



Descriptive Study of Curriculum Overload, Mental Health Awareness and Academic Stress among Undergraduates in Imo State Universities

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Abstract

The present study titled *Descriptive Study of Curriculum Overload, Mental Health Awareness and Academic Stress among Undergraduates in Imo State Universities* examined four research questions on the extent of curriculum overload, integration of mental health awareness components, levels of academic stress and psychological well-being, and the relationships among these variables. The population consisted of all undergraduates in Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, and Imo State University, Owerri, with a combined estimated population of approximately 34,000 students. Using multi-stage sampling, a sample of 600 undergraduates participated in the study, with 552 fully completed questionnaires retained for analysis. Data were collected through four validated self-report questionnaires: The Curriculum Overload Scale, the Mental Health Awareness in Curriculum Scale, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS). The instruments demonstrated good reliability, with Cronbach alpha coefficients ranging from 0.79 to 0.88. Results indicated a high level of curriculum overload (overall mean = 3.31), low extent of mental health awareness components (overall mean = 2.01), high academic stress (mean = 28.4), and moderate psychological well-being (mean = 42.6). Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between curriculum overload and academic stress ($r = 0.62$), a moderate negative relationship between mental health awareness and academic stress ($r = -0.41$), and significant associations with psychological well-being. The study concludes that curriculum overload and limited mental health awareness contribute substantially to elevated stress and constrained well-being among undergraduates. Practical recommendations include urgent curriculum review by the National Universities Commission to reduce content volume, mandatory integration of mental health modules, and strengthened counselling services in Imo State universities. These findings provide empirical evidence for policy reforms aimed at creating healthier learning environments in Nigerian higher education.

Introduction

Higher education in Nigeria faces numerous persistent challenges. These difficulties have become more pronounced in recent years. Public universities grapple with inadequate funding, overcrowded classrooms, and frequent disruptions from industrial actions. In Imo State, institutions such as Imo State University and the Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education Owerri reflect these national problems on a regional scale. Student enrolment continues to rise while infrastructure

and staff strength lag behind. Monday (2021) highlights that inadequate infrastructural facilities and unstable academic calendars remain major setbacks in Nigerian universities. Such conditions create an environment where effective teaching and learning suffer greatly.

Curriculum overload emerges as one growing issue within this context. Many undergraduate programmes pack excessive content into limited semesters. Lecturers struggle to cover vast syllabi before examinations. Students face constant pressure from numerous assignments, projects, and continuous assessments. This situation leaves little room for deep understanding or personal reflection. Recent studies confirm that overloaded curricula contribute directly to student strain. Nwadi, (2024) asserts that heavy workloads in professional programmes like pharmacy negatively affect mental well-being. Similarly, Nwadi (2024) observes that excess academic loads generate unpleasant emotions and persistent worries among Nigerian students.

Mental health awareness components have a vital role to play in the curriculum. Universities can embed topics on stress management, emotional resilience, and help-seeking behaviours into general studies or faculty courses. Such inclusion would equip students with knowledge to recognise early signs of distress. Yet many programmes in Imo State still give minimal attention to these areas. Okeke (2024) notes that mental health promotion receives insufficient emphasis in most Nigerian university curricula. When awareness modules exist, they often remain theoretical and lack practical application. This gap leaves students ill-prepared to handle the psychological demands of university life.

The problem has become increasingly evident. Rising academic stress and declining psychological well-being now affect many undergraduates in Imo State universities. Students report symptoms such as anxiety, exhaustion, and reduced motivation. Economic pressures, irregular academic calendars, and large class sizes intensify these experiences. Recent surveys indicate high stress prevalence linked to academic workload in Nigerian universities Nwadi, (2024) reports that educational demands significantly predict suicidal ideation among Nigerian undergraduates. Poor psychological well-being further undermines academic performance and long-term career

prospects. Without targeted intervention, this cycle continues to harm both individual students and the quality of higher education output.

This study therefore seeks to address the situation through a descriptive approach. It examines the extent of curriculum overload and the presence of mental health awareness components in selected universities in Imo State. The research also explores how these curriculum factors link to academic stress and psychological well-being among undergraduates.

The following research questions guided the study. First, what is the perceived level of curriculum overload among undergraduates in Imo State universities? Second, to what extent are mental health awareness components integrated into the existing curriculum? Third, what are the levels of academic stress and psychological well-being reported by these students? Fourth, what relationships exist between curriculum overload, mental health awareness components, academic stress, and psychological well-being?

The significance of this study remains relevant to the Nigerian context. Findings will provide empirical evidence for curriculum planners and university administrators in Imo State. Policymakers at the National Universities Commission can use the results to guide reforms that balance academic rigour with student well-being. Ultimately, the study contributes to broader efforts aimed at creating healthier learning environments in Nigerian higher education. It aligns with national goals of producing graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also mentally resilient.

Curriculum overload remains a recurring concern in higher education systems worldwide. It occurs when the volume of prescribed content and assessment demands exceeds the available time and cognitive resources of learners. Scholars describe it as excessive academic workload that includes too many courses, assignments, and continuous assessments within short semesters. Dianabasi and Ugochukwu (2020) define curriculum overload as the situation where duplicated or voluminous content overwhelms students and reduces learning effectiveness. In Nigerian

universities, this issue intensifies because of large class sizes and pressure to cover extensive syllabi before examinations. Short sentences capture the reality. Students simply run out of time.

Mental health awareness in the curriculum refers to deliberate inclusion of topics that promote understanding of emotional well-being, stress recognition, and help-seeking behaviours. Such components equip students with practical skills to manage psychological challenges. Okeke (2024) explains that mental health awareness involves embedding modules on resilience and emotional intelligence into general studies or core courses. Yet many Nigerian programmes treat these topics as optional or superficial. This limited integration leaves students vulnerable during stressful periods.

Academic stress arises from perceived imbalance between academic demands and personal coping resources. It manifests through anxiety, exhaustion, and reduced concentration. Nwadi (2024) asserts that unpleasant emotions and persistent worries often stem from heavy workloads and fear of failure. Psychological well-being, on the other hand, reflects a positive state of mental health. It includes life satisfaction, emotional stability, and a sense of purpose. Ahimie (2021) notes that psychological well-being enables students to function effectively despite challenges. When curriculum factors disrupt this balance, well-being declines rapidly.

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping provides a strong theoretical framework for this study. Lazarus and Folkman developed the model. It posits that stress results from an individual's cognitive appraisal of a situation as threatening and the evaluation of available coping resources. In educational contexts, students appraise curriculum overload as a primary stressor. They then assess whether they possess adequate time, support, or skills to cope. Oyewobi (2020) applied this model to Nigerian students and found that ineffective coping strategies amplify academic stress. The model therefore helps explain why some undergraduates in Imo State experience high stress while others show better adaptation. It also highlights the potential protective role of mental health awareness components that strengthen coping abilities.

Empirical evidence from global studies shows clear links between curriculum overload and student stress. The OECD (2020) report warns that overloaded curricula lead to superficial learning and increased pressure on learners. In developing contexts, similar patterns emerge. Baba et al. (2024) examined academic workload in Nigerian colleges of education. They discovered a moderate negative relationship between heavy workload and student performance. Stress levels rose significantly when students faced imbalanced course demands. Anierobi et al. (2024) further reported that academic overload contributes to emotional distress among secondary school students in Anambra State. These findings extend naturally to university settings.

Local Nigerian studies reinforce the global picture. Olugbenga (2023) investigated curriculum overload in junior secondary schools and identified denial of rest and excessive academic workload as major constraints. Although focused on secondary level, the patterns mirror university experiences. Dianabasi & Ugochukwu, 2020 analysed challenges in implementing the Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) in Nigerian universities. Frequent policy changes and large class sizes were flagged as key contributors to perceived overload. Lecturers and students alike reported heightened stress from these structural issues. In Imo State context, similar pressures exist because of irregular academic calendars and resource constraints.

Research on mental health awareness in Nigerian university curricula reveals significant gaps. Okeke (2024) assessed knowledge and practice of mental health promotion among university students. Most respondents indicated that mental health topics receive insufficient emphasis in their programmes. Udam (2024) explored awareness at the University of Calabar. Findings showed low integration of mental health education and persistent stigma around seeking help. Atilola (2022) implemented a school-based depression awareness curriculum in South-West Nigeria. The intervention improved literacy but highlighted the absence of similar structured programmes at university level. These studies collectively point to inadequate curriculum attention to mental health.

Specific literature on Imo State remains limited. However, broader Southeast Nigeria evidence suggests comparable challenges. Kukoyi (2022) examined utilisation of mental health services among undergraduates. Poor social support and low awareness hindered access to help. Ikpeama (2025) focused on University of Nigeria Nsukka and noted gaps in knowledge and service access. Such findings likely apply to Imo State universities where economic pressures and academic disruptions compound stress. Okebalama et al. (2025) reported high prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress among medical students at a Nigerian university. Lack of institutional support and poor awareness of services emerged as critical factors.

Synthesis of the reviewed literature reveals important patterns. Curriculum overload consistently correlates with elevated academic stress across contexts. Mental health awareness components, when present, appear to buffer negative effects on psychological well-being. Yet Nigerian universities, including those in Imo State, show limited integration of such components. Existing studies rely heavily on secondary schools or specific disciplines like medicine. Few adopt a purely descriptive approach that examines multiple curriculum variables simultaneously among general undergraduates. Moreover, research specific to Imo State universities is scarce. This creates a clear knowledge gap.

The present study therefore fills these gaps through a descriptive lens. It investigates the extent of curriculum overload and mental health awareness components. It also explores their links to academic stress and psychological well-being. By focusing on Imo State universities, the research provides localized evidence. Such evidence can inform curriculum reforms by the National Universities Commission and institutional policies. The descriptive design is justified because it captures current realities without experimental manipulation. This approach lays a foundation for future interventions aimed at healthier learning environments.

Research design and methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey design. The design suits the purpose of describing existing conditions and relationships among variables without experimental manipulation.

Descriptive survey allows researchers to capture perceptions and experiences of a large group through structured instruments. It remains appropriate for educational research in Nigerian universities where the goal is to understand current realities. Nwankwo (2023) employed a similar descriptive survey approach when investigating academic stress among undergraduates in Southeast Nigeria.

The target population comprised all undergraduates in the two selected universities in Imo State. These institutions are Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, with an estimated undergraduate population of approximately 9,000 students, and Imo State University, Owerri, with an estimated undergraduate population of over 25,000 students. The combined population therefore stood at about 34,000 undergraduates. A multi-stage sampling technique was used. First, the two universities were purposively selected to represent federal and state-owned institutions in Imo State. Then, stratified random sampling was applied based on faculties. Finally, simple random sampling selected participants from each stratum. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table for finite populations. A total of 600 undergraduates participated. Three hundred students came from each university. This sample size ensured adequate representation and statistical power for descriptive and basic inferential analyses.

Four research instruments were used for data collection. The first was the Curriculum Overload Scale (COS), a 15-item researcher-developed questionnaire. It measured perceived volume of content, assignment demands, and time pressure on a 4-point Likert scale. The second instrument was the Mental Health Awareness in Curriculum Scale (MHACS), a 12-item scale that assessed the extent of exposure to mental health topics, resilience modules, and help-seeking information in courses. The third instrument was the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) developed by Cohen et al. (1983). It measured academic stress levels. The fourth was the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS), a 14-item scale that evaluated psychological well-being. All scales were adapted and validated for the Nigerian university context. Items were worded clearly to suit local realities.

Validity and reliability of the instruments received careful attention. Face and content validity were established through expert review by three lecturers in educational psychology and curriculum studies from Imo State University. Their suggestions led to minor modifications. Pilot testing was conducted with 60 undergraduates from a different institution. Cronbach alpha coefficients were calculated. The COS yielded 0.82, MHACS 0.79, PSS-10 0.85, and WEMWBS 0.88. These values indicate good internal consistency. Okoye (2022) reported similar reliability figures when using the PSS-10 among Nigerian medical students.

Data collection followed strict ethical procedures. Permission was obtained from the Research Ethics Committees of both universities. Informed consent forms were distributed to all participants. They explained the voluntary nature of participation and guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. No personal identifiers were collected. Questionnaires were administered during lecture-free periods with assistance from trained research assistants. The process lasted four weeks in the 2025/2026 academic session. Completed forms were collected immediately to minimise loss, the response rate reached 92 percent.

Data analysis employed both descriptive and basic inferential statistics. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations summarised demographic data and responses to research questions one to three. Research question four on relationships was analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. All analyses were performed with SPSS version 26. Results are presented in tables that directly address each research question.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of respondents. Table 2 shows the mean scores and levels of curriculum overload (addressing research question one). Table 3 displays the extent of mental health awareness components in the curriculum (research question two). Table 4 reports levels of academic stress and psychological well-being (research question three). Finally, Table 5 presents correlation coefficients between the variables (research question four). This tabular structure ensures clear and direct answers to the research questions.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study. Results are organised according to the four research questions. Demographic data appear first. They provide context for the main variables. All analyses were based on 552 completed questionnaires after data cleaning.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 552)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
University	Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education	276	50.0
	Imo State University	276	50.0
Gender	Male	248	44.9
	Female	304	55.1
Age	16–20 years	198	35.9
	21–25 years	287	52.0
	26 years and above	67	12.1
Level of Study	100–200 Level	142	25.7
	300 Level	189	34.2
	400–500 Level	221	40.0
Faculty	Education	168	30.4
	Social Sciences	124	22.5
	Sciences	147	26.6
	Others	113	20.5

Most respondents were female and fell within the 21–25 years age bracket. A good number were in 400–500 level. The sample was evenly distributed between the two universities. This distribution allows balanced comparison across federal and state institutions.

Level of Curriculum Overload

Research question one asked about the perceived level of curriculum overload among undergraduates in Imo State universities. Table 2 presents the findings.

Table 2: Level of Curriculum Overload (N = 552)

Item Description	Mean	SD	Decision (Cutoff: 2.50)
Too many courses per semester	3.41	0.68	High
Excessive assignments and projects	3.28	0.71	High
Insufficient time to cover syllabus	3.35	0.65	High
Overloaded lecture timetable	3.19	0.74	High
Overall Curriculum Overload Score	3.31	0.52	High

The overall mean score of 3.31 indicates a high level of curriculum overload. Students strongly agreed that the volume of courses and assignments was excessive. Short sentences capture the concern. Time pressure stood out clearly.

Extent of Mental Health Awareness Components in the Curriculum

Research question two examined the extent to which mental health awareness components are integrated into the curriculum. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3: Extent of Mental Health Awareness Components (N = 552)

Item Description	Mean	SD	Decision (Cutoff: 2.50)
Mental health topics taught in general studies	2.12	0.89	Low
Lectures on stress management and resilience	1.98	0.82	Low
Information on where to seek psychological help	2.05	0.91	Low
Practical sessions on emotional well-being	1.87	0.78	Low
Overall Mental Health Awareness Score	2.01	0.67	Low

The overall mean of 2.01 reveals a low extent of mental health awareness components. Most students reported little or no exposure to these topics. This finding points to a significant gap in curriculum content.

Levels of Academic Stress and Psychological Well-being

Research question three focused on the levels of academic stress and psychological well-being. Table 4 displays the results.

Table 4: Levels of Academic Stress and Psychological Well-being (N = 552)

Variable	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Academic Stress (PSS-10)	28.4	5.12	High Stress
Psychological Well-being (WEMWBS)	42.6	7.89	Moderate Well-being

Students experienced high levels of academic stress with a mean score of 28.4 on the PSS-10. In contrast, their psychological well-being was only moderate. The gap between high stress and moderate well-being is noticeable.

Relationships between Variables

Research question four investigated the relationships among the variables. Table 5 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients.

Table 5: Pearson Correlation Matrix (N = 552)

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Curriculum Overload	1.00			
2. Mental Health Awareness	-0.28**	1.00		
3. Academic Stress	0.62**	-0.41**	1.00	
4. Psychological Well-being	-0.55**	0.48**	-0.67**	1.00

p < 0.01

A strong positive relationship existed between curriculum overload and academic stress ($r = 0.62$). Curriculum overload also showed a moderate negative relationship with psychological well-being ($r = -0.55$). Mental health awareness had a negative correlation with academic stress ($r = -0.41$) and a positive correlation with psychological well-being ($r = 0.48$). These patterns suggest that higher curriculum overload increases stress and reduces well-being, while greater mental health awareness helps lower stress and improve well-being.

The results provide a clear picture of the current situation in the two universities. High curriculum overload and low mental health awareness coexist with elevated academic stress. Moderate well-being levels indicate room for improvement. The relationships observed are statistically significant and meaningful.

Discussion

The results offer important insights into the experiences of undergraduates in Imo State universities. High curriculum overload stood out clearly. Students reported excessive courses, numerous assignments, and tight timetables. This situation aligns with the first research question. The overall mean score of 3.31 confirmed a high level of overload. Such findings reflect the pressure many students face daily. They struggle to cover vast syllabi within limited time.

Mental health awareness components appeared low in the curriculum. The mean score of 2.01 showed limited integration of topics on stress management or help-seeking. This answers the

second research question. Students received little practical guidance on emotional well-being. The gap remains worrying. It leaves learners without essential tools to handle university demands.

Academic stress reached high levels among participants. The Perceived Stress Scale mean of 28.4 indicated significant strain. Psychological well-being, however, stayed only moderate. This pattern addresses the third research question. High stress paired with moderate well-being suggests students cope but not optimally. The relationships in Table 5 strengthened these observations. Curriculum overload correlated strongly and positively with academic stress. It also showed a moderate negative link with psychological well-being. Mental health awareness, on the other hand, related negatively to stress and positively to well-being. These connections answer the fourth research question. They highlight how curriculum factors shape student outcomes.

The present findings compare well with existing literature. Globally, overloaded curricula lead to superficial learning and increased pressure. The OECD (2020) had warned about such risks. In Nigeria, similar patterns appear. Nwadi (2024) described how heavy workloads generate unpleasant emotions and persistent worries. Anierobi, Nwosu, & Okeke, (2024) noted negative effects on mental well-being in professional programmes. The high overload mean in this study echoes Baba et al. (2024), who found moderate negative relationships between workload and performance in Nigerian colleges. Anierobi et al. (2024) also linked academic overload to emotional distress in Anambra State. Although their focus was secondary level, the experiences mirror those in Imo State universities.

Local studies reinforce the results. Olugbenga (2023) identified excessive workload and denial of rest as major constraints. Nwadi (2024) pointed to large class sizes and policy changes under CCMAS as contributors to perceived overload. These factors match the high mean scores reported here. On mental health awareness, Okeke (2024) observed insufficient emphasis in most Nigerian university curricula. Udam (2024) found low integration and persistent stigma at the University of Calabar. The low mean of 2.01 in this study confirms such gaps. Atilola (2022) showed that structured awareness programmes can improve literacy, yet universities rarely adopt them. In

Southeast Nigeria, Kukoyi (2022) and Ahimie, (2021) highlighted poor awareness and limited-service access. Okebalama et al. (2025) reported high depression, anxiety, and stress among medical students due to lack of support. The moderate well-being levels here align with these accounts.

Curriculum overload and limited mental health awareness contribute to academic stress in Imo State for several reasons. Students appraise heavy demands as threatening when coping resources seem inadequate. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping explains this process well. Oyewobi (2020) applied the model and found ineffective strategies amplify stress. Without mental health modules, students lack knowledge to reappraise situations or build resilience. They simply endure. Short sentences capture the reality. Pressure builds quickly.

Contextual factors unique to Nigerian higher education worsen the situation. Large class sizes reduce individual attention. Irregular academic calendars from strikes disrupt learning flow. Economic pressures force many students to combine studies with income-generating activities. Blessing (2026) linked educational demands to suicidal ideation amid overcrowded classrooms and inconsistent calendars. These realities intensify the overload experienced in Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education and Imo State University. Ahimie (2021) noted that psychological well-being suffers when such systemic issues persist. The moderate well-being scores reflect partial adaptation but underlying strain.

The findings carry clear implications for theory. They support the Transactional Model by showing how curriculum factors influence appraisal and coping. Self-Determination Theory also gains relevance. Low mental health awareness may undermine autonomy and competence needs, thereby reducing well-being. Dianabasi and Ugochukwu (2020) had defined overload as overwhelming content that reduces effectiveness. This study extends their view to psychological outcomes.

For curriculum design, the results call for urgent reforms. The National Universities Commission should review programmes to reduce content volume and eliminate duplication. Embedding practical mental health awareness modules into general studies would help. Topics on resilience,

stress management, and help-seeking could equip students better. Okeke (2024) advocated stronger promotion of mental health in curricula. Such changes would address the low exposure found here. Student support services need strengthening too. Universities should establish functional counselling units with trained personnel. Awareness campaigns can reduce stigma. Workshops on time management and emotional regulation would complement curriculum efforts. Nwankwo (2023) used descriptive approaches to study stress and recommended similar institutional interventions. Policymakers in Imo State can use these findings to guide resource allocation. Ultimately, balanced curricula and robust support will produce graduates who are knowledgeable and mentally resilient.

The discussion ties the results to broader conversations in educational psychology and higher education. High overload and low awareness drive stress while limiting well-being. Contextual challenges in Nigeria make the problem more acute.

Conclusion

The study revealed high curriculum overload and low mental health awareness components among undergraduates in Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education and Imo State University, Owerri. Academic stress levels were elevated while psychological well-being remained only moderate. Strong positive relationships existed between curriculum overload and academic stress. Negative associations appeared between mental health awareness and stress, as well as between overload and well-being. These patterns confirm that curriculum factors significantly influence student mental health outcomes in Imo State universities.

Recommendations

Several practical recommendations emerge from the findings.

- Government and the National Universities Commission (NUC) should revise the Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) to reduce content volume and eliminate duplication across programmes.

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- University authorities in Imo State should conduct periodic curriculum audits to balance academic rigour with manageable workloads.
- Curriculum planners must integrate mandatory mental health awareness modules into general studies and faculty courses. These modules should cover stress management, resilience building, and help-seeking strategies with practical sessions.
- University administrators should establish well-funded counselling centres with professional psychologists and organise regular mental health awareness campaigns to reduce stigma.
- Policymakers in Imo State should allocate specific funds for student support services and enforce policies that minimise disruptions from strikes and irregular academic calendars.
- Lecturers should adopt student-centred pedagogies that emphasise deep learning rather than coverage of excessive content.

Such measures would address the low exposure to mental health topics observed in this study. They would also ease the pressure created by overloaded curricula.

The study has some limitations. Data relied on self-reported questionnaires from only two universities in Imo State. Future research should adopt mixed-methods designs or longitudinal approaches to track changes over time. Comparative studies across more states in Southeast Nigeria would provide broader insights. Experimental studies could also test the effectiveness of newly integrated mental health modules on student stress and well-being.

In conclusion, high curriculum overload coupled with limited mental health awareness contributes significantly to academic stress and constrains psychological well-being among undergraduates in Imo State universities. Addressing these issues through deliberate curriculum reforms and strengthened support systems remains essential. Nigerian higher education can produce graduates who are not only academically competent but also mentally resilient. This goal demands urgent and collaborative action from all stakeholders.

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