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Research Paper

STRESS AMONG PRIVATE UNIVERSITY LECTURERS IN GHANA: CAUSES AND COPING STRATEGIES

Danku, Lydia Sylvia¹	¹ Senior Lecturer, Department of Management Studies, Ho Technical University, Ho, Volta Region, Ghana.
Dzomeku, Veronica Millicent²	² Senior Lecturer, Department of Nursing, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana.
Dodor, Christian Thywill³	³ Lecturer, Department of Accounting and Finance, Ho Technical University, Ho, Volta Region, Ghana.
Adade, Thomas Clarkson⁴	⁴ Lecturer, Department of Accounting and Finance, Ho Technical University, Ho, Volta Region, Ghana.

ABSTRACT

The study generally evaluated the causes of stress and coping strategies among lecturers of private universities in Ghana using Evangelical Presbyterian University College (EPUC) as the case. The study employed a descriptive research design. The population of the study included all faculties in the university. Thus, census method of selecting respondents was adopted. A response rate of 86.5% was recorded. Relative Importance Index (RII) was used for data analysis. This research has clearly shown that stress existed among the lecturers. The findings indicated delay or irregularity in payment of salary, workload, inadequate monetary reward, too much subject matter to teach and excessive work hours as the major causes or sources of stress among the lecturers. In addition, goal setting, relaxing after work, positive thinking, planning ahead and prioritizing, learning how to control emotion, and forgetting things that happened in school after work were the prominent and most effective stress coping strategies used by the lecturers.

KEYWORDS: Stress, Private Universities, Coping Strategies, Relative Importance Index (RII), Ghana

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In today’s world, stress has turned into an overall marvel, which occurs in various forms in each work environment. In today’s work life, employees are by and large working for more hours, as the rising levels of responsibilities oblige them to strive considerably all the more strenuously to meet rising expectations about work performance (Dwamena, 2012). Stress has become an integral part of lecturing job (Ubangari & Bako, 2014). For instance the demand of lecturing job has increased the level of stress among lecturers in Nigerian

universities (*ibid*). According to Alabi, Murlala and Lawal (2012), all forms of work and organisational procedures are potential causes of stress simply because other people’s needs and wishes impinge on one another. They further stated that the nation-wide strike embarked by the Academic Staff Union of University (ASUU) in Nigeria which lasted for over five month is partly caused by stress related demands by the university lecturers termed “earned allowance” which includes overload allowance. In Ghana, several



nationwide surveys have indicated that, about 58% of the workforce in organizations suffers from stress – related problems (The Weekly Mirror, 2006 cited in Dwamena, 2012). This means that stress can be a killer of many organizations in Ghana of which Evangelical Presbyterian University College (EPUC) is no exception, hence the need to investigate.

Stress is depicted as the antagonistic psychological and physical responses that happen in a person as a consequence of his or her inability to adapt to the demands being made on him or her (Moorhead & Griffen, 1998). Michac in Dwamena (2012) specified causes of stress as follows: poor time management, unclear job descriptions, feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, inability to get things done, lack of communication, bad personal relationships, quality and complexity of tasks. According to Peretomade (1993) stress is used both in medical and management literatures to refer to an internal state of psychological, emotional and physiological tension or imbalance and strain within an individual resulting from his attempt to adapt and adjust to both internal and external pressures or to both physical and mental demand.

In private universities, lecturers perform many responsibilities in addition to lecturing. The lecturers have to administer students' continuous assessment, attend conferences, seminars and workshops, carry out researches and publish in recognised journals as well as engage in community services. Lecturers at the Evangelical Presbyterian University College (EPUC) experience a higher degree of stress as many of them double as lecturers in other tertiary institutions in town. Majority of the lecturers experience ill-health or breakdown during peak times which show a level of stress.

Even though stress is a well researched area, not much has been done in the area of lecturers in private universities in Ghana, hence the need to ascertain the true nature of stress at private universities in order to fill the gap in literature. It is in this view that this study was conducted to identify the major causes of stress as well as the coping strategies used by the lecturers.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study adopted person-environment (P–E) fit theory. This theoretical model has been in existence for some time, and which to a substantial degree has supported different ways to deal with stress and well-being (Dewe, Driscoll, & Cooper, 2012). This record of

the stress process comes from the early work and theorizing of Lewin (1935) and Murray (1938). One key advantage of the P–E fit conceptualization over some other theories is that P–E fit is based essentially on the idea of employee adjustment in the work setting, which has been illustrated as being basic for overall well-being (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Dewe, Driscoll, & Cooper, 2012).

The theory relies on the amount of a “stimulus” (for instance, workload, work complexity, level of authority and social interaction with work colleagues) that an individual wants to have, and the genuine level of the different stimuli (Dewe, Driscoll, & Cooper, 2012). P–E fit theory proposes that high strain will happen when there is a bungle between the individual's needs and what they get or stand up to at work (*ibid*). The fundamental idea underlying P–E fit theory is that there needs to be a match between what people want and what they get, as well as a match between their abilities (knowledge, skills) and the demands placed upon them. Lack of match (mis-fit) creates strain and (ultimately) reduces their sense of psychosocial well-being. However, demands–ability and needs–supply match are considerably more relevant to people when the stimuli are important to them (Dewe, Driscoll, & Cooper, 2012).

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Causes or Sources of Stress among Lecturers

Concerning the causes of stress most studies have pointed to the fact that the incidence of stress is due to overwork (Laver, 2009 cited in Ubangari & Bako, 2014). Graham (2008) in Ubangari and Bako (2014) argued that stress is not the inability to cope with excessive workloads and the unreasonable demands of incompetent and bullying managers; stress is a consequence of the employer's failure to provide a safe system of work as required by regulation (Ubangari & Bako, 2014). Again, research and publications (Abouserie, 1996; Blix, Cruise, Mitchell, & Blix, 1994), strike and school interruption, delay and irregular payment of salary and lack of instructional facilities (Ofoegbu & Nwadiani, 2006) are significant sources or causes of stress among university lecturers.

Akinmayowa and Kadiri (2014) identified academic workload, student-related issues, research and career development, interpersonal relationship, administrative-related issues as factors that contribute significantly to the level of stress experienced by academic staff. Also, Olatunji and Akinlabi (2012) and Yusoff (2013) identified the following source of stress

among university lecturers “lots of works load, inadequate ventilated office, noisy environment, multiple university problems, inadequate lecture halls, keeping pace with institutional demands, role expectation, emotional demand inter-personal relationship value and belief system.

Thabo (2010) examined the factors associated with work stress among university employees in Botswana. Their results indicated that work stress was associated with several aspects of the work environment such as overload, clarity of responsibilities and physical working conditions. Akbar and Akhter (2011) as opined in Akinmayowa and Kadiri (2014) investigated the factors that significantly contribute to stress among faculty members in both public and private business schools of Punjab in Pakistan. They found that workload, student-related issues and role conflicts were significant factors that contribute to stress in faculty members; while inadequate organizational resources and organizational structural & procedural characteristics do not contribute significantly to stress in faculty members.

Tytherleigh, Webb, Cooper, & Ricketts (2005) in Adebisi (2013) posited that major change initiatives, excessive work hours, heavy workloads, poor management, diminishing resources, unfavourable student to staff ratios, pressure to attract external funds, job insecurity, lack of recognition and reward, and role ambiguity, have frequently been reported by academic staff in the universities as correlates of occupational stress. Ali, Raheem, Nawaz and Imamuddin (2014) affirmed that work load, role conflict and inadequate monetary rewards are the main causes of stress among employees in Higher Education Sector, which reduces their work performance.

2.2.2 Stress Coping Actions and Reducing Strategies

Murphy (1996) researched on the effectiveness of stress management programmes. Subsequent to his 20-year review, encompassing various programmes, he concluded that stress management approaches that combined techniques were most effective (Nnuro, 2012). Humara (2002) also conducted a review of such programs (for sports performance) and found several common mechanisms across the programs evaluated. The results indicate that programmes that include goal-setting, positive thinking, situation restructuring, relaxation, focused attention, and imagery and mental rehearsal tend to be the most effective at improving performance and reducing anxiety: (Nnuro, 2012).

It has been determined the adverse impact of stress on performance was enhanced to some degree after individual motivation improved (motivation instruction was provided)(Dutke & Stober in Nnuro, 2012). In like manner Katz and Epstein (1991) ascertained that individuals that are high in constructive thinking tended to be less physiologically stirred by stress and more positive emotionally and psychologically than those low in constructive thinking who were additionally exposed to stress.

2.3 Summary of the Review

In the literature review, it has been observed that various factors contribute to stress. Key among the sources are poor management, research and publications, delay and irregular payment of salary, lack of instructional facilities, workload, administrative-related issues, inadequate ventilated office, role conflicts, excessive work hours, unfavourable student to staff ratios and inadequate monetary rewards. Stress management strategies such as goal-setting, positive thinking, situation restructuring, relaxation, focused attention, and imagery and mental rehearsal could be used to minimize the negative effect of stress on job performance.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

Descriptive research design was used. According to Pilot and Hurgler (1995), descriptive survey aims predominantly at observing, describing and documenting aspects of a situation as it naturally occurs rather than explaining them. The design has an advantage of producing good amount of responses from a wide range of people. At the same time, it provides a more accurate picture of events at a point in time. Creswell (2003) is however of the view that a descriptive study is more than just a collection of data. It involves measurement, classification, analysis, comparison and interpretation of data.

In addition, a cross-sectional case study approach was employed. Case studies are a useful way to explore, examine or bring to light variables, phenomena, processes and relationships that have not been thoroughly researched and as such deserve more intensive investigation. The essence of using case study was an attempt to gain insight into the state of stress among lecturers at EPUC.

3.2 Population of Study

In this study, the population was all the staff of EPUC. The population was heterogeneous as the University had both part-time and full-time lecturers

referred to as academic staff in addition to non-academic staff. The estimated academic staff population of EPUC was 37 lecturers (i.e. 19 part time lecturers and 18 full time lecturers). This study targeted only lecturers both part-time and full-time at the Central Municipal Campus of the University.

3.3 Sample Size Determination

The sample size for the study was 37 lecturers at the Central Municipal Campus of the University representing 100% of the estimated academic staff population. The entire academic staff of EPUC at the Central Municipal Campus was sampled (i.e. the entire population as the sample). Thus, census method was adopted as the population was small and there was the need for higher degree of accuracy. According to Farooq (2013), data collection through census gives opportunity to the investigator to have an intensive study about the problem and the investigator gathers a lot of knowledge through the method. Also, the use of census would lead to higher degree of accuracy in data. No other method is accurate like census method when the universe is small (Farooq, 2013).

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Major Causes or Sources of Stress among Lecturers

In Table 1 the mean score and Relative Importance Index (RII) of the various causes associated with stress were determined. The causes were ranked according to their RII. The Relative Importance Indices (RII) was calculated by using the formula of Aibinu and Jagboro (2002) and Olawale and Sun (2010) for each variable to determine the ranks of each of the variables as perceived by the respondents in terms of greatness. The five-point Likert scale 1-5 was used to calculate the RII for each items as follows: $RII = [(5n_1 + 4n_2 + 3n_3 + 2n_4 + 1n_5) / 5N]$ and it ranges from point two (0.2) to one (1), where point two denotes minimum strength and one the maximum strength. However, n_5 = number of respondent for Extreme Stress; n_4 = number of respondent for A lot of Stress; n_3 = number of respondent for Some Stress; n_2 = number of respondent for A Little Stress and n_1 = number of respondent for No Stress; N = Total Number of Respondents and the highest attainable score being five (5).

Table 1: Ranking of causes or sources of stress among lecturers of EPUC

Factors	N	Mean	RII	Ranking
Delay and irregular payment of salary	32	3.50	0.700	1
Workload	32	3.47	0.694	2
Inadequate monetary rewards	32	3.28	0.656	3
Too much subject matter to teach	32	3.13	0.625	4
Excessive work hours	32	3.00	0.600	5
Students' poor attitudes toward classroom tasks and assignments	32	2.88	0.575	6
Unfavourable student to staff ratios	32	2.66	0.531	7
Role conflicts	32	2.63	0.525	8
Research and publications	32	2.44	0.488	9
Promotion criteria	32	2.41	0.481	10
Inadequate ventilated office	32	2.41	0.481	11
Administrative-related issues	32	2.19	0.438	12
Lack of instructional facilities	32	2.09	0.419	13

Source: Field Survey, 2016

From the summary of results in Table 1, it can be observed that the key factors that contributed most to stress among lecturers of EPUC were: *delay or irregularity in payment of salary* ($RII = 0.700$); *workload* ($RII = 0.694$); *inadequate monetary reward* ($RII = 0.656$); *too much subject matter to teach* ($RII = 0.625$); and *excessive work hours* ($RII = 0.600$). Thus, the *delay or irregularity in payment of salary* factor was ranked the first significant factor; *workload* as the second significant factor; *inadequate monetary reward* as the third significant factor; *too much subject matter to teach* as the fourth significant factor; and *excessive work hours*

as the fifth significantly influential factor that accounts for stress among the respondents. Consequently, the research hitherto established that *students' poor attitudes toward classroom tasks and assignments*, *unfavourable student to staff ratios*, *role conflicts*, *research and publications*, *promotion criteria*, *inadequate ventilated office*, *administrative-related issues*, and *lack of instructional facilities* had less effect on causing stress among lecturers of EPUC. Therefore, in as far as evaluating the cause of stress was concerned in the EPUC context, the factors that registered $RII < 0.599$ were considered insignificant in causing stress among lecturers of EPUC.

This finding partly supports Ofoegbu & Nwadiani (2006); Akinmayowa and Kadiri (2014); Olatunji and Akinlabi (2012); Yusoff (2013); Akbar and Akhter (2011) and Ali, Raheem, Nawaz and Imamuddin (2014).

4.2 How Lecturers Handle Stress and Effectiveness of the Coping Strategies

In order to find out how lecturers at EPUC handle stress and how effective the coping strategies or actions adopted are, the mean score and Relative Importance Index (RII) of fourteen (14) stress coping strategies were determined. The strategies were ranked according to their RII. The Relative Importance Indices (RII) was calculated by using the formula of Aibinu and

Jagboro (2002) and Olawale and Sun (2010) for each variable to determine the ranks of each of the variables as perceived by the respondents in terms of usage and effectiveness. The five-point Likert scale 1-5 was used to calculate the RII for each items as follows: $RII = [(5n_1 + 4n_2 + 3n_3 + 2n_4 + 1n_5) / 5N]$ and it ranges from point two (0.2) to one (1), where point two denotes minimum strength and one the maximum strength. However, n_5 = number of respondent for Extremely Effective; n_4 = number of respondent for Very Effective; n_3 = number of respondent for Moderately Effective; n_2 = number of respondent for A Little Effective and n_1 = number of respondent for Ineffective or Never Used; N = Total Number of Respondents and the highest attainable score being five (5).

Table 2: Results from the respondents showing the stress coping or reducing strategies

Coping Strategy	N	Mean	RII	Ranking
Goal-setting	32	3.91	0.781	1
Relaxing after work (Relaxation)	32	3.88	0.775	2
Positive thinking	32	3.69	0.738	3
Planning ahead and prioritising	32	3.47	0.694	4
Learning how to control emotion	32	3.28	0.656	5
Forgetting things that happened in school after work	32	3.09	0.619	6
Seeing the humour in the situation	32	2.44	0.488	7
Focused attention	32	2.25	0.450	8
Being alone	32	2.25	0.450	9
Practising religion	32	2.09	0.419	10
Reading books about stress	32	1.91	0.381	11
Deep breathing	32	1.84	0.369	12
Situation restructuring	32	1.69	0.338	13
Imagery and mental rehearsal	32	1.44	0.288	14

Source: Field Survey, 2016

From the summary of results in Table 2, it can be observed that the prominent and most effective stress coping strategies used by the respondents were: *goal setting* ($RII = 0.781$); *relaxing after work* ($RII = 0.775$); *positive thinking* ($RII = 0.738$); *planning ahead and prioritizing* ($RII = 0.694$); *learning how to control emotion* ($RII = 0.656$); and *forgetting things that happened in school after work* ($RII = 0.619$). Thus, the *goal setting* strategy was ranked the first effective stress coping strategy; *relaxing after work* as the second effective strategy; *positive thinking* as the third effective strategy; *planning ahead and prioritizing* as the fourth coping strategy; *learning how to control emotion* as the fifth strategy, and *things that happened in school after work* was ranked as the sixth effective stress coping or reducing strategy among the respondents. Consequently, the research hitherto identified the strategy of *seeing humour in the situation*; *focused attention*; *being alone*; *practising religion*; *reading books*

about stress; *deep breathing*; *situation restructuring*; *imagery and mental rehearsal* as the least stress coping strategies among lecturers of EPUC. Therefore, in as far as assessing the effect of the strategies on stress management was concerned in the EPUC context, the strategies that registered $RII < 0.599$ were considered insignificant in effectively mitigating stress among lecturers of EPUC.

This finding is partly consistent with Humara (2002) who indicated goal-setting, positive thinking, situation restructuring, relaxation, focused attention, and imagery and mental rehearsal as most effective strategies for improving performance and reducing anxiety.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This research has clearly shown that stress existed among the lecturers. Delay or irregularity in payment of salary, workload, inadequate monetary reward, too much subject matter to teach and excessive work hours were the major causes or sources of stress

among lecturers of EPUC. However, students' poor attitudes toward classroom tasks and assignments, unfavourable student to staff ratios, role conflicts, research and publications, promotion criteria, inadequate ventilated office, administrative-related issues, and lack of instructional facilities were the minor causes of stress among lecturers of EPUC. The lecturers used various stress coping strategies. Goal setting, relaxing after work, positive thinking, planning ahead and prioritizing, learning how to control emotion, and forgetting things that happened in school after work were the prominent and most effective stress coping strategies used by the lecturers. Indeed, stress is a general phenomenon, which occurs in various forms in every work environment.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The management of private universities should pay the lecturers' salaries promptly and regularly in addition to adequately rewarding the staff duly in order to adequately motivate the lecturers to give out their best. More so, if possible adequate lecturers should be employed in order to reduce workload on the existing private university lecturers.

Aside stress coping strategies like goal setting, relaxing after work, positive thinking, planning ahead and prioritizing, learning how to control emotion, and forgetting things that happened in school after work, lecturers can also take in a lot of water whenever stressed up, practice deep breathing and continue thinking positive at all time.

7.0 LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The current study has limitations that should be mentioned. Most importantly, the findings come from a study of cross-sectional design, and limited to only lecturers of EPUC. Further research should be conducted on a larger scale by considering other private universities in Ghana in order to widen the scope for the purpose of generalisation.

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