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Work-related Stress among the Academic Staff of the University of Education, Winneba Campus, Ghana.

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Abstract

This study explored the causes and effects of work-related stress among the academic staff of the University of Education, Winneba (Winneba campus). Using a sequential explanatory mixed-method design, a structured questionnaire was administered to 50 lecturers who were randomly selected, while 15 of them were purposively selected for interviews. The researchers adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods in analysing the data. Means and standard deviations were used to analyse the questionnaire data, while the interview data were used to clarity issues as they emerged. The data highlighted several causes of stress among the lecturers, and these included excessive workload, insufficient preparation for lectures and difficulties in supervising students' research projects. The study also pointed out that the effects of stress experienced by the lecturers included anxiety, inability to meet deadlines and ill-health. It, therefore, recommended that the university should employ additional lecturers so as to reduce the workload of individual lecturers; and that the university should help them manage large class-size by considering technology-based approaches, which would enable them to display teaching and learning materials on its website..

Keywords: Stress, Workload, Lecturers, Ill-health, Research Supervision

Introduction

Stress is a major concern in many, if not all, educational institutions all over the world. Most of the institutions continue to spend large sums of money in an attempt to prevent and, even, help their staff manage the stress they experience in carrying out their roles and responsibilities. Among the major causes of occupational stress has been multiple roles assigned to academic staff within the universities. Lecturers, in Ghana, especially those at UEW, Winneba campus are no exception. At the university, the administrative duties have increased alongside the escalating demands associated with teaching and research responsibilities.

Administratively, the lecturers work as counsellors, examination officers, postgraduate coordinators, departmental heads, directors, deans and many other positions of responsibilities. With regard to their teaching loads/responsibilities, some teach extremely large classes (up to 400 students per semester), supervise theses, dissertations and project work. Indeed, in some extreme cases, some lecturers supervise up to 30 students per semester, owing to the running of both regular and sandwich programmes. Nonetheless, lecturers are expected to publish high-quality research in reputable journals to be promoted within the institution. Thus, the lecturers work under increasing pressure to meet targets set by the university. However, attempts made by the university to support the academic staff to cope with these increasing pressure appears to prove futile, as a research conducted by Gyaki (2013) suggests that the lecturers do not patronise the counselling services provided by the university

to enable them to overcome such pressures. This paper, therefore, attempts to explore the causes and effects of occupational stress experienced by the academic staff at the University of Education, Winneba campus.

The study is significant in four main ways. Firstly, it helps the lecturers to know the causes of the stress they experience in carrying out their roles and responsibilities. Secondly, the study draws the lecturers and the university authorities' attention to the factors responsible for the stress experienced in their work setting. Thirdly, the management of the university would also be informed about the policies that could be put in place to support the lecturers in their effort to manage the stress they experience. Finally, the study contributes to literature on work-related stress in the Ghanaian context.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on person-environment (PE) fit theory and the transactional model of stress and burnout. These are most widely accepted frameworks for conducting research on job-stress and burnout (Brewer & McMahan, 2004; Kokkinos, 2007). Person-environment fit is the degree to which individual characteristics harmonise with those of his or her environment (Meyer & Dale, 2010). Person-environment fit theory and transactional model of burnout assert that the interaction between an individual and his or her environment determines whether or not the situation is stressful for that person. It assumes that human behaviour is a function of the person and the environment, and that a person's vocational satisfaction, stability and achievement depend on the congruence or fit between the person's personality and the environment in which the person works (Herr, Cramer & Niles, 2004; Kokkinos, 2007; Salami, 2006). In the work situations, higher degrees of fit predict positive work outcomes (Vogel & Feldman, 2009). According to Clark-Murphy (2010), the person environment approach suggest that for optimal productivity, individuals should be compatible with their environments. Researchers, Streufert and Swezey (1986), concluded that decision-making performance reaches an optimal level when an individual's cognitive capability matches the complexity of their environment. Jacques (1989) also argued that for optimal productivity, organisations should be designed on the person-environment fit based on individual's cognitive capacity at every level of the organisation.

In the context of the workplace, the individual's attributes are interests, transferable skills, career motives and values, personality preferences, career orientations, self concepts and sense of self-efficacy. The work environment include individual's expectations and perceptions regarding workload, control over one's work, tangible and intrinsic rewards of work, the relationship and sense of community among co-workers, perceptions of fairness in the workplace and the role of personal and organizational values (Herr et al, 2004). If the fit between an individual and his environment is incompatible, stress results. Similarly, lack of fit between the demands placed on individuals and their abilities to meet those demands can result in stress.

Conceptual Framework

Lecturers at UEW are likely to experience stress because they operate in very challenging professional contexts. For example, some of them could teach large class-sizes ranging from 150 – 700 per semester, in some cases; supervise over 30 undergraduate and postgraduate research projects; lack of adequate office spaces and lectures rooms which are often overcrowded. Therefore, lecturers who work under such conditions are likely to face stressful situations that could lead to burnout.

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the causes of stress and burnout among lecturers at UEW, Winneba campus, and to identify strategies that they can employ to cope with the stress and burnout they experience. A triangulatory mixed method design was employed for this study. This design requires the researcher to collect both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, and analyse them at the same time. Thus, in this design, one set of data compliments the other, helping to overcome any weakness associated with each other (Wilmot, Mensah, Antwi-Danso, Kumfo, Kusi, Saba, Yarkwah & Wilmot, 2013; Creswell, 2009).

Population and Sampling Procedures

The study population consisted of all the lecturers at the UEW, Winneba Campus of Ghana. The total population for lecturers at the Winneba Campus during 2011/2012 academic year was 259; 197 males and 62 females

(UEW Annual Statistical Report, 2011). From this lecturer population, we selected sixty-five (65) for the study. For the quantitative phase, fifty (50) lecturers were randomly selected, while fifteen lecturers were involved in the qualitative aspect. That is, 15 lecturer interviewees were purposively selected to probe on issues as they emerged. The 50 (19.3%) lecturers were selected because that number was quite representative of the population studied. Also, we selected 15 lecturers for the qualitative phase of the study because that gave the opportunity to explore the issues that emerged from the quantitative data. This sampling size was selected for the qualitative because it was manageable. Also, it was necessary to select a sample that would enable the phenomenon under study to be explored for a better understanding. Creswell (2005) argues that selecting a large number of interviewees will 'result in superficial perspectives ... the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual or site' (p.207).

Data Collection Methods

A structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were the instruments used for data collection in this study. The questionnaire was used to gather data for the quantitative phase, while the interview schedule was employed to gather data in the qualitative phase. The design of the questionnaire schedule was based on the issues that were discussed in the literature review and were related sources of lecturer stress and burnout, effects of lecturer stress and burnout, and how lectures cope with the stress they experience. The key issues that came out the questionnaire data formed the basis of the interview schedule.

Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

In order to establish the validity of the instruments, colleague lecturers with knowledge in administration and management were given the instrument for a thorough review. Indeed their comments were favourable and did not require any major changes in the instruments. Furthermore, to grant the content validity of the instruments, they were given to retired professors in the area of school administration and management to scrutinise them.

To establish the internal consistency of the questionnaire instrument, ten questionnaires were pre-tested among lecturers at the UEW, Kumasi Campus. Indeed through the use of Cronbarch Alpha, the instrument yielded an alpha level of 0.78 which was considered reliable.

Data Analysis

The results from the quantitative survey were analysed with the aid of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 19 developed by Hull and Nie (1986) cited in Dampson and Mensah (2012). The mean and standard deviation scores, and frequency were generated through the use of the software. These variables were helpful in showing which stressors have the biggest impact of stress on lecturers. According to Burns and Grove (2001:30,52), descriptive research provides an accurate portrayal or account of characteristics of a particular individual, situation or group for the purpose of discovering new meaning, describing what exists, determining the frequency with which something occurs and categorizing information. These authors state that the purpose of descriptive research is the exploration and description of the phenomenon in real-life situation.

The qualitative data was analysed thematically. Thematic analysis is an analytical strategy which requires the researcher to organise or prepare the data, immerse himself or herself in and transcribe the data, generate themes and code the data, and describe them (Kusi,2012). For example, a comment like "I have a lot of administrative, teaching and research work to do and this makes me stress all the time" was coded "lecturers' workload." Moreover, to attribute comments to the individual lecturers, the interview transcripts were assigned some serial numbers. For example, Interviewee Professors were assigned IP -1 to 2; Interviewee Senior Lecturers (ISL 1-5), and the Interviewee Lecturers (IL 1-8).

Sources of Stress among Lecturers

This section established the number of potential sources of stress and burnout to lecturers at UEW in the performance of their duties. An examination of the mean scores give an indication as to which potential sources of stress were frequently perceived to be most problematic by the respondents; the higher the mean score, the better the act constituting to lecturer stress and burnout and lower the mean score, and the lesser the lecturers deem the act constituting to their stress.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Sources of Stress among Lecturers

Sources of Stress	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Staff relationship problem	50	1.96	.832
Students being difficult to handle	50	3.56	1.013
Insufficient preparation time for lecturers	50	4.28	.454
Large class size	50	4.14	.857
Poor administrative support	50	2.46	1.343
Poor working condition	50	3.92	1.209
Problem with self-efficacy	50	1.64	.802
Inability to incorporate technology into teaching	50	2.28	1.246
Marking too much scripts/workload	50	4.32	.868
Extra-curricular activities	50	1.52	.505
Too many unproductive meetings	50	1.82	.720
Pace of change of general university atmosphere	50	3.36	1.208
Inadequate resources	50	3.62	1.141
Ill-health	50	3.58	1.386
Failure to share information	50	3.46	1.232
Bureaucracy	50	3.98	.979
Lack of in-service training	50	3.66	1.022
Supervision of students' project work	50	4.00	.808
Intellectually weak students	50	3.60	1.178
Rigid promotion	50	3.10	1.488
Lack of adequate communication	50	3.00	1.578
Post-retirement uncertainties	50	2.38	1.227
Lack of support systems	50	3.78	1.314
Interface between work and home	50	3.08	1.426
Lack of recognition for good efforts	50	2.60	1.143

Table 1 shows the various sources of stress and burnout among lecturers. The results indicated that excessive workload was identified as the most frequent source of stress for the present sample of lecturers (mean=4.32, std. deviation=.868). The interview data also suggested that majority of the participants were of the view that workload or demands made on them were high. They attributed this situation to the large numbers of students handled and too many programmes being introduced both at regular and sandwich sessions without employing an adequate number of lecturers to teach on the programmes. For example IL-2 remarked:

> Recently, in my department, too many programmes have been introduced without a corresponding interment in the lecturer student population. This makes the workload more challenging and difficult leading to lecturer stress and sometimes deaths.

IL-7 shared her view:

> Well, I teach on so many programmes in my department during the sandwich and the regular periods. I hardly get time to rest! Apart from my teaching commitments, I supervise so many undergraduates and postgraduate research projects so I am always stressed up, and feel too tired and sick most of the times.

These comments suggest that stress is a phenomenon experienced by both the male and female lecturers at the university. However, evidence from the qualitative data reveals that the female lecturers were much

more concerned about their workload than their male counterparts, owing to their multiple marital roles at home as the following contrasting comments suggest:

> I wake up as early as 4:00AM, prepare my kids for school and prepare their pack-lunch as well as breakfast for my husband before sending the kids to school. Afterwards, I have to rush to work and carry out my normal duties as a lecturer. In fact, my work demands are extremely more than my home responsibilities, so I am always stress up (ISL-5)

> I am not so much concerned about my workload. After all, I have the passion for this job and my wife is supportive by caring for me at home (IL-4)

These comments seem to be a true reflection to a Ghanaian marital culture which requires a female spouse to undertake almost all the household duties. As a result of this a career female worker is more like to experience stress from multiple roles and responsibilities. Role overload and responsibility is a source stress among lecturers. It can lead to excessive demands on the individual's time and may create uncertainty about the ability to perform these roles adequately (Driscoll & Cooper, 2002). Sutherland and Cooper (2000) argue that being responsible for the work and performance of others requires regular and extensive interaction with others, and this is considered more stressful than being responsible for equipment, budgets and other issues. Studies elsewhere have also found workload as potential stressor in organizations (Bennet, 1994; Rollinson, 2005; Erasmus, 2006 & Cole, 2004).

 Another interesting issue that came out of the qualitative data was that age appeared to have influence the individual lecturer's stress level. For example, a Senior Lecturer, commenting on this issue said:

> At my age, how much workload can I contain? I easily get tired and stressed when I work for few hours. Maybe, I am growing too old! (ISL-3).

However, some lecturers believed that they were ready for 'any work', because 'that is what brings money into their pocket.' For example, one of the commented that 'even though, my workload is quite huge, I don't have any option – I need money to feed my wife and three kids! (IP-1). The idea that age influenced stress levels of the lecturers is a contentious in that a study conducted by Aftab and Khatoon (2012), Chaudhry (2012, and Raveeswaran, Raveendran and Ananthasayanan (2012) established significant age differences in occupational stress. However, a study by Qadimi and Praveena (2013) revealed no significant difference in occupational stress between the age group.

The second most reported stressor was 'insufficient preparation time for lectures' (mean=4.28, std. Deviation=.454). This was consistent with the interview data collected. The data suggested that lecturers did not have enough time to revise and prepare adequately for lecturers, affecting the quality of their delivery. The question is 'how would this impact on the quality of the graduates produced by the university? A lecturer can only be confident and deliver his lesson to his/her satisfaction when he gets sufficient time to prepare towards it.

The quantitative data in the above table suggested that 'large class size' with a mean of 4.14, and std. Deviation=.857 was another major contributing factor of the stress experienced by the lecturers. Similarly, the interview data revealed that lecturers were struggling to cope with large class-sizes they handled, as the following comments suggest:

> With my class size of about 700 students, you don't need to ask me whether I'm stressed by such workload. This is the situation we are facing in this university during and regular and sandwich sessions (IP-2).

> At the moment, I perform some administrative duties, as a Head of Department, but I still have to contend with my undergraduate and postgraduate courses, not to mention the supervision of dissertations and thesis that I supervise. The work is too stressful! (ISL-3)

Large class-size could impact negatively on the quality of teaching and learning. It has the propensity to impede the quality interact between teachers and students. In such situations, as those experienced at UEW, it might be difficult the lecturers to formatively assess the effectiveness of their mode of delivery and for the students to interact among themselves.

Another major source of stress among the lecturers relates to supervision of students research work (mean=4.0, st^{dev} =.808). This high mean might be attributed to the multiple programmes offered by the university without a corresponding increase in the number of lecturers to teach on the programmes. It is interesting to note that lecturers at some departments within the university supervise about thirty (30) students in a year. Supervising students' research projects is a tedious and time-consuming task, requiring constructive critical comments from the supervisor. Considering the number of research projects heaped on the lecturers at the university, such comments could be elusive to the supervisors: these could lead to the feeling of 'academic inadequacy and ineffectiveness'.

Additional sources of stress among the lecturers which emerged from the interview data was related to bureaucracy and favouritism in terms of appointments of lecturers to lead various departments or units and promotion of staff on time.

> Sometimes there is some kind of favouritism when it comes to who should be at a particular place or who should head a particular faculty/department/unit, when I feel that it should be my turn. The university has flexible promotion policies but the authorities do not go by it; they are biased, not fair and consistent (IL-1).

ISL-5 complained particularly about bureaucracy in dealing with problems, processing of documents and promoting staff members. IL-6 also affirmed that:

> It is very stressful when the authorities tend to favour some colleagues. At times processing of our documents and promotions are not attended to as expected whiles others get it easily. Meanwhile, they cannot give you the criteria they use to measure and even sometimes not ready to explain to you why the delay.

On the contrary, some of the interviewees saw the university system to be flexible, and the authorities were fair in the appointment and promotion of academic staff. IP-1, for example, said that "in this university, there are some level of fairness, collaboration and cooperation and the authorities create an enabling environment that offers everyone equal opportunity to develop and be promoted." Probably, this comment was made by a professor because he is a member of the university's management team and, therefore, saw nothing wrong with the system.

Effects of Stress on Lecturers

This section sought to find out how the stress and burnout experienced by lecturers at UEW affected them. The mean score gives an indication as to which effects lecturers reported have manifested itself the greatest.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for Effects of Stress on Lecturers

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Absenteeism	50	2.92	1.338
Aggression	50	3.60	1.069
Poor quality of work	50	3.82	1.207
Anxiety/frustration	50	4.24	.771
Depression	50	3.98	1.078
Unfriendly attitude towards students	50	3.14	1.309
Forgetfulness	50	1.78	.616
Poor time management	50	3.74	.944
Procrastination	50	3.96	.989
Inability to meet deadline	50	4.10	1.035
Higher rates of accidents	50	1.78	.790
Resignation/pre-mature retirement	50	1.52	.544
Staff conflict	50	1.54	.613
Ill-health	50	4.28	.573

Table 2 presents the effects that stress and burnout have on lecturers. The data pointed out that ill-health was the most reported effect of stress and burnout with (mean=4.28, std. Deviation=.573). Ill-health was also one of the effects of stress on the academic staff of the university mentioned in the qualitative data. It emerged that sometimes some of the lecturers had to take a sick leave as a result of the stress they experienced, as the following depicts:

> Recently I had to stay off work for about a week because of serious stress I experienced. Indeed, I could not even read and supervise any thesis because of the burning sensation I was feeling in my whole body. I was strongly advised by a physician to stay out of work in order to recuperate and that helped me! (ISL-1)

> Sometimes I feel like leaving this job because of the stress and its associated diseases. As I speak to you now, my blood pressure is very high and I feel sick and tired. I have just returned from sick leave, but I am still not well at all! (IL-5)

Ill-health experienced by the academic staff could be attributed to the fact that the majority of them are likely to work throughout their entire lives without a leave. This is so because the institution runs both regular and sandwich-based programmes, requiring the few lecturers available to work all year round. Ill-health could affect an employee commitment, lead to absenteeism and career progression (Spiers, 2003).

Anxiety/frustration was identified as the second effect of stress on lecturers (mean=4.24, std. deviation=.771). This is consistent with the interview data collected from the participants. The data suggested that some of the academic staff were anxious and frustrated most of the time as a result of the stress imposed on them by their numerous tasks. For example, a lecturer commenting on this issue said:

> I do a lot for this university. I am an administrator, a lecturer, an academic counsellor and a member of so many committees and associations. This puts me in an awkward position of not meeting my targets, making me frustrated and confused at times. In fact, when I think about the fact that I had to write and get promoted it makes me more anxious and worried (IP-2).

Other factors that recorded high mean included inability to meet deadline (mean=4.10, std. Deviation=1.035), and depression (mean=3.98, std. Deviation=1.078).

The qualitative data also highlighted other effects of stress experienced by the lecturers. The data suggested that what the participants go through affected their teaching responsibilities. This problem had three main dimensions: lesson preparation, delivery and marking of assignments. The interview data pointed out that when lecturers were stressed they were unable to read and research and as a result went to the lecture theatre with little information which affected the quality and quantity of their delivery. They could not also do effective marking because they lacked concentration and focus.

> When I am stressed and burnout I cannot do proper reading and research and as such go to lecture theatre unprepared, so I don't deliver to my satisfaction. I sometimes portray some unfriendly attitude towards my students, my time is not always managed well and even how to mark assignments and quizzes of about 400 scripts is a problem (IL -5)

ISL-4 also confirmed this view:

> I am always dull when stressed, which affects my teaching. Sometimes I cannot carry out effective research on the topic to be taught. In an attempt to use previous knowledge, I get to know that I am not fully prepared. Sometimes, the lesson is postponed which affects the next lesson. Assignments and quizzes are also marked irregularly which puts some students at advantage and others at disadvantage irrespective of their performance.

When a further probing question was asked on how stress and burnout experienced affected their administrative work, majority of the interviewees said they were not involved in an administrative work. The few involved in administrative work said combining teaching and that administrative responsibility made their case worse, more especially when colleagues were not cooperative.

> I was a head of department for two years. Though, my credit hours were not too much, the little teaching coupled with the administrative work was a very stressful task for me. Seeing to the smooth running of the department, attending meetings, attending to lecturers and students, and the worse thing is when your colleagues doubt your efficiency (ISL-2)

The interviewees were asked whether their job as lecturers affected their home life or not. Majority of them claimed their job as lecturers affected their home life. Their views pointed that it was so because bad mood at school translates itself to the home. They also commented that, they spent all their time on schoolwork which they missed out on personal responsibilities/ activities in the home; their family concerns were not well attended to. Most of the interviewees felt their work as lecturers affected their home life. IL-5, shared his experience:

> My work as a lecturer affects my home life because when I am stressed and in a bad mood at school, I go home with it. I spend one day in a weekend working on schoolwork which I miss out personal activity; I don't get enough time to attend to my wife and children and extended family issues are not also properly attended to.

However, some of the interviewees believed that the stress they experienced at work did not affect their family lives negatively. For example, IL-I made the following comment to support this view:

> The sort of work I do influence the way I live my life. I teach English methodology where I teach students how to teach children to read and involuntarily, the whole family has become a family that undertakes literacy evangelism; they teach communities around us how to read and so my work as lecturer has made positive impact in spite of the high level of stress I experience.

The responses of the interviewees revealed that stress and burnout they experienced as lecturers affected their general health, teaching responsibilities, their administrative work and their home lives. However, the data suggested that they were prepared to remain in the profession.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study found that excessive workload was one of the major stressors among academic staff of the university. Therefore, if possible, the university should employ additional lecturers so as to reduce the workload of individual lecturers. However, this option has high financial ramifications for the institution as most universities in Ghana operate within tight budgetary conditions. A practical option could be employing graduate assistants to support individual lecturers with less sensitive tasks. Employ graduate assistant would also go a long way to enable the lecturers have adequate time to prepare for lectures and be assisted in the marking of scripts, especially the multiple-choice based questions and support to them with minor administrative work.

The study also highlighted that the lecturers experienced excessive stress owing to the large classes they taught. It appears teaching large classes in the Ghanaian educational context has come to stay and the lecturers have to be more innovative in their teaching. We therefore, recommend that they considered technology based approaches, which would enable them to display the lecture notes on the university's website for access and to assess students online.

Furthermore, research project supervision was another stressor among the academic staff. We therefore, recommend that the number of research projects supervised each lecturer should be reduced as the case of most the internationally recognised tertiary institutions. Additionally, the academic staff should sharpen their time management skills to enable them to combine their multiple responsibilities assigned to them by the university.

A growing concern of the academic staff relating to stress was ill-health. We further recommend that the academic staff should be made to undertake mandatory annual leaves or holidays as pertains in other international institutions. This would enable them return to post much more refreshed and poised work. This, we believe, could impact the quality of teaching and the level of motivation and efficiency at their respective work places.

Administratively, the lecturers work as counsellors, examination officers, postgraduate coordinators, heads of departments and deans. With regard to their teaching load/responsibilities, some teaching extremely large classes (up to 500) per semester, supervise theses, dissertations, project work. In fact, in some extreme cases some lecturers supervise up to 30 research projects per semester, owing to the running of both regular and sandwich programmes. Nonetheless, lecturers are expected to publish high quality research in first class journals in order to be promoted within the institution. Indeed, lecturers are dying as lecturers continuously work under increasing pressure to meet targets set by the university.

However, attempts made by the university to support the academic staff to cope with these pressure appear to be futile. It appears that lecturers do not patronise the counselling services provided by the university to enable them to manage such pressures which are killing some of the lecturers no wonder three lecturers just passed on to eternity recently.

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