

Factors Associated with Psychological Wellbeing and Distress of Students in Nigerian Colleges of Education: A Study of Academic Stressors and Social Support

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ABSTRACT

The mental health of tertiary institution students has emerged as a critical concern globally, with various academic, social, and economic pressures contributing to heightened levels of psychological distress. In Nigeria, where students face unique socioeconomic challenges alongside academic demands, understanding the factors that influence psychological wellbeing is essential for implementing effective interventions. This study investigates the factors associated with psychological wellbeing and distress among students in Colleges of Education in Northwest Nigeria, focusing specifically on the relationship between academic stressors and psychological outcomes, and the role of social support networks in mitigating distress. Employing a mixed methods research design, the study gathered quantitative data through surveys and qualitative insights through interviews with 379 students from selected Colleges of Education. Grounded in the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping and Social Support Theory, the research examined academic workload, fear of failure, peer support, family support, and institutional support as key variables. Findings reveal that academic stressors, particularly workload and fear of failure, are significant predictors of psychological distress, while robust social support networks serve as protective factors. Despite high levels of perceived social support from family and peers, institutional support services remain underutilised, highlighting a critical gap in mental health provision. The study provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, administrators, and mental health practitioners, including curriculum reform, enhanced counselling services, and financial support schemes.

Keywords: Psychological Wellbeing, Psychological Distress, Academic Stressors, Social Support, College Students, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of mental health and wellbeing among students in higher institutions of learning. The transition to higher education presents unique challenges and stressors that can significantly impact students' psychological wellbeing, leading to distress and negative outcomes. Research suggests that the prevalence of mental health issues among students, including anxiety, depression, and stress, has been steadily increasing, highlighting the urgent need to understand the factors contributing to this phenomenon. The psychological wellbeing of students is crucial not only for their academic success but also for their overall quality of life and future prospects. Studies indicate that many mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders, typically arise within the age bracket of 15-25 years, which coincides with the period when many individuals are pursuing higher education. About 20-50% of university students experience these problems, with factors implicated ranging from individual factors such as high stress levels and academic pressure to institutional factors such as inadequate accommodations and lack of comprehensive mental health services .

In Nigeria, the mental health challenges facing students are compounded by socioeconomic difficulties, infrastructural deficits, and limited access to mental health services. Research has shown that academic stress and financial hardship are among the strongest predictors of depression among Nigerian college students, with

a moderate negative correlation found between psychological distress and academic performance. Despite these challenges, there remains a significant gap in understanding the specific factors that influence psychological wellbeing and distress within Nigerian higher education contexts. Higher education institutions play a vital role in supporting the mental health of their students, yet many Nigerian institutions lack structured mental health policies and adequate support services. A study at the University of Ibadan found that while 59.2% of students reported strong social support, particularly from family, only 3.9% had ever utilised the College's counselling services, highlighting a critical disconnect between student needs and institutional provision.

This research aims to address this gap by investigating the factors associated with the psychological wellbeing and distress of students in Colleges of Education in Northwest Nigeria, focusing specifically on two key objectives: (1) to examine the relationship between academic stressors, such as workload and fear of failure, and students' psychological wellbeing and distress, and (2) to investigate the role of social support networks in mitigating the negative impact of stressors on students' psychological wellbeing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks: the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping and Social Support Theory. Transactional Model of Stress and Coping: Developed by Lazarus and Folkman, this model posits that stress is a transaction between an individual and their environment, involving primary appraisal (evaluating the significance of an event) and secondary appraisal (evaluating one's coping resources). Academic stressors such as workload and fear of failure trigger this appraisal process, and the individual's coping mechanisms determine the psychological outcomes. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding how students perceive and respond to academic pressures.

Social Support Theory: Social support refers to the perception of the availability of support or assistance from others, such as friends and family. Research has consistently shown that perceived social support is related to academic, personal, emotional, and social adjustment among university students. Students with higher levels of perceived parental and peer social support show better adjustment (higher wellbeing and happiness) and less distress (less depression and anxiety) than those with lower levels of perceived support.

Empirical Studies on Academic Stressors and Psychological Distress

Numerous empirical studies have investigated the relationship between academic stressors and psychological distress among students in higher education. A study conducted in a Malaysian university found that academic workload, fear of failure, and time pressure were significant predictors of psychological distress among students. Similarly, research at Emmanuel Alayande College of Education in Nigeria demonstrated that academic stress and financial hardship were the strongest predictors of depression among students. Recent research at the University of Ibadan revealed an alarming prevalence of burnout, with 81.1% of medical students classified as experiencing burnout, with high academic workload and lack of breaks identified as the primary contributing factors. Female students (91.7%) and those in advanced years reported significantly higher levels of burnout, underscoring the need for targeted interventions.

A study examining mental health as a determinant of academic performance among Nigerian college students found a moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.54$, $p < 0.05$) between psychological distress and academic performance, confirming that poor mental health directly reduces students' academic outcomes. The study made a novel contribution by demonstrating that, unlike in previous African and Asian studies where family expectations and social support were central, academic and financial stressors are more critical in the Nigerian college context.

Empirical Studies on Social Support and Psychological Wellbeing

Research has consistently demonstrated the buffering role of social support in mitigating the negative impact of stressors on psychological wellbeing. A comprehensive study of first-year university students found that perceived social support from parents and friends predicted adjustment to college, and that social support

interacted with stress to predict adjustment outcomes. Students with higher levels of perceived social support showed better wellbeing and less distress.

However, the gap between available social support and institutional support is concerning. At the University of Ibadan, while 59.2% of students reported strong social support from family, only 3.9% had ever utilised the College's counselling services. The focus group discussion revealed that students rely heavily on peer support, family, social events, and religious gatherings to cope with burnout, but dissatisfaction with counselling services was prevalent, as they were seen as ineffective and underutilised. In the Nigerian context, studies have highlighted that students often prefer informal support networks over institutional services due to stigma, cultural perceptions, and limited trust in institutional support systems. This underutilisation may stem from a complex dynamic where students appear reluctant to seek help from the very institution they perceive as the source of their academic stress, suggesting an underlying distrust in the support system.

Positive Psychology Interventions

Emerging research has explored the potential of positive psychology interventions in improving student wellbeing in Nigerian contexts. A pilot study evaluating the impact of an eight-week education and intervention incorporating acts of kindness, gratitude, positive reframing, and character strengths found that compared with controls, the intervention group showed significantly higher mental wellbeing, positive affect, and resilience, with moderate to large effects. These findings suggest that brief, strengths-based positive psychology exercises can serve as low-cost, non-stigmatising additions to university mental health services.

The Nigerian Context

The Nigerian higher education context presents unique challenges for student mental health. Research indicates that most Nigerian higher education institutions lack structured digital health policies and have limited investments in mental health infrastructure. Socioeconomic factors, including financial strain, personal debt, and limited access to resources, compound academic stressors.

A study on students in Federal Colleges of Education in North-East Nigeria found significant mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and stress, with limited access to adequate mental health services. The study emphasised the need for comprehensive research and targeted interventions addressing the interplay between mental health problems and academic performance, particularly in regions where socioeconomic and regional challenges compound these issues.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to investigate the factors associated with psychological wellbeing and distress among students in Colleges of Education in Northwest Nigeria. The mixed-methods approach combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. A cross-sectional survey design is employed for the quantitative component, enabling the simultaneous examination of multiple factors and their associations with mental health outcomes. Qualitative data is collected through semi structured interviews to explore students' personal experiences and coping strategies. The study is conducted in Colleges of Education in Northwest Nigeria, specifically in Katsina, Kano, and Kaduna States. These states were selected to provide a representative sample of Colleges of Education in the region, reflecting diverse socioeconomic and infrastructural contexts. The population of the study comprises all students in selected Colleges of Education. A stratified random sampling technique is employed to select participants. Stratification is based on key demographic variables, including academic programme, year of study, and gender. The sample size of 379 respondents is determined using Morgan's Sampling Table to ensure adequate statistical power from a total population of approximately 10,000 students.

Data Collection Instruments

Three instruments are developed for data collection

1. Self-administered Questionnaire: A structured questionnaire based on validated psychological measures, consisting of:

Demographic Information: Age, gender, academic programme, year of study, and socioeconomic status

Psychological Wellbeing: Measured using the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), assessing positive affect, life satisfaction, and functioning

Psychological Distress: Measured using the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS21) to assess symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress

Academic Stressors: Questions addressing academic workload, fear of failure, time pressure, and perceptions of the academic environment

Social Support: Measured using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), assessing support from family, friends, and significant others

2. Interview Guide: Semi structured interview protocols for in-depth interviews with a subset of students, exploring:

Perceptions of academic stressors and their impact on mental health

Coping mechanisms and strategies

Experiences with social support networks

Perceptions of institutional support services

Recommendations for improving mental health support

3. Focus Group Discussion Guide: Protocol for focus group discussions with 812 participants per group, exploring shared experiences and collective perspectives on mental health challenges and support needs.

Validity and Reliability

Content validity is established through review by five experts in educational psychology and mental health. A pilot test is conducted with 30 students not included in the main study to assess clarity and relevance. Cronbach's alpha coefficient is calculated for the questionnaire scales: the WEMWBS ($\alpha = 0.87$), DASS21 ($\alpha = 0.89$), and MSPSS ($\alpha = 0.85$) demonstrate good internal consistency.

For qualitative data, trustworthiness is ensured through:

Prolonged engagement with participants

Triangulation of data sources

Member checking with participants

Audit trail of data collection and analysis

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection is conducted over six weeks, following these stages:

Stage 1: Administrative Permissions (Week 12)

Letters of introduction obtained from Isa Kaita College of Education

Approval obtained from relevant State Ministries of Education

Consent obtained from College Provosts and Deans of Student Affairs

Informed consent obtained from participants

Stage 2: Quantitative Data Collection (Week 34)

Questionnaires distributed electronically and physically to selected respondents

Surveys administered in private settings to ensure honest responses

Follow-up reminders sent to maximise response rates

Stage 3: Qualitative Data Collection (Week 56)

Semi structured interviews conducted with 30 students (3045 minutes each)

Focus group discussions conducted with 812 participants per group (6090 minutes each)

All interviews and focus groups audio recorded with consent

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis: Data from questionnaires are analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26, employing:

Descriptive Statistics: Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations to summarise responses

Bivariate Analysis: Pearson correlation to examine relationships between demographic factors, academic stressors, social support, and psychological wellbeing/distress

Multivariate Analysis: Multiple regression analysis to identify significant predictors of psychological wellbeing and distress, controlling for demographic variables

Qualitative Data Analysis: Interviews and focus group discussions are transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis is employed following Braun and Clarke's six phase process:

1. Familiarisation with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

NVivo software is used to facilitate qualitative data analysis, supporting systematic coding and theme development.

Triangulation: Findings from quantitative and qualitative analyses are triangulated to enhance validity and provide a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to established ethical research principles:

Informed Consent: All participants provide written informed consent

Confidentiality: Participants' identities are protected through anonymisation

Voluntary Participation: Participants are informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty

Cultural Sensitivity: Research protocols respect local cultural norms and practices

No Maleficence: The research does not cause harm to participants

Ethical Approval: Ethical clearance is obtained from the Isa Kaita College of Education Research Ethics Committee

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

Demographic Characteristics

The final sample comprised 379 students across the selected Colleges of Education. Demographic characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	201	53.0
	Female	178	47.0
Age Group	18-20 years	189	49.9
	21-23 years	134	35.4
	24+ years	56	14.8
Year of Study	Year 1	95	25.1
	Year 2	110	29.0
	Year 3	114	30.1
	Year 4	60	15.8
Academic Programme	Arts/Humanities	121	31.9
	Sciences	98	25.9
	Social Sciences	89	23.5
	Vocational/Technical	71	18.7

Academic Stressors and Psychological Distress

Table 2: Levels of Academic Stressors and Psychological Distress

Variable	Mean Score (15)	Standard Deviation	Percentage Reporting High Levels
Academic Workload	4.1	0.89	72.3%
Fear of Failure	3.9	0.94	65.4%
Time Pressure	4.0	0.91	68.5%
Examination Anxiety	4.2	0.87	76.5%
Psychological Distress			
Anxiety Symptoms	3.8	0.92	62.3%
Depression Symptoms	3.5	0.96	54.6%
Stress Symptoms	4.0	0.88	70.2%

Students reported high levels of academic stressors, with examination anxiety (76.5%) and academic workload (72.3%) being the most prevalent concerns. Psychological distress was also prevalent, with 70.2% of students reporting high levels of stress symptoms, followed by anxiety (62.3%) and depression (54.6%).

Table 3: Correlation between Academic Stressors and Psychological Distress

Variables	Correlation (r)	Significance (p)
Academic Workload Anxiety	0.48	$p < 0.01$
Academic Workload Depression	0.42	$p < 0.01$
Academic Workload Stress	0.52	$p < 0.01$
Fear of Failure Anxiety	0.45	$p < 0.01$
Fear of Failure Depression	0.39	$p < 0.01$
Fear of Failure Stress	0.47	$p < 0.01$
Time Pressure Anxiety	0.44	$p < 0.01$
Time Pressure Stress	0.50	$p < 0.01$

Significant positive correlations were found between academic stressors and psychological distress indicators. Academic workload showed the strongest correlation with stress ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$), while fear of failure showed moderate correlations across all distress indicators.

Role of Social Support

Table 4: Perceived Social Support and Psychological Wellbeing

Variable	Mean Score (15)	Percentage Reporting High Support
Family Support	4.2	78.5%

Peer Support	4.0	72.4%
Significant Other Support	3.7	58.9%
Institutional Support	2.8	32.1%
Psychological Wellbeing		
Life Satisfaction	3.6	56.2%
Positive Affect	3.9	64.8%
Psychological Functioning	3.7	60.4%

While students reported high levels of family support (78.5%) and peer support (72.4%), institutional support was notably low (32.1%). This gap between perceived social support and institutional provision is significant.

Table 5: Correlation between Social Support and Psychological Wellbeing/Distress

Variables	Correlation (r)	Significance (p)
Family Support Wellbeing	0.52	$p < 0.01$
Family Support Distress	0.44	$p < 0.01$
Peer Support Wellbeing	0.48	$p < 0.01$
Peer Support Distress	0.41	$p < 0.01$
Institutional Support Wellbeing	0.28	$p < 0.05$
Institutional Support Distress	0.22	$p < 0.05$

Family support showed the strongest positive correlation with psychological wellbeing ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$) and negative correlation with distress ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$). Institutional support showed weaker but significant correlations, suggesting its potential role if adequately developed.

Table 6: Multiple Regression Analysis: Predictors of Psychological Distress

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Academic Workload	0.34	0.06	0.28	5.67	$p < 0.001$
Fear of Failure	0.28	0.05	0.23	5.12	$p < 0.001$
Time Pressure	0.25	0.06	0.20	4.45	$p < 0.001$
Family Support	0.31	0.06	0.25	5.23	$p < 0.001$
Peer Support	0.22	0.07	0.18	3.89	$p < 0.001$
Institutional Support	0.12	0.08	0.08	1.52	$p = 0.13$

$R^2 = 0.48$, $F(6, 372) = 56.78$, $p < 0.001$

The multiple regression model explained 48% of the variance in psychological distress ($R^2 = 0.48$). Academic workload ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$) and fear of failure ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.001$) were the strongest predictors of distress, while family support ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$) and peer support ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$) significantly buffered distress. Institutional support was not a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.13$).

Qualitative Findings

Academic Stressors and Psychological Distress

Thematic analysis of interviews and focus group discussions revealed pervasive concerns about academic stressors and their impact on mental health.

Theme 1: Overwhelming Academic Workload

Students consistently reported that the volume of academic work was overwhelming and negatively affected their mental health:

"The workload is too much. We have assignments from multiple courses due at the same time, and we barely have time to rest. I often feel exhausted and anxious about meeting deadlines." (Student, Female, Year 3, Arts)

"Between lectures, assignments, and preparing for examinations, I have no time for myself. I feel like I'm constantly under pressure." (Student, Male, Year 2, Sciences)

Theme 2: Fear of Failure and Examination Anxiety

Fear of failure was a recurring theme, particularly related to examinations and academic progression:

"I'm always worried about failing my courses. If I fail, my parents will be disappointed, and I might lose my scholarship. This fear keeps me awake at night." (Student, Female, Year 1, Social Sciences)

"The examination period is the worst. The anxiety is so intense that I can't concentrate, and sometimes I even forget what I studied." (Student, Male, Year 4, Vocational/Technical)

Theme 3: Financial Concerns as an Additional Stressor

Financial strain was identified as compounding academic stress:

"Besides worrying about my studies, I constantly worry about paying my fees. My parents struggle to support me, and I sometimes have to work after school, which leaves no time for rest." (Student, Female, Year 2, Sciences)

This aligns with research showing that financial hardship is a strong predictor of depression among Nigerian college students.

Role of Social Support

Theme 4: Family Support as a Buffer

Students consistently reported that family support helped them cope with stress:

"My parents always encourage me and remind me that my best is enough. Their support keeps me going even when things are difficult." (Student, Female, Year 3, Arts)

"Knowing that my family believes in me gives me the strength to keep trying." (Student, Male, Year 1, Vocational/Technical)

Theme 5: Peer Support and Collective Coping

Peer networks were identified as crucial for emotional support and coping:

"My friends understand what I'm going through because they're in the same situation. We encourage each other, share notes, and sometimes just talk about our problems." (Student, Female, Year 2, Sciences)

"Without my friends, I don't think I would have survived this far. We help each other study and remind each other to take breaks." (Student, Male, Year 3, Social Sciences)

Theme 6: Institutional Support Gap

A concerning theme was the underutilisation and perceived inadequacy of institutional support services:

"I know there's a counselling centre, but I don't feel comfortable going there. I've heard from others that it's not very helpful." (Student, Female, Year 1, Arts)

"The counselling services are not well-publicised, and even if you go, the counsellors don't seem to understand what students are going through." (Student, Male, Year 4, Sciences)

This finding aligns with research at the University of Ibadan, where only 3.9% of students had utilised counselling services despite high levels of burnout.

Theme 7: Desire for Institutional Mental Health Support

Despite the gap in current provision, students expressed a strong desire for institutional support:

"We need the school to do more. They should have programmes to help students manage stress, not just expect us to cope on our own." (Student, Male, Year 2, Social Sciences)

"The school could organise workshops on stress management, and they should make counselling more accessible and less stigmatised." (Student, Female, Year 3, Sciences)

DISCUSSION

Relationship between Academic Stressors and Psychological Distress

The finding that academic stressors, particularly workload and fear of failure, are significant predictors of psychological distress supports the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. Students' appraisal of academic demands as threatening, coupled with limited coping resources, results in psychological distress. The prevalence of high stress symptoms (70.2%), anxiety (62.3%), and depression (54.6%) among students is concerning and aligns with global research indicating that 2050% of university students experience mental health problems. However, the rates in this study are notably higher than global averages, reflecting the compounded challenges faced by Nigerian students, including socioeconomic difficulties and infrastructural deficits.

The strong correlation between academic workload and stress ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$) is consistent with research at the University of Ibadan, where high academic workload and lack of breaks were identified as the primary contributing factors to burnout. The finding that examination anxiety (76.5%) was the most prevalent stressor reflects the high-stakes nature of Nigerian examinations and the significant consequences of failure, including scholarship loss and parental disappointment. Fear of failure (65.4%) as a significant predictor of distress highlights the role of performance anxiety in the Nigerian educational context. This aligns with research in Malaysian universities, where fear of failure and time pressure were significant predictors of psychological distress. The qualitative data revealing that students are "constantly worried about failing" and that examination anxiety "keeps me awake at night" underscores the emotional toll of academic pressure. Financial concerns were identified as an additional stressor, consistent with research showing that financial hardship is the strongest predictor of depression among Nigerian college students. The qualitative finding that students "worry about paying fees" and "sometimes have to work after school" highlights the intersection of academic and economic pressures.

Role of Social Support in Mitigating Distress

The finding that family support ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$) and peer support ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$) significantly buffer psychological distress supports Social Support Theory. Students with higher levels of perceived social support show better wellbeing and less distress. Family support showed the strongest buffering effect, consistent with research showing that perceived parental support is crucial for student adjustment. The qualitative finding that parents' encouragement "keeps me going even when things are difficult" reflects the importance of family as a source of emotional and motivational support. Peer support was also significant, with students describing how friends "understand what I'm going through" and "encourage each other." This aligns with research at the University of Ibadan, where students relied heavily on peer support, family, social events, and religious gatherings to cope with burnout.

However, the striking gap between social support and institutional support is concerning. While 78.5% of students reported high family support and 72.4% reported high peer support, only 32.1% reported high institutional support. The multiple regression analysis revealed that institutional support was not a significant predictor of psychological distress ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.13$), suggesting that current institutional support services are either inadequate or underutilised. The qualitative data provide insights into this gap. Students expressed that they "don't feel comfortable going to" counselling services and perceive them as "not very helpful." This underutilisation may stem from a complex dynamic where students are reluctant to seek help from institutions they perceive as the source of their academic stress, suggesting an underlying distrust in the support system. The gap between perceived social support and institutional support underscores the need for systemic reforms in Nigerian higher education. While family and peer support are valuable protective factors, they should not be relied upon as substitutes for professional mental health services, particularly for severe psychological distress. The finding that students express a strong desire for institutional mental health support indicates that there is demand for improved services.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Theoretical Implications: The study provides empirical support for the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping and Social Support Theory in the Nigerian college context. The findings confirm that academic stressors are significant predictors of psychological distress, while social support networks serve as protective factors. However, the study also reveals limitations of these frameworks in contexts where institutional support is inadequate. This suggests a need for theoretical models that explicitly address the role of institutional factors in student mental health.

Practical Implications

For College Administrators: The findings underscore the need for: Curriculum reform to reduce excessive academic workload, structured breaks and time management support, enhanced institutional support services, including accessible and non-stigmatising counselling and Financial support schemes to alleviate economic pressures.

For Mental Health Practitioners: The results suggest

Integration of positive psychology interventions, which have shown promise in Nigerian contexts, group based interventions leveraging peer support networks, mental health literacy programmes addressing stigma and promoting help seeking.

For Policymakers: The findings emphasise

Need for national mental health policies in higher education, investment in mental health infrastructure and Integration of mental health into educational quality frameworks.

Contributions to Knowledge

This study contributes to knowledge in several ways:

1. Contextual Understanding: Provides insights into the specific factors influencing student mental health in Nigerian Colleges of Education
2. Comprehensive Perspective: Offers both quantitative and qualitative insights into academic stressors and social support
3. Practical Recommendations: Provides actionable recommendations for enhancing student wellbeing
4. Theoretical Contribution: Extends stress and social support frameworks to the Nigerian college context
5. Empirical Evidence: Contributes to the limited body of research on student mental health in Northwest Nigeria

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the relationship between academic stressors and psychological distress, and the role of social support networks in mitigating distress among students in Colleges of Education in Northwest Nigeria. The findings reveal that academic stressors, particularly workload and fear of failure, are significant predictors of psychological distress, while robust social support networks, especially from family and peers, serve as protective factors. The high prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression among students is concerning and underscores the urgent need for comprehensive mental health interventions. While students benefit from strong family and peer support, institutional support services are critically lacking, with only a minority of students utilising available services. This gap between social and institutional support highlights the need for systemic reforms in Nigerian higher education.

The study's recommendations emphasise the need for comprehensive approaches addressing multiple dimensions: curriculum reform to reduce excessive workload, enhanced institutional support services, financial support schemes, and mental health literacy programmes. Specific recommendations include integrating structured breaks into the academic calendar, establishing accessible and non-stigmatising counselling services, implementing group based peer support interventions, and introducing positive psychology programmes that have shown promise in Nigerian contexts. In conclusion, while students in Nigerian Colleges of Education face significant psychological challenges, the potential for improving mental health outcomes through targeted interventions is substantial. By addressing the identified barriers and leveraging existing protective factors, stakeholders can foster supportive learning environments that prioritise students' psychological wellbeing and enable academic success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

For College Administrators

1. Curriculum Reform:

Review academic workload to ensure it is manageable

Integrate structured breaks into the academic calendar

Implement time management programmes to help students balance academic demands

2. Enhanced Institutional Support:

Establish accessible and non-stigmatising counselling services

Train counsellors to understand and address the specific challenges faced by students

Publicise mental health services to increase awareness and utilisation

3. Financial Support Schemes:

Establish scholarship and bursary programmes for economically disadvantaged students

Provide emergency financial assistance for students facing economic crises

Partner with financial institutions to offer student-friendly loans

4. Peer Support Programmes:

Establish peer support networks and mentoring programmes

Train student leaders in basic mental health first aid

Create safe spaces for students to share experiences and support each other

For Mental Health Practitioners

1. Positive Psychology Interventions:

Implement brief, strengths based positive psychology exercises (gratitude, kindness, positive reframing)

Evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions in the Nigerian college context

2. Group Based Interventions:

Leverage existing peer support networks through group based mental health programmes

Facilitate support groups where students can share experiences and coping strategies

3. Mental Health Literacy:

Conduct awareness campaigns addressing stigma and promoting help seeking

Provide education on recognising early warning signs of mental health problems

Train faculty and staff in supporting students with mental health challenges

For Policymakers

1. National Mental Health Policy:

Develop a national policy on mental health in higher education

Integrate mental health into educational quality frameworks

Allocate dedicated funding for mental health services in tertiary institutions

2. Infrastructure Investment:

Invest in mental health infrastructure in higher education institutions

Support the establishment of counselling centres with trained professionals

Provide resources for digital mental health interventions, particularly in rural areas

3. Research and Evaluation:

Fund research on student mental health to inform evidence based interventions

Establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for mental health initiatives

Support multi-institutional studies to compare mental health outcomes across contexts

For Students

1. Peer Support:

Actively engage in peer support networks

Seek help from friends and family when experiencing distress

Support fellow students who may be struggling

2. Coping Strategies:

Develop healthy coping mechanisms, including stress management techniques

Maintain balanced lifestyles with adequate rest and recreation

Utilise available institutional support services

3. Advocacy:

Advocate for improved mental health services in their institutions

Participate in mental health awareness initiatives

Provide feedback to administrators on the effectiveness of support services

Suggestions for Further Research

1. Longitudinal Studies: Conduct longitudinal studies to track the progression of psychological distress over the course of students' academic programmes

2. Intervention Research: Develop and evaluate culturally appropriate interventions, including positive psychology programmes and cognitive behavioural approaches

3. Multi-Institutional Studies: Compare mental health outcomes across different Nigerian states and types of institutions to identify contextual variations

4. Socioeconomic Analysis: Examine the relationship between students' socioeconomic backgrounds and vulnerability to psychological distress

5. Institutional Case Studies: Conduct in-depth case studies of institutions that have successfully implemented mental health interventions

6. Technology Based Interventions: Investigate the feasibility and effectiveness of AI-powered psychological counselling and digital mental health tools in Nigerian contexts

7. Cultural Studies: Explore cultural factors affecting mental health help seeking and develop culturally appropriate approaches to intervention

8. Comparative Studies: Compare mental health outcomes between Nigerian students and students in other African or developing country contexts

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Conflict of Interest Statement

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