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(IJEPC)**www.ijepec.com**A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING
STRESS, ANXIETY, DEPRESSION, AND BURNOUT AMONG
ACADEMIC AND NON-ACADEMIC UNIVERSITY STAFF**

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Abstract:

Mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout have become pressing concerns for both academic and non-academic staff in higher education institutions, driven by rising workloads, administrative demands, and organisational change. This study aims to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework to explain how job demands contribute to burnout, incorporating three established theories: The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, and Social Support Theory. The framework positions stress, anxiety, and depression as mediating variables that arise from prolonged exposure to excessive job demands, while organisational resources and interventions such as social support, autonomy, and structured wellbeing policies act as moderating factors that can buffer these effects. Through theoretical integration and conceptual synthesis, the study finds that burnout is more likely to occur when psychological distress remains unaddressed due to insufficient workplace support, leading to emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment. The framework highlights the importance of theory-based, context-sensitive strategies, recommending leadership development, mental health training, recognition systems, and proactive workload management to improve staff wellbeing. It also identifies directions for future research, including

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longitudinal validation, exploration of role-specific stressors, and cross-cultural comparisons to assess the influence of cultural and institutional factors on burnout development. This conceptual model offers an evidence-informed foundation for universities to design strategic interventions that move beyond reactive responses and towards a systematic, sustainable approach to protecting employee mental health and enhancing institutional effectiveness.

Keywords:

Burnout, Education, Counselling, Stress, Anxiety, Depression

Introduction

Mental health issues in workplaces have been increasingly highlighted in recent times, especially with higher education institutions. There are increasing pressures that academic and non-academic staff have been subjected to: teaching, research, administration, and service-provision, which all increase stress. These arose with the inception of COVID-19, perpetuating problems that led to mental health becoming a predominant consideration for organizations globally. According to Malaysian Ministry of Health data, a worrying trend is unfolding as callers that sought mental health assistance via the Psychosocial Support Service Helpline increased fivefold in 2022 compared to 2020 (Berita Harian, 2022). Earlier, the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2019 found that 2.3% of Malaysian adults reported mental health problems, with forecasts indicating a constant rise. Such findings point toward the urgent need for addressing mental health concern in an organization-oriented and holistic manner, such as in universities.

Various kinds of stressors exist in the academic workplace that academicians and non-academicians have to endure, which include heavy workload, unclear role expectations within an organization, increased expectations to deliver high performance, and the ability to keep abreast with digital change and flexible working arrangements (Rahman et al., 2024; Salmelo-Aro et al., 2022). It has indeed been contradictory. Stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout have been tied with each other in some studies (Ismail et al., 2021; Salmela-Aro et al., 2022), yet the conceptual frameworks that link these psychological factors within the university setting to organizational factors and intervention strategies are still missing. In the absence of a well-grounded conceptualization, remediation would be haphazard and poorly executed, thus undermining the long-term viability of its professionals' interventions (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020; Taris et al., 2017).

The objective of this research is to address the gap above, and propose a conceptual framework that links job demands, psychological outcomes (stress, anxiety and depression) and burnout in university employees. Based on three theories: The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and Social Support Theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985), this review argues that in developing interventions NUS needs to consider both individual disadvantages, and organizational contexts. The JD-R model highlights that burnout occurs when job demands exceed resources; COR theory has argued that stress will accompany the loss of resources, even when there is not enough recovery; and, the Social Support Theory cognates supportive contexts can mitigate stressor implications for mental health outcomes.

In this proposed framework, stress, anxiety, and depression are seen as intervening psychological responses to excessive job demands. If these reactions are not managed, they will gradually escalate to burnout, characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and low personal accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). The model does not disregard the role of organisational resources, such as flexible working conditions, opportunities for development, and psychological support services, in this relationship as their presence can reduce or add to staff outcomes.

It is utmost important to understand how mental health impacts university staff from both a personal point of view and the university as a whole. When employee burnout rises, job satisfaction decreases, organisational commitment reduces, unscheduled absences increase, and staff turnover increases. This is a serious issue that affects how the organisation operates and will reflect on how the organisation is perceived (Dewa et al., 2014; Mudrak et al., 2018; Watts & Robertson, 2011). The reality is that universities are under pressure to be competitive in a local and global economy and in order to do any of these things, a mentally healthy workforce needs to be maintained. Supporting staff mental health is helpful to not just staff, it's also strategic (Tang et al., 2019; O'Connor et al., 2021).

This paper lays the foundation to form structured theory-based approaches to mental health management in universities through an understanding of how stress, anxiety, and depression contribute to burnout and the moderating role of organisational interventions. This transitions universities from individually based reactive approaches to the anticipatory establishment of systemic managerial approaches connected to leadership development, a balanced workload, professional recognition, and wellness improvement.

In summary, the purpose of this paper is to present a coherent conceptual framework of how elements of the workplace connect with psychological mechanisms to determine burnout outcomes for university staff. This model hopes to inform future empirical studies, shape organisational policies, and aid in the design of pervasive interventions focused upon the well-being of employees in higher education.

Literature Review

Issues surrounding mental health decline for university staff have been on the rise in recent years. Thus, understanding how stress, anxiety and depression develop and relate to workplace issues is key to informing the development of supportive mechanisms (Harms et al., 2017). Stress is the emotional or physical strain that develops when people feel that they cannot contend with demands that are being placed upon them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Anxiety refers to enduring worry and tension in connection to fear about future situations that feel uncontrollable (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Depression can be characterized by prolonged periods of sadness, disinterest in previously enjoyed activities, and problems with functioning on a daily basis (Sabshin, 1968).

Burnout represents a significant problem in academic environments and encompasses emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a diminished sense of accomplishment, which is typically a result of continuous stress at work (Maslach et al., 2001). The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model helps to explain burnout how burnout occurs. It suggests that high job demands (such as workload or emotional challenge), combined with little in the way of job resources (minimal support, control/autonomy), can lead to the onset of mental health issues

(Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job demands are defined as job factors aspects that continue to require mental effort, which can deplete energy levels. Job resources, however, refer those factors that assist jobs in completing their tasks and alleviate job demands, foster personal and professional development (Schaufeli & Taris, 2013)

With the constructs accurately described, researchers and practitioners can anticipate better understand the levers of mental health and create more effective, longer-lasting actions conducive to promoting wellbeing in higher education environments.

In defining about stress, it was well stated that it is a mental and physical response that occurs when someone perceives the demands placed on them, real or imagined, exceed their ability to cope with them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In a university context work, stress can arise from factors such as workloads, administrative tasks, pressure to publish, and performance assessments. If these levels of stress are prolonged, with insufficient support or coping strategies, emotional exhaustion, and eventually burnout may occur.

Depending on the individual circumstances of staff, academic stress is often compounded by role confusion, difficulties balancing work with personal life, and worries about job security (Rahman et al., 2024). The everyday duties of an academic staff member to apply for funding, publish in relevant journals, and service student needs, can also contribute to stress (Winefield et al., 2003). When the academic pressure builds and there is inadequate support from the institution, academic staff may experience increased levels of personal psychological distress.

Research has shown a link between job-related stress in universities and decreased job satisfaction, work performance and health issues, including sleeping and depression (Gillespie et al.; 2001; Tytherleigh et al., 2005). Chronic work-related stress is also associated with emotional exhaustion and an overall negative attitude towards work, which are two critical indicators of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001).

The Covid-19 pandemic caused significant distress for university personnel given the sudden transition to online learning as well as navigating technical difficulties while simultaneously providing academic and emotional support to students facing their own challenges and juggling personal and family demands (Salmelo-Aro et al., 2022).

For these reasons, understanding the precursor to stress, along with strategies to mitigate and manage stress, is important. Universities should intervene through equitable distribution of work and through the provision of mental health services with an emphasis on programmes designed to mitigate stress and promote personnel wellbeing.

Anxiety is commonly understood as a state of excessive concern or unease about future events, which can interfere with daily functioning. It often presents not only as psychological unease but also as physical symptoms such as increased heart rate, muscle tension, restlessness, and difficulty concentrating (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). In the workplace, anxiety may arise from various factors, including fear of job loss, ambiguous responsibilities, limited managerial support, or overwhelming workloads. In academic environments in particular, these stressors are often heightened due to performance-based assessments and shifting institutional expectations. When individuals are regularly preoccupied with how they are being evaluated

or whether they meet expectations, anxiety becomes a chronic issue that can erode both personal wellbeing and professional effectiveness.

Anxiety in the workplace can significantly disrupt how individuals process information, make decisions, and maintain professional relationships. It often narrows cognitive focus, making it more difficult to solve problems creatively or adapt to new challenges (Schmidt et al., 2010). When anxiety is left unmanaged, it tends to amplify existing stress responses, which can accelerate mental fatigue and lead to emotional exhaustion. Over time, this chronic strain not only lowers work performance but also contributes to more serious mental health outcomes, including depression and occupational burnout (Bianchi et al., 2015). These effects are particularly concerning in demanding environments like higher education, where prolonged psychological pressure can go unnoticed and unaddressed.

In university settings, academic staff are frequently required to juggle multiple responsibilities including teaching, research, supervision, curriculum development, and administrative duties. This multitasking is often compounded by rising expectations to meet institutional performance targets, such as publishing in high-impact journals, securing research grants, and achieving favourable student evaluations. Adding to this pressure is the growing prevalence of short-term contracts and uncertain career progression, which can significantly heighten feelings of job insecurity. As noted by Sabagh, Hall, and Saroyan (2018), such conditions can intensify anxiety among faculty members, particularly when institutional support systems are weak or inconsistently applied. Without adequate support from leadership or peers, these demands may accumulate over time, increasing vulnerability to psychological distress and negatively impacting both personal wellbeing and professional engagement.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, anxiety levels among university staff increased significantly due to the rapid and unexpected shift in working conditions. Lecturers and academic support staff were required to transition to online teaching with little preparation time, which brought about challenges related to unfamiliar technologies, digital content creation, and student engagement in virtual classrooms. On top of these academic adjustments, many were also coping with heightened concerns about job security, institutional restructuring, and personal health risks. This period also demanded that educators manage their students' emotional wellbeing while simultaneously handling the needs of their own families, often in shared or disrupted home environments. As Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al. (2021) highlighted, this convergence of professional and personal pressures created a heightened state of psychological strain that many were unprepared to manage, emphasising the need for stronger institutional mental health support systems in times of crisis.

Addressing anxiety in the workplace requires a proactive and multifaceted approach. One of the first steps is increasing awareness and understanding of mental health among employees and leadership alike. Training sessions, workshops, and informational resources can help staff recognise early signs of anxiety and understand how to respond effectively. In addition to promoting awareness, organisations should facilitate access to professional counselling services, either on-site or through external partnerships, ensuring that support is confidential and easily available. Peer support mechanisms such as mentoring programmes, buddy systems, or informal discussion groups, can also offer valuable emotional reinforcement and reduce feelings of isolation. Crucially, institutions must foster a psychologically safe work environment where employees feel respected, valued, and able to voice concerns without fear

of stigma or retaliation. This kind of supportive culture not only helps reduce anxiety but also strengthens overall workplace morale and performance.

Depression is a complex and multifaceted affective disorder, characterised by a sustained low mood, anhedonia, diminished self-worth, and disruptions in cognitive processes such as concentration, memory, and decision-making (World Health Organization, 2021). It is not merely an episodic emotional state but rather a persistent psychological condition that can permeate all aspects of an individual's functioning. Within the context of higher education institutions, the onset of depressive symptoms is frequently precipitated by prolonged exposure to adverse occupational conditions. These include, but are not limited to, overwhelming workload demands, the constant pressure to meet research and teaching performance benchmarks, strained collegial or supervisory relationships, and the perceived absence of institutional recognition or psychological support. Such stressors, when left unaddressed, contribute to a gradual erosion of mental resilience, potentially culminating in the clinical manifestation of depression. As a result, the presence of depression within academic workspaces not only undermines individual wellbeing but also has broader implications for institutional effectiveness and sustainability.

Within academia, depression is often concealed beneath a pervasive professional ethos that valorises overwork, self-sufficiency, and unrelenting productivity. Academic staff are routinely enculturated into institutional settings that equate their scholarly output with their personal value and professional legitimacy. This performance-driven culture inadvertently discourages self-care, stigmatises vulnerability, and delays proactive engagement with mental health resources. Such internalised norms contribute to a cycle of emotional depletion, cognitive disengagement, and diminished psychological resilience (Evans et al., 2018). The empirical literature substantiates that depressive states disrupt intrinsic motivational processes, impair goal-directed behaviours, and undermine the efficacy of both individual and collective coping strategies. Consequently, the persistence of depressive symptoms in academic environments not only elevates the risk of comorbid psychological conditions such as anxiety and burnout, but also threatens long-term faculty wellbeing and institutional productivity (Bianchi et al., 2015).

Recent empirical investigations have highlighted a markedly elevated prevalence of depressive symptoms among contingent academic personnel, including adjunct lecturers, part-time faculty, and contract-based educators (Winefield et al., 2003; Sabagh et al., 2018). These individuals often occupy liminal professional roles that render them peripheral to the core academic and administrative operations of the institution. Their employment conditions are frequently characterised by precarious contracts, inconsistent income, and minimal integration into the organisational culture. As a result, they are systematically excluded from key institutional resources, including access to comprehensive health and wellbeing services, professional development opportunities, and meaningful participation in governance or policy-making processes. This structural marginalisation not only reinforces occupational insecurity but also cultivates a sense of professional invisibility and alienation. These psychosocial stressors, when combined with the absence of institutional recognition, significantly elevate the risk of developing depressive symptomatology among this vulnerable segment of the academic workforce.

The intersection between depression and burnout has been extensively studied, with both clinical and empirical evidence underscoring their high comorbidity and overlapping symptomatology. Although recognised as distinct diagnostic constructs, depression and burnout frequently manifest concurrently, often making differential diagnosis challenging. Shared symptoms such as persistent fatigue, anhedonia, motivational decline, and a pervasive sense of inefficacy create a clinical profile that blurs categorical boundaries. When depressive symptoms are not identified and managed in a timely manner, they can intensify and evolve into chronic burnout, a condition marked by enduring emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and disengagement from professional responsibilities (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). This progression is particularly salient in high-demand work environments, such as academia, where sustained psychological pressure and insufficient recovery periods create conditions ripe for such syndemic developments.

Addressing depression within academic contexts necessitates a comprehensive reconfiguration of institutional ethos and operational frameworks. Beyond superficial wellness campaigns, universities must commit to deep structural reforms that prioritise psychological safety and holistic staff wellbeing. This involves dismantling entrenched stigma around mental health, embedding evidence-based psychological support mechanisms into organisational policy, and adopting a proactive rather than reactive stance on mental health management. Key interventions include the recalibration of workload expectations to ensure they are reasonable and sustainable, the integration of mental health literacy into professional development programmes, and the establishment of accessible, confidential counselling services tailored to the specific challenges of academic life. Additionally, institutions should implement robust systems for longitudinal assessment of staff mental health trends, enabling data-driven decision-making and early identification of at-risk individuals. Such measures are critical not only for reducing the incidence and severity of depression but also for fostering a resilient academic workforce capable of sustaining innovation, collegiality, and pedagogical excellence.

Burnout is recognised as a complex psychological syndrome that emerges as a maladaptive response to sustained occupational stress, particularly within professions characterised by high emotional demands and limited recovery periods. As defined by Maslach and Leiter (2016), burnout comprises three interrelated dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion signifies a chronic state of physical and emotional depletion, where individuals feel they can no longer give of themselves at a psychological level. Depersonalisation, often described as a coping mechanism, manifests in the form of emotional distancing, cynicism, or a mechanical approach to work that strips interactions of empathy and authenticity. The final dimension, diminished personal accomplishment, refers to a pervasive sense of inefficacy and lack of fulfilment, leading individuals to question their competence and the value of their contributions. These dimensions do not function in isolation; rather, they reinforce each other in a cyclical pattern that, if unaddressed, can severely impair professional performance, personal well-being, and organisational cohesion.

In the academic context, burnout has emerged as a significant and growing concern, fuelled by a convergence of systemic and cultural pressures. Intensifying workloads, increasingly competitive performance metrics, heightened expectations around teaching evaluations, and the relentless demand for high-impact publications and external research funding have created an environment in which chronic stress is often normalised (Guthrie et al., 2017). Faculty

members frequently find themselves extending their work beyond contractual hours, often juggling teaching, research, supervision, administrative responsibilities, and community engagement. This multifaceted workload is rarely matched by proportional institutional support or recognition, which exacerbates feelings of disillusionment and emotional fatigue. Compounding this is the ongoing corporatisation of higher education, where managerial logics and market-based values have supplanted traditional academic ideals. The focus on measurable outputs such as publication counts, student satisfaction scores, and grant income, has increasingly overshadowed intrinsic motivations like intellectual exploration and collegial collaboration. This shift fosters a misalignment between personal and institutional values, contributing not only to professional dissatisfaction but also to a more pervasive erosion of academic identity and purpose (Berg & Seeber, 2016).

Studies consistently show that burnout takes a toll not just on individual well-being but on the broader health of organisations. When staff are burned out, their ability to focus, engage, and contribute meaningfully declines. This often translates into decreased productivity, more frequent absences, and a noticeable drop in overall job satisfaction (Leiter & Maslach, 2009). People may begin to question whether their work matters, and over time, some choose to leave the profession altogether in search of a more manageable and fulfilling path. Beyond the mental strain, the physical effects of burnout are also concerning. It has been associated with disruptions in sleep, heightened risk of heart disease, and weakened immune responses, showing that the body is just as impacted as the mind when sustained stress is left unaddressed (Salvagioni et al., 2017).

Preventing and addressing burnout calls for more than individual resilience. It requires institutions to take a hard look at the way work is structured and supported. It begins with building environments where people feel they have some control over their work, access to supportive relationships, and chances to grow professionally. Offering flexibility, mentorship, and time for meaningful reflection can go a long way. When workloads are balanced and staff feel seen and valued, the workplace becomes more than a source of stress. It becomes a place of purpose. Leadership matters too: when leaders listen, show empathy, and recognise effort, they help build trust and morale. A culture that encourages open dialogue and treats well-being as a shared responsibility can act as a protective layer against the strain that so often leads to burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Work demands are the physical, mental, social, or organisational parts of a job that require continuous effort and can affect a person's health and wellbeing (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In universities, these demands often come from multiple directions. Academic staff are expected to manage a wide range of tasks such as teaching, planning lessons, doing research, publishing papers, guiding students, applying for grants, and taking on administrative responsibilities. These tasks can become overwhelming, especially in situations where there are limited resources, not enough staff, or increased pressure to meet performance goals (Guthrie et al., 2017).

University staff often work long hours and face emotionally draining situations with students while trying to switch between tasks that require intense focus. The growing trend of treating universities like businesses, with more focus on numbers and competition, will add to the pressure. This shift has led to less freedom for academics and more focus on performance tracking and meeting targets (Berg & Seeber, 2016). As a result, many face unclear job

expectations, too many responsibilities, and conflicting demands. These conditions are known to increase stress and are linked to burnout (Rahman et al., 2024).

According to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, burnout is more likely to happen when job demands are high and resources are low. In other words, when staff are under pressure and lack support, recognition, or the ability to control how they work, they are more likely to struggle with their mental health (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In universities, this mismatch between what is expected and the support given can lead to low motivation, poor job satisfaction, and reduced productivity. Over time, it affects not only individuals but the institution as a whole.

Two bibliometric studies systematically mapped the intellectual structure of digital addiction (DA) research, with emphasis on its negative impact on academic achievement (Tülübaş et al., 2023; Karakose et al., 2022). Findings revealed an increasing focus on social media and smartphone addiction, as well as mediators like multitasking, procrastination, and cognitive load. The analyses underscore that persistent digital engagement can lead to attention deficits, lower performance, and heightened fatigue. In ODL settings where students and staff are immersed in online environments, this digital saturation may contribute to survey non-response or incomplete participation. Including this context strengthens the argument that online data collection must account for participants' digital workload and potential survey fatigue.

To reduce high work demands, universities need to make thoughtful and lasting changes to how work is organised and supported. This starts with giving staff a manageable and fairly distributed workload so that individuals are not constantly operating at the edge of burnout. Institutions should ensure that there are enough qualified staff to meet teaching, research, and administrative needs, and that responsibilities are shared equitably across departments. Involving staff in decisions that affect their work such as scheduling, policy changes, or resource planning, can also improve morale and strengthen commitment. Rather than relying heavily on narrow performance indicators, universities can benefit from valuing collaboration, creativity, and care work, which often go unnoticed but are essential to a healthy academic environment. Clarifying job expectations, offering flexibility, and encouraging open communication contribute to a more compassionate culture where staff feel respected and supported. Hence, these steps are not just beneficial for staff wellbeing, they are necessary for sustaining a thriving academic community.

Resources refer to job factors that assist in reaching work objectives, lessen job pressures, and promote individual growth and development (Schaufeli & Taris, 2013). Examples include independence, support from supervisors, opportunities for career advancement, and access to counselling services. When these resources are available, they help buffer the negative effects of job demands and build resilience against stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

In the university setting, access to these resources makes a noticeable difference in how staff manage their responsibilities. When academic staff are given autonomy over their teaching and research agendas, they tend to report greater motivation, engagement, and job satisfaction (Rahman et al., 2024). Supervisor support has also been linked to reduced levels of emotional exhaustion and improved psychological wellbeing among university employees (Leiter & Maslach, 2009). Similarly, participation in career development programmes, such as leadership

workshops or research training seminars, provides staff with the tools and confidence needed to navigate complex institutional demands and pursue advancement opportunities (Barkhuizen et al., 2014).

Mental health support services, including access to professional counselling and structured peer mentoring, are also critical in cultivating a supportive work culture. Such resources offer a space for emotional processing and personal growth, which in turn promote adaptive coping mechanisms and reduce stigma around mental health (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). When institutions invest in accessible and confidential mental health infrastructure, it signals that staff wellbeing is not just an individual responsibility but an organisational priority. Ultimately, by ensuring that adequate resources are in place, universities not only help individuals thrive but also foster a resilient and high-functioning academic community.

Table 1: Summary of the Key Construct

Construct	Definition	Key Reference
Stress	Response to perceived imbalance between external demands and coping ability.	Lazarus & Folkman (1984)
Anxiety	Excessive worry and fear about future threats.	American Psychiatric Association (2022)
Depression	Persistent sadness, loss of interest, and cognitive impairments.	World Health Organization (2021)
Burnout	Emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment.	Maslach & Leiter (2016)
Work Demands	Job aspects requiring sustained effort, associated with costs.	Bakker & Demerouti (2007)
Resources	Aspects that help achieve goals, reduce demands, and promote growth.	Schaufeli & Taris (2013)

Proposed Conceptual Framework

This paper presents a conceptual model (see Figure 1) that details the way in which job demands and resources interact to affect mental health outcomes and burnout among university employees. Utilizing the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, and Social Support Theory, the model indicates that high job demands lead to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, hence burnout. Organisational interventions and resources are conceived as moderating factors to reverse the negative impact of demands on mental well-being. With the incorporation of these factors, the model provides an integrated explanation of how employee experiences and organisational design collectively influence employees' mental health in the higher education domain.

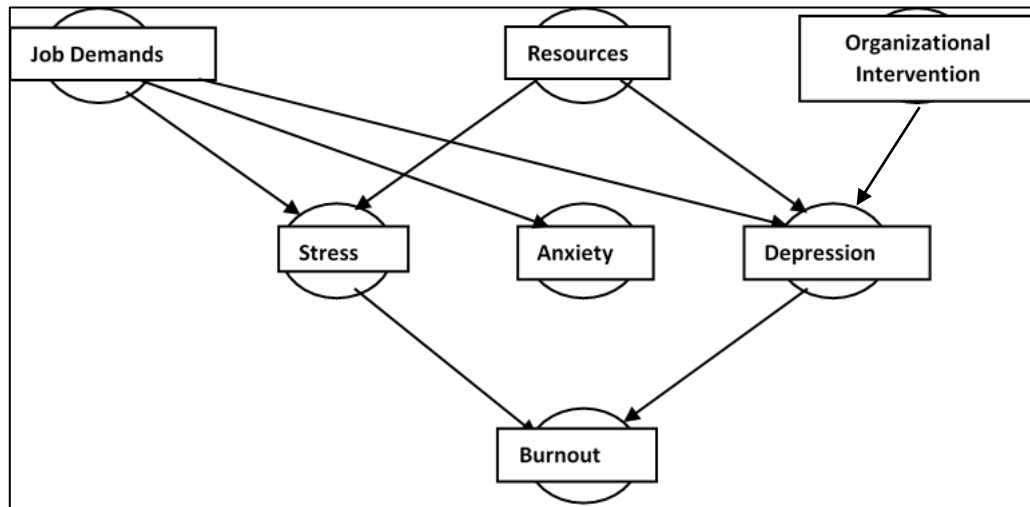


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model proposed explains how work environment factors lead to psychological distress and burnout among university employees. It combines theories from the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, and Social Support Theory.

Work demands (such as heavy workload, administrative pressure, emotional labor) are thought to increase psychological tension, thus contributing to increased Stress, Anxiety, and Depression levels. The three psychological conditions serve as mediators between work demands and burnout. When one is under prolonged intense distress, they can express signs of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased personal accomplishment.

In contrast, Resources (such as independence, social support, access to therapy) are believed to reverse the effect of job demands by alleviating depression, anxiety, and stress levels. Resources buffer workers from the evolution of psychological stress into burnout.

In this model, Organizational Interventions (such as stress management programs, flexible schedules, and health programs) are key factors that affect the availability and quality of resources. Well-designed interventions are able to strengthen employee resilience, improve coping, and directly reduce the likelihood of burnout. The model proposes two paths: work demands leading to psychological stress generating burnout, with resources and interventions acting as reducing factors. The best means to prevent burnout in higher education will need to stabilize demands and resources.

Conceptual Propositions

As proposed in the conceptual framework, a series of propositions are outlined that will guide future empirical investigations. These propositions are based on established theoretical concepts and are guided by existing literature in the field of occupational psychology and mental health research.

Proposition 1

Increased demands at work have been found to be positively related to increased stress, anxiety, and depression among university staff. Bakker and Demerouti (2007) describe that if workers are facing too much workload, time pressure, and emotional demands without sufficient recovery time, they will tend to develop increased levels of stress and psychological strain. In university contexts, heavy teaching loads, administrative work, and pressure to publish can be significant causes of these undesirable psychological outcomes.

Proposition 2

High stress, anxiety, and depression facilitate the effect of job demands on burnout. Stress, anxiety, and depression are mental processes through which high job demands produce symptoms of burnout. Maslach and Leiter (2016) state that repeated exposure to high levels of stress results in emotional exhaustion, the core element of burnout. Anxiety and depression increase feelings of helplessness and disengagement, resulting in faster burnout development.

Proposition 3

Job resources and organizational interventions buffer the relationship between job demands and psychological distress, reducing the negative effects. As observed by Schaufeli and Taris (2013), presence of job resources such as autonomy, feedback, social support, and chances for professional development can serve as buffers to high job demands. Organizational interventions to enhance resources, such as wellness programs, flexible work arrangements, and leadership training, take a central position in buffering stress, anxiety, and depression in employees.

Proposition 4

Higher organisational resources and interventions have a negative relationship with burnout of university employees. Organisations with strong support systems are likely to protect employees from burnout. Cohen and Wills (1985) pointed out that social support helps to buffer psychological distress. If institutions actively endeavour towards fostering mental health resources, recognising employee work contributions, and fostering a healthy work culture, the incidence of burnout is extremely remote.

Practical Implications

The proposed conceptual framework also has several important practical implications for higher education institutions, particularly within the Malaysian context, since matters of concern regarding the well-being of staff become more pertinent.

Firstly, universities need to acknowledge the urgent necessity of tackling mental health issues in an anticipatory and not reactive manner. The increasing need for psychosocial support services in Malaysia (Berita Harian, 2022) also reflects the increasing psychological burden on academic as well as administrative staff members. The universities should embed mental health support in their strategic planning instead of considering it as a secondary service. Having mental health policies established and making Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) available can offer immediate psychological respite for employees, reducing stress and anxiety before they develop into burnout.

Second, the model highlights the imperative necessity of aligning job demands and job resources. Malaysian universities generally require staff to balance intensive teaching workloads, administrative work, and research publications (Chua et al., 2018). Organizations must engage in regular workload assessments to provide fair task allocation and investigate adaptable work arrangements, including hybrid work programs, that have been proven to enhance work-life balance and limit mental stress (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020).

Third, Malaysian institution leadership behaviors need to be improved proactively to foster a more supportive and empathetic work environment. In another pertinent study, it was emphasized that transformational and servant leadership styles have been associated with reduced employee burnout and organizational commitment (Qureshi et al., 2024). Universities need to invest in leadership training programs that educate managers and department leaders to identify early warning signs of psychological distress and to foster supportive, open lines of communication.

Fourth, intervention efforts must aim to enhance strategies of resilience like mindfulness training, stress management workshops, and peer support groups. These interventions have been linked to enhanced psychological well-being and enhanced emotional resilience among Malaysian workers (Ong et al., 2024). Frequent mindfulness and emotional management workshops may substantially enhance individual coping techniques and minimize the chances of burnout.

Fifth, reward and recognition systems should be strengthened. Different academic faculties note that perceptions of worthlessness enhance stress and dissatisfaction (Zumrah, 2015). Establishing open recognition systems, like monthly recognition awards, appreciation sessions, and career advancement rewards, can promote feelings of achievement and belongingness among university personnel.

Finally, continual surveillance of mental health indicators is important. Institutions ought to conduct yearly well-being surveys, via questionnaires or focus groups, to continually evaluate the impact of interventions and modulate strategies where required. Evidence-based mental health governance will allow universities to continue being agile to new difficulties in employee well-being. Hence, through a systematic and well-planned strategy founded on the suggested conceptual model, Malaysian higher education institutions, in particular, are able to create healthier, more sustainable workplaces, fostering employees' well-being and institutional performance.

Directions for Future Research

Subsequent research should be directed towards verifying the conceptual model proposed here using longitudinal research design. Longitudinal research enables observation of temporal dynamics and causal links among stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout, especially under the higher education workplace stress (Lesener et al., 2020; Mijakoski et al., 2022). Longitudinal studies could shed more light on how the developmental path of psychological distress changes over time among non-academic and academic staff.

More studies are required to investigate stressors unique to different groups, since academic and administrative staff face different issues. Researchers tend to experience publication pressures, grading assessments, and career uncertainty, whereas non-academic staff experience

bureaucratic inefficiencies, vague job descriptions, and restricted career promotion opportunities (Kinman & Wray, 2018; Sabagh et al., 2021). Examining these sectoral variations could yield more efficient interventions and support approaches geared to meet each sector's specific needs. In addition, cross-country comparative analysis needs to be conducted to investigate whether cultural contexts influence the relationships within the model. Cultural norms regarding work-life balance, mental illness stigma, and institutional pressures can influence how employees perceive and cope with stress-related problems (Swanson & Swanson, 2019). Cross-country comparative analysis among various national higher education systems would make the framework more externally valid and guide culturally sensitive workplace policies.

Conclusion

Mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout among university staff are no longer a choice but an imperative. With more pressures from policy changes, performance tracking, and technological advancements, staff well-being is now a key element to ensuring institutional sustainability and service excellence among universities. A sound mental health strategy must recognize both academic and non-academic staff members as integral stakeholders within the university community. Neglecting their mental health not only endangers individual well-being but also risks interfering with organizational performance, morale, and staff retention (Kinman & Wray, 2018; Salmela-Aro et al., 2022).

Strategic interventions based on theory are core to building long-term change. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and other models offer sound guides for developing proactive and reactive intervention tactics that act on structural and psychosocial risk factors (Lesener et al., 2020). Integration of these models into institution policies will assist in early detection of burnout indicators, promote resilience, and minimize stigma against seeking help for mental health. Interventions must be evidence-based, culturally relevant, and reviewed periodically to conform to changing demands at varied roles and situations. In addition to its practical applications, the research also makes conceptual contributions through the suggestion of an integrating model to interpret the interaction of psychological distress variables within higher learning environments.

The proposed framework can potentially steer academic research and policy-making and serve as a benchmark for continuous tracking and cross-disciplinary dialogue. Future studies can expand the scope to encompass topics such as emotional regulation, organizational justice, and electronic workload to more closely capture the nuances of academic and administrative work in contemporary universities.

In summary, universities need to progress past superficial fixes and embrace comprehensive, theory-based, and context-aware strategies for employee wellbeing. It is only with this level of commitment that universities can create positive work environments and maintain elevated standards of education and service.

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