

**HEAVY COURSE LOAD AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG FINAL YEAR STUDENTS
OF FEDERAL COLLEGE OF EDUCATION (TECHNICAL)
UMUNZE ANAMBRA STATE**

BY

**OKOLI, ALEX (JUNIOR)
0706 508 3459
casezira@yahoo.com
Library Department
Federal College of Education (Technical)
Umunze, Anambra State**

Abstract

The study investigated heavy course load and coping strategies among final year students of Federal College of Education (Technical) Umunze, Anambra state. Guided by two specific objectives, two research questions and three hypotheses, the study selected, by proportionate sampling technique, 158 final year students from three (3) schools namely, Agriculture I Home Economics Education, Business Education and Science Education of Federal College of Education (Technical) Umunze. A structured questionnaire was designed and validated to elicit information from respondents. The internal consistency of the instrument was also determined. Data collected were analyzed using the mean, while the hypotheses were tested using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient and the t-test statistics. The results indicated that students perceived heavy course load as source of stress. It also found that students adopted both positive and negative strategies in coping with stress associated with heavy course load. Gender had no effect on students' responses. The study recommended, among others, a review of the present NCE curriculum and encouraging students to adopt more positive coping strategies.

Introduction

Several researches have been conducted on the effect of stress on workers. Most have focused attention on teachers' work load, consequent stress and coping strategies. It appears however, that little or no effort has been directed at the issue of stress as it affects students. The over-bloated courses which students are expected to read and pass each semester have never occurred to educators as a likely source of stress among students.

Ayorinde (1988) defined stress as a force or combination of forces that acts on a body as by pressing, pulling, stretching, compressing or twisting, which by such action tend to cause a change in the shape or size of the body acted upon. This is a physical perspective of stress. However, stress as concerned the students can be considered from the psychological rather than physical point of view. Here, Coleman (1980) defines stress as an adaptive response in reaction to external events or situations that place extreme physiological and psychological demands on the individuals. Stress though is not entirely a negative phenomenon. It can be positive, unleashing and preparing our energy for a challenging task (Kalejaiye-Matti, Bdullahi, Garba and Balogun, 2007). The positive form of stress is called Eustress. According to Kalejaiye-Matti et al (2007):

We need to understand that stress is a normal part of life especially in an academic environment where the hustle and bustle of incoming regular and out-going student exerted much pressure on the teachers in different capacities in their functions.

The positive form of stress challenges and virtually energizes the individual towards seeing to the accomplishment of a task.

The negative form of stress is known as Distress (Fawole, 2005; Nwachukwu & Nwachukwu, 2010). This has undesirable consequences. Chronic stress can take a heavy toll on the health of students. It can trigger rapid heart rate and high blood pressure, while the level of blood sugar can rise as well (Awake, Feb. 8, 2005). If the stress becomes persistent, all parts of the body's stress apparatus (the brain, heart lungs, vessels, and muscles) become chronically over or under-activated. This may produce physical or psychological damage over time. The list of illnesses in which stress may play a role is alarmingly long: heart disease, stroke, immune disorder, cancer, musculoskeletal disorders, and diabetes, to name just a few.

Ongoing stress can hamper creativity and productivity, as well as erode enthusiasm. Severe stress has also been linked to depression, increased aggression and burnout. Memory and concentration which are vital ingredients of academic achievements can be permanently impaired by constant stress (Awake, June 2010). Stress associated with heavy course load can over-stretch students beyond the limit of their capacities and this has dire consequences for effective education and the desirable learning outcome. Nwachukwu and Nwachukwu (2010: 187) observed that "individuals under stress could violate/disobey laid down regulations or procedures in the performance of certain functions ..." in other words, examination misconduct which has defied remedies in our education system may be rooted in stress associated with our bloated curriculum.

The NCCE's Minimum Standards for Nigeria Certificate in Education (2002) provides that every full time student should be required to register for a minimum of 18 and maximum of 24 credit units per semester except for students on field experience, teaching practice or industrial attachment. These credit units translate to at least 9 courses, assuming the minimum courses are of two credit units each. With the recent introduction of additional general courses, students are faced with up to 19 courses to pass in just one semester. Additional courses mean additional tests, assignments and final examinations in line with continuous assessment. Nineteen (19) courses therefore translate to 38 quizzes, 38 assignments and 19 examination sittings. For the final year students, there is an additional research project to contend with. Additional courses may not translate to additional knowledge.

When teachers are under stressful working condition, they fall back on certain coping strategies like alcohol taking, smoking, psychotherapy, occupational therapy, listening to music, rest and recreation (Nwachukwu iii Nwachukwu, 2010). In addition to these, Kalejaiye et al (2007) found that teachers engage in adequate planning of instruction, positive thinking and so on. How students cope with an apparent higher strenuous condition needs to be inquired.

Statement of Problem

There is no doubt that general courses are introduced alongside the major ones to expose students to the rudimentary knowledge of some discipline. For instance, it is against the backdrop of "widespread ignorance among Nigerian groups about each other and about themselves" that the national policy on Education (2004) provides for a compulsory first-year course in the "social organization, customs, culture, and history". However, when these general courses are many and run through the full cycle of the students' academic life, they may inflict undue stress on the students. Final year students of Federal College of Education (Technical) Umunze complain of heavy course load facing them in their final semester. This situation may allow them time for extra-curricular activities and may compel them to adopt some unacceptable coping strategies such as rote learning, drug abuse, examination misconduct and so on.

More courses may not necessarily translate to more knowledge. Rather, the associated stress and those negative coping strategies can be antithetical to education and students' wellbeing. This research therefore was undertaken to address this problem.

Purpose of Study

The study was guided by the following specific purposes:

1. Finding out the extent to which heavy course load constitutes source of stress to students;
2. Identifying coping strategies adopted by students against heavy course load.

Research Questions

Two research questions were posed:

1. To what extent does heavy course load constitute a source of stress among students?
2. What are the coping strategies adopted by students against heavy course load?

Hypotheses

Ho 1. Stress among final year students is not significantly dependent on heavy course load

Ho 2. Final year students' perception of heavy course load as source of stress will not be influenced by gender.

Ho 3. Final year students' coping strategies against heavy course load will not be influenced by gender.

Methodology

A survey design was used. Samples were taken through the proportionate random sampling technique three schools namely, Agriculture and Home Economics Education; Business Education; and Science Education were used in the study. Fifty per cent of year three students of the three selected schools were used. Sample was distributed as shown in table 1. The sample consisted of 31 male and 127 female.

A questionnaire titled "questionnaire on heavy course load and coping strategies (QHCLCS) was constructed by the researcher and used to elicit information from respondents. Two experienced lecturers in Education Psychology and one in Research Methods from Federal College of Education (Technical) Umunze validated the instrument. To test for the internal consistency of the instrument, the questionnaire was administered on thirty final year students of the School of Education of the college who were not part of the sample. Cronbach Alpha reliability estimate was used to test the instrument and it yielded a co-efficient reliability of 0.82.

Questionnaire administration was facilitated by three research assistants and all the 158 copies were completed and returned. Data generated were analyzed using the weighted mean as follows: Great Extent (GE)-3; Moderate Extent (ME)- 2; Less Extent (LE)-1 ; and no Extent (NE)-0. An item with a mean score of 2.00 and above was considered accepted while any item with a mean score below 2.00 was considered rejected. Standard Deviation (SD) was used to determine degree to which the scores differ from the mean. The hypotheses formulated were tested using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient and t-test statistics at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question 1

To what extent does heavy course load constitute source of stress among students?

Results of the research question 1 are viewed from table 2.

From table 2, it may be concluded that heavy course load was perceived as source of stress by both male and female students. For instance, female students believed that too many topics to cover during examinations was the highest source of stress (3.69). The highest mean ratings of 3.52 for male students was registered for items 1 and 4 apiece which suggest that there were too many reading materials; as well as too many topics to cover during examinations. Other sources of stress include two assignments and two quizzes to write for each course (3.23 and 2.52 for male and 3.46 and 3.38 for female students respectively); and students barely have time for extra-curricular activities (2.13 and 3.13 for male and female students respectively).

Research question 2

What are the coping strategies against heavy course load among students? Results of research question 2 are viewed from table 3

The results indicate that male students' coping strategies against heavy course load were rote learning (3.58), adequate planning of study (3.49); seeking the services of a counselor (3.42); and copying during examinations (2.46). Their female counterparts cope with adequate planning of study (2.84); rote learning (2.82); copying during examinations (2.68); carrying-over some courses (2.14); dropping out of school (2.13); and seeking the services of a counselor (2.13). It is remarkable that students rejected taking alcohol, smoking cigarette and use of hard drugs as coping strategies. Their equal rejection of sorting of lecturers (1.42 and 1.96 for male and female students respectively) is also noteworthy.

Test of Hypotheses

In the Hypotheses one (H01), the correlation value of +0.75 indicated an association between heavy course load and stress (see table 4). The hypothesis therefore was rejected. Stress among final year students was significantly dependent on heavy course load. The hypotheses two and three (H02 and H03) tested were both accepted at 0.05 level of significance and 157 degree of freedom (see Tables 4 and 5). In the second hypotheses, the calculated t value was 0.84 while the critical t-value was 1.960; while in the second hypotheses tested, the calculated t-values was 0.01 while the critical value oft was 1.960. It may therefore be inferred that there is no significant difference in male and female students' perception of heavy course load as source of stress. Also, there was no significant difference in male and female students' coping strategies against heavy course load.

Discussion of Findings

The finding that heavy course load constitutes a source of stress has confirmed that stress associated with work load is not restricted to teachers alone. Faced with overstuffed curriculum, students may suffer similar stress. In line with Nwachukwu and Nwachukwu (2010) who found that stress management strategies could be positive or negative, students are found to also engage in both positive and negative coping strategies against stress associated with heavy course load. There is also evidence that stress affects all students irrespective of gender, and their coping strategies are equally not affected by gender.

Recommendations

Sequel to the findings of this study, the following are recommended:

1. The curriculum of Nigeria Certificate in Education should be reviewed in such a way that only the most relevant courses are allowed. In other words, students should not be allowed to carry excess course load.
2. General courses should not be extended to final year as this runs contrary to the letters of the National Policy on Education.
3. Students should be encouraged to adopt only positive coping strategies in stress management.

Conclusion

The study has found that heavy course load can be a source of stress to final year student. It also found that both positive and negative strategies can be employed by students in coping with the stress associated with heavy course load. Too many courses may not translate to relevant knowledge. Hence, there is the need to reduce the number of courses facing students especially in their final year to encourage better learning outcomes.

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Table 1: **Distribution of Sample**

Schools	Population (year 3)	Sample (50%)
Agric/Home Economics	43	22
Business	189	95
Science	81	41
Total	313	158

Table 2: **Mean Ratings of Final Year Male and Female Students on Heavy Course Load as Source of Stress.**

S/N	Heavy Course Load	M-mean	F-mean
a.	There are too many reading materials to cover	3.52	3.33
b.	There are two assignments required for each course	3.23	3.45
c.	There are two quizzes to write for each course	2.52	3.38
d.	There are too many topics to cover during examinations	3.52	3.69
e.	Students have no time for extra-curricular activities,	2.13	3.13
Cluster mean		16.99	16.98

Note: M = Male; F = Female

Table 3: Mean Ratings of Male and Female Students on Coping Strategies against Heavy Course Load.

S/N	Stress-Coping Strategies	M-mean	F-mean
a.	Taking alcohol	1.26	1.43
b.	Smoking Cigarette	1.23	1.69
c.	Use of Hard drugs, i.e. Marijuana	1.23	1.42
d.	Coping during examination	2.46	2.68
e.	Adequate planning of study	3.49	2.84
f.	Carrying over some courses	1.75	2.14
g.	Dropping out of school	1.52	2.13
h.	Seeking the service of a counselor	3.42	2.13
1.	Sorting the lecturers	1.42	1.96
J.	Rote learning, i.e. cram work	3.58	2.82
Cluster mean		21.36	21.24

Table 4: Correlation Coefficient of Relationship between Heavy Course Load and Stress

Paired Scores	N	Correlation	Sig
Heavy Course Load and Stress	158	0.7562	0.164

P < 0.05

Table 5. T-test showing male and female students perception of Heavy Course as Source of Stress

Gender	N	Mean	SD	DF	Cal. T	Crit.t	Remark
Male	31	2.98	0.42				Null hypothesis accepted
Female	127	3.40					

P < 0.05

Table 6. T -test showing male and female students coping strategies against heavy Course Load

Gender	N	Mean	SD	DF	Cal. T	Crit.t	Remark
Male	31	2.14	1.56	156	0.01	1.960	Null hypothesis accepted
Female	127	2.13	1.66				

P < 0.05