

ENGLISH EDUCATION GRADUATES' REFLECTIONS ON COPING STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING ACADEMIC STRESS THROUGHOUT THE FINAL PROJECT PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Academic stress is commonly experienced by university students during the completion of their final projects due to demanding academic tasks, time pressure, and high academic expectations. Although previous studies have identified various coping strategies, limited attention has been given to how graduates reflect on the effectiveness of those strategies after completing their final projects. This study aimed to explore the coping strategies employed by English Education graduates to manage academic stress and examine how they reflected on the effectiveness of those strategies. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed involving five purposively selected English Education graduates to obtain in-depth reflective accounts of their coping experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that participants managed academic stress through both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies, particularly by seeking academic assistance and engaging in relaxation activities. Participants identified effective and less effective coping strategies and drew lessons that informed their responses to future academic challenges. These findings suggest that coping extends beyond immediate stress management and involves a continuous process of reflective learning. This study contributes to the existing literature by suggesting that, among the English Education graduates in this study, reflective evaluation functioned as an integral component of the coping process, through which participants assessed the effectiveness of their coping strategies and identified lessons for responding to future academic challenges.

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INTRODUCTION

Academic stress is widely recognized as a major challenge faced by university students, especially while completing academically demanding requirements. Completing a final project

is widely regarded as one of the most demanding stages of higher education, requiring students to undertake independent research while balancing academic expectations, limited time, supervisory feedback, and multiple rounds of revision. These cumulative demands often exceed students' perceived coping resources, resulting in heightened academic stress that may adversely affect their psychological well-being, learning engagement, and academic performance (Anggraini & Utami, 2025; Benítez-Agudelo et al., 2025; Misra & Castillo, 2004). Consequently, understanding how students manage academic stress during the completion of their final projects has become an important concern in higher education research.

For students in English Education programs, completing the final project involves additional challenges that extend beyond those typically experienced in many other academic disciplines. Besides carrying out independent research, students are expected to produce academically rigorous writing in English, identify and synthesize relevant literature, analyze research data systematically, and respond constructively to supervisors' feedback. In the Indonesian higher education context, these academic demands are frequently accompanied by difficulties in developing research ideas, organizing academic writing, and meeting disciplinary writing conventions, all of which may intensify academic stress throughout the final project process (Nurcholis et al., 2023; Muryani et al., 2024). Consistent with these academic challenges, Nurcholis et al., (2023) found that final-year English students experienced high levels of academic stress during thesis writing. However, less attention has been given to how graduates make sense of their coping experiences after successfully completing their final projects. Understanding these reflections is important because they reveal not only how graduates managed academic stress but also how coping experiences informed subsequent learning and personal development.

Understanding graduates' coping experiences requires a conceptual perspective that integrates academic stress, coping, and reflection. Academic Stress Theory views stress as arising when students perceive that academic demands outweigh the personal resources available to cope with them, emphasizing that stress is determined by individual appraisal rather than by objective academic demands alone (Misra & Castillo, 2004; Pascoe et al., 2020). According to Lazarus & Folkman (1984), coping is understood as a dynamic process involving continuously changing cognitive and behavioural efforts used to manage stressful situations. The model conceptualizes coping as the use of problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies to manage stressful situations. This framework provides a useful lens for understanding how graduates managed the academic and emotional demands of completing their final projects.

Although coping explains how individuals respond to stressful situations, it does not fully account for how they later evaluate the usefulness of those responses. This evaluative aspect is reflected in Schön's (1983) Reflective Learning Theory, which views reflection as a process through which individuals critically examine past experiences, evaluate the effectiveness of their actions, and apply the knowledge gained to refine future approaches to academic challenges. Combining these theoretical perspectives offers a comprehensive framework by explaining not only how students appraise and cope with academic stress, as described in the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, but also how they subsequently reflect on and evaluate the effectiveness of those coping experiences, as emphasized in Reflective Learning Theory.

Previous research has consistently shown that university students employ various coping strategies to manage academic stress throughout the completion of major academic requirements. Across educational contexts, students consistently rely on both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies, including planning, time management, academic support, emotional regulation, relaxation activities, and social support, to manage academic and emotional demands (Nurfarhanah & Karina, 2023; Vetrivel et al., 2024; Waterhouse & Samra, 2025). These findings demonstrate that effective coping involves both managing academic challenges and regulating emotional responses throughout the learning process.

Recent studies have also emphasized the importance of reflection in supporting students' personal and academic development. Through reflection, learners critically evaluate their experiences, develop greater self-awareness, and refine strategies for future learning (Harvey et al., 2025; Teng et al., 2024). Likewise, research on academic writing has shown that students gradually improve their learning strategies as they navigate research-related challenges and respond to academic feedback (Muryani et al., 2024). Together, these studies indicate that coping and reflection are complementary components of students' academic experiences. However, they have generally been investigated as separate areas of inquiry, with limited attention given to how reflective evaluation contributes to understanding the effectiveness of coping strategies after the completion of academically demanding tasks.

Despite these valuable contributions, important methodological limitations remain in the existing literature. Previous studies have identified the sources of academic stress and documented students' coping strategies, but much of the existing research has relied on cross-sectional designs, varied conceptualizations and measurements of coping, and samples concentrated in particular academic disciplines. These limitations provide limited insight into how graduates evaluate the effectiveness of specific coping strategies within particular academic contexts after completing academically demanding tasks. Consequently, little is known about how graduates evaluate, compare, and learn from their coping experiences after completing their final projects. Considering that reflection involves critically examining experience to inform future action (Nguyen et al., 2014), understanding graduates' reflective evaluations of coping strategies may provide deeper insight into coping effectiveness beyond strategy use alone by explaining how graduates learn from previous coping experiences to develop more adaptive responses to future academic challenges.

To address this gap, the present study explores English Education graduates' reflections on the coping strategies they employed to manage academic stress throughout the final project process. Rather than focusing solely on identifying coping strategies, this study examines how graduates evaluated the effectiveness of those strategies after completing their final projects. Unlike previous studies that examined coping strategies or reflective learning separately, this study integrates both perspectives to examine how graduates evaluate the effectiveness of their coping strategies they employed after completing their final projects. Conceptually, the study extends current understanding of coping by suggesting that reflective evaluation of coping effectiveness functions as an integral component of the coping process, through which graduates assess the usefulness of the strategies they employed and identify lessons from their coping experiences.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore the coping strategies employed by English Education graduates to manage academic stress throughout the completion of their final projects and to examine how these strategies influenced their ability to complete their final projects. To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) What coping strategies did English Education graduates use to manage academic stress while completing their final projects? and (2) How did English Education graduates reflect on the effectiveness of the coping strategies they employed throughout the completion of their final projects?

METHOD

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative design to investigate how English Education graduates reflected on the coping strategies they used to manage academic stress during the completion of their final projects (Creswell & Poth, 2017). A qualitative approach was selected because it allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of graduates' subjective experiences, personal interpretations, and reflections on the coping strategies they had employed (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The participants consisted of five English Education graduates who had successfully completed their final projects. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling (Tisdell et

al., 2025). They met two inclusion criteria: (1) having completed a final project, such as a thesis or academic article, and (2) having experienced academic stress during the completion of the project while being able to reflect on the coping strategies they used. This sampling technique ensured that all participants possessed direct experience relevant to the research objectives. As qualitative research emphasizes obtaining rich, in-depth accounts from information-rich participants rather than statistical generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2017), and because the study involved participants with highly relevant experiences and a focused research aim consistent with the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016), five participants were considered sufficient to address the research objectives.

Data collection was carried out through individual semi-structured interviews conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participants' availability. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they enabled participants to describe their experiences freely while allowing the researcher to probe issues relevant to the objectives of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The interview guide was designed based on the study's conceptual framework, incorporating the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), Reflective Learning Theory (Schön, 1983), and previous studies on academic stress, coping strategies, and reflective learning (Harvey et al., 2025; Muryani et al., 2024; Teng et al., 2024; Waterhouse & Samra, 2025). The interview protocol consisted of seven semi-structured questions exploring participants' experiences of academic stress, coping strategies, reflections on coping effectiveness, and lessons learned throughout the final project process. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. To protect participants' confidentiality, pseudonymous codes (P1–P5) were assigned and all interview data were treated confidentially throughout the study.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase analytical procedure proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006) to identify recurring patterns across participants' experiences. This process involved familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for and reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Audio recordings were first transcribed in Indonesian and subsequently translated into English using a meaning-based approach to preserve participants' intended meanings while maintaining semantic equivalence. The translated excerpts were carefully reviewed against the original Indonesian transcripts to ensure that the intended meanings and contextual nuances were accurately conveyed rather than translated literally. The translated transcripts were coded and organized into themes representing recurring patterns across participants' reflective accounts following Braun & Clarke (2006) thematic analysis procedures. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher repeatedly reviewed the transcripts, coding process, and theme development to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Member checking was conducted by asking participants to confirm the accuracy of selected interview excerpts and the interpretations derived from their responses. In addition, the coding process and theme development were discussed with the research supervisor (peer debriefing), and an audit trail documenting coding decisions and theme refinement was maintained throughout the analysis process to enhance the credibility and dependability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

This section presents the findings regarding participants' reflections on the coping strategies they employed to manage academic stress throughout the final project process. This finding will answer the following research questions.

The findings were organized into five major themes: (1) Sources of Academic Stress, (2) Emotional Responses to Academic Stress, (3) Problem-Focused Coping Strategies, (4) Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies, and (5) Reflection on Coping Effectiveness.

Sources of Academic Stress

All participants described experiencing multiple sources of academic stress throughout the completion of their final projects. The most frequently reported stressors included difficulties in qualitative data analysis, revision processes, approaching deadlines, searching for academic references, limited academic supervision, and expectations from supervisors, peers, and family members.

Difficulties in qualitative data analysis emerged as one of the most prominent sources of academic stress. Participants described feeling confused and mentally stuck when interpreting interview data, particularly during the findings and discussion stage. Participant 1 explained:

"The part that caused me the most stress was Chapter 4, especially the findings and discussion section, because I was quite confused about how to analyze the interview data that I had collected." (P1, translated from Indonesian)

Similarly, Participant 5 reported that the similarity of participants' responses made categorizing and interpreting the data more difficult, while Participant 4 experienced uncertainty when selecting appropriate research methods and determining suitable data analysis procedures.

The revision process also became a major source of academic stress. Participants reported uncertainty when responding to supervisors' feedback, often feeling unsure whether their revisions met academic expectations. As Participant 2 explained:

"I got stuck when I received revisions. Even after I had completed the revisions, I still felt uncertain because I wanted to improve them, but I was confused about which part needed to be improved." (P2, translated from Indonesian)

Limited academic supervision further intensified participants' stress. Participant 5 described difficulties in obtaining consistent guidance because the assigned supervisor was unavailable and the replacement supervisor provided only limited support.

Approaching deadlines and external expectations also increased academic pressure. Participants described feeling stressed as graduation deadlines approached while simultaneously trying to meet expectations from supervisors, peers, and family members. Participant 4 reflected:

"I felt pressured from the beginning because I saw my friends' progress. Then I also felt pressured by my supervisor's deadlines, and when I looked at the graduation schedule, that was when I really started to feel stressed." (P4, translated from Indonesian)

Another important stressor involved searching for appropriate academic references. Participants explained that identifying relevant literature required considerable time and effort because articles that initially appeared relevant often failed to address their research needs. Participant 3 stated:

"Sometimes the title seems to fit perfectly, but when we read the content, it turns out to be very different from what we expected." (P3, translated from Indonesian)

Taken together, these findings suggest that academic stress during the completion of final projects resulted from multiple interconnected academic and social demands. Participants experienced stress not only because of challenging academic tasks but also because of uncertainty surrounding data analysis, revisions, limited academic guidance, deadline pressure, external expectations, and the time-consuming process of locating appropriate academic references.

Emotional Responses

Participants described experiencing a range of emotional responses while coping with academic stress throughout the completion of their final projects. The most prominent responses

included emotional exhaustion, sadness, fear, frustration, and unstable moods, reflecting the psychological impact of prolonged academic demands.

Emotional exhaustion emerged as the dominant emotional response. Participants described experiencing burnout and feeling overwhelmed as academic tasks accumulated throughout the final project process. Participant 4 explained:

“I experienced burnout and felt overwhelmed because it turned out that there were so many things that had to be done throughout the process.” (P4, translated from Indonesian)

Similarly, Participant 2 reported that prolonged burnout increased emotional sensitivity, making even minor situations emotionally difficult to manage.

Participants also experienced other negative emotions, particularly sadness, fear, and frustration. Participant 5 described feeling sad and anxious as graduation deadlines approached because of concerns about delayed graduation and disappointing family members:

“Emotionally, I was really stressed. I also felt sad because the registration deadline for the yudisium was approaching. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to join the first yudisium period... I was also afraid of disappointing my parents because I was worried that my yudisium and graduation would be delayed.” (P5, translated from Indonesian)

Frustration was frequently reported when participants encountered demanding academic tasks, such as searching for references, completing revisions, and resolving research-related problems. Participant 3 explained:

“Honestly, I felt frustrated because it doesn't only take one or two days. It takes days or even weeks to search for references and read them.” (P3, translated from Indonesian)

Likewise, Participants 2 and 4 described feeling frustrated when responding to supervisors' revisions and determining appropriate approaches to complete their research tasks. In addition, Participant 2 reported experiencing unstable moods, which occasionally reduced motivation to engage in academic work.

Collectively, the findings suggest that academic stress was accompanied by diverse emotional responses throughout the completion of the final project.. Emotional exhaustion emerged as the most prominent response, while sadness, fear, frustration, and unstable moods reflected participants' psychological reactions to prolonged academic demands.

Problem-Focused Coping Strategies

Participants described employing various problem-focused coping strategies to manage academic stress throughout the completion of their final projects. The strategies included planning and time management, seeking academic assistance, utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) as an academic resource, and maintaining consistent daily progress. These approaches reflected participants' efforts to directly address academic challenges and sustain progress during the final project process.

Planning and time management emerged as an important problem-focused coping strategy. Participants organized their work by setting study schedules, balancing work and rest, and establishing achievable daily targets. Participant 1 explained:

“When I was working on my final project, I set specific hours for working and specific hours for resting. Usually, when I became stressed, I took a short break, but the break had to be limited... Once the 30 minutes were over, I had to continue working again.” (P1, translated from Indonesian)

Similarly, Participants 2 and 5 described organizing their work through scheduled study sessions, regular breaks, and realistic daily writing goals to maintain productivity throughout the final project process.

Seeking academic assistance emerged as the most consistently reported problem-focused coping strategy. Participants sought guidance from supervisors, lecturers, and peers to clarify research-related problems, obtain feedback, and identify appropriate solutions. Participant 3 stated:

"When I needed help, I usually asked my friends first, especially those who had already completed their final projects. After that, I asked my supervisor for a more detailed and in-depth explanation." (P3, translated from Indonesian)

Likewise, Participants 1, 2, 4, and 5 emphasized that consulting supervisors and discussing difficulties with peers helped them resolve academic challenges more effectively. Participants also utilized artificial intelligence (AI) as an academic support tool. AI was primarily used to identify relevant keywords, locate academic references, and obtain preliminary guidance before consulting supervisors. Participant 4 explained:

"I usually asked AI whenever I encountered problems, whether in Chapter 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5, or when I had difficulties with revisions or data analysis." (P4, translated from Indonesian)

Maintaining consistent daily progress also emerged as an important coping strategy. Rather than attempting to complete large portions of work at once, participants focused on making small but continuous progress each day. Participant 4 reflected:

"Every day, I made sure there was at least some progress. Each day, I had to complete something, even if it was only working on one subsection of a chapter." (P4, translated from Indonesian)

Participants 1 and 2 similarly emphasized that engaging with the final project every day, regardless of the amount of work completed, helped them sustain momentum throughout the research process.

Overall, the findings indicate that participants predominantly adopted problem-focused coping strategies to address academic challenges during the completion of their final projects. Through planning and time management, academic support, adaptive use of AI, and consistent daily progress, participants actively managed academic demands and maintained progress toward completing their final projects.

Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies

Participants also employed emotion-focused coping strategies to regulate the emotional distress associated with academic stress throughout the completion of their final projects. Rather than directly addressing academic problems, participants managed their emotional well-being by engaging in relaxation activities and seeking emotional support.

Engaging in relaxation activities emerged as the most consistently reported emotion-focused coping strategy. Participants described relieving emotional stress through activities such as listening to music, watching movies, engaging in hobbies, drinking coffee, using a stress ball, resting, spending time outside the home, and returning home to be with their families. These activities helped participants temporarily reduce emotional pressure before resuming their academic work. Participant 5 explained:

"I usually listened to music, went out by myself, met my friends, then went home to see my parents and eat home-cooked meals." (P5, translated from Indonesian)

Similarly, Participants 1, 2, 3, and 4 described using personally enjoyable activities, hobbies, or periods of rest to restore their emotional well-being and regain motivation during the final project process.

Seeking emotional support was another important emotion-focused coping strategy. Participants described sharing their concerns with friends and family members to obtain encouragement, emotional reassurance, and motivation while coping with academic stress. Participant 3 stated:

"I usually shared my problems with my friends. I told them what I was struggling with, and they would encourage me and give suggestions. That made me think, 'You're right,' and my motivation returned. It made me feel ready to continue working again." (P3, translated from Indonesian)

Likewise, Participants 2, 4, and 5 emphasized that emotional support from friends, parents, and family members helped reduce emotional distress and encouraged them to continue working on their final projects.

Overall, the findings indicate that emotion-focused coping complemented participants' efforts to manage academic stress throughout the completion of their final projects. By engaging in relaxation activities and seeking emotional support, participants were able to regulate emotional distress, restore motivation, and maintain their psychological well-being while continuing to complete their academic responsibilities.

Reflection on Coping Effectiveness

Participants reflected on their experiences of managing academic stress throughout the completion of their final projects by evaluating the effectiveness of the coping strategies they had employed, recognizing less effective approaches, and identifying lessons learned from the experience. These reflections illustrate how participants evaluated the effectiveness of their coping strategies and refined their approaches after completing their final projects.

Participants identified different coping strategies as the most effective based on their individual experiences. Although all participants reported that their coping strategies contributed positively to completing their final projects, the strategies they valued most varied according to their personal needs and circumstances. Participant 2 emphasized balancing focused work sessions with regular breaks to regulate stress according to personal needs, while Participant 4 highlighted the importance of selecting coping strategies that matched personal working preferences. Participant 3, however, considered emotional support and relaxation activities to be the most effective coping strategies:

"The most effective strategy for me was listening to music because I could do it anywhere, anytime, and it was very flexible. The second was talking with my friends because it helped clear my mind. I also had someone to talk to, share my feelings with, and sometimes my friends gave me motivation and encouragement to keep going." (P3, translated from Indonesian)

Likewise, Participant 5 emphasized that support from friends, lecturers, and family members played a significant role in maintaining motivation throughout the completion of the final project.

"For me, the most effective coping strategy was talking to my friends, asking my lecturers when I had difficulties, and going home to meet my parents. After talking with them, I felt more motivated to continue working on my final project." (P5, translated from Indonesian)

Although participants generally viewed their coping strategies positively, they also recognized approaches they considered less effective. Working close to deadlines, excessive social activities, and leisure activities that distracted attention from academic responsibilities were viewed as ineffective because they reduced productivity, consumed valuable time, or negatively affected the quality of the final project. Participant 2 reflected:

"The least effective strategy I used was working close to the deadline. Although it helped me finish the task, it didn't guarantee good quality." (P2, translated from Indonesian)

Similarly, Participant 5 acknowledged that spending excessive time going out with friends often delayed progress on the final project.

"Going out too often with my friends wasn't very effective because sometimes I forgot about my final project and wasted too much time." (P5, translated from Indonesian)

All participants also reflected on the lessons they learned from managing academic stress throughout the completion of their final projects. Across participants, these reflections emphasized the importance of maintaining consistent progress, managing time effectively, balancing work and rest, sustaining motivation, and selecting coping strategies that suited individual circumstances. Participant 1 reflected:

“Time management is essential. You need to work on it every day, even when you feel lazy or tired. The most important thing is to make a schedule for when to work and when to rest, and to make some progress every day, even if it's only a little.” (P1, translated from Indonesian)

Similarly, Participant 4 emphasized that coping strategies should be adapted to individual preferences rather than simply following what works for others.

“The lesson I learned is that everyone has different ways of coping with stress. We need to find the strategy that works best for ourselves because what works for other people may not necessarily work for us.” (P4, translated from Indonesian)

These findings demonstrate that participants engaged in reflective evaluations of their coping experiences by identifying effective strategies, recognizing the limitations of less effective approaches, and drawing lessons that could guide them in managing future academic challenges. These findings suggest that coping extends beyond the immediate management of academic stress and involves an ongoing process of evaluating, adapting, and refining coping strategies through reflection on previous experiences.

Taken together, the five themes illustrate an interconnected pattern of graduates' experiences in managing academic stress during the completion of their final projects. Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual relationships among the themes identified in the findings.

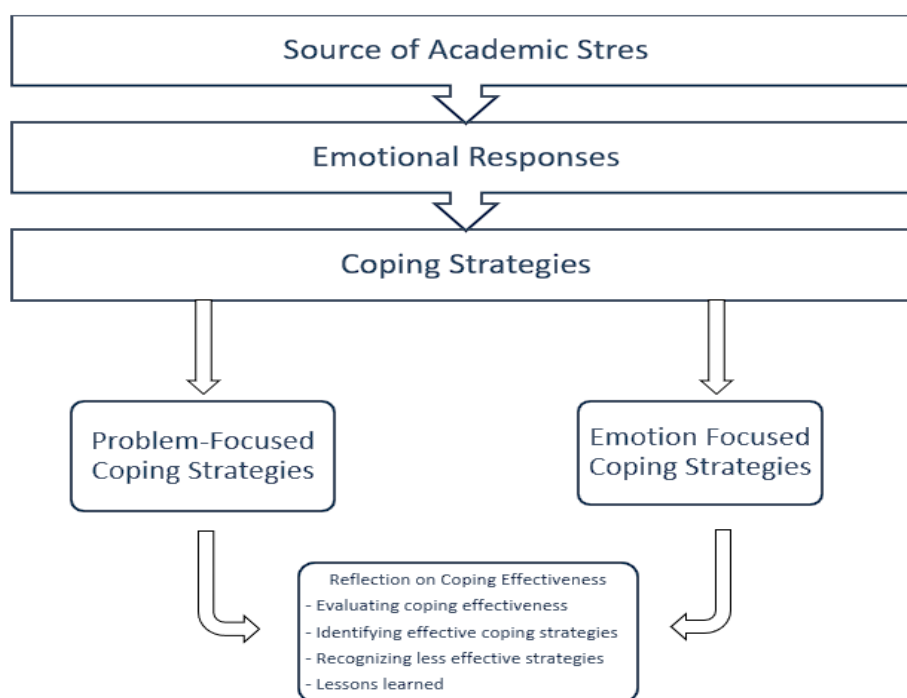


Figure 1. Conceptual Relationship Among the Themes Identified in the Findings

DISCUSSION

The present study explored how English Education graduates managed academic stress throughout the completion of their final projects and how they reflected on the effectiveness of the coping strategies they employed. Previous research has largely focused on the coping strategies students use or their relationship with academic stress, whereas the present study highlights how graduates retrospectively evaluated the effectiveness of those strategies after

completing their final projects. This finding suggests that understanding coping in higher education may also benefit from considering how individuals evaluate their previous coping experiences and identify lessons from those experiences.

The findings may be interpreted using (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, which views coping as an ongoing process in which individuals continually appraise stressful situations and adjust their responses accordingly. The present findings reflect this perspective, as participants employed both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies throughout the final project process before reflecting on the effectiveness of those strategies after completing their studies.

Building on this perspective, the following discussion examines participants' use of problem-focused coping strategies to address academic challenges, emotion-focused coping strategies to regulate emotional distress, and their reflections on the effectiveness of these coping strategies in managing academic stress throughout the completion of their final projects.

Problem-Focused Coping Strategies

Viewed through (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, participants predominantly adopted problem-focused coping strategies because many of the academic challenges they encountered were perceived as manageable through purposeful actions aimed at addressing the source of stress. Instead of avoiding academic responsibilities, participants actively addressed sources of stress by organizing tasks, seeking academic support, utilizing available learning resources, and maintaining consistent progress.

The present findings are in agreement with earlier research showing that problem-focused coping plays an important role in reducing academic stress among university students. (Vetrivel et al., 2024) reported that planning, time management, and seeking academic support were common strategies for coping with demanding academic tasks. Similarly, (Nurfarhanah & Karina, 2023) found that students who actively organized their learning activities and sought guidance from supervisors or peers were better able to manage academic difficulties. These studies suggest that directly addressing academic challenges enables students to maintain progress while reducing the impact of academic stress.

Rather than relying solely on supervisors or peers, participants used AI as an additional academic resource to identify relevant keywords, clarify research-related problems, and obtain preliminary academic guidance before consulting supervisors or searching for supporting literature (Bhullar et al., 2024). This use of AI can also be understood in relation to self-regulated learning, as participants independently used the tool to support their engagement with academic tasks and obtain preliminary information before seeking further academic guidance (Lan & Zhou, 2025). Together with maintaining consistent daily progress, these findings suggest that participants adopted flexible and adaptive approaches to managing academic demands throughout the final project process.

Collectively, these findings suggest that problem-focused coping supported participants' ability to complete their final projects by enabling them to address academic challenges proactively through planning, academic support, adaptive use of AI, and sustained daily progress.

Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies

From the perspective of (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, emotion-focused coping complemented participants' efforts to manage academic stress by regulating emotional distress when academic demands could not be immediately resolved. Rather than directly addressing academic tasks, participants used emotion-focused coping to restore emotional balance and maintain their capacity to continue working toward completing their final projects.

This finding is consistent with previous studies emphasizing the importance of emotion-focused coping in managing academic stress among university students. (Akbar & Aisyawati, 2021) found that social support was associated with lower psychological distress among university students, while (Kotyśko & Frankowiak, 2025) similarly reported that greater perceived social support was linked to lower academic stress and better psychological well-being. Furthermore, (Lopez et al., 2025) demonstrated that adaptive emotion regulation strategies helped students maintain more positive emotional states when responding to daily stressors. Together, these studies indicate that managing emotional responses through relaxation activities and emotional support is an important component of coping with academic stress, particularly when academic stressors cannot be eliminated immediately.

The present study further demonstrates that emotion-focused coping functioned alongside problem-focused coping rather than as an alternative to it. Participants commonly engaged in relaxation activities, such as listening to music, spending time with family or friends, pursuing hobbies, and taking short breaks, before returning to their academic responsibilities. Emotional support from peers and family members also provided encouragement that helped participants regain motivation and sustain engagement throughout the final project process. This pattern indicates that emotion-focused coping served to replenish emotional resources, allowing participants to remain engaged in solving academic problems instead of withdrawing from them.

Overall, the present findings demonstrate that emotion-focused coping contributed to participants' ability to manage academic stress by regulating emotional distress, restoring motivation, and supporting continued engagement with their final projects. When combined with problem-focused coping strategies, these emotional regulation strategies enabled participants to maintain both psychological well-being and academic persistence throughout the completion of their studies.

Reflection on Coping Effectiveness

A key contribution of the present study is its focus on graduates' reflections on the effectiveness of the coping strategies they employed throughout the completion of their final projects. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) provides a useful framework for understanding how participants responded to academic stress through problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. The present findings extend this perspective by showing that, after completing their final projects, graduates retrospectively evaluated the effectiveness of the coping strategies they had used and identified lessons from those experiences. However, these findings should be interpreted within the context of five graduates from a single English Education program and are intended to provide in-depth contextual insights rather than statistically generalizable conclusions.

Previous studies have primarily identified coping strategies adopted by university students or examined their relationship with academic stress (e.g., Labrague, 2024; Vetrivel et al., 2024). In contrast, the present study highlights how graduates distinguished effective from less effective coping strategies and reflected on why certain approaches better supported their academic progress.

Participants viewed coping as a flexible and adaptive process rather than a fixed set of techniques. Planning academic tasks, seeking academic and emotional support, regulating emotions through relaxation activities, and utilizing AI as an academic resource were perceived as effective because they supported both academic progress and psychological well-being. Conversely, delaying work until deadlines and engaging excessively in leisure activities were viewed as less effective because they reduced productivity and interrupted sustained engagement with the final project. These findings support Trudel-Fitzgerald et al., (2024) argument that effective coping depends on individuals' ability to adapt their coping responses according to situational demands.

Participants' reflections also revealed broader personal development beyond completing their final projects. They emphasized maintaining consistent progress, managing time effectively, balancing academic work with adequate rest, and selecting coping strategies that suited individual needs. These reflections are consistent with experiential learning theory, which proposes that meaningful learning develops through reflection on experience (Morris, 2020). They emphasized maintaining consistent progress, managing time effectively, balancing academic work with adequate rest, and selecting coping strategies that suited individual needs. These reflections demonstrate graduates' evaluative judgement, whereby they critically assessed the effectiveness of their previous actions to improve future decision-making and performance (Boud et al., 2018). Consistent with Stover et al., (2024), these reflections indicate that coping effectiveness extends beyond reducing academic stress by fostering greater self-awareness, self-regulation, and resilience.

Taken together, these findings extend current understanding of coping by showing that graduates' coping experiences involved not only managing academic stress but also reflecting on the effectiveness of their coping strategies to inform future responses to academic challenges. This finding aligns with Nguyen et al., (2014), who described reflection as a process through which individuals critically examine experience to generate new understanding that informs future actions. By evaluating which strategies facilitated or hindered their progress, graduates developed a deeper understanding of how to manage future academic challenges more effectively. This finding is further supported by Bucknell et al., (2024), who demonstrated that reflecting on successful and unsuccessful coping experiences strengthens resilience by encouraging individuals to evaluate and refine their coping strategies. Therefore, the present study extends existing perspectives on coping by suggesting that reflective evaluation can be considered an important component of coping, through which graduates assess the effectiveness of previous coping efforts and identify lessons from their experiences.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how English Education graduates managed academic stress during the completion of their final projects and reflected on the effectiveness of the coping strategies they employed. The findings showed that graduates managed academic stress by integrating problem-focused coping strategies, including time management, academic support, effective use of learning resources, and consistent progress, with emotion-focused coping strategies such as emotional regulation, social support, relaxation activities, and planned rest. More importantly, the findings suggest that coping with academic stress involves more than simply applying coping strategies during stressful situations. Participants reflected on the effectiveness of their coping experiences, identifying strategies they considered effective, recognizing less helpful approaches, and drawing lessons from those experiences. Overall, these findings suggest that coping with academic stress involves not only problem solving and emotional regulation but also reflective evaluation of previous coping experiences.

This study contributes to the existing literature by suggesting that, within the context of higher education, coping involves not only the implementation of strategies to manage academic stress but also reflective evaluation through which graduates assess the effectiveness of previous coping efforts and identify lessons from their experiences. This perspective extends existing applications of coping theory by highlighting reflective evaluation as an important component of coping alongside the use of strategies to manage academic stress. Unlike previous studies that have primarily focused on identifying coping strategies, the present study highlights how graduates evaluated the effectiveness of those strategies and learned from their previous coping experiences. These findings provide practical insights for students, supervisors, and higher education institutions to support more adaptive approaches to managing academic stress throughout the final project process.

This study was limited by the relatively small number of participants from a single university and relied solely on semi-structured interviews, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other higher education contexts. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific insights into graduates' coping experiences rather than as representative of all English Education students or higher education settings. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to include participants from diverse universities and academic disciplines and to adopt longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to examine how coping strategies and reflective coping processes evolve across different stages of final project completion.

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