

Uncovering Stress in University Faculty: A Narrative Approach

Maria Josep Blesa , Amalia Duch , Joaquim Gabarro , Maria Serna 

Departament de Ciències de la Computació, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya - BarcelonaTech, Spain.

How to cite: Blesa, M.J.; Duch, A.; Gabarro, J.; Serna, M. (2026). Uncovering Stress in University Faculty: A Narrative Approach. In: 12th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'26). Valencia, 15-18 June 2026. <https://doi.org/10.4995/HEAd26.2026.21743>

Abstract

Stress is a natural response to challenging situations, but at high levels it can negatively affect health and well-being. Uncertainty, an overload of responsibilities, and the need to adapt to new ways of working have impacted many people, and university faculty are no exception. Certain changes in our work environment seem to contribute significantly to stress. For example, increased digitization makes us struggle with technology, and the notable rise in teleworking has reduced direct communication. In addition, the administrative calendar often constrains faculty, concentrating tasks into short periods. Likewise, university objective systems for measuring teaching activity do not always reflect the actual time required. In this reflection, we aim to contribute to the analysis of stress situations and to foster discussion on their causes and effects. To this end, we present narratives that illustrate the main sources of stress in our daily lives and their repercussions on our work.

Keywords: *academic precarity; managerialism in higher education; audit culture; work intensification; technostress; platformization.*

1. Introduction

Recent research has increasingly investigated the sources and consequences of professional dissatisfaction and stress among university faculty. Several studies have employed survey-based approaches to assess faculty well-being and the impacts of stress on occupational outcomes, identifying workload, institutional demands, and adverse psychological effects as central concerns among academic staff (e.g., Rivera Mansilla, E. B., et al. (2022), Cantero Téllez, R., et al. (2022), Tian, M. et al. (2024)). Other work has examined the multifaceted nature of job stress by distinguishing between stressors associated with research, teaching, and administrative duties, and linking these dimensions to reduced life satisfaction through emotional burnout (Xu, Y.; Wang, Y. (2023)). In addition to quantitative approaches, commentaries and reflective pieces have drawn attention to personal experiences of stress in academic contexts, highlighting the emotional toll of organizational and professional pressures (Lashuel, H. A. (2020)). But gaps

remain in understanding how systemic and job-related factors interact to shape stress outcomes. Recent studies found a consistent and moderate-to-high positive correlation between job stress and burnout among university lecturers, reinforcing the central role of occupational stress in faculty well-being and underscoring the need for targeted institutional responses to address these stressors (Yingying, S., et al. (2025)). We are faculty members of different ages at a Spanish university, and we have recently noticed a significant increase in stress—something we had not perceived individually. Perhaps when immersed in a stressful situation, it is difficult to recognize it. We find it important to reflect on this and explore several related questions: How is this stress generated? What does it look like within the university teaching community? What are its causes? Is the university taking steps to prevent it? In this work, we aim to identify some sources of stress that we experience in our daily lives. Some stressors are systemic or linked to external factors, and addressing them is far from easy; we will not focus on these. Instead, we concentrate on stressors inherent to university work. To better clarify and examine these sources, we adopt a narrative approach, using a “first-person perspective”, similar to Schiller R. J. (2019). Our narratives consider stress arising from digitization, uncoordinated calendars, lack of foresight, and new faculty roles, among other factors. We conclude by presenting quantitative data to contextualize these experiences.

2 Narratives

2.1. a Digitization

Digitization has significantly transformed the management and administration of teaching, streamlining processes and improving efficiency in educational institutions. However, it seems that, in excess, this effectiveness is reversed and, in fact, increases the workload.

2.1.1. Narrative 1: *I struggle with technology even though I am STEM!*

Some of us are course coordinators, and let me tell you, that role comes with a special kind of stress. As a course coordinator, once the grades are corrected and reviewed—a process that is often emotionally draining—it’s time to close one course edition and prepare the next. We keep grades, exam questions, and solutions in the department’s repository, which should make things straightforward... until it does not synchronize properly. Suddenly, the same files show different versions on different computers, and any changes you thought were finalized may need to be re-entered. The situation becomes even more complicated when teaching across multiple centers. Each one has its own system for submitting grades, and the required formats never match: one wants decimals with commas, no tabs; the other wants dots. Mistakes are easy to make, and correcting them means repeating work you thought was already done. On top of that, exam statements must be uploaded for publication in the repository, but again, each center uses a different teaching system, separate from the grading system. Learning and juggling all these

platforms becomes a full-time job in itself. By the end of it, what should be routine administrative work feels like a constant source of stress, frustration, and mental load.

2.1.2. Narrative 2: I don't know who to turn to.

When I had an administrative problem, I knew who to turn to: Maria, Kim, Amalia, etc. Each of them was there to manage a different administrative area (travel, courses, PhD, economic management of projects, etc.) and together they made it so that the faculty/researchers could focus on their tasks, because administrative problems were solved efficiently. We were people working with people, face to face. Now there is only a web interface where we note down what is happening to us (ticket) and at some point, someone might do something about it.

2.1.3. Narrative 3: The full CV, at this point?

This year it is my turn to request the next five-year teaching review cycle and the six-year research evaluation period. The deadline for the former ended on January 10th, and for the later on January 31st. The six-year period, on the other hand, requires the inclusion of an abbreviated CV summarizing the best contributions to be evaluated. That seems quite logical. But one must also include a full CV of your entire research career, which is an absolutely useless work; among other reasons because all the scientific production we carry out (and meets a minimum of quality) is already in institutional local and international repositories and databases (ORCID, DBLP, etc.) and it is easily accessible.

2.2. b Compressed and uncoordinated calendars

One has the impression that if the digitization of university administrative management should serve for anything, it is to prevent errors and optimize processes that, if treated separately, could create conflicts. Even more so when a large proportion of the staff working at the university is administration and services. To date, the academic staff of our university is around 3500 professors, while the management and service administration staff is around 2100 people.

2.2.1. Narrative 4: Interference between teaching calendars.

At our university, faculty are assigned to departments, while teaching assignments are determined by the schools. It is therefore not unusual for faculty to teach in different schools. These schools, in addition to being located on separate campuses, rarely share a common academic calendar. At times, the difficulty of managing teaching responsibilities while complying with the differing restrictions of each calendar creates unnecessary stress.

2.2.2. Narrative 5: Subjugated to the administrative calendar.

At our university, the academic year is divided into two semesters. Coupled with changes in the enrollment calendar and the early start of the academic year (now beginning in early September

or February), this has shifted a range of teaching tasks to July, particularly those related to preparing for the following course. Administratively, this is one of the busiest periods, as enrollment for new students must be completed and support provided for multiple research-related trips. At the same time, June, July, and September are months in which administrative staff reduce their working hours. As a result, according to the administrative calendar, nearly four weeks are required to complete almost the same amount of work that is usually done in two weeks during the January period.

2.3. c Lack of foresight

Everyone expects forecasts to be accurate and avoid last-minute decisions. But...

2.3.1. Narrative 6: Looking for teachers to teach tomorrow.

In principle, I should not worry about what day enrollment is. However, in the last semesters, enrollment days have become days of maximum stress on my work calendar. Why? Our school calculates an initial number of groups to be opened based on the history of students enrolled in a subject. A few days before enrollment, a pre-enrollment period opens to find out which students are interested in enrolling. With this information, I have to make the final decision on how many groups open in the next edition. Unfortunately (actually fortunately, right?), the number of interested parties exceeds the forecast. Do I admit more students per group and load (for free) more work on the faculty? Do I open a new group? Who will be in charge? At what time? It is not an easy task because almost everybody has already their teaching assignment. However, I have to square it in a few days, and I have been doing so several times.

2.3.2. Narrative 7: Don't get sick, for goodness' sake.

On the Monday of the third week after starting a programming course, a disturbing message arrived in our WhatsApp teacher's group: "Hello, I'm admitted to the hospital, they are running tests, I won't be able to give my classes this week and most likely those of the entire semester." The message left us stunned. We did not know what it was about and probably she did not either, or preferred not to say. But, who will do her work?

2.3.3. Narrative 8: Doing things without looking ahead.

Just when we had finished arranging an appointment to continue discussing this article, one of the co-authors received a call to urgently attend a final degree examining board for which she was a substitute member. What was her surprise when, upon trying to find out why the titular member could not attend, it turned out to be an administrative problem. When configuring the boards, no one noticed that the contract of the professor who had been designated as a member would have ended by the reading date.

2.4. d New roles

The development of AI is creating fresh sources of workload and redefining faculty roles.

2.4.1. Narrative 8: *Are we fraud hunters?*

One of the co-authors had to evaluate a master's thesis on data science applied to football—a topic entirely unfamiliar to him, which already caused some unease. After a morning reading it, the work seemed acceptable, though the introduction felt thin. Checking a cited review article, she was surprised to find it did not appear in the journal issue. When she asked the supervisor if the references had been verified, the reply was that the student was trusted. In the end, the thesis remained ungraded, and three mornings were lost to a futile evaluation.

2.4.2. Narrative 9: *Are we IA detectives?*

As the head of the advanced computing specialization in the computer science master's program at my university, one of my tasks is to read the motivation letters of students applying to our program. But over the past two years, I have found myself reading the same letter repeatedly: same structure, same background (shifting from father to uncle to grandfather to brother), same interests perfectly aligned with the master's program objectives. How can this be? It's simple: our only applicant these days seems to be called ChatGPT. Our current master's students not only use AI systems to write their motivation letters, but also to complete their entire theses. What's worse, relying on it does not help them improve; mediocrity has become the norm. Assessing this new kind of work is exhausting and frustrating, and the constant need to detect and evaluate AI-generated work has added a new, unexpected layer of stress for faculty staff.

3 Our sensation in numbers

Through our narratives, we have tried to highlight some of the objective causes of strain—a stress generated not only by demanding situations themselves, but also by the feeling of being unable to accomplish everything, or of doing so without the quality and calm we would like. But is it only a feeling? To examine this, let us put some numbers to it.

3.1. a Accounting for our teaching activity

According to European Commission (2025), full-time teaching staff in public universities in Spain must dedicate an average of not less than 37.5 hours of work. The obligations of faculty are: (i) 8 teaching hours per week (with few exceptions); (ii) dedicate the necessary part of the day to teaching activity to teach a total of 24 ECTS per academic year.

Let us try to translate these teaching duties into actual work hours. At our university, 24 ECTS of purely teaching activity per course correspond to 72 points, with each point representing 10 hours of work. That amounts to 720 hours, which are expected to be completed over the 30

weeks that constitute the academic year. This works out to roughly 24 hours of work per week, or about two-thirds of the standard 37.5-hour workweek. However, according to surveys among colleagues and our own experience, most faculty have close to 100 points recognized by the university on average—around 30% above the stated maximum. Even without accounting for teaching-related activities that do not earn points, the 30 official weeks of the course are already fully occupied with teaching duties under the points system. In practice, this leaves no time for non-teaching activities, which, as we all know, is impossible to achieve. Note that the “extra” hours (dedicated but not recognized or valued) also make us face a significant number of different tasks in very tight time intervals. They are clearly hours of work overload well known to be a cause of occupational stress.

3.2. b Exam periods

Let us consider a real example of a work week during an exam period. Last January, in the final week, the final exam for the First Programming course was held. We spent four hours proctoring on Tuesday, and final grades—including reviews—had to be ready by noon the following Monday. The exam consisted of four problems, each with an official solution of 20 to 30 lines of code. Using an automatic grader, correction is quick when solutions pass and the code is clean. But long, complex, or failing programs take much more time, even without considering the effort to understand messy code. Correction times are also affected by fatigue, the number of exercises graded without a break, and other simultaneous teaching tasks. The cumulative effect of these pressures makes exam periods particularly stressful for faculty, turning routine grading into an exhausting process.

To put numbers on it, let us say the average correction time for this type of exercise is 5 minutes per exercise (optimistic!). The exam was taken by 82 students and around 75 submitted the 4 problems. Then the more than 300 exercises to correct represents more than 25 hours work. In fact, this exam was corrected entirely by two of the co-authors of this article (12.5 hours each). Adding one hour more to each teacher to post grades and two more hours to do reviews, the minimum time dedicated per professor is 19.5 hours. That is more than half of the working hours of the week, and we are not counting the hours dedicated to preparing the exam, neither the email communication with students who cannot complain in person, and others.

In some of our schools, it is common for Final Project Examining Boards to coincide with the last week of the exam period. Our university awards 0.5 points per student for reading, whether it is a bachelor's or master's thesis. Faculty on a board are expected to dedicate roughly five hours per student—reading and assessing the written report, listening to and evaluating the 30-minute oral presentation, and asking questions while participating in discussions to determine the grade. The written report is provided five working days before the reading. Typically, a board evaluates the work of four students consecutively (per school, so they can be eight!),

though sometimes only three. In the exceptional case of three students, the recognized dedication is still 15 hours (two full workdays). Adding this to the 20 hours already spent on the programming exam leaves barely two hours for any other tasks. This assumes, of course, that the hours recognized by the points match the time actually required—though in practice, they rarely do.

3.3. c And what happens with research?

So far, in the previous calculations, we have not mentioned research. However, it is a substantial and compulsory part of a university professor's work. How much time can be dedicated to research? Returning to what the European Commission (2025) publishes, faculty with full-time dedication are entitled to 22 working days of vacation plus public holidays, and clarify that Saturdays are not working days. Considering that we have between 12 and 15 public holidays a year, the working year consists of 45 weeks. If we remove the 30 corresponding to the teaching period from these 45 weeks, in which we have argued that there is no time for non-teaching activities, we should have 15 weeks of exclusive dedication to research (which would correspond to one-third of the working day, 562 hours of work).

What can generate strain in this case? The first thing is that the calendars of projects, conferences, etc. obviously do not adjust to the dates of those supposed 15 weeks, and those hours cannot be distributed uniformly throughout all the weeks of the course without professors substantially increasing their working hours. Furthermore, if one looks at the academic calendar, one observes that the weeks marked as administrative periods, which would be those that could be free of teaching activities, are not consecutive but are distributed in various periods throughout the year. Moreover, said weeks are no more than 10 in the calendar although theoretically they should be around 15. That implies, and corroborates, that the weeks with academic activities are more than the 30 of which the academic year theoretically consists. Does this simply mean that the points recognized by the university are spread over more weeks? Not necessarily. But it does mean that there are more weeks of a high level of work overload.

4 Final reflections and open questions

By way of reflection, we have presented a selected set of descriptive narratives of stress situations we detect in our daily lives. We think that, despite being only small examples, these narratives can help to identify many of the causes of burnout in faculty. Definitely, to carry out a general study at our university level would help to analyze the incidence and impact of the different narratives using traditional methods, and hopefully to find some solutions. In our opinion, faculty strain is mostly due to (i) the impossibility of planning and correctly carrying out teaching activity, especially in periods with an excess of teaching duties and little time to do it;

and (ii) by the realization that teaching consumes much of the time needed for research which is the pillar of quality university teaching and conditions the academic career.

The numbers presented make it clear that the pressure arising from the narratives does not remain only in the sensation of not being able to reach everything, but that there is a real impossibility. This happens despite the fact that faculty (mostly, and rightly so) have a great sense of responsibility, professionalism, motivation for their vocation, and dedication to work. What happens is that they end up dedicating significantly more hours to teaching than stipulated. No matter how much motivation is there, the hours of the day are limited and working under stress generates chronic exhaustion that can end up undermining natural motivation.

What effective solutions are being considered in our universities? The topic of stress is increasingly recognized, but student mental health has received much more attention than faculty well-being. Many universities, including ours, have established psychological counseling services and provide guides or workshops to help manage stress. Yet for faculty, these resources tend to focus on coping with the consequences—developing personal strategies to live with stress—rather than on preventing or eliminating the situations that trigger it. There is room to find solutions that alleviate the level of faculty strain based on an objective analysis of the time needed for teaching activities and planning difficulties. A more realistic design of both academic and administrative calendars should be considered. Reviewing and updating measurement systems and adapting them to reality would necessarily contribute to the perception that our work is valued, and that the conditions in which we carry it out matter.

References

- Cantero Téllez, R.; Romero Galisteo, R. P.; Rodríguez Bailón, M. (2022). Personal and teaching factors related to university professors' stress levels in the face of COVID-19. *International Journal of Technology and Educational Innovation*, 8(1), 102-110.
- European Commission. (2025). Eurydice - Eurypedia – National Education Systems- Spain - Conditions of service for academic staff working in higher education.
- Lashuel, H. A. (2020). Mental health in academia: What about faculty? *eLife*, 9, e54551.
- Rivera Mansilla, E. B.; Castillo-Acobo, R. Y.; Martínez Puma, E. G.; Maquera Maquera, Y.; Arias Gonzales, J. L.; Vasquez-Pauca, M. M. J. (2022). Stress in university teachers in the framework of the post-pandemic face-to-face academic resumption. *Journal of Medicinal and Chemical Sciences*, 5(6), 1040-1047.
- Schiller, R. J. (2019). Narrative economics: How stories go viral and drive major economic events. Princeton University Press.
- Tian, M.; Li, X.; Ma, J.; Zhang, T.; Wang, P.; Yuan, X.; Wang, X. (2024). Who merits more concern: University teachers under task-related or those under interpersonal-related stress? *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11(1), 1564.
- Xu, Y.; Wang, Y. (2023). Job stress and university faculty members' life satisfaction: The mediating role of emotional burnout. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14.

Yingying, S., Khaizer Omar, M., & Ismail, N. (2025). Job stress and burnout among lecturers: a systematic literature review and meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, Article 1673812.

Article in Press