



East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences

eajass.eanso.org

Volume 8, Issue 3, 2025

Print ISSN: 2707-4277 | Online ISSN: 2707-4285

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-4285>



EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

An Empirical Study on the Perceptions of Academic Stress among Selected Second-Year Undergraduate Students at Bugema University: A Qualitative Study

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.3.3392>

Date Published: ABSTRACT

28 July 2025

Keywords:

Academic Stress,
Copying
Mechanisms,
Academic
Demands,
Financial
Challenges,
Higher
Education.

This study explored the perceptions of academic stress among selected second-year undergraduate students at Bugema University, focusing on the sources of stress, its manifestation in academic lives, and the coping mechanisms employed by students. A phenomenological approach was used, with 15 students purposively selected from the School of Business and Economics, the School of Education and Humanities, and the School of Health Sciences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that academic stress at Bugema University was influenced by factors such as academic demands, financial challenges, interpersonal issues, and program-specific stressors. The impact of stress manifests in mental health challenges, decreased academic performance, and social withdrawal. Students adopted a range of coping mechanisms, including problem-focused strategies, emotional support, and avoidance behaviours. However, maladaptive coping strategies were found to exacerbate stress. The study recommended that universities, particularly Bugema University, implement more comprehensive support systems, including time management workshops, mental health services, and mentorship programs to address students' academic and emotional needs. The study also suggested providing financial aid and promoting positive faculty-student relationships to reduce academic stress. Future research could expand to a larger sample and explore different academic years or universities to better understand the broader implications of academic stress in higher education.

APA CITATION

Rosette, K., Kafeero, I. & Muwanguzi, E. (2025). An Empirical Study on the Perceptions of Academic Stress among Selected Second-Year Undergraduate Students at Bugema University: A Qualitative Study. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 8(3), 34-45. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.3.3392>

CHICAGO CITATION

Rosette, Kabuye, Israel Kafeero and Eria Muwanguzi. 2025. "An Empirical Study on the Perceptions of Academic Stress among Selected Second-Year Undergraduate Students at Bugema University: A Qualitative Study." *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 8 (3), 34-45. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.3.3392>.

HARVARD CITATION

Rosette, K., Kafeero, I. & Muwanguzi, E. (2025), "An Empirical Study on the Perceptions of Academic Stress among Selected Second-Year Undergraduate Students at Bugema University: A Qualitative Study", *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 8(3), pp. 34-45. doi: 10.37284/eajass.8.3.3392.

IEEE CITATION

K., Rosette, I., Kafeero & E., Muwanguzi "An Empirical Study on the Perceptions of Academic Stress among Selected Second-Year Undergraduate Students at Bugema University: A Qualitative Study", *EAJASS*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 34-45, Jul. 2025.

MLA CITATION

Rosette, Kabuye, Israel Kafeero & Eria Muwanguzi. "An Empirical Study on the Perceptions of Academic Stress among Selected Second-Year Undergraduate Students at Bugema University: A Qualitative Study". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol. 8, no. 3, Jul. 2025, pp. 34-45, doi:10.37284/eajass.8.3.3392

INTRODUCTION

It should be understood that academic stress has actually emerged as a pervasive and complex concern in higher education, profoundly affecting students' academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being. The concept of stress in academic settings has been extensively explored by theorists and researchers, providing valuable insights into its causes, consequences, and potential solutions. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress serves as a foundational framework, defining stress as a result of an individual's appraisal of the demands placed on them and their perceived ability to cope. Building on this model, contemporary scholars have investigated the interplay between academic and environmental factors contributing to students' stress levels.

Researchers such as Misra and McKean (2000), Sharma (2020), and Pariat et al. (2014), among others, have identified key determinants of academic stress. These include time management and academic workload (Kausar, 2022; Lee et al., 2021); social support and peer relationships (Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997); academic pressure and performance expectations (Cohen et al., 2019; Hancock et al., 2015); and financial concerns and socioeconomic status (Lee & Graham, 2021; Saunders et al., 2018). While these factors are often interconnected, they collectively highlight the multifaceted nature of academic stress and underscore the need for holistic approaches to address its impact.

Besides, systematic reviews and meta-analyses have consistently highlighted the detrimental impact of academic stress on students' mental health, academic outcomes, and long-term well-being (Pariat et al., 2014; Cohen et al., 2019). For instance, students experiencing high levels of stress are more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, and burnout, ultimately undermining academic success (Kulik et al., 2018; Ross et al., 2017). In response to these concerns, institutions of higher education, including Bugema University, have acknowledged the need for comprehensive stress management programs and supportive services. Bugema University's Strategic Plan 2021-2025 and Academic Policy Manual 2020 emphasise promoting student well-being and academic success through innovative support services and mental health initiatives. Therefore, this study explored the perceptions of academic stress among second-year undergraduate students at Bugema University, focusing on their experiences, contributing factors, and coping mechanisms. To achieve the aim of this study, we focused on three research questions:

Research Questions

- What are the key sources of academic stress experienced by selected second-year undergraduate students at Bugema University?
- How does academic stress manifest in the academic lives of selected second-year undergraduate students?

- What coping mechanisms were employed by selected second-year undergraduate students to manage academic stress?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper reviewed literature aligned with the study's research questions, which include identifying the nature of academic stress among undergraduate students at Bugema University, determining the primary factors contributing to academic stress, and exploring strategies that can be implemented to reduce academic stress among these students.

Sources of Academic Stress among University Students

Researchers have extensively studied academic stress among university students, particularly focusing on identifying key stressors. For instance, Macaskill (2018) highlighted that second-year students face significant academic stress due to increased academic workload and higher expectations compared to their first year. The study noted that the transition from a supportive first-year environment to the more demanding second year contributed to elevated stress levels. Financial pressures were also identified as a major source of stress for students at this stage. Similarly, a qualitative study by Islam and Rabbi (2024) found that second-year students often struggle with time management and balancing academic responsibilities with personal obligations. They identified academic workload, frequent assessments, and the lack of structured support systems as primary stressors. Similarly, the study highlighted interpersonal conflicts with peers and faculty as additional sources of stress.

Rweyemamu et al. (2024) investigated the prevalence of mental distress among students at a Tanzanian university, revealing that stress among second-year students was significantly influenced by financial constraints and the pressure to perform well academically. Their findings align with earlier studies that stress the financial vulnerability of

students in transitional academic stages. Furthermore, Aloka (2023) emphasised the role of poor peer relationships and limited access to counselling services as critical sources of academic stress. Using Lazarus's cognitive-relational theory, the study revealed that second-year students experience heightened stress due to the absence of effective stress management support systems.

These studies suggest that academic workload, financial constraints, interpersonal conflicts, and lack of support systems are common sources of academic stress for second-year undergraduate students. While previous research offers valuable insights, there remains a contextual gap concerning the unique stressors faced by students at Bugema University. Exploring these specific challenges can help in developing tailored interventions to address the academic stress experienced by this group.

How Academic Stress Manifests in the Academic Lives

Several studies have explored how academic stress manifests among university students, particularly in their second year of study. For instance, Macaskill (2018) highlighted that second-year students experience heightened academic stress due to an increased workload, higher expectations, and the transition from a supportive first-year environment to a more demanding academic landscape. Financial pressures were also identified as a significant contributor to stress at this stage. Similarly, Feldhammer-Kahr et al. (2022) examined the psychological effects of academic stress during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that a diminished sense of belonging and adaptability exacerbated stress levels among students, with depressive symptoms emerging as a common manifestation of academic stress. These findings emphasise the role of psychological and social factors in shaping students' academic experiences. Islam and Rabbi (2024) investigated how academic stress manifests through behavioural and emotional responses among university students. They noted that common manifestations include

anxiety, procrastination, and feelings of being overwhelmed, often stemming from deadlines, academic competition, and workload. Their qualitative study further revealed that students frequently report difficulty in balancing academic demands with personal responsibilities, leading to burnout and decreased motivation.

Restrepo et al. (2020) identified homework and schoolwork overload as the most stressful academic situations for university students. The study found that stress often manifested as physical symptoms such as fatigue and headaches, as well as psychological effects like irritability and difficulty concentrating. This underscores the multifaceted impact of academic stress on students' well-being. Aloka (2023) explored the academic and financial pressures contributing to stress among university students, finding that stress often manifests as decreased academic performance and increased absenteeism. The study recommended institutional interventions, such as counselling and stress management training, to mitigate these effects and support students in managing their stress. In summary, these studies highlighted the diverse ways in which academic stress manifests in the lives of second-year students, ranging from psychological distress and physical symptoms to behavioural changes and academic challenges. The findings underscore the need for targeted support mechanisms to address the unique pressures faced by students during this critical stage of their academic journey.

Coping Mechanisms Employed by University Students to Manage Academic Stress

The coping mechanisms employed by second-year undergraduate students to manage academic stress have been extensively explored in the literature. Dada, Babatunde, and Adeleye (2019) found that Nigerian built environment students commonly adopted problem-focused coping strategies, such as time management and prioritisation, to address academic workload and stress. These strategies were essential in helping students navigate the

increased demands of their second year. Maharani (2024) identified that second-year English education students employed self-regulation and peer collaboration as effective coping mechanisms. Maharani emphasised that students who actively sought support from peers and mentors demonstrated better stress management compared to those who relied on avoidance strategies. Govender et al. (2015) explored the experiences of occupational therapy students and found that second-year students frequently relied on social support and relaxation techniques to cope with academic stress. The study highlighted that these methods were effective in reducing anxiety and promoting emotional well-being, despite the heightened academic pressures.

Islam and Rabbi (2024) discovered that second-year university students employed a variety of coping strategies, including active problem-solving and stress reduction techniques like exercise and mindfulness. However, they noted that students who lacked adaptive coping mechanisms were more prone to burnout and decreased academic performance. Lo (2002) conducted a longitudinal study with nursing students in Australia, revealing that second-year students often turned to structured planning and social interactions as primary methods for coping with academic stress. These approaches were linked to improved self-esteem and reduced stress levels over time.

Gomathi, Ahmed, and Sreedharan (2013) examined stress and coping strategies among health profession students in the United Arab Emirates. They reported that while some second-year students utilised effective coping methods, such as time management and goal setting, others resorted to maladaptive mechanisms, including procrastination and avoidance, which exacerbated their stress levels. Tom (2015) highlighted that positive coping strategies, such as persistence and collaborative learning, were beneficial for students across all academic levels, including second-year students. These strategies not only mitigated stress but also

fostered resilience and adaptability, critical for navigating the challenges of university life. In summary, these studies emphasise the importance of adaptive coping mechanisms for managing academic stress among second-year undergraduate students. They suggest that fostering skills like time management, peer collaboration, and emotional regulation can significantly enhance students' ability to cope with academic pressures. Institutions should prioritise the development of support systems and stress management programs to equip students with these essential skills.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

This study employed a qualitative approach, specifically a phenomenological research design, to explore the perceptions of academic stress among second-year undergraduate students at Bugema University, focusing on their experiences, contributing factors, and coping mechanisms. The phenomenological design was adopted to capture the essence of participants' experiences, understand how academic stress manifests in their daily academic lives, and explore the meaning and significance of these experiences. According to Moustakas (1994), a phenomenological research design facilitated an in-depth examination of participants' subjective experiences, perceptions, and feelings related to academic stress.

Sampling

The study employed snow-ball sampling to select 15 undergraduate students from Bugema University, ensuring diverse representation across academic disciplines, levels of study, and stress experiences (Patton, 2002). Participants were drawn from three key academic divisions: The School of Business and Economics, the School of Education and Humanities, and the School of Health Sciences. Selection criteria required participants to be enrolled undergraduate students, have experienced academic stress, and be willing to participate in semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using standardised interview guides tailored for semi-structured interviews. These instruments facilitated the exploration of students' experiences with academic stress, its key sources, how it manifests, and potential solutions. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, and all sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Transcriptions were produced verbatim to ensure accuracy and preserve the participants' voices and perspectives.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework to systematically identify and interpret patterns within the qualitative data. This process began with familiarisation, where transcripts were read and re-read to gain a deep understanding of the content. Initial coding was then conducted to identify key ideas, followed by organising codes into sub-themes and overarching themes such as "Sources of Academic Stress", "How it Manifests" and "Coping Mechanisms." Themes were refined, reviewed for coherence, and validated to ensure they accurately captured participants' experiences. Finally, the themes were clearly defined and named, with detailed descriptions and examples provided, offering a comprehensive and insightful understanding of the phenomenon of academic stress.

FINDINGS

The aim of this paper was to explore and understand the perceptions of academic stress among selected second-year undergraduate students at Bugema University, focusing on their experiences, contributing factors, and coping mechanisms through a qualitative approach. Therefore, we based our findings on these dimensions.

Sources of Academic Stress

The first dimension of the study was the sources of academic stress operationalised using three sub-

themes were namely; academic demands, financial struggles and interpersonal challenges.

Academic Demands

The heavy academic workload emerged as a recurring source of stress for students, encompassing assignments, exams, and projects. This pressure is magnified by the extensive syllabi and frequent assessments students must navigate. Participant 3 expressed their challenges with academic demands:

"In my view, the workload is relentless. Each course feels like a race against time with tests, assignments, and presentations all seeming to overlap. By the end of the week, I am exhausted and barely able to catch my breath before the next round of deadlines comes up."

This statement illustrates the emotional toll of managing multiple academic tasks, with the relentless cycle of deadlines contributing to feelings of exhaustion and mental fatigue. Similarly, Participant 8 noted:

"Sometimes, I feel like I am not just learning but surviving the academic system. The stress builds up, especially during exam season, when everything feels ten times more intense."

The combination of high expectations, limited time, and intense academic schedules creates a stressful environment for students, significantly affecting their mental and emotional well-being.

Financial Struggles

Financial constraints represent another major source of stress, particularly for students juggling tuition fees, living expenses, and academic-related costs. Participant 10 shared their experience:

"Paying for school is a constant struggle. I worry about how to cover fees and still have money for basic needs like food and books. It's hard to focus on studying when you're worried

about whether you'll even be able to stay in school."

This financial burden exacerbates the stress of academic life, leaving students vulnerable to feelings of insecurity and anxiety. Participant 14 also highlighted the impact of financial struggles:

"There are times when I have to choose between buying a textbook and paying for transport to school. It's a tough decision, and it adds to the stress of just trying to keep up with my studies."

Financial pressures not only hinder academic performance but also increase the likelihood of mental health challenges, as students grapple with balancing their financial and academic responsibilities.

Interpersonal Challenges

Interpersonal difficulties, including poor peer relationships, ineffective teacher-student dynamics, and experiences of discrimination, significantly contribute to students' stress levels. Participant 5 reflected on these challenges:

"Sometimes, it feels like I'm competing with my classmates instead of collaborating. The environment can be so tense, especially during group projects where everyone has different ideas and expectations."

Additionally, Participant 11 highlighted the strain caused by teacher-student dynamics:

"I find it hard to approach some lecturers for help. It feels like they're unapproachable or dismissive, and that makes the academic journey even tougher."

These interpersonal challenges not only affect students' emotional well-being but also hinder their ability to seek support and perform well academically.

Specific Academic Requirements

Certain academic programs pose unique stressors. For example, nursing students cited specific challenges such as completing logbooks, handling theory-intensive workloads, and managing conflicts with staff. Participant 7 from a nursing program explained:

"The logbooks are a huge source of stress. You have to document everything perfectly, and if you miss anything, it can set you back. On top of that, the theoretical workload is overwhelming."

Similarly, Participant 13 added:

"There's so much pressure to meet clinical requirements and balance that with coursework. Sometimes it feels like there's no room for error, and that's incredibly stressful."

These program-specific demands create additional layers of stress that require tailored coping strategies for students in specialised fields.

Manifestations of Academic Stress

The second dimension of the study was the manifestations of academic stress operationalized using three sub dimensions namely; students' mental health, academic performance, and social well-being. Insights from participants highlight the pervasive impact of this stress, providing a deeper understanding of its multidimensional effects.

Mental Health Challenges

The mental health toll of academic stress is profound, with many students reporting increased anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion, particularly during peak academic periods. Participant 6 explained:

"The constant pressure to perform well leaves me feeling drained. Some days, I wake up already anxious about what needs to be done, and it feels like I'm carrying a heavy weight everywhere I go."

This sentiment underscores how persistent academic demands can lead to chronic stress, affecting students' ability to maintain a positive mental state. The emotional strain not only hampers their daily functioning but also exacerbates feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy.

Impact on Academic Performance

Academic stress often diminishes students' capacity to perform at their best. Participant 10 expressed frustration with the impact of stress on their focus and productivity:

"I'll sit down to study, but my mind just wanders to everything I haven't done yet. It's hard to concentrate, and sometimes I end up spending hours on something that should take less time because I can't stay focused."

This statement highlights how stress creates a mental barrier, making it difficult for students to effectively manage their academic responsibilities. The cumulative effect of such stress can lead to missed deadlines, incomplete assignments, and underperformance in exams.

Social and Emotional Effects

The repercussions of academic stress extend beyond academics, affecting students' social interactions and emotional resilience. Participant 8 shared their feelings of isolation:

"I used to hang out with friends more often, but now I feel like I have no time. Even when I do take a break, I'm always thinking about what I should be doing instead of relaxing."

This tendency to withdraw from social activities due to academic demands can lead to feelings of loneliness and strained relationships. Moreover, the emotional burden of stress often manifests in irritability and a sense of detachment, further isolating students from their support systems.

Coping Mechanisms

The third dimension of the study was coping mechanisms operationalised using the following sub-themes namely; problem-focused strategies, emotional and social support, institutional support and avoidance strategies.

Problem-Focused Strategies

Many students adopt problem-focused strategies such as planning and time management to address academic stress effectively. Participant 3 shared their approach to managing deadlines, stating:

"I have a strict schedule where I plan out everything—what assignments I'll work on, when I'll revise for exams, and even time for breaks. It doesn't always go perfectly, but having a plan makes me feel like I'm in control of my workload."

This proactive strategy enables students to break down complex tasks into manageable steps, reducing the feeling of being overwhelmed. Others turn to mindfulness practices as a way to maintain focus and stay calm. Participant 8 noted:

"I started practising mindfulness during stressful periods. Just 10 minutes of deep breathing or meditation helps me clear my mind and refocus on what needs to be done."

These approaches reflect a constructive way of handling stress by focusing on actionable solutions and fostering a sense of control over one's academic responsibilities.

Emotional and Social Support

Emotional and social support is essential for many students in managing academic stress. Sharing experiences with peers fosters a sense of solidarity and provides relief. As Participant 5 noted,

"Talking to my friends really helps. When I hear that others are struggling too, it makes me feel less alone. We sometimes study together or just vent, and that support means a lot."

Engaging in leisure activities such as watching movies, listening to music, or spending time with family also emerged as common methods for unwinding. Participant 10 remarked:

"After a long day of lectures and assignments, I like to watch a comedy show or listen to music. It's my way of escaping the pressure and giving myself a mental break."

These strategies underline the importance of maintaining emotional well-being through supportive networks and recreational outlets.

Institutional Support

Students also emphasised the value of institutional support systems in alleviating academic stress. Counselling services, mentorship programs, and faculty-student interactions were highlighted as beneficial resources. Participant 12 shared their experience with university counselling services:

"Going to the counselling centre was a turning point for me. The counsellor helped me develop better coping skills and reminded me that it's okay to ask for help."

Others expressed a desire for more accessible workshops and training on stress management, highlighting a gap in institutional support. Participant 14 suggested:

"Universities should provide more workshops on time management and mental health. If we had these resources earlier, it could prevent a lot of the stress we go through."

These insights point to the need for universities to actively foster a supportive environment that addresses students' academic and emotional challenges.

Avoidance Strategies

While some students adopt adaptive mechanisms, others resort to avoidance strategies, which, though offering temporary relief, often exacerbate stress in

the long run. Participant 6 reflected on his experience:

"When I'm stressed, I sometimes just avoid everything, skip lectures, ignore assignments, and distract myself with social media. It feels good in the moment, but then I fall even further behind, and the stress gets worse."

This pattern illustrated the appeal of avoidance as a coping mechanism but also its potential to compound academic difficulties. Finally, these findings revealed that while many students employed effective coping strategies, there is still a need for greater support and awareness to ensure all students can navigate the pressures of academic life in a healthy and sustainable way.

DISCUSSION

The study explored the perceptions of academic stress among second-year undergraduate students at Bugema University, focusing on their experiences, contributing factors, and coping mechanisms. The study findings revealed that academic demands, including heavy workloads, frequent assessments, and extensive syllabi, are major stressors, leading to exhaustion and mental fatigue (Islam & Rabbi, 2024; Macaskill, 2020). Financial constraints, such as tuition fees and living expenses, further exacerbate stress, with students often struggling to balance academic and financial responsibilities (Moore et al., 2021; Mulaudzi, 2023). Interpersonal challenges, including strained peer relationships, ineffective teacher-student dynamics, and program-specific stressors like clinical requirements for nursing students, add to the pressures (Jafarian-Amiri et al, 2020; Aryuwat et al., 2024).

Academic stress manifests through mental health challenges like anxiety and depression, diminished academic performance due to reduced focus and productivity, and social withdrawal, affecting students' emotional resilience and relationships (Khan et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2022). Students employed various coping mechanisms, including problem-focused strategies like time management,

emotional and social support from peers, leisure activities, and institutional support through counselling and mentorship programs (Martin & Cruz, 2023; Zhao et al., 2022). However, some resort to maladaptive avoidance strategies that exacerbate stress over time (Nguyen et al., 2020; Patel, 2023). The literature supports these findings, with studies by Macaskill (2020), Islam and Rabbi (2024), Yangdon et al. (2021), and others identifying academic workload, financial constraints, and interpersonal conflicts as key stressors among university students. These studies also highlighted the lack of effective support systems, suggesting the need for tailored interventions to alleviate academic stress and promote holistic well-being, particularly at Bugema University, where contextual factors influence the unique challenges faced by students.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that academic stress among second-year undergraduate students at Bugema University is a multifaceted issue influenced by a variety of factors. These factors include academic demands, financial struggles, interpersonal challenges, and program-specific stressors. The impact of academic stress is profound, with many students experiencing significant mental health challenges, diminished academic performance, and strained social relationships. Coping mechanisms employed by students vary widely, with some adopting effective strategies such as problem-focused approaches and emotional support, while others rely on avoidance behaviours that may ultimately exacerbate their stress.

The study highlights the need for universities to offer more comprehensive support systems that address the diverse stressors faced by students, ensuring that these systems are accessible and effective in alleviating academic stress. It is recommended that Bugema University and other institutions of higher learning implement targeted interventions to support students in managing

academic stress. These interventions should include more robust time management workshops, mental health support services, and mentorship programs that cater to both the academic and emotional needs of students. Additionally, addressing financial pressures through scholarships or financial aid programs could help reduce the burden on students and improve their academic focus. The institution should also promote positive peer relationships and improve faculty-student interactions to foster a more supportive academic environment.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

While this study offers valuable insights into the academic stress experienced by second-year students at Bugema University, it has several limitations that warrant consideration for future research. First, the study was limited to a specific group of students, which may not fully represent the experiences of all students at the university or in other institutions of higher learning. Future research could involve a larger sample size or include students from different academic years to capture a broader range of experiences. Additionally, this study was conducted using a qualitative approach, which provides in-depth insights but may not allow for generalisation to a larger population. Future studies could consider employing quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of academic stress and its effects. Furthermore, this study focused on a single university, and it would be beneficial to extend the research to other universities in Uganda or beyond to explore whether similar stressors and coping mechanisms are prevalent in different educational contexts.

Acknowledgement

This study was conducted with the support of Bugema University, and we would like to extend our gratitude to all the students who participated and shared their experiences. We also acknowledge the invaluable contributions of the faculty and staff at

Bugema University who facilitated the research process. Finally, we would like to express our sincere thanks to the research team for their dedication and commitment throughout the study.

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