

Work-Related Burnout Among Early-Career Academics in Japanese Universities

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Research Overview

This study investigates work-related burnout among early-career academics in Japanese universities, focusing on how employment status, research environment, gender and disciplinary field shape burnout risks. Using an online survey and quantitative analysis, the study aims to clarify environmental and individual factors contributing to burnout and inform institutional and policy-level interventions.

Purpose

Universities worldwide have undergone profound transformation under neoliberal reforms, marked by intensified competition, performance-based evaluation, and pressure to secure external funding. In Japan, these changes have been especially pronounced since the 2004 incorporation of national universities, which reduced core funding and expanded fixed-term academic positions. Early-career academics now juggle teaching, research, administrative duties, and expectations for international publications, under conditions of employment insecurity and shrinking research time, raising concerns about burnout.

Although international studies have documented high burnout levels among university faculty, empirical research focusing specifically on early-career academics in Japan remains limited. Existing studies in Japan tend either to focus on schoolteachers or to treat university faculty as a homogeneous group, leaving a gap in understanding how environmental and individual factors uniquely affect early-career academics. Moreover, while gender and employment status are recognized as predictors of burnout, little is known about how these factors interact particularly in Japan's increasingly competitive academic environment.

This study aims to address these gaps by examining:

1. How employment status (tenured, tenure-track, fixed-term), research environment, gender, and disciplinary field are associated with work-related burnout among early-career academics in Japan.
2. How gender differences in work-related burnout vary by employment status (tenured, tenure-track, fixed-term).

Methods

An online survey is administered to early-career academic members in Japan. Participants are identified through academic databases, including J-GLOBAL. The sample size is approximately 300 respondents. Following Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) criteria, early-career academics are primarily defined as those within eight years of obtaining a PhD. However, in the Japanese context, some academics begin their research careers before completing the doctorate. Prior to the funding category revision in 2019, JSPS also defined early-career academics as those aged 39 or under, regardless of doctoral degree status. Therefore, this study also includes university-based academics within this age bracket who have not yet earned a PhD but are employed in positions that involve research and teaching responsibilities.

Because complete random sampling is not feasible, the study seeks to approximate the population structure of early-career academics in Japan. Population characteristics such as distribution across national/public/private universities, gender ratios, and employment status are estimated using publicly available datasets.

Measures

Work-related burnout will be assessed using the subscale of the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI), which captures physical and psychological exhaustion from work demands. This subscale directly matches the study's focus and has been used in research on faculty and early-career academics in Japan (e.g., Taka et al., 2016). Independent variables include employment status (tenured, tenure-track, or fixed-term), gender, disciplinary field, and the academic work environment, measured with the Academic Work Environment Survey (Houston et al., 2006) using a Japanese version previously applied to foreign early-career academics in Japan (Sakurai, 2023).

Analysis

Descriptive statistics summarize overall levels of work-related burnout and differences across key subgroups. Multiple regression examines associations between burnout and the main independent variables, including employment status, gender, discipline, and research environment. Two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests interaction effects between gender and employment status on burnout. Together, these analyses clarify the independent and combined effects of structural and individual factors on early-career academics' burnout risk.

Results & Discussion (Expected Findings)

The analysis is underway. Prior studies suggest likely patterns. Work-related burnout is expected to be higher among early-career academics in fixed-term positions than among those in tenured posts, due to contract instability, reliance on competitive funding, and career uncertainty (Sestili et al., 2018). Gender differences are also anticipated, with women likely to report higher burnout than men, reflecting disproportionate service burdens, work–life conflict, and gendered organizational norms (e.g., Taka et al., 2016).

Interaction effects between gender and employment status may also emerge, with women in fixed-term positions experiencing particularly high burnout because of combined career insecurity and stronger performance pressures (Reevy & Deason, 2014). The research environment is likewise expected to predict burnout: limited research time, insufficient institutional support, and heavy administrative workloads, often reported in Japanese universities, are likely to increase burnout (e.g., Fuchigami & Sugita, 2021).

Taken together, prior studies suggest that burnout among early-career academics is strongly shaped by structural and work-environment conditions, such as employment insecurity, workload, and institutional support, rather than being attributable to individual factors alone. The present study examines the extent to which these patterns also appear in the Japanese context.

Keywords: Burnout, early-career academics, employment status, research environment, Japan