

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# UNVEILING THE NEXUS OF ACADEMIC STRESS AND BURNOUT: A COMPREHENSIVE LITERATURE REVIEW AND PATHWAYS TO SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

Stress and burnout among academics and lecturers are significant challenges in higher education, impacting individual well-being, institutional performance, and the broader sustainability of academic environments. This study employs a systematic literature review using the Scopus database and a bibliometric analysis performed with VOSviewer to explore the multifaceted dimensions of academic stress and burnout. A total of 30 papers were identified using the keywords "Academician Stress" (14 articles), "Academician Burnout" (13 articles, with 10 included), "Lecturer Burnout" (3 articles), and "Lecturer Stress" (3 articles). The bibliometric analysis revealed five major thematic clusters: physical stressors and musculoskeletal pain, psychological stress and mental health challenges, burnout exacerbated by external crises like COVID-19, job satisfaction and professional development, and methodological approaches to assessing stress. The findings highlight the interconnections between ergonomic challenges, psychological strain, and career-related pressures, emphasizing the need for holistic interventions. Using these insights, a conceptual model was developed, integrating ergonomic interventions, mental health resilience programs, structured professional development pathways, and collaborative institutional policies. This model aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). By addressing systemic stressors, this study offers actionable solutions to enhance well-being, productivity, and sustainability within academia.

## KEYWORDS

Scopus, academic stress, burnout, VOSviewer, sustainable development goals

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Stress and burnout among academics have become significant global concerns, adversely impacting individual well-being, professional productivity, and institutional performance. Lecturers in higher education institutions face multifaceted challenges, including increased workloads, pressures to publish, administrative responsibilities, and evolving pedagogical demands. These stressors often result in physical discomfort, psychological strain, and professional dissatisfaction, contributing to high levels of burnout (Isa and Palpanadan, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues, with the rapid transition to online and distance learning (ODL) creating additional stressors related to technology adoption, work-life boundaries, and student engagement (binti Ruslan et al., 2023). Addressing these challenges requires a systematic understanding of their root causes and comprehensive interventions.

Research highlights several dimensions of academic stress, including physical and ergonomic challenges. Prolonged sedentary tasks such as grading, lecturing, and administrative duties are linked to musculoskeletal pain and discomfort, significantly affecting academics' health (Birinci et al., 2019). Poorly designed workspaces and a lack of ergonomic support

exacerbate these issues, reducing job satisfaction and productivity. Similar trends have been observed in multiple studies, who emphasized the importance of workplace ergonomics in reducing physical stress among academicians (Agarwal et al., 2023). These findings underscore the need for institutional support in creating ergonomic work environments to alleviate physical stressors.

Psychological stress and burnout are equally concerning, with studies revealing a high prevalence of anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion among academics. They found that the shift to emergency online classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic increased stress levels among Vietnamese university lecturers, while noted similar trends in Indonesian lecturers working from home (Nguyen et al., 2023; Fitriasisari et al., 2022). Mental health issues among academics are often compounded by the stigma associated with seeking help, inadequate institutional support, and unclear work-life boundaries (Mohamed et al., 2020). These findings suggest the urgent need for mental health resilience programs tailored to the unique challenges faced by academics.

Professional pressures also play a crucial role in academic stress and burnout. The demand to publish in high-impact journals, secure funding for research, and balance teaching responsibilities often results in

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professional dissatisfaction. It highlighted the role of organizational commitment in mitigating stress, while emphasized the importance of psychosocial safety climates in promoting work engagement (Abdullah and Hamid, 2017; Teoh and Kee, 2022). Furthermore, it emphasized that the lack of structured career progression pathways and inadequate recognition systems significantly contribute to job-related stress (Isa and Palpanadan, 2020). Addressing these professional challenges is essential to enhance job satisfaction and maintain high-quality education standards.

This study aims to address the systemic challenges of stress and burnout among academics by aligning interventions with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By integrating insights from previous research and the findings of this study, a holistic conceptual model is proposed to address physical, psychological, and professional stressors. The model focuses on ergonomic and wellness programs, mental health support systems, professional development frameworks, and collaborative institutional policies. By adopting this comprehensive approach, academic institutions can foster sustainable work environments, contributing to individual well-being, institutional success, and the broader goals of sustainable development.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic review approach using data extracted from the Scopus database and a network visualization analysis performed with VOSviewer software. VOSviewer, a bibliometric and visual analysis tool, was used to identify and map the relationships between keywords in the selected literature. The tool is well-regarded for its ability to visualize large bibliometric datasets, making it suitable for analyzing trends and thematic connections in academic research (Van Eck and Waltman, 2010).

The Scopus database was searched with the following keywords: "Academician Stress," "Academician Burnout," "Lecturer Burnout," and "Lecturer Stress." The search retrieved a total of 14 articles for "Academician Stress," 13 articles for "Academician Burnout" (of which 10 were included based on relevance), and 3 articles each for "Lecturer Burnout" and "Lecturer Stress." The articles were exported on 30 November 2024, and the inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed studies addressing stress and burnout in higher education settings.

Relevance was determined based on the articles' focus on physical, psychological, and professional stressors, as well as their alignment with sustainable development goals and systemic solutions.

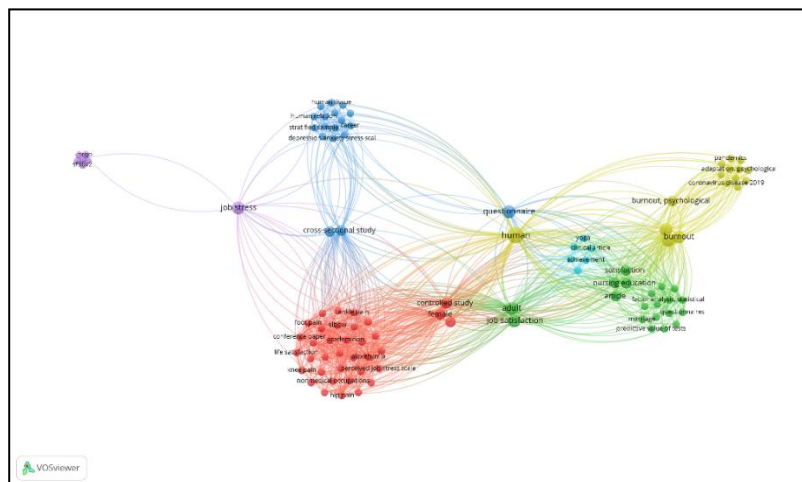
The keyword data from the selected articles were analyzed using VOSviewer to create a co-occurrence network. The analysis provided insights into the connections between frequently occurring terms, allowing for the identification of thematic clusters related to academic stress and burnout. The network map highlighted the central themes, such as "job stress," "burnout," "job satisfaction," and "psychological adaptation," as well as their linkages to physical and professional stressors.

By integrating the bibliometric analysis from VOSviewer with insights from the literature, this study developed a holistic conceptual model to address academic stress and burnout. The model focuses on ergonomic interventions, mental health support systems, structured career development pathways, and institutional strategies aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This methodology ensured a comprehensive and systematic approach to identifying key issues and proposing actionable solutions.

## 3. RESULTS

The visualization revealed five major thematic clusters: physical stressors and musculoskeletal pain, psychological stress and mental health challenges, burnout and the impact of external crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, job satisfaction and professional development, and methodological approaches to assessing stress. Each cluster was interpreted based on its prominence and the relationships between keywords, providing a detailed understanding of the factors contributing to academic stress and burnout (Figure 1).

The co-occurrence network visualization, developed using VOSviewer, provides a detailed overview of the research themes and interconnected keywords related to stress and burnout among academics and lecturers. As shown in Figure 1. The clusters identified in the visualization highlight distinct yet interconnected thematic areas that elucidate the complexities of job-related stress and burnout in academic professions. These clusters are discussed in greater detail below.



**Figure 1:** Visualization of similarity using VOSviewer based on 30 publications indexed in the Scopus database from 2014 to 2024 using the keyword 'Academic/Lecturer Stress/Burnout' searched on 30 November 2024.

### 3.1 Cluster 1: Job Stress and Physical Pain Manifestations

The red cluster focuses on the relationship between job stress and physical pain, with keywords such as "job stress," "foot pain," "knee pain," "hip pain," and "ankle pain" being prominent. These terms suggest that academics, often required to perform sedentary tasks for prolonged hours, face significant physical discomfort associated with their occupational roles. Ergonomic factors, such as inappropriate workstation setups, lack of movement, and prolonged periods of standing or sitting, appear to exacerbate these physical symptoms. Additionally, the presence of keywords such as "life satisfaction" and "nonmedical occupations" indicates that these physical symptoms do not exist in isolation but interact with psychological stressors to influence overall well-being. The findings underline the importance of addressing the physical health challenges faced by academics to mitigate the broader impacts of job-related stress.

### 3.2 Cluster 2: Psychological Stress and Methodological Approaches

The blue cluster captures the psychological dimensions of stress among

academics, with key terms such as "depression anxiety stress scale," "cross-sectional study," and "stratified sample" dominating this thematic area. These keywords suggest that many studies on academic stress employ standardized psychological tools to measure depression, anxiety, and stress levels. Furthermore, the methodological focus on cross-sectional study designs highlights the prevalence of snapshot assessments of stress and burnout among academics. The inclusion of terms like "human relations" and "career" suggests that interpersonal dynamics within academic institutions and career progression pressures are significant contributors to stress. This cluster reveals the psychological burden of academic roles, emphasizing the need for strategies to foster healthier workplace relationships and reduce anxiety-inducing career uncertainties.

### 3.3 Cluster 3: Burnout and Pandemic-induced Challenges

The yellow cluster is primarily concerned with "burnout," particularly in the context of external stressors such as "pandemics," with "COVID-19" prominently featured. This cluster highlights the heightened vulnerability of academics to burnout during crises, which exacerbate existing

workloads and introduce new challenges, such as transitioning to remote teaching, managing virtual collaborations, and addressing student needs in a digital environment. The term "psychological adaptation" emphasizes the mental resilience required to navigate these changes, while the inclusion of "burnout, psychological" underscores the emotional toll of these adjustments. This cluster reflects the pressing need for institutions to develop effective interventions, such as workload redistribution, flexible policies, and mental health support systems, to mitigate burnout during and beyond crises.

### 3.4 Cluster 4: Job Satisfaction, Achievement, and Professional Growth

The green cluster reflects a balance between stressors and factors contributing to positive workplace experiences, with key terms including "job satisfaction," "achievement," and "nursing education." These terms suggest that, while stress and burnout are prominent, a parallel focus exists on fostering satisfaction and recognizing achievements in academia. For instance, opportunities for professional growth, mentorship, and recognition for contributions to teaching, research, and community engagement can mitigate job-related stress and foster a sense of accomplishment. The term "adult" in this cluster indicates that these studies predominantly focus on adult professionals, reinforcing the importance of career-stage-specific interventions to promote job satisfaction.

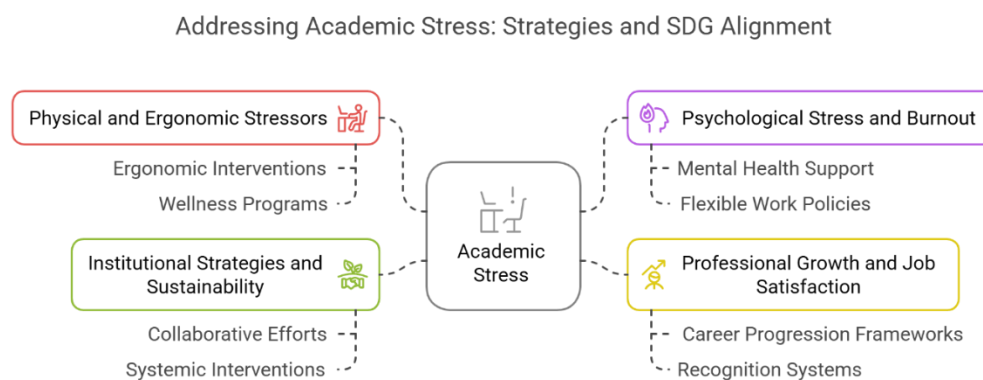
### 3.5 Cluster 5: Stress Assessment Tools and Professional Groups

The purple cluster centers on the tools and scales used to measure job stress, such as the "perceived job stress scale." This methodological focus highlights the academic rigor in assessing stress levels among specific populations, such as "academicians" and "nonmedical occupations." The presence of terms like "controlled study" further emphasizes the systematic approaches employed in understanding the unique stressors faced by academics. These tools provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of stress, enabling researchers to identify key stress drivers and develop targeted interventions.

## 4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal the multifaceted nature of stress and burnout among academics, exacerbated by physical, psychological, and professional factors (Figure 2). These issues have been observed globally and are particularly pressing in the context of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), including SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

### 4.1 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals



**Figure 2:** The overall strategies and SDG alignment addressing the academic stresses.

#### 4.1.1 Physical and Ergonomic Stressors: Linking to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being)

The results highlight a significant relationship between physical discomfort and job stress, underscoring ergonomic challenges such as musculoskeletal pain due to prolonged sedentary work. These issues are not unique to Malaysia; studies have documented similar trends globally. For instance, they identified a strong correlation between musculoskeletal pain and job stress among young academicians in the field of health sciences, emphasizing the need for ergonomic interventions (Birinci et al., 2019). Similarly, demonstrated how workplace ergonomics significantly impacts stress levels among academicians in India (Agarwal et al., 2023).

To address these issues, academic institutions must adopt evidence-based ergonomic interventions. Adjustable desks and chairs, flexible working hours, and regular physical activity breaks can alleviate physical stressors. The integration of wellness programs that promote physical and mental health has been shown to improve productivity and well-being (Fitriasari et al., 2022). By implementing these measures, institutions can align with SDG 3, ensuring academics' physical health and overall quality of life.

#### 4.1.2 Psychological Stress and Burnout: Aligning with SDG 3 and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)

Psychological stress, exacerbated by external crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, was a dominant theme in this study. The pandemic forced academics to adapt to online and distance learning (ODL), which significantly increased stress, anxiety, and depression levels (Ruslan et al., 2023). They similarly reported high burnout levels among Vietnamese university lecturers due to the rapid transition to emergency online classrooms (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Addressing psychological stress requires comprehensive mental health support systems. Institutions should provide counseling services and develop peer-support networks tailored to academics' unique challenges. Mental health awareness campaigns can destigmatize seeking help, fostering a culture of openness and resilience (Kassim et al., 2020).

Flexible work policies, particularly during crises, have been effective in reducing stress and maintaining work-life balance (Teoh and Kee, 2022). These interventions not only contribute to SDG 3 by enhancing mental health but also align with SDG 8 by promoting decent and sustainable working conditions.

#### 4.1.3 Professional Growth and Job Satisfaction: Supporting SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8

Job satisfaction and professional growth opportunities emerged as critical buffers against stress and burnout. The findings align with studies such as those by Abdullah and Bin Hamid (2017), who emphasized the importance of organizational commitment in mitigating stress among Malaysian academicians. Similarly, they identified a direct link between job satisfaction and reduced psychological distress among academics (Mohamed et al., 2020).

Institutions should develop structured career progression frameworks, mentorship programs, and recognition systems to enhance job satisfaction. Opportunities for professional development, such as participation in international conferences and research collaborations, can further motivate academics. Rewarding teaching excellence and research contributions fosters a sense of accomplishment, which is essential for maintaining high-quality education standards (Isa and Palpanadan, 2020). These strategies contribute to SDG 4 by ensuring that motivated and satisfied educators provide quality education and to SDG 8 by promoting a positive and sustainable work environment.

#### 4.1.4 Institutional Strategies and Sustainability: Connecting to SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals)

The study emphasizes the need for systemic institutional strategies to address the root causes of academic stress and burnout. Collaborative efforts involving policymakers, mental health professionals, and educators are essential for developing sustainable solutions. For example, highlighted the importance of addressing interpersonal discrimination and organizational stressors to improve health and performance among



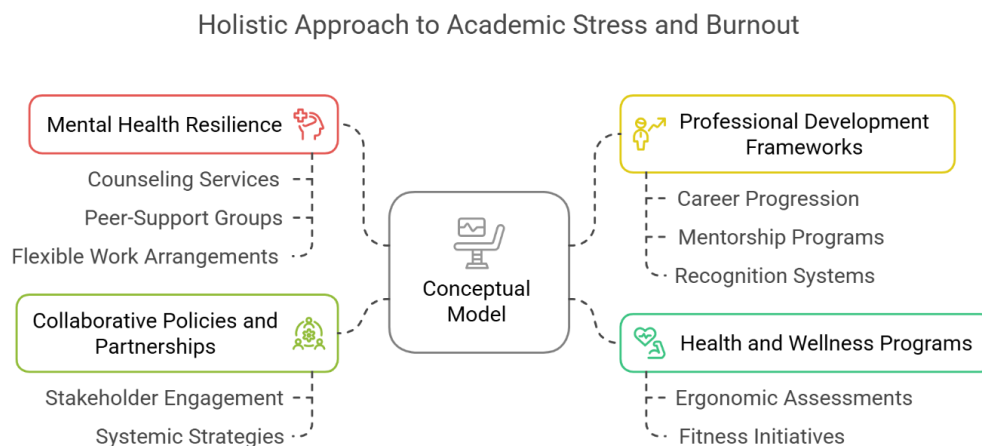
early-career academicians (O'Brien et al., 2016). They further emphasized the prevalence of burnout in Spanish universities, suggesting that systemic interventions are crucial (Cobos-Sanchiz et al., 2022).

Regular stress audits, transparent communication, and inclusive decision-making processes can build trust and foster a supportive institutional culture. Cross-disciplinary collaborations to develop innovative stress management strategies and partnerships with external stakeholders can

amplify these efforts (Awang et al., 2021). These approaches align with SDG 17 by leveraging partnerships to achieve systemic improvements.

#### 4.2 Conceptual Model: A Holistic Approach to Addressing Academic Stress and Burnout

Figure 3 shows the holistic approach to handle academic stresses and burnout.



**Figure 3:** The holistic approach to handle academic stresses and burnout.

The proposed conceptual model integrates physical, psychological, and professional dimensions of stress management, offering a holistic and sustainable framework aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The model addresses critical academic stressors while promoting well-being and institutional productivity.

Firstly, health and wellness programs are essential for mitigating physical stressors. This includes regular ergonomic assessments, exercise initiatives, and institution-supported wellness campaigns that address issues such as prolonged sedentary behavior, musculoskeletal discomfort, and general fatigue. Research has shown that such interventions, when systematically implemented, can alleviate physical exhaustion and reduce burnout among university staff (Kavurmaci et al., 2022; Ismail et al., 2013). These measures are consistent with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), as they enhance overall health outcomes in educational workplaces.

Secondly, the model emphasizes mental health resilience, which is crucial in buffering psychological distress. Counseling services, peer-support systems, and flexible work arrangements can alleviate emotional strain and work-family conflict, especially among female academicians (Demirel and Erdirençelebi, 2019; Fitriyasi et al., 2022). The importance of psychological support is further underscored by evidence linking burnout with diminished parenting self-efficacy and life satisfaction among academic mothers (Gülbetekin and Tunc, 2024). Moreover, cynicism and stress, when unmanaged, can intensify burnout levels, suggesting the need for preventive psychological support (Gün and Atanur Baskan, 2017). These strategies directly contribute to SDG 3 and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), ensuring that staff remain both mentally resilient and professionally engaged.

Thirdly, professional development frameworks offer long-term solutions by addressing career stagnation, lack of recognition, and insufficient mentorship. Studies have identified that structured progression, recognition mechanisms, and opportunities for growth significantly enhance job satisfaction and reduce occupational burnout (Kassim et al., 2020; Isa and Palpanadan, 2020). These frameworks are especially beneficial in research-driven institutions where role expectations and workload demands are high (Hashim et al., 2018). The integration of career development with mental health interventions creates a more adaptive academic environment, fulfilling targets under SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8.

Lastly, collaborative policies and partnerships are fundamental for systemic transformation. Engagement with institutional leaders, policymakers, and external health experts can help co-develop sustainable solutions that transcend individual-level interventions. This aligns with SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), which calls for multi-stakeholder collaborations to address complex global challenges. The positive psychological influence of cultural and artistic activities, such as exposure to poetry, has even been shown to reduce stress hormones in retired academicians, indicating the broader potential of holistic and community-inclusive interventions (Jabarouti et al., 2014).

Therefore, the proposed model leverages evidence-based strategies to manage academic stress through a multidimensional lens—integrating wellness, resilience, career support, and collaboration. By aligning with the SDGs, particularly SDGs 3, 4, 8, and 17, it advances a sustainable pathway for institutional well-being and professional satisfaction in academia.

#### 4.3 Future Directions and Implications

While this model addresses current challenges, future research should focus on longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term impact of implemented interventions. Cross-cultural comparisons can provide valuable insights into different academic systems' approaches to stress management, as demonstrated in their comparison of Israeli and American academicians (Keinan and Perlberg, 1987). Additionally, the role of digitalization in exacerbating or alleviating stress warrants further exploration, especially in light of recent shifts to online education (Rusli et al., 2023). By adopting this model, academic institutions can align their practices with the UN SDGs, fostering sustainable and supportive environments for educators worldwide.

### 5. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the multifaceted challenges of stress and burnout faced by academics, encompassing physical discomfort, psychological strain, and professional pressures, all of which have significant implications for individual well-being, institutional productivity, and the broader goals of sustainable development. By aligning interventions with the UN SDGs—specifically SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals)—a holistic conceptual model is proposed to address these challenges. The model emphasizes ergonomic improvements, mental health support systems, professional development frameworks, and collaborative institutional strategies as key pillars for promoting sustainable work environments in academia. Future research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of these interventions over time, exploring the role of digitalization, and fostering cross-cultural insights to create resilient and supportive academic ecosystems globally. By adopting these measures, academic institutions can enhance the well-being and productivity of educators, ensuring their critical contributions to society are sustained in alignment with global development priorities.

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