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PERCEIVED ACADEMIC STRESS AMONG TESL STUDENTS IN KOLEJ POLY-TECH MARA IPOH

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ABSTRACT

The upcoming generation of leaders, represented by students, plays a crucial role in governing the country. However, their tertiary education life is significantly influenced by academic and social pressures, which can lead to stress. This stress may manifest in severe consequences such as suicidal thoughts, drug addiction, and dropping out of college. Academic stress, arising from factors like lecturers, assignments, and peer interactions, is a key contributor to more profound issues like depression and anxiety. This paper aims to assess the level of academic stress among 421 future holders of a Diploma in TESL Kolej Poly-Tech MARA Ipoh. Survey results were analyzed to gauge stress levels associated with different stressors. The findings indicate that students predominantly experience heightened academic stress linked to outcomes, tests, peer interactions, and self-imposed pressure. These results offer insights for students, educators, and universities to identify and address academic stress issues, with implications for future research.

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Academic stress
Environmental Stress
Peer interaction stress
Self-inflicted stress

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Stress is a complex phenomenon, acknowledged to have persisted throughout history. From the perspective of medical, stress is a physical, mental, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension. It can lead to mental disorders posing a threat to mental well-being. It is a universal experience, affecting individuals irrespective of age, gender, education, or socio-economic status (WHO, 2023)

It's crucial to understand that stress can affect individuals in both positive and negative ways. Stress might impede performance on difficult tasks, but it can also trigger healthy and adaptive responses. For instance, a realistic fear of threats can either motivate individuals to confront them or avoid the threats altogether (Yikealo et.al, 2018). In a medical or biological context stress is a physical, mental, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension which can initiate the "fight or flight" response

With the main inspiration to build a strong, developed country, Malaysia requires innovative and skilled human resources in their respective fields who are dedicated to seeking creative and innovative solutions. Certainly, students of higher education institutions are the pillars of hope in putting into realization the country's vision and mission. However, it cannot be denied that the transition period between adolescence and adulthood, coupled with the challenges faced in the effort to complete education, leads students of higher education institutions to experience a phenomenon known as academic and environmental stress (Buchanan, 2012). The authors point out that five domains contribute to academic stress and environmental stress, namely physiology, social, environmental, psychological, and academic. Marlissa et.al (2019), argues that the goal of achieving a high Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) for better job prospects adds continuous academic pressure to these students, and identifying the cause factor of academic stress among students in Malaysian higher education institutions is deem important in offering solutions and reducing the likelihood of more students encountering this issue (Marlissa et. al, 2019). Therefore, this study aims to investigate academic stress levels among future holders of Diploma in TESL students in Kolej Poly-Tech MARA (KPTM) Ipoh, by addressing the following research question:

1. What is the extent of academic stress among KPTM students based on the sources of academic stress?

2. What is the level of academic stress among KPTM students according to year of study?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Academic Stress

Students' mental well-being has emerged as a significant concern in public health, primarily attributable to academic stress. Stress can be characterized as the body's response to life changes, observable both neurologically and physiologically while adapting to new conditions (Franken, 1994). Academic stressors have long been linked to detrimental outcomes such as moderate academic performance, mental health issues, and dropouts. This has led to the development of stress intervention programs for university students aimed at assisting them in stress management (Conley, 2015).

While the impact of stressors varies among students, and stress levels fluctuate throughout the study period, previous research indicates that the first year of university life is a particularly vulnerable period for students (Abdallah & Gabr (2014). This vulnerability is attributed to the adjustment to a new university environment, distinct from the previous school setting, and the concurrent quest for a new identity during the transitional phase. Another study that evaluates the correlation among the period of study and the stressors reported that a high strain level was observed in the first semester, and significantly declined towards the second semester (Bewick, 2010). Ironically, a contradicting result has also been reported that a stable level of stress has been observed throughout the first academic year (Barker, et.al, 2018]. These conflicting results may indicate that students' level of stress might be as well dependent on the various academic stressors that can be interpersonal or intrapersonal (Pitt et.al, 2018).

Interpersonal stressors encompass challenges in dealing with peers, university staff, faculty relationships, and roommates, arising from the pressure of studying and emotional exhaustion during the adaptation period to university life. Intrapersonal stressors, on the other hand, stem from students' perceptions of coping with stress. Lecturer-related stressors, particularly the expectations placed on students without considering their transitional phase, contribute significantly to stress. Intense competition among students for recognition and favoritism from lecturers can exacerbate this situation. While peer and relationship stressors may appear less prevalent, issues of homophily and belongingness can lead to disengagement among demotivated students (Yikaelo et,al, 2018).

2.2 Effects of Academic Stress

According to a study by Ramachandiran and Dhanapal (2018), 88% of respondents attribute their increasing academic stress to their studies, with 78% admitting to experiencing a moderate stress level. While academic stress can help promote learning among students it may also lead to anxiety, and helplessness, which could adversely affect students' life and academic performance which gradually affect social interactions with peers and authorities at large (Zhao et.al, 2015).

Academic stress can also impact health, leading to issues such as lack of energy, loss of appetite, headaches, insomnia, and gastrointestinal problems among individuals with high-stress levels. A study by Ramachandiran and Dhanapal (2018) found that 54% of respondents experienced sleeping disorders. Moreover, high levels of academic stress may contribute to mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Addressing these issues is crucial given the alarming number of students struggling to cope with academic life. Parental expectations, peer competition, and a demanding syllabus are cited as reasons for these challenges. Therefore, raising awareness of academic stress among students in higher education is essential to reduce the prevalence of high academic stress levels, fostering a healthy academic lifestyle and a promising future for students.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This investigation employs a quantitative approach, following the methods utilized by prior researchers in the field (Yikaelo et.al, 2018). The study employs a research instrument comprising a questionnaire adapted from the academic stress inventory developed by Lin and Chen (2019). A total of 421 participants, spanning first to third-year students, are included in the study, with Table 1 presenting the total number of respondents across academic years.

Table 1: Total Number of Respondents

YEAR OF STUDY	NO. OF STUDENTS
1	145
2	140
3	136
Total	**421**

This research instrument utilized is a questionnaire designed to assess students' levels of academic stress. The questionnaire comprises 33 items categorized into seven constructs derived from the academic stress inventory. These constructs encompass stress which may stem from a few state constructs; lecturers, result-related stress, test-related stress, group study-induced stress, peer-related stress, time management-related stress, and self-inflicted stress. Descriptive statistic measures are employed to analyze the results, determining the average mean score for each construct. The obtained average mean scores are then interpreted using the mean interpretation level, as outlined in Table 2 The obtained average mean scores are then interpreted using the mean interpretation level, as outlined in Table 2 (Marlissa et.al, 2019).

Table 2. Mean Interpretation Level Score

AVERAGE MEAN	INTEPRETATION
3.50 – 4.00	Very High
3.00 – 3.49	High
2.00 – 2.99	Average
1.50 – 1.99	Low
1.00 – 1.49	Very Low

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Academic Stress Levels among TESL Students of Kolej Poly-Tech MARA Ipoh Based on Sources of Academic Stress

This survey was undertaken to examine the extent of academic stress experienced by students who enrolled in the Teaching as Second Language (TESL) program in Kolej Poly-Tech MARA Ipoh. The purpose of this survey is to provide some insights regarding the nature of academic stress as well as to raise awareness about the causes of academic stress and potential repercussions for those grappling with it. A total of 421 respondents participated in an online survey involving students from Semester 2 to 6 (Year 1 to Year 3) who enrolled in the faculty of Teaching English as the Second Language (TESL). Since this survey was conducted at the beginning of the new semester, Semester 1 students have been excluded. In addition, the semester 7 students who were undergoing Teaching Practicum were also excluded due to geographical constraints, as they were not around the campus but were located in different schools within the district where they conducted their teaching practices.

The primary objective of the initial segment of this study is to explore the level of academic stress among KPTM Ipoh students based on distinct sources of academic stress. Seven different stressors have been selected, namely stress from lecturers, stress from academic results, stress from tests, stress from group studying, stress from peers, stress from time management, and self-inflicted stress (Lin & Chen (2019). The results of the analysis were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and are presented in the form of the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD), summarized in the tables below.

Table 3 illustrates the mean scores for items falling under the stress from the first construct – the lecturers. The elements constituting this construct include difficulties with exercises, lecturer explanations, excessive time spent on data research, language barriers, teaching methods, and the pace of lecturer instructions. Within this category, item L3, which represents *'I feel that I cannot understand the contents delivered by some of the lecturers'* received the highest mean score of 2.54, while item L1 which represents *"I feel that some of the lecturers give extraordinary difficult assignments"* attains the lowest mean score of 2.31.

Table 3. Mean Scores for Stress from Lecturer Items

NO	ITEMS	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION
L1.	I feel that some of the lecturers give extraordinarily difficult assignments.	2.31	0.717
L2.	I feel that some of the lecturers give too many assignments.	2.38	0.786
L3.	I feel that I cannot understand the contents delivered by some of the lecturers	2.54	0.779
L4.	I feel that I cannot adapt to some of the lecturers' methods of instruction.	2.36	0.812

Table 4 displays the average scores related to stress levels derived from the second construct – the results. The components involve parental expectations, differentiation of outcomes from high school, and the presence of imperfect results. Specifically, Item A48 which expresses *"I worry that my academic results will not meet my parents' expectations" obtained a higher mean score* (M=3.12, SD=0.973). In contrast, item A46 representing *'Due to my academic performance, I have conflicts with my parents', records the lowest mean scores* (M=1.72, SD=0.878). Nevertheless, students' past school result was also found to have added pressure to their learning journey, stating an average score of 2.86 (M), and 0.965 (SD) for item A47 representing *"I feel that there is a significant difference between my current results and high school results".* This indicates that underperforming at a higher education level does lead to higher stress levels.

Table 4. Mean Scores for Stress from Results Items

NO.	ITEMS	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION
A5.	I feel that my parents think that I did not take my studies seriously	1.97	1.015
A6.	Due to my academic performance, I have conflicts with my parents.	1.72	0.878
A7.	I feel that there is a significant difference between my current results and high school results.	2.86	0.965
A8.	I worry that my academic results will not meet my parents' expectations.	3.12	0.973

Table 5 presents the average scores for stress derived from the third construct - various tests. The components of the measurement, such as staying up late, concerns about failure, and the test content, contribute to this construct. The highest mean score within this construct is associated with item T11 - *"I worry that I have to retake the core subjects which I fail"* with a mean score of 3.11. Conversely, the lowest mean score refers to item T12 where respondents express *"I feel that the course syllabus and test outlines are not clear to help me to prepare effectively"*, with a mean score of 2.33. This result yields significant information; students who burden themselves with excessive pressure often experience anxiety regarding test outcomes, worrying about the possibility of failure or obtaining lower scores compared to their peers. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that excessive self-imposed pressure can inevitably result in academic stress.

Table 5. Mean Scores for Stress from Tests Items

NO.	ITEMS	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION
T9.	I often could not sleep at night worrying for the exam.	2.63	0.952
T10.	I always sleep late studying for exams.	2.83	0.850
T11.	I worry that I have to retake the core subjects which I fail.	3.11	0.979
T12.	I feel that the course syllabus and test outlines are not clear enough to help me prepare effectively	2.33	0.812

Table 6 displays the average scores related to stress arising from the fourth construct - study group. The elements constituting to this construct involve the challenges faced while sharing work with lack of competent team members. The

highest mean score is associated with item GW15, which addresses *"I worry that my group members will not complete their part in completing a group-work assignment"*, with a mean score of 2.97. Conversely, the lowest mean score is represented by the item GW13, which demonstrates *"I often find it hard to distribute tasks fairly with my classmates in completing group assignments*" with a mean score of 2.34. Students exhibiting apprehension towards collaborative efforts may find themselves easily frustrated, leading to self-imposed stress as they strive to meet their personal standards.

Table 6. Mean Scores for Stress from Studying in Group Items

NO.	ITEMS	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION
GW13.	I often find it hard to distribute tasks fairly with my classmates in completing group assignments.	2.34	0.887
GW14.	I worry that I could not find the right group members for group assignments	2.75	0.966
GW15.	I worry that my group members will not complete their part in completing a group work assignment	2.97	0.932

Table 7 displays the average scores about the stress from the fifth construct - peers. This construct comprises elements such as disturbance from the class environment and the perceived inability to achieve satisfactory results compared to peers. Among the various items, it is noteworthy that item P16 "*I always feel nervous when I need to make a speech or give a presentation in front of my peers",* attains the highest mean score of 3.14, while item P19; *"I am stressed because my academic results are not as good as my classmates"*, records the lowest mean score of 2.57. These figures indicate that students must be cognizant of the underlying causes of their stress and anxiety, enabling them to gain a deeper understanding and explore strategies to mitigate and prevent these challenges. Students' stress levels are often high when they undergo performance-based settings (presentations) where their competency is measured by the instructor (lecturers) and observed by peers (classmates).

Table 7. Mean Scores for Stress from Peers Items

NO.	ITEMS	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION
P16.	I always feel nervous when I need to make a speech or give a presentation in front of my peers.	3.14	0.918
P17.	I worry that my classmates will laugh at my inability to perform well when I give a speech or presentation.	2.97	1.015
P18.	I often find it hard to focus on studying by myself when my friends are being noisy.	2.80	0.963
P19.	I am stressed because my academic results are not as good as my classmates'.	2.57	0.999

Table 8 presents the average scores for the sixth construct pertaining to time management, reflecting the challenges associated with balancing social activities and academic responsibilities. The highest mean score is attributed to item T20; *"I often struggle to balance my academic and social activities effectively"* with a mean score of 2.32. In contrast, the lowest mean score is associated with item T21 – "*My academic work is always impacted by my social activities and students' association"* with a mean score of 1.97. The findings suggest that students who believe they effectively allocate

their time exhibit higher satisfaction levels in both their academic and personal lives. Moreover, those who feel in control of their time experience lower levels of stress and pressure.

Table 8. Mean Scores for Stress Due to Time Management Items

NO.	ITEMS	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION
T20.	I often struggle to balance my academic and social activities effectively.	2.32	0.877
T21.	My academic work is always impacted by my social activities and students' association	1.97	0.766

Table 9 displays the average scores gained from the last construct - self-inducted stress. This construct encompasses participants' confidence in their learning performance, interest in subjects, and challenges in keeping up with courses. The items contributing to this construct include statements about their confidence levels in learning, interest in subjects, and difficulties in keeping up with coursework. The items S22, representing *"I feel that my study skill is not as good compared to my peers"* received the highest mean score of 2.82 the lowest mean score is associated with the item S24 which states *"I feel that I have no interest in some courses in academics"* with a mean score of 2.22. From these findings, it can be deduced that students frequently experience a lack of interest in their courses, raising questions about the factors motivating their enrolment, such as potential family pressure or other undisclosed reasons.

Table 9. Mean Scores for Self-Inflicted Stress Items

NO.	ITEMS	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION
S22.	I feel that my study skills are not as good compared to my peers.	2.82	0.925
S23.	I feel that I have so many courses that are beyond my capability.	2.27	0.817
S24.	I feel that I have no interest in some courses in academics.	2.22	0.882
S25.	I felt that my performance was not as good as I had expected after I entered university,	2.27	0.962

The final phase of this article reveals the average minimum scores for each identified source of stress in this study. The data indicates that peer pressure has the highest minimum score of 2.87, followed by test-related stress with a score of 2.72, and group work-related stress with a score of 2.69. This is followed by achievement-related stress with a mean of 2.42, stress related to pressure from lecturers with a mean of 2.40, and time management-related stress records a minimum score of 2.14. The conclusion that can be drawn from this data is that the largest contributor to stress among students is attributed to peer assessment, while the smallest contributor is attributed to the failure to manage time effectively. A summary of these details is presented in Table 10.

Table 10 - Total Average Mean Scores

NO.	SOURCES OF STRESS	AVERAGE MEAN SCORES	LEVEL OF STRESS
1.	Stress from Lecturers	2.40	Average
2.	Stress from Achievements	2.42	Average
3.	Stress from Tests	2.72	Average
4.	Stress from Groupwork	2.69	Average
5.	Stress from Peers	2.87	Average
6.	Stress due to Time Management	2.14	Average
7	Self-inflicted Stress	2.40	Average
	Total Average Mean	2.21	**AVERAGE**

4.2 Academic stress levels among TESL students of Kolej Poly-Tech Mara Ipoh by year of study

The subsequent portion of the findings focuses on the second research question, examining the academic stress levels among KPTM Ipoh's TESL students based on their year of study. The data presented in Figure 11 illustrates the comparisons of average mean scores corresponding to the various academic years.

Table 11. Average Mean Scores Based on Year of Study

NO.	YEAR	AVERAGE MEAN SCORES	LEVEL OF STRESS
1.	Year 1 (Semester 2)	2.50	Average
2.	Year 2 (Semester 3 & 4)	2.50	Average
3.	Year 3 (Semester 5 & 7)	2.56	Average

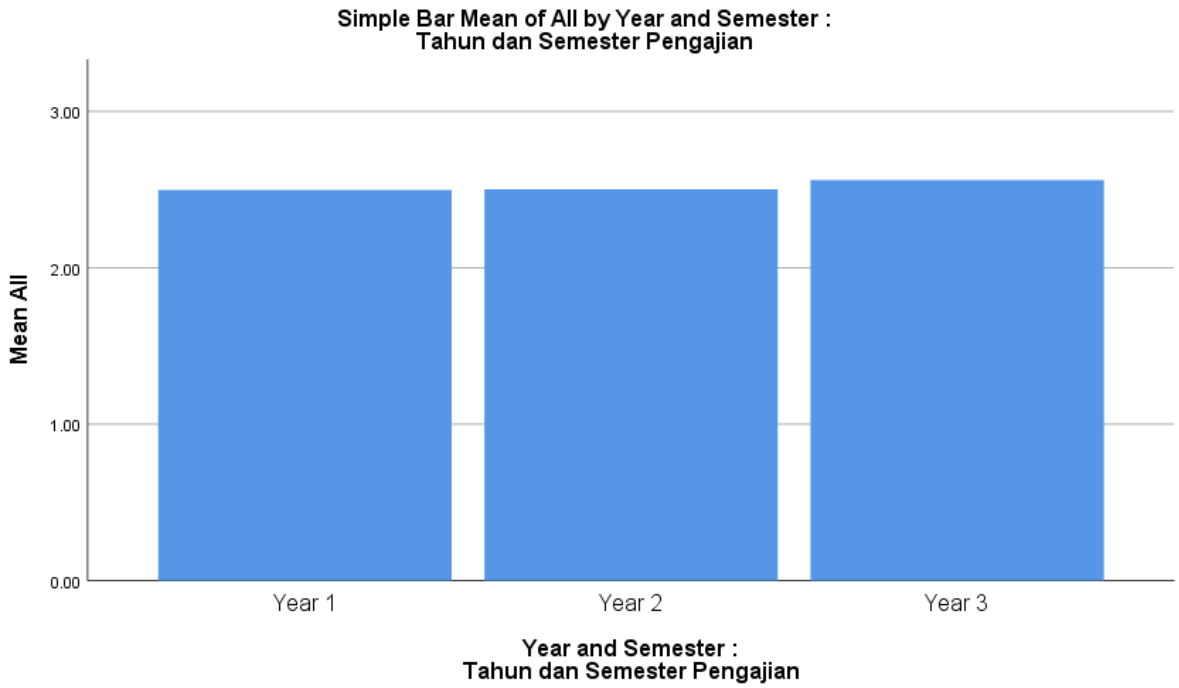

Figure 1. Comparisons of Average Mean Scores Based on Year of Study (Graph)

As depicted in Figure 1, a subtle yet noteworthy distinction is observed between the mean scores of students in year 1 compared to those in years 2 and 3. The mean scores derived from the study indicate that students in year 3 exhibit the highest mean score, with a mean score of 2.56, followed by both year 1 and 2 record a lower mean score of 2.5. These findings suggest that students in year 3 experience a higher perceived academic stress level than their counterparts in year 1 and 2.

In contemporary society, stress has become a prevalent challenge affecting individuals across every stage of life. Stress, a common part of daily life, poses an ongoing challenge, particularly in maintaining a healthy mental well-being. Psychologists say stress is when your body stays tense for a long time and affects how well you can do things. Stress can manifest in both physical or mental symptoms, arising from work-related pressures or individual lifestyle issues.

The study employed a quantitative research design, using a survey approach to investigate the academic stress among students from the faculty of Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) in Kolej Poly Tech Mara Ipoh. Numerous studies have explored the causes, effects, and solutions to stress problems in higher education; however, the issue persists, with students grappling with academic stress. Stress is now acknowledged as a lifestyle crisis affecting individuals at all developmental stages, challenging the idea that studying shouldn't be so stressful.

University students are often at risk of stress because they have a lot going on. Not being able to control a situation is a big source of stress. Even though there are unavoidable things like deadlines and exams, students can reduce stress by managing their time well and not waiting until the last minute to study. Many students don't get enough sleep, which is linked to lower grades and more stress.

While everyone might react to stress in similar ways, what causes the stress can be different. In college, common stressors include unnecessary activities, bad time management, social issues, and problems with peers. Taking care of

yourself with things like exercise, good sleep, and a healthy diet is important for managing stress and staying focused during classes and study times.

Stress can be good or bad. Managing stress well can have many benefits, but not managing it can lead to problems like anxiety. Students need to learn how to handle stress, knowing they can control it and use it to help them. Growing up often involves stress, and people should learn how to handle it when it comes up.

5.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the pervasive nature of stress in contemporary society, especially among university students, highlights the need for a nuanced understanding and effective management strategies. The study on academic stress among Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) students at Kolej Poly-Tech Mara Ipoh sheds light on the persistent challenges faced by individuals in higher education. In navigating the complexities of academic life, individuals must recognize their ability to influence and control stressors, viewing stress not only as a challenge but also as an opportunity for personal growth. Education on stress management should be an integral part of the developmental process, empowering individuals to handle stress constructively as they navigate the inevitable challenges that come with growth and life transitions. Ultimately, fostering resilience and coping skills is essential for individuals to thrive in an environment where stress is an inherent part of the human experience.

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