



Academic Stress in College Students: Causative Factors and Their Impact on Mental Well-Being

Rina Saldianasari

Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Sabili Bandung, Indonesia

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail: rinanoeg@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the causative factors of academic stress among college students and its impact on their mental well-being. The study employs a library research method by reviewing relevant literature from international journals and academic sources. Findings show that academic stress arises from several interconnected factors, such as excessive academic workload, social and peer pressure, high self-expectations, and inadequate social or institutional support. These stressors often accumulate and place students at higher risk of experiencing psychological strain. The impact of academic stress is significant, leading to sleep problems, heightened anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and decreased academic motivation. In the long term, it can also reduce overall quality of life and hinder academic performance. Furthermore, academic stress not only affects mental health but also physical health, potentially resulting in fatigue, weakened immunity, and other stress-related illnesses. The implications of these findings emphasize the importance of preventive and supportive measures. Higher education institutions are encouraged to provide accessible psychological counseling, foster supportive learning environments, and reduce stigma associated with mental health issues. Additionally, the development of structured intervention programs, stress management workshops, and peer support systems can play a vital role in improving students' resilience and overall well-being.

1. Introduction

Academic stress has emerged as a pervasive issue for students globally, often linked to the demand for high academic performance and the intense pressure to succeed. This challenge has become even more prominent due to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified students' feelings of isolation and exacerbated stress levels (Eisenberg et al., 2020). The restrictions on social

interactions, cancellation of in-person classes, and the transition to online learning further complicated students' ability to manage academic pressure, leading to heightened mental health concerns (Sahu, 2020). Studies have shown that academic stress can lead to severe mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and burnout, which affect both the academic and personal lives of students (Hamaideh, 2011; Zhang & Lian, 2022).

The consequences of academic stress extend beyond the classroom, affecting students' physical, emotional, and social well-being. Research indicates that academic stress can manifest in several negative ways, including sleep disturbances, reduced academic motivation, and social withdrawal. While previous studies have established the link between academic stress and poor mental health, the specific factors contributing to this stress remain underexplored in many contexts (Arslan, 2021). Identifying these factors is critical for developing effective strategies that can mitigate the impact of academic stress on students. Factors such as an overwhelming academic workload, unrealistic self-expectations, and lack of social support are commonly cited as major contributors to stress (Choi et al., 2016; Pascoe et al., 2020). Moreover, external pressures from peers and family expectations often compound the internal struggles students face, amplifying their stress levels (Li & Lin, 2003).

Previous research indicates that multiple factors contribute to the onset of academic stress. A primary contributor is the high academic workload, where the demands placed on students, such as tight deadlines, large volumes of reading, and exams, significantly impact their mental health (Choi et al., 2016). Social pressures, such as comparisons to peers and the desire to meet family or cultural expectations, also play a key role (Pascoe et al., 2020). Self-expectations and perfectionism can exacerbate stress, making students more prone to burnout (Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). Furthermore, a lack of social support networks in academic settings often leaves students feeling isolated, which in turn amplifies feelings of stress and anxiety (Green et al., 2021). These stressors can lead to a variety of negative outcomes, including sleep disturbances, anxiety, depression, and a general decline in quality of life (Eisenberg et al., 2009). For instance, studies by Pascoe et al. (2020) and Li & Lin (2003) show a strong correlation between academic stress and psychological distress, demonstrating that students under high levels of stress often experience a significant decrease in motivation and an increased risk of dropping out.

This article provides a fresh and comprehensive approach to understanding academic stress by synthesizing recent literature and offering new perspectives on its causes and consequences. Unlike prior studies, which often focus on isolated factors, this article adopts a more holistic view, integrating multiple stressors that students face in modern educational settings. By utilizing updated research, including studies from 2015 onward, this article contributes to the growing body of literature on the topic and underscores the importance of

considering both internal and external factors that affect students' mental health. Notably, recent studies have highlighted the growing importance of psychological support services in reducing the impact of academic stress and preventing mental health issues (Zhang & Lian, 2022). Moreover, this article advocates for universities to integrate comprehensive support systems that address academic pressure and promote overall student well-being.

2. Methodology

The research method utilized in this study is a library research approach, which involves the systematic collection and analysis of secondary data from academic sources. This method is particularly effective in examining well-established theories and identifying emerging trends in the field of academic stress and its impact on students' mental health. By reviewing a broad range of academic materials, including international journals, peer-reviewed articles, and research reports, the study was able to gather a comprehensive view of the issue. Library research provides the advantage of drawing from a wealth of existing knowledge without the need for primary data collection, allowing for a synthesis of findings across diverse studies and contexts. According to Webster and Watson (2015), this approach is valuable for developing a deep understanding of complex phenomena by drawing insights from multiple sources in a structured and critical manner.

The data sources included in this study were selected based on specific inclusion criteria: the studies must have been published within the last five years, ensuring the research incorporated the most current data and trends in the field of academic stress and mental health. By focusing on recent publications, this study aimed to capture the evolving nature of student experiences in contemporary higher education settings, especially in light of the increased mental health challenges that have emerged following the COVID-19 pandemic (Eisenberg et al., 2020). This period also includes the growing recognition of the importance of mental health support in academic environments, making the research particularly relevant for current discussions on student well-being (Pascoe et al., 2020). The relevance to college students in higher education was another key criterion, ensuring that the selected studies addressed the unique pressures and stressors experienced by this demographic.

In terms of the analysis process, the data was systematically categorized by identifying and grouping the primary causative factors of academic

stress and the subsequent effects on students' mental health. Factors such as high academic workload, peer pressure, unrealistic self-expectations, and lack of social support were consistently identified as key contributors to stress (Choi et al., 2016; Green et al., 2021). This categorization allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the complex nature of academic stress, illustrating that stressors are often interrelated and vary in intensity depending on individual and environmental factors. For instance, the work of Pascoe et al. (2020) highlights how academic stress can lead to physical and emotional consequences, such as sleep disturbances, anxiety, and reduced motivation, all of which can have long-term implications for students' mental well-being.

Additionally, the study examined how these factors impact students' overall mental health, focusing on outcomes such as anxiety, depression, burnout, and a decline in life satisfaction. According to Stoeber and Rennert (2008), perfectionism and self-imposed high expectations are particularly significant predictors of stress, leading to burnout and emotional exhaustion. The systematic review of these factors not only allowed for the identification of common patterns but also underscored the importance of institutional support, such as counseling services and stress management programs, to mitigate these negative effects (Li & Lin, 2003; Zhang & Lian, 2022).

This library research approach, therefore, provided a robust foundation for understanding the multidimensional nature of academic stress and its impact on mental health, with implications for policy and practice in higher education. By systematically categorizing the factors contributing to academic stress and their consequences, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse about improving student well-being through comprehensive support systems.

3. Results and Discussion

Causative Factors of Academic Stress

Academic stress has become an increasingly prevalent issue in higher education settings worldwide, affecting students' psychological, emotional, and physical well-being. The causes of academic stress are multi-faceted, involving both external and internal factors that place significant pressure on students to perform at high levels. In this section, we explore the primary causative factors contributing to academic stress, including high academic workload, social pressure, self-expectations, and lack of social support.

One of the primary factors contributing to academic stress is the high academic workload. In many higher education institutions, students are expected to manage multiple assignments, projects,

and exams, often with tight deadlines. The accumulation of academic responsibilities can overwhelm students, causing them to feel stressed, anxious, and fatigued. According to a study by Hamaideh (2011), excessive academic workload leads to heightened stress levels, which can manifest in physical symptoms such as headaches and gastrointestinal issues, as well as emotional symptoms like irritability and frustration. The pressure to meet deadlines and maintain academic performance can also affect students' overall mental health, leading to anxiety and burnout (Pascoe et al., 2020).

A significant factor that exacerbates the academic workload is the expectation for students to balance their studies with extracurricular activities, part-time jobs, and social engagements. As suggested by Choi et al. (2016), managing these multiple demands can lead to time management issues, leaving students with limited time for rest and relaxation. When students cannot meet the demands of their academic and social responsibilities, stress levels increase, further impacting their well-being.

Another key factor contributing to academic stress is social pressure. Students often experience stress due to comparisons with their peers, competition for academic achievement, and the desire to meet family expectations. Research has shown that social comparisons—especially in academic settings—can be a significant source of stress, as students feel compelled to achieve similar or better results than their peers (Green et al., 2021). This phenomenon, referred to as "peer pressure," is particularly pronounced in environments where academic performance is seen as a marker of success.

Family expectations also play a role in shaping the stress students experience. In many cultures, students face pressure from their families to excel academically, often because their educational success is viewed as a reflection of family honor and pride (Li & Lin, 2003). This external pressure can increase feelings of inadequacy and failure, contributing to higher levels of stress and mental health challenges. Research by Zhang and Lian (2022) has shown that students from highly competitive academic environments are particularly vulnerable to stress due to the continuous pressure to outperform their peers and live up to familial expectations.

In addition to external pressures, students often impose high expectations on themselves, which can also lead to stress. Perfectionism and the drive to succeed academically can create internal pressure, particularly when students feel that they must meet or exceed their own standards (Stoeber & Rennert, 2008).

When students fail to meet these self-imposed standards, they may experience feelings of frustration, disappointment, and guilt. This stress is compounded by the fear of failure, which can paralyze students and hinder their academic performance.

Perfectionism has been linked to negative mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and burnout (Stoeber, 2018). According to research by Arslan (2021), students who are perfectionistic tend to set unrealistic goals for themselves, which can lead to stress when they inevitably fall short of these goals. This pattern can create a vicious cycle, where students continue to push themselves to achieve unattainable standards, ultimately exacerbating their stress levels.

A lack of social support can also exacerbate academic stress, particularly when students feel isolated or disconnected from their peers and family members. Social support networks, including friends, family, and mentors, provide students with emotional and psychological resources to cope with stress. However, when students lack these supportive relationships, they may struggle to manage the pressures of academic life effectively.

According to Eisenberg et al. (2009), students who feel socially isolated are more likely to experience higher levels of academic stress and mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. The absence of a reliable support system can lead to feelings of loneliness and helplessness, making it more difficult for students to navigate the challenges of higher education. Studies by Choi et al. (2016) also highlight that students with strong social networks tend to have better coping mechanisms and lower levels of academic stress, suggesting that the presence of supportive relationships can buffer the negative effects of academic pressure.

Impact of Academic Stress on Mental Well-Being

The impact of academic stress on students' mental well-being is profound, affecting various aspects of their physical and psychological health. Prolonged academic stress can lead to sleep disturbances, increased anxiety and depression, reduced motivation, and a decreased quality of life. This section examines these key impacts in greater detail.

One of the most common physical manifestations of academic stress is sleep disturbances. Stressful academic workloads, coupled with the pressure to perform well, often lead to poor sleep quality, which can have negative consequences for students' mental and physical health. According to a study by Li and Lin (2003), students experiencing

high levels of academic stress report difficulties falling asleep, staying asleep, and waking up feeling refreshed. Sleep deprivation can exacerbate feelings of stress, anxiety, and irritability, further impairing academic performance and overall well-being (Pascoe et al., 2020).

In addition to affecting sleep patterns, academic stress can disrupt students' circadian rhythms, making it difficult for them to maintain a healthy sleep-wake cycle. This disruption has been linked to cognitive impairments, reduced academic performance, and an increased risk of developing mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Green et al., 2021). Therefore, the relationship highlights the importance of addressing stress management and sleep hygiene in promoting students' mental well-being.

Academic stress has been strongly linked to the development of anxiety and depression in students (Fauzian, 2020). Prolonged stress, particularly when accompanied by unrealistic academic expectations, can lead to feelings of hopelessness, despair, and emotional exhaustion. Research by Stoeber (2018) has shown that students who experience high levels of academic stress are at greater risk of developing anxiety disorders and depressive symptoms. These conditions can, in turn, interfere with students' ability to focus on their studies, engage in class activities, and maintain social relationships.

The psychological toll of academic stress can also lead to burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, reduced personal accomplishment, and depersonalization (Eisenberg et al., 2009). Burnout is particularly common among students who are overburdened with academic responsibilities and lack adequate coping strategies. A study by Pascoe et al. (2020) found that students who experience chronic academic stress are more likely to report symptoms of burnout, which can have long-term effects on their mental health and academic success.

Prolonged exposure to academic stress can also lead to reduced motivation among students. When stress levels become overwhelming, students may struggle to maintain their drive and enthusiasm for their studies. This decline in motivation can have a significant impact on academic performance, leading to a vicious cycle of increased stress and decreased achievement.

According to Arslan (2021), students experiencing high levels of academic stress are more likely to experience a loss of interest in their studies,

which can result in procrastination and a lack of engagement in academic tasks. Over time, this lack of motivation can contribute to lower academic performance and an increased risk of academic failure. The loss of motivation is often compounded by feelings of inadequacy and the fear of failure, which further perpetuate the cycle of stress.

Ultimately, unmanaged academic stress can lead to a decreased quality of life for students. The negative effects of stress extend beyond the classroom, impacting students' personal lives, social relationships, and overall sense of well-being. Students who experience high levels of stress often report feelings of frustration, burnout, and dissatisfaction with their lives. According to Zhang and Lian (2022), students who are chronically stressed may experience a decline in their overall life satisfaction, leading to a reduced sense of happiness and fulfillment.

Moreover, academic stress can contribute to a sense of disengagement from life, as students become preoccupied with their academic responsibilities and neglect other aspects of their well-being, such as social connections and physical health. This holistic decline in quality of life underscores the importance of addressing academic stress in a comprehensive manner, taking into account the physical, emotional, and social aspects of students' well-being.

Role of Educational Institutions

Educational institutions play a crucial role in alleviating academic stress among students. By providing counseling services, stress management programs, and creating a supportive environment, universities can help students manage stress more effectively. Additionally, designing flexible and realistic curricula can reduce the academic pressure that students experience, allowing them to succeed without sacrificing their mental health.

Counseling services are essential in providing students with the emotional and psychological support they need to cope with academic stress. According to Eisenberg et al. (2009), the availability of counseling services has been shown to reduce stress and improve mental health outcomes for students. Universities should ensure that students have access to trained counselors who can offer individualized support and help students develop coping strategies for managing stress.

In addition to counseling, stress management programs can provide students with the tools they need to navigate academic pressures. These programs may include workshops on time management, mindfulness

practices, and relaxation techniques, which can help students manage their stress levels more effectively (Pascoe et al., 2020). Providing these resources empowers students to take control of their mental well-being, reducing the likelihood of burnout and other stress-related mental health issues.

In order to reduce academic stress, universities should consider implementing flexible and realistic curricula that take into account the diverse needs and challenges faced by students. By offering flexible deadlines, reducing the workload during peak academic periods, and providing opportunities for students to engage in self-paced learning, institutions can help alleviate the pressure students face. Research by Choi et al. (2016) suggests that flexible curricula are associated with lower levels of academic stress and improved student satisfaction.

4. Conclusion

Academic stress is a significant issue that greatly impacts students' mental and physical well-being. As students navigate their educational journeys, they face numerous stressors that can affect their overall health. One of the primary causes of academic stress is the high academic workload. With multiple assignments, exams, and deadlines to meet, students often find themselves overwhelmed by the sheer volume of tasks. This pressure is compounded by social expectations, where students feel the need to perform at high standards to meet the expectations of their peers, families, and society at large. In addition to social pressures, many students also set high expectations for themselves, leading to internal stress. The desire for perfection and fear of failure can create immense pressure, causing anxiety and feelings of inadequacy when their goals are not met (Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). The lack of social support also exacerbates academic stress, as students who experience isolation or lack strong emotional connections may struggle to cope effectively with academic demands (Eisenberg et al., 2009).

The consequences of academic stress are far-reaching. Sleep disturbances, anxiety, depression, and a loss of motivation are common outcomes, and these can interfere with academic performance and overall life satisfaction (Green et al., 2021). Therefore, it is crucial for educational institutions to recognize the detrimental effects of academic stress and provide necessary interventions. Offering counseling services, creating a supportive environment, and promoting stress management programs can significantly reduce stress levels and improve students' well-being. By addressing these issues, universities can help students thrive both academically and personally.

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