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## **Prevalence of Economic Stress, Academic Work Overload and Depression among Undergraduate Students of Economics Education in Federal Universities in South East, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

The study examined prevalence of economic stress, academic work overload and depression among undergraduate students of Economics Education in Federal Universities in South East Nigeria. The study employed a descriptive survey design. The population of the study was 708 undergraduate students of Economics Education in Federal Universities in South East Nigeria which comprises 152 males and 566 females. The sample size of the study comprises of 100 males and 177 females making it a total of 277 students offering Economics Education in South East Federal Universities. The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher titled Prevalence of Economics Stress, Academic Work Overload and Depression among undergraduate students Questionnaire (PESAWODUSQ). The study found that there is prevalence of Economic Stress and academic work overload but there is no prevalence on depression among undergraduate students of Economics Education in Universities in South East Nigeria. Based on the findings, the study among others recommended that University administrators and healthcare providers in the university should develop a collaborative, mental health programme to create a helpful academic context that enhances students' success.

### **Keywords**

Academic work overload, Depression, Economic Stress, Economics Education, Prevalence

### **Introduction**

Recently, the world has been experiencing economic hardship, leading to significant changes in students' academic pursuits. These challenges range from economic stress to academic workload and may eventually result in depression, particularly among undergraduate students of economics education, who are the focus of this study. Economics education is a discipline aimed at producing well-trained teachers capable of equipping learners with a better understanding of how policymakers can influence the economy (Ogbueghu, Eneogu & Onuoha, 2023). The philosophy underlying the economics education program in a university is to produce graduates equipped with developmental skills and abilities to make meaningful contributions to the social and economic growth of the country (Onucha, 2015). Operationally, economics education is a discipline designed to produce skilled teachers who are well-grounded in economics and can effectively transfer knowledge to learners. The importance of economics education extends far beyond understanding basic principles of supply and demand and the workings of the economy.

The purpose of economics education is to create responsible citizens, train economically literate educators, and develop effective decision-makers. Students studying economics education in universities often complain of limited finances to meet the ever-increasing demands of the university system. These financial burdens include purchasing compulsory textbooks, paying departmental and faculty dues, securing accommodation, and covering expenses for printing assignments and project work. Such financial constraints contribute to feelings of stress due to the inability to meet these obligations. This type of stress is commonly referred to as economic stress. Economic stress can be defined as the anxiety or pressure resulting from an individual's financial situation or concerns about the overall economy (Johnson, 2017). Operationally, economic stress refers to the psychological, emotional, and physical strain that individuals or societies experience due to financial pressures or challenges.

Furthermore, studies have shown a prevalence of economic stress among students (Francis, 2019; Ayesha & Serfraz, 2020; Oduwaiye, Yahaya, Lasielye & Amadi, 2017; Brobbey, 2020). Therefore, economic stress is likely widespread among students studying economics education in South-East Nigeria.



In a bid to make ends meet, students may take on more work hours, which can reduce the time available for studying and completing coursework. This decrease in focus and motivation may, in turn, result in an accumulation of outstanding assignments, unread books, missed classes, and the pressure of meeting deadlines, ultimately leading to academic work overload (Ezeaku, 2021). According to Eduwem and Ezeonwumelu (2020), academic work overload refers to exposing learners to excessive academic activities to the extent that they struggle to cope with the intensity or workload. Ayo (2017) asserts that academic work overload in schools can lead to physical health issues. The lack of time for exercise, relaxation, and healthy eating habits due to a heavy academic workload can contribute to a weakened immune system, weight gain, and an increased risk of illnesses. Operationally, academic work overload refers to the volume of work and tasks that students or academics are required to complete within a given period.

Industrial actions such as strikes by labor unions, lecturers, and non-academic staff have complicated the university system, resulting in a shortened academic calendar. Consequently, students are required to take multiple lectures and examinations within a short period, further increasing the likelihood of academic overload among Economics Education students (Ani, 2017). Furthermore, studies have shown a prevalence of academic work overload among students (Adeye, 2021; Abosede, Usoro & Reuben, 2016; Obiora, 2016; Amini, Philips & Okonmah, 2020).

Consequently, if economic stress and academic work overload among Economics Education students are not addressed at the earliest possible time, they may lead to depression. Parasar and Mahto (2017) describe depression as a mental response triggered by hormonal signaling, where the perception of danger activates an automatic response system known as the "fight or flight" response. Depression is also characterized by a persistent low mood as its primary symptom, accompanied by other symptoms such as painful experiences, irritability, anguish, panic attacks, delays in cognitive and psychological functions, social withdrawal, demotivation, apathy, hopelessness, negative thoughts, delusions, dejection, and overall unhappiness (Akuta, 2019). Operationally, depression is a mental health disorder that affects how a person feels, thinks, and behaves. It is characterized by persistent feelings of sadness and a loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed.

Depression is a significant mental health issue that requires greater global attention from the public health sector, as it affected more than 300 million people worldwide in 2017 (Friedrich, 2017). This suggests that depression may be prevalent among undergraduate Economics Education students. Studies have also highlighted the prevalence of depression among

students (Animba, 2020; Emilia, 2020; Kjiy Muhammed, Murtala Aminu & Anwar, 2022; Naseen & Nazaneenn, 2019). However, the studies cited above were conducted outside the study area and population scope, meaning they do not confirm the prevalence of economic stress, academic work overload, and depression among undergraduate students of Economics Education. This underscores the need to investigate these issues among Economics Education students in Federal Universities in South-East Nigeria to bridge the knowledge gap and provide empirical evidence for future research.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Economics education undergraduate students face numerous challenges that hinder their academic performance and well-being. Despite being in a supportive learning environment, these students struggle with rigorous academic demands, financial constraints, and high career expectations. The prevailing societal hardship exacerbates economic stress, causing students to struggle to survive. The Nigerian economy's hardship affects students' ability to afford basic needs, further compounding economic stress, academic work overload and depression. This study therefore investigated the prevalence of economic stress, academic work overload, and depression among undergraduate students of Economics Education in Universities in South East Nigeria.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The general purpose of this research was to investigate the prevalence of economic stress, academic work overload and depression among undergraduate students of economics education in universities in South East Nigeria.

Specific purposes were to identify the:

1. Prevalence of economic stress among undergraduate students of Economics Education in Universities in South East Nigeria.
2. Prevalence of academic work overload among undergraduate students of Economics Education in Universities in South East Nigeria.
3. Prevalence of depression among undergraduate students of Economics Education in Universities in South East Nigeria.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study.

1. What is the prevalence of economic stress among undergraduate students of Economics



Education in Universities in South East Nigeria?

2. What is the prevalence of academic work overload among undergraduate students of Economics Education in Universities in South East Nigeria?
3. What is the prevalence of depression among undergraduate students of Economics Education in Universities in South East Nigeria?

## Methods

### Design of the Study

The study adopted descriptive survey design. According to Cooley (2018), descriptive research is the study of the data that is used to examine the relationship among variables and describes the characteristics of a population. This research design is the most appropriate for this study because it described the prevalence of economic stress, academic work overload and depression among undergraduate students of Economics Education in Universities in South East Nigeria.

### Area of the Study

The study was carried out in federal universities in South East Nigeria. South East is one of the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. It comprises of five states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. The zone is bounded by the River Niger on the west, the riverine Niger Delta on the south, the flat North Central to the north, and the Cross River on the east. The South East are predominantly Igbo ethnically and linguistically. South Easterners are popularly known with the farming occupation and trading. South East federal universities comprises of six (6) universities which are University of Nigeria, Nsukka which is located in Nsukka, Enugu state. It is the first indigenous university in Nigeria, known for academic excellence. Also, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka which is located in Awka, Anambra State. It is named after Nigeria first president and focuses on research and innovation. Federal University of Technology, Owerri, it is located in Owerri, Imo state and it specializes in science and technology. Another federal university is Micheal Okpara University, Agriculture Umudike, it is located in Umudike, Abia State, and it promotes agriculture agricultural education and research. Federal University, Ndufu-Alike Ikwo, it is located in Ikwo, Ebonyi state; it is dedicated to academic excellence and research. Finally, Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike Ikwo it is located in Ikwo, Ebonyi state, it is dedicated to academic excellence and research. (Radeliffe, 2020). These universities offer a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs in various fields of study. It is on this research studies that the researcher decided to use only three federal universities

UNN, UNZIKE and Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Imo State that offer economics education as a discipline

### Population and Sample

The population of the study was all the 718 Economics Education students in South East Federal Universities. This comprises of one hundred and forty (140) undergraduate Economic Education students from University of Nigeria, Nsukka. One hundred and thirty-seven (137) Economic Education students from Nnamdi Azikwu University, Awka and Four hundred and fourth one (441) undergraduate Economics Education students from Alvan Ikoku federal University of Education Owerri Imo State. The sample size comprises of 277 Economics Education undergraduate students. Simple random sampling technique was used to select two universities UNN and UNIZIK while total enumeration sampling technique was used to select their total population because they were manageable.

### Instrument of Data Collection and Study Procedure

The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled Prevalence of Economic Stress, Academic Workload and Depression Questionnaire (PESAWDQ). The instrument consisted of three clusters. Cluster A addressed prevalence of economic stress with 16 items, cluster B addressed prevalence of academic work overload with 15 items and cluster C addressed prevalence of depression with 13 items. The research instrument was face validated by five experts from the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Their comments, suggestions and corrections helped to develop the final draft of the instrument. The reliability of this instrument was ascertained through trial-testing of the instrument to determine the internal consistency of the items. twenty (20) questionnaires were shared for this purpose and the responses corresponded. The reliability coefficient was determined using Cronbach Alpha because items of the instrument are polychotomously scored and are on the same level of difficulty. The reliability coefficients for clusters A-C were 0.74, 0.75 and 0.85 respectively. The overall reliability coefficient of 0.82 was obtained.

### Data Collection Technique

The researcher and two research assistants after receiving detailed briefings on the modalities for administering and collecting data instrument visited the two universities to administer the instrument with a letter of introduction from the HOD indicating that the researcher is a student in the department requesting for data collection. The responses were collected on the spot to ensure 100% return of the instrument.



**Data Analysis Technique**

The data collected was analyzed using percentage to

answer the research questions. Percentage benchmark of 50% and above was accepted as prevalent.

**Results**

**Research Question 1:** What is the prevalence of economic stress among Economic Education Undergraduate Students in South East Federal Universities?

**Table 1: Percentage of Prevalence of Economic Stress among undergraduate students of Economics Education in Universities in South East Nigeria**

S/N	Items Statements: Prevalence of Economic stress	% Prevalence
1	I am unable to follow the lectures because I was not able to purchase the required learning materials needed for the class	84.00%
2	Sourcing for fund for my studies is burdensome	75.50%
3	Inability to meet up with the financial demands of my academic, causes me lack of concentration	80.00%
4.	I struggle to get the necessary materials I need in school due to lack of finance	60.00%
5	Unattended academic financial needs puts me off focus	72.50%
6.	I lose out of some lectures due to the inability to meet up with lecture materials	64.25%
7	I do not participate in activities that require financial contribution because of the low economic status	66.50%
8	Numerous financial requirement in school demotivates me I feel anxious all the time due to my accumulated debt	62.50%
9	I feel anxious all the time due to my accumulated debt	59.25%
10	I feel weight down do to my inability to attain to my financial wellbeing	56.50%
11	Sometimes, I feel frustrated because of my economic situation	70.50%
12	My economic situation frequently interferes with my relationship with co-students	73.75%
13	I feel economically drained as a result of academic experience	67.75%
14	I am comfortable with the little I can do with my limited fund	75.25%
15	My financial status regarding academic does not border me	67.75%
16	Inability to accesses the library do to non-payment of school fees and other fees	61.50%
<b>Grand Percentage</b>		<b>68.59%</b>

The findings presented in Table 1 indicate a high prevalence of economic stress among Economics Education undergraduate students in South East Federal Universities, with a grand percentage of 68.59%. The highest concern (84.00%) is the inability to purchase required learning materials, affecting lecture comprehension. Financial burdens hinder concentration (80.00%) and cause frustration (70.50%). Additionally, 75.50% struggle with funding their studies, and 73.75%

report strained peer relationships. These findings suggest that financial hardship significantly impacts students' academic experiences and overall well-being.

**Research Question 2:** What is the prevalence of academic work overload among Economic Education Undergraduate Students in South East Federal Universities?

**Table 2: Percentage prevalence of academic work overload among undergraduate students of Economics Education in Universities in South East Nigeria**

S/N	Item Statement: Prevalence of Academic Work Overload	% Prevalence
17	I often find myself working on assignment into nights and weekends	52.25%
18	I feel a great time pressure due to my studies	50.75%
19	I cannot set my own pace of work or study because of the much academic load	52.50%
20	To me I feel my academic expectation for academic performance are realistic and achievable within the given academic workload	51.25%
21	I miss some of my overloaded variables and misconduct as a result of academic workload	59.25%
22	I feel the academic work overload is manageable	55.25%



23	The level of support and guidance I receive from my lectures with regarding managing my academic work overload is satisfactory	78.00%
24	I do not have any flexibility in my lecture and study schedules	73.00%
25	I feel the current academic work overload is overwhelming	78.50%
26	I cannot decide the order in which to do my studies activities	67.75%
27	Although I make greater efforts, I don't get better grades due to too much, I have to read	52.25%
28	My studies requires complex skills with a high level of expertise but with limited time	58.75%
29	As times goes by, my studies are becoming increasingly complicated	65.50%
30	At some point I have felt like dropping a course due to the intensity of the work overload	44.25%
31	My academic work overload makes it difficult for me to balance other aspects of my life (i.e extra curricula activities)	45.25%
<b>Grand Percentage</b>		<b>58.97%</b>

Table 2 shows the responses of respondents on the prevalence of academic work overload among undergraduate students of Economics Education in Universities in South East Nigeria. The findings reveal a moderate prevalence of academic work overload among Economics Education undergraduate students in South East Federal Universities, with a grand percentage of 58.97%. A significant proportion (78.50%) find the

workload overwhelming, while 73.00% report inflexible schedules. Additionally, 67.75% struggle with organizing study activities, and 65.50% feel their studies are becoming increasingly complex. Despite these challenges, 78.00% find faculty support satisfactory. Overall, academic overload affects students' time management, study effectiveness, and work-life balance.

**Research Question 3:** What is the prevalence of depression among Economic Education Undergraduate Students in South East Federal Universities

**Table 3: Percentage prevalence of depression among Economic Education of undergraduate students in South East Federal Universities**

S/N	Item Statements : Prevalence of Depression	Percentage
32	I feel, studying economic contributes more to my stress	45.00%
33	I experience difficulty falling asleep	52.75%
34	I frequently experience feelings of stressor anxiety related to my academics	50.50%
35	I feel that my academic health is affected by my mental well being	48.25%
36	I feel that everything I have done has been a failure	44.25%
37	I feel free discussing my mental health (depression) concerns with my staff advisors	41.25%
38	I have missed classes because of depression	62.75%
39	I always have suicidal thoughts	44.50%
40	I always feel broken inside due to my inability to cope with academic stress	57.75%
41	I face problems with making decisions concerning academic activities	48.00%
42	I lack concentration always	46.50%
43	All the tasks I have performed, much more time than usual and it makes me want to give up school	52.00%
44	I feel, I have no future in my academics	41.50%
<b>Grand Percentage</b>		<b>48.85%</b>

Table 3 shows the responses of

respondents on the prevalence of depression among undergraduate students of Economics Education in Universities in South East Nigeria. The findings indicate a moderate prevalence of depression among Economics Education undergraduate students in South East Federal Universities, with a grand percentage of 48.85%. Notably, 62.75% have missed classes due to

depression, while 57.75% feel overwhelmed by academic stress. Difficulty sleeping (52.75%) and prolonged task completion (52.00%) further highlight academic strain. Additionally, 50.50% experience anxiety, and 44.50% report suicidal thoughts. These findings suggest that academic pressures significantly impact students' mental health and overall well-being.



## Discussion

The study on the research question one on the prevalence of economic stress among Economic Education Undergraduate Students in South East Federal Universities found a high prevalence of economic stress among the students in South East Federal Universities. This finding is in alignment with previous research. Eduwem and Ezeonwumelu (2020) established that financial stress significantly impacted students' focus, increasing anxiety and lowering academic performance. Similarly, Oduwaiye, Yahaya, and Amadi (2017) reported that economic hardships reduced student motivation and emotional stability, further affecting academic success. Francis (2019) also observed that financial difficulties heightened stress, limiting students' academic engagement. These findings supported the present study's results, reinforcing that economic stress remains a major challenge for students. The study underscored the need for financial aid, scholarships, and institutional support to mitigate economic stress and enhance students' academic well-being.

The study on research question two revealed a moderate prevalence of academic workload among Economics Education undergraduate students in South East Federal Universities, with many students feeling overwhelmed by inflexible schedules and increasing academic complexity. These findings are in agreement with Obiora (2016), who reported that excessive workload in Nigerian universities significantly affected students' mental well-being, study effectiveness, and time management. Similarly, Amini, Philips, and Okonmah (2020) found that overwhelming coursework and rigid schedules contributed to high stress levels and reduced academic productivity among students. Furthermore, Khadija, Muhammed, Murtala, and Anwar (2022) highlighted academic overload as a leading cause of burnout and student dropout in higher institutions. These consistent findings emphasize the need for effective workload management strategies and institutional support to improve students' academic experiences.

## Implications

The implications of the findings of this study are that economic stress can limit students' access to essential resources, hindering their ability to focus on academic pursuits. Similarly, academic workload overload can lead to burnout, decreased motivation, and reduced academic performance. These factors can collectively undermine students' overall learning experience and academic success.

The study on the research question three found a moderate prevalence of depression among

undergraduate students of Economics Education in South East Federal Universities. Many students reported missing classes due to depression, feeling overwhelmed by academic stress, experiencing difficulty sleeping, and struggling with prolonged task completion. Anxiety and suicidal thoughts were also evident, indicating that academic pressures significantly impact students' mental well-being and academic performance. These findings align with previous studies that have examined the prevalence and consequences of depression among university students.

In agreement with the present study, Animba, Philips, and Akonmah (2020) found that depression and test anxiety negatively affected students' academic performance, emphasizing that persistent academic stress often led to emotional exhaustion and mental fatigue. Similarly, Brobbey (2020) examined depressive symptoms in young adults and identified academic pressure, financial constraints, and social expectations as major contributors to students' mental health challenges. Friedrich (2017) also established that depression was a leading cause of disability among university students, leading to reduced concentration, absenteeism, and diminished academic motivation. The agreement between these previous studies and the present findings highlights the need for universities to adopt proactive measures to support students' mental health. Addressing depression through structured mental health programs, counseling interventions, and workload management strategies could significantly improve students' academic engagement and overall well-being.

## Limitation

The study was based on a sample of Economics Education students from federal universities in South-East Nigeria, which may not be representative of the broader region.

## Suggestions for Further Research

Following the study which has been carried out, the researchers suggests that a comparative study could be conducted to investigate the correlation between academic stress, anxiety, depression and academic performance of students. Also, a longitudinal study could examine the incidence of financial stress, academic work load and symptoms of depression among undergraduate students in the Universities

## Conclusion

Based on the research findings, the study concludes that economic stress and academic work overload are prevalent among undergraduate students in Economics Education at federal universities in South East, Nigeria, but depression is not prevalent among



them. Based on the findings, the study hereby recommends the following:

- University administrators and healthcare providers of the university should develop a collaborative mental health program to create a helpful academic context that promotes students' psychosocial well-being and enhances their success.
- University management should be flexible in order to give attention to the interest of their students and not to make too much boring and tighten academic schedules.
- University authorities should try as much as possible to reduce and internalized monetary payment such departmental dues and faculty dues.

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