

# Work Related Stress among Emerging Private Universities, a Case Study of Two Selected Universities in Harare, Zimbabwe

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.12040014>

Received: 10 March 2025; Accepted: 24 March 2025; Published: 29 April 2025

## ABSTRACT

This research examined work-related stress among staff members in two anonymous evolving private universities of Harare metropolitan district in Zimbabwe. The two universities have a total population of 136 staff members (both academic and non-academic). A sample size of 40 participants was selected out of the 105 staff members who operate onsite. By means of a cross-sectional research design with both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study collected data through semi-structured interviews and the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) to ascertain their sources of stress and stress levels. The findings revealed moderate to higher levels of stress among the administrative and support staff. The major stressors identified include; unclear institutional policies, delayed salaries, work overload, pressure to maintain standards, and competition for recognition. The research also noted that while women staff members were more motivated to express their stress, men staff members presented with passivity in seeking mental health support despite desiring it. Physical signs of stress involved chronic headaches, fatigue, and sleep disturbances, whereas emotional symptoms included irritability, procrastination, and poor concentration. The research emphasized a pressing need for structured mental health support frameworks, clear institutional policies, and well-defined self-care practices in evolving private universities. Recommendations include creating extensive mental health support initiatives, enhancing communication within the organization, and establishing stress management initiatives.

**Keywords:** work-related stress, emerging universities, private institutions, coping mechanisms, mental health support, academic staff wellbeing

## INTRODUCTION

Work-related mental health issues have been recorded to be on upsurge due to various factors. Rana and Soodan (2019) assert that the world has become increasingly competitive such that every endeavor has to be deemed lucrative and gratifying thereby exerting a lot of pressure on the workers. Griffith and Sovero (2021) specifically note that the university faculty members, particularly the part-time and junior faculty members struggle with ever-expanding workloads to improve their prominence through engagement in various academic-related undertakings. The study that was carried out by Xu and Wang (2023) further reveal that the stress that emanates from workplace demands has been noted to be the greatest spoiler of the university's faculty members' wellbeing. While most of the publications seem to have generally focused mostly on work-related stress in universities, without explicitly highlighting certain essentials like the nature of such universities; this study will specifically explore the experiences of the university staff that operates in a growing private-owned university.

Brady & Wilson (2022) assert that teaching in a private school is a taxing career that is characterized by strenuous workloads, standardized policies, a higher demand for visibility and the pressure to maintain the stipulated essential standards. This is in agreement with Soares et al (2020) who maintain that the university faculty members engage in a series of demanding activities to improve the visibility of their departments by engaging in demanding activities that strain their physical and mental health. In line with this, it can be argued that the upcoming universities are not an exception as they also struggle with a higher demand for visibility and standard

maintenance. One would therefore question how the staff survive amidst the demanding administrative and non-administrative tasks which unquestionably present as a strain to their mental wellbeing.

Zhao, Liao, Li, Jiang, & Ding (2022) maintain that job stress is usually associated with the physical, emotional and psychological challenges that are related to work pressure. Kang, Park, & Sorensen (2022) further assert that work-related stress in academic institutions is often associated with the work burdens that surpass the teacher's ability to cope thereby leading to depression, anxiety, and fatigue due to a blend of internal and external factors. Usoro and Etuk (2016) also defined stress as a condition that is associated with an experience of a discrepancy between the present and the desired state. The study therefore explored the stress levels of the staff who work in a growing private owned university in order to ascertain this reality and pave way for mitigation measures towards the escalation of stress levels among the university staff.

According to the Welford performance and demand theory (Welford, 1973), stress presents as a product of a result of an imbalance between one's actual performance and the expected performance or simply the pressure that results from the inability to meet the required performance standards. The same theory further highlights that human beings and other creatures adjust well and perform exceptionally well when exposed to favorable conditions. Suggestive of this, it can deduced that work-related stress levels can depend on the specific environmental factors (Oyewole, Adegoke, & Atoyebi, 2020). While Welford's theory explains this relationship between performance and balance, one can question why individuals facing the same stressors can actually perform differently even when they work in the same environment. This leaves a lot to be desired in light with individual stress levels and their triggers.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study aimed at achieving the following objectives;

- To establish the most prevalent stressors in emerging private-owned universities.
- To ascertain the levels of stress among the university staff.
- To establish measures of coping with negative stress among the university staff.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study helps in identifying how stress manifests in the academic environment of emerging private institutions, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of stress dynamics among the staff members. It can further aid administrators, educators, and policymakers in crafting strategies that promote mental well-being and a healthy work-life balance. The findings of the study can also lead to the development of more informed and strategic policies in areas like workload management, faculty training, and staff support programs. Furthermore, this research can open up avenues for future studies, exploring deeper connections between stress and factors like faculty burnout, social media usage, or the impact of emerging technologies in education.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study utilized a cross-sectional research design to obtain a fair representation of all staff members in the selected universities at the same time (Thomas, 2023). Both quantitative and qualitative approaches of data collection were employed so as to obtain both the numerical and non-numerical data. In a total population of 105 onsite staff members, the study sample of 50 participants was selected wherein a total of 50 semi structured interview guides were randomly distributed alongside the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) to assess the depression levels in a clinical setting (Kroenke, Spitzer & Williams 2001). In the end, a total of 40 questionnaires were retrieved from the respondents and these were found feasible for the study analysis. The obtained data was further scrutinized by the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) while some themes were also developed to present the respondents' opinions regarding the subject matter. The researchers maintained confidentiality in order to protect the reputation of the concerned institutions and the staff due to the sensitivity of the results.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study revealed that out of a study sample of 40, most of the university staff were women (20) than men (17) with a total of three who preferred not to reveal their gender. From this analysis, one can conclude that there has been a balance in terms of staff recruitment with regards to gender and age (as shown by the figures that were represented on the age bracket of 30-44 and 45+ years). With regards to marital status, out of a sample size of 40 respondents, those who are married were 23, 11 were single, 5 were single and 1 was separated. From these findings, one can deduce that most of the staff members were family people who had other responsibilities apart from work related.

### Profile of private-owned university staff and their stress levels

The study developed four tables to reveal the relationship between the university staff profiles and their stress levels.

Table 1. Professional role versus Depression level Cross-tabulation

Count		Depression level				Total
		Mild depression	Moderate	Moderately severe depression	Severe depression	
Professional role	Administrative staff	3	5	4	1	13
	Academic staff	6	6	3	3	18
	Non-academic staff	3	4	1	1	9
Total		12	15	8	5	40

In table 3 above, the study analysis revealed that the academic staff members had the highest number of those who were moderately and severely depressed respectively. According to the PHQ-9 score interpretation, those who are severely depressed are likely to be suffering from a major depressive disorder that is characterized by the impairment of social, occupational and other important areas of functioning (Kroenke et al, 2001). This can align with the idea that the academic staff carry a burden of a mixture of internal and external factors that surpass the teacher's ability to cope thereby leading to depression, anxiety, and fatigue (Kang et al, 2022).

Table 2. Gender versus Depression level Cross-tabulation

Count		Depression level				Total
		Mild depression	Moderate	Moderately severe depression	Severe depression	
Gender	Male	7	4	4	2	17
	Female	5	9	3	3	20
	Rather not say	0	2	1	0	3
Total		12	15	8	5	40

The gender distribution and depression levels of the respondents was analyzed contrastingly. The findings revealed that most of the respondents presented with moderate depression with a higher rate in females than

males. Suggestive of this, one can conclude that females tend to be more emotionally expressive than males (Chaplin, 2015). There is also a notable similar figure in both genders for those who were severely depressed. This could mean that men also suffer from severe symptoms of depression although they are limited in expressing it McKenzie, Collings, Jenkin, River, (2018).

### Emerging Themes

The following themes were developed from the qualitative data that was obtained from the semi-structured questionnaire that was administered. This consisted of three sections where first section comprised of a PHQ-9 scale that was intended to rate the stress levels of the respondents. The second section dealt with the demographic data to ascertain the age, gender, marital status and professional role of the university staff members. The last section made inquiries about the university staff's opinion with regards to seeking mental health services, indicate their personal sources of work-related stress, determine the presented signs and symptoms, the coping mechanisms and the suggestions on what can be done to reduce stress in their institution.

#### The desire to access the counselling services

The findings of the study revealed that out of the 40 participants, only 4 had accessed counselling services while 20 expressed their desire to meet a counsellor and the other 16 were not sure of anything. Out of this, the 4 who had gone for counselling, 3 were females while out of the 20 who desired counselling services, 11 of them were males. From this, one can realize that the majority of men would long to access mental health services though the reasons behind their hesitation is not clear. One of the male respondents expressed that; *"Going for counselling sessions can be helpful but it is difficult to spare time for such a commitment as we will be very busy"*. Another said; *"Visiting a counselling office at our institution would alert everyone that I am going through stuff and this can also ruin my reputation."* From these responses, one can conclude that pressure of work or societal expectations can be a limitation as asserted by Van Heerden, Msweli, & Van Rooyen, (2015).

#### Unclear policies and procedures escalating the stress levels

The participants attributed most of their stress to the imprecise guidelines that are coupled with a higher demand for standard maintenance. One of the participants specifically said; *"I get irritated by poor planning in this institution. There is need to come up with better working strategies rather than giving us unnecessary pressure while things are not fully organized"*. This response was echoed by a number of participants who confirmed that there was more to be desired in terms of the organization of the university which in turn exerts pressure in the staff. This is in agreement with the view that private owned learning institutions struggle with the pressure to maintain higher standards for growth and visibility (Soares et al, 2020). Another participant had to say; *"Delayed salaries and poor working conditions are stressful"*. One can then realize that upcoming universities also face administrative challenges that contribute to stress among the staff.

#### The stress related to the pressure to conform and achieve.

The findings of the study revealed that some of the work-related stress among the emerging university staff was caused by the pressure to suit into the environment and ensure for job security. The participants highlighted that there is a lot of competition with regards to visibility and promotion which prompts the individuals to work beyond their potentials in order to be noticed. One of the respondents said; *"Some of the stress is caused by the fear of losing the job and not getting recognized by the authorities especially with regards to departmental ranks"*. From this given response, one can deduce that the pressure to be recognized and achieve the best is one of the leading factors towards the intensification of work-related stress among university staff. Another participant had explicitly said; *"Lack of appreciation and favoritism is also another cause of stress"*. When asked to further clarify this, she further said; *"At times the authorities reward the undeserving members of staff leaving out the hardworking ones, such that at the end of the day one will feel demotivated and frustrated"*. From this response, it can be concluded that the university staff also struggle with the desire to be promoted which in turn exerts a lot of pressure on their daily contribution towards the development of the upcoming institution as asserted by Jung et al (2023).

## **Stress related symptoms affecting all functional dimensions**

The participants identified the physical, emotional and social effects of stress on their daily operations. The majority of the identified symptoms were 40% physical; and these included chronic headaches, fatigue, poor sleep patterns, and lack of appetite and heart palpitations. On the emotional symptoms, a good number also listed irritability, anger outbursts, procrastination, forgetfulness and challenges in concentration. This is in agreement with the findings of a study that was carried out at the Catholic University of Zimbabwe (Zvada, & Thomas, 2019). Suggestive of this, one can concur that the symptoms of stress among the academic staff contribute a lot to the physical and psychological wellbeing of the staff members. Other respondents further recorded poor social life that is coupled by lack of interest in keeping social connections, constant conflicts/squabbles within the work environment and lack of interest/motivation in previously enjoyed activities. From the identified symptoms, it can be further concluded that stress was visible among the university staff and this was experienced differently.

## **The dire need for well-defined self-care strategies**

The study findings recommend that the universities set in place self-care related strategies that are aimed at reducing stress. From the given responses, the participants underlined the significance of creating time for recreation, sports, mental health inputs, access to regular mental health services and other activities that can promote the wellbeing of the staff amidst the demanding responsibilities. On a different note, one of the respondents said; “One has to create boundaries between work and life”. Another also said; “The university authorities should not only advocate for the university growth but to also consider the wellbeing of the workers lest the institution will become a stressful space”. From these two responses, one can realize that more need to be done of the area of mental health wellness in developing universities lest people will end up struggling in silence until the situation gets out of hand.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study examined work-related stress among staff in two emerging private universities of Harare in Zimbabwe, focusing on stressors, stress levels, coping mechanisms, and possible solutions. The findings revealed significant stress levels among university staff, with academic staff experiencing the highest levels of moderate to severe depression. Stress was attributed to various factors, including unclear policies and procedures, delayed salaries, work overload, administrative inefficiencies, and the pressure to conform and achieve for job security and promotion. Women were found to be more emotionally expressive regarding their stress, while cultural and societal expectations discouraged men from seeking counseling or mental health services.

The symptoms of stress were both physical and emotional exhibiting signs of headaches, fatigue, poor sleep and irritability, procrastination, forgetfulness, respectively. Despite the awful mental health situation, very few staff members had reached out for counseling services. This was due to barriers such as workload, stigma, and lack of prioritization by the institutions. The findings underscore the urgent need for better mental health support, improved organizational practices, and policies to lessen stress among university staff.

### **Recommendations**

To prevent burnout, academic staff should be given realistic goals and administrative workloads reassessed. Fair recognition of staff contributions is crucial. Training in time management, stress management, and coping mechanisms is essential. Administrators should receive leadership training. Clear communication and clear organizational policies can reduce confusion and stress. On-time salary payments can save money.

Universities should provide accessible and confidential mental health support systems, organize workshops and seminars on stress management, and incorporate Employee Assistance Programs. They should promote self-care and recreational activities to help staff manage stress. Anonymous feedback channels can be used to improve working conditions. Prioritizing staff well-being alongside institutional growth and visibility fosters a supportive work culture. National policies should support mental health in private universities, ensuring adequate funding and resources.

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