



The Impact of Academic Work Load on the Mental Health of Undergraduate Students of Rivers State University

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of academic workload on the mental health of undergraduate students of Rivers State University. The design for the study is correlational research design. The population for this study was made up of all the undergraduate students in Rivers State University in Law Faculty. A sample of 400 students were drawn from the population. The respondents were made up of 163 male and 237 female students respectively. School Work Inventory (SWI) and Mental Health Questionnaire (MHQ) instruments were used for data collection. The reliability of the instrument was ascertained using the Cronbach Alpha technique on SPSS. It was revealed respondents had a mean value of 28.90 (SD = 9.35) on work load, while for mental health it was 41.67 (SD = 4.51) which when subjected to independent sample t-test, the result yielded a t-value of 2.131. This result therefore suggests that there is influence of work load on mental health of undergraduate students of Rivers State University. It was recommended that lecturers should find out the possible ways of students work load. This will help boost their sense of self importance, relevance and also improve their mental health.

KEYWORDS: Workload, Mental Health, Workload, Students

I. INTRODUCTION

The theory of mental health was propounded by Beck in 1967. He studied people suffering from mental health issues and found that they appraised events in a negative way. Beck (1967) identified three mechanisms that he thought were responsible for mental health issue:

- The cognitive triad (of negative automatic thinking)
- Negative self-schemas
- Errors in Logic (that is faulty information processing)

The cognitive triad are the three forms of negative thinking that are typical of individuals with

mental health issue: namely negative thoughts about the self, the world and the future. These thoughts tended to be automatic in depressed people as they occurred spontaneously. Depressed persons tend to feel helpless, worthless, and inadequate. They interpret events in the world in an unrealistically negative and defeatist way, and they see the world as posing obstacles that cannot be handled. Finally, they see the future as totally hopeless because their worthlessness will prevent their situation improving.

As these three components interact, they interfere with normal cognitive processing, leading to impairments in perception, memory and problem solving with the person becoming obsessed with negative thoughts.

Beck believed that individuals who are prone to mental health issues develop a **negative self-schema**. They possess a set of beliefs and expectations about themselves that are essentially negative and pessimistic. Beck claimed that negative schemas may be acquired in childhood as a result of a traumatic event. Experiences that might contribute to negative schemas include:

- Death of a parent or sibling.
- Parental rejection, criticism, overprotection, neglect or abuse.
- Bullying at school or exclusion from peer group.

However, a negative self-schema predisposes the individual to mental health issue, and therefore someone who has acquired a cognitive triad will not necessarily develop mental health issue. Some kind of stressful life event is required to activate this negative schema later in life. Once the negative schemas are activated a number of illogical thoughts seem to dominate such individuals. People with negative self-schemas become prone to making logical errors in their thinking and they tend to focus selectively on certain aspects of a situation while ignoring equally relevant information. Beck (1967) identified a number of systematic negative bias' in information processing known as logical errors or faulty thinking. These illogical thought patterns are



self-defeating, and can cause great anxiety or mental health issue for the individual.

Mentally healthy people feel comfortable about themselves and their abilities. They do not expect to be able to do everything perfectly, nor do they underestimate their powers. They shape the environment, if possible, if not adjust to it and such individuals have generally satisfying relationships with other people.

Mental health means how a person thinks, feel, and acts when faced with life's situations and people look at themselves, their lives, and the other people in their lives, evaluate their challenges and problems, and explore choices. These include handling stress, relating to other people, and making decision. Successful performance of mental function results in productive activities, fulfilling relationship with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and cope with adversity from early childhood until late life. Mental health is the springboard of thinking and communication skills, learning, emotional growth, resilience and self-esteem. It is a basic factor which contributes to maintenance of physical as well as social well-being. A mentally healthy person shows strength of purpose, co-ordination of effort, and steady pursuit of well-chosen goals. For him, there is integration and peace of mind. Also, a mentally healthy person is one who is able to find the real meaning of his own actions and the actions of others. He is also able to interpret himself to others.

According to Chengti (2018), "Mental health is thus the balanced development of the individual's personality and emotional attitudes which enable him to live harmoniously with the fellow men". Singh (2000), defined mental health as the ability to establish and nurture loving relationships with relevant others, to discern and engage in rewarding work, to continually develop one's understanding of self and relevant others, to meaningfully contribute one's mind towards promotion of well-being of community to which one belongs without losing one's own identity, independence and autonomy and to think and behave with an adequate blend of objectivity and sensitivity in all kinds of situations which one happens to come across. A person's mental health can be inferred from his behavior. A person's behavior may be viewed or interpreted differently by others, depending on their values and beliefs, Therefore, mental health is a state of emotional, psychological and social wellness confirmed by satisfying interpersonal relationships, effective behavior and coping, a positive self-concept and emotional stability (Videbeck in Doa, 2018). Neither mental nor physical health can exist alone. Mental, physical and social functioning, are

interdependent. Furthermore, health and illness may coexist. They are mutually exclusive only if health is defined in a restrictive way as the absence of disease (Sartorius in Awunor, 2018).

The mental health of students has always been at the forefront of concern over the years in Nigeria. In the last decade, there have been several reports of how students mentally breakdown as a result of the stress and frustration which our school systems have in a way helped foster. These stress and frustration most often result in depression and anxiety which sometimes lead to suicide. Poor mental health of students in higher education is an increasing concern for public health and policy. A 2020 Insight Network survey of students has a current mental health diagnosis and serious psychological (Pereira, 2019). A review of 105 Further Education (FE) colleges in England found that over a three-year period, 85% of colleges reported an increase in mental health difficulties (Association of Colleges, 2017). Depression and anxiety were both prevalent and widespread in students; all colleges reported students experiencing depression and 99% reported students experiencing severe anxiety (Pereira, 2019).

A UK cohort study found that levels of psychological distress increase on entering university and recent evidence suggests that the prevalence of mental health problems among university students, including self-harm and suicide, are rising with increases in demand for services to support students' mental health and reports of some universities finding a doubling of the number of students accessing support (Pereira, 2019). These common mental health difficulties clearly present considerable threat to the mental health and wellbeing of students but their impact also has educational, social and economic consequences such as academic underperformance and increased risk of dropping out of university.

Policy changes may have had an influence on the student experience, and on the levels of mental health problems seen in the student population; the biggest change has arguably been the move to widen higher education participation and to enable a more diverse demographic to access University education. The participation has been continually rising since the late 1960s but gained impetus in the 2000s through the work of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (Benson-Eggleton, 2019). Macaskill (2013) suggested that the increased access to higher education will have resulted in more students attending university from minority groups and less affluent backgrounds, meaning that more students may be vulnerable to mental health problems, and these students may also experience



greater challenges in making the transition to higher education.

The extent to which the increase in poor mental health is also being seen amongst non-students of a similar age is not well understood and warrants further study. However, the increase in poor mental health specifically within students in higher education highlights a need to understand what the risk factors are and what might be done in order to ensure young people are learning, developing and transitioning into adulthood in environments that promote mental wellbeing.

Mental health is the balance development of an individual's personality and emotional attitude which enables him to live harmoniously with his fellow men, mental health is not exclusively a matter of relation between persons, it is also a matter of relation of the individuals towards the community he lives in, towards the society of which the community is a part and towards to social institution which for a large part guides his life, determine his way of living, working, leisure and the way he earns and spend his money, the way he sees happiness, stability and security (Gaur, 2018). The school workload on the undergraduate students seems to be too cumbersome. School workload refers to a number of different yet related activities students engaged for their academic, social and physical progress in school. However, it is clear that most of these works are specified at a minimum of 2 hours and a maximum of 3 hours per credit point. Lal (2014) described school workload as the perceived relationship between the amount of mental processing and capability or resources and amount required by the task. Macqarie University (2015) outlined students school workload to include class attendance, amount of required reading group activities and assessment tasks or combination of all these.

According to Rahim, Saat, Siti-Aisha, Aziz, Zakaria, Kaar, Kamaraddin and Suhaima (2016) school workload should include a combination of three activities that is class attendance (both face to face and online), learning activities including reading or research and undertaking assessment tasks. School workload can be classified into quantitative (the amount of work to be done) and qualitative (the difficulty of the work). School workload could also be too high or too low. If it is too high it could lead to mental health and if it is too low it could be boredom, loss of situation, awareness and reduces alertness. Also, school workload can increase performance.

Weerasinghe et al. (2012) proved that heavy academic workload is the most prominent factor affecting to stress level of undergraduates. It was found that the test and examination was the top 10 of

the stressor in the academic related workload. Exam stress has been observed that students have marked undue stress during pre and examination period (Ganesh et al., 2012). Stress is more prevalent among students due to their hectic and demanding schedule which is important for learning as it interferes with their performances and keeps the task oriented (Ganesh et al., 2012). Misra and McKean (2000) studied the association between academic stress, anxiety, time management and leisure satisfaction among university students. Students were reported to experience anxiety and they used time management and indulged in leisure activities to deal with academic stress. In semester system, stress-inducing academic demands include grade competition; lack of time and issues relating to time or task management (Macan et al., 1990) they have to adapt to new learning challenging environments. There are many negative consequences of the academic stress such as increasing in body mass index (Saat et al., 2010) and eating behavior (Saat et al., 2014).

Workload components are the key tasks characteristics influencing human performance which define how people accomplish a required work and in what manner a person comprehends the task (Cox-Fuenzalida, 2017). Task demand is the ratio between time needed to complete a certain task and the available time to satisfy it and pointed out that workload is a combination between the available resources of an operating system, task demand, and people's capability. Workload influences and decreases the capacity of an individual. A rise in the task demand level may prompt errors and an increment in accordance to response time. In addition, high-task workload and complexity are thought to be two of the most critical factors in the reduction of performance quality. Primary task performance measures measure the performance end result of the task. On the contrary, secondary performance measures evaluate the residual resources or capacity not used in the primary task. Subjective procedures involve rating scales that users answer to assess the subjective effort needed to perform a task.

II RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted descriptive survey design and was carried out in Rivers State University located in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. Descriptive survey design is that in which the researcher collects data from a large sample drawn from a given population and describes certain features of the sample as they are at the time of the study and which are of interest to the researcher, however without manipulating any independent variables of the study Nwankwo (2016). Usually, the



findings from the sample are generalized to the population from which the sample was drawn. This study adopted this design because the researcher equally drew a sample from a larger population in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area and described the attributes and characteristics of such sample the way they are without manipulating any independent variable by establishing the magnitude, direction and degree of influence existing between the variables. This study was carried out precisely in the faculty of law in the institution since it has been observed that most of students in professional courses like law are faced with enormous workload as part of the requirement for graduating from the school. Thus, the desire to study the impacts of the academic workloads on the students.

The population for this study was made up of all the undergraduate students in Rivers State University. A sample of 400 students were drawn from the population. The respondents were made up of 163 male and 237 female students respectively. To determine the sample size Taro Yamane's formula is used and the calculation is shown below: this sampling technique was chosen because the researcher may not have access to some of the staff of these organizations.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where; n = sample size
 N = Population of the study
 e = tolerable error (0.05)

$$n = \frac{25,112}{1 + 25,212 (0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{25,112}{1 + 25,112 (0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{25,112}{1 + 62.78}$$

$$n = \frac{25,112}{63.78} = 393.73$$

Therefore; n = 393.73, the sample size for this study is 400 students.

Two instruments were used for data collection. The instrument are titled: School Work

Inventory (SWI) and Mental Health Questionnaire (MHQ). The first instrument has six sections A-F. The instrument are designed to assess the relationship between school work on the mental health of undergraduate students of Rivers State University. The instrument is made up of 25 items. The instrument is constructed on a four point Likert Scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A) Disagree (D) and strongly Disagree (SD).

In order to validate the research instrument, copies of the instruments were given to experts including the topic of the study, purpose of the study with its specific objectives, research questions and hypotheses. The items considered relevant by the experts were the ones that were included in the final version of the instrument.

The reliability of the instrument were ascertained using the Cronbach Alpha technique on SPSS. First, draft copies of the instrument was administered on 30 students who were not be part of the selected sample. Thereafter, the scores were inserted into the SPSS software and then analysis was done. The coefficient obtained are 0.82 and 0.92 for both instrument. Mean, standard deviation and t-test were used to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses at 0.05 alpha.

III DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

Hypothesis:

H₁: There is no significant effect of academic work load on mental health of male and female undergraduate students of Rivers State University.

H₀: There is significant effect of academic work load on mental health of male and female undergraduate students of Rivers State University

The data obtained from section on academic work load mental health was analyzed using independent sample t-test. Thereafter, the corresponding null hypothesis was tested using t-value, the obtained result is displayed in table 1 below;

Table 1: Independent sample t-test on the influence of work load on mental health of students

Variable	Mean	SD	N	t-value	P	α	Decision
Work load	28.90	9.35	400	2.131	0.000	0.05	Reject H ₀₁
Mental health	41.67	4.51					

According to the observed result shown in Table 1, it was revealed respondents had a mean value of 28.90 (SD = 9.35) on work load, while for



mental health it was 41.67 (SD = 4.51) which when subjected to independent sample t-test, the result yielded a t-value of 2.131. This result therefore suggests that there is influence of work load on mental health of undergraduate students of Rivers State University. In addition, it was shown that a p-value of 0.000 was gotten, a value less than 0.05 level of significance guiding the study. This result therefore indicates that there is an influence of work load on mental health of undergraduate students of Rivers State University. The null hypotheses were therefore rejected.

The study revealed in table 1 that there is a significant influence of work load on mental health of undergraduate students of Rivers State University. The influence is statistically not significant at 0.5 level of significance. This influence of work load on mental health means that as the scores on work load increases, there is corresponding increase in mental health and vice versa.

This means students whose scores are high on work load also earn a high score in their mental health, while those who score low in work load also score low in their mental health. This implies that when work load is high it will increase the mental health of the students. This finding is not surprising to this researcher because academic's workload comprises a complex mix of teaching, research and service/administration duties, but the proportions of these duties can vary considerably for individuals according to their experience level and discipline. Studies have suggested time-based approaches to allocating academic work are most credible, provided: academics have been involved in their development, they contain a holistic and realistic array of time allocations for the tasks, the work allocation process is transparent, and the budget process ensures the adequate allocation of resources.

The result from this study is similar to that obtained by Rahim (2016) and Matthew (2020) who examined optimizing students' workload and its effects on their mental health during COVID-19 Pandemic. Matthew (2020) examined optimizing students' workload and its effects on their mental health during COVID-19 Pandemic. The results revealed that the workloads does not significantly affects the students' mental health, the finding from both study differed in that the sample size used varied. In this same vein the findings is in line with the finding of Muralla (2020) who described the effects of academic workload on student burnout during online classes. Students in the Philippines face difficulties with remote learning after the COVID-19 crisis. The content analysis revealed the following categories of effects of academic workload on student

burnout during online classes: work is hurried and rushed, workloads are challenging to manage during online classes, feeling discouraged, irritated, stressed, and annoyed, feeling burnout, and feeling fatigued. Furthermore, regression analysis proved that students' academic burnout is significantly influenced by physical workload, reduced sense of performance, effort, and frustration. Thus, education and counseling support are needed to reduce the student's burnout during online learning.

IV CONCLUSION

This study highlighted a significant effect of work load and mental health of undergraduate students of Rivers State University. Understanding factors that influence students' mental health and wellbeing offers the potential to find ways to identify strategies that enhance the students' abilities to cope with the challenges of higher education. This study revealed a wide range of variables and the mechanisms that may explain how they impact upon mental wellbeing and increase the risk of poor mental health amongst students. It also identified a need for interventions that can be implemented before young people make the transition to higher education. This study has shown that student's school can actually affect their mental health in the sense that when students are stressed and much work load is given to students it may cause depression and reduction of their self-confidence. Also, improved knowledge of factors associated with poor mental health and also those that increase mental wellbeing can provide a foundation for designing strategies and specific interventions that can prevent poor mental health and ensuring targeted support is available for students at increased risk.

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