

Beyond the Classroom: Institutional Stressors Fuelling Burnout in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Burnout has become a significant concern in higher education institutions, affecting employee well-being, productivity, and organizational sustainability. This study examined the prevalence and determinants of burnout among 729 academic staff across seven campuses of Kolej Poly-Tech MARA Sdn. Bhd. (KPTMSB) using a cross-sectional survey design. Burnout was assessed using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), alongside measures of administrative workload and work-family conflict. The findings revealed that work-related exhaustion was the most prevalent burnout dimension, affecting 39.1% of respondents, followed by role clarity and job demands (28.4%) and self-exhaustion (27.1%). Emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment were reported at moderate to high levels among a substantial proportion of academic staff. Audit documentation, the trimester study system, work-family conflict, bureaucracy, and tasks beyond formal job responsibilities emerged as the primary contributors to burnout. Qualitative findings further highlighted the burden of non-core responsibilities, excessive administrative demands, and difficulties maintaining work-life balance. Although burnout levels varied across campuses, the differences were not statistically significant, indicating that burnout is primarily driven by institution-wide rather than campus-specific factors. The findings underscore the need for systemic institutional reforms, including the digitization of administrative processes, workload redistribution, review of the trimester system, and initiatives that support employee well-being and work-life balance. Future longitudinal studies are recommended to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions and provide evidence-based strategies for reducing burnout in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Burnout, HEI Staff, Higher Education, Work-Life Balance, Administrative Workload

INTRODUCTION

Burnout has emerged as a critical concern in higher education institutions worldwide. It is a psychological syndrome resulting from prolonged exposure to occupational stressors, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment. Employees in higher education environments often face increasing demands arising from teaching and learning activities, administrative responsibilities, performance expectations, institutional transformation initiatives, and evolving stakeholder needs. These challenges are frequently compounded by heavy workloads, bureaucratic requirements, resource constraints, and limited organizational support.

Burnout not only affects individual well-being but also undermines institutional effectiveness by reducing job satisfaction, lowering productivity, diminishing work engagement, and increasing turnover intentions. Prolonged exposure to workplace stress may contribute to adverse mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and chronic fatigue. Furthermore, the growing integration of digital technologies and the expectation of constant connectivity have blurred the boundaries between professional and personal life, making recovery from work-related stress increasingly difficult.

Given its implications for both employees and institutional sustainability, it is essential to investigate the causes, manifestations, and potential solutions to burnout within higher education settings. This paper examines the multifaceted nature of burnout in higher education institutions, identifies key organizational and individual factors contributing to its occurrence, and proposes strategies for mitigation. The findings aim to support the development of healthier, more sustainable work environments that enhance employee well-being, organizational performance, and the overall quality of higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Burnout among academicians has been widely recognized as a pressing issue in higher education, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (or cynicism), and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment. The phenomenon is often the result of prolonged exposure to academic stressors, including teaching, research, publication pressures, and administrative responsibilities (Ashipala et al., 2023; Lei et al., 2021). Research has highlighted that burnout is not only detrimental to individual well-being but also negatively impacts institutional performance and academic culture (Bibi Hamzah et al., 2024). The increasing attention to this issue underscores the need to understand the contributing factors and develop comprehensive strategies to address it.

Emotional intelligence (EQ) has emerged as a protective factor against burnout in academic settings. Mohamed et al., (2020) found that academicians with higher levels of emotional self-awareness and self-regulation were less likely to experience burnout symptoms. These emotional competencies enable individuals to recognize early signs of stress, regulate their responses, and maintain psychological resilience (O'connor et al., 2022). The same study also highlighted the significance of emotional management training in providing staff with the necessary skills to handle workplace stress more effectively. This suggests that enhancing EQ could serve as a proactive approach to reducing burnout levels in academic environments.

Another significant factor contributing to burnout is psychological distress, often exacerbated by low job satisfaction (Lin et al., 2025; Shin & Jung, 2014). According to Mark & Smith, (2012), academicians report higher burnout rates compared to professionals in other fields, largely due to personal, work-related, and student-related stressors. Their findings indicate that psychological distress is closely linked to feelings of helplessness and dissatisfaction with one's role and environment, further intensifying burnout. The study highlights the need for universities to cultivate more supportive and psychologically safe work environments that prioritize the mental health of their academic staff. Workload and institutional demands also play a central role in shaping burnout experiences. Lei et al., (2021) noted that the excessive burden of responsibilities, ranging from teaching loads to administrative tasks, leaves academicians feeling overwhelmed and emotionally drained. This often leads to disengagement from work and a decline in productivity. However, not all academicians respond to these pressures in the same way (Cox et al., 2018; Rusdi et al., 2023). Some demonstrate resilience and effective coping mechanisms that help them thrive under stress, suggesting the importance of personalized interventions. Tailoring burnout prevention strategies to individual needs and institutional contexts can lead to more sustainable outcomes (Koutsimani et al., 2019).

Gender differences in burnout experiences among academicians have also been a subject of academic inquiry. Several studies suggest that female academicians are more vulnerable to emotional exhaustion, one of the core components of burnout, due to the dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities (Bezuidenhout & Cilliers, 2011; Demirel & Erdirençelebi, 2019; Seibt et al., 2013; Zou et al., 2016). Mohamed et al., (2020) observed that women in academia often experience higher levels of work-family conflict, which contributes to psychological strain and lower job satisfaction. In contrast, male academicians tend to report higher levels of depersonalization or detachment, possibly as a coping mechanism for managing stress. Furthermore, institutional expectations and cultural norms may shape how burnout manifests across genders. For instance, women are often under greater pressure to demonstrate competence and balance caregiving roles, which can intensify feelings of inadequacy and fatigue (Raduan et al., 2022). These findings underscore the importance of gender-sensitive policies and support systems that address the unique stressors faced by male and female academicians alike.

In summary, the literature underscores that burnout among academicians is a multifaceted issue influenced by emotional intelligence, psychological distress, workload, institutional factors, and gender differences. While

some individuals demonstrate resilience and adaptability, many struggle with the persistent demands of academic life, leading to adverse outcomes for both personal well-being and institutional effectiveness. The variation in burnout experiences, especially across gender lines, highlights the need for tailored interventions and supportive workplace policies. A comprehensive understanding of these contributing factors is essential for developing effective strategies to prevent and mitigate burnout, ultimately fostering a healthier and more sustainable academic environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research design to examine the prevalence and determinants of burnout among academic staff at Kolej Poly-Tech MARA Sdn. Bhd. (KPTMSB). A census sampling approach was adopted, targeting all active academic personnel across seven campuses, namely Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia (UPTM), KPTM Bangi, KPTM Ipoh, KPTM Alor Setar, KPTM Batu Pahat, KPTM Kuantan, and KPTM Kota Bharu. A total of 731 questionnaires were distributed, and 729 valid responses were received, yielding a response rate of 99.7%. Only lecturers actively engaged in teaching during the data collection period were included in the study. Academic staff on extended leave, medical leave, study leave, or those reassigned to full-time administrative positions were excluded to ensure that the findings reflected the experiences of personnel directly involved in academic responsibilities.

Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire comprising six sections: demographic information, personality characteristics, job suitability, self-exhaustion, work-related exhaustion, and contributing factors to burnout. Burnout was assessed using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), which measures three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Responses were recorded using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). In addition, emotional exhaustion was measured using the validated three-item Maslach Burnout Inventory: Self-Exhaustion (MBI), developed by Leiter and Shaughnessy, with a mean score of 3.2 or higher indicating significant emotional exhaustion.

Administrative workload was measured using sixteen institutional stressor items identified during the pilot study. These items included audit documentation, bureaucratic procedures, form completion, committee involvement, trimester system implementation, reporting requirements, student supervision, and tasks performed outside formal job responsibilities. Respondents rated each item on a five-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater perceived administrative burden. Work-family conflict was assessed through items measuring the extent to which work responsibilities interfered with personal and family commitments, including after-hours work demands, difficulties maintaining work-life boundaries, role conflict, and perceived imbalance between professional and personal responsibilities. Higher scores reflected greater levels of work-family conflict.

Prior to the main study, a pilot study involving 14 academicians and counsellors was conducted to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and reliability of the instrument. Feedback obtained from the pilot study was used to improve the wording and structure of several questionnaire items. The final instrument demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89. Data obtained from the pilot study were excluded from the final analysis.

Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize respondent characteristics and burnout levels. Inferential analyses, including chi-square tests and independent sample t-tests, were conducted to examine differences across demographic groups and campuses. In addition, hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed to determine whether administrative workload and work-family conflict significantly predicted burnout after controlling for demographic characteristics. In Model 1, gender, age, years of experience, employment status, and administrative role were entered as control variables. In Model 2, administrative workload and work-family conflict variables were added to assess their incremental contribution to burnout. Changes in R^2 , standardized beta coefficients (β), and significance levels (p-values) were examined to evaluate the predictive influence of these factors on burnout.

RESULTS & ANALYSIS

A total of 729 academic staff from seven KPTMSB campuses participated in the study. The respondents had a mean age of 37.5 years (SD = 8.16), with the majority aged between 36 and 45 years (50.1%), followed by those aged 26–35 years (27.3%). Respondents aged 46–55 years constituted 15.4% of the sample, while only a small proportion were aged 21–25 years (4.7%) or above 55 years (2.6%). Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1: Sociodemographic of the academics who participated in the study (n=729)

Sociodemographic Characteristics		Mean (SD)	n (%)
Age (years)		37.5 (8.16)	
	21-25		34 (4.7)
	26-35		199 (27.3)
	36-45		365 (50.1)
	46-55		112 (15.4)
	56 and older		19 (2.6)
Gender			
	Female		559 (76.7)
	Male		170 (23.3)
Experience (years)			
	< 5		232 (31.8)
	5-10		107 (14.7)
	11-15		239 (32.8)
	16-20		67 (9.2)
	21-25		55 (7.5)
	26-30		18 (2.5)
	> 30		11 (1.5)
Employment status			
	Temporary		95 (13.0)
	Contract		129 (17.7)
	Permanent		505 (69.3)
Current Administrative/Rotational Role			
	Yes		295 (40.5)
	No		434 (59.5)

Female respondents accounted for the majority of the sample (76.7%, n = 559), while male respondents represented 23.3% (n = 170), indicating a predominantly female academic workforce across KPTMSB campuses. In terms of teaching experience, most respondents had either less than five years of experience (31.8%) or between 11 and 15 years of experience (32.8%). Regarding employment status, 69.3% were permanent staff, 17.7% were employed on a contract basis, and 13.0% were temporary staff. Additionally, 40.5% reported holding administrative or rotational positions, suggesting that a considerable proportion of academic staff were required to undertake responsibilities beyond teaching and research.

Burnout was assessed using measures of fatigue and apathy. Figure 1 presents the comparative levels of fatigue and apathy across the seven campuses. Overall, fatigue levels were consistently higher than apathy levels, indicating that physical and emotional exhaustion represented a more prominent aspect of burnout than emotional detachment.

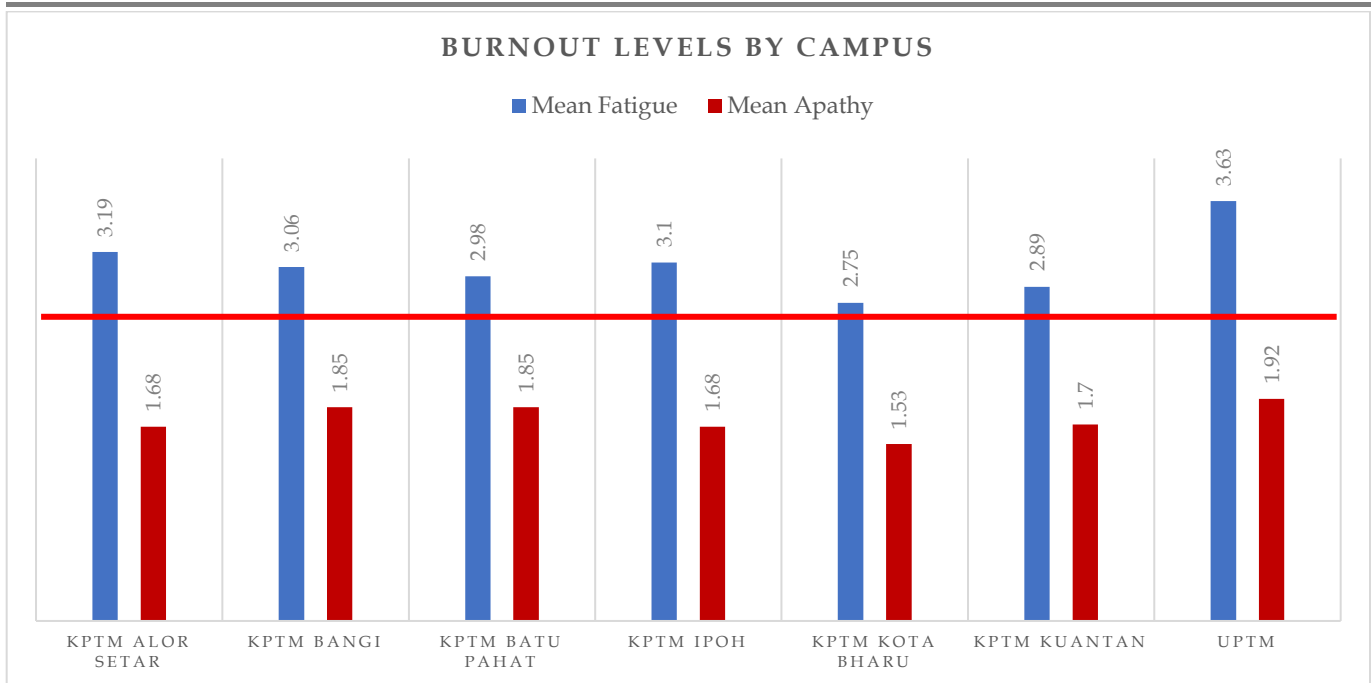


Figure 1: A comparative overview of fatigue and apathy levels across the seven institutions.

Among the campuses, UPTM recorded the highest mean fatigue score ($M = 3.63$), exceeding the burnout threshold of 3.00. This was followed by KPTM Alor Setar ($M = 3.19$), KPTM Ipoh ($M = 3.10$), and KPTM Bangi ($M = 3.06$). In contrast, KPTM Kota Bharu reported the lowest fatigue score ($M = 2.75$). Apathy levels were comparatively lower across all campuses, ranging from 1.53 to 1.92, with UPTM again recording the highest mean score ($M = 1.92$). These findings suggest that although academic staff generally remained engaged with their work, many experienced substantial levels of exhaustion. Persistent fatigue may negatively affect job performance, productivity, morale, and overall well-being if left unaddressed.

Table 2 presents burnout prevalence across three domains: Role Clarity and Job Demands, Self-Exhaustion, and Work-Related Exhaustion. Overall, 28.4% of respondents reported burnout associated with role clarity and job demands, while 27.1% experienced self-exhaustion. The highest prevalence was observed for work-related exhaustion, affecting 39.1% of respondents. This finding indicates that workload-related pressures represent the most significant contributor to burnout among academic staff.

Table 2: Comparison of Burnout Dimensions Among Academic Staff at Different KPTM Campuses

Burnout Domain	Burnout, n (%)	
	No Burnout	Burnout
Role Clarity & Job Demands		
KPTM Alor Setar	38 (76.3)	12 (23.7)
KPTM Bangi	122 (72.0)	47 (28.0)
KPTM Batu Pahat	44 (74.3)	15 (25.7)
KPTM Ipoh	53 (72.8)	20 (27.2)
KPTM Kota Bahru	95 (73.1)	35 (26.9)
KPTM Kuantan	46 (78.8)	12 (21.2)
UPTM	124 (65.2)	66 (34.8)
Overall	522 (71.6)	207 (28.4)
Self-Exhaustion		
KPTM Alor Setar	35 (70.9)	15 (29.1)
KPTM Bangi	126 (74.7)	43 (25.3)
KPTM Batu Pahat	41 (69.5)	18 (30.5)
KPTM Ipoh	55 (75.3)	18 (24.7)

KPTM Kota Bahru	98 (75.3)	32 (24.7)
KPTM Kuantan	44 (76.3)	14 (23.7)
UPTM	131 (69.1)	59 (30.9)
Overall	532 (72.9)	197 (27.1)
Work-Related Exhaustion		
KPTM Alor Setar	31 (62.8)	19 (37.2)
KPTM Bangi	104 (61.4)	65 (38.6)
KPTM Batu Pahat	37 (62.4)	22 (37.6)
KPTM Ipoh	45 (62.1)	28 (37.9)
KPTM Kota Bahru	90 (69.0)	40 (31.0)
KPTM Kuantan	38 (66.3)	20 (33.7)
UPTM	99 (51.9)	91 (48.1)
Overall	444 (60.9)	285 (39.1)

Across all three burnout domains, UPTM consistently reported the highest prevalence rates, particularly for work-related exhaustion (48.1%). However, the observed differences between campuses were not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 10.6$, $df = 6$, $p = 0.100$). This suggests that burnout is not confined to a particular campus but is instead influenced by broader institutional and organizational factors shared across KPTMSB. Consequently, institutional-wide interventions may be more effective than campus-specific initiatives in addressing burnout.

The study further examined specific factors contributing to burnout among academic staff. Figure 2 shows the mean scores for sixteen identified stressors. The preparation of audit-related documentation emerged as the most significant contributor ($M = 3.91$), followed by the implementation of the trimester study system ($M = 3.75$) and the assignment of tasks outside formal job responsibilities ($M = 3.63$). Other notable contributors included bureaucracy, committee involvement, form completion, student supervision, and continuous organizational changes.

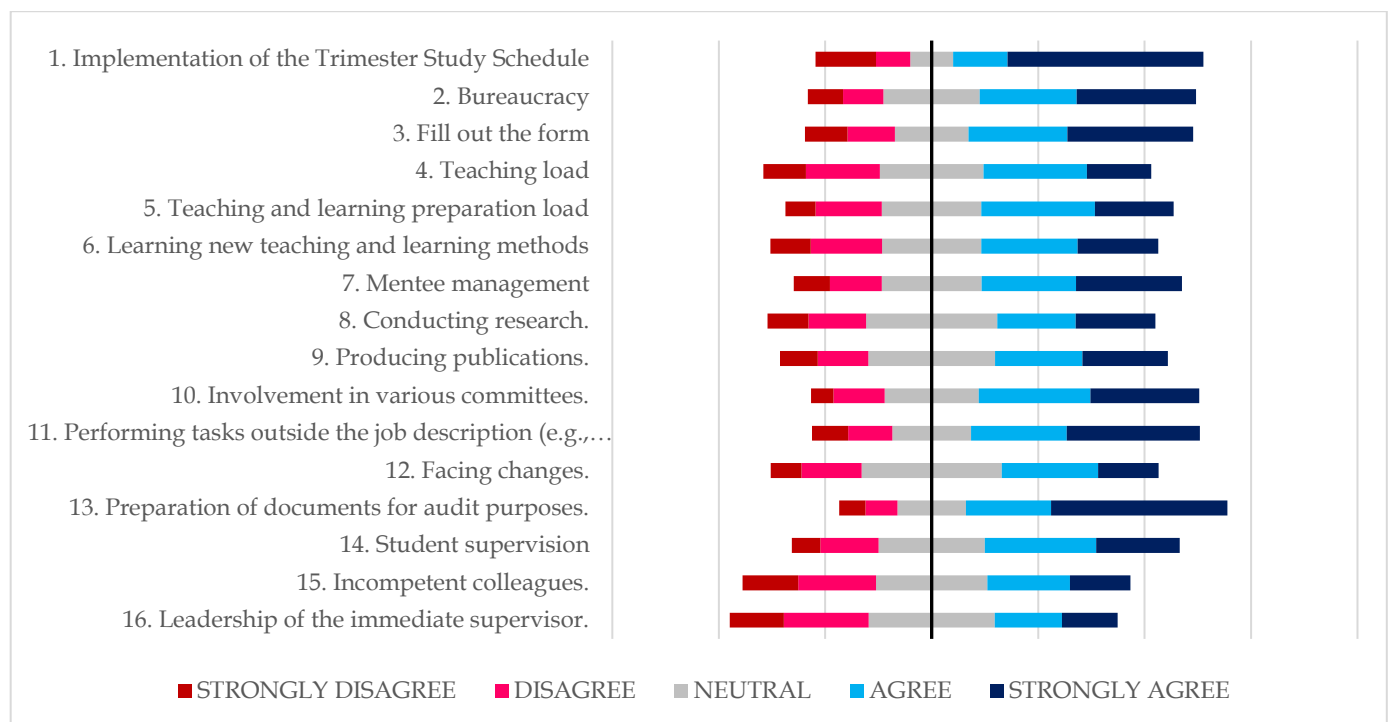


Figure 2: Key Factors Contributing to Academic Burnout According to Mean Scores

Approximately 35% of the identified burnout factors were associated with administrative responsibilities. These findings indicate that administrative workload plays a substantial role in increasing stress and fatigue among academic staff. Excessive documentation requirements, committee obligations, and bureaucratic procedures

consume considerable time and energy, often reducing the time available for teaching, research, and professional development activities.

Consistent with these findings, Figure 3 shows that more than 60% of respondents agreed that all sixteen factors contributed to fatigue and burnout. The most frequently cited stressor was audit documentation, identified by 78.2% of respondents, followed by the trimester system (75.0%). Other major concerns included tasks outside formal job scope, bureaucracy, and excessive administrative requirements. These findings reinforce the importance of reviewing institutional processes that contribute to unnecessary workload pressures.

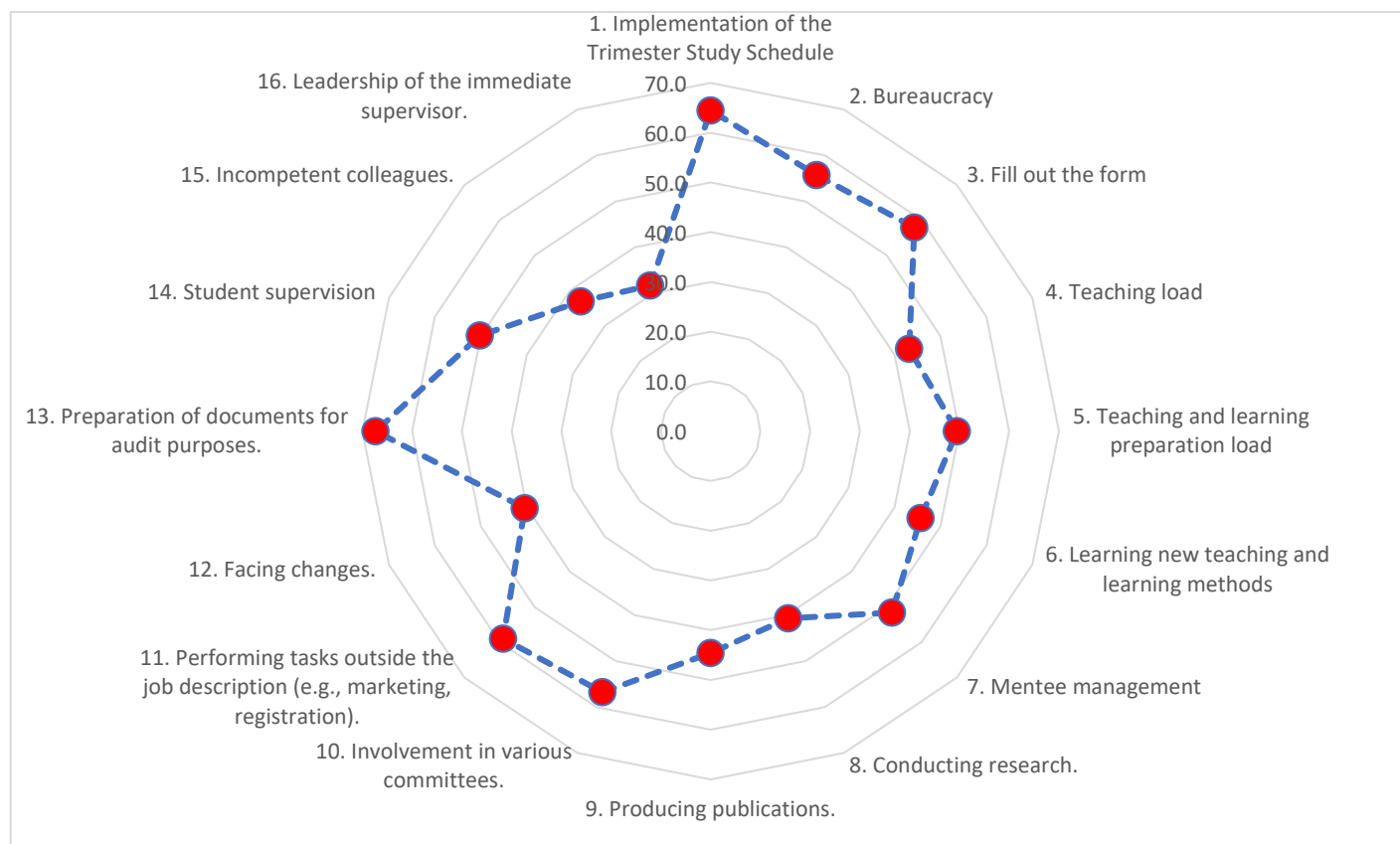


Figure 3: Staff Perceptions of Key Burnout Drivers

Analysis of the Maslach Burnout Inventory dimensions revealed that a majority of respondents experienced moderate to high levels of emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, 42% reported symptoms of depersonalization, indicating emotional detachment from students, colleagues, and the institution. In addition, 35% reported reduced personal accomplishment, reflecting feelings that their efforts were undervalued or inadequately recognized. Together, these findings suggest that burnout extends beyond workload concerns and affects motivation, engagement, and professional satisfaction.

The qualitative findings provided additional insights into the factors underlying burnout. A recurring theme involved the burden of non-core responsibilities, particularly administrative and documentation-related tasks. Respondents frequently reported that audit preparation, report writing, committee work, and tasks beyond their formal job scope reduced the time available for teaching and research activities.

One respondent stated, “The amount of time spent preparing documents for audits leaves very little time for teaching preparation and research activities.” Another remarked, “We are frequently assigned tasks outside our official job scope, which increases stress and makes it difficult to focus on our core academic duties.” Concerns were also raised regarding the trimester system, with one respondent noting that “the trimester schedule provides limited recovery time between semesters, resulting in continuous work pressure throughout the year.” Similarly, several respondents highlighted the burden of administrative requirements, commenting that “there are too many forms, reports, and meetings. Sometimes administrative work takes more time than actual teaching.” Work-

family conflict also emerged as an important issue, with respondents reporting difficulties maintaining a balance between professional and personal responsibilities.

Overall, the qualitative findings complement the quantitative results by illustrating how audit documentation, bureaucracy, the trimester system, and non-core responsibilities contribute to burnout. Together, these findings suggest that burnout is shaped not only by workload volume but also by the nature, distribution, and management of institutional responsibilities.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights burnout as a significant organizational challenge within higher education institutions. Using the Maslach Burnout Inventory framework, the findings revealed substantial levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment among academic staff. In particular, work-related exhaustion emerged as the most prevalent burnout dimension, affecting 39.1% of respondents, indicating that a considerable proportion of academic staff are experiencing persistent fatigue associated with their work responsibilities.

The findings demonstrate that burnout is closely associated with institutional stressors, particularly administrative workload, audit documentation requirements, the trimester study system, work-family conflict, and responsibilities beyond formal job scopes. Although burnout levels varied across campuses, the differences were not statistically significant, suggesting that burnout is driven by common organizational factors rather than campus-specific conditions. This highlights the need for institution-wide strategies to address the root causes of burnout.

The qualitative findings further reinforced the quantitative results by illustrating how excessive administrative responsibilities, bureaucracy, and competing work demands contribute to employee exhaustion and reduced well-being. These findings suggest that burnout is not solely an individual issue but a systemic organizational challenge that requires comprehensive institutional intervention.

To promote a healthier and more sustainable academic environment, higher education institutions should prioritize the digitization of documentation processes, review the workload implications of the trimester system, strengthen work-life balance initiatives, and pilot flexible work arrangements where appropriate. Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions over time and provide evidence-based recommendations for institutional reform. Addressing burnout proactively is essential to safeguarding employee well-being, enhancing productivity, improving staff retention, and maintaining the overall quality and sustainability of higher education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, several institutional interventions are recommended to reduce burnout and promote employee well-being within higher education institutions. First, institutions should review and streamline administrative processes by digitizing audit documentation, automating routine reporting procedures, and reducing unnecessary bureaucratic requirements. Given that audit-related documentation emerged as the most significant contributor to burnout, reducing administrative burden should be a priority. Establishing dedicated administrative support units may further enable academic staff to focus on their core responsibilities of teaching, research, and student development.

Second, institutional leaders should evaluate the workload implications of the trimester system and other organizational practices that contribute to continuous work pressure. Workload distribution should be reviewed regularly to ensure that responsibilities are allocated fairly and transparently. Clear job descriptions and boundaries should be established to minimize the assignment of tasks beyond formal job scopes and to prevent excessive committee and administrative obligations.

Third, institutions should strengthen initiatives that support work-life balance and employee well-being. This may include implementing flexible work arrangements where appropriate, promoting reasonable working hours,

encouraging leave utilization, and providing accessible mental health support services. Professional development opportunities related to stress management, resilience, and well-being may also help employees develop effective coping strategies.

In addition, institutions should foster a supportive organizational culture through transparent communication, participatory decision-making, and regular feedback mechanisms. Employees who feel valued, supported, and involved in institutional decisions are more likely to remain engaged and resilient when facing workplace challenges.

Finally, future research should adopt longitudinal designs to evaluate the effectiveness of burnout intervention strategies over time. Baseline burnout levels should be measured before the implementation of institutional reforms and compared with post-intervention outcomes. Such evaluations would provide empirical evidence on whether initiatives such as workload reduction, digitization of administrative processes, flexible work policies, and enhanced support systems lead to meaningful improvements in employee well-being, job satisfaction, and organizational performance.

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