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## The Manifestations and Consequences of Job Burnout among Academic Leaders in Saudi Arabia: A Qualitative Study

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### Abstract

*This qualitative study aimed to identify how job burnout manifests among academic leaders in Saudi universities, as well as its consequences. It addresses a gap in the literature by exploring how burnout manifests at personal, social, and institutional levels in this setting. Using the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory and Maslach's burnout model (emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced accomplishment) as a theoretical framework, the study conducted in-depth interviews with 25 academic leaders from five public state universities. Respondents participated in semi-structured interviews (2–2.5 hours long), delivered face-to-face or by telephone. Thematic analysis revealed the challenges and impacts of burnout: work–life integration challenges, cultural pressures, and lack of support. These findings provide useful information for targeted interventions to reduce the impact of burnout and promote well-being in Saudi Arabian higher education settings.*

**Keywords:** Academic Leaders, Job Burnout, Job Demands-Resources Theory, Higher Education, Maslach's Burnout Model, Saudi Arabia, Work–Life Integration.

### Introduction

Job burnout, which comprises three dimensions—emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and diminished personal accomplishment—is of growing concern in higher education worldwide (Maslach and Leiter, 2016). Workaholism is high prevalent, affecting an estimated 20% to 60% of the workforce (Salvagioni et al., 2017). Burnout has been widely scrutinised; however, its forms and effects may differ significantly across higher education settings.

Saudi Arabia's higher education sector is evolving more rapidly than ever, driven by the Vision 2030 initiative, a comprehensive national development strategy that strives to modernise the national economy and society (Altbash, 2020). These transformations are not without challenges for academic leaders; we see, among other things, the expansion of educational institutions, growing demands for internationalisation, and the need to negotiate conflicting cultural expectations of what leadership roles entail (Almansour and Al-Mogren, 2022a). These challenges, combined the demands of academic leadership in terms of managing heavy workloads, securing funding, navigating work–life commitments, and supporting faculty and students, may increase the risk of burnout faced by Saudi academic leaders (Alghamdi, 2023; Flynn and Ironside, 2018).

Although awareness of burnout has increased worldwide, few studies have focused on its effect on academic leaders within the unique sociocultural and institutional settings of Saudi Arabia.

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Most previous studies conducted in Saudi Arabia have concentrated on burnout among healthcare workers, banking workers, and faculty (Flynn and Ironside, 2018). Based on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and the three-dimensional model of Maslach burnout (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Maslach and Leiter, 2016). The objective of this study is to explore the lived experiences of job burnout among academic leaders working in Saudi higher education settings—with respect to representations and impacts of burnout at the individual, societal and institutional levels—that can be achieved by answering the following research questions:

### **Research Questions**

How does job burnout manifest among academic leaders in Saudi universities at the personal, social, and institutional levels?

What are the consequences of job burnout for academic leaders in Saudi universities considering their personal well-being, social interactions, institutional effectiveness, and job performance?

Using in-depth interview, this research investigated burnout's impact on general well-being, social interaction, institutional efficiency, funding, public perception, and outcomes among 25 leaders at five state universities of varying sizes. The results are intended to serve as essential knowledge for decision makers and practitioners interested in designing targeted measures to tackle burnout and boost well-being in the Saudi higher education system's institutional context.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study fills the gap in our understanding of burnout among Saudi Arabian academic leaders. These results provide essential insights into the unique experiences of this demographic so that culturally relevant solutions can be guided to combat burnout and promote wellness. The reviewed literature reported burnout among several professions in Saudi Arabia; however, a specific study among academic leaders is lacking. No research has investigated burnout syndrome among academic leaders at Saudi universities or identified the kind of pressure they face. They confront numerous challenges such as ensuring the higher education system's rapid growth, managing internationalisation, and the need to comply with social requirements for leaders, which can lead to emergencies and burnout (Altharman, 2023).

This study focused on this population to provide a knowledge-making method for effective targeted interventions addressing their unique needs and challenge (Maslach and Leiter, 1996). As indicated in recent studies examining similar occupations, such as dental residents (Alqahtani, 2023) and nursing students (Altharman, 2023), this is important for their well-being and successful careers. Overall, this study's findings serve as a basis for developing a support system for academic leaders in Saudi Arabia.

### **Research Background and Theoretical Framework**

#### *Consequences of Job Burnout at Multiple Levels*

Job burnout is a complex psychological syndrome that results from prolonged and/or recurrent chronic work stress (Maslach and Leiter, 2016); burnout comprises three main factors: emotional exhaustion, cynicism and/or depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001). These dimensions include emotional exhaustion, cynicism towards work and co-workers, feelings of reduced efficacy, and lack of accomplishment. Burnout not only harms individuals, but also makes social relationships difficult and undermines institutional

### **Personal Level**

Burnout takes a heavy toll on health; it affects individuals at all levels: physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Such personal effects may be emotional, physical, behavioural, or cognitive and can have a significant impact on quality of life and health. Burnout has effects on various levels:

**Psychological** burnout can also result in elevated levels of anxiety, depression, irritability, lack of motivation, hopelessness, and helplessness (Salvagioni et al., 2017). This emotional shift can decrease mental health and well-being.

**Physical** symptoms like sleep disturbances, fatigue, headaches, appetite changes, low immune responses and increased risk of general physical health problems have been associated with burnout (Melamed et al., 2006).

**Behavioral** impacts for those suffering from burnout include reduced effectiveness, procrastination, absenteeism, substance abuse, and social withdrawal (Altharman, 2023). Such behaviours can worsen burnout and cause a cycle of self-perpetuation.

**Cognitive:** Burnout is associated with reduced intellectual capacity, such as degraded decision-making and impaired creativity, focus, and attention (Maslach and Leiter, 2016). Various cognitive effects are detrimental to the job, productivity, and overall performance of individuals.

### **Social Level**

Burnout not only constrains one's sense of self but also affects social engagement. It can lead to:

**Interpersonal:** Burnout can negatively impact relationships at work, home, and with friends, leading to increased conflict and decreased cooperation and teamwork (Bakker et al., 2005).

**Communication:** Those affected by burnout may communicate pessimistically, transmitting cynicism and avoiding communication (González-Morales et al., 2012). This can lead to avoidance, tension, and discomfort in the workplace and in other social settings.

**Climate:** Burnout can create a negative, non-supportive workplace that lowers morale and collegiality (Maslach and Leiter, 2016). This affects the productivity, innovation, and overall culture of an organisation.

### **Institutional Level**

The consequences of burnout can extend to the institutions to which individuals belong. Burnout, which hit many organisations hard during the COVID-19 pandemic, can cause a decrease in performance, even damaging finances and reputation or affecting organisational culture. Burnout can lead to the following:

**Performance** Burnout causes declines in productivity, research output, teaching quality, and effectiveness at the institutional level (Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998).

**Financial:** Burnout can increase absenteeism, turnover, and healthcare costs (Maslach et al., 2001). These financial consequences can quickly become burdensome for institutions.

**Reputational:** High levels of burnout in an organisation may contribute to a negative reputation, making it difficult to attract and retain talent (Wright and Cropanzano, 1998). These factors can degrade an institution's image and competitiveness, resulting in a lasting impact.

**Cultural:** Burnout promotes an unhealthy and unhelpful culture that decreases creativity, collaboration, and innovation (Maslach and Leiter, 2016).

In short, burnout affects not only individuals, but also their social context and the social organisations they belong to. The burden of burnout manifests at multiple levels, underlining the need to address it as a means of supporting personal well-being, healthy social engagement, and effective institutional operations.

### ***The Transitioning Landscape of Academia in Saudi Arabia***

The context for this study is Vision 2030, a national strategic plan to diversify the economy and enhance the kingdom's global presence, under which the Saudi higher education sector is undergoing substantial transformation. Higher education has been hailed as a vital engine of economic and social advancement and, as such, has become the target of significant investment and reform initiatives (Altbash, 2020). This evolution highlights an exciting opportunity and a set of significant challenges for academics and educational leaders responsible for bringing education into the 21st century (Shin and Jung, 2021). Although Saudi higher education has expanded significantly, this growth has brought both substantial advancements and notable challenges, highlighting the need for continued attention in certain areas to ensure further progress.

### **Rapid Expansion**

The sudden boom in the number of universities and students has placed tremendous pressure on existing resources. This expansion poses challenges in infrastructure development and faculty recruitment as well as quality assurance during rapid growth period (Shin and Jung, 2021). The growth we have achieved cannot be sustained indefinitely without ensuring adequate resources for the support systems that accompany it.

### **Internationalisation**

Attracting international faculty: Saudi universities are attempting to internationalise institutions and students. However, the initiative has faced challenges of cultural integration, language barriers, and adapting new perspectives and learning styles in curricula (Almansour and Al-Mogren, 2022b). The ability to negotiate these challenges successfully is key to building genuinely internationalised institutions.

### **Quality**

An investment in quality remains one of the key focus areas, as it takes place based on worldwide standards of faculty development, research excellence, and innovation (Shin and Jung (2021). Continuous data monitoring and process evaluation on the five elements of the quality mechanism—(1) leadership and governance, (2) teaching and learning, (3) research and innovation, (4) community engagement, and (5) infrastructure and resources—can enable educational institutions to meet global standards (Altbash, 2020).

### **Cultural Considerations**

Navigating culture within an academic environment is a high-stakes task. Incorporating both

traditional hierarchical/top-down leadership styles alongside more collaborative or consensus-building styles can achieve the necessary delicate balance (Alshehri, 2021). Understanding cultural expectations and developing culturally intelligent leaders are paramount.

### **Gender Dynamics**

Promoting gender equity and creating inclusive spaces for female academics in leadership positions are key (Alhumaid, 2023). Ensuring engagement with gender dynamics and creating spaces for women to lead is critical for developing a more equitable and representative higher education system.

### **Accountability**

Increasing pressure for accountability and transparency requires the development of evaluation systems and a culture of continuous improvement (Altbash, 2020). It is valuable and increasingly vital to demonstrate the effectiveness and impact of higher education initiatives.

### **Technological Development Challenges**

Time to adapt is required at both the institutional and individual levels. Demands exist for students to become accustomed to and engage in online learning platforms, while faculty must adopt innovative teaching methods and utilise technology in research initiatives (Alzahrani, 2023). As technology advances and workplace skills requirements evolve, successfully integrating new technologies is imperative to better prepare students to meet the future workforce demands.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study used two well-established theoretical perspectives to conceptualise job burnout among academic leaders in Saudi Arabia:

**JD-R Theory:** This model suggests that job burnout capitulates when job demands exceed resources, resulting in strain and exhaustion (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). For example, the employment demands of Saudi Arabian academics may include heavy workloads, administrative tasks, internationalisation pressures, accountability expectations, technological advancements, cultural expectations regarding leadership roles, and gender dynamics. Job resources (leadership support, professional development opportunities, technology and resources, work-life balance, and positive organisational culture) help buffer the negative impacts of high job demands.

**Maslach's Three-Dimensional Model of Burnout:** This conceptualises burnout as a syndrome comprising three interrelated dimensions: emotional exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalisation, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach and Leiter, 2016).

### **Integrating the Frameworks**

A comprehensive conceptualisation of burnout among Saudi academic leaders is achieved by integrating the JD-R model and Maslach's model. The JD-R model provides insights into job-specific demands and resources resulting in burnout, while Maslach's model highlights individual experiences and expressions of burnout.

The integrated theoretical framework aligns well with the objectives of this study and suggests that it is important to focus on identifying potential sources of job demands and resources relevant to Saudi academic leaders. Exploring the relationship between demands and resources, the JD-R model can also provide insights into how the interaction between employment demands

and resources leads to the three aspects of burnout identified by the Maslach model. By investigating how burnout affects people using both theoretical domains, this study analyses how burnout impacts individuals, social networks, and institutions.

## **Methods**

This section describes the methods used in the qualitative study, including researcher positionality, sampling strategy, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures.

### **Positionality and Reflexivity of the Researchers**

The researcher has worked extensively in Saudi Arabian higher education, and this insider status has several advantages. It helps gain access to participants, developing trust and rapport, which are paramount for qualitative research (Mercer, 2007). This allowed the researcher to interpret the participants' experiences in a nuanced manner (Unluer, 2012) through cultural insight. Moreover, the insider perspective helps the researcher appreciate the complexities and challenges confronting academic leadership in this context.

However, this positionality requires acknowledging and reflecting on potential biases and power dynamics. To help allay these concerns, the researcher worked to acknowledge her positionality and potential biases towards the participants, a form of transparency (Mercer, 2007). Continuous reflexivity was applied throughout the research process as the researcher's perspectives and interpretations were critically discussed and relevant to the emerging data (Unluer, 2012). These included journaling, peer debriefing, and periodic reviews of the data analysis steps.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study complied with the ethical research principles and rules of the University of King Saud University, and University Research Ethics Committee approved this study. During the research process, the participants' confidentiality and anonymity were strictly ensured. Data processing was performed on an anonymised basis, with no identifiable information available in the database prior to analysis and reporting. Before participation, respondents were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the study, as well as their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained before participant enrolment, and sufficient opportunities were provided for participants to ask questions.

### **Data Collection**

#### *Semi-structured Interviews*

Because of their capacity to capture the contextualised complexities of lived experiences germane to this research, the primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews (Miles and Huberman, 2014; Roulston, 2010). This approach mediates the relationship between structured inquiry and the flexibility needed to address personal perspectives. A pre-determined interview guide ensured coverage of key themes related to job burnout; its manifestations and consequences; its impact on individual, social, and institutional functioning; and the coping mechanisms. This semi-structured approach allowed new insights and themes to emerge beyond the scope of the initial guide, thus enriching the collected data and enabling more nuanced understandings.

The development of the interview guide was a pragmatic and iterative process informed by previous studies and this study's unique needs. A review of job burnout literature (Employability of the JD-R model; Maslach's three-dimensional model) provided a sound

theoretical premise. Asking open-ended questions allowed freer sharing of personal experiences. The pilot was tested with academic leaders, and the guide was edited for clarity and relevance. Questions were derived from the study's research questions and theoretical framework, with a focus on data collection. Clear, accessible language free of jargon was used. The guide was validated and cross-culturally adapted through a well-structured process of translation and back-translation.

We prioritised the participants' comfort and data quality throughout the interviews. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or by telephone, according to the participants' preferences, to maximise convenience. Long interviews (2–2.5 h) enabled detailed experience sharing. All interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed after informed consent. We collected data over a four-month period (June–September 2023) to facilitate recruitment, scheduling, interviews, and transcription.

### **Sampling Strategy**

A purposive snowball sampling method was employed to recruit 25 academic leaders from five state universities in Saudi Arabia. Because establishing trust and gaining access can often be difficult, this approach was highly appropriate for reaching participants with knowledge and lived experiences of job burnout (Wellington, 2015). Purposive sampling enables researchers to select participants who can generate productive information about the research subject, thus providing rich and relevant data. Purposive sampling allowed for including academic leaders with varying experiences and views regarding burnout, which enriched the analysis.

To maximise sample diversity, the researcher initially contacted participants across departments and seniority levels at each university. These early participants were then asked to refer colleagues who would be willing to share their experiences. Thus, a broader range of perspectives were included by employing snowball recruitment.

### **Addressing Potential Biases**

Purposive sampling has advantages but must be used carefully to avoid introducing bias. The researcher's insider status in Saudi higher education implies bias in participant selection and data interpretation. To mitigate this, the researcher employed reflexivity throughout the process, continuously reflecting on her assumptions and interpretations. In addition, snowball sampling is useful for accessing hidden populations but may generate bias, as it is likely to recruit only similar participants with similar characteristics and perspectives. The researcher was aware of this potential bias, and thus deliberately obtained referrals from diverse individuals and involved participants with a variety of experiences and viewpoints.

### **Sample Size and Saturation**

The sample size ( $N = 25$ ) was sufficient for this qualitative study. In qualitative studies, saturation, which means that no new themes or insights are revealed during data collection, is achieved when new data fails to reveal new themes (Guest et al., 2020). Here, saturation was achieved when there was no further information gained during the interviews regarding the experience and implications of burnout after interviewing 25 participants.

### **Sample Characteristics**

The participants' demographics, including sex, age, academic rank, years of experience, and university affiliation, are presented in Table 1. The interview participants were both male and

female academic leaders in Saudi Arabia, reflecting different areas of specialisation and seniority levels, thus providing rich insights for the study's analysis.

<b>The number of Designations</b>	<b>Univer sity Name</b>	<b>Designat ion</b>	<b>Gend er</b>	<b>Age Ran ge</b>	<b>Acade mic Rank</b>	<b>Years of Experie nce</b>	<b>Department/ Field</b>
<b>1</b>	A Univer sity	Dean	M	30–40	Associ ate Profess or	10+	Engineering
<b>2</b>		Dean	F	41–50	Associ ate Profess or	20+	Education
<b>3</b>		Vice Dean	M	30–40	Associ ate Profess or	10+	Medicine
<b>4</b>		Vice Dean	F	30–40	Assista nt Profess or	10+	Science
<b>5</b>		Head of Departm ent	M	41–50	Associ ate Profess or	20+	Business
<b>6</b>	B Univer sity	Dean	F	30–40	Profess or	10+	Humanities
<b>7</b>		Dean	M	41–50	Associ ate Profess or	20+	Social Sciences
<b>8</b>		Vice Dean	F	30–40	Profess or	10+	Law
<b>9</b>		Vice Dean	M	41–50	Assista nt Profess or	20+	Arts

<b>10</b>		Head of Department	F	51–60	Professor	20+	Computer Science
<b>11</b>	C University	Dean	F	30–40	Professor	10+	Education
<b>12</b>		Dean	M	51–60	Professor	20+	Business
<b>13</b>		Vice Dean	F	51–60	Professor	20+	Medicine
<b>14</b>		Vice Dean	M	41–50	Assistant Professor	20+	Computer Science
<b>15</b>		Head of Department	F	30–40	Associate Professor	10+	Education
<b>16</b>	D University	Dean	M	30–40	Assistant Professor	10+	Education
<b>17</b>		Dean	M	41–50	Professor	20+	Business
<b>18</b>		Vice Dean	M	51–60	Professor	20+	Law
<b>19</b>		Vice Dean	F	30–40	Assistant Professor	10+	Humanities
<b>20</b>		Head of Department	F	41–50	Professor	15+	Science
<b>21</b>	E University	Dean	M	30–40	Assistant Professor	10+	Education
<b>22</b>		Dean	F	41–50	Associate Professor	15+	Medicine

23		Vice Dean	M	41–50	Professor	15+	Computer Science
24		Vice Dean	M	30–40	Associate Professor	10+	Business
25		Head of Department	F	30–40	Assistant Professor	10+	Law

Table 1. Participant Demographics

### The Pseudonym Structure

This study examined the link between the concept of job burnout among academic leaders in Saudi Arabi in the higher education sector based on the responses of 25 research participants. Pseudonyms are indicated as follows, “University (U) + letter for the specific university (A/B/C), “type of participant (Leader/L), “participant number “(1/2/3),” and “interview date. Hence, the subjects are referred to as “UALD3, 05/2023,” “UCLVD3, 06/2023,” “UBLHOD1, 07/2023,” and so on, for the first type of case study site. The job titles and data used in the analyses are presented in Table 2.

Elements	Code	Example	Explanation
University	U	UA	Five university letters (A, B, C, D or E) “U” indicates University, followed by the letter assigned to each university (A, B, C, D, or E)
The type of the participants	L	L	“L” designates Leader
The posts	LD, LVD, LHOD	LD	The abbreviation of the leader post
Participant Number	1, 2, 3...	3	Participant university role sequence number
Interview date		May 11, 2023	Date of the interview

This pseudonym indicates

U: University; A: University "A"; L: Leader (academic leader); LD: Dean

3: Participant 3 interviewed at University A

pers. comm. Personal communication (indicates an interview).

Interview date: 11 May 2023

Table 2. Pseudonym Structure

## Results and Discussion

The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), an established method for recognising and interpreting themes in qualitative data. This is a systematic, multistage process. The researcher first saturated the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts to obtain a complete picture of the participants' experiences. The initial codes were then created inductively, from the data, and deductively, following the theoretical background and research questions, using meaningful segments of the text. Next, the codes were collated into potential themes by noting relationships and patterns. Some themes emerged naturally, while others were combined or discarded if they overlapped significantly. This ensured that the identified themes were representative of the data, coherent, and meaningful. The final themes were then refined, described, and named in terms of their meaning and significance. Finally, a report featuring the themes, supporting data, and interpretations was created. A comprehensive and rigorous analysis was conducted by inductively synthesising the depth of participants' experiences, integrating them into a systematic framework guided by research questions and theoretical foundations. Inductive and deductive coding helped to introduce new constructs while maintaining an analysis based on the literature. As this was done iteratively, the themes were refined and validated by all researchers, yielding a strong and meaningful interpretation of the data.

### ***Q1: How does job burnout manifest among academic leaders in Saudi universities at the personal, social, and institutional levels?***

Job burnout among academic leaders in Saudi universities significantly manifests across personal, social, and institutional levels, as illustrated in Figure 1.

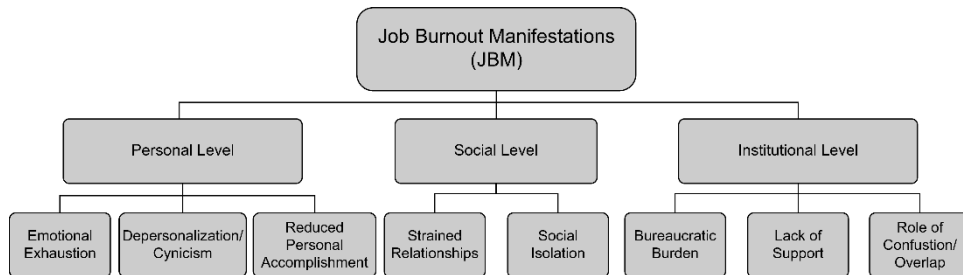


Figure 1

At the personal level, leaders experience emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation or cynicism, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Socially, burnout results in strained relationships and social isolation, cutting leaders off from crucial support networks. Institutionally, manifestations include burdens of bureaucracy, lack of institutional support, and

role ambiguity or conflict. These interconnected manifestations impact the overall health and performance of academic leaders. Table 3 outlines the Manifestations of Job Burnout (MJB) Among Academic Leaders, showing how the interplay of these factors creates a complex web of stressors contributing to burnout.

Theme	Primary findings
<p><b>The personal level</b></p>	<p><b>Emotional Exhaustion:</b> The condition where leaders settle into a mode of being extremely emotionally drained, characterised by fatigue, apathy, and physical depletion. This manifested in chronic tiredness, inability to concentrate and a deep sense of being overwhelmed. As one leader put it, they feel <i>“emotionally and physically drained at the end of the day, like a battery that’s completely run dry”</i> (UALD1, pers. comm., May 11, 2023). This sentence summarises the tiredness experienced as well as the state of their psychological and physical health.</p> <p><b>Depersonalisation/Cynicism:</b> Leaders become detached from their work and each other, exemplifying negativity, indifference, and cynicism. This encompassed feelings of frustration with students, colleagues, and the institutional environment. As one leader stated, <i>“I’ve been so beaten down from the constant bureaucracy and no support that I don’t even like my job anymore.”</i> (UBLVD2, pers. comm., June 12, 2023). This quotation demonstrates that when workers feel they have no support and instead face layers of bureaucracy, this breeds cynicism and negativity towards the job. These cynical emotions applied to students as well, with some leaders voicing the feeling that they were detached or apathetic regarding students’ academic needs</p> <p><b>Reduced Personal Accomplishment:</b> Leaders noted an increased feeling of lack of achievement alongside insufficient recognition of their work. This resulted in self-doubt, impatience, and apathy. <i>“I feel like I’m always working long hours but, I’m not getting the results I expected,”</i> was a typical statement. (UELD1, pers. comm., July 27, 2023). Leaders will inevitably express frustration—whether through a sigh or a moment of exasperation—at least once for every five years of dedicated effort in their roles. A lack of recognition in the workplace diminished their sense of purpose, leading to despondency and a loss of confidence. Several leaders felt invisible: that their contributions were ignored by the university administration.</p>
<p><b>The social level</b></p>	<p><b>Strained Relationships:</b> Burnout adversely affected interpersonal relationships. Leaders said they experienced greater conflict with colleagues, faculty, and students, less communication, and a general decline in collegiality. <i>“I’m snapping at colleagues more than I used to, and my relationships with faculty feel strained,”</i> one leader described. (UBLD1, pers. comm., June 02, 2023). Burnout directly</p>

	<p>affects those around you, with spikes in conflict and tension, as illustrated by this statement. These damaged relationships were not limited to work, spilling into their personal lives, and social networks. Other leaders spoke of problems with marital adjustment, withdrawal from social activities, and maladjustment and conflicts in family life.</p> <p><b>Social Isolation:</b> The demands of academic positions resulted in social isolation, with leaders describing a lack of social interaction, loneliness, and a decrease in overall quality of life. This was clear in statements such as, “<i>I don’t have time anymore to do anything outside of work and I feel like I’m losing track of my friends and family.</i>” (UELVD1, pers. comm., August 02, 2023). Burnout causes social isolation, represented by statements regarding “a decline in personal relationships.” Some leaders even reported neglecting hobbies and other activities that they previously enjoyed; this compounded their feelings of isolation and loneliness.</p>
<p><b>The institutional level</b></p>	<p><b>Human Capital Requirement — Bureaucratic Burden:</b> Leaders pointed to excessive administrative tasks and bureaucratic hurdles that produced frustration. They had to navigate complicated regulations, administrative headaches, and lengthy procedures. “<i>I spend nearly all my time on paperwork and administrative tasks,</i>” one leader stated, “<i>leaving little time for real leadership.</i>” (UALD2, pers. comm., May 15, 2023). This statement highlights the burden posed by administration and processes and how this impacts leadership. Such administrative burdens reduce the time and attention paid to strategic planning, faculty development, and student support. This was defined as Administrative Process Burdening Organisational Leadership.</p> <p><b>Lack of Support:</b> Leaders who felt unsupported by their institutions faced limited resources, lack of recognition and a lack of opportunity for professional growth. This appeared in comments such as, “<i>I don’t feel valued or appreciated by the university administration.</i>” (UBLHOD1, pers. comm., June 15, 2023). These typically highlight the gaps or unmet expectations that challenge a leader’s faith. Without support, for example, they felt isolated and disengaged, which diminishes motivation and reduces engagement. Leaders indicated that they did not have access to necessary resources, were not supported in their research activities, had no time for research, or had no capacity for professional growth.</p> <p><b>Role Confusion/Overlap:</b> There was confusion across leaders regarding role priorities, lack of clarity regarding expectations, conflicting priorities, and vague decision-making authority. A typical</p>

	<p>statement was, “<i>It’s not really clear what my expectations are, and I feel pulled in a lot of different directions.</i>” (UELD2, pers. comm., July 30, 2023). This statement captures the essence of the challenges of role ambiguity and its contributions to stress and burnout. Some leaders detailed conflicting demands from faculty, students and administrators, articulating how difficult it was for them to know what to prioritise and how to carry out their responsibilities effectively. Such fuzzy and conflicting roles often left them feeling frustrated, powerless, and lacking control.</p>
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Table 3

### ***Discussion: Research Q1***

The results of this study, presented in Figure 1, demonstrate that job burnout is expressed by academic leaders in Saudi universities at three interconnected levels: personal, social, and institutional. These results illustrate the complexity of burnout and its broad effects in different domains, highlighting the need for multi-faceted approaches to manage this phenomenon.

#### **Personal Level**

At the personal level, our findings agree with Maslach's three-dimensional model of burnout, as academic leaders describe exhaustion, depersonalisation/cynicism, and a drop in personal accomplishment (Maslach and Leiter, 2016). Leaders said that they felt emotionally drained, fatigued, and overwhelmed. This is consistent with prior studies that found that emotional exhaustion was a significant component of the burnout continuum scored by academics (Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998).

Participants also reported feeling detached from their work and cynical towards their students and colleagues. Other studies referenced by Leiter and Maslach (2001) confirmed that depersonalisation significantly impacts job satisfaction and leads to a greater decline in organisational commitment. Therefore, the absence of a personal relationship is detrimental to professionals.

Moreover, leaders reported feelings of reduced personal accomplishment and ineffectiveness despite their best efforts. This is consistent with research showing that decreased personal accomplishment correlates with feelings of inadequacy and lack of motivation (Maslach et al., 2001).

#### **Social Level**

Burnout also occurred at the social level, with participants describing strained relationships, and social and emotional withdrawal. The leaders reported an uptick in conflict with colleagues, faculty, and students and a deterioration in communication and collegiality. This finding is also in line with previous research demonstrating associations between burnout and interpersonal struggles (Bakker et al., 2005).

Social isolation also emerged as a prevalent theme, with leaders reporting a decrease in social interactions and overall quality of life. This is consistent with research that recognises social distancing as a prevalent symptom of burnout (Maslach and Leiter, 2016).

### **Institutional Level**

At the institutional level, the findings illuminate the impact of bureaucratic burden, institutional and managerial support, and role ambiguity/conflict on academic leaders' burnout. The participants complained of excessive administrative work and bureaucratic hurdles that interfered with their ability to focus on leadership duties. This aligns with research indicating that organisational constraints are a major contributor to burnout (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004).

Leaders also reported feeling unsupported by their institutions, having limited resources, a lack of recognition, and a lack of opportunities for professional growth. This finding aligns with studies that have highlighted the role of organisational support in reducing burnout (Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998).

Role ambiguity and conflict also appeared as key themes, with leaders reporting confusion about their specific responsibilities and expectations. This correlates with research showing that role ambiguity and conflict correlate with increased stress and burnout (Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998).

In summary, the manifestations of job burnout among academic leaders in Saudi universities are diverse and include many aspects related to their health, social relationships, and the productivity of their institutions. This study highlights the importance of addressing burnout through a multi-faceted understanding of the relevant factor, which involve intertwined personal, social, and institutional dynamics. By recognising and addressing these factors, higher education institutions can foster a more supportive and sustainable work environment for academic leaders. This will benefit both the individuals and the institutions they serve.

***Q2: What are the consequences of job burnout for academic leaders in Saudi universities, considering their personal well-being, social interactions, institutional effectiveness, and job performance?***

As shown in Figure 2, job burnout has serious implications for academic leaders in Saudi universities, affecting their well-being across various areas.

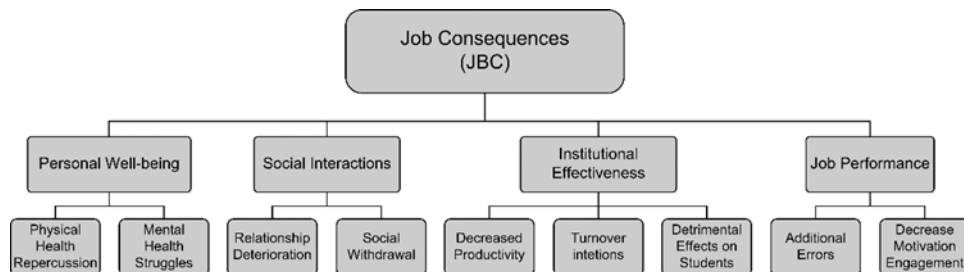


Figure 2

Burnout is notably detrimental to personal wellness, leading to issues such as sleep problems, headaches, anxiety, and depression. It also impacts the social aspect of life, causing some individuals to isolate and withdraw, straining relationships with colleagues, students, and family members. Additionally, institutional effectiveness is compromised, resulting in lower productivity, increased leader turnover, and negative impacts on students' academic performance and personal development. Job performance is also affected, manifesting in decision-making errors, lack of motivation, and job satisfaction. Table 4 outlines the

overarching consequences of job burnout among academic leaders, categorising them as individual, social, and institutional implications.

Theme	Primary findings
Personal Well-being	<p><b>Physical Health Repercussions:</b> Academic administrators shared an array of physical health concerns owing to burnout, such as sleep disturbances, chronic headaches, and gastrointestinal issues. For example, one leader stated, <i>“I have trouble sleeping all the time, and it makes me less energetic at work and hinders my effectiveness”</i> (UALD1, pers. comm., May 11, 2023). This is a clear example of the connection between chronic stress and physical health, where, in a vicious cycle, lack of sleep causes fatigue and lack of performance that leads to poor productivity and worsening health. Another leader mentioned having a compromised immune system, pointing to the serious long-term consequences that burnout inflicts on physical health. That is, leaders’ well-being is not only impacted by transitory stress; it can also have long-term consequences.</p> <p><b>Mental Health Struggles:</b> Missed opportunities from the psychological effects of working hours were associated with increased anxiety, depression, and hopelessness (Maslach and Leiter, 2016). <i>“I have been on the verge of anxiety and overwhelmed and have considered leaving academia altogether”</i> (UBLVD1, pers. comm., June 08, 2023). Leaders often face a deep emotional crisis and frequently contemplate leaving academia, reflecting a strong awareness of the importance of well-being and self-care regarding their careers. The description of constant anxiety captures the all-pervasive nature of such stressors, suggesting that the repercussions of burnout impact work and personal contexts, resulting in a poor quality of life.</p>
Social Interactions	<p><b>Relationship Deterioration:</b> Burnout severely impacted the interpersonal relationships of the academic leaders. For example, one explained, <i>“I’ve been fighting with my wife more than I used to, and I’m not as present for my children”</i> (UELD1, pers. comm., July 27, 2023). Outcomes: <i>“As a result of burnout, I have faced more conflicts at home and have become emotionally distant from my family”</i>. Burnout causes stress that carries over into the home atmosphere affecting one’s family. Moreover, when leaders work too intensely on minutiae (“dig down in details”), they may not be able to prioritise their tasks. This can leave them feeling overwhelmed and “not present” for their families; this can lead to strain in the family unit and a vicious cycle of emotional exhaustion.</p>

	<p><b>Social Withdrawal:</b> Many of the leaders also reported retreating from social life and increasing isolation. One leader stated, “<i>I used to enjoy going out, now I want to sit at home and be away from people</i>” (UALHOD1, pers. comm., May 25, 2023). This illustrates the psychological need to withdraw when burnout occurs because most leaders feel that they lack the energy and interest for social interaction. Exclusion from social activity can activate a negative feedback loop; loneliness will intensify mental health disorders, deepening feelings of isolation and vulnerability. Neglecting relaxation time and social activities may contribute to decreasing mental health and feelings of unfulfilled business and personal life.</p>
<p><b>Institutional Effectiveness</b></p>	<p><b>Decreased productivity:</b> One dean described the devastating impact of burnout: “<i>Burnout significantly impacted my ability to effectively lead and motivate my team. I feel like I was making more poor decision-making and had a hard time keeping my focus on important details</i>” (UALD1, pers. comm., May 8, 2023). This statement vividly portrays related cognitive decline; when leaders can no longer focus, their capacity for positive leadership decreases. Mention of “more errors in decision-making” underlines burnout’s grave impact on institutional effectiveness. Leaders’ failure to make good decisions negatively impacts work quality, which causes delay and, ultimately, institutional progress.</p> <p><b>Turnover Intentions:</b> Intentions to leave were strongly influenced by stress and inadequate resources. One vice dean stated: “<i>The constant stress and lack of support have made me rethink whether I want to stay in academia. “actively exploring other career options outside of higher education</i>” (UCLVD4, pers. comm., June 7, 2023). This paints a troubling picture for leaders who face frustrating conditions that can drive them from one institution to another. Senior leaders are increasingly leaving with millions of dollars in costs associated with the loss of key personnel. Losing experienced leaders at critical points can disrupt operations, creating operational instability. The costs of replacing and training new leaders only add to the strain, amplifying the impact on the institution's ability to function effectively.</p> <p><b>Detrimental Effects on Students:</b> Leaders experienced burnout that negatively impacted their capacity to support and mentor students. “<i>I’ve found myself less patient, less engaged with students,</i>” one Dean of Humanities explained. “<i>I don’t feel that I’m able to give the level of mentorship and support that I know that they need</i>” (UBLD6, pers. comm., May 25, 2023). This highlights the indirect correlations between teacher burnout and student well-</p>

	<p>being, as well as directly, because distracted leaders may lose patience with or interest in students. Although this generalisation should be approached with caution, withdrawing from leadership, even if well intended, can lead to lower student satisfaction, greater anxiety, and inferior academic results. This is partly because such a shift creates a domino effect in the educational ecosystem.</p>
<p><b>Job performance</b></p>	<p><b>Additional Errors:</b> Many leaders found that operational errors became more common, mostly as a direct result of burnout. One Dean of Business said, <i>“I’ve been a lot more careless lately, missing critical details in reports and proposals. It’s hurting my credibility and causing unnecessary delays”</i> (UBLD5, pers. comm., July 10, 2023). This speaks to the astonishing practical impact of mental fatigue. When leaders miss details, they undermine their credibility, and, simultaneously, stall institutional processes. A second vice dean said, <i>“I’m finding it harder and harder to make good decisions. My judgment is clouded by the constant pressure and exhaustion”</i> (UBLVD8, pers. comm). Decision-making quality tends to worsen under stress, which demonstrates burnout’s impact on leadership positions and the damage it can cause to an organisation.</p> <p><b>Decrease in Motivation and Engagement:</b> Burnout had a debilitating impact on leaders’ intrinsic motivation and general role engagement. <i>“I used to love my work, but now I’m just exhausted and feel disconnected from my colleagues,”</i> one Dean of Education said. <i>“I fear going to work every day.”</i> (UALD16, pers. comm., June 14, 2023). This captures the transition from being a highly motivated individual to becoming drained to the point of complete apathy. That is, someone who needs help and a wake-up call to recapture motivation. One department head echoed this sentiment: <i>“I’m struggling to find joy in my role. I used to thrive on new challenges, but now I just feel overwhelmed and apathetic”</i> (UCHOD20, pers. comm., July 10, 2023). Comments regarding discontentment may also indicate lower morale and productivity among different departments.</p>

Table 4. Consequences of Job Burnout among Academic Leaders

**Research Q2: Discussion**

This study’s findings show how job burnout has ramifications for the personal, relational, organisational, and performance-based factors of academic leaders at Saudi universities. These interrelated spheres present significant challenges, requiring intervention and support.

*Personal Well-Being*

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate burnout’s negative effects on individual well-being. Academic leaders

reported suffering from various physical health problems, including disrupted sleep, chronic hypertension, and gastrointestinal issues. These results align with earlier studies that showed associations between burnout and physical illness, such as sleep problems, fatigue, and susceptibility to illness (Melamed et al., 2006). The qualitative data also identified a vicious cycle: poor physical health promotes fatigue, which limits effectiveness, further contributing to burnout symptomology, with observed psychosomatic interconnections.

The participants also experienced mental health issues, namely, heightened levels of anxiety and depression. This speaks to a large body of research demonstrating burnout's negative effects on mental health, particularly the higher risk of developing depression, anxiety disorders, and psychological distress (Maslach and Leiter, 2016). Given the participants' desperation and contemplation of leaving academia, the mental health impacts of burnout can be severe, necessitating institutional support systems to mitigate these issues.

### *Social Interactions*

Burnout also leads to poor socialisation, as observed in relationships with colleagues, family, and friends, which showed signs of strain. The participants reported greater conflicts, diminished communication, additional social withdrawal, all symptoms of interpersonal strain resulting from burnout. These factors align with research showing that burnout is associated with worsening social interactions, including lower empathy, greater cynicism, and less social support (Bakker et al., 2005). Professional stress affected the participants' personal lives, demonstrated by a participant who experienced intense issues in the spousal relationship. This is another, more far-reaching example of burnout's impact.

Anaedeia (also known as social withdrawal) is a typical strategy employed by those suffering from burnout. It increases feelings of isolation and loneliness (Maslach and Leiter, 2016). It can also produce a negative feedback cycle, with social isolation exacerbating mental health issues, triggering further withdrawal and disengagement. Participants' accounts of neglecting hobbies and social activities highlighted the detrimental influence of burnout on their overall quality of life.

### *Institutional Effectiveness*

The repercussions of burnout spill over to institutional productivity, with the respondents reporting low productivity and plans to exit academia. This is consistent with the research reviewed above, which links burnout to declines in job performance, increased absenteeism, and increased turnover (e.g., Maslach and Leiter, 2016). Prevalent themes within the qualitative data suggest that burnout leads to operational inefficiencies. Due to the loss of cognitive capacity, the quality of decision-making deteriorates. Burnout can result in the loss of experienced leaders, causing diminished institutional progress and additional work for the remaining staff.

Additional points with important institutional implications include the effects of burnout on student learning and development. Students may suffer from decreased satisfaction work relatedness higher anxiety, and poorer academic outcomes when academic leaders are emotionally exhausted, disengaged, and unable to provide mentorship and support. It also emphasises the interconnections between academic leaders, their well-being, and the success of their institutions (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2007).

### *Job Performance*

Burnout also affected job performance, with all the participants reporting feeling unmotivated

and disengaged, committing errors, and feeling exhausted. These results are consistent with research that relates burnout to diminished cognitive functioning, particularly in terms of focus, attention, and decision-making (Maslach and Leiter, 2016). Qualitative data demonstrated that burnout depletes intrinsic motivation and promotes apathy, which can further decrease job performance and foster a toxic work environment.

#### *Relations of Cause and Effect between the Domains*

This study's results highlight a complex causal nexus between personal well-being and the quality of social interactions, institutional effectiveness, and job performance. For instance, burnout can diminish physical health, which contributes to emotional fatigue and can cause strained relationships with co-workers and family. Similarly, social withdrawal amplifies mental health challenges, which further reduces both productivity and the intention to leave academia. These ripple effects demonstrate burnout's widespread consequences and the need for broader measures to address its various impacts.

This study provides a better understanding of the implications of job burnout among academic leaders at Saudi universities. Burnout directly affects personal well-being, social interactions, institutional efficiency, and job performance, thereby emphasising an urgent need for targeted interventions to minimise workplace burnout and improve well-being. By confronting the challenges identified here and implementing supportive measures, higher learning institutions can promote a healthier and more sustainable work environment for academic leadership, helping to serve both individuals and institutions more effectively.

#### **Study Limitations**

This study has some limitations. First, although the sample was sufficient for a qualitative study, it may not represent the experiences of all academic leaders from different universities in the Saudi higher education landscape. Second, the qualitative approach is subjective and can be affected by researcher bias, even while providing an in-depth exploration of experiences. Third, the results are context derived and may be difficult to generalise to other countries or educational systems with different cultural and administrative contexts. Finally, with its cross-sectional design, the study is limited by being only a snapshot of temporal burnout experiences rather than an examination of the dynamic and evolving nature of burnout.

#### **Implications**

Despite these limitations, the results have significant theoretical and practical implications.

**Theoretical Implications:** This study advances the theoretical understanding of job burnout by documenting its manifestations and impact on academic leaders in Saudi Arabia. These results confirm the applicability of the JD-R model and Maslach's three-dimensional model of burnout in these contexts, making it evident that the same framework can be used to study burnout in diverse cultures, professions, and regions. In addition, this study demonstrated the interdependence of personal, social, and structural elements in relation to burnout, allowing for a deeper understanding of its facets.

**Practical implications:** The findings have practical implications for policymakers, leaders in higher education, and academic leaders themselves. This study highlights the need for interventions to reduce the high prevalence of burnout among academic leaders in Saudi Arabia. These results can contribute to implementing specific programs and policies to reduce burnout and improve this population's well-being. These include offering mental health assistance,

alleviating bureaucratic pressures, establishing clear roles and goals, creating a supportive organisational culture, and encouraging work–life balance. By addressing the aforementioned challenges and implementing supportive mechanisms, those in higher education will create healthier and more sustainable workplaces for their academic administrators, one that will benefit both the stakeholders and the institutions themselves.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on this study’s findings and limitations, future studies should investigate the following areas.

**Larger sample ranges:** Future studies should aim for broader sample sizes that capture a wider swath of academic leaders from institutions across the spectrum of higher education—government, private universities, colleges, and community colleges—to capture a broader picture of higher education burnout.

**Longitudinal studies:** Research that follows academic leaders over time could reveal how burnout manifests, which factors sustain it, and the long-term implications for leaders and their institutions.

**Add quantitative methods:** Using quantitative methods could provide a statistical analysis of burnout’s prevalence and associated or predictive factors within academic leadership by integrating qualitative and quantitative methods.

**Assessing mitigating strategies:** Future studies should assess whether targeted strategies to address burnout, specifically among academic leaders. This could provide evidence-based best practices for improving mental health and workplace performance.

**Cross-Cultural Cross-National Comparisons:** Research comparing burnout experiences among academic leaders in different cultural or educational contexts may shed light on how contextual variables shape the experiences and consequences of burnout experiences.

### ***Recommendations For Policymakers***

This study’s finding suggests several policy recommendations in the field of Saudi Arabian higher education to address job burnout among academic leaders.

**Build Solid Support Networks:** School administrators need to create robust support networks that include mental health resources, counselling services, and peer support networks to help academic leaders experiencing burnout. Such support systems have proven effective in reducing burnout and developing well-being in different professional groups, such as academics (Maslach and Leiter, 2016).

**Reduce Bureaucratic Load:** Academic leaders spend huge amounts of time and energy managing administrative matters and paperwork, which can enhance stress and burnout. Shin and Jung (2021) suggest easing leaders’ bureaucratic burden, as they are often forced to spend most of their time writing reports and submitting internal applications, making it difficult to implement their visions effectively. Bolden and Petrov (2023) highlights that one way to increase leadership effectiveness is to lessen the bureaucratic burden. Reducing workload on leaders to help them focus on their core functions, streamlining administrative procedures, and enhancing the flow of information and delegation of authority are recommended strategies for alleviating burnout.

**Support Professional Development:** Engaging in professional development, such as attending seminars or workshops that offer tools to help navigate stress, resilience, and work–life balance, could enhance successful outcomes. Research supports the idea that such programs positively affect academics, reduce burnout, and improve well-being (Bolden and Petrov, 2023).

**Communicate Roles, Responsibilities, and Expectations:** Clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and expectations can reduce uncertainty and anxiety among academic leaders, allowing them to handle their workloads and priorities better. Role clarity has been recognised as a protective factor that mitigates the risk of burnout (Bolden and Petrov, 2023).

**Cultivate an Empathetic Organisational Culture:** Developing a culture that embraces a supportive and inclusive workplace, acknowledges employee’s accomplishments, and fosters work–life balance can combat employee burnout. Organisational culture positively affects employee well-being and job satisfaction (Al-Khasawneh, 2012).

Understanding the causes and consequences of job burnout and adopting evidence-based strategies for countering it in academia can help higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia create a healthier and more sustainable academic workplace for leaders and a broader educational ecosystem. The researcher argues that sustainable action plans are needed to keep academic leaders afloat and empower their institutions.

## **Conclusions**

This qualitative study examined the perceived burnout experiences of academic leaders in Saudi higher education. It demonstrated the nuanced interaction of individual experiences, cultural norms, and institutional structures in influencing burnout in this context. The results showed that emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and a lack of personal accomplishment were common among academic leaders, highlighting the major psychological toll of higher education’s competitive landscape. This study also identified burnout as an important predictor of strained interpersonal relations and social isolation, which is consistent with the tenet of the JD-R model that limited resources and support have adverse effects.

Moreover, the study emphasised the role of institutional factors associated with burnout, such as role ambiguity and bureaucratic burdens, providing a basis for intervening at the organisational level. These findings highlight the dire need for an institutionalised national program to manage and mitigate burnout in Saudi higher education. This action plan should include targeted interventions for job demands, resource provision, and the mental health support provided by academic leaders.

In summary, this research will benefit educational policymakers and leaders in Saudi Arabia in supporting their mission to enhance the well-being of academic leaders and improve the quality of higher education. The results will assist in designing and implementing culturally appropriate interventions to prevent burnout, sustain healthy working conditions, and support academic leaders in successfully performing their roles. Therefore, by supporting the well-being of academic leaders, Saudi Arabia can ensure that these institutions contribute to the nation's goals, maintaining high standards of creativity and excellence that align with both national expectations for higher education and the Vision 2030 objectives. Further research is required to explore burnout’s long-term effects and the effectiveness of preventive interventions and the promotion of academic leaders’ well-being.

## **Disclosure Statement**

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

## **Informed Consent Statement**

Written informed consent was obtained before participant enrolment, and sufficient opportunities were provided for participants to ask questions.

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