E-LEARNING AND JOB BURNOUT AMONG HIGHER EDUCATION INSTRUCTORS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has created colossal challenges for higher education institutions to transform their courses to e-learning just overnight. This transformation has required extra effort and time from instructors which has led to increasing levels of exhaustion, stress and anxiety. Thus, causing job burnout and affecting their mental health. This study explores the level of job burnout among higher education staff during COVID-19 and identifies the factors leading to the development of this psychological condition. To do so, 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted with instructors from five universities. Data was coded and analysed using *NVIVO* 12. The findings demonstrate that 75% of the instructors are experiencing high levels of job burnout. The level of burnout varies based on gender and having children.

Keywords: E-Learning, Job Burnout, Mental Health, Covid-19, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Since its first occurrence at the end of 2019 in Wuhan, China, COVID-19 has spread all over the world with an outrageous increase of confirmed cases and deaths. On the 11th of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that COVID-19 is a public health emergency of international concern Abdellatif & Shahroury (2021). The Coronavirus is highly infectious and its clinical features vary between asymptomatic state to severe acute respiratory distress syndrome and multi-organ dysfunction Basheti, Nassar, Barakat, Alqudah, Abufarha & Saini (2020); Talevi, Socci, Carai, Carnaghi, Faleri & Pacitti (2020). This virus spreads through chains of human-to-human interaction, which implies that the only way to break down this chain is by cutting off the route of transmission Talevi, Socci, Carai, Carnaghi, Faleri, ... & Pacitti, (2020). Therefore, countries all over the globe have implemented many strict procedures to slow down the spread of the virus ranging from social distancing to quarantine and complete lockdown including the mandatory closures of schools and universities and the suspension of all non-essential face-to-face activities. According to the UNESCO, universities in more than 60 countries were completely closed by 13th March 2020 Abdellatif, & Shahroury (2021); Yaseen, Alsoud, Nofal, Abdeljaber & Al-Adwan (2021). COVID- 19 has hit various spheres of our lives including healthcare, economy, education, aviation, agriculture, tourism and global markets Xiong, Lipsitz, Nasri, Lui, Gill & McIntyre (2020). The global community is concerned about the long-term consequences of COVID-19. Until now the main focus of the WHO is on controlling and mitigating the effect of the pandemic through testing and treating infected people and developing vaccines and treatment protocols Kumar & Nayar (2021). However, major concerns are rising about the mental health and psycho-social consequences of the pandemic Devkota, Sijali, Bogati, Ahmad, Shakya & Adhikary (2021); Gupta, Puyat, Ranote, Vila-Rodriguez & Kazanjian (2021).

The WHO speculates that the COVID-19 pandemic will have a psychological effect that will impact the mental health of different groups of people either diagnosed with COVID-19 or affected by the strict prevention measures of quarantine and lockdowns or affected by the socio-economic impact of the pandemic Basheti, Mhaidat & Mhaidat (2021). This effect may include increasing the level of job burnout, anxiety, confusion, stress, stigma, depression, insecurity, loneliness, insomnia, emotional isolation, drug abuse, suicidal behaviour and domestic violence

against women and children Rubin (2020); Duan & Zhu (2020). Further, it is believed that some groups of the population may be more vulnerable to psychological distress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic such as; healthcare workers, elderly, children, pregnant women, parents, international students, carers and educators Hidalgo-Andrade, Hermosa-Bosano & Paz (2021). Many reports to UNESCO have emphasized the significance of considering the psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on frontline workers so that the lessons learned can be highly beneficial during future pandemics Holmes, O'Connor, Perry, Tracey, Wessely, Arseneault & Bullmore (2020). Unsurprisingly, similar to doctors and nurses who are the front-line workers in the healthcare system, teachers and instructors are considered the front-line workers in the education system, who are responsible for rapidly implementing new teaching methods to maintain the continuity of the learning process and maximize learners' health and safety Sokal, Lesley, Eblie, & Jeff, (2020).

Teachers and instructors all over the world faced colossal challenges due to schools' and universities' closures. Schools and universities had to adapt their classes to e-learning due to various restrictive measures such as; social distancing, quarantine and lockdowns. Instructors were rushed to teach online and administrate exams online Medetbayeva & Akhmetov (2021); Romani, Pantia, Rivera, Guizado & Bernedo (2021). This urgent and unplanned transmission occurred while the majority of higher education instructors were unready, untrained and lack sufficient resources Almajali & Masadeh (2021). This transformation has required extra effort and time from instructors to adapt their classes to e-learning which has led to increasing levels of exhaustion, stress and anxiety. Thus, causing job burnout and affecting their mental health. Burnout is conceptualized by Maslach & Jackson (1981) as "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do 'people-work' of some kind" p. 99. The existing literature presents three main components of job burnout including exhaustion, professional efficacy and cynicism. First, exhaustion which relates to stress and forceful physical and emotional situation that deteriorates an employee's capability to work efficiently. Second, professional efficacy relates to reduced personal accomplishment where an employee negatively evaluates himself/herself and develops a sense of ineffectiveness in work and interaction with others. Finally, cynicism also known as depersonalization which relates to losing the personal element in dealing with others and developing a skeptical and cold attitude towards others Maslach & Leiter (2016).

Interestingly, decades of research have strongly emphasized that teaching is a stressful profession that have both high levels of workload and job demands Johnson, Cooper, Cartwright, Donald, Taylor & Millet (2005); Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2015). Given the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers' and instructors' workload and job demands are expected to be maximized. It is believed that when instructors experience high levels of stress, their mental health and wellbeing will be negatively affected, leading to attrition and burnout which in turn will negatively affect their students' achievement Harmsen, Helms-Lorenz, Maulana & Van Veen (2018). Therefore, given the expectation of subsequent waves of COVID-19, this research aims to explore the impact of the transmission into e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of higher education instructors focusing on the level of job burnout, identify the factors leading to the development of this psychological condition and to provide evidence-based recommendations for supporting instructors during pandemics.

The Psychological Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic and its Restrictive Measures

Health pandemics have always been a critical part of humans' history. For instance, during the past century, several pandemics have hit the world causing the death of millions such as; the Spanish flu (1918-1920), the Asiatic flu (1956-1957), the Hong Kong flu (1968-1970), the SARS (2002-2003), the HIV/AIDS (2005-2012), the "Swine" flu (2009), the MERS (2012), the Ebola (2013-2014), the Zika (2016) and others Ma, Rogers & Zhou (2020). It is strongly believed that pandemics and their restrictive measures such as; social distancing, quarantine and

lockdowns affect the mental health and psychological wellbeing of different groups of a population.

Psychological reactions to pandemics vary widely among different groups and range between maladaptive responses, emotional distress and defensive behaviours such as; fear, anger, insecurity, anxiety, stress, frustration, depression, loneliness, boredom, depression and others. A recent study conducted by Qiu, Shen, Zhao, Wang, Xie & Xu (2020) about the mental health of the Chinese population during the COVID-19 pandemic found that 35% of the respondents suffered from some psychological distress. Similarly, Rossi, Socci, Talevi, Mensi, Niolu & Di Lorenzo (2020) showed that 53% of Chinese participants suffered from moderate to severe psychological conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the same vein, Wang, Pan, Wan, Tan & Ho (2020) investigated the mental health of the Italian population and stated that 37% of the respondents experienced post-traumatic stress, 20% experienced anxiety, 17% experienced severe depression and 7% experienced insomnia. Moreover, a recent systematic literature review conducted by about the mental health of the general population during COVID-19 showed high rates of stress (8% to 82%), depression (15% to 48%), psychological distress (34% to 38%), post-traumatic stress disorder (7% to 54%) and anxiety (6% to 51%) among the Chinese, Italian, Spanish, American, Turkish, Danish, Iranian and Nepali population.

Methodology

Data was collected through 40 qualitative semi-structured interviews with instructors from four universities in Jordan. Interviews were conducted with 20 females and 20 males. The researchers used semi-structured interviews because it fit with the exploratory nature of the research. In addition, they have a flexible and more of a discussion nature where the researchers can prepare some open-ended questions and enable the interviewee to expand the discussion, give some real-world examples or move the discussion into some pertinent related topics. The participation in this research was voluntary and responses were anonymized and recorded. The researchers conducted all interviews between May and June 2021 over the phone or using Zoom using English or Arabic upon the request of the interviewee. The duration of each interview was approximately 15-30 minutes. The researchers transcribed and translated the interviews themselves and then coded and analysed them using *NVIVO* 12. The researchers prepared the interviews' questions based on the objectives of the research and the existing literature covering the following areas; psychological conditions related to COVID-19, level of job burnout and factors leading to job burnout.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As for the first theme concerning psychological conditions related to COVID-19, interviewees highlighted some important and concerning conditions including; stress, anxiety and exhaustion. 75% of the interviewees stated that they feel stressed all the time. Interestingly 60% of them are females. Regarding anxiety, 50% of the interviewees claimed that their anxiety level increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. As for exhaustion, 90% of the interviewees emphasized that they are highly exhausted. Surprisingly, 70% of them are females. The following quotes show a range of the psychosocial conditions and negative emotions that our interviewees experienced.

> *"These online lectures are headache; it seems that I am fully occupied 24/7. Students keep sending me messages all the time and I have to answer them. I am completely exhausted".*
> *"I can't deny it I am really under a lot of pressure. Too much work to be done, I feel stressed all the time and to be honest it has negatively affected my family. I am sorry to say that but E-learning is killing me mentally and physically".*

> *"I might sound silly but people think oh she is working from home, that's so easy and comforting but it is the complete opposite. There is always that fears and negative thoughts at the back of my mind about have I done enough for my courses, are students on the same line with me, are they cheating, do they really solve their assignments by themselves, are they complaining and so on. It's that annoying feeling of anxiety, discomfort and uneasiness".*
> *"All I can say that e-learning plus lockdown is too much stress".*
> *"Personally, I feel exhausted, I don't have time or energy to do anything"*

As for the second theme concerning the level of job burnout, 75% of our interviewees stressed that they are experiencing high levels of job burnout. Interestingly, among those 80% are found to have children (under 5 years old) and 90% are females. These shocking percentages raise concerns about the mental health of females especially those who have young children during pandemics and associated its restrictive measures. These percentages are in line with many previous studies which proofed that females are generally burdened with more responsibilities including childcare and domestic workload and that household responsibilities have amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic which has a negative impact on their productivity Clark, McGrane, Boyle, Joksimovic, Burke & Sullivan (2020). The following quotes show a range of our interviewees reactions that demonstrate different degrees of exhaustion, low personal evaluation and cynicism.

> *"To be honest, I feel down, I feel that I am not doing good with e-learning. It seems that I don't fit with the system. I just wish we could go back to face-to-face lectures soon"*
> *"I am really struggling with e-learning. I started to hate this career".*
> *"I feel torn apart, this lockdown and all the fuss about e-learning and those platforms is eating me; I don't have time for anything else. I did not work on any research this year. I am not happy at all about my performance in 2020".*
> *"We can't deny it, 2020 is not the best year for academics at least maybe in my field; my research team and I are truly struggling to work on any article".*
> *"I am really exhausted. It just never ends. Lectures, quizzes, assignments and students are complaining all the time. They want to be fed by spoon!! Do you think after all of that I feel happy? No I am not. I wish I can have a break from students".*

Finally, regarding the last theme relating to factors leading to job burnout, our interviewees highlighted many factors including; job demands, available resources, domestic workload and lack of experience. All our interviewees emphasized that the shift towards e-learning has increased their job demands; they have been asked to transform their course materials into an online format, find creative ways to engage students with the course, follow up with all students' issues and complaints, conduct exams online in addition to other normal paperwork. Abdellatif (2021) Additionally, some of our interviewees reported the lack of sufficient resources to administrate courses online including; Wi-Fi, laptop and other portable devices that could facilitate delivering online lectures especially those who teach practical courses that include solving complicated mathematical equations. Unsurprisingly, instructors who teach labs such as; medical, pharmaceutical and engineering, were suffering more than others. Moreover, the data demonstrate that the surge of domestic workload has been an extra burden that promoted the development of negative emotions and high levels of stress. Interestingly, 75% of our interviewees emphasized that they did not have any previous experience of administrating online courses and that they had to learn by themselves and develop their skills. Some of our interviewees' responses were.

"I have one laptop and I had to share it with my kids who were staying at home and have to attend their classes. Honestly, I couldn't afford buying another one. The prices of electronic devices were insane at that time".

"I as a professor in electronics engineering was truly struggling, teaching students complicated circuits online is almost impossible".

"Before COVID-19, I have never used any e-learning platform. I was told that I have to use Microsoft Teams just overnight. You can imagine my situation if I tell you that my relation to technology doesn't go beyond using Word, Power point and sending emails. But let's not deny I have learned a lot during last year".

"I have five kids they were all staying at home, three of them have to attend their classes and two of them are under four years. They never stopped screaming, fighting and calling me. I had to ask my neighbour to help me with the little ones to be able to give my lectures. I was unable to do anything more than my lectures. I didn't have any time or energy to work on any research".

"Having an infant and e-learning is a nightmare, you can imagine him waking up and screaming in the middle of a lecture. I am sure my students will never forget those lectures. At least he changed their moods!!".

"My husband and I were working from home and I have two little kids, you can imagine the amount of housework I have. I was really exhausted at that time. I have sent my kids straight away to the nursery just when they opened back. I can't deny it I was terrified to do that but I didn't have any other options. I nearly lost my job. It seems that no one understands what females go through during lockdowns".

"I used to teach a course called 'Computer Application in Management', I had to change the entire content of the course because students were complaining that they were unable to have a copy of the software".

"Teaching programming languages online was not easy. Knowing that many students are weak in some concepts and they lack access to appropriate resources. I am glad that we are back now on campus".

CONCLUSION, LIMITATION AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this research demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic has a negative impact on the mental health of higher education instructors causing the development of some serious psychological conditions including; stress, anxiety and exhaustion. It has shown that the transmission to e-learning due to COVID-19 restrictive measures has led to high levels of job burnout among instructors. This could be attributed to the increase in job demands along with domestic workload and the lack of sufficient resources and previous experience of e-learning. Interestingly, the results of this research proofed that females with young children were the most vulnerable group who were burdened with extra responsibilities and thus experienced more severe psychological conditions than males.

Moreover, this research is not without some limitations; for instance, the limited number of interviews that were conducted might hinder the ability to generalize the results. Thus, future research could explore levels of job burnout among educators at a wider scale through using questionnaires. There is also a need for investigating ways of supporting higher education instructors during pandemics. Finally, the findings of this research suggest the need for a nationwide mental health support plan for higher education instructors and other vulnerable groups of the population. In addition, extra support is needed for females with young children who show to be the most vulnerable among all other groups. Further, higher education institutions must provide more support for their instructors including appropriate resources and training especially for those who lack technological skills and capabilities. This support could reduce the psychological distress that instructors might experience during these hard times. Potentially, any mental health support steps to be taken now would be beneficial for the expected subsequent waves of COVID-19 or future pandemics.

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