

An Exploration of Second-year Student Nurse's Perceptions of Stress Towards Substandard Academic Performance at University, Windhoek, Khomas Region, Namibia

Fransina Sheelongo

University of Namibia

Joseph Galukeni Kadhila (✉ jkadhila@unam.na)

University of Namibia

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Abstract

Background: Stress has always been a contributor to student nurses' substandard academic performance due to difficulty dealing with academic tasks. Stress influenced the psychological well-being of undergraduate nursing students.

Methods: This study used the qualitative research method; Qualitative research is research that provides in-depth insights and understanding of real-world problems. The steps proposed by George was used for data analysis. Purposive sampling method was used to select participants from a population of 94 second-year degree nursing students. A total number of 15 second-year degree student nurses registered for the academic year 2022 at the Unam main campus were interviewed. An interview guide, an audio recorder, and field notes were used as the data collection instrument during face-to-face interviews.

Results: The study found that second-year degree nursing students at UNAM main campus perceived stress with negative feelings due to its detrimental effects and they further expressed how it affected their academic performance negatively due to demotivation to study when they are stressed. The study also found that students experienced stress from various stressors such as challenges with log books completion and submission, struggle with financial matters, overwhelmed with theory workload, and conflict with the registered nurses at the clinical settings.

Conclusion: The study concluded that there is no specific policy or guidelines to cope with the stress-related factors at the campus under study. The finding of this study shall therefore assist the University of Namibia under study and all stakeholders to work on the identified contributing factors.

Introduction

Stress is a contributor to student nurses' substandard academic performance due to difficulty dealing with academic tasks. Stress influences the psychological well-being of undergraduate nursing students in China, and the United Kingdom (21). Inevitably stress creates a loss of consideration in class, which can lead to inability to learn in class, a lack of desire to study, and contributes to absenteeism. Stress is described as a state of mental pressure and tension in psychological research (18). Furthermore, nursing students are subjected to mental stress and anxiety because of a variety of circumstances such as an overload of academic work and clinical practice, a lack of sufficient funds, and inadequate housing. Thus, students were subjected to stressors that contributed to headaches, muscular discomfort, sleeping issues, emotional instability, and flu-like symptoms, all of which interfered with everyday functioning (3).

As a result, cognitive and mental process functioning were compromised, putting students at risk of forgetting school work, failing to manage time, and becoming disorganized. Whistle, stress may further have an impact on both physical and mental well-being, which may have resulted in substandard academic performance, contributed to tests, assignments, and exam failure, resulted in a longer academic year of study as well as dropping out of varsity as evidenced in (21).

This study proved that 41% of Chinese students had considered leaving nursing compared to 14.9% of United Kingdom students. Furthermore, student nurses had limited time for other activities because they are usually preoccupied with school work and practicals, as indicated by research done in Uganda by (1). This research revealed, that 28.9% of students had little time for relaxation. Depression has always been a common mental health problem among young people, and university students have often been stressed out because of their studies (11).

Internationally, stress is a major health problem reported to be widespread among student nurses with levels ranging from moderate to severe (21). Moderate results were evidenced in the study conducted in China and the United Kingdom whereby (6) results showed that stress is considered to be at a moderate level among nursing students in China and the UK with the average scores of 15.43%, and 14.93%. While stress resulted from an accumulation of many different pressures which build up gradually and can affect students' mental health.

Moreover, a study conducted by (2) reported, that 43% of students in Sweden universities have experienced a high level of stress during clinical practice, apart from that, the majority of nursing students experienced mild to extremely severe symptoms of depression 51.1% while stress 82% (14).

Additionally, (9) study revealed long working hours, difficulty with academic work, and inadequate money to purchase textbooks was contributing factor to stress among students in KWA Zulu-Natal, South Africa

A study conducted in Namibia by (11) stated that 96% of students have experienced stress. Therefore, there was a need to conduct this study to explore student nurses' perceptions and experiences of stress toward substandard academic performance at UNAM's main campus, Windhoek, Khomas region, Namibia.

The study in this matter was found relevant by the researcher as it ensured that the factors which caused stress and substandard academic performance were identified to orchestrate a plan. Moreover, the fact that similar research has not yet been done on degree nursing students at the University's Main Campus makes the information new, relevant, and applicable to improve the overall academic performance of these nursing students.

Research Design

Exploratory, qualitative design using a phenomenological approach was used in this study. A qualitative research design was used in this study as the researcher explored student nurses' perceptions and experiences regarding stress which contributed to substandard academic performance among second-year degree nursing students at UNAM's main campus.

A total number of 15 second-year degree nursing students from the UNAM main campus were interviewed in this study.

Data collection

A semi-structured interview guide was used as a data collection instrument. An interview is a two-way conversation in which the interviewers asked the participant questions for data collection and to learn about the ideas, beliefs, views, opinions, and behaviour of the participant (10). The instrument consisted of three sections. A demographic particular, B the perceptions, and C the experiences of second-year degree nursing students regarding stress which contributes to substandard academic performance. The interview was tape-recorded, and field notes were collected. Collection of data was done over three weeks.

Data analysis

Semi-structured interviews for this study were analyzed by using steps proposed by (5). These were the steps followed:

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was collected from 15 participants through face-to-face interviews at UNAM main campus, whereby a semi-structured interview guide was used as a data collection instrument. The researcher stopped with data collection after participants kept on giving the same information as data reached its saturation, therefore researcher started with data analysis whereby the data was analyzed by using steps proposed by (5) as follows: step 1 the researcher assigned each participant with a number for organizational purposes, step 2 the researcher conducted verbatim transcription to exclude grammatical issues of participants, step 3 audios was transcribed, step 4 content analysis was conducted and words were coded as well as separated into categories, step 5 data was examined to identify common topics, step 6 collected the data into groups identified by their code, step 7 organized the codes into themes and sub-themes. Data was presented into themes and sub-themes.

Research Results

Characteristics of participants

During data collection, a non-probability, the purposive sampling method was used to select UNAM main campus second-year degree nursing students who were knowledgeable about the topic under study. This helped the researcher to gain an understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences of stress toward substandard academic performance at UNAM main campus, Windhoek Khomas region. The total number of participants who participated in this study were 15 with an average age of 19 to 23. There were 14 female participants in this study because they were more accessible than male participants. Only one male participant participated in this study. Most of the students were living outside campus as they lived in their parent's homes and few students were from the UNAM hostel, guardian homes as well as renting. All the students had grade 12 certificates as their highest educational level. In this study, the researcher assigned each participant a number for organizational purposes as well as for confidentiality as no names were mentioned throughout the study. During the results discussion participants were referred to as stipulated in this example (P1) means that participant no 1, Table 1.

TABLE 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

Participant number	The age of the participants	Gender of participants	Resident of participants	The highest educational level of participants
1	19	Female	Parent home	Grade 12 certificate
2	20	Female	Parent home	Grade 12 certificate
3	23	Female	Parent home	Grade 12 certificate
4	21	Male	Parent home	Grade 12 certificate
5	22	Female	UNAM hostel	Grade 12 certificate
6	19	Female	UNAM hostel	Grade 12 certificate
7	22	Female	Renting	Grade 12 certificate
8	23	Female	Parent home	Grade 12 certificate
9	21	Female	Guardian home	Grade 12 certificate
10	21	Female	UNAM hostel	Grade 12 certificate
11	20	Female	Parent home	Grade 12 certificate
12	22	Female	Renting	Grade 12 certificate
13	20	Female	Parent home	Grade 12 certificate
14	20	Female	Parent home	
15	23	Female	Parent home	Grade 12 certificate

TABLE 2 THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

Themes	Sub-themes
4.2.1 Stress is perceived with detrimental effects which resulted in stress affecting the academic performance of participants.	4.2.1.1 Psychological effect 4.2.1.2 Physical effect 4.2.1.3. Social effect
4.2.2 Stress results in impairment of carrying out daily activities.	4.2.2.1 Participants became demotivated to study and do other activities due to being overwhelmed.
4.2.3 Lack of concentration due to stress	4.2.3.1 Participants lost focus on their study.
4.2.4 Stressors experienced by the participants.	4.2.4.1 challenges with clinical procedures 4.2.4.2 Struggle with Financial matters 4.2.4.3 Overwhelmed with theory workload 4.2.4.4 Conflicts with the registered nurses in the clinical settings

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes

The following themes emerged, Theme 1, Stress perceived with detrimental effects which resulted in stress affected the academic performance of participants, theme 2, Stress resulted into impairment of carrying out daily activities, theme 3, Lack of concentration due to stress and theme 4, Stressors experienced by the participants. Each theme was supported by sub-themes as stated in table 2 above and further discussed under 4.3 whereby results of the current study were controlled and compared with results from related literature reviewed. Interview data were quoted directly from the participant of this study

Discussion Of The Research Results

Stress perceived with detrimental effects resulted in stress affecting the academic performance of participants.

Stress had detrimental effects which can affect daily living and mental health. Stress had detrimental effects on physical health, and psychological as well as cognitive effects such as attention and concentration deficit on academic, Physical effects of stress are those related to physiological challenges to the body while psychological involve an individual's perception of life circumstances (19), (19) further stated that effects of stress directly impact mental health which affects academic performance due to the effects of stress on recognition. Stress can affect mental health and disrupt a person's routine (19). Sstudents faced a wide range of ongoing stressors related to academic demands during University life (21). Therefore, the researcher explored student nurse's perceptions and experiences of stress toward substandard academic performance and the above theme was emerged and supported by sub-themes as follows:

Psychological effect: (8), concluded that students encounter various obstacles and difficulties during their studies which subjected them to physiological and psychological consequences. Admittedly, Stress can affect one mentally, physically and even socially. Indeed, (17) concluded that university students faced stress from many sources, and the impact from this stress can be detrimental to students. The researcher explored second-year degree nursing students perceptions of stress toward substandard academic performance at UNAM main campus, and participants shared their perceptions of stress with negative feelings. Stress had detrimental effect on their physical, psychological and social well-being. According to (17) stress can lead to psychological change of an individual which can trigger the effect of developing mental disorder such as depression and anxiety, which are both important psychological factors that concern University students. Both anxiety and depression can be impact on the academic of the students, indeed participants of this study perceived stress with negative feelings as it impacted their psychological well-being leading them not to concentrate in their study as they kept focusing on the situation that they are going through. There were similar effects in regard with psychological effects of stress stated in the literature reviewed and with that of the current study as some participants responded as follows:

"Stress is not a good thing as when you are stressed you won't think logically and sometimes you will make decisions that you will regret later. Sometimes you might even be depressed for long which can also cause health problems". (P4)

"For me stress has mental and emotional effects that affect my mental well-being as once I am emotionally stressed there is nothing I can do as I constantly have to think about that issue".(P 5)

Another participant had this to say, *"To me stress is a bad thing because when I am stressed it drains me emotionally, psychologically and it takes away my concentration"* (P 7)

. Indeed, another participant had to say, *"Okay! I perceive stress as a bad thing as it affects one negatively like personally when I am stressed, stress leads me to depression, and I am one person that does not open up to talking as when I am stressed I tend to cry a lot, but I don't speak out". (P 13)*

Physical effect: According to (20), stress is the emotional and physical strain caused by our response to pressure from the outside world. Hence, stress affects the body differently from person to person, but the common physical effects of stress are low energy levels and headaches which can negatively affect students' academic performance. In this study participants perceived stress as a factor that contributed to the impairment of their physical well-being which the researcher found similar to the physical effects discussed in Sharma's study. In this study some participants responded as follows:

"To me, stress is a very bad thing. Stress can affect you psychologically and physically, stress causes headaches and if you have a headache you won't study". (P 2)

Another participant had to say *"Okay! Stress is a very bad thing as it affects one negatively. Personally, when I am stressed I lose weight, I tend not to eat, I lose appetite, and with all that, I even lose interest in studying which leads to failure". (P 13)*

Social effects: After being admitted to the University, some students left their family houses to go and stay in the University hostel or rent as a way of accommodation. According to (17), Departing from home causes a schedule change that could bring about stress in university students as suddenly living in different settings that students are not used to can trigger stress, indeed when students moved out of the family home for the first time, it can lead to a large amount of stress also (4) concluded that stress can be delivered from decision making on an intimate relationship. (9) concluded that 42.2% of students perceived social isolation, and social isolation was associated with stress, depression, and anxiety. Indeed, (13), stated that stress can result in students experiencing ineffective communication and ineffective work.

Therefore, this review was similar to the perceptions of some of the participants of this study who responded similarly to the reviewed literature as they responded as follows:

"Now that I am renting sometimes I don't have enough food and sometimes I think about my family members that I left in the north when I am thinking of all those things I don't concentrate in class". (P 7)

"Stress is not a good thing and it affects my academic performance very badly as the fact is very evident because anytime there is a lot of stress at home I can see a decline in motivation to study which leads to poor performance". (P 1)

"I sleep the whole day and distance myself because sometimes I don't feel like being occupant by other people". (P 6)

Another participant had to say this *"When I am stressed even the way I communicate with my patients and my colleagues is not good". (P 4).*

Stress resulted in impairment of carrying out daily activities.

When something is impaired it is referred to as weakened or damaged. Stress had negative challenges and changed the way students carried out daily activities. Stress can reduce academic achievement, decrease motivation to study which negatively impacted students learning capacity and academic performance, and increase the risk of school dropout (12). The participants of this study, the second-year degree nursing students from UNAM main campus who participated in this study shared their perceptions of stress toward substandard academic performance. Therefore, they stated that stress can contribute to impairment of carrying out their everyday activities for instance studying leading to substandard academic performance. Below was the sub-theme that supported the above theme:

Participants became demotivated to study and do other activities due to being overwhelmed

Lack of motivation to study due to exhausted and overwhelmed can result in substandard academic performance. Admittedly, emotional exhaustion due to study demands contributed to the development of detached attitudes toward student studies leading to burnout of students that caused low academic engagement (16). (16), stated that study burnout increased over time during tertiary education as evidenced by 7% of students suffering from study burnout while 30% were exhausted during their studies regarding this review this was compared with similar perceptions from some of the participants of this study as follow:

"To me, stress is a very bad thing. When I am stressed I don't study, nor go to class as even if I go to class I won't get anything from the lesson which affects my academic performance. (P 2)

Another participant had to say, *"stress weakens the body and you won't have the strength to stand up and do academic activities". (P 3)*

Another participant had to say, *"OK! " I negatively view stress; I don't know how to handle stress properly. Burnout! No break between practical and school block this leads to stress and overwhelming". (P 9)*

In regard with demotivated to do other activities, another participant had to say this even though it was not supported in the mentioned literature control, *"When I am stressed I tend to neglect myself physically and just focus on the stress that I have. I won't be able to take care of myself like making myself clean and presentable. For example, instead of ironing my uniform, I will go with a crusty uniform".*

Lack of concentration due to stress

To concentrate, cognitive should be well functioning, indeed with the presence of stress cognitive function can be impaired leading to poor concentration. Stress is an inevitable part of everyday life for many which can affect the ability to concentrate. Stress has impacted students learning capacity and academic performance (12). The participants of this study further shared their perceptions of stress toward substandard academic performance regarding participants perceiving stress as a factor that resulted in impairment of their concentration. This was further supported by a sub-theme discussed below:

Participants lost focus on their study

Stress can impact the cognitive function that is triggered by school workload (13). Indeed, cognitive function refers to a mental process involved in the acquisition of knowledge, manipulation of information, and reasoning, moreover cognitive functions include the domains of perception, memory, learning, attention, decision making, and language ability. This was compared with the results revealed from this study as participants stated that stress can hinder their concentration which negatively affects their academic performance. The following were some of the responses from some participants:

"I negatively view stress because it affects someone mentally and academically whereby you won't even be able to focus on your study and have good grades". (P 11)

Another participant had to say, *"Once I am stressed I don't focus anymore, so many things are coming into my mind, there is too much pressure and my academic performance will be low or it will be less than what I used to perform". (P 12)*

"Okay! Whenever I am stressed I don't study. This can lead to failure as I even skip one of my classes because of stress". (P 13)

Indeed, the other participant also had to say, *"Okay, to me stress is a bad thing. When I am stressed I hardly concentrate and focus on what I was supposed to do especially when it comes to academics". (P 15)*

"Once I am stressed I constantly have to think about a certain issue that is affecting me. Even if I have a test instead of studying for the test I am constantly being reminded of the issue that I am battling and with that, it slows down my progress, and I won't perform well". (P 5)

Stressors experienced by the participants.

Students in University settings faced a wide range of ongoing stressors related to academic demands (12). According to (15) stress can be any type of change that causes physical, emotional, or psychological strain, indeed students experienced stress during university life. During the interview at UNAM main campus, the participants were further asked to tell the researcher about their experiences regarding stress and how it affected their academic performance. Participants shared their experiences of stress and how it affected their academic performance yet various stressors were experienced by the participants in this study as discussed below:

Challenges with clinical procedures

The participants shared their experiences of stress they experienced during clinical placement. The majority of the participants were stressed during clinical placements. According to (8), nursing is a multi-tasking profession requiring knowledge of nursing skills and competencies, therefore nursing students

are being placed for clinical practice indeed, obliged to complete enormous work to gain information abilities from theory and apply them to practical situations. The Samson-Akpan study highlighted that students experienced stress during the clinical component of the educational program. Therefore, all this was similar stress experienced by the participants of this study. The participants stated that they have experienced stress due to log book completion and submission. Concerning challenges with clinical procedures some study participants had this to say:

"The thing that I am more stressed about this year is to get all my three books done especially the midwifery book". (P 1)

"The wards are full of students contributing to stress because all the students are grabbing the procedures for their logbooks". This creates a lot of pressure and fear of not finishing the book on time before the end of the year". (P 3)

Apart from that one participant had to say, *"OK! As a nursing student I faced stressing situations for example pressure from the lecturers pressuring us to complete the books and hand them in". (P 10)*

"I am stressing because of log books. We are given a short period to finish the whole big content which is stressful, for example, midwifery log book given 4 weeks". (P 8)

Struggle with Financial matters: (18), highlighted that students were subjected to stress full situations due to a variety of circumstances such as a lack of sufficient funds. The Samson-Akpan study highlighted that students had challenges with finance. This was similar to the findings of this study as the participants shared their experience of stress due to lack of enough funds to cater for their taxi money to go to school, practicals as well as cosmetics, and food. Therefore, some of the participants responded as follows: *"As a self-funded student, I always experienced financial stress. Once I have financial crises I end up lending money from NSFAF holders and I will be in pressure of paying back ending up selling up some of my belonging". (P 12)*

Also, one participant had to say, *"Sometimes parents might not have money for you to pay for your cab and NSFAF takes too long to refund us ". (P 3)*

the other one expressed, *"Every time I have to make sacrifices to complete the logbook. Week in and week out, Monday to Friday you have to spend money for going to practical". (P 9)* Indeed all these affected their mental well-being contributed to substandard academic performance.

"Sometimes there is no transport money to go to campus and practical and I end up being stressed and I won't think of books, I just concentrate on my stress be depressed and just stressed thinking where will I get this.... Where will I get this.....at the end of the day it will result in performing poorly". (P 4)

Overwhelmed with theory workload

There were various factors contributed to the stress experienced by nursing students as evidenced by the study that was done by (1), with the following statistics: top stressors were, academic curriculum 38%, dissatisfaction with class lecturers 30.9%, long-distance walk 29.5%, lack of time for recreation 28.9%, performance in examination 28.3%, lack of special guidance from faculty 26.7% and high parental expectations 26.7%. Indeed, (7), found that health care curriculum was negatively associated with stress, depression, and anxiety this finding corroborated that of (23), who concluded that students experienced stress mostly due to curriculum overload. Admittedly, (13) also concluded that nursing students experienced a high level of stress due to excessive work load this review was similar to the findings of this study as some participants had this to say:

"Fear of test and examination! Us nurses neh! Our time is mainly between school and practice and we don't have enough time just to focus and prepare for the test and examinations. SO! At the end of the day when it's time for the test, you panic as maybe you did not study enough which leads to stress and you might not pass the test well with the marks that you wanted to get". (P 7)

"Sometimes we don't fail because we did not study, is because of the exam timetable being set with modules to be written in one week which is stressful" (P 9)

"The content is a lot and time to study is very short. Sometimes at the clinical block, you have to work until 19h00 because sometimes the ward is very busy and students are a lot of help to nurses. Come back home exhausted and there is no time to pay attention to your theory as well". (P10)

"It is hard for me to get time just to focus on my study. You have practical books to finish, hours, assignments, evaluations and tests to study". (P 11)

"Okay! I have experienced stress due to academic pressure whereby we are always writing tests following each other like in a week we can write 3 tests and you only be given a day to study". (P 14)

"Academic pressure! Writing tests on a Monday after a week of practice. Soo.... Is just something else because when we are on practical we are focusing on practical, you might have time to study, but not everything because the content is too much. Sometimes you will even be asked to do assignment while on practical and submit it while you were supposed to be on duty" (P 15)

Conflicts with the registered nurses in the clinical settings

Conflicts were common in healthcare settings. Conflict is an inevitable and integral part of any workplace including hospital settings (20). Conflicts that the students encountered during clinical practice stem from the difficulties health care staff experience in adapting to the new and difficulties all face in reaching a mutual understanding (22). Hence, in Ghana, the prevalence of interpersonal stress was also reported high among students (23). Therefore, similar findings were found in this study as some of the participants of this study shared their experiences regarding conflicts with registered nurses in clinical settings. Some of the participants responded as follows:

“Working with the sister from morning until 16hoo and when it comes to signing of the books that sister will tell you I did not see you” (P 2)

“Stress due to being mistreated by the registered nurses whereby sometimes they are refusing to sign our books, imagine working for something and end up not being signed for it. Your time and taxi money are wasted”. (P 13)

“Sometimes there are those RN that won't like signing or just don't have the energy to sign even if they have seen you working and it is very stressful as you wasted taxi money, so! You need extra money to work for extra days”. (P 15)

Conclusion

The study concluded that there is no specific policy or guideline to cope with the stress-related factors at the centre under study. The finding of this study shall therefore assist the University of Namibia under review and all stakeholders to work on the identified contributing factors. Therefore, the Campus under study should place such considerations into practice in conjunction with the suggested recommendations. Overly, the application of the results of this study into practice can be gradual but its outcome is expected to yield better results that can improve the nursing students' perceptions and experiences of stress the researcher opted implementation plan to utilize the findings of this study and fine-tune them into real practice for the betterment and improvement of the problem under study.

Limitations

This study was conducted at UNAM main campus on second-year degree nursing students registered for the academic year 2022, therefore findings cannot be generalized to other training institutions and other UNAM campuses, it was limited to the small selected size of second-year degree nursing students at UNAM main campus, Windhoek, Khomas region.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Written informed consent was obtained from all the participants prior to data collection to partake in this study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the School of Nursing and Public Health at the University of Namibia Health Research Ethics Committee SoNEC 91/2022 to conduct the study. The following ethical principles, respect for a person, justice, maleficence and beneficence where adhered and respected throughout the study according to guidelines.

Consent to publish

Informed consent was obtained from the participants.

Availability of data materials

The data base is available on a reasonable request from the corresponding author Joseph Galukeni Kadhila.

Competing interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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Authors contributing

1. Fransina Sheelongo was responsible for the original draft and preparation of manuscript, data analysis and writing up of manuscript: 2. Joseph Galukeni Kadhila* was responsible for the supervision and editing of the manuscript. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

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Authors details

1. Fransina Sheelongo University of Namibia, 2. Joseph Galukeni Kadhila School* of Nursing and Public Health, Faculty of Health Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, University of Namibia.

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