

# Academic Pressure a Psychosocial Predictor of Suicide among Youths in Selected Kenyan Public Universities.

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.802116>

Received: 09 February 2024; Revised: 17 February 2024; Accepted: 22 February 2024; Published: 17 March 2024

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to assess the influence of academic pressure on the suicide rates among youths in selected Kenyan Public university. The target population for the study was 149,628 youths in public universities and 40 staffs in the student welfare office. The study focused on students at University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University and Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology due to the large population of students in this institution thereby giving a representative sample of the students in public universities. The study adopted the use of both stratified and simple random sampling to get a sample of 153 respondents. The study informs on the influence academic pressure has in students in public universities having suicidal ideation as well as on the rates of suicide among the students

**Keywords:** Academic pressure, suicide rates, suicidal ideation, youths.

## INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that over 800,000 people die from suicide each year, representing an annual global suicide rate of 10.7 per 100,000 populations (Doran & Kinchin, 2018). World Health Organization (WHO) indicated that globally suicidal deaths account for 1.4% of all deaths with cases of suicidal attempts being 20 times much higher than actual suicides (WHO, 2019).

In Australia, the rate of suicide among the youths has been on the rise and suicide has been the leading cause of death accounting for 38.4% of the total deaths reported in 2018 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Even if suicide is a leading cause of death across all age groups, suicide among youth should be of concern for several reasons. First, the increase in the incidences of suicide deaths is registered mostly during early adolescence and young adulthood (Nock, Borges, Bromet, Alonso, Angermeyer & Beautrais 2008). Secondly, suicide is ranked as the top cause of death during youth compared to other age groups. It is the second leading cause of death during youthful stage and tenth in all age groups (WHO, 2017). In addition, a lot of people who may have attempted suicide did so in their youthful age. This is due to the youth age being the onset for suicidal ideation and suicide attempt.

In Kenya, there has been an increase on suicidal deaths, with reported cases rising from about 265 to 421 between the year 2008 and 2017 (WHO, 2018). Mutisya (2016) noted that just like in most African countries, it was hard to establish the actual prevalence of suicidal deaths or attempts, since national records depended on the few cases reported in health centers and police stations.

Academic pressure is the demand placed on students from academic work overload, long studying periods and high grade expectations. This pressure makes students to be stressful (Hatoum, 2021). According to Newport Institute (2022), academic pressure on youths has been going higher. The stress of getting to the

right college, getting good grades and securing the best internships in preparation for career success takes huge effect on youth's mental health. In most cases, academic success comes at the expense of youths social and emotional development.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Youths are under a lot of pressure to achieve high academic standard and obtain high academic results. However, this unintentionally affects their well being thereby making them to perform poorly in school. As a result, the students develop academic stress (Pascoe, 2018).

Academic pressure may come from family expectations, the ambitious goals set by the students, or the demands placed on them by society at large. Educators and school administrators may also push students to succeed (Newport Institute, 2022). Academic pressure negatively affects students' social, physical, cognitive and physiological health and increases the chances of students developing disorders such as anxiety, depression, sleep deprivation and insomnia (Hatoum, 2021)

Stress among the youths can be good for motivating them to keep performing well. However, it may trigger physical and mental illnesses that harm the body and affect oneself. The approach in handling stress is key since stress is associated with multiple illnesses. Students in higher learning institutions are prone to stress due to myriad of factors including poor performance, heightened expectations from family and the need for career advancement (Centre for Studies on Human Stress, 2007).

The rate of anxiety among the first-year undergraduate students is found to be high because of the new social and intellectual challenges that comes along with joining higher learning institutions (Wong, Cheung, Chan, Ma & Wa Tang, 2006). Stress is commonly found among students because of the academic workload and group projects. This stress is generally due to academic pressure. A cross-sectional study by Teh, Ngo, Binti Zulkifli, Vellasamy and Suresh (2015) concluded that the occurrence of stress is more common among students in Malaysia. In their study, they identified that, having a huge work load in a short time frame and the need to pass in the exams as the key push factors to pressuring the students. Due to the demand placed on students' by themselves, their parents and the society at large to attain higher performance, the students' academics therefore informs on the chances of the them contemplating or even committing suicide. (Lee, Wong, Chow & McBride, 2006).

Compared to freshmen, students taking health related courses are said to be more stressed than those in other programs. Whenever students are engulfed by stress, their academic performance is likely to be affected thereby increasing their chances of being psychologically distressed (Elias, Ping & Abdullah, 2011). Academic stress can affect the students' daily life, well-being as well as mental health (Kaur, 2012).

Students are concerned about their future, which is mostly dependent on their academic results. Most students look forward to attain the best grades. As compared to female, male students mostly attach importance to academic performance (Moksnes, Moljord, Espnes & Byrne, 2010). Due to this, the students are likely to be stressed fearing not fail in their academics.

Besides working hard to meet their own goals, the workload at the institutions makes the students to feel under pressure (Bataineh, 2013). Do (2007), in his study in Vietnam found that 65% of the respondents complained on the school workload as being their main source of stress. The academic workload that the students are expected to handle within shorter period of time makes them to feel exhausted and overstretched hence stressed out. (Shkulaku, 2015).

Essel, Adom and Chukwuere (2020), in their research assessing the state of academic stress in higher institution of Ghana found out that, excessive academic stress is a result of the intensive academic demands

placed on students and faculty. Due to this academic pressure and stress, majority of the students have found themselves feeling depressed and as failures for not being in a position to achieve their academic expectations.

In Kenya, Jenkins, Caleb, Ray, Linnet, Peter, Michael, James, David and Bernhards (2015), on their study on prevalence of suicide found out that 24.1% of the respondents had once thought of life as being worthless, 7.9% had suicidal thoughts and 1.9% attempted suicide at one point in their lives.

A study by Wanyoike (2015), found out that the main push factor for suicide among university students to be Social Pressure, which includes the high cost of schooling and the need to perform well in academics. In the study, the pressure to achieve high performance was identified among the main stressing factor experienced by university students. When under pressure due to poor performance, students feel hopeless and opt for alternative ways to handle the pressure. Data from a study on the link between academic stress and suicidal ideation among university students in Nairobi indicated a strong positive correlation between academic stress and suicidal ideation among university students in Nairobi County (Ouko, Ondieki & Obinna (2021).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The objective of the study was to assess the influence of academic pressure on the increased suicide rate among youths in Kenyan public universities. The study hypothesis was; There is no statically significant relationship between academic pressure and suicide.

The study adopted both stratified sampling and simple random sampling. Stratified sampling was used to group youths/students into their respective faculties and afterwards simple random sampling was used to get respondents from respective faculties. Simple random sampling was also used in getting a representative sample of the counsellors working at the student welfare office.

A sample of 153 respondents both youths and counsellors was used for the study. The sample size comprised of 15 counsellors from the student welfare office and 138 youths/students from University of Nairobi, Kenyatta university and Jomo Kenyatta university of Agriculture and Technology. A total of 153 questionnaires was distributed and the researcher successfully obtained a total of 124 questionnaires back. The figure was made up of 112 responses from the students in the institutions and 12 responses from the counsellors at the student welfare offices.

The researcher first sought the respondents consent and seeking permission from relevant authorities to collect data. Data was collected using two different set of questionnaires, one for the youths/students and the other for the staff at the student welfare office which majorly included the school counsellors. The data was analyzed and presented in tables and figures. A T-test was conducted to test the hypothesis and assess the relationship between academic pressure and the increased rate of suicide among youths in Kenyan public universities.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The researcher assessed the influence of academic pressure on the youths by getting the respondents views on key academic requirements and the academic demands that they are required to meet.

Most of the respondents 92% were regular students while 3.5% and 4.5% of the respondents were online and evening based students respectively. The researcher also assessed if the youths may have failed or had missing marks and their feelings for having failed and for having missing marks. 35.7% of the respondents reported to have ever failed in a unit of study while 64.3% reported to have not failed. From the 35.7% who

reported to have ever failed, 97.5% of them reported to have felt wasted and useless while 2.5% reported to have felt normal.

19.6% of the respondents reported to have had missing marks while 80.4% had not had missing marks. Those who reported to have had missing marks all indicated it was stressful having missing marks majorly due to the hectic nature of retrieving the marks. The researcher also assessed if the respondents ever felt pressured as the exam period approached, 79.5% of the respondents reported to be feeling pressured while 20.5% reported to be normal and not feeling pressured.

The researcher also assessed the respondents' views and perception on academic challenges they could be facing and its influence on them having feelings of hopelessness. The findings are as shown in table 12 below. From the findings; 68.5% of the respondents agreed to feeling exhausted and under pressure from the workload in units under study, 84.7% agreed to feeling under pressure due to short CATs and assignment deadlines, 84.7% agreed to feeling wasted for having missing marks and having to follow up and retrieve them, 85.4% agreed to feeling worthless and seeing themselves as failures for failing to graduate in time, 65.3% reported to feeling worthless due to failing units and having to do supplementary exams, 64.5% informed that they felt overwhelmed due to too much academic demands, 67.7% reported to feeling disgraced and failures for scoring low grades and 58.1% informed that unpreparedness for cats and exams makes them feel overwhelmed and under pressure.

These findings are in line with Pascoe (2018), who stated that youths are under a lot of pressure to achieve high academic standard and this has an effect on their wellbeing and as a result they are likely to develop stress. From the findings, most of the respondents indicated to be overwhelmed, being under pressure and feeling worthless as a result of some of the academic pressure they go through from having missing marks, failing to graduate in time and having to put up with too much academic demands.

Table 12. Title: Views on Influence of Academic Challenges on Suicide

		Frequency	Percent
Too much workload in units of study makes the student feel exhausted and feel unable to handle such life	Agree	85	68.5
	Disagree	39	31.5
Short CAT and assignment deadlines put pressure on the students making them overwhelmed and contemplate suicide	Agree	105	84.7
	Disagree	19	15.3
Missing marks and having to follow up to retrieve the marks makes one feel wasted and life as being unfair	Agree	105	84.7
	Disagree	19	15.3
Failing to graduate in time as anticipated makes one see himself as a failure and feel worthless	Agree	106	85.4
	Disagree	18	14.6
Failing in units and having to do supplementary exams makes student feel worthless	Agree	81	65.3
	Disagree	43	34.7
Too much academic demands makes the student feel overwhelmed and could push them to committing suicide	Agree	80	64.5
	Disagree	44	35.5
Being awarded and scoring low grades in units of study frustrates students making them to feel as failures and a disgrace thereby contemplating suicide	Agree	84	67.7
	Disagree	40	32.3
Unpreparedness for exams and CATs contributes to students feeling overwhelmed and pressured resulting to them having suicidal thoughts	Agree	72	58.1
	Disagree	52	41.9

The researcher assessed the prevalence of suicide/ suicidal ideation among the youths in the institutions, the results are as shown in table 7 below.

Table 7: Title: Having Had Death Wishes

Having had wishes of being dead			Having feelings of the family being better off in your absence		
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
Yes	34	30.4	20	17.9	
No	78	69.6	92	82.1	
<b>Total</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>100</b>	

From table 7 30.4% of the youths responded to have had wishes of being dead and 17.9% responded to have had feelings of their families being better off in their absence. 69.6% and 82.1% of the respondents indicated not to have had wishes of being dead or their families being better off in their absence.

Table 8. Title: Having Had Thoughts and Having Attempted Suicide

Having thoughts of committing suicide			Having ever tried committing suicide	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	34	30.4	11	9.8
No	78	69.6	101	90.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>100</b>

Data from table 8 indicated that 30.4% of the respondents reported to have ever thought of committing suicide while 9.8% reported to have ever tried committing suicide. On the other hand, 69.6% of the respondents reported to have never thought of committing suicide and 90.2% reported not to have tried committing suicide.

The researcher tested the study hypothesis by comparing the response rate of the respondents on having feelings of hopelessness/ having suicidal ideations and their responses on the respondents' views on academic challenges faced and their implication on them. Table 13 below shows a t-test result with a  $\alpha$  value of 0.05, the hypothesis is:

Ho: There is no statistically significant relationship between academic pressure and suicide.

H1: There is statistically significant relationship between academic pressure and suicide.

Rule: Reject the null hypothesis if the p value is  $<0.05$

The p value is 0.001 which is smaller than the  $\alpha$  level of 0.05. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that: There is a statistically significant relationship between academic pressure and suicide.

Table 13. Title: Comparison Between Feelings of Hopelessness and Academic Pressure

Description	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Df	Sig (2-tailed)
Pair 1 Having thoughts of committing suicide – Missing marks and having to follow up to retrieve the marks makes students feel wasted and life as being unfair	.536	.614	9.232	111	.000

Pair 2	Having had feelings of : Life isn't worth living, there's nothing I can do to make it better, I'd be better off dead, I feel there is no way out, I won't be around to deal with it – Failing to graduate in time as anticipated makes students see themselves as a failure and feel worthless	.402	.622	6.838	111	.000
Pair 3	Having had wishes of being dead – Too much academic demands makes the student feel overwhelmed and could push them to committing suicide	.366	.671	5.773	111	.000
Pair 4	Having had wishes of being dead – Short CAT and assignment deadlines put pressure on the student making them overwhelmed and contemplate suicide	.536	.568	9.975	111	.000
Pair 5	Having ever tried committing suicide – Too Much workload in Units of study makes the student feel exhausted and feel unable to handle such life	.616	.541	12.051	111	.000

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From the results of the study, the researcher concludes that, a larger population of the youths in the Kenyan Public University at some point may have had feelings of hopelessness and may have contemplated suicide.

Academic achievement is the key objective for joining institutions of higher learning for the youths. However, the findings indicated that most of the youths feels under pressure due to academic demands placed on them. Failure to graduate in the anticipated time and failing in the units of studies makes most of the youths doubt themselves and see themselves as worthless. Such feelings push youths to have suicidal thoughts that they may end up actualizing. The study confirmed there being a relationship between academic pressure that the youths in the institutions experience and increased suicide rates.

Therefore, the study recommends that higher learning institutions to consider tailor making the academic curricular to be students/youth friendly to avoid them feeling overwhelmed by too much demands, higher learning institutions should consider ensuring that students have their marks all the time after examination and that they don't delay students from graduating unless the delay is from the student/youths themselves, higher learning institutions should consider having psychological health related courses among the common units in order to equip the youths with skills on how to go about life challenges such as ending of an intimate relation.

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