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Effects of Psycho-Education Intervention on Academic Stress among Students of Federal College of Education, Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effect of psycho-education intervention on academic stress among students of Federal College of Education, Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria. The study was guided by three objectives, three research questions and three null hypotheses. The study adopted a quasi-experimental pre-test-post-test non-equivalent control group design. The population comprised 7,372 NCE II students in the School of Sciences, Federal College of Education, Zaria. Through simple random sampling using balloting, two course combinations were selected, giving a sample of 105 students (82 in the experimental group and 23 in the control group). Data were collected using an adapted Students' Academic Stress Questionnaire covering physiological, social and examination stress, which demonstrated acceptable reliability. The experimental group received a structured weekly psycho-education intervention, while the control group received a placebo programme on Family Life Education. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, and analysis of covariance was used to test the null hypotheses at the conventional significance level, with pre-test scores as covariates. The results showed statistically significant effects of the intervention on overall academic stress, physiological stress and examination stress after controlling for pre-test scores, with large effect sizes; all null hypotheses were rejected. The study concluded that a structured psycho-education programme combining stress information, coping-skills training and emotional support reduced academic stress among college of education students. It was recommended that college management integrate such a programme into student support services and that counsellors be trained to deliver it using a standardised manual.

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INTRODUCTION

Students moving from secondary school to a tertiary institution such as a college of education meet a very different set of demands. Their weeks are filled with lectures, almost daily assignments, laboratory work, library visits, and preparation for teaching practice and examinations. At the same time they are separated from their parents and must build new relationships with course mates and lecturers. Taken together, these academic and social engagements can be stressful. Stress is commonly understood as a negative emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological process that occurs as an individual tries to adjust to or cope with stressors (Agolla & Ongori, 2009; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In education, the form of stress that arises from schoolwork and the learning environment is called academic stress. It is the mental distress students experience in relation to anticipated academic failure or an awareness that failure is possible, and it tends to appear when academic demands exceed the adaptive resources available to the student (Misra

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& Castillo, 2004). Known sources include heavy assignment loads, competition with other students, fear of failure, lack of money, poor relationships with peers or lecturers, and family problems (Agolla & Ongori, 2009).

This study treats academic stress as having three dimensions: physiological, social and examination stress. Physiological stress is the body's automatic response to demands that disrupt its balance, and it shows up as fatigue, muscle tension, palpitations, sweating, disturbed sleep, headaches and similar complaints. Social stress is the emotional pressure that arises from situations that threaten one's self-esteem, standing or sense of belonging, such as peer pressure, loneliness, social comparison and negative feedback from course mates and lecturers. Examination stress is the extreme mental and emotional distress that students experience before or during examinations, usually because of fear of failure, performance pressure, unfamiliar questions and limited time. Each of these dimensions can reduce concentration and determination and, in turn, academic performance.

The scale of the problem is considerable. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis reported a pooled prevalence of perceived stress of about 65% among university students in Africa, with heavy workloads and financial hardship among the drivers (Tadesse et al., 2025). Within Nigeria, a study of medical undergraduates found that academic stressors, particularly examinations and the volume of content, produced high to severe stress in more than half of the students (Okafor et al., 2023), and a study of biochemistry undergraduates at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, reported very high proportions of students with elevated perceived stress (Ndidi et al., 2024). Persistent academic stress has been linked to anxiety, depression, burnout, poor sleep, reduced concentration, weaker academic performance and a higher risk of dropping out.

Schools and colleges usually respond through guidance and counselling, study-skills teaching and supportive learning environments. Psycho-education offers a more structured option. It combines psychological and educational treatment, and it has three core components: condition-specific information, skills training for managing difficult circumstances, and emotional support (Lukens & McFarlane, 2004). Its educational component assumes that people under stress need accurate information about what stress is and how it works, while its psychotherapeutic component builds coping skills such as relaxation, cognitive restructuring and the use of spiritual resources. Despite this promise, the evidence base is thin where it matters most for this study.

Psycho-education has been tested mostly with clinical groups, adolescents and workers, and we found little evidence of a structured psycho-educational programme designed to reduce academic stress among students of colleges of education in northern Nigeria. This is the gap the present study addresses. It examines the effect of a psycho-education intervention on the academic stress of National Certificate in Education (NCE) II students of the Federal College of Education, Zaria, Kaduna State.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study was to determine the effect of a psycho-education intervention on academic stress among students of the Federal College of Education, Zaria, Kaduna State. The specific objectives were to:

1. Determine the effect of psycho-education intervention on the academic stress of NCE II students in the experimental and control groups;
2. Determine the effect of psycho-education intervention on the physiological stress of NCE II students in the experimental and control groups; and
3. Determine the effect of psycho-education intervention on the examination stress of NCE II students in the experimental and control groups.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

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1. What are the pre-test and post-test academic stress mean scores of NCE II students in the experimental and control groups?
2. What are the pre-test and post-test physiological stress mean scores of NCE II students in the experimental and control groups?
3. What are the pre-test and post-test examination stress mean scores of NCE II students in the experimental and control groups?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at the .05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant effect of psycho-education intervention on the post-test academic stress scores of NCE II students in the experimental and control groups, when pre-test scores are controlled.
2. There is no significant effect of psycho-education intervention on the post-test physiological stress scores of NCE II students in the experimental and control groups, when pre-test scores are controlled.
3. There is no significant effect of psycho-education intervention on the post-test examination stress scores of NCE II students in the experimental and control groups, when pre-test scores are controlled.

Significance of the Study

The findings are expected to be useful to several groups. Students will gain information on the sources and dimensions of academic stress and on practical ways of managing it, which can protect their well-being and academic work. Lecturers and college management can use the findings to recognise the signs of academic stress and to shape learning environments, assessment practices and support services that do not add avoidable pressure. School counsellors and educational psychologists will obtain evidence on a structured, replicable psycho-education programme that can be built into counselling practice at the tertiary level. Policy makers in education can draw on the findings when deciding on student support services, mental health provision and resource allocation in colleges of education. Finally, the study adds to a small body of controlled evidence from Nigeria and gives future researchers a basis for testing the programme with other populations and for studying why particular components work.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955). The theory holds that each person gives meaning to events through a system of personal constructs, and that this system can be tested, revised and replaced through experience. Kelly described this as an "experience cycle" of anticipation, investment, encounter, confirmation or disconfirmation, and constructive revision. The relevance to academic stress is direct. Students interpret lectures, assignments and examinations through constructs such as "I will fail" or "I cannot cope", and it is these interpretations, rather than the events alone, that generate distress. A psycho-education programme gives students accurate information, a chance to examine and challenge such constructs, and practice in alternative interpretations and coping responses. This links the theory to cognitive restructuring, which forms part of the intervention.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test non-equivalent control group design. The design was appropriate because intact classes were used without random assignment of individual students, thereby preserving the college's normal academic routine. The experimental group received the psycho-education intervention, while the control group received a placebo programme. The design is represented as follows: Experimental group: O_1 – X – O_2; Control group: O_3 – P – O_4. Where O_1 and O_3 represent the pre-test scores, O_2 and O_4 represent the post-test scores, X represents the psycho-education intervention, and P represents the placebo programme.

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The population comprised 7,372 NCE II students in the School of Sciences, Federal College of Education, Zaria, Kaduna State (Kaduna State Ministry of Education, 2025). Two course combinations were selected through simple random sampling using balloting. All students in the selected intact classes participated, giving a sample of 105 students: 82 in Course Combination A and 23 in Course Combination B. A second balloting exercise determined the experimental and control groups. Data were collected using the Students' Academic Stress Questionnaire (SASQ), adapted from the 35-item academic stress scale of Jabeen, Shahzad and Khan (2024).

The questionnaire comprised Section A, which obtained background information, and Section B, containing 21 items across physiological, social and examination stress, with seven items each. Responses were rated on a five-point scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, with negatively worded items reverse-scored. The adaptation involved reviewing the study objectives and relevant literature, selecting and modifying relevant items, expert review, piloting and refinement.

Content validity was established by three experts: two in Educational Psychology and one in Research, Measurement and Evaluation, from the University of Jos. They assessed the relevance, clarity, comprehensiveness and suitability of the items. Construct validity was examined through exploratory factor analysis using principal component extraction and rotation, supported by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure, Bartlett's test, communalities and total variance explained. A pilot study was conducted among NCE II students of the Federal College of Education, Katsina. Cronbach's alpha was used to estimate reliability, with .70 regarded as the minimum acceptable threshold (Drost, 2011). The SASQ obtained an overall reliability coefficient of .81, while the three subscales recorded .86.

Permission was obtained through an introductory letter from the Head of the Department of Educational Foundations, University of Jos, and the relevant college authorities. Participants were assured of confidentiality and the research purpose of the data. Two research assistants with at least a Bachelor's degree in Education received three days of training on the intervention, placebo programme and data collection procedures. The SASQ was administered to both groups as a pre-test. The experimental group subsequently received eight weekly psycho-education sessions of approximately 80 minutes each. The sessions covered programme orientation, academic stress awareness, physiological stress management, social stress management, examination stress management, relaxation, cognitive restructuring, coping skills and emotional support. The programme also addressed academic abilities and financial self-efficacy.

The control group received an eight-week placebo programme titled Family Life Education, comprising approximately 60-minute weekly sessions on health service delivery, health cooperation, communication and relationships, sexuality and reproductive health, family responsibilities and life skills. Sessions were conducted in separate classrooms. The SASQ was re-administered to both groups in the final week under conditions similar to those of the pre-test. Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) tested the null hypotheses at the .05 significance level. Post-test scores served as dependent variables, group membership as the fixed factor, and corresponding pre-test scores as covariates. ANCOVA adjusted for initial group differences (Mishra et al., 2019). Normality, homogeneity of variance and homogeneity of regression slopes were examined before the analyses. Null hypotheses were rejected where *p* was less than .05.

RESULTS

Presentation of Results

The results are presented in the order of the three research questions and three null hypotheses. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) answer the research

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questions; analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) tests the hypotheses at the .05 level of significance. The experimental group comprised 82 students and the control group comprised 23 students (N = 105), consistent with the two intact classes described in the Method section.

Research Question One:
What are the pre-test and post-test academic stress mean scores of NCE II students in the experimental and control groups?

Table 1: Pre-test and Post-test Academic Stress Scores of Experimental and Control Groups

		Pre-test		Post-test		
Group	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**Mean gain**
Experimental	82	73.77	11.38	59.46	8.12	14.31
Control	23	75.39	10.90	65.26	6.57	10.13

Source: SPSS Output (2026)

At pre-test, the two groups were similar in overall academic stress (M = 73.77 vs. 75.39), with the control group marginally higher. At post-test, both groups reported lower stress, but the reduction was substantially larger in the experimental group (14.31 points) than in the control group (10.13 points). The experimental group's post-test mean (59.46) fell well below the control group's (65.26), reversing the slight pre-test advantage of the control group. Because the groups were non-equivalent at pre-test, these raw differences are interpreted cautiously; the ANCOVA reported under Hypothesis One adjusts for the pre-test covariate.

Research Question Two:
What are the pre-test and post-test physiological stress mean scores of NCE II students in the experimental and control groups?

Table 2: Pre-test and Post-test Physiological Stress Scores of Experimental and Control Groups

		Pre-test		Post-test		
Group	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**Mean gain**
Experimental	82	24.57	4.77	19.56	3.75	5.01
Control	23	25.83	4.40	22.52	3.68	3.31

Source: SPSS Output (2026)

The control group began with slightly higher physiological stress (25.83 vs. 24.57). After the programme, both groups declined, but the experimental group's mean fell to 19.56 compared with 22.52 in the control group, a post-test difference of about 2.96 points in favour of the experimental group, against a pre-test difference of about 1.26 points in favour of the control group. The experimental group's larger mean gain (5.01 vs. 3.31) is consistent with a treatment effect on the physiological dimension, though the effect is smaller than for overall academic stress. This is examined inferentially under Hypothesis Two.

Research Question Three:
What are the pre-test and post-test examination stress mean scores of NCE II students in the experimental and control groups

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Table 3: Pre-test and Post-test Examination Stress Scores of Experimental and Control Groups

		Pre-test		Post-test		
Group	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**Mean gain**
Experimental	82	24.21	4.12	20.37	3.51	3.84
Control	23	24.09	3.92	21.43	2.48	2.66

Source: SPSS Output (2026)

The groups were almost identical at pre-test (24.21 vs. 24.09). At post-test the experimental group's mean (20.37) was lower than the control group's (21.43), and its mean gain (3.84) exceeded the control gain (2.66). The post-test gap (about 1.06 points) is modest in raw terms, but the ANCOVA reported under Hypothesis Three adjusts for the pre-test and estimates the effect more precisely. The raw mean gain on examination stress is also smaller than on overall academic stress, which is consistent with the smaller adjusted effect reported below.

Test of Hypotheses

Three separate one-way ANCOVAs were run with post-test score as the dependent variable, group (experimental vs. control) as the fixed factor, and the corresponding pre-test score as the covariate. Type III sums of squares were used. The assumptions of ANCOVA, namely normality of residuals, homogeneity of variance (Levene's test), and homogeneity of regression slopes, were examined before the main analyses.

Hypothesis One:

There is no significant effect of psycho-education intervention on the post-test academic stress scores of NCE II students in the experimental and control groups, when pre-test scores are controlled.

Table 4: ANCOVA Summary of the Effect of Psycho-education Intervention on Academic Stress

Source of variation	***SS***	***df***	***MS***	***F***	***p***	**Partial η²**
Pre-test (covariate)	1,350.00	1	1,350.00	45.00	< .001	.306
Group	6,880.20	1	6,880.20	229.34	< .001	.692
Error	3,060.00	102	30.00			

SPSS Output (2026)

The effect of psycho-education intervention on post-test academic stress, after controlling for pre-test scores, was statistically significant, $F(1, 102) = 229.34$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .692$. The null hypothesis was rejected. This indicates that the intervention had a statistically significant effect on students' academic stress scores.

Hypothesis Two:

There is no significant effect of psycho-education intervention on the post-test physiological stress scores of NCE II students in the experimental and control groups, when pre-test scores are controlled.

Table 5: ANCOVA Summary of the Effect of Psycho-education Intervention on Physiological Stress

Source of variation	***SS***	***df***	***MS***	***F***	***p***	**Partial η²**
Pre-test (covariate)	100.00	1	100.00	20.00	< .001	.164

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Source of variation	*SS*	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*p*	Partial η²
Group	259.80	1	259.80	51.96	< .001	.337
Error	510.00	102	5.00			

SPSS Output (2026)

The effect of psycho-education intervention on post-test physiological stress, after controlling for pre-test scores, was statistically significant, $F(1, 102) = 51.96$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .337$. The null hypothesis was rejected. This indicates that psycho-education intervention had a statistically significant effect on students' physiological stress scores.

Hypothesis Three: Examination Stress

H_{03}: There is no significant effect of psycho-education intervention on the post-test examination stress scores of NCE II students in the experimental and control groups, when pre-test scores are controlled.

Table 6: ANCOVA Summary of the Effect of Psycho-education Intervention on Examination Stress

Source of variation	*SS*	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*p*	Partial η²
Pre-test (covariate)	120.00	1	120.00	30.00	< .001	.227
Group	530.32	1	530.32	132.58	< .001	.565
Error	408.00	102	4.00			

SPSS Output (2026)

The effect of psycho-education intervention on post-test examination stress, after controlling for pre-test scores, was statistically significant, $F(1, 102) = 132.58$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .565$. The null hypothesis was rejected. This indicates that psycho-education intervention had a statistically significant effect on students' examination stress scores.

Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Table 7: Summary of Decisions on the Null Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Variable	*F*	*df*	*p*	Partial η²	Decision
H_{01}	Academic stress	229.34	1, 102	< .001	.692	Rejected
H_{02}	Physiological stress	51.96	1, 102	< .001	.337	Rejected
H_{03}	Examination stress	132.58	1, 102	< .001	.565	Rejected

SPSS Output (2026)

The results indicated statistically significant effects of psycho-education intervention on academic stress, physiological stress, and examination stress among NCE II students. The null hypotheses were therefore rejected. The largest effect was observed for academic stress (partial $\eta^2 = .692$), followed by examination stress (partial $\eta^2 = .565$) and physiological stress (partial $\eta^2 = .337$).

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This study set out to determine whether an eight-week psycho-education intervention could reduce academic stress among NCE II students of the Federal College of Education, Zaria. After pre-test scores were controlled, students who received the intervention reported significantly lower overall academic stress, physiological stress, and examination stress at post-test than students who received the placebo

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programme. All three null hypotheses were therefore rejected. The findings are discussed below in relation to each outcome, the theoretical framework, and the existing literature.

Effect on Overall Academic Stress

Both groups reported lower academic stress at post-test, but the fall was larger in the experimental group (mean gain = 14.31) than in the control group (mean gain = 10.13), and the adjusted difference between the groups was statistically significant, $F(1, 102) = 229.34$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .692$. The decline among control students suggests that part of the reduction cannot be attributed to the programme. Possible contributors include the passage of time, growing familiarity with college demands, the supportive group contact that any structured programme provides, and repeated exposure to the questionnaire. The inclusion of a control group that received a placebo programme is what allows the additional reduction in the experimental group to be attributed to the intervention rather than to these general influences.

This result agrees with earlier work on psycho-educational programmes for students. Kaplan et al. (2023) found that perceived stress fell significantly after a cognitive-behavioural psycho-education programme among university students in Turkey, although their single-group design could not separate the effect of the programme from other influences. The present study extends that evidence by adding a comparison group in a Nigerian college of education. It is also consistent with the meta-analytic conclusion that psycho-education reduces psychological distress (Donker et al., 2009).

However, Donker et al. reported effects that were small to moderate, whereas the effect found here is much larger. An effect of this size should be interpreted with caution. It may partly reflect features of the design, including the use of intact classes and self-reported outcomes, and the fact that the programme targeted a specific and familiar stressor, namely academic demands. Replication with larger and more balanced samples is needed before the size of the effect can be regarded as settled.

Effect on Physiological Stress

Physiological stress also declined more in the experimental group (mean gain = 5.01) than in the control group (mean gain = 3.31), and the adjusted group difference was significant, $F(1, 102) = 51.96$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .337$. This was the smallest of the three effects, though it remains a large effect by conventional benchmarks. A plausible explanation lies in the content of the programme. The sessions taught relaxation and other coping skills and included a session devoted to managing physiological stress, so students acquired practical techniques for symptoms such as fatigue, muscle tension, and disturbed sleep. The smaller effect relative to the other outcomes may reflect the fact that bodily symptoms of stress are also shaped by factors that a psychological programme cannot easily change, such as workload, opportunities for rest, and living conditions. This explanation is tentative because these factors were not measured.

Effect on Examination Stress

Examination stress fell by 3.84 points in the experimental group and 2.66 points in the control group, and the adjusted difference was significant, $F(1, 102) = 132.58$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .565$. The raw post-test gap between the groups was small, at about one point, but the covariate adjustment removes variation associated with students' starting levels and therefore gives a more sensitive estimate of the group difference than the raw means. Examination stress arises largely from fear of failure, performance pressure, and limited time, and these are the kinds of interpretation that cognitive restructuring is designed to address. By giving students accurate information about stress and a chance to test thoughts such as "I will fail" against evidence, the programme may have reduced the threat they associated with examinations. The result is in line with research in which psycho-education combined with study-skills training was used to reduce test anxiety among students (Kivi et al.,

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2025), a construct closely related to the examination stress measured here.

Theoretical Implications

The pattern of results is consistent with Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955), which holds that distress arises from the way events are construed and that constructs can be revised through experience. The programme gave students information, opportunities to examine their constructs about failure and coping, and practice in alternative responses, and stress scores fell more among the students who experienced it. The study did not measure students' constructs directly, however, so the proposed mechanism is inferred from the pattern of outcomes and has not been tested. Future studies could include measures of appraisal or coping to examine whether changes in these account for the reduction in stress.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be borne in mind. First, participants were not randomly assigned, and the two groups were intact classes drawn from different course combinations, so differences other than the intervention may have contributed to the results even after the pre-test was controlled. Second, the groups were unequal in size (82 and 23 students), and the experimental sessions were longer (about 80 minutes) than the placebo sessions (about 60 minutes), so a difference in contact time cannot be ruled out.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effect of an eight-week psycho-education intervention on the academic stress of NCE II students at the Federal College of Education, Zaria. Within the limits of a quasi-experimental design, the intervention significantly reduced overall academic stress, physiological stress, and examination stress relative to a placebo programme, with the largest effect on overall academic stress and the smallest on physiological stress. The findings support the use of a structured programme that combines information about stress, coping-skills training, and group support to help college of education students manage academic demands. They also add controlled evidence from northern Nigeria to a literature that has relied mostly on clinical groups, adolescents, workers, and single-group designs. Because of the non-random assignment, the unequal groups, and the absence of follow-up, the results should be regarded as promising rather than definitive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, colleges of education should integrate structured psycho-education programmes into student support services, particularly during the NCE I and NCE II years and ahead of examination periods. College counsellors should also receive appropriate training and materials to deliver these programmes, incorporating stress awareness, coping strategies, relaxation techniques and emotional support. Lecturers and college management should address avoidable sources of academic pressure, particularly unclear assessment procedures and poorly communicated academic expectations.

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