JoSLEPI 3 (3) (2025)
Journal of Science Learning Process and Instructional Research
https://journal.riau-edutech.com/index.php/joslepi
ISSN 3031-3252
Publisher :
Andester Riau Edutech
Pusat Inovasi Pendidikan dan Teknologi

WORK-RELATED STRESS OF MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES' ACADEMIC STAFF

Khairunesa Isa[1], Ami Widyastuti[2], Sarala Thulasi Palpanadan[3], Nurin Nusratina Ramlan[4] , Mansor Abu Talib[5]

[1] *Centre for General Studies and Co-curricular, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia.*
[2]*Center for Trust, Peace, and Social Relation, Coventry University and Fakultas Islam Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Indonesia.*
[3,4]*Centre for Language Studies, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia*
[5]*Faculty of Social Science and Liberal Art, UCSI University, Malaysia*

Corresponding author's email: nesa@uthm.edu.my

Submiited: 29/09/2025
Accepted: 27/11/2025
Published: 29/12/2025
Vol. 3
No. 3

Abstract- Work-related stress is a widespread issue that impacts employee productivity and well-being across various sectors, including academia. This study aims to examine the organizational factors contributing to stress among academic staff in Malaysian public universities and explore effective coping mechanisms to reduce stress. A structured questionnaire comprising 33 items of a four-point Likert scale was administered to 305 academic staff who were randomly selected from four Malaysian public universities. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods through SPSS 24.0. The findings revealed that workload was the most significant contributor to stress, followed by job specifications, leadership, and salary and compensation. Emotion-focused coping strategies were found to be the most preferred method for managing stress. This study highlights the importance of implementing targeted interventions to reduce work-related stress and enhance employee well-being.

Keywords: *academic staff, workload, well-being, workplace stress*

1 Introduction

In today's fast-paced world, shaped by digital transformation, hybrid work models, economic uncertainty, and the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals are faced with a complex range of stressors that can significantly impact their overall well-being. The shift to remote and hybrid work, increased dependence on digital tools, and the unpredictability of economic recovery have all intensified stress levels among employees. Holmen and Rahe's (1967) Life Events Theory suggests that major life changes create more stress than minor ones, with consequences for both mental and physical health. In the workplace, prolonged exposure to stress can diminish productivity, affect cognitive function, and lower job satisfaction. Additionally, there is a clear inverse relationship between job satisfaction and burnout which is high levels of burnout are associated with lower job satisfaction (Nasution Raduan et al., 2022).

Stress at work isn't just an individual problem it's a systemic concern that echoes through our health, organizations, and economies. Lingering occupational stress takes a toll on both mind and body, contributing to burnout, anxiety, depression, and even physical issues like heart disease and weakened immunity. In today's post-pandemic world, stress levels have soared. Employees are battling heavier workloads, blurred boundaries between work and life, financial anxiety from inflation, and job

How to Cite
Khairunesa Isa, et al (2025). Work-Related Stress of Malaysian Public Universities' Academic Staff. Journal of Science, Learning Process and Instructional Research (JoSLEPI). 3(3), 21-30

insecurity (BrightPlan, 2023). On top of that, the rapid pace of digitalization and constant demands for reinvention are pushing employees to their limits. The evidence is clear: workplace stress isn't just a personal inconvenience it threatens economic sustainability by reducing productivity, increasing healthcare costs, and draining organizational resilience (McKinsey, 2025).

Research Background

Work-related stress is a significant and complex issue, with substantial effects on both employee well-being and organizational performance. As Choudhury (2013) notes, the impact of work-related stress is multifaceted, with various factors contributing to the overall experience of stress. A key source of stress among employees, including academic staff, is the misalignment between job expectations and actual performance, as highlighted by Carr et al., (2011). Furthermore, research by Holmen and Rahe (1967) suggests that major life changes, often experienced in the workplace, can result in heightened stress levels among employees. In the context of Malaysian public universities, academic staff often experience the combined pressures of teaching, research, and administrative duties, which contribute to increased stress (Isa et al., 2021). Similarly, Jun et al. (2022) found that teaching and learning-related stressors were significantly positively correlated with social connections.

Research consistently shows that work-related stress has detrimental effects on both the physical and mental health of employees. Zafir and Fazilah (2006) reported that stress is associated with lowered disease resistance, sleep disturbances, and reduced concentration, which can lead to increased errors and accidents. Stress also contributes to negative emotional outcomes, including anxiety and anger (Zhang and Zheng, 2017), which further exacerbate the individual's overall well-being.

In Malaysia, a significant number of workers, including academic staff, face work-related stress. Isa et al. (2021) identified several key stressors among lecturers, such as heavy workloads, limited control over working conditions, and insufficient institutional support. These stressors contribute to high levels of emotional exhaustion and burnout, which can negatively impact both personal well-being and professional performance. Yuksel (2020) pointed out that burnout is often overlooked, despite its serious consequences. The growing impact of work-related stress on academic staff in Malaysia has become a pressing issue, especially with the increasing pressure to enhance the global competitiveness of the education system. This paper aims to explore the prevalence and key determinants of work-related stress among academic staff in Malaysian public universities. By identifying both organizational and individual factors contributing to stress, this study provides actionable recommendations for addressing work-related stress and improving both employee well-being and institutional performance.

2 Literature Review

Academician stress is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by a range of organizational and individual factors that must be addressed comprehensively to mitigate its adverse effects. Key stressors identified in the literature include excessive workloads, time pressures, inadequate support, organizational changes, and individual traits (Yozgat et al., 2013; Mihailidis et al., 2020). Yozgat et al. (2013) highlighted several organizational factors that contribute to workplace stress, including excessive workload, unclear job roles, ineffective management, autocratic leadership, and poor communication. Mihailidis et al. (2020) further emphasized that insufficient support and resources significantly exacerbate lecturer stress. These findings underscore the need for a holistic approach to managing academic stress, given the interplay between organizational structures, leadership styles, and individual characteristics.

From an organizational perspective, Holmen and Rahe (1967) proposed that stress-inducing events could be categorized into three types: adverse events, uncontrollable and unpredictable occurrences, and ambiguous events such as an unexplained reprimand from a superior. These stressors highlight the crucial role of management and leadership in alleviating stress. Chiumento (2006) identified several management-related factors contributing to employee stress, including collaborative management practices, well-structured work systems, decision-making autonomy, leadership credibility, and recognition from employers. Zainah and Hamdan (2002) further identified role ambiguity, role conflict, lack of managerial support, exclusion from decision-making processes, and rapid technological changes as significant sources of stress. Moreover, Nagy et al. (2019) underscored the importance of leadership styles in stress management, noting that personality traits such as perfectionism, neuroticism, and negative affectivity play a significant role in exacerbating stress levels among academic staff. Wan Muda et al. (2021) also emphasized that leadership capacity is vital in fostering innovative behavior and managing stress within organizations.

Stress among academic staff has garnered increasing attention due to its significant impact on both individual well-being and job performance. Research has demonstrated that stress negatively affects mental and physical health, with concomitant decreases in job performance (Ma'arof, 2001; Morin et al., 2021). Beyond the organizational factors, additional stressors such as role ambiguity, interpersonal conflicts with colleagues, and the challenge of maintaining work-life balance have been identified as key contributors to academic stress (Eisenberg & Stinglhamber, 2011; Lunberg & Cooper, 2011; Nazelira & Norfadzilah, 2017). Failure to employ appropriate coping mechanisms can lead to emotional distress and, over time, exacerbate stress levels.

A key factor contributing to academic stress is the level of support provided by colleagues and supervisors. Hill and Lent (2006) found that a lack of support from peers and superiors often leads to increased stress, with staff feeling isolated and disconnected. These feelings can result in lower job satisfaction and, over time, higher turnover intentions (Liu et al., 2020). Richardson et al. (2012) also highlighted that academic staff experiencing high levels of stress are more likely to report decreased job satisfaction and engagement. If left unaddressed, this stress can lead to burnout, which has been linked to higher rates of absenteeism and turnover (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Additionally, Azizan et al. (2024) noted that both personal and work-related stressors are often perceived as contributing factors to burnout.

Research increasingly shows that organizational changes like restructuring, downsizing, and shifts in academic culture can be major sources of stress for academic staff. For example, Kinman and Wray (2013) found that such changes often disrupt daily work expectations and increase pressure on employees. Similarly, Isa (2020) highlighted how changes in university structures and culture can raise job demands and intensify stress. These effects are not just structural. The lack of job control, insufficient support from colleagues, and overwhelming workloads identified by models such as Karasek's (1979) and Bakker and Demerouti's (2016) are also critical contributors to workplace stress. More recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers observed a sharp increase in stress among university staff due to heavier workloads, constant online engagement, and rapidly shifting expectations (Ross et al., 2024). All of this points to the need for a deeper understanding of how organizational environments and human relationships interact to shape stress levels in academia.

In addition to organizational factors, administrative duties such as paperwork and meetings have been identified as notable sources of stress for academic staff (Arneson & Ekberg, 2020). While workload and time pressures are commonly recognized as major contributors to stress, they do not uniformly

affect all academic staff. For example, Jaafar et al. (2020) observed that, despite moderate workloads, lecturers did not experience significant stress or tension, with teaching quality remaining unaffected. This finding suggests that stress levels in academia may be influenced by various contextual factors, implying that workload alone is not always the primary driver of stress for all academic staff. Conversely, Noor and Ismail (2016) highlighted a significant relationship between teaching responsibilities, research demands, and career development with stress levels among academic staff ($p<0.05$).

The physical work environment also plays a critical role in determining stress levels among academic staff. Poor lighting, inadequate ventilation, overcrowded workspaces, noise, and extreme temperatures have been identified as key environmental stressors (Sutton & Rafaeli, 1987; Bao et al., 2009). In the academic context, Kelleher et al. (2020) found that an unfavorable physical work environment is linked to higher stress levels among academic staff, leading to discomfort, reduced concentration, and diminished task performance. Zafir (2010) and Mohd Aripin et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of ergonomic workplace design, noting that improper desk and chair configurations can exacerbate stress and lead to physical discomfort. Thus, creating a conducive and ergonomically sound work environment is paramount in managing academic stress.

Another significant stressor for academic staff is role ambiguity, characterized by a lack of clarity regarding job responsibilities and expectations. Abdul Rahman et al. (2020) established a positive correlation between role ambiguity and stress, a finding supported by Damin et al. (2019). Although Isa et al. (2020) suggest that job specification may have a negligible impact on stress levels, it is important to recognize that variations in work environments and job expectations can influence the degree to which role ambiguity contributes to stress. Providing clear job specifications and expectations can reduce role ambiguity and mitigate associated stress.

Salary and compensation also play a prominent role in academic stress, with several studies linking inadequate remuneration to heightened stress levels among academic staff (Bíró & Molnár, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). However, some studies report that salary does not significantly predict stress (Isa et al., 2020). The influence of salary on stress is likely contextual, varying across institutional settings and countries. Yanchus et al. (2020) found that salary was a stronger predictor of stress in the United States than in Canada, while Ghazinoory et al. (2021) linked low salaries to lower job satisfaction and higher turnover intentions among academic staff in Iran. These findings suggest that the impact of salary and compensation on stress may depend on both the institutional and national contexts.

3 Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative survey methodology, randomly selecting 305 participants of academic staff at Malaysian public universities. The primary research instrument was a self-administered questionnaire, and the collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics with SPSS 24.00 software. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: (i) demographic information, (ii) organizational factors contributing to workplace stress, and (iii) respondents' perceptions of effective coping mechanisms for managing stress. The primary aim of this study was to identify the organizational factors that contributed to stress among academic staff in Malaysian public universities and to explore the coping strategies they perceived as most effective in alleviating stress. Data were measured on a five-point Likert scale, and mean scores were used to categorize stress levels as low, moderate, or high, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean Value Interpretation

Value	Interpretation
1.00 – 2.33	Low level
2.34 – 3.66	Moderate level
3.67 – 5.00	High level

4 Results and Discussion

Demography

This study investigated a sample of academic staff from public universities in Malaysia. The data were collected through a survey distributed to 305 participants randomly selected from the population. The demographic profile of the participants is presented in Table I. The results indicated that 53.8% of the participants were female and 46.2% were male. These findings were consistent with the previous research that showed gender balance among academic staff in Malaysia (Ministry of Higher Education, 2018).

Regarding ethnic diversity, most respondents in this study were Malay (62.6%), followed by Chinese (23.6%), Indian (10.6%), and other ethnicities (3.2%). A previous study by Abdullah et al. (2018) found a notable difference in stress levels among Malaysian academic staff based on ethnicity, with Malay staff reporting higher stress levels than non-Malay staff. This highlighted the importance of considering ethnicity in addressing stress management and promoting well-being among academic staff. In terms of ethnic diversity, many of the respondents in this study were Malay (62.6%), followed by Chinese (23.6%), Indian (10.6%), and other ethnicities (3.2%). The findings were consistent with previous research, such as a study by Abdullah et al. (2018) which found that Malay academic staff reported higher stress levels than non-Malay staff.

Regarding years of service, the largest group of respondents had been working in the university for 6-10 years (39.3%), followed by those with 1-5 years of service (29.2%), 11-15 years (17.7%), 16-20 years (6.1%), and more than 20 years (7.7%). These results provided valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions of academic staff in Malaysian public universities, highlighting the diversity in years of service. Moreover, the findings of this study aligned with previous research, such as a study by Karim et al. (2021) which found a significant negative correlation between years of service and job stress among academic staff in Malaysian public universities, indicating that as years of service increased, job stress decreased. Furthermore, a study by Yusoff et al. (2019) also found that years of service and ethnicity were significant predictors of stress, with non-Malay staff and those with fewer years of service reporting higher stress levels.

Organizational Factors Influencing Stress in the Workplace

Table 2 presents the mean scores for the stress levels of academic staff, measured using a five-point Likert scale. The mean score of 3.73 indicates that academic staff in Malaysian public universities are experiencing high levels of stress. The findings reveal that workload is the primary source of stress, followed by factors such as job specifications, leadership, and salary and compensation.

This indicates that a significant portion of academic staff are currently experiencing stress due to organizational demands. These findings are consistent with recent studies, which have highlighted that job demands and workload are major drivers of stress among academic staff (Yusoff et al., 2013; Abdul Rahman et al., 2016). Furthermore, Rusli et al. (2023) claim that academicians in both Malaysia and Indonesia face stress linked to career development, with pressures stemming from research, teaching, and interpersonal relationships. Academics are under increasing pressure to publish high-quality research in reputable journals as a requirement for career advancement, which only adds to their stress. Even with numerous publications, they may still face challenges in achieving promotion due to the complexities of the promotion process (Akinmayowa and Kadiri, 2016).

Based on the data presented, the workload was identified as the most significant contributor to work-related stress among academic staff, with a mean score of 3.86, followed by job specification (mean = 3.76) and leadership (mean =3.63). The findings of this study were consistent with previous research conducted by Yusoff et al. (2013) and Abdul Rahman et al. (2016), which identified job demands, workload, lack of control, role ambiguity, and inadequate support systems as key factors contributing to high levels of stress experienced by academic staff members. However, the unexpected finding in this study was the moderate level of association between salary and compensation and work-related stress among academic staff, with a mean score of 3.63. This result contrasted with the previous research that consistently demonstrated a significant relationship between low salaries and high levels of work-related stress (Ahmed et al., 2020; Pfeffer, 2018).

Table 2: Academic Staff's Stress Level

Organisational Factor	Mean	Level of Mean
workload	3.86	High
job specification	3.76	High
leadership	3.69	High
salary and compensation	3.63	Moderate
Total Mean	**3.73**	**High**

Respondents' Perceptions of the Most Effective Coping Strategies

The findings presented in Table 3 show a mean score of 3.57, suggesting that academic staff generally perceive their coping strategies as moderately effective. This aligns with previous research, which has reported similar moderate levels of effectiveness in coping with workplace stress (Brough et al., 2016; Saeed et al., 2021). Additionally, Rusli et al. (2023), in their comparative study between Malaysia and Indonesia, found that respondents tended to rely on a variety of coping strategies, including active coping, planning, venting, self-distraction, positive reframing, acceptance, and religion.

Notably, emotion-focused coping emerged as the most preferred strategy, with a mean value of 4.25, reflecting findings by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who identified emotion-focused coping as a prevalent approach for managing stress in the workplace. Problem-focused coping followed as the second most favored strategy, with a mean score of 3.89, which was consistent with the study by Shimazu et al. (2018), who highlighted its effectiveness in addressing job-related stressors. Additionally, time management ranked third with a mean score of 3.63, corroborating Bakker et al. (2019), who emphasized its value in reducing stress and enhancing job performance.

Social support, comprising both formal and informal networks, was the fourth most preferred coping strategy, with a mean value of 3.47. This finding was in line with Koeske and Koeske (2020), who found that social support played a critical role in alleviating work-related stress and promoting employees' mental health and performance. In contrast, relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation were ranked the least favored, with a mean value of 3.26. Although previous research had demonstrated the effectiveness of relaxation techniques in reducing stress symptoms (Ortner et al., 2007), the lower mean suggested that academic staff might perceive these methods as less suitable for their work environment. Furthermore, physical exercise emerged as the least preferred coping strategy, with a mean score of 2.92. This aligned with prior studies indicating that academic staff might not prioritize physical exercise due to constraints like time and accessibility (Fernandes et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2019). Despite its lower ranking, it was important to recognize the significant health benefits of physical exercise, which might still prove effective for some individuals.

Existing literature supports the effectiveness of emotion-focused coping as a strategy for managing stress, as it helps individuals regulate emotional responses to stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping, on the other hand, is widely recognized for its ability to address the root causes of job stress (Shimazu et al., 2018). Effective time management has also been identified as a key stress-reduction strategy, enabling individuals to prioritize tasks and manage their workload more efficiently (Macan et al., 1990). Social support, including formal and informal networks, remains a crucial resource for mitigating work-related stress (Cobb, 1976). While relaxation techniques are known to alleviate both physical and psychological symptoms of stress (Ortner et al., 2007), physical exercise continues to be valuable in improving mental health and reducing stress through the release of endorphins and the enhancement of overall well-being (Salmon, 2001).

Table 3: Respondents' Perceptions of the Most Effective Coping Strategies

Coping Strategies	Mean	Level of mean
Emotion-focused coping	4.25	high
Problem-focused coping	3.89	High
Time management	3.63	moderate
Social support	3.47	moderate
Relaxation techniques	3.26	moderate
Physical exercise	2.95	low
Total Mean	**3.57**	**Moderate**

5 Conclusion

This study provides important insights into the pervasive issue of work-related stress among academic staff in Malaysian public universities. The findings indicate that workload is the primary stressor impacting academic staff's productivity and well-being. As such, it is essential for university management to adopt policies that not only reduce workload but also promote a better work-life balance. Implementing measures such as hiring additional staff, establishing realistic academic targets, and offering flexible work arrangements would significantly ease the pressure on academic staff, fostering a healthier and more productive work environment.

In addition to addressing workload, the study highlights the critical role of leadership in mitigating stress. Effective leadership practices, such as open communication, regular feedback, and leadership training to recognize and manage stress, are essential for creating a positive organizational culture. Moreover, the study revealed that factors such as job specification, salary, and compensation policies

contribute to stress. Consequently, universities should consider reviewing and revising their policies in these areas, ensuring equitable and transparent compensation packages alongside performance-based incentives that recognize academic staff's contributions.

In conclusion, this research emphasizes the need for a holistic and collaborative approach to stress management, integrating both university management and academic staff in the development of tailored strategies. By fostering open dialogue, providing the necessary support systems, and revising key policies, Malaysian public universities can mitigate the detrimental effects of stress on academic staff. The findings of this study offer valuable recommendations for improving staff's well-being, enhancing job satisfaction, and increasing productivity. Further research is needed to examine the long-term effects of these stressors and evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies in different institutional contexts, which could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of stress management in higher education institutions.

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