

(1) Research Abstract

Project Title

Sixth-Form Stress: the relationship between internal factors and academic stress for sixth form students.

Introduction/background (max 200 words)

Our research aim is to identify the factors contributing to perceived academic stress in sixth form. The research will be carried out through a self-report questionnaire with quantitative and qualitative aspects. This quasi experiment includes three variables: sex assigned at birth (male vs female), number of subjects taken (four vs three) and type of subjects (stem vs humanities vs other). These are our variables. Firstly, we believe that there will be a difference in Perceived Academic Stress (PAS) on average and the factors that cause this between males and females. Similarly, we believe that there will be a difference in PAS and the factors that cause it between those who do 3 A level and those who do 4. Finally, we believe that 'STEM' students will score higher (/5) on the perceived academic stress scale than those who do Humanities or other, and the factors will differ between them. Overall, our motivation for this study is to identify the relationship between academic stress and our variables and the factors that cause them in the hopes of improving wellbeing institutionally.

Research objectives (max 100 words)

Our research objective was to measure the difference in Perceived Academic Stress across three variables. They were sex assigned at birth (female vs male); number of subjects being studied at a level (four vs three) and type of subjects taken (humanities vs stem vs other). We want to use an ethical, efficient and reliable method so we decided to use a questionnaire. We used the Perceived Academic Stress Scale (although modified to be more ethical) to achieve quantitative data regarding the severity of stress itself, and an open-ended question to achieve qualitative data regarding the factors that cause it.

Methods (max 500 words)

The data formulated for this study was collected by an online Questionnaire and the 53 participants were selected via an opportunity sample. We asked a couple of teachers from the following subjects to have the questionnaire be completed in lessons: History, Sociology, Psychology, Biology. Having a teacher present ensured that nobody was tempted to answer mockingly further validating our results. Furthermore, all responses were anonymous and kept confidential reducing the likelihood for participants to lie for social desirability purposes.

To accurately measure stress, we used the Official Perceived Academic Stress Scale (slightly modified to make it appropriate for 16/17-year-old students to answer), which is an instrument used in numerous studies including the founders' study (Bedewy and Gabriel, 2015) on higher education. We deemed that not only would this be a more efficient option compared to constructing our own questions (allowing for more time for the participants to complete the questionnaire), but also it has been tested in numerous professional scenarios and has been confirmed to be fit for purpose meaning that the internal validity of this questionnaire is high. We included 10 academically focused questions from this scale, and rephrased two of

them to ensure more valid results; students weren't tempted to consistently select the same box. We then calculated an average for each individual and variable and compared them to each other (findings below).

After the Quantitative section of the questionnaire, we asked the open-ended question: 'What do you think are the main factors that contribute to your academic stress?' We then quantified the results making them easier to analyse; the 6 categories we sorted answers into were: workload, expectations, exams, under preparation, Advanced Skills Baccalaureate Wales (compulsory for all students), and teachers. We then calculated percentages detailing what the most common factors among our three variables were. Questionnaire attached in appendix.

There were many ethical procedures in place in this study in the hopes of making the participants as comfortable as they can be. For example, we have 2 sets of consent forms per participant, a question at the beginning asking if they are willing to participate in the study, and one at the end after debriefing the purpose of the study and explaining that they have a right to withdraw. Also, within the concluding statement, we included some links where students can seek mental health support should they require it. We have also maintained confidentiality during this study since at no point in this write up does Eloise or I mention a specific individual's scores or comments. Reassuring this confidentiality would be upheld also helped to create a more valid result since participants were more likely to be honest. Finally, we ensured that there was no pressure to answer questions participants did not want to answer, with the only compulsory questions being those providing us with the variables (with a 'prefer not to say' option on the Gender- related one to accommodate for all identities) and consent.

Results (max 500 words)

Results may be presented in any format the student(s) consider most appropriate, such as graphs, tables, charts, diagrams, or written summaries.

For every variable, we calculated the individual's perceived academic stress (PAC) and then calculated the mean PAC for all those in a certain variable e.g. females. The results can be found below under 'QUANTITATIVE'.

We also tallied the recurring qualitative data provided by the participants regarding the factors causing their stress according to the variables we are studying. These can be found below under 'QUALITATIVE'.

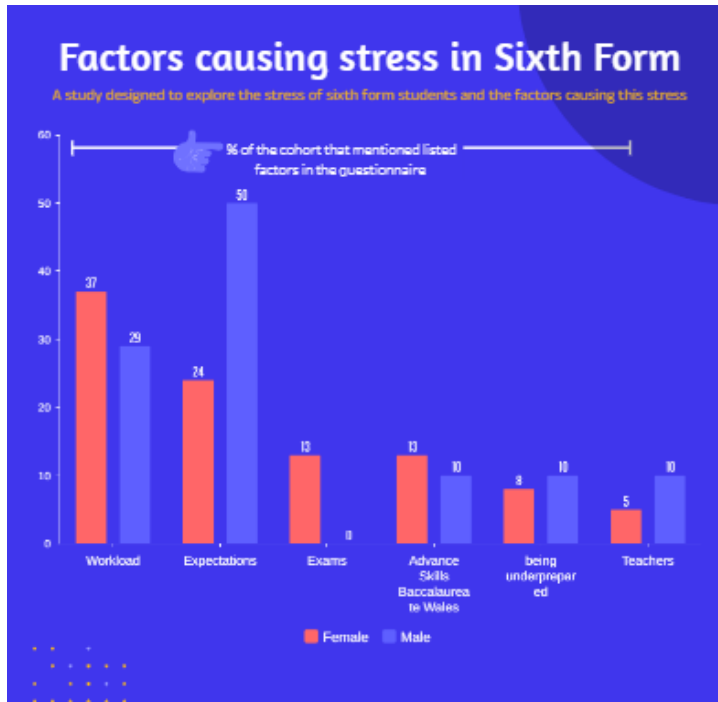
It is also important to note that we did not get an equal distribution across the variables, so the number of participants for that corresponding variable is in brackets in the quantitative section.

MALE VS FEMALE

QUANTITATIVE SCORES OF AVERAGE PERCEIVED ACADEMIC STRESSES (/5)

MALES (16)	FEMALES (37)
3.0	3.1

QUALITATIVE FACTORS CAUSING STRESS.



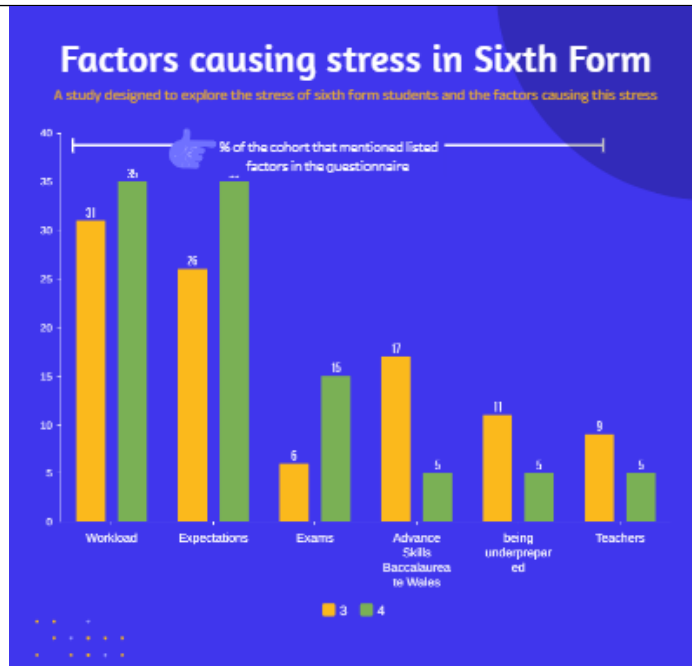
37% of the female cohort reported workload as a main factor compared to 29% of males. 24% of the female cohort reported expectations as a main factor which is over half of the male percentage (50%). 13% of females reported exams being a main factor of stress, whereas no males did. 13% of females reported that ASBW was a main factor compared to 10% of males. 8% of females reported that being underprepared was the issue compared to 10% of males. Finally, 5% of females reported that teachers were the main factor causing stress compared to 10% of males.

3 VS 4 A LEVELS CHOSEN

QUANTITATIVE SCORES OF AVERAGE PERCEIVED ACADEMIC STRESSES (/5)

3 A Levels (33)	4 A Levels (20)
3.1	3.1

QUALITATIVE FACTORS CAUSING STRESS.



31% of those doing 3 A Levels described workload as a major factor for their stress compared to 35% of those doing 4. 26% of those doing 3 mentioned expectations compared to 35% of those doing 4. 6% of those doing 3 mentioned exams compared to 15% of those doing 4. 17% of those doing 3 mentioned ASBW compared to just 5% of those doing 4. 11% of those doing 3 mentioned under preparation compared to 5% of those doing 4. 9% of those doing 3 mentioned teachers compared to 5% of those doing 4.

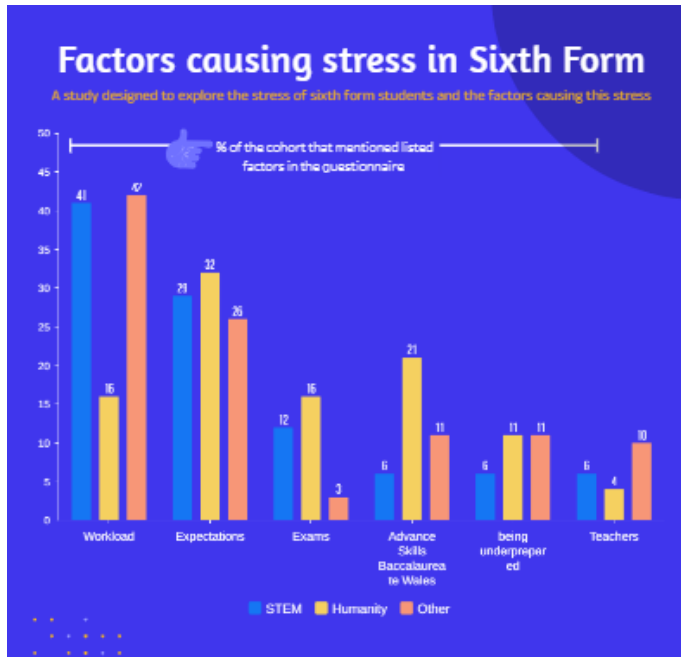
TYPE OF SUBJECTS CHOSEN

QUANTITATIVE SCORES OF AVERAGE PERCEIVED ACADEMIC STRESSES (/5)

STEM (14)	HUMANITY (20)	OTHER (19)
3.4	3.0	2.9

QUALITATIVE FACTORS CAUSING STRESS.

(next page)



41% of STEM students mentioned workload, compared to 42% of 'Other' students and just 16% of Humanities students. 29% of STEM students mentioned expectations compared to 26% of 'Other' students and 32% of Humanities students. 12% of STEM students mentioned exams, compared to 16% of Humanities students and just 3% of 'Other' students. 6% of STEM students mentioned ASBW, compared to 11% of 'Other' students and a whopping 21% of Humanities students. 6% of STEM students mentioned under preparation compared to 11% of both 'Other' and Humanities students. 6% of STEM students mentioned teachers compared to 4% of Humanities students and 10% of 'Other' students.

Limitations (max 200 words)

Mental Health is a complicated phenomenon made up of many factors. Unfortunately, it is infeasible for us to explore everything (however much we would like to) in one study, so we focused on institutional factors. We did this because it avoids ethically uncertain ground (such as asking about homelife) and it allows us to easily apply our research to improve mental health among our peers. However, we recognise that external factors play an important role in mental health that we simply cannot ignore.

Pragmatically, we could only study certain year 12 classes. This is because validity would be hindered if we opened it to the whole year group (social desirability), and Year 13 was in mock exam week during this time, which would be a huge confounding variable. Furthermore, we lacked contacts with other schools and colleges that could have strengthened our results, so we weren't able to conduct our research there.

Furthermore, we were unable to research stress from a variety of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, but our research acts as a gate to exploring these variables.

Conclusions and recommendations (max 300 words)

It is important to note that it is difficult to establish causation of the stress (since we focused solely on academic factors), so a higher-scale research project is needed for more valid and repeatable conclusions. However, our research demonstrates that there are no direct relationships between: sex assigned at birth and perceived academic stress, or quantity of subjects and perceived academic stress. However, we did find a relationship between the type of subjects a student studies; there is a relationship between higher stress levels and STEM focused students (as previously hypothesised by the both of us). Interestingly, although the stress levels are consistent across males and females, the factors behind them alter slightly perhaps due to the difference in childhood socialisation (females are conditioned to be emotionally mature and passive, and males to be instrumental and emotionally distant); (Parsons and Bales, 1955).

From this data, we aim to implement mental health support systems within our school for all students (but initially prioritising STEM focused individuals). We hope that this will break down the social stigma regarding youth mental health, by leading lessons on how to manage time and workload effectively (predominant factor identified in qualitative data) which will be useful for exam season and university applications. These are fast approaching and having adequate mental health support during these will be crucial for self-confidence and wellbeing. These can take many formats including focus groups, a social-media platform or online webinars. Having a trusted but qualified member of staff included in these will be pivotal for spreading awareness and providing not only a comfortable atmosphere but a constructive one. Regular wellbeing checks can help to monitor whether it would be necessary for students to attend these supportive groups- this could be through the format of questionnaires or one-to-one interviews.

Appendix

Our Questionnaire:

Sixth Form Survey 2026

Before you begin this questionnaire, please read the following information carefully.

- You understand that taking part in this questionnaire is **completely voluntary**.
- You can **stop at any time** without giving a reason, and you may skip any question you do not want to answer.
- Your responses will be kept **confidential** and used only for the stated purpose of this study/project.
- No personal information that identifies you will be shared with anyone outside the research team/project organisers.
- You are in **sixth form** (aged 16–19) and able to give your own informed consent.
- You have had the opportunity to ask questions or seek clarification if needed.

(Contact 20ifisher@stanwell.org or 20epitkinthomas@stanwell.org if you have any questions)

By selecting 'I agree' you are confirming you have read the statements above and are happy to continue with the questionnaire *

- I agree
- I do not wish to continue

How do you identify?

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

How many A-levels are you currently studying not including ASBW?

- 3
- 4

How would you describe your A- Level subjects?

- Mainly STEM
- Mainly Humanities
- Other (including a direct mix of both, and/or predominantly expressive arts)

Section 2

You will now answer a series of questions regarding how much you are in agreement with the statement. Nobody will see your answers aside from the researchers, so please aim to answer as honestly as possible.

The time allocated to classes and academic work is not enough

- | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| Strongly disagree | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Strongly agree |

The size of the curriculum (workload) is excessive

- | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| Strongly disagree | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Strongly agree |

I believe that the amount of work given to me is too much

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

...

I am unable to catch up if getting behind the work

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

Competition with my peers for grades is quite intense

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

I am confident that I will be a successful in my future career

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly disagree

...

Examination times are very stressful to me

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

What do you think are the main factors that contribute to your academic stress?

Long answer text

Thank you for taking part in this questionnaire. Your responses are really valuable and will help us better understand the topic being studied. *

The purpose of this questionnaire was to gather information about **stress in sixth form**. We did not expect any risks or negative effects from taking part, but if any of the questions made you feel uncomfortable, you were free to skip them. You can still withdraw your responses if you no longer want them to be used by ticking the corresponding box below.

All the information you provided will remain confidential and will only be used for the purposes of this project. No personal details that could identify you will be shared.

If completing this questionnaire raised any concerns or made you think about something you'd like to talk through, you can speak to a trusted teacher or another support service in school.

Thank you again for your time and contribution.

- I am happy for my answers to be used
- I am not happy for my answers to be used

Bibliography:

Bedewy, D, & Gabriel, A (2015). Examining perceptions of academic stress and its sources among university students: The Perception of Academic Stress Scale. Health Psychology Open, 2(2), 1-9.

Parsons, T, & Bales R,F. (1955) Family, Socialization and Interaction Process. Free Press.

(2) Research Discussion

The discussion section of the research may be submitted in any format chosen by the student(s). This may include, for example, a written discussion, PowerPoint presentation, poster, video, podcast, or a combination of formats.

Students are encouraged to consider the nature and methodology of their research when selecting the format for their discussion (for example, research undertaken as a literature review may be best suited to a written report).

The discussion should include a clear summary of the research findings, alongside a comprehensive consideration of the real-world applications and implications of these findings.

The discussion section will carry equal weighting to section 1 (research abstract) in the overall scoring.

Winners will be selected based on the originality of the research and the quality of the project presentation. Full judging criteria is provided below.

If your discussion section is in written format, please complete the box below. If it is provided in an alternative format (such as a PowerPoint presentation, poster, video, podcast, or similar), please attach it to the email when submitting this document.

Discussion (no word limit)

[Podcast for Discussion Section](#)

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Kltalbg9q1olJjp6wdN-QxhQs6E76AK2/view?usp=sharing>