

ADDRESSING BURNOUT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A FRAMEWORK FOR PROFESSOR WELL-BEING

Juljana Laze

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Education, Aleksandër Moisiu University
Lagja 1, Rruga e Currilave Durrës, 2001, Durrës, Albania

E-mail address: julianalaze@uamd.edu.al

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9804-7920>

Azeta Tartaraj

Department of Marketing, Faculty of Business, Aleksandër Moisiu University
Lagja 1, Rruga e Currilave Durrës, 2001, Durrës, Albania

E-mail address: azetatartaraj@uamd.edu.al

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7276-0565>

Martina Pavlíková

Department of Journalism, Faculty of Arts, Constantine the Philosopher University
B. Slančíkovej 1, 949 74 Nitra, Slovakia

E-mail: mpavlikova@ukf.sk

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6738-3320>

Juraj Spuchľák

Faculty of Theology, Catholic University in Ružomberok
Spišská Kapitula 12, 053 04 Spišské Podhradie, Slovakia

E-mail: juraj.spuchlak@ku.sk

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3990-4240>

Mária Gažiová

Faculty of Theology, Theological Institute, Catholic University in Ružomberok
Spišská Kapitula 12, Spišské Podhradie 053 04, Slovakia

E-mail address: maria.gaziova@ku.sk

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4262-5618>

ABSTRACT

Aim. The study aims to examine how higher education professionals experience burnout and its impact on social well-being, with the outlier being taken at the Aleksander Moisiu University in Albania. The study aims to identify the predominant causes of burnout and their relationship to both staff and students.

Methods. It methodologically combines both primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained from interviews with 30 academic staff, 30 administrative staff and 100 students. This approach regarding burnout in higher education enables a thorough understanding of experiences, challenges, and perceptions. The secondary data contextualised the findings with previous literature on academic stress, well-being, and organisational support.

Results. The study suggests that healthier and more sustainable work environments, which guarantee the well-being and success of both staff and students, should be developed to avert burnout and provide better support.

Conclusions. The analysis highlights the absence of protocols and targeted individual programmes for addressing burnout among academic, administrative, and student staff. It underscores the need for healthier, more sustainable work environments and calls for further research to strengthen institutional prevention of burnout and provision of support mechanisms.

Keywords: academic burnout, social well-being, organisational support, sustainable work environment, higher education, intervention strategies

INTRODUCTION

Burnout in higher education affects students, academic staff, and administrative personnel, making its study increasingly necessary. Fatigue, detachment, and reduced effectiveness are widely reported, influencing academic performance, institutional function, and the overall environment. While burnout is mainly associated with negative outcomes, some studies suggest that overcoming academic challenges can foster resilience, personal development, and stronger academic communities. These challenges can strengthen academic communities. International research consistently highlights significant difficulties in academia due to burnout.

Daniel J. Madigan and Thomas Curran (2021) find that burnout mostly harms students. Leon De Beer et al. (2024) describe it as clinically marked by exhaustion and symptoms that impede academic development. When institutions fail to manage pressure or provide adequate support, academic progress stagnates. This negatively affects both domestic and international student experiences. Burnout also impacts academic and administrative staff. Christina Maslach et al.'s conceptualisation remains central to contemporary research (Antinluoma et al., 2018; Bruce et al., 2024; Padilla & Thompson, 2016).

Local studies suggest that burnout is shaped by cultural and social aspects, though it exhibits common characteristics across countries (Marku et al., 2024). Professional anxiety, emotional strains, and classroom dynamics significantly affect educators' performance and well-being (Muho et al., 2024). In post-communist societies, enduring cultural values related to authority, stress management, and professional identity continue to influence how burnout is experienced and managed within academic settings (Oriola Hamzallari, 2018).

In Albania, burnout in higher education institutions remains under-researched, and there is little evidence regarding preparedness to address it. This gap underscores the need for further research to understand its impact on academic and administrative processes, student engagement, and instructional quality. Burnout often reflects deeper organisational issues, including high workloads, insufficient resources, and unsupportive institutional cultures. Addressing burnout, therefore, requires comprehensive support strategies aimed at promoting well-being in education, improving institutional climate, and ensuring a sustainable environment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Maslach's Three-Component Model of burnout is a central conceptual framework widely applied across professional contexts, including higher education, to analyse burnout's impact on students' outcomes, job performance, organisational dynamics, and individual well-being. The model has conceptualised burnout as a three-dimensional construct comprising emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment, with emotional exhaustion acting as a precursor to the other dimensions (Maslach, 2001). Subsequent work by Michael P. Leiter and Maslach (2016, 2024) emphasises that burnout arises from interactions among job demand, organisational support, and individual characteristics such as resilience.

Empirical studies confirm that workplace conditions, combined with personal traits, significantly influence burnout across sectors, including education (Taris et al., 2014). Research in academia demonstrates that insufficient support, high demands, and declining job satisfaction reduce performance and well-being among staff and students (Fesun et al., 2020; Yildirim & Senel, 2023). During the period of heightened stress, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges intensified, particularly among students and academic staff (Aslan et al., 2020; Kennedy, 2024; López-León et al., 2022; Marrinhas et al., 2023).

Complementing this framework, the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory explains burnout as a consequence of actual or threatened resource loss at the individual, social, and institutional levels (Chen et al., 2024; Groulx et al., 2024; Hobfoll, 2011; Stafford, 2017). Social Exchange Theory further contributes by highlighting how perceptions of fairness, reciprocity, and organisational supports shape individual engagement

and vulnerability to burnout (Ahmad et al., 2022; Calder et al., 2024; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Homans, 1961).

Together, the Maslach model, COR theory, and Social Exchange theory offer an integrated theoretical lens for understanding burnout as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and organisational factors. Their combined use supports theoretical, analytical, and practical application, including the use of diagnostic tools such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory, and informs the development of institutional policies. These kinds of resources provide concrete methodologies for easily diagnosing aimed at promoting wellbeing, engagement, and a sustainable work environment in higher education.

METHOD

This study employs a combined research approach using both primary and secondary data to examine burnout among staff in higher education institutions. The documentary review focuses on the law on higher education (Republic of Albania, Law No. 80 / 2015) “On higher education and scientific research in higher education institutions”, the statute, the higher education institution’s strategies, and the internal regulations of the departments and study programmes of the “Aleksandër Moisiu” University.

The research used a qualitative methodology utilising in-depth semi-structured interviews with 160 participants, including 30 academic staff, 30 administrative personnel, and 100 students, evenly divided between 50 from the first cycle and 50 from the second cycle of studies.

The purpose of the study was to elucidate the contributing factors and outcomes of burnout in the academic community. Academic and administrative staff from different positions in higher education institutions, such as professors, administrative personnel, and students, participated in the research. The study included individuals from various categories to obtain a clearer perspective and enhanced insights into the research issues raised.

The study aims to identify the multifaceted causes and effects of burnout within the academic community by including a diverse range of participants. It explores burnout through the lenses of organisational, psychological, and pedagogical dimensions, assessing how factors such as academic workload, institutional culture, emotional demands, and support systems impact the well-being of these institutions. The anticipated outcomes are expected to inform strategies for mitigating burnout, enhancing professional satisfaction, and fostering healthier academic environments.

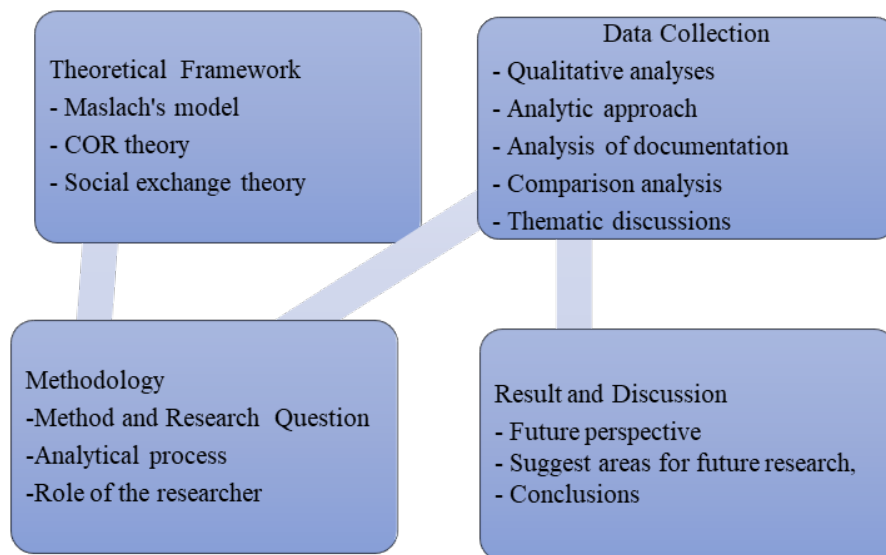
The recruitment initiatives target faculty members’ departments to achieve a representative sample of the larger population, reflecting prior research on burnout that has frequently adopted a qualitative approach to capture in-depth experience. Several studies have used qualitative methods in burnout research, with Rynke Douwes et al. (2023) emphasising the value of incorporating students’ voices into well-being

programmes in higher education, while Hy V. Huynh et al. (2023) explored professors' perceptions of well-being in relation to personal practices and job characteristics. In this study, qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis based on interviews or in-depth semi-structured interviews, complemented by supplementary data on organisational elements, such as social support, workload, and demographic characteristics. Data collection was facilitated through online survey platforms to ensure confidentiality and effective participation, with invitations and reminders distributed via institutional communication channels, and informed consent procedures followed to ensure ethical compliance. Within this context, four research questions were formulated to deepen understanding of burnout in higher education by focusing on challenges, key influencing factors, organisational health, and the impact of burnout on individual well-being.

Burnout was assessed using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), a valid instrument based on Maslach's Three-Component Model, which includes emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and personal accomplishment, alongside additional measures of organisational factors. Researchers can systematically examine the complex interconnections between environmental, organisational, and personal factors that contribute to burnout in higher education, clearly defining research questions within established theoretical frameworks and drawing on empirical studies.

Figure 1

Model Research



Source. Own research.

The study examines burnout among higher education staff, focusing on factors such as workload, institutional culture, emotional challenges, and support mechanisms.

It provides findings on mitigating burnout and enhancing job satisfaction, offering evidence-based recommendations for education leaders and policymakers to promote a supportive academic environment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research examined burnout among employees in higher education institutions, based on four main research questions. The discussion includes some of the findings and questions to highlight the prevalence, predictors, effects, and implications of burnout in higher education settings.

RQ.1: This primary research question aims to identify the challenges and barriers perceived by universities regarding burnout among faculty, administrative staff, and students, focusing on organisational culture, workload pressures, emotional support structures, and coping mechanisms.

The analysis revealed variability in burnout levels across professional categories and demographic groups, with emotional exhaustion emerging as the most recognised component, consistent with Maslach's three-component model (Leiter & Maslach, 2016). Junior staff frequently reported fatigue and emotional issues related to early career pressures, while senior academics associated burnout with institutional responsibilities and academic workload.

Depersonalisation, within Maslach's framework, varied by gender and occupation, with female faculty experiencing higher levels than males, possibly due to their greater representation in academic and administrative roles and prevailing academic expectations. Feelings of inefficacy and reduced productivity were also evident as tenured staff reported higher personal accomplishment than non-tenured colleagues, suggesting the influence of job security and promotion opportunities.

Job pressure emerges as a central contributor to burnout. Faculty and administrative staff describe exhaustion caused by relentless demands and lack of recovery time. As a professor noted, "With every semester, I feel depleted... It's always stressful," while an administrative staff member stated: "Even though I'm not teaching, the constant pressure and the demand to respond quickly make me feel exhausted."

Comparison among professors, administrative, and support staff reveals distinct stressors. Azeta Tartaraj and Brunela Trebicka (2023a; 2023b) emphasise that organisational structures and internal coordination affect operational efficiency and employee stability; differences in governance or communication may increase academic staff pressures, negatively impacting their well-being.

Faculty emphasises constant pressure to remain productive in research, teaching and service alongside limited institutional support for work-life balance, while administrative staff highlight the overwork, lack of appreciation and the emotional toll of dealing with demanding students and faculty. As one participant explained, "Burn-

out comes from overwork, lack of appreciation, and the pressure to remain friendly becomes overwhelming.”

Interviews consistently pointed to insufficient institutional support, recognition, and stress relief resources as key drivers of burnout, with students also noting that professors appeared overwhelmed. Within the Albanian context, Law No. 80/2015 establishes general responsibilities for safeguarding staff well-being, but lacks specific procedures for burnout prevention, creating a gap between legal procedures and institutional practices.

The findings link burnout to structural pressures, increased workloads, and insufficient institutional support, consistent with international research (Brock, 2023; De Beer et al., 2024). Studies show that ambiguous role expectations, bureaucratic rigidity, and poor communication predict burnout among academic and administrative staff (Aloka et al., 2024; Jeglinska et al., 2023). Moreover, the lack of formal well-being programmes and mental health exacerbated emotional exhaustion and reduced motivation. These results highlight burnout as a systemic organisational issue, underscoring the need for structured support mechanisms, effective workload management and well-being-oriented policies in higher education.

RQ.2: The analysis of the second research question indicates that demographic factors moderate the relationship between organisational characteristics and burnout. Younger employees with lower educational qualifications appear more susceptible to burnout under conditions of heavy workload and low job control. Additionally, gender differences influence both the understanding and intervention strategies concerning burnout in academic settings. The following points address the role of demographic factors, including country variables, in staff burnout at higher education institutions.

The results suggest complex relationships between burnout incidence and age. As noted by Hui-Chuan Hsu (2019), older employees also experience burnout, particularly as they near retirement, due to increased expectations despite limited opportunities for career advancement. However, research indicates that younger employees are more likely to suffer from ‘burnout’ because of the heavy demands associated with starting their careers and juggling multiple responsibilities (Mauno et al., 2013).

One younger member described this pressure:

As a younger faculty member, I feel tremendous performance pressure concerning publishing research and securing funds. Productivity is expected from the start, yet know-how or support to manage these demands is often lacking. Indeed, I feel there is no room to grow without burning.

This perspective supports that older employees manage burnout risk more effectively owing to their exposure and coping mechanisms. The findings also reveal age-related differences in risk and resilience factors, as well as coping strategies that either mitigate or exacerbate burnout.

Discussions with faculty, administrative staff, and students further highlight these demographic nuances, underscoring the need for context-specific interventions tailored to different age and gender groups. A student remarked, “It’s obvious that some professors are having difficulties. I’ve noticed that senior faculty appear more collected and calmer”. This observation reinforces the argument that younger faculty are more vulnerable to stress induced by heavy workloads compared with older counterparts, who tend to manage stress more effectively through experience.

RQ.3: Organisational elements strongly predict burnout among academic staff according to Maslach’s Three-Component Model. Workload includes teaching, research, administrative duties, student supervision, and committee participation. High workload consistently predicts emotional exhaustion (Leiter & Maslach, 2016), while limited autonomy and low social support exacerbate burnout risk (Engels et al., 2022; Koster & McHenry, 2023; Lesener et al., 2022). A negative organisational culture further increases vulnerability, underscoring the need for supportive intervention.

Social support, collegiality, and mentoring buffer emotional exhaustion and enhance resilience (Bakker & Vries, 2021; Horta et al., 2022; Simbula et al., 2020). Academic staff reported overwhelming workload and lack of recognition: “To juggle teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities with no support or flexibility feels impossible. It feels like we are constantly working at full throttle, but with no support available and no recognition”. Excessive hours and research pressure remain key stressors.

Organisational culture, leadership styles, and performance management affect burnout while open communication, autonomy, collegiality, and recognition protect against it (Denison et al., 2014; Hegazy et al., 2023; Kraja & Spahija, 2023; Schneider et al., 2013). Restorative work environments improve well-being, and students noted that a lack of support negatively affects teaching quality.

Workload balance and accessible support systems. Organisational development encourages academic staff and students, helping to eliminate emotional exhaustion and promoting a healthier higher educational environment. Institutions should prioritise work load balance, integrate social responsibility and accessibility support systems (Laze, 2024). These findings underscore the urgent need for universities to develop and implement policies and strategies addressing these issues to support professional well-being.

Administrative support is critical; inadequate resources heighten stress and organisational strains (Collie, 2022; Kullolli et al., 2024; Stephen, 2024). Interactions among organisational, personal, and external factors shape burnout experience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, academic stress negatively affected performance and well-being (Reci Xhakolli & Hamzallari, 2023). The study indicates that workload, autonomy, support systems, and organisational culture constitute structural factors contributing to burnout. Addressing these requires structural reforms rather than individual intervention, offering the main pathway to sustainable wellbeing in higher education.

RQ.4 The fourth research question examines burnout’s impact on student outcomes, organisational commitment, work performance and job satisfaction. High burnout lev-

els impair interpersonal relationships with students, reduce academic performance, and lower job satisfaction, engagement and commitment. Addressing burnout is critical for sustaining progress in higher education.

The findings reveal a complex interplay between burnout and job performance Maslach's negative correlation. Higher burnout correlates with lower productivity, increased error, absenteeism, and diminished creativity, innovation, and job crafting (Olson et al., 2019; Wolfe, 2024). Fluctuations in workload, social support, and autonomy affect job satisfaction and stress, highlighting the need for organisational flexibility. Meaningful work and professional development act as protective factors. A faculty participant noted, "Burnout clearly affects my performance. I struggle to connect with students, collaborate with colleagues, and maintain teaching quality." Similarly, an administrative member shared: "Burnout diminishes motivation and hampers operational management and institutional success." Students also reported noticing stress burnout in professors, which reduces participation. Megi Tirana et al. (2025) highlight a link between professors' well-being and students' emotional intelligence.

Supportive leadership, open communication, recognition and fairness strengthen resilience and engagement. Academic burnout indirectly affects students' learning and achievement by influencing class atmosphere (Atik & Çelik, 2021; Botusha, 2024; Hamza & Suli, 2025). Human resource management enhances organisational productivity and protects staff from burnout by promoting recognition, development, and psychological support. Students' support services, such as counselling, can mitigate the negative impact on students' success (Liu et al., 2023).

Participants reported high burnout levels across academic and support staff, characterised by exhaustion, depersonalisation, and personal accomplishments. Critical themes include blurred job descriptions, minimal organisational support, excessive workload, and limited resources. Burnout disrupts collaboration and social support within the universities. The absence of structured protocols and targeted programmes emphasises the urgent need for sustainable work environments, clear support mechanisms, mental health resources and professional development to foster well-being. These findings underscore the necessity of institutional reforms and targeted interventions to cultivate a supportive academic culture that prioritises the success and welfare of the entire university community.

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of burnout among academic and administrative staff in higher education by identifying its prevalence, key predictors, and organisational consequences. The findings demonstrate that emotional exhaustion is the most prominent dimension of burnout affecting staff across professional roles and demographic groups. Burnout emerges not as an individual issue,

but as a systemic challenge shaped by organisational structures, working conditions and institutional culture.

The results highlight the central role of organisational factors such as excessive workload, limited job control, insufficient support, and perceived organisational injustice in intensifying burnout. Younger academic staff and those in lower academic ranks appear particularly vulnerable. Burnout is shown to negatively affect job satisfaction, organisational commitment and overall well-being, while increasing absenteeism and intention to leave, thereby posing a risk to institutional effectiveness and sustainability.

The study reveals a significant gap between growing performance expectations in higher education and the lack of formal mechanisms to prevent, identify and manage burnout. Although national and international regulatory frameworks in Albania address governance, quality assurance and academic performance, they largely overlook the psychosocial well-being of academic and administrative staff. This misalignment underscores the need for institutional strategies that prioritise well-being through workload management, counselling services, support for leadership professional development and an inclusive organisational culture.

Despite limitations related to cross-sectional design and self-reported data, the study offers insightful recommendations for leaders in higher education and policymakers. A comprehensive, empirically supported strategy that incorporates supportive work environments, efficient human resource management, and organisational reform is needed to address burnout. Prioritising mental health and resilience is crucial for long-term academic success, institutional sustainability, and educational quality, in addition to safeguarding the well-being of staff.

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