Unveiling the Layers of Faculty Burnout in Canadian Private Universities during the post-COVID Pandemic Period

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered the employment landscape, including educational institutions, creating long-term effects for college and university employees. One of the major implications of the pandemic is the systemic transformations in employment and organisational dynamics, that resulted in effects on working conditions and workplace responsibilities. Emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion accompanying these changes have heightened the risk of faculty burnout. This qualitative research, reports on the multifaceted phenomenon of faculty burnout within Canadian private universities amidst the post pandemic. A phenomenological approach was used to conduct indepth interviews with participants, resulting in narrative responses regarding experiential aspects of participants' workplaces, daily routines, social interactions, and perceptions of organisational support. Notable findings included burnout in eleven distinct categories: technology and tools, career development, intrinsic motivation, psychological factors, social worth, unmet individual expectations, mental and physical health, time constraints, task management, workload, and professional role. The findings were categorized into three overall themes, including organisational factors, individual factors, and work-specific factors. A comprehensive conceptual model was developed to provide a snapshot of the value alignment of these factors to the overall concept of faculty burnout. The results highlight the significance of the intricate interplay of various elements contributing to burnout and offer significant insights into the lived experiences of faculty members within the context of burnout among Canadian private universities during and after the pandemic. The study informs academic researchers and institutional policymakers of the need for adaptable and responsive interventions to support the faculty, especially in the post-Covid context.

Keywords: faculty burnout, post-COVID, Canadian private universities, phenomenological approach

1. Introduction

Enforced social isolation is one of the defining features of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was an unprecedented period in modern history. The restrictions created during the pandemic created social isolation and aa new set of challenges across various sectors, while the long-term effects of this event continue to unravel, two major implications arose in systemic transformations in employment and organisational dynamics (Taylor & Frechette, 2022). As Ramos et al. (2023) observed, this period led to reduced job security and required drastic adaptability among employees. In addition, Nemteanu et al. (2021) found that the pandemic largely impacted employee well-being and satisfaction, with notable concerns for organisational management.

Prolonged work hours, ambiguous job expectations, increased responsibilities amidst declining resources, limited career advancement prospects, and inadequate compensation adversely affect the physical health and psychological well-being of faculty members, compelling them to engage in remote teaching methods (Ramos et al., 2023). These factors collectively contribute to heightened burnout risks and increase turnover in the higher education sector (Winfield & Paris, 2023). And while faculty members contended with these conditions prior to the pandemic, this type of job insecurity detrimentally influenced faculty burnout and exacerbated it (Taylor & Frechette, 2022).

Faculty members' ability to adapt to rapid technology changes influenced their ability to succeed in higher education institutions during and after the pandemic. According to Turkistani et al. (2022), an array of demanding activities that included teaching, grading, and lesson planning mentally exhausted faculty members during the pandemic. Moreover, extensive teaching commitments, diverse research projects, community service activities,

and active participation in various committees and seminars piled stress on faculty members' workloads (Dewi et al., 2022). Faculty members with additional responsibilities engaged in extensive social interactions and sustained lofty ideals faced a higher possibility of experiencing burnout.

Faculty continue to grapple with elevated stress and anxiety levels; initial shifts to online teaching and the ongoing demands of academic life have compounded stress and anxiety. The necessity of remote work brought about changes in work patterns, with a need for greater flexibility in work arrangements to accommodate the shifts in work practices arising from the pandemic, which includes balancing personal responsibilities and professional commitments (Rock, 2024).

According to Boamah et al. (2022), repeated exposure to stressors, coupled with a sense of pessimism and inadequacy, can lead to burnout. Its effects are often associated with decreased motivation, lower productivity, job dissatisfaction, increased sick leave, and mental and behavioural health issues (Arrona-Palacios et al., 2022) McAlpine (2021) delved deeper into the phenomenon of burnout, categorising it into three types, namely, *overload burnout*, which is common among highly committed employees in unstable environments; *under-challenged burnout*, experienced by individuals facing numerous challenges without adequate recognition; and *neglect burnout*, occurring in those who feel overwhelmed and unsupported in challenging situations.

A combination of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion with symptoms that manifest gradually among individuals often characterize job burnout (Olley, 2023). When applied to faculty members, job burnout may lead to increased intentions of leaving the institution, declining job performance, and absenteeism from the workplace. Ultimately, burnout brings a detrimental effect to both individual faculty members and the institutions they serve (Rock, 2024).

In this research, we aim to delve into faculty burnout, with a focus on the experiences and perceptions of participants during the post-Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on their working conditions and workplace responsibilities. The pandemic was chosen for this study because it represented an extreme situation that created a large amount of stress globally, and more specifically, it created acute stress for faculty members in private universities in Canada. At the beginning of the pandemic, faculty had to change their teaching methods to teaching their classes online without receiving training on this format. The overarching goal for this study is to determine if the stress that faculty members experienced during the pandemic had any effect months after its end. The findings of this research might help the leadership at various universities to identify early signs of faculty burnout and minimise these consequences through a comparison of the results during and after the pandemic.

According to Turkistani et al. (2022), this correlation is notably due to a spectrum of encountered challenges, namely, emotional distress (frustration, fear, uncertainty), practical hurdles (time management, sustaining student engagement, exam integrity) and achieving a work-life balance. Hence, we summarise the different stressors that faculty members faced during the pandemic and explain how these challenges contribute to experiences of burnout.

Furthermore, the qualitative insights gained from this research are intended to guide institutional managers in formulating effective strategies designed to assist and support faculty members currently in the post-pandemic period. Ultimately, this research fosters a deeper understanding of the dynamics of burnout to create a more positive work environment and promote the well-being of faculty within various academic departments.

2. Literature Review

The incidence of job burnout during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a subject of extensive scholarly attention, particularly within the domain of higher education faculty. Leiter and Maslach (2003) note that the unique aspects of the higher education work environment, can exacerbate factors leading to employee burnout. These factors include emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment. Contributing factors, such as relentless workloads, imbalances between personal and professional life, and deficiencies in resources, elevate the risk of burnout (Arrona-Palacios et al., 2022). Yüceol et al. (2012) point out that familial responsibilities, gender disparities, and marital status are the top factors affecting the balance between work and personal life of faculty members in higher education institutions, which ultimately creates a strain on task management and efficiency.

On the other hand, Al Serhan and Houjeir (2020) went against the conventional assumptions about compensation and job satisfaction, with results pointing to a negligible correlation between financial remuneration and faculty burnout. Dewi et al. (2022) seemingly confirmed this observation as their study revealed that increasing work overload does not negatively affect job satisfaction; however, it leads to higher burnout levels. By examining the relationship between increased workload and burnout, Taylor and Frechette (2022) revealed that the stress that faculty members experienced negatively affected their work responsibilities, perpetuating a cycle of stress.

Moreover, the stress identified is an accumulation of various tasks and responsibilities, including administrative, documentation, and research. Thus, when skills associated with teaching online are lacking, a qualitative overload may occur (Almonacid et al., 2020).

Arrona-Palacios et al. (2022) found that the pandemic has significantly altered the pattern and quality of sleep among faculty members in Mexico, calling for higher education institutions to offer psychological support and psycho-educational interventions. The sudden transition to remote work is one of the key factors that affect faculty burnout across different sectors. According to Winfield and Paris (2022), this transition to remote work results into two scenarios: individuals that easily transitioned were less susceptible to burnout and others who had difficulty moving to remote work experienced higher levels of burnout. Additionally, an individual's position within an organisational hierarchy influenced their perception of the organisation's pandemic response and their overall working conditions. These observations highlight the critical factor of well-managed remote work transitions to enhance employee retention, hence mitigating burnout.

The existing literature underscores the detrimental effects of inadequate physical support, resources, isolation, and stress during the pandemic on faculty members' performance and well-being (Baker & Lutz, 2021; Taylor & Frechette, 2022). The pandemic highlights the critical importance of adaptability, flexibility, and resourcefulness. Addressing faculty burnout during and post-pandemic is imperative to alleviate its negative repercussions on the academic community.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

This is a qualitative study conducted at various private Canadian universities that evaluated how the post-pandemic period impacted the faculty members' personal and professional lives in relation to faculty burnout. After a review of the literature around the different components and factors that affect job burnout and a discussion of the challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and after it ended, a modified purposive sampling technique was employed, focusing on selecting information-rich cases for in-depth analysis (Gentles et al., 2015). Faculty members from different Canadian private universities were recruited to participate in the research through email and interviewed between April and September 2023. This approach ensures free-will among the faculty members, which means that they were not only willing and interested in participating, but also encouraged to share their relevant experiences. This method led to the cultivation of an engaged and diverse group of eight faculty members, whose detailed insights into their experiences during the post pandemic were invaluable for the study's objectives. The blend of purposive and volunteer-based sampling ensured a rich collection of data while maintaining the focus and relevancy for the phenomenological approach of the study. Since private universities have distinct administrative structures and operational dynamics, faculty members from these institutions were selected to offer their unique perspectives regarding the phenomenon of faculty burnout.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

This research strictly adheres to the ethical guidelines and standards set forth by University Canada West. The researchers informed the participants about the nature of the study, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Consent was obtained from all participants following the ethical protocols of University Canada West, emphasising transparency and respect for participant autonomy. Privacy and confidentiality measures were also enforced. To this point, the researchers anonymised all identifiable information to ensure that participants' responses remained confidential throughout the study.

3.3 Data Collection

The researchers gathered the initial data via a series of interviews. The interviews comprised open-ended questions that aimed to uncover the experiences and perceptions of faculty members during the post-pandemic period. Workplace experiences, daily routines, social interactions, and perceptions of organisational support are some of the factors that were included in the interview questions. Specifically, the interview questions included the following:

Challenges, successes, and overall experiences in the workplace during the post-pandemic period

Daily job responsibilities and routine activities

Instances of feeling tired or physically weak

Feelings of worthlessness or failure related to work

Social relationships at work

Suggestions for organisational/institutional support improvements

Impact of the pandemic on personal well-being and self-care practices

Perceived areas of improvement in personal and professional life.

3.4 Analysis Method

This study employed a phenomenological approach as established by Edmund Husserl, which emphasized the study of phenomena as humans directly experienced it (Jansen, 2010). This approach is particularly suited to exploring and understanding the lived experiences of faculty members during the post pandemic period. The data analysis involved a thorough reading and re-reading of the transcribed interviews. In addition, the process included coding and noting:

Descriptive comments that focused on what the participant stated

Linguistic comments that were used to observe how they expressed their experiences

Conceptual comments that were used to interpret the underlying meaning of the participants' narratives

Emergent themes as observed from interrelations, linkages, and patterns from this initial analysis were noted (Finan et al., 2022). The researchers then found profound insights from this thematic exploration, revealing the experiences, adversities, and resilience strategies of faculty members during the post-pandemic period.

Credibility is a cornerstone of qualitative research that implies a faithful representation of participants' perspectives (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007). Therefore, the use of member checking was conducted in this study. More specifically, the researchers returned the interview transcripts to the participants to verify the accuracy and authenticity of their conveyed experiences. Following the methodology of Tashakkori and Teddlie (1988), participants were also given a consolidated narrative that included key points from the initial interviews to ensure it accurately reflected their actual experiences. As a result, the researchers were able to understand the complex and often conflicting aspects found in the participant's responses in the context of their experiences as faculty members during the post-pandemic period. Finally, measures for inter-rater reliability were implemented to ensure that data interpretation is consistent and dependable.

4. Finding

The data analysis, derived from interviews with eight faculty members from Canadian private universities, provided insights into the factors influencing burnout. Data were carefully transcribed, coded, and categorised using a phenomenological approach. This process resulted in the identification of 11 distinct categories, which were further condensed into three main thematic dimensions. These dimensions collectively contribute to a comprehensive understanding of faculty burnout.

4.1 Factors Related to the Organisation

The first thematic dimension encompassed organisational factors. Notable among these are technology and tools, and career development. Participants emphasised how support from the organisation in terms of technology and tools substantially influenced their experiences related to burnout. Participants also identified opportunities for career development, or the absence thereof, as critical factors influencing their professional satisfaction and experiences related to burnout. As outlined by Olsen et al. (1995) career development encompasses satisfaction with specific facets of a faculty role, such as autonomy, collegial relations, support for teaching and research activities, and overarching job satisfaction. It also involves work-life balance considerations, conflicts between professional duties and personal life, and the fulfilment of career aspirations. The availability or absence of these aspects substantially influences faculty members' perceptions of their professional journey and experiences of burnout.

4.2 Factors Related to the Individual

The second thematic dimension encompasses the following elements: intrinsic motivation, psychological factors, social worth, unmet individual expectations, and mental and physical health. These factors lead to an increased feeling of burnout among participants, including anxiety and stress. In addition, this prompted a reflection on personal limitations and resources.

Intrinsic motivation is a key individual factor that drives intellectual curiosity and excitement among faculty members; participants' teaching, and research activities ignited this factor. However, Singh et al. (1998) observed that environmental factors can hinder these activities and thwart intrinsic motivation, leading to burnout. In addition, Rasmussen and Jeppesen (2006) noted that the reported psychological variables, as categorised into behavioural, attitudinal, and emotional aspects, revealed observable symptoms in the faculty, affecting their

behaviour, attitudes, and emotional states.

On the other hand, social worth served as a crucial resource in times of resource scarcity such as in the post pandemic period. This can refer to a sense of other valuing an individual. This value can lessen or even mitigate work-related fatigue (Goštautaitė et al., 2020).

In addition, we found a consistent theme among participants regarding the alignment or misalignment of personal and professional expectations. This observation is prevalent in previous research as well. Hammond et al. (2018) revealed the detrimental effects of misalignment by prioritising clients' needs over personal expectations. Additionally, McMahon, and Russell (2022) found that unrealistic job expectations Finan can render individuals more susceptible to burnout.

Finally, we found a negative correlation between occupational stress and overall well-being. Specifically, burnout affects the mental aspect of an individual and fosters physical symptoms. In fact, increased burnout levels correspond to a higher prevalence of physical illnesses; both of these results require a holistic approach mitigate these effects. Moreover, Suñer-Soler and Grau (2013) reinforced this notion by integrating the concept of health-related quality of life, highlighting the importance of a comprehensive understanding of individuals' needs, perceptions, satisfaction levels, and aspirations.

4.3 Factors Related to Work

The final thematic dimension comprises time constraints, task management, workload, and professional role. We noted many factors that participants identified that lead to heightened feelings of stress and burnout, such as are pressures of stringent timelines, ineffective management of tasks, excessive workloads, and broad professional obligations.

Task management is identified as a critical factor, with its degree of efficiency serving as a key element in enhancing task performance by establishing a structured framework for work completion. According to Pan (2017), various factors can negatively affect an employee's overall performance, such as anxiety, fatigue, concentration difficulties, and a lack of control over their work. Notably, the same study found a negative correlation between burnout and task performance.

Olsen et al. (1995) examined the alignment of individual interests, satisfaction, and the institution's expectations and found a connection between the professional roles and satisfaction levels of faculty at a research university. In this case, the clarity of roles within an organisation is pivotal. As Sinval et al. (2022) articulated, role clarity involves the precise definition of tasks, clear delineation of expectations, and explicit outlining of responsibilities for employees, all of which are crucial for minimising ambiguity and enhancing job performance.

4.4 Comprehensive Conceptual Model

From these findings, a comprehensive conceptual model was developed to articulate organisational, individual, and work-related factors as they related to the experiences of burnout among faculty members. Grounded in qualitative data, this model provides a systematic framework for understanding the multifaceted and personal nature of burnout experiences in higher education. It serves as a theoretical tool for academic researchers and institutional policymakers, offering insights into the dynamics of faculty burnout and guiding strategies for its mitigation in academic environments.
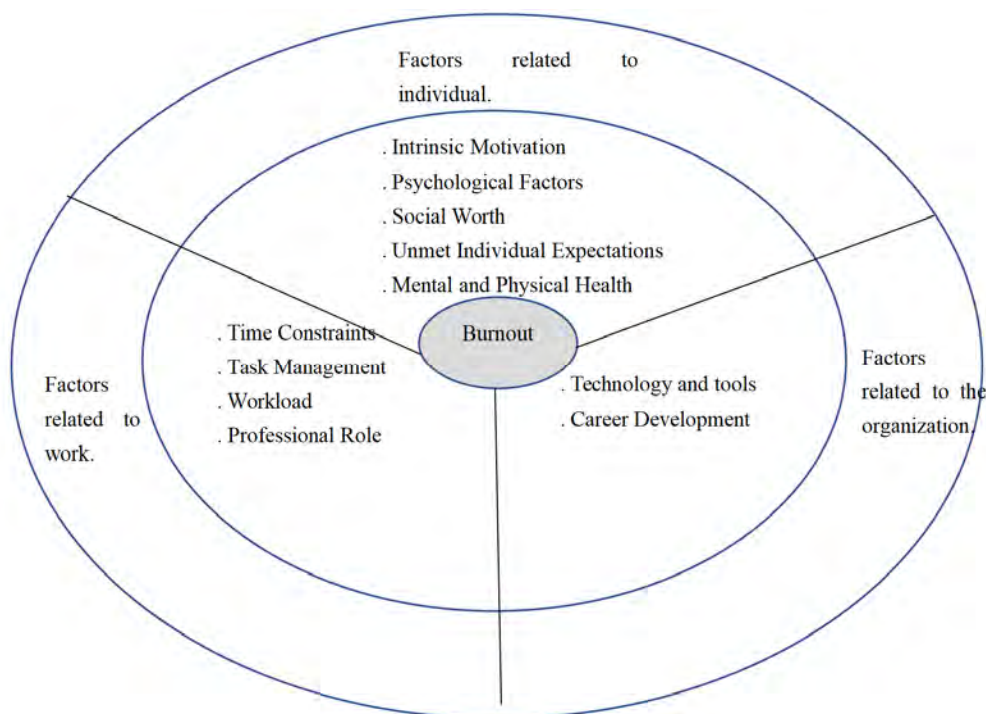
Figure 1. The conceptual model: organisational, individual, and work-related factors as they related to the experiences of burnout among faculty members

5. Discussion

The results of this research offer significant insights into the lived experiences of faculty members within the context of burnout among Canadian private universities during the COVID-19 pandemic and after.

5.1 Alignment with Existing Literature

Burnout is generally regarded as a response to prolonged occupational stressors, typically manifested through emotional, physical, and psychological symptoms. Participants in our study vividly recalled experiences of exhaustion, heightened stress, and a palpable need for well-being support, which echoes the negative toll of working during the post-pandemic. These findings resonate with the research of Maslach and Leiter (1997) on the three-dimensional structure of burnout defined in the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Leiter, 1997), suggesting a direct correlation between higher levels of exhaustion and severe burnout.

Our research shows that task management, workload, and professional role are found to be in accordance with the factors related to work that Finan et al. (2022) observed in their research. Similarly, the psychological factors observed in our study echo the elements related to individuals, such as personality types discussed in the research of Finan, McMahon, and Russell. Our findings also correspond with Barkhuizen, Rothmann, and Van De Vijver, 'Burnout and Work', 322–32; Ramos et al., 'Burnout Syndrome'; Taylor and Frechette, 'Impact of Workload', 134–48 (Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Ramos et al., 2023; Taylor & Frechette, 2022) underscoring the numerous effects of factors related to work and individual on burnout experiences. However, the balance between work and personal life, which is a critical aspect of the factors related to individuals, does not surface in our research.

Moreover, multiple themes were found in our research that paralleled the findings of Minihan et al. (2022). Specifically, these include multiple roles, disconnection, and overburdened factors corresponding to recently introduced pivotal issues, namely, lack of guidance, need for more support, and insufficient public awareness.

The growing list of post-COVID-19 research shows that there is a need to address and mitigate several phenomena that the pandemic has exacerbated, such as burnout. The alignment of our findings with existing literature not only brings validation to our research but also enriches the discourse regarding faculty burnout through a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of this issue. Ultimately, these insights are crucial to attain the main objective of this research: to highlight the need for adaptive and responsive support systems in academia.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

Although there have been a number of studies centred around the phenomenon of burnout, our model contributes to the larger discourse by highlighting the nuanced nature of faculty experiences during the post-pandemic, an unprecedented period of prolonged stress and anxiety in recent years. In essence, our research underscores the need to evolve the understanding of burnout as it relates to the changes in work environments and external stressors like a global pandemic.

5.3 Practical Implications

Practically, the model serves as a guide for university administrators and policymakers in crafting targeted interventions. By specifying the multifaceted causes of burnout, institutions can develop more comprehensive support strategies, ranging from improving technological infrastructure to offering more flexible work arrangements and mental health support.

5.4 Strengths and Limitations

As a focal point of our research, the lived experiences of faculty help create an in-depth understanding of burnout in the context of the post-pandemic. However, as we studied the private universities in Canada, further research can include public universities in Canada.

5.5 Future Research

It is recommended that future researchers use this comprehensive model in different learning contexts and incorporate different statistical methods to gain a deeper analysis of the relationships between these factors. The versatility and robustness of the model can provide a more comprehensive understanding of faculty burnout in different settings.

6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic will continue to have long-lasting effects on nearly every profession. It brings an additional layer of stress to higher education institutions, particularly faculty members. Using a phenomenological approach to study the lived experiences of faculty members in Canada, we uncovered the complex interplay of three themes contributing to faculty burnout: organisation, individual, and work-related factors. According to our findings, task management, workload, and professional role are some of the major work-related drivers of this phenomenon, while intrinsic motivation, psychological resilience and personal expectations were found with most of the respondents. For organisational factors, technology and tools, career development, and workload management were uncovered as some of the major drivers of burnout.

The investigations analysed in this study reveal the presence of burnout among higher education faculty members. To help these institutions as well as policymakers address this phenomenon, this research offers a comprehensive conceptual model that systematically frames the diverse factors influencing faculty burnout. This model highlights the significant role of organisational support, particularly on technology transformation, and underscores the importance of allocating resources to support faculty wellness and foster a supportive work environment in general.

The present research provided a snapshot of the dynamics of faculty burnout within higher education institutions in a region-based context. The limitations of such a snapshot in time and place include the small sample size of our study. Thus, with the evolving nature of the academic workplace as well as the long-term impact of the pandemic, we recommend that authors in future research consider including a variety of educational contexts and incorporating longitudinal research.

In conclusion, this research provides a comprehensive understanding regarding faculty burnout that can be applied to both theory and practice in higher education institutions. And while many colleges and universities have adapted to the new modalities of teaching, higher education is still at a crossroads. Thus, this research underscores the need for a holistic approach to address faculty well-being, integrating organisational support with a deep understanding of individual experiences and needs. As the academic landscape continues to evolve, the insights garnered from this research can help institutions of higher learning make progress in supporting their staff and faculty in all aspects of their lives.

Authors' contributions

Dr. Khatereh Pourasadollahi and Dr. Michele Vincenti contributed equally to the study, and all authors have reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Obtained.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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