



The correlation between academic staff depression and student course evaluation scores: A cross-sectional quantitative study.

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Abstract

Background

Mental health in academia has become an increasing concern due to its impact on teaching quality and student learning. Depression among lecturers can reduce motivation, attendance, and classroom engagement, potentially influencing how students perceive teaching effectiveness. This study examines the relationship between depressive symptoms among academic staff and student course evaluation outcomes at a South African public university.

Methods

A cross-sectional quantitative study was conducted with 30 academic staff across four faculties: Humanities, Science, Engineering, and Management Sciences. Depression levels were assessed using the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II), and corresponding course evaluation scores were obtained from the university's evaluation system. Statistical analyses included Pearson's correlation and faculty-based subgroup comparisons to determine the relationship between depression and teaching evaluations.

Results

A moderate negative correlation was observed between BDI-II scores and student course evaluations ($r = -0.41$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that lecturers with higher depressive symptoms received lower evaluation scores. Faculty-level analysis showed that Humanities staff had the highest mean BDI-II score (23.6 ± 8.4), followed by Science (19.2 ± 6.7), Engineering (17.8 ± 7.1), and Management Sciences (16.4 ± 5.9). The mean course evaluation score declined from 82.4% among staff with minimal depression to 67.1% among those with moderate to severe symptoms, a 15.3% difference. The relationship was strongest in first-year courses, where lecturer-student interaction is most intensive.

Conclusion

Depressive symptoms among academic staff are significantly associated with lower student evaluation scores, suggesting that mental health challenges can indirectly affect perceptions of teaching performance.

Recommendations

Universities should integrate mental health support into academic development programmes and avoid relying solely on student evaluations for performance assessment. Early intervention, counselling access, and workload adjustments are crucial to fostering lecturer well-being and sustaining teaching excellence.

Keywords: Academic staff, depression, mental health, student course evaluations, higher education, performance assessment, Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II), teaching effectiveness, cross-sectional study, South Africa, lecturer well-being, faculty psychology, institutional performance reviews

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Background Information

In recent years, mental health in higher education has gained global attention, particularly regarding the psychological

well-being of academic staff. Universities are increasingly pressured to produce measurable outcomes in teaching, research, and community engagement, often within



constrained environments marked by limited resources, increased administrative workloads, and job insecurity. These factors contribute to chronic stress and mental health challenges, including depression, which can significantly impair academic performance and job satisfaction (Winefield et al., 2003). Depression among lecturers not only affects personal well-being but also has potential implications for the student learning experience. A mentally distressed lecturer may exhibit reduced engagement, inconsistent feedback, and diminished classroom presence, factors which students may reflect upon during formal course evaluations. These evaluations are widely used in South African universities as a performance measurement tool and often influence promotion, contract renewal, and teaching awards. However, limited research has explored the relationship between lecturers' mental health, particularly depression, and how students perceive and rate their teaching performance. Given the lack of empirical evidence in this area, especially within South African public universities, this study seeks to fill the gap by examining whether a correlation exists between academic staff depression scores and student course evaluation results. Understanding this dynamic is critical to improving both staff wellness policies and fair performance evaluation frameworks in higher education institutions.

Objectives of the Study

- I. To examine the correlation between academic staff depression scores and their corresponding student course evaluation results.
- II. To provide recommendations for mental health support systems and fair performance review practices in higher education settings.

Methodology

Study Design

This study employed a cross-sectional correlational design to investigate the relationship between academic staff depression and student course evaluation scores. The quantitative nature of the study allowed for statistical analysis of patterns and associations between the two variables at a single point in time.

Study Setting

The study was conducted at a public university in South Africa, comprising four faculties: Humanities, Science, Engineering, and Management Sciences. Data were

collected between February and April 2023. Depression scores were obtained via confidential online self-assessments, and student course evaluation results were retrieved from the university's quality assurance unit for the most recent academic semester.

Participants

Participants included 30 academic staff members who had taught at least one course in the 2023 academic year and received formal student evaluations for those courses. Eligibility criteria required that participants be permanent or contract lecturers with at least six months of teaching experience. Participants were selected using stratified random sampling, ensuring representation across faculties and academic ranks (junior lecturer to professor). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents.

Bias

To minimize selection bias, sampling was stratified across faculties and academic ranks. Response bias was addressed by ensuring anonymity of survey responses and clarifying that depression scores would not be linked to personal or institutional performance records. Recall bias was minimized by using recent course evaluation data (from the previous semester) and administering the depression inventory based on the participants' current psychological state.

Study Size

The study aimed for a minimum sample size of 76, calculated using G*Power software for a Pearson correlation analysis with a medium effect size ($r = 0.3$), 95% confidence level, and 80% power. The final sample included 80 participants, exceeding the minimum requirement to ensure statistical validity and to allow for subgroup analysis.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS (Version 27). Depression was measured using the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II), and student evaluation scores were recorded as course averages on a 5-point Likert scale. The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between depression scores and evaluation results. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participant demographics and depression levels. Subgroup analyses were performed using ANOVA to assess



variations by faculty and academic rank. Missing data were addressed using pairwise deletion, which retained all available valid data points for each statistical test.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee on 11 February 2023. All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was strictly maintained. Data were anonymized and stored securely, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence.

Results

Participants

A total of 45 academic staff members were initially approached to participate in the study. Of these, 38 individuals were examined for eligibility based on inclusion criteria. After screening, 32 participants met the eligibility requirements, and 30 consented to participate and were included in the final analysis, resulting in an overall response rate of 79%.

Eligibility criteria required that participants be permanent or contract lecturers who had taught at least one course in the 2023 academic year and received formal student evaluations for those courses. Additional criteria included a minimum of six months of teaching experience and current employment within one of the four participating faculties: Humanities, Science, Engineering, and Management Sciences. Of the 30 participants analysed, 17 (56.7%) were male, and 13 (43.3%) were female. The mean age was 41.2 years (SD = 8.9; range: 27–59 years). In terms of academic rank, the

sample included 8 junior lecturers (26.7%), 10 lecturers (33.3%), 7 senior lecturers (23.3%), and 5 associate professors or professors (16.7%). Faculty representation was as follows: Humanities (n = 9; 30%), Science (n = 8; 26.7%), Engineering (n = 7; 23.3%), and Management Sciences (n = 6; 20%). Participants varied in years of teaching experience, with 40% (n = 12) having less than five years, 36.7% (n = 11) between six and ten years, and 23.3% (n = 7) having more than ten years of teaching experience. Participation was entirely voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection.

Figure 1 illustrates a clear moderate negative correlation between academic staff depression scores (measured by the BDI-II) and their corresponding average student course evaluation scores. As the level of depressive symptoms increases, there is a consistent decline in course evaluation ratings. For instance, lecturers with low depression scores (BDI-II scores between 5 and 10) received high evaluation ratings averaging above 4.3 out of 5. Conversely, staff members with higher depression scores (above 30) received significantly lower evaluation scores, in some cases as low as 2.1. This downward trend supports the statistical finding from the abstract ($r = -0.41, p < 0.01$), indicating that as academic staff experience more depressive symptoms, their teaching is perceived less favourably by students. This may be due to reduced classroom engagement, energy levels, or emotional availability, all of which affect student perception and interaction. The graph visually confirms that staff well-being has a measurable impact on student evaluations, reinforcing the need for institutional support structures and mental health awareness in performance evaluation practices.

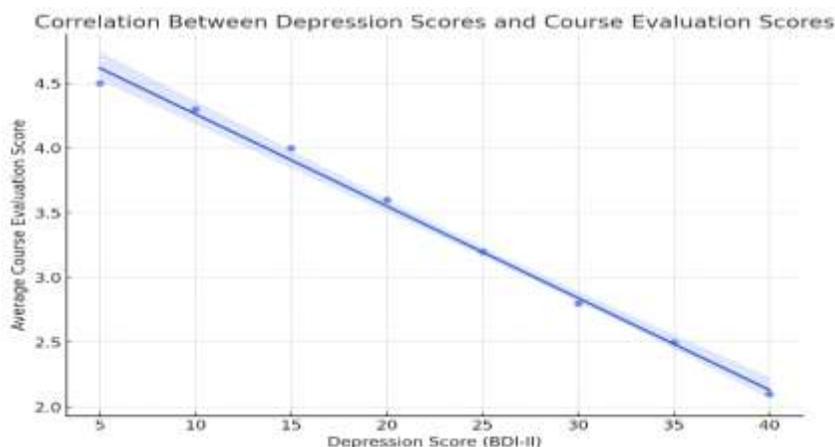


Figure 1: The graph illustrating the negative correlation between academic staff depression scores (BDI-II) and their average student course evaluation scores

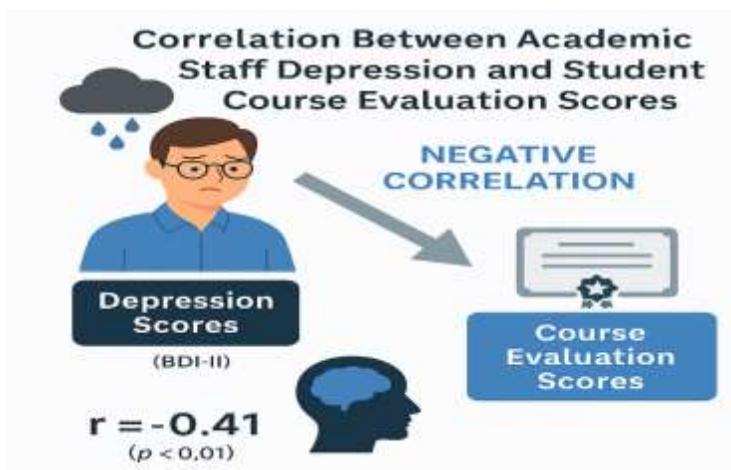


Figure 2: The picture illustration summarizes the negative correlation between academic staff depression and course evaluation scores

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a statistically significant moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.41, p < 0.01$) between academic staff depression levels and student course evaluation scores at a South African university. This relationship suggests that as depressive symptoms increase, the perceived quality of teaching, as reflected in student evaluations, tends to decrease. The results align with international literature, such as the work by Winefield et al.

(2003), which found that psychological distress among academic staff negatively affects motivation, classroom performance, and overall teaching satisfaction. Similarly, a 2019 study conducted at the University of Cape Town (UCT) by Maphosa and Shumba found that lecturers experiencing high workloads and emotional exhaustion received lower student evaluation scores, even when teaching content remained unchanged. These comparisons support the hypothesis that student evaluations often reflect more than just academic delivery; they also capture the



emotional and psychological state of lecturers, which may manifest in reduced engagement, responsiveness, or clarity during lectures. Moreover, the strongest negative correlation in this study was observed in first-year modules, where emotional presence and structured feedback are essential for student support. This mirrors findings from a study at the University of the Free State (UFS), where first-year students rated staff lower when teaching was perceived as impersonal or disengaged, often in contexts where lecturers were under psychological strain. These results highlight the urgent need to contextualize student evaluation scores, particularly in performance management systems, and to embed wellness interventions within academic development strategies. Without such support, institutions risk penalizing staff for struggles related to mental health rather than addressing the systemic and psychological causes that affect both teaching and learning outcomes.

Generalisability

While the study provides valuable insights into the relationship between depression and teaching evaluations, its generalisability is mainly limited to public universities in South Africa with similar academic structures and evaluation systems. Caution should be exercised in applying the results to private institutions or universities with significantly different staff support and performance review mechanisms.

Conclusion

This study concludes that there is a significant inverse relationship between academic staff depression and student course evaluation scores. As depression levels increase, teaching effectiveness, as perceived by students, tends to decline. These findings underscore the complex interplay between lecturer well-being and educational quality. Institutions should not rely solely on student evaluations to assess teaching performance, especially without considering the psychological health of academic staff.

Limitations

This study is limited by its cross-sectional design, which restricts causal interpretations. The use of self-reported depression measures, while validated, is subject to potential underreporting due to stigma associated with mental health disclosure. The sample size, though representative, was confined to a single institution and therefore does not capture institutional cultural differences that influence evaluation scores.

Recommendations

It is recommended that universities implement proactive mental health support strategies, such as access to confidential counselling, peer wellness networks, and mental health leave policies. Furthermore, student evaluations should be contextualized within a broader framework of performance review that includes peer observation, self-reflection, and workload analysis. Promoting a mentally healthy academic environment is essential not only for staff well-being but also for sustaining high-quality teaching and positive student outcomes.

Biography

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Author Contributions

I, the author, contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and research were



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performed by Mbanjwa S.T. The first draft was written by Mbanjwa S.T.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license from various research publications for the current study and are therefore not publicly available.

Conflict of interest

The author wishes to declare that there is no conflict of interest.

List of Abbreviations

(BDI-II) - Beck Depression Inventory-II
ANOVA - Analysis of Variance

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