

Academic Burnout in University Students: Causes, Consequences, and Coping Mechanisms

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Introduction

This literature review examines the lived experience of academic burnout among university students and discusses its causes, consequences of academic burnout, and how to cope with the burnout. It focuses on learning how students experience burnout, what emotional and academic consequences they endure, and what coping mechanisms they use to deal with it. The review represents opinions of different domains and academic levels and provides a holistic approach to the problem. It does not consider burnout in school participants or the teaching personnel nor does it dwell on clinical manifestations of mental disorders.

ACADEMIC BURNOUT IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, AND COPING MECHANISMS



Academic burnout is a state of emotional exhaustion, cynicism or detachment, and reduced academic efficacy caused by prolonged academic stress. Recognizing it early and using effective coping strategies leads to better well-being, stronger academic performance, and long-term success.

THE BURNOUT PATHWAY



COPING & SUPPORT MECHANISMS



Research Background

Academic burnout is a burning problem of higher learning that is still spreading within the ranks of universities among students of all disciplines and all levels (Liu, 2023). Burnout refers to a condition in which a person is burnt out emotionally, has lost out on academic efficacy and has become cynical about the process of seeking education. This is highly harmful to a student and his/her education. The growing academic performance pressure, financial strain, isolation, and uncertainty of their future job prospects have only contributed to the risk of student burnout, particularly in the context of modern competitive education systems (Walsham, 2023). Most studies established the prevalence of academic burnout, which shows its strong relationship with psychological health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and sleeping disorders (Pagnin, 2014). These struggles were additionally worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, where the abrupt transition to online education and a lack of access to campus resources helped destabilise the student schedule and support systems (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2023). Therefore, finding out how students experience burnout and what aspects are involved is more relevant today than ever before. The current research is a qualitative investigation into the experience of academic burnout through the lens of actual students. It aims at capturing the perceived causes, i.e., workload, deficiency of academic support, and performance pressure, and emotional and psychological outcomes that students experience (Yangdon, 2021). Further, the study will seek to reveal different coping mechanisms that students use, such as informal peer support, self-care mechanisms, and institutional support, and the effectiveness of these methods.

Though the literature on student burnout is gaining more quantitative research, fewer studies are exploring the subjective experience and coping stories of students themselves (Folsom, 2024). As the study seeks to fill this gap, it can guide further insights into the nature of academic burnout occurrence and management, which can subsequently be the basis of more [effective policy and intervention strategies to support](#) student wellbeing and academic resilience within the university context.

Rationale

The rationale of this literature review is the increasing identification of academic burnout as a serious issue in the mental health and well-being of students in universities (Halat, 2023). As future professionals and contributors to various sectors, particularly the social and health industries, students' academic experiences directly influence their capacity to thrive and serve others effectively. Burnout during university not only hinders academic success but also poses long-term risks, such as chronic stress, reduced resilience, and withdrawal from professional pathways (Fernández-Castillo and Fernández-Prados, 2023). Within the health and social care industries, where the emotional demands are already high, students entering these fields with prior experiences of unmanaged burnout may face compounded challenges. Understanding the lived experiences of academic burnout can help educational institutions, mental health practitioners, and policymakers

develop more targeted, empathetic, and preventative strategies to support student well-being. By exploring students' coping mechanisms, the study also sheds light on what support systems are perceived as effective, offering valuable insights for the development of student-focused health interventions and campus-based mental health services (Thomas, 2025).

This literature review is particularly relevant at a time when mental health concerns are rising globally. Enhancing support for students now can lead to a healthier, more [resilient future workforce](#), particularly in socially impactful fields where emotional endurance and mental well-being are essential.

Aims and Objectives

The study aims to explore the lived experiences of academic burnout among university students, focusing on its causes, consequences, and the coping mechanisms they employ.

Research Objectives

- To explore university students' perceptions and lived experiences of academic burnout, including the key factors they identify as contributing to their stress and exhaustion.
- To examine the emotional, psychological, and academic consequences of burnout as described by students across different disciplines and levels of study.
- To investigate the support mechanisms students use to manage or recover from academic burnout, and how effective they perceive these methods to be.

Research Methodology

Search Strategy and Databases Used

A thorough literature retrieval was performed to cover multiple academic databases to guarantee the use of qualitative and relevant resources (Hiebl, 2023). Databases that were used were Google Scholar, JSTOR, PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus and Science Direct as they have extensive coverage of peer-reviewed publications covering various fields including psychology, education, health and social sciences. The search was refined by using Boolean operators (AND, OR). Key search terms included: "academic burnout", "university students", "student mental health", "causes of burnout", "coping mechanisms", "student stress", and "psychological impact of academic pressure". Filters were applied to limit the results to English-language articles published between 2010 and 2024, to ensure recent and relevant findings were included (Rao and Moon, 2021).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To maintain the focus of the review, only studies that directly addressed the experiences of academic burnout among university or college students were included. Both qualitative and quantitative studies were considered, provided they offered insights into students' personal experiences, coping mechanisms, or the academic and psychological consequences of burnout (Bodicoat, 2021). Studies focusing on school-aged children, teaching staff, or clinical psychiatric diagnoses outside the context of academic burnout were excluded. Additionally, non-peer-reviewed articles, opinion pieces, and grey literature were omitted to ensure academic rigour.

Data Extraction and Thematic Analysis

After applying the inclusion criteria, selected studies were critically reviewed, and relevant data were extracted. Key themes were identified and grouped under three overarching categories: causes of academic burnout, consequences of burnout, and coping/support mechanisms. The thematic analysis enabled a deeper understanding of how students perceive and respond to burnout within different academic contexts (Schmidt, 2025). Each study was analysed for methodological approach, participant characteristics, main findings, and relevance to the research aim. This allowed for cross-comparison of findings across disciplines and institutions, helping to identify patterns, gaps, and inconsistencies in the literature (Hiebl, 2023).

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

As this is a secondary research project based on published literature, there were no direct ethical issues involving human participants. However, care was taken to ensure proper citation and academic integrity (Taquette and Borges da Matta Souza, 2022). A limitation of this method is that it relies on previously collected data, which may be shaped by the original researchers' objectives or cultural contexts (Lim, 2025). Additionally, there may be publication bias, as studies with significant findings are more likely to be published than those with null results.

Literature Review

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a method used in qualitative research to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns (themes) within data (Christou, 2022). It enables researchers to explore participants' perspectives by systematically coding and categorising their responses, revealing meaningful insights related to the research questions or objectives under investigation.

Perceived Academic Pressures and Expectations

A central theme emerging from the literature is the immense academic pressure students perceive from a combination of workload, assessments, and high expectations, which are significant contributors to stress and exhaustion. The form of degree programs in which the student is engaged can usually determine how intense such pressures are. As an example, the most prominent sources of stress in very competitive disciplines such as dentistry are directly connected

to academic achievements, such as “examinations and grades,” a so-called fear of failing the course or year, and a non-stop fear of keeping up with the workload (Collin, 2020). Such pressures do not exist solely on the pass/fail concept; rather, they are compounded by a culture of competition that values a high level of personal expectations and performance (Collin, 2020).

A similar culture of high achievement exists in other intensive professions, such as physiotherapy, where there are high-stakes entry requirements that draw in academically motivated students, who are more at risk of burnout (Biggs, 2023). The intensity in such places is usually self-generated and externally motivated. One of them is a so-called socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP), which means that students feel that they are compelled to achieve a perfect level that is set by outside agents, including educators, family, or society (Biggs, 2023). The pressure to constantly exceed your best and always not be good enough generates a constant pressure to keep working harder and harder; this, in turn, can directly cause burnout.

In addition to individual degree programs, a more general university setting is quite stressful. Students are undergoing a significant life transition, and they are regularly handling educational requirements with part-time jobs and financial obligations (Denovan, 2017). The combination of these stressors implies that the students at UK universities experience significantly more perceived stress on average compared to regular citizens, and academic workload is one of the key contributors (Denovan, 2017). Such stresses can contribute to the student crisis, consisting of psychological and behavioural issues, and is an indication of the profound impact of the academic environment on student well-being (Arikawe, 2024).

Emotional and Psychological Toll of Burnout

The psychological and emotional consequences of the sustained academic strain are also severe and complicated. As demonstrated several times in the literature, academic burnout is not merely stress, but a significant burden to the mental health of students, and it takes the form of anxiety, depression, cynicism, and emotional exhaustion. The study of arts, dental, and physiotherapy students reveals that burnout is closely related to negative psychological outcomes. It is also prevalent to see burnout and psychological distress being reported, and over half of the dental students in one survey have surpassed the requirements of either (Collin, 2020). This distress is highly correlated with maladaptive perfectionism, and it is also characterized by low self-esteem, depression, and high anxiety (Collin,

2020). Similarly, the available studies that

investigate physiotherapy students suggest that the presence of academic burnout is in connection with the increase in anxiety and a lack of self-esteem (Biggs, 2023). A good predictor of burnout is the pressure to meet the externally imposed standards or SPP, and mental health is deeply damaged by fear of failure and self-criticism (Biggs, 2023). To this degree, SPP is even termed as a “public health concern” that is linked to poor mental health and even suicidal thoughts (Flett, 2022; Biggs, 2023).

Burnout is typically described as being defined in terms of three components, viz, the Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Cynicism (CY) (a sense of alienation), and reduced Academic Efficacy (AE) (Biggs, 2023). This model is employed in defining the degree of tiredness, alienation or school work negativism and inefficiency. This relationship between stress and negative feelings is confirmed by psychometric studies, and it is stated that the relation between negative affect and perceived stress scores is strong (Denovan, 2017). This fact proves that the level of stress is not just a short-term emotional experience but is closely related to the emotional status of a student and exposes him or her to the risk of developing a more severe psychological disorder, i.e. depression (Denovan, 2017). The psychological expenses of academic burnout are also confirmed by the need to use institutional responses, such as the allocation of special mental health services and psychological support (Arikawe, 2024).

Disruption to Academic Performance and Motivation

Academic burnout is directly contrary to the reason for being in the university because it has a large [impact on academic performance](#), academic drive and interest of students. The burnout and its associated emotional and psychological burnout also imply the inability of the students to study because of its effects, which create a self-feeding loop of poor grades and an increased amount of stress. A decrease in academic motivation and achievement is one of the direct outcomes of burnout (Biggs, 2023). The cynicism dimension of burnout represents this and refers to the formation of a cynical and disconnected attitude towards school (Biggs, 2023). Cynical students lose motivation to continue their course of studies, doubt the worth of their education, and become increasingly alienated by their study setting (Denovan, 2017). This has behavioural aspects like a lack of productivity and procrastination.

This can be so bad as to jeopardise the enrolment of a student in the university. Chronic stress is directly connected with low academic performance and may provoke a situation where

students avoid academic tasks (Collin, 2020). In other situations, the stress mounts to such a level that students consider “serious dropping out” (Biggs, 2023). This shows that burnout is not only about lower grades, but it can contribute to the problem of attrition, as students do not follow their educational passion anymore (Biggs, 2023).

The consequences are so immense that student emergencies, which are frequently based on burnout,

are perceived to influence the tone of learning and the outcomes of students in the institutions in a radically extreme way (Arikawe, 2024). This shows how the welfare of students and academic performance go hand in hand; one cannot be in good condition without the other. The key aim of [crisis management](#) and burnout in students, then, is not only to make them emotionally healthy but also to make an environment in which they can succeed at academics (Arikawe, 2024).

Coping Strategies and Resilience Mechanisms

Students use a multiplicity of coping strategies and resilience mechanisms to deal with the overwhelming pressures of academic life with mixed levels of success. These strategies and their effectiveness play a major role in determining whether the student will succumb to burnout or successfully manoeuvre through it. One of the most vital differences that the research gave rise to pertains to adaptive and maladaptive coping.

The adaptive strategies are common among students because they are problem-oriented and emotionally supportive. These are “planning, acceptance, active coping, emotional support, and positive reframing” (Collin, 2020). Such active and positive coping strategies are related to more [positive psychological](#) outcomes. As an example, an increased utilisation of adaptive coping techniques is strongly associated with a reduced level of psychological distress (Collin, 2020). Moreover, the initial coping ability is a significant indicator of the perception and stress management by a student (Denovan, 2017). The more positive are the coping aspects: coping with the feeling that things finally go one way is substantially connected with a high positive affect and a low negative affect (Denovan, 2017). Other key protective factors presented are resilience, academic self-efficacy, and academic buoyancy, as these would act as a cushion against the adverse outcomes of perfectionism and burnout (Biggs, 2023).

On the other hand, denial, substance use, and behavioural disengagement are all maladaptive coping behaviours, which have a strong association with poor outcomes. The students

using these approaches experience a pronounced level of stress, burnout, and psychological stress (Collin, 2020). It is important to note that students who are maladaptive perfectionists tend to fall into such unhealthy coping patterns, leading to a negative spiral of pressure and ill mental health (Collin, 2020). Interestingly, although the sphere of substance use is not foreign to the life of a student, substance use was found to be one of the least reported methods of coping with the situation, which implies that students might not use alcohol as their primary method of coping with stress (Collin, 2020). The distinction between these coping styles can be essential to the creation of effective interventions, and such therapies as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) are promising in curbing perfectionism and facilitating more healthy reactions to stress (Biggs, 2023).

Institutional and Social Support Systems

The last theme emphasises the fact that burnout among students is not merely an individual problem, but rather closely depends on the institutional and social system of support. The setting of the university, teachers, colleagues, and loved ones are critical to the development of stressors that cause burnout or alleviate them. Availability and performance of these support structures are essential in promoting healthy learning conditions.

The primary role is to be proactive about it in an institutional sense. The research strongly recommends the formulation of a holistic and specific crisis management plan in the context of education (Arikawe, 2024). These entail having proactive communication plans, developing specific mental health resources, and... extensive emergency response actions (Arikawe, 2024). They need to have available strong university counselling services, and tools such as the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) can be deployed as effective screening tools to assess individuals requiring additional assistance and follow progress (Denovan, 2017).

The faculty and the academic staff have a very important role to play. Unstable responses of tutors are one of the greatest contributors to academic stress, which is why educators should communicate in a clear and supportive manner (Collin, 2020). Teaching strategies that focus on teaching towards self-fulfilment, as distinct from the acquisition of external standards, can be meaningfully promoted by academic staff to create a less pressuring environment (Biggs, 2023). Burnout is also fuelled by the fear of failure, which can be minimised by inducing self-compassion and the culture of making mistakes being acceptable (Collin, 2020). Lastly, peer support and social support systems are priceless. It was discovered that due to their powerful effect on reducing stress

and anxiety, peer mentoring programs make students feel more confident and supported (Collin, 2020).

Analysis and Discussion

Even though the research has expanded dramatically in the previous years, when a closer examination was carried out, significant limitations were discussed along with missed dimensions. With the help of this literature, the lack of variety was found in both the methodological approaches and participant demographics. This discussion has also highlighted the significant requirement for simpler and more inclusive research. However, gaps, such as a lack of intersectional analysis, reliance on quantitative tools, and disciplinary bias. With the help of such insights, there is a better understanding of the current study's qualitative design, along with a broader understanding that academic burnout varies according to student populations.

Limitations/Recommendations

Although the current body of literature offers a strong basis to develop a healthy perspective of academic burnout, there are still some lapses and constraints that hinder the progress of new research. One of the key issues is the disproportionate representation of students in the programs that are characterised by a high level of stress and high performance, i.e., the programs such as dentistry and physiotherapy (Collin, 2020; Biggs, 2023). Although there is increased academic pressure in these fields, the limited nature of existing research may cause a misrepresentation of the expanded scale and the various forms of burnout and other topics of research and degrees at university (Pate, 2023). There is an underrepresentation of the student experience of humanities, social science, or vocational learning (Riaz and Shaukat, 2024). This creates a research gap in the experience and internalisation of academic burnout in the broader and wider student group.

The majority of the literature works follow a cross-sectional quantitative design, and psychometric measures (Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) are used to assess the level of burnout and stress (Denovan, 2017). These instruments help quantify emotional and mental distress, but cannot be effective in quantifying the depth and texture of the subjective lives of students. This, in turn, means that the qualitative aspects, the sense-making processes of students experiencing burnout, contextual features that condition their response, and their emotional experiences are

underrepresented (Wang, 2024). Such a gap is why qualitative studies, such as the present one, are important, e.g., they use such methods as thematic analysis that make it possible to reach a more humane, holistic vision of the issue.

The second limitation is that intersectional factors have not been thoroughly discussed, including gender, socio-economic status, cultural background, and disability (Alghamdi, 2023). These variables may greatly influence the experience and management of academic burnout. As an example, low-income students might be under even more pressure, experiencing financial strain, the requirement to work part-time, and gain access to institutional support (Denovan, 2017). Along the same lines, minority and international students may be exposed to additional stress associated with cultural adaptation, discrimination, or language/communication difficulties that are usually not considered within the current burnout frameworks (Williams-York, 2024). Such nuances should be investigated more closely with the help of qualitative research to comprehend the role of identity and social positioning in burnout.

Moreover, although existing research points out adaptive and ineffective coping mechanisms, it tends to fail to critically evaluate the efficacy of institutional responses or mental health programs. Counselling services, peer support programs, and curricular stress-management training are often suggested (Arikawe, 2024; Collin, 2020), but it has been limited to present-day longitudinal evidence on how students access these services or even see their effects in the long term. This indicates a lack in the assessment of not only availability, but accessibility and perceived effectiveness of the support

mechanisms, which could have been obtained through qualitative data. In addition, socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) as a popular health issue is a quite new field of research that should be explored more deeply (Biggs, 2023; Flett, 2022). Although the current research has a correlation between SPP and high burnout along with psychological difficulties, there is no sufficient investigation on how students develop a sense of perfectionism, and how this quality interacts with the culture of the institution and feedback. The study will hence examine the experience of SPP among students in their daily lives in academia and the impacts that the experience has on their self-worth, academic motivation, and well-being.

This paper aims to address the above-mentioned gaps with a qualitative study of academic burnout among a wider range of university students than those with clinical or competitive backgrounds. A thematic analysis methodology will give this research rich and contextualised data on the lived experiences of students with the psychological and academic impacts of burnout, as

well as the coping mechanisms students develop to survive burnout (Guraya, 2025). It will also discuss the role of identity, background, and social support systems in the burnout experience. To conclude, although the existing literature provides valuable critical insights into the [causes and consequences](#) of academic burnout, it suffers the limitation of focusing on a single discipline, relying on quantitative methods to the exclusion of all others, lacking an intersectional approach, and an underrepresentation of institutional responses.

Conclusion

The given literature review sought to investigate the multidimensional effect of academic burnout on university students, especially in pressurised professions like dentistry and physiotherapy. A combination of literature themes gives a clear explanation of both internal and external factors that result in student burnout and subsequent effects. The literature source has always given consistency in the prevalence of academic burnout in the field of higher education, which is influenced by intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The problem of student stress can be discovered as the result of factors such as socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP), along with large workloads and fear of failure. These are not one-off experiences but are deeply scripted into university systems and cultures of performance and success. The effects are dramatic: the incidence of anxiety, depression, burnout, cynicism, and even suicidal thoughts is reported with consistency in competitive courses.

Importantly, burnout is not just a disturbing effect on psychological health; it also interrupts academic motivation, engagement, and performance. Students neglect their learning, perform poorly, and even drop out, further explaining the interrelation between stress and academic decline. Although adaptive coping styles such as emotional support and positive reframing are applied by certain students, maladaptive responses that exacerbate mental health are also used. These two factors, resilience and self-efficacy, have a pivotal influence on the results, and it is important to teach people healthy coping skills and stress-management methods. Institutional and social support systems seem to be an

important but little-tapped area of intervention. The literature recommends that universities should be more proactive in their mental health and crisis management plans, integrate stress management into courses, and provide inclusive learning environments where errors are perceived as learning opportunities. Moreover, there is a demand for maintaining a

steady academic feedback, well-functioning systems of peer support, and availability of mental health support.

To summarise, the reviewed literature can be deemed as excessively related to the current research as it discloses the extent and depth of academic burnout and shows evidence-based ways to find its solutions. Nevertheless, gaps still exist, especially regarding the investigation of long- term effects, culturally specific considerations, and intersectional students' experiences. These areas should be developed further in future studies, but institutions need to take the available research to make academic institutions healthier and more sustainable. This study seeks to address some of these gaps by providing knowledge that may be helpful in guiding policy, practice, and future research.

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