

Career-stage Stress in Academia: Investigating its Impact on Lecturers' Well-being at the University of Cyberjaya, Malaysia

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Abstract - Job stress in academia has become a pressing concern, influencing both institutional effectiveness and the well-being of academic staff. This study explores how stress manifests across different career stages including early-career, mid-career, and senior among fifteen lecturers at the University of Cyberjaya, Malaysia. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis, then examined through thematic analysis. The findings reveal that early-career lecturers face high levels of stress due to workload, performance pressure, and unclear promotion pathways, leading to symptoms such as anxiety, sleep disturbances, and appetite loss. Mid-career lecturers struggle with administrative overload and research demands, resulting in fatigue and emotional exhaustion. Senior lecturers, meanwhile, experience burnout, chronic health issues, and identity-related stress due to leadership burdens and perceived lack of recognition. These results underscore the need for stage-specific interventions to support the physical and mental health of academic staff. The study contributes to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and 4 (Quality Education) by emphasizing institutional responsibilities in promoting health and maintaining quality education through supportive academic environments.

Keywords: career stages stress, well-being, mental health impact, physical health impact, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

I. INTRODUCTION

Job stress is a growing concern in higher education, affecting how well lecturers teach, the success of universities, and the personal well-being of academic staff. According to the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (2021), about 35% of lecturers experience high levels of burnout due to intense job pressures. This stress leads to more absences, lower productivity, and higher turnover among university staff, creating challenges for both individuals and institutions.

Lecturers are expected to manage multiple roles simultaneously teaching, research, administrative tasks, and student support within fast-paced, competitive academic environments. The stressors they encounter often vary depending on their career stage, which highlights the need for a more targeted approach to understanding and addressing academic stress.

In the context of the study described, well-being refers to the overall state of health and quality of life for lecturers, encompassing both physical health and mental health

impacts caused by job stress across different career stages among the Malaysian academic environment. The definition aligns with global frameworks, such as the World Health Organization's view of health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being (WHO, 1948), adapted to the specific challenges faced by Malaysian lecturers at institutions.

Early-career lecturers often feel anxious and struggle with headaches or insomnia because of job insecurity and overwhelming workloads. Mid-career academics face emotional exhaustion and fatigue as they juggle increasing demands with personal responsibilities. Senior lecturers deal with chronic fatigue, stress-related illnesses, depression, and feelings of disconnection, often due to a lack of support, recognition, and the pressures of preparing for retirement. Research shows that supportive leadership, manageable workloads, mentorship, and recognition can make a big difference in reducing stress and helping academics stay healthy and engaged (Leslie & Karen, 2020; van der Ross et al., 2022; Wilmot, 2025; Cao et al., 2025).

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Job stress is a well-recognized challenge in higher education worldwide, but there's still much to learn about how it affects lecturers at different career stages in Malaysian universities. While global studies have explored academic stress, research specific to Malaysia, particularly at institutions such as the University of Cyberjaya, is limited. This gap is significant because the unique cultural, institutional, and professional contexts in Malaysia shape how lecturers experience and cope with stress. Understanding these differences across early-career, mid-career, and senior lecturers is crucial, as each group faces distinct pressures that impact their physical and mental health, as well as their professional performance.

Although studies by Xu and Wang (2023) highlight how heavy workloads and performance pressures lead to emotional burnout among university faculty, they often focus on broader contexts, such as Chinese universities, and don't fully address Malaysia's unique academic environment. Similarly, van der Ross et al. (2022) found that the COVID-19 pandemic intensified stress for academics globally, but their study, based in South Africa, doesn't capture the specific challenges in Malaysian universities. Wilmot (2025) points out that senior lecturers often feel neglected by institutional leadership, yet this perspective is underexplored in Malaysia, where hierarchical structures and cultural expectations may amplify stress.

Leslie (2020) emphasizes the stress of late-career faculty in academic medicine, particularly around retirement transitions, but this hasn't been adequately studied in the Malaysian context, where career progression and institutional support may differ. Mohd Ramlee and Abu Bakar (2020) note that early-career polytechnic lecturers in Malaysia face administrative overload and institutional pressure, but their findings are limited to polytechnics and don't extend to universities like the University of Cyberjaya, where teaching, research, and administrative demands may vary.

This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring how job stress affects lecturers at different career stages in Malaysian universities, with a focus on the University of Cyberjaya. It aims to understand the specific sources of stress for early-career, mid-career, and senior lecturers and how these stressors impact their physical and mental health, as well as their teaching and research performance. The findings are intended to inform the development of institutional policies and targeted interventions that enhance support systems for lecturers and promote sustainable academic careers at Malaysian universities, particularly at the University of Cyberjaya. Addressing these challenges is also closely aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education).

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sources of stress

Early-career lecturers

Starting out in academia was often overwhelming. Young lecturers frequently faced stress due to unclear roles, the pressure to prove themselves, and a lack of guidance. According to Xu and Wang (2023), heavy teaching and research workloads, administrative tasks, and the push for publications and funding created intense stress, which was worsened by long hours and limited resources. Zhou and Wang (2024) noted that young Chinese lecturers dealt with job insecurity and unclear career paths, which added to their anxiety. In Malaysia, Mohd Ramlee and Abu Bakar (2020) found that early-career polytechnic lecturers struggled with institutional pressure and administrative overload. For STEM lecturers, Janssens and Ueda (2023) highlighted that high expectations and limited support led to feelings of isolation and burnout.

Mid-career lecturers

Mid-career academics faced a different kind of pressure. They were expected to ramp up research output, take on more administrative duties, and juggle work with personal life. Kim and Yeo (2024) found that Thai lecturers felt dissatisfied and burned out from these demands. Van der Ross et al. (2022) noted that the COVID-19 pandemic hit mid-career academics hard, with increased workloads and blurred work-life boundaries causing emotional exhaustion, especially in the absence of institutional support. Pashazade et al. (2024) also mentioned that lecturers in the sandwich generation struggled to balance family and work, which added to their stress.

Senior lecturers

Senior lecturers, often in the late stages of their careers, faced unique challenges. Adapting to new technologies, dealing with age-related bias, and preparing for retirement were common sources of stress. Wilmot (2025) found that senior lecturers felt neglected by college leaders, with inadequate support, lack of recognition, and limited autonomy contributing to their stress. Leslie and Karen (2020) explained that senior lecturers in medical programs experienced declining career satisfaction, reduced productivity, and the emotional burden of transitioning into retirement, especially when institutions failed to provide tailored support. Michulek et al. (2024) stated that the absence of peer support and recognition left senior staff feeling isolated.

Physical health impacts

Early-career lecturers

The intense pressure on early-career lecturers often took a physical toll. Zhou and Wang (2024) reported that young Chinese lecturers frequently experienced headaches and insomnia due to job stress and insecurity. Mohd Ramlee and Abu Bakar (2020) found that Malaysian polytechnic lecturers suffered from fatigue, appetite loss, and chronic headaches stemming from administrative overload and institutional pressure.

Mid-career lecturers

Mid-career academics also faced physical health challenges. Van der Ross et al. (2022) suggested that heavy workloads and blurred work-life boundaries during the COVID-19 pandemic led to exhaustion and stress-related symptoms such as sleep disturbances. Kim and Yeo (2024) implied that the relentless demands placed on Thai lecturers contributed to physical fatigue, which worsened over time in the absence of adequate institutional support.

Senior lecturers

For senior lecturers, long-term exposure to stress often resulted in more serious physical health issues. Cao et al. (2025) highlighted that long-serving lecturers experienced chronic fatigue and stress-related illnesses, including hypertension. Wilmot (2025) noted that excessive workloads and a lack of leadership support contributed to physical deterioration, such as persistent fatigue and stress-induced conditions. Leslie (2020) stated that chronic stress from career transitions and institutional pressures caused sleep disturbances and other health issues commonly seen in late-career academics.

Mental health impacts

Early-career lecturers

The uncertainty and pressure of early-career stages significantly affected mental health. Zhou and Wang (2024) found that young Chinese lecturers experienced anxiety due to job insecurity and unclear career paths. Janssens and Ueda (2023) reported that lecturers in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields felt isolated and burned out, which led to emotional exhaustion and disengagement.

Mid-career lecturers

Mid-career academics often felt mentally drained. Van der Ross et al. (2022) observed that the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to emotional exhaustion among mid-career lecturers, particularly in the absence of institutional support. Kim and Yeo (2024) noted that Thai lecturers experienced dissatisfaction and burnout, which eroded their mental well-being. Liu et al. (2021) suggested that supportive leadership and mindful practices helped mitigate stress, but in their absence, mental strain often escalated.

Senior lecturers

Senior lecturers faced significant mental health challenges. Wilmot (2025) found that unsupportive leadership resulted in disengagement, frustration, and emotional exhaustion, thereby increasing burnout and reducing job satisfaction. Sabagh et al. (2023) reported that senior lecturers coping with administrative responsibilities and grant pressures often experienced depression and disconnection. Leslie and Karen (2020) highlighted that late-career faculty struggled with declining career satisfaction and the emotional weight of transitioning into retirement, which could result in anxiety and social isolation.

IV. METHOD

This study used a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of lecturers at different career stages at the University of Cyberjaya. The goal was to understand how stress affects academic staff physically and emotionally, based on their professional tenure. Twelve lecturers from three faculties including Allied Health Sciences, Psychology and Social Sciences, and the Centre of Foundation, Language and General Studies were selected through purposive sampling. Participants included full- and part-time lecturers with at least one year of teaching experience and a self-identified experience of job-related stress.

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and document analysis. Interviews explored the causes and effects of stress. Observations helped identify non-verbal cues and behavioural signs of stress, while institutional documents were used to assess workload and available support mechanisms. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis in ATLAS.ti software. This involved coding, grouping related ideas, and identifying key themes that captured the participants shared experiences.

IV. FINDINGS

Demographic finding

The study involved fifteen lecturers from the University of Cyberjaya, consisting of nine females (60%) and six males (40%). Participants represented a variety of career stages and academic backgrounds. Age distribution was as follows: 26–35 years (5 participants; 33.3%), 36–45 years (6 participants; 40%), and 46 years and above (4 participants; 26.7%).

In terms of teaching experience, the participants were distributed across three career stages: early-career lecturers

with 0–5 years of experience (6 respondents; 40%), mid-career lecturers with 6–15 years of experience (5 respondents; 33.3%), and senior lecturers with over 16 years of experience (4 respondents; 26.7%).

Sources of stress

Each career stage presented unique stressors. Early-career lecturers reported unclear roles, unstructured workloads, and constant pressure to perform. One remarked, “Too much workload and understaffing. Balancing teaching and research are hard,” while another noted, “No clear pathway on promotion opportunities.”

Mid-career lecturers cited excessive administrative work, research expectations, and time constraints. One participant shared, “It’s hard to focus on research with so many admin tasks,” While another said, “Handling large classes and administrative tasks along with seven subjects is stressful.”

Senior lecturers expressed concern over leadership burdens and feeling undervalued. Comments included, “Feeling burnt out and unable to cope with demands,” and “Recognition and appreciation are lacking for experienced lecturers.”

Physical health impacts

Physical health impacts included appetite loss, headaches, and fatigue among early-career staff. Mid-career lecturers reported milder symptoms but noted the cumulative toll. Senior lecturers experienced chronic fatigue and illnesses. One stated, “I get sick more often now than I used to. It’s stress, I think.”

Mental health impacts

Mental health impacts ranged from anxiety and emotional overwhelm in early-career staff to burnout and low motivation among seniors. Examples included, “I can’t stop stressing about performance,” and “It drains my motivation over time.”

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study support the research questions that job stress evolves across different stages of an academic career and manifests uniquely in both physical and mental health outcomes. Early-career lecturers were found to be the most psychologically vulnerable, facing performance pressure, unclear job expectations, and a lack of structural support. These findings are in line with the study by Xu and Wang (2023), who reported that unclear expectations and excessive workload led to emotional burnout among junior faculty in China (Zhou & Wang, 2024) also observed similar psychological strains, including anxiety and somatic symptoms, among young university lecturers facing job insecurity and promotion uncertainty.

Mid-career lecturers in this study demonstrated relatively greater emotional resilience yet continued to face stress associated with administrative overload and the pressure to produce research outputs. This aligns with Kim

and Yeo (2024) findings that mid-career faculty experience significant work-family conflict and heavy workloads that contribute to burnout. Similarly, Liu et al., (2021) showed that institutional leadership and mindfulness interventions could mitigate emotional exhaustion in this group, affirming the importance of organizational support.

Meanwhile, senior lecturers reported chronic fatigue, diminished motivation, and a sense of being undervalued often because of long-standing leadership duties and insufficient recognition from their institutions. These findings similar with Michulek et al. (2024), who emphasized that poor workplace dynamics and a lack of collegial support can lead to disengagement in senior faculty. Wilnot (2025) also supported this perspective by noting that inadequate institutional support contributed to a decline in well-being and motivation among senior lecturers nearing retirement.

The physical symptoms of stress observed in this study also varied by career stage. Early-career lecturers experienced acute symptoms such as sleep disturbances and headaches, while mid-career lecturers reported milder but persistent fatigue. Senior lecturers showed signs of chronic stress-related illnesses, including cardiovascular issues and burnout. These findings are corroborated by Cao et al. (2025), who reported that prolonged exposure to academic stress can lead to serious physical health consequences in long-serving university staff.

Conversely, no contradictory findings emerged from the literature to reject the observed patterns in this study. The themes identified are consistent with existing global and regional research, further validating the conclusion that stress in academia is career-stage specific and requires differentiated support strategies.

Taken together, these findings highlight the urgent need for Malaysian universities to implement interventions that address the distinct stressors at each career stage. Institutional reforms that include mentorship programs, balanced workloads, recognition systems, and phased retirement options can significantly enhance the well-being and productivity of academic staff throughout their careers.

VI. CONCLUSION (OR LIMITATION OR SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER STUDIES)

This research highlights that job stress is not experienced uniformly across academic careers. Each stage presents its own set of challenges that require tailored institutional responses. Early-career lecturers need mentorship and emotional support. Mid-career lecturers benefit from balanced workloads and recognition, while senior lecturers require flexible arrangements and meaningful roles to remain engaged.

While insightful, the study's scope is limited by its small sample size and single-institution focus. Future research should adopt broader, longitudinal methods to better understand academic stress over time and across various contexts.

Importantly, the study supports efforts toward Sustainable Development Goals particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education).

Promoting lecturer well-being is not only a moral imperative but also essential for long-term educational excellence and institutional resilience. These recommendations align closely with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). By investing in the mental and physical well-being of lecturers, institutions contribute to healthier work environments and more effective teaching and learning outcomes.

Moreover, implementing annual stress audits, developing career-stage-sensitive support systems, and institutionalizing well-being initiatives not only foster staff retention but also uphold the values of sustainability and educational excellence within the higher education sector.

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