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Mapping Student Burnout: Exhausted, Detached, and Disheartened – Insights from the Maslach Burnout Inventory

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Abstract

Building on the growing literature on burnout in modern society, this study explores the prevalence and profile of burnout among university students. On a sample of 223 students, burnout was mapped using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), through three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal achievement. The average score for emotional exhaustion was 20.13 (SD = 10.53), placing students in the moderate burnout category for this dimension. This suggests that many students regularly experience academic fatigue, emotional drain, and signs of chronic stress related to their studies. An independent samples t-test shows that female students reported significantly higher emotional exhaustion than male students ($p = .002$). The depersonalization subscale had an average score of 14.31 (SD = 9.69), which corresponds to a high level of burnout. This result indicates that a significant number of students may be experiencing social withdrawal, emotional detachment, and a loss of empathy in interpersonal relationships. Conversely, students scored relatively high on the personal achievement subscale, with a mean of 27.22 (SD = 8.78). According to the interpretive framework, this falls into the high-level burnout range for this subscale, as it reflects a low sense of personal accomplishment. Despite continuing to function academically, many students may doubt their abilities or feel ineffective, which can be a delayed consequence of emotional exhaustion and social detachment. Such a burnout profile – moderate exhaustion, high depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment – reflects a concerning pattern of psychological strain among students. While they may persist in their academic duties, they are at risk of more severe burnout without appropriate interventions. These findings highlight the need for targeted institutional responses. Contributing to the field, the paper argues that universities should prioritize mental health and well-being initiatives, encourage healthy social connections, and rebuild students' academic confidence through mentoring, positive feedback, and personalized support.

Keywords: burnout, Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), student burnout, higher education mental health

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized and increasingly interconnected world, students are more frequently exposed to high levels of stress. This is due to a range of factors, including cultural adaptation, academic pressure, and the challenges of navigating international environments. Starting new academic roles and managing increased responsibilities can elevate stress levels, which is broadly defined as the body's response to new or challenging demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Havelka Meštrović & Havelka, 2021).

During adolescence and early adulthood, many individuals begin to develop coping mechanisms for stress. However, these strategies may be insufficient or not used properly when confronted with the intensified demands of university life, particularly in a multicultural or international setting (Compas et al., 2001). These are the situations when students might experience increased levels of anxiety, and, more problematic, enter the state of higher risk for burnout.

It is important to distinguish burnout from anxiety, as the two constructs, while related, capture different psychological phenomena. Burnout represents a profound depletion of emotional and physical resources, emerging as a sustained response to chronic stressors in academic or occupational settings, whereas anxiety is a broader emotional state characterized by excessive worry and physiological arousal that can arise from multiple sources. While students experiencing burnout may also report elevated anxiety, burnout is conceptually grounded in chronic stress responses to persistent demands, whereas anxiety can be more general, situational, or anticipatory. The two phenomena are also measured differently, where burnout captures chronic emotional exhaustion, detachment, and reduced accomplishment in a specific role (e.g., via the Maslach Burnout Inventory), and anxiety captures general emotional tension, worry, and physiological arousal (e.g., via the Anxiety Screening Questionnaire). This distinction in the measurement logic further emphasizes that burnout reflects the cumulative impact of sustained demands, whereas anxiety reflects broader, often short-term emotional and bodily responses. Recognizing this distinction allows for a more precise understanding of students' mental health and ensures that interventions can target specific challenges effectively.

2. LITERATURE

Although the term burnout is most commonly associated with occupational settings, recent research has highlighted its prevalence among university students. Traditionally, we focused on job burnout as a psychological syndrome that involves a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job, resulting in overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2017). Newer research reveals that academic burnout exceeds that of the working population (Olson et al., 2025). Academic burnout is characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion, feelings of ineffectiveness, low motivation, depersonalization,

detachment, and, in some cases, derealization (Obregon et al., 2020; Salmela-Aro et al., 2009; Schaufeli et al., 2002). These symptoms significantly impair a student's academic performance, increase university drop-out rates, and diminish overall well-being. Furthermore, it was found that burnout in nursing students negatively impacts students' health, decreases academic success, increases attrition, and threatens the quality of patient care (Burlison et al., 2023). It is to be suspected that burnt-out students do not make an ideal population getting ready to enter the job market and take on the role of future leaders.

An influential framework that helps us understand burnout is the job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001), which explains the intricate balance between job pressures and resources. While excessive job demands (e.g., too high a workload) are related to burnout, high levels of job resources are associated with engagement (Crawford et al., 2010). We know employees can simultaneously be highly engaged and burned out (Farndale & Vidović, 2025), but we have yet to see if this is true for students in the academic setting as well. What is known for now is that female students and those in higher academic years report higher stress and burnout (Olson et al., 2025; Kilic et al., 2021). Also, language barriers, cultural adaptation, and separation from familiar support systems can intensify these challenges, especially for international students (e.g., Ansari Lari et al., 2025; Gradiski et al., 2022). Finally, students in higher years and smokers were also found to have significantly higher burnout scores (Liu et al., 2023).

Many students begin to struggle with mental health issues only after it is too late—often when their academic performance has already started to decline. Early recognition of the symptoms associated with burnout is essential in helping students address these challenges before they escalate. Identifying the warning signs—such as lagging behind academically, lower motivation for continued education, emotional exhaustion, lack of motivation in general, feelings of detachment, and cognitive difficulties—can facilitate timely support and intervention. Raising awareness about mental health and burnout symptoms within educational environments is therefore crucial to promoting student well-being and academic success.

As students increasingly face these stressors, particularly in global academic environments, institutions must prioritize the development of support systems and stress-management resources. Early intervention can play a crucial role in mitigating the effects of burnout and promoting mental health among students (Havelka Mestrovic & Havelka, 2021). Studies identified perceived social support as a protective factor (Kilic et al., 2021), which should be utilized through building academic support networks. Also, building psychological capital is proven to lead to well-being (Momin & Rolla, 2024; Siddiqi et al., 2025).

The primary objective of the current study is to assess the prevalence and severity of burnout symptoms among university students studying in an international environment. As the globalization of education increases, more students are exposed to academic, social, and cultural stressors that can contribute to psychological strain. Therefore, this study aims to

identify how many students report experiencing symptoms of burnout and the extent to which these symptoms are present. It also seeks to raise awareness of the mental health risks associated with international education and highlight the importance of early detection and stress-related intervention.

3. METHODS

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, survey-based research design to examine the level and prevalence of burnout among undergraduate students. Data were collected using structured questionnaires distributed to undergraduate students enrolled in an international business program. A survey design was selected because it allows for the efficient collection of standardized data from a relatively large group of participants, enabling statistical analysis and comparison across variables. The use of a self-administered questionnaire ensured consistency in data collection, minimized interviewer bias, and facilitated participants' ability to respond at their own pace.

The study is conducted in Croatia, an EU member state of a upper-middle-income status. The college chosen to conduct the study at is perfectly positioned to experience a significant proportion of international students (approximately 30%). The college offers both a USA-accredited and an EU-accredited degree, at lower prices when compared to attending a college in the USA. This unique academic context provides an uncommon opportunity to examine academic burnout in a cross-cultural student population, contributing novel insights to the literature on how international and multicultural settings may shape stress, burnout, and anxiety among university students.

3.2. Participants

The study included 223 undergraduate students enrolled in an international business program at a college in Croatia with a high proportion of international students (roughly 30%) representing 19 different countries. Participants were recruited through email invitation and in-class announcement, and all provided informed consent before participation. The sample consisted of students from all four years of study, with 45,38% male and 54,62% female students. The majority of international students came from the USA, United Arab Emirates, Ukraine, Montenegro, and Albania, while the remaining students represented a diverse range of nationalities. Participants' ages mostly ranged from 18–23 years with a few outliers.

3.3. Instruments

The study used two well-established and widely used assessment tools: The Anxiety Screening Questionnaire, which measures levels of anxiety in individuals, and The Maslach Burnout Inventory, which evaluates burnout across emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and

personal accomplishment. Both instruments have demonstrated strong psychometric properties in previous research and are commonly used in studies involving undergraduate students and young adult populations. Both instruments were used in the English language, as the official language of the college used to recruit participants.

The Anxiety Screening Questionnaire (ASQ) was used to assess participants' levels of anxiety. The ASQ is a standardized self-report instrument designed to identify symptoms of anxiety in adults and young adults. It consists of seven items, rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "Not at all" to "Nearly every day", with higher scores indicating greater levels of anxiety.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is a widely validated and extensively used psychological assessment tool designed to measure occupational burnout. In this study, occupational stress was linked to student stress, as college activities were observed as occupational activities. The MBI version used in this study contains 22 items.

MBI assesses burnout as a multidimensional construct comprising three core dimensions: Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP), and Personal Accomplishment (PA). Emotional Exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted of emotional resources. Depersonalization reflects a negative, callous, or detached response toward recipients of one's care or service. Personal Accomplishment measures feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work with people (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009; Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

The MBI has demonstrated very good reliability and validity across diverse occupational groups and cultural contexts. Internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) typically exceed 0.70 for all subscales. The instrument has been translated into multiple languages and validated internationally (Schaufeli, Leiter & Maslach, 2009).

Higher scores on Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization, coupled with lower scores on Personal Accomplishment, are indicative of higher burnout levels. While normative data exist, cutoff points may vary by population and study design.

Although a student-specific version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI-SS) exists, the standard MBI was chosen for this study to maintain the well-established three-factor structure of Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment, allowing a more nuanced interpretation of burnout symptoms. Schaufeli et al. (2002) note that while both the MBI and MBI-SS have been applied in student populations, the MBI-SS may not consistently replicate the factorial structure across different countries and contexts. Using the standard MBI ensures comparability with prior research while capturing the same core dimensions relevant to academic burnout.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data collected from the Anxiety Screening Questionnaire (ASQ) and the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) were entered into IBM SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, were computed to summarize participants' anxiety and burnout levels. Inferential statistical analyses were conducted to examine relationships between variables, such as independent samples t-tests and Pearson correlations.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Overall Burnout and Anxiety

The study found that a significant portion of students reported experiencing moderate to high levels of burnout. 55.5% of students fell into these categories, while 44.5% reported low levels of burnout (Figure 1). Similarly, the study found that 52.6% of students experience moderate or severe anxiety (Figure 2). The study also found a strong, statistically significant correlation between burnout and anxiety (Table 1). The Pearson correlation coefficient was 0.609 ($p < .001$), indicating a strong positive relationship between the two.

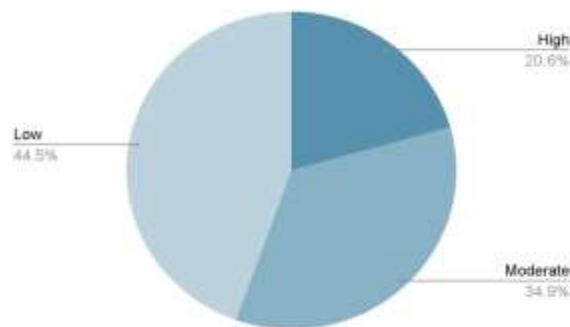


Figure 1. Burnout overall

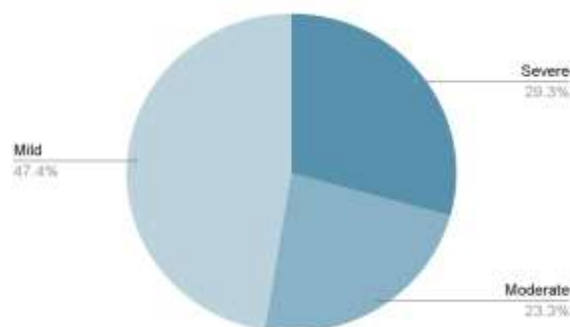


Figure 2. Anxiety overall

Table 1. Pearson correlation table for burnout and anxiety

		Burnout	Anxiety
Burnout (Maslach A)	Pearson Correlation	1	0,609**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<0,001
	N	161	140
Anxiety (Anxiety Screen Questionnaire)	Pearson Correlation	0,609**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0,001	
	N	140	140

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.2. Dimensions of Burnout by Gender

The Maslach Burnout Inventory was used to assess three key dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal achievement. Gender-based differences were observed across these dimensions.

Emotional Exhaustion: Female students reported moderately higher levels of emotional exhaustion compared to male students (Figure 3 and Table 2). The medium effect size ($|d| = 0.55$) and confidence interval not crossing zero indicate a meaningful gender difference. The mean score for females was 22.14 (moderate level), while the mean score for males was 16.54 (low level). This difference was found to be statistically significant. Specifically, a higher percentage of females reported moderate (37.1%) and high (27.4%) emotional exhaustion, while the majority of males reported low (56.5%) emotional exhaustion.

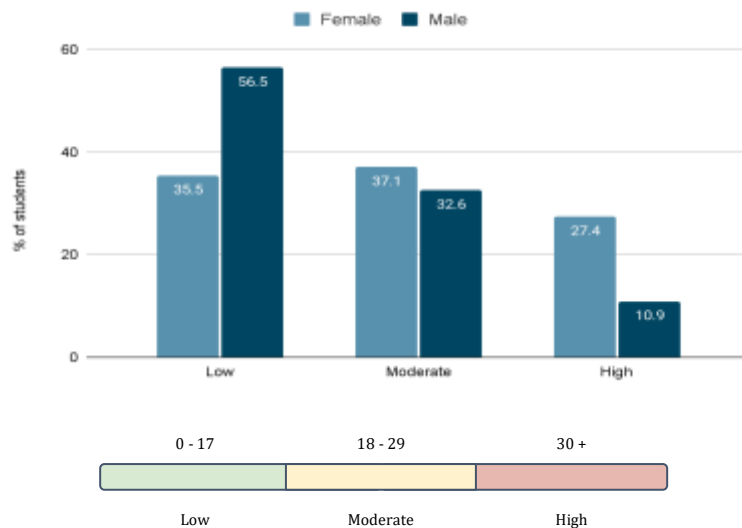


Figure 3. Emotional Exhaustion (Maslach A) by Gender

Table 2. Independent Samples T-test for Gender Differences in Emotional Exhaustion (Maslach A)

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p	Cohen's d	95% CI for d
Emotional Exhaustion (Maslach A)	Male	59	16.54	7.91	-3.53	119.56	.001	-0.55	-1.01
	Female	71	22.14	9.07					to -0.30

Depersonalization: The depersonalization scores also showed gender differences, although the statistical significance of this difference was not specified (Figure 4 and Table 3). The mean score for females was 14.87, and for males was 13.23, with both groups on average scoring at a high level. Female students tended to report moderate (27.4%) to high (58.1%) depersonalization, whereas males more often reported moderate depersonalization (50%). A minority of students reported low depersonalization (14.5% of females and 6.5% of males). Overall, males scored slightly lower than females, but the small effect size ($|d| = 0.17$) and confidence interval crossing zero suggest the gender difference is not statistically meaningful.

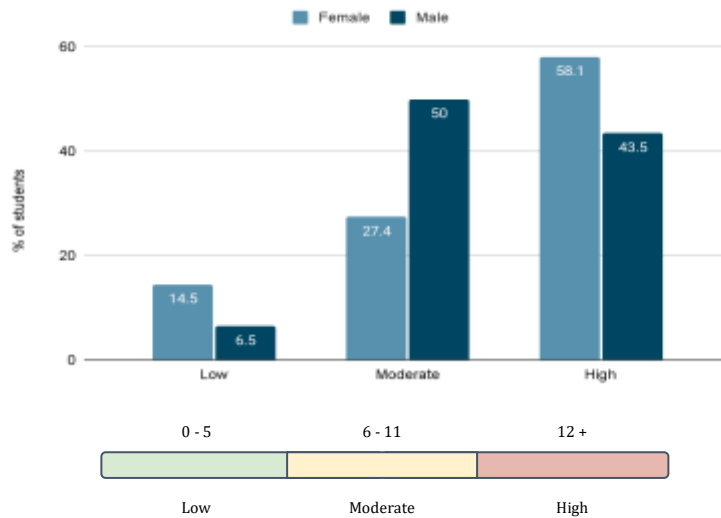


Figure 4. Depersonalization (Maslach B) by Gender

Table 3. Independent Samples T-test for Gender Differences in Depersonalization (Maslach B)

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p	Cohen's d	95% CI for d
Depersonalization (Maslach B)	Male	59	13.23	5.30	-0.95	119.98	.345	-0.17	-0.52
	Female	71	14.87	7.50					to 0.18

Reduced Personal Achievement: Both male and female students tended to report high levels of reduced personal achievement, with no statistically significant difference between the genders (Figure 5 and Table 4). The mean score for females was 27.48 (high level), and for males was 28.30 (high level). A large majority of both female (77.4%) and male (82.6%) students reported high levels of reduced personal achievement. Specifically, with an effect size

near zero, and the confidence interval crossing zero, indicates no meaningful gender difference between males and females in reduced personal achievement.

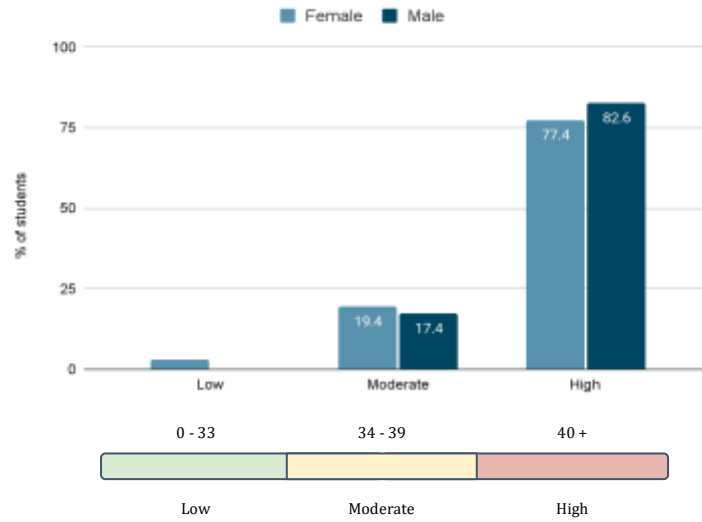


Figure 5. Reduced Personal Achievement (Maslach C) by Gender

Table 4. Independent Samples T-test for Gender Differences in Reduced Personal Achievement (Maslach C)

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p	Cohen's d	95% CI for d
Reduced Personal Achievement (Maslach C)	Male	59	28.30	5.34	0.07	128	.945	0.01	-0.34 to 0.36
	Female	71	27.48	6.22					

5. DISCUSSION

Earlier findings indicated a wide range of student burnout prevalence, ranging from 33–55% among medical students (Kilic et al., 2021), to 40.3% (Obregon et al., 2020), 59.9% (Liu et al., 2023), even up to 73.2% (Olson et al., 2025), with almost one-third of the students reporting frequent symptoms of burnout (Olson et al., 2025). Most of the studies indicated a higher prevalence of burnout among female students (e.g., Gradicki et al., 2022; Obregon et al., 2020; Olson et al., 2025), although some found male students to have higher burnout scores (Liu et al., 2023).

The findings of this study revealed significant insights into student burnout. The high prevalence of moderate to high burnout (55.5% of students) and anxiety (52.6% of students) among the student population highlights a critical need for intervention. The strong correlation between burnout and anxiety ($r=.609$, $p<.001$) suggests that these are not isolated issues but rather intertwined challenges that must be addressed holistically.

By focusing on an international student population in Croatia, this study adds a unique perspective to cross-cultural burnout research. The findings highlight how cultural adaptation, separation from familiar support systems, and academic pressures interact in a setting that is underrepresented in the existing literature, offering valuable implications for institutions with diverse student bodies.

With regards to location, one paper pooled data from 55 studies coming from 24 countries to find heterogeneity: the pooled prevalence in Upper Middle-Income countries (UMIC), Lower middle-income countries (LMIC), and Lower income countries was 9.8%, 42.9%, and 20.1% respectively (Kaggwa et al., 2021). The same paper reports that overall one-third of university students in low- and middle-income countries experience burnout. Data from this study was collected in Croatia, a country considered a high-income economy, with an international pool of students. High burnout prevalence from this study is opposed to the findings from this pooled study summary, calling for further investigation and research. Taken together, the prevalence observed in this study (55.5%) is substantially higher than typical estimates reported both regionally and globally. While global pooled rates of student burnout often fall between 30–40%, and even lower in high-income countries, the prevalence in our sample exceeds these benchmarks, suggesting that this student population may be experiencing unusually elevated levels of academic stress.

The gender-based analysis further deepens these insights. Female students, in particular, appear to be at a higher risk for emotional exhaustion, a core component of burnout. While the study did not find a statistically significant difference in depersonalization or reduced personal achievement between genders, the notably higher emotional exhaustion among female students points to a gender-specific vulnerability. Considering that it is exactly the emotional exhaustion component of the questionnaire that is indicative of burnout, this is highly important. The widespread report of reduced personal achievement across both genders suggests a universal struggle with feelings of academic inadequacy.

6. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study have several critical implications for academic institutions, student support services, and educators in general. It starts with acknowledging the prevalence of academic burnout in modern education. This paper showed that overall, approximately half of the students reported moderate to high burnout levels, giving a clear insight into how widespread this problem is. The impact of burnout is so prevalent in contemporary society that even the World Health Organization - WHO (2019) included burnout in the organization's International Classification of Diseases diagnostic manual, defining it as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed”.

We know that student characteristics such as being out-of-phase in the curriculum, being female, rating wellness initiatives as less effective, and demonstrating lower motivation for continued education may be used as predictors of student burnout (Obregon et al., 2020). And it is exactly these indicators that should be used to pre-select students who should be monitored more closely and offered more intensive support. Further, we know that there are some proven methods that help alleviate anxiety and burnout, such as planning for brief periods of acute stress rather than a long period of stress, as planned acute stress appeared more controllable (Kilic et al., 2021), providing social support, self-compassion, culturally sensitive university programs, and mental health literacy initiatives (Ansari Lari et al., 2025), and even using cognitive-behavioral approach for students who are perfectionists (Bahreyni et al., 2023).

Based on all these, we suggest the following recommendations that take on a holistic strategy to tackle emotional exhaustion, feelings of inadequacy, and social isolation:

6.1. Rebuilding the Academic Confidence of Students

The high levels of reduced personal achievement indicate a crisis of confidence. To counteract this, academic institutions should implement strategies focused on rebuilding students' academic confidence. This can be achieved through: constructive and positive feedback that highlights strengths and provides clear, actionable steps for improvement; mentoring programs that pair students with faculty or their peers to provide guidance and a sense of belonging; and skill-building workshops on topics like time management, effective study habits, and building resilience.

6.2. Prioritizing Mental Health and Well-Being

Considering the strong link between burnout and anxiety, mental health should be a central focus of student support. This means prioritizing mental health and well-being by providing: enhanced and accessible mental health services (e.g., counselling and therapy); proactive outreach to students identified as being at high risk for burnout and anxiety; and integrating mental health education into the curriculum to destigmatize seeking help and provide students with coping mechanisms.

6.3. Encouraging Healthy Social Connections

Earlier studies suggested that isolation, especially with international students, can be a contributing factor to burnout. Higher education institutions should actively encourage healthy social connections to foster a supportive community among students. As mentioned earlier, opportunities such as mentoring (faculty and peers), but also opportunities such as student clubs, social events, and group projects, help students to (re)connect and feel a sense of connection and support in their community.

The question remains if female student burnout and anxiety should be approached differently than for their male colleagues. We know from other fields that women often find different ways of coping (e.g., young military women finding novel ways to cope with their male-dominated environment in Bjarnesen, 2025). This, and other gender differences, means that mental health studies done on men may not yield data applicable to women and vice versa. Hence, it is crucial to be aware of these likely differences between male and female students and ensure that any recommendations made to students of a certain gender are based on research done on the same gender or on a mixed-gender group. This is certainly a topic for further exploration and something for universities to consider as they adapt in an effort to provide a better learning environment for students.

7. LIMITATIONS

While this study provides important insights into student burnout and anxiety, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, as is common in this field, our study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to reporting bias, social desirability bias, or inaccuracies in students' self-assessment of burnout and anxiety. A discussion can be raised if students are indeed so susceptible to burnout and if this is realistic. Yet, even if, compared to some other demographic groups, students would be shown to perhaps inflate their results and levels of burnout, this is still their personal perception, and as such, is valid. Second, this research employed a cross-sectional design, preventing conclusions about causality between burnout, anxiety, and demographic or academic factors. Future studies using longitudinal designs could better capture changes over time and identify potential causal relationships.

Third, the sample was drawn from a single country (Croatia), albeit with some international students, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other cultural and educational contexts. Although comparisons to pooled international studies were made, further research involving broader and more diverse samples is needed to determine whether these patterns hold across different institutional settings and economic classifications.

Fourth, while the study included gender-based analyses, the lack of exploration of other demographic variables (such as socioeconomic status, family support, year of study, and field of study) limits a more nuanced understanding of burnout risk factors. Additionally, mental health history and personality traits were not assessed, yet they may play a significant role in students' vulnerability to burnout and anxiety.

Finally, although validated instruments were used, burnout and anxiety are complex constructs, and quantitative measures alone may not fully capture students' lived experiences. Furthermore, the instruments were initially designed to capture perceptions of employees, not students, and there might be a need for redesigning these instruments for a better fit. Overall, incorporating qualitative approaches in future studies could provide richer insights and inform more targeted interventions.

8. CONCLUSION

More than half of the students who participated in this study reported academic burnout. Their levels of burnout were statistically significantly related to their level of anxiety, making these two concepts inseparable when discussing academic burnout. As mentioned in many studies, implementing an effective wellness program that can rebuild academic confidence, prioritize mental health and well-being, and encourage healthy social connections seems to be the best route to address student anxiety and reduce student burnout. Higher education institutions need to take this epidemic seriously and invest in the mental health of their students to best prepare them for their careers.

In addition, while this was not feasible in our study, we feel that future research would benefit from adopting longitudinal designs that track changes in burnout and anxiety over time, helping to clarify causal pathways and provide more insight into the dynamics of changes in burnout. Additionally, a mixed-method approach might also offer deeper insights by complementing quantitative findings with qualitative perspectives on students' lived experiences, coping strategies, and the contextual factors that shape academic stress. Such approaches would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying burnout and guide the development of more targeted, evidence-based interventions.

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