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ACADEMIC STRESS

IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND ITS IMPACT ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

ESTRÉS ACADÉMICO EN ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS Y SU IMPACTO EN EL RENDIMIENTO ACADÉMICO

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ABSTRACT

Academic stress in university students and its impact on academic performance is a highly relevant topic within the field of educational psychology, due to its increasing prevalence and its implications for students' psychological, emotional, and social well-being. This phenomenon has become a central concern in higher education, as current academic demands can generate high levels of stress that affect both learning and the student's quality of life. The objective of this study was to analyze the relationship between academic stress and academic performance in university students. The methodology used was qualitative, with a documentary and descriptive design based on a review of recent scientific literature. Studies published in academic databases were selected, prioritizing research related to academic stress, student performance, psychological well-being, and associated factors such as self-efficacy, coping mechanisms, and lifestyles. It was found that high levels of stress are associated with difficulties in concentration, emotional exhaustion, disruptions in lifestyle habits, and decreased academic performance. Furthermore, it was found that factors such as self-efficacy, coping strategies, social support, and healthy lifestyles can act as protective elements that moderate its negative effects. The reviewed evidence confirms that academic stress is a multidimensional phenomenon that requires a comprehensive approach at both the individual and institutional levels.

Keywords:

Academic stress, academic performance, university students, psychological well-being, coping, higher education.

RESUMEN

El estrés académico en estudiantes universitarios y su impacto en el rendimiento académico constituye un tema de gran relevancia dentro del ámbito de la psicología educativa, debido a su creciente prevalencia y a sus implicaciones en el bienestar psicológico, emocional y social de los estudiantes. Este fenómeno se ha convertido en una preocupación central en la educación superior, ya que las exigencias académicas actuales pueden generar niveles elevados de tensión que afectan tanto el aprendizaje como la calidad de vida del estudiante. El objetivo del presente estudio fue analizar la relación entre el estrés académico y el rendimiento académico en estudiantes universitarios. La metodología utilizada fue de tipo cualitativo, con un diseño documental y descriptivo basado en la revisión de literatura científica reciente. Se realizó la selección de estudios publicados en bases de datos académicas, priorizando investigaciones relacionadas con el estrés académico, el rendimiento estudiantil, el bienestar psicológico y factores asociados como la autoeficacia, el afrontamiento y los estilos de vida. Se identificó que niveles elevados de estrés se asocian con dificultades en la concentración, agotamiento emocional, alteraciones en los hábitos de vida y disminución del desempeño académico. Asimismo, se encontró que factores como la autoeficacia, las estrategias de afrontamiento, el apoyo social y los estilos de vida saludables pueden actuar como elementos protectores que moderan sus efectos negativos. La evidencia revisada confirma que el estrés académico es un fenómeno multidimensional que requiere un abordaje integral desde lo individual y lo institucional.

Palabras clave:

Estrés académico, rendimiento académico, estudiantes universitarios, bienestar psicológico, afrontamiento, educación superior.

INTRODUCTION

Academic stress in university students has become a topic of growing interest within the fields of educational psychology and mental health research due to its significant impact on personal development, psychological well-being, and academic performance. In today's higher education environment, students face multiple demands, including heavy workloads, constant assessments, pressure to achieve high results, and the need to adapt to competitive environments. These demands can generate a stress response that, when persistent or excessive, can negatively affect various areas of a student's functioning.

Academic stress is understood as the set of physical, emotional, and cognitive reactions that arise when the demands of the academic environment exceed a student's perceived resources for coping. This phenomenon not only influences an individual's emotional state but can also impact their academic performance and overall quality of life. In this regard, Barbayannis et al. (2022) point out that academic stress is closely related to the mental well-being of university students, demonstrating associations with symptoms of anxiety, depression, and decreased psychological well-being. Furthermore, the authors emphasize that the experience of stress is not uniform, as some student groups are more vulnerable depending on personal, social, and contextual factors, including external conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified academic demands and social isolation.

Additionally, Zhao (2024) analyzes academic stress from a typological perspective, highlighting the importance of variables such as academic self-efficacy and coping strategies. His findings indicate that students with a higher perception of personal competence and positive coping strategies tend to experience higher levels of academic satisfaction, even in highly demanding contexts. Conversely, students with low self-efficacy and inadequate coping strategies exhibit higher levels of stress and lower satisfaction with their university experience, which can affect their motivation and retention in their studies.

Regarding academic performance, several studies have demonstrated that academic stress can significantly influence student performance. Chacón et al. (2025) found that academic stress acts as a predictor of university performance, negatively affecting grades and overall performance. This suggests that the impact of stress is not limited to emotional well-being but also has direct consequences for academic outcomes. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2025) point out that prolonged stress can contribute to the development of academic burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, demotivation, and decreased performance, especially when students lack adequate coping strategies or institutional support.

For her part, Iqra (2024), in a systematic review, emphasizes that academic stress should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon involving individual, institutional, and social factors. From this perspective, the need to address academic stress holistically is highlighted, considering both the student's personal characteristics and the conditions of the educational environment. This comprehensive view allows for a better understanding of the dynamics that influence the emergence and maintenance of stress, as well as its effects on the educational experience.

Taken together, the empirical evidence suggests that academic stress is a complex phenomenon that significantly impacts the psychological well-being, academic satisfaction, and performance of university students. However, gaps remain in the literature regarding a detailed understanding of how these variables interact with each other in different educational contexts, as well as in the identification of protective factors that can mitigate its negative effects.

In this regard, the present study aims to analyze the relationship between academic stress and academic performance in university students, considering its impact on psychological well-being and exploring associated factors that may influence this relationship. In this way, it seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon of academic stress, to provide evidence that will allow for the development of intervention and support strategies aimed at improving the educational experience and performance of students at the university level.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach, with a documentary and descriptive design, based on the review and analysis of recent scientific literature related to academic stress in university students and its impact on academic performance. This type of methodology allows for the examination, synthesis, and understanding of the most relevant findings from previous research, to construct a comprehensive view of the phenomenon under study without resorting to the direct collection of empirical data.

For this study, a systematic search was conducted for scientific articles published in recognized academic databases, such as indexed journals in psychology, education, and health sciences. Research published primarily in recent years was selected to ensure the currency and relevance of the information analyzed. Inclusion criteria included studies addressing academic stress in university students, its relationship with academic performance and psychological well-being, as well as associated factors such as coping strategies, self-efficacy, lifestyle, and social context.

Studies that were not directly related to the university context or that did not provide relevant empirical or theoretical evidence for the analysis of the phenomenon were also excluded. The collected information was organized through a process of critical reading, identification of thematic categories, and comparison of results between authors, which allowed for the establishment of points of convergence and divergence among the different studies reviewed.

The information was analyzed using content analysis, which allowed the contributions to be grouped into thematic areas such as: effects of academic stress on mental health, impact on academic performance, risk, and protective factors, and associated psychosocial variables. This process facilitated a comprehensive interpretation of the phenomenon and the development of conclusions based on scientific evidence.

DEVELOPMENT

Analyzing academic stress in university students requires understanding it as a dynamic phenomenon that occurs within complex educational systems, where personal, institutional, and contextual factors converge. Unlike other forms of everyday stress, academic stress is characterized by its continuity over time, its direct relationship with assessment processes, and its cumulative impact on student performance. In this sense, it is not merely an emotional reaction to specific situations, but a prolonged experience that can modify patterns of behavior, thought, and physiological response.

One of the most relevant aspects in the study of academic stress is its relationship to students' coping mechanisms. When academic demands remain consistently high, the body activates alert responses that, if not properly regulated, can lead to progressive burnout. This burnout manifests not only psychologically but also physically, affecting sleep, energy levels, and recovery capacity. Several studies have indicated that prolonged exposure to these conditions can disrupt study and rest rhythms, generating cycles of fatigue that directly impact sustained academic performance.

In the cognitive domain, academic stress has significant effects on fundamental learning processes. Selective attention, working memory, and the ability to organize information can be diminished when students are under high levels of pressure. This is because the cognitive system prioritizes responding to the perceived threat, reducing the resources available for complex tasks such as reasoning and problem-solving. Consequently, even highly prepared students may experience difficulties demonstrating their knowledge in assessment situations.

Another key element is the role of coping strategies, which largely determine how students deal with academic

demands. Adaptive strategies, such as time management, seeking academic and emotional support, and setting realistic goals, can reduce the impact of stress. Conversely, avoidance strategies, such as procrastination, denial, or social isolation, tend to intensify psychological distress. Zhao (2024) highlights that the effectiveness of these strategies is closely linked to the student's perceived control over their academic performance, which directly influences their level of satisfaction and emotional stability.

From another perspective, academic stress can also be analyzed as a factor influencing the construction of a student's academic identity. During their university years, individuals not only acquire disciplinary knowledge but also develop a perception of themselves as learners and future professionals. In this process, the constant experience of stress can affect confidence in one's own abilities, generating doubts about remaining in the program or about career choices. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the early years of university education, when levels of adaptation are still developing.

Furthermore, recent literature has identified that academic stress is not evenly distributed among all students. Certain groups are more vulnerable due to specific circumstances, such as additional workload, family responsibilities, or a lack of financial resources. These external factors increase the pressure on students, limiting their study time and reducing their opportunities for rest. In this sense, academic stress should also be understood as a socially conditioned phenomenon, in which structural inequalities play a decisive role.

Regarding academic performance, it's important to consider that stress doesn't always produce exclusively negative effects. In some cases, moderate levels of stress can act as a stimulus, promoting activation, concentration, and preparation for assessments. However, when these levels exceed a student's regulatory capacity, the effect reverses, and performance begins to decline. This nonlinear relationship between stress and performance has been widely discussed in the literature, highlighting the importance of identifying optimal balance points for learning.

Another relevant aspect is the influence of the institutional environment on the generation of academic stress. Pedagogical practices, assessment systems, and the organization of the academic calendar can significantly contribute to the workload perceived by students. For example, the accumulation of exams in short periods, the lack of timely feedback, and the limited flexibility in assessment processes can increase the perception of pressure. Iqra (2024) emphasizes that addressing academic stress requires not only individual interventions but also transformations in educational structures that allow for the reduction of unnecessary stressors.

Furthermore, academic stress can influence students' study behavior, altering their habits and routines. Some students tend to excessively increase their study hours in response to stress, which can lead to physical and mental exhaustion. Others, on the other hand, reduce their academic activity due to anxiety or feelings of inadequacy, creating a negative cycle of poor performance and increased stress. These dynamics demonstrate that stress is not only a consequence of the academic environment but also a factor that actively modifies student behavior.

From a psychoeducational perspective, it is essential to consider the role of emotional self-regulation in managing academic stress. A student's ability to recognize, understand, and regulate their emotions directly influences their performance and well-being. A lack of these skills can increase vulnerability to stress, while their development can act as a protective factor that improves adaptation to the university environment. In this sense, educational institutions have an important role to play in promoting socio-emotional competencies that enable students to cope more effectively with academic demands.

Academic stress should be understood as a multifactorial phenomenon requiring a comprehensive approach. Its impact is not limited to academic performance but extends to mental health, motivation, interpersonal relationships, and the student's educational trajectory. Current evidence suggests the need to implement intervention strategies that include both strengthening individual skills and improving institutional conditions. Only through this comprehensive approach is it possible to reduce the negative effects of academic stress and promote more balanced and sustainable educational experiences.

Academic stress has been extensively studied for its impact on students' psychological well-being and performance, and one of the most relevant contributions is that of Pascoe et al. (2020), who demonstrate that this phenomenon not only affects academic performance but also has direct consequences for mental health at different educational levels. In their analysis, the authors highlight that academic stress is consistently associated with symptoms of anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion, which negatively impacts concentration, motivation, and learning capacity. They also point out that the transition between educational stages increases vulnerability to stress due to adapting to new demands, heavier workloads, and changes in assessment systems. Similarly, they emphasize that this type of stress should not be understood as an isolated event but as a cumulative process that can progressively affect a student's academic and personal development. Consequently, their main contribution lies in demonstrating the need to address academic stress from a comprehensive perspective that considers both psychological well-being and educational demands.

Furthermore, Benítez-Agudelo et al. (2025) provide significant evidence through a longitudinal study that allows observation of the effects of academic stress over time, demonstrating that its consequences are not only immediate but also sustained and progressive. In this regard, the authors find that continuous exposure to academic stress is related to alterations in psychological well-being, changes in physiological markers, and modifications in health habits, such as sleep and physical activity. They also highlight that these effects tend to accumulate, generating a progressive deterioration in academic performance and the student's quality of life. Likewise, they emphasize that the interaction between psychological and physiological factors allows for a more complete understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon, since stress affects not only the mind but also bodily functioning. Consequently, their contribution is fundamental in demonstrating that academic stress has a multidimensional and long-term impact.

In addition, Mohamad Idaris et al. (2022) analyze the impact of academic stressors on the performance of higher education students, highlighting those factors such as academic workload, pressure to obtain good grades, and constant evaluation directly influence student performance. In their study, the authors explain that the perception of stress varies according to each student's individual characteristics, which determines how they cope with academic demands. They also point out that when stressors are not managed adequately, they can lead to a significant decrease in academic productivity and the quality of learning. Furthermore, they emphasize that the educational context plays an important role in generating stress, since highly competitive systems tend to intensify the pressure on students. Consequently, their contribution focuses on identifying the main stressors and their direct relationship with academic performance.

Regarding protective factors, Monserrat-Hernández et al. (2023) broaden the understanding of academic stress by incorporating lifestyle variables, such as physical activity and diet, highlighting their fundamental role in stress regulation. In their research, the authors point out that students who maintain healthy habits exhibit lower levels of academic stress, as physical exercise contributes to tension release and improves mood, while a balanced diet supports cognitive function. Conversely, a lack of physical activity and an inadequate diet are associated with greater vulnerability to stress and reduced coping capacity. They also emphasize that these habits not only influence physical well-being but also emotional stability and academic performance. Consequently, their contribution lies in demonstrating the importance of lifestyle factors as modulators of academic stress.

Similarly, Abdullah et al. (2024) analyze the impact of academic stress on emotional well-being and university

performance, highlighting that this phenomenon has significant negative effects on both dimensions. In their study, the authors demonstrate that high levels of stress are associated with increased anxiety, emotional fatigue, and decreased academic performance, which directly affects the student's university experience. They also point out that stress can lead to difficulties in emotional regulation, increasing feelings of overload and reducing the ability to adapt to academic demands. Furthermore, they emphasize that there is a close relationship between a student's emotional state and their academic performance, as both influence each other. Consequently, their main contribution lies in demonstrating the direct connection between stress, emotional well-being, and academic performance.

On the other hand, Taj et al. (2024) contribute to the analysis of academic stress by focusing on its specific impact on university performance, highlighting those high levels of stress significantly reduce concentration, study efficiency, and information retention. In their research, the authors explain that excessive stress interferes with the cognitive processes necessary for learning, leading to poor academic performance. They also point out that students with higher stress levels tend to exhibit demotivation, procrastination, and difficulty fulfilling their academic responsibilities. Furthermore, they emphasize that a lack of adequate coping strategies exacerbates these negative effects. Consequently, their study reinforces the idea that academic stress is a determining factor in student performance.

Similarly, AlHamlan et al. (2025) analyze the impact of academic stress on the lifestyles of university students, demonstrating that this phenomenon affects not only academic performance but also daily health-related habits. In their study, the authors point out that academic stress is associated with sleep disturbances, changes in eating habits, and reduced physical activity, which creates an imbalance in the student's daily life. Furthermore, they explain that these lifestyle changes can intensify stress, creating a negative cycle that is difficult to break. They also highlight that prolonged stress can affect the student's overall health and diminish their quality of life. Consequently, their contribution lies in demonstrating the relationship between academic stress and daily behavioral patterns.

Similarly, Zhang et al. (2024) analyze the relationship between mental health, self-control, and academic performance, highlighting that academic stress significantly influences these variables. In their study, the authors point out that students with greater self-control exhibit better academic results and a lesser negative impact from stress, as they can regulate their emotions and study behaviors more efficiently. They also emphasize that mental health acts as a mediating factor between stress and academic performance, meaning that its deterioration can amplify the negative effects of stress. Furthermore, they

underscore the importance of strengthening self-regulation skills to improve academic performance. Consequently, their contribution focuses on the interaction between key psychological variables in the educational context.

Kristensen et al. (2023) provide evidence on the relationship between academic stress, self-efficacy, and psychological distress, highlighting that self-efficacy acts as an important protective factor against stress. In their study, the authors explain that students with a higher perception of academic competence experience lower levels of stress and better emotional adjustment, while those with low self-efficacy are more vulnerable to psychological distress. They also point out that these variables interact dynamically within the individual, influencing their response to academic demands. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of self-efficacy as a key psychological resource for university adjustment. Consequently, their contribution lies in demonstrating the moderating role of self-efficacy in academic stress.

Deng et al. (2022) broaden the understanding of academic stress by including the family context as an influential factor, noting that the combination of academic and family stress has a significant impact on mental health and student performance. In their research, the authors demonstrate that students exposed to high levels of pressure both at home and at university have a greater risk of depression and lower academic performance. They also highlight that family support can act as a protective factor that mitigates the negative effects of academic stress. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of considering the student's social environment to fully understand their academic experience. Consequently, their contribution lies in integrating family variables into the analysis of academic stress.

Han et al. (2024) contributes to the study of academic stress from a longitudinal perspective, highlighting that this phenomenon has cumulative effects on students' mental health and lifestyle habits. In their research, the authors point out that sustained stress can progressively alter academic and personal behavior, affecting both performance and overall well-being. They also explain that there is a bidirectional relationship between stress and lifestyle, as both influence each other. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of considering the evolution of stress over time to understand its true effects. Consequently, their contribution lies in demonstrating the dynamic nature of academic stress.

AlHadi et al. (2014) identified the main stressors present in university life, highlighting factors such as academic workload, exams, and institutional pressure as central elements that affect student performance. In their study, the authors point out that these stressors have a direct impact on decreased academic performance and increased

psychological strain. They also emphasize that early identification of these factors is key to developing effective intervention strategies. Furthermore, they highlight that the university environment can be a significant source of stress when adequate support mechanisms are lacking. Therefore, their contribution lies in identifying the main academic stressors.

Ruiz-Camacho & Gozalo (2025) analyze the prediction of stress responses in university students, highlighting the influence of sociodemographic and academic variables on the intensity of stress experienced. In their study, the authors explain that factors such as age, gender, and educational context influence how students respond to academic demands. They also point out that these individual differences allow for the prediction of stress levels and the design of more specific intervention strategies. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of considering student diversity in the analysis of academic stress. Consequently, their contribution lies in the predictive approach to the phenomenon.

Finally, Bedewy & Gabriel (2015) analyze perceptions of academic stress and its main sources, highlighting that how students interpret academic demands directly influences their stress levels. In their research, the authors develop an instrument to measure perceived academic stress, allowing for a more precise assessment of this phenomenon. They also point out that factors such as workload, performance pressure, and constant evaluation are the main sources of perceived stress. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of understanding the student's subjective experience of stress. Consequently, their contribution lies in the conceptualization and measurement of academic stress from the student's perspective.

The reviewed studies reveal that academic stress is a complex, dynamic, and multifactorial phenomenon that significantly impacts university life. Generally speaking, stress not only influences academic performance but also has profound effects on students' mental health, emotional well-being, and lifestyle habits. Furthermore, this phenomenon can manifest immediately or over a prolonged period, generating cumulative consequences when not managed effectively.

Furthermore, research agrees that academic stress is determined by multiple factors, including workload, assessment systems, institutional pressure, and personal demands. Added to this are individual variables such as self-efficacy, self-control, and coping strategies, which can act as protective or risk factors depending on their level of development. Similarly, the influence of the social and family context is recognized, broadening the understanding of stress beyond the strictly academic sphere.

On the other hand, studies highlight that the impact of stress is not uniform across all students, as there are

significant differences based on personal and contextual characteristics. Some students adapt better thanks to psychological resources and healthy habits, while others are more vulnerable, which can lead to emotional exhaustion, decreased performance, and disruptions to their lifestyle. In this regard, the importance of considering both internal and external factors to understand the individual experience of stress is emphasized.

Finally, the evidence suggests that academic stress should be addressed from a holistic perspective that includes both individual interventions and improvements in educational conditions. This involves not only strengthening students' coping skills but also promoting more balanced and healthy academic environments. Taken together, the reviewed contributions allow us to conclude that academic stress is a central phenomenon in current higher education, with direct implications for students' academic, psychological, and social development.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of academic stress in university students leads to the conclusion that this phenomenon constitutes a relevant and persistent problem within higher education, due to its direct impact on psychological well-being and academic performance. A review of the scientific literature reveals that academic stress is not an isolated reaction, but rather a complex process that develops from the interaction between high academic demands and the student's coping capacity. In this sense, it is confirmed that institutional demands, workload, and evaluation systems are central factors in the generation of stress.

Furthermore, academic stress significantly impacts multiple dimensions of a student's life, particularly their mental health, emotional stability, and academic performance. The reviewed evidence shows that high levels of stress are associated with cognitive difficulties, decreased concentration, emotional exhaustion, and reduced academic achievement. Moreover, this phenomenon can extend to other areas of a student's life, affecting their sleep, eating habits, physical activity, and social relationships, thus increasing their overall vulnerability.

On the other hand, it is recognized that not all students experience academic stress in the same way, as individual and contextual factors modulate its impact. Variables such as self-efficacy, self-control, coping strategies, social support, and family environment play a determining role in how students face academic demands. In this sense, it is acknowledged that certain personal resources can act as protective factors, while their absence can increase the risk of negative consequences.

Similarly, it is concluded that academic stress must be understood from a comprehensive and multidimensional perspective, one that is not limited solely to the analysis of

academic performance, but also includes psychological, social, and physiological aspects. This view allows us to understand that the problem does not depend exclusively on the student, but also on the institutional conditions in which the educational process takes place.

Finally, it is established that it is necessary to implement intervention strategies at both the individual and institutional levels, aimed at preventing and managing academic stress. This involves strengthening students' coping skills, promoting healthy lifestyles, and simultaneously improving academic conditions to reduce unnecessary stressors. Overall, it is concluded that addressing academic stress comprehensively is fundamental to improving educational quality, student well-being, and academic performance in higher education.

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