

# Burnout of students at Óbuda University

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### *Abstract*

*Burnout is an ever present part of the XXI. century. It is investigated predominantly in professions where communication and interaction with others are basic necessities. According to literature data, those of human services, - e.g. health-care, education ... - are of greatest danger. However, not only teachers and lecturers may experience elevated level of burnout, but students, especially those under extreme pressure, as well. Present study aims to investigate the burnout of students at Óbuda University. Research was conducted among 191 university students with the use of the Maslach Burnout Inventory. According to research findings 11 percent of students at Óbuda University are burnt out to an extreme extent. Male students were at greater risk, as well as those, of older age and longer past of higher educational studies.*

*Keywords: burnout, university students, emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, personal accomplishment*

## 1 Introduction

Burnout is an ever present part of the XXI. century. As a hip term it has many definitions and classifications. However, one thing is clear by now. Individual factors, such as innate susceptibility and emotional intelligence (Freudenberger, 1983) and organisational factors (Cherniss, 1989) mutually influence its progress. While individual characteristics are given set in case of a higher educational institute, in this case Óbuda University, organisational factors might be changed for the better.

Cherniss (1989) enumerates eight negative work settings that should be changed, in order to decrease the prevalence of burnout cases. Adapted to university settings they are as follows:

1. Absence of orientation or introduction programmes

2. Inadequate leadership and supervisory practices
3. Low level of autonomy
4. Discrepancy between institutional goals and personal values
5. Limited scope of teacher-student contact
6. Social isolation
7. High workload
8. Under stimulation

These negative organisational settings, combined with personal sensitivity can result in problems with reception, lack of challenge and doubt of one's competence. The sense of bureaucratic infringement of one's autonomy or perceived lack of collegial support can also be generated by such organisational settings.

Present study aims to look into the burnout of students at Óbuda University from an individualistic starting point, in order to see, whether organisational settings for students are decent.

## **1.1 Burnout**

Burn out – as a term for psychological imbalance, was first used by Graham Greene (1960), for an architect. It became a psychological terminus technicus only in 1974, when Freudenberger adapted, the so plastic description of the Green's novel's protagonist's mental state into organisational settings. He, as an unpaid psychiatrist of an American free hospital, could observe the process of mental "burn out" of many young, enthusiastic, idealistically motivated volunteers. He labelled the phenomena of the gradual energy depletion, and the permanent and with time intensifying loss of motivation and commitment as burn out, as an analogy to the fading warmth and light of a fire burning out. He theorized that the burnout process can be divided into 12 phases that are only abstract constructs, and are not necessarily visible (in this order).

A compulsion to prove oneself

In most cases, the starting point is the strong will of the individual, to prove him/herself. The ambition to be THE BEST, or at least better, than most, quickly turns into grim determination

#### Working harder

To meet (more often than not, their own) high expectations, they are working hard, in order to brand themselves irreplaceable. In doing so, they try to use as few help from others as possible, in extreme cases shouldering all tasks alone.

#### Neglecting one's needs

While trying to work as much as humanly possible is, they usually gradually sacrifice their own social circle and do not attend to their physiological needs either.

#### Displacement of conflicts

By this time, they are already aware that something is not right. Usually the first somatic symptoms have already emerged. However, they often can not find the cause of the problem, and in searching for the trigger they might generate a personal crisis.

#### Revision of values

As an answer to the crisis generated, they revise their own value system. The previously important things, like friends, family, hobbies, gastronomy are usually perceived to be of no importance anymore. They become emotionally dull. The only valid measure they can measure themselves on left is work; basic physiological needs are overseen and neglected.

#### Denial of emerging problems

Social contacts are becoming more and more unbearable. Peers are perceived to be dumb, lazy, and are not worthy of attention. However, conflicts that emerge are not attested to the heightened level of their intolerance and damaged value system. Time pressure and negative attitude of colleagues are blamed.

#### Withdrawal

By this time, their social supportive belt is reduced to almost zero. They are feeling isolated, hopeless, and without support, aid and direction. (To compensate) they are working "by the book", and seek alleviation in alcohol or drugs.

#### Obvious behavioural changes

Those, around the one undergoing behavioural changes due to burnout can no longer disregard the changes. They become fearful, shy, or apathetic towards the one burning out. Parallel to this, the one overworking him/herself feels him/herself increasingly worthless.

#### Depersonalization

After losing contact with others surrounding them, they finally lose contact with themselves as well. They can no longer sense personal needs, neither can they perceive value in themselves or others. Their life loses the prospect of future and becomes a series of mere mechanical functions.

### Inner Emptiness

Their life is empty by now. They regard leisure time as dead time. To overcome this sense of emptiness, they engage in exaggerated sexuality or use alcohol, drugs.

### Depression

In this last but one phase of burnout the individual shows the symptoms of depression. He/she is exhausted and indifferent; can see nothing for him/herself in the future; loses hope. Life holds no meaning any more.

### Burnout Syndrome

By now, they are mentally, as well as physically broken down. Almost each of them has suicidal thoughts in order to find a solution to their hopeless situation. However, only few actually carry them out. They are in need of urgent medical attention.

Burnout cannot only be defined as a process but as a state as well. The basic state definition was created by Maslach and Jackson (1986) that labelled burnout as “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do ‘people work’ of some kind”.

Emotional exhaustion: As emotional resources are depleted, individuals feel they are no longer able to express themselves and understand others as they were able to do earlier.

Depersonalisation: Alienation from peers, and other significant others develops negative, cynical attitudes in individuals. This feeling is labelled depersonalisation.

Reduced sense of personal accomplishment: Not only others and the self are evaluated negatively, but personal achievements as well. They find no happiness in their work or everyday activities.

Maslach’s definition concentrates on mental syndromes connected to burnout and restricts itself onto human services. Pines’s and Aronson’s (1988) definition on the other hand is broader, involving somatic symptoms, and is not restricted to helping professions. “Burnout is a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in situations that are emotionally demanding.” In the present paper I will apply this last definition of burnout.

## 1.2 Symptoms and consequences of burnout

Burnout is reported to be correlated with variety of personal distress factors such as depression, apathy, tension, fatigue and anxiety (Burke and Greenglass, 2001). However, whether phenomena occurring in connection with burnout are symptoms or consequences is only a question of taxonomy. They can only be divided by an arbitrary line. Moreover, both consequences and symptoms can be

regarded as manifestations of burnout. Literature enumerates more than 100 manifestations that can be arranged into 7 groups; i.e.: affective, cognitive, physical, behavioural, social, attitudinal and organisational.

#### Affective manifestations

Emotional exhaustion is one of the basic manifestations of burnout. The individual has a sense of insufficiency that causes the feeling of failure, emptiness, help- and hopelessness (Maslach and Leiter, 2008). Aggression and anxiety are also frequent auxiliaries of burnout (Kahill, 1988). Frustration tolerance is diminished. The individual is overly sensitive, hostile and suspicious.

#### Cognitive manifestations

As a result of high arousal and nervous tension the individual becomes forgetful, is unable to relax and concentrate and has difficulties in decision making.

#### Physical manifestations

The most frequent bodily manifestation of burnout is chronic fatigue (Shirom, 1989). However, numerous psychosomatic outcomes are enumerated in literature, such as: headache, nausea, insomnia, muscle pain, gastro-intestinal and cardiovascular disturbances as well as prolonged (never ending) cold or flu.

#### Behavioural manifestations

Behavioural manifestations, such as hyperactivity and violent outbursts are mainly caused by increased level of arousal. It might be an outcome of caffeine and alcohol over-consumption or drug use.

#### Social manifestations

Burnout is necessarily accompanied by interpersonal conflicts. Problems with peers, family members, colleagues and friends are common. Decreased social involvement, mental and social withdrawal from others can be observed. Individual either become emotionally detached, or take work conflicts home increasing interpersonal conflicts inside the family, with spouse, children or parents.

#### Attitudinal manifestations

Trying to protect self with cold, cynical attitude, sick jokes, negative stereotyping is a way of coping for burnt out individuals. Not only individuals, but organisations are distrusted. Those of high burnout level do not sense the challenge of their jobs neither do they perceive the appreciation of the organisation or that of colleagues. They are critical and distrusting.

### Organisational manifestations

Burnout causes intention to quit and absenteeism (Jackson, Schwab and Schuler, 1986), as well as lower level of productivity, tardiness and on the job mistakes (Kahill, 1988).

Neither of the above enumerated manifestations is welcome at any organisation; universities are no exceptions. Therefore it is of utmost importance to keep burnout syndrome at a minimum.

Nowadays, burnout is mainly investigated in professions where communication and interaction with others is a basic necessity. According to numerous international studies, those of human services, - e.g. health-care, education ... - are of greatest danger. However, not only teachers and lecturers may experience burnout, but students, especially those under extreme pressure, as well. The aim of present paper is to point out to what extent students at Óbuda University are burnt out, and whether there are distinctive demographical features of those burnt out.

## **2 Research material and method**

### **2.1 Participants in the Study**

The research has been conducted among 191 university students. All of them studied full time at the Óbuda University. 118 of them were male and 73 female. In this case this is overrepresentation of female students (Szikora, 2011).

The average age of male respondents was slightly higher (22.000 years; Std. Dev: 1.797; Var: 3.231) than that of female respondents (21.781 years; Std. Dev: 1.436; Var: 2.062).

Respondents were asked about their time spent in higher education, and the time they plan to spend as well. Male respondents were already for a longer time in higher education with an average of 3.043 years (Std. Dev: 1.585, Var: 2.511), than female students with an average duration of 2.904 years (Std. Dev: 1.406; Var: 1.977). The difference between male and female students in the average number of semesters planned to be spent at a higher educational institute was less significant. The respective averages were 3.763 years (Std. Dev: 1.305; Var: 1.704) and 3.479 years (Std. Dev: 1.492; Var: 2.225). This small difference suggests that male respondents spend more time in total in higher education than females. However the difference in total semesters at higher educational institutes was not significant. Males: 9.836 semesters (Std. Dev: 2.750; Var: 7.564), females: 9.342 semesters (Std. Dev: 2.401; Var: 5.763). Table 1 - 2 and Figure 1 show the breakdown of respondents along the 3 above mentioned characteristics.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Total
<b>Male</b>	17.24	22.41	27.59	18.10	6.03	4.31	3.45	0.86	0.00	100
<b>Female</b>	16.44	23.29	30.14	19.18	9.59	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.37	100

Table 1

Percentage of respondents by gender and years spent in higher educational institutes

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total
<b>Male</b>	5.08	10.17	32.20	12.71	37.29	0.85	1.69	100
<b>Female</b>	15.07	10.96	20.55	21.92	28.77	1.37	1.37	100

Table 2

Percentage of respondents by gender and semesters planned to spend in higher educational institutes

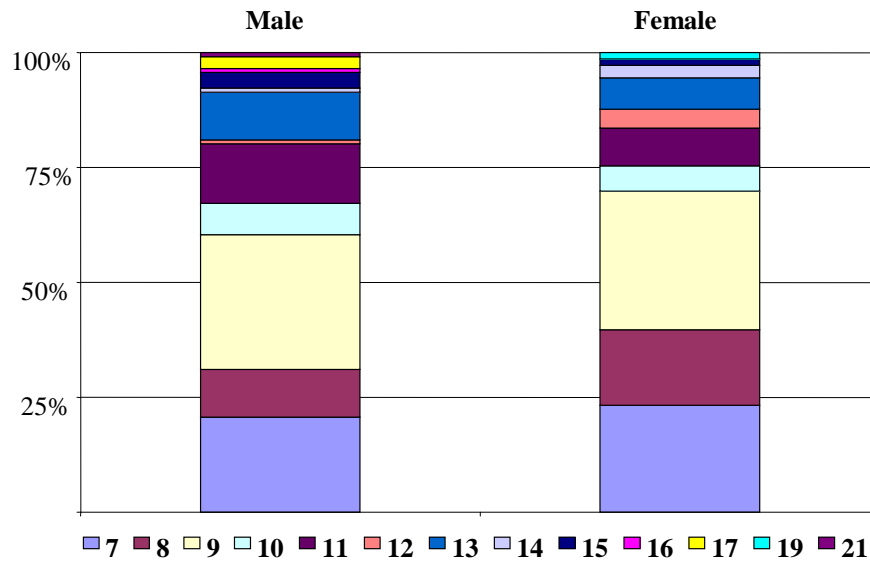


Figure 1

Percentage of respondents by gender and total number of semesters in higher educational institutes

## **2.2 Research Method**

In order to quantify the burnout of students at Óbuda University Maslach's Burnout Inventory (Maslach and Jackson, 1986), a questionnaire specifically developed for the study of students was used. Maslach Burnout Inventory seeks to apprehend burnout via three major aspects of the syndrome including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and decrease in personal accomplishment. Respondents were supposed to use this questionnaire to evaluate 22 statements against two seven-degree scales in terms of intensity.

## **3 Results**

Adhering to Maslach's suggestions for result evaluation, the respondents were separated into 3 groups – high, average, low - based on their burnout scores in each category. According to research data approximately 11 percent of the respondents (21 person) is in high danger of burnout in one or more dimensions.

The ones scoring lowest on the depersonalisation and emotional exhaustion subscale, and highest on the personal accomplishment scale are those out of immediate danger of burnout. The second group of respondents, scoring between the 1/3 and 2/3 of the total subscale points are at an average risk of burning out. The third group - that can be identified by scoring higher than the 2/3 of the total scores on the emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation scales, and lower than the 1/3 on the personal accomplishment scale - are of imminent danger. The frequency of burnout points in each burnout factor is displayed by Figure 2, 3, 4.



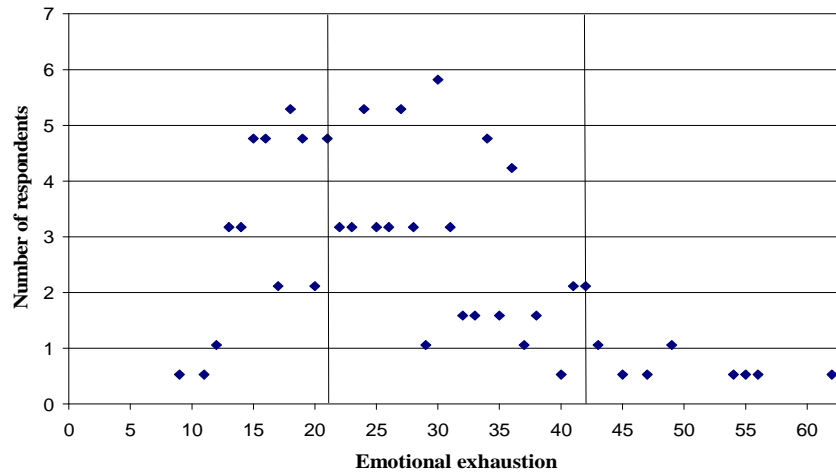


Figure 2  
Emotional exhaustion scores of respondents

According to research data 15 individuals were in imminent danger of burning out on the basis of emotional exhaustion scores. This is 7.93 percent of the respondents. The average burnout score out of 63 was 23.233 (Std. Dev: 9.795; Var: 95,946). 61 respondents were in the “safe zone”.

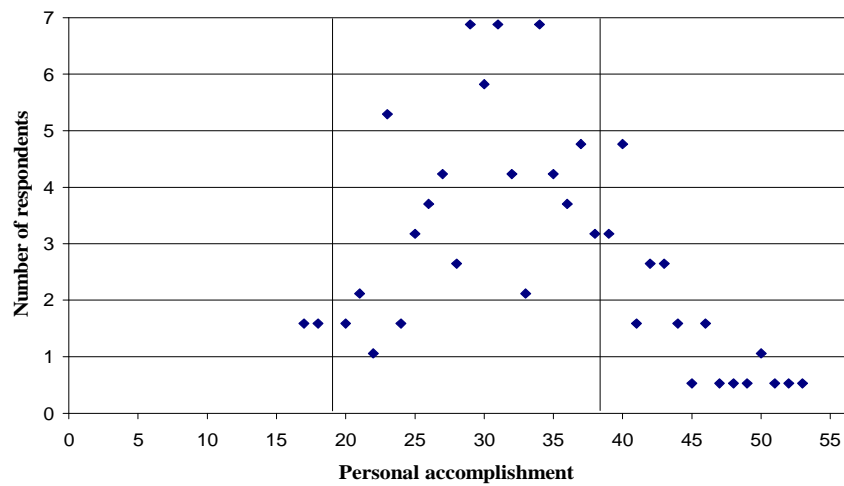


Figure 3  
Personal accomplishment scores of respondents

According to research findings 6 respondents were in imminent danger of burning out on the basis of sense of personal accomplishment scores. This is 3.17 percent of the respondents. The average burnout score out of 56 was 32.661 (Std. Dev: 7.651; Var: 58.544). In this case, the higher average score means that more valued their personal accomplishments higher, what is a good sign. 50 respondents were in the least endangered group according to their personal accomplishment scores.

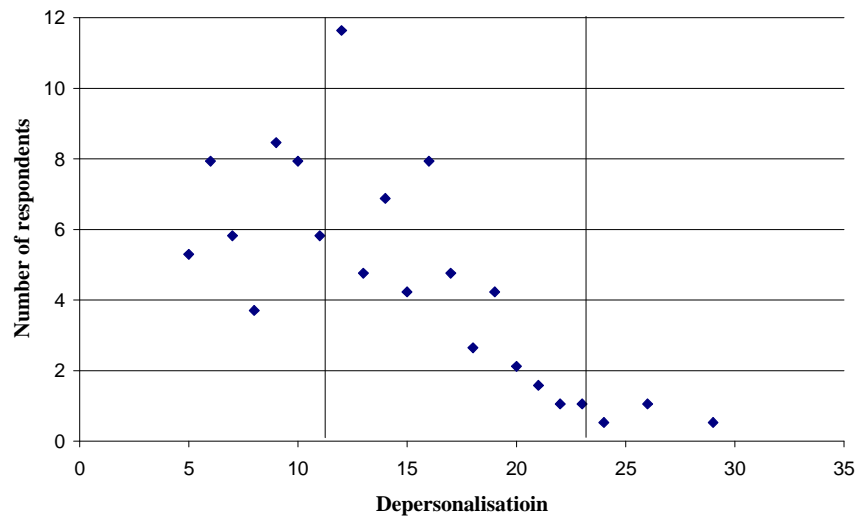


Figure 4

Depersonalisation scores of respondents

According to MBI - depersonalisation scores measured only 4 respondents were in imminent danger of burning out. This is 2.11 percent of the respondents. The average burnout score out of 35 was 12.402 (Std. Dev: 4.913; Var: 24.135). In this case, the lower average score also signifies positive tendencies. 85 respondents were in the least endangered group according to their respective scores.

The aim of present study was not only to explore the burnout level of students at Óbuda University, but to possibly identify factors that affect their burnout, or at least characteristics that identify those at extreme risk of burnout. In order to detect such demographical variables I made a bivariate correlation between demographical factors and the questions of MBI. The significant correlations are presented in Table 3.

		Age	Gender	Years spent in higher education
I feel emotionally drained by my studies	Correlation* Sig.**	0.187 0.010	-0.195 0.007	0.177 0.015
I have accomplished many worthwhile things	Correlation* Sig.**	-0.147 0.044		
Studying or attending a class is really a strain for me	Correlation* Sig.**		-0.162 0.026	
I feel I treat some people as if they were impersonal objects	Correlation* Sig.**		-0.205 0.005	
I deal with emotional problems very calmly	Correlation* Sig.**		-0.239 0.001	
I can easily create a relaxed atmosphere with my peers	Correlation* Sig.**			0.222 0.002

\*Pearson Correlation  
\*\*Sig. (2-tailed)

Table 3

Significant correlations of MBI question with demographical variables

As the table summarises correlation coefficients are not high enough for strong correlations, so the data are signifying rather tendencies than hard facts.

According to research data age has a positive correlation with burnout. The older the respondents were the more emotionally drained they felt, and the less meaning they could assign to the things they have accomplished in their lives.

Gender also had positive correlation with burnout. Though many literature states that women are at higher risk of burnout (Adekola, 2010; Maslach Schaufeli and Leiter, 2001) in our sample men were at more risk. Feelings of being emotionally drained, perceived hardships of fulfilling the role requirements of a student as well as emotional detachment from problems or people were more intense among male respondents.

Years spent in higher education displayed a diverse relation with burnout. On one hand those with more years of higher educational background could more easily create a relaxed atmosphere with their peers, maybe because of their common pasts, experiences; on the other hand they felt emotionally more drained by their studies, than those who have started their studies later.

		<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>
<b>Depersonalisation</b>	Pearson Correlation		-0.165
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.023
<b>Emotional exhaustion</b>	Pearson Correlation	0.155	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.034	

Table 4

Significant correlations of MBI factors with demographical variables

As main factors of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, only depersonalisation and emotional exhaustion were connected to demographical data. Older respondents were emotionally more exhausted, while male respondents experienced higher levels of depersonalisation.

## 4 Conclusions

According to my research data only 11 percent of students at Óbuda University are burnt out to an acute extent. This suggests that organisational factors concerning students at this organisation are respectable.

Out of the three factors of Maslach Burnout Inventory emotional exhaustion is the most prevalent one. 8 percent of students experienced high level of emotional exhaustion and 60 percent medium level. Though extremely low level of personal accomplishment was measured only in 3 percent of students 71% of them were at medium risk. The less burnout cases were identified by the third factor – depersonalisation. 2 percent of respondents were at extreme risk, and 53 percent of them at medium. Male students were at greater risk, as well as those, of older age and longer past of higher educational studies.

Although research data show high levels of burnout among students at Óbuda University, main causes of these phenomena could not be identified. In order to create a higher educational environment that is more supportive of its student, more enquiries are needed about organisational settings that influence burnout.

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