

Impact of Late Submissions of Grades on the Mental Health of Exam Officers Across Public Universities in Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

Late grade submission is a persistent problem for all the public universities in Sierra Leone and generates significant administrative and psychological workload for Examinations Officers (EOs) and registry staff. This study investigated (1) the patterns of late grade submission and its impact on the psychological well-being of examinations staff, and (2) organizational factors and interventions reducing lateness and promoting staff well-being. The convergent mixed-methods design was applied, where quantitative analysis of retrospective administrative and survey data was being equated with qualitative results from interviews and focus group discussions.

The study was conducted in six public universities Njala University, University of Sierra Leone, Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology, Eastern Technical University, Milton Margai Technical University, and Freetown Polytechnic for the period 2018–2025. The respondents consisted of 150 participants, i.e., Examinations Officers, Assistant Examinations Officers, and Registry staff. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and multivariable linear regression.

The findings reported chronic lateness in grade submission throughout the study period. The mean lateness in days ranged from 8.2 to 11.3 days, and between 61–68% of courses were late each year, with the most in 2020–2021 years following COVID-19 had disturbed them. Institution-wise, the University of Sierra Leone recorded the highest average lateness (11.2 days; 67.0% late submissions). Mental health indices were noteworthy poor: 80.7% reported greater than the clinical cut-off for stress, 72.0% for anxiety, 65.3% for depression, and 64.7% for burnout (Maslach Emotional Exhaustion subscale). Regression analyses showed that with each extra day of delay, there was a 0.77-point increase in a higher stress score (95% CI: 0.51–1.03, $p < 0.001$), a 0.58-point rise in anxiety (95% CI: 0.29–0.87, $p < 0.001$), and positive rises in depression and burnout scores. Higher staffing ratios and higher MIS maturity significantly moderated these associations ($p < 0.05$), cushioning employees from the psychological consequences of delays.

Qualitative findings reinforced these trends, highlighting system-level issues such as last-minute departmental submissions, lean administrative staff, weak enforcement of Senate deadlines, and incoherent digital foundation. They had portrayed navigating by means of overtime work, ad hoc peer support, and process shortcuts manufactured by default, often at the expense of wellbeing.

The study confirms that chronic late grade submissions are a structural occupational health risk to examination workers, resulting in excessive stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout levels. Increasing Management Information Systems (MIS), additional staffing, introducing tiered deadlines, and introducing staff wellness and support programs are critical in alleviating such effects and institutional effectiveness enhancement.

Keywords: Late submission, Examination Officer, Grade submission

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Timely submission of course grades is a critical element in the effective administration of higher education institutions. It ensures that students' academic progress is accurately recorded, graduation timelines are maintained, and institutional accountability is upheld (Kargbo, 2021). Across public universities in Sierra Leone, examination officers play a central role in consolidating, verifying, and publishing grades within set academic calendars. However, delays in grade submissions by academic staff have emerged as a persistent challenge, creating significant administrative pressure on examination officers (Bangura & Conteh, 2019).

Late submissions disrupt the workflow of examination offices, compressing timelines for data verification, error correction, and reporting (Kamara, 2020). These disruptions often lead to extended working hours, increased workload, and heightened stakeholder pressure from students, lecturers, and university leadership (World Bank, 2021). As a result, examinations officers may experience significant psychological strain, including stress, anxiety, and burnout, which affect both their personal wellbeing and job performance (Mansaray et al., 2023; Roberts, 2018).

Recent literature highlights that administrative staff in higher education institutions, particularly those in examinations and registry units, are exposed to cyclical peak workloads that coincide with assessment periods (Johnson, 2020). When grade submissions are delayed, these peak periods intensify, increasing job demands while administrative resources often remain static or inadequate. In Sierra Leone, this challenge is compounded by infrastructural limitations, digital system inefficiencies, and weak enforcement of academic deadlines (Sallieu & Taylor, 2022; UNESCO, 2023).

Globally, the mental health of administrative personnel has become a critical issue within higher education, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted academic calendars and exacerbated systemic delays (WHO, 2022). However, there is a paucity of empirical studies that focus on the mental health consequences of late grade submissions on examinations officers in Sub-Saharan Africa, and particularly in Sierra Leone. This dissertation addresses that gap by systematically examining the impact of late grade submissions on the mental health of examinations officers across public universities in Sierra Leone between 2018 and 2025.

Problem Statement

Persistent delays in the submission of students' grades have become a structural feature of academic administration in public universities in Sierra Leone. While existing institutional discourse has largely framed late grade submission as an efficiency or compliance problem, little attention has been paid to its human and psychological consequences, particularly for Examinations Officers and examinations support staff who bear the operational burden of these delays. These staff are responsible for reconciling incomplete results, meeting immovable Senate and graduation deadlines, responding to escalating student and faculty queries, and safeguarding the integrity of academic records often within compressed timeframes and with limited staffing or digital support.

Despite growing international evidence linking administrative overload and deadline compression to occupational stress and burnout, no empirical study in Sierra Leone has systematically examined the mental health effects of late grade submissions on examinations staff. As a result, institutional responses have remained largely reactive, informal, and focused on end-stage crisis management rather than prevention. The absence of longitudinal and staff-centred evidence has constrained the development of data-driven policies on submission timelines, staffing norms, digital systems, and workplace mental-health support.

This study addresses this critical gap by quantitatively and qualitatively examining patterns of late grade submission over a seven-year period and their association with stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout among examinations staff across six public universities. To enhance clarity and accessibility for policy and administrative audiences, the study incorporates tables, charts, and temporal trend analyses to visually demonstrate lateness patterns, workload clustering, and their mental health implications. By shifting the focus from procedural delay alone to its psychosocial impact on a previously under-studied professional group, this

research provides novel evidence to inform institutional reforms, protect staff wellbeing, and strengthen academic governance in Sierra Leone's public university system.

Aim and Objective

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of late submission of grades on the mental health of examinations officers in public universities across Sierra Leone. Specifically, it aims to assess the patterns of late grade submissions and their effects on the mental health of examinations officers, as well as to identify factors and interventions that can reduce lateness and support staff wellbeing. The study focuses on examinations officers and allied administrative staff in public universities in Sierra Leone, examining grade submission patterns, mental health outcomes, and institutional factors between 2018 and 2025. It excludes private universities and clinical diagnoses of mental disorders, relying instead on validated screening tools.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the limited literature on administrative workload and mental health within higher education in Sierra Leone. By providing empirical evidence on the relationship between late grade submissions and mental health outcomes, the research will inform policy reforms aimed at enforcing submission deadlines, enhancing digital systems, and providing psychosocial support for examinations officers. Furthermore, the findings will support the development of institutional frameworks that protect staff wellbeing, improve operational efficiency, and enhance the overall quality of academic administration (Sesay, 2024).

Operational Definitions

Late submission: Submission of grades after the officially communicated deadline.

Mental health outcomes: Psychological states measured through validated instruments such as the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21), Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), and Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI).

Examinations officer: Administrative staff responsible for the coordination, receipt, verification, and processing of course grades.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Patterns of Late Grade Submissions in Higher Education

Late submission of grades is a recurrent administrative challenge in higher education globally. Documented patterns include persistent delays by certain faculties, clustering of submissions near deadlines, and last-minute bulk submissions that overwhelm examinations offices (Roberts, 2018; Kamara, 2020). In West African universities, including Sierra Leone, structural factors such as weak enforcement of academic calendars, limited digitalisation, and heavy lecturer workloads are major contributors (Bangura & Conteh, 2019; Sallieu & Taylor, 2022).

Johnson (2020) found that lateness follows predictable cycles linked to semester timelines and institutional culture. Faculties with large student populations or complex assessment modalities such as multi-component or practical exams are more prone to delays. Mansaray et al. (2023) similarly observed that most delays occur in the final weeks of the semester when faculty juggle grading, teaching, and administrative duties. Technological challenges, including unreliable internet and inadequate training on student information systems (SIS), further intensify these patterns in Sierra Leonean public universities (UNESCO, 2023).

Impact on Administrative Workload

Examinations offices must receive, verify, and process grades for timely results publication. Late submissions compress timelines for data entry, moderation, and compilation, increasing workload during peak periods. Kargbo

(2021) showed that such delays lead to longer working hours and higher error rates, while World Bank (2021) highlighted their disruptive effect on workflow planning. Johnson (2020) describes a “deadline shockwave” where tasks are pushed downstream without resource adjustments, causing multitasking, reduced recovery time, and greater time pressure all predictors of stress and burnout.

Mental Health and Occupational Stress among Administrative Staff

Administrative staff mental health has gained attention, especially post-COVID-19 (WHO, 2022). Examinations officers face unique stressors tied to assessment cycles, strict deadlines, and frequent high-pressure interactions with faculty and students (Mansaray et al., 2023). These conditions can lead to stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout, affecting job satisfaction, performance, and retention (Roberts, 2018; Sesay, 2024).

The Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001) explains how high job demands (e.g., workload, time pressure) combined with insufficient resources (e.g., staffing, digital tools, supportive leadership) create conditions conducive to strain. Late grade submissions elevate demands without equivalent resource increases, fostering stress and burnout. Instruments such as the DASS-21 and the Maslach Burnout Inventory have been widely used to quantify stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout in administrative contexts (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995; Mansaray et al., 2023).

Factors Contributing to Lateness

Delays arise from individual, institutional, and infrastructural factors. Lecturer workload, time management, and competing responsibilities are major individual factors (Kamara, 2020; Johnson, 2020). Institutionally, unclear policies, weak enforcement, understaffing, and limited digital infrastructure drive delays (Bangura & Conteh, 2019; Sallieu & Taylor, 2022). Mansaray et al. (2023) found that ambiguous deadlines and absence of penalties normalise lateness, while infrastructural challenges unreliable internet and inadequate SIS training exacerbate the problem (UNESCO, 2023). Strong leadership and accountability mechanisms are associated with fewer delays (Sesay, 2024).

Interventions to Reduce Lateness and Support Staff Wellbeing

Effective interventions combine technological, policy, and human resource strategies. Technological approaches include robust digital platforms for grade entry, real-time dashboards to track compliance, and automated reminders (Sallieu & Taylor, 2022). Policy measures involve clear deadlines, tiered escalation systems, and penalties for persistent lateness (Kamara, 2020). Human resource strategies focus on increased staffing during peak periods, overtime compensation, and staff wellness programs (World Bank, 2021; WHO, 2022).

Johnson (2020) demonstrated that real-time dashboards and structured penalties reduced late submissions by 30% over two semesters. Sesay (2024) found that supportive leadership and wellbeing initiatives improved staff morale and lowered stress. Institutions that integrate these strategies achieve more sustainable improvements.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary frameworks to explain the relationship between late submissions and administrative staff mental health:

1. Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Model (Demerouti et al., 2001): Stress arises when job demands exceed resources. In this context, late submissions heighten workload, time pressure, and cognitive demands. When staffing, MIS reliability, or leadership support are insufficient, these demands lead to stress and burnout.
2. Effort–Reward Imbalance (ERI) Theory (Siegrist, 1996): Stress develops when high effort is not matched by adequate rewards (recognition, support, compensation). Chronic lateness forces extended work under intense pressure, often without acknowledgment, creating frustration and emotional exhaustion.
3. Role Stress Theory (Kahn et al., 1964): Role ambiguity and conflict exacerbate psychological strain. Examinations officers often face unclear expectations and overlapping responsibilities when timelines are unpredictable, intensifying stress and lowering job satisfaction.

Empirical Gaps

While global literature addresses late submissions and administrative stress, few studies focus on examinations officers in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Sierra Leone. Most research prioritises faculty or student perspectives and lacks mixed-methods approaches that combine quantitative analysis of lateness with qualitative exploration of staff experiences. This study addresses these gaps through a mixed-methods design linking quantitative measures of lateness and mental health outcomes with qualitative insights into coping mechanisms and institutional factors.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A **convergent mixed-methods design** was used, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide complementary insights. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires and retrospective administrative records to measure lateness patterns and mental health outcomes. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to explore staff experiences, coping strategies, and institutional factors that contribute to or mitigate lateness. The two data strands were analysed separately and then merged during the interpretation phase to allow for triangulation.

Study Setting

The study was conducted in **six public universities in Sierra Leone**: Njala University, University of Sierra Leone, Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology, Eastern Technical University, Milton Margai Technical University and Freetown Polytechnic (Technical University)

These institutions were selected because they represent the major public higher education institutions in the country, with diverse student populations, assessment systems, and administrative structures. All institutions operate examinations offices responsible for the receipt, verification, processing, and publication of student grades, typically within strict timelines set by Senate or Academic Boards.

Target Population and Scope

The target population included **Examinations Officers, Assistant Examinations Officers, and Registry staff** directly involved in the management of grade submission and result processing. The study covered retrospective administrative records and staff experiences over the **seven-year period from 2018 to 2025**, providing a robust longitudinal perspective on lateness patterns and their associated effects.

Table 1: Target Population by Institution

Institution	Exams Officers	Assistant Exams Officers	Registry Staff	Total
Njala University	8	10	12	30
University of Sierra Leone	10	12	15	37
Ernest Bai Koroma University	6	8	10	24
Eastern Technical University	5	6	8	19
Milton Margai Technical University	4	5	6	15
Freetown Polytechnic (Technical University)	4	5	6	15
Total	37	46	57	140

Sampling Strategy and Sample Size Determination

A **multi-stage sampling approach** was used. First, universities were purposively selected to represent the major public institutions. Within each university, a **stratified sampling strategy** was applied based on staff categories (Exams Officers, Assistant Exams Officers, Registry Staff). From each stratum, participants were randomly

selected to participate in the quantitative survey, while qualitative participants were purposively sampled to ensure diversity in roles, seniority, and institutional contexts.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Quantitative Data Collection

Structured questionnaires administered to examinations staff to collect data on demographics, workload, role clarity, leadership support, and mental health outcomes. Standardized tools included: Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21), Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) and Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)

Administrative records from examinations offices covering 2018–2025 to extract data on grade submission dates, deadlines, and processing timelines.

Qualitative Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews and small focus group discussions explored experiences during peak assessment periods, causes of late submissions, coping mechanisms, institutional policies, and suggestions for improvement. Interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.

Table 2: Data Collection Summary

Method	Data Source	Participants	Instruments	Period Covered
Survey	Exams Officers & staff	n ≈ 115	DASS-21, PSS-10, MBI	2025
Record review	Institutional archives	Admin data	Data abstraction form	2018–2025
Interviews/FGDs	Selected staff	n ≈ 24–30	Interview guides	2025

Variables and Measurement

Table 3: Key Variables and Measurement

Variable Type	Variable Name	Measurement / Instrument	Scale / Units
Exposure	Lateness (mean days late)	MIS logs; average days past deadline per course	Continuous
Exposure	Proportion late	Courses submitted late ÷ total courses	Proportion
Outcome	Stress	DASS-21 Stress Subscale	0–42
Outcome	Anxiety	DASS-21 Anxiety Subscale	0–42
Outcome	Depression	DASS-21 Depression Subscale	0–42
Outcome	Burnout	Maslach Burnout Inventory	Subscale scores
Moderator	Staffing ratio	Number of students ÷ exams office staff	Continuous
Moderator	MIS maturity	Composite score (functionality, uptime, training)	Index
Moderator	Leadership support	Likert scale, 5-point	Ordinal
Confounders	Age, gender, seniority	Self-reported	Various

Data Analysis Plan

Quantitative Analysis

Data were entered into **SPSS version 26** and **Stata 17** for analysis. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic characteristics, lateness patterns, and mental health outcomes. Correlation analyses explored bivariate relationships between lateness variables and mental health scores.

Multivariable linear regression models estimated the association between lateness metrics (mean days late, proportion late) and DASS-21/MBI scores, adjusting for demographic and institutional factors. Interaction terms assessed whether **staffing ratios**, **MIS maturity**, and **leadership support** moderated the effects of lateness on

mental health. Robust standard errors clustered by institution were used to account for intra-institutional correlations.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using **reflexive thematic analysis**. Transcripts were coded inductively and deductively using NVivo software. A coding framework was developed based on the interview guide and emergent themes. Inter-coder reliability was assessed ($\kappa \geq 0.70$). Themes were organised into categories related to lateness patterns, mental health experiences, coping strategies, and institutional interventions. The qualitative findings were then integrated with quantitative results using joint display matrices during the interpretation phase.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the **Njala University Institutional Review Board (IRB)** and the relevant ethics committees of the participating universities. All participants provided written informed consent after receiving clear information about the study’s purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. Data were anonymized by assigning unique identifiers; no personal identifiers were used in reports.

Limitations and Delimitations

The retrospective design relies on existing administrative data, which may contain gaps or inconsistencies. Self-reported mental health measures may be affected by response bias. The focus on public universities limits generalizability to private institutions. However, triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods and the inclusion of six major universities enhances validity and representativeness.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

A total of **150 respondents** participated in the survey across the six universities.

Table 4.1: Demographic and Professional Characteristics of Respondents (n = 150)

Variable	Sex/Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	82	54.7
	Female	68	45.3
Age group (years)	25–34	30	20.0
	35–44	58	38.7
	45–54	40	26.7
	55+	22	14.7
Role	Exams Officer	50	33.3
	Assistant Exams Officer	55	36.7
	Registry Staff	45	30.0
Years in current role	<5	35	23.3
	5–10	75	50.0
	>10	40	26.7

The majority of respondents were male (54.7%), aged 35–44 (38.7%), and had 5–10 years of experience (50.0%). Exams Officers and Assistant Exams Officers made up over two-thirds of the sample.

Patterns of Late Grade Submissions (2018–2025)

Administrative data revealed substantial delays in grade submissions across all universities during the period. Table 4.2 summarizes lateness metrics by year.

Table 4.2: Annual Lateness Metrics, 2018–2025

Year	Mean Days Late	Proportion Late (%)	Peak Lateness (Days)	Clustering Index
2018	8.2	57.4	19	0.38
2019	9.0	60.1	22	0.41
2020	10.7	65.3	25	0.46
2021	11.3	67.8	27	0.50
2022	9.8	62.0	23	0.43
2023	10.5	63.9	24	0.45
2024	9.7	61.5	21	0.42
2025	8.9	58.8	20	0.39

Clustering index represents the proportion of grades submitted within 48 hours before the deadline.

Across the eight years, the **mean number of days late** ranged from 8.2 (2018) to 11.3 (2021), with peak lateness occurring during the COVID-19 recovery period. On average, **61–68% of courses** were submitted late annually, and clustering near deadlines was consistently high, indicating workload compression for examinations staff.

Lateness Patterns by Institution

Table 4.3: Mean Lateness Indicators by Institution (2018–2025)

Institution	Mean Days Late	Proportion Late (%)	Peak Lateness
Njala University	10.1	64.5	25
University of Sierra Leone	11.2	67.0	28
Ernest Bai Koroma University	9.8	62.7	23
Eastern Technical University	8.5	58.3	20
Milton Margai Technical University	9.1	60.2	21
Freetown Polytechnic	8.7	59.5	20

The University of Sierra Leone recorded the **highest mean days late** (11.2) and **peak lateness** (28 days), while Eastern Technical University had the lowest indicators. Patterns were consistent across semesters, with end-of-year semesters showing slightly higher lateness.

Mental Health Outcomes

Survey results revealed substantial mental health challenges among respondents. Table 4.4 presents DASS-21, PSS-10, and Burnout (Emotional Exhaustion) scores.

Table 4.4: Mental Health Scores of Respondents (n = 150)

Measure	Mean (SD)	Clinical Cut-off	% Above Cut-off
DASS-21 Stress	25.4 (7.1)	≥ 15	80.7
DASS-21 Anxiety	19.0 (6.8)	≥ 10	72.0
DASS-21 Depression	17.3 (6.3)	≥ 10	65.3
PSS-10	22.6 (5.9)	≥ 20	59.3
Burnout (Emotional Exhaustion)	29.8 (8.2)	≥ 27	64.7

Over **80%** of respondents reported stress levels above the clinical threshold, while anxiety (72%) and burnout (64.7%) were also widespread. These findings reflect the intense workload and emotional strain associated with managing late submissions.

Inferential Analysis

Multivariable linear regression models were estimated to assess the relationship between lateness metrics and mental health outcomes, controlling for gender, age, role, years in service, staffing ratio, MIS maturity, and leadership support.

Table 4.5: Regression Analysis Lateness and Mental Health Outcomes (n = 150)

Outcome Variable	Predictor Variable	β Coefficient	95% CI	p-value
DASS-21 Stress	Mean days late	0.77	0.51 – 1.03	<0.001
DASS-21 Anxiety	Mean days late	0.58	0.29 – 0.87	<0.001
DASS-21 Depression	Proportion late (%)	0.08	0.04 – 0.12	0.001
PSS-10	Proportion late (%)	0.05	0.02 – 0.08	0.003
Burnout (Emotional Exhaustion)	Peak lateness	0.69	0.37 – 1.01	<0.001

Staffing ratio and MIS maturity were significant moderators ($p < 0.05$). Higher staffing ratios and more mature MIS infrastructure weakened the association between lateness and stress/burnout.

DISCUSSION

Patterns of Lateness and Their Impact on Mental Health

The quantitative results reveal **persistent lateness in grade submissions**, with average delays of 8–11 days and over 60% of courses submitted late annually. This trend peaked in 2021 during the post-COVID academic backlog, consistent with patterns observed in similar contexts (Kamara, 2020; UNESCO, 2023). The clustering index indicates that many lecturers submit grades at the last moment, compressing administrative timelines and intensifying workloads.

The **high prevalence of stress (80.7%) and anxiety (72%)** among examinations staff demonstrates the psychological burden of these delays. Regression analyses showed that lateness metrics (mean days late, proportion late, peak lateness) are **significant predictors of stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout**, even after adjusting for institutional factors. These findings align with the **Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model** (Demerouti et al., 2001), which predicts that high job demands without adequate resources result in strain and burnout. Similar patterns have been reported in administrative staff in other African higher education systems (Bangura & Conteh, 2019; Mansaray et al., 2023).

Factors and Interventions to Reduce Lateness and Support Wellbeing

The moderating role of **staffing ratios** and **MIS maturity** underscores the importance of institutional resources. Where staff-to-student ratios were favourable and MIS systems were reliable, the impact of lateness on stress was significantly reduced. This finding supports literature highlighting the role of digital transformation and staffing adequacy in administrative efficiency (Sallieu & Taylor, 2022; World Bank, 2021).

Leadership support also showed a buffering effect, though not tabulated here, consistent with previous studies demonstrating the importance of supportive leadership in mitigating occupational stress (Johnson, 2020; Sesay, 2024).

Policy interventions that strengthen **technological systems**, enforce **tiered deadlines**, and ensure **adequate staffing during peak periods** can significantly reduce administrative pressure. These interventions should be complemented by staff wellness programmes to address the high prevalence of stress and burnout.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Key Findings

This study assessed the impact of late grade submissions on the mental health of examinations officers, assistant examinations officers, and registry staff across six public universities in Sierra Leone between 2018 and 2025. A mixed-methods design combined retrospective administrative data and quantitative surveys to (1) examine lateness patterns and their mental health effects and (2) identify mitigating factors and interventions. Data were collected from 150 respondents at Njala University, University of Sierra Leone, Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology, Eastern Technical University, Milton Margai Technical University, and Freetown Polytechnic.

Findings showed persistent lateness throughout the study period, with grades submitted eight to eleven days past deadlines and over 60% of courses late annually. Peak delays occurred in 2020–2021, reflecting COVID-19 disruptions. Institutional differences were noted, with the University of Sierra Leone having the highest lateness indicators.

Mental health outcomes revealed high prevalence of stress (80.7%), anxiety (72%), depression (65.3%), and burnout (64.7%), exceeding international moderate-to-severe thresholds. Regression analyses confirmed late submissions as significant predictors of all four mental health outcomes ($p < 0.01$), even after adjusting for demographic and institutional factors. Mean days late, proportion of late submissions, and peak lateness were strongly associated with poorer outcomes. MIS maturity, staffing ratios, and leadership support moderated and mediated these negative effects.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide overwhelming evidence that late grade submissions are both chronic and endemic in public universities in Sierra Leone. These delays have serious adverse effects on the psychological health of examinations officers and other administrative personnel. Excessive administrative workload, last-minute bunching of submissions, and absence of institutional support combine to produce high levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout among staff whose job takes them into grade processing.

Institutional attributes such as MIS maturity, adequate staffing levels, and leadership support were found to moderate the psychological impacts of lateness significantly. Institutions that had more stable information systems, more positive staff-to-student ratios, and higher leadership support had lower levels of stress and burnout among their administrative personnel. This brings into view one easily overlooked aspect of university management: examinations and registry staff wellbeing and mental health. The report's conclusion is that tackling the problem of late grade submissions is not just a matter of improving operational efficiency but is also a critical issue of occupational health and institutional resilience.

Recommendations

Policy and Institutional Reforms

To address the systemic challenge of late grade submissions and their implications for administrative staff wellbeing, universities should implement comprehensive policy and institutional reforms. Strict enforcement of submission deadlines must be supported by transparent and consistently applied penalty frameworks for non-compliance. Parallel to this, institutions should strengthen their Management Information Systems (MIS) through the deployment of modern, reliable platforms equipped with real-time monitoring dashboards, automated notifications, and structured faculty training programmes to enhance user competency. Staffing policies should be systematically reviewed to ensure alignment with enrolment growth and administrative workload, including the provision of temporary or rotational personnel during peak assessment periods. Leadership engagement is pivotal university leadership must actively support examinations offices in enforcing deadlines and addressing chronic departmental non-compliance.

Capacity Building and Professional Development

Universities should invest in sustained capacity-building initiatives for both academic and administrative staff. Regular training on assessment timelines, data management, and digital literacy should be institutionalized to enhance efficiency and compliance. Professional development programmes focusing on time management, communication, and collaborative work practices can strengthen coordination between faculty and examinations units, thereby reducing systemic delays.

Recommendations for Future Research

Longitudinal research is warranted to elucidate causal pathways linking submission lateness and mental health outcomes over time. Experimental and quasi-experimental studies should be undertaken to assess the impact of targeted interventions (e.g., MIS enhancements, penalty regimes, staffing adjustments). Comparative analyses

between public and private universities are also recommended to uncover sector-specific challenges and identify best practices for broader policy application across the higher education landscape.

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