

# Prevalence of Burnout among University Academic Staff in Uganda; Does Gender Matter?

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## Abstract

More than half the educators in high-income countries suffer from burnout, which has detrimental effects for lecturers' wellbeing, to the effectiveness of institutions of learning and students' care outcomes. In Uganda, although suspected due to high reported levels of lecturer absenteeism and turnover, there is limited evidence of burnout among university academic staff. There is now sufficient evidence that university academic staff are strained by competitiveness, job insecurity and the accelerated work demands of academic jobs, including tenure-related demands, research and publication pressures, teaching loads, few opportunities for promotion and excessive paperwork which may lead to burnout. This study aimed to estimate the prevalence of burnout in a national sample of lecturers in Uganda using a descriptive cross-sectional research design. A sample of 358 respondents was randomly selected from the population of university academic staff. Data was collected using the Professional Quality of Life version 5. Descriptive statistics and independent-sample t-test were used in data analysis. All statistics were tested at .05 significant levels. Results showed that more than half (58%) of the academic staff had moderate levels of burnout while 38% of them had high levels of burnout. It was recommended that Employ Assistance Program be established in universities in Uganda. Also to relieve pressures that could lead and burnout, training in emotional-social competencies is recommended.

Keywords: Burnout; Academic Staff; Universities; Uganda

## Introduction

Burnout is a phenomenon comprising of chronic stress and characterized by depersonalization, emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment [1]. More than half the educators in high-income countries suffer from burnout, which has detrimental effects for educators' wellbeing, to the effectiveness of higher institutions of learning [2]. According to the Alliance for Excellence in Education, close half a million United States educators either move or leave the profession

each year which costs the US up to \$2.2 billion yearly. 40 to 50% of new educators leave the profession after 5 years. In Europe, approximately 30 % of the educators have symptoms of burnout. In Uganda, although suspected due to high reported levels of absenteeism, reduced productivity, poor physical and psychological health, problematic interpersonal relations, and academic staff turnover, there is limited evidence of burnout among university academic staff [3-5].

Generally, limited studies have been conducted in low-income countries especially in Africa where burnout studies are scarce. The existing weakness of several higher education systems in Africa due to scarce human resources has provoked a heavy and complex workload among university academic staff thus contributing to burnout. However, the level of burnout among lecturers in Africa, its perceived causation and potential mitigating measures need to be explored, to design appropriate interventions. For example, a study by the Human Sciences Research Council found 10.6% of educators in South Africa had been hospitalized in the previous 12 months. The study also indicated that least 75% educators had reported a visit to a health practitioner in the six months and the most frequently reported diagnoses were stress-related illnesses, such as high blood pressure, stomach ulcers and diabetes. Therefore, a wider scale quantification of the magnitude of academic staff burnout in Africa is warranted [6,7].

Studies have identified a myriad of factors that contribute to faculty burnout. The demands of academic work have increased considerably without adequate compensation, thus transforming universities into relatively stressful workplaces. There is now sufficient evidence that university academic staff are strained by competitiveness, job insecurity and the increased work demands of academic jobs, including tenure-related demands, research, and publication pressures, teaching loads, few opportunities for promotion and excessive paperwork. On a more personal level, additional burdens such as trying to balance home and work create a heavy burden on educators that can lead to educator burnout. The effect of demographic variables such as gender, marital status, subject matter, and rank on burnout has been studied revealing inconsistent results. In Weng's study, gender had a very low effect on burnout. This mirrors studies in Turkey which indicate that demographics had low effect on educators' burnout. On the contrary, other studies revealed that gender differences in burnout were non-significant. Such contradictory results

complicate the determination of the reasons for educators' burnout. In Uganda, although there is limited evidence, the causes of burnout among academic staff may include weaknesses in the universities' governance, ill-facilitated work environments, research, work overload, limited opportunities for promotion, inadequate remuneration and moonlighting [8-17].

Excessive burnout is of great public health concern due to its health consequences. It not surprising that burnout is listed in the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, 10th revision (ICD-10) under the category 'Problems related to life-management difficulty'. In western countries, several studies have shown that burnout may predict work disability in employees. Some studies revealed that the educator's burnout adversely impacted student state motivation and effective learning. In Germany, Klusmann et al. found that educators with higher levels of burnout had a lower quality of instruction, and their students also had lower levels of motivation. In the United States, educators' burnout was negatively associated with classroom quality. Burnout ultimately leads to work loss and diminished productivity. This underscores the need for more research into factors related to burnout and other forms of psychological strain among university faculty [18-20].

Other potential consequences of burnout to the individual university academic staff include substance abuse, a myriad of psychiatric disorders including anxiety, depression, quitting the profession, professional misconduct and poor quality of life, which in the end will have a significant, negative impact on the quality of education. The worst manifestation of burnout is suicidal ideation. Web-forum discussions frequently referred to educators' low well-being and suicide rate as higher than other groups. A meta-analysis showed a negative relationship between burnout and educators' self-efficacy. It has been reported that individuals with burnout exhibit changes in the brain, such as a reduction in grey matter volume of the anterior cingulate, caudate and putamen. Burnout has also been associated with a reduced ability to down-regulate emotional stressors and changes in subcortical volume. It is partly this that health promotion in schools has attracted researchers and educators since the 1998 World Health Organization's report on the health of schools and health setting learning. Burnout prevalence varies according to countries and occupations but is estimated between 3-16% and for educators was reported between 25-35% in Europe, being 19,7% in Italy. Due to the social and cultural importance of lecturers, this study aimed to analyze burnout levels of Ugandan university lecturers [21-29].

In Uganda, the profound changes experienced by the academic profession in recent decades represent a potential cause of the high prevalence of burnout among academic staff. There are suspected high levels of burnout due to high

reported levels of absenteeism and academic staff turnover, though there is limited evidence of this condition. The number of lecturers leaving universities in Uganda is increasingly alarming. Between 2008 and 2012 ten lecturers left Gulu University, 68 left Makerere University, 15 left Kampala International University, 17 left Ndejje University, 19 left Kyambogo University yet over 26 left Mbarara University of Science and Technology. Review of studies reveals that staff turnover is due to weaknesses in the universities' governance, ill-facilitated work environments, and inadequate remuneration. While this is true, these studies fail to address an important component of staff wellbeing. Lecturers' wellbeing is central to improving the quality of education [30-35]. University academic staff members are susceptible to burnout in an effort to fulfill their obligations but this is often overlooked in policy and research [7]. Thus the present study aimed to establish the prevalence of burnout among university academic staff in Uganda. To achieve this purpose the following objectives were established;

- To determine the prevalence of burnout among university academic staff in Uganda
- To determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in burnout levels experienced by male and female academic staff in universities in Uganda

## Methods

The study employed a cross-sectional survey design through which data was gathered from a cross-section of universities as well as academic staff within a specific period. This design is appropriate per this study because the respondents had almost similar characteristics. The researcher collected information from a cross-section of respondents at once. Therefore this design was also most appropriate for a big population as it saved time [36].

## Participants

Universities were selected using simple random sampling to give each university an equal chance of participating in the study since their staff showed symptoms of burnout like staff turnover, job dissatisfaction and absenteeism. Taking 30% of the target population, the sample used comprised of 358 (200 male and 158 female) staff members comprising of 250 from public and 108 private universities. Participants' age was between 28 to 65 years ( $M=42,5$  and  $SD=6,1$ ), with 10% of the sample having a PhD and above. Concerning to marital status, 70% were married, and 67% had children. Work experience ranged between 2 and 42 years ( $M=16,7$  and  $SD=9,3$ ). There was proportional allocation of the number of universities and staff based on population-based on the population after stratification by university categories.

**Table 1:** Gender Distribution and Category of Universities.

Category	Frequency	Percentage
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Public	250	70
Private	108	30
Total	358	100
Male	200	56
Female	158	44
Total	358	100

**Table 1** shows that 250 (70%) of the respondents were from public universities while 30% were from private universities. **Table 1** also shows that more than half (56%) of the sample respondents were male. The female respondents constituted 44%. Results show that the number of male respondents was 12% bigger than that of the female respondents. This difference notwithstanding, the size of females was significant enough for the study to capture gender-balanced experiences of burnout.

## Instruments

A self-completion questionnaire was full-filled after formal authorization and voluntary participation. The questionnaire includes socio-demographic questions including gender, age, marital status, and academic degree and professional experience. Professional Quality of Life version 5 with a score range of 5–50 was used to measure burnout [37]. The scores were grouped into low burnout with a score of 22 and below, average burnout having scores between 23 and 41, and high burnout having scores between 42 and above. A Cronbach alpha score of 0.84 was recorded in this study for the burnout

## Procedures

Data was collected data from academic staff working in universities in Uganda. All questionnaires were filled at

respective universities. The need to protect the rights and privacy of university academic staff was considered. Participants gave signed informed consent, with anonymity being assured. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without any penalty. Confidentiality of test scores was assured and the material was stored in a safe and inaccessible place, with password-protected computer access. Ethical clearance was given from the National HIV/AIDS Research Committee of Makerere University.

## Data analysis

All statistical analyses were performed using R (R Core Team, 2015) with statistical significance set at  $p < 0.05$ . The Shapiro–Wilk test results showed that the respondents' scores were normally distributed. Descriptive statistics and independent-sample t-test were used to establish gender differences in burnout among university academic staff.

## Results

The first objective was to establish the prevalence of burnout among university academic staff in Uganda. This objective was met by asking the lecturers to rank their level of burnout. The ranking was done on a scale with five options: 0 ("never") to 5 ("every day")." The findings are summarized in **Table 2**.

**Table 2:** Burnout level.

Burnout level	Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Low	Male	108	54
	Female	79	50
Moderate	Male	52	26
	Female	51	32
High	Male	40	20
	Female	28	18

The results in **Table 2** show that both male and female academic staff experienced burnout. The results indicate that 54% of the male respondents experienced a low level of burnout and 50% of female respondents experienced a low level of burnout. In the moderate level of burnout, there are more females than the male with a percentage value of 32% and 26% respectively. In the high category of levels of burnout males formed 20% and females constituted 18%. A general

comparison of the percentage of female and male academic staff at every level shows that males have high levels of burnout. Results showed that more than half (58%) of the academic staff had signs of burnout while 38% of them had high levels of burnout. This implies that a significant number of academic staff are not psychologically fit to fulfill their pedagogical obligations.

The results above show that there are differences in burnout levels between male and female academic staff. To confirm if there was a statistically significant difference in burnout levels based on gender, it was hypothesized that there is no statistically significant difference in burnout levels experienced by male and female academic staff in universities in Uganda.

To analyse the hypothesis an independent t-test was used to establish the implied variable relationship. The analysis of independent sample t-test compared the male and female mean burnout levels. The level of significance was set at 0.05 and the results are shown in **Table 3**.

**Table 3:** Independent t-test for levels of burnout.

Levene's Test for quality of Variance t-test for Equality of Means									
	F	Sig	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Diff	
Levels Burnout								Lower	Upper
EV assumed	14.5	0.704	-2.328	355	.020*	-21	0.089	-382	-32
EV not assumed			-2.284	192.738	.023*	-21	0.091	-386	-28

EV=Equality of Variance.

Results in **Table 3** indicate that burnout levels with t-value of -.300 and -.301, has the probability value of  $p=0.765$ . Both values show that  $p>0.05$ . Therefore the gender differences in the levels of burnout experienced by female and male academic staff in universities in Uganda had no statistical significance since the p-value ( $p=0.765$ ) is greater than the alpha value ( $p=0.05$ ). In other words, there was not sufficient evidence from the data to link male or female respondents to high or low levels of burnout. Therefore, the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant difference in burnout levels experienced by male and female academic staff in universities in Uganda was accepted. This study implies that the biological factor of gender may not be a reasonable starting point for understanding and explaining burnout among academic staff in universities. Additionally, the results imply that professionals are professionals irrespective of their gender, and share similar experiences in their feelings of the pain of dealing with learners. Besides, male and female lectures work under the same conditions in the university setting; thus they are affected in the same magnitude.

## Discussion

In the past university, teaching was thought to be less stressful because universities provided a good working environment with academic freedom and abundant resources. However, due to the twenty-first-century global changes, modern universities have passed through a transition, which has made the working environment within universities very demanding. The effects of work-related demands followed by the scarcity of resources and the lack of suitable coping capacities eventually lead to burnout. The first objective was to establish the prevalence of burnout among university academic staff in Uganda. The descriptive results revealed that both male and female academic staff had symptoms of burnout. Results showed that 60 % of the academic staff had

high levels of burnout while 38% of them had very high levels of burnout [38-40].

These results are not surprising given the stressful nature of teaching. Reviewing 12 major studies of burnout among full-time university teaching staff, Watts and Robertson concluded that burnout levels in this group were 'comparable with mean values for education and medical professionals. A possible explanation to this observation is increasing research and publication pressure, job security, limited opportunities for promotion have made burnout a common risk to the wellbeing of academic staff. Lackritz's study estimates the percentage of incidence of highest levels of burnout is at half the rate of the general workforce. The result of the present study concurs with studies in similar circumstances and populations. In an Irish study, Byrne, Chughtai, Flood, Murphy, and Willis found that 64% had reported high levels of burnout. In Spain, Navarro and Más added that burnout was a costly problem with 16-18% of university staff showing the high levels of burnout. A United State study found that 20% of faculty members at a public US university experienced the highest levels of burnout [2,41-44].

Notwithstanding the above consistency, the current study contrasts with equally several previous studies. This did not demonstrate significant symptoms of burnout. One of these studies on burnout among industrial and technical educators, Brewer and McMahan reported an average degree of burnout for all three dimensions of burnout. Croom found that agricultural educators experience moderate levels of emotional exhaustion, low levels of depersonalization and a high degree of personal accomplishment. In Turkey, Ardiç and Polatçı found that academic personnel reported moderate levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, but a high level of reduced personal accomplishment in one public university. Serinkan and Bardakçı revealed that significant differences were found in the level of burnout among research

assistants, associate professors and full-time professors in one university [2,45-48].

The second objective was to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in burnout levels experienced by male and female academic staff in universities in Uganda. Comparing the results of the present study with those of others is not straightforward due to variations in sociocultural factors, occupational settings or using different measures of assessment. The results revealed that there was no sufficient evidence from the data to link male or female respondents to high or low levels of burnout. This was an unexpected finding that nevertheless has a basis in the literature. Consistent with some prior findings in samples of practitioners gender differences in burnout were non-significant. The results in the present study are further supported by similar results found by that showed there was no evidence of gender differences in the levels of burnout in their studies on teaching professionals [14-16,46].

In contrast to the findings of the current study, Decker and Borgen found out that females were more likely to report burnout than males. Also, a study amongst primary and secondary school educators in Greece found that female educators experienced higher levels of burnout compared to men. In a similar study a higher level of burnout was revealed among female academic staff. Other different research findings also revealed that men are susceptible to burnout. Bilge also found that female gender was found to be an important predictor of a lower level of depersonalization. Tumkaya found that female faculty experience emotional exhaustion compared to male faculty. However, the discrepancy in results may be attributed to the difference in gender distribution. The high representation of female respondents in these two studies could have led to the implied gender differences. Also, inconsistency in findings could be related to a multitude of differences in these studies including practice areas, measurement instruments, and designation of the practitioners. Therefore, these findings are inconclusive and further investigation is needed to assess for differences amongst results [17,49-58].

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Burnout is an important topic that needs to be investigated further in the academic world. It is related to job performance, productivity, absenteeism, dissatisfaction, turnover, and illness. Academic burnout studies can help university administrators and educators to develop the quality of education. While there is hardly any study on burnout among academic staff in Uganda, the present study has significant implications for university administrators, who should be interested in the mental state of their members.

To relieve pressures that could lead to burnout, training in burnout management competencies is recommended. With available instruments which measure burnout, occasional administration of such instruments would allow administrators and academic staff to anticipate burnout, rather than waiting for it to happen. Additionally, the university administration

must regularly observe the factors which may have adverse effects on the effectiveness of university academic staff and take remedial actions to reduce burnout. Otherwise, the relationships among educators, learners and administrators will be damaged and hence the quality of education will be negatively affected.

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