

ACADEMIC PRESSURE AS A SYSTEMIC ISSUE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF WORKLOAD, MENTAL HEALTH, AND INTEGRITY IN AN ELT MASTER'S PROGRAM

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of academic workload and deadline structures on graduate students' mental health and academic integrity within the context of higher education. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research explores the lived experiences of nine first-semester students enrolled in a Master's Program in English Education at an Indonesian university. Data were collected through reflective narrative questionnaires and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meanings. The findings reveal that academic stress is driven not primarily by the quantity of assignments, but by the simultaneity of deadlines, which creates a perceived loss of control over time and cognitive resources. This condition triggers sustained psychological pressure, manifesting in anxiety symptoms such as insomnia, overthinking, and emotional exhaustion, alongside signs of mild depression and decreased academic motivation. The study further finds that under such pressure, students tend to adopt situational coping strategies, including lowering academic standards and prioritizing task completion over depth and quality. Importantly, the results suggest that compromises in academic integrity are not rooted in moral deficiency but are shaped by systemic academic conditions, particularly excessive workload and poorly coordinated assessment design. This study contributes to the literature by integrating academic workload, mental health, and academic integrity into a unified analytical framework, emphasizing the need to reconceptualize academic dishonesty as a context-driven phenomenon. The findings underscore the importance of institutional interventions, including coordinated deadline management, workload redistribution, and mental health support systems, to foster both student well-being and sustainable academic integrity practices in postgraduate education.

Keywords – academic stress, graduate students, academic integrity, mental health, workload, qualitative case study.

Introduction

Postgraduate education, particularly a master's program education is required to produce graduates who have advanced critical thinking skills, academic independence, and high scientific integrity. However, various studies show that excessive academic demands contribute to increased psychological pressure on graduate students. Evans et al. (2018) highlight a mental health problem in graduate studies, showing that graduate students are consistently identified as a high-risk group for mental health issues, with significant proportions experiencing anxiety and depression.

Academic stress arises as a response to an imbalance between environmental demands and an individual's capacity to manage them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In tertiary education contexts, Barbayannis et al. (2022) shows that a high workload and deadline pressure are significantly correlated with a decline in students' mental well-being. This condition is further exacerbated by assignment patterns that are simultaneous, repetitive, and lack coordination between courses (Grepo, 2023).

In the context of graduate education, academic stress not only affects mental

health but also academic integrity. Studies by Miles et al. (2022) and Sozon et al. (2024) show that time pressure, mental fatigue, and poor time management are the dominant factors that drive academic dishonesty, including plagiarism and academic shortcutting. Aruğaslan, (2024) empirically found a relationship between academic pressure, procrastination, and a decline in academic integrity.

Postgraduate students face complex academic demands, including scientific writing, in-depth theoretical analysis, and meeting high academic standards in a relatively short period of time. These conditions have the potential to create multiple layers of psychological pressure that impact the quality of learning and the academic integrity of students. Research on academic stress has shown a strong relationship between academic demands and mental health disorders (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Misra & McKean, 2000). A recent study by Li et al. (2025) confirms that academic stress plays a significant role in increasing the risk of depression among graduate students.

In the context of academic integrity, McCabe et al. (2001) and Miles et al. (2022) emphasize that academic dishonesty is often not merely a moral issue, but a response to systemic pressures. Sozon et al. (2024) also say that an academic culture that normalizes excessive workloads also increases the risk of integrity violations.

Despite these progresses, existing research tends to examine academic workload, mental health, and academic integrity as separate domains, resulting in a fragmented understanding of how these factors interact within the actual academic context. Furthermore, empirical exploration of these relationships in postgraduate settings within non-Western contexts remains limited, particularly in English Language Teaching (ELT)

programs in Indonesia. This gap is significant, as cultural, institutional, and curricular differences can influence how academic stress is experienced and managed. Therefore, a more integrated and context-sensitive approach is needed to understand how structural academic conditions influence both psychological outcomes and academic behavior.

Responding to this gap, this study aims to explore how workload structure, particularly the simultaneity of deadlines and limited completion time, affects students' mental health and academic integrity practices among ELT master's students in Indonesia. To reach these goals, the researcher formulates three research questions as follows: (1) How do students perceive workload and deadlines, (2) How does workload influence anxiety and depression, and (3) How does academic pressure affect academic integrity. In line with these questions, the study aims to describe students' experiences, analyze the psychological impact of academic demands, and interpret the relationship between academic pressure and integrity within a unified analytical framework.

The significance of this study lies in its contributions to both theoretical and practical domains. Theoretically, this study develops a systemic perspective by conceptualizing academic stress, mental health, and academic integrity as interrelated constructs within a single analytical model, rather than as separate phenomena. This approach challenges reductive interpretations of academic dishonesty and emphasizes the role of structural and psychological factors in shaping student behavior. Practically, these findings are expected to serve as a reference in designing a more balanced and sustainable academic system, particularly regarding workload distribution, assessment practices, and support mechanisms for students.

Pedagogically, this study provides insights into how learning environments can be structured to maintain rigorous academic standards while safeguarding student well-being.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative method with a case study design, as outlined by (Robert K. Yin, 2023). A qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to deeply understand the subjective experiences, perceptions, and reflections of master's students regarding academic workload, stress, mental health conditions, and their implications for academic integrity. The focus of the research is not on measuring statistical causal relationships, but rather on exploring the meaning and dynamics of the phenomena experienced by participants in a real context.

The study was conducted within a Master's Program in English Education at an Indonesian university. Nine first-semester students voluntarily participated in the study. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their active enrollment in a full academic workload during the semester. Notably, seven of the nine participants were working students, which adds a layer of complexity to their academic experiences.

Data were collected using reflective narrative questionnaires distributed via Google Forms. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to reflect on workload perceptions, emotional responses, coping strategies, and students' views on academic integrity. This approach allowed for flexibility in participation while also providing space for students to express their personal reflections more openly and comfortably.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the

framework proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006) and further elaborated by Naeem et al. (2023). The analysis process involved several stages, including data familiarization, initial coding, category development, theme identification, theme refinement, and conceptual model development. Through this process, recurring patterns and meanings were identified and organized into coherent themes that addressed the research questions. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study adhered to qualitative research criteria, including credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Ethical considerations were also maintained throughout the research process, with participants providing informed consent and their identities kept confidential.

Finding and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented thematically to capture the complexity of students' lived experiences in dealing with academic workload, mental health challenges, and academic integrity. Four major themes emerged from the data analysis, namely: 1.) Temporal Clustering of Academic Workload as a Primary Driver of Perceived Academic Stress, 2.) Chronic Academic Anxiety and the Deterioration of Students' Mental Well-being, 3.) Emergent Burnout Dynamics: Emotional Exhaustion, Motivational Decline, and Psychological Strain, and 4.) Context-Driven Compromise of Academic Standards as an Adaptive Coping Mechanism. These themes are interconnected and collectively illustrate how academic pressure operates as a systemic issue within the postgraduate learning environment.

1. Temporal Clustering of Academic Workload as a Primary Driver of Perceived Academic Stress.

The findings reveal that students' academic stress is not primarily determined by the number of assignments, but rather by the temporal structure in which these assignments are distributed. Most participants indicated that individual tasks were still manageable; however, stress intensified significantly when multiple assignments from different courses were assigned with overlapping deadlines. This temporal clustering created a perception of an overwhelming workload that was difficult to organize, thereby reducing students' sense of control over their time and cognitive resources.

This perception is clearly reflected in participants' narratives. One respondent stated, "*Tugas setiap mata kuliah sukanya barengan deadline-nya jadi kelihatan banyak.*" (Respondent 02), which translates to "*The assignments for each course tend to have the same deadline, so it seems like there are a lot of them.*" (Respondent 02). Similarly, another respondent explained, "*Semua tugas diberikan hampir selalu secara bersamaan, jadi rasanya tidak ada jeda.*" (Respondent 09), meaning "*All tasks are almost always given simultaneously, so it feels like there is no break.*" By (Respondent 09). These statements highlight how the simultaneity of deadlines eliminates recovery time and produces a continuous sense of urgency.

The emotional consequences of this condition are also evident in the data. One respondent described experiencing "*The emotions were varied, starting with feeling stressed, overwhelmed, anxious, and panic attack when the due is close and the amount are a lot.*" (Respondent 06). From a theoretical perspective, this finding can be understood through the lens of Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). At the primary appraisal stage, students interpret clustered deadlines as a threat to their

academic success. Subsequently, during secondary appraisal, they evaluate their coping resources, particularly time and mental capacity, as insufficient, resulting in heightened stress. This confirms previous research by Grepo (2023) and Reda Ismail (2022), which emphasizes that accumulated time pressure has a more significant impact on stress than task quantity, as it directly undermines perceived control and time management capacity.

2. Chronic Academic Anxiety and the Deterioration of Students' Mental Well-being.

Building upon the structural pressure created by workload clustering, the findings demonstrate that students experience persistent academic anxiety that evolves into broader mental well-being disturbances. All respondents reported anxiety-related symptoms, indicating that academic stress in this context is not situational but chronic in nature. This anxiety emerges as a direct psychological response to continuous academic demands and high expectations.

Participants described a range of symptoms, including insomnia, overthinking, panic, and physical discomfort. One respondent noted, "*Ngga bisa tidur nyenyak kalau banyak tugas.*" (Respondent 02), meaning "*I can't sleep well when I have a lot of assignments.*" (Respondent 02). Another participant reported physical manifestations of stress, stating, "*I usually feel stressed and experience physical symptoms such as headaches at the back of my head and stomach discomfort when facing a heavy workload and tight deadlines. These conditions sometimes interfere with my ability to focus and complete assignments effectively.*" (Respondent 05). These accounts indicate that academic anxiety extends beyond psychological distress

and disrupts cognitive functioning and physical health.

More severe forms of anxiety were also evident. One respondent explained, *"The most profound was the sleeping difficulty. I was having sleep deprivation due to the large number of assignments that had to be completed in a short time period. This also affects other aspects such as the ability to think clearly, sound decision-making, and, of course, health conditions. By being sleep deprived, the level of tiredness was quite high."* (Respondent 06). Additionally, another participant stated, *"Yes, sometimes I experienced mild anxiety symptoms such as overthinking or feeling pressured, especially when dealing with multiple tasks or deadlines."* (Respondent 09). These experiences are further compounded by declining self-confidence, as reflected in the statement, *"The pressure sometimes makes me overthink, such as doubting my ability to complete the tasks. I often lose confidence, and I think I'm not ready to take a master's program yet."* (Respondent 03).

These findings suggest that academic stress has transitioned into sustained psychological pressure, which aligns with prior research indicating that academic stress is a direct antecedent of anxiety and depressive symptoms among graduate students (Evans et al., 2018; Barbayannis et al., 2022; Li et al., 2025). The persistence of these symptoms also indicates a deterioration of overall mental well-being, as students struggle to maintain balance between academic demands and personal health.

3. Emergent Burnout Dynamics: Emotional Exhaustion, Motivational Decline, and Psychological Strain.

As academic anxiety persists over time, the findings further reveal the emergence of burnout-like dynamics characterized by emotional exhaustion, loss of motivation, and psychological strain. Although not always reaching clinical levels of depression, these symptoms reflect a gradual depletion of students' emotional and cognitive resources due to prolonged exposure to academic pressure.

Participants described feeling mentally drained and disengaged from the learning process. One respondent stated, *"Yes, there were moments when academic demands led to a loss of motivation, emotional exhaustion, and a temporary sense of helplessness. This usually happened during periods of sustained pressure, such as when multiple major assignments coincided with limited recovery time. I felt mentally drained and less engaged with the learning process."* (Respondent 01). Similarly, another participant expressed, *"Absolutely! Loss of motivation, emotional exhaustion, and helplessness quite overwhelm me sometimes. I am doubting myself if it's right for me to take the master's program while I feel I'm not good enough."* (Respondent 03). These statements highlight how sustained academic pressure undermines both motivation and self-efficacy.

Other respondents emphasized the intensity of emotional fatigue. For instance, *"Yes, I have experienced a loss of motivation and emotional exhaustion when working on assignments that required special attention and deep focus. During those times, the academic demands made me feel overwhelmed and mentally drained."* (Respondent 05), and *"At one point, I was feeling really exhausted and had a very low level of motivation due to the high demands."* (Respondent 06). Field notes further support this pattern, with participants reporting that *"Heavy workload and tight*

deadlines sometimes interfere with my ability to focus and complete assignments effectively." (Respondent 06) and feeling *"Quite dizzy and overwhelmed, especially when assignments never stop."* (Respondent 07). These findings align with the concept of academic burnout, which is characterized by emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, and disengagement (Aubin et al., 2025; SenthilKumar et al., 2023). The progression from anxiety to burnout suggests that academic pressure operates cumulatively, gradually eroding students' psychological resilience and engagement with their studies.

4. Context-Driven Compromise of Academic Standards as an Adaptive Coping Mechanism.

The final theme reveals that students respond to sustained academic pressure by adapting their academic behavior, particularly by lowering their academic standards as a coping mechanism. Under conditions of time pressure and mental fatigue, students prioritize task completion over quality, which reflects a pragmatic response to systemic academic demands rather than an intentional disregard for academic integrity.

This adaptation is evident in participants' statements. One respondent explained, *"Ya kalau mepet akhirnya bikin-nya asal selesai saja, kualitas nomor dua."* (Respondent 02), meaning *"Yes, when pressed for time, we just finish it and quality comes second."* (Respondent 02). Another respondent elaborated, *"Yes, academic pressure has sometimes forced me to lower my ideal academic standards, especially in terms of depth of analysis and careful revision. Sometimes I also use AI to finish my assignment quickly."* (Respondent 05). These responses indicate a conscious shift in priorities, where meeting deadlines becomes more

important than maintaining academic depth.

Further reflections reinforce this finding. One participant noted, *"Sure it has. Under time pressure and stress, the quality of my work will also decrease. The focus shifts from creating high-quality work to just merely being able to complete and submit the assignment on time."* By (Respondent 06). From a theoretical perspective, this behavior can be understood as a form of situational coping, in which students adjust their strategies to survive within a high-pressure academic environment. These findings support previous research by McCabe et al. (2001), Miles et al. (2022), and Aruğaslan (2024), which suggests that academic integrity issues often arise from contextual pressures rather than individual moral failure.

In addition to the identified themes, the findings also suggest that students' responses to academic pressure are shaped by a dynamic process of cognitive and behavioral adaptation that evolves. Initially, students attempt to manage academic demands through conventional strategies such as time management, prioritization, and increased effort. However, as workload pressure intensifies, particularly under conditions of temporally clustered deadlines, these strategies gradually become insufficient. This insufficiency leads to a shift from proactive coping to reactive coping, where students focus primarily on meeting immediate academic requirements rather than maintaining long-term learning quality.

This transition reflects a critical turning point in students' academic experience. At earlier stages, students still demonstrate strong intrinsic motivation and commitment to academic excellence. Yet, as sustained pressure continues without adequate recovery time, their

coping capacity becomes progressively depleted. As a result, students begin to adopt more pragmatic and efficiency-oriented strategies, including simplifying tasks, reducing depth of analysis, and reallocating effort toward assignments perceived as more urgent or heavily weighted. This behavioral shift indicates that academic decision-making under pressure is not random, but rather strategically adjusted based on perceived constraints and priorities.

Moreover, the data indicate that this adaptive process is closely linked to students' perception of control. When students feel that they have sufficient time and cognitive resources, they are more likely to engage in deep learning and uphold high academic standards. Conversely, when they perceive a loss of control due to overlapping deadlines and excessive workload, their focus shifts toward survival-oriented strategies. This finding reinforces the argument that perceived control plays a central role in mediating the relationship between academic demands and student behavior.

Importantly, this pattern also highlights the temporal dimension of academic stress, where the impact of workload is not static but accumulative. The longer students are exposed to high-pressure conditions, the more likely they are to experience a decline in both psychological well-being and academic performance quality. Therefore, academic pressure should be understood not only as an immediate response to workload, but as a longitudinal process that shapes students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral trajectories over time.

Furthermore, the discussion of this study is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives. First, *Stress and Coping Theory* by Lazarus & Folkman, (1984) provides the primary lens for understanding how students appraise and

respond to academic demands. Second, *Academic Load Theory and Mental Well-being* by Evans et al. (2018) and SenthilKumar et al. (2023) explain how excessive and continuous workload contributes to emotional exhaustion, cognitive disruption, and declining motivation, particularly when recovery time is insufficient. Finally, *The Academic Integrity Theory* by (McCabe et al., 2001) and (Macfarlane et al., 2014) that emphasize integrity-related behaviors are shaped by situational and contextual factors, including time pressure and mental fatigue, rather than solely by individual moral character.

This perspective is then linked to existing findings and generates an analytical framework in which academic workload acts as the initial driver of a cascading process. High workload and demanding academic conditions generate academic stress, which subsequently leads to anxiety and depression. These psychological conditions reduce students' coping capacity, limiting their ability to regulate emotions and engage in adaptive problem-solving. As coping capacity declines, students become more susceptible to compromised academic practices, including reduced quality of work and potential integrity violations. This framework highlights that academic behavior is the outcome of a complex interaction between structural demands, psychological processes, and coping mechanisms.

Conclusions

This study concludes that academic stress among graduate students in the English Education Master's Program is not primarily determined by the quantity of assignments, but rather by the temporal structure of workload distribution, particularly the pattern of simultaneous deadlines combined with limited completion time. Across all participants, including both working and non-working

students, this condition consistently elicited a sense of overwhelming academic demand, suggesting that academic pressure should be understood as a systemic issue rather than an individual limitation. Within the framework of stress appraisal proposed by Lazarus & Folkman (1984), students interpret clustered deadlines as a threat to their academic success during the primary appraisal stage, while in the secondary appraisal stage they evaluate their available time and mental energy as insufficient to cope with these demands. This imbalance ultimately triggers sustained stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion, reinforcing the view that academic pressure is structurally embedded within the learning system.

The findings further demonstrate that academic pressure has a direct and significant impact on students' mental well-being, as evidenced by recurring symptoms such as insomnia, overthinking, panic, emotional fatigue, and loss of motivation. These psychological responses indicate that academic stress in postgraduate education is not merely situational but can develop into chronic conditions that affect both cognitive functioning and emotional stability. In this regard, the study reinforces existing literature by Evans et al. (2018), Barbayannis et al. (2022), and Li et al. (2025), which identifies graduate students as a high-risk group for anxiety and depression due to prolonged academic pressure. Consequently, academic stress should not be treated as an inevitable byproduct of advanced learning, but rather as a student welfare issue that requires institutional awareness and intervention.

In addition, this study highlights that the decline in academic standards observed among students is situational and adaptive, rather than a reflection of weak moral values or compromised personal

integrity. While the majority of students continue to uphold academic integrity as an important principle, the pressures of limited time and excessive workload often force them to prioritize task completion over depth of analysis and quality of output. This finding supports the argument that academic integrity is not solely determined by individual character but is significantly influenced by the design of academic systems and assessment structures (McCabe et al., 2001; Macfarlane et al., 2014; Sozon et al., 2024). Therefore, compromises in academic quality should be understood as context-driven responses shaped by systemic conditions, rather than as purely ethical failures.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by reinforcing the understanding that academic workload, mental health, and academic integrity are interrelated constructs within a systemic academic framework. It challenges reductive interpretations of academic dishonesty and instead positions student behavior within the broader interaction between structural pressures, psychological responses, and coping mechanisms. Furthermore, the use of reflective narrative questionnaires through Google Forms demonstrates methodological value in capturing subjective experiences and sensitive issues such as stress and mental well-being, thereby enriching qualitative approaches in higher education research.

From a practical standpoint, the findings underscore the urgent need for institutions to re-evaluate academic workload design and assessment systems, particularly at the postgraduate level. One critical implication is the importance of synchronizing deadlines across courses to prevent the accumulation of assignments within the same time period, which has been identified as a primary trigger of stress. In addition, lecturers are

encouraged to shift from quantity-oriented assessment toward approaches that emphasize depth of understanding, critical reflection, and sustainable learning processes. The findings also suggest that institutional structures should account for student diversity, particularly by differentiating between working and non-working students through more flexible class arrangements and curriculum design. Such differentiation has the potential to improve both the effectiveness and efficiency of learning while reducing unnecessary academic strain.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of institutional mental health support systems as an integral component of postgraduate education. Universities should consider providing structured support mechanisms, such as counseling services, stress management programs, and responsive academic policies that acknowledge students' psychological conditions. These interventions are essential given the demonstrated impact of academic pressure on mental well-being and learning motivation.

Building on these implications, several forward-looking considerations emerge. Academic programs are encouraged to adopt collaborative assessment planning, where lecturers coordinate across courses to distribute workload more proportionally and avoid temporal clustering of deadlines. At the institutional level, there is a need to develop more holistic and sustainable learning environments that balance academic rigor with student well-being. Finally, future research should expand upon this study by employing mixed-methods approaches, integrating qualitative depth with quantitative generalizability to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between academic stress,

mental health, and academic integrity across diverse educational contexts.

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