

School variables and mental health challenges among students in the University of Calabar, Nigeria.

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Abstract

This study employed a correlational design to examine the relationship between school variables—specifically academic workload and classroom conditions—and the mental health of students at the University of Calabar, Nigeria. Two research questions were formulated, which were translated into two null hypotheses. The study's population consisted of twenty-six thousand four hundred and thirty-four (26,434) undergraduate students across twenty-four (24) faculties and one hundred and sixteen (116) departments for the 2023/2024 academic session. A sample of 228 students was selected using stratified and simple random sampling techniques. The data collection instrument, titled “School Variables and Mental Health Challenges” (SVMHCQ), was developed by the researcher and validated by experts. The reliability of the questionnaire, assessed using the Cronbach Alpha method, yielded an average index of 0.83. The hypotheses were tested using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient at a significance level of 0.05. The findings revealed a significant relationship between school variables (academic workload and classroom conditions) and the mental health of students at the University of Calabar, Nigeria. It was concluded that the mental health of students is influenced by their academic workload and classroom conditions. Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, it is recommended that institutions review

and manage academic workloads to ensure they are reasonable and manageable. This approach would help reduce student stress and promote a healthy balance between academic responsibilities and personal well-being.

Keywords: School variables, academic workload, classroom condition, mental health of students

Introduction

Mental health challenges among university students have emerged as a significant public health concern globally, and Nigeria is no exception. Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to contribute to their community. It includes the absence of mental disorders and the presence of positive characteristics such as resilience and emotional stability. The transition to university life often brings various stressors, including academic pressures, social adjustments, and financial constraints, which can adversely affect students' mental health (Ogunyemi et al., 2022). At the University of Calabar, these challenges are particularly pronounced, as students navigate a complex educational environment that may not adequately support their mental well-being. According to Adeleke et al. (2023), the increasing prevalence of mental health issues among Nigerian university students, including anxiety, depression, and stress-related disorders, is concerning. Factors such as stigma, lack of mental health resources, and insufficient awareness of mental health issues further exacerbate the situation. Mental health is crucial at every stage of life, including during university education, as it influences academic performance, relationships, and overall quality of life. Poor mental health can lead to various issues, including decreased academic performance, social withdrawal, and, in severe cases, suicidal ideation (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2019; Akpa, Anam, & Akah, 2024).

One significant factor identified as influencing students' mental health is school variables. School variables refer to the various factors within the educational environment that can influence students' academic performance, social interactions, and overall well-being. These variables include, but are not limited to, the quality of academic programs, availability of resources (e.g., libraries, laboratories, and counseling services), student-teacher relationships, class size, infrastructure, and the overall campus environment (Kitzrow, 2016; Ibok et al., 2025). School variables can either positively or negatively impact students' experiences and outcomes, including their mental health. For instance, a supportive academic environment with accessible counseling services and positive peer interactions can enhance students' mental health (Storrie, Ahern, & Tuckett, 2018). Conversely, a lack of resources, high

academic demands, and poor infrastructure can lead to increased stress and mental health challenges (Ibrahim, Kelly, Adams, & Glazebrook, 2019).

At the University of Calabar, several school variables may influence students' mental health. Like many Nigerian institutions, the university faces challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate funding, and limited access to mental health resources (Adeyemi & Adeyemi, 2016; Ibok, et al.2025). These factors can create a stressful environment for students, potentially leading to mental health issues. Additionally, the transition from secondary school to university life can be particularly challenging, as students often face new academic and social pressures without adequate support systems (Otu, Charles, & Otu, 2020; Ibok, Ogar, Bessong, Bessong, Agwanyang, & Olofu,2026). To provide direction for this study, two school variables—academic workload and classroom conditions—were considered, as they are likely to relate with students' mental health at the University of Calabar, Nigeria.

Academic workload is the amount and complexity of academic tasks assigned to students within a specific time frame. This includes not only the number of assignments, readings, exams and projects but also the difficulty level and the time required to complete these tasks. Academic workload can significantly impact students' ability to manage their time, maintain their mental health, and achieve academic success. According to Ojo & Adebayo, (2022), academic workload is often measured in terms of credit hours, hours per week, or the number of assignments and exams within a course or semester. A high academic workload can lead to stress and impact mental health. Ibrahim, Bello, and Yusuf (2020) conducted a cross-sectional study among undergraduates in Northern Nigeria, revealing that over 30% of students exhibited clinically significant symptoms of depression and academic-related stress. The study identified several interconnected causes, primarily academic pressure, including high expectations from lecturers and parents, frequent assessments, and the need to maintain good grades under limited time and resources. The researchers emphasized that these stressors, if unaddressed, can significantly impair students' academic engagement, emotional stability, and overall quality of life. A similar finding was reported by Oladeji, Akinlabi, & Adegoke (2021) at the University of Ibadan, where over 40% of undergraduate students experienced moderate to severe academic stress. The study identified academic workload intensity as the primary contributor, with students citing overwhelming lectures, frequent assignments, and closely scheduled examinations as major pressure points. The authors found workload as a significant source of psychological distress among university students. Uwakwe and Modebelu (2016) found that undergraduates facing high academic loads reported elevated levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, especially those lacking

adequate time for rest or extracurricular engagement. Ugwu and Onyishi (2019) found that a positive relationship between academic workload and mental health of students.

While the volume of academic tasks contributes to stress, students' perceptions of their workload play a critical role in determining mental health outcomes. Ezenwaji, Okoye, and Nwankwo (2022) emphasized that how students evaluate their ability to manage academic demands significantly impacts their stress levels. Those who perceive their workload as manageable tend to experience lower stress, while those who view it as overwhelming are more likely to develop symptoms of anxiety or depression which influence their mental well-being. Adigun and Bello (2023) conducted a qualitative study at Lagos State University, revealing that many students perceived their workload as unreasonably high due to uncoordinated timetables, frequent schedule changes, and last-minute demands. These factors created chaos and a sense of lack of control, leading to chronic sleep deprivation, irritability, and anxiety. The study concluded that academic workload influence mental health of students

The structure of the Nigerian university system amplifies the effects of academic workload on mental health. Okeke, Nwosu, & Madu (2018) found high prevalence rates of burnout symptoms among final-year students, particularly during project writing and exams. Contributing factors include overloaded curricula, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to student support services which influence mental health in tertiary institutions. Onukwufor and Amadi (2019) found that academic workload significantly associated with mental health of students. According to Nwachukwu, Ojo, and Adeboye, (2021), academic workload resulted to stress leading to increased mental fatigue and anxiety. In the same vein, Ojo, and Adeyemo (2023) examines the relationship between academic workload and mental health among students in tertiary institutions across Nigeria. A sample of 500 undergraduate students from five universities completed a survey assessing their perceived academic workload and mental health indicators, including anxiety and depression. The findings reveal a significant positive correlation between high academic workload and increased mental health challenges, indicating that excessive academic demands contribute to heightened stress levels among students. Okafor and Eze (2023) investigates the relationship between academic workload and mental health among students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. A sample of 450 undergraduate students from three universities participated in the research, completing a questionnaire that assessed perceived academic workload and mental health indicators such as stress, anxiety, and depression. The findings reveal a significant positive correlation between high academic workload and adverse mental health outcomes, indicating that excessive academic demands contribute to increased stress levels among students. The study calls for the development of policies that promote balanced academic workloads to

enhance student well-being.

Classroom condition is the physical and psychological environment in which learning takes place. This includes factors such as classroom layout, lighting, temperature, seating arrangements, and overall maintenance of the learning space. A conducive classroom environment can enhance learning and positively impact students' mental health (Nwogbo et al., 2023). Classroom condition is the overall environment of the classroom, encompassing both the physical setup (e.g., furniture, technology, resources) and the psychosocial atmosphere (e.g., teacher-student interactions, peer relationships). Classroom condition encompasses the physical and psychological aspects of the classroom, such as seating arrangements, lighting, noise levels, and the emotional climate. A positive classroom environment can enhance learning and student engagement. Classroom conditions also play a vital role in students' mental health. Poor environments characterized by overcrowding, inadequate lighting, and insufficient ventilation contribute to stress and burnout. Ajayi and Olatunde (2019) highlighted that many Nigerian students study in "dehumanizing spaces," which negatively impact their academic performance and mental well-being. Umeh and Abiola (2021) found that students in inadequate conditions reported higher incidences of headaches, emotional fatigue, and poor concentration. These conditions undermine students' academic self-efficacy, leading to feelings of hopelessness. To address these challenges, researchers advocate for institutional reforms, including infrastructure improvements, psychosocial interventions, and student-centered planning. Okonkwo and Balogun (2020) emphasize the importance of improving classroom conditions as a crucial component of student mental health and academic success.

Despite the growing body of research on mental health among students, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the specific challenges faced by students at the University of Calabar. Existing studies indicate that factors such as academic stress, peer relationships, and institutional support play a critical role in influencing students' mental health (Nwogbo et al., 2023; Ibok, Ogar, & Akpeke, 2025). However, there is limited research that specifically examines how these variables interact within the unique context of the University of Calabar and how they contribute to mental health issues among its students. In the same vein, Nwankwo and Okeke(2023) investigates the impact of classroom conditions on the mental health of students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the study surveyed 300 students from three universities regarding their perceptions of classroom environments, including factors such as comfort, safety, and resources. Results indicate a significant relationship between positive classroom conditions and improved mental health outcomes, such as reduced anxiety and enhanced academic performance. Adesola and

Chukwu (2023) examines the impact of classroom conditions on the mental health of students in tertiary institutions across Nigeria. Using a quantitative approach, the study surveyed 320 students from five universities regarding their perceptions of classroom environments, including aspects such as physical comfort, resources, and overall atmosphere. Results indicate a significant relationship between positive classroom conditions and improved mental health outcomes, including decreased anxiety and enhanced academic engagement. The findings suggest that universities should prioritize improving classroom environments to support the mental health of students.

Two theory Stress Theory(1976) and Ecological Systems Theory(1976) were used to guide this study school variables and mental health challenges among students at the University of Calabar, Nigeria. Stress theory was developed by Hans Selye, (1976) which focuses on the physiological and psychological responses to stressors. Selye introduced the concept of General Adaptation Syndrome, which describes how the body responds to stress in three stages: alarm, resistance, and exhaustion. According to Stress Theory, students at the University of Calabar may experience various stressors, including academic pressure, financial difficulties, and social challenges. These stressors can lead to increased anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. If students face continuous academic demands without adequate support, they may enter the resistance stage, leading to burnout and mental exhaustion. While Ecological systems theory, proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner(1979), emphasizes the importance of various environmental systems in human development. It identifies different levels of influence, including microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems, which interact to shape an individual's experiences. This approach allows for targeted interventions that consider both individual experiences and the broader environmental influences that shape students' mental health outcomes. Both Stress Theory and Ecological Systems Theory provide valuable insights into the significant relationships between school variables and mental health challenges among students at the University of Calabar. Stress Theory highlights the role of academic workload and classroom conditions as stressors that can adversely affect mental health, while Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes the importance of the broader environmental context in shaping students' experiences.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between school variables and mental health challenges among students in the University of Calabar, Nigeria. Specifically, the study seek to established

1. The relationship between the academic workload and mental health of students in the University of Calabar.
2. The relationship between the classroom condition and mental health of students in the University of Calabar.

Statement of hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated for the study:

1. There is no significant relationship between academic workload and mental health of students in the University of Calabar.
2. There is no significant relationship between classroom condition and mental health of students in the University of Calabar.

Methodology

The study was conducted at the University of Calabar, employing a correlational survey design to explore the relationship between school variables—specifically academic workload and classroom conditions—and the mental health of students. The target population consisted of all undergraduate students at the University of Calabar. According to records from the Students' Affairs Division, there are twenty-six thousand four hundred and thirty-four (26,434) undergraduate students enrolled across twenty-four (24) faculties and one hundred and sixteen (116) departments for the 2023/2024 academic session. This is because students in their third and fourth years (300/400 level) have more academic experience and maturity compared to first- and second-year students. They are likely to have encountered various academic pressures and social challenges, providing richer insights into mental health issues. At this level, students are often engaged in specialized courses and may face significant stress related to their field of study, making them more relevant for research on mental health challenges.

Sampling Method

A multi-stage sampling method was utilized for this study. Initially, the names of all twenty-four faculties were written on pieces of paper, folded, and placed in a bowl. After mixing thoroughly, six paper balls were randomly selected with replacement, representing approximately thirty percent of the total faculties. From each selected faculty, twenty percent of the departments were chosen to participate in the study. The departments selected included Crop Science, Radiography, Sociology, Computer Science, Theatre Arts, and Chemistry. To determine the respondents, the researcher employed a systematic random sampling method. In each selected department, a list of students was collected, and twenty percent of those in their third and fourth years were selected. Every fifth student's name was chosen

from these lists, forming the sample for the study. A total of two hundred and twenty-eight (228) undergraduates were randomly selected from six departments across six faculties at the University of Calabar for the 2023/2024 academic session. This is because a sample size of 228 provides a balance between statistical power and feasibility. This size is large enough to detect significant effects and relationships while allowing for a manageable data collection process.

Data Collection Instrument

The data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire titled "School Variables and Mental Health Challenges" (SVMHCQ). The questionnaire consisted of 22 items, with 6 items measuring each sub-level related to academic workload and classroom conditions, and 10 items assessing the mental health of students. Mental health is a multifaceted construct that encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how individuals think, feel, act, and interact with others. Mental health dimensions help in identifying various factors that contribute to mental well-being and challenges. The questionnaire utilized a four-point scale: strongly agree -4 points, agree-3 points, disagree -2 points, and strongly disagree-1 point.

The instrument underwent face and content validation by four experts—two from Measurement and Evaluation and two from Human Kinetics and Health Education, all affiliated with the University of Calabar. Corrections suggested by the experts were incorporated by the researchers, and the document was deemed valid to measure. Face validation is primarily based on the opinions of experts regarding the relevance and appropriateness of the test items. Content Validity ensure that the measurement items adequately cover the construct. This involve expert reviews or focus groups to evaluate whether the items reflect the domain of interest. Construct Validation was used to ensured that a test or measurement accurately represents the theoretical construct it is intended. This help confirm that the measurement tool is capturing the intended psychological constructs.

Reliability and Data Analysis

The reliability of the questionnaire, assessed using the Cronbach Alpha method, yielded an average index of 0.83. Given that this reliability index exceeds 0.50, it was considered sufficiently high for the study. Data collected were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The hypotheses were tested using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient for three hypotheses, with all tests conducted at a significance level of 0.05.

Presentation of results

The result of the analysis is presented in Tables 1 and 2. The hypotheses were tested at .05 significant level.

HO₁ There is no significant relationship between academic workload and mental health of students in the University of Calabar. The independent variable is academic workload while the dependent variable is mental health of students in the University of Calabar. To test this hypothesis, the mean, standard deviation of academic workload and mental health of students in the University of Calabar were computed and correlated using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Pearson Product Moment Correlation for the relationship between academic workload and mental health of students in the University of Calabar (N=228)

Variables	Mean	SD	r-value	Pvalue
Academic workload	15.324	2.988		
			.765*	.000
Mental health of students	30.672	4.213		

* Significant at .05, df = 226

The result of the analysis as presented in Table 1 revealed that the calculated ($r=.765$; $p=.000$) is significant at .05 level of significance with 226 degrees of freedom. With this result, the null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant relationship between academic workload and mental health of students in the University of Calabar was rejected while alternative hypothesis was retained which implied that there is a strong positive significant relationship between academic workload and mental health of students in the University of Calabar. This means that as one variable increases, the other variable also tends to increase. This suggests that the more students' academic workload, the more mental health disorder tend to be. On the other hand, the lesser academic workload, the better mental health of students tends to be. A positive high significant relationship between workload and the mental health of students implies that as students' workload increases (e.g., more assignments, exams, and responsibilities), their mental health may also be impacted negatively. This could lead to increased stress, anxiety, and feelings of being overwhelmed,

ultimately affecting their overall well-being and academic performance. The relationship may not be straightforward. It could be that increased workload leads to poorer mental health, but it is also possible that students with poorer mental health struggle to manage their workload effectively, leading to an increased perception of workload. Other variables, such as time management skills, social support, and personal coping strategies, may influence both workload perception and mental health outcomes, complicating the interpretation of the relationship.

HO₂

There is no significant relationship between classroom condition and mental health of students in the University of Calabar. The independent variable is academic workload while the dependent variable is mental health of students in the University of Calabar. To test this hypothesis, the mean, standard deviation of classroom condition and mental health of students in the University of Calabar were computed and correlated using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Pearson Product Moment Correlation for the relationship between classroom condition and mental health of students in the University of Calabar (N=228)

Variables	Mean	SD	r-value	Pvalue
Classroom condition	15.765	2.543		
			.789*	.000
Mental health of students	30.672	4.213		

* Significant at .05, df = 226

The result of the analysis as presented in Table 2 revealed that the calculated ($r=.789$; $p=.000$) is significant at .05 level of significance with 226 degrees of freedom. With this result, the null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant relationship between classroom condition and mental health of students in the University of Calabar was rejected while alternative hypothesis was retained which implied that that there is a positive high significant relationship between classroom conditions and the mental health of students suggests that as classroom conditions improve (e.g., better lighting, comfortable seating, adequate resources), students' mental health also tends to improve. This can manifest as lower

levels of anxiety, stress, and depression, and higher levels of overall well-being and academic engagement. The positive relationship suggests that better classroom conditions could lead to improved mental health, correlation does not imply causation. It is unclear whether improved classroom conditions directly lead to better mental health, or if students with better mental health are more likely to perceive their classroom environment positively. Other factors, such as teacher support, social interactions among peers, and individual resilience, could influence both classroom conditions and mental health, creating a confounding effect.

Discussion of finding

The results indicate a significant relationship between academic workload and the mental health of students at the University of Calabar. High academic demands contribute to overwhelming stress, anxiety, and burnout, as students struggle to meet deadlines and maintain grades. Many students lack effective coping mechanisms, exacerbating their mental health issues. This aligns with previous studies by Ibrahim, Fatoye, and Adewuyi (2020), which found that over 30% of students exhibited significant symptoms of depression and academic-related stress. Other research, such as that by Oladeji, Akinlabi, & Adegoke (2021), confirms that academic workload significantly influences mental health. The finding agreed with Uwakwe and Modebelu (2016) who noted that students facing high academic loads reported elevated anxiety and depressive symptoms, leading to a cycle of underperformance and stress. Institutional cultures often normalize academic overload without adequate mental health support, leaving students to cope with chronic stress silently (Ugwu & Onyishi, 2019). Perceptions of workload also play a crucial role; students who view their academic load as manageable experience lower stress levels compared to those who find it overwhelming (Ezenwaji, Okoye, & Nwankwo, 2022).

The finding aligns with Hans Selye, (1976) found that high academic demands can act as stressors, leading to feelings of overwhelm, anxiety, and depression among students. When students perceive their workload as excessive and feel they lack the necessary resources (such as time management skills or academic support), their mental health may suffer.

The finding agreed with Ecological Systems Theory, developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), Bronfenbrenner, (1979) who stated that the interplay between academic demands and other elements of the microsystem (such as peer support and family expectations) can shape students' mental health. If the academic environment becomes overwhelming, it can have cascading effects on students' interactions with other systems, leading to increased stress and mental health challenges.

The findings also reveal a significant relationship between classroom conditions and students' mental health. Poor classroom environments—characterized by inadequate lighting and uncomfortable seating—can distract students and hinder their focus, contributing to stress and anxiety. A well-maintained classroom can enhance engagement and foster a sense of community, positively impacting mental well-being. Umeh and Abiola (2021) found that students in inadequate classroom conditions exhibited higher incidences of headaches, low mood, and poor concentration. Poor learning environments lead students to internalize their struggles as personal failures, reducing motivation and increasing feelings of hopelessness (Olawuyi & Bamidele, 2022). Additionally, overcrowding and ambient noise contribute to cognitive fatigue and impaired information retention (Bello & Adeoye, 2020; Adediran & Okafor, 2017). Improving classroom conditions is thus essential for student mental health and academic success (Okonkwo & Balogun, 2020). While Ecological systems theory, proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner(1979), emphasizes the importance of various environmental systems in human development. It identifies different levels of influence, including microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems, which interact to shape an individual's experiences. This approach allows for targeted interventions that consider both individual experiences and the broader environmental influences that shape students' mental health outcomes. The finding agreed with Stress Theory (1979) who highlights how academic demands can create significant stress for students, while Ecological Systems Theory(1979) which provides context for how these pressures interact with family expectations and cultural norms to influence mental health.

The finding aligns with Hans Selye, (1976) found that the relationship between classroom conditions and mental health can also be examined through Stress Theory. Poor classroom conditions (e.g., inadequate lighting, uncomfortable seating, or disruptive environments) can serve as additional stressors that negatively impact students' mental health. If students perceive their classroom environment as hostile or unwelcoming, it can exacerbate feelings of stress and anxiety, further affecting their overall well-being.

The finding agreed with Ecological Systems Theory, developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), Bronfenbrenner, (1979) who found classroom conditions are part of the microsystem that influences students' mental health. The quality of the classroom environment, including factors like physical comfort and emotional support from teachers, can significantly affect students' learning experiences and psychological well-being. Additionally, the mesosystem, which includes interactions between different microsystems (e.g., between classrooms and home life), can further impact how classroom conditions affect mental health. For example,

if students feel supported at home but struggle in a poorly maintained classroom, the negative impact on their mental health may be exacerbated.

Conclusion

This finding shows a significant relationship between academic workload, classroom conditions, and the mental health of students at the University of Calabar. The findings highlight important associations that underscore the impact of academic and environmental factors on student well-being. This indicates that higher academic demands, characterized by increased assignments, exams, and responsibilities, are associated with poorer mental health outcomes. Students experiencing heavy workloads may face heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout, which can adversely affect their overall well-being and academic performance. Additionally, positive classroom conditions, such as adequate lighting, comfortable seating, and supportive teaching practices, are linked to better mental health outcomes. This finding underscores the necessity for educational institutions to create conducive learning environments that foster student engagement and well-being.

Recommendations

Based on the finding of the study, the following recommendations were made.

1. Institutions should consider reviewing and managing academic workloads to ensure they are reasonable and manageable, thereby reducing student stress and promote a healthy balance between academic responsibilities and personal well-being.
2. Investments should be made to enhance classroom conditions, ensuring they are conducive to learning. This includes maintaining infrastructure, improving lighting, and ensuring adequate resources are available.

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