



# Influence of academic stress on prevalence and susceptibility to depression among Obafemi Awolowo University students, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The study investigated the prevalence of students' susceptibility to depression in Obafemi Awolowo University. It also investigated the extent to which academic stress could predict students' susceptibility to depression.

**Method** – The population for this study consisted of undergraduate students of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. A sample size of 612 undergraduate students was selected using multi-stage sampling procedure. In the first stage, six faculties out of thirteen were randomly selected, using systematic sampling technique. In the second stage, three departments were selected randomly from each of the six faculties, using simple random sampling technique to give a total of 18 departments. In the third stage, accidental sampling technique was used to select 34 students from each of the three departments selected in faculties to make a total of 612 respondents. Data collected were analysed, using frequency counts, percentages and Simple Linear Regression analysis.

**Result** – The results showed that 20.4% of the students had mild susceptibility to depression, 51.5% had moderate susceptibility to depression, while 28.1% had severe susceptibility to depression. The results further showed that 12.6% of the respondents had mild stress from their academics, majority 73.9% had moderate stress from their academics while 13.6% had extreme stress from their academics. In addition, the result reveals that academic stress significantly predict student's susceptibility to depression at ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Implication** – The study provides useful evidence that can inform policymakers, counsellors, and universities to develop effective mental health interventions by determining the factors that lead to the psychological distress of students.

**Originality/Value** – The study is important since it offers empirical evidence into the nature and prevalence of depressive symptoms in university students which can be easily ignored in spite of their increased vulnerability to it.

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**Kata Kunci:**

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**Abstract**

**Tujuan** – Studi ini menyelidiki prevalensi kerentanan mahasiswa terhadap depresi di Universitas Obafemi Awolowo. Studi ini juga menyelidiki sejauh mana stres akademik dapat memprediksi kerentanan mahasiswa terhadap depresi.

**Metode** – Populasi studi ini terdiri dari mahasiswa sarjana Universitas Obafemi Awolowo, Ile-Ife. Sebanyak 612 mahasiswa sarjana dipilih menggunakan prosedur sampling bertahap. Pada tahap pertama, enam fakultas dari total 13 fakultas dipilih secara acak menggunakan teknik sampling sistematis. Pada tahap kedua, tiga departemen dipilih secara acak dari masing-masing enam fakultas menggunakan teknik sampling acak sederhana, sehingga totalnya menjadi 18 departemen. Pada tahap ketiga, teknik sampling acak digunakan untuk memilih 34 mahasiswa dari masing-masing tiga departemen yang dipilih di fakultas, sehingga total responden menjadi 612. Data yang dikumpulkan dianalisis menggunakan hitung frekuensi, persentase, dan analisis regresi linier sederhana.

**Hasil** – Hasil menunjukkan bahwa 20,4% mahasiswa memiliki kecenderungan depresi ringan, 51,5% memiliki kecenderungan depresi sedang, sementara 28,1% memiliki kecenderungan depresi berat. Hasil lebih lanjut menunjukkan bahwa 12,6% responden mengalami stres ringan akibat akademik, mayoritas 73,9% mengalami stres sedang akibat akademik, sementara 13,6% mengalami stres ekstrem akibat akademik. Selain itu, hasil menunjukkan bahwa stres akademik secara signifikan memprediksi kerentanan mahasiswa terhadap depresi ( $p < 0,05$ ).

**Implikasi** – Studi ini menyediakan bukti yang berguna bagi pembuat kebijakan, konselor, dan universitas untuk mengembangkan intervensi kesehatan mental yang efektif dengan menentukan faktor-faktor yang menyebabkan gangguan psikologis pada mahasiswa.

**Orisinalitas/Nilai** – Studi ini penting karena menyediakan bukti empiris tentang sifat dan prevalensi gejala depresi pada mahasiswa universitas, yang sering diabaikan meskipun mereka memiliki kerentanan yang meningkat terhadapnya.

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## **Introduction**

Depression has been an issue of concern due to the high rate of students visiting the mental health department of the University Teaching Hospital and suicidal actions among them. It has been observed that depression amongst students around the world seems to increase. Moreover, the average age of onset is also on the decline, making depression a particularly salient problem for university student populations, over two-thirds of which do not talk about or seek help for mental health problems. Since depression is related to poor work performance, and missing of study schedules then the impact of the development of depressive symptoms on the academic performance of students could be adverse. The inability of students to achieve required academic qualifications may adversely affect their job prospects and ultimately their life satisfaction.

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As human beings daily interact with their environment, they are bound to come across situations that could make them happy and unhappy. Some feelings of happiness or sadness may fade away within a few days or weeks depending on the circumstances but deep sadness that lasts more than two weeks and affects one's ability to function may be a sign of depression. Depression is a mental disorder that presents with depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, decreased energy, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, and poor concentration (Watson, et al., 2020). It is often characterised by feelings of deep sadness, discouragement, hopelessness, worthlessness, as well as a general lack of interest, energy, appetite, or pleasure in life. Other common symptoms also include dark moods, sleep changes, inability to concentrate, and withdrawal from friends, difficulty getting through normal activities, and at the extreme preoccupation with death or thoughts of self-harm (Persano, 2022).. The occurrence of these feelings may be regarded as depressive disorder or mental disorder depending on how long they last and interfere with normal daily activities (Wichers, 2014).

Depression can occur among any age, gender, or socio-economic group. Its prevalence among students is of particular concern in this study. University students, being largely adolescents or young adults, are faced with the challenge of coping with the demand of university life away from protection and the regulated life of home and the family (Bukhari & Khanam, 2015).. They are vulnerable to peer group pressure, substance misuse or abuse, broken relationship, and “course carryovers”. They may also have deep unresolved problems with their fellow students or even lecturers, which can engender, loss of concentration, warped thinking, skipping of lectures or practicals, absence from tests, or failure to submit assignments on schedule (Hendricks, 2019). These descriptions have been observed to occur among students of Obafemi Awolowo University and are likely to occur in similar institutions as well. When they occur over time and accumulate, or even increase in intensity such students may be susceptible to depression.

The study is important since it offers empirical evidence into the nature and prevalence of depressive symptoms in university students which can be easily ignored in spite of their increased vulnerability to it. The study provides useful evidence that can inform policymakers, counsellors, and universities to develop effective mental health interventions by determining the factors that lead to the psychological distress of students. In the end, the results will have an effect in enhancing the well-being of students, their performance and better results of their lives in the long run by ensuring that the students who are at risk of depression are identified and assisted earlier.

Susceptibility to depression has been implicated in early life stress, sex, genetic make-up, or later chronic stress, the latter being modulated by physiological factors (Edgar, 2010). When these major risk factors interact with the fast, sometimes unpredictable life of undergraduates, they will be increasingly unable to cope with the challenges they face; and if they do not self-disclose or are successfully encouraged to share their inner conflicts, confusion, or doubt with significant others such students are likely to associate less with their friends or course mates (Khalid & Wahyuni, 2023).. Therefore, been reclusive they may abhor negative or dangerous thoughts or even contemplate actions that can cause hurt or pain both to themselves and others. The risk factors which may make students susceptible to depression can be divided into Psychosocial and Psychological factors (Kim, 2021).

Psychosocial factors can be social, cultural or environmental influences which affect an individual's or group's mental health and behaviour. Sociological factors which can make an individual susceptible to depression are parenting behaviours /attitudes, material conditions (income, access to resources, food/nutrition, water, sanitation and housing), employment conditions, and unemployment, parental physical and mental health (Kirkbride, et al., 2024).

Substance use is another factor that has been implicated as a risk factor that may contribute to depressive disorders. The substances that are being misused by undergraduates include hard drugs, alcohol and even some prescription drugs (Iloabuchi et al., 2021). These have been found to be particularly hazardous and harmful for undergraduate students. Peer pressure and increasing media influences encourage substance use. Inability of a person to deal with thoughts and feelings, to manage him/herself in daily life (emotional intelligence), as well as the capacity to deal with the social world by partaking in social activities, taking responsibilities or respecting the views of others (social intelligence) through innate or learnt ability can also make a person susceptible to depression (Cavins, 2021; Mubarok & Karim, 2022).

The capacity for an individual to develop and flourish is deeply influenced by their immediate social surroundings including their opportunity to engage positively with family members, friends, or colleagues, and earn a living for themselves and their families and also by the socio-economic circumstances in which they find themselves (Ahmed et al., 2023).. Restricted or lost opportunities to gain an education and income are pertinent socio-economic factors which may lead to depression. The wider socio-cultural and geo-political environment in which people live can also affect an individual's mental health status (Jayawickrama & Wright, 2025). Levels of access to basic commodities and services (water, essential health services, the rule of law), exposure to predominating cultural beliefs, attitudes or practices, as well as social and economic policies formed at the national level, for example, the ongoing global financial crisis are expected to have significant mental health consequences (Ogwu & Kosoe, 2024)..

Thinking patterns, discrimination, social or gender inequality and conflict, sense of failure among others are psychological factors that can make one susceptible to depression (Kite et al., 2022). . The loss of a loved one by an undergraduate student can make them to grief. This is characterized with the experience of insomnia, poor appetite, and loss of pleasure or interest in activities as a way of responding to the loss. These symptoms of grief are expected to subside over time, but when symptoms get worse, grief may turn into depression. Thinking patterns which include overstressing the negative, taking the responsibility for bad events but not for the good ones,

having flexible rules about how one should behave, thinking that you know what others are thinking and that they are thinking badly about you can make an individual to be at risk of getting depressed (Nugraha et al., 2022).

Negative experiences within the home or at school due to family conflict or bullying, for instance, have a damaging effect on the development of core cognitive and emotional skills. Individuals with chronic disease or disability are at elevated risk of being marginalized from social or community activities, particularly those associated with stigma or discrimination (such as HIV/AIDS) (Siddique, et al., 2023). While some disease processes directly affect the brain such as cerebral malaria, HIV/AIDS, stroke, substance use disorder and others primarily create a psychological burden (such as an altered lifestyle or coming to terms with the possibility of prolonged illness or premature death) leading to depression (Adroa Afiya, 2024)..

There are some students who may stake their happiness on achieving a particular goal such as getting 'As' in their examinations. If some of these goals are not met for some reason, they might believe they have failed somehow, and it is this sense of failure that can sometimes bring on depression (Williams et al., 2024).

Academic stress may also lead to depression. Stress is defined as the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it. It is obvious that during their academic life, students have many goals, obligations, and expectations for the future (Deng et al., 2022). Some are not satisfied with the course of study possibly due to the students' lack of interest in their course or because the parents chose for them the course of study. The events that cause or result in stress reactions are called stressors. Academic stressors may be environmental factors (late dismissals from class, noisy classrooms, hot classrooms, cold classrooms, crowded classrooms, and poor classroom lighting); perception factors (i.e., non-native language lectures, reading wrong material, fast-paced lectures, forgetting pen/pencils, unclear assignments, unclear course objectives, and incorrect answers in class) or demand factors (final grades, term papers, studying for examinations, and waiting for graded tests) (Jiménez-Mijangos et al., 2023).. Academic stress is defined as student's interactions between academic-related stressors, such as performing assignments under tight deadlines, having an overload of projects and exams, difficulties with teachers or instructors, and expecting to be able to complete difficult tasks, and the student's psychological or physiological response to these stressors. Students that fail to achieve their goals, meet expectations or responsibilities, are at a higher risk of suffering from depression and other psychological and mental problems (Liu et al., 2022).. For this reason, it is assumed that poor academic success or performance is one of the main causes of depression among students.

The purpose of this study is to investigate factor that could predict students' susceptibility to depression and enhance wholesome mental health. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. investigate the prevalence of students' susceptibility to depression in Obafemi Awolowo University;
2. investigate the extent to which academic stress could predict students' susceptibility to depression.

## Research Method

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. A survey was considered appropriate because it facilitated the collection of information that best described the existing phenomena, answered the questions that were raised and solved problems that were posed. The research design studies the characteristics of the relatively small subsets of the population. Facts about a representative sample are gathered and the result obtained is used to generalise for the entire population.

### *Population*

The population for this study consists of Obafemi Awolowo University undergraduate students. Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) is located in Ile-Ife, Osun State in the South Western geopolitical zone of Nigeria. It has 13 faculties and 76 departments. The population of the undergraduate students of the university consisted of a total number of 28,877 with a total number of 15,864 male and 13,013 female as at the commencement of 2018/2019 academic session. The statistics were collected from the university Budgeting, Planning, and Monitoring Unit.

### *Sampling Technique*

A sample of 612 undergraduate students of Obafemi Awolowo University was selected for the study using multi-stage sampling technique (which involves three stages). In the first stage, six faculties out of thirteen were randomly selected using a systematic sampling technique. In the second stage, three departments were selected randomly from each of the six faculties using simple random sampling technique to give a total of 18 departments. In the third stage, accidental sampling technique was used to select 34 students from each of the three departments selected in a faculty to make a total of 612 respondents representing 2.12% of the entire population of the students.

### *Research Instrument*

In carrying out this study, two instruments were used. An instrument titled Burn's Depression Checklist (BDC) developed by David Burns (1999) was adapted. It has 25 items and the response options were Not At All, Somewhat, Moderately, A Lot, and Extremely. The values attached are 0, 1, 2, 3, and 4 respectively. In the present study, however, the name of the instrument remains BDC, and the response options and the number of items were not tampered with but some of the items were modified to suit the purpose of this study.

Also an instrument titled Academic Stress Inventory (ASI) developed by Lin, Y. M., & Chen, F. S. (2009) was also adapted. It comprises 15 items and the response options were Strong, Agree, Neutral, Disagree and Strong Disagree with scores of 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively. In this present study, however, the name of the instrument and number of items remain the same but the response options were modified to be Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree with the scores of 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively.

### *Procedure for Data Collection*

The copies of the instrument were administered directly to the respondents from the selected departments. The copies of the questionnaire were then given. The respondents were assured of confidentiality in their responses to the questionnaire and to further ensure that students were told

not to put their names on the questionnaire. All the copies given out were retrieved from the respondents immediately they are done responding to the questionnaire. From a total of 632 copies of questionnaires administered, 612 were adequately completed and found useful for the study making a return rate of 96.8%.

### *Techniques for Data Analysis*

Data collected for the study were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. While descriptive statistics were used to answer research questions one and two. Inferential statistics was used to test hypothesis one at 0.05 level of significance. Specifically, while frequency counts and percentage was used to answer research questions one and two, Simple linear regression was used to test hypothesis one.

## **Results and Discussions**

**Research Question One:** What is the prevalence of students' susceptibility to depression in Obafemi Awolowo University?

The Burn's Depression Checklist (BDC) was used to elicit information on students' predisposition to depression. The Burn's Depression Checklist (BDC) was used to elicit information on students' predisposition to depression. All the items used to measure students' susceptibility to depression were summed together (min=25, max=107, mean=43.8) and from the lowest score to few scores closer to the mean score (25-30) were categorized as Mild depression, from few scores closer to the mean score to some scores after the mean scores (31-50) were categorized as Moderate depression while scores higher than the means score to the maximum scores (51-107) were categorized as Severe depression. The result was presented in table 1.

**Table 1: The prevalence of students' susceptibility to depression in Obafemi Awolowo University**

<b>Susceptibility to Depression</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Mild depression	125	20.4
Moderate depression	315	51.5
Severe Depression	172	28.1
Total	612	100.0

Table 1 revealed that 20.4% of the respondents had mild depression, 51.5% of the respondents had moderate depression, 28.1% had severe depression.

**Research Question Two:** What is the level of academic stress experienced by Obafemi Awolowo University students?

Academic Stress Inventory (ASI) was used to answer this research question using 15 items to test the respondents' Academic Stress. All the 15 items used to measure Academic Stress were summed together (Min=15, Max=60, Mean=40.76) and from the lowest score to few scores closer to the mean score (15-30) were categorized as Mild stress, from few scores closer to the mean score to some scores after the mean scores (31-50) were categorized as Moderate stress while scores higher than the means score to the maximum scores (51-60) were categorized as Extreme stress. The result is presented in table 2.

**Table 2: Academics Stress Inventory**

Level of stress	Frequency	Percent
Mild stress	77	12.6
Moderate stress	452	73.9
Extreme stress	83	13.6
Total	612	100

Table 2 revealed that 12.6% of the respondents had mild stress from their academics; majority 73.9% had moderate stress from their academics while 13.6% had extreme stress from their academics.

### *Research Hypothesis*

**Hypothesis One:** There is no significant influence of academic stress on susceptibility to depression among Obafemi Awolowo students.

Simple linear regression was used to test the hypothesis at 0.05% significant level. Academic stress was regressed on student's susceptibility to depression.

**Table 1: Influence of Academic Stress on students' susceptibility to depression**

Variables	$\beta$	Std.error	t	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	F	sig
(Constant)	-2.835	2.565	-1.106	.110	.108	74.681	.000
Academic stress	.531	.061	8.642				

Table 1 shows the predictive role of academic stress on student's susceptibility to depression. The result ( $p < 0.05$ ) reveals that academic stress significantly predict student's susceptibility to depression, therefore the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis was accepted. It was also discovered that academic stress explained 11% variation in students' susceptibility to depression.

### *Discussion*

The first issue addressed by the study was to find out the prevalence of students' susceptibility to depression. The result revealed that more than 75% of the students are susceptible to depression, with 20.4%, 51.5%, and 28.1% having mild, moderate, and severe depression respectively. This appears to be relatively high. This is because, in addition to coping with the normal stressors of everyday life, students have to deal with stressors specific to the university, which include information and input overload, financial indebtedness, lack of leisure time, pressures of work, work relationships, and career choices. The amount and complexity of the material to be learned, students also feel academic pressure due to frequent academic examinations in a competitive environment and unmet academic expectations. The finding in this study agrees with Khan, Mahmood, Badshah, Ali, & Jamal, (2006) who reported in their study the prevalence of depression among medical students in a university in Pakistan as 70%. However, the findings didn't agree with Adewuya et al., 2006 who reported a low prevalence of depression. Possible explanations for the variation in the prevalence of depression found in this present study and that of previous studies



conducted among university students are likely due to variation in the instruments used. Instruments used to diagnose depression in other studies include the CES-D, DASS-21, BDI-II, and PHQ-9. There is also variation in cut-off points used for diagnosis. The difference in the time of the study, as well as the difference in culture and lifestyle in the various regions where the studies were carried out, may also account for the difference in the result.

The second issue addressed by the study was to find out the level of academic stress experienced by Obafemi Awolowo University students. The result discloses that the majority of the students are affected by academic stress. 12.6% had mild stress, 73.9% are moderately stressed while 13.6% had extreme stress from their academics. The high level of academic stress among these students may have been due to academic stressors such as family expectation, teachers' expectations, competition with other students and an unreasonable academic overload, lack of time to study due to the vast course content being covered, lack of time management skills, low motivation levels, fear of failure, class assignments, not enough guidance, pressure to mingle and to get associated are some of the reasons for the stress. The high level of academic stress observed in this study is similar to the findings of Jayinithi (2019) who discovered that more than 70% of university students had a high level of academic stress. The similarity may be connected to the use of the same sample size. However, the high level of academic stress report in this study is slightly higher than what was obtained in another study carried out in Nigeria by Oduwaiye et al., (2017) who found out that university students drawn from five different universities in Kwara State had 94.7% level of academic stress. The difference may be due to the combined use of two research instruments: Students' Stress Level Questionnaire" (SSLQ) and "Students' Academic Performance Pro-forma" (SAPP) to obtain relevant data from the respondents.

The hypothesis was to explore if there was any significant influence of academic stress on susceptibility to depression among Obafemi Awolowo university students. The hypothesis was rejected. It was revealed that there was a significant influence of academic stress on susceptibility to depression. The findings of this study reveal that academic stress could influence student's susceptibility to depression. Academic stress is caused by the interaction between stressors and the student's perception and reaction to them. Most often, fresh students are faced with challenges to fit in as they are coming from an entirely different environment. They want to meet up with parents as well as teacher's expectations for good grades, which require that they develop effective study techniques. Both new and old have to assimilate a vast amount of academic material in a short period, their inability to do this within a short time sends them thinking. They are also faced with the urgent need to change their old habits are productive to new ones and also to assume new responsibilities, the unhealthy competition that is being set up by their parents, lack of satisfaction in the course they are doing, reading but not seeing the effect in their grades yet they still want to socialise. In the midst of all these, inaccessible guidance or a total lack of it worsens the situation. It is therefore not too surprising that students in Obafemi Awolowo University, are susceptible to depression, anyone faced with this kind of circumstances will eventually have their health and emotional state affected hence large percentage of them are depressed. The findings of the study are in agreement with many other studies that have been conducted in other universities in Nigeria and across the world like Rahul Gajanan Kamble and Vikas Minchekar (2018). The similarity may have been because stress is not just restricted to a locality.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings of this research, the results indicated that a large percentage of undergraduate students in Obafemi Awolowo University are susceptible to depression. The students' susceptibility to depression is influenced by academic stress.

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The following recommendations were made based on the research findings:

1. As the students are the future of every nation, the government of the country should provide the fund and resources that will be needed by the universities to create an enabling environment that will be stress free.
2. The university should make available:
  - Mental health experts, for example, school psychologists, behaviour analysts, and professional counsellors to assist students to manage or overcome distress that may interfere with their overall mental health development
  - A conducive academic environment where students can read and attend lectures. Overcrowded classrooms, unproportioned ratio of a lecturer to students, lack of learning resources (good chairs and desks; well lighted classroom; blurred writing boards, hot and stuffy classrooms) should be addressed
  - A system or policy to reduce academic workload of students should be made available where possible.
3. Educators, Counsellors, and Psychologists should come up with a multidisciplinary approach such as:
  - Attaching students to staff who can act as advisers on academic and personal matters.
  - Identifying students with learning disabilities and referring them for comprehensive diagnostic assessment which would enable them to access academic and behavioural interventions.
  - Health education and counselling on depression and available coping mechanisms should be provided to students in the university, especially during orientation program.

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