



The Influence of Academic Pressures on students' mental well-being; A case study of Ghana Christian University College

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Abstract

The relationship between academic pressures and students' mental well-being is crucial for educators, parents, and policymakers on several levels. By creating a nurturing and supportive academic environment, stakeholders could help mitigate the adverse effects of academic stress on students' mental health. It is essential to remember that while academic success is important, it should not come at the cost of a student's mental well-being. This study therefore sought to investigate the influence of academic pressures on students' mental well-being at Ghana Christian University College. The study found that although most learners understood the need for counselling, only a few sought it out or participated in it. The study therefore recommended that a counselling clinic should be established and that mental health awareness efforts should be intensified by school authorities.

Keywords: Higher Education Institutions, Ghana Christian University College and Academic Environment.

Introduction

Academic pressures have become a significant concern in higher educational institutions globally (Ross, Scanes & Locke, 2023), including Ghana Christian University College. The relentless pursuit of academic excellence can lead to immense stress, negatively impacting students' mental well-being (Claney, 2023). The academic environment has always been a source of pressure for students. This pressure, which often stems from the need to excel academically, has been established by various researchers to have a significant impact on a student's mental well-being (Jiang, Gao, Wu, & Guo, 2022). The rising stakes in education coupled with the constant need to outperform not only oneself but also peers, adds multiple layers of stress and anxiety among students (Terada, 2022). Therefore, the need to explore the extent to which academic pressures are influencing students' mental well-being in Ghana Christian University College cannot be overemphasized.

Statement of the Problem

Most experts agree that the mental health of tertiary students is of paramount importance since this has a direct correlation to the kind of future workers in the job market (Halat, Soltani, Dalli, Alsarraj & Malki, 2023). A study into the impact of academic pressure as a psychological construct on learners' mental health is important to unearth the challenges students are facing and recommend needed interventions (Olivera, Gasser, Nareanjo, et. al., 2023). The independent variable in this study is academic pressures while the dependent variable is the state of mental health of learners in Ghana Christian University College. The hypothesis that premised this study is that the high levels of academic pressures experienced by students at Ghana Christian University College, coupled with the lack of effective stress management strategies and mental health support services, pose a significant threat to the mental well-being of these students, potentially leading to increased stress, anxiety, and depression. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the influence of academic pressures on the mental well-being of students at Ghana Christian University College, to identify effective strategies for mitigating the negative impacts of academic pressures and promoting a healthier academic environment.

The ideal school environment is one where learning experiences are not necessarily a source of pressure but a place where the cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains of learning are impacted and imbibed by both facilitators and learners respectively (Hoque, 2017). An experiential analysis of Ghana Christian University College indicates that most learners are under one pressure or the other, most of which can be attributed to either learning experiences or financial obligations related to learning. The lack of significant mental health support for learners compounds the issue, putting learners at significant risk of increased stress, anxiety, and possible depression in certain instances (Mofatteh, 2021). This paper therefore seeks to explore the extent to which academic pressures are impacting students' mental well-being as well as seek to unearth remedies to the situation.

Research Question

The main research question was how does academic pressure influence student's mental well-being. The sub-questions that guided the study are:

1. What are the primary sources of academic stress for students at Ghana Christian University College?
2. How do academic pressures impact the mental well-being (e.g., depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation) of students at Ghana Christian University College?
3. What coping strategies do students at Ghana Christian University College employ to manage academic stress, and how effective are these strategies?

Literature Review

Academic pressures refer to the various stressors that students encounter in their educational journey. These pressures can stem from several sources such as examinations and assignment deadlines, with students feeling the need to perform well and meet strict timelines. A study by Islam and Rabbi (2024) which sought to explore the sources of academic stress and adopted coping mechanisms among university students confirms the assertion that overloads of assignments, standards established by peers, lack of library resources, health

issues during class tests and difficulties associated with virtual (online) classes were found to be the major sources of academic pressures. The study therefore recommended planning and prioritising study breaks, deep breathing, counselling, healthy lifestyle choices and time management as useful remedies. Although the above study was apt in unearthing the role that academic pressure plays when it comes to students' academic work, it failed to focus more on the mental well-being of students, a gap that this current academic exercise seeks to bridge.

Similarly, academic pressures are believed to stem from presentations and peer competition can add to this pressure, as students may feel the need to outperform their classmates and excel in all areas. High expectations from oneself, parents, and educators can also create pressure, with students feeling the need to live up to these expectations. Similarly, some students also experience pressure to conform to societal norms and expectations regarding academic success. The advent of technology and social media has further intensified these pressures, as students now also feel the need to maintain a positive online image while simultaneously achieving academic success. A study conducted by Jiang, Gao, Wu & Guo (2022) contends that academic pressure positively affects adolescents' deviant behaviour. The study also established that parent-child conflict and self-control play a direct mediating role between academic pressure and adolescents' behavioural problems. This study however recommended a harmonious school and family atmosphere.

These various pressures discussed above have a significant impact on the mental well-being of students, leading to stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns. It is therefore vital to address these pressures and ensure students receive the necessary support and guidance to navigate through their academic journey (Mofatteh, 2021). These remedies could involve counselling services, stress management workshops, supportive policies at the institutional level, and open dialogue with parents and teachers. Given the profound impact of these pressures, it is crucial to explore effective strategies to alleviate them (Agyapong, Brett-Maclean, Burbach & Agyapong, 2023). Both individual and systemic approaches can be instrumental in mitigating the effects of academic stress.

For students, developing good study habits, maintaining a balanced lifestyle incorporating physical activity and relaxation techniques, seeking peer support, and not hesitating to seek professional mental health support when needed can all contribute to managing academic pressures (Chacon-Cuberos, Zurita-Ortega, Olmedo-Moreno & Castro-Sanchez, 2019). Mindfulness and stress management techniques can also help students stay focused and calm, reducing the negative impact of stress on their academic performance and mental health. Educators also have a critical role to play as well. They can foster a supportive and non-competitive academic environment, provide positive feedback, and encourage a growth mindset (Indriaswuri, Gading, Suranata & Suarni, 2023). They can also be trained to identify early signs of stress and provide or refer for appropriate support.

Importantly, shifting the focus from purely academic achievements to overall personal development and life skills can help reduce the emphasis on grades and performance, thereby reducing academic pressures. Parents can contribute by creating a supportive home environment, encouraging open communication, and promoting a balanced perspective on success (Abdullah, Shah & Idaris, 2020). They should be cautious about setting unrealistic expectations and instead encourage effort and learning rather than just the outcome.

Finally, educational institutions can implement policies to reduce academic pressures. This could include reviewing the workload and deadlines, providing mental health support, promoting a healthy work-life balance, and fostering a school culture that values diversity and individual strengths over competitiveness (Halat, Soltani, Dalli, Alsarraj & Malki, 2023). While academic pressures are a part of the education system, they should not be allowed to overshadow the ultimate goal of education - learning, growth, and development (Vallejo, 2023). By recognising and addressing these pressures, we can create a more balanced, healthy, and productive academic environment for all students.

Methodology

This study was guided by the interpretivism paradigm and hence the single case study approach was utilised. The total population of students at the main campus of Ghana Christian University College as at the time the study was conducted was 757. These students belong to a total of four schools with the School of Theology and Ministry being the prime school. As the primal school in the University College, the researcher selected the school of Theology and ministry on grounds that it was the school from which all other schools emerged historically. This paper therefore narrowed its selection to students in the School of Theology and Ministry which had a total of 66 students for the 2023/2024 academic year. All 16 students in level 400 were purposively selected to participate in the study. Final year students in Level 400 were selected because they were the most likely to face academic pressures since their academic journey was coming to an end and hence their deadlines were fast approaching. The selection of level 400 final-year students for this paper is strongly supported by a study conducted by Brobbey (2021) who studied the impact of stress on the academic performance of students in the University of Cape Coast, School of Business. Similarly, the total number of level 400 students was used as the total sample size, hence census sampling was utilised. The selection of participants in the study were selected via convenience.

The instrument of interview guide employed for this study was adapted from Brobbey (2021) who carried out a similar study in the University of Cape Coast. The instrument was pre-tested with level 300 students in the School of Theology and Ministry in Ghana Christian University College. The target group for pretesting was informed by the researcher's observation that students in level 300 were also prone to experience academic pressures since they were preparing to graduate the following year. The study adhered to strictly to the principles of trustworthiness throughout the study and employed data source triangulation as a compensation measure for the weaknesses that may arise from the use of trustworthiness (Stahl & King, 2020). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. During the transcription stage, evolving themes were noted and coded. Data that was collected was therefore analysed thematically and sequentially. It is also worth noting that the responses from participants of the study reached saturation at an early stage, hence the quoted responses were limited to the initial respondents during the presentation of findings (Mwita, 2022). During this study, the ethical consideration of obtaining informed consent from participants (orally), ensuring confidentiality and anonymity by using codenames during the presentation of findings, avoiding harm and deception, respecting autonomy, and maintaining fairness in participant selection were strictly adhered to.

Results and Discussions

The results of the study revealed that most students reported experiencing high levels of academic stress. This academic pressure is primarily attributed to work overload and meeting deadlines for various submissions. This finding confirms the findings of a similar study conducted by Mofatteh (2021). Participant One for instance hinted that:

Yes, I feel that there is pressure on me to graduate with my colleagues this year, and it is as if there is not enough time to do all the assignments and my capstone. There is so much to do in little time. The four years have come so fast (IDI-L1).

It is interesting to note that none of the participants considered the need to outperform other colleagues as a source of pressure which is commendable. The fact that no participant from the School of Theology and Ministry (STM) considered the need to outperform other students is a demonstration of solid Christian principles which the school intends to impact into the learners. When participants were asked if they thought the noticeable academic pressure was influencing their mental health in any way, almost all the participants responded in the affirmative. Their opinions were echoed by Participant 2 who indicated that:

Hmmm, as for our mental health is under serious threat. The pressure we are feeling from our academic work is making us anxious because we are afraid that we will be laughed at or considered failures if we do not graduate on time (IDI-L2).

This study confirms that anxiety had a leading impact on students' mental health due to academic pressure. This finding confirms that of Deng, Cherian, Khan, et. al, (2022) who studied family and academic stress and their impact on students' depression levels and academic performance. Fortunately, depression and suicidal tendencies were not mentioned as the resulting consequence of academic pressures. Participants of the study were again asked to express their knowledge about mental well-being and how academic pressure was influencing that part of their lives. Most of the participants made references to the courses they took in Introduction to psychology and other psychology related courses as their predominant source of information regarding their mental wellbeing. According to Participant One:

Yes, I know a lot about mental health and the need for my mental well-being from my class in psychology. I am aware that these things can affect my mental health and I always pray that God gives me the strength to persevere (IDI-L1).

The fact that most of the participants of the study had an appreciable knowledge about their mental health was commendable. Although most participants demonstrated a significant understanding of mental health and the need to see a counsellor, very few admitted that they had once seen a counsellor. Some participants even acted surprised when I told them there were licensed counsellors on campus they could visit for help. According to Participant Four, whose opinion was slightly echoed by all respondents:

I never knew that we had counsellors on campus. I always thought we had to go out there to see counsellors. I know counselling helps but I have never visited a licensed counsellor before. I talk to my senior pastors' but I have never been to a licensed counsellor (IDI-L4).

Participants of the study were then asked to suggest remedies for the impact that academic pressure was having on their mental wellbeing. Participant Six for instance hinted that:

We all know about the academic pressures that final year students are going through, and I am sure everyone will agree that something must be done about it. The first thing is that we need to be more prayerful and trust in the word of God. We also need counselling as students, so the school must provide a counselling centre for us (IDI-L6).

The study thus identified that students who used spiritual and ritual-centred coping strategies were less likely to experience suicidal ideation. Similarly, it came to bear that some participants saw the need for counselling as a sure way of coping with the impact that academic pressure is having on their mental well-being.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study highlight the significant impact of academic pressures on students' mental well-being at Ghana Christian University College. The results suggest that academic stress is a major contributor to anxiety and depression among students. The study also underscores the importance of spiritual and ritual-centred coping strategies in mitigating the negative effects of academic stress. This study however points to the need to intensify mental health education. This would aid in ensuring that students not only cognitively recognise the need to see a counsellor but also use the counselling sessions. Similarly, this study points to the urgent need to establish a counselling unit in the university to take care of the growing mental health needs of learners, especially, those in the final year.

Conclusion

Understanding the relationship between academic pressures and students' mental well-being is crucial for educators, parents, and policymakers. By creating a nurturing and supportive academic environment, stakeholders could help mitigate the adverse effects of academic stress on students' mental health. It is essential to remember that while academic success is important, it should not come at the cost of a student's mental well-being. The findings therefore suggests that academic pressures could have severe consequences on students' mental health and that spiritual and ritual-centred coping strategies could be effective in mitigating these negative effects. The study recommends that institutions implement mental health support services and provide students with resources to manage academic stress effectively.

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