



# **Perspectives of Undergraduate Students on the Academic Workload and Suicidal thoughts at Nigerian University**

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## **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

## **Article Information**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajess/2024/v50i81509>

### **Open Peer Review History:**

This journal follows the Advanced Open Peer Review policy. Identity of the Reviewers, Editor(s) and additional Reviewers, peer review comments, different versions of the manuscript, comments of the editors, etc are available here: <https://www.sdiarticle5.com/review-history/120166>

**Original Research Article**

**Received: 15/05/2024**

**Accepted: 17/07/2024**

**Published: 22/07/2024**

## **ABSTRACT**

This study examined the impact of academic activities on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised of 100 students in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The study

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**Cite as:** Onyinyechukwu, Nnaemezie Nkiru, Nwankwo Nonyelum Stella, Ibe Ijeoma Maria Assumpta, and Nwanokwara Happiness. 2024. "Perspectives of Undergraduate Students on the Academic Workload and Suicidal Thoughts at Nigerian University". *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies* 50 (8):91-99. <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajess/2024/v50i81509>.

selected respondents using a simple random sampling technique. Instrument for data collection was a 20 item structured questionnaire titled Perceived Effects of Academic Activities on Suicidal Thoughts Questionnaire (PEAASTQ). The instrument was validated by three experts from the Faculty of Education in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The instrument's reliability was established using the Cronbach Alpha coefficient that yielded coefficient values of 0.86 from section A, 0.96 from section B, 0.80 from section C, and 0.96 from section D, indicating that the instrument was valid. The data collected for the study were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. Findings from the study showed that the students agreed that excess academic workload can lead to depression, limit someone's social life, and contribute to suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students and that unplanned, d changes in academic workload negatively impact on someone's mental well-being. Based on these findings, the study recommends among others that there should be an extension of academic sessions to allow for a more balanced and manageable workload throughout the semester. These can help prevent burnout and reduce the cumulative stress of a continuous academic schedule.

*Keywords: Academic activities; suicidal thoughts; undergraduate students.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Being accepted to further studies at a university level is like a dream came through for most of university students, even though studying in a university means additional responsibilities and pressure to succeed. In order to graduate, university students will have to do or be involved in assignments, projects, small research, continuous assessments, written exams, attending classes, outdoor activities (extra co-curricular), group meetings, etc. Even though they realize that the journey is challenging and sometimes suffering, students have to endure whatever it is, in order to get a better life or position in society” [1,2]. Like it or not, university students may expose themselves to tiring and stressful situations which eventually may affect their emotional or psychological states and may lead them to the idea of taking their own life or committing suicide.

According to Nwafor [3], “suicidal thought among students is defined as the wish, thought or desire to take one's own life violently due to a variety of internal and external causes, such as personality, undesirable emotions and school life. Suicidal thought refers to thinking about ending one's life”. It ranges from infrequent feelings and wishes to be dead or thoughts that life is not worth living [4]. Also, “suicidal thought is the act of killing oneself deliberately initiated and performed by the person concerned in the full knowledge or expectation of its results” [5]. Suicidal behaviour take different forms such as taking a drug overdose, deliberately crashing a car, and dyeing by hanging among others. It exists in the form of a consideration to act it out [6,7].

In this regard, “the thought of engaging in suicide has been classified into active and passive forms. Active suicidal thought involves an existing wish to die along with a plan on how to carry out the death” (Tucker and Wiesen-Martin, 2015); “Passive suicidal ideation involves feelings and thoughts about wanting to die, though without actual planning. These thoughts and feelings are non-specific. Once they become specific, passive suicidal ideation gives way to active suicidal ideation [8,9]. The primary dividing line between passive suicidal ideation vs. active ideation is whether the individual experiencing suicidal ideation has made plans or taken steps toward it. It also includes a specific plan that is likely to be taken, how an individual intends to kill him/herself and the intention to act on such thoughts” [4].

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) [10], Suicide among youth is quite high and ranked as the third cause of death. Many cases of suicide attempts and suicide among young people including those in the university system have been reported in Nigeria universities [11]. Despite this, student interventions for suicide prevention remain largely ineffective.

“Undergraduate students are a class of students in the university who are studying or running an academic program to get a first degree in a discipline or field of study. To achieve this, students must develop keen interest in reading and acquiring knowledge for better performance. Hence, this may put students that is going through social and psychological disorder like guilt, economic pressure, lack of attention from parents and friends, lack of school facilities, and

friendship problem into academic pressures. Academic pressure in the form of the desire to score good grades and maintain parental and peer approvals” [12-15]. The absence of an effective coping mechanism could make such pressures a source of suicide thought. However, not all students have the capacity and the needed support to manage such pressures alongside other competing demands, the result sometimes is suicide ideation and the tendency to attempt in some hopeless situations.

Is important to know that suicide does not just happen; it sometimes takes the victims to think about it [16]. “Students who evaluate themselves as not having the capacity to succeed or perform well academically may be involved in suicide. Some people might think or assume that those who have suicidal thoughts or ideation could be just having temporary suicidal ideation and they probably are not actually going to commit suicide. Their assumption could be right or could be wrong. But whatever it is, by having suicidal ideation means that the risk is there already and it is worth to be taken into account.

Suicidal thought among undergraduate students is a fundamental element which can eventually lead to suicide attempts as well as suicide completion” [17]. As suicidal ideation tends to be common in a university setting (Curran, 2019) hence, it is important to look at the development of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts among students at the university level.

“Other university stressors that posed a risk for suicide among students in universities were identified, namely, the transition from school to university, planning their future, travelling, accommodation, finance for studies, entrance and admission requirements, ability to cope with academic work, the pressure to succeed, and health concerns of family members and themselves” [18], (Modi, 2017; Ozel, 2015). Furthermore, they were stressed by competition, burnout, extreme workloads, personal life problems, lack of leisure time, bullying, and high expectations of self/others (James, 2015). Also, “students reported feeling intimidated by university management and leaders as well as healthcare professionals in seeking help” [19] mainly because they had a low cultural and contextual understanding of students [20], (Eskin, 2019).

There is no doubt that suicide cases are emerging among university undergraduates in Nigeria [21] and the literature in Nigeria shows that there are somewhat numerous studies on suicide among young people but the analytical focus is so little on the university undergraduates. For example, the ones available include that of Omigbodun, et al., [22] on suicidal thoughts and attempts among adolescents (10-17 years); Aloba and Ojeleye [21] among university students; [23] on the prevalence of suicide thoughts among adults in Lagos Nigeria and [24] on suicide among secondary school students in Ile Ife. By this inclination, this present study would be a bit intellectually departed from the previous studies by specifically investigating the perceived effects of academic activities on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

## 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The pursuit of higher education can be an exciting and transformative time for students; academic institutions are intended to provide a nurturing environment for personal and intellectual growth. However, the increasing demands of rigorous coursework, tight deadlines, and high expectations have led to an alarming rise in stress levels among students. The potential negative impact on their mental health becomes a major concern. While academic success is a significant goal, the potential negative consequences of those stressors on students’ mental health, particularly the emergence of suicidal thoughts, remain an urgent and underexplored issue. It is on this note that the study is focused on determining the impact of academic activities on suicidal thoughts among students at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

## 1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to ascertain the impact of academic activities on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students. Specifically, to determine:

1. The impact of excess academic workload on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University.
2. The impact of short academic session on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University.

3. The impact of fear of academic failure on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University.
4. The perceived preventive measures to suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University.

### 1.3 Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the impacts of excess academic workload on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University?
2. What are the impacts of short academic sessions on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University?
3. What are the impacts of fear of academic failure on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University?
4. What are the perceived preventive measures to suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University?

## 2. METHODS

The study made use of the descriptive survey research design. The study was carried out in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra state. According to office of the Director of Academic Planning (DAP), Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka has a total population of 48960 comprising of regular undergraduates and part-time undergraduates. The sample of one hundred students used for this study was drawn from faculty of Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka campus. A purposive sampling technique was used for the study. Based on this, the researcher selected ten (10) students

randomly from ten Departments of the faculty of education who are willing and ready to attend to the questionnaire thereby making it one hundred (100) respondents. It involved the selection of male and female undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University at random. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher titled: Impact of Academic Activities on Suicidal Thoughts Questionnaire (IAASTQ). The questionnaire consists of twenty (20) questions and was structured with four point scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). Content and face validity of the instrument was established with the help of three experts, two from the Department of Health Promotion and Public Health Education and one from the Department of Vocational Education with emphasis on measurement and evaluation, all from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. In order to establish the reliability of the instrument, a Cronbach Alpha Coefficient method of reliability test was used for the study; When analyzed and compared, section A yielded a coefficient of 0.86, section B yielded a coefficient of 0.96, section C yielded a coefficient of 0.80 and section D yielded a coefficient of 0.96, then the researcher concluded that the instrument was reliable and appropriate for the research. The data collected were analysed using statistical mean rating for research questions 1-3 and simple percentages for research question 4.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented according to the research questions.

**Research Question 1:** What are the impacts of excess academic workload on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka?

**Table 1. Mean ratings on the impacts of excess academic workload on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University. Awka  
N=100**

S/n	Item	Mean	SD	Remark
1.	Excess academic workload always makes someone depressed.	3.49	.64	Agreed
2.	Excess academic workload affects someone's ability to manage personal life.	2.49	.91	Disagreed
3.	Pressure to meet certain academic expectations makes someone think of suicide as last option.	3.15	.61	Agreed
4.	Excess academic workload limits someone's social life leading to suicidal thoughts.	3.00	.78	Agreed
5.	Unplanned changes in academic workload negatively impact on someone's mental well-being	3.07	.74	Agreed

Analysis in Table 1 shows that the respondents accepted in all the questions asked on the effect of excess academic workload on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka except number two question. The mean scores of questions 1, 3, 4 and 5 are as follows 3.49, 3.15, 3.00 and 3.07 respectively. Then number two question is 2.49 showing that they rejected that excess academic workload affects someone's ability to manage personal life. The respondents however have the following scores in SD; .64, .91, .61, .78, and .74 respectively.

**Research Question 2:** What are the impacts of short academic sessions on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka?

As shown in Table 2 on the effect of short academic session on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, the respondents accepted on

all the questions asked. The mean scores of the questions, 1 -6 are as follows 3.19, 2.82, 3.00, 2.93, 2.82 and 2.89 respectively. Their mean ratings ranged from 2.82 to 3.19. The respondents however have the following scores in SD; .91, .72, .78, .76, .90 and .89 respectively.

**Research Question 3:** What are the impacts of fear of academic failure on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Table 3 shows that the four questions out of five listed items on the effect of fear of academic failure on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka were accepted by the respondents. However, item number one was rejected. The mean scores of the questions are as follows 2.36, 2.58, 2.94, 2.88, 2.52 and 2.54 respectively. The respondents however have the following scores in SD; .88, .86, .74, .70, .75, and .86 respectively.

**Table 2. Mean ratings on the impacts of short academic sessions on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka**

N=100				
S/n	Items	Mean	SD	Remark
6.	The short academic session contributes to someone's fear of academic failure resulting in thoughts of self-harm.	3.19	.91	Agreed
7.	The condensed academic session adds pressure to someone's academic duties contributing to feelings of depression.	2.82	.72	Agreed
8.	The shortened academic session increases someone's academic workload leading to the thought of committing suicide.	2.93	.78	Agreed
9.	Learning under tight deadlines caused by short academic session heightens someone's stress levels contributing to suicidal thoughts as a way of escape.	2.82	.76	Agreed
10.	The short academic session can result in someone's feelings of emotional exhaustion, triggering contemplations of suicide.	2.89	.89	Agreed

**Table 3. Mean ratings on the impacts of fear of academic failure on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka**

N=100			
	Mean	SD	Remark
11. Failing courses in school can make someone develop thought of self-harm.	2.36	.80	Disagreed
12. Academic failure can have serious consequences on someone's future leading to thought of self-harm.	2.58	.86	Agreed
13. Academic failure can lead to depression.	2.94	.74	Agreed
14. Academic failure can make someone to experience worry and anxiety.	2.88	.70	Agreed
15. Academic failure can make someone to experience hopeless and dejection contributing to thoughts of self-harm.	2.54	.86	Agreed

**Research Question 4:** What are the perceived preventive measures to suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka?

Data relating to this research question is presented in Table 2.

**Table 4. Mean ratings on the perceived preventive measures to suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka**

N= 100					
S/n	Items	N	Yes %	N	No %
16.	Reaching out to Counsellors and therapists for professional help whenever you feel depressed.	88	94.7	12	5.3
17.	Practicing healthy coping mechanisms for managing emotional distress.	85	90.7	15	9.3
18.	Reaching out to someone for emotional support during difficult times.	78	84.0	22	16.0
19.	Talking to friends and family about academic stress.	28	12.4	72	87.6
20.	Ensuring to take sufficient rest and sleep for overall well-being.	88	94.7	12	5.3

Analysis in Table 1 shows that the respondents has high percentage in question 1 (94.7%), showing that reaching out to Counsellors and therapists for professional help whenever you feel depressed is preventive measure to suicidal thoughts. The second, third, and fifth items also indicated yes to the preventive measure to suicidal thoughts. (90.7%, 84.0%, 94.7% respectively). However, the respondents are in opinion that talking to friends and family about academic stress are not preventive measure to suicidal thoughts (12.4%).

#### 4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The discussion of the study findings is carried out based on the issues relevant to the research questions.

Findings on the impacts of excess academic workload on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University showed that undergraduate students agreed that excess academic workload always makes someone depressed; undergraduate students did not agree that excess academic workload affects someone's ability to manage personal life. They were in the opinion that pressure to meet certain academic expectations makes someone think of suicide as last option. Undergraduate students agreed that excess academic workload limits someone's social life leading to suicidal thoughts; they also agreed that unplanned changes in academic workload negatively impact on someone's mental well-being. The finding is in line with a report by

Frontiers which shows that academic workload can lead to anxiety and depression.

Findings on the impacts of short academic session on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka show that undergraduate students agreed that the short academic session contributes to someone's fear of academic failure resulting in thoughts of self-harm; they were in opinion that the condensed academic session adds pressure to someone's academic duties contributing to feelings of depression. The undergraduate students agreed that the shortened academic session increases someone's academic workload leading to thoughts of committing suicide; they were in opinion that learning under tight deadlines caused by the short academic session heightens someone's stress levels contributing to suicidal thoughts as a way of escape; they agreed that the short academic session can result in someone's feelings of emotional exhaustion, triggering contemplations of suicide.

Findings on the impacts of fear of academic failure on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka show that undergraduate students were not in opinion that failing courses in school can make someone develop thoughts of self-harm; they agreed that academic failure can have serious consequences on someone's future leading to thoughts of self-harm; they also agreed that academic failure can lead to depression. Undergraduate students were in

opinion that academic failure can make someone to experience worry and anxiety; they were also in opinion that academic failure can make someone to experience hopelessness and dejection contributing to thoughts of self-harm. The findings is in line with the discoveries of Cassady et al. [25,26] which emphasized that academic fear in students was associated at high levels with depression and that as academic anxiety increased, depression in students also increased.

Findings on the perceived preventive measures to suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka shows that undergraduate students were in opinion that reaching out to counsellors and therapists for professional help whenever you feel depressed, practicing healthy coping mechanisms for managing emotional distress, reaching out to someone for emotional support during difficult times are preventive measures of suicidal thoughts. They were not in opinion that talking to friends and family about academic stress is a preventive measure to suicidal thoughts. Undergraduate students also agreed that ensuring to take sufficient rest and sleep for overall well-being is a preventive measure to suicidal thoughts. The findings is in line with the discoveries of Gutierrez and Osman (2008); Miller, Eckert and Mazza (2009) which emphasizes that each person should develop strong personal coping strategy, increase leisure and recreational activity which can be beneficial for students.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it is concluded that excess academic workload, short academic session and fear of academic failure can lead to suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students. Overall, the findings suggests that reaching out to counsellors and therapists for professional help whenever you feel depressed, practicing healthy coping mechanisms for managing emotional distress are preventive measures of suicidal thoughts. It is important to reach out to someone for emotional support during difficult times and ensure to take sufficient rest and sleep for overall well-being.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. Teachers should ensure clear communication of course expectations,

deadlines, and grading criteria and provide transparent information about the workload associated with each course, this will help students plan and manage their time effectively, thereby reducing pressure and depression associated with excess academic workload.

2. There should be an extension of academic sessions to allow for a more balanced and manageable workload throughout the semester. Also, universities should implement mid-semester breaks to provide students with opportunities for rest and recovery. These breaks can help prevent burnout and reduce the cumulative stress associated with a continuous academic schedule.
3. Each student should develop strong personal coping strategies such as practicing mindfulness to stay present and reduce anxiety, regular physical activity to help alleviate stress and improve mood, develop effective time management skills to reduce feelings of overwhelm, seek help from mental health professionals and therapists, break down problems into manageable parts and work on solutions. A combination of these strategies will be most beneficial to solving problems of suicidal thoughts due to academic stress.

## DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of manuscripts.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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