

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENGAGEMENT AND ACADEMIC BURNOUT:
EPISTEMOLOGICAL PREMISES FOR IMPROVING
EDUCATIONAL QUALITY**

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Abstract:

Our study relates to the relationship between the students' engagement in academic activities and their degree of burnout in an educational and social context. The topic to which our study refers is not focused strictly upon the learning process, but it relates to activities carried out in an academic context whose results do not always confirm educational, social, professional and personal expectations. Thus, we will discuss and analyze concepts such as “burnout”, “exhaustion”, “fatigue”, “stress” in the context of the carrying out of certain activities.

Under these conditions, the research was focused on students (N=145) enrolled in undergraduate studies at *Al. I. Cuza* University of Iași and the *Ștefan cel Mare* University of Suceava, the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, in the academic year 2022-2023. The participation was voluntary and anonymous. The average age recorded was 21 years (M=21, SD=1.4) and the distribution according to the gender variable indicated a ratio of 89f /56m. The questionnaire included two scales ($\alpha=0.9$) that aimed at self-reporting levels of academic engagement and associated burnout. The analysis of the results revealed a significant ($p=.000$) high negative correlation ($r = -0.9$) (invers proportion ratio of variability) between the two dimensions. Following the interpretation of the results, *the general hypothesis of the study* was confirmed; according to this hypothesis there is a relationship between the variables “academic engagement” and “academic burnout” in the sense that the

students who declare high levels of engagement in the educational field experience lower levels of burnout and vice versa.

Keywords: *academic commitment; academic burnout; educational performance; burnout; academic quality.*

Introduction

The involvement of students in the quality of the act of learning reveals the very idea of their active participation in such an educational approach. This assumption requires the consideration of a process of continuous training, but also of sustainable development of what the quality of the training/learning process stands for. Such a process requires a clear awareness of what constitutes the way of organizing personal and professional resources as they are found in students' lives.

The quality of the activities carried out in the student environment largely depends on how they organize their relationship between resources and performance. Realizing one's own potential is most often achieved by taking into account the ability to relate to the idea of success, but also to emotional and sometimes even to physical stress. Hence the validated/confirmed studies of some specialists on aspects relating to possible correlations among anxiety, self-esteem, desirable or less desirable behaviors, fatigue, stress, performance and so on.

The relevance of this type of study is supported by the degree of novelty and topicality of the subject, in the context of the advance of research in the psycho-pedagogical and educational field. Also, **the scientific importance** of this approach is justified by the need to calibrate educational policies according to the student's psycho-emotional resources. The analysis carried out can also be **useful** as a research base for further developments intended to provide solutions to improve the phenomenon of the academic burnout.

1. The theoretical substantiation

If we take into account the specialized literature, we note that the term “exhaustion” itself is explained in relation to the term “burnout”; the second term is rather understood as a specific form of mental and physical wear and tear (Freudenberger, 1974) or as a lack of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2011; Mac Donald, Kelly, Christen, 2019;

Trépanier, Vallerand, Ménard, 2020) correlated with states of boredom (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2014; Virgă, Pattusamy & Kumar, 2020) or with implications of a psychological (Maslach& Jackson, 1981), social (Söderfeldt, Söderfeldt & Warg, 1995; Lloyd, King & Chenoweth, 2002; Kim & Stoner, 2008) or even pathological nature (Thunman,2012; Hernandez & Wu, 2018), implications that may or may not generate performance (Garden, 1991; Verbeke, 1997).

In such a context we can talk about a state of chronic fatigue generated by a series of aspects related to a quantitative and qualitative dimension of the learning process, but also of involvement in academic, formal, non-formal and informal activities (scientific demonstrations, volunteer activities and so forth). This form of burnout is frequently found among students and it can lead to a series of problems related to physical and mental health and also to the idea of responsibility regarding the assumption and fulfillment of a potential work task.

On the one hand, in a broader sense, our attention will focus on the relationships of the variables mentioned in this study starting from the idea of academic commitment. The explanation and substantiation of this idea from the perspective of predictors of educational performance (Greenwood, Horton & Utley, 2002; Dogan, 2015) and interpersonal relationships (Lee, 2012) positions the concepts of “burnout” and “exhaustion”/“fatigue”/“stress” in a global framework of scientific educational research, taking into account aspects related to resilience, fear, fear of failure and fear of authority.

On the other hand, we will analyze the concept of “academic burnout” in students, taking from the specialized literature its relationship with the idea of organizational behavior (Maslach& Jackson, 1981) or cognitive decline/performance (May, Bauer &Fincham, 2015).This whole process of “emotional burnout” becomes epistemically relevant to the extent that the focus is on the analysis of skills of a social nature. Thus, factors such as the cognitive reevaluation or time management, emotional involvement must underpin an entire process of reducing academic burnout related to students. (Brock, & Grady, 2002).

Certainly, beyond the causes underlying the forms of burnout associated with alternative dimensions, which the specialized literature identifies and validates through a series of quantitative studies, we can appreciate that such a study reconfirms the need to reevaluate and reconsider the activities of educational nature activities carried out in an academic context by students in relation to work tasks, personal and professional expectations. Under these conditions, the way students perceive their own performance

cannot be correlated with the idea of burnout (McCarthy, Pretty, Catano, 1990; Schaufelli et. all, 2002), but rather with the idea of perception of the process of personal and professional self-regulation (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001).

The ways in which students engage in such an academic approach to learning, relating to those around them, but also participating in a series of academic activities can *de facto* generate positive or negative effects of an internal/intrinsic nature (increase/lack of motivation, increased/decreased personal performance) or even external/extrinsic (optimal/deficient relationship with others, activism/passivity in relation to social issues, obvious/or less obvious or even non-existent valorization and capitalization).

2. Methodology

2.1. Purpose, objectives and research topic

The purpose of the research is to identify the psycho-emotional, behavioral and contextual factors which diminish the commitment to educational activities. More precisely, in order to improve the educational quality, we consider it necessary to probe the elements of involvement, motivation, performance, attitudinal benchmarks, and so on and their impact on the functionality and quality of life.

This approach supports the need to develop a research problem that identifies the potential relationships between the two reported categories (the level of engagement and the level of burnout): *Is there a link between the academic engagement and the phenomenon of burnout?* In this regard, the objectives of the research will pursue:

O1: measuring the level of student involvement in the academic activity (self-report);

O2: measuring the level of burnout of students in terms of academic activity (self-report);

O3: checking the potential degrees of relationship between the two analyzed dimensions.

2.2. Hypotheses

In order to verify the potential relationships between the two variables, we will analyze the following hypothesis:

H1: There is a significant (negative) correlation between the students' level of academic engagement and their level of academic burnout.

H0: There is no significant correlation between the students' level of academic engagement and their level of academic burnout.

2.3. Instruments

For the analysis of the independent variable “academic involvement” the Academic Engagement Scale (Zhang et. all, 2015) was applied. It includes 14 items associated with dimensions such as: the attitude towards study, the level of engagement, the psycho-emotional commitment, and so forth. The answers were scored on a Likert-type scale, where 1 – “total disagreement” and 5 – “total agreement”. After application, we obtained an optimal internal consistency score: 0.99 (Table 1).

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.997	.997	14

Table 1. *Alpha Cronbach coefficient related to the Academic Engagement scale*

Similarly, in order to test the “academic burnout” variable, the participants were distributed the Academic Burnout Scale (Zhang et. all, 2015) which is intended to record the students' attitude towards academic activities (purpose, benefits, psycho-emotional impact and so on). The scale was adapted to facilitate the optimal understanding of the items by Romanian students. The content of the scale is structured in 15 items with answers on 5 levels of assessment (Likert-5). The internal consistency coefficient obtained from application is similarly high: 0.99 (Table 2).

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.990	.990	15

Table 2. *Alpha Cronbach coefficient related to the Academic Exhaustion scale*

2.4. Participants

The questionnaire was randomly distributed to second-year students enrolled in the UAIC and USV students, as mentioned. The respondents (N=145) recorded their answers voluntarily, through the Google Forms application. 89 of the participants were female and 56 were male and the average age of the participants was 21 years (SD=1.4)

The data collection period: 14.11.2022 – 27.11.2022.

2.5. Analyze. Obtained results

The recorded data were processed in IBM SPSS Statistics 20, following descriptive (Appendix 1) and correlational analysis. After analyzing the correlation between the two variables, we obtained the following results (Table 3):

- The correlation between the two variables is statistically significant ($p=.000$, $p < 0.001$);
- The correlation is negative (negative r);
- The size of the correlation indicates a strong connection (high correlation) between the two variables ($r = -0.902$, $r \in [0.51; 1]$).

Correlations

		Impl.Ac	Burn.Ac
Spearman's rho	Correlation	1,000	-,902**
	Coefficient		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000
	N	145	145
c	Correlation	-,902**	1,000
	Coefficient		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	.
	N	145	145

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

Table 3. Correlational analysis results: academic engagement-academic burnout

2.6 Discussions and interpretations

The analysis carried out therefore reveals a significant negative correlation between the two investigated variables, indicating an inversely proportional relationship between the levels of the recorded scores. Thus:

- The students with high levels of engagement have low scores on academic burnout;
- The students with average levels of engagement also record average scores on the academic burnout variable;
- The students who experienced low levels of engagement also reported increased levels of academic burnout.

In conclusion, we accept the hypothesis (H1: There is a significant (negative) correlation between students' level of academic engagement and their level of academic burnout) and we reject the null hypothesis.

2.7 Preliminary conclusions

According to the analysis carried out and the related interpretations, it can be stated that there is a significant relationship, in the case of students, between the attitude towards the educational process and the exhaustion of mental and emotional resources. The interdependence between engagement and burnout, from the perspective in which they were approached in this approach, was validated for both genders and without variations according to age parameters. The high level of correlation between the two variables indicates a significant potential for further research to pursue the possibilities of improving the commitment of students in order to improve the quality of the education act and, implicitly, their psychological and affective well-being in a formative/education context.

3. Limits and directions of development

The limitations of the current study are related to the size of the investigated group (limited number of participants, less significant for the Romanian student population), but also to the categorized gender distribution (there is a lower representation of the male participants compared to the female participants). Also, an isolation of the parasite variables is necessary.

The potential of the subject addressed supports the possibility of further research directions by augmenting the research base, expanding the level of placement of students and its utilization within other specializations, faculties or universities in Romania. Also, the

study can be calibrated by introducing associated variables: awareness, performance, personality, emotionality, sociability, conscientiousness, organization, perfectionism, skills, resources, and so on.

General conclusions

The achievement of the study regarding the possible correlation between the academic involvement and the academic burnout brings into discussion the idea of some current participatory mechanisms and processes through which the learning and assimilation process is facilitated. The educational experiences are thus deciphered and transposed in a scientific manner, through the analysis of innovative ideas, in a theoretical and applied framework.

Such ideas which are of significant importance to the research and the community of specialists can be found in the field of the epistemic homogeneity (for instance, the mutual learning, the cooperative learning, the rethinking of strategies for approaching the learning process and the educational activities carried out in an academic context). Concerning the analysis and synthesis approach of such a subject addressed in this research, we note its authenticity in the area of educational applications with visible implications at the society level.

The awareness of such existing aspects in the educational process allows and requires from our standpoint the assumption and implementation of significant strategies and elements within the educational society. An openness towards man and also towards society as a whole, allows for a clear representation of what the quality of a learning approach stands for in connection, on the one hand, to the relational dimension between the academic engagement of students in the learning process and the academic exhaustion thereof, and on the other hand, with their level of engagement in academic activities. Under these conditions, the human value must be given more credit in relation to what can be translated through it from an economic, social standpoint and, last but not least, from the viewpoint of social and professional expectations.

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