MINDFULNESS-BASED GROUP INTERVENTIONS AND FACULTY MENTAL WELL-BEING IN UAE HIGHER EDUCATION

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Occupational Stress, Emotional Exhaustion, and Structural Pressures in Contemporary Academic Work
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Abstract - The contemporary higher education sector has undergone profound structural transformation through processes of massification, marketisation, managerialism, internationalisation, and post-pandemic digital reconfiguration (Marginson, 2016a; Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Watermeyer et al., 2021). These shifts have intensified academic workloads and contributed to rising levels of occupational stress, emotional exhaustion, and declining mental well-being among university faculty worldwide (Kinman, 2014; Watts & Robertson, 2011). While literature on academic burnout and workplace well-being has expanded substantially in Western contexts, comparatively limited empirical attention has been paid to faculty mental health within the Arabian Gulf region and the United Arab Emirates (Wilkins, 2020; Romanowski & Karkouti, 2017). Drawing upon the Job Demands–Resources model, transactional stress theory, Conservation of Resources theory, and burnout research (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Hobfoll et al., 2018; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Maslach & Leiter, 2016), this paper examines the theoretical foundations linking workload, stress, emotional exhaustion, and well-being while evaluating mindfulness-based group interventions as supportive mechanisms for occupational resilience.

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions across the world have undergone extensive transformation over recent decades as a result of massification, internationalisation, marketisation, and managerial reform (Trow, 2007; Marginson, 2016a; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Universities increasingly operate within competitive environments shaped by rankings, accountability systems, and performance measurement frameworks (Hazelkorn, 2015; Power, 1997). These changes have intensified faculty workloads and contributed to growing concerns regarding stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion among academic staff (Kinman & Wray, 2013; Mudrak et al., 2018).

The UAE represents a particularly significant setting for examining these dynamics because of its rapid higher education expansion, branch campus concentration, and highly internationalised academic workforce (Wilkins, 2020). Despite the growing importance of the region, relatively little empirical work has explored faculty mental health within UAE higher education systems.

II. STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF ACADEMIC WORK

Processes associated with academic capitalism and entrepreneurial university models have reshaped faculty roles and institutional expectations (Clark, 1998; Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014). Faculty are increasingly expected to maintain research productivity, secure grants, engage with institutional branding, and satisfy performance metrics linked to global ranking systems (Marginson, 2014; Lim, 2018).

The emergence of New Public Management and audit culture has also altered university governance structures through strategic planning, accountability systems, and managerial oversight (Hood, 1991; Deem et al., 2007; Shore, 2008). Although these developments have improved institutional accountability, they have also intensified role complexity and reduced perceived autonomy among faculty (Anderson, 2008; Lynch, 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated digital transformation and intensified workload demands through rapid transitions to online teaching and hybrid delivery systems (Kniffin et al., 2021; Watermeyer et al., 2021).

III. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The transactional model of stress developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) conceptualises stress as a dynamic relationship between individuals and their environments. Stress emerges when individuals appraise workplace demands as exceeding available coping resources.

The Job Demand–Control model similarly proposes that strain is greatest in situations characterised by high demands and limited autonomy (Karasek, 1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Effort–Reward Imbalance theory extends this perspective by highlighting the consequences of situations in which high professional effort is not matched by adequate rewards or recognition (Siegrist, 1996; Siegrist & Li,

2016).

Conservation of Resources theory further explains occupational strain through the loss or threatened loss of valued resources such as time, energy, and social support (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model integrates these traditions by distinguishing between job demands and job resources and explaining how excessive demands contribute to burnout and emotional exhaustion while resources foster engagement and well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Lesener et al., 2019).

IV. BURNOUT AND WELL-BEING

Burnout research identifies emotional exhaustion as the central component of chronic occupational strain (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Schaufeli, 2017). Faculty burnout has been linked to workload intensification, role conflict, publication pressure, and administrative overload (Watts & Robertson, 2011; Kinman, 2014).

Contemporary occupational health research increasingly emphasises positive well-being in addition to the reduction of distress (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Positive psychological functioning therefore includes dimensions such as engagement, meaning, resilience, and flourishing rather than merely the absence of pathology.

V. MINDFULNESS-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Mindfulness-based interventions have received increasing attention as approaches for improving occupational well-being and reducing stress (Good et al., 2016; Janssen et al., 2018). Practices associated with mindfulness aim to improve attentional regulation, emotional awareness, and non-judgmental present-moment attention (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

Research suggests that mindfulness-based interventions may reduce perceived stress and emotional exhaustion while strengthening coping processes and resilience in demanding professional environments (Khoury et al., 2015; Lomas et al., 2017). Group-based mindfulness interventions may also strengthen collegial support and reduce isolation within multicultural academic settings such as the UAE.

VI. UAE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

The UAE higher education sector has expanded rapidly over the last two decades and now hosts one of the world's most concentrated branch campus environments (Wilkins, 2020). Institutions operate within highly internationalised environments characterised by expatriate faculty labour, multicultural student populations, and ranking-oriented strategic priorities (Romanowski & Karkouti, 2017).

Faculty within these systems frequently navigate demanding institutional expectations while operating under fixed-term employment conditions and culturally diverse professional settings. Existing literature suggests that these dynamics may contribute to unique forms of occupational stress that remain underexplored in current higher education research.

VII. CONCLUSION

The literature reviewed throughout this paper demonstrates that faculty stress and emotional exhaustion are deeply connected to structural transformations within contemporary higher education. Marketisation, managerialism, audit culture, and internationalisation have intensified academic work and reshaped institutional expectations (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Deem et al., 2007; Hazelkorn, 2015).

Mindfulness-based interventions may provide meaningful support by strengthening coping resources, emotional regulation, and resilience; however, such interventions should not be treated as substitutes for institutional reform. Sustainable improvements in faculty well-being require universities to critically examine workload design, organisational structures, and the broader conditions under which academic labour is organised and evaluated.

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