EMOTIONAL AND ACADEMIC BURNOUT OF STUDENTS COMBINING EDUCATION AND WORK

O. Koropets¹, A. Fedorova¹, I. Kacane²
¹Ural Federal University (RUSSIAN FEDERATION)
²Daugavpils University (LATVIA)

Abstract

The article is devoted to the problem of emotional and academic burnout of working students of higher educational establishments. Theoretical and empirical research has revealed that academic burnout, as a particular case of emotional burnout, is accompanied by a sense of emotional and physical exhaustion, decreased motivation for studying, a negative attitude towards teachers and groupmates and, eventually, low academic performance. The diagnosis of the emotional burnout syndrome has been performed by a method of psychological questionnaire for working students. The study was conducted in the time period of two years (2017–2018) in one of the state universities of Russian Federation. A comparative analysis of the development of students’ academic burnout phases among depending on the length of their combining work and studies has been carried out. Based on the results of the study, the causal relationships between the severity of the symptoms of burnout and the duration of the period of combining work and studies have been revealed. The life aspects of the “work – study” continuum, causing the greatest concern among working students, have been determined. The limitations of the presented study are stipulated by a small number of the respondents sample set. Further research is aimed at building a model of academic burnout of working students, the development and adaptation of tools for its diagnosis and prevention measures.

Keywords: emotional burnout syndrome, academic burnout, emotional exhaustion, determinants of burnout, self-efficacy.

1 INTRODUCTION

The issue of emotional burnout in university students is currently focused on by researchers in the field of psychology, pedagogy, and medicine for a number of reasons:

• emotional burnout adversely affects the students’ physical and mental well-being;
• students experiencing academic burnout lose interest in learning; as a result, their academic performance deteriorates, which may lead to their expulsion from the higher education institution;
• academic burnout at the beginning of professional development during university studies may contribute to this syndrome further developing in subsequent career stages when trying to master the profession;
• academic burnout inevitably disrupts the system of the student’s interpersonal relations, which leads to an increased number of conflicts in the student environment, and to inadequate reactions to teachers’ requirements.

The above reasons determine the importance of timely prevention and diagnostics of academic burnout in students, and identifying factors contributing to its development. Despite the relevance of researching the burnout syndrome, the number of studies focusing on the causes of academic burnout in students, on the factors and preventive measures, is still relatively limited.

The purpose of this research is theoretical and empirical study of environmental factors associated with the syndrome of emotional burnout in full-time students who combine work and studies.

The American psychiatrist G. Freidenberg was the first to focus on the issue of emotional burnout in 1974 and to attract attention to it. He attributed it to emotional exhaustion, leading to profound personal changes in interpersonal communication [1]. Those most prone to burnout are people working in the “person-person” sphere, especially those whose work involves emotional empathy and increased responsibility (doctors, teachers, social workers, etc.). Recently, however, burnout has increasingly been identified in representatives of various professional spheres, students, and even the unemployed.
The classic definition of emotional burnout associates it with three main symptoms: exhaustion, depersonalisation (cynicism, negative attitude towards the subjects of professional activity), and reduction of personal achievements (feeling that you lack professional skills). Thus, there are three main components of the syndrome: exhaustion (individual stress-component of the syndrome), depersonalisation (interpersonal component), and reduction of personal achievements (self-esteem component) [2]. Emotional exhaustion is considered the key aspect of burnout. In a study conducted by A. Malach-Pines and E. Aronsons, physical exhaustion due to loss of energy and chronic fatigue is also considered a symptom of burnout [3]. Modern studies also show that a sense of lack of professionalism is not mandatory in the development of emotional burnout syndrome. The syndrome may occur when there is a discrepancy between the nature of the work and certain characteristics of the employee. The main causes of burnout are: excessive workload, unfair evaluation of labour results, conflicts at work, etc. In addition to the organizational and role factor, the personal factor related to certain personal characteristics of the employee can also play an important role. Burnout is dangerous because of its consequences, which can manifest themselves in increased anxiety, depression, frustration, aggression and fear. Various psychosomatic disorders and, as a result, serious problems with a person’s physical and mental health, are also possible. In terms of organizational consequences, burnout leads to decreased staff involvement, labour productivity, and contributes to an increase in staff turnover [4].

Psychologists have studied the issue of burnout in detail. According to V.V. Boyko, emotional burnout should be considered in terms of the mechanisms of psychological protection in cases where a complete or partial suppression of emotions occurs in response to certain traumatic effects. On the one hand, burnout, as a functional stereotype, can contribute to measured and economical use of the individual’s energy resources. On the other hand, dysfunctional consequences of burnout inevitably arise, manifested in decreased performance and in deteriorated relationships with colleagues and customers [5]. V.E. Orel considers mental burnout syndrome as an integral phenomenon that has a detrimental effect on the personality of a professional [6].

Academic burnout as a particular case of emotional burnout syndrome has recently become the object of researchers’ attention, but its negative impact on students’ academic performance, health, and well-being has already been proved. Academic burnout is characterized by the components (symptoms) similar to those of emotional burnout syndrome: academic exhaustion, academic disinterest and academic inefficiency. The difference is that the manifestation of these symptoms is directly related to learning activities, as well as to the students’ supplementary activities (work and research). To date, there is no established terminology and the variability in naming this syndrome is acceptable. The following are possible: academic burnout, educational burnout, learning burnout. Academic burnout is defined as a psychological state characterized by continuing negative emotions and low motivation associated with learning, research interests, and/or student’s work [7].

There are two main trends in the research of academic burnout that focuses on studying its determining factors.

The first trend is associated with identifying organizational factors that determine burnout in students. For example, the correlation between the quality of education, student burnout, and student commitment to the university is studied [8]. The results showed the importance of social support in preventing burnout. Social support is a resource that allows people to cope with stress: it mitigates the effects of stressful events and leads to more positive emotions. Moreover, social support from family environment, friends, and teachers plays an important role in maintaining the students’ health and protecting them from the harmful effects of stressful factors.

The second most numerous group of studies of academic burnout focus on studying the personality-related predicates of burnout. The main research question is identifying the personality traits, character traits, and states that protect the student from burnout. Studies are also conducted to identify personal factors that predict mental stress and burnout. For example, it was proved that stronger perfectionism is found in students with low academic burnout rather than among students with high academic burnout [9]. Z. Rakhmati studied the levels of academic burnout among students with high and low levels of personal self-efficacy. The results of the study showed a negative correlation between self-efficacy, academic burnout variables and its components. Therefore, students with higher self-efficacy demonstrate low levels of academic burnout [10]. Modern foreign studies examine in detail the relationship between emotional intelligence, burnout and life satisfaction among university students. It was proved that emotional intelligence is associated with better adjustment or academic success. Emotional intelligence is the ability to control feelings and emotions and use them to control behaviour. A high level of emotional intelligence is associated with a lower level of anxiety, stress, burnout and a
higher level of satisfaction with life. As a result, a model for mediating burnout was created, that mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and life satisfaction. In general, research results emphasise the possibility of identifying students who are at risk of academic burnout [11]. Thus, it was substantiated that emotional intelligence affects the students’ ability to successfully cope with the demands and pressures of the learning environment.

Research results have also shown a correlation between academic burnout and the students’ psychological capital (PsyCap), in other words, academic burnout can be controlled by improving one’s psychological capital [12].

A number of modern studies focus on identifying the relationship between external and internal factors that intermediate academic burnout. Thus, S. R. Jacobs and D. Dodd studied the correlation between social support, personality temperament and workload (academic and professional). It was found that a high level of burnout is due to some features of temperament and subjective perception of the workload, while the actual level of workload is not associated with burnout [13].

Much less research has been done into academic burnout, but this issue has started to attract interest, with the term “academic burnout” being rarely used: following the established tradition, the term “emotional burnout syndrome” is more common. According to O.S. Glazachev, burnout in students develops as a stress-response mechanism with a gradual increase in somatic vegetative symptoms in response to intense learning and communicative activities. The trigger for the development of the syndrome is emotional-cognitive disorientation, and the result is emotional exhaustion and vegetative deregulation [14].

V.V. Kustov’s study shows the relationship between the individual’s spiritual and moral development and emotional burnout in students majoring in social pedagogy. A high level of goodwill, altruism, tact and empathy towards children was revealed in individuals not prone to emotional burnout. On the contrary, students who have the burnout syndrome demonstrated a low level of spiritual and moral qualities development. The so-called “goodwill index” is considered an integral characteristic of the spiritual and moral qualities of a person and the main indicator of emotional burnout [15]. Thus, despite the increased interest of modern psychological science and practice to the issue of emotional burnout, to date, there are virtually no studies of academic burnout in students who combine work and studies. However, increased workload associated with combining work and studies may trigger the development of the syndrome.

2 METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in 2017–2018 in a large state university. It involved 287 second- and third-year students (152 female and 135 male students) aged from 18 to 22. The respondents mainly work in the service sector in the following positions: waiters, sales assistants, couriers, bartenders, hostesses, fitness trainers, administrators, receptionists.

The sample was divided into two groups depending on the length of working experience: group 1, comprising 55 students (with less than a 3-month experience of combining work and studies); group 2 - 32 students (with a 3- to 12-month experience of combining work and studies).

To diagnose the syndrome of emotional burnout, the questionnaire developed by V.V. Boyko was used, which can only be applied to working students. We assumed that in those students who have a longer experience of combining work and study, the burnout syndrome will be manifested more noticeably. The theoretical analysis of research focusing on the issue of emotional burnout showed that there is no direct correlation between burnout and work experience. However, in this case, the factor of combining work and studies can contribute to the development of academic burnout. As a rule, working students begin to experience difficulties with studying; many of them shift to part-time studies.

3 RESULTS

The results of the survey showed that the majority of working students suffer from the burnout syndrome. The syndrome was detected in 72.7% of the respondents in the first group, and in 84.4% of the students in the second group. The analysis of the results showed a different degree of development of the main phases of emotional burnout in students with different work experience (Table 1).
The table shows that in both groups the dominant phase is the “Stress” phase. This phase triggers the development of the symptom, indicates the beginning of emotional burnout. It was detected in 41.8% of the students from the first group and in 56.2% of the students from the second group.

Table 1. The main phases of burnout in working students, %.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work experience</th>
<th>“Stress” phase</th>
<th>“Resistance” phase</th>
<th>“Exhaustion” phase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 3 months</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 12 months</td>
<td>56.2</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The “Resistance” phase marks the beginning of resistance to stress and the activity of the psyche defence mechanisms, at the same time indicating the active development of emotional burnout: it was identified in 29.1% of the respondents in the first group and in 37.1% of the respondents in the second group. The third phase, “exhaustion”, is more pronounced among the respondents of the second group: in 25.9% and 12.7% of the students, respectively. It indicates that burnout has become an integral attribute of the personality, the person’s nervous system is weakened, and the overall energy levels are low. Some respondents showed all the three phases of the burnout syndrome: stress, resistance and exhaustion. The comparison of the most pronounced symptoms of emotional burnout allowed us to study the specifics of the syndrome in both groups.

In the first group (combining work and studies for less than 3 months), the following symptoms are manifested most severely: experiencing stressful circumstances, anxiety and depression, and inadequate selective response. The following symptoms: depersonalisation, emotional deficiency and resignation, were manifested only slightly.

Thus, the difficulties arising from the combination of work and studies appear to cause students to experience certain emotions and provoke anxiety and depression symptoms. Students who have combined work and studies for a long period of time (the second group of respondents) also suffer from psycho-traumatic circumstances, anxiety and depression symptoms. In addition, the dominant symptoms are reduction of professional responsibilities and self-dissatisfaction. These results can be explained by the fact that students do not cope with academic and professional workload and try to ease the burden by all available means. However, this inevitably affects the quality of work and studies, and, as a result, leads to self-dissatisfaction. The symptoms of emotional resignation and emotional deficiency are manifested only slightly in the respondents of this group. To assess the significance of the differences between the groups, we used the Fisher criterion (Fisher’s angular transformation). This criterion makes it possible to compare two samples and estimate the frequency of occurrence of the criterion under study [16].

The authors have put forward the following hypotheses.

H0: The proportion of those who show the studied effect in the first sample (with work experience of less than three months) is not higher than in the second sample.

H1: The proportion of those who show the studied effect is higher in the first sample than in the second sample.

We were interested in the severity of the emotional burnout syndrome and its individual phases (stress, resistance and exhaustion) in two groups of respondents.

The comparison of the samples by frequency of the “Resistance” phase manifestation in respondents showed that the obtained empirical value (φ*emp=0.801) is in the zone of insignificance, H1 is refuted. The comparison of the data of the two samples on the “Exhaustion” phase showed that the obtained empirical value (φ*emp=3.175) is in the significance zone: H0 is rejected, H1 is accepted. The results of the statistical analysis allow us to conclude that students who combine work and studies for a longer period are more prone to exhaustion. This may be due to the fact that combining work and studies is not particularly difficult during the first several months. However, the number of missed classes gradually increases, which leads to gaps in knowledge and academic underperformance. Symptoms of academic burnout arise: reduced motivation to learn, feeling one’s own inefficiency as a student, a feeling of physical and mental exhaustion, conflicts with teachers, etc.

To identify the factors that determine the development of burnout, of interest are those aspects of life that subjectively caused increased anxiety among the respondents, presented in Table 2. The
respondents were asked to assess the degree of anxiety about some aspects of their life in the “study-work” continuum using a ten-point scale (where “0” means “does not worry at all”, “10” causes great anxiety).

The students in the first group expressed concern about the following aspects of their life: academic performance, study schedule and workload in their job. To a lesser extent, they are worried about relationships with colleagues, relationships with fellow students, organisation of the study process.

Table 2. Average scores for different aspects of life in the “work-studies” continuum that cause concern.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of life</th>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Combining work and studies</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic workload</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job-related workload</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with fellow students</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with colleagues</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation of the study process</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation of the work process</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work schedule</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study schedule</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with teachers</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with the superior</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic performance</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work efficiency</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The students who have worked for a long time are more concerned about the very fact of combining work and studies, the workload in their job, their academic performance and relationships with teachers. The least concern is caused by the relationships with colleagues and fellow students, the academic workload and the study schedule. It can be assumed that the responses that received the highest scores from the majority of the respondents may be the factors that trigger the development of the syndrome and lead to the development of “stress” phase, manifested, in particular, in experiencing psycho-traumatic circumstances.

4 CONCLUSIONS

A student who has to combine work and studies for a long time almost inevitably has to choose their priorities: either focus on studies or on work. The research hypothesis that a long period of combining work and studies leads to more pronounced manifestation of the emotional burnout syndrome, was partially confirmed. The students who have been combining work and studies from three months to one year, show more pronounced symptoms corresponding to the exhaustion phase. Nevertheless, it is impossible to state unequivocally that there is a direct correlation between burnout and the duration of the period of combining work and studies.

The mechanisms of academic burnout development are not completely clear. Academic burnout, as a particular case of emotional burnout, is the inevitable consequence of the students improperly organizing the combination of work and studies. The burnout is accompanied by a sense of emotional and physical exhaustion, reduced motivation to study, a negative attitude towards teachers and fellow students and, consequently, low academic performance. During especially tense periods, such as end-of-term examinations, term papers and graduation projects due dates, the manifestations of the syndrome can reach their maximum levels. The external environment factors directly related to studies and work, in combination with certain personal characteristics, can trigger the development of burnout.

Since academic burnout can be caused by various factors, a system of comprehensive measures for the prevention and treatment of this disorder needs to be developed. University teaching staff should encourage the development of the students' self-efficacy, enhance the students' interest in the educational process, develop the students' time management skills, and improve their own communicative culture. When organizing the educational process, the conditions and factors that affect
academic burnout, including student fatigue, need to be taken into account. Those students who combine work and studies need to be offered individual educational trajectories. Further studies of emotional burnout in students may focus on the development of a model of academic burnout, on developing and adapting tools for diagnosing burnout.

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