

# The relationship between academic stress and academic performance among private university students



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**Abstract** This study investigates the relationship between academic stress and academic performance among private university students in Kelana Jaya Selangor, focusing on UNITAR International University. A quantitative approach was employed, with data collected from 102 students through a 25-item structured questionnaire. SPSS software was used for analysis, with Pearson correlation employed to assess the relationships between independent and dependent variables. The research aims to understand how these factors influence academic outcomes. The findings revealed significant positive correlations for all three factors. Heavy academic workload showed a strong positive correlation with academic performance ( $r = 0.781$ ), ( $p < 0.05$ ), suggesting that increased workload may enhance students' time management and study skills. Financial stress also exhibited a positive correlation ( $r = 0.648$ ), ( $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that financial pressures might motivate students to achieve higher grades. High academic expectations and competition were moderately correlated with academic performance ( $r = 0.613$ ), ( $p < 0.01$ ), implying that a competitive academic environment fosters better performance. These results highlight the potential benefits of certain stressors in motivating students to excel academically. However, it is crucial to balance these stressors to ensure student well-being. Future research should explore the mechanisms behind these relationships and investigate strategies to support students in managing stress effectively while enhancing academic performance.

**Keywords:** academic stress, academic performance, private university students, well being

## 1. Introduction

Academic stress is a pervasive issue in higher education globally, with numerous studies linking it to mental health challenges and academic difficulties. International research, such as Talib and Zia-ur-Rehman (2012), has demonstrated that elevated levels of perceived stress correlate with diminished academic performance due to impaired focus, memory retention, and time management. In Malaysia, particularly among private university students, academic stress manifests through unique contextual factors including financial strain, academic workload, and competitive academic environments. Zakaria et al. (2020) emphasized that poor time management among Malaysian students exacerbates stress, while Lim and Bakar (2021) highlighted the societal and personal pressures that contribute to performance anxiety. This study focuses on UNITAR International University in Kelana Jaya, Selangor, to explore how these localized stressors influence academic outcomes within the Malaysian private university context.

Academic stress is a major concern in higher education, particularly among university students, where it has been linked to both mental health challenges and academic difficulties. Research shows that academic stress has a direct impact on students' academic outcomes, particularly their ability to graduate on time. Talib and Zia-ur-Rehman (2012) demonstrated that higher levels of perceived stress correlate with lower academic performance, as students are less able to focus, retain information, or manage their time effectively.

In the context of private university students, common stressors include academic workload, financial strain, and competitive academic environments. The inability to cope effectively with these stressors often leads to impaired academic performance and mental health issues. This can lead to anxiety, procrastination, and burnout, ultimately affecting academic performance. As Zakaria et al. (2020) noted, poor time management exacerbates this issue, leaving students overwhelmed. The constant pressure to achieve high grades, driven by societal and personal expectations, can lead to significant stress (Lim & Bakar, 2021). Students who perceive academic competition as a threat may experience performance anxiety, which can impair cognitive functioning and reduce academic achievement.

## 2. Problem Statement

In Malaysia's private universities, students often encounter the dual pressures of high academic expectations and a competitive academic environment. Lim and Bakar (2021) found that these pressures often lead to performance anxiety, which



can impair cognitive functioning and reduce academic achievement. The fear of failure further intensifies stress, particularly when students perceive themselves as lacking the necessary resources or skills to meet expectations, as explained by Lazarus' appraisal theory. This stress may result in maladaptive coping strategies such as excessive studying or avoidance behaviors, negatively impacting both mental health and academic performance (Rahman et al., 2019). Additionally, heavy academic workload and time constraints are significant stressors among Malaysian private university students. According to Lazarus' theory, when students perceive their workload as exceeding their capacity to manage it, they experience heightened stress, leading to anxiety, procrastination, and burnout. This study aims to investigate these context-specific stressors and their relationship with academic performance among students at UNITAR International University.

High Expectations and Academic Competition is one of the main problem. In Malaysia's private university, students often face the dual pressures of high academic expectations and a competitive academic environment. The constant pressure to achieve high grades, driven by societal and personal expectations, can lead to significant stress (Lim & Bakar, 2021). Students who perceive academic competition as a threat may experience performance anxiety, which can impair cognitive functioning and reduce academic achievement.

The stress caused by high expectations and academic competition is further intensified by the fear of failure. According to Lazarus, this stress arises when students' appraisal of the situation leads them to believe they lack the necessary skills or resources to meet these high expectations. As a result, students may engage in maladaptive coping strategies, such as excessive studying or avoidance of challenging tasks, which can negatively impact both their mental health and academic performance (Rahman et al., 2019).

Heavy Workload and Time Management are one of the primary sources of stress among private university students including assignments, projects, and exams. According to Lazarus' theory, students appraise these workloads as stressful when they perceive them as exceeding their ability to manage within the given time constraints. This can lead to anxiety, procrastination, and burnout, ultimately affecting academic performance.

### 3. Research Objectives

In this study, the researcher intends to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between heavy academic workload and academic performance among private university students.
2. To investigate the relationship between financial stress and academic performance among private university students.
3. To analyse the relationship between high academic expectations and competition and the academic performance of private university students.

### 4. Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

1. Is there any relationship between heavy academic workload and academic performance among private university students?
2. Is there any relationship between financial stress and academic performance of private university students?
3. What is the relationship between high academic expectations and competition on the academic performance of private university students?

### 5. Significance of the Study

This study will provide future researchers with a solid foundation for understanding the relationship between academic stress and academic performance, particularly among students in private universities in Malaysia. By identifying key stressors such as heavy academic workload, financial pressures, and academic competition, this study offers a valuable reference point for future studies aiming to expand or refine the scope of academic stress research. Researchers may build upon this work by examining other variables, exploring different contexts, or developing intervention models aimed at reducing stress and improving student outcomes.

The findings of this study also will be essential for counsellors working within private universities or in academic settings. By highlighting the specific stressors faced by students, counsellors can tailor their intervention strategies to better support students in managing academic stress. Understanding the primary causes of stress, such as financial burdens or academic expectations, will allow counsellors to develop personalized coping mechanisms, offer appropriate guidance, and create stress-reduction programs aimed at enhancing students' well-being and academic performance.

The study is directly relevant to private university students, as it will increase their awareness of the factors contributing to their stress and provide them with strategies to mitigate its impact on their academic performance. By understanding the relationships between stress and performance, students can take proactive steps to manage their academic workload, seek financial support, and navigate competitive academic environments with greater confidence. This heightened awareness can lead to improved academic success and a more positive university experience.

## 6. Theory

Recent studies continue to affirm the relevance of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping in academic contexts. Obbarius et al. (2021) validated a modified version of the model using structural equation modeling, highlighting the role of personal resources such as self-efficacy and optimism in buffering stress effects. Biggs, Brough, and Drummond (2017) further emphasized the model's applicability in modern stress research, noting its integration with emotional regulation and resilience frameworks. These contemporary extensions recognize that coping is not only reactive but also involves proactive emotional regulation and adaptation strategies. In academic settings, particularly among university students in Southeast Asia, the model has been applied to understand how students interpret and respond to stressors such as workload, financial pressure, and competition. While Lazarus' model remains foundational, recent scholarship has incorporated digital stress frameworks to reflect the evolving challenges faced by students in technology-driven learning environments. These developments underscore the model's enduring relevance and adaptability in explaining academic stress and coping mechanisms.

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping serves as the primary theoretical foundation for understanding the relationship between academic stress and academic performance. According to this theory, stress arises from the interaction between an individual and their environment. In the academic context, stress occurs when students perceive academic demands as exceeding their ability to cope. This model emphasizes the importance of cognitive appraisal, wherein individuals assess whether a situation is a challenge they can overcome or a threat to their well-being. Students who perceive academic tasks as challenges are more likely to engage in problem-solving strategies, while those who view them as threats may experience overwhelming stress.

In the academic environment of private university, where competition and expectations are high, students often face situations that they appraise as threatening. For instance, a heavy academic workload or financial pressure can be perceived as insurmountable challenges, leading to stress. The transactional model helps explain why some students experience higher levels of academic stress than others, even when faced with similar circumstances. It also highlights the role of coping mechanisms in moderating the effects of stress. Students who possess effective coping strategies, such as time management and seeking social support, are better equipped to handle stress and maintain their academic performance.

## 7. Literature Review

Heavy academic workload is a major source of stress for private university students, particularly in Kelana Jaya, where the academic demands are often rigorous. Students are required to manage multiple assignments, exams, and projects, often with tight deadlines. Research by Rahman et al. (2019) found that students in private universities reported higher levels of stress related to their academic workload compared to their peers in public institutions.

Lee and Loo (2019) highlighted that poor time management often leads to procrastination, which exacerbates the stress associated with heavy workloads. Students who procrastinate are more likely to experience last-minute cramming, which not only increases stress but also reduces the quality of their academic work.

Empirical studies have shown that heavy academic workloads are associated with a range of negative outcomes, including burnout, anxiety, and depression. Zakaria et al. (2020) found that students who reported high levels of stress related to their academic workload were more likely to experience symptoms of burnout, which further impaired their academic performance. This suggests that interventions aimed at reducing academic workload or improving time management skills could significantly alleviate stress and improve academic outcomes for private university students.

Lim and Bakar (2021) noted that students in private universities are particularly vulnerable to stress related to academic competition, as they are constantly comparing themselves to their peers and striving to meet high academic standards. This competitive atmosphere can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and a decline in academic performance. The impact of academic competition and societal expectations on academic performance has been widely studied. Lim and Bakar (2021) found that students who reported high levels of stress related to academic competition were more likely to experience burnout and a decline in academic performance. Similarly, Zakaria et al. (2020) noted that students who felt pressure to meet societal expectations often experienced anxiety and decreased motivation, which negatively affected their academic outcomes.

## 8. Methodology

This study uses a quantitative correlational research design to explore the relationship between academic stress and academic performance among students. A correlational design is appropriate because it allows the researcher to examine associations between the variables of interest without implying causation. Quantitative data collection through surveys provides measurable insights into stress levels and academic outcomes, which can then be statistically analyzed to understand the strength and direction of these relationships. This design aligns with previous research that has investigated stress impacts on academic performance, providing a well-established foundation for this study.

## 9. Samples and Sampling

The study targets a sample of 102 UNITAR International Students from various level of study in Kelana Jaya. The sample includes students from different academic years, disciplines, and demographic backgrounds to ensure that the findings reflect the broader private university population. Such diversity within the sample allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to academic stress across different student subgroups. Stratified random sampling is utilized to select participants from UNITAR in Kelana Jaya, Selangor. Stratification is based on key demographic and academic characteristics, such as level of education, field of study, age, race and gender, to ensure that the sample accurately represents the diversity within the student population. This technique is particularly effective for reducing sampling bias, as it ensures that all subgroups are proportionately represented in the study. Simple random sampling is chosen because it aligns with the study's goal of examining academic stress across different subpopulations within the private university context.

## 10. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards to ensure the integrity of the research and the protection of participants' rights. Prior to data collection, all participants were provided with comprehensive information regarding the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights, including the freedom to withdraw at any stage without penalty. For participants with limited literacy, the consent form is explained verbally to ensure comprehension (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Informed consent was obtained through signed forms, and for participants with limited literacy, the content was explained verbally to ensure full comprehension. Participation was strictly voluntary, with no coercion or undue influence exerted. To maintain confidentiality, all data were anonymized, and no personal identifiable information was disclosed in the reporting of findings. Given the sensitivity of topics such as financial stress and academic pressure, the questionnaire was carefully designed to avoid intrusive or offensive language, and responses were handled with discretion and respect. The researcher-maintained neutrality throughout the study, avoiding leading questions and ensuring that data interpretation was grounded in participants' actual responses, thereby upholding objectivity and credibility in the research process. Data interpretation will be conducted systematically, ensuring that findings are based on actual responses rather than researcher assumptions (Tracy, 2020).

## 11. Instrumentation

The study employs a structured questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument. The questionnaire is designed to measure academic stress levels and perceived academic performance using validated scales. Academic stress is assessed through questions related to common stressors such as workload, time management, financial pressure, and competition, while academic performance is measured through self-reported GPA, CGPA and perceived academic success.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research instrument, a structured questionnaire comprising 25 items was developed based on established literature and theoretical constructs related to academic stress and performance. The questionnaire was divided into four sections, each representing a key variable: heavy academic workload, financial stress, academic expectations and competition, and academic performance. Content validity was established through expert review by faculty members specializing in educational psychology and research methodology, who assessed the relevance, clarity, and comprehensiveness of each item. Construct validity was supported by aligning the items with the dimensions of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping. A pilot test was conducted with a sample of students like the target population, and the results were analyzed using Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency. The reliability coefficients ranged from 0.801 to 0.954, exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.78 (Trizano-Hermosilla & Alvarado, 2016), indicating a high level of consistency across all constructs. Additionally, normality tests including skewness, kurtosis, and Shapiro-Wilk confirmed that the data distribution was suitable for parametric analysis. These procedures collectively affirm that the questionnaire is a valid and reliable tool for measuring academic stress and performance among private university students.

## 12. Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software, which is widely used for statistical analysis in social science research. SPSS was chosen for its reliability, ease of use, and ability to perform various statistical tests relevant to examining the relationship between academic stress and academic performance among private university students in Kelana Jaya, Selangor. To ascertain the strength of the variables and whether they are connected, correlation analysis in SPSS Version 26 is utilized. A high correlation suggests a strong relationship between the variables.

### 12.1. Instrument Reliability - Cronbach Alpha

To test instrument reliability, internal consistency is acceptable if the alpha score is  $\geq 0.78$ . Reliability analysis was carried out on Section B to Section E values scale comprising 25 items.

Table 1 showed Cronbach's alpha value of 0.801 to 0.954 ( $\geq 0.78$ ), indicating a statistically high level of internal consistency for the scale within these questionnaire items in the pilot test. Since the reliability is above 0.78, no item needed to be considered for deletion or alternation (Trizano-Hermosilla & Alvarado, 2016).

**Table 1** Cronbach Alpha Reliability Analysis Result.

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha
Heavy academic workload	0.801
Financial stress	0.922
Academic expectation and competition	0.835
Academic performances	0.954

### 12.2. Assessing Normality - (Shapiro-Wilk Normality Test)

In this chapter also, the researcher begins by discussing the normality test results. It is first shown in this chapter to show that the quantitative data was normally distributed. The various statistical measures such as skewness, kurtosis, histogram, and normal Q-Q plots of the overall scores were used to show that the quantitative data was normally distributed, allowing for inferential statistical analysis.

### 13. Findings

This study was conducted among 102 private University students in Kelana Jaya. The respondents, who ranged in age from 18 to 30, were consists of 47 males and 55 females. Indian is the majority in race description which consists of 31.6% followed by Chinese (16.3%) and Malay (13.3%).

Demographic Description of Each Respondent as follows:

RQ1: Is there any relationship between heavy academic workload and academic performance among private university students in Klang Valley, Selangor?

H1: There is a relationship between Heavy Academic Workload and academic performances.

According to Table 3 below, Gay et al. (2012), if the correlation is less than 0.35 is a low correlation. If the correlation is between 0.36 and 0.65 it is a moderate correlation. Above 0.66 is a high correlation. Table 2 explains the size of correlation and the interpretation.

**Table 2** Demographic Table of Respondents.

Variable	Category	n (N =102)	percentage
Gender	Female	55	33.1
	Male	47	28.1
Race	Malay	22	13.3
	Indian	53	31.9
	Chinese	27	16.3
Age	18-24	55	32.5
	25-30	47	28.3
Education Level	Certificate	14	8.4
	Foundation	24	14.5
	Diploma	24	14.5
	Bachelor's degree	39	23.5

**Table 3** Interpreting the size of the correlation.

Size of Correlation	Interpretation
0.35 and below	Low correlation
Between 0.36 - 0.65	Moderate correlation
Above 0.66	High correlation

Based on the data provided in Table 4, there is a significant positive correlation between heavy academic workload (HAW) and academic performance among private university students in Kelana Jaya, Selangor. The correlation coefficient is ( $r = 0.781$ ), which is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). This suggests that as the academic workload increases, academic performance also tends to improve among the students surveyed ( $N = 102$ ). In summary, the hypothesis H1 is supported by the data, indicating that there is indeed a significant positive relationship between heavy academic workload and academic performance among the students surveyed.

RQ2: Is there any relationship between financial stress and academic performance of private university students in Klang Valley, Selangor.

H1 There is a relationship between Financial Stress, and academic performances.

Based on the data provided in Table 5, there is a significant positive correlation between financial stress (FS) and academic performance among private university students in Kelana Jaya, Selangor. The correlation coefficient is ( $r = 0.648$

), which is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). This suggests that as financial stress increases, academic performance also tends to improve among the students surveyed (N = 102). In summary, the data supports the existence of a significant positive relationship between financial stress and academic performance among the students surveyed. This finding suggests that students experiencing higher financial stress may be more motivated to perform well academically, possibly due to the pressure to secure scholarships, financial aid, or future job opportunities. The hypothesis H1 is supported by the data, indicating that there is indeed a significant positive relationship between Financial Stress, and academic performances among the students surveyed. This result has answered the research Question 2.

**Table 4** Correlation between heavy academic workload and academic performance.

Variable	HAW	Academic
HAW	1	.781* (N = 102)
Academic Performance	.781* (N = 102)	1

*Note:* \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Table 5** Correlation between Financial Stress, and academic performances.

Variable	FS	Academic
FS	1	.648* (N = 102)
Academic Performance	.648* (N = 102)	1

*Note:* \*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

RQ3: What is the relationship between high academic expectations and competition on the academic performance.

Hypothesis: H1 There is a significant relationship between high academic expectations and competition on academic performance.

Based on the data provided in Table 6, there is a significant positive correlation between high academic expectations and competition (HAEC) and academic performance among private university students. The Pearson correlation coefficient is ( $r = 0.613$ ), which indicates a moderate positive relationship between high academic expectations and competition and academic performance. This means that higher academic expectations and competition are associated with better academic performance. The significance level is ( $p = 0.000$ ), which is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), indicating that this relationship is statistically significant and not due to chance.

**Table 6** Correlation between high academic expectations and competition on academic performance.

	HAEC	Academic Performance
HAEC	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.613*
	N	102
Academic Performance	Pearson Correlation	.613*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	102

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In summary, the data supports the existence of a significant positive relationship between high academic expectations and competition and academic performance among the students surveyed. The hypothesis also is accepted and the research question 3 has been answered.

## 14. Discussion

The first research question (RQ1) explored the relationship between heavy academic workload (HAW) and academic performance among private university students in Klang Valley, Selangor. The findings indicated a significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.781$ ), ( $p < 0.05$ ). This suggests that students who experience a heavier academic workload tend to perform better academically. One possible explanation for this could be that a higher workload encourages students to develop better time management and study skills, leading to improved academic outcomes. Additionally, students with a heavier workload might be more engaged and motivated to succeed, further enhancing their performance.

The second research question (RQ2) examined the relationship between financial stress (FS) and academic performance. The results showed a significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.648$ ), ( $p < 0.05$ ). This finding is somewhat counterintuitive, as financial stress is generally expected to have a negative impact on academic performance. However, recent studies have suggested that financial stress can act as a motivational factor under certain conditions. For instance, Biggs et al. (2017) noted that stress appraised as a challenge rather than a threat may lead to adaptive coping strategies, such as increased effort and goal-directed

behavior. This aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping, which emphasizes the role of cognitive appraisal in determining stress outcomes. Students experiencing financial stress may perceive academic success as a pathway to financial stability, thereby increasing their motivation to perform well. Obbarius et al. (2021) further validated this model, showing that personal resources like self-efficacy and optimism can buffer the negative effects of stress and enhance academic outcomes. While financial stress appears to enhance performance in this context, it is important to recognize that prolonged exposure to financial strain may lead to burnout or mental health issues, as noted by Wang and Eccles (2012). Therefore, support systems and financial aid programs are essential to help students manage stress effectively while maintaining academic success.

The third research question (RQ3) investigated the relationship between high academic expectations and competition (HAEC) and academic performance. The study found a significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.613$ ) ( $p < 0.01$ ). This indicates that students who face higher academic expectations and competition tend to perform better academically. High expectations and competition may create an environment that fosters academic excellence, as students strive to meet these expectations and outperform their peers. This competitive atmosphere can lead to increased effort, better study habits, and ultimately, higher academic achievement.

## 15. Overall Implications

The results of this study highlight the complex interplay between various stressors and academic performance. While heavy academic workload and financial stress are typically viewed as negative factors, they appear to have a positive impact on academic performance in this context. This suggests that certain levels of stress and pressure can be beneficial, motivating students to achieve better academic outcomes. However, it is important to recognize that excessive stress can have detrimental effects, and a balance must be maintained to ensure student well-being.

## 16. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should explore the underlying mechanisms that drive the positive relationships observed in this study. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into how these factors influence academic performance over time. Additionally, qualitative research could help understand students' perspectives on how they manage academic workload, financial stress, and competition. Investigating the role of support systems, such as counseling services and peer support, could also provide valuable information on how to mitigate the negative effects of stress while enhancing its positive aspects.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the factors that influence academic performance among private university students in Kelana Jaya, Selangor. By understanding these relationships, educators and policymakers can develop strategies to support students in achieving their academic goals while maintaining their overall well-being.

Based on RQ3. There is a relationship between Academic Expectations and Competition and academic performances. The study revealed a significant relationship between academic expectations and competition with academic performance. High expectations from peers, family, or educators can drive students to excel but may also lead to stress and burnout if the expectations are perceived as overwhelming. Additionally, competition among peers may foster academic excellence for some students while causing anxiety and fear of failure for others. Research by Wang and Eccles (2012) confirms that perceived academic pressure and competition are crucial determinants of students' mental health and performance. Providing supportive and non-competitive academic environments, along with mental health resources, can help students manage these pressures more effectively.

## 17. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study investigated the relationships between heavy academic workload, financial stress, high academic expectations and competition, and academic performance among private university students in Kelana Jaya, Selangor. The findings revealed significant positive correlations for all three factors, suggesting that these stressors can enhance academic performance under certain conditions. Overall, the study highlights the potential benefits of certain stressors in motivating students to achieve higher academic outcomes. However, it is crucial to balance these stressors to ensure student well-being. Future research should explore the mechanisms behind these relationships and investigate strategies to support students in managing stress effectively while enhancing academic performance.

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## Ethical considerations

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comprehension. Participation was strictly voluntary, with no coercion or undue influence exerted. To maintain confidentiality, all data were anonymized, and no personal identifiable information was disclosed in the reporting of findings. Given the sensitivity of topics such as financial stress and academic pressure, the questionnaire was carefully designed to avoid intrusive or offensive language, and responses were handled with discretion and respect. The researcher-maintained neutrality throughout the study, avoiding leading questions and ensuring that data interpretation was grounded in participants' actual responses, thereby upholding objectivity and credibility in the research process. Data interpretation will be conducted systematically, ensuring that findings are based on actual responses rather than researcher assumptions (Tracy, 2020).

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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