The role of academic leadership in mitigating job burnout among university

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate the role of academic leadership in mitigating the phenomenon of burnout among university faculty members. Recently, faculty members have faced increasing workloads, including teaching, research, publication, academic supervision, and administrative tasks. Given the limited institutional support they receive, this study explored burnout through semi-structured interviews with a sample of faculty members and four administrative leaders (deans and department heads) at two Jordanian universities. The results revealed that the most significant causes of burnout were the unequal distribution of workloads, inadequate support from academic leaders, and bureaucratic constraints that limit leaders' ability to effectively support faculty. Furthermore, the findings indicated a gap between leaders' intentions to provide support and their actual capacity to do so due to limited authority and complex systems. The study recommended granting academic administrations the necessary resources. Powers that contribute to supporting faculty members, and raising oversight of these departments on the other hand with regard to the distribution of burdens without personal considerations and with complete transparency, in addition to developing programs within universities aimed at raising practices that support the well-being of faculty members.

Keywords: Academic leadership, Job burnout, Faculty members, Organizational justice, Occupational stress, Organizational support

Introduction

Higher education institutions are fundamental pillars of social and economic development, playing a vital role in knowledge production through scientific research and the development of qualified human resources through effective teaching (Altbach, 2018). Faculty members bear the brunt of these responsibilities, tasked with a wide range of interconnected duties, including teaching, student supervision, research and publication, and participation in committees and administrative work.

With the acceleration of digital transformation, increasing accreditation and quality standards, and growing competition in scientific publishing, the academic work environment has become more complex and demanding, often transforming the university from a stimulating environment into a source of chronic professional stress (Kinman & Wray, 2018). In this context, burnout has emerged as one of the most serious challenges facing higher education administration, given its negative repercussions on the mental and physical health of faculty members, the quality of teaching, research output, and job stability (Maslach et al., 2001; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2019).

Burnout is often defined by three main dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or derealization, and a decline in personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001). Previous studies in higher education indicate high levels of burnout among faculty members, resulting from increased teaching and research workloads, role conflicts, and weak institutional resources and support (Kinman & Wray, 2013; 2018).

In contrast, academic leadership—at its various levels, from department head to dean—emerges as a crucial variable that can either exacerbate or mitigate this phenomenon. Leadership is responsible for shaping the culture of the college or department, distributing burdens and tasks, ensuring organizational fairness, and providing social and organizational support to faculty members. Therefore, it can be argued that leadership practices directly contribute to either increasing or reducing professional stress (Turnipseed & Van Der Ploeg, 2010; Jam et al., 2025).

Despite growing research interest in the relationship between leadership and burnout in various contexts, there remains a need for qualitative studies that explore the actual experiences of faculty members and academic leaders and analyze their perceptions

of the role of leadership in managing professional stress and coping with burnout, particularly within the Arab context and specifically in Jordan. This study aims to investigate the role of academic leadership in mitigating burnout among faculty members at selected Jordanian universities through an in-depth analysis of their experiences and perceptions.

Research problem

The Problem and Questions of the Study

The problem of the study

Many faculty members report experiencing high levels of psychological and professional stress due to increasing teaching, research, and administrative workloads on the one hand, and weak institutional and leadership support on the other. This stress leads to various manifestations of burnout, such as emotional exhaustion, apathy towards students and colleagues, and a decline in the sense of professional accomplishment. This negatively impacts the quality of the educational and research process and may even lead some faculty members to consider leaving the profession or migrating to other institutions. Despite the pivotal role of academic leadership in managing the university work environment, the specific ways in which this leadership contributes to reducing or exacerbating burnout remain insufficiently clear in the Arabic literature.

Therefore, the central question of this study is:

How do faculty members and academic leaders perceive the role of academic leadership in managing professional stress and mitigating burnout in Jordanian universities?

Research questions

The main research question branches into the following sub-questions:

- What are the most prominent forms and manifestations of job burnout experienced by faculty members at the universities under study, and what are the main factors they attribute to the university work environment?
- What current practices and procedures are adopted by academic leaders (department

heads and deans) to support the job well-being of faculty members?
- What challenges and difficulties do academic leaders face when striving to implement effective strategies to mitigate job burnout in their institutions?

To achieve the study's objectives, a qualitative approach will be used, and the study tool will be semi-structured interviews. The study sample will consist of 6 faculty members from Ajloun National University and the Hashemite University, in addition to 4 administrators (department heads and deans), A preliminary interview guide containing open-ended (in-depth) questions on the following topics will be prepared:

- Their perceptions of work-related stress.
- Their experiences with burnout.
- Their evaluation of the procedures and support provided by academic leaders.

Literature Review

Understanding the role of academic leadership in mitigating burnout among faculty members is complex and multifaceted, requiring a foundation in established theoretical frameworks and diverse research literature. Burnout in academia does not stem from a single factor, but rather arises from the interplay of increasing job demands, limited institutional resources, and varying levels of professional relationships across departments. This section, therefore, reviews the fundamental concepts related to academic leadership and burnout, presenting key theories that explain the relationship between them, such as the demands-resource model, the leader-member exchange theory, and organizational justice. It also examines relevant previous studies to establish a knowledge framework that enables the analysis and interpretation of the current study's findings within the existing literature.

Theoretical framework and review of related literature

1. Academic leadership in higher education institutions: The term academic leadership refers to individuals who occupy formal positions within universities—such as department chairs, deans, and vice presidents—who combine scholarly expertise

with administrative responsibilities. Their role includes directing academic and administrative efforts to achieve institutional goals, ensuring the quality of teaching and research, and creating a supportive work environment for faculty members (Abbas & Yasmin, 2023).

The literature suggests that effective academic leadership extends beyond routine administrative functions to include developing a clear vision for the academic unit, ensuring equitable distribution of teaching and administrative loads, providing necessary resources, and fostering a culture of collaboration and collegiality (Pounder, 2011).

According to Siddique et al. (2011), academic leadership has a direct impact on faculty motivation and institutional effectiveness, and the absence of supportive leadership or clarity of roles contributes to reduced job satisfaction and increased intentions to leave or psychologically withdraw from work. Similarly, Mehmood et al. (2012) emphasize that academic leaders are central to managing change and improving quality in higher education, noting that a key challenge lies in balancing accreditation requirements with faculty needs and working conditions.

Therefore, academic leadership can be considered a critical factor in shaping the work environment—either intensifying job burnout when fairness and support are absent or alleviating stress when leadership practices are supportive, inclusive, and equitable.

2. Burnout and its dimensions in academic settings

Maslach et al. (2001) define burnout as a chronic response to persistent emotional and interpersonal stressors in the workplace, consisting of three primary dimensions:

- **Emotional exhaustion**: feelings of being emotionally drained due to accumulated job demands, such as increased teaching and research workload.
- **Depersonalization:** adopting negative, detached, or dehumanized attitudes toward students or colleagues as a defense mechanism against stress.

- **Reduced personal accomplishment:** a sense of inefficacy or diminished professional achievement.

These dimensions are linked to several negative outcomes, including lower performance, reduced organizational commitment, increased turnover intentions, and poorer psychological and physical health (Leiter & Maslach, 2016).

In higher education, numerous studies indicate that faculty members are especially vulnerable to burnout due to intensified teaching and research expectations, pressures to publish, workload overload, and challenges in maintaining work–life balance (Kinman & Wray, 2018; Watts & Robertson, 2011).

3. Sources of burnout in higher education

Educational literature indicates that the academic work environment has unique characteristics that make faculty members more susceptible to burnout than those in other professions. This is due to a combination of organizational, professional, and personal factors that interact to increase stress levels:

1. Time pressure and role overload

Faculty are required to manage teaching, grading, supervision, research, committee work, and administrative responsibilities concurrently, leading to accumulated time pressure and chronic stress (Kinman & Wray, 2018).

2. Role conflict and ambiguity

Burnout intensifies when universities demand increased research output while simultaneously increasing teaching and administrative loads, generating conflicting expectations (Olson-Buchanan et al., 2013).

3. Insufficient institutional support

Common concerns among faculty include limited research support, lack of recognition, constrained professional development opportunities, and inadequate mechanisms for addressing grievances, all of which heighten stress (Kinman & Wray, 2013).

4. Inequitable workload distribution

Greenberg (2011) highlights organizational justice—especially fairness in workload distribution—as one of the strongest predictors of employee well-being and burnout.

4. Theoretical frameworks explaining the leadership–burnout link

- ### Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model

According to Bakker and Demerouti (2017), burnout occurs when job demands are high and job resources are insufficient. From this perspective, academic leadership functions as a key job resource that can:

1. Reduce demands through workload management
2. Provide emotional and professional support
3. Enhance fairness and clarity of expectations

When leadership support is absent, job demands outweigh available resources, increasing the likelihood of burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

- ### Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory

LMX theory focuses on the quality of the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers. High-quality LMX relationships—characterized by trust, respect, and support—reduce stress and enhance job satisfaction, lowering burnout levels (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Studies have found that high LMX relationships correspond with reduced burnout and higher levels of employee motivation and engagement (Fernet et al., 2012). In academia, LMX helps explain why faculty who feel excluded or unsupported by department chairs experience higher burnout levels than those who perceive strong, inclusive leadership relationships.

- ### Organizational justice

Organizational justice theory argues that employees' perceptions of fairness whether distributive (equity of workload), procedural (fairness of decision-making), or interactional (quality of interpersonal treatment) significantly influence stress and burnout (Greenberg, 2011).

In higher education, Olson-Buchanan et al. (2013) report that fairness in the distribution of teaching assignments and committee responsibilities is among the most powerful predictors of reduced burnout among faculty.

5. Previous studies on academic leadership and burnout

Kinman and Wray (2018) identified leadership support and fair workload distribution as the most influential factors in mitigating stress among academic staff. Their findings suggest that leadership plays a preventive role against burnout by shaping a healthier organizational climate.

Furthermore, research in educational leadership indicates that supportive leadership styles—such as transformational and servant leadership—are associated with greater faculty well-being and decreased burnout (Hoch et al., 2018).

Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2019) emphasize that professions involving continuous human interaction, including teaching, place workers at higher risk of burnout unless a supportive organizational environment is provided.

Despite the rich international literature, few qualitative studies have examined how academic leaders and faculty together perceive the leadership role in mitigating burnout in Arab and Jordanian contexts. This underscores the significance of the present study.

The concept of burnout in higher education

Burnout is defined as a psychological syndrome caused by chronic stress that has not been properly managed. It differs from transient stress in that it develops and worsens over time due to persistent deficiencies in working conditions. In the academic environment, the effects of burnout are significant because it impacts the core functions of faculty members and the university (Maslach et al., 2001).

Job burnout is measured by these criteria

A. Emotional Exhaustion: This dimension is the core component of burnout, representing a faculty member's feeling of complete depletion of energy and emotional resources. The member feels incapable of

exerting further effort in their work, often due to an excessive workload (heavy teaching hours, supervision, and research demands).

B. Depersonalization: This dimension refers to developing a negative or cynical attitude toward work and the people involved (students and colleagues). A burned-out faculty member tends toward emotional detachment and approaches issues in an inhuman or mechanical way as a defense mechanism against accumulated stress.

C. Reduced Personal Accomplishment: This dimension reflects a feeling of failure and professional inadequacy. The faculty member feels that their efforts are unproductive or that their accomplishments do not meet their own or management's expectations, leading to decreased self-confidence and self-efficacy. (Maslach et al., 2001).

Sources of job burnout in the academic environment

The university environment is characterized by unique sources of stress that make faculty members particularly vulnerable to burnout (Kinman & Wray, 2018):

1. Time Pressure and Double Burden: The tasks assigned to faculty members—teaching, grading, student affairs, research, publication, and conferences—place them under immense pressure.

2. Role Ambiguity and Role Conflict: One of the most significant problems facing faculty members is the conflicting expectations from administration, which emphasizes increased research while simultaneously burdening them with high teaching loads.

3. Inadequate Resources and Lack of Support: Insufficient financial or technical resources, low salaries, or, most importantly, the absence of organizational and social support from leadership, exacerbate the negative effects of stress.

The theoretical framework emphasizes that academic leadership intervenes in this equation either as a source of stress (if it is unsupportive or unfair) or as a source of support (if it is effective and supportive). This qualitative study aims to explore and analyze this dynamic in depth through the participants' experiences.

Research Methodology

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of faculty members and academic leaders and understand their perceptions of the role of leadership in mitigating job burnout. The qualitative approach is most appropriate when the goal is to analyze phenomena within their natural context and to investigate the meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences, rather than relying on direct quantitative measurement. This design also allows for the exploration of the intricate details of the relationship between leadership and occupational stress in the academic work environment.

2. Population and sample

The study population consisted of faculty members and academic leaders (department heads and deans) at Jordanian universities. Two universities were selected: Ajloun National University and the Hashemite University. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants with direct experience of the study topic. The sample consisted of six faculty members from various disciplines and four academic leaders (department heads and deans), selected for their clear experience with university work pressures and their direct interaction with academic leadership.

3. Data collection tool

The study relied on semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection tool. An interview guide was developed, including open-ended questions that allowed participants to freely and in detail express their experiences. The guide focused on three main themes:

- Participants' perceptions of work pressures at the university.
- Their experiences with burnout and its dimensions.
- Their evaluation of supportive or restrictive leadership practices and the role of leadership in managing stress.

4.Data collection procedures

The interviews were conducted individually in the participants' offices or via electronic communication, according to their preference. Each interview lasted 30-45 minutes. The interviews were recorded after obtaining the participants' consent, and the researcher transcribed them verbatim.

Findings

The study findings were based on content analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with six faculty members and four academic leaders. Through thematic analysis, four main themes were identified, representing the most prominent patterns of shared experiences among the participants.

The first theme: Forms of Job Burnout Among Faculty Members

The interviews revealed that most participants suffer from high levels of job burnout, manifested in three main dimensions:

1.Emotional burnout

Most faculty members expressed a persistent feeling of psychological fatigue and loss of energy due to the accumulation of teaching and research workloads.

One participant stated: "My work at the university now extends into my home and during vacations. I conduct research, teach, and keep up with online work, to the point that it's starting to affect my family." (Participant 3)

2.Detachment or numbness towards work

Some participants indicated that they had lost enthusiasm for dealing with students and their daily tasks as a defense mechanism against the constant pressure.

3.Low sense of achievement

Several participants reported feeling that their efforts were unseen or unappreciated, reinforcing their sense of not making professional progress.

One participant said: "No one appreciates the effort. When you don't see appreciation, there's a

breakdown, while those closest to management get the perks." (Participant 4)

Second theme: Sources of Occupational Stress and Burnout

1. Unfair distribution of workload

Most participants agreed that the distribution of teaching and administrative tasks was unfair and opaque.

One participant said: "The distribution of teaching and administrative workload is unfair. Some people don't work as much as others, and that makes me feel wronged." (Participant 2)

2. Role conflict and overlapping tasks

Participants complained about being asked to perform multiple roles simultaneously, which increases pressure and creates a sense of unclear professional priorities.

3. Lack of institutional and leadership support

Most faculty members indicated that academic leaders lack the ability and sometimes the will to provide genuine support.

"There is no real support, even if the intention is there. The leader wants to help, but lacks the authority." (Participant 6)

4. The burden of publishing and research

Several participants described the pressures associated with scholarly publishing as "constant and increasing," without any corresponding reduction in teaching load or adequate research support.

Third theme: Academic Leadership Practices and Their Role in Supporting Faculty Members

The study results revealed a clear discrepancy between what faculty members expect from their leaders and what those leaders are actually able to provide.

1. Lack of appreciation and recognition

Participants confirmed that appreciation whether

verbal, moral, or material is almost entirely absent.

2. Weak communication between leaders and faculty members

Participants indicated a communication gap, which weakens mutual trust and increases feelings of marginalization.

3. Limited authority of academic leaders

The leaders themselves stated that administrative constraints limit their ability to support their colleagues.

"Sometimes I am forced to make decisions I disagree with to appease senior management, even if I understand the faculty member's circumstances." (Academic Leader)

4. Over-Reliance on central administration

Leaders reported lacking the flexibility to make decisions that would alleviate pressure on faculty members, such as:

Redistributing workloads, approving leaves of absence and Granting research funding.

Fourth theme:

Challenges Facing Academic Leaders in Managing Stress

1. Conflict Between Senior Management Demands and Faculty Needs
Leaders stated that they experience a "role conflict" between satisfying senior management and responding to the needs of their colleagues.
2. Bureaucratic Constraints: The most prominent challenges included: Weak authority, Excessive centralization snd Slow administrative procedures
3. Resource Shortages: This included Limited research support, Insufficient funding and Lack of research assistants or dedicated research time
4. Ambiguous Regulations: Leaders complained about unclear policies regarding workload distribution and performance evaluation, making decision-making difficult and prone to negative feedback.

Discussion

The study results show that job burnout among faculty members is primarily comprised of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, detachment, and a decline in sense of accomplishment. These dimensions align with the classic model of Maslach et al. (2001), indicating that stress in the Jordanian academic environment is consistent with global trends in this field.

The results also reveal that unequal workload distribution was the factor most strongly associated with burnout, which is consistent with Greenberg's (2011) observations regarding the central role of organizational fairness in reducing feelings of stress and burnout. This finding is also consistent with Kinman and Wray (2018), who emphasized that a sense of unfairness in tasks and responsibilities is one of the most prominent causes of stress in the higher education sector.

Regarding weak institutional and leadership support, participants' statements reflected a clear gap between what faculty members expect from their leaders and what leaders can actually provide due to administrative constraints. This aligns with the demands-resources (JD-R) model, which views leadership as a key "functional resource," and argues that a deficiency in this resource increases the likelihood of burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

The results also demonstrated that the quality of the leader-faculty relationship directly impacts stress levels, with those having cooperative leaders experiencing less stress. This is consistent with the Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX), which asserts that high-quality leadership relationships contribute to reduced burnout and increased satisfaction (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Fernet et al., 2012).

Furthermore, interviews with academic leaders revealed structural challenges, particularly bureaucratic constraints and role conflicts, factors identified in previous studies as major obstacles to effective leadership in universities (Mehmood et al., 2012). This suggests that burnout is not an individual problem, but rather a structural one related to policies and authority.

Overall, these findings confirm that academic leadership has a clear impact on managing professional stress, whether through promoting fairness and reducing workloads or through moral support and leadership relationships. They also highlight the need to empower department heads and deans with greater authority and provide clear and equitable mechanisms for distributing tasks, in line with the literature advocating for the development of a supportive and sustainable university environment.

Conclusion

The results of this study confirm that burnout among faculty members at Jordanian universities is a multidimensional phenomenon closely linked to the unequal distribution of workloads, weak institutional support, and administrative constraints that limit the effectiveness of academic leadership. Interviews revealed that faculty members suffer from increasing levels of emotional exhaustion, detachment, and a decline in their sense of accomplishment, and that these symptoms are exacerbated when organizational fairness is absent and sufficient support resources are lacking.

The study also showed that while academic leaders recognize the importance of their role in mitigating faculty stress, they face constraints that limit their ability to intervene effectively, such as role conflicts and administrative centralization. Based on the integration of these findings with theoretical frameworks, it appears that promoting fairness, improving the quality of leadership relationships, and providing adequate staffing resources are crucial factors in reducing burnout and building a healthy and sustainable university environment.

Recommendations

The study's findings indicate the need to strengthen the role of academic leadership in reducing burnout by adopting more flexible and equitable policies and procedures within colleges and departments. The study recommends empowering academic leaders by granting them broader authority to manage workloads and distribute tasks in a more equitable and transparent manner, along with providing ongoing training programs focused on supportive leadership skills, organizational fairness, and stress management. It also recommends reconsidering teaching loads, particularly for faculty members engaged in intensive research, and providing additional institutional resources such as research support and dedicated research hours. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of improving communication channels between senior management, academic leaders, and faculty members to ensure clear procedures and policies, and to foster a healthy work environment that contributes to reducing burnout levels and promoting job well-being.

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