

Job demands and resources in the work of university teachers in central and eastern Europe

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Abstract

The situation of higher education as a workplace as well as that of the academics has changed significantly in recent decades. Earlier, compared to working in other fields, teaching at a university was considered to be a predictable, calm, relatively stress-free, flexible, autonomous, and socially recognized profession. Teachers and colleagues were protected from many sources of workplace stress, such as uncertainty, work-related ambiguity, or low job control, but today this is no longer the typical case (Kinman, 2014). The expectations (or needs) related to these roles and activities put strong pressure on the teachers, they are serious sources of stress that have a negative impact on their health, well-being (Kinman et al., 2006; Kinman, 2014). Based on the job demands-resources theory (JD-R theory) this paper investigates the workplace factors affecting the health and well-being of Central and Eastern European (CEE) university teachers.

Keywords: *Job demands and resources; university teachers; central and eastern Europe.*

1. Introduction

The situation of higher education as a workplace as well as that of the instructors has changed significantly in recent decades. Earlier, compared to working in other fields, teaching at a university was considered to be a predictable, calm, relatively stress-free, flexible, autonomous, and socially recognized profession. Instructors and colleagues were protected from many sources of workplace stress, such as uncertainty, work-related ambiguity, or low job control, but today this is no longer the typical case (Kinman, 2014). The workplace characteristics that used to protect the university workforce from certain sources of workplace-related stress seem to have disappeared by now, following the expansion of university education (Malik et al., 2017). As a result of the expansion, diversification of higher education, and the shift in the direction of being regarded as a service provider, university teachers have to perform multiple tasks and roles at the same time: lecturers, researchers, mentors, and sometimes they even have to fulfill the function of pastors (Bell et al. 2012; Kinman, 2014;). The expectations (or needs) related to these roles and activities put strong pressure on the university teachers, they are serious sources of stress that have a negative impact on their health, well-being (Kinman et al., 2006; Kinman, 2014).

In our study, we examine the workplace factors affecting the health and well-being of East-Central European university teachers. Our main question is what difficulties the teachers of the region have to deal with during their work, and what are the resources that contribute to their well-being. We used the job demands-resources theory (JD-R theory) as a theoretical background to examine this issue. The JD-R theory is a theoretical framework that helps to explain and understand the relationship between workplace characteristics and employee performance and well-being. It classifies the workplace characteristics into two categories that are negatively correlated: (negative) work requirements and work-related resources which have a direct impact on the employee's stress level, motivation, health problems, and numerous organizational outcomes. Workplace resources are the characteristics of the workplace that are necessary to achieve the work goals set, contribute to work enjoyment, motivation, and engagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014). Based on the JD-R theory we also examined the job demands and the workplace resources among university teachers in CEE. Earlier research primarily took a psychological approach and examined psychological stress sources and resources, and showed their correlation with regard to work performance, workplace and psychological well-being, or even burnout. But in our exploratory research, we examine difficulties and resources related to the work of the instructors from a higher education research perspective and using a qualitative method (focus group interviews). Previous empirical works that utilized this theory applied the correlations of stress and resources primarily for different aspects of well-being; as the first step of our study, we would like to identify these factors based on the experiences of the teachers in the region under investigation. The geographical area (Central and Eastern Europe) can be considered a

novelty, as it is a region that contains several countries that have similar cultural roots and historical antecedents and are in a similar social-economic situation but at the same time, they have many peculiarities. The applied method is suitable for getting to know the characteristics and challenges of teaching work in the countries and institutions examined in a close-up, valid way, over a broad basis, based on the opinions and experiences of those affected, laying the foundation for further quantitative research that reveal correlations.

A portion of the sources of stress are related to workplace requirements (long working hours, administrative burdens, providing academic and mentoring support, carrying out and fulfilling tasks required for quality assurance, pressure for grants and publications, managing a large number of e-mails, etc.), another portion to the factors limiting efficiency (ineffective management, the lack of administrative and technical support, poor communication, rushed work pace, frequent interruption of work, conflicting roles and limited opportunities to prepare for teaching, research, and professional development), and other problems (such as lack of respect, harassment, interpersonal conflicts, or job insecurity). The high workload also significantly affects the health of the instructors, which is related to and can be manifested in symptoms of depression, aggressiveness, impatience, rejection, and procrastination (Iyaji et al., 2020).

1.1. Health-behavior, physical activity among the instructors

Several studies draw attention to the unhealthy lifestyle of university teachers, employees (inactivity, unhealthy diet, high stress, etc.) which also leads to loss of life among them in many cases (Iyaji et al., 2020). Still, only a few studies deal with the physical activity of the academics, the problem of inactivity, while compared to the average population, they are more likely to be familiar with physical activity's importance and its beneficial effects on various dimensions of health, especially those who work and do research on this field. But this knowledge is not always followed by the activity (Kwiecień-Jaguś et al., 2021), while physical activity plays an essential positive role in health promotion and wellbeing (Cooper & Barton, 2016; Lotan et al., 2005). Practicing organized physical activity contributes to the treatment and prevention of mental illnesses and disorders, and increases the level of physical and mental well-being among both the mentally ill and the general population (Fox, 1999). Research conducted at a South African university came up with devastating results about the health status of the teachers: the majority of the respondents are overweight or obese, generally, the colleagues are not healthy, a great portion of them feel that they are under a lot of pressure, so they are exposed to a lot of stress at work, though they are looking for opportunities that would support their health and well-being. 63% of women and 48% of men did less than the recommended 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise, so they can be characterized as having an inactive lifestyle. Negative behavioral patterns can also be observed among them when it comes to nutrition: low fruit and vegetable consumption and high consumption of sugary soft drinks. Overall, the respondents feel that they are

undervalued by their colleagues, they are undermotivated at work and they are dissatisfied with the management, the opportunities, and the wellness initiatives at their faculty (Koen et al., 2018).

In a comparative study, one fifth of Australian and only 18% of British academics participated in at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity, and a similar proportion did at least 90 minutes of more vigorous exercise. The vast majority of them (77.4% of the Australians, 88.2% of the British) did not participate in the health-oriented programs and events organized by their university. In both countries, approximately 10% indicated that their institution does not even provide such opportunities. At the same time, we are well aware that an organization has to provide its employees with access to wellness programs that encourage them to participate. Behavioral changes brought about as a result of these programs can be useful for the development of institutional culture, reduce absenteeism, medical expenses, and contribute to the well-being of the employees. (Koen et al., 2018).

Among Cameroonian academics, a positive correlation was found between inactive lifestyle and burnout, while the opposite, i.e. a physically active lifestyle, especially sports, function as a protective factor against numerous diseases (cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, obesity, cancer, metabolic syndrome, stress, depression, aging, dementia, etc.). (Ngalagou et al., 2019). In a Nigerian study, it was found that although physical activities and recreation are positively correlated with quality of life, unfortunately, university teachers do not make use of the sports facilities and infrastructure provided by their institution, the majority of respondents spend their free time with passive activities, mostly due to work requirements (Omolawon et al., 2011).

2. Methodology

In our research, we used a qualitative method, focus group interviews, to reveal the workplace stress and resources affecting the well-being and health of Central and Eastern European university teachers. For the analyses, seven focus group interviews were conducted with academics from nine higher education institutions in five countries, online between July and October 2022. The length of the interview material is about eight hours, which was transcribed into a total of 168 pages of written text. The interview outline broadly examined the work and situation of the academics along the following dimensions: introduction, dimensions of teaching effectiveness, challenges of higher education pedagogy, the impact of teaching work on well-being and health, institutional culture, leisure time and cultural consumption, experiences and attitudes towards disabled students, religiosity, language and ethnic diversity in higher education, the role of the institution in preserving and developing the health of the university teachers.

The number of participants in the focus group interviews was between four and eight from the following institutions (41 people in total): University of Debrecen (UD), Reformed Theological University of Debrecen (RTUD), University of Nyíregyháza (UNY) (Hungary); Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania (branch Miercurea Ciuc, SAPI, Romania), Partium Christian University (PCU, Romania); Ferenc Rákóczi II. Transcarpathian Hungarian Institute (THU, Ukraine), J. Selye University (JSU, Slovakia), University of Novi Sad (UNS), Subotica Tech - College of Applied Sciences (STCAS) (Serbia). The Hungarian universities are institutions from the North-Eastern region of the country, where the proportion of disadvantaged students is overrepresented compared to other regions, so the teachers have to deal with special challenges. From the other countries, we have picked the higher education institutions of the Hungarian minority, so the teachers and students are also in a special situation, due to being members of a minority. The interviewees were selected in such a way as to obtain heterogeneous groups according to gender, age, and position, as well as field of study (faculty). In terms of position, there were participants from all levels, from PhD students who are part-time teachers to full professors, several interviewees also holding senior positions (department head, institute head, doctoral program president, dean, assistant dean, assistant rector). Based on the age known, the youngest respondent was 31 and the oldest was 65. 18 men and 23 women participated in the interviews.

During the analysis, we used deductive and inductive coding: we examined the difficulties and resources related to work in connection with the JD-R theory (deductive), and we looked for other sources of stress and supporting factors inductively. Based on the answers, we performed a type analysis to typify the difficulties and resources, and a thematic analysis was performed regarding the coping strategies used to overcome stress, sports and other activities related to health behaviors, institutional contributions, and expectations. The codes are: 1. work-related difficulty, stress, and 2. resources; 3. individual protective factor, coping strategy; 4. institutional supporting factor and 5. expectations, that could promote the well-being of academics.

3. Results and conclusions

Similarly to research conducted among university teachers in Britain, Australia (Kinman et al. 2006; Bell et al., 2012; Fetherston et al., 2021), Pakistan (Aziz and Quraishi, 2017), Saudi Arabia (Alqarni, 2021), China (Han et al., 2020) and Nigeria (Iyaji et al., 2020), the most important workplace difficulties, challenges, and resources are related to teaching roles, interpersonal relationships, support by the management, and infrastructural conditions. Difficulties that came up with regards to teaching include that it is undervalued compared to research performance, even though it takes a lot of work and energy to prepare, be up to date in the course material, to organize the classes, and pass on practical, but always professional knowledge. However, student feedback is not always adequate in this regard, especially

during the time of COVID, when there was no personal contact, so university teachers got feedback neither from the students, nor from the institution in general about how well they were able to deliver the study material to the students. Hungarian institutions of higher education do have a mostly voluntary feedback system, as well as a completely informal website (markmyprofessor), where the work of a given academic can be evaluated anonymously, but these are not necessarily objective, as students are influenced by the difficulty and importance of the course material, and of course the grade received. This way the measurement of the quality of education itself can also be problematic. They deal with the workplace stress by playing sports, physical activity and quality, active time spent with the family in order to preserve their health and well-being. At the same time, in accordance with earlier studies (Kinman, 2014; Koen et al., 2018; Iyaji et al., 2020), the vast majority of subjects do not play sports or perform regular physical activity (only 13 people do). Significant differences can be observed between the institutions (countries) examined; among the subjects in Ukraine, no one mentioned physical activity or sports, while when it comes of gender, there was an equal proportion of active teachers.

The most important message of our study is that the institutional environment is key to both the effective work and well-being of the instructors. This requires well-functioning technology and suitable infrastructure (PCE), financial remuneration independent of external grants for existential security. Meanwhile, it is even more important to define predictable, transparent institutional goals, strategy, and jointly agreed values, to create a predictable and controlled system of evaluation and rewards, which do not change according to the whims of the current leadership or with the change of leadership (in Serbia and Romania). For this reason, constant and effective communication between the leadership and the smaller subunits is very important. Although a stable, predictable system of evaluation already exists in several countries (Romania, Ukraine), and compliance with it is another source of stress, but it has only been introduced into the operation of the institutions examined in Hungary during the recent changes in higher education. Thus, its effectiveness is not yet known, but at the same time it promotes predictability and transparency, which go hand in hand with the differentiation of wages. This could result in a kind of competitive situation within the teaching community, which can negatively affect interpersonal relationships. Among the resources related to work, a good community or team within the faculty or with colleagues from other institutes stands out, so it is extremely important for the management of the institution to support these common, grassroots teambuilding programs. In addition, institutions can contribute to the well-being and health of the instructors primarily by offering free or at least discounted participation in sports, cultural and leisure events, as well as mental health counseling, but it is important for these not to be self-serving (the colleagues from the university should not participate in the programs to make up for the missing audiences of the otherwise overfunded organizations of the institution) and haphazard: without a targeted health strategy, these are not sufficiently effective. These team-building informal programs

were also greatly affected by COVID: they were either forced back into the online space, or they were completely stopped, or they are being revived currently, so in this case, too there appears the need to support grassroots initiatives (department excursions, playing football, theater, etc.).

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