

Sources of Occupational Stress among University Professors – A Case Study for the Romanian Universities

Monica Elisabeta PADURARU¹

Abstract

Occupational stress is a variable that affects the organizational climate and the quality of activities in any organization. In universities there are sources of stress that are specific to this professional environment which may affect the job satisfaction of professors, the quality of teaching and, last but not least, the state of their health.

Identifying the sources of occupational stress is the first step that the manager of any educational institution needs to take in order to improve the quality of the organizational climate, to increase its employee performance and hence the quality of the services provided.

Based on the analysis of 140 filled in questionnaires (by professors from 23 universities), this article presents the sources of occupational stress that highly affect the activity of professors from Romanian universities.

Keywords: stress, work-related stress, occupational stress, university professors, sources of occupational stress in university.

JEL classification: I23, M12

Introduction

In the EU's Guidance on work-related stress (1999), work-related stress is defined as a pattern of emotional, cognitive, behavioral and physiological reactions to adverse and noxious aspects of work content, work organization and work environment. It is a state characterized by high levels of arousal and distress and often by feelings of not coping; so the focus is on the workplace, which is regarded as a source of stress. High levels of prolonged stress are harmful to both the health and the general welfare of the teachers, their students as well as to the functioning of the entire educational organization.

Since 1990, in Romania, the status of university professors aligned with new developments in the social, economic and political contexts of our country. There is an evident change of priorities in higher education as well as a tendency towards redefining its mission, with the focus shifting on developing students' skills required in the labor market insertion. These changes have led to a reevaluation of the status of higher education professors, a reassessment of standards and specific skills of their profession, many of them viewing these

¹ **Monica Elisabeta PĂDURARU**, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania,
E-mail: monicapaduraru@yahoo.com

changes as potential sources of stress with both professional and personal consequences.

1. Occupational stress in education

“Stress is part of everyone's life. The same situation can elicit negative stress (distress) or positive stress (eustress) in different people. Health is maintained through identifying the factors and situations that require optimum energy mobilization (eustress) and systematically avoiding distress agents” (Chelcea S., Chelcea A., 1990, pag.157).

According to European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (1999), stress is the second most frequently reported work-related health problem in Europe. A European opinion poll found that more than half of all workers considered occupational stress to be common in their workplace. Workers experience stress when the demands of their job are greater than their capacity to cope with them. In addition to mental health problems, workers suffering from prolonged stress can go on to develop serious physical health problems such as cardiovascular disease or musculoskeletal problems. For the organization, the negative effects include poor overall business performance, increased absenteeism, presenteeism (workers turning up for work when sick and unable to function effectively) and increased accidents and injury rates. Absences tend to be longer than those arising from other causes and work-related stress may contribute to increased rates of early retirement.

Since the '60s, in the specialty's research literature, there are many researches on the subject of occupational stress in education. In these researches we find phrases like “teachers' stress, teachers' burnout, teachers' morale, teachers' motivation and job satisfaction”. Often, these issues are addressed during public debates in the media, election campaigns and official negotiations concerning teaching salaries. Occupational stress occurs when the demands of the work environment exceed the employee's ability to cope with them. It is not a disease, but it may lead to mental or physical illness. Work-related stress is a symptom of an organizational problem, not an individual weakness and can affect everyone in the educational sector, not only teachers.

2. Occupational stress with reference to the teaching profession

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (1999) believes that stress is one of the major health risks. Educational organizations have become increasingly stressful work places. Reported stress levels in the teaching profession are well above the average. According to the same institution, there are many potential sources of stress in teaching: pressure to develop increasingly refined professional skills; economic pressure (low pay, job insecurity); students (increased number of students in classes, their lack of motivation, attention and interest); conflicting relations between parents and teachers; poor planning and scheduling

(ongoing restructuring; frequent reforms in the system of vocational education; shifting from individual work to team work; personnel shortages and the lack of school subsidies; bureaucracy; insufficient financial resources); personal and social pressure (such as concern for the quality of education, lack of coherence between personal goals and professional obligations, lack of recognition regarding the social status of the teaching profession); school as a stressful work-place (demanding job tasks and excessive working hours, lack of time, lack of control and autonomy, environmental noise, poor ventilation, lack of solidarity, bureaucracy and administrative duties).

Stress in schools can be generated by tense situations and conflicts between teachers and students, teachers and management or between teachers themselves. Engaged in carrying out different activities, members of the organization interact and cooperate, their work experiences being accompanied by all kinds of feelings: satisfaction-dissatisfaction, joy-sadness, trust-distrust etc. [...] All these influence, to a great extent, the overall functioning of the organization, and consequently its performance (Păun, E., 1999, p. 115). Different types of relations at institutional level, school cultures and subcultures can generate a positive climate (consultative democratic or participatory democratic) or a tense, interpersonal environment (exploitative autocratic or benevolent autocratic). Managerial culture, understood as the sum of all beliefs, values, symbols, attitudes and behaviors expressed by the managers of an organization, a culture which is reflected in all the decisions and actions they take and apply to ensure competitive development (Năstase, 2004, page 98) can have an impact on the organizational climate. Many teachers believe that issues related to the management or administration of the organization count as an important source of stress. Particularly they mentioned poor communication, lack of support and resources, and lack of opportunities to get involved in decision making.

Blix and his colleagues found that 74.1% of the university teaching staff is moderately stressed, and 10.4% severely stressed. Teichmann and Ilvest divided the sources of stress into three main category: (a) individual sources of pressure as work-home imbalance; (b) the sources of occupational stress in organization and work – intrinsic to the job as workload and work environment; occupational roles; relationships at work; organizational structure and climate; extra-organizational sources of stress; (c) the sources of pressure outside the university e.g. in academic community. High levels of prolonged stress are harmful to the health and the general state of teachers, students and for the functioning of the entire organization. Consequences of occupational stress include burnout syndrome (Wall, Janet E.; Walz, Garry R, 2003).

2.1 Research methodology

The aim of this study is to get more detailed comprehension about sources of stress in the case of university professors, therefore we considered appropriate to use a quantitative research method for gathering the information (a questionnaire-

based survey), as well as a qualitative method (a semi structured interview). Data were collected using an unrepresentative sample of 140 professors from 23 institutions of higher education in Romania.

The questionnaire on perceived sources of academic stress was elaborated by the author of this study, following thorough research, as well as data analysis of the answers given by the interviewed university staff regarding the most common sources of stress as they are perceived by them. The items were expressed in the form of statements which refer to potential sources of stress that a professor may face at work or at home (because of their work-related activities). The sources of stress have been assessed according to the intensity felt by each subject with values ranging 1 and 5: 1 indicates that the situation presented is not a source of stress for the subject and 5 indicates that the source of stress is considered very strong by the respondent; the rest of the scores refer to the intensity which falls between these two extremes.

Following the steps mentioned above, we developed The Questionnaire on Perceived Sources of Academic Stress, which comprises 47 sources of stress, divided into nine distinct dimensions.

2.2 Data analysis and interpretation

The answers given by the respondents highlighted the sources of stress faced at work. We present here in after the responses for each dimension given by the 140 university professors who took part in the study.

Among the sources of stress cited in the "innovation and change" dimension of the questionnaire 25% of respondents considered "the frequent legislative changes" as an important source of stress (25% strongly agree and 41% agree). Another strongly stressful source cited by the respondents was "the feeling that we are heading in the wrong direction (as an organization - goals, priorities)" (24% totally agree, 36% agree). "The transition to the Bologna system" and "the pressure to update the professional skills in accordance with technical, informational and scientific developments" were perceived as less discomforting by the respondents. We can thus conclude that the main source of discomfort in academic environment is caused, on one hand, by the uncertainty generated by frequent legislative changes, and on the other hand, by the reduced adherence to the organization's goals which include its development and direction. Yet, changes in technology generate a minimum amount of discomfort, many academic professors being up to date with these developments and even in the position to promote change in this area.

Regarding the dimension "hierarchical structure and management", the most stressful sources cited by the respondents were "orientation towards economic profit at the expense of quality teaching (increased number of students, high acceptance rates for admission)" (39% totally agree, 26% agree) and "lack of motivation strategies" (34% totally agree, 37% agree). Among the sources rated as moderately stressful were "rigid hierarchical structure specific for academic

organization”; “biased assessment by the management that does not reflect the workload or the performances”. “Less opportunity for the involvement in making decisions regarding the department”, “lack of support from department management” and “blocking vital information by the management” were perceived as less discomforting by the respondents. The respondent rated the sources of stress related to top management higher than those related to department management.

In the case of “peer relationships” dimension, we found that the respondents do not rate the sources presented as highly stressful. Thus, “the lack of communication between peers regarding teaching activities” was rated only by 16% with strongly agree and 32% agree. Most respondents disagreed with the following sources of stress: “workplace conflict” - 47%; “peer competition” - 39%; “lack of collaboration” - 36%; “increasingly competitive workplace” - 35%; “competition between departments” - 26%. This leads us to conclude that most respondents work in organizations with a positive, supportive climate that create little or no discomfort at all for the employees. This aspect should be taken into consideration when creating stress management strategies at work - peer support, and collaborative networks could become a starting point in reducing work related stress. The data obtained for this dimension are consistent with those obtained for the dimension “hierarchical structure and management”, indicating that the sources of stress related to the department level management were perceived as moderate or less stressful.

From the collected data related to the dimension “teacher-student relations”, we concluded that an important source of stress is caused by “expanding in number of students” (27% strongly agree, 36% agree), followed by “predominantly extrinsic motivation of students (powered by the pursuit of a degree.)” (21% totally agree, 38% agree). “Students’ misconduct” and “students; lack of interest for the subject matter” were rated as moderately stressful. The respondents cited “course evaluation” and “tensed relations between teachers and students” as less stressful. The highest rated source of stress within this dimension “increased number of students” concurs with the results obtained from the analysis of another stress source “orientation towards economic profit at the expense of quality teaching” from the dimension “hierarchical structure and management”, many professors being disgruntled by the increased number of students enrolled in courses.

Four of the five sources of stress within the “work overload” dimension have been rated as highly stressful by the respondents. Thus “work life balance (lack of free time, fatigue)” (34% totally agree and 35% agree); “reducing recreational activities” and “taking work home (research, designing courses, grading papers)” (34% totally agree and 33% agree) were perceived as the most stressful sources. Rated as moderately stressful were “teaching overload” and “additional administrative tasks, on top of teaching activities”.

With regards to “time management” dimension we found that “lack of time to carry out research” was rated as highly stressful by the respondents (30% totally agree, 44% agree), followed by “extended working hours to the detriment of personal life” (28% totally agree, 45% agree). The last two dimensions highlight

one of the characteristics of the teaching profession: the working hours extend far beyond the regular eight hour work program (either for designing courses, and grading papers or for conducting research).

In the context of “limited resources” dimension we observed that most respondents rated “lack of personal workspace at the office” as highly stressful (28% totally agree, 26% agree). The following stress sources: “poorly equipped workplace”; “poorly equipped teaching spaces”; “lack of teaching spaces (college classrooms, labs)” and “lack of books and journals” were rated as moderately stressful.

Within the context of the “career aspects” dimension we found that most respondents agree to a great extent to the sources of stress presented. In fact, the scores revealed the highest rate of perceived stress amongst all the sources proposed by the questionnaire. Thus “low wages” (the difference between income and workload or between income and the quality of the professional training) was rated as highly stressful by most respondents (54% totally agree, 22% agree), followed by “increased cost of academic publishing (ISI indexed publishing, attending conferences, etc.) (46% totally agree, 34% agree); “excessive emphasis on research activities at the expense of teaching activities” (33% totally agree, 20% agree); “low social status of the teaching profession” (31% strongly agree, 31% agree). “Difficulty of getting promoted (fastidious requirement criteria)” and “lack of in-service training” were perceived by the respondents as moderately stressful.

The three sources of stress included in “role ambiguity” dimension were rated by respondents as being slightly to moderately stressful. The answers show the following rates: “vague responsibilities” (12% totally agree, 24% agree); “lack of regulations at department level” (11% strongly agree, 24% agree) and “initial training that is inadequate to the professional requirements” (11% totally agree, 16% disagree).

The last item of the questionnaire requires from the respondents to state the most stressful source of all presented above. The highest rated source of stress (14%) is “low wages” (the difference between income and workload or between income and the quality of the professional training) many respondents considering that the income doesn’t reflect the workload (designing courses / seminars, research and publishing, attending conferences) nor the strenuous training required in order to secure a job in academia.

The second highest rated source of stress was “work life balance (lack of free time, fatigue)” - 11% of the respondents cited this as being the most stressful of all sources. The teaching profession implies allocating a large amount of time for thorough preparation of teaching activities. The Teaching activities (teaching, mentoring, and evaluation) are only a small part of the requirements of this profession; designing a course entails hours of study, while conducting research studies is very strenuous and time consuming. All these activities take up a lot off the professors’ free time, as they are pressed to be up to date with the new developments in their field of study.

The third highest rated source of stress was “excessive emphasis on research activities at the expense of teaching activities”, as cited by 9% of the respondents. It is our belief that this can be linked to the fourth highest rated source of stress - “difficulty of getting promoted (fastidious requirement criteria)” - as

perceived by 7% of the respondents. One of the most important criteria taken into consideration within the frame of periodic professors' assessment and that also is a major condition for career advancement is field study - participation in research projects, ISI indexed publishing, etc. This has caused a lot of dissatisfaction among the professors who believe that research is overrated and that teaching activities should be the main criterion of assessment and career advancement.

Table 1. The highest rated sources of work-related stress

| Sources of work-related stress | Percentage |
|---|------------|
| “low wages” (the difference between income and workload or between income and the quality of the professional training) | 14% |
| work life balance (lack of free time, fatigue) | 11% |
| excessive emphasis on research activities at the expense of teaching activities | 9% |
| difficulty of getting promoted (fastidious requirement criteria) | 7% |

Three out of four sources of stress which are viewed as the most taxing are part of the dimension “career aspect”: “low wages”; “excessive emphasis on research activities at the expense of teaching activities”; “difficulty of getting promoted”, which indicates the importance given by respondents to this aspect of their professional life.

Conclusions

Work-related stress associated with university professors is determined by sources that are specific to this professional environment. Following a thorough data analysis we found that the highest rated sources of stress are: low wages, work life balance, excessive emphasis on research activities at the expense of teaching activities, and difficulty of getting promoted.

The mere identification of those sources of stress is not sufficient, but it can lead to setting up a strategy to improve the organizational climate and increase the employees' performances, and, consequently, the quality of teaching activities.

Some of the identified sources of stress cannot be diminished only through internal measures (e.g. low wages, excessive emphasis on research activities at the expense of teaching activities, difficulty of getting promoted) because they depend on decisions that are taken at system level (e.g. pay scale, evaluation criteria established at national level).

However, at organizational level, management can intervene on the other identified sources of stress relying on the strengths of each organization.

Based on the collected data, we conclude that the most pressing issues can only be addressed at systemic level, through new educational policies that should

be performance oriented, thus increasing the quality of teaching in universities and, hopefully, the social status of the teaching profession.

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