

Long-Term Impact of Stress Management Practices on University Students' Academic Career Development and Professional Preparedness

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Abstract

The present study was a qualitative study regarding the experience of academic stress and coping strategies among the undergraduate students of University of Malakand, Pakistan. Based on the issue of data saturation, ten students were purposively selected and interviewed by semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Results indicated that the main contributors of academic stress were financial issues, mountains of assignments, high parental and personal expectations, fear of failure, and poor time management. Subjects indicated that on-going stress had a negative impact on their memory, concentration, problem-solving, motivation, and academic performance. Students employed a range of coping strategies including making plans, setting goals, self-care and reaching out to friends and family, however there were many that did not always use these strategies. Most students had a difficult time balancing school and personal life. The study results indicate that academic stress, when left unmanaged, has a detrimental effect on students' academic achievement and their cognitive functioning. Some recommendations from students were effective time management, self-care, healthy lifestyle, social support, and coping through faith. The results point to the importance of creating culturally relevant and well-structured stress management programs for universities that can include financial stressors, as well as academic stressors, and support a regular and appropriate coping strategies.

Keywords: Academic Stress, Stress Management, Coping Strategies, Academic Performance, University Students, Pakistan

Introduction

Today's University students face unprecedented academic pressure which has a serious impact on their long term career prospects, academic performance and mental health. Moderate stress has been linked with increases in motivation and performance, but poorly managed and chronic stress

are strongly related to anxiety, depression, burnout, diminished cognitive functioning, and diminished academic performance (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Pérez-Jorge et al., 2025). These difficulties are exacerbated by Pakistan's extremely competitive education systems, the high load on students, parental expectations, financial difficulties, and worries about post-school stability in the labor market (Hussain, 2024; Javaid et al., 2024).

Academic stress has been shown in recent studies not only to impact current academic results like grades or retention rates but can have long-term effects on the psychological health and career development of students. While there is a significant amount of research examining the immediate effect of stress management techniques on academic achievement, few studies have been conducted to investigate the long-term effects of regular stress management practices on students' continued academic success and preparedness for the future. The study is important because it will help universities to create more efficient support systems for stress management so that students will be able to create sustainable coping strategies that will facilitate their learning process and their future professional life.

Literature Review

The issue of academic stress in the university has become a major concern and problem in the world, affecting students' mental health, academic results and their career futures. Chronic academic stress is a consistent risk factor for negative consequences, such as anxiety, depression, and academic burnout, impaired cognitive functioning, and lowered academic performance (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Pérez-Jorge et al., 2025; Deng et al., 2022). These factors can be exacerbated by the competitive academic climate in Pakistan, parental expectations, financial constraints, and the fear of not finding employment after graduation (Hussain, 2024; Javaid et al., 2024).

Academic Stress and Its Impact on Performance

Results from extensive research have shown that high levels of academic stress have a negative impact on the cognitive processes of students including working memory, attention, and information retention, which will ultimately impact student grades and overall academic success (Almarzouki, 2024). Longitudinal research also indicates that stress that persists beyond university can lead to academic burnout, loss of motivation, and increased dropout rates, which can extend beyond the **end of the academic journey** (Zhang, 2025; Han, 2024). Others have found weak and inconsistent direct correlations between levels of stress and grades, but general conclusions indicate that unmanaged chronic stress can lead to a vicious cycle that impacts sustained academic achievement and personal development (Pérez-Jorge et al., 2025).

Role of Stress Management Practices

Mindfulness, time management, cognitive-behavioral approaches, physical activity and social support have proved to be promising stress management techniques in reducing the perceived stress in university students and enhancing their psychological well-being (Amanvermez et al., 2021; Mansuroğlu, 2025). Short-term interventions have shown to improve immediate academic outcomes (such as focus and task completion). There are not as many studies that focus on the long-term benefits of regular stress management habits in terms of long-term academic achievement and career readiness. There is emerging evidence to suggest that consistent use of adaptive coping strategies over time leads to increases in academic resilience, self-efficacy, and emotional regulation in students (Waterhouse et al., 2024; Freire et al., 2020). These skills seem to be more significant at key transition points, including when going from college to work.

Long-Term and Career-Related Outcomes

The ability to cope and demonstrate resilience is crucial from university to the workplace. Stress management during study period has positive effects on professional readiness, intelligence quotient in Emotion and problem solving in working life (Mansuroğlu, 2025). On the other hand, prolonged academic stress and burnout in higher education can have a negative impact on mental well-being, career self-confidence and professional performance (Bouchrika, 2026). The Pakistani context emphasizes the need for culturally appropriate stress management strategies that cater for the local academic and socio-economic context (Maqsood, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

The present study is based on the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping by Lazarus & Folkman (1984). In this model, stress is viewed as the interaction between the person and the environment, which becomes stressful as a result of processes of appraisal and coping that involve the mind. Positive coping strategies may help manage stressors that can become too overwhelming and result in positive adaptation and growth over time (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Spătaru, 2024). Although a considerable amount of research literature has been published on academic stress, there still exists a huge lacuna particularly related to long-term effects of continuous implementation of stress management strategies on overall academic career growth and professional readiness, especially in underdeveloped countries such as Pakistan. The purpose of the current study is to begin removing this limitation of existing research by examining sustained outcomes instead of only short-term outcomes.

Research Objective:

To examine the effect of regular stress management on the development of the academic career, on-going performance of university students, and their professional readiness.

Research Question

What is the long-term significance of regular stress management practices on the career development, on-going academic performance and future career readiness of university students?

Research Design

The study used a qualitative design to explore the influence of coping strategies of stress on academic achievement and belief and suggestions students offered for coping with academic stress. This study used a descriptive design and the purpose was to describe, analyses and interpret rich qualitative data regarding student experiences. Themes and patterns were identified by a thematic analysis of the data and the narrative data presentation was used instead of statistical representation of data.

Population of the Study

The study population was all undergraduate students of the University of Malakand, Pakistan.

Sample and Sampling Technique

This study was carried out in different departments of the University of Malakand. These participants were 10 undergraduate students. The sample size was determined based on the qualitative research principles which mean that sample size is determined by the point of data saturation where no further new data are emerged from the further interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher employed purposive sampling to identify information rich participants. The

following criteria were required of the participants: (a) being attending University of Malakand as a BS student, and (b) their voluntary consent in the interview.

Data Collection

The researcher used semi-structured interviews to gather data from the participants. The interview questions were open-ended to gain insight into the causes of academic stress, the way that students cope with stress, its impact on students' academic performance, and students' recommendations.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. This process entailed transcribing the interviews, reading and re-reading the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing and refining the themes, and then defining and naming the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These were then interpreted and discussed in the context of the study aims.

Findings

The qualitative data was analyzed thematically and five major themes were identified. The following themes are introduced:

Academic Stress

Participants noted other sources of academic stress. The top concern reported as a source of stress was financial difficulties. Some other key factors were poor time management, high workload, and high expectations from parents and from oneself, fear of failure, exam pressure, family problems and difficulty in balancing academic and social duties.

Strategies for Managing Academic Responsibilities

Under Stress Students reported using different strategies to manage their academic responsibilities during stressful times. Often used strategies were scheduling, setting realistic goals, dividing tasks into smaller steps, practicing self-care and asking for support from others. But some pupils reported that they lacked the skills to cope with responsibilities under stress. Most participants disclosed their stress to close friends/family. Friends were seen as a key source of motivation and advice, and family emotional support. However, a few participants preferred not to share their stress with anyone.

Balancing Academic Workload and Personal Life

Most participants found it very difficult to balance academic work with personal life. They said that they felt overwhelmed, resulting in lower motivation, attention difficulties, strained family relationships, and lower well-being. A handful of students were able to balance by dividing time appropriately.

Cognitive and Emotional Impacts of Long-term Stress

Participants reported that chronic stress had a negative impact on their memory, attention, concentration, and their problem solving capabilities. Emotional side effects like irritability and behavioral changes were also reported. The impact of stress on motivation and academic performance was a significant decrease in students' motivation, engagement, and creativity. This led to procrastination, poor grades, hurried work, and overall academic drop.

Student Recommendations for Managing Stress

Participants were given practical information about students experiencing stress. Self-care, effective time management, regular exercise, healthy eating, seeking support, taking a break and maintaining faith and positivity were all key recommendations.

Discussion

Based on the results of this study, it was found that the students face academic stress at a high level, among the most common stressors are financial problems, heavy workload, high expectations, fear of failure, and poor time management. These stressors can be associated with poor academic performance, memory and concentration problems, and lower motivation, thereby affecting students' academic performance. Students knew basic stress management techniques such as scheduling, goal setting and self-care; however, many had problems with making these techniques a regular habit for them. Social support from friends and family proved to be an important coping resource, while others preferred to cope on their own. The findings are consistent with the previous findings reported in the literature which show that chronic academic stress has a negative impact on student's cognitive performance, motivation and academic performance (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Pérez-Jorge et al., 2025; Hussain, 2024). The results are also congruent with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, which highlights the fact that the negative impact of stressors can be reduced through the use of coping strategies. One of the strengths of the present study is that the long term implications were considered. Chronic and untreated stress seems to negatively affect the acquisition of key skills: resilience, problem solving, emotional control, all of which are important for long-term positive academic outcomes and future success in the workplace. This reinforces the idea that regular stress-management interventions are essential to not only immediate outcomes of school performance, but also to the development of one's academic career. The study also recommends that the higher education institutions in Pakistan should establish active and continuous program of stress management which should be more than just awareness and establish coping mechanisms among students in a structured and consistent way. Supporting help-seeking and fostering a campus culture that supports help seeking may also be beneficial.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the experiences of students in the university regarding academic stress and the management of stress. The results indicated that money worries, workload, high expectations and time management issues are significant stressors. These stressors had a significant effect on students' cognitive functions, motivation, and academic achievement, as well as on balancing academic and personal life. While there was some awareness by students of various coping strategies and appreciation and importance to social support, many students were not able to implement the coping strategies consistently. The aim of the present study is to support this central objective by emphasising the importance of consistent and effective stress management practices in enhancing the student's short-term academic success as well as their long-term academic resilience and readiness for professional life. Persistent stress can interfere with the acquisition of key competencies that are required for students' future employment: problem-solving skills, emotional regulation skills, and sustained motivation skills. Finally, it is important to realize that awareness programs like these will not be enough unless current or future initiatives will be continuous and structured in higher education institutions, especially in Pakistan. Universities have the opportunity to make a significant contribution to improving both the academic performance and lifelong career growth of their students if they provide them with practical and consistent coping strategies. In conclusion, promoting student well-being and resilience is a key factor in preparing students for success in school and in life.

Recommendations

Based on this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Structured Stress Management Programs:** Universities should create and maintain concrete and continuous programs of stress management training for the students, not awareness programs. These programs should emphasize specific skills including time management, goal setting, breaking tasks into smaller units, and cognitive coping techniques to enhance the consistency of students' use of these strategies.
2. **Improving Counselling:** Services and fostering a culture of mental health on campus in higher education institutions Students should be provided access to regular peer support groups and faculty mentoring programs to help students obtain social support from peers, family, and mentors during periods of stress.
3. **Stress Management in Curriculum:** Integration of Stress Management in Curriculum including orientation programs for first year students. Financial management skills and balancing academic and personal life were identified as stressors and should be given special attention. Policy-Level Interventions for Financial and Academic Pressure: Policy interventions to lower financial pressures on students include options for flexible payment systems, part-time job opportunities, and scholarships. Also, academic policies should be examined to balance workload and assessment giving reasonable timelines, which would help to reduce chronic stress and help academic career development.

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