Occupational Stress of University Lecturers

Doan Thi Cuc
Tan Trao University, Yen Son District, Tuyen Quang Province, Vietnam

Tran Minh Hang
Tan Trao University, Yen Son District, Tuyen Quang Province, Vietnam

Pham Minh Tu
Tan Trao University, Yen Son District, Tuyen Quang Province, Vietnam

Received: 10/4/2024        Accepted: 15/6/2024

Abstract

Occupational stress ranks as the foremost type of stress among adults. University faculty members experience occupational stress through negative emotions such as tension, anxiety, anger, and depression, all stemming from their teaching duties. Here, stress is understood as adverse, objective impacts that create both material and psychological challenges for faculty members. Using methods of analysis, classification, and synthesis of theories, this study provides an overview of the research history and elucidates the concept and classification of occupational stress among university faculty. The findings of this research serve as a foundation for policymakers in university administration.

Keywords: Occupational stress, university faculty, Vietnam.


Introduction

In the current context, characterized by societal changes, the explosion of the scientific and technological revolution, global integration, and advancements in learners' cognitive and psychological development, there is a pressing demand for faculty members to adapt. Additionally, the requirements of a fundamental and comprehensive educational reform during the Fourth Industrial Revolution, particularly those concerning professional expertise, pedagogy, and professional qualities, place significant demands on faculty. These objective demands can lead to positive changes but also generate considerable pressure.

Preliminary research indicates that occupational stress is the primary form of stress among adults. For university faculty, occupational stress involves negative emotional experiences such as tension, anxiety, anger, and depression, all stemming from their...
teaching responsibilities. Here, stress is understood as adverse, objective influences that create both material and psychological challenges for faculty members. Summarizing various studies, researchers categorize the manifestations of stress for faculty into three main groups: stress from professional and academic demands, stress from management and policy, and stress from social relationships.

The occupational pressures currently impacting university faculty significantly affect the quality and effectiveness of teaching and education. This issue has garnered considerable attention from educational researchers, administrators, and faculty members, being discussed at various forums and conferences where the state of stress, its causes, and potential solutions are addressed. Consequently, an overview of the occupational pressures faced by university faculty is essential as a foundation for enhancing measures to alleviate these stresses. This research is thus of critical importance.

**Brief History of Research**

Pressure here is understood as the objective, unfavorable impacts causing difficulties and stress, both materially and mentally, for teachers (Kurt Lewin, 1993). Chris Kyriacou (2001) in his research indicated that psychological pressure is a psychological process that occurs when individuals face environmental impacts that create stress, resulting in certain physical and mental health impairments.

Contrary to "occupational pressure" is "occupational happiness." Occupational happiness is an individual's perception of their own life through the evaluation of that life. From a professional perspective, occupational happiness is the perception of workers about their profession. Positive evaluations of the profession indicate that the workers are experiencing happiness in their profession. For teachers, occupational happiness is the satisfaction and contentment with the profession they have chosen (Keyes and Waterman, 2009).

Research by Lambert, R. G., McCarthy, C., O'Donnell, M., & Wang, C. (2009) has shown that teachers' occupational pressure is their experience of negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, anger, and depression, originating from their teaching duties.

Khan EA, Aqeel M, Riaz MA (2014), in their study "Impact of job stress on job attitudes and life satisfaction in college lecturers. Int J Inform Educ Technol," aimed to explore the relationships between job stress and job attitudes among college lecturers. This cross-sectional study design utilized purposive sampling techniques. The results showed that job stress has a significantly negative relationship with job performance, job satisfaction, and life satisfaction, while it is positively related to turnover intention. Furthermore, a significant difference was found between married and unmarried university lecturers concerning these variables.

Veena G, Pushpalatha K, Mallaiah TY. (2016) in their study "Professional stress among faculty members of Mangalore University: A Study," aimed to determine the level of occupational stress among university faculty and ways to mitigate stress. This study used a structured questionnaire to collect data from faculty members of Mangalore University (India). The findings revealed that a majority (41, 82.0%) of respondents were satisfied with their current job, while only 9 (18.0%) were not satisfied. Moreover, 15 (30.0%) of respondents managed occupational stress through yoga, followed by 14 (28.0%) through exercise, and 6 (12.0%) through meditation.
Mitra D, Ann M, Lisa R. A (2016), in a qualitative study on the academic role in the UK, identified positive characteristics, negative aspects, and related stress factors within a primarily teaching-focused university, highlighting various sources and causes of occupational pressure.

Qian Meng Guan Wang (2018), in his study "A research on sources of university faculty occupational stress: a Chinese case study," investigated the level of stress among university faculty, key determinants of their stress, and its implications for both faculty and administrators. Participants completed a questionnaire with 24 items, and responses from 240 participants at a Chinese university were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics revealed the characteristics of the participants. Cronbach’s alpha and varimax rotation were used to assess the reliability and validity of the scale. The main statistical methods used were ANOVA and multivariate regression. The results indicated that occupational stress among university faculty is pervasive across professional hierarchies. Faculty face varying levels of teaching, scientific research, and personal development pressures. Professional rank, age, and teaching duration contribute to differences in stress levels. The study suggested that scientific research, professional development, and administrative tasks significantly influence faculty stress.

These studies collectively show that researchers have examined the occupational pressures of faculty from multiple perspectives. The findings indicate that occupational pressure for teachers is an experience of negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, anger, and depression, arising from their teaching duties. University faculty face pressures from teaching, scientific research, personal development, life, family, and health, negatively affecting their job performance and quality of life. Therefore, there is a need for recommendations and measures to reduce occupational stress and create occupational happiness. For teachers, occupational happiness is satisfaction and contentment with their chosen profession. These studies form a crucial basis for us to develop a theoretical framework on the occupational pressures of university faculty in Vietnam.

**Research Content**

**Profession**

Research on vocational education and profession (Trade/Occupation) defines it as the social division of labor assigned to each individual. Through labor in the socially assigned field, individuals contribute to society while supporting themselves and their families (Nguyen Minh Duong - Encyclopedia of Educational Psychology in Vietnam, p. 640). Thus, the profession of a teacher can be understood as the social division of labor for teachers. Teachers contribute to society through teaching and sustain themselves and their families through their teaching profession. Teachers impart not only ancient experiences and new, modern knowledge to learners but also help shape learners’ qualities and capacities to adapt to contemporary social life. In other words, teaching is a profession that trains and shapes the character of new generations.

This directly relates to the content of teaching and the educational institution itself. Therefore, three fundamental elements of teaching are the school, the teacher, and the learner. These three elements are closely interconnected, interacting and influencing each other. A school that creates a good educational environment will make teachers feel comfortable and enthusiastic about their teaching duties. Diligent and attentive
students will inspire teachers to be passionate about their work and committed to their profession and students. Hence, whether a teacher experiences occupational pressure largely depends on these relationships.

**Pressure**

Work pressure is recognized as a significant factor influencing the performance of employees in today's industrial era (Sexton & Helmreich, 2000). In daily life, we can easily observe that every job, whether completed or not, involves moments that make individuals feel pressured by the tasks they are performing (Elisa, 2007). Factors such as a lack of responsibility and support from superiors, tedious meetings, power struggles, interpersonal conflicts at the workplace, environmental conditions like air quality, temperature, noise, workload, and issues of overwork or underwork, contribute to the pressure experienced by individuals in their work (Gretchen, 2002). Therefore, researching work pressure in the workplace is essential and urgent, particularly in industrial zones and more broadly in the context of modern industrialization and modernization. This research can help managers identify the factors affecting work pressure among employees and implement policies or measures to reduce pressure, thereby enhancing employee performance and overall organizational effectiveness.

The theoretical foundation and research models exploring work pressure and its relationship to individual and organizational performance have become significant areas of study in recent years. Work pressure occurs when job demands exceed the capabilities of the individual performing the job, and the related responses to work pressure are the outcomes of these demands (Westman, 2005). A sense of personal dysfunction resulting from an organizational event and the psychological and physiological reactions to pressure in the work environment are considered work pressure (Montgomery et al., 1996). Work pressure is a situation that causes discomfort when job requirements do not align with the individual's abilities. It is a common phenomenon that manifests differently across various work situations and affects workers in different ways (Malek, 2010). Work pressure refers to individual responses to working conditions and is expressed through the work environment and employee interactions (Oke & Dawson, 2008). Consequently, numerous factors influence work pressure, such as the work environment, working conditions, workplace relationships, job performance, and role ambiguity. These factors result from the interactions between individuals and their workplaces.

**Psychological Pressure**

Psychological pressure is the psychological process that occurs when individuals are subjected to environmental factors that create stress, leading to certain impediments and impacts on their physical and mental health.

Stress is a term that the biologist-physicist Robert Hooke referred to in the 17th century while studying artificial structures. Load refers to the weight imposed on a structure, stress is the area where this weight is applied, and strain is the deformation of the structure under the load and stress. Hooke's analysis in the field of physics has had significant implications for 20th-century stress models in physiology, psychology, and sociology. In these fields, stress is viewed as an external demand or load placed on biological, social, and psychological systems, with Selye being the first to address stress in the context of health in the 1950s (Lazarus, 1993).
There are two types of stress: physiological and psychological. The type of stress that Richard Lazarus focused on is psychological stress. Lazarus' stress theory includes four main components: (1) internal or external stressors that cause stress, emphasizing the person-environment relationship and the significance of this relationship; (2) an appraisal process (through neural or physiological systems) to recognize threats or harm deviating from normal conditions; (3) coping processes, either mental or physical, to manage the stressor's demands; (4) a complex pattern of psychological and physical responses, often referred to as stress reactions. Psychological stress can be categorized into three types: (1) Harm, which refers to psychological damage that has already occurred; (2) Threat, which is the anticipation of potential harm that has not yet happened; (3) Challenge, which results from difficult demands that we believe can be overcome using our resources. This classification shows that psychological stress can originate from various internal and external antecedents, naturally leading to different consequences (Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Work stress occurs when job demands exceed an employee's ability to cope, with responses to work stress being the outcomes derived from these demands (Westman, 2005). Work stress is a common occurrence faced by every employee, and how it is managed depends on individual personality and psychology.

Work stress is a response to stressful, stimulating, or psychologically affecting situations. It is a psychosomatic concept reflecting responses to any stressor that puts an individual in a challenging situation, necessitating preparation for a fight-or-flight response. Graham and CCS (2000) assert that work stress arises from factors such as workload overload, conflicts of interest, time pressures, staff shortages, inadequate equipment, and interpersonal conflicts among colleagues.

Increasing work pressure poses a threat to employees' mental health, affecting their behavior. Research indicates that work stress is a primary cause of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes such as organizational commitment, job dissatisfaction, and intentions to quit (Barsky et al., 2004). Consequently, the higher the perceived work stress, the greater the intention to leave, leading to the following research hypothesis:

**Job-related Stress of University Lecturers**

Work-related stress: Work-related stress is the specific relationship between an individual and their work environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is defined as a psychological state that occurs when there is a mismatch between job demands and an individual's beliefs in their ability to meet those demands. The way individuals perceive and assess work situations can lead them to coping behaviors, which in turn generate responses to their perceptions of future situations, including whether those needs align with their capabilities (Cox, Griffiths, & Rial-Gonzalez, 2000).

There are various definitions of job stress among lecturers. Kyriacou (2001) suggests it involves unpleasant emotions such as anxiety, depression, stress, anger, or disappointment that lecturers experience in some aspect of their teaching work. Lambert, McCarthy, O'Donnell, and Wang (2009) define it as the result of unmet expectations and needs, leading to depression, loss of motivation, and negative thinking. Kokkinos (2007) views it as a form of occupational stress, where work-related factors either undermine or enhance physiological and psychological conditions, impeding normal bodily functions.

According to Kyriacou's summary (2001), factors contributing to job stress include: lack of student motivation, maintaining discipline, workload and time pressures, peer
evaluation, interaction with colleagues, self-esteem and status, management and administration, role ambiguity and conflict, and poor working conditions.

Lecturers cope with stress using two main techniques: direct action and palliative techniques. Direct action techniques aim to control stressors so they no longer affect them in the future, which may include: organizing and managing oneself more effectively; developing personal capabilities; negotiating with colleagues. In contrast, palliative techniques aim only to alleviate existing states of stress such as: attempting to change one's assessment of the situation (mentally); engaging in activities to relax and soothe current anxiety and frustration (Kyriacou, 2001).

Pham Thi Huong (2021) argues that job stress among lecturers stems from teaching responsibilities and the teaching environment, leading to negative emotional states (depression, despair, frustration, irritability...) and physical decline (insomnia, increased blood pressure...), which in turn lead to coping mechanisms (absenteeism, substance abuse, accepting defeat...) that can negatively impact both personal life and teaching outcomes. Prolonged stress also leads to burnout.

From these studies, we understand job-related stress for lecturers as their experience of negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, anger, and frustration originating from their teaching work. Here, stress is understood as objective impacts that are unfavorable, causing difficulties and tensions both physically and mentally for lecturers.

Occupational stress is a leading type of stress among adults. Job-related stress among lecturers involves experiencing negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, anger, and frustration arising from their teaching work. Here, stress is understood as objective impacts that are unfavorable, causing difficulties and tensions both physically and mentally for lecturers.

Classification of Job-Related Stress Among University Lecturers

During the ongoing educational reforms in Vietnam's higher education, we categorize the pressures on lecturers into four main groups:

Stress related to personal factors: These pressures include teaching methods that meet curriculum objectives; updating information competencies and enhancing teaching qualifications; and the requirement for continuous professional development as per professional standards.

Stress related to student factors: These encompass pressures arising from overcrowded classrooms; unrealistic student demands; students not achieving expected outcomes, which can lead to frustration, and the attitude and ethics of students in the classroom. This has been a significant stressor for lecturers, consistent with previous studies on factors influencing lecturers' stress levels, including negative classroom management affecting emotional exhaustion (Borg, 1990; Lewis, 1991; Balson, 1992), and several other studies highlighting the link between students' misconduct and lecturer burnout and stress (O'Connor & Clarke, 1990; Borg, Riding, & Falzon, 1991; Boyle, Borg, Falzon, & Baglioni, 1995; Tsouloupas et al. 2010; Gable et al. 2009). Of particular interest here is lecturers' perceptions of declining moral and cultural standards in student behavior and learning, whether this is a widespread phenomenon and the causes behind it, including the role of school environment factors (according to student perspectives).

Stress related to job duties: Administrative tasks are indeed the primary stress factors in lecturers' work such as record keeping, reporting, scheduling, and planning. Some
tasks require extensive after-hours dedication and may only be managed superficially. This aligns with opinions of some experts (To, 2018). Notably, some tasks are evaluated as not truly essential or having minimal impact on teaching quality and training objectives despite demanding significant effort and time. Therefore, there is a need for more robust efforts to streamline, improve, and innovate administrative tasks of lecturers (Nhat Nam, 2019).

In addition to administrative work, lecturers perceive substantial stress from both teaching and non-teaching duties with overwhelming responsibilities. These include teaching workload: (1) mandated class hours and advisory roles, (2) exam/test creation and grading; Non-teaching workload: (1) lesson planning, (2) committee meetings, departmental/union activities, (3) competitive activities, (4) internal assessments/duty assignments, (5) professional and political training; Communication and interaction with students and parents. For those in advisory roles: managing class activities, educational activities, coordinating with organizations and other educational forces. Research is needed to consider streamlining, improving, and innovating non-teaching duties to allow lecturers to focus more on teaching activities, which should ideally be the primary stressor, rather than administrative tasks or workload.

Stress related to other factors: Stress from educational management mechanisms, societal needs, and social relationships of teachers. Economic pressure and coping: Essentially, this involves family life pressures, significantly influenced by income from teaching work. Efforts to improve teachers’ income through government policies and the Ho Chi Minh City Department of Education and Training are commendable as economic pressure ranks last among other stressors for teachers. However, material living standards and family demands likely outweigh official income from school employment. Moonlighting—seen as a response to family economic pressures when official income is inadequate—is quite common, especially in natural sciences and foreign languages (as seen in graduation exams and admissions). This remains a fundamental issue requiring continued resolution.

Conclusion

Professional work-related stress has a dual nature concerning lecturers’ professional activities: On the positive side, stress serves as a motivational force for developing the lecturer workforce and enhancing the quality and efficiency of professional activities. Conversely, excessive stress, without timely mitigation measures, leads to overload phenomena, negatively affecting the physical and mental well-being, as well as the quality and efficiency of lecturers’ professional activities. This, in turn, impacts educational quality, where educational objectives may not be adequately met. Prolonged professional work-related stress among lecturers ultimately results in "occupational burnout". Occupational burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion and ineffective job performance stemming from prolonged stress and pressure. Therefore, policymakers need timely solutions to alleviate professional stress among lecturers.

Acknowledgements

This research is funded by Tan Trao University in Tuyen Quang, Viet Nam.
Reference


