

The Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student burnout level. An Exploratory Approach

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most challenging times for universities that had to adopt alternative teaching methods but also for students who experienced changes in their physical and mental health in their attempt to adapt to all new transformations. In this paper we investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the level of mental health of students, namely the impact on the student's burnout. For this research we conducted a survey among undergraduates and master' students aiming to measure their level of burnout (based on MBI, and the three dimensions – emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal accomplishment) and interviews for identifying the main factors that influenced the students' burnout level.

Keywords: burnout syndrome, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal accomplishment, COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Introduction

Prevention and control measures implemented during pandemic still generate contradictory discussions, but beyond all controversies about the effectiveness of pandemic measures, one thing is certain: the pandemic of COVID-19 has completely changed the lives and perspectives of all people, and it has eroded quite much the image and confidence in the governments of the countries affected by the pandemic. Consequences and negative effects of the Covid 19 pandemic may be found in all aspects of our society and daily life, and one of the most affected fields was education. In this sense, the decision to close schools and implicitly the migration of educational processes in digital and online forma, adopted as a measure of combating the pandemic, the has created both a positive and a negative impact on teachers and students. In fact, not only the educational and academic activity but also the private life of students and teachers was severely affected by the impact of regulations regarding social distancing and the implementation of specific hygiene measures (protective masks, hand disinfection). On the other hand, several studies have shown that the Covid-19 pandemic, through the imposed restrictions, had a major impact on the mental health of different sections of the population and implicitly on students (Dalton et. al, 2020; Brook et al., 2020; Cao W. et. al, 2020; Xiao C., 2020).

This study, based on a survey among undergraduates and master's students, aims to reveal the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the mental health of students. In this sense, we wanted to measure the level of students' burnout as long as their level of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or their appreciation of personal accomplishment during

the pandemic COVID-19. We also intended to find the main factors that, in students' opinion, have had positive or negative influence on their level of burnout.

2. Digital and online education

Although the pandemic boosted the use of online education, the process of teaching via the Internet began as early as the 1990s at the beginning of the Internet. Initially, it was used to assess the different skills acquired by students, especially in the field of using communication and information technology (Volery and Lord, 2000). Consequently, various forms of education emerged based on terms such as: E-learning, online learning, computer-assisted learning (Ruiz et al., 2006). From these points of view, a certain expansion in using Internet and online platforms in educational processes was to be expected, given the benefits they may offer to students and teachers in the learning-teaching activity. Unquestionably, the development of the Internet and its use in the educational processes encouraged mass education, while some educational institutions succeeded offering educational services to segments of population located in remote areas or areas with no such services.

3. The impact of the COVID-19 on education

One of the areas most affected by COVID-19 pandemic was the national education field. Nor could it be otherwise since education systems are one of the important and basic components of a society. The extremely rapid spread of the Covid-19 has forced many countries to close their academic institutions as a measure to reduce the pandemic impact. United Nations estimated that more than 180 countries have imposed the temporary closure (quarantine) of national educational institutions and the quarantine of students at home (Ma et al. 2021). After shutting down schools, the most convenient solution countries have resorted to diminish the negative impact on educational processes was the migration of teaching and learning processes in the online environment.

Although the adoption of the online education process has been a necessity and a temporary and proper solution at that moment, many countries have been unprepared for the widespread implementation of the online education processes, especially that implementation had to be done extremely fast. This may be one of the explanations for the turmoil, disorientation, disorder, and confusion that troubled national education systems at the beginning of the pandemic, and which persisted for quite some time after the beginning of the pandemic. The potential injury was also a factor of influence, not only because of the threats to their or their family health, but also because of schools' closure and the transition to online learning and finally due to the social and physical distance imposed by the quarantine measures.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on teachers with major repercussions on the teaching process. On the one hand, the imposed quarantine has led to the rapid adoption by teachers of ICT tools for online teaching. This "forced" and rapid shift to online teaching has caught some teachers unprepared, with no ICT knowledge and skills needed to conduct online teaching activities. Those teachers did not have the necessary time to adapt and assimilate the ICT tools necessary for the teaching and assessment process of students, and this caused them a high level of stress. In this regard, several studies have clearly shown that the pandemic has generated an elevated level of stress among teachers, caused not only by fear for their health and that of their family, but also by the challenges they face in the adoption of online learning – workload and information overload, unfamiliarity with new online learning platforms (Collie, 2021; Karuppanan, 2021; Stachteas, and Stachteas, 2020; Lizana et.al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on students as well, and not only on the physical health (Saulle et.al, 2021) but also on the mental health of students. Moreover, Schwartz et al. (2021) asserted that students were multiple affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the high level of stress was only one among the negative symptoms experienced by students. In fact, higher stress levels are the most common negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students (Drissi, 2020; Bourion-Bédès et. al, 2021). Other negative effects reported among students are those related to the presence of depression and anxiety (Podlesek and Kavcic, 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Cam et al., 2022; Dragal and Bajracharya, 2020), respectively the presence of related problems like sleep disorders, loss of appetite, joint pain, weight loss (De Maio Nascimento, 2020).

4. Methodology of the research

For this research we conducted a survey and ten focus groups among undergraduate students from Public Administration and Management, Conflict Studies and Advertising programs and master's students in Public Administration, all from Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, "Babeş-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca.

1. For identifying the students' level of burnout we conducted a first survey, in the period 10.11.2021-11.11.2021, using a seven-point scale questionnaire as a data collection tool; 280 students participated in this survey. To measure the students' level of burnout we used Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The use of MBI allows the analysis of burnout syndrome from a multiple perspective (3-dimensional): (1) emotional exhaustion (EE); (2) depersonalization / loss of empathy (DP); (3) personal accomplishment (PA). According to MBI, the dimension of professional exhaustion is related to the loss of individual energies over time, while the dimension related to depersonalization refers to the disorder of relationships with others and it may be manifested either by dependence on others or by negativity and cynical attitude toward other people. Instead, lower scores on personal accomplishment dimension are linked to negative self-esteem, questioning personal abilities, achievements and professional success, one's own professional perception (as incompetent) and inability to achieve his/her goals. In our analysis of the burnout syndrome, we want to find out both the overall level of burnout and the level of burnout on each three dimensions (EE, DP, PA).

2. For identifying factors that had positive or negative impact on students' level of exhaustion, we conducted ten focus groups (FG) in which 100 students participated (10 students participated in each focus group). The focus group was based on an interview guide, the students' answers being audio recorded for better further data processing. The use of the focus group method was to reduce the data collection time.

5. The findings of the research

5.1. The students' level of burnout

The use of MBI allows the assessment of the level of burnout from a triple perspective: (1) the level of exhaustion; (2) the level of depersonalization / loss of empathy; and (3) the level of personal accomplishment.

Regarding the overall level of burnout, the resulting data suggest that this level is not high but a medium level of burnout, with a mean of 4.46 (on a 7-point scale where 1 is the highest level and 7 is the lowest level) (Fig. 1). In this sense, 57.8% of respondents have an average level of burnout while 31.8% of them report a low level. At the other end of the spectrum, only 10.4 of all students seem to have a high overall level of burnout (Table 2).

Regarding the assessment of burnout syndrome from the perspective of the three dimensions (EE, DP, PA) the findings show that for exhaustion almost half of the respondents (49,3%) have average scores and only 12,5% have a high level of burnout. For depersonalization / loss of empathy dimension, most of students reported relatively low levels (44,3%). Regarding the third dimension, most of the respondents reported low and medium values for personal accomplishment (Table 2). In this sense, only less than 20% of the students appreciated as high their personal achievements.

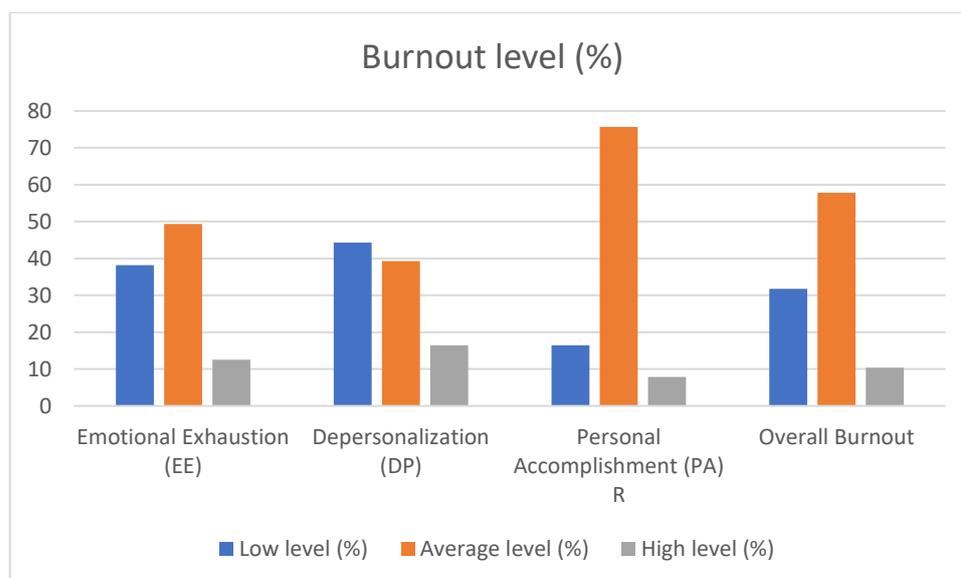
Table 1. The students'level of burnout – means and standard deviations

	Mean	Standard deviation
Emotional Exhaustion (EE)	4,5702	1,02421
Depersonalization (DP)	4,7407	1,26770
Personal Accomplishment (PA) R	4,2558	1,57936
Overall Burnout	4,4677	0,86636

Table 2. The students 'level of burnout (% of respondents)

	Low level (%)	Average level (%)	High level (%)
Emotional Exhaustion (EE)	38,2	49,3	12,5
Depersonalization (DP)	44,3	39,3	16,4
Personal Accomplishment (PA) R	16,4	75,7	7,9
Overall Burnout	31,8	57,8	10,4

Figure 1. The students 'level of burnout (% of respondents)



We found no significative differences between male and female students' burnout levels (Lambda – 0,008, Sig. 0,479), between undergraduates from Public Administration and Management, Conflict Studies or Advertising (Lambda 0,045, Sig. 0,739), between undergraduates or master students (Lambda 0,004, Sig. 0,739) or year of study for undergraduates students (Lambda 0,028 Sig. 0,261). There is only a weak association between master students by specialization and the burnout level (Lambda 0,107 Sig. 0,012). Considering the three dimensions (EE, DP, PA) we may found the same weak association between master students by specialization and the emotional exhaustion level (Lambda 0,152 Sig. <0,001), the depersonalization level (Lambda 0,149, Sig. 0,007) and the personal accomplishment level (Lambda 0,152, Sig. <0,001) but no significant associations between EE, DP, PA and the other factors (gender, undergraduates specialization, year of study).

5.1. The students' level of burnout

Considering factors that influence the burnout level, the survey data reveals a complex image as we may find factors that have a negative effect, increasing the syndrome, and factors that contribute to reducing burnout. In this sense, the main factors that contribute to the increase of the burnout level among students during the COVID-19 pandemic are mainly related to the stress felt by the students during that period (Table 1).

Table 1. The main factors that contribute to the increase of the burnout level

No.	The factor that contributes to increased burnout	% of respondents who selected the factor
1	Stress caused by the possibility of infection and disease with COVID-19 (they and their relatives)	60,0 %
2	Study overload	48,0 %
3	Lack of knowledge and skills related to the use of ICT educational tools (especially the use of the Moodle platform)	20,0 %

On the other hand, the factors that contribute to the decrease of the burnout level are related not only to the individual psychological state but also to organizational aspects such as the faculty support (Table 2).

Table 2. The main factors that contribute to the decrease of the burnout level

No.	The aspect (factor) that contributes to increased burnout	% of respondents who selected the factor
1	The level of personal psychological (mental) stability <i>the level of emotional stability,</i> <i>emotional resilience (high level of resilience),</i> <i>level of personal neuroticism (low level of neuroticism)</i>	70,0 %
2	The social support provided by school and family	50,0 %
3	Psychological security climate offered by school, friends, and family	30,0 %

6. Conclusions

The pandemic period can be described as an important but tumultuous period in the lives of students with impact on students' mental and physical health. Our research showed that there is no evidence that students developed high levels of burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the level of stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic among students has been relatively high, the level of burnout is at relatively normal limits (most students report only low and

medium levels of burnout). In multidimensional analysis of the burnout syndrome, the three dimensions scores (EE, DP, PA) show the same average level of burnout.

The study's findings show the implications that university structures must assume in relation to its students. In this sense, the results suggest that to maintain a normal level of mental health of students, respectively to reduce the level of burnout among them, the university/faculty must be actively involved in providing support to students. The low and average burnout scores of FSPAC students may be as well a result of faculty support provided during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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