

## **Perceived Effects of Academic Activities on Suicidal Thoughts among Undergraduate Students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State Nigeria.**

### **ABSTRACT**

This study examined the perceived effects of academic activities on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Four research questions guided the study. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised of 100 students in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The study selected respondents using 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. Reliability of the instrument was established using 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, which was an indication 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 wellbeing. 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 associated with a continuous academic schedule.

**(Keyword: Academic Activities, Suicidal Thoughts, Effects)**

### **Introduction**

Being accepted to further studies at a university level is like a dream came through for most of the university students, despite the fact that studying in a university means additional responsibilities and pressure to succeed. In order to graduate, university students will have to do or involve 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 the society. Like it or not, university students may expose themselves to tiring and stressful situations which eventually may affect their emotional

or psychological states which may lead them to the idea of taking their own life or actually committing suicide.

According to Nwafor (2020), suicidal thought among students is defined as the wish, thought or desires 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 (Klonsky, 2016). 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 (Alabi, and Abdulmalik, 2015). Suicidal behaviour take different forms such as taking a drug overdose, deliberately crashing a car, dyeing by hanging among others. It exists in the form of a consideration to act it out.

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). 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.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2014), Suicide among youth is quite high and ranked as the third causes of death. Within the last decade, cases of suicide attempts and suicide among young people including those in the university system have been reported in Nigeria universities (Aloba, Adefemi, and Aloba, 2018). 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 in order to get a first degree in a discipline or field of study. To achieve this,

students must develop keen interest to read and acquire knowledge for better performance. Hence, this may put student that is passing through social and psychological disorder like guilt, economic pressure, lack of attention from parents and friends, lack of school facilities, friendship problem into academic pressures. Academic pressure in the form of the desire to score good grades and maintain parental and peer approvals (Eneka, 2017). The absence of effective coping mechanism could make such pressures 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 make an attempt in some hopeless situations.

Is important to know that suicide does not just happen; it sometimes takes the victims to think about it (Ugwu, Nwafor, Obi-Nwosu and Okoye, 2020). 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 something that is worth to be taken into account.

Suicidal thought among undergraduate students is a fundamental element which can eventually lead to suicide attempt as well as suicide completion (Thompson, Dewa and Phare, 2012). 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 university level.

Other several 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 (Lew, 2020; 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 health care professionals in seeking help (Lipson, 2019) mainly because they had a low cultural and contextual understanding of students (Cramer, 2017; Eskin, 2019).

There is no doubt that suicide cases are emerging among university undergraduates in Nigeria (Aloba et al., 2017) 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.,(2008) on suicidal thoughts and attempts among adolescents (10-17years); Aloba and Ojeleye (2017) among university students; (Adewuya et al., 2016) on prevalence of suicide thoughts among adults in Lagos Nigeria and (Mapayi et al., 2016) 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

### **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 perceived effects of academic activities on suicidal thoughts among students at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

### **Purpose of the Study**

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

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

### **Research Questions**

The study seek to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perceived effects of excess academic workload on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University?
2. What are the perceived effects of short academic session on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University?
3. What are the perceived effects 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?

## **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 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. Purposes 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: Perceived Effects of Academic Activities on Suicidal Thoughts Questionnaire (PEAASTQ). The questionnaire consist 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.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented according to the research questions.

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

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

S/n	Items	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	3.07	.74	Agreed

workload negatively impact on  
someone's mental well-being

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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 perceived effects of short academic session on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka?

**Table 2: Mean ratings on the perceived effects of short academic session 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

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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 perceived effects of fear of academic failure on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

**Table 3: Mean ratings on the perceived effects 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 thought of self-harm.	2.54	.86	Agreed

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, the 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.

**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%).

### Discussion of Findings

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

Findings on perceived effects 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 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 report by Frontiers which shows that academic workload can lead to anxiety and depression.

Findings on the perceived effects of short academic session on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka shows 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 the 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 perceived effects of fear of academic failure on suicidal thoughts among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka shows 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 (2019) 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.

## **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.

### **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.

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