

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AS CORELATE OF ACADEMIC STRESS MANAGEMENT AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN FEDERAL UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress management among undergraduate students in federal universities in South East Nigeria. The research adopted a correlational survey design and involved a sample of 540 students. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficient to determine the strength and direction of the relationships. The results indicated that self awareness, self motivation, and self regulation important components of emotional intelligence, have a positive and significant association with academic stress management. These findings suggest that students who are more emotionally intelligent are better equipped to cope with academic pressures and challenges. Based on these outcomes, the study recommends that universities develop and implement programs or courses aimed at enhancing emotional intelligence skills among students to promote their academic well-being and overall success.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, academic stress management, undergraduates

Introduction

Academic stress is a significant psychological challenge faced by undergraduate students, characterized by emotional strain resulting from academic demands and pressures within the university environment. It arises when students perceive that the academic requirements exceed their capacity to cope, leading to adverse effects on their mental health and academic performance (Neseliler, Tannenbaum, Zacchia, Larcher, Coulter, & Lamarche, 2017). This type of stress is often caused by a variety of factors such as heavy workloads, difficult coursework, frequent examinations, tight deadlines, and the pressure to achieve high grades (Ofoegbu, 2014). In addition, students may experience stress due to balancing academic responsibilities with personal life challenges, including family issues and financial constraints (Iheanacho, 2019). The manifestations of academic stress include physical symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, and sleep disturbances, as well as psychological symptoms like anxiety, depression, and decreased motivation (Pongoh & Palangda, 2023; Olayinka, 2015). If unmanaged, academic stress can negatively impact students' academic achievement, reduce their engagement with studies, and impair their overall well-being.

Emotional intelligence, defined as the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions effectively, plays a crucial role in how students manage academic stress (Salovey & Mayer, 2020). Students with high emotional intelligence tend to cope better with stress by applying adaptive strategies such as emotional regulation, positive reframing, and seeking social support (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008). Research indicates that emotional intelligence correlates positively with academic

performance and mental health, serving as a buffer against the negative effects of stress (Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, & Majeski, 2004; Ofoegbu, 2014). Despite the recognized importance of emotional intelligence in stress management, limited studies have explored this relationship among undergraduate students in federal universities in South-East Nigeria. Understanding this correlation within the specific cultural and academic context of the region is essential for developing targeted interventions to enhance students' psychological resilience and academic success. Factors such as pressure to perform, exam fear and classroom environment are considered to cause academic Stress. Mishra (2017) revealed that academic workload and fear of getting lower marks were the main sources of academic Stress. Mehfooz and Haider (2017) and also Elias, Ping and Abdullah (2011) pointed out that academic pressure as the major cause of stress among students. Fear of failure causes lot of stress among students (Bataineh, 2013). Apart from affecting the health and well-being, symptoms of Academic Stress like depression and anxiety have an adverse effect on academic achievement as well (Bernal-Morales et al. 2015). Stankovska et al. (2018) found a negative correlation between academic stress and academic performance. Since, academic stress have been seen to have great influence on students' performance and academic achievement among undergraduate students (Pongoh & Palangda, 2023), it becomes important to investigate how they manage academic stress.

Academic stress management is the process of acquiring and practicing a variety of cognitive and behavioral techniques with the goal of managing and coping with academic stress (Corsica, 2011). Stress management is about coping with stress by preventing stress, relieving stress, and tolerating stress. Given how bad stress is for the body, managing stress is essential. Managing stress is required and although not simple to employ. Stress management helps productivity, performance, motivation and satisfaction, have less muscle tension and aches, be in a better mood and get along better with family, friends and colleagues. Hence it is in the interest of the researchers to ascertain if emotional intelligence components such as self-awareness, self-motivation and self-regulation have any association with how undergraduate students manage academic stress. Self-awareness is an important component of emotional intelligence which may be associated with how students manage their academic stress. Self-awareness is a multi-dimensional, introspective process used to become aware of, scrutinize, and understand one's thoughts, feelings, convictions, and values on an ongoing basis, with the use of this understanding to consciously and authentically guide behavior, (Eckroth-Bucher, 2010). Symonds, (2023) found that having a high level of self-awareness is one of the keys to building emotional intelligence which can help deal with academic stress better, help self-development, and help understand other people better. Self-awareness shows the ability of an individual to perceive, understand and access thoughts and feelings clearly and objectively through reflection and self-examination (Betz 2022). Hence, a self-aware student may be able to effectively manage stress. Another important variable for this study is self-motivation.

Self-motivation is simply the reason driving your efforts, it's the "why" behind everything you do, and the reason you might take up a course, commit to a behavior, or work toward achieving a goal. Self-motivation is defined as the internal state that helps us initiate, continue, or terminate a behavior (Tchiki, 2015).

Everything that motivates an individual is a conscious need or desire. Most times students get motivated by the reward or praises they receive in the learning environment. Self-regulation is an ability to manage and regulate your behavior towards strong emotions like embarrassment, anger, excitement, frustration. Self-regulation can be defined as the whole system of standards, thoughts, processes, and actions that guide people's behavior toward desired end states (Carver & Scheier, 2012).

Literature sources have confirmed that emotional intelligence is important to students to enable them manage their stress levels and also to achieve optimum academic achievement (Sander & Watkins, 2022). Empirical evidence also revealed that emotional intelligence has helped students to manage academic stress (Singh & Sharma, 2012; Subburaj, Sundaram & Sekar, 2012; Jahan, 2020). Singh and Sharma (2012) in their research on relationship between general intelligence, emotional intelligence, stress levels and stress reactivity revealed that emotional intelligence as an attribute is better suited to handle day to day acute stress and chronic perceived stress. Furthermore, Subburaj, Sundaram and Sekar (2012) in their study on role of emotional intelligence in managing academic stress discovered that emotional intelligence is a key to managing academic stress and creating pleasant environment for the students and supports them to present their best. Jahan (2020) also found that there is a significant inverse relationship between emotional intelligence and stress on students implying that when emotional intelligence is high, stress is low and vice versa. Other literatures also found that Emotional Intelligence is associated with stress management (Salovey & Mayer's, 2020; Bartwal & Raj, 2014).

Emotional intelligence, as defined by Salovey and Mayer (2020), refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions. Goleman (1995) further emphasized its role in personal and academic success. Recent studies (Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2006; Fernandez-Berrocal & Extremera, 2016) have shown that students with high emotional intelligence cope better with academic stress, demonstrate resilience, and maintain better mental health. In Nigeria, research by Ugoji (2014) and Ogundokun (2012) indicates a positive link between emotional intelligence and academic adjustment. However, most studies focus on academic achievement rather than stress management, and few address students in federal universities within the South-East region, where stress is intensified by large class sizes, inadequate support services, and socio-economic challenges. This study therefore, addresses these gaps by examining how emotional intelligence relates specifically to academic stress management among undergraduates in federal universities in South-East Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Academic stress is a growing concern among undergraduate students, particularly in federal universities where academic demands, competition, and institutional challenges are high. In the context of South-East Nigeria, students in federal universities often grapple with overwhelming workloads, limited counseling support, socio-economic pressures, and unstable academic calendars. These stressors affect their mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. Ideally, undergraduate students should be able to manage academic stress effectively through healthy coping strategies and institutional support systems that foster resilience and emotional stability. Emotional intelligence defined as the ability to

perceive, understand, and manage emotions plays a key role in helping students navigate academic challenges and maintain psychological balance. In settings where emotional intelligence is well developed, students tend to cope better with academic pressure and demonstrate greater academic success. However, the reality is that many undergraduates in federal universities in South-East Nigeria struggle to manage stress effectively. High levels of anxiety, burnout, and poor academic performance have been reported, suggesting a gap in students' emotional regulation skills and support systems. While previous research has linked emotional intelligence to academic achievement, there is limited empirical evidence specifically examining emotional intelligence as a correlate of academic stress management within this unique educational context. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by investigating the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress management among undergraduate students in federal universities in South-East Nigeria. The aim is to determine whether emotional intelligence can serve as a protective factor in reducing stress and enhancing students' academic experiences.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the correlation between emotional intelligence components such as self-awareness, self-motivation, self-regulation and academic stress management among undergraduates. Specifically, the study determined the:

1. relationship between self-awareness and academic stress management of Undergraduates
2. relationship between self-motivation and academic stress management of Undergraduates
3. relationship between self-regulation and academic stress management of Undergraduates
4. joint relationship between self- awareness, motivation regulation and academic stress management of Undergraduates

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the relationship between self-awareness and academic stress management of Undergraduates?
2. What is the relationship between self-motivation and academic stress management of Undergraduates?
3. What is the relationship between self-regulation and academic stress management of Undergraduates?
4. What is the relationship between self- awareness, motivation regulation and academic stress management of Undergraduates?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses was tested at 0.05 level of significance

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between self-awareness and academic stress management of Undergraduates

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between self-motivation and academic stress management of Undergraduates

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between self-regulation and academic stress management of Undergraduates

H₀₄: There is no significant relationship between self- awareness, motivation regulation and academic stress management of Undergraduates

Methods

This study adopted a correlational survey design. This study was conducted in universities in South-East, Nigeria. The population of the study comprised all undergraduates in the five federal universities in South East, Nigeria. A sample size of five hundred and forty (540) students sampled from University of Nigeria and Nnamdi Azikiwe University was used. This study was conducted using two structured questionnaire which was developed by the researchers with the caption “Academic Stress Management Questionnaire (ASMQ) and Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (EIQ). They were used in the collection of data for this study. The ASMQ consisted of one cluster with fourteen (11) items with a five-point rating scale of Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, and Never. While the EIQ consisted of three clusters: A, B and C. Cluster A (self-awareness) had nine items, Cluster B (Self-motivation Scale) had eleven items and Cluster C (Self-regulation Scale) had five items. All clusters had a four-point rating scale response option of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) was used. The research instrument was validated by three experts from the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The reliability of the instruments was ascertained through trial-testing to determine the internal consistency of the items. The reliability coefficient was determined using Cronbach Alpha. The overall reliability coefficient for ASMQ and EIQ are 0.82 and 0.88 respectively. This high reliability coefficient signifies that the instrument is reliable and can be used to carry out this study. The researcher administered the questionnaire to undergraduate students through online means (Google forms). Data collected was analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient.

Results

Table 1: Pearson correlation coefficient on the relationship between self-awareness and academic stress management of Undergraduates

Correlations			Self- awareness	Academic Management	Stress
Self-awareness	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	1	0.134	
				0.03	
Academic Management	Stress Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.134	1	
			0.03		
			N	540	540

The analysis on table 1 shows the Pearson correlation coefficient of the relationship between self-awareness and academic stress management of Undergraduates. The result showed a positive coefficient of 0.134. This implies that the more the self-

aware a student is, the higher the ability of the student to manage academic stress efficiently.

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between self-awareness and academic stress management of Undergraduates. Table one showed a p-value of 0.03 which is less than the 0.05 level of significance. This implies that we reject the null hypotheses and thus conclude that there is a significant relationship between self-awareness and academic stress management of Undergraduates.

Table 2: Pearson correlation coefficient on the relationship between self-motivation and academic stress management of Undergraduates

Correlations		Self-motivation	Academic Stress Management
Self-motivation	Pearson Correlation	1	0.392
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.00
Academic Stress Management	Pearson Correlation	0.392	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	
	N	540	540

The analysis on table 2 shows the Pearson correlation coefficient of the relationship between self-motivation and academic stress management of Undergraduates. The result showed a positive coefficient of 0.392. This implies that the higher the self-motivation of the student the higher the ability of the student to manage academic stress.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between self-motivation and academic stress management of Undergraduates. Table 2 showed a p-value of 0.00 which is less than the 0.05 level of significance. This implies that we reject the null hypotheses and thus conclude that there is a significant relationship between self-motivation and academic stress management of Undergraduates.

Table 3 Pearson correlation coefficient on the relationship between self-regulation and academic stress management of Undergraduates

Correlations		Self-regulation	Academic Stress Management
Self-regulation	Pearson Correlation	1	0.372
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.00
Academic Stress Management	Pearson Correlation	0.372	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	
	N	540	540

The analysis on table 3 shows the Pearson correlation coefficient of the relationship between self-regulation and academic stress management of Undergraduates. The result showed a positive coefficient of 0.372 (p=0.00). This implies that the higher

the self-regulation capacity of the student the higher the ability of the student to manage academic stress adequately.

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between self-regulation and academic stress management of Undergraduates. Table 3 showed a p-value of 0.00 which is less than the 0.05 level of significance. This implies that we reject the null hypotheses and thus conclude that there is a significant relationship between self-regulation and academic stress management of Undergraduates.

Table 4 Pearson correlation coefficient on the relationship between self-awareness, motivation regulation and academic stress management of Undergraduates

Correlations		S-AMR	Academic Management	Stress
S-AMR	Pearson Correlation	1	0.661	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.01	
Academic Management	Pearson Correlation	0.661	1	
Stress	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.01		
	N	540	540	

The analysis on table 4 shows the Pearson correlation coefficient of the relationship between self-awareness, motivation regulation and academic stress management of Undergraduates. The result showed a positive coefficient of 0.661. This implies that the higher the self-regulation capacity of the student the higher the ability of the student to manage academic stress adequately.

H₀₄: There is no significant relationship between self-regulation and academic stress management of Undergraduates. Table 4 showed a p-value of 0.01 which is less than the 0.05 level of significance. This implies that we reject the null hypotheses and thus conclude that there is a significant relationship between Emotional Intelligence (self-awareness, motivation regulation) and academic stress management of Undergraduates.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed a positive correlation which implies that the more self-aware a student is, the higher the academic stress management. This relationship is however insignificant. This finding is in line with the findings of Farzaneh et al (2015) who found that self-awareness, effective communication and stress management skills in total, resulted in increased social and academic adjustment implying that there is a positive relationship between self-awareness and academic stress management. The findings also align to the findings of Visani et al (2010) who in their study found that self-awareness education is effective and beneficial for improving adaptability. This finding also conforms with the finding of Charoghchian (2022) who found that emotional intelligence components, including self-awareness, were significant predictors of academic stress coping skills among students. However, no study was found to be in non-conformity with the current study findings. The findings of the study showed a positive significant

correlation which implies that there is a linear relationship between self-motivation and academic stress management. This finding is in line with the findings of Struthers et al (2000) who found that the relationship between college students' stress and course grade is qualified by their academic coping style and motivation which implies a positive relationship between self-motivation and academic stress management. No study was found to be out of line from the current finding. The findings of study also showed a positive significant correlation which implies that there is a linear relationship between self-regulation and academic stress management. This finding is in line with the findings of Fuente et al (2020) who found that self-regulation level of undergraduate students predicted the type of academic stress coping strategies that were used. This finding also agrees with the finding of Charoghchian (2022) who found that emotional intelligence components, including self-regulation, were significant predictors of academic stress coping skills among students. However, no study was found to be in dispute with this current finding.

The findings also showed a positive significant correlation which implies that there is a linear relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress management. This finding agrees with the findings of Sebanc et al. (2016) who found positive correlations between quality of the relationship with peers and academic achievement which is made possible through adequate academic stress management. The results also align with Charoghchian (2022) who revealed a significant difference between the scores of social awareness and stress management. No study was found to be in disagreement with this finding.

Educational Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have important educational implications. They suggest that promoting emotional intelligence, enhancing self-awareness, and equipping students with effective coping strategies are essential in managing academic stress. Integrating emotional intelligence education into the school curriculum can foster students' ability to understand and regulate their emotions, leading to improved academic performance and mental well-being. Educational institutions should strengthen guidance and counseling services, provide stress management training, and create supportive learning environments that prioritize students' emotional and psychological needs. Additionally, teachers and school administrators should receive training to recognize signs of academic stress and apply student-centered approaches that reduce pressure and foster resilience. These measures, when effectively implemented, can contribute to a more balanced and productive educational experience for students.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes meaningfully to existing knowledge by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress management among undergraduate students in federal universities in South-East Nigeria, a region that has received limited scholarly attention in this regard. It deepens the understanding of how emotional competencies influence students' ability to cope with academic challenges, thereby highlighting emotional intelligence as a protective factor for psychological resilience and academic success. The findings of the study are expected to inform university administrators,

counselors, and policymakers on the need to integrate emotional intelligence training into student support programs, such as orientation courses and counseling interventions. Furthermore, this research can serve as a foundation for future studies focusing on the role of emotional intelligence in mental health promotion and stress management within the Nigerian university system. By addressing contextual gaps and suggesting practical interventions, the study enhances the field of educational psychology and contributes to the development of emotionally aware and academically resilient student populations.

Conclusion

The study concluded that emotional intelligence and its key components—self-awareness, self-motivation, and self-regulation—are positively correlated with academic stress management among undergraduate students in federal universities in South-East Nigeria. Although the correlation between self-awareness and academic stress management was positive but statistically insignificant, it aligns with previous research indicating that greater self-awareness supports better academic adjustment and coping. Self-motivation and self-regulation demonstrated significant positive relationships with academic stress management, confirming that motivated students and those who effectively regulate their emotions are better equipped to handle academic stress. Overall, the findings reveal a significant linear relationship between emotional intelligence as a whole and academic stress management, supporting the role of emotional intelligence in enhancing students' ability to cope with academic challenges. These results emphasize the importance of developing emotional intelligence skills to improve stress management and promote academic success among undergraduates.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Universities and schools should consider implementing specific programs or courses aimed at developing emotional intelligence skills among students. These programs can include workshops, seminars, or even incorporate it into the existing curriculum.
2. Universities and schools should provide access to counseling services or support groups where students can seek guidance and assistance in managing their academic stress. This would help students develop emotional intelligence skills and cope with stress more effectively.
3. Schools should organize workshops or seminars for parents, providing them with information and resources to support their children's emotional intelligence development.

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