

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACADEMIC STRESS AND ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT AMONG PRIVATE UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN KWARA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines relationship between academic stress and academic adjustment among private university undergraduate students in Kwara state, Nigeria. The research design that was used for this study is descriptive survey using correlation method. The population for this study were all private university undergraduates in Kwara state, Nigeria. Proportionate and simple random sampling techniques were used to select 344 from 100 – 500 level undergraduates. The research instruments used for this study were questionnaire forms that consisted of Perceived Academic Stress Inventory and Student Sojourner Academic Adjustment Scale. Research questions were answered using percentages and hypothesis was tested with Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) statistic at 0.05 level of significance. Finding revealed that level of academic stress of private universities undergraduate students in Kwara state, Nigeria was average. It was also discovered that academic adjustment of private universities undergraduate students in Kwara state Nigeria was average; the common dimension of academic adjustment was average. Finally, finding revealed that there was significant relationship among academic stress and academic adjustment of private university undergraduate students in Kwara state, Nigeria. This outcome could be as a result of the fact that the respondents are on average level on academic stress and academic adjustment.

Key words: Academic Stress, Academic Adjustment, Private Universities, Undergraduates, Students.

Introduction

University education represents the highest level of formal education and plays a vital role in self-development, nation-building, and overall societal advancement. It is a critical component of human development globally and serves as a major driver of knowledge creation and innovation. University education provides high-level skilled manpower for research, economic growth, and national development. It also meets essential labour market needs through the training of professionals such as teachers, doctors, nurses, civil servants, engineers, humanists, entrepreneurs, scientists, and social scientists, among others (Ofor-Douglas, 2023).

In Nigeria, university education represents the highest level of formal education required to drive sustainable socio-economic, political, and cultural development. Nigerian universities are broadly categorized into two main types: government-owned and controlled institutions, and privately owned universities. Private universities began full operations in 1999, following the return to democratic governance under President Olusegun Obasanjo, which marked the end of 16 years of military rule. The Federal Government has the authority to receive applications for the establishment of private universities, which are processed by the National Universities Commission (NUC), Nigeria's primary regulatory body, before final approval (Ajadi, 2010). Private universities also help to reduce the pressure on public universities and curb the drain on Nigeria's foreign exchange reserves. The establishment of private universities in Nigeria has been driven by several factors, including the growing need for a highly skilled labour force tailored to local market demands, as well as the tendency of many students to seek admission abroad when denied places in public universities, thereby exacerbating capital flight (Owoeye, 2012). Private universities have introduced competition between public and private institutions, thereby fostering diversity and improvements within Nigeria's university education system (Ibadin et al., 2005). Such competition contributes to the enhancement of both the quality of educational inputs and outputs. A holistic examination of the rationale for establishing private universities and their efforts to achieve stated objectives reveals the emergence of intense academic demands, which have, in turn, led to increased academic stress among undergraduate students.

Academic stress is a major aspect of students' life process that is unavoidable and very important to their success. Stress is the reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them and it arises when they are worried that they cannot cope. Similarly, stresses occur as a result of excessive pressure on the body that is shown when individuals are undergoing pressure. Students are mostly affected by academic stress, as they are subjected to different kinds of stressors, such as the pressure of academics and the obligation to succeed (Noson & Shastri, 2016). According to Kötter et al. (2017), stress negatively affects academic performance and could also become a vicious circle of continually increasing stress and decreasing performance. Crego et al. (2016) reported that stress is one of the factors that affect the academic activities and can compromise academic performance of students. Another study conducted by Kötter et al. (2017) mentioned that increased stress leads to decreasing level of performance. Stress occurs as a consequence of the pressure to succeed and has been shown to afflict university students in particular because the workload usually involves time constraints, (Adams 2019). With this, stress is revealed to have a significant relationship with academic activities and academic outcome among private university students.

Academic stress among private university students can be classified into positive stress (eustress) and negative stress (distress) (Kamaruddin et al., 2021). Eustress occurs when stressors contribute to improved performance and productivity, often leading to positive outcomes such as motivation, enhanced concentration, and a sense of achievement. In contrast,

distress arises when an individual perceives that they are unable to cope with a given situation or academic demand. This form of stress is associated with anxiety, worry, and may lead to both mental and physical health challenges. In essence, distress is harmful to the body, and beyond a certain threshold, stress ceases to be beneficial and begins to negatively affect health, mood, productivity, relationships, and overall quality of life (Murff, 2005). Furthermore, academic stress in private universities can have both positive and negative consequences if not properly managed (Stevenson & Harper, 2006). Academic institutions operate within work environments that differ significantly from non-academic settings; therefore, it is expected that the signs, causes, and effects of stress will also differ between these contexts (Chang & Lu, 2007). This implies that students are expected to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills that will enable them to contribute meaningfully to national development.

According to Kamaruddin et al. (2021), academic stress may enhance an individual's task performance up to an optimal level; however, beyond this point, excessive stress leads to a decline in performance. Stress also functions as a modulator of memory processes and human learning, thereby having significant implications for academic achievement. In advanced educational settings such as private universities, where undergraduate students are often subjected to heavy workloads, strict time limits, and intensive preparation for tests and examinations, students are prone to experience varying degrees of stressors. Researchers such as Malach-Pines and Keinan (2007), Ongori (2007), and Agolla and Ongori (2009) identified stress symptoms including loss of energy, high blood pressure, depressed mood, increased irritability, difficulty concentrating, impatience, nervousness, strain, and other related conditions. When stress is experienced negatively, students may develop both physical and psychological problems. Several methods are currently used to manage and control stress responses. These include effective time management, social support, positive reappraisal, and engagement in leisure activities (Marwan, 2013). Additionally, relaxation techniques, biofeedback, medication, and yoga have been identified as approaches that may produce therapeutic psychological effects in managing academic stress among adolescents (Rizzolo, 2009). Overall, the management of academic stress involves a wide range of strategies, from preventive techniques aimed at reducing the occurrence of stress to coping mechanisms that can be employed when individuals feel overwhelmed.

Additionally, according to Singh et al. (2012), difficulties in adapting to a new environment can significantly hinder the academic performance, as well as the social and psychological adjustment of private university undergraduate students. A smooth transition from secondary school to university increases the likelihood of student success in terms of academic achievement and persistence (Rienties et al., 2012). Academic success, particularly one that is competitive with peers in other tertiary institutions globally, remains a top priority for private university undergraduate students. However, available records indicate that students face a series of academic challenges arising from various stressors associated with rigorous

academic activities, all in their attempt to achieve set goals regardless of their level of academic stress.

Academic adjustment refers to the process through which students cope with and adapt to academic challenges within the learning environment. The concept of academic adjustment was originally derived from Biology and is modelled after the term “adaptation,” which describes the process by which living organisms adjust to their environments in order to function effectively and survive. In private universities, as in other tertiary institutions, academic adjustment plays a significant. Academic adjustment refers to the process through which students cope with and adapt to academic challenges within the learning environment, adjusted students are more likely to plan their study schedules, prioritise tasks, and engage in independent learning activities. This fosters lifelong learning skills that are essential beyond university education (Zimmerman, 2002). The concept of academic adjustment was originally derived from Biology and is modeled after the term adaptation, which describes the process by which living organisms adjust to their environments in order to function effectively and survive. In private universities, as in other tertiary institutions, academic adjustment plays a significant role in the lives of undergraduate students, serving as a foundation for academic success and overall well-being, (Credé & Niehorster, 2012). It is not only related to students’ academic progress and achievement but also to their attitudes toward university life, levels of anxiety, experiences of loneliness, social support systems, and academic motivation.

Previous research has consistently shown that academic adjustment influences academic achievement (Bailey & Phillips, 2016; Rienties et al., 2012). The adjustment of students to university life is a complex and multidimensional process that requires the development of various competencies to facilitate effective adaptation and integration into a new educational setting. Academic adjustment refers to the psychological processes through which individuals cope with the demands and challenges of everyday life. It serves as a mechanism through which individuals maintain a balance between their needs and environmental circumstances. Academic adjustment also involves how individuals respond to changes in life situations, such as transitioning to a new school (particularly for newly admitted students), experiencing financial setbacks, or coping with the loss of loved ones, among other challenges.

Successful interaction with the new university environment, such as maintaining positive relationships with lecturers and fellow students, and effectively managing the increased complexity and volume of learning content, plays a key role in determining whether a student is satisfied with the first-year experience. It also influences whether the student achieves good grades, passes courses, and progresses to the second year (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Sevinç & Gizir, 2014). At this level, one of the variables that plays an important role in students’ adjustment and integration into the new university context is participation in extracurricular activities (Weidman, 2009). These include a wide range of activities, services, and student groups, provided that they are organized within or in connection

with the higher education institution. Students' participation in volunteer programmes or community-based services is considered to have a positive impact on personal and educational development, as well as on the acquisition of important life competencies and the moral, civic, and social development of the student (Persell & Wenglinsky, 2004). Involvement in extracurricular activities is also associated with higher levels of personal development, learning, and academic satisfaction (Kuh, 2003), as well as improved interpersonal and intimate relationships (Hood, 2004).

Additionally, student participation in campus sports activities, whether competitive or recreational, appears to be positively associated with self-esteem, leadership development, academic fulfilment, and improved indicators of physical and emotional health (Taylor, 2005). Such activities may also foster self-discipline, teamwork, cooperation, self-confidence, and the ability to cope with failure (Lapchick, 2007). Furthermore, certain activities, such as sports, can enhance a student's status and social image on campus (Cantor & Prentice, 2006). Understanding findings from research conducted at the secondary school level can provide insight into the nature of academic adjustment challenges at the university level. For example, Gupta (2013) conducted a study on the adjustment problems of senior secondary school students, and the results confirmed a significant difference in adjustment problems among senior secondary school students. Similarly, Devika (2013) carried out a comparative study on the adjustment of secondary school students, and the analysis revealed that the overall level of adjustment among students was average. The study also found a significant difference in emotional adjustment between boys and girls, while no significant differences were observed between male and female students in relation to family, social, educational, and financial adjustment.

In addition, Bala (2014) discovered that high achievers and low achievers are similar as far as social and home adjustment is concerned when he studied the adjustment problems of high and low achievers, in this case, high achievers are rated high hence they are superior on school adjustment scale while low achievers have more adjustment problems on health and emotional area compared to high achievers, reversibly, high achievers were found be adjusted on health and emotional area than low achievers. Gill (2014) investigated emotional, social and educational adjustment of visually handicapped students of special school students. By the application of mean, standard deviation, and t-test indicated no significant difference between the educational social and emotional adjustments of special school students belonging to boys and girls.

Generally, findings reveal that individuals react differently to academic adjustment. Rajkonwar et al. (2015) studied adjustment and academic achievement among visually impaired school children in Assam and reported that the overall adjustment of visually impaired boys and girls was similar. The uniqueness of academic adjustment within academic settings, both at lower and higher levels such as secondary schools and private universities, cannot be

underestimated. Furthermore, Singh (2015) reported a positive relationship between academic adjustment and emotional intelligence, as well as between adjustment and mental health.

Statement of the Problem

University education remains the highest level of the educational system in Nigeria, equipped with human and non-human resources required for developing various skills needed by citizens and visitors. The goal of university education, according to the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2013), is to contribute optimally to national development by intensifying and diversifying its programmes for the production of high-level manpower within the context of national needs and other global demands. Private universities are not excluded from these responsibilities despite being privately owned by individuals. Available literature reveals that psychological variables are associated with academic competition, particularly in relation to competition with counterparts globally. Variables such as academic stress and academic adjustment, among others, can affect private university undergraduates in Nigeria.

Research on university education indicates that various psychosocial variables, such as academic stress, are strongly associated with the adjustment levels of university students (Dyson & Renk, 2006). Findings revealed that the number of students seeking counselling for university adjustment problems is highest during the initial period of university life (Doğan, 2012; Gizir, 2014). Challenges experienced by students during the adaptation process, particularly among first-year private university students, may be largely associated with academic stress and adjustment difficulties. Against this background, the present study aims to examine the relationship between academic stress and academic adjustment among private university undergraduates in Kwara State, Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine academic stress, and academic adjustment of private universities undergraduate in Kwara State, Nigeria. Specifically, this study examined:

1. The level of academic stress of private University undergraduates in Kwara State, Nigeria.
2. The level of academic adjustment of private University undergraduates in Kwara State, Nigeria.
3. Whether relations exist between academic stress and adjustment among private university undergraduates.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the level of academic stress of private university undergraduate in Kwara State, Nigeria?
 2. What is the level of academic adjustment of private university undergraduates in Kwara State, Nigeria?
 3. Is there any relationship between academic stress and academic adjustment among private university undergraduates in Kwara State?
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Hypothesis

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between academic stress and academic adjustment of private university undergraduate students in Kwara State, Nigeria.

Methodology

The research design that was used for this study is descriptive survey using correlation method and the population comprises of all private university undergraduates in Kwara State. The target populations comprised all the 100–500 levels private university undergraduates in Kwara State, proportionate and simple random techniques were used to select 344 undergraduate students used for the study. The research instruments for this study were questionnaires that consist of Perceived Academic Stress Inventory, Student Sojourner Academic Adjustment Scale (SSAAS). Perceived Academic Stress Inventory was designed by Zajacova, Lynch, and Espenshade in 2005 to assess academic stress. It has 27 items and three subscales including difficulty with academic performance in class, difficulty with academic performance out of class and university, difficulty with managing work, family, and university. The items are scored based on a 5-point Likert-type rating scale, ranging from totally agree (1) to totally disagree (5). In a study carried out by Sarancheh, Maktabi, and Haji Yakhchali (2014), with the use of the Cronbach alpha coefficient and a split-half method, the reliability of this inventory was 0.83 and 0.78 respectively.

The second instrument that was used to elicit information on academic adjustment was Student Sojourner Academic Adjustment Scale (SSAAS) which was adopted from Joel, Yao and Yasin (2016). The SSAAS was based on five-point rating scale. Responses were in this form: Rarely Applies to Me= RAM (1point), Occasionally Applies to Me= OAM (2 points), Neither does or doesn't Apply to ME = NAM (3points), Sometimes Applies to Me= SAM(4 points), Always Applies to Me = AAM (5 points). While the reliability index was found to be 0.83 by Joel, Yao and Yasin (2016).

Results

Research Question 1: What is the level of academic stress of private University undergraduate in Kwara State, Nigeria?

To answer this research question, participants' responses to the academic stress questionnaire were collated. The minimum score, maximum score and range score of the respondents were 40, 200 and 160. The range was divided by the three level of academic stress (high, average and low) and the cut off was 40. Undergraduates with scores of 40 – 93.33 were regarded as having low level of academic stress, undergraduates with scores of 93.34 – 146.66 were regarded as having average level of academic stress, while undergraduates with scores of 146.67 – 200 were regarded as having high level of academic stress respectively.

Table 1: Percentage Analysis of Level of Academic Stress of Private University Undergraduate in Kwara State, Nigeria

Academic Stress	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High Level of Academic Stress	54	15.7
Average Level of Academic Stress	239	69.5
Low Level of Academic Stress	51	14.8
Total	344	100.0

Table 1 presents the levels of academic stress of private university undergraduate in kwara state, Nigeria. This implies that the level of academic stress among universities undergraduates in Kwara State, Nigeria was average.

Research Question 2: What is the level of academic adjustment of private University undergraduates in Kwara State, Nigeria?

To answer this research question, participants' responses on the academic adjustment questionnaire were collated. The minimum score, maximum score and range score of the respondents were 9, 45 and 36. The range was divided by the three level of academic adjustment (high, average and low) and the cut off was 9. Undergraduates with scores of 40–93.33 were regarded as having low level of academic stress, undergraduates with scores of 93.34 – 146.66 were regarded as having average level of academic stress, while undergraduates with scores of 146.67 – 200 were regarded as having high level of academic stress respectively.

Table 2: Percentage Analysis of Level of Academic Adjustment of Private University Undergraduate in Kwara State, Nigeria

Academic Stress	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High Level of Academic Adjustment	73	21.2
Average Level of Academic Adjustment	145	42.2
Low Level of Academic Adjustment	126	36.6
Total	344	100.0

Table 2 revealed that the level of academic adjustment of universities undergraduates in Kwara State, Nigeria was average.

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between academic stress and academic adjustment of private university undergraduate students in Kwara State, Nigeria.

In order to test this research hypothesis, participants' responses to the academic stress and academic adjustment questionnaire were collated.

Table 3: PPMC Analysis of the Relationship between the Academic Stress and Academic Adjustment of Private University Undergraduate Students in Kwara State, Nigeria

Variable	No	Mean	Std	df	Cal.r	Sig.(2-tailed)	Decision
Academic Stress	344	123.26	26.02	342	.09	.08	H₀₁
Academic Adjustment	344	26.03	7.99				Not Rejected

As shown on table 3, the calculated r-value was .09 while its calculated significance value is .08, of df 2/342 at alpha level of 0.05. On this basis, null hypothesis one was therefore not rejected. This means that there was no significant relationship between academic stress and academic adjustment of private university undergraduate students in Kwara State, Nigeria. The reason was that the calculated significance value (.08) was greater than 0.05 alpha level ($p > 0.05$).

Discussion of Findings

From the analysis presented in the previous chapters, the following discussions of findings were made: The findings of this study revealed that the level of academic stress of private University undergraduate in Kwara State, Nigeria was average. This likely as a result of a convenient and flexible academic timetable and assistance rendered in carrying out of domestic-chores such as sweeping, cooking and laundry among others. This finding is in consonance Busari, (2014) reported that the level of academic stress of undergraduate students of the University of Ado Ekiti, Emmanuel Alayande Campus Oyo were moderate.

It was also discovered that the level of academic adjustment of private University undergraduates in Kwara State, Nigeria was average. The average level of academic adjustment in private university students is likely because the academic stress experienced is equally not to the extreme. This average ability to adjust is likely because the greatest percentages of respondents are within the age category of 22 years and above. This finding is in line with that of Ahmad et al. (2017) found that academic adjustments of undergraduates' students of University of Sargodha was moderate. Also, Mudhovozi (2012) found that academic adjustment of first-year students at a university in Zimbabwe was moderate.

In addition, finding revealed that the common dimension of academic adjustment of private University undergraduates in Kwara State, Nigeria was academic motivation. This finding is similar to that of Aklilu (2018) who reported that students are not well adjusted /achieved least adjustment/ in personal-emotional dimension among other three dimensions of adjustment. Lastly, finding revealed that there was no significant relationship between academic stress and academic adjustment of private university undergraduate students in Kwara State, Nigeria. This outcome could be as a result of the fact the respondents are on average level on academic stress and academic adjustment. This finding is in line with that of Gagandeep and Sandeep (2019) whose finding revealed that there exists no significant relationship between adjustment and academic stress of adolescents. On the contrary, Hussain (2008) reported that academic stress and adjustment are significantly correlated.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the researcher concluded that, the level of academic stress of private University undergraduate in Kwara State, Nigeria was average, and the level of academic adjustment of private University undergraduates in Kwara State, Nigeria was average, it was also discovered that, there was no significant relationship between academic stress and academic adjustment of private university undergraduate students in Kwara State, Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are put forward;

1. Academic activities in private universities should be periodically reviewed to ensure that practices that may trigger academic stress among undergraduate students are minimised or eliminated.
2. Counselling units in every university should be actively engaged in guiding students in various ways to help them adjust to and manage academic life effectively.
3. Seminars should be organised for students to create awareness of various ways of maintaining balance in academic stress, adjustment, and other related variables that can hinder academic success.

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