

Workload Stress and Mental Health Outcomes Among University Faculty in Karnataka

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of workload stress on the mental health of faculty members in universities in Karnataka, a region experiencing rapid expansion in higher education. Drawing on data from 400 faculty across public and private institutions, the research analyses stress arising from teaching, administrative, and research responsibilities and its influence on psychological distress, burnout, and job satisfaction. Using a purposive sampling method, the study employed a quantitative research design. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, independent-samples t-tests, ANOVA, and moderation analysis to explore the impact of specific workload components and demographic factors. Findings reveal that teaching and administrative duties are the most significant stressors, strongly correlated with distress and burnout, while negatively affecting job satisfaction. Demographic differences highlight that female faculty, Assistant Professors, and those in private universities are disproportionately affected, with stress effects exacerbated by structural inequities such as pay disparities, compliance-driven governance, and patriarchal norms. Moderation analysis confirms that gender, academic rank, and university type intensify the relationship between stress and adverse mental health outcomes. The findings underscore the systemic and inequitable distribution of stress in Karnataka's higher education sector. Policy measures such as equitable workload allocation, pay parity, gender-sensitive institutional support, and protections for early-career academics are recommended to foster a healthier, more sustainable academic environment.

Keywords: Workload stress, faculty well-being, mental health, psychological distress, burnout, job satisfaction, higher education, Karnataka universities, statistical analysis, gender disparities, policy reform

1. Introduction

India's higher education landscape has expanded substantially in the past decade, with over 1,000 universities and 40,000 colleges as per the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2019 - 2020 report (Ministry of Education, 2021). Karnataka alone hosts 60 universities, including both public and private institutions, making it one of the leading states in higher education infrastructure (AISHE, 2020). Faculty strength in Karnataka universities exceeds 25,000, serving a rapidly growing student population. This expansion has placed considerable demands on faculty members, who must manage teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities concurrently.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) updated its guidelines on faculty workload in 2019, recommending a minimum of 40 hours per week of academic engagement. This workload is to be divided with approximately 16 hours dedicated to teaching, including contact and tutorial hours, and the remaining time allocated to research, examination duties, student mentorship, departmental and institutional administrative roles (UGC, 2019). Despite these guidelines, studies and reports from academia indicate that actual workloads often exceed these recommended limits, resulting in increased stress levels among faculty (Padmanabha, 2018). The combined responsibilities and performance expectations create a challenging work environment that may affect mental health outcomes, such as psychological distress, burnout, and job satisfaction (Winefield, Boyd, & Winefield, 2003).

While workload stress among faculty is a widely acknowledged concern. University faculty are expected to excel simultaneously in teaching, research, and administrative roles. This "triple workload" structure often stretches beyond the standard working hours, leading to detrimental effects on faculty well-being (Tytherleigh, Webb, Cooper, & Ricketts, 2005). In Karnataka, where both public and private universities are competing to enhance global rankings, publish research of international standards, and implement government directives, the expectations placed on faculty have intensified (Reddy & Rajasekhar, 2019). However, little empirical evidence is available on how these pressures manifest in terms of psychological distress, burnout, and job satisfaction.

1.1 Research Questions and Objectives

In this context, this study seeks to answer several key questions to understand the impact of workload stress on university faculty in Karnataka. The research questions guiding this inquiry are: To what extent do teaching, administrative, and research responsibilities contribute to workload stress among university faculty? How does workload stress influence mental health outcomes such as psychological distress, burnout, and job satisfaction? How do demographic factors,

including university type, gender, and designation, shape these patterns both through mean group differences and by moderating the relationship between workload stress and mental health? What policy directions can be proposed to reduce workload stress and promote faculty well-being within Karnataka's higher education institutions?

To address these questions, the study is structured around four main objectives. First, it examines the extent of workload stress arising from teaching, administrative, and research responsibilities among university faculty. Second, it analyses how these stressors affect key mental health outcomes, namely psychological distress, burnout, and job satisfaction. Third, it evaluates the role of demographic factors (university type, gender, and designation) in shaping workload stress and mental health, both through group differences and moderation effects. Finally, it seeks to translate these findings into policy recommendations aimed at strengthening faculty well-being in Karnataka's higher education institutions (HEIs).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Components of Workload Stress in Academia

Workload stress among university faculty is a multifaceted construct encompassing pressures from teaching responsibilities, administrative duties, and research demands. Gillespie et al. (2001) provided early empirical evidence linking increased workload in these domains to elevated occupational stress levels in academic settings.

Teaching-related Stress: This component captures the strain caused by the various demands of classroom teaching, such as the number of teaching hours, extensive preparation, grading burdens, and the emotional labour involved in managing diverse student needs and academic grievances (Winefield et al., 2003; Kyriacou, 2001). In the Indian context, high student-to-faculty ratios often exacerbate this stress, requiring faculty to engage in extended hours for tutorials and mentoring beyond scheduled lectures (Padmanabha, 2018).

Administrative-related Stress: This encompasses the pressures arising from non-teaching obligations like committee work, policy compliance, preparing reports, and contributing to university governance (Tytherleigh et al., 2005). These duties are often unplanned, time-consuming, and compete with core academic functions, leading to role overload. In Indian universities, compliance with regulatory bodies like the UGC entails substantial bureaucratic efforts, further impacting faculty stress and time allocation (Reddy & Rajasekhar, 2019).

Research-related Stress: This captures the demands related to scholarly activities, including the continuous pressure to publish high-impact articles, secure research funding, and meet deadlines (Kinman & Wray, 2013). The increasing competition for grants and the 'publish or perish' culture lead to extended work hours and role conflict when balancing research expectations with teaching and administrative responsibilities (Gillespie et al., 2001). The Indian scenario adds contextual challenges such as limited research infrastructure and support (Padmanabha, 2018).

2.2 Impact of Workload Stress on Mental Health

The relationship between workload stress and mental health outcomes is well-documented in academia. Psychological distress manifests as symptoms of anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion when stressors become chronic and unmanageable (Kinman & Wray, 2013). Burnout, characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, is a common consequence of sustained academic stress (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Empirical research indicates that high workloads predict burnout and negatively impact job satisfaction, influencing faculty retention and performance (Gillespie et al., 2001; Winefield et al., 2003). Indian studies indicate rising mental health concerns among university faculty, urging attention to occupational stressors and institutional support mechanisms (Padmanabha, 2018).

2.3 Research Gap

While international research extensively explores faculty workload and mental health, India-specific empirical studies remain few and fragmented, especially focusing on regional contexts like Karnataka (Reddy & Rajasekhar, 2019). There is a lack of comprehensive investigations that simultaneously consider teaching, administrative, and research-related stress subcomponents and their differential impacts on psychological distress, burnout, and job satisfaction.

3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is designed to explain the relationship between workload stress and mental health outcomes among university faculty in Karnataka. Faculty workloads are shaped by three primary domains: teaching-related responsibilities (e.g., large class sizes, grading, mentoring, preparation), administrative responsibilities (e.g., compliance with NAAC and UGC regulations, committee work, event organisation), and research-related responsibilities (e.g., publication pressure, grant applications, lack of support). These stressors form the independent variables of the framework.

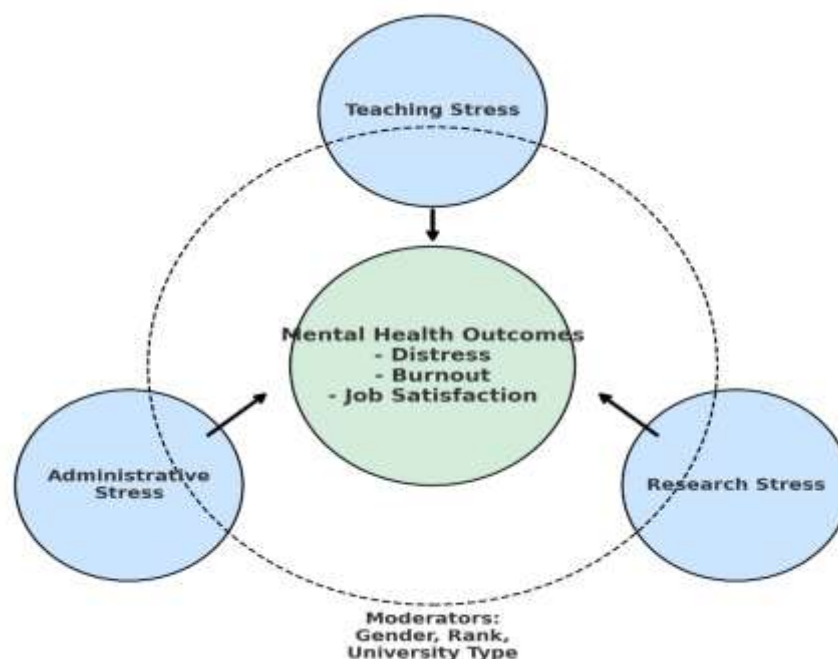


Figure 3.1 Circular conceptual framework of the study

The outcomes include psychological distress (anxiety, exhaustion, and overwhelm from sustained stress), burnout (persistent exhaustion, detachment, and reduced accomplishment), and job satisfaction (fulfilment, recognition, and intrinsic rewards). Together, these represent the mental health and professional well-being of faculty.

Demographic factors - gender, academic rank, and university type - are incorporated as both grouping variables and moderators. They capture how different faculty sub-groups experience stress unevenly and how these characteristics shape the strength of the stress-outcome relationship. For example, stress may have stronger negative effects on job satisfaction among private university faculty or on burnout among Assistant Professors.

Finally, the framework recognises that these relationships are embedded within the broader socio-political and economic context of Karnataka's higher education system, including regulatory frameworks, pay disparities between state and private institutions, and cultural expectations. This contextual layer explains why workload stress is not just an individual issue but a structural challenge.

4. Research Methodology

This study employed a descriptive and analytical quantitative research design to examine the impact of workload stress on faculty mental health in Karnataka universities. A purposive sampling technique was adopted to select participants who had direct experience with the workload conditions under study. Purposive sampling was chosen because this study required respondents who were faculty members actively engaged in teaching, research, and administrative duties within Karnataka universities, making them uniquely qualified to provide relevant data. Additionally, this non-probability sampling method enabled deliberate inclusion of faculty across different academic ranks and university types, ensuring representation of diverse workload demands and institutional contexts (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

Data were collected from 400 faculty members, comprising 280 males and 120 females, drawn from private and state universities in Karnataka. The academic rank and university type distribution are shown below:

Table 4.1 shows the distribution of faculty rank and university type

Academic Rank	Private Universities	State Universities	Total
Assistant Professors	130	70	200
Associate Professors	70	50	120
Professors	45	35	80
Total	245	155	400

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising three parts. The first captured demographic characteristics (gender, rank, and university type). The second measured workload stress across three domains: teaching-related stress

(e.g., class sizes, grading, mentoring, preparation), administrative stress (e.g., committee duties, NAAC documentation, UGC compliance, reporting), and research-related stress (e.g., pressure to publish, grant applications, lack of support). The third section assessed mental health outcomes, including psychological distress, burnout, and job satisfaction. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), and scale reliability was confirmed with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding 0.70.

Data were gathered through an online survey circulated among faculty via university communication channels, following institutional approvals. Informed consent was obtained, and anonymity was maintained to protect participant privacy. Reliability testing confirmed acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha > 0.70), and content validity was ensured through expert review and pilot testing. Factor analysis supported the distinctiveness of stress dimensions and outcome constructs.

The collected data were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to address the study objectives and research questions. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, minimum, and maximum values, were used to summarise demographic variables (gender, academic rank, and university type) and key constructs of workload stress and mental health outcomes. Graphical presentations such as pie charts, bar charts, boxplots, and dot plots with error bars were employed to visualise the distribution of variables.

To examine sources of workload stress, mean comparisons were performed across teaching-related, administrative, and research stress dimensions. Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed to assess the bivariate associations between workload stress dimensions and mental health outcomes, followed by regression analysis to evaluate the predictive strength of stressors on psychological distress, burnout, and job satisfaction.

To test differences across demographic groups, independent-samples t-tests (for binary variables such as gender and university type) and one-way ANOVA (for academic rank) were applied. Where significant group differences were identified, post-hoc tests were conducted to specify the direction of differences. Furthermore, moderation analysis was employed to evaluate whether demographic variables influenced the relationship between workload stress and mental health outcomes, providing insights into differential vulnerability among faculty subgroups.

All analyses were conducted using SPSS 26.0, supplemented by Microsoft Excel for descriptive tabulation and visualisation. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. To enhance clarity, both numerical results and graphical outputs were integrated into the Results section, followed by interpretive discussion linking the findings to the Indian higher education context. The study conformed to ethical standards with voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality assured. Institutional ethical clearance was secured prior to data collection.

This study is limited by its use of purposive sampling, which, while effective in capturing diverse perspectives across faculty ranks and university types, does not permit full generalisation to all university faculty in Karnataka. The findings should therefore be viewed as indicative rather than representative.

5. Results and Analysis

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, structured around the research objectives and questions. Both descriptive and inferential analyses are reported, beginning with the profile of respondents and moving toward deeper statistical examinations of workload stress, mental health outcomes, demographic differences, and moderating effects.

5.1.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

This section presents the demographic profile of respondents and descriptive results for the primary study variables: workload stress (teaching, administrative, and research-related) and mental health outcomes (psychological distress, burnout, and job satisfaction).

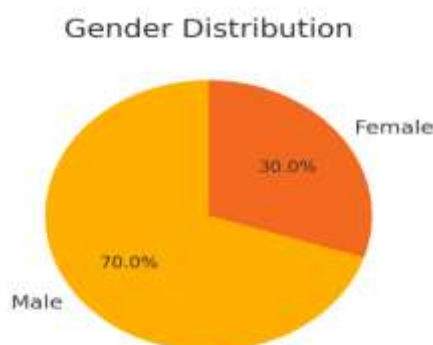


Figure 5.1: Gender distribution of respondents

The sample is male-dominated (70%), while females account for only 30% of the respondents. This indicates a noticeable gender imbalance among faculty members in Karnataka universities, with men holding a significantly larger share of academic positions (Figure 5.1).

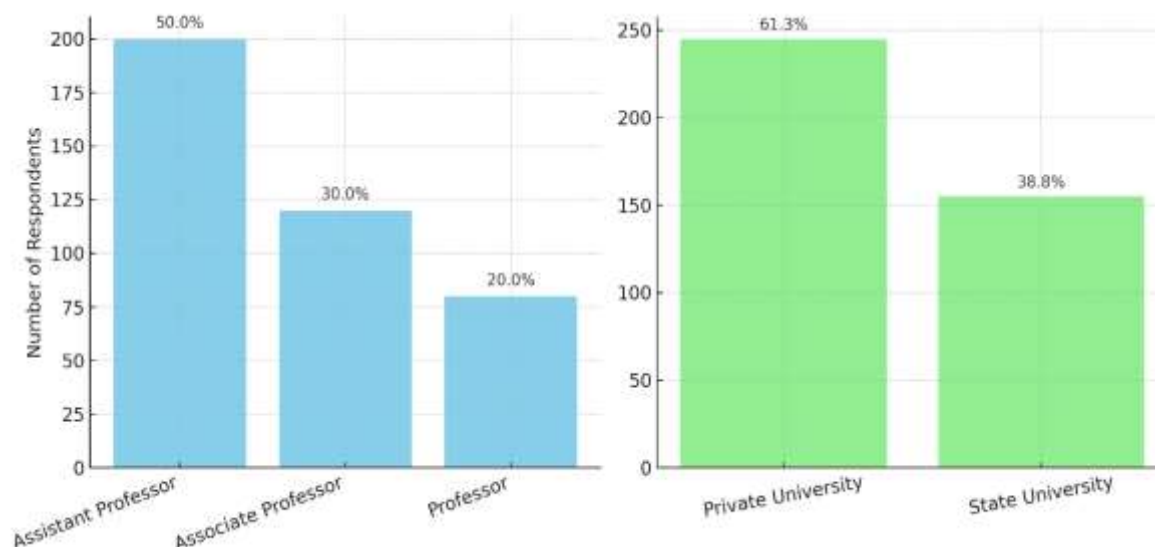


Figure 5.2: Distribution of respondents by academic rank and institution affiliation

In terms of academic designation, Assistant Professors formed the largest group (50%), followed by Associate Professors (30%) and Professors (20%). This reflects the typical staffing composition in universities, where early and mid-career faculty members dominate. With respect to institutional affiliation, most respondents were from private universities (61.3%), while 38.7% were from state universities. This proportion reflects the strong presence of private universities in Karnataka's higher education system and provides a balanced representation of both public and private institutions (Figure 5.2).

5.1.2 Descriptive Statistics of Workload Stress Variables

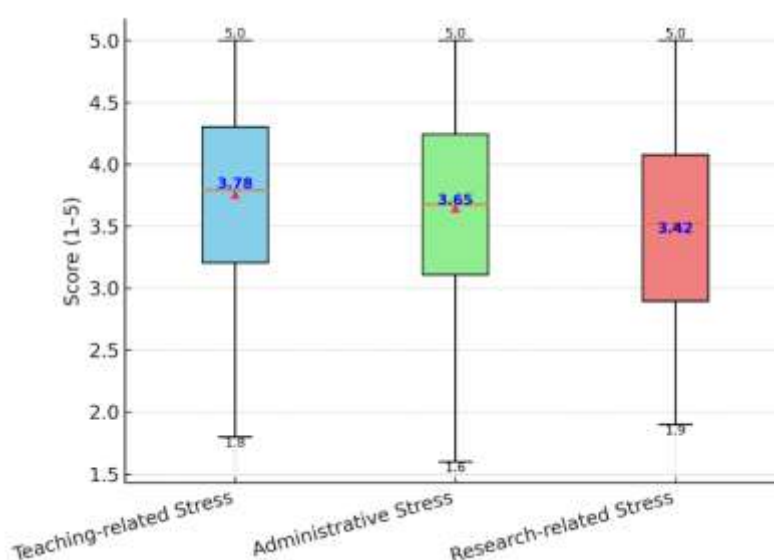


Figure 5.3: Boxplot workload stress distribution (Teaching, Administrative, and Research) with annotated values (Mean, Minimum, and Maximum)

Figure 5.3 illustrates the distribution of workload stress across teaching, administrative, and research domains. Teaching-related stress recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.78$), with values ranging between 1.8 and 5.0, reflecting consistently high levels of perceived pressure in instructional duties. Administrative stress followed closely ($M = 3.65$), though it

displayed greater variability (range: 1.6-5.0), suggesting that while many faculty experience high administrative burden, some perceive it as less intense. Research-related stress showed the lowest mean ($M = 3.42$) with a range of 1.9-5.0, indicating moderate stress levels overall. The comparative pattern underscores that teaching and administrative responsibilities contribute more heavily to workload stress than research, highlighting the dual pressure of pedagogical and bureaucratic tasks in university faculty roles.

5.1.3 Descriptive Statistics of Mental Health Variables

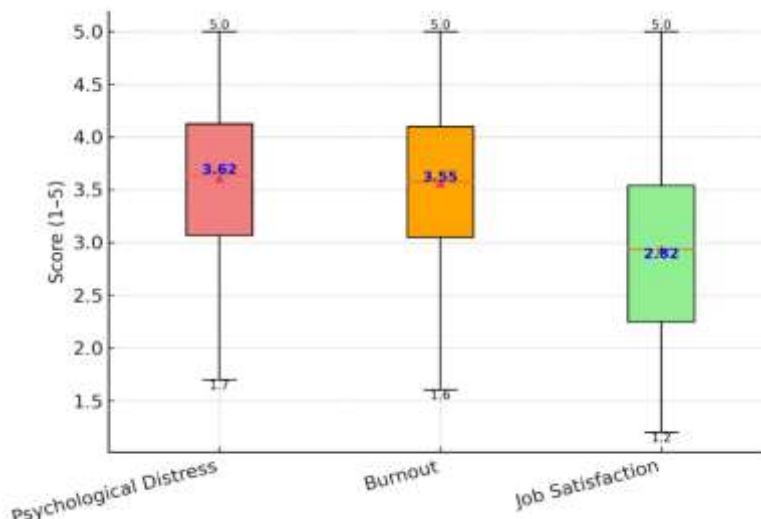


Figure 5.4: Boxplot of mental health outcomes (Psychological distress, Burnout, and Job Satisfaction) with annotated values (Mean, Minimum, and Maximum)

Figure 5.4 highlights the variation in mental health outcomes among faculty members. Psychological distress had the highest mean score ($M = 3.62$), with values ranging between 1.7 and 5.0, indicating moderately high stress-related symptoms across respondents. Burnout followed closely ($M = 3.55$, range: 1.6-5.0), suggesting that prolonged workload demands were leading to emotional exhaustion in many cases. In contrast, job satisfaction recorded the lowest mean ($M = 2.82$, range: 1.2-5.0), reflecting a comparatively weaker sense of professional fulfilment. Overall, the findings reveal a concerning imbalance, where negative outcomes (distress and burnout) outweigh the positive outcome (job satisfaction), underlining the adverse impact of workload stress on faculty mental health.

5.2.1 Sub-Dimensions of Workload Stress (Objective 1)

Faculty workload stress was analysed across three domains: teaching, administrative, and research-related responsibilities. Table 5.1 summarises the descriptive statistics for each domain.

Table 5.1: Sources of Workload Stress by Dimension

Stress Dimension	Sub-Factors	Mean	SD
Teaching-related Stress	Large class sizes, grading burden, student mentoring, and preparation time.	3.78	0.82
Administrative-related Stress	Committee work, NAAC-related documentation, event organisation, compliance with UGC policies, reporting	3.65	0.91
Research-related Stress	Pressure to publish, grant applications, and lack of research support	3.42	0.87

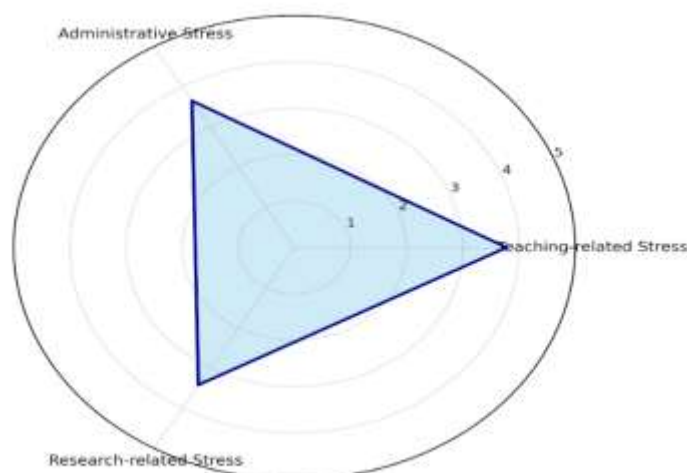


Figure 5.5: Radar chart of workload stress dimensions

Figure 5.5 & table 5.1 highlight the comparative intensity of workload stress dimensions. Teaching-related stress recorded the highest mean value ($M = 3.78$), reflecting pressures from large class sizes, grading, mentoring, and preparation. Administrative stress followed with a mean of $M = 3.65$, driven by NAAC-related documentation, committee work, compliance with UGC policies, and reporting requirements. Research-related stress was comparatively lower at $M = 3.42$, yet still moderate, reflecting challenges such as pressure to publish, grant applications, and limited research support. The visualisation confirms that teaching and administrative duties are the dominant sources of workload stress, both surpassing the stress attributed to research activities.

5.2.2 Comparative Levels of Stress Dimensions

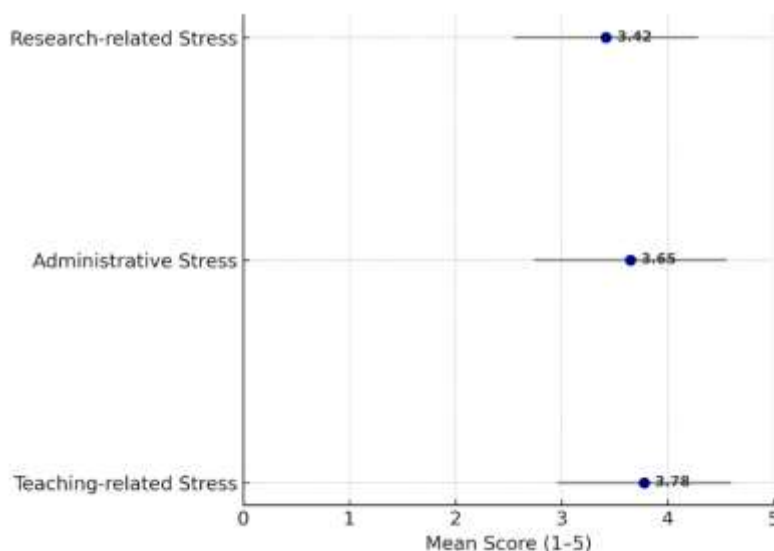


Figure 5.6: Dot plot of workload stress dimensions (Mean $\pm$ SD)

Figure 5.6 illustrates the comparative intensity of workload stress dimensions with their variability. Teaching-related stress recorded the highest mean ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.82$), highlighting consistent pressure from classroom teaching, student mentoring, grading, and preparation. Administrative stress followed ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.91$), but with the widest spread among respondents, reflecting uneven exposure to institutional tasks such as NAAC-related documentation, committee work, and UGC compliance. Research-related stress was the lowest ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.87$), though still moderate, indicating challenges in publication pressure and grant competition. The results confirm that teaching and administrative

duties are the dominant sources of workload stress, both exerting greater pressure on faculty compared to research responsibilities.

5.3 Impact on Mental Health Outcomes (Objective 2)

To examine the relationship between workload stress and mental health outcomes, Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted. The results are summarized in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2: Correlations between Workload Stress and Mental Health Outcomes

Variables	Psychological Distress	Burnout	Job Satisfaction
Teaching-related Stress	0.58***	0.52***	- 0.47***
Administrative-related Stress	0.44***	0.55***	- 0.39***
Research-related Stress	0.41***	0.36**	- 0.33**

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

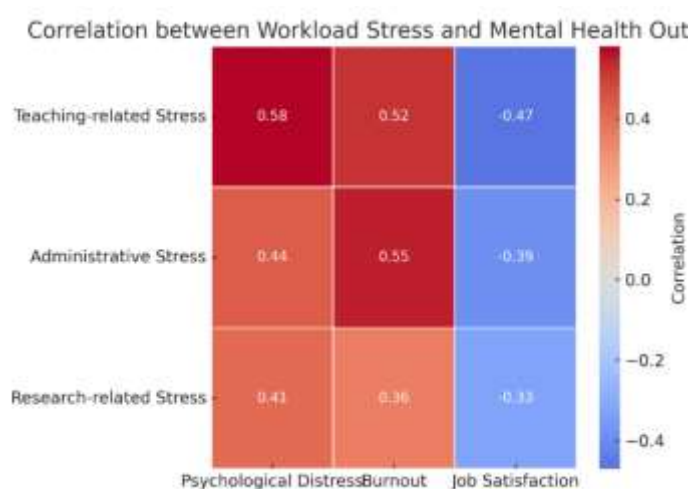


Figure 5.7: Heatmap of correlations between workload stress and mental health outcomes.

As per Figure 5.7 & table 5.5, the correlation analysis indicates that teaching-related stress is most strongly associated with psychological distress ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$) and burnout ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$), while also negatively correlated with job satisfaction ($r = -0.47$, $p < 0.001$). Administrative stress showed the strongest association with burnout ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.001$), reflecting the emotional toll of bureaucratic responsibilities such as NAAC documentation and compliance reporting. Research-related stress demonstrated moderate correlations with distress ($r = 0.41$) and burnout ($r = 0.36$), and a weaker but significant negative correlation with job satisfaction ($r = -0.33$). Overall, the findings suggest that teaching and administrative stressors exert the greatest negative influence on faculty mental health, particularly in relation to psychological distress and burnout, while all three stress dimensions consistently reduce job satisfaction.

5.4 Influence of Demographic Variables on Workload Stress and Mental Health (Objective 3)

To examine whether demographic characteristics influence workload stress and mental health, independent sample t -tests and one-way ANOVA were conducted. The results are summarised in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3: Influence of Demographic Variables on Stress and Mental Health Outcomes

Variable	Group Comparison	Key Finding (Mean $\pm$ SD)	p - value
Gender	Male vs. Female	Females reported higher psychological distress (M = 3.74 vs. 3.52)	0.021*
Academic Rank	Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, Professor	Assistant Professors showed higher administrative stress (M = 3.78) vs. Professors (M = 3.41)	0.008**
University Type	Private vs. State	Private university faculty reported higher workload stress (M = 3.71) and burnout (M = 3.62) vs. state universities (M = 3.49; M = 3.33)	0.032*

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

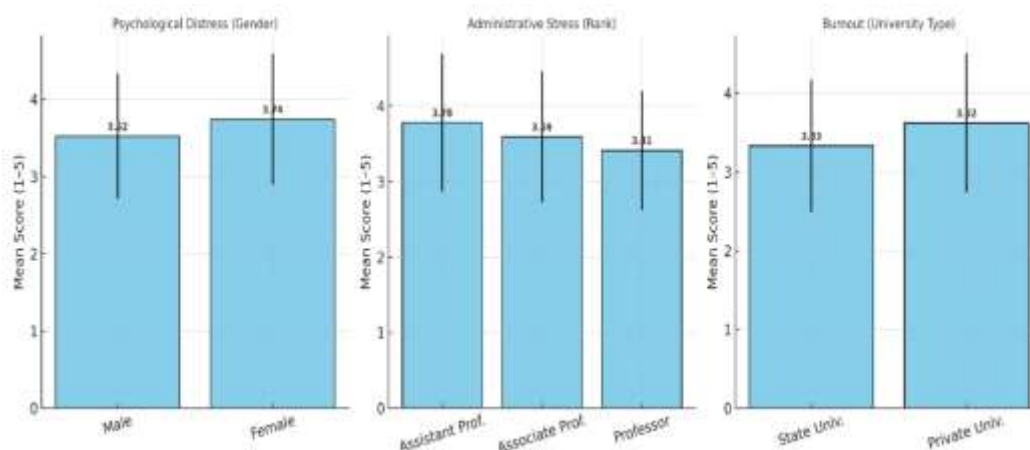


Figure 5.8: Group differences in workload stress and mental health outcomes (Mean ± SD)

In Figure 5.8 & table 5.3, significant demographic variations were observed. Female faculty reported higher psychological distress ($M = 3.74$, $p < 0.05$) compared to males. Assistant Professors reported the highest administrative stress ($M = 3.78$, $p < 0.01$), surpassing both Associate Professors and Professors, reflecting the heavier administrative and compliance burden at early career stages. Additionally, faculty in private universities experienced greater workload stress ($M = 3.71$) and burnout ($M = 3.62$) than those in state universities ($M = 3.49$; $M = 3.33$, respectively), indicating that institutional context plays a role in shaping stress and mental health outcomes. In summary, gender, academic rank, and university type significantly influence workload stress and its mental health impact, with private university faculty, female academics, and Assistant Professors facing the greatest challenges.

5.5 Moderation Effects of Demographic Variables (Objective 3)

To test whether demographic factors moderate the relationship between workload stress and mental health outcomes, interaction effects were examined using regression analysis. The results are presented in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4: Moderation Effects of Demographics on Stress-Mental Health Relationship

Moderator	Outcome Variable	Interaction Effect (β)	p value	Interpretation
Gender × Stress	Psychological Distress	0.18**	0.006	Stress predicts higher distress for females more strongly than for males.
Rank × Stress	Burnout	- 0.15*	0.021	Administrative stress predicts burnout more strongly for Assistant Professors.
University Type × Stress	Job Satisfaction	- 0.12*	0.034	Negative effect of stress on job satisfaction is stronger in private universities.

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

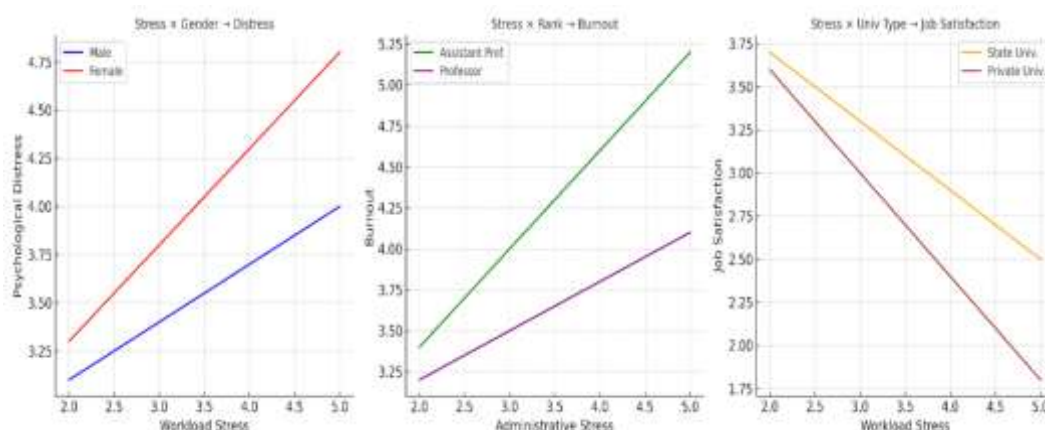


Figure 5.9: Interaction effects of demographic variables on the stress-mental health relationship

According to Figure 5.9 & table 5.4, the moderation analysis demonstrates that demographic characteristics significantly alter the strength of stress-mental health linkages. Gender moderated the stress-distress relationship ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$), with stress predicting higher distress more strongly among females. Academic rank moderated the stress-burnout relationship ($\beta = -0.15$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that administrative stress contributes more to burnout among Assistant Professors compared to senior faculty. Finally, university type moderated the stress-satisfaction relationship ($\beta = -0.12$, $p < 0.05$), with the negative impact of workload stress on job satisfaction being stronger in private universities than in state universities. These findings highlight that demographics not only influence mean stress levels (Section 5.4) but also condition the magnitude of stress effects on mental health outcomes, underscoring the need for targeted interventions.

6. Discussion

This study offers insights into the sources, impacts, and variations of workload stress among faculty in Karnataka's higher education institutions (HEIs), while situating them within India's wider political, economic, administrative, and socio-cultural landscape. The findings not only confirm international evidence on faculty stress but also reveal context-specific dynamics shaped by regulatory structures, pay disparities, and academic hierarchies.

6.1 Teaching and Administrative Burdens in Context

The dominance of teaching-related stress (large class sizes, grading, mentoring, preparation) reflects both the massification of higher education and India's compliance-heavy regulatory framework. With more students but relatively limited growth in faculty or infrastructure, these burdens become acute. As one faculty member put it: *"We are expected to mentor students like in elite institutions, but with class sizes ten times larger. It feels like a setup for failure."*

Administrative stress, especially linked to NAAC, UGC, and ranking compliance, illustrates the increasing audit culture in Indian HEIs. A senior faculty member commented, *"We write more reports than research papers. The system trusts paperwork more than real teaching."* Another noted: *"Sometimes I feel I am employed as a data - entry operator rather than an academic."*

These burdens are not accidental but the result of policy frameworks like NEP 2020, which emphasise accreditation and performance indicators. While intended to assure quality, they often produce paperwork cultures rather than pedagogical innovation. Similar findings were reported in Andhra Pradesh, where Singh & Jha (2020) observed that academic load and administrative interfaces were the leading stressors among faculty.

Moreover, faculty shortages have been consistently flagged by auditors. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG, 2020) reported that Karnataka's HEIs had thousands of unfilled faculty posts, violating UGC's prescribed teacher-student ratios. Such shortages explain *why* existing staff are overstretched, bearing heavier teaching and compliance duties.

6.2 Mental Health Consequences and Economic Dimensions

Workload stress was strongly associated with psychological distress and burnout, outcomes that cannot be separated from economic insecurities. State university staff benefit from UGC - mandated pay scales, pensions, and research grants, while private university staff often face contractual employment, irregular increments, and exclusion from UGC funding schemes. One private university respondent lamented: *"We work longer hours than our state university peers, but the salary is not even comparable. It feels unfair and demoralising."* Another reflected: *"I accepted lower pay, hoping for growth, but now I realise stress is high and recognition is low. It makes me think of leaving academia."*

These inequities reflect regulatory asymmetries. CAG (2019) found that many private and aided colleges without UGC pay scales were ineligible for UGC recognition under Sections 2(f) and 12B, excluding their faculty from national research grants. Such disparities reinforce perceptions of injustice and contribute to lower job satisfaction.

At the macro level, economic disparities also influence national productivity. Faculty burnout reduces research output and innovation, weakening India's global competitiveness. In Karnataka, a hub for IT and higher education, the consequences are especially acute: overworked and underpaid faculty undermine the state's knowledge economy, jeopardising India's NEP 2020 vision of becoming a global education hub.

6.3 Gendered and Cultural Dimensions

Female faculty reported higher psychological distress, consistent with global evidence that women experience higher perceived stress (Costa et al., 2021). A key reason lies in the patriarchal structure of Indian society, which places disproportionate household responsibilities on women. Beyond professional commitments, they are expected to cook food, care for children, manage household chores, and attend to elderly family members. This double burden translates into chronic time poverty and emotional exhaustion. One respondent explained: *"Even after 10 hours at the university, I cannot rest. My family expects me to prepare dinner, help children with studies, and attend to in-laws."* Another said: *"Male colleagues can focus on research after office hours, but I barely find time to sleep."*

The academic workplace often reflects these same gendered norms. As one female Assistant Professor shared: *"After spending the day teaching and filling forms, I still come home to another shift of cooking and childcare. My male*

colleagues do not face this." Another observed: *"In meetings, suggestions from senior men are taken seriously. For women, even basic concerns are brushed aside."*

These disparities are further reinforced by policy gaps. While initiatives such as *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* promote girls' education, equivalent policies for gender equity among faculty are underdeveloped. A review confirmed that women academics in Indian HEIs report lower job satisfaction than men, often tied to role conflict and lack of institutional support (Sapna et al., 2021).

Such realities echo earlier findings in Indian contexts showing that the lack of institutional family-support mechanisms exacerbates women's stress and slows their career advancement (Singh & Jha, 2020). The persistence of these patriarchal norms contradicts constitutional guarantees of equality (Articles 14-15) and weakens national productivity by preventing half the academic workforce from contributing fully to leadership and research innovation.

6.4 Academic Rank and Institutional Hierarchies

Assistant Professors bore the heaviest administrative loads, a finding consistent with task delegation shaped by rank. As one explained: *"Whenever NAAC files are to be prepared, it is automatically assigned to us. The Professors guide, but we do the work."* Another remarked: *"We are juggling classes, research expectations, and admin work - but without the authority to say no."*

These patterns reflect academic feudalism in Indian HEIs. UGC workload norms lack explicit protections for early-career faculty, allowing departments to push compliance tasks downward. Singh & Jha (2020) similarly reported that junior faculty experienced higher stress due to limited resources for career advancement.

Political underinvestment exacerbates this: CAG (2020) found that Karnataka universities often left senior posts vacant, creating flatter hierarchies where administrative burdens fell disproportionately on juniors. This explains *why* Assistant Professors report greater burnout - they carry compliance workloads without the security or authority of senior ranks, sacrificing their research time and long-term productivity.

6.5 Moderation Effects and Structural Inequalities

Moderation analysis showed that stress effects were amplified for vulnerable groups - women, junior faculty, and private university staff. One private university faculty member explained: *"We have to show results for rankings and placements constantly. The pressure is relentless - there is no space for failure."* Another added: *"In state universities, at least there is job security. Here, the stress is mixed with fear of losing the job."*

These dynamics reflect the political economy of privatisation. Since the early 2000s, Karnataka has encouraged private HEIs, but weak labour protections leave faculty vulnerable. The CAG (2019) documented that such institutions often bypass UGC norms, limiting faculty access to research funds and fair pay.

Gender and rank also moderate stress pathways. Sapna et al. (2021) found systematic gender differences in job satisfaction, supporting the finding that stress effects are more severe for women. Similarly, younger faculty in other studies report stress due to inadequate autonomy and recognition (Singh & Jha, 2020). These inequalities highlight gaps in social justice: while student access policies emphasise inclusion, faculty equity remains unaddressed, undermining the constitutional vision of education as a public good (Article 21A).

7. Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the need for systemic reforms to reduce workload stress and strengthen faculty well-being in Karnataka's higher education institutions. First, teaching and administrative responsibilities must be rationalised. Universities should adopt equitable task allocation and leverage digital platforms to minimise redundant compliance work. Regulators such as NAAC and UGC should shift emphasis from paperwork-heavy accountability to outcome-based evaluation systems that genuinely enhance teaching and research quality.

Second, economic disparities between private and state universities require urgent attention. Aligning faculty pay and job security in private institutions with UGC norms would help reduce stress linked to financial insecurity. Equal access to grants and research funding is also necessary to ensure that faculty across institutional types can pursue meaningful scholarly work without disproportionate burdens.

Third, promoting gender equity in academia demands institutional support structures such as flexible scheduling, childcare facilities, and transparent workload allocation. These measures would help address the double burden faced by women faculty balancing professional and household responsibilities.

Finally, early-career faculty, particularly Assistant Professors, require targeted protections. Their disproportionate administrative workload undermines research productivity and career progression. Structured mentorship, reduced compliance tasks during probation, and dedicated research funding would safeguard their academic development.

In summary, addressing faculty workload stress requires coordinated efforts at both institutional and policy levels. By prioritising fair workload distribution, pay parity, gender-sensitive practices, and stronger governance mechanisms, Karnataka's higher education system can enhance faculty well-being, improve teaching and research outcomes, and strengthen its global competitiveness.

8. Conclusion

This study investigated workload stress and its mental health impacts among faculty in Karnataka's universities. It demonstrated that teaching and administrative duties are the strongest stressors, contributing to psychological distress, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction. Importantly, stress is not uniform: female faculty, junior academics, and private university staff face disproportionate burdens, shaped by patriarchal norms, pay disparities, and compliance-driven governance.

The study makes an original contribution by filling a regional research gap in India's higher education literature. While international evidence has long established the links between workload and mental health, little empirical work has examined how these dynamics unfold in Karnataka, a major hub of Indian higher education. By linking workload stress to structural inequities in governance, gender roles, and institutional hierarchies, this study moves beyond individual-level explanations and frames faculty well-being as a systemic challenge.

The findings also carry policy significance, highlighting the need for reforms in workload distribution, pay parity, gender-sensitive practices, and governance mechanisms. Addressing these inequities is not only essential for protecting faculty health but also for sustaining teaching quality, research productivity, and India's global competitiveness in higher education.

This study is limited by its use of purposive sampling, which restricts generalizability to the wider faculty population. Future research employing probability-based sampling and longitudinal designs would help validate and extend these findings. Nonetheless, by foregrounding the specific challenges faced by Karnataka's faculty, this work provides a valuable foundation for both policy reform and further scholarly inquiry.

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