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ACADEMIC STRESSORS AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES: ANALYZING THE SUPERVISOR-INDUCED PRESSURES LEADING TO STUDENT WITHDRAWAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS ALIGNING WITH THE SDGs

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of supervisor-induced pressures on postgraduate students, highlighting their effects on mental health and retention while emphasizing the need for balanced academic practices to enhance well-being and educational outcomes in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is a quantitative research study within a cross-sectional survey design. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional approach, data were gathered through structured surveys from 112 postgraduate students in Indonesia, examining the prevalence and consequences of academic stressors. The findings show an association between supervisory pressures and negative outcomes, with 52.7% of participants considering withdrawal and 58% reporting severe anxiety. Key stressors included unrealistic deadlines (20.5%) and high expectations tied to unreasonable timelines (17.9%). Regression analysis indicated that unrealistic deadlines were linked to adverse mental health outcomes ($\beta = 0.38, p < 0.05$), though these results should be interpreted cautiously given the study's design. Theoretically, this research underscores the necessity of empathetic supervision, tailored interventions, and sustainable academic systems to mitigate these impacts, offering actionable insights for fostering supportive educational environments. Empirically, it addresses critical gaps in understanding and proposes strategies aligned with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) to reshape academic practices for improved student outcomes. By highlighting barriers to SDG 4 (Quality Education), such as student withdrawal, and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), such as anxiety, the study provides ground-level evidence for institutions to improve supervisory practices. While limited by its cross-sectional design and convenience sampling, the study offers valuable exploratory evidence that can guide immediate institutional reforms and inform future, larger-scale research.

KEYWORDS: Postgraduate Education, Academic Stress, Supervisory Pressure, Student Retention, Resilience.

1. INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate education represents a transformative journey of intellectual exploration and professional growth. However, this journey is often accompanied by significant challenges, particularly the pressures imposed by academic supervisors. While intended to guide and inspire, these pressures frequently lead to unintended consequences, such as heightened stress, declining mental health, and student withdrawal. Despite existing studies on academic stress, little is known about how supervisor behaviors directly contribute to withdrawal and mental health crises in postgraduate education. This study addresses that gap by focusing on supervisor-induced pressures as a central factor. Findings from this study highlight the extent of these challenges, with over half (52.7%) of respondents considering withdrawing from their programs due to overwhelming academic demands.

The negative effects of supervisor-induced pressures extend beyond academic performance, with 58.0% of respondents reporting "extremely" severe anxiety. These issues are compounded by unrealistic deadlines (20.5%), high expectations with unreasonable deadlines (17.9%), and poor communication, factors that strain students' mental resilience and academic commitment. By integrating Stress Theory and Social Support Theory as guiding frameworks, this study examines how these pressures shape student outcomes, rather than presenting multiple theories in isolation.

This study aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizing the need for systemic changes in academic environments. Specifically, SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) underscores the urgency of addressing mental health challenges to ensure students' overall well-being. Stress-related issues, exacerbated by inadequate coping mechanisms, underscore the critical importance of fostering supportive academic settings. The findings also provide ground-level evidence for SDG 4 (Quality Education), showing how excessive pressures can force students out of programs and limit equitable access to education.

Furthermore, SDG 4 (Quality Education) advocates for inclusive and equitable education. Excessive academic pressures expose this principle by forcing students out of programs and hindering their potential. By addressing these stressors, institutions can create a more supportive and sustainable learning environment. Lastly, SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) highlights the broader implications of these findings. Improved supervisory practices and institutional support can

enhance not only academic outcomes but also professional development, contributing to a more sustainable and productive academic ecosystem (United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2022). Driven by these priorities, this study seeks to answer the pivotal question: "How do supervisor-induced pressures impact the mental health and educational journey of postgraduate students?" By exploring this dynamic, the research aims to offer actionable insights and inform policies that promote balanced supervisory practices and robust mental health systems. Ultimately, this work contributes exploratory evidence that, despite methodological limitations, provides immediate relevance for institutions seeking to strengthen student well-being and retention. Ultimately, this work contributes to the global discourse on sustainable education and student well-being, paving the way for more resilient academic communities.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study integrates several key theories and concepts to explore the impact of supervisor-induced pressures on postgraduate students' mental health and educational outcomes. Rather than presenting multiple theories in isolation, this study applies Stress and Coping Theory and Social Support Theory as guiding lenses. These frameworks provide a coherent structure for analyzing how supervisory practices influence student well-being and withdrawal decisions.

Stress and Coping Theory provides a foundational understanding of how individuals perceive and respond to stressors. Stress is a result of the individual's appraisal of a situation as threatening or demanding, coupled with their perceived ability to cope with it. In the context of postgraduate education, supervisor-induced pressures can be viewed as significant stressors that affect students' mental health and coping mechanisms (Health. 2024; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Montemayor, 2023; Ramahsendran et al., 2017; Witter et al., 2017). This theory directly informs the study's analysis of how unrealistic deadlines and poor communication contribute to anxiety and withdrawal intentions.

Social support Theory emphasizes the role of emotional, informational, and instrumental support in mitigating stress. In the academic context, supervisors are expected to provide support, but undue pressure can diminish this perception, exacerbating stress and leading to negative outcomes

(Deci & Ryan, 1985; House, 1981; Mboera et al., 2021). This framework helps explain how reduced supervisory support intensifies the impact of stressors, shaping both mental health and academic performance. Other theories such as the Job Demands-Control Model, Self-Determination Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, and Role Theory are acknowledged as complementary perspectives but are not the primary analytical focus. They provide background context for understanding how demands, autonomy, resources, and role strain interact with supervisory practices.

This study aligns with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) by highlighting the critical need for mental health support in academic settings to ensure the well-being of postgraduate students. Addressing academic stressors and supervisor-induced pressures can contribute to improved mental health outcomes for postgraduate students (ESCWA, 2021; UN, 2023). The findings also provide ground-level evidence for SDG 4 (Quality Education), showing how excessive pressures can force students out of programs and limit equitable access to education.

Additionally, SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) focuses on promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. Insights into HR practices and supervisory pressures can inform better workplace practices within academic institutions, contributing to a more supportive and sustainable work environment for both students and staff (United Nations, 2002).

As a PhD student and medical doctor with public health expertise, I have observed and interacted with numerous postgraduate students across various universities. Many have shared experiences of undue supervisory pressures resulting in stress and mental health issues. These observations motivated this study, which addresses a critical gap in understanding the impact of supervisory practices on postgraduate students' well-being and educational outcomes. By applying Stress and Coping Theory and Social Support Theory as guiding frameworks, the research offers actionable insights for policy recommendations, emphasizing balanced supervisory practices and robust mental health support systems.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative and cross-sectional design to explore how supervisor-induced pressures affect postgraduate students' mental health and educational outcomes. Data were gathered from 112 postgraduate students in Indonesia. Participants

included both male (51.8%) and female (48.2%) students from different age groups, regions, and fields of study, in line with the approach of (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The sample was recruited through convenience and snowball sampling, beginning with doctoral management classmates and extended to peers in other universities. While non-random, this approach provided access to diverse postgraduate experiences but limits generalizability.

A structured survey was created using Google Forms. Survey links were shared with Doctoral Management classmates, who were asked to complete the survey and share it with their peers across Indonesia. The survey included standardized instruments: the Academic Stress Scale (to measure supervisor-induced pressures), the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7) for anxiety, and a short checklist for academic performance outcomes. It also asked questions about demographics (age, gender, field of study, region), experiences of supervisor-induced pressures, perceived stress levels, coping mechanisms, mental health status (using standardized scales), and educational outcomes (e.g., intention to continue studies, academic performance) (Ramahsendran et al., 2017; Saunders et al., 2019). Data collection took place between March and May 2025.

The data collected was analyzed using statistical software to gain meaningful insights. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the characteristics of the sample, key variables, and frequency distributions. Inferential statistics included correlation and regression analyses, with results reported separately for correlation coefficients (r) and regression coefficients (β). Confidence intervals (CIs), effect sizes, and model fit statistics (R^2 , p -values) were calculated to ensure transparency and accuracy. The analysis aimed to identify patterns and correlations to understand the impact of academic stressors on students' well-being and performance.

This study adhered to strict ethical research practices to protect participants. Informed consent was obtained, and participation was voluntary. Participants could withdraw at any time without penalty. Their identities were kept confidential, and personal identifiers were not collected. Data was stored securely and accessed only by authorized research personnel. Ethical approval was reviewed by the institutional review board (IRB) in Semarang, Indonesia. The IRB confirmed that formal approval was not required for anonymous, educational survey research, but the study followed all ethical guidelines for human participants.

4. RESULTS

This study surveyed 112 postgraduate students across Indonesia to explore the impact of supervisor-induced academic pressures on their mental health and academic performance. The findings reveal critical insights into how these stressors contribute to significant challenges faced by students in their educational journey.

Table 1. Survey Respondent Demographics and

Impact of Academic Stressors

Table 1 presents a detailed breakdown of the demographic characteristics of the survey respondents and the impact of supervisor-induced academic pressures on their performance, mental health, and program continuation. The data highlights the prevalence of academic stressors and their significant consequences, aligning with the study's focus on understanding and addressing these critical issues.

Table 1: Participants Demographic and Impact of Academic Stressors.

Participant Demographic	Category	Number (%)
Gender	Male	58 (51.8%)
	Female	54 (48.2%)
Age Group	20-25 years	29 (25.9%)
	26-30 years	33 (29.5%)
	31-35 years	30 (26.8%)
	36-40 years	14 (12.5%)
	Above 41 years	6 (5.4%)
Region	Java	63 (56.3%)
	Kalimantan	11 (9.8%)
	Sumatera	12 (10.7%)
	Sulawesi	14 (12.5%)
	Bali	6 (5.4%)
	Nusa Tenggara	2 (1.8%)
	Papua	4 (3.6%)
Field of Study	Design	7 (8%)
	Business Administration	8 (7%)
	Information Technology	9 (8.0%)
	Education	10(9%)
	Management	11 (10%)
	Economics	11 (10%)
	Others	55 (46.4%)
Impact on Academic Performance	Extremely	37 (33.0%)
	Significantly	10 (8.9%)
	Moderately	22 (19.6%)
	Slightly	30 (26.8%)
Intention to Withdraw	Not at all	13 (11.6%)
	Yes	59 (52.7%)
	No	53 (47.3%)
Mental Health Support Usage	Always	39 (34.8%)
	Often	5 (4.5%)
	Sometimes	22 (19.6%)
	Rarely	13 (11.6%)
	Never	33 (29.5%)

The diverse demographics of the respondents provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing the impact of academic stressors, ensuring a well-rounded understanding of the challenges faced by postgraduate students.

Table 2. Prevalence and Nature of Supervisor-

Induced Pressures

Table 2 captures the frequency and types of pressures experienced by respondents from their academic supervisors, highlighting the common stressors faced by students.

Table 2: Frequency of Pressures and their Nature.

Variables	Frequency	Number (%)
Frequency of Pressure	Always	39 (34.8%)
	Sometimes	32 (28.6%)
	Often	14 (12.5%)
	Rarely	19 (17%)
	Never	8 (7.1%)
Nature of Pressure	Pressure to Publish	23 (20.5%)

	High Expectations and Unreasonable deadline	20 (17.9%)
	Poor Communication	17 (15.2%)
	Lack of Support	16 (14.3%)
	Frequent Criticism	9 (8%)
	Micromanagement	9 (8%)
	Unclear Guidance	9 (8%)
	Personal Attacks	9 (8%)

The pervasive and multifaceted nature of supervisor-induced pressures contributes significantly to the academic stress experienced by postgraduate students.

Performance and Mental Health

Table 3 summarizes the effects of academic pressures on the performance and mental health of respondents, providing a clear overview of how stressors influence academic outcomes.

Table 3. Impact of Academic Pressures on

Table 3: Performance and Mental Health of Respondents.

Variables	Category	Number (%)
Academic Performance	Extremely	37 (33%)
	Slightly	30 (26.8%)
	Moderately	22 (19.6%)
	Significantly	10 (8.9%)
	Not at all	13 (11.6%)
Mental Health	Extremely	38 (33.9%)
	Moderately	20 (17.9%)
	Significantly	10 (8.9%)
	Slightly	15 (13.4%)
	Not at all	29 (25.9%)
Current Stress Levels	Very High	34 (30.4%)
	Low	27 (24.1%)
	Moderate	26 (23.2%)
	High	16 (14.3%)
	None	9 (8%)

The significant impact of academic pressures on both performance and mental health highlights areas for intervention to support students' well-being and academic success.

Effectiveness

Table 4 presents the coping strategies employed by respondents to manage academic pressures and their perceived effectiveness.

Table 4. Coping Mechanisms and Their

Table 4: Coping and Effectiveness of Mechanisms.

Variables	Usage	Number (%)
Coping Strategies	Relaxation Techniques	32 (28.6%)
	Time Management	29 (25.9%)
	Seeking Social Support	21 (18.8%)
	Physical Activity	20 (17.9%)
	Professional Help	10 (8.9%)
Effectiveness of Mechanisms	Extremely Effective	39 (34.8%)
	Very Effective	32 (28.6%)
	Moderately Effective	31 (27.7%)
	Slightly Effective	8 (7.1%)
	Not Effective	2 (1.8%)

These findings provide insights into the strategies students use to manage academic pressures and their perceived effectiveness, highlighting the importance of supporting students' mental health.

Intentions

Table 5 outlines the frequency of seeking mental health support and students' intent to continue their studies despite academic pressures.

Table 5. Support Seeking and Continuation

Table 5: Frequency of seeking mental support.

Variables	Frequency	Number (%)
Support Seeking	Always	39 (34.8%)
	Sometimes	22 (19.6%)

	Rarely	13 (11.6%)
	Often	5 (4.5%)
	Never	33 (29.5%)
Intent to Continue Studies	Definitely Yes	57 (50.9%)
	Probably Yes	30 (26.8%)
	Unsure	18 (16.1%)
	Probably Not	5 (4.5%)
	Definitely Not	2 (1.8%)
Impact on Key Performance Areas	Thesis Deadlines	12 (10.7%)
	Publication Pressure	5 (4.5%)
	Grades	19 (17%)
	Examination Performance	11 (9.8%)
	Presentation Anxiety	9 (8%)

Table 6: Correlation Analysis

To explore the relationships between supervisor-induced pressures and various outcomes, we conducted a correlation analysis using STATA software. Correlation coefficients (r) were reported separately from regression coefficients (β) to avoid duplication errors. Confidence intervals (95% CI) were added to improve transparency.

Table 6: Relationships between supervisor-induced pressures and various outcomes.

Variable 1	Variable 2	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Significance (p-value)
Supervisor-Induced Pressures	Anxiety	0.52	< 0.01
Supervisor-Induced Pressures	Academic Performance	-0.45	< 0.01
Frequency of Supervisor-Induced Pressures	Intention to Withdraw	0.48	< 0.01
Nature of Pressure: Unrealistic Deadlines	Mental Health Status	0.38	< 0.05
Seeking Social Support	Coping Effectiveness	0.32	< 0.05

Seeking Social Support Effectiveness 0.32 < 0.05
Coping

The correlation analysis reveals significant positive correlations between supervisor-induced pressures and anxiety (r = 0.52, 95% CI [0.41-0.63], p < 0.01) as well as the intention to withdraw (r = 0.48, 95% CI [0.36-0.59], p < 0.01). This suggests that higher levels of supervisor-induced pressures are associated with increased anxiety and a greater likelihood of students considering withdrawal. Conversely, there is a significant negative correlation between supervisor-induced pressures and academic performance (r = -0.45, 95% CI [-0.56--0.33], p < 0.01), indicating that increased pressures are linked to poorer academic performance. Additionally, unrealistic deadlines correlate significantly with poorer mental health status (r = 0.38, p < 0.05), while

seeking social support positively correlates with coping effectiveness (r = 0.32, p < 0.05).

Table 7: Regression Analysis

To further investigate the impact of supervisor-induced pressures on mental health and academic outcomes, we conducted regression analyses. Regression coefficients (β) were reported separately, with model fit statistics (R²) included to strengthen reliability.

Table 7: Impact of supervisor-induced pressures on mental health and academic outcomes.

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Regression Coefficient (β)	Significance (p-value)
Anxiety	Supervisor-Induced Pressures	0.52	< 0.01
Academic Performance	Supervisor-Induced Pressures	-0.45	< 0.01
Intention to Withdraw	Frequency of Pressure	0.48	< 0.01
Mental Health Status	Unrealistic Deadlines	0.38	< 0.05
Coping Effectiveness	Seeking Social Support	0.32	< 0.05

The regression analysis indicates that supervisor-induced pressures were associated with higher anxiety (β = 0.52, p < 0.01, R² = 0.27) and negatively linked to academic performance (β = -0.45, p < 0.01, R² = 0.22). Additionally, the frequency of pressures was a predictor of the intention to withdraw (β = 0.48, p < 0.01, R² = 0.24), suggesting that frequent pressures from supervisors increase students' likelihood of considering withdrawal. Unrealistic deadlines were associated with negative mental health outcomes (β = 0.38, p < 0.05), while seeking social support positively influenced coping effectiveness (β = 0.32, p < 0.05). These findings should be interpreted cautiously, as the cross-sectional design prevents causal inference.

4.1. Discussion

The findings from this study underscore the significant impact of supervisor-induced pressures

on postgraduate students' mental health, academic performance, and coping mechanisms. The key results are intricately tied to theoretical frameworks and concepts, offering a comprehensive understanding of the observed outcomes.

Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984): The prevalence of anxiety (33.9%) and withdrawal intentions (52.7%) align with this theory, which explains stress as the appraisal of supervisory pressures as overwhelming. These pressures, particularly unrealistic deadlines (20.5%) and excessive workloads (17.9%), highlight the students' perceived inability to cope effectively. This reinforces the need for institutional support systems that reduce stressors and strengthen coping capacity.

Social Support Theory (Turner, 2002; House, 1981; Waldman et al., 2006): With 18.8% of students seeking social support to manage academic stress, this theory highlights the protective role of interpersonal connections. However, professional help was underutilized (8.9%). This suggests that institutions should foster both formal and informal support networks, while supervisors adopt more empathetic roles to enhance perceived support.

Other frameworks such as the Job Demands-Control Model, Self-Determination Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, and Role Theory provide complementary perspectives. They help explain how limited autonomy, resource depletion, and role strain interact with supervisory practices, but the guiding analysis in this study is primarily based on Stress and Coping Theory and Social Support Theory.

Correlation and Regression Measures: Using STATA software, the study revealed significant associations between supervisor-induced pressures and negative academic outcomes. The correlation coefficient between supervisor-induced pressures and anxiety was $r = 0.52$ ($p < 0.01$), indicating a strong positive relationship. Regression analysis showed that unrealistic deadlines were associated with negative mental health outcomes ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.05$, $R^2 = 0.21$). These findings demonstrate associations rather than causation, given the cross-sectional design, and should be interpreted with caution.

Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being: The high proportion of students experiencing severe anxiety and contemplating withdrawal emphasizes the urgent need for accessible mental health services in academic institutions.

SDG 4: Quality Education: Addressing the root causes of withdrawal and performance decline

highlights the importance of supervisory reforms that create inclusive, equitable, and supportive learning environments.

SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth: Insights into supervisory practices reveal parallels to workplace environments, offering actionable recommendations to improve HR practices and create sustainable, supportive systems in academia.

Actionable Recommendations: Institutions should train supervisors to set realistic deadlines, communicate clearly, and provide pastoral care. Universities should strengthen counseling services and peer-support programs to reduce stress and withdrawal risk. These steps will not only improve students' well-being but also contribute to achieving SDG targets.

In conclusion, this study contributes exploratory evidence toward understanding and addressing supervisor-induced pressures in postgraduate education. By emphasizing guiding theoretical frameworks and aligning with the SDGs, these findings call for structural changes in academic settings to foster student well-being, performance, and sustainable development. Despite limitations such as the small, non-random sample and cross-sectional design, the study provides immediate, ground-level evidence that can inform institutional reforms and future research.

5. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the profound impact of supervisor-induced pressures on postgraduate students in Indonesia, revealing significant implications for their mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. The findings emphasize the critical need for institutional support to mitigate stressors, as the prevalence of anxiety and loss of motivation among students is notably high. Supervisor-induced pressures, particularly unrealistic deadlines and excessive workloads, are major contributors to academic stress. Limited autonomy and high demands exacerbate this stress, underscoring the importance of empowering students with supportive supervisory structures.

The reduction of critical resources, such as emotional support and time, calls for targeted interventions to build resilience and preserve students' academic resources. While the protective role of social support is evident, the underutilization of professional help suggests the need for institutions to foster both formal and informal support networks. Rather than relying on multiple disconnected theories, this study applied Stress and Coping Theory and Social Support Theory as guiding

frameworks, providing a coherent foundation for interpreting the observed outcomes. Other theories such as Job Demands-Control, Self-Determination, Conservation of Resources, and Role Theory are acknowledged as complementary perspectives.

Correlation and regression analyses highlight strong associations between supervisor-induced pressures and negative academic outcomes. For example, pressures were correlated with anxiety ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$) and withdrawal intentions ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$), while regression analysis showed unrealistic deadlines were linked to poorer mental health ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.05$, $R^2 = 0.21$). These findings indicate associations rather than causation, given the cross-sectional design. This underscores the need for clear, achievable expectations and role clarity.

This study advocates for supervisory reforms that create inclusive, equitable, and supportive educational environments, aligning with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3, 4, and 8. Institutions should implement comprehensive support systems, including mental health services and resilience-building programs, to address the significant proportion of students experiencing severe anxiety and contemplating withdrawal.

Empowering students with autonomy and improving time management strategies can foster intrinsic motivation and enhance academic performance. Supervisors should adopt empathetic, approachable roles and provide constructive feedback to reduce role conflict and enhance academic outcomes. Future research should test targeted interventions, explore moderating factors such as coping strategies and social support, and examine cultural and contextual influences on supervisory practices. Larger, random samples and longitudinal designs would strengthen generalizability and causal inference.

To bring this conclusion to an end, this study contributes valuable exploratory evidence toward understanding and addressing supervisor-induced pressures in postgraduate education. By emphasizing guiding theoretical frameworks and aligning with the SDGs, these findings call for structural changes in academic settings to foster student well-being, performance, and sustainable development. Despite methodological limitations, the study provides immediate, ground-level insights that can encourage institutional reforms and future research.

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[Author 2,3,4] contributed to the final proofreading, feedback, and enrichment of the manuscript.

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