and nutritious meals while following a healthy sleep pattern would energize the body to overcome academic stress. Also, one lecturer advised both lecturers and students to have '*Routine health behaviors such as self-care, vehicle safety and drug avoidance*' (LG1, Personal Communication, 27/3/2019).

### 3.1.3.9. Using Africultural Coping Mechanisms

The researchers noticed that a significant number of respondents interviewed resorted to Africultural coping mechanisms such as prayers, reading religious books and attending church programs as a means of managing academic stress. Some of the students in the focus group discussion said that they attended prayer sessions anytime examinations were due to release their pent up academic stress. They said:

*'Attending a church program or prayer sessions before an examination helps me to calm down'* (ST-FGD-1, Personal Communication, 10/3/2019).

Other students said they were calmed down

psychologically whenever they said a word of prayer or read their favorite Bible scripture under very stressful academic conditions.

## 3.2. Findings from the Quantitative Data Set

### 3.2.1. Sources of Academic Stressors among Faculty and Students in Ghanaian Higher Institutions

The overall 19-item scale for the sources of academic stressors (Table 2) among faculty and students in Ghanaian higher institutions demonstrated a good internal consistency as measured by Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha = .87$ ). The individual factors showed a fair internal consistency of average alpha .86. The three most important sources of academic stressors identified were financial and money problems ( $M=3.58$ ), academic/coursework demands ( $M=3.56$ ) and housing/accommodation problems ( $M=3.40$ ).

### 3.2.2. Causative Agents of the Identified Academic Stressors among Faculty and Students in Ghanaian Higher Institutions

The general 15-item scale for the causative agents of the identified academic stressors (Table 3) among faculty and students in Ghanaian higher institutions showed a high internal consistency as measured by Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha = .85$ ). The individual elements showed a very good internal consistency of average alpha .83. The three most important causes of academic stressors identified were procrastination ( $M=3.72$ ), lack of planning of work schedule ( $M=3.65$ ) and keeping up with academic activities and tasks ( $M=3.54$ ).

**Table 2.** Sources of Academic Stressors

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
University/College	2.27	.977	386
Academic/Coursework Demands	3.56	1.128	386
Finances and Money Problems	3.58	1.190	386
Housing/accommodation Problems	3.40	1.064	386
Transport	2.21	.930	386
Change in Living Conditions	1.39	.885	386
Change in Sleeping Habits	2.98	.664	386
Change in eating Habits	2.97	.864	386
Mental Health Problems	1.68	.872	386
Physical Health Problems	2.16	.894	386
Parenting issues	1.85	.848	386
Childcare	1.67	.764	386
Family Relationships	1.90	.816	386
Relationships break-down	1.94	.937	386
Language/Cultural Issues	1.90	.864	386
Discrimination	1.10	1.080	386
Friendships	1.89	.742	386
Romantic Relationships	2.70	.937	386
Parental Expectations	1.18	.982	386

NB: n=386; scale: 0=not at all to 4=Mostly

**Table 3.** Causative Agents of the Identified Academic Stressors

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Procrastination	3.72	1.175	386
Lack of planning of work schedule	3.65	1.135	386
Poor Sleeping Habits	2.14	.871	386
Poor Eating Habits	2.98	.805	386
Uncensored Academic Ambitions	3.20	.862	386
Work Expectations	2.73	.886	386
Financial Rewards	1.18	1.076	386
Family discussions and conflicts about the studies	1.80	.867	386
Making Leisure time and academic work compatible	2.15	.871	386
Teachers Pressure	2.18	1.107	386
Keeping up with Academic Activities and Tasks	3.54	1.939	386
Too much responsibility to fulfill	2.30	1.021	386
Competitiveness among classmates	2.21	1.094	386
Presentations of work in class	2.30	1.027	386

NB: n=386; scale: 0=not at all to 4=Mostly

**Table 4.** Ways of Managing Academic Stress

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Setting healthy academic goals	3.44	1.410	386
Good Planning and schedule of academic work	3.86	1.282	386
Giving room for exercise	3.43	1.163	386
Relaxation at regularly planned intervals	3.46	1.176	386
Meticulously following healthy eating and sleeping habit	2.81	1.237	386
Setting up of guidance and counseling units	2.89	1.359	386
Africultural Coping Mechanism	3.75	1.280	386

NB: n=386; scale: 1=do not apply to 5=used greatly

### 3.2.3. Ways of Managing Academic Stress among Faculty and Students in Ghanaian Higher Institutions

The overall 7-item scale of the ways of managing academic stress among faculty and students in Ghanaian higher institutions (Table 4) showed a fairly high internal consistency as measured by Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha = .87$ ). The individual items showed a good internal consistency of the average alpha .86. The three most important causes of academic stressors identified were good planning and schedule of academic work ( $M=3.86$ ), the use of africultural coping mechanisms ( $M=3.75$ ) and setting healthy academic goals ( $M=3.44$ ).

## 3.3. Discussion

### 3.3.1. Research Question 1: The Sources of Academic Stressors among Faculty and Students in the Higher Institutions of Ghana

The leading sources of academic stress as showed in both the qualitative and quantitative data are academic and course workloads, financial problems, as well as high expectations from family, teachers, and superiors at work.

The pressure imposed on faculty members to constantly publish or risk losing their stay in the universities coupled with the high excellence required of faculty in terms of teaching and student assessment is a major source of stress [27]. This is true especially for lecturers who desperately need these research publications for promotion. In the case of students in the Ghanaian higher institutions, intensive coursework overload is a great source of academic stress as noted by Shkulaku [31] as well as Nandamuri and Gowthami [59]. This may be due to the comprehensive nature of the Ghanaian academic curriculum where students read unimportant courses linked with their chosen programmes of study. Similar findings were noted by Amana, Nakitende and Ngabirano [60], Bedewy and Gabriel [61] and Zeidner [28] among Ugandan, Egyptian as well as Arab and Jew students respectively. This puts unnecessary examination phobia [53, 34] in students as they have to make time to learn all the vast nature of the content of myriads of courses every semester and pass very well due to the high academic expectations from family and teachers [12, 23]. This may be one of the causes of the high examination malpractices noted recently in the

general Ghanaian education system.

Also, financial problem is cited as one of the major stressors among faculty and students. This probably is a result of the poor financial conditions in Ghana and the exorbitant tuition fees [16]. The unbridled domestic financial obligations expected [14, 62] from faculty members by their families and friends owing to the wrong perception that they are well paid. Many lecturers have to engage in extra-academic engagements in other institutions to earn extra money to cushion them for these financial obligations. This breeds academic stress that negatively affects their academic and professional outputs and reduces their life expectancy ratios.

### 3.3.2. Research Question 2: The Causative Agents of the Identified Academic Stressors among Faculty and Students in the Higher Institutions of Ghana

Procrastination, as well as poor planning and time management in keeping up with the academic and professional responsibilities of faculty and students, were the main causative agents of the identified academic stressors in both the qualitative and quantitative data sets. Waiting for the last hour in carrying out academic work such as student assessment, presentations, thesis writing, studying for examination and research activities were noted to cause the most academic stress among faculty and students in Ghanaian higher institutions. This is similar to the findings of Azila-Gbettor et al. [26] among the business students in the Ho Technical University in Ghana. Likewise, Bukoye [2] noticed the high procrastination rate among undergraduate students at the IBB University in Lapai in Nigeria. Failure to plan their work schedules and academic course work demands [63] often resulted in high arrears of tasks to be performed by faculty and students in Ghanaian higher institutions. Striving to meet deadlines by performing heavy tasks within a relatively shorter period resulted in high mortality rates among faculty and students [42] as well as low standard academic and professional outputs [11].

### 3.3.3. Research Question 3: Effective Ways of Managing the Academic Stress Identified among Faculty and Students in Higher Institutions of Ghana

Among the seven suggested ways of managing academic stress, good time management, the use of Africultural coping mechanisms and the setting of healthy and realistic academic goals were the main stress management mechanisms suggested in the qualitative and quantitative data sets. Academic stress cannot be ruled out completely from higher institutions [3]. Therefore, the key strategy is to manage academic stress efficiently. This concurs with the view of Lin and Chen [40] who posited that good planning of work and academic schedule will aid both students and faculty in completing their assigned tasks on time and reduce academic stress. Similarly, Ng et al. [23], as well as Bakksh and Sayed [3], noted that effective time

management resulted in improved academic grades of students and of course, the professional output of faculty. Thus, this study buttresses the suggestion of Aam et al. [29] that academic counsellors must guide students, especially the fresh entrants toward inculcating in them skills on good time management to assist them to efficiently manage their time for academic/coursework demands. Another important coping mechanism for academic stress noted among the faculty and students in Ghanaian higher institutions was the use of Africultural coping strategies such as maintaining religiosity and spirituality [64]. The findings revealed that the use of prayers, attending religious programs, enjoying the social support of religious brothers and sisters as well as the reading of religious books (Holy Bible and Holy Quran) assisted both faculty and students in managing their pent up academic stress.

Also, the findings of the study indicated that faculty and students need to set realistic academic goals and ambitions so as not to be caught in the web of academic stress. D'chunha and Shah [65] share the same view that students and faculty must learn to set limits in academic targets and ambitions. These set targets must correlate with their academic abilities, interests, performances, and resources available to them. Otherwise, their set of academic ambitions will only be wishful dreams and thinking. This finding maybe because of the high religious climate in Ghana as realized by Adom [66] in his work on the use of the Asante cosmology and belief systems as a catalyst for nature conservation. Similar findings in previous studies on academic stress are in unison with this finding. For instance, Vasquez [62] realized that social support of the members of the church and religious bodies among learners in the Latino community while Tartaro, Luecken, and Gunn [67] also noted that the religiosity and spirituality in terms of prayers lowered blood pressures and eased stress among young adults, some from African-American descents. Yikealo et al. [12] also found out that the reading of the Holy Bible and the Holy Quran among students of the Christian and Islamic religious association in the college of education in the Eritrea Institute of Technology aided them in managing effectively, their academic stress.

## 4. Conclusions

The study was carried out to investigate the sources, causative agents and effective management strategies for academic stress among faculty and students in some Ghanaian higher institutions. The study has shown that academic stress cannot be ruled out completely from the academic life of both faculty and students in academic institutions of learning. The sources of academic stress in Ghanaian higher institutions noted were financial problems, academic and course work demands, high academic and professional expectations from parents, teachers and university management and many others. Procrastination



and poor time management as well as setting unrealistic academic and professional goals and ambitions were the identified causative agents of the academic stressors. Finally, the effective stress coping mechanisms suggested amongst others by the study were good time management, the use of Africultural coping mechanisms and the setting of healthy and realistic academic goals. These recommendations have been forwarded for policy implementation to assist in managing academic stress among faculty and students in Ghanaian higher institutions:

1. University management through their data analysis units in appropriate departments must conduct a family economic earnings/status survey of new entrants to be able to know students who need financial assistance and make these documents available to student fund awarding institutions and student loan trust funds to assist such students. The modalities for application and payment must be flexible to allow the needy students to be able to apply for such scholarships and loan facilities to be able to address the financial problems that cause academic stress.
2. The welfare associations of higher institutions in Ghana must organize seminars and talk shows to sensitize the general public especially families of university faculty not to impose unnecessary stress on faculty members to perform extraneous and hard-to-reach financial obligations under the wrong perception that they are financially sound.
3. The university management team must organize time management and proper organizational skills workshops and seminars must be organized for both faculty and students by the university management via concerned agencies and experts to sensitize and enlighten them on proactive ways of managing their time to eradicate academic stress.
4. Curriculum developers must incorporate the teaching of stress management strategies as an essential module in the school curriculum. Such a generalized course must be made mandatory but non-scoring for all students in the various higher institutions in Ghana.
5. Courses that are not directly related to programmes of study by students must be taken out of their academic curriculum or made optional/non-scoring by the curriculum planning committees in the higher institutions of Ghana to reduce academic stress in students.

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