

## THE IMPACT OF ACADEMIC WORKLOAD ON STRESS LEVELS AND PROCRASTINATION AMONG FIRST-SEMESTER UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** The early stage of college is a crucial transitional period for new students, marked by the need to adjust to the higher education learning system. During this phase, first-year students often face a heavy academic workload, which can significantly affect their psychological well-being. This study aims to describe the impact of academic workload on stress levels and procrastination tendencies among early-semester university students. This research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach, utilizing open-ended questionnaires distributed online via Google Forms for data collection. The participants were first- and second-semester students selected through purposive sampling. The findings reveal that most students feel overwhelmed by the quantity and complexity of assignments. This contributes to heightened academic stress, as indicated by symptoms such as mental fatigue, anxiety, and decreased motivation to study. Furthermore, unmanaged stress was found to lead to procrastination behaviors, serving as a coping mechanism to avoid academic pressure. Therefore, educational institutions must play an active role in providing psychosocial support and time management training to help prevent the long-term negative effects on students' mental health.

Keywords: Academic Workload, Academic Stress, Procrastination, Early-Semester Students

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### INTRODUCTION

Becoming a university student is not only about pursuing formal education but also marks a significant transition from adolescence to adulthood. During this period, individuals are expected to be independent, manage their own time, and adapt to a learning system that is far more complex than that of high school. This aligns with the Regulation of the Government of

the Republic of Indonesia No. 30 of 1990, which states that a student is an individual pursuing knowledge in higher education and actively participating in the learning process. With increasing academic demands, students must face various pressures such as homework, lab reports, presentations, and group projects—all of which must be completed within tight deadlines. According to Pertiwi (2021), a heavy academic workload coupled with poor time management skills can cause significant psychological stress. Similarly, Khansa and Kumalasari (2022) indicate that the high frequency of academic assignments is directly linked to an increased risk of mental health issues such as stress and anxiety. This suggests that academic burden is one of the major contributors to mental imbalance among students, particularly those in the early semesters.

Academic stress is a type of emotional pressure that arises when academic demands exceed an individual's perceived capabilities. Hidayanti and Chris (2022) found in their research that students who struggle to manage their study pace and workload tend to experience stress, marked by difficulty concentrating and a decline in study motivation. Furthermore, Pratiwi (2020) stated that prolonged academic stress can lead to varying degrees of depression if not properly addressed. Prior studies by Wibowo and Rahmi (2021) reinforce these findings, showing that first-year students tend to experience higher levels of stress than their senior counterparts due to adaptation difficulties and limited social support in the early stages of college. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of academic stress is essential in helping students navigate the initial phase of higher education in a healthy and productive manner.

In response to academic pressure, some students resort to ineffective coping strategies such as procrastination. Academic procrastination refers to the behavior of delaying the completion of assignments despite being aware of the negative consequences. Pertiwi (2021) links high stress levels to increased tendencies of procrastination among students as a form of avoidance from academic pressure. Yuvita et al. (2022) also revealed that procrastination is not only influenced by stress but is also associated with low self-efficacy and poor time management skills. In line with this, Nurmalasari and Sari (2021) found that students who experience high levels of stress are more likely to procrastinate when completing academic tasks. Therefore, procrastination should not merely be seen as a behavioral issue, but also as an indicator closely related to the academic stress experienced by students.

Previous studies have shown that first-year students are the most vulnerable group to stress and procrastination. Gisela and colleagues (2022) reported that freshmen often lack effective strategies to cope with academic demands, leading them to avoid responsibilities as a form of escape. Additionally, Rahardjo and Putri (2020) emphasized that the lack of experience, time management skills, and understanding of faculty expectations make new students more susceptible to pressure. The process of adjusting to a new campus environment, academic norms, and social interactions also contributes to student stress. These circumstances highlight that the early period of college is critical in determining students' mental well-being and academic success.

In this context, higher education institutions must take responsibility in creating a learning environment that not only emphasizes academic achievement but also supports the mental well-being of their students. As Siregar and Fitri (2021) stated, universities should provide counseling services, time management training, and a more balanced and realistic workload. This study aims to explore how academic workload affects stress levels and procrastination behavior in first-year students. The main research questions are: (1) What is the relationship between academic workload and stress levels among early-semester students? and (2) Does academic-related stress increase the tendency for procrastination in new students? The objective of this study is to analyze the correlation between workload, stress, and procrastination, and to offer recommendations for higher education institutions in developing more supportive academic policies. By deeply understanding the root causes of these issues, it is hoped that universities can create a healthier, more responsive, and student-friendly learning environment for freshmen.

## **METODOLOGI**

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of how academic workload affects the stress levels and procrastination behavior of first-semester students in higher education institutions. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for a more comprehensive exploration of social realities through the subjective experiences of participants, as compared to the quantitative approach

which emphasizes numerical measurements (Moleong, 2019). Through this approach, the researcher is able to capture students' interpretations of academic pressure, their emotional reactions, and the impact of such pressure on their tendency to procrastinate.

### **Research Design**

The design of this study is descriptive qualitative, which aims to describe, explain, and interpret existing social phenomena without manipulating variables. This study does not focus on hypothesis testing as in quantitative research, but rather on presenting phenomena in a narrative form. In this case, the researcher seeks to explore how early-semester students perceive their academic workload, the stress they experience, and how they respond to such pressure through procrastination behavior.

### **Research Subject and Location**

Participants in this study were early-semester students (1st and 2nd semesters) at a university in Indonesia. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a method in which samples are chosen based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The criteria for participants were as follows:

- Active students currently enrolled in the 1st or 2nd semester;
- Experiencing or facing academic pressure due to college assignments;
- Willing to provide honest, transparent information voluntarily.

The number of participants was not predetermined, as qualitative research emphasizes the depth and variety of information over quantity. Therefore, data collection continued until saturation was reached-when no new information emerged from additional participants.

### **Data Collecting Techniques**

Data were collected through an open-ended survey distributed online via Google Forms. This method was chosen due to its ease of distribution, broad reach, and efficiency in gathering adaptive data from respondents across diverse regions and backgrounds.

The open-ended questionnaire included several questions designed to investigate:

- How students perceive and feel about the academic workload they face;

- The impact of the workload on their psychological condition, such as stress, fatigue, and anxiety;
- The actions they take to deal with this pressure, including tendencies to delay tasks as a form of procrastination.

As an open-ended survey, respondents were free to answer in their own words, allowing the researcher to capture the unique meanings and personal expressions of each individual.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

The data obtained from the open-ended responses were analyzed using content analysis, a technique used to identify, classify, and interpret meaning from qualitative data. The analysis process involved the following steps:

- **Data Reduction:** The researcher read all responses, then selected and simplified the data according to the research focus.
- **Data Display:** Relevant answers were grouped into themes such as perceptions of assignments, academic pressure, symptoms of stress, and strategies to overcome procrastination.
- **Conclusion Drawing:** After categorizing all data, the researcher interpreted and summarized emerging patterns or findings based on context.

The analysis followed an inductive process, meaning that conclusions were drawn from the data itself, without being dominated by prior assumptions. The focus was on how students described their academic situations and how those experiences influenced their attitudes toward stress and task postponement.

### **Data Validity Verification**

In qualitative research, data validity is crucial to maintaining the credibility of the findings.

The researcher applied several validation techniques, including:

- **Technique triangulation,** by comparing questionnaire findings with relevant theories and scientific references to ensure that interpretations align with existing concepts;
- **Respondent checking,** where selected participants were asked to review their responses and confirm that the researcher had correctly understood their intended meaning;

- Peer discussion, involving consultation with academic advisors or fellow researchers to gain alternative perspectives and minimize interpretative bias.

These techniques ensure that the findings truly reflect the authentic experiences and thoughts of the participants.

## **RESEARCH RESULT**

This study involved 25 early-year university students, specifically those in their 1st and 2nd semesters, from a university in Indonesia. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on students who actively attended classes, were willing to participate voluntarily, and had relevant experiences with academic workload.

Most participants were from the Education and Economics departments, aged between 18 and 20 years old. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires distributed via Google Forms, allowing students to provide honest and in-depth responses based on their personal experiences.

Analysis of the respondents' answers revealed five main themes:

- (1) academic workload,
- (2) stress levels,
- (3) procrastination behavior,
- (4) ways of coping with stress, and
- (5) students' expectations from the university.

Each theme was analyzed based on recurring patterns in the responses and supported by direct quotes.

### **Academic Workload**

From the analysis, most early-semester students felt overwhelmed by the amount of academic tasks they had to complete. In a single week, they could receive assignments from nearly every subject, often with overlapping deadlines. This situation led to significant pressure and feelings of being overwhelmed. Some students also mentioned difficulty managing their time, especially if they were still adjusting to the university system.

Sample quotes:

- “In one week, I can have assignments from five different courses, all due around the same time. I don’t even know where to start.”
- “The college system is very different from school. Here, lecturers give assignments without enough explanation and with very short deadlines.”
- “The workload leaves me no time to rest, especially when there are lab sessions too. I often stay up late just to finish assignments.”

### **Academic Stress Levels**

The heavy workload greatly impacted students’ stress levels. Many respondents reported experiencing significant academic stress, especially when they struggled to understand the course material but still had to complete assignments. Symptoms of stress mentioned included difficulty sleeping, anxiety, feeling pressured, and even a loss of motivation to study.

Sample quotes:

- “Sometimes I feel like I’m being chased. One task isn’t done yet, and there’s already another one. It feels like there’s never a moment to breathe.”
- “My stress doesn’t just come from the amount of assignments, but also from not understanding the material. That makes me anxious and afraid I’ll fail.”
- “When assignments pile up, I can’t concentrate. I often feel blank in class, just thinking about the unfinished work.”

### **Procrastination Behavior**

Most respondents admitted to procrastinating on assignments. This behavior was often triggered by stress, fatigue, fear of not doing the work well, or confusion about the task itself. Although they were aware of the consequences, they still chose to delay as a way of escaping the pressure.

Sample quotes:

- “I often postpone assignments, not because I’m lazy, but because I get stressed just looking at how many there are and not knowing where to start.”
- “Usually, I do assignments close to the deadline, because starting too early just stresses me out.”

- “Sometimes, I choose to sleep or scroll through my phone to forget about assignments for a while-but in the end, they’re still not done.”

### **Coping Strategies for Academic Pressure**

Students used a variety of methods to cope with the pressure from overwhelming tasks. Some tried to plan their schedules, engage in light physical activities, or seek temporary distractions, while others preferred talking to friends or isolating themselves. Not all strategies were effective-some even worsened their stress levels.

Sample quotes:

- “I try to make a plan so I don’t feel rushed, although it doesn’t always work when I’m feeling unmotivated.”
- “When I’m stressed, I usually play games for a bit, then try to tackle my tasks little by little.”
- “I talk to my friends. We often share information about assignments, and that helps because it makes me feel I’m not alone.”

### **Students’ Expectations Toward the University**

Most survey participants hoped that the university and lecturers would be more considerate when assigning tasks and avoid overlapping deadlines. They also expressed a desire for psychological support, such as counseling services or time management workshops, to help them adjust to the new academic environment.

Sample quotes:

- “I hope the lecturers coordinate better when giving assignments. Sometimes, all the tasks come in the same week.”
- “If there were counseling programs or time management workshops for freshmen, I would definitely join. I’m still learning how to manage everything.”
- “In my opinion, the university should pay more attention to students’ mental health, not just grades and attendance.”

## **DISCUSSION**

Based on the analysis of data from open-ended questionnaires distributed via Google Forms, it was found that academic workload is the primary cause of academic stress and

procrastination behavior among early-semester students. Almost all respondents shared their personal experiences in dealing with heavy and overwhelming academic demands, which directly affected their mental condition and learning approaches.

These findings support previous studies by Pertiwi (2021) and Khansa and Kumalasari (2022), which revealed that excessive academic workload, coupled with a lack of adaptive coping strategies, can trigger psychological pressure, mental fatigue, and even a decline in learning motivation.

In the context of first-year students, this pressure becomes more complex as they are undergoing a transitional phase from the high school education system to a higher education system that is more independent, fast-paced, and demanding. During this phase, many students have not yet mastered effective learning skills, including time management, academic planning, and stress management. This makes them a vulnerable group when it comes to academic pressure.

One of the most evident consequences of this stress is the emergence of procrastination behavior—an inclination to delay assignments despite being aware of their importance. Procrastination is not merely caused by laziness but often serves as an escape mechanism from anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and confusion when facing complex tasks. This aligns with the perspective of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who stated that coping is a cognitive and behavioral response to stressful situations. In this case, procrastination can be seen as a form of emotion-focused coping characterized by avoidance.

Interestingly, this study revealed that some students made efforts to cope with the pressure, such as creating study schedules, discussing with peers, or engaging in relaxing activities. However, these strategies were not always effective in reducing stress, especially when not accompanied by a proper understanding of appropriate coping techniques.

Students also expressed their hope that higher education institutions would pay more attention to their mental well-being, not just evaluate them based on academic performance. They hoped for better coordination among lecturers in assigning tasks to prevent deadline

clustering, as well as the availability of counseling services or self-development training to enhance their academic resilience.

Therefore, the results of this study indicate that addressing academic stress and procrastination among early-semester students requires a comprehensive approach. It is not enough to merely reduce the number of assignments-students must also be empowered with self-management skills, such as time management, prioritization, relaxation techniques, and building self-confidence in the academic context.

Higher education institutions should not only function as providers of academic material but also as supporters of students' mental and emotional development, especially during the early stages of their university journey. Implementing programs such as student coaching, academic orientation sessions, and peer mentoring can serve as concrete solutions to help first-year students become more prepared and resilient.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study shows that academic workload has a significant impact on stress levels and procrastination behavior among first-year university students. The transition from high school to university presents various new challenges, where students are expected to quickly adapt to an independent and demanding learning environment. The accumulation of assignments-often with closely timed deadlines-leaves students feeling overwhelmed, pressured, and mentally exhausted.

The findings reveal that the stress experienced by students not only affects their emotional well-being but also triggers procrastination behavior, which is not caused by laziness but rather as a form of avoidance stemming from anxiety and confusion. Although some students attempt to cope with the pressure through personal efforts such as time management or peer support, many still struggle due to a lack of effective strategies and institutional support.

Therefore, it is crucial for higher education institutions to understand the psychological impact of academic pressure on early-semester students. Beyond teaching, universities should provide support systems that include coordinated assignment planning among lecturers,

accessible counseling services, and training programs to improve students' self-management and coping skills. In doing so, institutions can help students build the emotional resilience and academic independence necessary for success in their educational journey.

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