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## **Levels of Academic Stress and Anxiety among Undergraduates at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka**

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### **Abstract**

Academic stress and anxiety (ASA) are prevalent issues among undergraduates worldwide, often hindering academic progress and overall well-being. At the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), ASA remains a pressing concern due to the increasing demands of academic and social responsibilities [This sentence captures the specific problem of the study]. This study aimed to investigate the levels of ASA among undergraduates at UNN. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, with a sample of 400 undergraduates selected from a population of 39,139 students using a multistage sampling procedure. Data were collected using a 19-item valid and reliable Level of Academic Stress and Anxiety Questionnaire (LASAQ). Mean and standard deviation were used to analyse and answer the research questions, while t-tests and One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used to test the null hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance. The results indicated moderate levels of ASA among participants, with no significant differences in academic stress based on age, gender, and year of study. Similarly, no significant differences in academic anxiety were found based on age and level of study, though a significant difference was observed based on gender ( $p < .05$ ). Based on these findings, the authors recommended that universities implement gender-sensitive support systems and counseling programs to address academic anxiety. Students are also encouraged to adopt effective time management, self-care practices, and a healthy lifestyle to better manage stress and enhance overall well-being.

**Keywords:** Stress, Anxiety, Undergraduates, Socio-demographic variables

### **Introduction**

Academic stress and anxiety (ASA) are increasingly recognized as significant challenges within higher education, impacting students' overall well-being and academic achievement. Studies revealed that up to 50 per cent of students globally experience some level of ASA, with higher rates reported in countries, such as China, India, and the United States (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2024). In low- and middle-income countries, such as those in Africa, the prevalence is particularly high due to factors such as limited resources and large class sizes (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2023). For instance, in Nigeria, the prevalence of academic stress and anxiety ranges from 12 per cent through 71.8 per cent, with a significant proportion of students in public universities experiencing higher stress levels compared to those in private institutions (Akinsola & Adeyemo, 2017). Research indicates that Nigerian students face considerable levels of ASA, with studies showing that up to 68.3 per cent of university students report high levels of academic stress, often due to heavy coursework, examination pressures, and poor time management. Furthermore, around 61.7 per cent of students in Enugu have reported experiencing anxiety, particularly students offering medical courses (Anosike et al., 2022).

These findings highlight the widespread nature of ASA among undergraduates and emphasize the need for effective interventions to address this growing concern.

Stress can be defined as a feeling of emotional or physical tension caused by demands that exceed the capacity to cope. It's a natural adaptive response to challenges and can motivate one to act and overcome obstacles (American Psychological Association [APA], 2023). However, when excessive or prolonged, it can become detrimental to health and well-being. There are majorly two types of stress: Eustress and Distress. Eustress, often referred to as "good **stress**" is the body's normal and positive response to stimuli from the environment and it motivates one to perform at his or her best, achieve good goals, and feel challenged and engaged in life, while distress is a type of stress that has negative consequences on one's physical and mental health (Afzal et al., 2022). The stress that is specific to students and an educational situation is called academic stress.

Academic stress is described as a condition or state, that occurs as a student responds to stimuli from a school environment. According to the World Health Organization [WHO], (2012), academic stress is a state of emotional strain resulting from the perceived or actual demands of an academic environment. Academic stress is the subjective emotional, cognitive, and physiological response to academic demands perceived as exceeding resources or surpassing coping abilities (Cassady & Johnson, 2020). Contextually, academic stress is a mental and emotional state experienced by undergraduate students in response to the challenges and pressures of their academic environment. These challenges can come from various sources. Stress is usually accompanied with anxiety.

Anxiety can be seen as the worry, fear or uneasiness about a situation. Anxiety is a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome (WHO, 2018). It is a normal human emotion that can help to avoid danger or prepare for challenges. However, when excessive or persistent, it can become a debilitating mental health condition, significantly impacting daily life (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2023). An anxious individual often experiences intense worry or fear, other physical symptoms, such as rapid heartbeat, sweating, muscle tension, and difficulty breathing, as well as psychological symptoms, such as difficulty concentrating, insomnia, and irritability. (APA, 2022). When the situation that causes anxiety is linked to a school or university setting, it is referred to as academic anxiety.

Academic anxiety is simply the state of worry, fear or uneasiness, faced by students, about an academic situation. Martin and Marsh (2020) defined academic anxiety as a state characterized by worry, apprehension, and negative cognitions and emotions specific to academic situations and performance. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), (2023), academic anxiety is a feeling of worry or nervousness about school work, examinations, or school performance. It can be mild or severe, and it can affect students of all ages. Contextually, academic anxiety can be seen as the anticipatory concern and apprehension linked specifically to academic scenarios, encompassing not only the pressures associated with academic stress but also the emotional and cognitive unease. Elevated levels of ASA are often faced by undergraduates as they try to navigate the demanding challenges of their educational journey.

Understanding the overall levels of academic stress and anxiety among undergraduates at the University of Nigeria is crucial for identifying the general mental health status of the student population. This knowledge will benefit university administrators and policymakers by highlighting the need for comprehensive support systems to enhance student well-being. Health professionals and counselors can use these insights to design effective stress management programmes and interventions tailored to the unique needs of students, ultimately fostering a healthier academic environment for the students.

Ideally, the University would provide both academic excellence and a nurturing environment that supports students' mental well-being, helping them manage academic stress and anxiety (ASA). However, current evidence suggests that ASA are prevalent among 'University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) undergraduates, raising concerns due to their negative impacts on their health and the economy at large. Although general factors contributing to ASA in universities are known, a lack of specific research at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, impedes the development of targeted interventions. This research aims to address this gap by investigating ASA levels at UNN, quantifying them through validated tools, and identifying key contributing factors.

### **Research Objectives**

The purpose of the study was to investigate the levels of academic stress and anxiety among undergraduates of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Specifically, the study seeks to determine the:

1. levels of academic stress and anxiety among undergraduates of University of Nigeria;
2. levels of academic stress and anxiety among undergraduates of University of Nigeria based on age, gender and level of study.

### **Methods**

#### **Research design and setting**

In order to accomplish the purpose of this research, a cross-sectional design was used. This design was considered most suitable to use in this study because it has been successfully used by Ngbea and Kwaghgbah (2021) in a similar study. This study was conducted in the University of Nigeria Nsukka, Enugu state. Undergraduates in the university are exposed to different levels of ASA due to several factors, one of which is the pressure from academic workload during the rush of activities in the academic calendar in order to catch up and cover the space created by the worldwide lockdown and workers' strikes. These factors can heighten ASA levels among the undergraduates which can cause problems such as academic failure or low graduating score which can lead to unemployment, stress related diseases like anxiety disorders, depression, musculoskeletal problems, sleeping and eating disorders.

#### **Population and sample**

The population for the study consists of 39,139 undergraduates of all the faculties in the University of Nigeria Nsukka as at 2022/2023 (ICT Centre, 2024). The sample size comprised of 400 undergraduates of UNN. The sample size is in line with the guideline of Cohen et al., (2011). Multistage sampling technique was used to draw the sample for the study. The first stage involved the use of simple random sampling technique to select 5 faculties among the 10 faculties within UNN. The second stage involved the use of simple random sampling technique of balloting with replacement to select 10 departments (2 from each of the 5 faculties selected). The third stage then involved the use of convenience sampling technique to select 40 students each from the 10 selected departments. This gave a total of 400 undergraduates that were used for this study.

#### **Data collection instrument**

The instrument for data collection is a combination of an adapted version of the Student Stress Inventory (SSI) and an adapted version the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory-6 (STAI-6), and was titled 'Levels of Academic Stress and Anxiety Questionnaire' (LASAQ), which comprises of 19 items. The questionnaire was divided into 3 sections: Sections A, B and C. Section A contains 3 items on demographic characteristics of the respondents: age, gender and level of study. Section B contains 10 items to determine the respondents' levels of academic stress.

Section B was assigned the response options of never, somewhat frequent, frequent and always. Section C contains 6 items with response options of not at all, somewhat, moderate and very much. The respondents were requested to place a tick (✓) against the option(s) that best applies to them in sections A and C, but were requested to circle in Section B.

The ‘Student-life Stress Inventory’ (SSI) is a self-report questionnaire developed by Arip et al in 2015 to assess stress levels experienced by college or university students across various life domains. It measures both the level of stress related to academic, physical, and social aspects of student life. It consists a total of 4 subscales and 40 items, with each subscale having 10 items. The academic subscale was adapted and used in section B

The STAI-6 (State-Trait Anxiety Inventory-6) is a shortened version of the Spielberger State-Trait Anxiety Inventory developed by Spielberger et al. This version is known to have been developed by Marteau and Bekker (1992). It comprises of six items and assesses both state and trait anxiety.

The face validity of the instrument 'LASAQ was established by experts from the Department of Human Kinetics and Health Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Their criticisms, corrections and suggestions were incorporated in the final instrument. The reliability of the instrument was calculated using Cronbach Alpha from which a reliability index of 0.663 was obtained and considered reliable (Okpala and Ogbazi, 1994).

### Data collection and analysis

A letter of introduction from the Head of Department, Human Kinetics and Health Education, UNN was collected and presented to those in charge, to enable the researchers to carry out the study. Four hundred (400) copies of the questionnaire were administered to the undergraduates by the researchers. Out of the 400 copies of the questionnaire administered to the subjects, only 380 were returned and duly filled out. The information from the questionnaires was coded and analyzed using IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM-SPSS, version 24 for windows). The research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation. The null hypotheses were tested using t-tests and One-way ANOVA statistics at 0.05 level of significance.

## Results

**Table 1: Levels of Academic Stress among Undergraduates of University of Nigeria Nsukka (n=380)**

S/N	Items	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Standard Deviation (SD)
1.	I have a financial problem because of the expenses of the university	2.77	1.008

2.	I find difficult to juggle time between study and social activity	2.29	.923
3.	I feel nervous delivering the class presentation	2.34	1.055
4.	I feel stressed as submission deadline neared	2.36	1.001
5.	I feel stressed to sit for examination	2.25	.952
6.	I find difficult to juggle time between study and society involvement	2.24	.996
7.	I loss interest towards courses	2.13	.973
8.	I feel burden of academic workloads	2.61	.893
9.	I feel stressed dealing with difficult subject	2.73	.969
10.	I feel difficult in handling my academic problem	2.36	.930
Total Mean Stress		24.09	5.709

**Key:** 10-18 = Mild academic stress; 19-29 = Moderate academic stress; 30-40 = Severe academic stress

Table 1 shows that undergraduates of UNN have a total mean score of 24.09, indicating moderate academic stress level. Therefore, undergraduates of UNN had moderate level of academic stress.

**Table 2: Levels of Academic Stress among Undergraduates of University of Nigeria Nsukka According to Sociodemographic variables (n=380)**

Variable	Mean( $\bar{x}$ )	N	SD	F/t	p-value	Decision
Age group(years)						
16-20	23.85	166	5.736			
21-25	23.96	185	5.494			
26-30	25..04	29	6.720	F= 2.244	.083	Not rejected
31 and above	32.00	3	3.464			
Gender						
Male	23	146	5.383	t= -1.087	278	Not rejected
Female	24	234	5.902			
Level of study						
First year	23.86	116	5.416			
Other years	24.05	144	5.800	F = 2.245	.783	Not rejected
Final year	24.38	120	5.908			

**Key:** 10-18 = Mild academic stress; 19-29 = Moderate academic stress; 30-40 = Severe academic stress

Table 2 shows that undergraduates' stress level is higher among higher age group 31 years and above ( $\bar{x}$  = 32.00, SD = 3.464); females ( $\bar{x}$  = 24.35, SD = 5.902); and those in final year ( $\bar{x}$  = 24.38, SD = 5.908). However, there was no significant difference in the stress level of undergraduate students of University of Nigeria Nsukka according to the variables studied ( $p > .05$ ).

**Table 3: Levels of Academic Anxiety among Undergraduates of University of Nigeria Nsukka (n=380)**

S/N	Items	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Standard Deviation (SD)
1.	I feel calm and relaxed.	2.22	.957
2.	I feel satisfied with myself.	2.16	.970
3.	I feel secure and confident.	2.00	.927

4.	I feel pleasant.	2.19	.933
5.	I feel nervous and restless.	1.94	.984
6.	I tend to be pessimistic.	2.22	.985
<b>Total Mean Anxiety</b>		<b>12.73</b>	<b>3.766</b>

**Key:** 6-9 = low trait-anxiety; 10-14 = moderate trait-anxiety; 15-19 = high trait-anxiety; 20-24 = very high trait-anxiety.

Table 3 shows that undergraduates in UNN have moderate trait-anxiety level with a mean score of 12.73 and standard deviation of 3.766.

**Table 4: Levels of Academic Anxiety among Undergraduates of University of Nigeria Nsukka According to Socio-demographic characteristics (n=380)**

Variable	Mean( $\bar{x}$ )	N	SD	F/t	p-value	Decision
Age group(years)						
16-20	12.93	166	3.876	F= 1.876	.113	Not rejected
21-25	12.37	185	3.541			
26-30	13.65	26	4.326			
31 and above	15.67	3	3.619			
Gender						
Male	13.32	146	3.799	t= 2.498	.013	Rejected
Female	12.35	234	3.703			
Level of study						
First year	13.02	166	3.908	F = .489	.614	Not rejected
Other years	12.61	144	3.634			
Final year	12.59	120	3.798			

**Key:** 6-9 = low trait-anxiety; 10-14 = moderate trait-anxiety; 15-19 = high trait-anxiety; 20-24 = very high trait-anxiety

Table 4 shows that anxiety level of UNN undergraduates was higher among those aged 31 years and above ( $\bar{x}$  = 15.67, SD = 4.619); males ( $\bar{x}$  = 13.32, SD = 3.799); and those in first year ( $\bar{x}$  = 13.02, SD = 3.908). However, significant difference in level of anxiety existed only according to gender ( $p < .05$ ).

## Discussion

### Levels of Academic Stress among Undergraduate Students of UNN

This study considered level of academic stress among undergraduate students of University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The findings in Table 1 showed that the level of academic stress among undergraduates of UNN was moderate. This result was unexpected and therefore surprising because undergraduates of UNN struggle with balancing social and academic life, academic work overloads, inadequate time to study or prepare for an examination, low motivation and high expectations from family. The findings from this study are in contrast with the findings of Ongori and Angolla (2009) who reported that majority (81%) of the students in the University of Botswana agreed that they experience high level of stress. This difference could be from the type of instrument used or the academic workload of the university. The findings agree with that of Bataineh (2013) that the majority of the students at King Saud University experience moderate level of stress. This finding suggests a need for health education interventions tailored to address mental health concerns among university students, emphasizing stress management techniques to promote overall well-being.

The findings in Table 2 revealed that the level of academic stress was severe for undergraduates aged 31 and above but moderate for other age groups. This was expected and not surprising because undergraduates 31 and above are usually individuals who are married, working various jobs, raising children or keeping a home (amongst other responsibilities) and have little or no time to manage their stress. However, the difference in stress level based on age was not significant. The finding is in contrast with that of Onolemhenhen and Abel (2020) that academic stress was found to decline with increasing age of students.

The results in the table further showed that the level of academic stress among undergraduates based on gender was moderate and there was no significant difference. The finding was expected and not surprising because both male and female students often face similar academic demands, such as coursework, examinations, deadlines, and performance expectations. These demands can lead to stress regardless of gender. Female students have better study habits with statistically significant differences observed as per organizing time while male students exhibit higher resilience to stressors and might not perceive them as demanding. This finding is similar to that of Licayan et al. (2021) which states that there were no significant differences in respondents' responses in terms of sex. However, it differs from the findings of Suneeta et al. (2010) and Misra and Mckean, (2010) where females had better study and coping habits than males, which also noted that females have better time management skills.

The level of academic stress among undergraduates based on year of study was generally moderate. This was unexpected and surprising because undergraduates especially first year are usually overwhelmed by the experience and hardships of leaving home and transitioning to university, while final years struggle in their project research and final papers. The corresponding hypothesis revealed that there was no significant difference in the levels of academic stress among undergraduates of UNN based on level of study. This finding is in contrast with the results of Shiferaw, Anand, and Nemera (2015) who found that academic stress differed by level of study as students in higher classes had more academic responsibility than those in lower classes. This difference could be attributed to the numerous support service, counselling and orientation that UNN provides to its students.

### **Levels of Academic Anxiety among Undergraduate Students of UNN**

This study also considered the levels of academic anxiety among undergraduate students of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The findings in Table 3 showed that the level of academic anxiety among undergraduates of UNN was moderate. This was unexpected and surprising, given the typically high-pressure environment of university academics. This is similar to the findings of Gahir (2024) that a high proportion of students (51%) exhibited average academic anxiety level. The findings however differ from that of Mofatteh (2021) that academic anxiety is high among undergraduate university students who study in developed and developing countries. This difference could be due to instrument used or the academic pressures and workloads in that environment. The finding of moderate academic anxiety levels at UNN suggests significant implications for health, health education, and national development. Health-wise, it points to a need for improved mental health services, focusing on stress management and emotional well-being. In health education, it highlights the importance of integrating mental health awareness and coping strategies into the curriculum. From a national development perspective, while moderate anxiety levels may not immediately impact performance, if unaddressed, they could affect long-term productivity and contribute to broader societal challenges. Therefore, managing academic anxiety is crucial for fostering healthier individuals and a more resilient workforce, ultimately supporting national growth.

Table 4 revealed that the level of academic anxiety based on age was mostly moderate. UNN undergraduates aged 31 years and above have high level academic anxiety, while



undergraduates aged 16-20 years, 21-25 years and 26-30 years had moderate academic anxiety level. The corresponding hypothesis showed no significant difference in the levels of academic anxiety among undergraduates of UNN based on age. This finding is similar to that of Asif et al. (2020) which reported that students over 23 had higher academic anxiety than those under 23. In the findings of Avila-Carrasco et al. (2023) no statistical differences were seen by age, however, those aged 19 years or less showed a notably lower academic anxiety.

Furthermore, the results in the table showed that the level of academic anxiety based on gender was moderate but a little higher in males than in females. This was unexpected and surprising as female students tend to worry more due to their gender roles and hormone fluctuations in estrogen and progesterone levels during the menstrual cycle which can affect anxiety levels. The corresponding hypothesis revealed that there was a significant difference in the levels of academic anxiety among undergraduates of UNN based on gender. Avila-Carrasco et al. (2023) made contrasting findings which reported that female students had significantly higher proportions of academic anxiety.

The level of academic anxiety was moderate based on the level of study. This was unexpected and surprising because academic anxiety is typically perceived as varying across academic levels, with higher levels expected to exhibit higher levels of anxiety due to increased academic demands and pressures. The difference was however, not significant. Kumar et al (2019) reported results by a study on final year medical students of Karachi with 72% academic anxiety. Onolemhenhen and Abel (2020) asserted that academic stress rises for undergraduates in their first year, declines in other years but rises again in the final year. This finding raises important implications. Health-wise, it challenges the assumption that academic anxiety increases with academic levels and suggests that students at all stages may experience moderate anxiety, necessitating widespread mental health support. In health education, it emphasizes the need for continuous mental health education and coping strategies throughout a student's academic career, rather than focusing only on specific academic years. From a national development perspective, ensuring that students at all levels have access to effective stress management and mental health resources could contribute to a healthier, more productive student population, ultimately benefiting the workforce and society at large.

### **Conclusion**

This study showed that undergraduates of University Nigeria, Nsukka had moderate levels of academic stress and anxiety, with no significant differences in academic stress across demographic variables such as age, gender, and level of study. However, a significant difference was observed in academic anxiety levels based on gender, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive mental health interventions. The findings imply that academic stress and anxiety may not be solely influenced by factors like age or level of study, suggesting that all students, regardless of their year or demographic characteristics, experience moderate levels of ASA. This calls for continuous, holistic mental health interventions that address not only specific groups but also target the overall well-being of students across different academic levels. The study's findings further emphasize the importance of developing comprehensive strategies to manage stress, including self-care practices and time management. These initiatives, alongside curricular integration of mental health workshops, could contribute to fostering a more supportive academic environment and promoting sustainable student success.

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