

Mental Health Implications of the Quarter System: An Analysis of Student Experiences at Tertiary Institutions in Zimbabwe

Eniko Chenge¹, Raymond Nyuke², Namatirai Faith Butsa³ and Dr. Rosemary Guvhu⁴

^{1,2,3}Midlands State University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Gweru, Zimbabwe

⁴Midlands State University, Faculty of Education, Gweru, Zimbabwe

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90900087>

Received: 26 August 2025; Accepted: 01 September 2025; Published: 30 September 2025

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the mental health implications of the quarter system on students at Midlands State University, Gweru Campus, Zimbabwe. The primary objective was to assess how this academic structure impacts the students' mental health and formulate strategies that can mitigate the associated challenges. Utilizing a pragmatic paradigm and a mixed methods approach, the researchers employed a convergent parallel design, analyzing quantitative data from 84 respondents and qualitative insights from 20 participants from the Psychology department. Random sampling was used for quantitative data collection, while purposive sampling was applied for qualitative insights. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency analysis and means, while qualitative data were thematically analyzed to identify recurring themes related to academic stress and supportive strategies. Findings revealed high levels of stress, anxiety, and feelings of being overwhelmed, particularly during the second and fourth quarters, which students perceived as more intense and shorter than the first and third quarters. The requirement to sit for exams twice a semester contributed significantly to academic pressure, leading students to focus primarily on passing rather than mastering content. Participants expressed that the quarter system hindered their ability to manage stress, because of tight deadlines, heavy workloads, and limited flexibility exacerbating academic anxiety. Limited breaks and insufficient time for reflection further intensified their challenges. Overall, the study highlights the detrimental effects of the quarter system on student mental health, aligning with similar findings in global contexts, and underscores the need for supportive measures to enhance student well-being. The study suggested for regular campus-wide wellness events, extension of semester breaks to two weeks and quarter-specific stress management programmes that not only addresses issues as they arise but also educates students on effective coping strategies.

Keywords: Mental Health, Quarter System, Midlands State University (MSU), Gweru

Research Area: Psychology

Paper Type: Research Paper

INTRODUCTION

Mental health is a growing concern among university students worldwide, particularly in the context of academic pressures and institutional demands. The quarter system, which divides the academic year into shorter, more intensive terms and typically lasting about 10 weeks can exacerbate stress and anxiety among students. This system requires rapid adaptation to new courses and assessments, often leading to increased academic pressure and mental health challenges. Research indicates that students in high-pressure academic environments are at a greater risk of experiencing mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and burnout (Billah, 2023). Students in quarter systems often experience a rapid pace of coursework and frequent

assessments, contributing to mental health challenges (Hammoudi, et al., 2023). This faster pace means that students must cover the same amount of material in a shorter time, which can lead to increased stress due to the intensity of the workload. The quarter system structure can lead to increased academic pressure, which has been linked to higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among students, unlike the Semester System, which usually consists of two longer terms (approximately 15-16 weeks). The fast-paced nature of the quarter system can lead to feelings of overwhelm, particularly for students who may already be facing socio-economic challenges and limited access to mental health resources. Keith. (2024) revealed that the students who prioritize self-care practices, including time for hobbies and social connections, experience improved mental well-being and academic performance. Setting clear goals, maintaining a routine, and ensuring time for relaxation, social activities and engaging in sports and having a support system of friends and family can help students mitigate the impact of stress and enhance their overall well-being (Brown, 2024). This research aimed at assessing the impact of the quarter system on the mental health of students at Midlands State University, Gweru Campus in Zimbabwe. The findings of study sought to provide understandings that can inform university policies and mental health interventions, ultimately promoting a healthier academic environment for students.

Background

Mental health among university students is a critical area of concern, particularly in the context of academic pressures and institutional structures. Students often experience heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression as they navigate the demands of their academic environment, especially in systems that require rapid adaptation to new courses and assessments. The pressure to perform academically within a condensed timeframe can lead to feelings of overwhelm and burnout. Studies have shown that academic stress is a significant predictor of mental health problems among university students, with many reporting difficulties in coping with the demands of their studies (Khombo, et al, 2023). The condensed timeframe for completing coursework can lead to feelings of overwhelm and anxiety (Wagner, Snoubar & Mahdi, 2023). Students suffering from stress report feeling sleeping and mental health problems, and even depression. Students in Romania claims constant fear of failure and doubt themselves, their academic skills, and success (Lovin & Dernerdeau-Moreau, 2022). Effective time management, social support, and engagement in wellness activities are crucial for mitigating stress (Ramos-Monsivais, *et al.*, 2024). Stress exposure can significantly disrupt sleep patterns, leading to insomnia and other sleep disorders. Individuals with high sleep reactivity are more vulnerable to insomnia, particularly under stress (Kalmbach, Anderson & Drake, 2018). Agyapong, et al (2022), noted that high levels of stress can lead to significant mental health issues, which could be extrapolated to students studying under the quarter system. However, Ezank (2021) revealed that students struggle, they may hear about counselling centres and supports in their universities but not take further action. Stigma surrounding mental health may prevent some students from seeking help, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive support services.

It is recommended that the students utilize techniques such as meditation, yoga, and deep-breathing exercises to manage anxiety and promote mental clarity. These practices can help students stay grounded amid academic pressures. Furthermore, the students can utilize the university resources such as mental health services, academic advising, and counselling services, these can help students navigate the demands of the quarter system. Nurijanyan (2024) recommended for expansion of mental health services, along with offering workshops on stress management, anxiety reduction, and coping skills, which can provide students with the tools they need to navigate their mental health challenges. It is also critical to foster strong peer relationships and maintaining supportive family dynamics, in order for students to better manage the academic pressures associated with this accelerated educational structure.

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

This study employed a pragmatic paradigm, which underpins the mixed methods approach, to explore the mental health coping strategies of students at Midlands State University, Gweru Campus, within the quarter system framework. The mixed methods approach combines the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative data thus providing a more comprehensive understanding of how academic pressure affects students and the

role of social support systems in their coping mechanisms (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). The study followed a convergent parallel design to synthesize insights from quantitative patterns and qualitative narratives, yielding a more holistic comprehension of mental health and coping strategies under the quarter system (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The design allowed researchers to concurrently conduct the quantitative and qualitative studies in the same phase of the research process, weigh the methods equally, analyze the two components individually and interpret the results together (Creswell & Clark, 2017). A structured questionnaire developed by the researchers was used to collect quantitative data to a random sample of 84 psychology students while qualitative data were gathered from 20 purposively selected psychology students using semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics namely frequency analysis and the mean to provide a summary of students' coping strategies in the face of mental health challenges brought about by the quarter system (Holcomb, 2016). On the other hand, qualitative data was analysed thematically to identify recurring themes related to academic stress, coping, and social support (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This provided rich, narrative data on the mental health effects of the quarter system and the role of support systems like peers, family, and university resources (Patton, 2015).

The researchers obtained the permission from the MSU authorities to conduct the study at Gweru campus. All ethical aspects including voluntarism to participate in the study, data confidentiality amongst many of the were respected and adhered to throughout the research process.

RESULTS

Quantitative results

Gender distribution

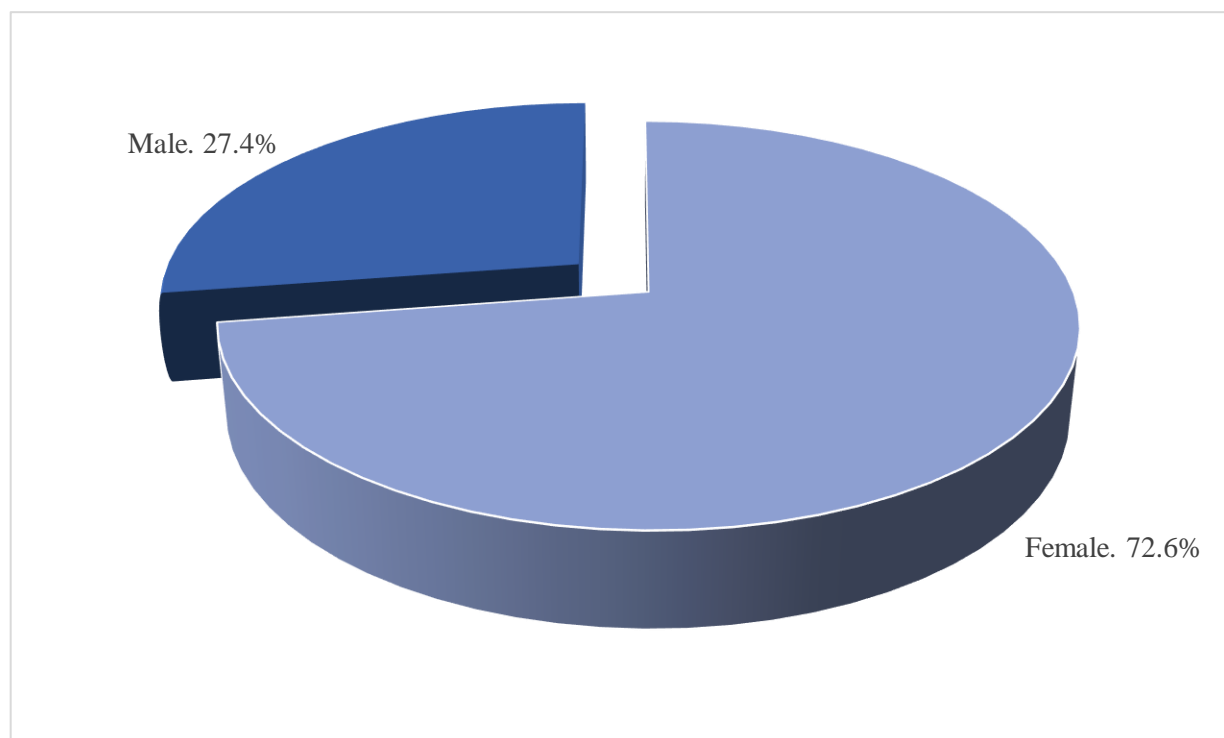


Figure 1 Gender distribution

The gender distribution in this sample showed a significant predominance of female respondents (72.6%, $n = 61$) while male respondents made up 27.4% ($n = 23$). This imbalance could reflect the actual gender ratio within the student population at Midlands State University, Gweru Campus or it may be due to a higher willingness of female students to respond to surveys related to mental health. The predominance of female respondents might also have skewed the results toward the experiences and coping mechanisms that are more common among female students.

Levels of study

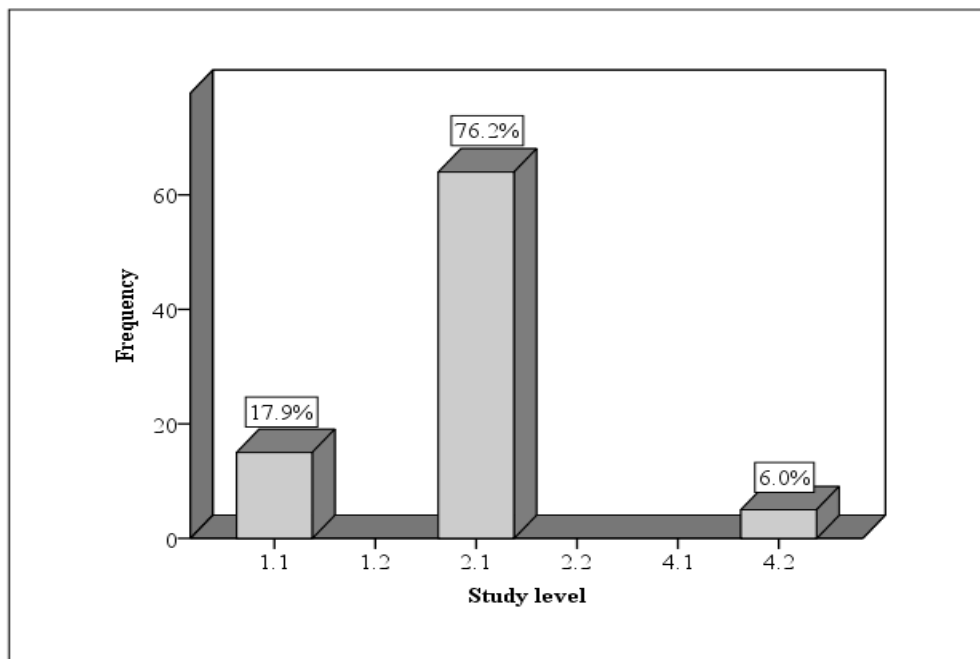


Figure 2 Levels of study

The bar chart illustrates the distribution of respondents by study level highlighting that most of them were second-year students. Specifically, 76.2% of the sample were in Level 2.1 while 17.9% were in Level 1.1 and only 6.0% were in Level 4.2. This distribution indicates that the majority of insights regarding mental health and coping strategies primarily reflect the experiences of second-year students.

Age groups

Age group	Frequency	Percent
18-21	55	65.5
22-23	22	26.2
24-27	4	4.8
Above 27	3	3.6
Total	84	100.0

Figure 3 Age distribution

The age distribution of respondents shows that the majority fell within the 18-21 age group, accounting for 65.5% of the sample. This was followed by 26.2% in the 22-23 age range, 4.8% in the 24-27 group and 3.6% who were above 27 years of age.

The impact of the quarter system on the mental health of students at Midlands State University, Gweru Campus.

Table 1 Stress levels

Frequency	Percent
3	3.6
67	79.8
7	8.3
4	4.8
3	3.6
84	100.0

In terms of overall stress levels, the majority of students (79.8%, $n=3$) reported being "stressed sometimes" under the quarter system while smaller proportions indicated higher levels of constant stress. Specifically, 8.3% ($n=7$) of students felt "stressed," 4.8% ($n=4$) were "stressed all the time" and 3.6% ($n=3$) reported feeling "extremely stressed." Only 3.6% ($n=3$) of students indicated that they were "not stressed at all." This distribution suggests that the quarter system has introduced a significant level of stress among students, with the majority experiencing at least occasional stress and a smaller but notable portion dealing with chronic stress.

Table 2 Mental health issues after the implementation of the quarter system

Frequency	Percent
26	31.0
12	14.3
16	19.0
2	2.4
1	1.2
3	3.6
24	28.6
84	100.0

Regarding specific mental health issues experienced by students following the introduction of the quarter system, difficulty sleeping was the most frequently reported issue, affecting 31.0% ($n=26$) of students, followed by increased anxiety (19.0%, $n=16$) and feelings of depression (14.3%, $n=12$). A small number of students reported experiencing combinations of these symptoms, with 3.6% ($n=3$) experiencing increased anxiety, depression, and difficulty sleeping simultaneously. However, 28.6% ($n=24$) of students indicated no change in their mental health since the quarter system was implemented. These findings suggest that the quarter system may be contributing to a range of mental health issues among students, with sleep disturbances and anxiety being the most commonly reported.

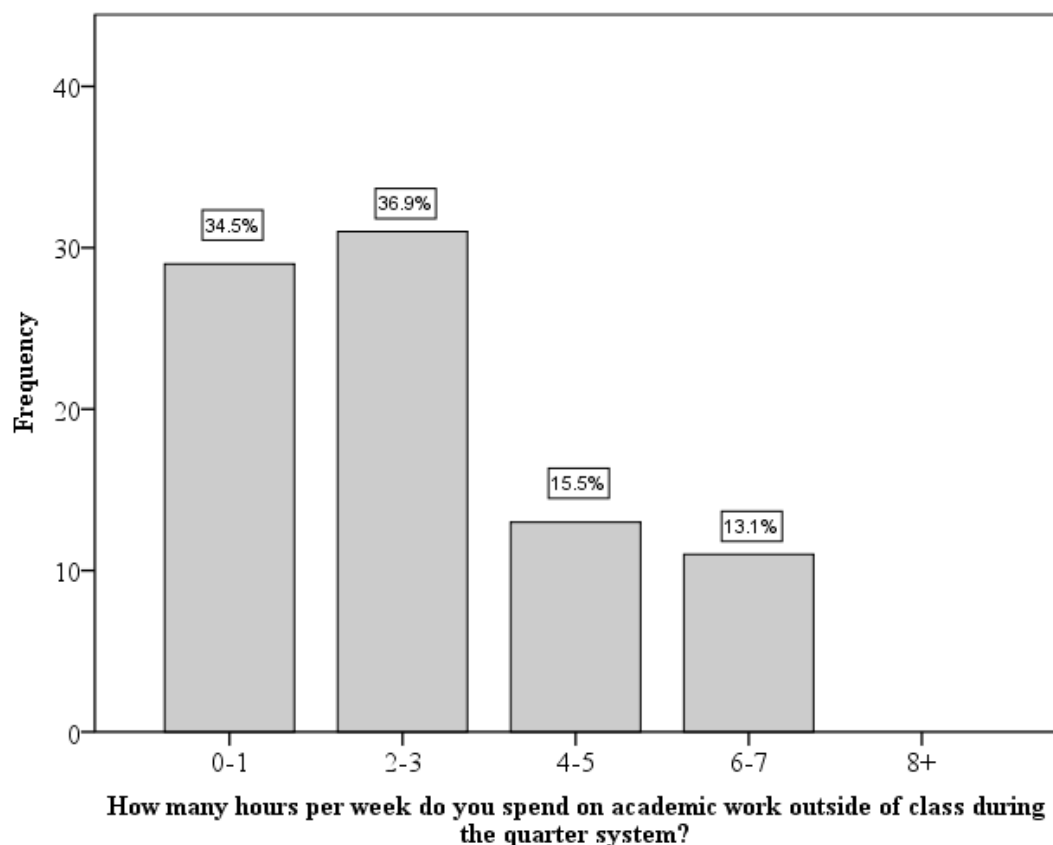


Figure 4 Hours spent on academic work outside classroom

The bar chart shows the distribution of hours students at Midlands State University, Gweru Campus, spent on academic work outside of class each week under the quarter system. The largest proportion of students (36.9%, $n = 31$) reported spending 2–3 hours per week on academic work outside of class, followed closely by 34.5% ($n = 29$) who spent only 0–1 hour. A smaller proportion (15.5%, $n = 13$) dedicated 4–5 hours, while 13.1% ($n = 11$) reported spending 6–7 hours per week on academic work outside of class. No students indicated spending more than 8 hours per week. These findings suggest that most students spend a limited amount of time on academic work outside of class, with the majority spending fewer than 3 hours weekly. This low level of outside academic engagement may reflect the intensive nature of the quarter system, where time constraints and fast-paced schedules limit students' ability to dedicate substantial additional time to academic work.

To recommend evidence-based strategies that support mental wellbeing of students

Figure 5 Evidence-based strategies to support students' mental well-being

	Mean	Standard deviation
Regular mental health workshops	4	1
Increased access to mental health services	4	1
Peer support groups	4	1
Stress management and coping skills training	4	1
Flexible academic deadlines during high stress times	4	1

The data on recommended strategies for improving student mental well-being indicated strong support for regular mental health workshops ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.00$), increased access to mental health services ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.00$), peer support groups ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.00$), stress management and coping skills training ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.00$), and flexible academic deadlines during high-stress periods ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.00$) to be “beneficial” for enhancing mental well-being. The standard deviation of 1.00 for each strategy suggests a consistent response among students, with most viewing these strategies as similarly valuable. These findings highlight a broad consensus among students on the importance of these evidence-based strategies in promoting mental well-being.

Qualitative research

Demographic Data

Gender

Table 3 Gender distribution

Gender	Total Participants
Female	10
Male	10

The study participants were gender-balanced 10 females and 10 males (50-50%). Balancing participants in terms of sex in a study on students' experiences on the quarter system was crucial for ensuring comprehensive and representative findings. This balance allowed researchers to capture diverse perspectives, as male and female students may have different experiences on quarter system vis-a-vis their mental health.

Age

Table 4 Age distribution

Gender	Age Range In Years		
	18-22	23-26	Above 27
Female	3	7	0
Male	3	6	1

The majority (13) of the participants were aged from 23-26 years (65%; n=13), 18-22 years were six (30%; n=4) and the minority were above 27 years who were one (5%; n=2) and all were from Psychology Department at Gweru Midlands State University. The variation in age was aimed at bringing divergence in terms of knowledge, perceptions, experiences, and articulation of things and aspects. It was assumed that the participants could have acquired their perceptions years of experience under the quarter system approach to learning.

Academic level

Table 5 Academic level

Gender	Academic level			
	2.2	4.1	4.2	Masters
Female	2	3	4	1
Male	2	3	4	1

For better deeper understanding of the perceptions of learners on implications of quarter system on their mental health, the researchers had more of level 4s students. As such 4.1 level had (30%; n=6), 4.2 level had (40%; n=8), 2.2 level (20%; n=4) and Masters level (10%; n=2). The study wanted learners with more experience in terms of interactions with the quarter system. The level 4s often possess more advanced critical thinking skills and a greater understanding of changes of educational approaches, allowing them to provide insightful feedback on the impact of the quarter system on their mental health.

The impact of the quarter system on the mental health of students at Gweru Midlands State University Campus, Zimbabwe.

The above-mentioned objective sought responses in line with how the quarter system has affected the students' overall stress levels compared to a traditional semester system and the ways in which the quarter system has influenced their ability to manage anxiety during studies.

On how the quarter system has affected the students' overall stress levels compared to a traditional semester system, 18 participants out of 20 reported high stress levels, with sleepless nights, anxiety and felt overwhelmed. Most stress and anxiety came in the 2nd and 4th quarters they felt was shorter than the 1st and 3rd quarter. The issues of writing exams twice a semester put much pressure on learners, just reading to pass. The following participants said;

"In as much as it has reduced pressure of writing maybe six modules at once, the aspects of the quarter system still contribute to anxiety because in all honesty exam time is not a time that one can relax, there is always anxiousness. The fact that I have to seat at Multi-Purpose Hall to write examination twice in a semester contributes much more to the anxiety because in the old tradition approach one knew that anxiety struck once then it was all done", said P19

"I feel like the quarter system somehow increases my stress levels because of too much workload and limited time frame is overwhelming. For example, last quarter even though I was doing 2 modules I had sleepless nights due to pressure of trying to know everything about those modules, manage the assignments and tests within the short period of time" said P 14

"I feel that this quarter system has affected my overall mental health state since it gives much academic pressure to execute modules in a short period of time that cause academic anxiety, compared to the traditional system. The quarter system has significantly increased my stress. There's less time to absorb material and prepare for exams, as such, I often find myself feeling overwhelmed during exam weeks because I have multiple subjects with overlapping deadlines, and I struggle to keep up" said P11

"..... because having to read twice for exams in one semester. I would really be ready for the first quarter exams but the second quarter I will be drained and just want to pass and rest. For example, most of my first quarter results are way better than my second quarter results. This approach enables us to merely pass, rather than cultivate genuine understanding" said P20

“For me as an employed person the quarter systems has is on challenges especially when it comes to attending lectures after having examinations is just impossible, no company can give an employee two weeks consecutively of paid leave” said P7

P5 said, *“The quarter system has tight deadlines which causes stress. It is more stressful, because I am overwhelmed with exams, assignments and presentations. It gives a lot of stress and is very hard to finish the module outlines since the timeframe will be very tight”.*

The results indicated that the learners were experiencing high stress levels, demonstrating a prevalent issue among the majority of students. This suggested that stress management strategies are urgently needed within the student population. The students perceived these quarters as shorter compared to the 1st and 3rd quarters, which may contribute to a feeling of being rushed or unprepared. This suggests that the pacing of the quarter system may not align well with students' capacity to manage their workload effectively. The requirement to write exams twice a semester added to the pressure, that led students to focus primarily on "reading to pass" rather than deep learning. This approach can undermine the educational experience and lead to surface-level engagement with course material. The findings further suggested a need for effective coping strategies tailored to the specific challenges of the quarter system. MSU may need to explore interventions such as stress management workshops. To alleviate pressure, MSU could consider implementing academic support initiatives that encourage deeper learning rather than just exam preparation.

On the ways in which the quarter system has influenced the ability of students to manage anxiety during studies, most (15) learners felt that the quarter system was failing them to manage stress instead. The learners faced academic anxiety, because they had to meet up with deadlines, lot of pressure to balance reading time, limited flexibility, achieving the best grades and writing in-class tests without the full knowledge of the modules. The participants reported being worried about the results of the previous quarter and ask themselves endless questions because they enter into another quarter without knowing the results of the previous quarter. Some students had sleepless nights due to pressure of trying to know everything about those modules, manage the assignments and tests within the short period of time. The quarter system gave the students limited breaks, heavy workload, insufficient time for reflection, review and intensive exam schedules. Overwhelming information evolved into fears of failure and the pressure of having to prepare for exams in short time contributed to their anxiety and they felt that it was a bit challenging to manage the anxiety. Participants had to say the following;

“.....I had sleepless nights due to pressure of trying to know everything about those modules, manage the assignments and tests within the short period of time”, said P17

“I am believing that as a result of the quarter system, nowadays I'm much more anxious during the course of the semester as compared to the traditional semester system. Now I worry about the results from the previous quarter and ask myself endless questions and this may even affect the current quarter's performance as a result of the previous quarter, having to continue to learn without knowing the results of the previous quarter that contributes to my anxiety a lot”, said P13.

“The fear that the poor grades mostly contribute to my anxiety. This is because I will be questioning my abilities and the time I have before writing examinations. Sometimes the portal will be down which gives me anxiety. Every quarter I have to register for modules and the system is sometimes down which gives me anxiety...The pressure of it makes me to neglect my mental health and wellbeing which causes anxiety”, said P 11

“The fast-paced nature of the quarter system tends to exacerbate my anxiety. Since the material moves so quickly, I often feel like I'm playing catch-up. I find it hard to focus, and my mind races during lectures. Yes, the back-to-back scheduling of exams and deadlines puts me on edge because there's no time to catch my breath. For instance, right after finishing one exam, I have to start studying for the next one. It doesn't allow for any downtime, and that really heightens my anxiety levels”, said P 17.

The minority (5), including the Masters students felt that the pressure was not much as they always had time to rest and plan. They felt that the modules were quite manageable.

“.... Somehow, it does help to manage anxiety as I am adapting to it on a daily basis but mostly it causes anxiety rather than management”, said P4

Generally, the results indicated that many learners perceived the quarter system as detrimental to their ability to manage stress and anxiety effectively. The rigid deadlines and heavy workloads inherent in this system created significant academic pressure. The constant demands of in-class test and the expectation to achieve high grades without adequate preparation contributed to their anxiety. The results also indicated that the limited breaks and insufficient time for reflection further exacerbated their feelings of being overwhelmed, making it difficult for them to manage their academic responsibilities and mental well-being. Moreover, the overwhelming volume of information and the intense pace of the quarter system led to fears of failure, intensifying the pressure on students as they prepare for exams in a constrained timeframe. This chronic stress affected their capacity to engage deeply with the material, as they often focused solely on passing rather than truly understanding the content.

Evidence-based recommendation to support mental wellbeing of students

The objective sought answers in line with strategies or programmes to enhance mental well-being for students during the quarter system. The participants called for more counselling services, student led support events, student mental health programmes, campus wide-wellness events, quarter specific stress management programmes and workshops that must be done to educate students about how to manage academic pressure. They also called for semester break to be at least 2 weeks, library to open 24/7. They advocated for free gym, regular mental health workshops, flexible academic time tables, dedicated “mental health days” before exams would allow students some time to recharge rather than just focusing on academics. Some participants had to say;

“I believe the gym fees should be taken from one's fees, just like medical aid. Because some may not even have the extra money to pay for the gym every month.so there's need to revise that the gym fee is taken from fees even if it's not for everyone.... So having a gym that's free to everyone at any time would be beneficial to students”, said P 8

“I believe establishing peer support groups and workshops on time management and study skills would greatly benefit students in terms of providing a platform for sharing coping strategies and experiences.....Dedicated “mental health days” before exams would allow students some time to recharge rather than just focusing on academics. It could be great to have planned activities or wellness workshops during that time”, said P14

“I would like to think employment of fun activities like team buildings, trips, modelling, celebrity shows can help relieve the pressure that comes with the quarter system. Time out is really needed from studies and it can only make sense during this system of intense learning”, said P9

The results indicated a desire for proactive measures that can equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary to cope with stress effectively. Additionally, practical strategies such as extending semester breaks to two weeks, keeping libraries open 24/7, and providing free access to gym facilities is very relevant and shows the desired by learners to learn, research and keep fit in mental health. The results indicated a strong demand among students for enhanced mental health support and resources within the MSU. Participants expressed a desire for more counselling services and student-led initiatives that focus on mental well-being, emphasizing the importance of peer support and community engagement in managing academic pressure. The suggestion for campus-wide wellness events and quarter-specific stress management programmes indicates a proactive approach to mental health that not only addresses issues as they arise but also educates students on effective coping strategies. This reflects a recognition that mental health is integral to academic success and overall student experience. Additionally, students advocated for practical changes to the academic structure and campus facilities, such as extending semester breaks to two weeks and providing 24/7 library access. These suggestions highlighted the need for more flexibility in academic schedules, allowing students time to recharge amidst rigorous demands. The call for free gym access and dedicated “mental health days” before exams underscores a holistic approach to wellness, integrating physical health with mental well-being. Overall,

these findings suggest that students are seeking comprehensive and accessible support systems that prioritize their mental health, advocating for a more balanced and sustainable academic environment during the quarter system.

Integration

The impact of the quarter system on the mental health of students at Midlands State University, Gweru Campus.

The findings of quantitative research indicated a significant level of stress among students under the quarter system, where the majority (79.8%, n=67) of respondents were sometimes stressed, whilst (8.3%=7) were stressed with (4.8%, n = 4) stressed all the time and (3.6%, n = 3) reported feeling "extremely stressed." This distribution suggests that the quarter system has introduced a significant level of stress among students, with the majority experiencing at least occasional stress and a smaller but notable portion dealing with chronic stress. These results corresponded with the qualitative findings which revealed that the participants had high stress levels, with sleepless nights, anxiety and felt overwhelmed. Most stress and anxiety came in the 2nd and 4th quarters they felt was shorter than the 1st and 3rd quarter. The issues of writing exams twice a semester put much pressure on learners, just reading to pass. The students perceived these quarters as shorter compared to the 1st and 3rd quarters, which may contribute to a feeling of being rushed or unprepared. This suggests that the pacing of the quarter system may not align well with students' capacity to manage their workload effectively. The requirement to write exams twice a semester added to the pressure, that led students to focus primarily on "reading to pass" rather than deep learning. The causes presence of stress amongst the participants were testified by two participants P14 and P5 who respectively said;

"I feel like the quarter system somehow increases my stress levels because of too much workload and limited time frame is overwhelming. For example, last quarter even though I was doing 2 modules I had sleepless nights due to pressure of trying to know everything about those modules, manage the assignments and tests within the short period of time"

P5 said, *"The quarter system has tight deadlines which causes stress. It is more stressful, because I am overwhelmed with exams, assignments and presentations. It gives a lot of stress and is very hard to finish the module outlines since the timeframe will be very tight"*.

The results indicated that the learners were experiencing high stress levels, demonstrating a prevalent issue among the majority of students. This suggest for urgent stress management strategies within the student population. MSU may need to explore interventions such as stress management workshops for learners.

Mental health issues experienced by learners

Regarding specific mental health issues experienced by students following the introduction of the quarter system, the respondents cited difficulty sleeping as the most frequently reported issue, affecting 31.0% (n = 26) of students, followed by increased anxiety (19.0%, n =16)) and feelings of depression (14.3%, n = 12). These findings suggest that the quarter system may be contributing to a range of mental health issues among students, with sleep disturbances and anxiety being the most commonly reported.

The above-mentioned mental health issues sleepless nights, anxiety and worrisome were mentioned in qualitative research, indicating convergence in findings. The learners reported facing academic anxiety, because they had to meet up with deadlines, lot of pressure to balance reading time with limited flexibility, achieving the best grades and writing in-class tests without the full knowledge of the modules. They were also worried about the results of the previous quarter and ask themselves endless questions because they enter into another quarter without knowing the results of the previous quarter. Some students reported sleepless nights because of pressure and trying to know everything about the modules, manage the assignments and tests within the short period of time. The quarter system gave the students limited breaks, heavy workload, insufficient time for reflection, review and intensive exam schedules. This was testified by participants P17, P13 and P17;

"..... I had sleepless nights due to pressure of trying to know everything about those modules, manage the assignments and tests within the short period of time".

“Now I worry about the results from the previous quarter and ask myself endless questions and this may even affect the current quarter's performance as a result of the previous quarter, having to continue to learn without knowing the results of the previous quarter that contributes to my anxiety a lot”.

“...Yes, the back-to-back scheduling of exams and deadlines puts me on edge because there's no time to catch my breath. For instance, right after finishing one exam, I have to start studying for the next one. It doesn't allow for any downtime, and that really heightens my anxiety levels”.

The results also indicated that the limited breaks and insufficient time for reflection further exacerbated their feelings of being overwhelmed, making it difficult for them to manage their academic responsibilities and mental well-being. Moreover, the overwhelming volume of information and the intense pace of the quarter system led to fears of failure, intensifying the pressure on students as they prepare for exams in a constrained timeframe. The results critically indicate a strong demand for enhanced mental health support and utilisation of mental health resources in the MSU. Participants expressed a desire for more counselling services and student-led initiatives that focus on mental well-being, emphasizing the importance of peer support and community engagement in managing academic pressure, which is a low hanging fruit for MSU.

On hours' students spent on academic work outside of class each week under the quarter system, the study that the largest proportion of students (36.9%, $n = 31$) reported spending 2–3 hours per week on academic work outside of class, followed closely by 34.5% ($n = 29$) who spent only 0–1 hour. A smaller proportion (15.5%, $n = 13$) dedicated 4–5 hours, while 13.1% ($n = 11$) reported spending 6–7 hours per week on academic work outside of class. No students indicated spending more than 8 hours per week. These findings suggest that most students spend a limited amount of time on academic work outside of class, with the majority spending fewer than 3 hours weekly. This low level of outside academic engagement may reflect the intensive nature of the quarter system, where time constraints and fast-paced schedules limit students' ability to dedicate substantial additional time to academic work.

There was convergent with the qualitative research as witnessed by p17, P11 and P9 respectively

...”, right after finishing one exam, I have to start studying for the next one. It doesn't allow for any downtime, and that really heightens my anxiety levels”, said P 17.

““I got very anxious trying to manage my time. I ended up pulling several all-nighters, which affected my sleep and further increased my stress”

“.....but to a higher extend its just too much as it intensified workload that we end up with no time to breath at all”

On recommendations, the findings from quantitative research, indicated strong support for regular mental health workshops ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.00$), increased access to mental health services ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.00$), peer support groups ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.00$), stress management and coping skills training ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.00$), and flexible academic deadlines during high-stress periods ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.00$) to be “beneficial” for enhancing mental well-being. The standard deviation of 1.00 for each strategy suggests a consistent response among students, with most viewing these strategies as similarly valuable. These findings highlight a broad consensus among students on the importance of these evidence-based strategies in promoting mental well-being.

These findings converged with sentiments drawn from the qualitative findings, where the participants called for more counselling services, student led support events, campus wide wellness events, quarter specific stress management programmes and workshops that must be done to educate students about how to manage academic pressure. They also called for semester break to be at least 2 weeks and flexible academic time tables.

In line with the expectations of the convergent mixed methods design, overall, the findings from the quantitative and qualitative researches converged. The qualitative results gave more meaning of the quantitative findings.

DISCUSSION

The impact of the quarter system on the mental health of students

The participants reported high stress levels, with sleepless nights, anxiety and felt overwhelmed. Most stress and anxiety came in the 2nd and 4th quarters they felt was shorter than the 1st and 3rd quarter. The issues of writing exams twice a semester put much pressure on learners, just reading to pass. These findings confirmed with Wagner, Snoubar & Mahdi (2023)'s study that which found that condensed timeframe for completing coursework in quarter system can lead to feelings of overwhelm and anxiety. The findings also corresponded with the results from Billah (2023) who found that students in high-pressure academic environments are at a greater risk of experiencing mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and burnout and Hammoudi, et al. (2023) who alluded that learners in quarter systems often experience a rapid pace of coursework and frequent assessments, contributing to mental health challenges. The experience of sleepless nights, anxiety, and feelings of being overwhelmed, highlighted the severe impact of stress on students' mental health. These symptoms can adversely affect academic performance and overall well-being. MSU may need to explore interventions such as stress management workshops. The perception that the 2nd and 4th quarters are shorter indicates a potential misalignment in the academic calendar. It may be beneficial for MSU to review the structure of the quarter system, possibly extending these periods or providing additional support during peak stress times. Students should be motivated to learn, not to get stress, because stress exposure can significantly disrupt sleep patterns, leading to insomnia and other sleep disorders. Individuals with high sleep reactivity are more vulnerable to insomnia, particularly under stress Kalmbach, Anderson & Drake, 2018). Agyapong, et al (2022), noted that high levels of stress can lead to significant mental health issues, which could be extrapolated to students studying under the quarter system

On how the quarter system influenced the ability to manage anxiety during your studies, the study found that the learners were failing to manage stress, because faced academic anxiety, had to meet up with deadlines and there were lots of pressure to balance reading time. The learners felt that there was limited flexibility, as they wrestled with achieving the best grades and writing in-class tests without the full knowledge of the modules. The students felt overwhelming information that evolved into fears of failure and the pressure of having to prepare for exams in short time. They felt that the quarter system gave them limited breaks, heavy workloads, insufficient time for reflection, review and intensive exam schedules. Largely the findings concurred with Mhlanga (2020) who found that the students struggled to cope with the demands of the quarter system. The findings were also in line with Graves, et al (2021), who revealed that students who lack appropriate stress management skills, find it difficult to balance the academic demands. Somehow the findings also shared similarities with Hammoudi, et al. (2023), who found that in quarter systems, students often experience a rapid pace of coursework and frequent assessments, contributing to mental health challenges. The results also share similarities with a study done in Romania where the students also claimed constant fear of failure and doubt themselves (Lovin & Dernaudeau-Moreau, 2022). In terms of economic situation, Romania and Zimbabwe, almost share that same similarities where the students also fear their future after graduation. This might as well exacerbate the anxiety in learners at MSU, where the combination of facing exams unprepared due to fast pace in quarter system and uncertainty of getting employed after graduation. However, the rigid deadlines and heavy workloads inherent in the quarter system created significant academic pressure. The constant demands of in-class test and the expectation to achieve high grades without adequate preparation contributed to their anxiety. The feedback from participants highlighted a clear need for MSU to reconsider the structure of the quarter system, aiming to alleviate these pressures and provide a more supportive learning environment that fosters both academic success and mental health

Evidence-based recommendation to support mental wellbeing of students

The study findings indicated various recommendations from students, such as more counselling services, student led support events, student mental health programmes, campus wide wellness events, quarter specific stress management programmes and workshops that must be done to educate students about how to manage academic pressure. They also called for semester break to be at least 2 weeks, library to open 24/7. They advocated for free gym, regular mental health workshops, flexible academic time tables, dedicated "mental health days" before exams would allow students some time to recharge rather than just focusing on academics.

These recommendations aligned very well with Nurijanyan (2024) who recommended for expansion of mental health services, along with offering workshops on stress management, anxiety reduction, and coping skills, can provide students with the tools they need to navigate their mental health challenges. In addition, the creation of inclusive environments that foster a sense of belonging and support is vital for student well-being. Initiatives promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion can help ensure that all students feel valued and understood. Furthermore, the student organizations, including cultural and interest-based clubs, can provide a supportive community where students can connect with others with similar experiences or interests. Nurijanyan (2024) further recommended for education for students on personal coping strategies, time management techniques that can help students balance academic, work, and personal commitments more effectively, promoting stress reduction. Mindfulness and meditation practices as they have shown to reduce stress and anxiety; universities could offer workshops or courses in these areas. Other recommendations included the peer support networks due to the fact that they are critical in providing a sense of understanding and community. Programmes like Active Minds which create spaces where students can share experiences and strategies for managing mental health, breaking down the stigma surrounding these discussions. Lastly but not the least, the Self-care practices, including regular exercise, healthy eating, and adequate sleep, because there are fundamental in maintaining mental health.

The results indicated a strong demand among students for enhanced mental health support and resources within the MSU. The suggestion for campus-wide wellness events and quarter-specific stress management programmes indicates a proactive approach to mental health that not only addresses issues as they arise but also educates students on effective coping strategies. This reflects a recognition that mental health is integral to academic success and overall students' experience. Additionally, students advocated for practical changes to the academic structure and campus facilities, such as extending semester breaks to two weeks and providing 24/7 library access. These suggestions highlighted the need for more flexibility in academic schedules, allowing students time to recharge amidst rigorous demands. The call for free gym access and dedicated "mental health days" before exams underscores a holistic approach to wellness, integrating physical health with mental well-being. MSU can promote these practices by increasing resources such as fitness centers and sleep health education. Encouraging a healthy work-life balance through flexible deadlines, reducing course loads, and offering pass/fail options can help students manage stress more effectively. Universities like Stanford and MIT have adopted such policies, allowing students to focus on learning and growth rather than just grades (Nurijanyan, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The findings indicated high stress levels, increased anxiety and feelings of depression. that emanated from pressures to deal with course deadlines, sleepless nights, limited flexibility, effort to achieve best grades and worries about starting a new quarter without results of the previous quarter. The findings indicated the typical nature of the quarter system which gives the students limited breaks, heavy workload, insufficient time for reflection, review and intensive exam schedules. This system requires rapid adaptation to new courses and assessments, often leading to increased academic pressure and mental health challenges. The results indicated a strong demand for academic reforms and enhanced mental health support and resources among and for students. The universities need to encourage a healthy academic-life balance through flexible deadlines, reducing course loads and offering reasonable longer breaks between quarters.

REFERENCES

1. Agyapong.B., Obuobi-Donkor, G., Burbach, L & Wei, Y.(2022). Stress, Burnout, Anxiety and Depression among Teachers: A Scoping Review. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2022 Aug 27;19(17):10706. doi: 10.3390/ijerph191710706. PMID: 36078422; PMCID: PMC9518388.
2. Billah, M., Rutherford, S., Akhter, S & Tanjeela, M.(2023). PMC
3. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
4. Brown, D. (2024). Balancing Academics and Athletics: Lessons from My Journey, and the Importance of Youth Development. <https://www.pulse/balancing-academics-athletics-lessons-from-my-journey-drake-brown-bwpc>

5. Chitra, E., Hidayah, N., Chandratilake. M & Nadarajah, V., D. (2022). Self-Regulated Learning Practice of Undergraduate Students in Health Professions Programs. *Front Med (Lausanne)*. 2022 Feb 16; 9:803069. doi: 10.3389/fmed.2022.803069. PMID: 35252245; PMCID: PMC8888845.
6. Creswell, J. W., & Clark, V. L. P. (2017). Designing and conducting mixed methods research. Sage publications. https://toc.library.ethz.ch/objects/pdf/z01_978-1-4129-7517-9_01.pdf
7. Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2023). Revisiting mixed methods research designs twenty years later. *Handbook of mixed methods research designs*, 21-36. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0255634
8. Dr. Keith. (2024). Balancing School and Self-Care: Essential Strategies for Students
9. Ezank, M. (2021). Students Struggle but Don't Seek Colleges' Help. *Inside Higher Education*.
10. Fostering Mental Health and Well-Being among University Faculty: A Narrative Review. *J Clin Med*. 2023 Jun 30;12(13):4425. doi: 10.3390/jcm12134425. PMID: 37445459; PMCID: PMC10342374
11. Freire, et al. (2020). Coping Strategies and Self-Efficacy in University Students: A Person-Centered Approach. *Front. Psychol*.
12. Graves, B., S., Hall, M., E., Dias-Karch, C & Christine Apter, C. (2021). Gender differences in perceived stress and coping among college students. *PLOS ONE* 16(8): e0255634
13. Hammoudi, H., D., Soltani, A., Dalli, R., Alsarraj, L. & Malki, A. (2023). Understanding and Holcomb, Z. (2016). *Fundamentals of descriptive statistics*. Routledge.
14. Kalmbach, D., A, Anderson, J.,R, Drake, C.,L. (2018) The impact of stress on sleep: Pathogenic sleep reactivity as a vulnerability to insomnia and circadian disorders. *J Sleep Res*. 2018 Dec;27(6):e12710. doi: 10.1111/jsr.12710. Epub 2018 May 24. PMID: 29797753; PMCID: PMC7045300.
15. Khombo, S., Khombo, K., Stoddart, R., S., Sifelani. I & Sibanda, T. (2023). Knowledge, attitudes, and uptake of mental health services by secondary school students in Gweru, Zimbabwe. *Front Psychol*. 2023 Feb 1;14: 1002948. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1002948. PMID: 36818083; PMCID: PMC9930152.
16. Lovin, D & Dernerdeau-Moreau, D. (2022). Stress among Students and Difficulty with Time Management: A Study at the University of Galați in Romania. *Soc. Sci*. 2022, 11(12), 538; <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11120538>
17. Medical Information Team
18. Mhlanga, S. (2023). Exploring the interaction between depression and learning in Shona culture: a study of students and lecturers in a tertiary education institution in Zimbabwe. *Academia.edu*
19. Nuriyanyan, K. (2024). Academic Stress and Student Mental Health & Well-Being on college campuses
20. Osborn, T., G, Li, S., Saunders, R & Fonagy, P.(2022). University students' use of mental health services: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Int J Ment Health Syst*. 2022 Dec 17;16(1):57. DOI: 10.1186/s13033-022-00569-0. PMID: 36527036; PMCID: PMC9758037.
21. Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*. Sage publications.
22. Ramos-Monsivais, C.L., Rodríguez-Cano, S., Lema-Moreira, E. et al. (2024). Relationship between mental health and students' academic performance through a literature review. *Discov Psychol* 4, 119 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44202-024-00240-4>
23. SAMHSA (2024). Peer Support Workers for those in Recovery. DOI: 10.3389/fpubh.2023.1152366. Online; Retrieved from SAMHSA on 24/10/2024. <https://www.google.com/search?>
24. SAMHSA. (2024). General Peer Support. https://www.samhsa.gov/default/files/brss_tacs. Online; Retrieved from SAMHSA on 24/10/2024
25. Wagner, B., Snoubar, Y & Mahdi,Y.,S. (2023). Access and efficacy of university mental health services during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Front Public Health*. 2023 Dec 20;11: 1269010. doi: 10.3389/fpubh.2023.1269010. PMID: 38174076; PMCID: PMC10761424.
26. Wei, P. (2022). The impact of social support on students' mental health: A new perspective based on fine art majors. *MPC*. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.994157
27. Yang, C., Gao, H., Li, Y., Wang, E., Wang. N & Wang, Q. (2022). Analyzing the role of family support, coping strategies and social support in improving the mental health of students: Evidence from post COVID-19. *Front Psychol*. 2022 Dec 23; 13:1064898. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1064898. PMID: 36619015; PMCID: PMC9822709.