

Exploring the Impacts of Work-related Stress on Master's Project and Completion Rates among Post Graduate Working Learners

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.8120335>

Received: 18 December 2024; Accepted: 25 December 2024; Published: 22 January 2025

ABSTRACT

The dual demands of professional and academic responsibilities often create stress that hinders progress on master's projects, leading to delays, reduced motivation, and other challenges. This research examines the challenges faced by postgraduate working learners in managing work-related stress while completing their master's project; and aims to identify effective strategies and institutional support mechanisms that enhance stress management and improve project completion success rates. A qualitative approach was employed, involving in-depth interviews with 16 postgraduate learners conducted via Google Forms to capture detailed insights into their experiences and coping mechanisms. Participants identified key stressors such as time management difficulties, professional responsibilities interfering with project tasks, and the mental and physical strain caused by overlapping commitments. These factors were found to disrupt project focus and hinder progress. Despite these challenges, respondents displayed resilience by implementing strategies such as task prioritisation, collaboration with colleagues and supervisors, and seeking support from their institutions. Many noted that institutional interventions, such as tailored workshops, flexible policies, and enhanced supervisor guidance, were instrumental in alleviating stress and sustaining their progress. The findings underscore the importance of creating structured and empathetic support systems for postgraduate working learners, highlighting the need for institutions to address their unique challenges. This research contributes valuable insights into the experiences of postgraduate working learners, offering practical recommendations for educators and policymakers. By addressing these factors, institutions can improve the learning environment, enhance the success rates of master's project completion, and support the overall well-being of working postgraduate learners. This study also opens avenues for future research to explore interventions across diverse academic settings.

Keywords: work-related stress, postgraduate working learners, master's project completion, time management strategies, institutional support, academic resilience

INTRODUCTION

Work-related stress is a significant issue for postgraduate students, particularly those in the Faculty of Technology and Applied Sciences (FTAS), who balance academic commitments with professional responsibilities. The demanding nature of their programs, coupled with the challenges of managing work and study simultaneously, places these learners in a uniquely stressful position. Stressors such as excessive workloads, insufficient time management, and inadequate institutional support create a challenging environment, often leading to mental health issues like anxiety and burnout, which impede academic performance and delay project completion (Deng et al., 2022; Komlenac et al., 2022). FTAS postgraduate students face unique stressors due to the technical and applied nature of their disciplines. The integration of hands-on projects, laboratory work, and theoretical studies demands significant time and focus, creating conflicts with professional obligations. Domaley et al. (2023) identified academic stress and a lack of adequate resources as critical barriers to timely thesis completion. Moreover, the demands of technical disciplines often

exacerbate work-related stress, as students must juggle the complexities of applied science projects with their professional roles, creating a compounded strain that hinders their ability to meet deadlines effectively (Darling & Whitty, 2019). Hence, work-related stress affects academic performance and delays project completion for FTAS postgraduate learners, highlighting the need for tailored institutional support to reduce stress and improve outcomes.

Institutional support plays a vital role in mitigating these challenges. Maharani et al. (2020) emphasized that flexible working arrangements, structured academic programs, and stress-alleviation tools can significantly improve both mental health and academic outcomes. Supervisory support, including clear guidance and regular feedback, has also been identified as a critical factor in reducing stress and enhancing project completion rates (Kabito et al., 2020). Jin et al. (2023) highlighted that targeted interventions, such as mindfulness programs and peer support networks, are particularly effective in addressing the unique needs of learners in technical and applied sciences. Despite advancements in understanding the effects of work-related stress, there remains a gap in addressing the specific stressors encountered by FTAS postgraduate learners. The technical demands of their programs, combined with the pressures of professional commitments, require tailored strategies to ensure their academic and personal well-being. Existing frameworks often overlook the unique challenges of these learners, emphasizing the need for targeted research and interventions. This paper examines the multifaceted relationship between work-related stress and the successful completion of master's projects among FTAS postgraduate learners. It specifically focuses on how work-related stress impacts their ability to complete their projects and achieve academic goals. By aligning with the objectives of exploring challenges and identifying effective strategies, the study evaluates key stressors faced by postgraduate working learners and assesses their effects on project completion rates. Furthermore, it proposes actionable strategies and institutional support mechanisms to enhance stress management, thereby improving the success rates and overall well-being of this unique group of learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the complexities of work-related stress requires exploring its key sources, how it affects academic performance, and the strategies employed to manage it effectively. FTAS postgraduate learners face unique stressors due to the technical and applied nature of their programs, which demands further investigation. This literature review examines the sources and impact of work-related stress, highlights strategies for mitigating these challenges, and addresses specific gaps in the literature. Additionally, it presents a theoretical and conceptual framework to contextualise the relationship between work-related stress and academic outcomes.

Sources of Work-Related Stress

The sources of work-related stress for FTAS postgraduate learners are multifaceted. Excessive workloads, role conflicts, and inadequate time management are among the most common stressors faced by these learners (Deng et al., 2022; Domaley et al., 2023). For example, postgraduate learners must juggle strict academic timelines while meeting professional obligations, resulting in chronic stress and reduced productivity. A study by Eni (2023) revealed that work stressors, such as insufficient support, unclear expectations, and heavy workloads, disproportionately affect academic performance, particularly among senior faculty and postgraduate learners. Similarly, Matlakala (2024) highlighted that work-related stress is intensified by role ambiguity and the increasing demands of professional tasks, which affect learners' ability to focus on academic projects. Technical disciplines, such as those in FTAS, place additional strain on learners. Darling and Whitty (2019) emphasize that project-based work introduces specific stressors, including unclear project requirements and tight deadlines, which exacerbate role conflicts. Students working on applied sciences projects often face resource limitations, further hindering their progress. Odogun and Abanobi (2023) found that inadequate institutional support, such as lack of training and outdated technological tools, contributes to elevated stress levels, especially in academic environments that demand high performance. Therefore, FTAS postgraduate learners face significant work-related stress from heavy workloads, role conflicts, and insufficient support.

Technical disciplines add to these challenges with unclear project requirements, tight deadlines, and limited resources, keeping stress levels high and impacting academic and professional performance.

Impact of Work-Related Stress on Academic Performance

The consequences of work-related stress extend beyond emotional and psychological well-being, directly impacting academic performance. Stress impairs cognitive functioning, diminishes focus, and delays the completion of critical tasks such as theses and research projects (Komlenac et al., 2022). Domaley et al. (2023) emphasized that unclear academic guidance, coupled with administrative bureaucracies, amplifies stress and increases the likelihood of burnout among postgraduate learners. Pascoe et al. (2020) further noted that stress diminishes learning capacity, motivation, and overall academic achievement, leading to delayed project milestones and higher attrition rates in postgraduate programs. The relationship between work-related stress and academic performance is compounded by time constraints. Students in FTAS programs, where technical competencies require extended hands-on work, face additional challenges when balancing academic and professional workloads. Research by Byrom et al. (2020) found that postgraduate students who experience persistent stress exhibit decreased mental well-being, which in turn reduces their ability to perform effectively in both domains. The cumulative effects of stress manifest in prolonged project timelines, incomplete work, and, in severe cases, academic disengagement.

Strategies for Stress Management

Various strategies have been proposed to mitigate the adverse effects of work-related stress among postgraduate learners. Supervisory support, characterized by clear communication, consistent feedback, and resource availability, plays a pivotal role in alleviating stress and improving project outcomes (Kabito et al., 2020). Maharani et al. (2020) argued that flexible working arrangements and institutional interventions, such as stress management workshops and time management training, enhance students' ability to balance their academic and professional obligations. Mindfulness programs, peer support networks, and individualized stress-alleviation tools are particularly effective for improving resilience and well-being among postgraduate learners (Jin et al., 2023). Additionally, Gallea, Medrano, and Morera (2021) suggested that promoting mental health awareness within academic institutions can help learners adopt coping mechanisms that reduce burnout and improve overall performance. Institutions offering robust support systems, including access to counseling services, academic mentors, and technological resources, are more successful in helping students manage the challenges of technical programs effectively (Odogun & Abanobi, 2023). These approaches represent key strategies for effective stress management.

Unique Challenges for FTAS Students

FTAS postgraduate learners face distinct stressors that set them apart from learners in other disciplines. Technical and applied sciences projects require prolonged focus, precision, and hands-on work, all of which are often incompatible with professional obligations. Darling and Whitty (2019) highlighted that project-based work carries higher stakes, as outcomes are tied not only to academic success but also to professional competency. Furthermore, FTAS learners may experience stress stemming from workplace pressures, such as high performance expectations, limited support, and role ambiguity (Matlakala, 2024). The inability to balance these competing demands has broader implications for students' mental health and overall well-being. Lopez-Trujillo et al. (2023) emphasized that quality-of-life factors, such as social support, health, and workload management, are crucial for mitigating stress in postgraduate technical programs. Without sufficient institutional and supervisory support, students are more likely to experience academic delays and reduced motivation, which ultimately jeopardizes their ability to complete master's projects successfully.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite a growing body of research on work-related stress, significant gaps remain in understanding its unique impacts on FTAS postgraduate learners. Existing studies often generalize findings across diverse student

populations, neglecting the specific stressors associated with technical and applied sciences disciplines. Additionally, while interventions such as counseling and flexible work arrangements have shown promise, their effectiveness in addressing the specific challenges of FTAS learners, particularly regarding master's project completion, remains underexplored. Addressing these gaps requires targeted research that focuses on actionable strategies to improve stress management, enhance resilience, and support project completion. This review of the literature underscores the critical need for tailored interventions that address the specific stressors faced by FTAS postgraduate learners. By synthesizing existing findings, this study contributes to the understanding of how work-related stress impacts academic performance and project completion rates among this unique group of learners. The findings highlight the importance of institutional support systems, supervisory guidance, and targeted stress management strategies to ensure academic success and well-being for postgraduate students in technical and applied sciences.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework provides a comprehensive view of how work-related stress impacts postgraduate learners and highlights the importance of coping strategies, institutional support, and resilience in overcoming these challenges. By addressing these areas, institutions can foster environments that better support learners, leading to improved academic success and mental well-being.

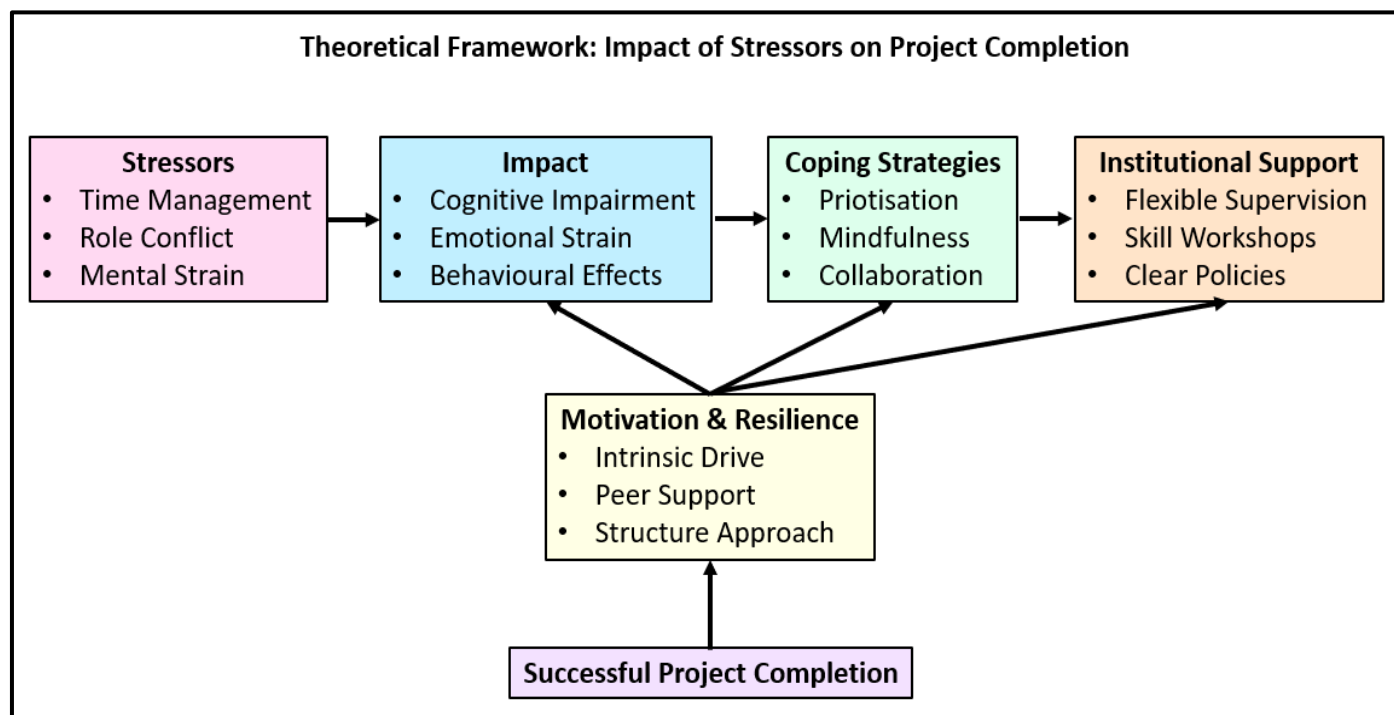


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework: Impact of Stressors on Project Completion.

(Adapted from Domaley et al., 2023; Xu & Wang, 2023; Deng et al., 2022; Komlenac et al., 2022; Sanchez-Trujillo et al., 2022; Gallea et al., 2021; Liaquat, 2021; Pascoe et al., 2020; Darling & Whitty, 2019).

The theoretical framework in Figure 1, identifies key components influencing work-related stress and its impact on postgraduate learners' master's project completion. Stressors, as external challenges, form the primary contributors to work-related stress. These stressors include time management challenges, where learners struggle to balance professional, academic, and personal responsibilities due to competing deadlines, long work hours, and job-related travel (Deng et al., 2022). Additionally, role conflict and overload arise when individuals attempt to meet academic expectations while fulfilling professional and familial duties, leading to emotional exhaustion (Darling & Whitty, 2019). Lastly, mental and physical strain stemming from prolonged stress can result in burnout, reducing cognitive performance, engagement, and overall project progression (Gallea et al., 2021).

The impact of these stressors manifests in three (3) critical areas: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains. Stress can impair cognitive processes such as concentration, problem-solving, and critical thinking, hindering the ability to manage complex academic tasks effectively (Komlenac et al., 2022). Emotionally, stress contributes to anxiety, depression, and burnout, which erodes learners' motivation and well-being (Pascoe et al., 2020). Behaviorally, stress-induced procrastination and avoidance behaviors result in missed deadlines and rushed, low-quality work, further compounding anxiety (Xu & Wang, 2023).

To mitigate these challenges, learners employ coping strategies such as task prioritization and time management, which help individuals focus on critical tasks while delegating less urgent responsibilities (Menardo et al., 2022). Additionally, mindfulness and self-care practices which include relaxation techniques, exercise, and mental clarity exercises are essential for managing emotional strain and maintaining focus (Jin et al., 2023). Learners also rely on collaboration and social support by seeking guidance and encouragement from peers, mentors, and colleagues, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and reducing feelings of isolation (Sanchez-Trujillo et al., 2022).

Institutions play a vital role in providing support mechanisms to alleviate stress. These include flexible supervisory approaches that accommodate learners' professional commitments by offering tailored guidance and adaptable project timelines (Liaquat, 2021). Additionally, institutions can provide workshops and skill-building resources on time management, research structuring, and academic writing to equip learners with essential tools for success (Domaley et al., 2023). Clear communication and transparent policies are also critical, as consistent guidelines and predictable timelines minimize disruptions and stress during key project phases (Liaquat, 2021). Finally, fostering peer support networks and mentorship programs encourages knowledge-sharing and emotional support, which significantly reduces isolation and stress among postgraduate learners (Sanchez-Trujillo et al., 2022).

Mediating these relationships is the role of motivation and resilience, which empower learners to navigate stress and stay committed to their goals. Intrinsic motivation, driven by a focus on long-term achievements such as career advancement, provides the energy to overcome challenges and persist through exhaustion (Albort-Morant et al., 2020). Learners also draw strength from peer support and inspiration, as hearing success stories from others reinforces their resolve and commitment to the academic journey (Sanchez-Trujillo et al., 2022). Finally, a structured approach to project work, characterized by clear guidelines, phases, and consistent feedback, enables learners to manage workloads effectively and build resilience through setbacks (Xu & Wang, 2023).

Together, the interplay between stressors, coping strategies, institutional support, and the mediating role of motivation and resilience determines the likelihood of successful master's project completion. This expanded framework provides a holistic understanding of how postgraduate learners can overcome stress-related challenges through effective support and self-management mechanisms.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in Figure 2 outlines four (4) study variables: challenges, coping strategies, institutional support, and motivation and resilience. It provides a structured approach to examining how work-related stress influences the completion of a master's project among postgraduate working learners.

1. Work-Related Stressors encompass challenges such as time management, role conflict, and mental strain. Time management challenges arise when learners struggle to balance professional, familial, and academic responsibilities, often resulting in stress and delays. Role conflict occurs when work and study demands overlap, leading to emotional exhaustion and burnout. Mental and physical strain, caused by prolonged stress, impairs cognitive performance, focus, and overall engagement with academic tasks, hindering progress in their projects.
2. Coping Strategies describe the individual approaches learners use to manage and alleviate stress. These include task prioritisation, where learners focus on urgent academic responsibilities while delegating

less critical tasks; mindfulness practices, which reduce emotional exhaustion and maintain mental clarity; and collaboration, through which learners seek guidance and emotional support from peers, mentors, or colleagues. These strategies enable learners to mitigate the effects of stress and sustain their focus on academic goals.

3. Institutional Support Mechanisms are essential for fostering an environment conducive to academic success. Flexible supervisory practices that align with professional schedules help learners balance work and study commitments. Workshops and training programs provide skills such as time management, academic writing, and research organisation, equipping learners to manage their projects effectively. Transparent communication and clear institutional policies reduce uncertainties, easing stress. Platforms for peer support, such as mentorship programs and collaborative networks, promote shared problem-solving and build camaraderie, further empowering learners to manage stress.
4. Motivation and Resilience. These factors bridge the impact of stressors and coping strategies on academic progress. Intrinsic motivation, driven by personal aspirations like career advancement or educational goals, encourages learners to persist despite challenges. Peer support and shared inspiration provide emotional reinforcement and practical strategies for overcoming obstacles. Structured approaches, including clear guidelines, timelines, and supervisory feedback, help learners break large tasks into manageable steps, reducing stress and improving productivity.

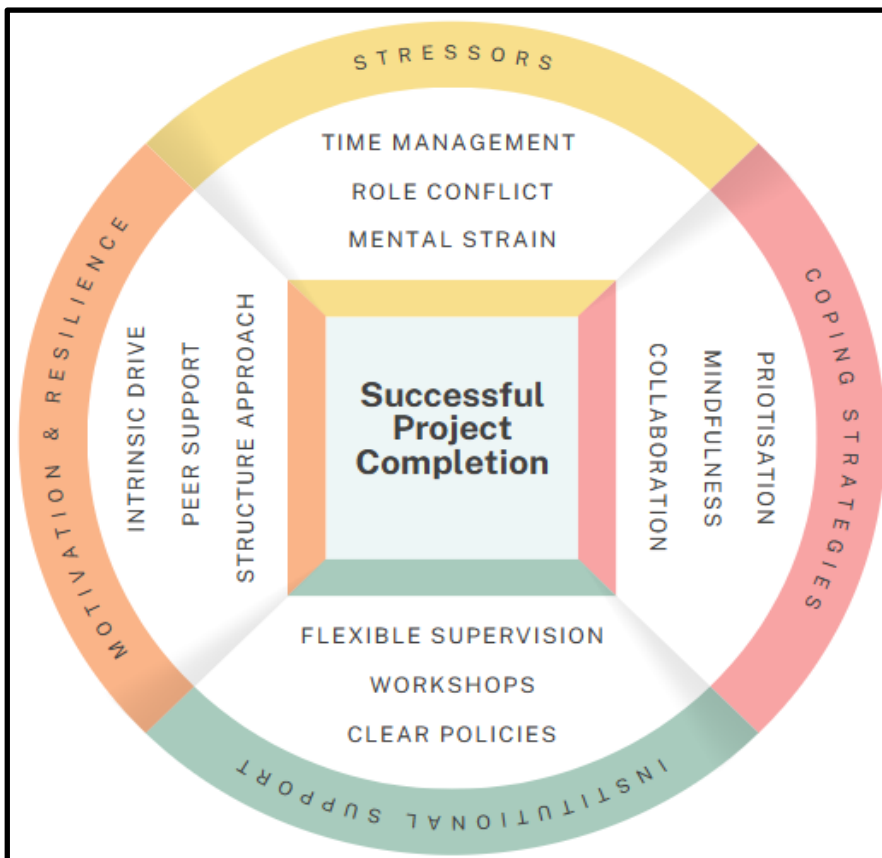


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

In summary, the framework examines how stressors, coping strategies, and institutional support interact with motivation and resilience to impact project completion. It highlights actionable interventions for institutions and learners, offering pathways to achieve academic success while managing professional and personal responsibilities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the impacts of work-related stress on master's project progression and completion rates among postgraduate working learners. According to Creswell and

Poth (2018), qualitative methods are ideal for examining phenomena in depth, especially when little is known about the topic. Braun and Clarke (2013) emphasised that thematic analysis is particularly effective for identifying recurring themes and capturing the diversity of participants' perspectives. By focusing on the perspectives of postgraduate learners, the study aims to capture the nuances of how stress affects their academic progress and identify strategies they use to manage it.

Data Collection Method

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Google Forms, a widely accessible digital platform. Semi-structured interviews strike a balance between structure and flexibility, enabling researchers to explore participants' experiences in depth while maintaining a level of consistency across the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This method is particularly well-suited for qualitative research, as it allows for follow-up questions to delve into unique responses, fostering rich and meaningful narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The open-ended questions were intentionally crafted to elicit comprehensive insights into the challenges learners face, the coping strategies they adopt, and the types of support they find beneficial, encouraging participants to share their perspectives in their own words. The use of Google Forms as a tool for data collection provides several advantages, particularly for research involving working learners. It ensures accessibility and flexibility, enabling participants to respond at a time and location that suits them best. This consideration is crucial for individuals balancing professional and personal commitments, who may find synchronous or face-to-face interviews challenging to accommodate (Bryman, 2016). Furthermore, Google Forms facilitates anonymity and reduces potential interviewer bias, as participants can complete the form without external pressures (Janghorban, Latifnejad Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014). Digital methodologies like this align with contemporary research practices that leverage technology to improve participation rates and gather high-quality data. Such approaches are especially relevant in studies involving diverse and geographically dispersed populations, ensuring inclusivity without compromising the depth and reliability of the findings (Farooq & De Villiers, 2017). This strategy reflects the growing recognition of the importance of digital tools in qualitative research, particularly for addressing logistical constraints and improving participant convenience.

Sampling

The study utilised purposive sampling to select 16 postgraduate working learners enrolled in various master's programmes at the Faculty of Technology and Applied Sciences (FTAS). According to Patton (2015), purposive sampling ensures that participants with relevant experiences are included, enhancing the study's relevance and depth. A sample size of 16 is consistent with recommendations for qualitative research, where data saturation typically occurs with 12 to 15 interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Data Analysis Techniques

Thematic analysis is chosen as the data analysis method for this study because it provides a systematic framework for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. This method is particularly suited for exploring how postgraduate working learners experience and cope with work-related stress, as it focuses on capturing both commonalities and variations in participants' perspectives. Thematic analysis is adaptable and can be used across a range of qualitative research designs. It is particularly effective in studies exploring subjective experiences, such as the interplay of work-related stress and academic progress (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This flexibility allows the researcher to analyse data in a way that aligns with the research objectives. This technique also enables the researcher to go beyond surface-level descriptions, delving into the underlying meaning of participants' responses. Nowell et al. (2017) stated, this is essential for understanding the nuanced impacts of stress on academic performance and identifying strategies for effective stress management. The step-by-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) ensured rigour and transparency in the analysis. This process involves familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. Following this approach ensures that the findings are grounded in the data, enhancing the credibility of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Challenges Faced by Postgraduate Working Learners in Managing Work-Related Stress While Completing Their Master's Project

Time management emerged as a significant challenge among respondents, particularly in the context of balancing professional responsibilities with the demands of completing their master's project. Many learners shared how work commitments interfered with their ability to dedicate sufficient time to project-related tasks. Learner 1 shared their struggle with finding time to write their project paper due to demanding schedule, while Learner 2 experienced stalled progress due to an inability to engage in critical thinking, directly linked to the pressures of a demanding work environment. This finding identifies time management and work-related stress as significant barriers, aligning with prior research by Darling and Whitty (2019), who note that project work itself becomes a source of stress, especially for individuals managing dual roles. Learner 14 highlighted the difficulty of balancing professional, academic, and family responsibilities, particularly during critical phases of project preparation, such as meeting submission deadlines. This observation aligns with Deng et al. (2022), who found that overlapping demands increase emotional strain and depression, consequently impacting academic performance. Similarly, Learner 16 highlighted how frequent travel and urgent work assignments compounded their challenges, leaving minimal time for focused academic effort. These accounts collectively illustrate the persistent tension postgraduate working learners face when juggling their professional roles with the rigorous requirements of completing a master's project. As a result, they often lack sufficient personal or focused time to make consistent and meaningful progress. These experiences provide valuable qualitative insights into the challenges learners face, emphasizing the importance of capturing participants' lived experiences, as advocated by Creswell and Poth (2018). By highlighting these struggles, the findings reveal the complexity of the dual-role conflicts experienced by postgraduate working learners.

In addition to time management difficulties, many learners described how work-related stress adversely impacted their ability to complete their master's project. Learner 6 highlighted the difficulty of achieving a relaxed and focused state of mind necessary for effective project work due to competing professional and academic demands. Similarly, Learner 13 emphasised how work-related stress led to burnout, which not only slowed their academic progress but also reduced their ability to manage daily tasks. This recognition of burnout and mental health challenges aligns with Gallea et al. (2021), who argue that graduate learners experiencing burnout often exhibit diminished engagement and productivity. Learner 11 provided a particularly detailed account of how work-related stress reduced their productivity, caused missed deadlines, and generated frustration at their inability to balance both their job and academic commitments. They described feeling drained and unmotivated, which further complicated their ability to meet project expectations. These individual accounts emphasize the importance of recognising both time management and mental health challenges as critical barriers, which strengthens the findings by connecting learners' lived experiences to established research on burnout, stress, and dual-role conflicts. These experiences underscore the emotional and psychological challenges faced by postgraduate working learners and highlight the critical need for effective support systems to mitigate stress and facilitate successful project completion.

Strategies and institutional support mechanisms that enhance stress management and improve the success rates of master's project completion

1. Support Systems

The importance of support systems, both personal and institutional, emerged as another key theme. Learner 3 appreciated the understanding and assistance from their manager, which helped alleviate conflicts between work and study. This learner highlighted the significance of a supportive workplace team that could step in when needed, reducing stress and enabling progress on academic commitments. On the institutional front, Learner 14 suggested that Open University Malaysia (OUM) could foster more interaction among peers and alumni to create a stronger support network. This recommendation is supported by Sanchez-Trujillo et al. (2022), who found that structured peer networking programs, such as academic forums or virtual collaborative

platforms, effectively alleviate postgraduate stress by fostering shared learning and emotional support. The discussion could have explored how institutional mechanisms could formalize these interactions beyond informal peer suggestions. Meanwhile, Learner 7 recommended that supervisors adopt a more empathetic approach to accommodate the dual demands of work and study. This aligns with Liaquat (2021), who argued that flexible and empathetic supervisory approaches significantly reduce postgraduate stress by recognizing and adapting to the learners' unique challenges. Supervisors who exhibit understanding and adaptability can play a pivotal role in creating an academic environment that mitigates stress rather than exacerbates it. These insights demonstrate how both workplace and academic environments play a critical role in either mitigating or exacerbating the stress of postgraduate students.

2. Strategies to Cope

Several learners shared strategies they employed to manage the challenges of balancing work and preparing their master's project. These strategies reveal practical, learner-driven methods for coping with stress and maintaining progress. The discussion effectively highlights individual coping strategies, such as task prioritization, collaboration, and mindfulness, shared by Learners 10, 11, and 12. These strategies align with Menardo et al. (2022) argument that stress management practices, including mindfulness, help maintain mental clarity and improve academic performance. Learner 10 emphasised the importance of completing project-related tasks promptly and collaborating with team members to share workloads effectively. By ensuring that tasks were addressed in a timely manner, Learner 10 was able to maintain steady progress on the project. Similarly, Learner 11 highlighted the value of developing a systematic approach to stress management, explaining:

“Developing effective strategies for managing stress, such as carefully prioritising tasks based on their urgency and importance, incorporating mindfulness practices to maintain focus and mental clarity, and actively seeking help from colleagues, mentors, or peers when challenges arise, has proven to be a crucial approach for learners juggling project preparation alongside professional commitments.”

These strategies align with the findings of Menardo et al. (2022) argument that stress management practices, such as mindfulness, task prioritization, and collaboration, are essential for maintaining mental clarity and improving academic performance. In addition, Learner 12 shared how they prioritized urgent project tasks while delegating less critical responsibilities at work, a method that allowed them to focus on making meaningful progress on their master's project without compromising professional obligations. Learner 11's and Learner 12's approaches reflect the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model proposed by Ornek and Esin (2020), which emphasizes the importance of personal resources such as effective prioritization and delegation in mitigating work-related stress. Collectively, these individual accounts demonstrate how learners adopted tailored strategies, including time management, delegation, collaboration, and mindfulness practices, to address the demands of their professional and academic roles. These approaches not only helped mitigate stress but also ensured meaningful progress toward completing their master's projects.

3. Institutional Support Needs

Many learners expressed the need for enhanced support from their institution to alleviate the challenges of preparing their master's project while managing work commitments. Learner 5 emphasised the value of face-to-face workshops held during off days, explaining:

“Face-to-face workshops during off days would make a significant difference for working learners like me because they provide an opportunity to engage with lecturers and peers in a more interactive and focused setting. This dedicated time would allow us to discuss our master's project, seek guidance, and clarify expectations without the distractions and time constraints of balancing work responsibilities.”

This recommendation aligns with Jin et al. (2023), who argue that interactive learning environments provide critical emotional and academic support for professionals managing stress. In addition, Learner 7 emphasised

the importance of flexible and empathetic supervisory approaches, recognizing the dual pressures of careers and family responsibilities. Flexible measures such as accommodating non-traditional working hours and responding promptly to inquiries were noted as pivotal in easing the stress of juggling competing priorities. This reflects findings by Liaquat (2021), who highlight how tailored guidance that adapts to individual circumstances can significantly reduce postgraduate stress and ensure steady academic progress. Learner 12 proposed the provision of online seminars and training sessions focused on skill-building, including time management, structuring complex research, and academic writing techniques. Such resources, delivered in accessible formats, empower learners to efficiently manage their work commitments and academic responsibilities. These suggestions align with Domaley et al. (2023), who emphasise that structured interventions play a critical role in enhancing postgraduate success. Moreover, platforms that facilitate the exchange of experiences and strategies among learners could foster a sense of community and shared problem-solving, helping to reduce isolation and stress. Adding to this, Learner 14 emphasised the need for consistent institutional policies and clear communication. They pointed out that adequate notice of significant changes such as modifications to submission guidelines or exam formats minimises disruptions and reduces stress during critical project phases. This aligns with Liaquat (2021), who identify unclear guidelines and inconsistent communication as key stressors for postgraduate students. Predictable procedures and transparent communication demonstrate an understanding of the unique challenges faced by postgraduate learners balancing multiple responsibilities.

Collectively, these perspectives highlight the importance of practical institutional measures, including flexible supervisory practices, skill-focused resources, and transparent policies. Such interventions address the realities of balancing professional, academic, and personal commitments, facilitating not only successful project completion but also contributing to the overall well-being and satisfaction of postgraduate learners.

4. Motivation and Resilience

Despite the challenges faced, many learners demonstrated a strong sense of motivation and resilience, which played a crucial role in completing their master's project. For instance, Learner 10 expressed that their determination to achieve academic success served as a driving force, enabling them to persevere through moments of exhaustion and self-doubt. They noted that maintaining a clear focus on long-term goals provided the necessary energy to navigate the complexities of balancing full-time work with project writing. This aligns with Albort-Morant et al. (2020), who found that positive stress, when managed effectively, can drive individuals toward innovation and achievement.

In a similar vein, Learner 15 shared how inspiration from peers who had successfully overcome similar challenges became a source of strength. Hearing about the strategies such as prioritizing tasks, seeking advice, and building support networks encouraged them to adopt similar practices. Research by Sanchez-Trujillo et al. (2022) highlighted the value of mentorship programs or peer accountability groups as a proactive way to sustain motivation and reduce feelings of isolation. This sense of shared experience fostered a feeling of camaraderie, which further motivated them to stay committed to their project, even when the workload seemed overwhelming.

On the other hand, Learner 14 highlighted the significance of early exposure to project guidelines and timelines. They explained that a clear understanding of expectations allowed them to develop a structured approach to their work, breaking the project into manageable phases. This structured approach helped maintain a steady pace, effectively allocate time, and reduce stress. Xu and Wang (2023) supported this observation, emphasizing that reducing role ambiguity enhances performance and alleviates stress for postgraduate learners. Additionally, access to clear guidance and feedback from supervisors was described as instrumental in maintaining their focus and ensuring they stayed on track.

These individual accounts illustrate the interplay of intrinsic motivation, peer support, and structured guidance in helping postgraduate learners overcome the challenges associated with project writing. While intrinsic motivation provided the internal drive to achieve their goals, the encouragement and experiences shared by

peers reinforced their resolve. At the same time, the clarity and structure offered by early guidance and supervisory support helped to transform the daunting task of a master's project into an achievable endeavour. Collectively, these factors demonstrate the importance of fostering a supportive environment that empowers learners to navigate academic challenges and remain steadfast in their pursuit of educational milestones.

CONCLUSION

Completing a master's project is a significant milestone for postgraduate learners, particularly those balancing professional and academic responsibilities. This study highlights the challenges they face, including time management struggles, professional obligations, and mental and physical strain. Despite these obstacles, learners demonstrated resilience through intrinsic motivation, peer support, and structured guidance. Strategies such as task prioritisation, mentorship, and clear supervisory feedback played a pivotal role in reducing stress and enhancing focus. These findings underscore the importance of fostering supportive institutional environments tailored to the unique needs of working learners. Future research should explore the long-term impact of these interventions and expand the focus to diverse academic disciplines and settings, further informing policies that promote academic success and well-being.

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