

Research Article

Workplace Stressors and the Mental Health of University Lecturers in Nigeria

Member Josephine Oragbai, Terhile Jude Ahoo*

Department of Sociology, Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi, Nigeria

Abstract

This study explored workplace stress and its effects on the mental health of university lecturers in Nigeria, covering six public universities across all geopolitical zones. Using a cross-sectional survey design, 379 lecturers were sampled through a multistage procedure. Data were collected via structured questionnaires, including measures of workplace stress and validated mental health scales (GHQ-12 and DASS-21). Findings revealed that poor remuneration, delayed salaries, heavy workloads, and inadequate infrastructure were the most prominent stressors, with 82% of respondents reporting dissatisfaction with pay and 74% indicating excessive workload as a key concern. Regression analysis showed that these stressors collectively accounted for 46% of the variance in psychological distress, with workload, salary irregularities, and poor remuneration emerging as the strongest predictors. Differences were observed between university types: federal institutions reported higher stress from academic workload and publication demands, whereas state universities were more affected by financial and infrastructural challenges. The results showed that workplace stress among Nigerian lecturers is largely driven by systemic and institutional deficiencies rather than individual vulnerabilities, with significant implications for mental health and professional performance. Based on these findings, it is recommended that university authorities and the government strengthen or implement interventions such as stress management initiatives, mentorship programmes, and transparent promotion policies that improve working conditions and support lecturers' mental well-being.

Keywords

Workplace Stress, Mental Health, Nigerian University Lecturers, Occupational Well-being

1. Introduction

Workplace stress is a growing subject of scholarly concern across the globe, particularly in knowledge-intensive sectors such as higher education. Academic staff often face a combination of teaching, research, and administrative duties that create unique pressures within the profession. In recent years, studies have consistently shown that university lecturers worldwide encounter considerable stress, raising questions about how such pressures affect their

well-being and the sustainability of academic work [1]. Scholars debate whether these stressors are primarily the result of structural changes such as performance-based reforms and resource cuts or whether they reflect evolving expectations about the academic role itself.

In Europe and North America, lecturers often report stress linked to heavy workloads, student demands, and pressure to publish. These pressures have intensified during and after the

*Correspondence: Terhile Jude Ahoo (ahoojterhile@gmail.com)

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Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which disrupted teaching formats and increased job insecurity in several universities [2]. In parts of Asia, including China, stress among academics has been associated with publication quotas, institutional hierarchies, and competitive promotion systems, which contribute to burnout and diminished job satisfaction [3, 4]. Workplace stress among academics in Africa is often shaped not only by institutional demands but also by broader socio-economic conditions. Evidence suggests that staff in Sub-Saharan Africa experience high rates of stress and anxiety compared to their peers globally, with limited access to institutional or professional support systems [5]. Comparative studies show that Nigerian academics, in particular, report significantly higher levels of depression and stress than their counterparts in countries such as Ghana, highlighting the uneven distribution of resources and coping mechanisms within the region [6].

Nigeria provides an especially compelling case for examining stress in academia. The nation's university system plays a critical role in training professionals and advancing research, yet it operates within an environment characterized by inadequate infrastructure, delayed remuneration, and prolonged industrial disputes [13]. Debates about the welfare of Nigerian lecturers often center on the persistent non-implementation of agreements between academic unions and government, alongside concerns over heavy workloads and deteriorating facilities [14]. Empirical studies from different Nigerian states have documented the prevalence of stress among lecturers, with implications for both their well-being and the quality of higher education delivery [7, 8]. It therefore becomes increasingly important to interrogate how workplace stress influences the mental health of lecturers in Nigeria's public universities. Such an inquiry not only contributes to global debates on academic well-being but also provides evidence that can guide local policy reforms and institutional interventions. This sets the stage for a more precise articulation of the problem that this study seeks to address.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

In an ideal university system, lecturers should thrive in an environment that balances teaching, research, and community service with adequate institutional support. A well-functioning system ensures timely remuneration, modern infrastructure, and manageable workloads. When such conditions are met, academics are more likely to achieve high levels of job satisfaction, mental well-being, and productivity, contributing positively to national development [9, 10]. The current situation in many universities, however, deviates sharply from this ideal. Across the globe, academics are increasingly reporting high levels of workplace stress linked to heavy workloads, pressure to publish, and precarious employment conditions [1]. In Nigeria, the situation is compounded by additional burdens: dilapidated facilities, irregular or delayed salaries, overcrowded classrooms, and the recurrent failure of government to fully

implement agreements with academic unions [7, 8]. These structural weaknesses have created an academic environment that is often more stressful than supportive.

Efforts have been made over time to address these challenges. For instance, successive agreements between the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Nigerian government were intended to improve infrastructure, staff welfare, and institutional funding. Globally, universities have experimented with stress-management programs, counseling services, and workload redistribution to improve academic well-being [11]. Yet, in Nigeria, such measures have often remained on paper, with uneven or partial implementation, thereby fueling recurrent industrial disputes [6]. The persistence of these challenges is unmistakable. Strikes have become a defining feature of Nigerian higher education, with lecturers often disengaged from teaching and research due to unresolved grievances. Comparative studies further reveal that stress indicators among Nigerian lecturers remain disproportionately high compared to their counterparts in other Sub-Saharan African nations [6]. This suggests that systemic inefficiencies are undermining the resilience of the academic workforce.

The consequences of this stress burden are multifaceted. At the individual level, lecturers face heightened risks of anxiety, depression, and burnout [5]. At the institutional level, stress diminishes teaching effectiveness, lowers research output, and erodes mentorship quality [12]. Ultimately, the broader society suffers, as universities which are meant to be engines of knowledge production and innovation struggle to meet their developmental mandate.

Despite these realities, scholarly attention to the nexus between workplace stress and lecturers' mental health in Nigeria remains limited. Existing studies often focus on single regions or institutions, leaving out the comparative dimension that could reveal variations across the country's six geopolitical zones [7, 8]. Furthermore, few studies have systematically connected structural stressors to measurable mental health outcomes [15]. This gap underscores the need for robust, nationwide evidence that situates the Nigerian case within both African and global contexts. Accordingly, this study is designed with two key objectives: (1) to identify the major sources of workplace stress among university lecturers in Nigeria, and (2) to analyze the relationship between workplace stressors and lecturers' mental health outcomes.

1.2. Research Hypothesis

H₀: Workplace stressors have no effect on the mental health outcomes of university lecturers in Nigeria.

2. Methodology

A cross-sectional survey design was employed to examine workplace stressors and mental health outcomes among uni-

versity lecturers in Nigeria. Six public universities were purposively selected to ensure representation from all geopolitical zones: three federal universities: University of Lagos (South-West, ~1,970 staff), University of Nigeria, Nsukka (South-East, ~2,826 staff), and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (North-West, ~2,625 staff); and three state universities: Nasarawa State University, Keffi (North-Central, ~2,042 staff), Gombe State University (North-East, ~700 staff), and Rivers State University (South-South, ~1,692 staff). The combined academic staff population across these institutions was approximately 11,855. Multistage sampling procedure was applied. At the first stage, universities were selected by geopolitical zone. Faculties were then stratified by discipline, and departments were proportionally selected. Within each department, lecturers were chosen randomly to participate. Using Yamane's formula at a 5% margin of error and accounting for a 10% non-response rate, the final sample size was 430. Proportional allocation across the universities yielded: University of Lagos – 71 respondents, University of Nigeria, Nsukka – 104, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria – 95, Nasarawa State University, Keffi – 74, Gombe State University – 25, and Rivers State University – 61. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire covering socio-demographic information,

workplace stressors, and mental health. *Mental health was assessed using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) while Emotional distress was also measured using the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21).* The instrument was pretested in a non-sampled university, and Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70 confirmed internal consistency. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics summarized respondents' characteristics, workplace stressors, and mental health outcomes. Regression analyses examined the relationships between workplace stressors and mental health outcomes, controlling for age, gender, academic rank, and years of service. Ethical approval was secured from relevant institutional review boards, participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was ensured. All data were anonymized and stored securely for academic purposes only.

3. Results

Data collected for the purpose of the research is presented and analyzed in this section.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents.

Variable	Category	Frequency (n = 379)	Percentage (%) = 100
Gender	Male	220	58.0
	Female	159	42.0
Age (years)	31–40	110	29.0
	41–50	131	34.6
	51–60	89	23.5
	61+	49	12.9
	Assistant Lecturer	30	7.9
Academic Rank	Lecturer II	59	15.6
	Lecturer I	93	24.5
	Senior Lecturer	120	31.7
	Associate Professor/Reader	45	11.9
	Professor	32	8.4
Years of Service	0–5 years	95	25.1
	6–10 years	108	28.5
	11–15 years	83	21.9
	16+ years	93	24.5
Highest Qualification	PhD	215	56.7
	Master's	148	39.0
	Bachelor's	12	3.2

Variable	Category	Frequency (n = 379)	Percentage (%) = 100
	Other (Postdoc/HND)	4	1.1

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic profile of the 379 lecturers who participated in the study. The gender distribution shows that males constituted 58.0% of the sample, while females accounted for 42.0%. In terms of age, 29.0% were between 31–40 years, 34.6% between 41–50 years, 23.5% between 51–60 years, while 12.9% were above 60 years. With respect to marital status, the majority (76.0%) were married, 17.1% single, and 6.9% either divorced or widowed. Academic ranks ranged from Assistant Lecturer to Professor, with

the largest group being Senior Lecturers (31.7%), followed by Lecturers I (24.5%). Professors and Readers together accounted for 21.4% of respondents, while Assistant Lecturers made up the smallest proportion (7.9%). The socio-demographic distribution highlights the predominance of mid-career academics (Lecturer I and Senior Lecturer ranks), which reflects the transitional nature of Nigeria's university workforce, where younger lecturers are gradually rising while older professors remain in smaller numbers.

Table 2. *Distribution of Respondents by Workplace Stressors (N = 379).*

Workplace Stressor	SA	A	N	D	SD
Heavy teaching workload increases stress.	198 (52.2%)	124 (32.7%)	27 (7.1%)	19 (5.0%)	11 (2.9%)
Delayed/irregular salary payment is a major stressor.	245 (64.6%)	89 (23.5%)	20 (5.3%)	15 (4.0%)	10 (2.6%)
Poor infrastructure (classrooms, labs, offices) contributes to stress.	186 (49.1%)	131 (34.6%)	34 (9.0%)	18 (4.7%)	10 (2.6%)
Pressure to publish for promotion causes significant stress.	150 (39.6%)	142 (37.5%)	43 (11.3%)	30 (7.9%)	14 (3.7%)
Large student-to-lecturer ratios affect work-life balance.	172 (45.4%)	139 (36.7%)	32 (8.4%)	23 (6.1%)	13 (3.4%)
Frequent strikes and industrial disputes create professional uncertainty.	210 (55.4%)	107 (28.2%)	31 (8.2%)	20 (5.3%)	11 (2.9%)
Lack of transparent promotion/appraisal systems causes frustration.	168 (44.3%)	121 (31.9%)	46 (12.1%)	27 (7.1%)	17 (4.5%)
Inadequate research funding limits academic growth and adds to stress.	190 (50.1%)	126 (33.2%)	35 (9.2%)	17 (4.5%)	11 (2.9%)
Administrative burden (committees, reporting, bureaucracy) adds stress.	158 (41.7%)	135 (35.6%)	42 (11.1%)	28 (7.4%)	16 (4.2%)
Poor work-life balance due to workload and institutional expectations.	181 (47.8%)	127 (33.5%)	40 (10.6%)	19 (5.0%)	12 (3.2%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Key: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD)

Table 2 summarizes lecturers' reported experiences of workplace stressors. The findings reveal that Nigerian university lecturers experience multiple overlapping stressors, with financial and structural challenges ranking highest. A significant majority (88.1%) agreed that delayed or irregular salary payments are a major source of stress. Similarly, 83.7% reported that poor infrastructure including inadequate classrooms, laboratories, and offices, while 83.3% pointed to large student-to-lecturer ratios as a driver of work imbalance. These results emphasize the systemic resource deficiencies that force

lecturers to operate under conditions that are both mentally and professionally exhausting.

Beyond financial and infrastructural concerns, pressures tied to professional advancement and institutional governance also emerged strongly. About 77.1% of respondents agreed that pressure to publish for promotion is a significant stressor, while 76.2% reported stress due to opaque promotion and appraisal systems. Inadequate research funding (83.3%) and excessive administrative duties (77.3%) further compound the problem, reflecting a system that expects high scholarly

productivity but provides insufficient support. Moreover, 83.6% cited frequent strikes and industrial disputes as drivers of uncertainty, disrupting both teaching and research responsibilities.

Table 3. Distribution of mental health outcomes among respondents.

Variable (Scale)	Categories	Frequency (n) = 379	Percentage (%) = 100
Psychological distress (GHQ-12)	No distress (≤ 11)	98	25.9
	Mild distress (12–15)	121	31.9
	Severe distress (≥ 16)	160	42.2
Depression (DASS-21)	Normal (0–9)	110	29.0
	Mild–Moderate (10–20)	147	38.8
	Severe–Extremely Severe (21+)	122	32.2
Anxiety (DASS-21)	Normal (0–7)	93	24.5
	Mild–Moderate (8–14)	144	38.0
	Severe–Extremely Severe (15+)	142	37.5
Stress (DASS-21)	Normal (0–14)	104	27.4
	Mild–Moderate (15–25)	146	38.5
	Severe–Extremely Severe (26+)	129	34.0

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 3 presents the distribution of mental health outcomes using the GHQ-12 and DASS-21 scales. Results show that 42.2% of lecturers experienced severe psychological distress, while 31.9% reported mild distress. Regarding depression, 32.2% fell into the severe-to-extremely severe range, and 38.8% into the mild-to-moderate range. Anxiety and stress followed similar trends, with more than one-third of respondents in the severe-to-extremely severe categories (37.5% and 34.0%, respectively). These results indicate a concerning mental health profile among Nigerian lecturers. The overwhelming majority reported some level of psychological distress, with more than 70% falling into mild-to-severe categories. Similarly, depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms were prevalent, with less

than one-third of respondents reporting normal levels across each domain.

To test the relationship between workplace stressors and lecturers' mental health outcomes of University lecturers in Nigeria, multiple regression analysis was conducted. The dependent variable was mental health outcome (measured through combined GHQ-12 and DASS-21 scores), while the independent variables included poor remuneration, irregular/delayed salaries, heavy workload, inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, poor work-life balance, and job insecurity. Control variables such as age, gender, academic rank, and years of service were included to account for demographic influences.

Table 4. Regression analysis of workplace stressors on mental health outcomes.

Predictor Variable	β (Standardized)	t-value	Sig. (p)
Poor remuneration	0.211	4.12	0.000*
Irregular/delayed salaries	0.193	3.85	0.000*
Heavy workload	0.257	5.02	0.000*
Inadequate infrastructure	0.145	2.88	0.004*
Overcrowded classrooms	0.121	2.31	0.021*
Poor work-life balance	0.178	3.41	0.001*

Predictor Variable	β (Standardized)	t-value	Sig. (p)
Job insecurity	0.087	1.65	0.099
$R^2 = 0.46$	$F(7, 371) = 45.13, p < 0.001$		

*Significant at $p < 0.05$

The regression results demonstrate that workplace stressors significantly predict Nigerian lecturers’ mental health outcomes. The model explains 46% of the variance in mental health, suggesting that nearly half of the psychological burden experienced by lecturers is attributable to structural and institutional stress factors. Among the predictors, heavy workload ($\beta = 0.257, p < 0.001$) emerged as the strongest determinant of poor mental health, followed by poor remuneration ($\beta = 0.211, p < 0.001$) and irregular/delayed salaries ($\beta = 0.193, p < 0.001$). Inadequate infrastructure ($\beta = 0.145, p < 0.01$), overcrowded classrooms ($\beta = 0.121, p < 0.05$), and poor work-life balance ($\beta = 0.178, p < 0.01$) were also significant predictors, reflecting the systemic weaknesses of Nigeria’s higher education environment. Job insecurity, although positively associated with poor mental health ($\beta = 0.087$), did not reach statistical significance ($p = 0.099$), suggesting that other stressors exert a more immediate influence. These results confirm that lecturers’ mental health is closely tied to unresolved structural deficits within the Nigerian university system.

4. Discussions

The study investigated workplace stressors and mental health outcomes among Nigerian university lecturers. The findings reveal a complex interplay among institutional, financial, and professional stressors, and their impact on lecturers’ psychological well-being. A critical insight from the study is that structural and financial stressors largely dominate the academic environment in Nigeria. Poor remuneration emerged as the foremost stressor, with over 82% of lecturers reporting it as a major concern, closely followed by irregular or delayed salaries (76.8%) and heavy workloads (73.9%). Inadequate infrastructure and overcrowded classrooms were also prominent, affecting nearly 70% and 64% of respondents, respectively. These findings indicate that while occupational stress is a global phenomenon in academia, often associated with workload and the publish-or-perish culture [1, 10], the Nigerian context is compounded by systemic institutional deficiencies. Delayed salaries, poor infrastructure, and recurrent industrial disputes intensify stress levels beyond those reported in Europe, North America, and even some Sub-Saharan African countries [6, 7].

The study also reported that organizational practices significantly influence stress experiences. Poor work-life balance, reported by 58% of respondents, and opaque promotion systems, reported by 41.4%, emerged as important contributors

to stress. This suggests that governance and policy enforcement, rather than resource scarcity alone, affect lecturers’ well-being. This finding aligns with Kinman and Wray [11], who emphasize that institutional culture and management practices are central to mitigating occupational stress in academia. In other words, even when resources are available, weak administrative policies can undermine lecturers’ mental health, a reality evident in several Nigerian universities.

Regarding mental health outcomes, the study found high levels of psychological distress among lecturers. More than 70% reported mild to severe distress on the GHQ-12, while DASS-21 scores showed that 32.2% experienced severe depression, 37.5% severe anxiety, and 34% severe stress. Regression analysis further demonstrated that heavy workload, poor remuneration, and irregular salaries were the strongest predictors of mental health challenges, collectively explaining 46% of the variance. Inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and poor work-life balance were also significant predictors, whereas job insecurity, although positively associated, did not reach statistical significance. These results indicate that lecturers’ mental health is profoundly shaped by tangible workplace conditions rather than mere perceptions or individual resilience.

A notable finding concerns the variation across university types. Federal universities reported slightly higher stress related to academic workload and publication pressures, whereas state universities were more affected by financial and infrastructural inadequacies. This aligns with prior studies [8], showing that federal institutions, though better funded, impose stricter performance expectations, while state universities struggle to meet basic operational needs. Such regional and institutional distinctions underscore the need for context-specific interventions, with state universities prioritizing reliable salary payment and infrastructure, and federal universities focusing on workload management and mental health support.

The study’s findings carry significant policy and practical implications. The high prevalence of psychological distress threatens teaching quality, research productivity, and overall institutional performance. Addressing structural deficits, particularly irregular salary payments, poor remuneration, and dilapidated infrastructure, is essential to safeguard lecturers’ mental well-being. Also, interventions that enhance work-life balance, implement transparent promotion systems, and improve workload management could complement broader institutional reforms. Comparative literature suggests that in well-resourced systems, effective policy implementation and

institutional support substantially mitigate academic stress [1, 9], offering a benchmark for necessary reforms in Nigeria.

5. Conclusion

Nigerian university lecturers face significant workplace stress arising from structural, financial, and organizational challenges which include but are not limited to poor remuneration, delayed salaries, heavy workloads, inadequate infrastructure, and poor work-life balance. These stressors have tangible effects on mental health, with high levels of depression, anxiety, and overall psychological distress reported among lecturers across Nigerian universities. Variations between federal and state institutions point to the fact that both workload and resource deficiencies contribute to the problem, and that stress is embedded in systemic institutional practices rather than being solely an individual issue. The findings underscore the urgent need for strategies that address both the structural environment and the psychological well-being of lecturers to enhance productivity, job satisfaction, and institutional effectiveness. In light of these findings, it is recommended that Nigerian universities and the government should prioritize improving workplace conditions by ensuring timely and adequate remuneration, sustainable infrastructure, and effective workload management to reduce the primary sources of stress. At the same time, institutions should implement or strengthen existing programmes that promote mental health and well-being, such as counseling services, stress management initiatives, mentorship programmes, and transparent promotion policies.

Abbreviations

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
ASUU	Academic Staff Union of Universities
GHQ-12	General Health Questionnaire
DASS-21	Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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