

Job Stress Among University Lecturers: Implications For Counselling

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Abstract

Job stress describes the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. This study examined the prevalence of job stress among university lecturers. Descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The population consisted of all university lecturers in South western Nigeria. The study sample was from six universities selected on the basis of ownership. These comprised two each of federal, state and private universities. A sample of 1235 university lecturers were selected using stratified random sampling technique. Data for the study were collected using an instrument titled "Questionnaire on Stress Assessment" (QSA). The validity of the instrument was ascertained while test retest reliability method was used to determine the reliability and a reliability coefficient of 0.92 was obtained. Data collected was analysed using percentage. The results revealed that out of 1358 64(13.3%) experienced low stress level 490 (34.7%) experienced moderate stress level, 563 (45.6%) experienced high stress level 9(0.7%) experienced extremely high stress level while 9(0.7%) of the total sample did not specify their stress level. It was concluded that there is prevalence of high stress level among university lecturers. Counselling framework was developed to mitigate the challenge.

Keywords: stress, job stress, antecedents of stress, stress assessment, stress management, university lecturers, work environment, work load

INTRODUCTION

An increasing body of research evidence suggests that university lecturers are exposed to high levels of job stress (Altbach, 1996; Seldin, 1987; Winefield, 2000), a finding that has been clearly evidenced in the United Kingdom (Court, 1996; Kinman, 1996). Academics throughout the world deal with a substantial amount of ongoing occupational stress (Kinman, 2001). Ironically, university teaching has traditionally been conceived as a relatively stress-free occupation, or at least has been seen in this way by outsiders (Fisher, 1994). Although they are not highly paid in comparison to professionals in the commercial sector, academics have been envied for their tenure, light work loads, flexibility 'perks' such as overseas trips for study and/or conference purposes and the freedom to pursue their own research (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, Stough 2001). However, with many of these attractions and advantages being eroded over the past two decades, it comes as no surprise that higher education institutions are now commonly labeled as 'stress factories'.

Against a background of mounting research evidence, there can be little doubt that stress has a debilitating effect on both individual and organizational outcomes (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994). In the academic context, occupational stress has specifically been associated with job dissatisfaction, increased smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, physical ill health

(i.e coronary heart disease) and poor psychological well-being (i.e. anxiety and depression) (Doyle & Hind, 1998; Watts, Cox, Wright, Garrison, Herkimer & Howze, 1991; Winefield, Gillespie, Stough, Dua & Hapuarachi, 2001). Furthermore, stress has been implicated as a causal factor of impaired work performance, decrease in faculty productivity, absenteeism, propensity to leave and higher staff turnover (Kinman, 2001; Taris, Schreurs & Van Iersal-Van Silfhout, 2001).

Generally speaking, psychological well-being among academics is relatively poor (Kinman, 2001). Two-third of the respondents in Gillespie et al (2001) study reported that stress impacted on them psychologically: they described experiencing feelings of anxiety, depression, burnout, anger, irritability and helplessness. Academic burnout in particular has been well documented (i.e Blix et al, 1994; Doyle & Hind 1998). Moreover, depression has been associated with suicidal thoughts and tendencies (Watts, Cox, Wright, Garrison, Herkimer & Howze, 1991). In fact, an epidemiological study of suicide conducted by Kelly, Charlton & Jenkins (1995) suggest that university academic staffs are at around 50 percent greater risk than the average worker. Psychological stress, in turn, can lead to severe physical consequences. In a study by Winefield and colleagues (2002), the majority of the respondents reported experiencing tiredness 'sometimes' to 'nearly all the time' back and neck pains, sleeping

difficulties, headaches, muscle pain, colds and virus infections. Furthermore, in the South African context, Coetzee and Rothmann (2005) recently found high levels of psychological and physical ill health in a sample of 372 university staff members.

Occupational stress is also thought to have a spill-over effect, whereby stress becomes a major determinant of the overall quality of life, including family life (Doyle & Hind, 1998; Kinman & Jones, 2003). High levels of organizational stress, if not resolved, will undermine the quality, productivity and creativity of employees' work, detract from their health, well-being and morale (Everly, 1990; Matteson & Ivancauich, 1987; Nowack, 1989; Terry, Tonge & Callan 1995). Conversely, preventing chronic stress will preserve staff well-being and organizational performance (Gillespie et al, 2001).

Servilha (undated) conducted a study to investigate the incidence of stress among university teachers and to define the predominant stage in which symptoms were more frequent, specifying their type. Stress symptoms were detected in 47.82% of the university teachers who were married females, age 40 to 49. The most frequent stage of stress was the resistance stage, and the most frequent symptoms were physical ones, indicating that the core of the teachers tension was in their body, not their cognition. In many of the teachers, despite the dominance of physical symptoms, some psychological aspects were also altered. Results show that more studies on stress and its causes, affecting university teachers, are as necessary as the implementation of measures that will protect the health of faculty members, providing them with a better quality of life.

In Nigeria, Nwadiani and Ofoegbu (2006) identified university lecturers as one occupational group that functions under conditions of high stress. The result of the analysis established that several factors (such as lecturers' strike actions and unstable school calendar, lack of instructional facilities and irregular payment of salary, campus militancy, violence and cultism) contribute to the high level of stress among university teachers in Nigeria. It was concluded that once the identified factors remained constant, the level of stress among university lecturers would remain a permanent feature in Nigerian universities.

The antecedents of stress common among academics shown in studies conducted around the world include: workload, time constraints, lack of promotion opportunities, inadequate recognition, inadequate salary, changing job roles, inadequate resources and funding and negative interaction with students (Boyd and Wylie, 1994; Daniel and Guppy, 1994; Harrison, 1997; Sharpley, Reynolds, Acosta & Dua, 1996; Seldin, 1987). Other sources of stress, such as high self-expectation (Hind & Doyle, 1996), job insecurity

(Tytherleigh, Webb, Cooper & Ricketts 2005), lack of community and poor interactions with colleagues (Abouserie, 1996), inequality in the system (Gillespie et al, 2001), concerns over amalgamations (Sharpley, Reynolds, Acosta & Dua, 1996) and lack of regular performance feedback (Boyd & Wylie, 1994) have also been highlighted in a few studies

Organizational stress results from the interplay between an individual's personal characteristics (examples of such variable could include personal goals, confidence, emotional intelligence), their environment, the demands placed upon them, and their ability to cope (Cottingham & House, 1987; Greenberg, 2002; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Siegrist, 2001). It is important to recognize that an optimal level of organizational stress can enable an individual to work effectively and with greater satisfaction (Greenberg, 2002). Stress levels that extend beyond these optimal parameters can reduce performance. An individual's optimal level of stress is influenced by the way in which stress is appraised and accommodated (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). A number of moderating factors that can reduce or eliminate the negative effects of organizational stress have been identified including: coping styles (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984); emotionality (Costa and McCRAE, 1992); levels of control (Spector, 1986); and social support (House, 1981).

Gillespie et al (2001) explored stress among university staff by concentrating on five key areas: experience and level of stress; causes, consequences, moderators and recommendations for stress reduction. The stressors identified as causing most distress were: insufficient funding and resources, work overload, poor management practice, job insecurities and insufficient reward, and recognition. Gillespie et al's evidence suggests that job stress not only influences professional effectiveness, but also personal well-being.

Although some studies found high levels of stress relating to work relationships, control, resources and communication and job insecurity (Tytherleigh, 2003; Tytherleigh, Webb, Cooper & Ricketts, 2005), excessive workloads and work-life imbalance are among the most frequently reported stressors by academics (Association of University Teachers, 2003). In fact, 80 percent of the academics in Boyd and Wylie's (1994) study indicated that their workloads had expanded significantly in recent years. Also, with this escalation in the demands of the job, it is not surprising that academic staff report difficulty in maintaining firm boundaries between the workplace and the home as, for many, it appears that the home is the extension of the work place (Kinman, 1998). The majority of academics (67%) in Kinman & Jones's (2003) study agreed that work now

encroached more on their home lives than in the recent past and 72 percent believed that their families suffered as direct result of their jobs. More seriously, both work overload and work-life imbalance have been related to low psychological well being among academics (Daniels & Guppy, 1994; Kinman & Jones, 2003; Winefield et al, 2002).

Winefield and Jarrett (2001) found that stress was highest and job satisfaction lowest among staff whose work loads involved a combination of teaching and research. Staff in that situation reported feeling overwhelmed by a workload that required them to deliver research outputs in addition to other demands. The challenges to secure external research funding was reported to be the major stressor. Taris, Schreurs and Van Iersel-van Silfhout (2001) also explored the precursors of job-related strain and found that stress was highest in the same group of teachers, indicating both limited resources and elevated job demands.

Statement of the Problem

Stress is the greatest assault on human psychological, health, cognitive, emotional and behavioural integrity in the list century (Akinloye, Akinboye and Adeyemo, 2002). Studies have shown that two out of every five teachers are highly stressed as against one in every five in other occupations such as nursing management, routed haulage and security (Smith and Bourke, 2000, U.K. National union of Teachers 2000, and U.K Health and safety Executive, 2000). Considering effect of stress on the health and job performance of workers, it is important to examine its prevalence among university lecturers so as to develop counselling frame work to mitigate it.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to investigate prevalence of job stress among university lecturers. Specifically, the study is designed to:

- Examine prevalence of job stress among university lecturers.
- Develop counselling framework to mitigate job stress among university lecturers.

Research Question

What is the prevalence of job stress among university lecturers?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a survey research design. The population comprised all lecturers in Southwestern Nigeria. Six universities were purposively selected on the basis of ownership. Two each of the federal, state and private universities were selected in order to have equal representation. Those selected were Obafemi Awolowo University, University of Lagos, University of Ado-Ekiti, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Covenant University, Otta

and Bowen University, Iwo. Using Maccor (2008) sample size formula, a sample of 1358 lecturers were selected for the study. An instrument titled “Questionnaire on Stress Assessment” was used to elicit information from the lecturers. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section A consists of socio-demographic and work characteristics of the respondents while section B consists of 20-item inventory on lecturer stress level adapted from Akinboye, Akinboye and Adeyemo Stress Assessment Test (2002). The validity of the instrument was determined by giving it to experts in education, tests and measurement. The test re-test reliability method was used to determine the reliability of the instrument. The instrument was administered twice on 40 lecturers who did not participate in the main study. The two administrations of the instrument yielded a test re-test reliability coefficient of 0.92. Data collected was analysed using percentage and ANOVA.

FINDINGS

Research Question: What is the prevalence of job stress among university lecturers?

Table 1: Prevalence of Job Stress Among University Lecturers

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid low stress level	164	13.3	13.4	13.4
Moderate stress level	490	39.7	40.0	53.3
High stress level	563	45.6	45.9	99.3
Extremely high stress level	9	7	.7	100.0
Total	1226	99.3	100.0	
Missing system	.9	.7		
Total	1235	100.0		

Table 1 shows the prevalence of job stress among university lecturers. Out of 1235, 164 experienced low stress level which represented 13.3%. Also, 490 experienced moderate stress level which represented 39.7%. In addition 563 experienced high stress level which represented 45.6% while 9 experienced extremely high stress level which represented 0.7%. Nine which also represented 0.7% of the total sample did not specify their stress level. This implies that university lecturers experience stress in the course of carrying out their duties and responsibilities.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The analysis of data collected on the prevalence of job stress among university lecturers revealed that 563 (45.6%) of the sample used for the study experienced high stress level. This findings is in consonance with an increasing body of research evidence which suggests that university lecturers are exposed to high level of stress (Altbach, 1996,

Seldin,1987, Winefield, 2000). Kinman (2001) also reported that academics throughout the world deal with substantial amount of on going occupational stress.

Suggested Counselling Intervention Programme for Stress Management

Step I: Acknowledgement of the Stress

This step involves creating awareness among university lecturers about possibility of experiencing stress. Lecturers can protect themselves by learning how to recognize the signs and symptoms of stress and taking steps to reduce its harmful effects.

Once in a semester or session, a get-together can be organized in the department or faculty where lecturers could be informed by a trained counsellor about the signs, symptoms, causes and effects of stress so that proactive steps could be taken to combat it. This could also be organized in a larger group by Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) or university authority of each institution in which a trained counsellor could be invited as a resource person but in a relaxed mood. Any of these avenues could be used to collect data on the stress level of lecturers by making use of assessment tools like checklist, rating scales, projective and non-projective tests. Data collected could be used to identify lecturers that are highly stressed. Health personnel may also be involved to assess the stress level of lecturers.

Those identified to be highly stressed would be further assessed in order to ascertain the controlling or reinforcing variables. This information will be used for proper grouping for treatment purposes. Objective should then be specified so as to ensure the assessment of progress and effectiveness of treatment programme. The objective should be realistic and observable.

Step II: Techniques of Stress Management

This involves the use of appropriate strategies that would work for an individual at a particular moment. This may include behaviour modification, cognitive therapy improving emotional intelligence and relaxation practice. Behavior modification involves time and task management and avoiding unhealthy ways of coping with stress such as smoking, drinking too much, over eating or under-eating, zoning out for hours in front of the TV or computer, withdrawing from friends, family and activities, using pills or drugs to relax, sleeping too much, procrastinating, filling up every minute of the day to avoid facing problems and taking out your stress on others (lashing out, anger outburst, physical violence). Improvement in emotional intelligence involves self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management. Relaxation practices

include deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, visualization, yoga, massage therapy.

The technique that would be used for each group depends on the controlling or reinforcing variables identified. There may be a change from one technique to the other depending on its effectiveness in bringing desired change i.e. reduction in the stress level.

Step III: Cultivating a Healthy Work Environment

This involves encouraging the client to maintain reduction in the stress level by engaging in activities that counteract experience of high stress based on the skill acquired during the treatment programme. There should also be follow-up in form of get-together among the treatment group where there would be interaction and feedback. This aspect of intervention strategy also involves the roles that the government, university authority or community and Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) could play in combating stress among university lecturers. This includes provision of adequate recreational facilities, social support, policies and procedures, workshops, seminars/conferences and professional counselling.

Provision of adequate recreational facilities is important in order to encourage regular exercise which helps in maintaining a healthy physical state among university lecturers. Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) should also be involved in mobilizing its members to participate in sporting activities by setting up sports committee which would be organizing inter-faculty or college soccer or other types of game at least once in every semester. In order to encourage social support, there should be avenue for interaction among lecturers from different faculties or colleges. The university authority or ASUU could work out how this would be possible, may be by organizing social activities.

In terms of policies and procedures, there are certain organizational changes that university managers or employers can make to reduce workplace stress. They should make communication friendly and efficient, not mean-spirited or petty, give workers opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their jobs, be sure that the workload is suitable to employees' abilities and resources; avoid unrealistic deadlines, offer rewards and incentives, provide opportunities for career development, cultivate a friendly social climate by establishing a zero-tolerance policy for harassment and making management actions consistent with organizational values.

Workshops/seminars/conferences on stress management could be organized by the university authority.

Finally, professional counselling services could be made available to lecturers and all members of university community by establishing the Directorate of Guidance and Counselling services headed by a trained Counsellor. Each university manager should work towards this, since counselling is better than medication in reducing stress because it does not have side effects.

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