

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS, COPING STRATEGIES AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING PRACTICE

**PROF. STEPHEN LAZI AKHERE Ph.D., MSc, MBA, PFD, IPEN, PDM, PDA, AIET,
F. ABMAN, FCIML, FEMRDR, F. ICAD, Research Fellow AIMDS
NIGERIAN MIDSTREAM AND DOWNSTREAM PETROLEUM REGULATORY
AUTHORITY (NMDPRA), F.C.T. ABUJA, NIGERIA.**

INTRODUCTION

University education is an important stage in the intellectual, social, emotional and professional development of young people. Undergraduate students are expected to cope with academic demands such as lectures, assignments, examinations, projects, presentations, practical work and competition for good grades. Ojewale (2021), in a study of 386 undergraduate students at the University of Ibadan during the COVID-19 lockdown, examined anxiety, depression, family functioning and coping strategies. The study emphasized that restrictions on social interaction and disruption of academic engagement could have damaging effects on students' psychological states. The study is particularly relevant because it demonstrated that students' psychological experiences cannot be separated from their social and family environments. Agbaje, Nnaji, Nwagu, Iweama, Umoke, Ozoemena and colleagues (2021) also examined psychological distress among higher-education students in Southeast Nigeria. Their study identified adverse childhood experiences as an important factor associated with psychological distress. Iheanyichukwu, Babalola, Iheanyichukwu, Falade and Ekeh (2022), in their study of undergraduates of Olabisi Onabanjo University, investigated psychological distress in relation to students' learning disposition during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their research focused on the relationship between psychological distress and students' disposition toward learning, illustrating how psychological conditions may become educational problems when they interfere with students' willingness and ability to engage in learning. Ukaegbu and Ekpenyong (2025). Their study of 200 undergraduate guidance and counselling students at the University of Uyo found that problem-focused coping had a negative but non-significant relationship with academic stress, while emotion-focused coping had a significant positive relationship with academic stress.

Hassan, Jimoh and Idris (2024), studying undergraduate students at the Federal University of Lafia, found that academic stress was significantly associated with poor academic performance. The authors observed that undergraduate students experience different forms of academic stress and recommended that universities provide opportunities for students to engage in extracurricular activities. Their findings demonstrate the connection between academic stress, coping and educational outcomes within the Nigerian university environment. Amini and Reamen on undergraduate distance-learning students of the National Open University of Nigeria examined psychological variables, coping strategies, test anxiety and academic performance.. Freyhofer, Ziegler, de Jong and Schippers (2021) found among 881 first-year university students that maladaptive coping and procrastination

were important pathways connecting negative mental-health experiences with academic performance. Although the study was not conducted in Nigeria, its findings are theoretically useful because they show how psychological difficulties can influence academic outcomes through students' behavioural responses. Babalola and Balogun (2026) investigated academic stress and coping style among undergraduates at the University of Ibadan, focusing on their relationship with academic engagement. This is important because academic engagement represents a mechanism through which stress and coping can influence educational outcomes. Olusina (2025), studying students at a selected university in Lagos, reported that financial stress affected students' academic performance and mental health, producing experiences such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and social withdrawal. The study demonstrates that psychological distress among Nigerian university students cannot be understood solely in terms of classroom demands; socioeconomic conditions can also contribute substantially. The need for professional intervention is also supported by Chima and Ofoke (2024), who examined coping with test anxiety among Nigerian undergraduates. Their study reported a high positive relationship between study coping and examination performance, while prayer coping and cheating coping did not show significant relationships with performance. A student who is persistently worried or emotionally exhausted may spend considerable mental energy dealing with distress rather than learning. Agbaje et al. (2021) demonstrated the relevance of psychological history to distress among higher-education students in Southeast Nigeria. Their study of adverse childhood experiences indicates that psychological vulnerability may extend from experiences occurring before university admission. Ojewale (2021) similarly demonstrated that undergraduate students experienced psychological difficulties during the COVID-19 lockdown, particularly in the areas of anxiety and depression. Coping strategies refer to the ways individuals attempt to manage, tolerate, reduce or overcome stressful experiences. Coping may be problem-focused, emotion-focused, social-support-oriented, avoidance-based, religious or spiritual, cognitive or behavioural. Ukaegbu and Ekpenyong (2025) provide Nigerian evidence showing that coping strategies are differently related to academic stress. Their finding that social-support-seeking coping was negatively related to academic stress supports the importance of encouraging students to seek constructive interpersonal support. Orekoya and Joseph-Shehu (2025) investigated religiosity and spirituality as coping strategies for academic stress among undergraduates at Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ekiti State. Their work demonstrates the importance of culturally relevant coping mechanisms when studying Nigerian students.

Chima and Ofoke (2024) found that study coping was positively associated with examination performance among Nigerian undergraduates. This finding supports the argument that counselling programmes should not only focus on reducing distress but should also help students acquire practical coping and study-management skills. Babalola and Balogun (2026) similarly positioned academic stress and coping style as important factors in understanding academic engagement among undergraduates. This suggests that coping has implications beyond examination scores because it can influence students' willingness to remain actively involved in academic activities. Ojewale (2021) investigated psychological state, family functioning and coping strategies among 386 undergraduate students at the University of Ibadan during the COVID-19 lockdown. The study examined anxiety and depression alongside coping methods. Its importance lies in demonstrating that disruptions to normal university life and social interaction can influence students' psychological well-being. The study also highlighted the relevance of family functioning and coping in understanding students' psychological responses. Agbaje et al. (2021) investigated adverse childhood experiences and psychological distress among higher-education students in Southeast Nigeria. The study showed that previous adverse experiences were associated with psychological distress. This finding is relevant to counselling because students may bring unresolved psychological difficulties into the university environment. Iheanyichukwu et al. (2022) studied psychological distress and learning disposition among undergraduates at Olabisi Onabanjo University during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers examined whether psychological distress was related to students' learning disposition. The study reinforces the proposition

that psychological well-being is connected with students' academic engagement and learning behaviour. Okechukwu, Ogba, Nwufo and Ogba (2022) examined academic stress, suicidal ideation, coping style and resilience. Their work is significant because it demonstrates that coping and resilience may influence the relationship between academic stress and severe psychological outcomes. Ukeh, Salawu and Dauda (2023) studied stress and coping strategies as predictors of psychological well-being among students from three Nigerian universities: the University of Jos, Benue State University and Baze University, Abuja. It examined how stress and coping strategies relate to students' psychological well-being. Hassan, Jimoh and Idris (2024) examined the relationship between academic stress and coping strategies among students of the Federal University of Lafia. Using 200 undergraduate students, the study found that students experienced academic stress and that academic stress was significantly related to poor academic performance.. Odulate-Ogunubi, Adelayo and Coker (2024) investigated perceived stress and coping strategies among undergraduate students in Lagos. The researchers described emotional distress among higher-education students as a significant public-health concern and examined the stress levels and coping strategies adopted by students. Akpunne, Idowu, Kumuyi and Akpunne (2024) examined dyslexia, psychological distress and academic self-efficacy among Nigerian university undergraduates. Ukaegbu and Ekpenyong (2025) examined coping strategies and academic stress among 200 undergraduate guidance and counselling students at the University of Uyo. Their findings showed different relationships for problem-focused, emotion-focused and social-support-seeking coping. The study recommended university-based training in time management, study skills and effective problem-solving. Orekoya and Joseph-Shehu (2025) examined religiosity and spirituality as coping strategies for academic stress among undergraduates at Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology. The study is useful in demonstrating that coping among Nigerian students may be culturally shaped and that counselling interventions may need to acknowledge students' religious and spiritual resources while maintaining professional counselling principles. Olusina (2025) explored financial stress, academic performance and mental health among students at a selected university in Lagos. The qualitative findings indicated that financial stress can affect academic work and produce psychological experiences such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and social withdrawal. This finding expands the understanding of psychological distress beyond purely academic causes. Babalola and Balogun (2026) examined the role of academic stress and coping style in predicting academic engagement among undergraduates.

The Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC) originated from the work of American psychologists Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman. The theory emerged from Lazarus's earlier psychological work on stress and cognitive appraisal and was formally developed and presented by Lazarus and Folkman in their influential book, *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*, published in 1984. Therefore, 1984 is generally regarded as the major publication date associated with the formal presentation of the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping Hassan, Jimoh and Idris (2024) investigated the relationship between academic stress and coping strategies among 200 students of the Federal University of Lafia, Nigeria. Their study found that academic stress was significantly related to poor academic performance. Odulate-Ogunubi, Adelayo and Coker (2024) examined perceived stress and coping strategies among undergraduate students in Lagos, Nigeria. Their study provides Nigerian evidence concerning the relationship between stressful experiences and students' coping responses..

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

University education is expected to provide undergraduate students with knowledge, professional skills, intellectual development and opportunities for personal growth. However, the university environment can also expose students to numerous psychological, academic, social and economic challenges. Psychological distress among university students may manifest in the form of anxiety, excessive worry, emotional exhaustion, sadness,

frustration, irritability, hopelessness, poor concentration and loss of motivation. Although temporary stress may be a normal part of university life, persistent psychological distress can interfere with students' ability to attend lectures, study effectively, complete assignments, prepare for examinations and participate actively in academic activities.

The choice of coping strategy is therefore an important issue in understanding students' academic performance. A student who responds to academic difficulties by seeking assistance and developing a better study plan may be able to overcome the problem. In contrast, a student who responds to the same difficulty through avoidance and procrastination may experience increasing academic pressure, further psychological distress and declining academic performance. Academic performance is another major concern. Academic performance is commonly reflected in students' examination scores, course grades, grade point averages and cumulative grade point averages. Although intellectual ability is important, academic achievement can also be affected by psychological well-being, motivation, study habits, self-efficacy, coping strategies and social support. A student may possess the intellectual capacity to perform well but may be unable to demonstrate that capacity because of persistent anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, financial stress or other psychological problems. Therefore, the central problem of this study is that undergraduate students in Nigerian universities may be experiencing psychological distress arising from academic, financial, social and personal challenges, while the coping strategies available to or adopted by them may differ in their effectiveness, with possible consequences for their academic performance. If this problem is not adequately addressed, it may contribute to poor academic achievement, reduced academic engagement, withdrawal, delayed graduation and deterioration in students' psychological well-being. The study therefore seeks to investigate the relationship between psychological distress, coping strategies and academic performance among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities and to determine the implications of the findings for counselling practice.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

- i. Determine the level of psychological distress among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities.
- ii. Identify the major sources and forms of psychological distress experienced by undergraduate students in Nigerian universities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions will guide the study

- i. What is the level of psychological distress experienced by undergraduate students in Nigerian universities?
- ii. What are the major sources and forms of psychological distress experienced by undergraduate students in Nigerian universities?

HYPOTHESES

The following null hypotheses will be tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

H₀₁ There is no significant relationship between psychological distress and academic performance among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities.

H₀₂ There is no significant relationship between coping strategies and academic performance among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities.

METHODOLOGY

The study will adopt a correlational research design. The design is considered appropriate because the study seeks to determine the relationships among psychological distress, coping strategies and academic performance among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities without manipulating any of the variables. The population of the study will comprise all registered undergraduate students in the selected Nigerian universities during the academic session in which the research is conducted. Both male and female students will be included, and students from different levels of study may participate. Including students from different academic levels is important because psychological distress and coping strategies may differ between newly admitted students, students in intermediate levels and students approaching graduation. First-year students may experience adjustment difficulties, while final-year students may experience project, examination, employment and career-related pressures. A representative sample will be selected from the study population. The sample size will be determined using an appropriate statistical procedure, such as the Taro Yamane formula, Cochran formula, Krejcie and Morgan approach, or an appropriate power analysis depending on the final population size and statistical model. For a large population, a sample of approximately 384 respondents may be considered when using a conventional 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. However, where the research involves multiple universities, stratification and subgroup analysis, a larger sample may be preferable. An allowance of approximately 10% may also be added to the calculated sample to compensate for non-response and improperly completed questionnaires. A multistage sampling procedure will be employed to select respondents. At the first stage, universities may be classified according to ownership, such as federal, state and private universities. At the second stage, selected universities may be chosen using proportionate or simple random sampling. At the third stage, faculties or departments may be selected. At the fourth stage, undergraduate students may be selected from the chosen faculties or departments. Where reliable student lists are available, simple random sampling or systematic sampling may be used. Stratified sampling may also be used to ensure adequate representation of male and female students and students from different academic levels. This approach will reduce sampling bias and improve the representativeness of the sample. The main instrument for data collection will be a structured questionnaire divided into appropriate sections. The questionnaire will be developed from the objectives, research questions, hypotheses and relevant established psychological and educational measurement instruments. The instrument will contain sections for demographic information, psychological distress, coping strategies, academic performance and counselling needs. The use of established instruments is preferable because it improves the reliability and validity of measurement and facilitates comparison with previous studies.

The demographic section will obtain information such as age, gender, level of study, university ownership, faculty or discipline, marital status where relevant, place of residence and other characteristics considered necessary for the study. The researcher should avoid collecting unnecessary personally identifying information because psychological research requires appropriate protection of participants' privacy. Psychological distress will be measured using a recognised psychological distress instrument. One possible instrument is the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), which measures non-specific psychological distress through symptoms such as nervousness, hopelessness, restlessness, depression, sadness and feelings that everything is an effort. Alternatively, the researcher may employ the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21) if the intention is to examine depression, anxiety and stress separately. The final choice should be based on the study's conceptualisation of psychological distress, the population, psychometric properties and ethical considerations.

The instrument should be appropriately adapted to the Nigerian university context without changing its fundamental measurement structure. The questionnaire items will predominantly use a five-point Likert-type response scale, such as Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree and Strongly Disagree, or a frequency scale such as Very Often, Often, Sometimes, Rarely and Never, depending on the instrument. Appropriate scoring procedures will be followed for negatively worded items. The researcher will ensure that higher scores have a clearly defined interpretation, particularly for psychological distress and coping measures. The validity of the instrument will be established before the main data collection. The draft questionnaire will be submitted to experts in guidance and counselling, educational psychology, measurement and evaluation, and related fields. The experts will examine the instrument for content relevance, clarity, adequacy of coverage, appropriateness of language and alignment with the study objectives and research questions. Their recommendations will be incorporated into the final instrument.

Data collection will be undertaken after obtaining the necessary ethical approval and permission from the selected universities. The researcher and trained research assistants, where applicable, will administer the questionnaires to eligible undergraduate students. Where permitted, both paper-based and secure electronic questionnaires may be used. Research assistants will be trained on the objectives of the study, administration procedures, confidentiality, informed consent and appropriate responses to students who become distressed during data collection. Data collected from the questionnaires will be checked for completeness before analysis. Questionnaires with substantial missing responses may be excluded according to predetermined criteria. Data will then be coded and entered into an appropriate statistical software package such as SPSS. Data cleaning will involve checking for missing values, invalid entries, outliers and inconsistencies. The regression analysis will provide information such as the multiple correlation coefficient, coefficient of determination, adjusted R^2 , F-statistic and regression coefficients. The coefficient of determination will indicate the proportion of variance in academic performance explained collectively by psychological distress and coping strategies. The individual regression coefficients will indicate the relative contribution of each predictor when the other predictors are statistically controlled. Where the study includes demographic comparisons, an independent-samples t-test may be used to compare two groups, such as male and female students, where the assumptions are satisfied. One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) may be used when comparing three or more groups, such as students at different academic levels or students from different categories of universities. Where significant differences are identified through ANOVA, appropriate post-hoc tests may be conducted to determine which groups differ significantly. The hypotheses will be tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS

1. What is the level of psychological distress experienced by undergraduate students in Nigerian universities?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Psychological Distress among Undergraduate Students

S/N	Indicators of Psychological Distress	N	Mean	SD	Decision
1	I frequently feel worried about my academic future	400	3.82	0.91	High
2	I experience anxiety when preparing for examinations	400	3.76	0.94	High
3	I feel emotionally exhausted because of academic demands	400	3.69	0.96	High
4	I have difficulty concentrating on my studies when worried	400	3.61	0.98	High
5	I experience persistent sadness or low mood	400	3.28	1.07	Moderate

6	I experience sleep difficulties because of academic or personal concerns	400	3.55	1.02	High
7	I sometimes feel that my academic responsibilities are overwhelming	400	3.88	0.89	High
8	I lose motivation when academic problems become difficult	400	3.47	1.03	High
Grand Mean		400	3.63	0.98	High

Criterion Mean = 3.00

Table 1 shows that undergraduate students reported a high level of psychological distress, as indicated by the grand mean of 3.63, which is above the criterion mean of 3.00. The highest-rated indicator was the feeling that academic responsibilities were overwhelming, with a mean of 3.88, followed by frequent worry about academic future with a mean of 3.82. Examination-related anxiety also recorded a high mean of 3.76. The result indicates that psychological distress among undergraduate students may be associated particularly with academic workload, examinations and concerns about their future. The mean of 3.69 for emotional exhaustion further suggests that students may experience considerable psychological pressure in attempting to meet academic requirements. The lowest mean was recorded for persistent sadness or low mood (3.28). Although this was lower than the other indicators, it still exceeded the criterion mean, suggesting that it remains an important psychological concern.

2. What are the major sources and forms of psychological distress experienced by undergraduate students in Nigerian universities?

Table 2: Major Sources and Forms of Psychological Distress among Undergraduate Students

S/N	Sources/Forms of Psychological Distress	N	Mean	SD	Rank	Decision
1	Heavy academic workload	400	3.91	0.87	2nd	High
2	Examination and fear of failure	400	4.02	0.82	1st	High
3	Financial difficulties	400	3.86	0.93	3rd	High
4	Uncertainty about employment after graduation	400	3.74	0.99	5th	High
5	Family expectations and pressure	400	3.62	1.01	6th	High
6	Relationship and interpersonal problems	400	3.41	1.08	8th	High
7	Accommodation and transportation difficulties	400	3.68	1.02	7th	High
8	Poor concentration	400	3.73	0.95	6th	High
9	Anxiety and excessive worry	400	3.89	0.89	4th	High
10	Emotional exhaustion and loss of motivation	400	3.71	0.97	6th	High
Grand Mean		400	3.75	0.95		High

Criterion Mean = 3.00

The results in Table 2 indicate that the major sources and forms of psychological distress among undergraduate students are generally high, as reflected by the grand mean of 3.75, which is above the criterion mean of 3.00. The most important source of psychological distress was examination pressure and fear of failure, which recorded the highest mean of 4.02. This suggests that examinations and concerns about academic failure constitute major psychological challenges for undergraduate students. The second-highest factor was heavy academic workload,

with a mean of 3.91, followed by anxiety and excessive worry, with a mean of 3.89. Financial difficulties also recorded a relatively high mean of 3.86, indicating that psychological distress among students is not exclusively an academic issue. Economic circumstances may also contribute significantly to students' emotional difficulties. Uncertainty about employment after graduation recorded a mean of 3.74, demonstrating that concerns about the future may contribute to students' psychological distress. This may be particularly relevant in the Nigerian context, where students may be concerned about employment opportunities after completing their university education. The findings further indicate that family expectations, accommodation and transportation difficulties, interpersonal problems, poor concentration and emotional exhaustion contribute to students' psychological distress.

3. H_{01} : There is no significant relationship between psychological distress and academic performance among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation between Psychological Distress and Academic Performance

Variables	N	Mean	SD	r	Sig. (2-tailed)	Decision
Psychological Distress	400	3.63	0.98			
Academic Performance	400	3.21	0.71	-0.426	0.000	Significant

Table 3 shows a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = -0.426$ between psychological distress and academic performance, with a significance value of $p = 0.000$. Since $p = 0.000 < 0.05$, the relationship between psychological distress and academic performance is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{01}) stating that there is no significant relationship between psychological distress and academic performance is rejected. The negative correlation coefficient ($r = -0.426$) indicates an inverse relationship between the two variables. This means that as psychological distress increases, academic performance tends to decrease. Conversely, students experiencing lower psychological distress tend to demonstrate better academic performance. The magnitude of the correlation indicates a moderate negative relationship. This suggests that psychological distress is an important factor associated with academic performance, although it is not the only factor determining students' academic achievement. The finding has important implications for counselling practice. If psychological distress contributes to reduced academic performance, university counselling centres should provide programmes aimed at reducing examination anxiety, managing academic stress, improving emotional regulation and helping students develop effective coping mechanisms.

4. H_{02} : There is no significant relationship between coping strategies and academic performance among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities.

The second hypothesis examines whether the coping strategies adopted by students are significantly associated with their academic performance. Pearson Product Moment Correlation may be used where the coping-strategy score is treated as a continuous variable and the relevant assumptions are satisfied.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation between Coping Strategies and Academic Performance

Variables	N	Mean	SD	r	Sig. (2-tailed)	Decision
Coping Strategies	400	3.47	0.76			
Academic Performance	400	3.21	0.71	0.381	0.000	Significant

Significance level = 0.05

Table 4 indicates a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = 0.381$ between coping strategies and academic performance, with a significance value of $p = 0.000$. Since $p = 0.000 < 0.05$, the relationship between coping strategies and academic performance is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{02}) stating that there is no significant relationship between coping strategies and academic performance is rejected. The positive correlation coefficient ($r = 0.381$) indicates a positive relationship between coping strategies and academic performance. This means that students who report greater use of effective coping strategies tend to demonstrate better academic performance. However, the correlation is moderate rather than extremely strong. This implies that coping strategies are associated with academic performance but do not completely determine students' academic outcomes. Other factors such as intelligence, motivation, study habits, socioeconomic circumstances, teaching quality, learning environment and family support may also influence academic achievement. The finding has important implications for counselling practice. University counsellors should assist students in developing effective coping strategies, including problem-solving, time management, study planning, seeking social support, positive cognitive restructuring, examination preparation and appropriate help-seeking.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The first finding of the study showed that undergraduate students experienced a high level of psychological distress, with a grand mean of 3.63, which was above the criterion mean of 3.00. The finding indicates that psychological distress is an important concern among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. The highest-rated indicator was the feeling that academic responsibilities were overwhelming, with a mean of 3.88, followed by frequent worry about academic future with a mean of 3.82 and examination-related anxiety with a mean of 3.76. Emotional exhaustion also recorded a relatively high mean of 3.69, while persistent sadness or low mood recorded the lowest mean of 3.28, although it remained above the criterion mean. The present finding is consistent with Ojewale (2021), who investigated psychological state, family functioning and coping strategies among undergraduate students at the University of Ibadan during the COVID-19 lockdown. Ojewale reported psychological difficulties involving anxiety and depression among the students and demonstrated the importance of coping and family functioning in understanding students' psychological experiences. The similarity between Ojewale's findings and the present result suggests that psychological distress has remained an important issue among Nigerian university students, even though the circumstances producing distress may change over time. While Ojewale's study was conducted during the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 lockdown, the present finding indicates that psychological distress continues to occur in the ordinary university environment as students deal with academic workload, examinations, financial concerns and uncertainty about their future. The finding is also related to the study of Agbaje et al. (2021), who examined adverse childhood experiences and psychological distress among higher-education students in Southeast Nigeria. Their study demonstrated that psychological distress among students can be influenced by experiences extending beyond immediate academic circumstances. This is important because students enter university with different psychological histories, family experiences and levels of resilience. Therefore, the high level of psychological distress found in the present study may not be attributed solely to academic workload. Previous experiences, family circumstances, socioeconomic conditions and personal vulnerabilities may also influence how students respond to university challenges.

The second finding concerned the major sources and forms of psychological distress experienced by undergraduate students. The results showed a grand mean of 3.75, which was above the criterion mean of 3.00. This indicates that the identified sources and forms of psychological distress were generally high. Examination pressure and fear of failure recorded the highest mean of 4.02, followed by heavy academic workload with 3.91, anxiety and excessive worry with 3.89, financial difficulties with 3.86, uncertainty about employment after

graduation with 3.74, and emotional exhaustion and loss of motivation with 3.71. The prominence of examination pressure and fear of failure indicates that academic assessment constitutes one of the most important psychological stressors confronting undergraduate students. Examinations are frequently associated with expectations of success, competition, progression and graduation. Students may perceive poor performance as threatening their educational and occupational future. This may produce examination anxiety, excessive studying, sleep difficulties, worry and emotional exhaustion. The finding agrees with Hassan, Jimoh and Idris (2024), who examined academic stress and coping strategies among students of the Federal University of Lafia. Their study found a significant relationship between academic stress and poor academic performance. The agreement between the two studies demonstrates that academic stress and examination pressure are important problems within the Nigerian university environment. The present finding adds that examination pressure is not merely an academic inconvenience; it can become a significant source of psychological distress. The third finding concerned the relationship between psychological distress and academic performance. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis produced $r = -0.426$ and $p = 0.000$. Since the probability value is less than the 0.05 significance level, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between psychological distress and academic performance was rejected. The result supports Hassan et al. (2024), who found a significant relationship between academic stress and poor academic performance among students of the Federal University of Lafia. The similarity is important because the present study moves from the broader concept of academic stress to psychological distress and demonstrates that the psychological consequences of stress are also associated with academic outcomes. The finding also agrees with Iheanyichukwu et al. (2022), who examined psychological distress and learning disposition among undergraduates of Olabisi Onabanjo University during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their study connected psychological distress with students' disposition toward learning. The present finding complements their work by demonstrating that psychological distress is not only related to students' learning disposition but may also be associated with their academic performance. The fourth finding concerned the relationship between coping strategies and academic performance. The analysis produced $r = 0.381$ and $p = 0.000$. Since $p = 0.000 < 0.05$, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between coping strategies and academic performance was rejected. The result indicates a statistically significant positive relationship between coping strategies and academic performance. The finding agrees with Ukaegbu and Ekpenyong (2025), who examined coping strategies and academic stress among undergraduate guidance and counselling students at the University of Uyo.

CONCLUSION

This study examined psychological distress, coping strategies and academic performance among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities, with particular emphasis on the implications of the findings for counselling practice. The study was motivated by the increasing recognition that university students are exposed to academic, financial, social, family and future-related pressures that may affect their psychological well-being and academic achievement. The study specifically examined the level of psychological distress, the major sources and forms of psychological distress, the relationship between psychological distress and academic performance, and the relationship between coping strategies and academic performance. The findings revealed that undergraduate students experienced a high level of psychological distress, with a grand mean of 3.63, which was above the criterion mean of 3.00. The major manifestations included feeling overwhelmed by academic responsibilities, worrying about academic future, examination anxiety, emotional exhaustion, difficulty concentrating and loss of motivation. This finding indicates that psychological distress is not an isolated problem among university students but an important issue that can influence their educational experiences and general well-being. The study further established that the major sources and forms of psychological distress were generally high, with a grand mean of 3.75. Examination pressure and fear of failure recorded the highest mean of 4.02, followed by heavy academic

workload with 3.91, anxiety and excessive worry with 3.89, and financial difficulties with 3.86. Uncertainty about employment after graduation, family expectations, accommodation and transportation difficulties, interpersonal problems and emotional exhaustion were also identified as important sources or manifestations of distress. These findings demonstrate that psychological distress among Nigerian undergraduates has multiple causes and cannot be explained solely by academic factors.

The study also established a statistically significant negative relationship between psychological distress and academic performance, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = -0.426$ and $p = 0.000$. Since the probability value was below the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was rejected. The result indicates that students experiencing higher psychological distress tend to demonstrate lower academic performance, while students experiencing lower psychological distress tend to perform better academically. Although psychological distress is not the only determinant of academic performance, the finding demonstrates that it is an important factor associated with students' academic outcomes. The study further found a statistically significant positive relationship between coping strategies and academic performance, with $r = 0.381$ and $p = 0.000$. Consequently, the second null hypothesis was rejected. The finding indicates that students who employ more effective coping strategies tend to demonstrate better academic performance. Effective coping strategies may enable students to manage academic pressure, organise their activities, seek appropriate assistance, regulate their emotions and remain focused on their academic responsibilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

1. University counselling centres should strengthen psychological screening and early identification programmes. Since the study found a high level of psychological distress among undergraduate students, universities should develop systematic mechanisms for identifying students experiencing anxiety, emotional exhaustion, excessive worry, poor concentration and other indicators of psychological distress.
2. Universities should provide structured stress-management programmes for students. Counselling units should organise regular seminars, workshops and practical training on stress management. Students should be taught how to recognise early signs of stress and use appropriate techniques to manage academic and personal pressures before they become severe.
3. Examination-anxiety counselling should be strengthened. Since examination pressure and fear of failure recorded the highest mean of 4.02, counselling centres should organise special programmes before examination periods. These programmes should cover examination preparation, relaxation techniques, positive thinking, emotional regulation, study planning, time management and techniques for managing examination anxiety.
4. Universities should provide coping-skills training. The significant positive relationship between coping strategies and academic performance indicates the importance of effective coping. Counsellors should teach students problem-solving, planning, positive reframing, appropriate help-seeking, social-support utilisation, emotional regulation and other adaptive coping strategies.
5. Students should be discouraged from relying on maladaptive coping strategies. Counsellors should help students identify coping behaviours such as excessive avoidance, procrastination, social withdrawal and other behaviours that may increase psychological or academic problems. Counselling programmes should assist students in replacing ineffective coping behaviours with healthier alternatives.

REFERENCES

- Agbaje, O. S., Nnaji, C. P., Nwagu, E. N., Iweama, C. N., Umoke, P. C. I., Ozoemena, L. E., et al. (2021). Adverse childhood experiences and psychological distress among higher education students in Southeast Nigeria: An institutional-based cross-sectional study. *Archives of Public Health*, 79, 62.
- Akpunne, B. C., Idowu, O., Kumuyi, D. O., & Akpunne, E. N. (2024). Assessing the relationship between dyslexia, psychological distress, and academic self-efficacy among Nigerian university undergraduates. *Journal of Education and Health Promotion*, 13, 315.
- Amini, C. M., & Reamen, J. N. (2022). Effects of psychological variables, coping strategies on test anxiety and academic performance of undergraduate distance learning students in National Open University of Nigeria. *Journal of Education in Developing Areas*.
- Babalola, F. E., & Balogun, S. K. (2026). Predicting academic engagement: The role of academic stress and coping style among undergraduates. *Nigerian Journal of Social Psychology*, 9(1).
- Chima, U. D., & Ofoke, S. M. (2024). Coping with test anxiety: Need for professional intervention. *Nigerian Journal of Social Psychology*.
- Hassan, I. I., Jimoh, B. E., & Idris, Y. I. (2024). Relationship between academic stress and coping strategies among students of Federal University of Lafia, Nigeria. *International Journal of Intellectual Discourse*, 7(1), 273–286.
- Iheanyichukwu, T., Babalola, S. O., Iheanyichukwu, B. F., Falade, E. O., & Ekeh, A. N. (2022). Psychological distress as a correlate of learning disposition during COVID-19 pandemic among undergraduates of Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State. *African Journal of Behavioural and Scale Development Research*, 4(2).
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer Publishing Company.
- Odulate-Ogunubi, B., Adelayo, A. Y., & Coker, A. O. (2024). Perceived stress and coping strategies among undergraduate students in Lagos, Nigeria. *Journal of Psychiatry Research Reports*, 1(1), 1–4.
- Ojekale, L. Y. (2021). Psychological state, family functioning and coping strategies among undergraduate students in a Nigerian university during the COVID-19 lockdown. *Journal of Preventive Medicine and Hygiene*, 62(2), E285–E295.
- Okechukwu, F. O., Ogba, K. T. U., Nwifo, J. I., & Ogba, M. O. (2022). Academic stress and suicidal ideation: Moderating roles of coping style and resilience. *BMC Psychiatry*, 22, 546.
- Olusina, A. (2025). Exploring the influence of financial stress on students' academic performance and mental health at a selected university in Lagos, Nigeria. *International Journal of Studies in Psychology*, 5(3), 58–63.
- Orekoya, A. O., & Joseph-Shehu, E. M. (2025). An assessment of the prevalence of religiosity and spirituality as coping strategies for academic stress among undergraduates in Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti.

Ukaegbu, H. M., & Ekpenyong, U. O. (2025). Coping strategies and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. *Journal of Philosophy, Policy and Strategic Studies*, 2.

Ukeh, M., Salawu, A., & Dauda, I. A. (2023). Stress and coping strategies as predictors of psychological wellbeing among Nigeria university students. *Journal of Behavioral Health and Psychology*, 12

**Copyright & License:**

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.