Psychological Stress and Management Strategies for Academic Staff of Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

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Abstract: This paper discussed stress management strategies for academic staff of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Both secondary and primary data were employed. Data was collected from print materials and online publications. This study reveals that excess workload, lack of instructional materials, inadequate infrastructural facilities, exorbitant work demands, conflicting roles, pressure towards conformity, job insecurity, strike actions, insecurity and students’ misbehavior are causes of stress among academic staff in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Consequently, studies of psychological stress hamper environmental events that put people’s ability to cope or individual responses to events that elicit negative affect. In this article, the definition of stress does not include psychiatric disorders linked to stress but is limited to the academic environment. To address these, the paper recommended among other things that the tertiary institutions’ administrators should ensure that capacity building on stress management is organized for the academic staff. This will help to reduce stressors and enhance resilience skills and coping mechanisms among them.

Keywords: Academic staff, Tertiary institutions, Psychological Stress.

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Introduction

Tertiary education is an advanced and organized form of carrying out the teaching and learning process in higher institutions of learning. Tertiary education also deals with the provision of research services and community service with the aim of developing society. Education in tertiary institutions in Nigeria focuses on manpower development. Murtala and Ogunode (2022) are of the opinion that tertiary education basically specializes in teaching programmes, research and community service. Tertiary education is an advanced education that is provided for those who are through with Post-Basic Education and Career Development (PBECD) education. According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria, National Policy on Education (2013) tertiary education is an education received by individuals after the completion of their Post-secondary Education in institutions such as Universities and Inter-University Centres such as the Nigeria French Language Village, Nigeria Arabic Language Village, National Institute of Nigerian Languages, institutions such as Innovation Enterprise Institutions (IEIs), and Colleges of Education, Monotechnics, Polytechnics, and other specialized institutions such as Colleges of Agriculture, Schools of Health and Technology and the National Teachers' Institutes (NTI) (FRN, 2013).

Education in tertiary institutions contributes to the national development of Nigeria, through high-level manpower training; accessible and affordable quality learning opportunities in formal and informal education in response to the needs and interests of all Nigerians. Similarly, tertiary education prepares students with the knowledge and skills for self-reliance and the world of hard work as well as reduces the lack of skilled personnel through the production of skilled manpower relevant to the needs and demands of professionals in the labour market. Therefore, facing these
Stressors can present emotional experiences and disturbances that need protective factors which threaten the personality trait of neuroticism of the academic staff and also increase the tendency of their worries. This is why this research identifies the management of stress as an intervention to assist (Janina 2022) the tertiary academic staff of the universities.

It is instructive that the stressors in the academic environment are an inevitable part of life. All people, whether they are V.C’s, Deans, H.O.D’s, Directors, academic staff and non-academic staff are confronted with the implementation of a teaching programme that includes teaching, students supervision, marking of assignments, tests and examinations, preparation of students' results with deadline in order to meet up with time cannot be avoided. Accordingly, it is essential to manage stress effectively.

**Concept of Academic Staff**

Academic staff are the teaching staff in higher institutions and the implementer of the school curriculum and lecture presentation. Academic staff is the knowledge and character builder imparter in the higher institution. They are the pillar and foundation of higher institutions (Ogunode & Adamu 2021).

The functions of the academic staff according to Ogunode, Akinlade and Musa (2021) include lecturing, preparing the lecture note, preparing the lesson note, source for instruction materials, giving assignments to students, assessing the students through continuous assessment and examination, setting exams questions, marks the answer sheet, supervise students research work especially projects, theses and dissertation and prepares the students to grade points. The academic staff conducts different levels of research, presents their findings and contributes to the development of knowledge in higher institutions. The quality of any higher institution depends on the quality of academic staff it possessed for delivering teaching and providing other academic services. The quality and quantities of academic staff in higher institutions have been used to assess the quality of the higher institutions. Academic staff in Nigerian tertiary institutions are confronted with many challenges including psychological stress. The tertiary institutions are full of activities and programme that placed stress on the academic staffers (Ogunode, Jegede & Musa, 2021).

**Concept of Psychological Stress**

There are many definitions of psychological stress, the following definitions seem to be the most comprehensive and descriptive. Psychological stress is the perceived environmental demands surpassing individuals’ coping capacity (Murtala, 2022). According to Gericke (1997), stress is the pressure that an event places on an individual. Stress is also an individual’s response to physical, mental and chemical events, both external and self-generated, that frighten, endanger, excite or distress them. Feelings of conflict, frustration, disillusionment, apathy indifference, dismay, and tension are familiar to a large number of employees and managers as well as professionals in organizations. These are no different from the context in the focus of the research. Opportunities for individuals need to grow in a healthy way and development is limited in a number of ways if the conditions of an environment are critical due to the presence of collective stressors (Janina, 2022). Psychological Stress is also defined as a set of circumstances under which an individual cannot respond adequately or instrumentally to environmental stimuli, or can so respond only at the cost of excessive wear and tear on the person. For example chronic fatigue, tension, worry, physical damage, nervous breakdown or loss of self-esteem. Stress is therefore a relational concept since it involves factors in the environment which combine with factors in the individual.

Specifically, it is the pressure and strain that result from demands or challenges that require some kind of readjustment by the individual be it positive or negative. For example, conflict, frustration deprivation, and anxiety can all produce stress. So can a change in jobs, including promotion or an increase in workload, marital issues, divorce, a birth in the family or death.

According to National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) (2013) Stress is indeed a part of life,
beginning at the moment of entry into this world and recurring until we leave it. Thus stress is inevitable within the school system or any organization for that matter. Administrators cannot completely eliminate stress either for others or for themselves. Furthermore, a certain degree of stress seems to be a precondition for psychological growth, achievement, and the development of new skills, although stress always involves at least some temporary degree of discomfort. It is frequently the occasion for the emergence of a creative solution to personal or organizational problems. On the other hand, prolonged stress can be harmful among staffers in higher institutions.

Causes of Stress among Academic staff

There are many sources or causes of stress (managerial and professional) in tertiary institutions. Some of them include; excess workload, shortage of instructional materials, inadequate infrastructural facilities, exorbitant work demands, role conflict and ambiguity, pressure towards conformity, Job insecurity, strike actions, insecurity and students Misbehavior.

Excess Workload

Excess workload in Nigerian tertiary institutions is one of the major sources of stress for the academic staff. Nigerian staffers especially in public universities are overworked. They lecture large number of students coupled with other academic assignments to be completed within a short period of time. The excess workload of academic staff in Nigerian tertiary institutions is responsible for the stress challenges they are faced with. Ogunode Akin-Ibidiran and Ibidiran (2022) reported that academic staff in public universities are known for teaching larger classes. For example, at the National Open University, the academic staff-to-student ratio was 1:363, at Lagos State University the ratio was 1:144, and at the University of Abuja, the ratio was 1:122. This imposes stress on them.

Shortage of Instructional Materials

Instructional materials are employed by academic staff to support the implementation of the teaching programme. Many academic staff cannot access adequate and exact instructional materials to use for the delivery of lectures. The inability of many academic staff to access these resources and use them to support the delivery of lectures has caused psychological stress to many of them. Ogunode and Atobauka (2021) noted that many public universities do not have sufficient educational resources to support the implementation of the teaching programme in their respective institutions.

Inadequate Infrastructural Facilities

Another source of psychological stress for the academic staff in Nigerian tertiary institutions is the shortage of facilities in the institutions. When human and materials resources needed to implement teaching and research programme are not provided their adequacies it affects the morale and causes stress on the academic staffers. Ogunode and Abubakar (2021) confirms that many lecturers shared offices. Lecture halls and laboratories are often in short supply (Ogunode & Ndayebom, 2022).

Exorbitant Work Demands

DVC’s, Deans of faculties, Heads of departments, Directors of units and Chairmen of committees in the university system often find themselves faced with a lot of assignments. Tightly scheduled work days, heavy teaching load and simultaneous demands exert considerable stress on staffers in tertiary institutions. Obi, (2016) stated that the exorbitant work demands of universities in Nigeria are capable of causing stress for the university managers. Many Deans and heads of departments are engaged in too much of assignments that make some of them burn out.

Conflicting Role

The conflicting role is another major cause of psychological stress among the academic staff in
tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Stress is created by the academic staff under role confusion on a given assignment which the staff may not be sure how to carry them out and what to do or which way to turn. A study by Micheal (2012) revealed that conflicting role in the workplace constitutes an amount of stress to personnel and this is known to have reduced their productivity.

**Pressure towards Conformity**

Many newly employed academic staffers in tertiary institutions are confronted with stress because of a lack of conformity with the higher institution environment in terms of culture and norms. Individuals show wide variations in the willingness to conform to a norm established by the various institutions, for some newly employed academic staff the pressure to conform represents stress in their lives. This stress or pressure placed upon the academic staffers as a result of demands from the institutions primarily has psychological and sociological implications on the academic staffers. Micheal (2012) and Adams (1980) identified pressure from institutions and managers have resulted to stress for the newly employed staff workplace.

**Job Insecurity**

Job insecurity in the various tertiary institutions among the newly employed also created stress on the academic staff. There is fear of losing their jobs because their employment is still in the capacity of probation. The uncertainty surrounding their placement causes a lot of stress on them. Mark (2017) observes that fears of being fired pose another source of managerial stress on teachers (academic staff) due to its resultant consequences for example having unqualified teachers in the school system could create feelings of insecurity.

**Strike Actions**

Strike actions in the tertiary institutions in Nigeria have resulted to stress on many academic staffers. Many staffers which to carry out their functions because the strike actions served as obstacles causing much frustration and stress. The Nigerian university system is known for prolonged strike actions (Okoli, Ogbondah, & Ewor 2016; Ogunode, Ugochukwu, & Jegede 2022). Murtala, Akinjobi and Ogunode (2022) reiterated that most academic staff in Nigeria stays idle during strike actions while only a few are engaged with other minor work or business. The effects of staying idle by most academic staff in Nigeria during the strike have led to different illnesses or sicknesses. Backing this submission, Dr. Sandeep Govil, Psychiatrist, Saroj Super Speciality Hospital, submits that, “Sitting idle for longer duration can lead to anxiety, depression, poor thinking capacity, loss of concentration, and even decline in memory (Healthshots, 2021).

**Insecurity**

The insecurity facing Nigeria as a country and the numerous attacks on the universities, especially the academic staffers have resulted to stress in for many of them. Many academic staffers in Nigeria have experienced attacks such as kidnappings and assaults. The continuous attacks on the various higher institutions in the country are causing stress and frustration to the academic staffs in Nigeria.

**Students’ Misbehavior**

The student's behaviors in the classroom also cause stress to academic staffers in Nigerian higher institutions. The behaviour of some students such as noise making, indecent dressing, hairstyles, disobedience to lecture roles, phone noise, etc. All these negative behaviours cause stress on academic staffers. Alhassan (2000), concludes that pupil misbehavior such as noisy pupils, difficult classes and difficult behaviour problems causes stress on teachers in schools.

**Effective Strategies to Combat Psychological Stress among Academic Staff in the Tertiary Institutions:**

There are many strategies to reduce stress, especially among academic staffers in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Some of these strategies include:
Capacity Building on Stress Management

The tertiary institution administrators should ensure capacity building on stress management is organized for the academic staff. This will help to reduce stressors and enhance their capacity for resilience. Research has highlighted the significance of internal attributes (i.e., abilities, motives, and values) in understanding human behavior (Ungar, 2006). For instance, it has been suggested that the ability to effectively regulate positive (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004) and negative emotions (Troy & Mauss, 2011) is crucial for the promotion of resilience and protection against stressors.

Provision of Infrastructure Facilities

The tertiary institution managers should provide adequate infrastructure facilities in all the tertiary institutions. Murtala, et al (2022), posited that inadequate infrastructure facilities pose disorienting situations for the worker and culminate in the source of unhappiness and stress.

Supply of Adequate Instructional Materials

The academic staffers should be provided with adequate instructional materials to support the implementation of teaching and research programmes in the institutions.

Employment of Adequate Staff

Adequate staff should be employed in all tertiary institutions to reduce the heavy workloads of academic staffers in higher institutions across the country.

Work Planning

Academic staffers in tertiary institutions should plan their academic work and schedule systematically for easy implementation. Planning is very important in the academic environment and for academics. Sometimes the root of negative emotions like fear of failure, lack of confidence and frustration can be found in the fact that the person did not plan his or her schedule ahead of time. NOUN (2013) concludes that therefore to reduce your stress levels, prepare yourself as much as possible for the unexpected. If you receive a task to complete, include it immediately in your planning and do it as soon as possible. Also, encourage those working for you to implement this step. Postponing a task will only lead to a build-up of stress.

Develop an Effective Support Strategy

Academic staff working in higher institutions should develop an effective support strategy. This implies you are providing maximum support for other colleagues or team members and even your heads. NOUN (2013) opines that having people to turn to, talk to and rely on have proved to be perhaps the most significant factor in helping people to minimize the occurrence and impact of stressors in their lives and on their health.

Thinking Positively

Ask yourself what you are going to do about the challenge ahead of you. How can I resolve it? What am I going to achieve? Remember that the first step towards reaching your goals is having a positive attitude. Be confident and enthusiastic, think positively about yourself and life, recognize your limitation and remember that change can be positive. As already indicated a positive response to a stressful situation can make your life interesting, challenging and exciting. It can equally make your schedule interesting and challenging in an organization.

Having a Target set and setting standard

According to Gerick (1997) many of us end up doing too much and too quickly. The reason for this is that we do not sit down and think about what we really wish to achieve. Train yourself to think in terms of objectives. This applies not only to the working environment but to other activities in life. A school manager should always have a standard-set objectives to be achieved in the school system while changing strategy from failed ones. This is closely related to the idea of being clear about school values. Be systematic when making decisions and solving problems.
Learn to break down a problem into manageable components. Gather enough information about any given problem and then put it into perspective. Distant yourself from the sources and try to be objective and see the problem as others would see it.

**Exercise**

One of the strategies to reduce stress among academic staffers is to engage in physical exercise within or outside the universities environment. Physical exercise helps people to reduce stress and frustration in workplaces, especially in offices. Taking work, listening to music and involving games and taking part in a fitness programme or any strenuous activity helps to disperse the stress response as well as to re-energize you to help you deal with problems. Research has shown that the fitter you are, the less you are likely to develop physical or mental illnesses. If you are fit, you have more energy and stamina to tackle problems. You also have more resilience when things do not work out well.

**Relaxation**

Another technique to reduce stress among the staff in the higher institutions is for the individual to some an office to relax. When you can relax by listening to music, watching television, attending a sports match, reading a book, and playing with some of your colleagues.

**Avoid personalizing challenges**

Avoid personalizing challenges you are to carry out as an academic staffer, recognizing the difference between an insult directed at you and one directed at the system you represent, do not get emotionally involved in outbursts, being prepared and knowledgeable about individual differences and cultural differences, learning to accept people and study how to manage them, asking if you do not know something and obtaining more information on how to perform your duties more effectively could be very useful.

**Effective Communication**

Communicating effectively with colleagues and head of departments on one’s concern, asking questions about the assignment you are to carry out, meeting people that have done it before, developing good communicative strategies for sources of information are instrumental to managing academic staff stressors. NOUN (2013) asserts that poor and ineffective communication can put a great deal of pressure on you as well as on the person with whom you are communicating.

**Conclusion**

This paper examined psychological stress and management strategies for academic staff of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The paper concluded that excess workload, shortage of instructional materials, inadequate infrastructural facilities, environmental conditions, exorbitant work demands, conflicting roles, pressure towards conformity, job insecurity, strike actions, insecurity and students’ misbehavior are causes of psychological stress among academic staff of the tertiary institutions in Nigeria. To address these worrisome problem, this paper recommends, capacity building on stress management, provision of infrastructure facilities, supply of adequate instructional materials, employment of adequate staff, work planning, development of an effective support strategy, thinking positively, having a target, constant exercise, relaxation, addressing personal challenges and adopting effective communication strategies as coping mechanisms for psychological stress of academic staff of tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

**REFERENCES**


