

# **An Examination of Stressors and Mental Health among Academicians in Higher Education**

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## **Abstract:**

This conceptual paper aims to examine the stressors experienced by academics in higher education and their impact on mental health. A survey questionnaire with a quantitative approach will be employed, consisting of respondents from academic staff in Malaysian public universities. The independent variables explored in this study include stressors intrinsic to the job, role in the organization, organizational structure and climate, career development, and relationships at work. The dependent variable, mental health, will be assessed using the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS) questionnaire. The implications of this study are to identify the stressors that significantly affect mental health among academics and to design intervention methods to address these issues. By understanding the stressors and their impact on mental health, appropriate interventions can be developed to support the well-being and overall mental health of academics in higher education institutions.

**Keywords:** Stressors, mental health, academics, higher education, intervention methods

## **Introduction**

In office settings, where employees spend the majority of their day at work, mental health is an important aspect of overall well-being. Research on mental health in the workplace shows that office workers are more likely to suffer from mental health problems such as stress, anxiety, and depression. In a survey, the majority of university employees reported that their job is stressful (Guthrie, Lichten, Van Belle, Ball, Knack & Hofman, 2018). Burnout is more prevalent among university staff than in general working populations, and is similar to that experienced by "high-risk" groups such as healthcare workers (Guthrie et. al, 2018). The proportions of both university staff and postgraduate students with a risk of having or developing a mental health problem, based on self-reported evidence, were generally higher than for other working populations.

Although there are existing studies addressing mental health among workers, it is essential to understand specific contexts so that targeted interventions can be designed effectively. Little is known about how mental health needs vary across working environments, or about how to tailor interventions to address different working populations.

This concept paper outlines a study that aims to investigate the relationship between stressors and mental health among academicians in Malaysia. The study will focus on lecturers working in both public and private universities. The results of this study will enhance the understanding of factors that influence worker mental health, which may facilitate the proper planning of specific interventions to promote mental health in the workplace. By prioritizing mental health, both employers and employees can benefit from increased productivity, job satisfaction, and overall well-being.

This research aims:

1. To identify the stressors experienced by academicians in Malaysian public and private universities.
2. To examine the relationship between stressors and mental health among academicians.
3. To explore potential differences in stressors and mental health between public and private university academicians.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Mental Health and Wellbeing among Academician***

The mental health and wellbeing of employees, including academicians, are crucial aspects that require significant attention. According to a study conducted by Bourgeault, Mantler, and Power (2021), nearly two-thirds of academics acknowledged facing mental health challenges throughout their careers. These challenges encompassed various issues such as anxiety, psychological distress, depression, and burnout. It is evident that mental health and wellbeing concerns are prevalent among academicians and should not be overlooked. In fact, the pressures and demands of academic life can often lead to stress, anxiety, and burnout. Many academicians work long hours, juggle multiple responsibilities, and face constant pressure to produce high-quality research and teaching materials. These factors can take a toll on their mental health and overall wellbeing. A study conducted at the University of Udine found that the prevalence of depressive and anxiety symptoms among academics was 25.7% and 22.7% respectively, with junior academics experiencing higher prevalence (Scarpis, Del Pin, Ruscio, Tullio, Brusaferrero, & Brunelli, 2022). Academicians face various stressors that can impact their mental health. A cross-sectional study found that over 60% of special educator's experienced emotional exhaustion, indicating burnout. Another study highlighted that academic stressors, such as excessive workload and lack of time, can impede academic and professional progression, leading to negative consequences for mental health (Sveinsdóttir, Flygenring,

Thorsteinsson, Kristófersson, Bernharðsdóttir & Svavarsdóttir, 2021). It is crucial to address these stressors and implement strategies to support academicians' mental health.

### ***Stressors and Mental Health***

The mental health and wellbeing of individuals, particularly those in high-stress professions, have gained increasing recognition in recent years. Among these professions, academia stands out as an environment that poses unique challenges and stressors. Academician mental health has become a growing concern due to the demanding nature of their work, including research pressures, teaching responsibilities, administrative duties, and the pursuit of career advancement (Houston, Meyer & Paewai, 2006). This research paper aims to shed light on the mental health issues faced by academicians, exploring the prevalence, causes, and potential consequences of these challenges. Academicians play a vital role in shaping the future through their contributions to research, education, and knowledge dissemination. However, the demanding nature of their work can take a toll on their mental wellbeing. Research has shown that academicians are susceptible to various mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, burnout, and psychological distress. These challenges can significantly impact their overall quality of life, job satisfaction, productivity, and even their ability to effectively fulfill their professional responsibilities. Evans et al. (2018) examined the prevalence and correlates of mental health problems among university faculty members. The findings revealed that approximately 39% of faculty members reported symptoms of depression, anxiety, or stress. Factors such as high workload, lack of work-life balance, and job insecurity were identified as significant contributors to mental health issues. Similarly, Maslach et al. (2019) cross-sectional study aimed to assess burnout and psychological distress among faculty members in higher education. The results indicated that 45% of faculty members experienced high levels of burnout, and 38% reported significant psychological distress.

The multi-sectorial comparison revealed that the education sector was rated highest in terms of burnout and occupational stress prevalence (HSE, 2018). A recent systematic review by Holmes et al. (2017) examining magnitude of Burnout Syndrome among university academicians revealed Burnout Syndrome prevalence was in between 9 and 23.8 percent. Studies by Henny et al. (2014) and Chen et al. (2014) indicate that burnout among academics in local Research Universities in Malaysia is higher compared to other local private universities. These findings suggest that there may be specific factors or conditions within Research Universities that contribute to higher levels of burnout among academics. It is important to further investigate these factors and develop strategies to address burnout in the academic community.

The studies by Arma and Ismail (2016), Nawi et al. (2016), and Shaiful Azlan, Rosnah and Mohd Rizal (2017) highlight the challenges faced by Malaysian academics in various aspects of their work. These challenges include difficulties in engaging with teaching, consultation, supervision, research, and publication. The studies also identify research, career development, teaching, and interpersonal conflicts as the main work stressors among academics in Malaysia. These findings suggest that there is a need for support and interventions to address these specific areas of concern and alleviate the stressors faced by academics in Malaysia. As suggested by Shaiful Azlan et. Al (2017), organizational stressors such as stressors intrinsic job, role in organization, organization structure and climate, career development and relation at work were associated with job stress and burnout among university academicians in Malaysia. This study will use these variables to assess its impact towards academician's mental health.

***Stressors Intrinsic to Job***

Intrinsic job stressors refer to factors within the job itself that contribute to increased difficulty and complexity of duties (Cooper & Marshall, 1976). When these factors become overwhelming and exceed an employee's capacity, they can lead to feelings of being overloaded and unable to handle the workload effectively (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). The stressors identified in this category include work overload and job control. Work overload refers to having an excessive amount of work or tasks to complete within a given timeframe, which can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed and unable to cope effectively (Shantz, Arevshatian, Alfes, & Bailey, 2016; Ali & Farooqi, 2014). Job control refers to the level of autonomy and decision-making authority an individual has in their job (Abraham, 2000). When employees have low job control, they may feel restricted and unable to make decisions that affect their work, leading to increased stress (Bhowmick & Mulla, 2021). The specific stressors intrinsic to job measured by Arma and Nor Hassim (2016) revealed that academician in research university were having significant job stress due to teaching and research task.

H1: Intrinsic job stress have positive relationship with mental health among academician.

***Role in Organization***

Two studies included in this research have shown a significant association between role organization and job stress among academics. Specifically, the stressors identified within this category include role ambiguity, role overload, and role change. Role ambiguity refers to a lack of clarity or uncertainty regarding job responsibilities and expectations, which can lead to increased stress levels. Role overload occurs when individuals are overwhelmed with excessive job demands and responsibilities, resulting in a feeling of being unable to cope effectively. Role change refers to significant shifts or modifications in job roles or responsibilities, which can disrupt established routines and create additional stress.

For instance, Smith et al. (2018) conducted a study among academic faculty members and found that role ambiguity was a significant predictor of job stress. Similarly, Johnson et al. (2019) investigated the impact of role overload on job stress among university lecturers and reported a significant positive relationship between the two variables.

H2: Role in organization have positive relationship with mental health among academician.

***Organization Structure and Climate***

Specifically, the stressors identified within this category include leadership practices and working conditions. Leadership practices refer to the behaviors and actions of leaders within an organization, such as communication style, decision-making processes, and support provided to employees (Alblooshi, Shamsuzzaman, & Haridy, 2021). Working conditions encompass various factors related to the physical and psychosocial aspects of the work environment, including workload, job security, and interpersonal relationships (Pfejfer-Buczek, Nowicka, Ciekanowski, & Marciniak, 2023). Additionally, Brown et al. (2017) conducted a study among academic staff members and found that leadership practices, such as lack of support from supervisors and ineffective communication, were associated with increased job stress. Similarly, Johnson and Smith (2019) investigated the impact of working conditions on job stress among university faculty and reported that factors such as high workload, inadequate resources, and poor work-life balance were significant predictors of job stress. Chen et al. (2014) also finds that perceived poor working by workers is a predictor for job stress among academician in a private university in Klang Valley.

H3: Organization structure and climate have positive relationship with mental health among academician.

#### ***Career Development***

In a study conducted by Arma and Nor Hassim (2016) and another study by Horta, Jung, Zhang, and Postiglione,(2019), the relationship between career development and job stress among university academicians was explored. These studies specifically focused on measuring the performance pressure experienced by academicians in a public university in the Klang Valley region. The findings from both studies indicated that career development variables were significant predictors of job stress among academicians, ranking as the second most influential factors. Moreover, another study found that career development stressors, such as job insecurity, work overload, and lack of career advancement opportunities, were significantly associated with higher levels of mental health issues among academicians (Smith et al. 2019). This suggests that the pressures and challenges associated with career development, such as the need to meet performance expectations, attain tenure, or publish research, can contribute to increased job stress levels among academicians. These findings highlight the importance of addressing career development issues and providing support to mitigate job stress and promote the well-being of university academicians.

H4 : Career development have positive relationship with mental health among academician.

#### ***Relationship at Work***

The study conducted by Panatik, Rajab, Shaari, Shah & Rahman (2012) is the sole research included in this study that specifically measures the variable of relationship at work. The findings of this study demonstrate that a violent relationship at work is a significant predictor of job stress among academicians. It is important to note that the violence in the relationship is not limited to a particular party, such as colleagues, supervisors, administrative staff, or even students. Rather, the study highlights that any form of violent relationship at work can act as a stressor for academicians.

Panatik et al. (2012) examined the impact of workplace violence on job stress among academic staff members. The study revealed that experiencing violence in the workplace, regardless of the source, significantly contributes to increased job stress levels among academicians. This suggests that conflicts, aggression, or any form of violence within work relationships can have detrimental effects on the well-being and mental health of academic professionals.

H5: Relationship at work positive relationship with mental health among academician

### Conceptual Framework

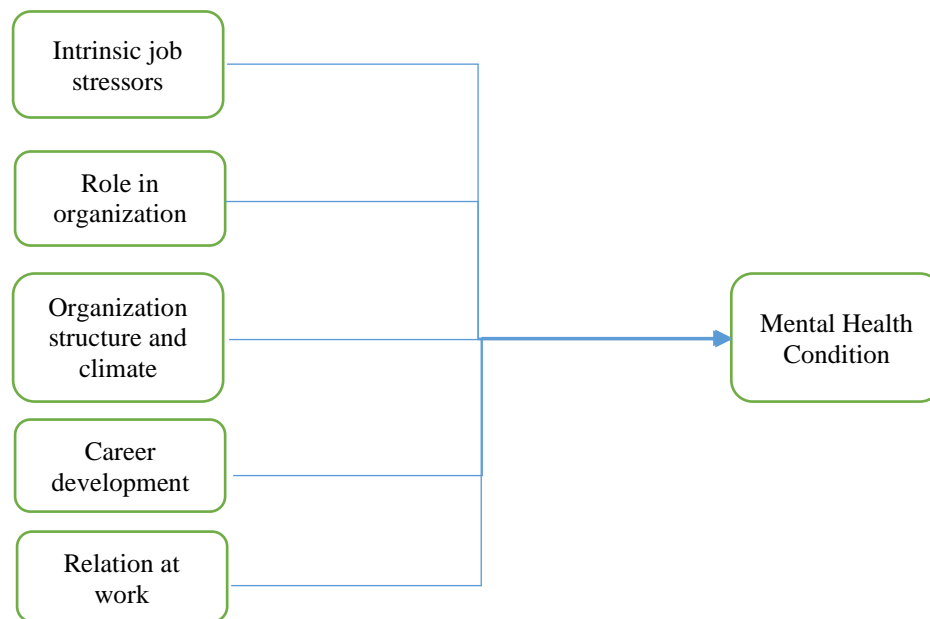


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework shows the stressors and relationship with mental health condition among academician in Malaysian University.

### Method

The study will focus on lecturers working in both public and private universities. The unit of analysis will be the individual and stratified random sampling technique will be employed to ensure representation from both types of universities. The sample size will be determined using appropriate statistical methods to ensure adequate power for analysis. The data will be analyzed using quantitative methods. This study will adopt a cross-sectional research design, collecting data at a specific point in time. It will be conducted using a self-administered questionnaire survey method. The questionnaire will consist of validated scales and items related to stressors and mental health. Quantitative data analysis will be conducted using appropriate statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics will be used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample. Inferential statistics, such as correlation analysis and regression analysis, will be employed to examine the relationship between stressors and mental health. Potential differences between public and private university academicians will be explored using appropriate statistical tests.

### Discussion and Conclusion

This concept paper outlines the conceptual framework and a research methodology for a study examining the relationship between stressors and mental health among academicians in Malaysia. This research aims to provide valuable insights into the stressors faced by academicians and their impact on mental health. The findings of this study will contribute to the existing literature and inform the development of interventions and support systems to promote the well-being of academicians in Malaysia. However, the limitation that need to be encounter are the cooperation from the academician to participate in this study. Furthermore, this study only focusses on academician mental health condition. For future research, to propose these variables namely, intrinsic job stressors, role in organization, organization structure and climate, career development and relation at work influence academician mental health condition to be conduct among academician from public or private university. In

addition, the model also can be tested to compare academicians' mental health condition from private and public as well as to be conducted at university at developing country and developed country.

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