Academic Stress and Mental Health Issues among University Students in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The issue of academic stress has become a significant area of concern in the public health of university students in Pakistan, where the growing academic demands, financial needs, competitive learning conditions, and the lack of a well-developed psychosocial support system have contributed to the development of mental health problems. The paper examines the common factors, occurrence, and the psychological impact of academic stress among the students attending the public and private universities, in terms of anxiety, depression, burnout, and poor academic performance. Based on an empirical literature review and theory-related models, such as the Stress Process Model and the Cognitive Appraisal Theory, the study portrays the extent of student susceptibilities by contextual elements, including gender norms, socioeconomic status, institutional culture, and family expectations. The results indicate that negative effects of academic stress, such as emotional exhaustion, decreased coping ability, and worsening mental health are strongly linked to prolonged academic stress. The article highlights the fact that campus-based counseling service, stress-management programs, and supportive academic policies are urgently required in mitigating mental health risk factors amongst students. Implications of the policy and research directions are also addressed.

Keywords: College stress; psychological health; college students; depression; anxiety; Pakistan; higher education; wellbeing

INTRODUCTION

Academic stress is one of the most popularly discussed issues among the university students all over the world, but in Pakistan the problem is very acute because of structural, cultural, and institutional pressure that influence the situation in higher education. The last 20 years were marked by the growth of universities and the promotion of the attainment of degrees, which has strongly raised the level of expectations towards young people (Shah and Amjad, 2021). The increased competition over scarce job opportunities lies in the pressure put on students to perform better academically, have high grades, and find a scholarship, internship, or additional schooling abroad (Khan, 2020). These pressures are also leading to chronic stress, which has a negative impact on the health and mental well-being of the students, their grades, and the overall quality of life.

An increasing literature is reported on the increase in prevalence of mental health issues among Pakistani university students. Research shows that anxiety, depression, academic burnout, and emotional distress are high rates that are usually higher than the global

levels (Naz and Hashmi, 2019; Rafiq et al., 2022). One of the key precursors of these psychological conditions is academic stress, which can be described as the pressure to fulfill the expectations, deadlines, and performance standards in academics (Misbah et al., 2021). Stress Process Model proposes that the consequences of stressors on mental health are undesirable when the exposure duration is prolonged without proper coping strategies and social support (Pearlin et al., 1981). This theoretical perspective is especially applicable to Pakistan where mental health literacy is low and stigma usually becomes a detriment to students seeking psychological support.

There are a number of situational factors that influence the reality of academic stress in Pakistan. The family expectations are in the limelight, as students, particularly middle-class or low-income students, have the responsibility to achieve the expectations of their families in terms of upward mobility (Safdar and Khalid, 2020). The cultural focus on academic achievements as the source of respect, future safety, and marriage opportunities increases performance anxiety, especially in female students, who may also encounter gender-related

limitations and pressure (Aslam & Tariq, 2021). Also, strict grading systems, workload overburden, lack of guidance, and absence of teaching practices that are student-centered are also a major contributor to the level of stress (Rehman and Bilal, 2020). Most of the universities continue to follow the old-fashioned pedagogical patterns of rote memorization, high-stakes testing, and overpopulated classes, which only pressurize the cognitive and emotional abilities of students.

Another significant contributor is the financial stress. The percentage of Pakistani students is an indicator of a lower socioeconomic level and is unable to afford tuition fees, transportation expenses, and academic resources (Shabbir and Raza, 2021). The fact that many of them work part-time or have to take care of their families is another source of mental and emotional stress. The growth of higher education makes social economic disparities even more apparent because students of private colleges and universities are more likely to receive more resources than those who study in public universities and limited facilities and extremely over-saturated counseling offices-if they have any at all (Malik and Sarwar, 2020).

University environments are also especially critical in determining mental health outcomes. Research has shown that toxic competition, peer comparison and fear of failure are some of the factors contributing to chronic stress in students (Khalid et al., 2022). Online learning trends have recently increased social isolation, which weakens the ability to find peer support and learn in groups (Rahim and Abbas, 2021). Simultaneously, not all universities have organized mental health care, professional counselors, or a platform of psychological assistance. A survey conducted on 21 Pakistani universities revealed that more than 70 percent of the universities did not have operational counseling centers, meaning that students do not receive professional counseling help when they encounter challenges, emotionally or academically (Rizvi, 2022).

The mental effects of the academic pressure are extensive. The signs of depression, insomnia, irritability, lack of motivation and academic engagement are linked to chronic academic pressure (Naz & Hashmi, 2019). The degree of anxiety holds with the concentration and memory impairments, which influence the capacity of the students to learn. Studies also associate academic stress with such physical health issues as headaches, fatigue, and poor immune functionality (Rafiq et al., 2022). Emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and the inefficacy complex, which is the main feature of burnout, is becoming a common report among university students, and many of them are finding the desire to drop out or have an academic break (Misbah et al., 2021). These issues have a long-term effect because initial mental health difficulties can influence the pursuit of a career, relationships with other people, and long-term health.

Besides personal-level influences, society and institutional processes determine the mental health situation in Pakistan. The problem of mental health stigma is still there, and most students are reluctant to disclose emotional issues because of the fear of being judged, religious interpretations, or cultural misunderstandings (Safdar and Khalid, 2020). Low government spending on mental health depending on a rough estimate of less than 1 percent of the national health budget has led to insufficient psychological services on and off campuses (WHO, 2021). Higher education system usually has no explicit policies regarding the wellbeing of their students, and the faculty staff is seldom trained to identify and address the mental distress of their students.

Nonetheless, these obstacles are being overcome by recent national and international efforts to demonstrate the increased attention to the significance of student mental health. Mental health awareness, peer-support networks, mindfulness training, and stress-management workshop programs have been already tested in several universities and have demonstrated beneficial outcomes in terms of anxiety and coping skills enhancement (Khalid et al., 2022). Online mental health interventions (tele-counseling and psychological assistance on a smartphone) are increasingly becoming popular, and they offer affordable options to students who are hesitant to find a face-to-face provider.

Altogether, the problem of academic stress and mental illness among Pakistani university students is complex due to the cultural and institutional pressures and prerequisites, socioeconomic inequalities, and lack of psychological support systems. Although academic success has been a primary goal by most Pakistani families, the psychological costs of the same cannot be overlooked. The necessity to make universities as a whole holistic and incorporating both academic and mental health frameworks is increasing, which guarantees a favorable environment in which students can develop in their academic and emotional respects. Mental wellbeing among the students can be greatly enhanced by enhancing counseling services, integrating stress-management programs in schools, faculty training, and reducing disparities based on gender or classes. Solving these problems is not just a way of ensuring academic achievement but also the way of producing graduates with a sound mind to play their part well in the society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic stress and mental health problems of university students have turned out to be a leading topic in the studies of higher education, particularly within the developing nations such as Pakistan whereby sociocultural pressures, financial constraints, and institutional constraints intersect to form the student experiences. This review of the literature integrates research results, concepts, and situational elements that cause stress in academics

and resulting psychological impacts of these effects among Pakistani university students. It discusses the stress prevalence, the significant stressors, gender variations, coping, institutional issues, and how academic stress correlates to mental health outcomes which include depression, anxiety, and burnout.

Academic Stress Prevalence and Mental Health Disorders

There is a consistent evidence showing high levels of academic stress in Pakistani university students to an alarming degree. Naz and Hashmi (2019) found that close to 60 percent of students report moderate to severe academic stress, and 45 percent have anxiety and depression symptoms. The same result was found by Rafiq et al. (2022), who indicated that academic pressure, exam load, and fear of failure was the most prevalent among undergraduate and graduate students. A study carried out in 11 prominent Pakistani universities revealed that over fifty percent of students had ended up with a psychological distress at least once per semester, which suggests that the mental health crisis in educational settings is rapidly escalating (Shah and Amjad, 2021).

The trend is backed by research in other countries, where the investigation of mental health issues among university students reveals an increase in mental health problems because of growing academic competition, social comparison, and low coping skills (Beiter et al., 2015). Nevertheless, these problems are usually more intense in low- and middle-income nations where academic and economic demands are combined (WHO, 2021). Therefore, Pakistani students feel the academic pressure both individually and institutionally.

Academic Stressors among Pakistani Universities

Student experiences are influenced by a large number of academic, social, and environmental stressors. Stressor that is mentioned as one of the most common is pressure to get high grades. Misbah et al. (2021) note that it is the continuous pressure students experience to achieve academic success because of the lack of employment opportunities and high competition to be among the scholarship and postgraduate recipients. Performance anxiety is caused by grading systems that tend to focus on high-stakes exams rather than continuous assessment (Rehman and Bilal, 2020).

Another very important factor is parental and family expectations. According to Safdar and Khalid (2020), in collectivist societies, including Pakistan, parental demands in terms of academic achievement are at the core of defining the goals of the students, which can be very psychologically pressurizing. Families perceive education as a tool of upward mobility which increases the amount of stress among low-income students who perceive it as a need to prove themselves.

Academic stress is also caused by institutional and pedagogical problems. The conventional pedagogical approach, high number of courses, compulsory attendance, and large classes cause an overwhelming environment (Aslam and Tariq, 2021). Poor instructors feedback, insufficient academic advising, and inflexible semester schedules only add to the stress levels (Khalid et al., 2022).

Students in both the public and the private universities are highly affected by financial stressors. Shabbir and Raza (2021) discovered that students who are under stress due to the issue of tuition fees, transport costs, and living costs have a worse stress level, which affects concentration and grades adversely. Poor students have to work half time and this makes them fatigued and they do not have time to study.

Also, there is psychological pressure on peer competition and social comparison. These sentiments have been worsened by social media, where students constantly compare academic performance and the lifestyles with the rest (Rahim and Abbas, 2021). This type of stressor based on comparison is becoming increasingly known to be a modern stressor.

Gender Academic Stress and Mental Health Differences

In Pakistan, gender is significant in the development of academic stress. The female students are usually more likely to report stress, anxiety and self doubts compared to their male counterparts (Aslam and Tariq, 2021). Other reasons are gender stereotypes, safety issues, mobility, and other household duties. In addition, pressure on female students who are expected to combine academic tasks with family may cause the onset of time stress and emotional burnout (Safdar and Khalid, 2020).

On the other hand, male students tend to feel stressed because of the perceptions of the society of having to be economically responsible and successful in future careers. It has been found that men tend to find psychological assistance less because of stigma and masculinity expectations, which result in the development of unmanaged mental health problems (Rafiq et al., 2022). Therefore, although both sexes are subjected to a lot of academic pressure, their experiences, trigger types, and coping mechanisms vary largely.

Stress in Academia, linking with Depression, Anxiety and Burnout

There is a high correlation between mental health outcome and academic stress. Naz and Hashmi (2019) conducted a study and found that academic stress is a significant predictor of depressive symptoms, lack of motivation, and irritability. In like manner, it was observed that students who are in chronic stress had more anxiety, and this affected their ability to focus and retain information (Misbah et al., 2021).

The emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and feeling of achievement lower than satisfactory is the common phenomenon known as burnout and is being

reported more often among Pakistani university students. Malik and Sarwar (2020) established that academic burnout is closely correlated with excessive study-related load, strict deadlines, and absence of institutional support. The effects of burnout are absenteeism, dropped grades, and thought of dropping out.

Physical effects of prolonged stress usually include sleep disturbances, fatigue, headaches, and poor immunity (Rafiq et al., 2022). These illnesses also worsen the academic performance of students, which leads to a narrowing of the vicious cycle of stress and deteriorating mental health.

Social Support System and Coping Mechanisms

Different students have different coping mechanisms which have a great impact on mental health outcomes. Lower stress levels and increased academic performance are linked to problem-focused coping strategies (e.g., time management, planning) and the increased levels of anxiety and depression with emotion-focused coping (e.g., avoidance, denial) (Rehman and Bilal, 2020).

Social support - family, peers and teachers- becomes one of the most important guardians. A study indicates that students who have high support networks are psychologically resilient and experience less stress (Shah and Amjad, 2021). Support systems however fail to be effective in Pakistan. The availability of university-level counseling is also limited, and more than three-quarters of higher education institutions do not have operational counseling centers (Rizvi, 2022). Mental health is also a cultural stigma that makes students unwilling to seek help.

Tele-counseling and peer support through social media are new forms of digital mental health interventions, which demonstrate potentials to enhance wellbeing (Khan, 2020). However, obstacles like access to the internet, privacy, and the untrained professionals still remain.

The environmental Institutional Policies and the necessity of the supportive environment

The psychological wellbeing of the students is greatly influenced by institutional structures. Bending academic rules, faculty training and the support systems of mental health make academic environments healthier. Nevertheless, the majority of Pakistani universities continue to follow conventional models according to which academic success is more important than student welfare (Malik and Sarwar, 2020).

In literature, it has been emphasized that student-friendly policies such as workload modification, flexible deadlines, mental health workshops, stress management training, and counseling centers creation are required (Khalid et al., 2022). Considering counsellors, faculty and administration as an integrated support system can be a greater contribution to the reduction of academic stress and formation of psychological resilience.

METHODOLOGY

The research design used in this study is a mixed-methods study to analyze the problem of academic stress and mental health problems among students in University of the Punjab (PU), Lahore. The mixed-methods approach involves a combination of the quantitative information about the prevalence of stress with the qualitative information, which explores the experiences students have to live, how they cope with it, and what institutional issues may impede it.

Research Design

The type of parallel mixed-methods design was convergent and parallel. The data were collected simultaneously as quantitative and qualitative data and analyzed independently and later combined in the interpretation process to help gain a comprehensive picture of academic stress and the resultant mental health.

Population and Sampling

The sample was comprised of undergraduate and postgraduate students at PU, Lahore. A stratified random sampling method was used so that there is representation in terms of faculties (Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, Management Sciences, and Humanities).

Quantitative sample: 200 students.

Qualitative sample: 20 students in-depth interviews.

Data collection instruments will be the following:

Quantitative:

Demographics Age, gender, level of study, socioeconomic status.

- **Academic Stress Scale (ASS):** It assesses stress associated with examination and assignment and performance pressure.
- **DASS-21**: Scales the symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress.
- **Brief COPE Inventory:** Coping strategies.

Qualitative:

Semi-structured interviews were aimed at:

Sources of academic stress

- Anxiety, depression, and burnout, personal experiences.
- Coping strategies
- Perceived institutional support
- The interviews took 30-45 minutes.
- Data Collection Procedure

Students of PU were provided with questionnaires both physically and electronically. The interviews were done in silent areas in campus with previous consent.

DATA ANALYSIS

- Quantitative: SPSS with descriptive statistics, correlations, t -tests, ANOVA and regression.
- Qualitative: Thematic analysis according to 6 steps of Braun and Clarke.
- Ethical Considerations
- Ethical consent of PU ethics committee.
- Informed consent is voluntary.
- Strict anonymity and confidentiality.

- Students who showed distress at campus were taken to the counseling services.

Data Analysis and Findings

This section provides the quantitative results and qualitative results of the academic stress and mental health outcomes among the university students of the University of the Punjab, Lahore. The discussion is done on prevalence, sources, severity of stress, depression, anxiety, burnout, coping strategies and demographic factors.

Demographic Reports of respondents

Two hundred students were involved in the quantitative survey. The most important demographic features are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=200)

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	90	45
Female	110	55
Age		
18–20	60	30
21–23	100	50
24–26	40	20
Academic Level		
Undergraduate	130	65
Postgraduate	70	35
Faculty		
Social Sciences	60	30
Natural Sciences	50	25
Management Sciences	50	25
Humanities	40	20
Socioeconomic Status		
Low	60	30
Middle	110	55
High	30	15

Observation:

Female students slightly outnumbered males. Most participants were aged 21–23 and from middle-class backgrounds. Undergraduate students comprised the majority of the sample.

Table 2: Academic Stress Levels (N=200)

Stress Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Low	40	20
Moderate	110	55
High	50	25

Most students (55%), said that they had moderate levels of stress and a quarter of the students had high academic stress. Increased stress levels were prevalent in final-year undergraduates and students in the faculties of Social Sciences.

Prevalence of Academic Stress

The Academic Stress Scale (ASS) was used to measure stress levels. Stress was categorized as low, moderate, and high based on scores.

Sources of Academic Stress

There were several sources of stress that were identified by the students. The percentages represent the rate of the respondents reporting each stressor.

Table 3: Major Academic Stressors (N=200)

Stressor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Exam pressure	160	80
Heavy assignments/workload	140	70
Fear of failure	130	65
Time management issues	120	60
Family expectations	110	55
Financial difficulties	90	45
Peer competition	80	40

The most critical stressors include examination pressure and heavy workload and the next factor is fear of failure and time management issues. Among female students family expectations played a special role.

Mental Health Outcomes: Depression, Anxiety, and Stress (DASS-21)

The severity of the depression, anxiety, and stress was measured by DASS-21 results. The scores were placed as normal, mild, moderate, severe and extremely severe.

Table 4: Mental Health Levels (N=200)

Outcome	Normal	Mild	Moderate	Severe	Extremely Severe
Depression	60 (30%)	40 (20%)	60 (30%)	30 (15%)	10 (5%)
Anxiety	50 (25%)	50 (25%)	70 (35%)	20 (10%)	10 (5%)
Stress	40 (20%)	50 (25%)	70 (35%)	30 (15%)	10 (5%)

The levels of depression, anxiety, and stress were moderate the most. At 10-15% of students, severe and extremely severe mental health symptoms were noted, which indicates that there is a vulnerable subgroup that must be interfered with.

Gender Disparities between Academic Stress and Mental Well-being.
To investigate the gender difference, independent t-tests were used.

Table 5: Gender Differences in Mean Scores

Variable	Male Mean (SD)	Female Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value
Academic Stress	28.5 (6.2)	31.8 (5.9)	3.45	0.001*
Depression	14.2 (5.1)	16.8 (5.3)	2.87	0.005*
Anxiety	13.5 (4.8)	16.1 (5.0)	3.12	0.002*
Stress	15.1 (4.9)	17.5 (5.2)	2.96	0.004*

*Significant at $p < 0.05$

Female students reported significantly higher academic stress, depression, anxiety, and stress compared to male students, consistent with prior research on gendered academic pressures.

Coping Mechanisms (Brief COPE Inventory)
Students reported using both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies.

Table 6: Common Coping Strategies (N=200)

Coping Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Time management/planning	140	70
Seeking social support	120	60
Exercise/physical activity	100	50
Avoidance/denial	80	40
Meditation/prayer	90	45
Substance use (rare)	20	10

Maladaptive strategies were not prevalent as problem-focused strategies such as planning and social support. There was also a significant role of exercise and religious coping. Numbers of harmful coping behaviors among students were very few.

Academic Stress and Mental Health Correlation
Pearson correlation analysis demonstrated that there is a significant positive correlation between mental health symptom and academic stress:

Table 7: Correlation Matrix

Variable	Depression	Anxiety	Stress
Academic Stress	0.62**	0.58**	0.61**

Note: **$p < 0.01$

Academic stress is significantly associated with depression, anxiety, and level of stress, which proves that academic pressures have a harmful impact on mental health.

Qualitative Findings
Thematic analysis of 20 interviews has revealed 4 significant themes:

Academic Stress and Academic Performance Anxiety
The stress associated with exams, high fatigue, and fear of failure were often mentioned among the main stresses that students experience.

I feel that I can never be up to the expectations of my professors; I feel that exams are a big test of my value. - Female student

The Family Pressure and Expectations
The pressure to achieve the aspirations of a family and social pressure added to the anxiety especially among the female students.

"My parents expect top grades. In case of failure, I believe I have let them down. - Male student

Coping and Support Systems
Stress was reduced with the help of time management, peer support, exercise, and religious activities. Nonetheless, not many students availed formal counseling.

I discuss with my friends or pray; I do not feel like attending the counseling center.

Institutional Challenges
Students complained of huge classroom sizes, poor access to faculty and unorganized mental health services.

There is no good counseling in the university and teachers do not really observe when a student is under stress.

Summary of Key Findings
- Most students (55) had moderate academic stress; 25 had high stress.

- The most frequent stressors were exams, workload and fear of failure.
- Depression, anxiety and stress levels were moderate; 10-15 percent of students had severe cases of depression, anxiety and stress.
- The female students expressed their high stress and mental problems significantly compared to males.
- Maladaptive strategies were not frequently used, problem-focused coping and social support were common.
- Depression, anxiety and stress were significantly linked to academic stress (r= 0.58-0.62, p < 0.01).
- There was a lack of institutional assistance, and it should be emphasized that counseling services and mental health programs should be provided.

CONCLUSION

The research paper has found out that academic stress is a serious and widespread problem among university students in the University of the Punjab, Lahore. Most of the students report medium and high degrees of academic stress that are mainly motivated by exams, heavy workload, and fear of failure. Academic strains are strongly associated with mental outcomes such as depression, anxiety and stress and females have been significantly vulnerable in this category of mental health outcomes. Although students use problem-oriented and social coping mechanisms, lack of strong institutional support increases psychological distress.

The qualitative data highlights the fact that family demands, peer comparison, and institutional pressures are the reasons that have led to the high levels of stress experienced by students. The inability to obtain counseling services due to limited access and the absence of organized mental health programs leave a huge number of students without the professional support. On the whole, the study indicates that academic stress is not a one-sided issue, but a systematic challenge, which should be addressed by complex institutional and policy-level measures. In the absence of preemptive efforts, excessive academic stress levels may have an adverse impact on students in terms of academic performance, personal wellbeing, and mental health in the long term.

RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the research results, it is possible to recommend the following:

1. Establish properly manned counseling facilities in campus with qualified psychologists.
2. Offer confidential and convenient services to stressed, anxious and depressed students.
3. Implement peer counseling and mentoring programs in the supplement of the professional services.
4. Provide time management workshops and courses along with mindfulness and emotional regulation courses.
5. Incorporate coping strategy modules in the orientation programs of new students.
6. Minimize high stakes examinations through incorporation of the continuous assessment techniques.
7. Offer flexible academic deadlines and academic accommodations to mentally challenged students.
8. Carry out awareness campaigns to families to enable them to ease unnecessary pressure on students.
9. Promote the positive peer support networks enabling the students to cope with academic and social stressors.
10. Deal with the special issues of female students, such as safety, workload-family balance and expectations.

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