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## THE HIDDEN COST OF ACADEMIC PRODUCTIVITY: BURNOUT AND QUALITY OF LIFE IN UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

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### ABSTRACT

*This study analyzes the presence of Burnout syndrome and its relationship with quality of life among university professors from a biopsychosocial and occupational health perspective. Higher education teachers are exposed to increasing psychosocial risks due to academic workload, administrative responsibilities, research productivity demands, and job instability, which may negatively affect their mental health and overall well-being. A quantitative, cross-sectional, and correlational study was conducted with a sample of 154 university professors. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and the WHOQOL-BREF quality of life questionnaire were used. Results showed high levels of emotional exhaustion (40%) and depersonalization (28%), along with medium-low levels of quality of life, particularly in psychological health and work environment domains. Significant correlations were found between emotional exhaustion and psychological health ( $r = -0.68$ ), depersonalization and social relationships ( $r = -0.55$ ), and personal accomplishment and overall quality of life ( $r = 0.61$ ). The findings suggest that Burnout syndrome significantly affects the quality of life of university professors and should be addressed through institutional policies, occupational health programs, and psychosocial risk management strategies. This study contributes to the understanding of occupational mental health in higher education and highlights the need to promote healthier academic work environments.*

**KEYWORDS:** Burnout Syndrome; University Professors; Quality of Life; Occupational Mental Health; Psychosocial Risk; Higher Education.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, higher education has undergone profound transformations due to globalization, quality assurance systems, and increasing demands for academic productivity. These changes have significantly modified the academic profession, expanding the role of university professors beyond teaching to include research, administrative management, academic production, and social engagement. As a result, academic work has become increasingly complex and demanding, exposing professors to psychosocial risks that may affect their mental health and quality of life (Castilla *et al.*, 2021; Agyapong *et al.*, 2023).

One of the most relevant consequences of chronic exposure to occupational stress is Burnout syndrome, defined as a psychological response to prolonged work-related stress characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). Burnout has been widely studied in professions that involve constant interaction with people, such as teaching, healthcare, and social services, where emotional demands and interpersonal relationships are central to job performance (Schaufeli *et al.*, 1993).

Research has shown that Burnout among university professors is associated with anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, reduced job satisfaction, and decreased teaching effectiveness (Ramírez Zhindón *et al.*, 2023; Barrera-Pedemonte & González, 2020). Furthermore, Burnout not only affects individual health but also impacts organizational climate, institutional productivity, and educational quality (Maslach & Leiter, 2017).

In Latin America, and particularly in Colombia, university professors frequently work under conditions of job instability, temporary contracts, high teaching loads, and pressure for research productivity, which increases exposure to psychosocial risks and emotional exhaustion (Bedoya *et al.*, 2017; Muñoz *et al.*, 2022). These conditions may negatively affect teachers' well-being, mental health, and quality of life.

Quality of life is a multidimensional concept defined by the World Health Organization as individuals' perception of their position in life in relation to their goals, expectations, cultural context, and value systems (WHO, 1996). This concept includes physical health, psychological well-being, social relationships, and environmental conditions, making it a key variable for understanding the impact of occupational stress on overall well-being (The WHOQOL Group, 1998).

Although Burnout has been widely studied, most research has focused on measuring Burnout levels, while fewer studies have analyzed its relationship with quality of life, particularly in university professors and from an occupational health perspective. Understanding this relationship is essential because Burnout not only affects work performance but also the overall well-being and life satisfaction of teachers (Salgado & Leria, 2018; Villamarín & Salcedo, 2023).

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the presence of Burnout syndrome and its relationship with quality of life among university professors. This research contributes to the fields of occupational health, public health, and higher education by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between psychosocial risk and quality of life in academic workers, highlighting the need for institutional strategies to promote mental health and well-being in universities.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Burnout syndrome has been extensively studied in occupational health and organizational psychology due to its impact on workers' mental health and organizational performance. Freudenberger first introduced the concept, and it was later developed by Maslach and Jackson (1986), who defined Burnout as a psychological response to chronic occupational stress characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. This tridimensional model remains the most widely used framework for studying Burnout in teaching professions and human service occupations.

From a theoretical perspective, Burnout can be understood through the biopsychosocial model, which states that health and disease are the result of the interaction between biological, psychological, and social factors (Engel, 1977). This model suggests that Burnout should not be understood solely as an individual psychological problem but as a response to organizational conditions, work environment, and social context (Ayuso-Mateos *et al.*, 2006).

Research indicates that university professors are exposed to multiple psychosocial risk factors such as excessive workload, administrative burden, role conflict, job insecurity, and pressure for academic productivity, which contribute to chronic stress and emotional exhaustion (Castilla *et al.*, 2021; Bedoya *et al.*, 2017). These psychosocial risks are recognized as key determinants of occupational mental health and quality of life (OIT, 2021).

Quality of life has been defined by the World

Health Organization as a multidimensional construct that includes physical health, psychological state, level of independence, social relationships, and environmental conditions (WHO, 1996). The WHOQOL model proposes that quality of life is influenced by both objective conditions and subjective perceptions, making it an important variable for analyzing the impact of Burnout on overall well-being (The WHOQOL Group, 1998).

Several studies have found significant relationships between Burnout dimensions and quality of life domains. Emotional exhaustion has been associated with poor psychological health, anxiety, and sleep disorders, while depersonalization has been linked to social isolation and interpersonal conflict (Villamarín & Salcedo, 2023). In contrast, personal accomplishment has been identified as a protective factor associated with motivation, job satisfaction, and better quality of life (Salgado & Leria, 2018).

Recent international research suggests that Burnout among university professors is not only the

result of individual stress but also of structural changes in higher education systems, including quality assurance processes, research productivity demands, and job instability (Agyapong et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2024). These structural factors have transformed academic work into a high-demand profession with significant psychosocial risks.

From an occupational health perspective, Burnout is currently recognized as a phenomenon associated with chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, which implies that institutions must implement prevention and intervention strategies to protect workers' mental health and well-being (Ministerio del Trabajo, 2015).

Therefore, analyzing Burnout and quality of life among university professors requires an integrated approach that considers psychological, social, and organizational factors. This study adopts a biopsychosocial and occupational health approach to understand how psychosocial risks and working conditions influence Burnout and quality of life in university professors.

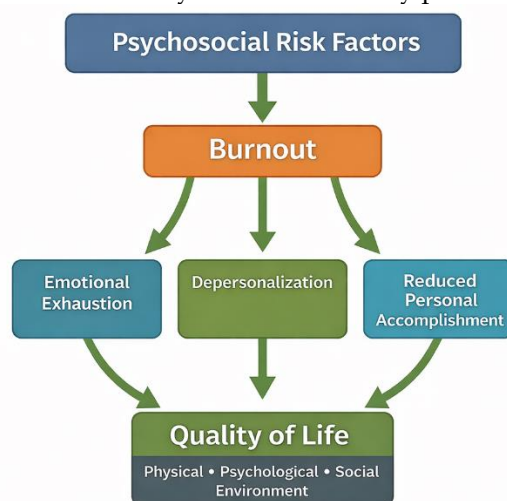


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Relationship Between Burnout and Quality of Life of Life.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted under a quantitative approach, with a non-experimental, cross-sectional, and correlational design. This design allowed the analysis of the relationship between Burnout syndrome and quality of life without manipulating the study variables, providing a snapshot of the phenomenon in a specific population at a given time (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014).

#### 3.1. Participants

The target population consisted of approximately 580 university professors working in higher education institutions in Neiva, Colombia. The sample size was calculated using the formula for

finite populations, with a 5% margin of error, a 99% confidence level, and a probability of occurrence of 0.25, resulting in a sample of 154 university professors.

A non-probabilistic sampling by clusters was used, where each cluster corresponded to a higher education institution. Inclusion criteria included: (a) being an active university professor, (b) being over 18 years old, and (c) voluntary participation through informed consent. Participants who did not complete the instruments or did not sign the consent form were excluded.

#### 3.2. Instruments

Three instruments were used for data collection:

### 1. Sociodemographic And Occupational Questionnaire

This instrument collected information related to working conditions such as age, gender, academic level, type of contract, working hours, job seniority, and institutional responsibilities. The instrument was validated through expert judgment.

### 2. Maslach Burnout Inventory (Mbi)

Burnout syndrome was measured using the MBI, composed of 22 items distributed across three dimensions: emotional exhaustion (9 items), depersonalization (5 items), and personal accomplishment (8 items). This instrument is internationally recognized as the most widely used tool for assessing Burnout in occupational contexts (Maslach & Jackson, 1986).

### 3. WHOQOL-BREF

Quality of life was assessed using the WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire, which includes 26 items measuring four domains: physical health, psychological health, social relationships, and environment. This instrument has been widely validated for assessing quality of life in different populations (WHOQOL Group, 1998).

#### 3.3. Procedure

Data collection was conducted through the distribution of an online questionnaire via institutional emails and academic networks. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

The collected data were exported to a Microsoft Excel database and subsequently analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26.

#### 3.4. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analyses were performed, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, to characterize the sample and study variables.

**Inferential analyses were conducted using:**

- **Pearson correlation coefficient**, to determine the relationship between Burnout dimensions

and quality of life domains.

- **Student's t-test and ANOVA**, to identify statistically significant differences according to sociodemographic and occupational variables.

A significance level of  $p < 0.05$  was established for all statistical analyses.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Sociodemographic And Occupational Characteristics

The sample consisted of 154 university professors from higher education institutions in Neiva, Colombia. Regarding gender distribution, 52.6% were women and 47.4% were men. The predominant age group was between 31 and 45 years (42%), followed by the group between 46 and 60 years (35%).

In terms of academic level, 68% of the participants held postgraduate degrees, while 32% had only undergraduate degrees. Regarding employment conditions, 56% had fixed-term contracts, 30% had indefinite contracts, and 14% were hired on an hourly basis. Additionally, 61% of the professors reported working more than 40 hours per week, indicating a high workload among participants.

### 4.2. Burnout Syndrome Levels

The results showed a significant presence of Burnout syndrome, particularly in the emotional exhaustion dimension. Approximately 40% of the professors reported high levels of emotional exhaustion, indicating emotional fatigue, work overload, and mental exhaustion associated with academic responsibilities.

Regarding depersonalization, 28% of participants presented high levels, reflecting negative or distant attitudes toward students or colleagues, which may be interpreted as a coping mechanism in response to chronic work stress.

In contrast, 49% of the participants reported high levels of personal accomplishment, suggesting that despite high levels of emotional exhaustion, many professors maintain a sense of professional purpose and motivation.

*Table 1: Burnout Syndrome Levels.*

Burnout Dimension	Low	Medium	High
<i>Emotional exhaustion</i>			40%
<i>Depersonalization</i>			28%
<i>Personal accomplishment</i>			49%

### 4.3. Quality of Life Levels

Quality of life was assessed using the WHOQOL-

BREF instrument, which evaluates four domains: physical health, psychological health, social

relationships, and environment.

**The results showed that:**

- 35% of professors reported physical health problems, including fatigue, muscle pain, and sleep disorders.
- 42% reported low levels of psychological health, including anxiety, irritability, and emotional distress.
- 33% reported dissatisfaction with their social relationships, indicating social isolation or lack of personal time.
- 41% reported negative perceptions of their

work environment, including inadequate infrastructure, lack of resources, and limited institutional support.

Overall, the results indicate a medium to low level of quality of life, particularly affected in the psychological health and environmental domains.

**4.4. Correlation Between Burnout and Quality of Life**

**Pearson correlation analysis showed statistically significant relationships between Burnout dimensions and quality of life domains:**

**Table 2: Correlation Between Burnout and Quality of Life.**

Variables	Pearson <i>r</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Emotional exhaustion – Psychological health	-0.68	<0.05
Depersonalization – Social relationships	-0.55	<0.05
Personal accomplishment – Quality of life	0.61	<0.05

- A strong negative correlation was found between emotional exhaustion and psychological health ( $r = -0.68$ ), indicating that higher emotional exhaustion is associated with lower psychological well-being.
- A moderate negative correlation was found between depersonalization and social relationships ( $r = -0.55$ ), suggesting that higher depersonalization is associated with poorer interpersonal relationships.
- A moderate positive correlation was found between personal accomplishment and overall quality of life ( $r = 0.61$ ), indicating that higher personal accomplishment is associated with better quality of life.

These results confirm that Burnout syndrome is significantly related to quality of life among university professor.

**5. DISCUSSION**

The results of this study confirm that Burnout syndrome is a significant problem among university professors and that it is closely related to quality of life, particularly in the psychological health and social relationships domains. These findings are consistent with previous studies that have identified emotional exhaustion as the most prevalent dimension of Burnout among teachers and as the main predictor of mental health deterioration (Maslach & Leiter, 2017; Ramírez Zhindón et al., 2023).

One of the most relevant findings of this study is the high prevalence of emotional exhaustion (40%), which indicates that university professors are exposed to chronic occupational stress. This finding is consistent with international research showing that

academic work has become increasingly demanding due to administrative workload, research productivity requirements, and performance evaluation systems (Castilla et al., 2021; Agyapong et al., 2023). These structural changes in higher education have transformed teaching into a high-demand profession with significant psychosocial risks.

The presence of high levels of depersonalization (28%) suggests that some professors develop emotional distancing as a coping strategy in response to work overload and chronic stress. This finding has been reported in previous studies, which indicate that depersonalization functions as a psychological defense mechanism that allows workers to continue performing their duties despite emotional exhaustion, although it negatively affects interpersonal relationships and organizational climate (Figueiredo-Ferraz et al., 2013).

An interesting finding of this study is the coexistence of high emotional exhaustion and high personal accomplishment. This result suggests that many university professors maintain a strong sense of professional purpose and commitment despite adverse working conditions. This phenomenon has been described in previous research as a “vocational paradox,” where teachers remain highly committed to their profession even when experiencing high levels of stress and emotional exhaustion (Salgado & Leria, 2018).

Regarding quality of life, the results showed that the most affected domains were psychological health and work environment. These findings are consistent with studies indicating that psychosocial risks at work are strongly associated with mental health problems, sleep disorders, fatigue, and emotional

distress among teachers (Villamarín & Salcedo, 2023; Muñoz *et al.*, 2022).

The correlation analysis confirmed a strong negative relationship between emotional exhaustion and psychological health ( $r = -0.68$ ), which suggests that emotional exhaustion is a key predictor of mental health deterioration among university professors. This finding supports the theoretical model proposed by Maslach, which states that emotional exhaustion is the central component of Burnout and the main indicator of occupational stress (Maslach & Jackson, 1986).

Similarly, the negative correlation between depersonalization and social relationships ( $r = -0.55$ ) indicates that emotional distancing affects interpersonal relationships, which may lead to social isolation and reduced social support. Social support has been identified as one of the most important protective factors against Burnout, so its deterioration increases the risk of mental health problems (Schaufeli *et al.*, 1993).

On the other hand, the positive correlation between personal accomplishment and quality of life ( $r = 0.61$ ) suggests that professional motivation, recognition, and sense of achievement function as protective factors against Burnout. This finding indicates that institutional strategies aimed at strengthening professional recognition, motivation, and career development may improve teachers' quality of life and reduce Burnout risk.

From an occupational health perspective, these findings suggest that Burnout should not be understood only as an individual psychological problem but as an organizational and structural problem related to working conditions, job insecurity, workload, and institutional support. Therefore, Burnout prevention requires organizational interventions rather than only individual coping strategies.

This study contributes to the scientific literature by providing empirical evidence of the relationship between Burnout and quality of life among university professors and by analyzing this relationship from a biopsychosocial and occupational health perspective. The findings highlight the need for universities to implement psychosocial risk management programs, mental health promotion strategies, and organizational changes aimed at improving working conditions and quality of life among professors.

### **5.1. Implications For Practice**

The results of this study have important implications for universities, occupational health

professionals, and policymakers. First, universities should implement psychosocial risk management programs aimed at reducing emotional exhaustion and improving working conditions. Second, mental health promotion programs should be integrated into Occupational Health and Safety Management Systems to prevent Burnout and improve quality of life among professors. Third, institutional policies should focus on reducing administrative workload, improving job stability, and strengthening professional recognition programs, as these factors were identified as key elements influencing Burnout and quality of life. Finally, this study highlights the importance of organizational interventions rather than only individual coping strategies, since Burnout is strongly associated with working conditions and organizational factors.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This study analyzed the presence of Burnout syndrome and its relationship with quality of life among university professors from a biopsychosocial and occupational health perspective. The results showed a high prevalence of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, as well as medium to low levels of quality of life, particularly in the psychological health and work environment domains. The findings confirm that Burnout syndrome is significantly associated with quality of life among university professors.

One of the most important findings is that emotional exhaustion was strongly associated with psychological health, indicating that emotional exhaustion is a key predictor of mental health deterioration among university professors. Similarly, depersonalization was associated with social relationship problems, while personal accomplishment was identified as a protective factor associated with better quality of life.

These results suggest that Burnout among university professors should be addressed not only from an individual perspective but also from an organizational and occupational health perspective. Working conditions, job instability, workload, and lack of institutional support appear to be important factors contributing to Burnout and reduced quality of life.

Therefore, universities should implement institutional policies aimed at reducing psychosocial risks, promoting mental health, improving working conditions, and strengthening professional recognition and support systems for professors. Improving teachers' quality of life is not only a matter of individual well-being but also a key factor

in improving educational quality and institutional sustainability.

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