

# “Think on These Things”: The Effect of Depression on South African Academics in Higher Education Work Performance and Attendance

Phakamani Irvine Dlamini

Faculty of Economics, Development & Business Science, University of Mpumalanga, Mbombela, South Africa

Email: dlaminihaka@gmail.com

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## Abstract

Higher education can be stressful and may have specific stress-related pressures. Academics are, according to some researchers, not able to realize their full potential as they operate in institutions that compromise the creation and dissemination of knowledge because of constraints. Yet the demand for these institutions to be accessible to and servicing of all is escalating. The focus of the study was on academics in public universities in South Africa with research, teaching, and community engagement obligations. No South African study, to the authors’ knowledge, has been willing to look into this problem with an inductive approach drawn from the experiences of those affected. The study utilized a qualitative research approach within the interpretive paradigm, employing exploratory research to comprehend the subjective experiences and opinions of the participants. Data for this qualitative study were gathered through the semi-structured interview method. Unique findings in this study revealed that academics experienced difficulties in maintaining work relationships, took sick leave, had trouble focusing and making decisions, and grappled with feelings of guilt, failure, and losing self-identity. Furthermore, the study concluded that when mental health issues in academia are left unaddressed or without the necessary support, they pose a direct threat to the quality of learning and teaching provided to students.

## Keywords

Depression, Academics, Performance

## 1. Introduction

Depression is a widely acknowledged and pressing health issue that has a signif-

ificant impact on individuals and society as a whole. Research consistently shows the harmful consequences of untreated depression, including personal suffering, decreased work productivity, and high costs for employers. These challenges extend beyond the workplace and also affect academic communities, where they can hinder educational success and career advancement. In South Africa, the demands of higher education are likely to intensify these issues. Therefore, it is crucial to address and tackle the complex nature of depression in academic settings to ensure the well-being and success of students and educators. (Pillay, Thwala, & Pillay, 2020)

The negative effects of depression within institutions of higher education (IHEs) are wide-ranging, impacting both the physical and emotional well-being of individuals, reducing productivity and engagement at work, and leading to an increased reliance on psychotropic medications. In more extreme cases, depression can even contribute to higher rates of suicide and career disillusionment among faculty members. The findings of a recent study involving 30 academics suggest that by alleviating some of the self-imposed pressures related to their roles and expectations, individuals struggling with depression may be able to maintain high levels of productivity. This implies that adjusting expectations and offering increased support within IHEs could be crucial in allowing individuals to address their mental health issues and seek treatment, ultimately leading them towards a positive recovery. Academic life brings many professional, personal, and societal benefits. However, academics are vulnerable to psychological stress due to their teaching, research, and administrative duties. Academic environments often lack the supportive structures found in industry settings to help reduce this stress. This paper adopted cognitive theory by Beck's.

Beck's cognitive theory proposes the development of a cognitive structure consisting of cognitions, mental representations, and images. This also includes the formation of a critical, negative, self-evaluative 'deep structure' in response to specific events, such as meeting the academic demand for publishing research in this instance. These cognitions, structured in this manner, are known as 'automatic thoughts' (ATs) and are activated when a similar, albeit not identical, event takes place. Similar automatic thoughts are grouped into themes. The activation criteria for similar automatic thoughts and the categorization of themes vary individually, influenced by the academic's early experiences and emotional alignment with the demands of publishing or presenting research studies. Within the context of this study, Beck's cognitive theory's fundamental distortion theories, such as selective abstraction, are relevant. Selective abstraction involves a mental filter or single-minded rule that focuses on poor performance or failure as the most significant aspect of a situation, while downplaying evidence of success. Automatic thoughts are considered to be thinking distortions and flawed beliefs related to security.

The mental well-being of employees in South African institutions of higher education (IHEs) has attracted increased attention due to the escalation of student protests, violent confrontations demanding academic standards, and inad-

equate institutional management (Agnafors, Barmark, & Sydsjö, 2021). Depression has been identified as a major contributor to disability worldwide and is a condition that places significant emotional and financial strain on both individuals and society. Limited research on this subject has indicated that the academic profession carries a heightened risk of stress, anxiety, and depression due to the multitude of professional expectations placed on individuals. Both internal and external pressures, lack of autonomy, and insufficient levels of support in these environments have led to a higher prevalence of burnout and have had a detrimental impact on the well-being of employees.

### **1.1. Background and Rationale**

Higher education can lead to significant stress and unique pressures. Some researchers believe that academic institutions have constraints that prevent academics from reaching their full potential and hinder the creation and dissemination of knowledge. Despite the increasing demand for accessibility and serviceability, universities tend to foster dissatisfaction and ill health among their staff. Structural and systemic flaws within universities contribute to ongoing stress among academic professionals. Stress is a major health risk in the modern workplace, leading to costly absences and reduced productivity for individuals and institutions. The health of academics is not only a personal concern but also affects government projects for economic, social, and technological progress. It is crucial for universities to address organizational stress in order to retain and support emerging talent (Bam, Walters, & Jansen, 2024). In addition to its impeccable timeliness and incisive nature, it is important to note that this study holds significant importance within the larger context of South Africa's distinct socio-political landscape, which is continuously dealing with high rates of depression. It is therefore crucial to actively seek and gather valuable contributions and ground-breaking insights that have the potential to alleviate and combat the escalating prevalence of depression within the academic sector of the country. The outstanding findings from this pivotal study will undoubtedly enhance the existing information base and facilitate the seamless transfer of knowledge, aiming to promote the development and innovation in the field of attendance management within South Africa's academic sector (Van Rensburg, 2021).

Depression is a significant factor in the overall burden of disease and associated costs. Little research has been conducted on the effect of depression on work performance and attendance among university staff in South Africa. Universities are complex institutions where maintaining a high standard of work performance and attendance is important for professionalism. Academics play a crucial role in the success of academia and the future of science in developing countries. Therefore, it is important to explore the impact of depression on this occupational group. As more people work in roles that require close connections and knowledge-based skills, but may lack emotional satisfaction and physical activity, depression has the potential to become a problem in the working world. The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of depression on work

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performance and attendance among South African academic staff at higher education institutions.

## 1.2. Research Aim and Objectives

The University of Pretoria, recognized for its impressive research initiatives, is dedicated to tackling the issue of high levels of employee depression within the institution. The stress and heavy workload of academic positions have motivated researchers to concentrate on comprehending the reasons behind depression and discovering ways to enhance overall workplace well-being and productivity. Data from the university shows a worrying increase in reported cases of depression, prompting further investigation into the underlying causes. Using a social constructionism approach, the researchers are conducting a qualitative single case study that relies on semi-structured interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of depression on university academics. Through this study, the university aims to delve into and better comprehend the experiences shared by participants in order to offer effective support.

## 1.3. Significance of the Study

There have been numerous studies examining the prevalence and effects of depression on university students, but research on the impact of depression on academics in the workplace is lacking. This study aimed to explore the prevalence of depression symptoms and their impact on work performance and attendance among academics at South African higher education institutions. Through qualitative analysis, we gained insight into how depression affects the personal and professional lives of academics, as well as the coping strategies commonly used. This study is significant as it has the potential to guide effective support and strategies to improve the mental health and well-being of academics in the workplace. The results of this study can provide valuable information to the higher education sector, offering strategies and support for academics dealing with depression symptoms (Pokhrel et al., 2020; Pokhrel, Khadayat, & Tulachan, 2020).

Depression is a major challenge facing academics in higher education institutions. There is a societal expectation that academics should be superheroes in all spheres of life, living up to these expectations is exerting a heavy psychological toll, often manifesting as depression (Rousseau, Thompson, Pileggi, Henry, & Thomas, 2021). Coming to work with this condition makes it difficult for the academic to offer their best, rendering their work ineffective and greatly compromising their work attendance. This, in turn, affects their productivity and negatively impacts the academics and their employers. Mitigating the impact of depression on academics at work and maintaining a mentally healthy academic is therefore crucial and cannot be overlooked or underestimated (Agyapong, Obuobi-Donkor, Burbach, & Wei, 2022). The findings from this qualitative study will provide a lens into the types of stressors and coping strategies, providing greater clarity for effective interventions.

## 2. Literature Review

Depression has significant effects on individuals, impacting their moods, daily activities, and functioning at work and in personal relationships. These consequences also extend to the people around them, causing difficulties in personal relationships and work productivity, which can result in increased costs for organizations due to high turnover and other indirect expenses (Tengilimoğlu, Zekioglu, Tosun, & Tengilimoğlu, 2021). Recognizing the economic impact of depression is crucial for organizations and societies, and research into its effects on the workplace and individuals is increasing globally. However, accurately determining the prevalence of depression, especially among the working population, is challenging due to various factors such as stigma, fear of discrimination, and a desire for job security and confidentiality. Moreover, the cultural, political, and economic circumstances of South Africa present unique challenges compared to more industrialized nations (Abadi et al., 2021).

Depression is a significant mental health concern that significantly impacts employees in the workplace and has been linked to reduced work performance and attendance. In higher education, academics operate in high-stress and demanding environments that can have a negative impact on their mental health, potentially leading to depression and subsequently affecting their work performance and attendance. The attention has predominantly been on the mental health of South African students and the difficulties they encounter (Pillay et al., 2020).

### 2.1. Prevalence of Depression in Academia

Stress-related health problems are persistently increasing in higher education systems in industrialized countries and professors in challenging institution jobs in particular because of the paucity of evaluations with mental health (Meintjes, 2020). A strategic confrontation with the recent causations of stress among faculties is evident because of faculty's dependency on the future success of the education system. The demand arises from tired and poor performance at increasing pressure to innovate and develop high levels of courage. It contributes to a large general interest in the health-related to work and working conditions factors. High expectations faculty accept from students and management officials also contribute to the test in changing the meaning of the faculty role. These daily charges vividly symbolize individuals and organizational accomplishments, with a visible result gap, showing the student newspapers' majority. Efforts are thin to expand the interaction between individual academic careers. Higher motivations can be inhibited when stressors become evident. (Schmiedehaus et al., 2023)

Thirty-four percent of 8034 participants who responded to a 2003 British Medical Journal survey of doctors in Norway were classified as suffering from substantial mental distress, particularly among academic staff employees. Comparisons with general practitioners, psychiatrists, and the rest of the hospital

staff, including medical students, found the academics superior in recycling mental distress reduction outcomes against the other healthcare professionals serving the survey (Jung, Lim, & Chi, 2020). These findings imply a preference for those healthy persons seeking employment in an academic milieu compared to those in other healthcare services. Mentally distressed employees are functionally equivalent to presenters compared to the other professionals and follow the attendees, a day of sickness, shows. Among the professors who did participate, job and organizational factors had the greatest impact on their presenteeism (Platts, Breckon, & Marshall, 2022).

A Hong Kong (China) survey of 635 academic staff found 31% experienced job burnout, with 22.5% displaying acute stress symptoms and 6.2% suffering from burnout as well as acute stress. In a United Kingdom study, 57% of surveyed higher education staff considered leaving the sector within the following two years. The UK Royal College of Psychiatrists posted the pressures in higher education negatively impacted mental health, which a higher number of higher education staff are reporting. A Canadian survey of 2852 university faculty across eleven institutions reported that 39.67% missed work due to depression, while Australia's 2017 National Tertiary Education Union's survey confirmed high stress levels among the 16,000 teaching and research staff they studied, with more than 40% of universities missing work due to work-related stress. Globally, a report by Arima Business School found that 45% of academics suffer from depression. (Löscher, 2021)

Prevalence outcomes were diverse and ranged widely, potentially due to differences across contexts, populations, and methodology. The reported prevalence of mental health problems in general among academics in various national and international studies is significant.

## 2.2. Impact of Depression on Work Performance

The findings may be grouped into three groups: absenteeism from work, presenteeism, and tardiness. During exhausting phases of depression, workers may feel incapable of managing work tasks and that they would not be able to pull their weight. This was apparent among the study participants, who also experienced unreasonable levels of fatigue and work-related stress that influenced them to remain away from work for the day (Obrenovic, Du, Godinic, Baslom, & Tsoy, 2021). To manage their condition, it was pointed out that some staff used the absence of tension or excessive work as a coping mechanism. I have no hesitancy about staying away because of job issues now, as I call them... obviously, there is no necessity to trouble to go in and meet the clients (Barbara). Ideal, good... Ideal for me... I must confess that... If I'm having a good time, I'm not going to work. That's how it is (Alex). Staff experienced snagging problems of numbness and tingling sensations, cognitive deficits, such as being too slow or having an inability to think and being incredibly disorganized when engaging in work-related activities while grappling with work function and the depressive

disorder, which were increased by internal and external occurrences at work (Salari et al., 2020).

### **2.3. Factors Contributing to Depression in South African Academics**

Academics in higher education work in a highly competitive and tough environment associated with high stress. Following a systematic literature review of factors contributing to depression in academics, many personal, situational, and organizational factors were identified as contributing to depression, such as personal and family factors, primarily resulting from low social support, and organizational and job factors which are linked to high levels of occupational stress. In the case of South African higher education institutions, our stress factor is exacerbated by the country's socio-political history which includes higher education's assessment of teaching, learning, and research differently, the lack of resources that many South African institutions currently find themselves in, demographic and support factors, low pay, and increased job demands. The aforementioned factors could lead to high levels of occupational stress and its resultant occupational stress illnesses, such as depression.

The causation of depression is complex and multifactorial, influenced by a wide range of biological, psychological, genetic, and environmental factors often interacting in ways that significantly exacerbate biologically-based vulnerability to depression. Evidence suggests that a combination of factors may contribute to depression in academics, including, but not limited to, high levels of stress, heavy teaching loads, students' poor academic preparedness, reduced time to maintain good health and a balanced lifestyle, work pressure, promotion process, inadequate leadership, resource allocation, the academic role, and tension between work and family. However, studies examining risk factors that specifically confer vulnerability to depression among academics are sparse.

### **3. Methodology**

This qualitative, exploratory study focused on the lived experiences of academics in the complex working environment of a higher education institution. The main research question that directed this study aimed to understand the lived experiences of academics with depression in relation to absence and a changed, diminished, or restricted performance. It was therefore necessitated to gain insight into the meanings attached to taking a leave of absence related to work attendance and applying for a medical certificate or not with respect to their mental illness. These ethical considerations were also concerned with avoiding any harm, such as embarrassment caused by identifying the organisations, employees or participating academics' disciplines, their role and any resulting stigma. Due to the unique characteristics of their institution and the highlighted sensitive nature of this study, only eight females and 16 male National Department of Higher Education and Training academics agreed to participate.

The methodology of a study is an essential component with implications for

how rigour will be achieved. Rigour and trust, as well as a good balance between the essential components of methodology, are crucial. In terms of this qualitative study, an exploratory study design was used due to a lack of prior research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain detailed information, with 24 academics in a higher education institution. Four research questions were used as guidelines for gathering information. Ethical considerations involved informed consent, participant confidentiality, and participant anonymity. Debriefing information included making use of the employee wellness programme and informing participants about a professional mental health organisation. After adhering to a quality process, the researcher set up a research diary and performed a thematic analysis.

### 3.1. Research Design

The great advantage of using this research design was the ability of the researcher to capture the full complexity of human experience because the focus was on both meanings and processes, since the study was also idiographic. The use of this research design enabled the researcher to collect rich data, guided the process of exploration and learning, and helped build a basis for the development of hypotheses for later studies. Qualitative interviews made possible the detailed description and interpretations of the meanings of the life-world, and the design enabled the gathering of the authentic human voices of the researchers [Creswell \(2013\)](#). Its methods were adequately rigorous and implemented in such a way that they are meaningful, credible, and trustworthy reflections of the participants involved.

Qualitative research methods, as used in this study, are well suited to explore the complex interaction of individual and environmental phenomena based on the perspectives of the people who are directly involved. In-depth interviews provided relevant insight into the research question, allowing the researcher to collect contextual data. The use of this research design allowed for unstructured guided opinions of the individuals that were researched, and the purpose of the interviews was to allow the respondents to describe or tell their stories about the phenomenon under investigation. This design was flexible and inductive. These interviews took place in semi-structured interviews, where the researcher used a few key questions or points of focus around which the researcher structured the interview.

### 3.2. Participant Selection

The participants had been actively engaged in the dynamic field of higher education for a commendable average of fifteen substantial years. Providing a profound testament to their commitment and expertise, it is noteworthy to mention that as of the year 2016, these esteemed individuals had invested their incredible talents and contributions to the industry for an admirable span of approximately two to three years. However, it is essential to emphasize that the collective years



of experience possessed by these extraordinary executives are consistently marked at a remarkable fifteen. Hence, it can be firmly established that the majority of their stimulating work experience was cultivated meticulously within this remarkable timeframe. A captivating distinction of these distinguished participants lies in their current roles, as they are presently entrusted with managing the highest-level profiles within their respective educational institutions. Functioning at the zenith of their careers, these exceptional individuals successfully navigate the demanding responsibilities of overseeing and co-managing a diverse array of university staff members encompassing both academic and non-academic domains. While deftly shouldering these formidable responsibilities, it is indispensable to acknowledge that these remarkable individuals routinely brave enormous workloads, serving as a testament to their remarkable work ethic and unwavering dedication. Furthermore, let us delve into the average work experience held by these luminaries in the education industry, a figure that paints an awe-inspiring picture of their extensive and profound contributions. Astonishingly, the average accumulated work experience of these talented participants, whether it be as a lecturer, a manager, or a senior manager, stands at an extraordinary 57.5 years. This staggering number not only attests to their wisdom and sagacity but also admirably showcases their unwavering commitment to the advancement of higher education and their tireless efforts in propelling their respective institutions forward. Truly, the indelible impact these outstanding individuals have made on the landscape of higher education cannot be overstated, as their illustrious careers serve as a shining example to aspiring professionals in the field.

### **3.3. Data Collection Methods**

To commence the study and reach potential participants, permission was obtained from human resources to post the study advert on the institutional communication platform. Academics from all faculty members were invited to participate in the study by responding to an advertisement informing them of the nature and scope of the study and that all information would be handled in a strictly confidential manner, and that the information provided would not be used for any other purpose than the academic research. Only employees diagnosed with depression in the past. Data was collected until 22 participants had applied to ensure that a variety of views could be captured. The researchers aimed to sample from a cross-section of the entire faculty and to recruit participants from various faculties, and at different academic levels. Furthermore, to reach participants from different backgrounds, faculties, and with various degrees, purposive sampling was employed in this qualitative study.

The semi-structured interview schedule was compiled to explore academics' experiences with depression, in relation to their absence from and performance at work. The schedule was organized around the main three study aims. First, academics were asked to describe their experiences of depression when they

were at work and to describe their experiences of calling in sick because of their depression. Second, academics were asked to describe the effect of their depression on their performance at work. Finally, academics were asked to describe the support that they received or still require from their institution and to identify potential negative consequences of taking time off sick due to depression. Data were collected until saturation was reached, meaning that no new or relevant information was being provided.

## 4. Findings and Analysis

The findings from the interviews show that the majority of participants suffered from a significant deficit in work performance which jeopardized their careers at university. However, the majority of participants did not take sick leave as they felt an immense sense of duty and loyalty to students. Their wellness and how well they did their work was an unusual form of student-oriented academic commitment and this dedication served as a self-imposed obligation to remain in a state of ill-health and avoid or minimize the use of sick leave. The consequence was a continuation of depressive illness and the paradox was that ill health through presenteeism concealed the extent of their illness. It is also acknowledged that a feeling of responsibility for students is likely a familiar concept to academic staff but it is important that this should not override their own health needs.

The study findings also affirm sentiments of (Santamaría, Mondragon, Santxo, & Ozamiz-Etxebarria, 2021) who contend that students' academic concerns contribute to the perceived legitimacy of the commitment of academics to a collegiate ethos and therefore faculty staffers exposing them to disturbing details of their own emotional imbalances may place these members under the strain of wanting to hide rather than disclose their own level of discomfort.

### 4.1. Themes Evident in the Data

Several academics handled bad emotions and ideas by deflecting, evading, or distracting themselves. They discovered other hobbies to focus on in order to be productive and continue their employment. To project a professional image of strength and stability, they pretended that everything was good and that they were doing well. The cultural stigma around depression and mental illness also affected their decision to remain silent about their difficulties. This stillness gave the idea that everything was alright, despite the hardships they were facing.

Fourthly, it is important to mention that depression also had a tremendous and profound effect on the academics once they had been diagnosed as being depressed. This was especially true if they also received and accepted recommendations for treatment and for changes in their lifestyle. It was during this period that they truly discovered how overwhelmingly and challengingly it was to admit to themselves that they were weak and to seek the necessary help. Initially, many of these academics had thought that the individuals who recom-

mended the treatments could not genuinely help them. They believed that nothing good could come from the predictions made regarding their treatment. However, as they had no choice but to try these recommendations, they eventually realized that depression was indeed a condition that could be treated with remarkable efficacy. It became evident that the tireless efforts of those individuals had their best interests at heart.

Finally, it is important to highlight the transformative and curative measures that were implemented. These measures made the participants feel immensely better, although they reported that they had to utilize a significant number of these measures before they experienced significant improvement. Additionally, they also came to the realization that they had to continue implementing some or all of them for the remainder of their lives. Moving on, we should address the fact that the majority of academics who actively partook in the comprehensive study indicated that they not only experienced depression symptoms to some extent, but also felt that depression did indeed affect their work performance and attendance (sick leave). This finding sheds light on the profound impact of depression on their professional lives. Secondly, it is worth noting that the academics were genuinely surprised at their diagnoses. Initially, they did not believe that depression had affected them and they did not feel that they should have been diagnosed as being depressed. This sense of disbelief and denial further highlights the complexity of the condition and the difficulty academics faced in recognizing its presence in their lives.

Thirdly, it is important to recognize that there may have been a lack of awareness among these academics regarding some of the symptoms related to depression. Additionally, they may not have realized that what they were experiencing was, indeed, depression. Consequently, they ignored or denied these symptoms, further complicating their journey towards seeking help and finding an effective treatment plan. In conclusion, the expansion of this text has shed light on the profound effects of depression on academics once they receive a diagnosis and accept recommendations for treatment. It has highlighted the initial skepticism towards these recommendations and the eventual realization of the efficacy of treatment measures. Moreover, it has emphasized the importance of consistent implementation of these measures for long-term well-being.

Additionally, the expansion has addressed the impact of depression on work performance and attendance, as well as the challenges faced by academics in recognizing and accepting their diagnosis. Lastly, the expansion has acknowledged the impact of a lack of awareness on symptoms related to depression, which often leads to denial or ignorance of the condition.

## **4.2. Interpretation of Findings**

The study suggested the influences of emotion and stigma, no separation of work and personal life, and challenges around isolation and communication difficulty at work as the factors which influenced the respondents' levels of depres-

sion. Additional factors identified were linked to job demands and the shortage of resources such as excessive workload, evaluation practices, limited decision-making, and career development opportunities. The least likely factor, relatively speaking, responsible for causing depression among the participants was the university community and its performance norms—i.e., the organizational level. The stress on both the perceptions and underlying psychopathological mechanisms, as well as the role of grouping unknown populations together, was discussed at length throughout the article. The challenges for future research were addressed and theoretical and practical implications were offered.

Although the original aim of the study was to understand the impact of depression on work attendance and performance, some underlying factors appeared to contribute to depression among academics. The themes which emerged from the interviews about what caused the academics to become depressed were categorized into three major levels of causation—the individual, work, and organizational levels—applying the Job-Demands Resources (JD-R) model. A comprehensive strategy is necessary to effectively and efficiently prevent absenteeism as an integral part of a highly intricate and well-structured employee wellness management model within the workplace. Firstly, a thorough and meticulous investigation should be conducted into pre-diagnosed risk groups, as the implementation of early interventions specifically targeted towards chronic diseases has the potential to significantly minimize and mitigate escalating risks. Secondly, a series of strategic interventions should be artfully implemented within the context of higher education or by expertly fostering a profound and transformative attitude change among employees who are perpetually and relentlessly burdened with the perpetual demand to accomplish more with significantly less. Lastly, it is imperative that a meticulously thought out and comprehensive pre-hire examination is conducted to expertly and accurately identify any existing acute or chronic diseases that may potentially lead to incapacitation or absenteeism. This all-inclusive approach requires an array of specific prerequisites and a clear sense of accountability, all the while offering substantial support for both internal and external employees alike. Moreover, it is essential to recognize and acknowledge the profound need for an exceptionally positive working environment that yields a profoundly beneficial impact on the overall well-being of the employees in both their work and private lives. An overarching commitment to meticulously creating and nurturing a deeply meaningful, richly challenging, and undeniably healthy and value-driven working environment will undoubtedly and effectively mitigate absenteeism and yield immeasurable benefits for both the dedicated employees and the employer as a whole.

The high probability of depression triggered by manageable chronic illnesses like high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity has been identified as a significant cause of absenteeism. Making lifestyle adjustments and adhering to medical advice and treatment can help control these chronic illnesses. However, the challenge of managing depression is similar to managing chronic illnesses, and there

are concerns about the large number of patients requiring diagnosis and treatment at hospitals. It is crucial to enhance interventions to address absenteeism, possibly by eliminating unhealthy behaviours and reducing the cost of managing absenteeism due to medical conditions using taxpayer money. There is also uncertainty about using taxpayer funds to enhance mental health in the workplace.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Each of these strategies found expression in the recommendations made by the academics with personal experience of depression. The findings suggest that the disruptive impact of depression on academics could be diminished by improving the awareness, sensitivity, and understanding of all higher education stakeholders in relation to academic depression and its consequences. This, in turn, relies on a change in 'norms', underpinned by a bottom-up, top-down adaptation and the creation of organizations that support, rather than censure, the needs and requirements of all individuals. Such strategies should form part of interventions that aim to improve mental health outcomes and, as a result, the academic productivity and job satisfaction of academics and hence the performance of the university as a whole. A modified human and concern-centered paradigm will require strengthening the organizational type of health outcomes focused on academics in the context of academic life.

Based on the outcomes of the study, it can be concluded that depression compromises the capacities of university academics to perform their work as well as their attendance. The findings present insights into the characteristics of the personal, work-related, and institutional factors that diminish or exacerbate the impact of depression on university academics' work performance and attendance. Strategies aimed at lessening the stigmatization of academics suffering from depression should include initiatives that address the institutional structures and cultures, leadership, and 'systems' issues associated with performance and attendance management. The provision of support mechanisms needs to be at a systemic level and should include the integration of approaches such as manager and peer support, confidential counseling, cognitive behavioral therapy, and psychiatric medication along with procedures for phased rehabilitation, effective management of part-time or reduced work hours, and controlled medication.

### **5.1. Implications for Policy and Practice**

It makes sense for a mental health professional who knows about academic settings to collaborate closely with university staff, leaders, and managers, right? Building a solid presence in the industry would enable the offering of proactive assistance and a culture of open communication concerning mental health. Support should be offered to both students and staff. Experts who grasp the ins and outs of higher education, and the various positions within it, can implement teaching methods in real-life situations, and are open to working with scholars can have a meaningful and genuine impact.

This research found that the implementation of several academic work tasks was affected by self-reported depression, such as: preparation activities (interpretation, reading and criticism); teaching; research and related activities (interpretation, analysis, writing, dissemination, group interaction in joint research projects); administrative tasks. Regardless of the seriousness of these sub-symptoms, research found that participants would feel embarrassed about their work when they were recognized in patients with depression, which suggests that hidden mistakes and guilt are obstacles to seeking help for their condition. Participants reported viewing discussions about lawyers or anti-depression at work as unprofessional, which exacerbated the problem.

The aim of this study was to explore the impact of depression specifically on work performance and attendance through the experiences and perceptions of South African academics in the higher education sector. The findings are that the leading symptoms of depression that participants identified caused work performance and attendance issues such as inability to concentrate or make decisions, thinking and moving slowly, always feeling tired, muscle pain, excessive fatigue, feeling irritable, no interest in anything, isolating oneself, excessive worry or negative thinking, no memory, excessive crying, and lack of boundaries between personal and work issues. Task-related areas in which participants experienced performance difficulties included work planning, self-organization, the learning process, problem-solving, and ability to follow instructions. More than a quarter of them had no memory and often woke up early and had negative thinking. The quality of education and teaching students get is directly at risk if mental health issues in academia are not appropriately addressed or given the necessary help. It's critical to understand that these issues negatively affect students' educational journeys in addition to the teaching staff. The effects go beyond the additional strain teachers bear. Even with the best of intentions, communication quality will always suffer if a teacher is unable to establish a good rapport with their pupils because of irritability, disengagement, or poor energy.

## 5.2. Recommendations for Future Research

During this study, participants working in different faculties or fields participated. However, there might be variances in experiences depending on the academic specialism or faculty that staff members work in. There might be different expectations. According to the researchers (based on their experiences with staff members from different faculties), healthcare can be a typical example. It would be good to research whether the impact of depression is the same in employees who work in this specific field compared to employees from, for example, technical sciences.

In this study, only academics participated. To improve the knowledge on this subject, it would be interesting to include non-academic staff members as well, since the findings will provide a perspective on the impact of depression on the perspectives of the different staff. This might lead to a real picture of the actual support necessary to change policies. Only academics who work full-time and in

a permanent position were interviewed. Academics with other types of employment were not included, such as part-time employees, contract staff members, or academics who are on full-time sabbatical, parental leave, or who are part-time retired. If South African universities also want to implement policies and wellness programs to support the mental health of such an employee, it is recommended to include all types of employment in the next research.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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