

Exploring Occupational Stress in Higher Education: The Student Perspective

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Abstract: Students enrolled in higher education study programs face various and vast challenges. These academic demands can generate occupational stress if proper support methods are not put in place. The scientific literature has investigated mainly perceived occupational stress by students in singular universities, especially in the medical field and differences in stress experience due to demographic variables. This exploratory study investigated occupational stressors among students at the Faculty of Administration and Public Management, Bucharest University of Economic Studies. Data was collected from a representative sample of 347 undergraduate and master's students. An online survey was distributed using Google Forms. Statistical analyses were performed using the JASP software program. The main research question was: „to what extent are academic demands and assessment methods associated with occupational stressors among faculty students, and how do these stressors correlate with the preference for specific mitigation strategies?” Perceived occupational stress was correlated with the students' preference for organizational interventions, specifically the reduction of administrative burden and increase of curricular flexibility. The implications for the field include the mapping and listing of specific occupational stressors and the existing relationship between these factors, coping strategies and the existing assessment methods at the faculty level. The contribution brought by this paper to the field study consists in the empirical support provided for faculty management to replace or at least complement final exams with continuous assessment methods. The results also emphasize the need for better coordination of academic disciplines by professors to mitigate students' occupational stress.

Keywords: occupational stress, higher education, students.

Introduction

The mental health of university students has become a critical public health concern globally. As higher education environments increasingly mimic high-pressure professional workplaces, students face occupational stressors including academic workload, financial constraints and future career anxieties.

Occupational stress affects more and more students across different cultures and geographies. Approximately two-thirds of 167 first-year medical students from an American university reported moderate to high levels of burnout (Shoua-Desmarais et al., 2020). In another study, 28.7% of 448 undergraduate students enrolled in exercise science and public health promotion courses at a large public university in the United States reported severe stress (Graves et al., 2021).

Reichel et al. (2024) measured well-being and specific occupational stressors among 264 German university students. On Likert scales from 1 to 5, the average score for well-being was less than 2.50, while workload was rated at approximately 3.30, on average. Students seemed to be

especially stressed due to the previously mentioned factor and their well-being was affected. Occupational stress levels and corresponding coping strategies were investigated among 409 medicine and pharmacy students. Moderate and high levels of stress were reported by approximately 65% of students. Most frequently encountered occupational stressors were related to thinking about future performance in the chosen profession, high volume of work and funding problems (Nguye et al., 2024).

The following literature review examines the prevalence of occupational stress, associated risk factors and coping mechanisms among university students from higher education systems (Crețu & Lazăr, 2025).

Literature review

Occupational stress

Previous research highlighted the complex interaction between lifestyle factors and socio-cultural environments in determining student mental health. In a longitudinal study of Bangladeshi university students, Hossain et al. (2019) identified a significant increase in depression and anxiety over 15 months. They found that dissatisfaction with university culture, financial insecurity, and lifestyle factors, such as physical inactivity, poor sleep quality and excessive screen time, were inextricably linked to psychological disorders. This illustrates how academic, financial and personal factors can affect the well-being state of students and how, cumulatively, these factors can generate occupational stress in the short term and cause mental problems in the long term.

Mensah et al. (2020) examined the transition of students from occupational stress related to academic lectures to stress associated with practical training among Ghanaian hospitality and marketing interns during their internship stages. They found that hospitality students reported higher stress levels than marketing students, citing stressors such as lack of pay, repetitive work and transportation challenges. Crucially, this study established that high stress levels were negatively correlated with internship satisfaction and positively correlated with turnover intention. The nature of work and its characteristics, especially job demands, are important factors, even in the case of students' internships, and can be perceived as stressors. This might also indicate a mismatch between students' abilities or skills and the chosen study program for their future career (Malek et al. 2025). Shifting the focus to resilience, Gong, Jao and Qu (2021) conducted a meta-analysis involving over 22,000 Chinese students to explore the relationship between resilience and burnout. Their findings confirmed a negative correlation between the two; however, they noted a "decline effect". Resilience levels appeared to decrease with age from primary school to college. The capacity to overcome obstacles and persevere towards an endeavor can help students to better manage their stress levels. The challenge for students is to maintain the same resilience levels, as it seems that this capacity is lower during university studies than in previous cycles of education. Perhaps this is happening due to new and increased responsibilities associated with life as young adults and more potential stress emerging from various sources.

By 2022, research began to focus heavily on the classification of coping behaviors and cross-cultural differences. In a comparative study, Maskova, Mägdefrau and Nohavová (2022) examined first-year teacher education students in Germany and the Czech Republic. They found significant cross-country differences, with German students displaying healthier work-related patterns compared to their Czech counterparts, who were more vulnerable to burnout. This study linked healthy coping patterns to intrinsic motivation and career choice values. Effective stress mitigation strategies may thus contribute to increased motivation and autonomy for students.

Differences between the two countries might be explained by different cultural factors, attitudes toward study or work, work-life integration mindset, discipline, etc. Synthesizing strategies specifically for healthcare students, Fitzgibbon and Murphy (2022) conducted a literature review identifying that problem-focused strategies (e.g. planning) were associated with reduced stress, whereas emotion-focused and avoidance strategies often exacerbated distress (Rech et al., 2025). They emphasized the need for institutions to design interventions that promote positive coping mechanisms to protect students' future professional well-being. It seems that a more effective strategy to mitigate stress is to first identify and address directly the causes (stressors) rather than manifestations or outcomes (e.g. emotions during the stress state). Avoiding stress factors or denying the state does not work. Instead, students should engage in proactive behaviors and try to change, alter or at least reduce occupational stressors, once they are aware of them.

Reichel et al. (2024) utilized a cross-lagged panel design to investigate reciprocal effects between occupational stressors and strain among German university students. They found evidence for "strain effects", where existing depression predicted higher perceived workload and work complexity one year later. This insight suggests the existence of a vicious cycle where poor mental health can lead to a perception of intense stressors. These stressors can further generate chronic stress in the long term and then higher rates of depression. And thus the cycle repeats. It appears that students with already existing mental health problems are at higher risk of experiencing occupational stress. Most recently, Nguyen et al. (2024) examined Vietnamese first-year medical students, observing primary occupational stressors to be represented by worries related to competencies required in the future. Their findings reinforced the importance of adequate coping mechanisms, discovering that self-distraction and problem-solving were common among medical students. On the other side, maladaptive strategies, such as self-blame, were associated with higher academic and financial stress. The usefulness of self-efficacy and focusing on solving problems or addressing stress factors is highlighted again. Such approaches are essential for students to reduce their perceived occupational stress levels.

Occupational stress can be perceived differently based on students' gender. Graves et al. (2021) discovered that medium and higher levels of stress were reported by the majority of female undergraduates among 448 students from a university in Florida, USA. 21.6% of females reported severe stress, in comparison to only 7.1% males. Females also scored significantly higher than men on emotion-focused coping as a stress mitigation strategy. Self-distraction, emotional support, instrumental support and venting were used more frequently by female students than their male counterparts. It is possible that higher stress levels are perceived by female students due to personality trait differences, more extensive responsibilities, study-family conflict or other cultural factors. Despite the increased occupational stress, women are also more proactive in dealing with the symptoms, being more inclined to engage in coping strategies focused on emotions.

Complementing the focus on stress risk factors, Schönfeld et al. (2019) explored protective mechanisms, specifically the role of self-efficacy. In a three-wave study of Chinese students, they found that self-efficacy mediated the relationship between daily stress and mental health. While daily stressors increased symptoms of depression and anxiety, higher self-efficacy acted as a buffer, predicting better mental health outcomes over two years. This finding indicates that the ability of an individual to reframe occupational stressors and approach them with the belief that they can be overcome, having confidence in one's own strengths, is an effective coping mechanism for stress mitigation. In another study, two adaptive coping strategies were effective in reducing perceived burnout of students: planning and positive reinterpretation (Shoua-Desmarais et al., 2020). Visualizing possible scenarios and reframing situations are useful methods to reduce occupational

stress, as the same events related to academic life can either be approached from a pessimistic or optimistic perspective. A student thus can choose how to relate to external factors outside her or his control. Hoffmann and Geisler (2020) explored how mindfulness-based approaches can act as effective stress coping mechanisms among 214 German college students. Observing and acceptance represent two facets of mindfulness that were examined in the study. Acceptance showed statistically significant and negative correlations with threat appraisal and perceived stress by students. Observing one's own experiences only reduces stress (by lowering threat appraisals) when paired with high levels of acceptance. Conversely, increased observation coupled with reduced acceptance amplifies stress and threat perception. As an individual, especially a student, it is important to first acknowledge situations with relevant stakes or potential threats and then realize that outcomes can not always be entirely influenced by yourself. Adopting such a mindset seems to correspond with a reduction in stress levels.

Self-distraction, problem-solving and social support represented the most frequently adopted measures for stress mitigation by most students from a medical university (Nguye et al., 2024). Körner et al. (2023) investigated coping strategies among 209 German university students. Reducing structural and social hindering demands represents a study crafting technique that was associated with higher levels of students' engagement and lower levels of exhaustion. Focusing on the causes, academic demands or occupational stressors, understanding how and why they appear and then designing appropriate solutions is more effective than just addressing the manifestations of stress. The first can approach can lead to increased academic performance for students, while the latter only solves issues in the short term.

The research literature provides an image of university students facing high levels of occupational stress, driven by academic workload, financial pressure and anxieties towards the future. While self-efficacy and problem-focused coping offer protective benefits, a significant percentage of students, particularly in medical and healthcare study domains, exhibit risk patterns for occupational stress and possibly burnout. The discovery of the reciprocal effect, where strain exacerbates the perception of occupational stressors, underscores the urgent need for organizational interventions that address both environmental stressors and individual coping resources.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to empirically investigate the occupational stressors within the Faculty of Administration and Public Management, specifically analyzing the influence of academic demands and assessment methods, to identify evidence-based strategies for stress mitigation and curriculum optimization. The research objectives were as follows: O1. *To discover and hierarchize the primary occupational stressors of students*; O2. *To examine demographic variations in stress perception to understand if specific groups require targeted support*; O3. *To analyze the congruence between the faculty's current assessment methods and the students' preferred method and determine if assessment formats act as stressors* and O4. *To investigate the relationship between occupational stressor levels and mitigation preferences, providing faculty management with actionable data*. The research hypotheses were: H1. *Demographic variables are associated with the perception of specific occupational stressors*; H2. *Students experiencing higher levels of occupational stressors also demonstrate a significantly stronger preference for mitigation strategies* and H3. *There are statistically significant relationships between students' occupational stressors and their current assessment methods*.

A cross-sectional quantitative study design was adopted. The sampling method was convenient, targeting students across all study specializations. The sample consisted of 347

undergraduate and master's students enrolled in all of the faculty's study programs: Public Administration and Human Resources (bachelor's degree); Administration and Public Management, Public Administration and European Integration and Human Resources Management in the Public Sector (master's degree). Based on the university's rector report (ASE, 2024), the Faculty of Administration and Public Management had a total of around 1300-1500 students enrolled across all study programs in the academic year 2024-2025. At a population size of 1500, with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, the sample of 374 students is statistically representative.

The study deployed a self-administered structured questionnaire. The questionnaire included items related to social-demographic variables (age, gender, year of study, employment status, commute situations, etc.), scales assessing occupational stress factors (stressors), potential-stress-mitigation strategies and current academic assessment methods and preferences for alternative assessment methods. 26 occupational stressors were proposed to students and measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 - very small degree; 5 - very large degree). 11 stress mitigation strategies were proposed to students and measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 - very small degree; 5 - very large degree). Respondents were asked to indicate which of the following assessment methods in the disciplines from the list would be less stressful: *essays, projects, case studies, simulations, presentations, involvement in activities alongside the professor* and to propose other methods, if it was the case. Participants were also surveyed regarding their preference (less stressful and more effective) of the following types of evaluations: conventional assessment methods (*continuous assessment, exam assessment, mixed assessment*) and current assessment methods (*written exam, oral exam*).

The research instrument was distributed for approximately two weeks of the academic year among students using the Google Forms platform. Participants were informed of the study's purpose. After data collection, a database was generated and processed in Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics and correlational analyses were performed in Jeffrey's Amazing Statistics Program (JASP) software.

Results and discussions

Descriptive statistics for profile variables are presented in **Table 1**. The sample size of respondents involved in the research was 347 students. In terms of gender distribution, the sample was predominantly female ($n = 257$, 74.1%), with male participants constituting a smaller portion of the group. ($n = 90$, 25.9%). The majority of respondents reported living in urban areas ($n = 257$, 74.1%), while 25.9% ($n = 90$) resided in rural areas. The majority of the students were not currently employed ($n = 255$, 74.1%). Approximately one-quarter of the sample reported being employed ($n = 88$, 25.4%). When asked about commuting habits, 77.2% ($n = 268$) indicated they do not commute, whereas 22.8% ($n = 79$) reported that they do commute.

A total of 310 students enrolled in bachelor's degree programs responded. Among first-year undergraduate students ($n = 71$), the most common was Human Resources (*Resurse umane*), accounting for 54.9% of the cohort, with Public Administration (*Administrație Publică*), the other specialization, at 46.1%. The second-year undergraduate cohort ($n = 135$) displayed an inverse trend in distribution, with the majority of students enrolled in Public Administration (68.1%) and almost a third (31.9%) in Human Resources. For third-year students ($n = 104$), the concentration in the Public Administration program was most pronounced, representing 91.3% of the group.

37 responses were collected from master's level students. The first year cohort ($n = 13$) displayed a diverse distribution. The largest group ($n = 5$) was specializing in Human Resources Management in the Public Sector (*Managementul Resurselor Umane în Sectorul Public*).

The remaining students were evenly split (4 in each case) between Administration and Public Management (*Administrație și Management Public*) and Public Administration and European Integration (*Administrație Publică și Integrare Europeană*). In the second-year masters' cohort (n = 29) more than half of the students were specialized in Public Administration and European Integration (16). Smaller groups attended Human Resource Management in the Public Sector (6) and Public Administration and Management (3) academic programs.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for all occupational stressors

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Variance	Min.	Max.
Exam session	4.196	0.932	0.869	1.000	5.000
Obtaining a scholarship	2.965	1.446	2.091	1.000	5.000
Maintaining a budgeted position or obtaining a budgeted position	3.689	1.467	2.151	1.000	5.000
School fees	3.161	1.504	2.263	1.000	5.000
Grades obtained for the assessment of knowledge, projects carried out, results from tests, examinations, etc.	3.827	1.045	1.091	1.000	5.000
The amount of knowledge, teaching materials to be learned	3.827	1.050	1.103	1.000	5.000
The complexity of knowledge, teaching materials to be learned	3.735	1.077	1.161	1.000	5.000
Tasks, assignments and projects to be carried out	3.677	1.135	1.289	1.000	5.000
Tasks that need to be completed simultaneously	3.942	1.079	1.164	1.000	5.000
Short deadlines	3.839	1.167	1.361	1.000	5.000
The weekly busy study schedule	3.084	1.510	2.279	1.000	5.000
Overlaps between college and workplace activities	2.859	1.735	3.012	1.000	5.000
Distance from home to college	3.020	1.367	1.870	1.000	5.000
Duration of academic tasks	3.357	1.173	1.375	1.000	5.000
Variation, diversity and complexity of academic tasks	3.343	1.148	1.318	1.000	5.000
Interpersonal relationships with college colleagues	2.352	1.309	1.714	1.000	5.000
Interactions with professors	2.723	1.237	1.530	1.000	5.000
Disturbing behavior of professors	2.994	1.336	1.786	1.000	5.000
Existing facilities	2.599	1.276	1.628	1.000	5.000
Level of satisfaction with the academic performance achieved	3.444	1.168	1.363	1.000	5.000
Perfectionism	3.579	1.277	1.632	1.000	5.000
Prioritizing tasks	3.539	1.110	1.232	1.000	5.000
Insufficient recognition and rewards	3.228	1.262	1.593	1.000	5.000
Lack of psychological support	3.046	1.407	1.981	1.000	5.000
Improper guidance, support and feedback from professors	2.919	1.263	1.595	1.000	5.000
Poor collaboration with colleagues in the group	2.729	1.372	1.882	1.000	5.000
Interactions with professors during teaching activities	2.818	0.940	0.883	1.000	5.000

Source: Authors' own research.

The results in Table 2 indicate a clear preference for organizational, structural changes within the academic environment. The most highly endorsed coping strategy was *flexibility in the academic program* ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.15$), which received the highest average score among all variables. This was followed by a preference for *changing assessment methods* as a coping strategy, where valid data was available for 343 participants (missing $n = 4$, $M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.27$) and a desire for *reducing the volume and/or frequency of administrative activities* ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.14$). Participants expressed moderate interest in social and wellness-oriented activities. *Cultural activities* ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.24$) and *social activities* ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.26$) scored slightly above the midpoint of the scale. *Relaxation and mindfulness exercises* ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.27$) were also viewed as a moderately viable option, whereas *regular physical activities* ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.31$) and *coaching programs* ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.24$) received comparatively lower endorsement. The least preferred strategies involved altering the composition of the study groups. *Reducing the size of student study groups* ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.17$) and *transferring to another study group* ($M = 1.67$, $SD = 1.12$) displayed the lowest average scores in the survey. This suggests that the students do not perceive their immediate colleagues, peer group size or composition as a primary stressor requiring intervention.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for stress mitigation strategies

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Variance	Min.	Max.
Reducing volume and/or frequency of administrative activities	3.259	1.144	1.308	1.000	5.000
Flexibility in the academic program	3.957	1.151	1.325	1.000	5.000
Reducing the size of student study groups	2.089	1.166	1.359	1.000	5.000
Transfer to another student study group	1.669	1.124	1.263	1.000	5.000
Relaxation and mindfulness exercises	2.983	1.265	1.601	1.000	5.000
Regular physical activities	2.749	1.305	1.703	1.000	5.000
Mentoring programs	2.692	1.221	1.491	1.000	5.000
Coaching programs	2.746	1.244	1.548	1.000	5.000
Social activities	3.009	1.264	1.598	1.000	5.000
Cultural activities	3.118	1.242	1.544	1.000	5.000
Changing assessment methods	3.452	1.272	1.617	1.000	5.000

Source: Authors' own research.

The distribution of data reveals a strong reliance on written testing formats. An overwhelming majority of the students reported being assessed through *written exams*, representing 90.4% ($n = 310$) of the valid responses. On the other side, *oral exams* were reported by a significantly smaller number of students, less than 10% ($n = 33$). In terms of *proposed assessment methods* that should replace the ones currently in use, with the aim of being less stressful and also effective in the learning process, responses varied among the 347 students. From the list of proposed methods, the most preferred, by more than one third of students, were *essays* (36.88%) and *projects* (34.87%). These were followed by *case studies* (10.95%), *involvement in joint activities with the professor* (6.05%), *presentations* (5.76%) and *simulations* (3.74%), the remaining methods being preferred by a very reduced number of students. *Continuous assessment* was indicated by two students. Assessment based only on exam and mixed assessment was proposed by one student, each. One student proposed “interactive games” as an alternative assessment method. One student mentioned the need for individual projects that “are more focused on the quality of the information rather than the quantity”. Another pointed to the usefulness of

inviting professionals to deliver lectures and another student mentioned “practical assignments that would reflect real life experiences”. Regarding the appraisal of conventional assessment methods in terms of the least stressful but also effective in the learning process, the results indicate a preference for cumulative evaluation at study disciplines over single-point assessments. The majority of students mentioned *continuous assessment* as the preferred method, accounting for 55.9% ($n = 194$) of the sample. *Mixed assessment* (continuous and exam-based) was the second most frequent category, selected by 30% ($n = 104$) of participants. Only 13% ($n = 45$) indicated only *exam-based assessment* as the preferred method. Specific formats, such as written and oral exams, were selected scarcely, each being mentioned by only 2 students.

Inferential statistics

Correlations for occupational stressors and sociodemographic variables

Table 3 shows correlations between occupational stressors and sociodemographic variables. *Exam session* correlated negatively and significantly with *gender* ($\rho = -.26, p < .001$) and *employment* ($\rho = -.20, p < .001$), suggesting that females and unemployed students experienced the exam session to be more stressful than male and employed students, respectively. *Maintaining or obtaining a budgeted position* showed significant negative correlations with *age* ($\rho = -.11, p < .01$) and *gender* ($\rho = -.19, p < .001$). *Grades obtained at assessments* negatively correlated with *gender* ($\rho = -.28, p < .001$). *The amount of knowledge to be learned* statistically and negatively correlated with *gender* ($\rho = -.19, p < .001$). Stress arising from the *complexity of knowledge to be learned* showed significant negative correlations with *gender* ($\rho = -.18, p < .001$) and *employment* status ($\rho = -.12, p < .05$). The pressure of *tasks that need to be completed simultaneously* showed a weak, but statistically significant and positive correlation with *age* ($\rho = .13, p < .05$) and a negative significant correlation with *gender* ($\rho = -.15, p < .01$).

Thus, H1. *Demographic variables are associated with the perception of specific occupational stressors* was validated. The majority (6 out of 8) of occupational stressors significantly correlated with gender and age.

Table 3. Correlations between occupational stressors and sociodemographic variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Exam session	—											
2. Maintaining a budgeted position or obtaining a budgeted position	0.322***	—										
3. Grades obtained for the assessment of knowledge, projects carried out, results from tests, examinations, etc.	0.404***	0.313***	—									
4. The amount of knowledge, teaching materials to be learned	0.453***	0.275***	0.493***	—								

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
5. The complexity of knowledge, teaching materials to be learned	0.430***	0.234***	0.459***	0.773***	—							
6. Tasks, assignments, projects to be carried out	0.350***	0.064	0.501***	0.491***	0.554***	—						
7. Tasks that need to be completed simultaneously	0.372***	0.133*	0.399***	0.531***	0.606***	0.661***	—					
8. Short deadlines	0.348***	0.013	0.345***	0.474***	0.535***	0.561***	0.645***	—				
9. Age	-0.076	0.203***	0.033	-0.015	-0.001	0.090	0.130*	0.989	—			
10. Gender	-0.257***	-0.106*	-2.277***	-0.193***	-0.176***	-0.084	-0.148*	-0.089	0.086	—		
11. Commute	0.055	0.055	0.032	-0.067	-0.011	0.012	0.026	-0.009	-0.020	-0.008	—	
12. Employment	-0.201***	0.005	-0.037	-0.097	-0.118	0.009	0.086	0.009	0.319***	0.100	0.055	—

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Source: Authors' own research.

Figure 1 represents a correlations matrix heat map for occupational stressors and sociodemographic variables. Based on the visual elements, the research findings can be grouped into four distinct categories, defined by their color intensity and hue. This visual coding corresponds to the strength and direction of the statistical relationships. The dark purple zone represents the strongest positive associations of the variables. The medium to light purple cells indicate moderate, statistically significant positive relationships. The beige zone represents statistically significant negative correlations (inverse relationships). In this matrix, this color is almost exclusively found in the rows with sociodemographic variables. This zone highlights the link of *gender* and *employment* to stress perception. The consistent band of beige nuances across the “gender” row indicates that gender is a significant differentiator for stress. The strongest negative associations can be seen for *grades obtained during assessment* ($\rho = -.28$) and *exam session* ($\rho = -.26$). Specific beige cells connect *employment* with *exam session* ($\rho = -.20$) and *the complexity of knowledge to be leaned* ($\rho = -.12$), suggesting that employment status significantly alters how these stressors are prioritized or perceived by employed students compared to their non-employed counterparts. The grey/white cells represent variables that are statistically unrelated to one another. The “commute” row is almost entirely white, suggesting that the distance from home to college and the act of commuting have no statistical relationship with the intensity of academic stressors. While *age* significantly correlates with *employment* ($\rho = .32$), the cells connecting *age* to *occupational stressors* like *grades obtained at assessment* ($\rho = .33$) or *the amount of knowledge to be leaned* ($\rho = -.02$) are white. This suggests that age does not buffer or increase the perception of academic difficulty.

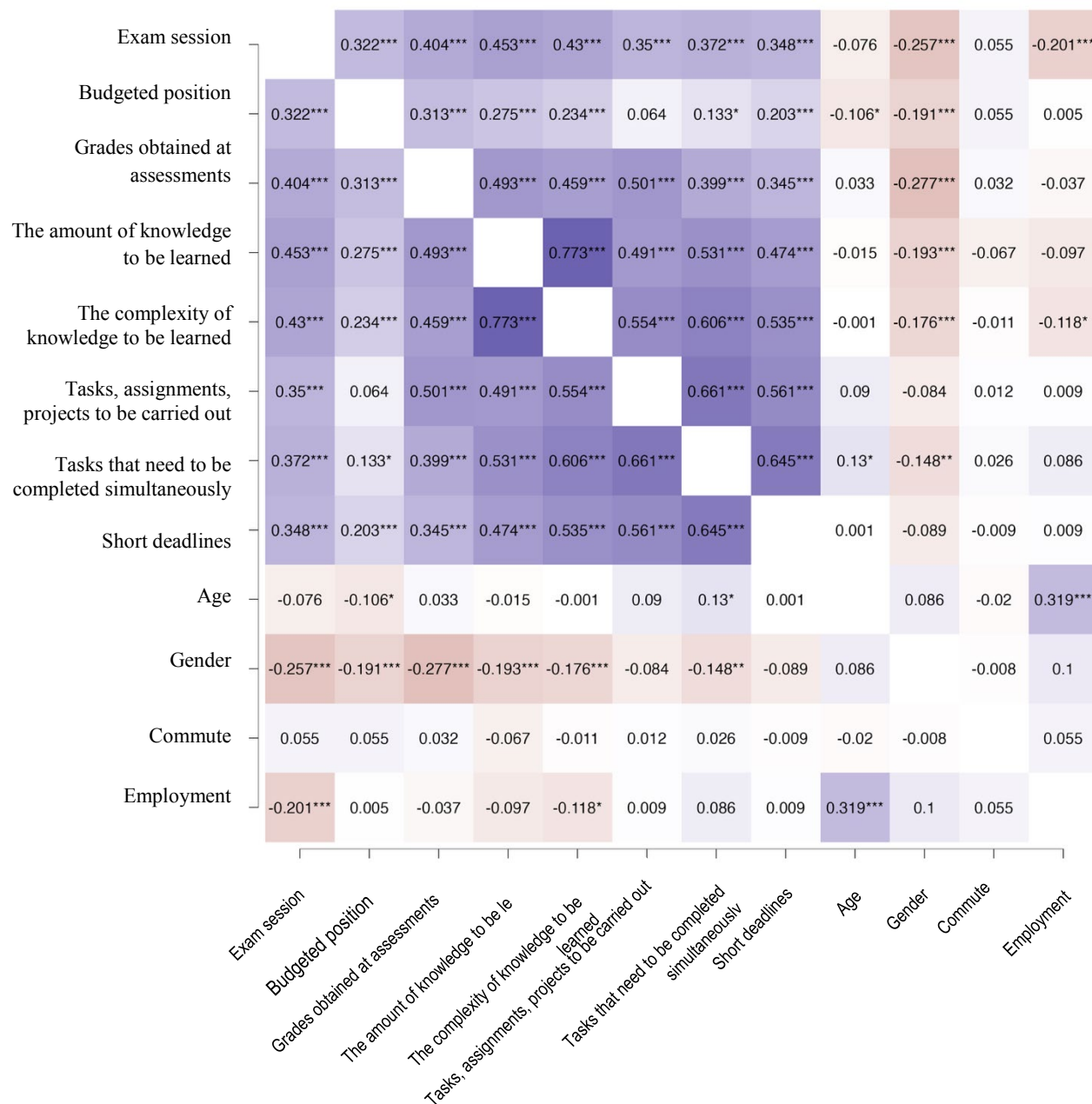


Fig. 1. Occupational stress and sociodemographic variables correlations heatmap

Source: Authors' own research.

Regarding stress, occupational stressors and stress mitigation strategies, Table 4 displays the discovered associations. *Exam session* was positively associated with a preference for *reducing the volume and/or frequency of administrative activities* ($\rho = .22, p < .001$), *flexibility in the academic program* ($\rho = .21, p < .001$) and *changing assessment methods* ($\rho = .22, p < .001$). *Maintaining or obtaining a budgeted position* was positively correlated with the preference for *flexibility in the academic program* ($\rho = .20, p < .001$), *relaxation and mindfulness exercises* ($\rho = .18, p < .001$), *reducing the volume and/or frequency of administrative activities* ($\rho = .16, p < .01$) and *changing assessment methods* ($\rho = .17, p < .01$). Strong positive associations were discovered

between *grades obtained at assessments* and structural academic changes, specifically *flexibility in the academic program* ($\rho = .20, p < .001$), *reducing the volume and/or frequency of administrative activities* ($\rho = .24, p < .001$) and *changing assessment methods* ($\rho = .28, p < .001$). Additionally, *grades obtained at assessments* correlated positively with interest in various support measures, including *relaxation and mindfulness exercises* ($\rho = .18, p < .01$), *mentoring programs* ($\rho = .15, p < .01$), *coaching programs* ($\rho = .11, p < .05$) and *socio-cultural activities* ($\rho = .16, p < .01$). The *amount of knowledge to be learned* correlated significantly and positively with: *reducing the volume and/or frequency of administrative activities* ($\rho = .31, p < .001$), *flexibility in the academic program* ($\rho = .28, p < .001$), *relaxation and mindfulness exercises* ($\rho = .17, p < .01$), *mentoring programs* ($\rho = .11, p < .05$) and *changing assessment methods* ($\rho = .24, p < .001$). High levels of the *complexity of knowledge to be learned* were strongly associated with a desire for *reducing the volume and/or frequency of administrative activities* ($\rho = .32, p < .001$), *flexibility in the academic program* ($\rho = .22, p < .001$), *relaxation and mindfulness exercises* ($\rho = .22, p < .001$), *mentoring programs* ($\rho = .12, p < .05$), *coaching programs* ($\rho = .11, p < .05$), *transferring to another study group* ($\rho = .17, p < .01$) and *changing assessment methods* ($\rho = .28, p < .001$). *Tasks, assignments and projects to be carried out* was positively correlated with several academic adjustments: *reducing volume and/or frequency of administrative activities* ($\rho = .26, p < .001$), *flexibility in the academic program* ($\rho = .14, p < .01$), *relaxation and mindfulness exercises* ($\rho = .16, p < .01$), *transferring to another study group* ($\rho = .15, p < .01$), *reducing the size of student study groups* ($\rho = .11, p < .05$) and *changing assessment methods* ($\rho = .29, p < .001$). *Tasks that need to be completed simultaneously* were significantly associated with *reducing volume and/or frequency of administrative activities* ($\rho = .36, p < .001$), *relaxation and mindfulness exercises* ($\rho = .16, p < .01$), *social activities* ($\rho = .14, p < .05$) and *changing assessment methods* ($\rho = .32, p < .001$). Students experiencing *short deadlines* as a stressor also indicated a significant preference for *relaxation and mindfulness exercises* ($\rho = .14, p < .01$), *reducing the size of student study groups* ($\rho = .16, p < .001$), *transferring to another study group* ($\rho = .13, p < .05$), *flexibility in the academic program* ($\rho = .23, p < .001$), *regular physical activities* ($\rho = .11, p < .05$) and *changing assessment methods* ($\rho = .28, p < .001$).

H2. *Students experiencing higher levels of occupational stressors demonstrate a significantly stronger preference for mitigation strategies* was therefore validated. All of the perceived occupational stressors correlated with at least 3 mitigation strategies.

Table 4. Correlations between occupational stressors and mitigations strategies

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1. Exam session	—																	
2. Maintaining a budgeted position or obtaining a budgeted position	0.322***	—																
3. Grades obtained for the assessment of knowledge, projects carried out, results from tests, examinations, etc.	0.404***	0.313***	—															
4. The amount of knowledge, teaching materials to be learned	0.453***	0.275***	0.493***	—														
5. The complexity of knowledge, teaching materials to be learned	0.430***	0.234***	0.459***	0.773***	—													
6. Tasks, assignments, projects to be carried out	0.350***	0.064	0.501***	0.491***	0.554***	—												
7. Tasks that need to be completed simultaneously	0.372***	0.133*	0.399***	0.531***	0.606***	0.661***	—											
8. Short deadlines	0.348***	0.013	0.345***	0.474***	0.535***	0.561***	0.645***	—										
9. Reducing volume and/or frequency of administrative activities	0.222***	0.203***	0.243***	0.306***	0.316***	0.259***	0.356***	0.315***	—									
10. Flexibility in the academic program	-0.208***	0.160**	0.202***	0.279***	0.216***	0.140**	0.333***	0.229***	0.461***	—								
11. Transfer to another student study group	-0.060	-0.045	0.043	0.080	0.174**	0.145**	0.126*	0.128*	0.183***	-0.067	—							
12. Relaxation and mindfulness exercises	0.080	0.182**	0.178***	0.168**	0.224***	0.109*	0.158*	0.142**	0.199***	0.223***	0.153**	—						
13. Regular physical activities	-0.073	0.029	0.012	-0.013	0.036	0.071	0.052	0.108*	0.123*	0.065	0.215***	0.463***	—					
14. Mentoring programs	0.112*	0.090	0.146**	0.107*	0.116*	0.041	0.077	0.060	0.159**	0.210***	0.212***	0.578***	0.444*	—				
15. Coaching programs	0.114*	0.055	0.111*	0.087	0.112*	0.026	0.064	0.067	0.179***	0.181***	0.182***	0.518***	0.425***	0.776***	—			
16. Social activities	0.102	0.039	0.091	0.058	0.072	0.055	0.136*	0.061	0.192***	0.187***	0.120*	0.495***	0.423***	0.555***	0.597***	—		
17. Cultural activities	0.075	0.078	0.155**	0.071	0.034	0.028	0.090	0.076	0.134*	0.203***	0.074	0.481***	0.395***	0.567***	0.602***	0.707***	—	
18. Changing assessment methods	0.216***	0.166**	0.281***	0.241***	0.277***	0.294***	0.323***	0.275***	0.342***	0.434***	0.044	0.352***	0.154**	0.293***	0.325***	0.324***	0.376***	—

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Source: Authors' own research.

Correlations for occupational stressors and assessment methods

As can be seen in Table 5, there was a significant negative correlation between *exam session* and *current assessment methods* ($\rho = -.23, p < .001$). The *amount of knowledge to be learned* correlated significantly and negatively with *current assessment methods* ($\rho = -.12, p < .05$). The *complexity of knowledge to be learned* correlated significantly and negatively with *current assessment methods* ($\rho = -.15, p < .01$).

Table 5. Correlations for occupational stressors and assessment methods

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Exam session	—									
2. Maintaining a budgeted position or obtaining a budgeted position	0.322***	—								
3. Grades obtained for the assessment of knowledge, projects carried out, results from tests, examinations, etc.	0.404***	0.313***	—							
4. The amount of knowledge, teaching materials to be learned	0.453***	0.275***	0.493***	—						
5. The complexity of knowledge, teaching materials to be learned	0.430***	0.234***	0.459***	0.773***	—					
6. Tasks, assignments, projects to be carried out	0.350***	0.064	0.501***	0.491***	0.554***	—				
7. Tasks that need to be completed simultaneously	0.372***	0.133*	0.399***	0.531***	0.606***	0.661***	—			
8. Short deadlines	0.348***	0.013	0.345***	0.474***	0.535***	0.561***	0.645***	—		
9. Current assessment methods	-0.225***	-1.04	-0.094	-0.116*	-0.150**	-0.103	-0.114*	-0.098	—	
10. Conventional assessment methods	0.016	0.037	0.059	0.005	-0.008	0.044	-0.042	0.054	-0.132*	—

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Source: Authors' own research.

A negative statistically significant correlation was discovered between *task, assignments and projects to be carried out* and *current assessment methods* ($\rho = -.11, p < .05$). *Tasks that need to be completed simultaneously* were significantly and negatively correlated with *current assessment methods* ($\rho = -.11, p < .005$).

Thus, H3. *There are statistically significant relationships between students' occupational stressors and their current assessment methods* were partly validated. Only half of the perceived occupational stressors were significantly and positively correlated with the assessment methods currently in use.

Conclusions

This exploratory study investigated the sources of occupational stress among students at the Faculty of Administration and Public Management of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The findings suggest that the academic environment is the primary driver of occupational stress for students, overshadowing social or environmental factors. The data reveal that exam sessions and time constraints are the most acute stressors. Conversely, interpersonal relationships with peers and professors were rated as reduced stress factors.

A critical finding is the structural mismatch between formally established assessment methods and students' preferences. While 90% of students were assessed through high-stakes written exams, the majority (55.9%) would have preferred continuous assessment methods. This discrepancy can be linked to the higher levels of the exam session perceived as a stress factor.

The data provide an empirical basis for shifting from only summative assessment (final exams) to formative assessment (continuous evaluation). Such a shift may reduce exam tension without necessarily lowering academic standards. The intensely perceived "simultaneous tasks" stressor suggests that curriculum planners should coordinate assignment deadlines across different courses to avoid overwhelming students.

In regard to research limitations, the samples was consistently skewed towards female participants (74%) and students residing in urban areas. This limits the generalizability of the findings. The study focused on a single faculty. The nature of the stressors involved (e.g., high volume of theoretical knowledge) may differ significantly from other social sciences-based faculties and from technical or vocational faculties, where practical applications could create different stress dynamics. The data represent only one moment in time due to the cross-sectional study design. It does not account for how stress levels fluctuate throughout the semester until the exam session.

Future research should employ a longitudinal design to track stress levels at multiple points during the academic year to identify peak stress periods more accurately. A qualitative follow-up study (focus group) could explore why administrative activities are perceived as so stressful, providing actionable data for bureaucratic simplification. It would be valuable to replicate this study across different faculties, in the same study domains or others, to determine if the preference for continuous assessment and the impact of time constraints are universal student experiences or specific to social sciences.

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