

## **Burnout syndrome in university professors in the COVID-19 post-pandemic period**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on higher education and, therefore, on university teachers. The abrupt transition to online teaching, health-related concerns, as well as adaptation to an incessantly changing academic environment, have significantly increased tensions and pressure on teachers, with immediate adaptation to the new conditions being a very important challenge. Teaching technologies and methodologies in response to the pandemic, triggering the level of stress and emotional exhaustion in university teachers. In order to contribute to the gap in the empirical literature in this regard, the objective of this study is to determine the state of manifestation and prevalence of burnout syndrome in university teachers in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. The study was carried out under a quantitative methodology, with a non-experimental design, and a cross-sectional descriptive approach, applying intentional non-probabilistic sampling. The results obtained show a high prevalence of burnout syndrome in 71% of teachers, a medium level in 24%, and a low level in 5%. Universities must implement prevention programs, training in coping skills, as well as supportive institutional policies that ensure the mental health and well-being of university teachers.

**Keywords:** university professor, burnout syndrome, MBI, post-pandemic COVID-19.

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically impacted people's lives worldwide, becoming the dominant focus in social, health, economic, and political realms. This event has marked a distinct before and after in human history, leading to a global economic and multisectoral crisis.

This period witnessed shifts resulting in increased pressure and anxiety, widespread fear of contagion, frustration, isolation, uncertainty about the near future, and an upsurge in workloads. This exceptional situation has triggered, and continues to trigger, contextual changes that may exacerbate pre-existing conditions, contributing to heightened physical and mental fatigue, anxiety, stress, and burnout, particularly among university faculty. Furthermore, the potential negative psychological effects directly linked to confinement conditions, the pandemic's characteristics, and associated multiple factors classify confinement as a high-stress psychosocial adversity, presumably exerting a greater psychological impact than typical life events (Sandín & Chorot, 2017).

Factors such as the ambiguity and uncontrollability of the threat (i.e., the coronavirus), its invisible and unpredictable nature, the lethality of the invader, or the potential lack of rigor in the information provided by the media can themselves cause psychological disturbances related to the perception of one's personal health threat. The concerns, fears, and/or anxiety experienced by those in confinement might also be linked to secondary factors, such as the health of loved ones, potential healthcare system collapse, employment issues, loss of income, global spread of the virus, and its economic and social consequences, etc. (Sandín et al., 2020)

Universities were forced to adapt rapidly to the sudden new scenario to continue delivering quality education to students, facing complex challenges in resuming in-person classes. The post-pandemic work exhaustion of university faculty needs urgent attention, as it encompasses a range of emotional and physical problems positively correlated with job performance (Leal, 2022).

Numerous studies have empirically documented the prevalence of burnout syndrome among university faculty. However, research focusing on identifying the prevalence of faculty burnout during and post-COVID-19 pandemic remains limited, despite their work being completely disrupted overnight since March 2020. While there are many studies on burnout during the pandemic related to healthcare workers, fewer address firefighters and police officers, and emerging research focuses on non-university teaching staff. This study aims to explore and analyze the manifestation and prevalence of burnout syndrome among faculty at public universities in Andalusia during the post-COVID-19 pandemic period.

## 2 CONCEPTUALIZATION

In the literature on burnout syndrome, there is consensus in identifying Freudenberg as the precursor of this concept, as well as coining the term 'burnout' in 1974 (Shirom, 2003; Serrano et al., 2002; Maslach et al., 2001).

Burnout negatively impacts the physical and psychological health of those affected (Gil-Monte, 2003; Laschinger, 2001). While it has been primarily associated with the professional sphere, numerous authors argue that it can develop in areas beyond work. The effects of job burnout extrapolate, affecting

individuals' work and non-work lives, and vice versa (Peeters et al., 2005; Lacovides et al., 2003; Schaufeli et al., 2001; Demerouti et al., 2000; Hellesøy et al., 2000).

Since Freudenberg (1974) defined job burnout as "a feeling of failure and an exhausted or worn-out existence resulting from excessive demands on energy, personal resources, or spiritual strength of the worker" (pp. 160), numerous definitions have been proposed for this construct (Lacovides et al., 2003; Maslach et al., 2001; Janssen et al., 1999). The most cited in literature and used as operational definitions in empirical research are those by Cherniss (1980), Maslach and Jackson (1981), Pines & Aronson (1988), and Shirom (1989), with Maslach and Jackson's (1981) definition being particularly prominent, although Shirom's (1989) has gained followers in recent years.

According to Maslach and Schaufeli (1993), despite differences in application and precision, most proposed definitions share five common elements: a) the predominance of fatigue symptoms as emotional and mental exhaustion; b) presence of various atypical physical exhaustion symptoms; c) burnout symptoms are work-related; d) symptoms manifest in individuals without prior psychopathologies; and e) there is a decrease in efficacy and deterioration in job performance due to negative behaviors and attitudes.

The lack of a unified conceptualization and definition of burnout poses significant challenges for its study and leads to a fragmented theoretical framework, primarily due to the numerous definitions and symptomatologies associated with the phenomenon, and the generalization of its incidence across all occupational or professional domains (Gil-Monte, 2003; Shirom & Ezrachi, 2003; Fogarty et al., 2000; Guerrero, 2001).

For Garcés de los Fayos (1999), "after Freudenberg's definition in 1974, and the contributions of Maslach and Jackson (1981), and those made by Pines et al., (1981), few have been the original contributions to the definition of burnout, revolving all around these three, including nuances specific to the context in which research was developing without substantially altering the originals" (pp. 8-9).

In an attempt to clarify the concept of burnout syndrome, many researchers have dedicated considerable effort to identify and differentiate it from other concepts such as stress, adjustment disorders, chronic fatigue syndrome, anxiety, and depression (Shirom et al., 2005; Shirom & Ezrachi, 2003; Lacovides et al., 2003; Serrano et al., 2002; Maslach et al., 2001).

### **3 STRESS AND BURNOUT**

Regarding stress, while there is consensus in the literature that these are two distinct concepts, the boundaries delineating them are not very clear, as they share some characteristics but also possess important differences (Shirom et al., 2005), and it remains a hotly debated topic.

The controversy around burnout syndrome and stress stems from the broad acceptance of burnout as a process triggered by chronic exposure to work-related stress, as previously discussed. Table 1 presents the main differences between stress and burnout, according to Serrano et al. (2002).

Table 1: Differences between Stress and Burnout

<b>Burnout</b>	<b>Stress</b>
Does not decline with vacations	Disappears with rest and relaxation
Not identified with workload overload or fatigue	General response of the organism to a stressor or stressful situation
Minimally stressful but demotivating work can generate burnout	People with notions of omnipotence, unrealistic aspirations, excessive work hours, overloaded schedules
Insidious in nature. Develops slowly over a long process	General response of the organism to a stressor or stressful situation
Can affect all professions, but teaching and healthcare are most impacted by this syndrome	People with notions of omnipotence, unrealistic aspirations, excessive work hours, overloaded schedules
Arises from organizational factors, work climate, and the specific work culture of one's field	Caused by the interaction of multiple stressors and the individual's personality structure
Personal characteristics are modulating variables – not independent – in contrast to situational and environmental factors	Personality type: altruistic, committed, selfless
Negative traits (lack of assertiveness, low self-esteem, dependency, and low involvement) tend to lead to its development. Paradoxically, those with positive characteristics (enthusiastic, idealistic, highly committed to their work) are at greater risk of experiencing burnout	Personality type: altruistic, committed, selfless."

Source: Serrano et al., (2002)

#### 4 MASLACH, SCHAUFELI, AND LEITER’S MODELIZATION (2001)

For Maslach et al. (2001), the main contributions from the pioneers in the study of burnout were: a) uncovering the foundations of the phenomenon by naming it, b) recognizing it as a fairly common response among people, indicating that those suffering from burnout and its consequences were not isolated cases, c) conducting descriptive and qualitative research using techniques such as interviews, case studies, and on-site observations.

During this initial period, this syndrome was considered specific to professionals working in social services and healthcare, as one of the attributed causes of burnout was the direct contact with others to whom support services were provided.

In terms of the empirical phase, according to Maslach et al. (2001), this second phase began in the 1980s and differed from the first in that research on burnout became “systematically more empirical, utilizing methodologies like questionnaires and surveys, studying broader subject populations, and

focusing mainly on measuring the syndrome by developing different metrics” (Maslach et al., 2001, pp. 401).

This period marked significant advancements in measuring burnout, using more sophisticated methodologies and statistical tools. It acknowledged that the problem of burnout is affecting more individuals daily, regardless of their profession, whether or not they are social service professionals (Burke & Richarden, 1991; Leiter & Schaufeli, 1996; Schaufeli et al., 1996; Maslach et al., 2001). Evidence of this is the new version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory – the most widely used measurement instrument globally – which was limited to professionals in direct and constant contact with people receiving such professional services, thereby enabling the inventory to measure burnout in any type of professionals. The explanatory models provided by different researchers vary – with the exception of Cherniss’s (1980) process model – in terms of the sequence of the three components of the burnout syndrome: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. That is, although there is no unanimous acceptance of the conceptual definition of the construct, the opposite is true when admitting that emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, as identified by Maslach and Jackson (1981), constitute the components of the burnout syndrome, accepting its three-dimensional nature.

Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of having depleted one's emotional resources due to continuous interactions that workers must maintain with each other as well as with clients (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Wright & Hobfoll, 2004; Shirom, 2003; Blanch et al., 2002; Schaufeli et al., 2001; Guerrero, 2001). For Maslach et al. (2001), “the exhaustion component represents the basic dimension of stress” (pp. 399), while depersonalization represents “the dimension of the interpersonal context” (pp. 399). The depersonalization component would involve the development of cynical attitudes towards the people to whom workers provide services. Gil-Monte and Peiró (1999) specify that this dimension is associated with excessive detachment from others, silence, the use of disdainful attitudes, and attempts to blame others for one's own frustration.

Finally, reduced personal accomplishment represents, in the opinion of Maslach et al. (2001, pp. 399), “the self-evaluation dimension of burnout”. This dimension would represent the loss of confidence in personal accomplishment and the presence of a negative self-concept as a result, and “a rejection of self and personal achievements can develop, as well as feelings of failure and low self-esteem” (Salanova et al., 2005, pp.170).

## 5 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted using a non-experimental design with a quantitative, descriptive, and cross-sectional approach. The data collection instrument used was the Spanish version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) questionnaire (Ferrando & Pérez, 1996). The study population consisted of faculty members from public Andalusian universities. The sample was obtained through non-probabilistic purposive sampling, with a sample size of 298 faculty members. The selection criterion required that the faculty member had worked from the start of the pandemic until June 2023, without having taken any type of leave during this period. Fieldwork was carried out during June and July of 2023. The data provided were protected at all times under strict confidentiality, participation was voluntary based on informed consent, with responses given anonymously. For the treatment and analysis of the data, the statistical software SPSS version 27 was used, following the cut-off points established by Maslach and Jackson (1986) for the dimensions of the burnout syndrome.

The Spanish version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), aimed at assessing and quantifying the prevalence of burnout syndrome among teachers, consists of 22 items in the form of statements that evaluate the three dimensions of the syndrome: emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and personal accomplishment (PA). Subjects rate each questionnaire item on a Likert scale, indicating how often they have experienced the situation described in the item over the past year, and the scores given for each dimension are then summed. This frequency scale has 7 levels, ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (every day). The instrument has excellent internal consistency and reliability, as measured by Cronbach's  $\alpha$ , with an  $\alpha$  of 0.9 for the Emotional Exhaustion dimension, an  $\alpha$  of 0.79 for Depersonalization, and an  $\alpha$  of 0.71 for Personal Accomplishment at work, according to the manual by Seisdedos (1997). The calculation of the scores obtained in each dimension is carried out by adding up the values assigned by the respondents to the items that comprise the respective dimension.

## 6 RESULTS

To verify the reliability of the instrument and its dimensions, Cronbach's alpha technique was used. In this study, a global reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92, for the Emotional Exhaustion dimension a Cronbach's alpha of 0.9, for the Depersonalization dimension a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85, and for the Personal Accomplishment dimension a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84. Therefore, all values obtained in the global reliability analysis and for the dimensions are excellent.

The scores for each dimension should be kept separate and should not be combined into a single score; each dimension should be assessed according to the cut-off criteria set by Maslach and Jackson (1986). Subsequently, the prevalence of burnout syndrome is evaluated for each subject in the sample, considering that the higher the scores for the AE and DP dimensions, and the lower the score for the RP



dimension, the higher the level of burnout. Likewise, low burnout is characterized by low levels of AE and DP, and high levels of RP. Medium levels of burnout would be found in the remaining possibilities.

The teachers studied show a high degree of emotional exhaustion, with a prevalence of 81%, a medium degree with a prevalence of 14%, and only 5% manifest a low degree of prevalence in the dimension of emotional exhaustion. The 81% prevalence reflects a sensation of extreme fatigue, exhaustion, and a lack of energy. The teachers have experienced overwhelming emotional burnout as a result of the demands of their job. Emotional exhaustion, as reported by the sample studied, is due to: workload overload, emotional tiredness, constant fatigue, psychological wear, feelings of being burned out by teaching performance, frustration, a sensation of energy depletion, work burnout, excessive effort and dedication to students, feeling of having reached the limit of their capabilities at work, as well as high levels of tension and pressure derived both from teaching performance and research work.

The dimensions of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization were the burnout dimensions that showed a high degree of prevalence, with 81% in emotional exhaustion and 76% in depersonalization, with only 3% representing a high degree in the personal accomplishment dimension.

The depersonalization dimension, statistically positively correlated with the emotional exhaustion dimension, presents with a high degree in 76%, a medium degree in 20%, and a low degree in 4%. This component is characterized by cynicism, pessimism, and negativity, insensitivity and indifference, developing distant attitudes towards students. The 76% prevalence implies the adoption of a distant and cynical attitude towards students, colleagues, and the educational institution in general. Teachers may come to feel insensitive to the needs and concerns of others, which is often manifested in an impersonal or even hostile treatment towards students.

An 85% prevalence of low degree in the personal accomplishment dimension indicates perceptions of personal and professional failure and the feeling that the work done lacks value. Teachers feel they are not achieving their goals, that their work is not rewarding, and that they have lost motivation and satisfaction in their educational work. Regarding the personal accomplishment dimension, the research conducted shows a prevalence of high degree in 3%, a medium degree in 12%, and a low degree in 85%. In this component, the teacher assesses their feelings and emotions regarding understanding, altruism, motivation, energy, creating a good atmosphere in the classroom, effectiveness in student care, esteem towards their work, and emotional calmness in solving problems in the work environment. Therefore, 73% of teachers feel discontent regarding achievements, motivation, and job performance. It is alarming that more than 80% of the teachers studied express high emotional exhaustion and low personal accomplishment.

The prevalence of burnout syndrome in teachers is determined from the scores obtained in each dimension of the construct, considering that the higher the scores in the AE and DP dimensions, and

the lower the score in the RP dimension, the greater the level of burnout. Similarly, low burnout is characterized by low levels of AE and DP, and high levels of RP. Medium levels of burnout would be found in all other possibilities.

The study reveals a high-degree prevalence of burnout syndrome in 71% of the teachers studied, a medium degree in 24%, and a low degree in 5. This implies that 71% of the teachers scored high in the dimensions of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and low in the personal accomplishment dimension. Twenty-four percent of teachers scored at the medium level for personal exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Lastly, 5% of the teachers scored low in the dimensions of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and high in the personal accomplishment dimension.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

The mental health of Spanish university faculty in the post-pandemic period is a critical issue that requires careful attention. Research compiled underscores the importance of addressing factors such as workload, autonomy, resilience, social support, and work flexibility to prevent burnout syndrome. The implementation of wellness programs, coping skills training, and supportive institutional policies are key to promoting the mental health and well-being of faculty members. Addressing these factors comprehensively is crucial to ensure a healthy and sustainable work environment in universities.

The pandemic has highlighted the need to address the mental health of university faculty, as well as the importance of developing specific strategies to face the challenges posed by a global crisis situation. It is essential for universities to provide support, training, and resources that enable faculty to adapt to the new realities of university teaching, as well as to maintain a healthy work-life balance. In the constantly changing post-pandemic context, it is crucial for educational institutions to continue evaluating and adjusting their burnout prevention strategies to address the evolving needs of faculty members. Furthermore, focusing on faculty well-being and mental health benefits not only the professionals themselves but also enhances the quality of education they provide to students. Caring for the mental health of faculty members is a key element in promoting a robust educational system.

The results show a high depletion of the emotional resources of university faculty due to job requirements, a high degree of cynicism, and distancing attitudes towards students, as well as a low degree in feelings of efficiency, motivation, and personal accomplishment in teaching performance. Workload, faculty autonomy, resilience, social support, work flexibility, and training in coping skills and mental health are interconnected elements that must be considered holistically. The comprehensive



design of university institutional programs for faculty mental health must imperatively consider the determinants in the existence and prevalence of burnout syndrome:

- **Workload and working hours:** The workload and duration of the working day are fundamental factors that influence the development of burnout syndrome in Spanish university faculty in the post-pandemic period. Implementing effective workload management strategies is essential. This includes equitable task distribution among teaching staff, efficient planning of academic activities, and promoting a healthy balance between work and personal life. In addition, educational institutions may consider implementing policies that limit working hours and promote a culture of respect for faculty's free time.
- **Faculty autonomy:** This is a critical factor in preventing burnout syndrome. Faculty members who have greater control over their pedagogical practices, including the choice of teaching methods and curriculum design, experience less burnout. The pandemic has driven a greater need for adaptation to new teaching methods, highlighting the importance of allowing faculty to make educational decisions that align with their strengths and the specific context of their classes. Promoting faculty autonomy is crucial in burnout prevention.
- **Resilience and recovery capacity:** These personal attributes play a key role in preventing burnout. Faculty with higher levels of resilience are more able to withstand stress and adapt to changing situations. To promote resilience, educational institutions can implement training programs in coping skills, mindfulness, and psychological support. These programs can help faculty develop effective coping strategies, improve emotional self-regulation, and learn to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Emotional and psychological support should be available and accessible to faculty members who need it.
- **Work flexibility:** Its effective management requires universities to balance institutional needs with individual ones. This involves allowing faculty to adjust their schedules and responsibilities according to their personal needs and circumstances. Work flexibility policies should be supported by open communication between faculty and administration.
- **Training in coping skills and mental health:** Effective training in the prevention of burnout is vital. The pandemic has underscored the importance of providing faculty with the necessary tools to cope with stress, anxiety, and other mental health-related concerns. Faculty who have acquired these skills can manage stress more effectively and maintain optimal mental health. Training programs that address stress management, emotional self-regulation, self-care, and mental health promotion must be implemented. It is essential to allocate resources.

- **For access to mental health services and emotional support:** Ensuring access to mental health services and emotional support is essential. Promoting a culture of well-being that eliminates the stigma associated with seeking help is crucial.

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