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Original Article

### Examining the Relationship between Stressors and Coping Strategies Used by Teacher-Trainees in Universities in Central Region, Uganda

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**Keywords:**

Stressors,  
Coping Strategies,  
Problem-Focused  
Coping,  
Emotion-Focused  
Coping,  
Teacher-Trainees,  
and Universities.

Stress is an integral part of the student's university life that calls for appropriate coping measures. Guided by the Transactional Appraisal Theory of stress and coping, this study examined the relationship between stressors and coping strategies used by pre-service teacher-trainees in universities in the Central region of Uganda. The study was quantitative in nature and adopted a cross-sectional survey research design on a target population of 7502 teacher-trainees. Five hundred fifty-four (554) pre-service teacher-trainees from year one to year three on two programs of study were selected using a simple random sampling strategy. The study involved 254 (45.8%) males and 300 (54.2%) females with an average age of 24 years. The findings revealed academic difficulties and time pressure as key stressors. The findings further revealed a significant positive relationship between stressors and coping strategies used by pre-service teacher-trainees to mitigate stress ( $r = 0.469$ ,  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ,  $n = 554$ ). Although teacher-trainees adopted myriad coping strategies simultaneously, the findings revealed that the majority used avoidant coping strategies ( $\beta = 0.550$ ,  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ), followed by problem-focused coping ( $\beta = 0.439$ ,  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ) and emotion-focused coping strategies ( $\beta = 0.363$ ,  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ). Thus, the study underscored the importance of adaptive coping strategies in mitigating stressful situations. The study recommends awareness and orientation of students in university life, strengthening counselling services, and introducing mindfulness programs to enhance the students' problem-solving and adaptation-solving skills.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Stress among university students is generally a big concern as they navigate through their academic journey (Oduwaiye et al., 2017). Stress can be defined as tension and demands that challenge a person's capacity for adjustment and is a result of pressure from stressors (Taj et al., 2024). This tension is brought about by unwanted life changes that may be personal or environmentally triggered (Mathews, 2017). Stress in the academic setting refers to elements like pressure emanating from personal demands and dysfunctions that may affect students' academic performance, emotional well-being, and interpersonal connections, eventually leading to health conditions (Aguila et al., 2015). Thus, stress can simulate or demotivate a teacher-trainee from academic excellence. Teacher-trainees encounter stressful factors in the form of pressure and expectations from academic difficulties, alienation from academics, inability to manage time, and romantic and assorted social problems that affect their psychological well-being. If stress is not coped with appropriately, it can result in anxiety and depression, which are detrimental to their psychological well-being and academic performance.

Coping is seen as a deliberate use of cognitive, affective, or behavioural strategies to deal with circumstances and expectations that are imposed from within an individual regarding unpleasant or potentially dangerous pressure (Anshel, 2012). Coping strategies are the specific behavioural and psychological techniques people use to manage, tolerate, and minimise stressful situations in their

lives (Ntoiti et al., 2024). Appropriate coping strategies are essential in managing stress and maintaining the psychological well-being of teacher-trainees. Coping strategies are also the behavioural and cognitive adjustments brought about by managing a person's unique internal and external pressures (Wu et al., 2020). Teacher-trainees who embrace problem-focused coping strategies in managing stress develop positive emotions (Baloglu, 2008; Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2019). The goal of a problem-focused coping strategy is to solve problems or take action to change the source of the problem (Carver et al., 1989). They, for example, face the challenge directly and use strategies such as active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, restraint coping, and seeking social support to mitigate the problem directly (Ogoma, 2020). Problem-focused, also known as task-oriented coping, aims at changing stressful circumstances by actively working to resolve the issue or lessen its detrimental effects (Feyisa et al., 2022). Teacher-trainees who use this strategy are in a position to reframe the meaning of the problem and develop a positive attitude, which enables them to adapt to the environment. This ultimately enables teacher-trainees to avoid problems that would limit them from performing well.

However, teacher-trainees bent to emotion-focused strategy deal with emotions that accrue as a result of stress. They use emotional reactions such as self-blame, rage, or self-preoccupation, hoping to lessen stressful situations (Feyisa et al., 2022). They tend to live in denial, avoid, and even reframe the

meaning of the problem at hand. Avoidance coping strategy refers to physical or psychological efforts used to remove oneself from challenging circumstances (Buchwald & Moore, 2017). Avoidance coping involves denying the stressor and psychologically disengaging through sleep, daydreaming, and alcohol use to numb oneself from thinking about the problem. For example, a teacher-trainee who engages in avoidance coping portrays behaviours such as living in denial, distraction, or escape when they perceive a threat or stressor as overwhelming or uncontrollable. The avoidant coping strategy involves diverting attention instead of confronting and dealing with the problem directly. Studies have shown that avoidance coping has adverse consequences, such as increased anxiety, decreased problem-solving, and negatively impacts mental health (Riegel et al., 2024; Rodrigues et al., 2023). Additionally, studies have documented that self-regulation theory views avoidance coping as a maladaptive coping strategy that may be detrimental to a person's well-being. For instance, Tonsing and Tonsing (2021) reported that students who used avoidance coping strategies experienced higher perceived stress. Thus, maladaptive coping manifested through avoidance and emotion-focused coping increases stress among teacher-trainees.

## Objective

To examine the relationship between stressors and coping strategies used by teacher-trainees in universities in the Central Region, Uganda.

## Hypothesis

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a significant relationship between stressors and coping strategies used by teacher-trainees in universities in the Central Region, Uganda.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent studies have shown that access to university education is on the rise due to its increasing significance in producing skilled human resources

who are essential in driving the knowledge economy (Trinh, 2023). Good academic grades are viewed as a proxy indicator of competencies acquired during learning, such as knowledge acquisition (hard skills), technical skills transfer, and innate ability utilisation (Kumar et al., 2021; Velasco, 2012). Unfortunately, good academic performance is hindered by factors associated with stress and poor coping strategies. Previous studies have highlighted that higher education is stressful to students due to factors such as adjustment and resumption of study after a long vacation and living independently from parents (Oduwaiye et al., 2017). University life is a significant change for many students because it gives them the freedom to make their own decisions away from the undue influence of their parents (Lewis et al., 2015; Nakalema & Ssenyonga, 2013). The responsibility to meet their academic demands is very stressful for most of them. A high level of stress among students is linked to inadequate adaptability, which might result in health issues (Dominguez-Lara, 2017; Restrepo et al., 2018) and low academic performance (Richardson et al., 2012). Stress phenomena are a significant challenge to students' well-being. The Transactional Theory of Stress is key in understanding the underlying challenges of stress and coping. According to the theory, stress is ultimately a system of evaluation, reaction, and adaptation. That stress is a result of an interplay between the individual and their environment, thus devising appropriate coping responses to manage the perceived stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stress has both positive and negative effects and can enable some to succeed academically or cause health problems that can impair academic performance. Additionally, research indicates that extended exposure to stressful situations has a significant negative impact on one's health (Waghachavare et al., 2013).

Stress is a normal and unavoidable part of life for university students, and how they cope with it has an impact on their academic performance (Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2019). For example, past studies in

the USA, Canada, Romania, and Malaysia revealed high stress levels among university students, with some adopting maladaptive coping strategies such as abuse of drugs and alcohol, eventually affecting their performance (Boke et al., 2019; Ioana-Maria et al., 2016; Perez et al., 2019; Yusoff et al., 2011). Studies have shown that university students cope with stress through emotion-focused (Barbe et al., 2025; Persaud & Persaud, 2016) and avoidant coping (Ioana-Maria et al., 2016) through different ways such as turning to religion, watching movies and talking to family and peers about the problem. Others use adaptive coping through problem-focused coping, which involves dealing directly with the source of the problem (Avci & Gungor, 2023; Thornberg et al., 2023). Problem-focused coping was associated with positive attributes such as the formation of positive attitudes which is good for their mental health and psychological well-being.

Research on stress in educational environments first appeared in the 1930s (Leach, 1984), although Selye has extensively written on the subject. According to Selye (1976), stress is brought on by negative beliefs of failure, too much academic work, poor performance, uncertainty following graduation, fear of failing to find employment, lack of professional knowledge, poor goal setting, and personal and institutional stressors. Students' behaviour and academic performance suffer greatly when they fail to adapt under immense pressure (Abdullah et al., 2020; Taj et al., 2024). Stress greatly affects teacher-trainees' psychological well-being, timely completion of studies, and academic performance. In Uganda, daily academic hassles were ranked highly in contributing to stressful situations among university students (Amanya et al., 2017; Nakalema & Ssenyonga, 2013). However, the studies reviewed illustrated different stressors such as academic pressure, relationship problems, social alienation, and time pressure, among others. These studies were, however, from the global and regional institutions, conducted on the general student population and not specific to teacher-

trainees, the prime unit of analysis for the current study. The reviewed studies indicated that students coped with stress using problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping strategies. It was therefore prudent to examine the effect of the highlighted stressors among and coping strategies used by pre-service teacher-trainees in local institutions in Uganda. This study, therefore, focused on three universities in the Central Region of Uganda to examine the relationship between stressors and coping strategies used by pre-service teacher-trainees.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Research Design:** This quantitative study used a cross-sectional survey research design, which is appropriate for studying large samples in a time-efficient way while also saving costs (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This design helped in ascertaining the effect of stressors on coping strategies used by teacher-trainees in universities in the Central region of Uganda.

**Study Population:** The study was carried out among full-time pre-service teacher-trainees in universities in the Central Region, Uganda. Two large public and one private university, with a target population of 7,502 in the two programs participated in the study. Due to the peculiarity and uniqueness of pre-service teachers, two programs, Bachelor of Science with Education (BSc.Ed) and Bachelor of Arts with Education (BAED), were purposively selected.

**Sample Size:** A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to 610 pre-service teacher-trainees from a target population of 7,502 pre-service teacher-trainees in three universities (one private, two public) in the Central region using a sample size determination table with a confidence level of 99%, and a degree of accuracy of 5% (The Research Advisors, 2006). The inclusion criteria were universities offering two comparable programs (BSc.Ed and BAED) to pre-service teacher-trainees. From each university, a simple random sampling



strategy was preferred since it offered equal chances of participation for all teacher-trainees (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). To enable equal representation, teacher-trainees were stratified according to year of study, and thereafter, data was collected using a simple random sampling strategy. A total of 554 (254 Male, 300 Female) in the age range between 19-46 participated in the study.

**Procedure:** Data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire. Participants from the first to third year in their first semester in the academic year (AY) 2024/2025 were requested to respond to the questions, and confidentiality and privacy were assured. Although data was collected from 610 teacher-trainees, after cleaning and deleting outliers, 554 (90. 8%) remained, which was sufficient as it provided a platform for making recommendations.

## Measures

**The Inventory of College Students' Recent Life Experiences (ICSRLE) Scale:** The 49-item Inventory of College Students' Recent Life Experiences (ICSRLE) tool (Kohn et al., 1990) was used. This inventory has seven sub-scales namely, developmental challenges (10-items,  $\alpha = 0.79$ ), time pressure (7-items,  $\alpha = 0.79$ ), academic alienation (3-items,  $\alpha = 0.79$ ), romantic problems (3-items,  $\alpha = 0.73$ ), assorted annoyances (5-items,  $\alpha = 0.47$ ), general social mistreatment (6-items,  $\alpha = 0.76$ ), and friendship problems (3-item,  $\alpha = 0.68$ ) coded on four-point Likert scale as follows: 4=Very much part of my life, 3= Distinctly part of my life, 2= Only slightly part of my life, 1=Not at all part of my life.

In this study, five sub-scales with 28 items were considered. The sub-scales included development challenges, romantic problems, general social mistreatment, time pressure, and academic alienation, since the other three would not generate valid data for the current study. Developmental challenges were reworded to academic difficulties and general social mistreatment to social alienation.

The Cronbach Alpha of the Inventory of College Students' Recent Life Experiences (ICSRLE) in the current study were academic difficulties  $\alpha = 0.806$ , romantic problems  $\alpha = 0.834$ , social alienation  $\alpha = 0.811$ , academic alienation  $\alpha = 0.813$ , and time pressure  $\alpha = 0.865$ . The overall alpha for the tool was  $\alpha = 0.884$ .

## *Coping Operations Preference Enquiry (COPE)*

**Inventory:** The coping strategies of teacher-trainees were measured using the COPE inventory (Carver et al., 1989). This inventory has three sub-scales, namely, problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping. The COPE inventory was measured on a scale of four. 4= I usually do this a lot, 3= I usually do this a medium moment, 2= I usually do this a little bit, 1= I usually don't do this at all. Problem-focused coping is a 5-sub-scale with four items each on five sub-scales of active coping (4-items,  $\alpha = 0.62$ ), planning (4-items,  $\alpha = 0.80$ ), suppression of competing activities (4-items,  $\alpha = 0.68$ ), restraint coping (4-items,  $\alpha = 0.72$ ) and seeking of instrumental social support (4-items,  $\alpha = 0.75$ ). Emotion-focused coping is a 5-sub-scale with four items each on, seeking of emotional social support (4-items,  $\alpha = 0.85$ ), positive reinterpretation and growth (4-items,  $\alpha = 0.68$ ), acceptance (4-items,  $\alpha = 0.65$ ), denial (4-items,  $\alpha = 0.71$ ), and turning to religion (4-items,  $\alpha = 0.92$ ). Three scales measured avoidant coping responses, focus on and venting emotions (4-items,  $\alpha = 0.77$ ), behavioural disengagement (4-items,  $\alpha = 0.63$ ), and mental disengagement (4-items,  $\alpha = 0.45$ ).

The Cronbach Alpha for the COPE scale in the current study were active coping  $\alpha = 0.855$ , planning  $\alpha = 0.871$ , suppression of competing activities  $\alpha = 0.807$ , restraint coping  $\alpha = 0.802$  seeing social support for instrumental reasons  $\alpha = 0.871$ , seeing social support for emotional reasons  $\alpha = 0.887$ , positive reinterpretation  $\alpha = 0.892$ , acceptance  $\alpha = 0.857$ , turning to religion  $\alpha = 0.867$ , denial  $\alpha = 0.888$ , focus and venting of emotions  $\alpha = 0.872$ , behavioral disengagement  $\alpha = 0.869$  and mental disengagement  $\alpha = 0.808$ . The general alpha

was 0.895, and the subscales, problem-focused coping  $\alpha = 0.899$ , emotion-focused coping  $\alpha = 0.885$ , and avoidant coping  $\alpha = 0.826$ .

**The Brief Coping:** A Brief COPE is an inventory with 14 sub-scales and 28 items with the same rating scale as the COPE. Only a sub-scale of substance abuse (2 items,  $\alpha = 0.90$ ) was used since it had a higher factor loading than the original long COPE (Carver, 1997). They were coded as follows: 4= I usually do this a lot, 3= I usually do this a medium moment, 2= I usually do this a little bit, 1= I usually don't do this at all. The Cronbach Alpha for the Brief COPE scale of the substance abuse sub-scale in the current study was  $\alpha = 0.931$

**Data Management:** Completed questionnaires were coded for easy reference. Data was entered and cleaned both manually and electronically to detect and correct key errors, incompleteness, and outliers. Data was subjected to parametric tests to check for normality, linearity, and collinearity. After data entry, frequency tables were used to display outliers and thereafter analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences Software (SPSS) version 25.

**Data Analysis:** Descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage tables were used to analyse data on teacher-trainees' social-demographic attributes such as age, sex, religion, year of study, marital status, sponsorship, program of study, residential status, and employment status. Inferential analyses, including means, standard deviations, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient, and regressions, were conducted to

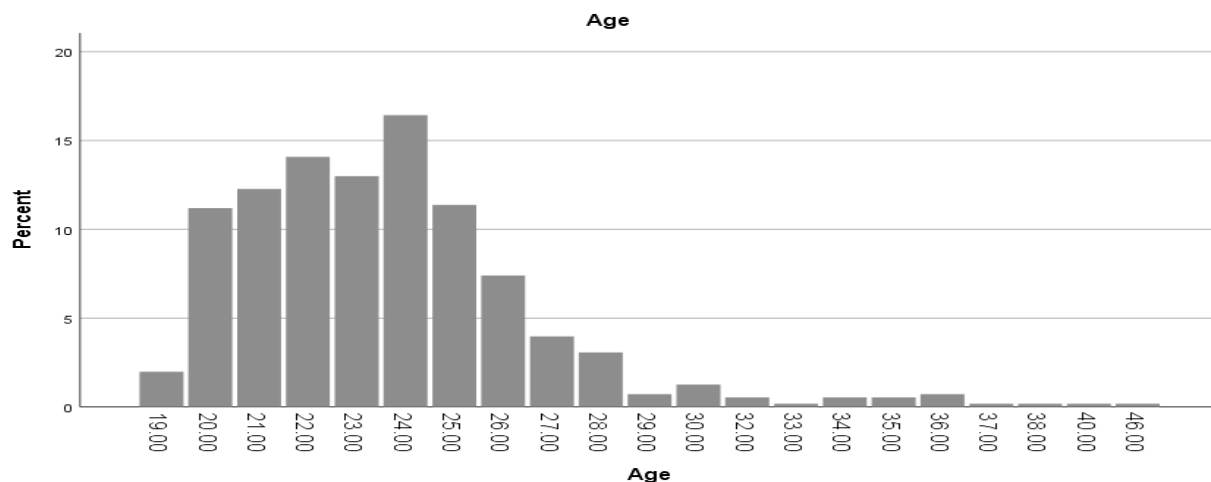
determine the relationship and strength of the relationship between stressors and coping strategies used by teacher-trainees.

**Ethical Procedures:** The study sought ethical clearance from the Mbarara University of Science and Technology Research Ethics Committee (MUST-2024-1722) and Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (SS3485ES) to ensure compliance with the ethical guidelines after approval by the Kyambogo University Directorate of Research and Graduate Training. The director, Directorate of Research and Graduate Training, Kyambogo University, provided an introductory letter that was presented to the deans of the participating schools and faculty at Makerere, Kyambogo, and Uganda Martyrs Universities. Since all respondents were adults, consent forms were signed after explaining the benefits of the study and ensuring privacy. Confidentiality was ensured through concealment of identity, and participants were guided not to write anything that could identify them. The researcher promised to keep the information confidential and private during data collection, report writing, and dissemination of findings.

## RESULTS

### Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants

Results in *Figure 1* indicate the age of teacher-trainees in years in three universities in the Central region, Uganda.

**Figure 1: Results for Age of Teacher-Trainees**

The results in *Figure 1* show the age of respondents in years. The findings revealed that the majority of the respondents were aged 24 years (16.4%). These were closely followed by 22-year-olds (14.1%), 23-year-olds (12.3%), and 25-year-olds (11.4%) respectively. The ages coincide with the entry age from high school to university and completion for

the three-year respondents. Therefore, appropriate age groups were represented in this study.

Besides age, more demographic information was sought that included, sex, marital status, religious affiliation, ownership of the university, program and year of study, sponsorship and engagement in part-time jobs as indicated in *Table 1* below.

**Table 1: Results for Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

| Variable                    | Categories       | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------------|------------------|-----------|---------|
| Sex                         | Male             | 254       | 45.8    |
|                             | Female           | 300       | 54.2    |
|                             | Total            | 554       | 100.0   |
| Marital Status              | Single           | 489       | 83.3    |
|                             | Married          | 39        | 7.0     |
|                             | Co-habiting      | 26        | 4.7     |
|                             | Total            | 554       | 100.0   |
| Religious Affiliation       | Anglican         | 155       | 28.0    |
|                             | Catholic         | 218       | 39.4    |
|                             | Pentecostal      | 95        | 17.1    |
|                             | Moslem           | 59        | 10.6    |
|                             | Other            | 27        | 4.9     |
|                             | Total            | 554       | 100.0   |
| Ownership of the university | Government-owned | 429       | 77.4    |
|                             | Privately-owned  | 125       | 22.6    |
|                             | Total            | 554       | 100.0   |
| Program of study            | BAED             | 333       | 60.1    |
|                             | BSc.Ed           | 221       | 39.3    |
|                             | Total            | 554       | 100.0   |
| Year of Study               | Year 1           | 208       | 37.5    |
|                             | Year 2           | 207       | 37.4    |
|                             | Year 3           | 139       | 25.1    |

|               |            |     |       |
|---------------|------------|-----|-------|
|               | Total      | 554 | 100.0 |
| Sponsorship   | Government | 152 | 27.4  |
|               | Private    | 402 | 72.6  |
|               | Total      | 554 | 100.0 |
| Part-time job | Yes        | 93  | 16.8  |
|               | No         | 462 | 83.2  |
|               | Total      | 554 | 100.0 |

The results in *Table 1* indicate that although both male and female teacher-trainees participated in the study, the majority were females, 54.2% compared to their male counterparts at 45.8 %. Nevertheless, both sexes were represented across the three years of study. Furthermore, the findings revealed that the majority of the respondents were single, 83.3 % and this is because of the nature of their study programs, where they joined university directly from high school. However, a few were married at 7.0% and cohabiting at 4.7%. Nevertheless, the views of both single and married teacher-trainees were considered in this study.

The findings further revealed that the majority of the respondents were studying in government universities, 77.4% while 22.6% were from a private one. The results were representative of the views of teacher-trainees in a private university and government-sponsored public universities. On the program of study, the biggest percentage was offering BAED 60.1% while 39.3% were offering BSc.Ed. Thus, all respondents had sufficient education to provide objective information for the

study that was generalizable to all teacher-trainees. The results further showed that year one respondents were higher at 37.5% and were closely followed by year two at 37.4% with year three coming last at 25%. The few respondents in year three are attributed to the effect of COVID-19, which left schools closed in Uganda for close to two years. Nevertheless, the views of teacher-trainees across the two programs and the year of study were equally represented. Additionally, the results revealed that the majority of the respondents were privately sponsored, 72.6% while 27.4% were supported by the government. Notably to note is that one of the universities in this study was purely private. The results further indicated that the majority of the respondents were not engaged in full or part-time jobs 83.2% and thus had enough time to concentrate on their studies.

### Descriptive Results for Stressors

The results for the stressors experienced by teacher-trainees in different universities are presented in *Table 2*.

**Table 2: Descriptive Results for Stressors**

| <b>Romantic Problems</b>                                | <b>NAPL</b>    | <b>OSPL</b>    | <b>DPL</b>      | <b>VPL</b>     | <b>Mean</b> |
|---|----------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------|
| Conflicts with boyfriend/girlfriend/spouse              | 307<br>(55.4%) | 109<br>(19.7%) | 46<br>(8.3%)    | 92<br>(16.6 %) | 1.86        |
| Conflicts with boyfriend's/girlfriend's spouse's family | 352<br>(63.5%) | 96<br>(17.3%)  | 48<br>(8.7%)    | 58<br>(10.5%)  | 1.66        |
| Decisions about intimate relationship(s)                | 255<br>(46.0%) | 125<br>(22.6%) | 85<br>(15.3%)   | 89<br>(16.1%)  | 2.01        |
| <b>Assorted Social Problems</b>                         |                |                |                 |                |             |
| Social isolation  | 241<br>(43.5%) | 170<br>(30.7%) | 87<br>(15.7%)   | 56<br>(10.1%)  | 1.92        |
| Being taken for granted                                 | 238<br>(43.0%) | 170<br>(30.7%) | 98<br>(17.7%)   | 48<br>(8.7%)   | 1.92        |
| Being ignored   | 259<br>(46.8%) | 142<br>(25.6%) | 105<br>(19.0 %) | 48<br>(8.7%)   | 1.89        |



| <b>Romantic Problems</b>                                | <b>NAPL</b>    | <b>OSPL</b>    | <b>DPL</b>     | <b>VPL</b>     | <b>Mean</b>            |
|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|------------------------|
| Being taken advantage of                                | 253<br>(45.7%) | 130<br>(23.5%) | 91<br>(16.4%)  | 80<br>(14.4%)  | 1.99                   |
| Social rejection  | 326<br>(58.8%) | 116<br>(20.9%) | 63<br>(11.4%)  | 80<br>(14.4%)  | 1.70                   |
| <b>Academic Alienation</b>                              |                |                |                |                |                        |
| Disliking your studies                                  | 348<br>(62.8%) | 106<br>(19.1%) | 60<br>(10.8%)  | 40<br>(7.2%)   | 1.64                   |
| Finding courses(s) uninteresting                        | 302<br>(54.5%) | 124<br>(22.4%) | 86<br>(15.5%)  | 4.2<br>(7.9%)  | 1.76                   |
| Dissatisfaction with school                             | 294<br>(53.1%) | 120<br>(21.7%) | 87<br>(15.5%)  | 53<br>(9.6%)   | 1.81                   |
| <b>Time Pressure</b>                                    |                |                |                |                |                        |
| Not enough leisure time                                 | 145<br>(26.2%) | 121<br>(21.8%) | 127<br>(22.9%) | 161<br>(29.1%) | 2.54                   |
| Not enough time to meet your obligations                | 114<br>(20.6%) | 119<br>(21.5%) | 155<br>(28.0%) | 166<br>(30.0%) | 2.67                   |
| A lot of responsibilities                               | 111<br>(20.0%) | 98<br>(17.7%)  | 150<br>(27.1%) | 195<br>(35.2%) | 2.77                   |
| Too many things to do once                              | 110<br>(19.9%) | 104<br>(17.0%) | 133<br>(25.0%) | 143<br>(37.9%) | 2.81                   |
| Heavy demands for extracurricular activities            | 174<br>(31.4%) | 104<br>(18.8%) | 133<br>(24.0%) | 143<br>(25.8%) | 2.44                   |
| Not enough time for sleep                               | 144<br>(26.0%) | 126<br>(22.7%) | 130<br>(23.5%) | 154<br>(27.8%) | 2.53                   |
| Interruptions of your school work                       | 172<br>(31.0%) | 114<br>(20.6%) | 124<br>(22.0%) | 144<br>(26.0%) | 2.43                   |
| <b>Academic Difficulties</b>                            |                |                |                |                |                        |
| Struggling to meet your own academic standards          | 116<br>(20.9%) | 108<br>(19.5%) | 128<br>(23.1%) | 202<br>(36.5%) | 2.75                   |
| Lower grades than you hoped                             | 142<br>(25.6%) | 141<br>(25.5%) | 149<br>(26.9%) | 122<br>(22.0%) | 2.45                   |
| Hard effort to get ahead                                | 110<br>(19.9%) | 129<br>(23.3%) | 150<br>(27.1%) | 165<br>(29.8%) | 2.66                   |
| Important decisions about your education                | 93<br>(16.8%)  | 121<br>(21.8%) | 129<br>(23.3%) | 211<br>(38.1%) | 2.82                   |
| Dissatisfaction with your ability in written expression | 138<br>(24.9%) | 136<br>(24.5%) | 140<br>(25.3%) | 140<br>(25.3%) | 2.50                   |
| Important decisions about your future career            | 91<br>(16.4%)  | 114<br>(20.6%) | 146<br>(26.4%) | 203<br>(36.6%) | 2.83                   |
| Struggling to meet the academic standards of others     | 139<br>(25.1%) | 119<br>(21.5%) | 151<br>(27.3%) | 145<br>(26.2%) | 2.54                   |
| Dissatisfaction with your mathematical ability          | 170<br>(30.7%) | 117<br>(21.1%) | 132<br>(23.8%) | 135<br>(24.4%) | 2.41                   |
| Dissatisfaction with your appearance                    | 232<br>(41.9%) | 96<br>(17.3%)  | 86<br>(15.5%)  | 135<br>(24.4%) | 2.24                   |
| Finding courses too demanding                           | 89<br>(16.1%)  | 93<br>(16.8%)  | 123<br>(22.2%) | 249<br>(44.9%) | 2.96                   |
| <b>Average Total Rating for Stressors M(SD)</b>         |                |                |                |                | <b>2.31<br/>(0.54)</b> |

Key: NAPL: not all part of my life, OSPL: only slightly part of my life, DPL: distinctly part of my life, and VPL: very much part of my life

Results in *Table 2* above show that major stressors experienced across universities were academic difficulties with the majority 44.9% and an average mean = 2.95 reporting to finding courses too demanding, followed by those who reported that making important decisions about their future was very much part of their life 36.6% with an average mean 2.83 while struggling to meet their own academic standards at 36.6 %, mean = 2.75 reporting that it was part of their life. Teacher-trainees mentioned time pressure to be very stressful,

especially with the majority reporting “too many things to do at once” 37.9% to be very much part of their life, with an average mean of 2.81 and “too many things to do at once” at 35.5% and an average mean = 2.77.

### Relationship between Stressors and Coping Strategies

The objective was to establish the relationship between stressors and coping strategies of teacher-trainees. The results are presented in *Table 3*.

**Table 3: Relationship between Stressors and Coping Strategies (n=554)**

|           |                     | Stressors | Coping |
|-----------|---------------------|-----------|--------|
| Stressors | Pearson Correlation | 1         |        |
|           | Sig. (2-tailed)     |           |        |
|           | N                   | 554       |        |
| Coping    | Pearson Correlation | .469**    | 1      |
|           | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .000      |        |
|           | N                   | 554       | 554    |

\*\**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*

Results in *Table 3* indicate a highly positive relationship between stressors and coping strategies among teacher-trainees in different universities in the Central region, Uganda, where ( $r=0.469$ ,  $p=0.000$ ,  $n=554$ ), implying a perfect correlation. The results indicate that stressors had a positive and significant relationship with coping strategies ( $p=0.000<0.05$ ). Therefore, the implication was that the more teacher-trainees got exposed to stress, the

more they devised appropriate coping strategies to mitigate it.

### Regression Coefficients for Stressors and Problem-Focused Coping Strategies

In order to establish the relationship between the coping strategies, regression analyses were conducted as presented in *Table 4* below.

**Table 4: Regression Coefficients for Stressors and Problem-Focused Coping Strategies**

| Coefficients <sup>a</sup>   |            |           |       |                           |        |                               |                         |
|-----------------------------|------------|-----------|-------|---------------------------|--------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Unstandardised Coefficients |            |           |       | Standardised Coefficients |        | 95% Confidence Interval for B |                         |
| Model                       | B          | Std Error |       | B                         | T      | Sig                           | Lower Bound Upper Bound |
| 1                           | (Constant) |           |       |                           |        |                               |                         |
|                             | Stressors  | 1.785     | 0.108 |                           | 16.588 | 0.000                         | 1.574 1.997             |
|                             | PFC        | 0.439     | 0.045 | 0.381                     | 9.668  | 0.000                         | 0.350 0.528             |

a. Dependent Variable: PFC

The results in *Table 4* present the regression findings for the effect of stressors on problem-focused coping strategies. The findings revealed

that stressors had a significant positive relationship with problem-focused coping ( $\beta=0.439$ ,  $p=0.000<0.05$ ). This implied that as the stressors

increased, teacher-trainees adopted problem-focused coping strategies such as active coping, making action plans, and seeking instrumental support from other people, such as peers and lecturers, to deal directly with the problem.

### Regression Coefficients for Stressors and Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies

A regression analysis was conducted to establish the relationship between stressors and emotion-coping strategies, and the results as presented in *Table 5* below.

**Table 5: Regression Coefficients for Stressors and Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies**

| Coefficients <sup>a</sup>   |            |           |                           |        |                               |             |             |
|-----------------------------|------------|-----------|---------------------------|--------|-------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Unstandardised Coefficients |            |           | Standardised Coefficients |        | 95% Confidence Interval for B |             |             |
| Model                       | B          | Std Error | B                         | T      | Sig                           | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| 1                           | (Constant) |           |                           |        |                               |             |             |
|                             | Stressors  | 1.925     | 0.105                     | 18.250 | 0.000                         | 1.718       | 2.132       |
|                             | EFC        | 0.363     | 0.045                     | 0.328  | 0.000                         | 0.276       | 0.451       |

a. Dependent Variable: EFC

Additionally, the finding further revealed a significant positive relationship between stressors and emotion-focused coping ( $\beta = 0.363$ ,  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ). This implied that as stressors increased, some teacher-trainees used emotion-focused coping strategies to manage the emotions causing the stress, for example by turning to religion, and acceptance that the problem happened, while others lived in denial.

### Regression Coefficients for Stressors and Avoidant Coping Strategies

Further analysis was conducted to establish the relationship between stressors and avoidant coping strategies, and the findings are presented in *Table 6* below.

**Table 6: Regression Coefficients for Stressors and Problem-Focused Coping Strategies**

| Coefficients <sup>a</sup>   |            |           |                           |        |                               |             |             |
|-----------------------------|------------|-----------|---------------------------|--------|-------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Unstandardised Coefficients |            |           | Standardised Coefficients |        | 95% Confidence Interval for B |             |             |
| Model                       | B          | Std Error | B                         | T      | Sig                           | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| 1                           | (Constant) |           |                           |        |                               |             |             |
|                             | Stressors  | 1.118     | 0.100                     | 11.198 | 0.000                         | 0.922       | 1.314       |
|                             | AFC        | 0.550     | 0.042                     | 0.486  | 0.000                         | 0.467       | 0.633       |

a. Dependent Variable: AFC

Furthermore, findings in *Table 6* revealed a significant positive relationship between stressors and avoidant coping strategies ( $\beta = 0.550$ ,  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ). This implied that some teacher trainees used avoidance coping strategies such as distracting their minds by watching TV, movies, and sleeping, among others. The findings generally

presented a complex relationship between stressors and coping strategies. Teacher-trainees use a combination of coping strategies to solve their problems depending on the prevailing circumstances, although the majority coped through avoidant coping with the highest unstandardized  $\beta$

= 0.550, followed by problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping, respectively.

### Regression Analysis for Stressors and Coping Strategies

The study sought to ascertain whether the relationship and strength between variables were

significant. The linear regression analysis was used to evaluate whether stressors had a significant relationship with coping strategies of teacher-trainees in universities in the Central region of Uganda. The results are presented in *Table 7* below.

**Table 7: Model Summary of Regression Analysis between Stressors and Coping Strategies**

| Variable  | B     | F-Factor | P (sig) |
|-----------|-------|----------|---------|
| Stressors | 0.466 | 153.21   | 0.000   |
| Coping    | 0.226 |          | 0.32    |

$R = 0.226$ ,  $R^2 = 0.217$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.216$

The results in *Table 7* present the regression results for stressors and coping strategies. The results indicate a correlation coefficient ( $R = 0.226$ ), coefficient of determination  $R$  Square = 0.217 and Adjusted  $R$  Square = 0.216. An Adjusted  $R$  Square of 0.216 meant that stressors accounted for 21.6 % of the variance in the choice of the coping strategies used by teacher-trainees in universities in the Central region of Uganda. Besides stressors, the model suggested that 78.4% was contributed by other factors that were not considered in this study. In order to determine whether the model was significant enough, the p-value 0.000 was less than 0.05 ( $F = 153.21$ ;  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ), which implied that the model was statistically significant. The implication was that the way teacher-trainees coped was significantly pushed by the magnitude of stress they experienced. The study, therefore, accepted the research hypothesis that was stated as: There is a significant relationship between stressors and coping strategies among teacher-trainees in universities in the Central region, Uganda.

### DISCUSSION

Stress among university students is a key factor that influences their well-being in universities. How they cope is instrumental since it determines their academic success and general well-being. The current study extends prior work by previous researchers on the subject of stress and coping among teacher-trainees. In order to understand it

better, we set out to address the key objective intended to investigating the relationship between stressors and coping strategies used by teacher-trainees in universities in the Central region of Uganda. Hence, the hypothesis was also developed and stated that there is a significant relationship between stress and coping strategies among teacher-trainees in the Central region of Uganda. Stressors were studied based on five dimensions of academic difficulties, romantic problems, assorted social problems, academic alienation, and time pressure, while coping was inclusive of problem-focused, focused and avoidant coping strategies. The test results showed that there was a significant positive relationship between stressors and coping strategies, and thus the hypothesis was supported. The findings were incongruent with Folkman and Lazarus' (1984) Transactional Theory of stress and coping, on which the study was hinged, which stated that teacher-trainees can devise appropriate means to cope with stressful situations. This implied that the more students perceived stress, the more they devised ways to cope with it. This was in direct agreement with Boke et al. (2019) in a study in Canada, especially using emotion-focused coping. The present study findings revealed that academic difficulties, specifically demanding courses, and making important decisions about their future career and education, stressed them immensely. The findings were further in line with Tonsing and Tonsing's (2022) study, which indicated that

academic demands were strong sources of stress among students in the USA.

Additionally, the current study findings revealed that teacher-trainees had challenges managing their time, and this was a strong cause of stress since the majority complained about having too many things to do at once. The findings are in agreement with Pereira and Barbosa (2013), who identified lack of time due to excessive class content, tests, and personal demands as key stressors among medical students in Brazil. In addition, Nazeer and Sultan (2014) revealed that poor time management and a vast curriculum predicted perceived stress among students in India. Zamroni et al. (2019) concurred with previous studies that limited time, academic difficulty, and academic pressure contributed immensely to student stress. The present study findings further revealed that most teacher-trainees coped using adaptive coping strategies such as active coping and planning that enabled them to achieve their set academic goals. The regression findings revealed that avoidant coping was detrimental to teacher-trainees' academic performance. Feyisa et al. (2022) in their study concurred with the current study findings that as the students progressed through their studies, the more stress and coping strategies increased. The findings are also in line with Sabirova et al. (2020) in their study, which revealed that students used positive coping specifically to mitigate stressful situations as they manoeuvred through their academic journey. Thornberg et al. (2023) also pointed out that students reported using adaptive coping strategies to cope with distressful situations. The three commonly used were problem-solving, cognitive-restructuring and social support. Additionally, Ukeh and Hassan (2018) in their study on the impact of coping strategies on psychological well-being among university students in Nigeria concurred with the findings. In their study, psychological being, which was comprised of stress and anxiety, was found to have a positive impact, especially when adaptive coping strategies such as active

coping, problem solving and cognitive restructuring were used.

Furthermore, the study findings also revealed that the majority of teacher-trainees adopted emotion-focused coping, specifically "turning to religion" whenever they were troubled. These findings are supported by empirical studies such as Bulanda et al. (2020), whose findings revealed that most students used emotional-coping strategies such as engaging in recreational activities, seeking God more, and encouraging themselves. Turner et al. (2015) also indicated that students coped through emotion-focused coping by engaging in socially distractive activities in England. Additionally, Liverpool et al. (2024) in their study confirmed previous studies that the majority of students copied through emotion-focused coping, specifically seeking social support from family and friends, as well as meditation and spirituality. Additionally, Kwaah and Essilfie (2017) concurred with the current study that students used multiple coping strategies simultaneously. However, the majority used emotional-coping strategies such as praying and meditating and well-avoidant coping specifically by watching TV and listening to music. This was in direct line with Mina (2022), whose study findings revealed that students used behavioural, spiritual, and social support to cope with stress.

The present findings further revealed that some teacher-trainees use avoidant coping to distract themselves from their problems. They mainly used mental disengagement, specifically distracting the mind by watching movies, and TV, and thinking less about the problem. The findings agree with other empirical studies, such as Birabwa et al. (2014), which showed that 64% of respondents reported distracting their minds by watching TV or videos. Gustems-Carnicer et al. (2020) reported that both males and females coped using avoidant coping behaviour and emotional discharge. The reduced use of avoidant coping strategies was instrumental in improving their academic



performance. The findings further revealed that some students engage in maladaptive coping, especially through alcohol and drug abuse. Although the current study findings revealed that the majority of teacher-trainees used maladaptive coping strategies, some used drug abuse, which was detrimental to their well-being. These findings were in disagreement with previous studies, such as Boke et al.(2019), that reported that student stress is highly associated with maladaptive coping and substance abuse in advanced years, such as the third and fourth years. Additionally, Mofatteh (2020) revealed that male students smoked for social bonding as a coping measure.

The findings therefore affirm that teacher-trainees experience various kinds of stress triggered by different stressors. There is no single coping measure but a multitude of them, and the prevailing circumstances determined a strategy that teacher-trainees used to cope. It was also observed that teacher-trainees used more than one coping strategy to cope. This is in conformity with van Heijst et al. (2024), who found that students used multiple coping strategies simultaneously as tension arose. Admiraal (2020) also pointed out that teacher-trainees used a combination of active coping and avoidant coping, which is in direct agreement with the current study. Active coping, according to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), is congruent with problem-focused coping in the current study. Besides, most of the studies were not specific to teacher trainees but to the general student population.

## CONCLUSION

The present investigation shows that stress was a prevalent problem among teacher-trainees. They utilised all three coping strategies, namely problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping strategies. Problem-focused coping strategies especially through active coping such as “taking additional action to try and get rid of the problem,” and “planning and seeking social support for instrumental reasons had higher mean scores. A few

teacher-trainees used emotion-focused coping, especially through turning to religion, positive reinterpretation, and growth by learning through experience. This called for the exposure of the learners to gain experience. Others used avoidant coping such as mental disengagement by going to the movies, watching TV sleeping more than usual. However, avoidant coping strategies were detrimental to their academic performance. The study concluded that many teacher-trainees used avoidant coping, followed by problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Thus, there is a need for teacher-trainees to use adaptive coping strategies that deal directly with the problems they encounter.

## Recommendations

Therefore, the study recommended a need for awareness and sensitisation of teacher-trainees about university life through engaging them in different programs such as orientation and continued guidance by the university counsellors, lecturers and university management. This could enable them to manage their time well, manage academic pressure, and seek positive social relations. Stress should be addressed in their initial training, such as during orientation. Career guidance and guest speakers should be involved regularly to prepare teacher-trainees for life after campus and future careers. This initiative could ease stress, especially on the finalists.

The university management could organise mentorship programs for students to prepare them for life after university. This would enable them to cope with perceived stress positively through the use of adaptive coping strategies such as problem-focused coping, active reinterpretation and problem-solving. The students can also be introduced to mindfulness programs to enhance their problem-solving and adaptation skills.

There should be a promotion of better-coping strategies that can enable teacher-trainees to excel in their studies. For instance, the use of learner-

centred methods by lecturers that engage learner participation and thus lessen academic pressure.

Lecturers should help their students in setting realistic goals for their studies to ease stress. Regular engagement in the progress and work plans to achieve such goals could enable them not only to perform well but general psychological well-being.

### Research Limitations

The study focused on the relationship between stress and coping in only three universities using quantitative methods. In future engagements, a mixed methods approach should be used to include the views of the participants using qualitative methods for exploratory analysis.

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