



Perception of Stress among Masters' Students at Adventist University of Central Africa (AUCA)

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Abstract: *Stress is a status of experiencing appearing and menacing occasions in an individual's physiological, moral, physical, psychological welfare, or simply a combination of these events. It is considered as a concern in the daily life of individuals' worldwide. The aim of this research was to measure levels of academic-related stress among students enrolled in a Master's programme at AUCA during semester three of the academic year 2021 – 2022. Applying a web designed survey for a sample of 110 students; only 87 respondents participated in the study, giving a response rate of 79 percent. Results of the research revealed that among the respondents, 10.34 percent perceived high stress levels. 73.56 percent experienced moderate level of stress, while 16.1 percent reported a low level of stress. A high level of perceived stress was found among females compared to males and also among junior staff compared to other employment positions and unemployed respondents. Regarding the age and area of specialization, respondents between 26 – 35 years old and those taking finance as major have been found more stressed across the three levels. This calls for the University to organize regular trainings on stress detection to better understanding the signs of stress and how to alleviate its effects before it becomes severe.*

Keywords: *Stress, Measure, Postgraduate Students, Adventist University of Central Africa (AUCA)*

How to cite this work (APA):

Mfizi, J., Gisanabagabo, S. & Kayonde, P. K. (2022). Perception of stress among masters' students at the Adventist University of Central Africa. *Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education*, 6(4), 83 – 92.

1. Introduction

Stress can be defined as the status of experiencing occasions seeming as threatening an individual physiological, moral, physical or psychological welfare or simply a combination of these events (Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon, Hazarika, 2021). Hans Selye was the first scientist to categorize 'stress' as at the bottom of the nonspecific signs and symptoms of illness (Tan and Yip, 2018). He emphasized stress as a situation of facing a nonspecific response to any demand. Some other researchers have restricted the meaning of stress "to conditions where an environmental demand exceeds the natural regulatory

capacity of an organism, in particular situations that include unpredictability and uncontrollability" (Koolhaas, Bartolomucci, Buwalda, de Boer, Flügge and Kortei, 2011). When there is extreme pressure in its intensity and probably in its prolonged nature this can lead to mental and physical illness, with the possibility to produce depression, nervous breakdown and at the extreme can cause heart disease. Stress is also associated with physical and psychological symptoms such as altered appetite sleep pattern disturbances and headache. Stress, as part of daily lives can adversely affect personal or communities' lives if it is prolonged or poorly managed.

Stress can have its origins from family poor relationships, work or can be academic based whereby for example some highly demanding courses can unconsciously produce physical and psychological problems in students' behavior (Abraham, Navya, Joshy, 2019). Furthermore, insufficiencies in health care have been registered as source of stress. Stress causes major harms, creating anxiety, discouragement or unproductive environment. However, it is not easily identified or diagnosed to look for medication or any other type of psychological assistance. Regarding postgraduate students, stress can originate from in fear of performing poorly in academic endeavors that involve many overlapping deadlines related to course works from lecturers, dissertations, examinations and limited time to rest or to looking after families for those who are married. Shortage in finances can also end up producing stress to the students who in many cases do not benefit a special government support as it is at undergraduate level in some universities. Others may be concerned with well-paying job prospects or feel not adequately supported by the institutions where they take their studies.

Investigating the lifetime exposure to traumatic events and symptoms of post-traumatic stress among South African university students, McGowan and Kagee (2013)'s findings revealed that the significant predictors of the severity of post-traumatic stress symptoms to be gender, Black race, Coloured race, and year of study. Assessing the perceived stress among dental students at the University of the Western Cape findings of Rayner, Gordon, Shaikh, Crombie and Yasin-Harnekar (2015) pointed out that Fourth year students experienced the highest degree of stress. This suggests that the stress goes increasing towards the end of the cycle of training whereby the load of completing studies, research and internship to carry on are somehow stressing. In a study conducted in South Korea on stress and health related quality of life of Nepalese students studying in South Korea, Bhandar (2012) found the relationship with advisor and marital status to be the significant predictors of stress. Analyses of the study conducted by Aminu, Muslim and Jamiuc (2021) revealed gender, marital status, year of study, and access to education funds as significant predictors of stress.

To the best of knowledge of the researchers, there is a small number of papers that assessed stress among

students in Rwanda. Only one paper of Kubwimana, Mutatsineza, Tesi and Wong (2022) assessed the level of stress among Medical Students in Rwanda. There is therefore a deficiency of studies that have evaluated the perception of stress among postgraduate students, where a big number pursues those studies while at the same time working on full-time or a part-time basis, with different portfolios. Similarly, it is at this level where there are married students of whom some are also parents. Balancing their education that is highly demanding, the work that entitles heavy workloads, family responsibilities, and participation in community' social events are stressful, hence can cause negative academic outcomes, reduction in cognitive ability, impaired coping and incompletion of graduate studies.

Taking the case of AUCA postgraduate's students; one would like to know if they do suffer from stress? To which extend is its severity in relation to their age group, gender, employment position and area of specialization? This study aims at measuring levels of academic-related stress among students enrolled in a Master's programme at AUCA in order to devise strategies of their alleviation or simply their prevention.

2. Literature Review

Stress is a usual physiological reaction to a thought-provoking event, which is somehow not easy to recognize when not acute. Some potential symptoms of stress include headaches, anxiety, feeling neck pain or back pain as well as poor sleep. They can also be extended to heart diseases and eventually depression. Taking the example of international students, Adeoye-Agboola and Evans (2015), reported several factors that can influence mental health of international students. Those factors were related to financial difficulties, academic stress, future prospects were most likely to stimulate mental health of international students and consequently impact their academic performance. Indeed, the experience that they went through during the period of learning at new institution combined with likelihood of facing new culture in their newly academic and social setting in which they found themselves, had an impact on their levels of stress, hence their academic performance.

Given the living conditions of postgraduate students, their working status has been observed as a growing trend in different countries because work provides income to pay their tuition fees, to look after their families and attend to some interventions for individuals and societies (Roux, 2018). It is in context, many people tend to pursue their

studies at advanced level, predominantly in postgraduate programmes, in order to acquire higher level of human capitals that are expected to give them opportunities to access to well-paid jobs. However, when the subject perceives a disproportion between the demands of work which in many cases is full-time, and unavoidable demands of family as well as that of the society along with studies, this can be source of stress. The rising pressure of balancing the heavy workload and other daily assignment to perform being academic or related to the family end up exposing their body feeling extremely tired, which can create a higher level of stress, hence affecting their productivity and their commitments (Sallehuddin, Huzaidy, NorAzrin and Rosli, 2019).

Assessing the impact of work on stress, the study of Dundes and Marx (2006) reported that 64 percent of student-workers who worked more than 10 hours per week experienced an increase in their level of stress. This suggests a direct relationship between the number of hours spent working and the level of stress.

In exploring the behavior of Australian medical students regarding the ideal balance between work, family as well as to other aspects of their routine lifestyle, Tolhurst and Stewart (2004) found that most participating students confirmed family commitment to be a high priority and considered “time out” as important feature in maintaining good conditions of their health. They further confirmed of putting efforts to pursue an acceptable balance by emphasizing on discipline when choosing to work while achieving also other objectives related to attending family issues. They were to choose structures that allocate relevant time to working and allowing students to cater for their partners, parents and children.

In assessing the level of stress associated with gender, Waghachavare, Girish, Dhumale, Yugantara, Kadam and Gore (2013) observed that female were statistically significant stressed more than male in a study they conducted on stress among students of Professional Colleges from an urban area in India. 27.7% female respondents were stressed against 20.4% of males. Similarly, Sallehuddin *et al.* (2019) also found female students to be more stressed than males in their study on the Relationship between Stress, Workload and Time Management towards Academic Performance among Working Postgraduate in Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). Likewise, Shefabhai (2018) concluded that graduates girls had more stress than graduates boys.

By measuring the perceived stress in adults of Swedish population emphasizing on prevalence and association of depression, anxiety and medication, Jan and Maud (2002) came to the conclusion that women in the 30 to 39-year age

group while for men, their higher exposed age group was 40–44-year age.

In the same vein, Gamonal-Limca, Montero-Mateos, Lozano-López, Maciá-Casas, Matías-Fernández, and Roncero (2022) found that significantly higher scores of stress were observed among women, young adults, students, and those who expressed concern about getting infected by COVID-19 pandemic. These groups were probably feeling distress when handling this outbreak pandemic that indeed challenged the whole world.

In the same way Nadini and Indeira (2016) established that younger students experienced more stress in coping with the amount of work in each course, especially those of the group age below 25 years old (93%) and those between 26 – 35 years old group (82%) while students age between 36 – 45 years old and above experienced the level of stress in the proportions of 56% and 55% respectively.

Evaluating the level of stress and employment position, Winefield and Jarrett (2001) found junior staffs being more stressed than senior staffs. Equally, in an interview study among staffs working in the emergency department (ED) of a London teaching hospital, Flowerdew, Brown, Russ, Vincent and Woloshynowych (2011)’s findings revealed high levels of misunderstanding between senior and junior staff. Junior doctors were complaining of being overloaded and not receiving fully support from the senior doctors. In contrast to findings confirming a significance difference between junior and senior staff regarding the level of stress, Laal and Aliramaie (2010) did not find any when conducting a study on how much nursing staff managed to cope with the stressful events in two hospitals in Iran.

Considering the level of stress and area of study specialization, Hidvegi and Racsco (2013) found that officers of the Hungarian Customs and Finance Guard being more significantly vulnerable than teachers. In the same trend, Giorgi, Arcangeli, Perminiene and Lorini (2017) established that the most stressful positions were related to managerial, administrative as well as supervisory roles. In relation to coping with stress, postgraduate students are expected to be informed on how to easily notice the signs of stress in order to find the quickest possible means to proceed its management or simply its elimination. Poor stress management coupled with long working hours in postgraduate training and programs to undertake may impact students' quality of life. Affected students may feel meaningless their social life, experience sleepless nights, and poor health conditions, thus exposing them to higher level of stress.

Several people try to prevent stress by regular physical exercises, socialize with best friends or take religious meditations (Aserton, 2012). By regular physical exercises,

the body eliminates some toxic substances that constitute a good ground for stress development. Physical exercise produces a sense of well-being by producing neurotransmitters called endorphins (Rokade, 2011). However, some others use a negative approach of coping with stress by taking alcohol, self-isolating or using recreational medications.

Some higher institutions of learning design an environment having green spaces which may serve as relaxing places that can be used by anyone who is suffering for a relatively low level of stress.

3. Methodology

The study population comprises 153 students registered in postgraduate studies at AUCA in semester 3 of the academic year 2021-2022. Among those students, 125 (81.7%) were from Master of Business Administration and 28 (18.3%) were from Education. The study adopted a descriptive research design and a web design data collection technique.

Students were asked to fill out a self-administered questionnaire which was shared through this designed link of which the 10-items of the tool developed by Seldom Cohen (1983) are accessed through a designed link: [Survey questionnaire](#). Data was collected over a period of two months from August to September 2022. A written consent was obtained from respondents who willingly accepted to participate in the study. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) developed by Sheldon Cohen was adopted to measure the perception of stress among masters' students at AUCA because it is the most widely used in many studies assessing the level of stress resulting from events and situations that happened over the previous month to the period of data collection (Andreou, Evangelos, Lionis, Varvogli, 2011). It is a measure at which extent situations in a personal's life are judged as stressful in the previous month. The score was evaluated for each respondent from 10 items. Each item was rated based on a five point Likert-type scale (0 = never to 4 = very often). To obtain the total score that is the basis for classification of different degree of stress, the procedure consists of first, reversing scores

for questions 4, 5, 7, and 8 following this pattern: 0 = 4, 1 = 3, 2 = 2, 3 = 1, 4 = 0, and then adding up scores for each item. Respondents who had scores ranging from 0-13 were perceived as having low stress, those who have scores ranging between 14 - 26 were classified as having moderate stress while those having scores ranging between 27- 40 were considered as having high perceived stress (Abraham, Navya, Joshy, 2019).

To draw a sample from which primary data were collected, the study made use of the formula by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) as follows:

$$n = \frac{N*(Z_{\alpha/2})^2*p(1-p)}{(N-1)e^2+(Z_{\alpha/2})^2*p(1-p)} \dots\dots\dots(1)$$

$$n = \frac{153*(1.96)^2*0.5*0.5}{(153-1)(0.05)^2+(1.96)^2*0.5*0.5} = 110 \dots\dots\dots(2)$$

Whereby
 n = sample size;
 N = the total number of students registered in postgraduate studies at AUCA in semester three of the academic year 2021-2022;
 $Z_{\alpha/2} = 1.96$, at 95% Confidence level;
 Coefficient pegged on the degree of confidence (here 95%, $Z_{\alpha/2} = 1.96$);
 p= Proportion of the population with the characteristic of interest (here, p = 0.5);
 e = margin of acceptable error of 5%.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents results of the study and discussion. To evaluate the level of stress among students enrolled in postgraduate studies at AUCA in semester three of the academic year 2021-2022, the score of the PSS – 10 (using 10 items) was used. Out of 110 expected respondents from the drawn sample, only 87 (representing 79%) responded by filling the questionnaire. This suggests that findings are reported and discussed based on responses of the 87 respondents who collaborated in the study.

Table 1: Distribution of demographic variables

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	26	29.89
Male	51	58.62
Age group		
< 25	8	9.20
26 – 35	51	58.62
36 – 45	27	31.03
> 45	1	1.15
Marital status		
Married	42	48.28
Single	44	50.57
Divorced	1	1.15
Employment status		
No employment	4	4.60
Full-time	76	87.36
Part-time	7	

Source: Survey conducted, August – September 2022

Among the 87 respondents, 51 were males (58.62) and 59 (67.81%) of the sample being under 36 years old with only 1 respondent above 45 years old. Most of 44 respondents were single (50.57%) and married ones were 42 (48.27%).

83 respondents were employed of which the majority 76 (91.56%) were full-time employees and 7 (8.43%) were part-time employees. About 4 participants (4.59%) were only students.

Table 2: Perceived Stress and Age

Years old	Low		Moderate		High	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
< 25	1	7.14	6	9.38	1	11.11
26 – 35	9	64.29	36	56.25	6	66.67
36 – 45	4	28.57	21	32.81	2	22.22
> 45	-		1	1.56	-	
Total	14	100	64	100	9	100

Source: Survey conducted, August – September 2022

Findings from table 2 above confirm a situation where respondents between 26 – 35 years old and were more stressed across the three levels. This can be probably linked to the situation whereby it is the segment of employees who are gradually on promotion to senior positions and also many may be somehow involved in getting married. Sometimes, they are also parents with small kids that demand for their care. Adding to these competing activities to take graduates studies with its pressure of many deadlines at workplace can be the underlying factors of students in this age group to being more stressed. Indeed, the current changing environment at higher learning

institutions students must work either on full time or part time basis to pay their tuition fees and cater for other family and society demands. This may lead to a dynamic environment that challenges postgraduate students especially in managing themselves against all competing activities they have to handle, hence producing stressing behavior to students. These findings are in agreement with those of Jan and Maud (2002) and Nadini and Indeira (2016) who established that younger students experienced more stress in coping with the amount of work compared to colleagues who were adult.

Table 3: Perceived Stress and Gender

Gender	Low		Moderate		High	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Female	4	28.57	26	40.63	6	66.67
Male	10	71.43	38	59.37	3	33.33
Total	14	100	64	100	9	100

Source: Survey conducted, August – September 2022

Female respondents reported high level of perceived stress compared to male. Probably these findings may take roots in many activities female students have to work on at the same time more than their male colleagues. They have to handle all challenging academic activities as well as workplace activities like their male colleagues. However, on top of these common activities, they have their own

challenging life problems such as their menstrual issues (which for some is troublesome), they get pregnant, nurturing as well as breastfeeding their children while catering for their husbands for those who are married. Findings in this study line up with findings from Sallehuddin *et al.* (2019) who found female students to be more stressed than male students.

Table 4: Perceived Stress and Employment position

Employment position	Low		Moderate		High	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
CEO/MD	-		3	4.69		
Director/Head of Department	4	28.57	10	15.63	1	11.11
Senior Manager/Specialist	3	21.43	19	29.69	3	33.33
Junior Staff	5	35.71	17	26.56	4	44.44
Part -time	2	14.29	4	10.94	1	11.11
No employment			4	6.25		
Total	14	100	64	100	9	100

Source: Survey conducted, August – September 2022

In evaluating the level of stress and employment position, junior staffs were found to be more stressed across the three levels compared to other employment positions as well as to unemployed respondents. These findings are consistent with that of Winefield and Jarrett (2001) and Flowerdew *et al.* (2011) suggesting that the level of stress is higher for junior staff than those in senior positions. This can be linked to the fact that such staffs receive tasks to perform from their supervisors and when combining their work, their studies that are also demanding as far deadlines are

concerned and family and society demands, they end up experiencing the environment to be burdensome, hence producing stress in their working conditions. Despite the challenging workload they may have at their workplaces, sometimes their pay is not competitive, which can be an additional element to increase their level of stress. A well organization and implementation plan of work can help such students to manage their work and as well as their studies (Sallehuddin *et al.*, 2019).

Table 5: Perceived Stress and Option of Studies

Concentration/ Major	Low		Moderate		High	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Accounting	1	7.14	4	6.25	1	11.11
Finance	6	42.86	32	50.00	4	44.44
Human Resource	2	14.29	1	1.56		
Management	1	7.14	8	12.50	2	22.22
Project Management	1	7.14	4	6.25	1	11.11
Education Administration			5	7.81		11.11
Curriculum	3	21.43	10	15.63	1	11.11
Total	14	100	64	100	9	100

Source: Survey conducted, August – September 2022

In relation to concentration of studies, table 5 above reports that students majoring in finance to be more stressed across the three levels. Probably it is because people in finance are the ones taking positions in planning and supervision in many organisations. They spent more time in generating; analyzing data so that by adding studies to their routine activities may be somehow stressfully. Hidvegi and Racsko (2013) found that officers of the Hungarian Customs and Finance Guard being more significantly vulnerable than teachers. This suggests that people in charge of finances (collection and probably allocation and control) are more prone to having high level of being stressed. Equally, Giorgi *et al.* (2017) concur with these findings because in their studies on Work-Related Stress in the Banking Sector whereby most stressful positions were related to managerial, administrative as well as supervisory roles that are held in many organisations by people with finance, economics, management and accounting background.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study objective was to measure levels of academic-related stress among students enrolled in a Master's programme at AUCA in semester 3 of the academic year 2021 – 2022. Findings pointed out that 10.34 percent of respondents were found with high level of stress, 73.56 percent with moderate level of stress and 16.10 percent with low level of stress. These findings are in line with current changing environment at higher learning institutions students who must work either on full time or part time basis to pay their tuition fees and look after for other family and society demands, this was found to be stressing factors. Postgraduate students are called to strategically manage themselves against all competing activities they must handle.

5.2 Recommendations

From the study, the following recommendations were made:

This calls for a better understanding of the signs of stress and how to alleviate its effects before it become severe. Among advices from scholars and practitioners include having a healthy lifestyle taking into consideration a well-balanced diet, looking ahead at different deadlines and making a clear plan to meeting them. This will reduce the pressure and likelihood to miss set targets (Sallehuddin *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, Aserton (2012) has advised physical exercise, talking to friends, deep and proper breathing as coping mechanisms to stress. In addition, students are advised to save their works at different locations (computer, hard-driver, emails). They are to establish a

supportive network because when somebody has experiences time of relaxing with good friends, the level of stress can be brought at a lower level or even eliminated.

They should organize seminars about detection of stress and its prevention if not its alleviation or cure. As the study focused on measuring the level of stress, further studies can explore the causing factors of stress, its mitigation among postgraduate students at AUCA and extensively in Rwanda as well as the impact of perceived stress on postgraduate students' performance.

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