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Contentment with work and risk of professional burnout among university staff¹

Submitted: 30.06.2025

Accepted: 23.03.2026

Published: 30.06.2026



Keywords:

professional burnout,
contentment with work,
job satisfaction,
university teacher,
university human
potential management

Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The article evaluates contentment with work in relation to professional burnout among university staff. The study was conducted between May and December 2024 among academic staff members of a university in Poland. The sample consisted of 163 university teachers with various scientific degrees and titles. The sampling was convenience. The study's objectives were to identify and evaluate correlations between contentment with work and areas of burnout, as well as selected socio-demographic and work-related factors.

¹ This article presents a part of a study using an original tool: the Educational and Developmental Needs Questionnaire (PER, Polish: *Kwestionariusz Potrzeb Edukacyjno-Rozwojowych*), developed by Joanna M. Łukasik. The research was conducted as part of the project *Job satisfaction and risk of professional burnout among university staff*, under action 2.1, *Funding for research mini-projects: Supporting scientific studies and development works in management influencing the socio-economic environment in the region*. This project forms part of the initiative *Greater potential of management and quality sciences through better use of the capital of Polish rural areas*, implemented under the Regional Initiative of Excellence program for 2024–2027 (Project No. 011/2.1/2024, RID/SP/0039/2024/01). The project manager and executor is Joanna M. Łukasik, and its co-executor is Dr. Chrystian Firlej. The project is co-financed by the Ministry of Science within the Regional Initiative of Excellence program. The total subsidised amount amounts to PLN 6,187,000. The project is being carried out over the period 2024–2027.

Suggested citation: Łukasik, J. (2026). Contentment with work and risk of professional burnout among university staff. *Multidisciplinary Journal of School Education*, 15(1(29)), 85–102.

<https://doi.org/10.35765/mjse.2026.1529.05>

Research methods: The study was conducted using the survey method. The following questionnaires were used: MSQ-SF and OLBI. The data obtained were described using adequate statistical methods.

Process of argumentation: During a literature review, it was noted that studies of job satisfaction and burnout among academic teachers had hardly ever been conducted. Therefore, it was concluded that a research project focusing on this group (academic staff members) and conducted using tools applied in pedagogy only occasionally (MSQ-SF) or never (OLBI), as well as with complementary concepts and methodologies, would be valuable.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: Analyses of the results indicate that academic teachers are content with their job. The majority of them do not experience burnout. Slight burnout was evident among respondents with experience in other workplaces. This means that managers of human potential in universities should focus in particular on empowering the youngest staff members with experience in other working environments.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: There is a need to explore contentment and burnout among academic teachers further. Such research will help diagnose the situation of these staff members and take supportive, empowering measures that will prevent, for example, outflow of academic teachers or a decrease in the quality of their work.

Introduction

For decades, there has been ongoing interest in the issue of professional burnout. Of the numerous reasons for this interest, the main one is that, once diagnosed, burnout and its consequences for employees and organizations can be minimized by implementing appropriate preventive or therapeutic/medical measures. As noted by Baka and Basińska, “more and more managers are aware that human resources are one of the main sources of a lasting competitive advantage. For this reason, they pay much attention not only to employees’ achievements but also their health and well-being at work” (Baka & Basińska, 2016, p. 31). Moreover, the lack of diagnosis and adequate preventive measures has a negative impact on the functioning of burned-out persons in many areas of their lives. Existing studies, particularly those that have investigated teachers, show the negative influence of burnout on people’s physical and mental

health (Schaufeli et al., 2009) and on their functioning in the workplace (Baka & Cieślak, 2010; Świętochowski, 2011; Synal & Szempruch, 2017).

Since there are few studies on job satisfaction and burnout among academic teachers, though Świętochowski conducted one study on university and secondary school teacher burnout (2011, pp. 133–143), this article is a step toward filling this gap. The objective of the text is to explore and describe the relations between contentment with work and professional burnout among university teachers. The study is valuable for protecting the teachers' psychological health and, in the event of a positive diagnosis, taking measures to reinforce their sense of self-worth, personal dignity, and will (Maslach & Leiter, 2011, p. 17) to prevent consequences such as psychological, social, and somatic disorders (Fengler, 2000; Maslach et al., 2001).

Theoretical grounds of the project

Despite the category differences, the term 'contentment with work' is often identified or used interchangeably with 'job satisfaction' in the psychological and pedagogical literature (Łaguna, 2012; Pikuła et al., 2024; Wołowska, 2013). However, according to Zalewska (2001, p. 199), they should be distinguished as two independent concepts. Therefore, it was decided that this project would focus on contentment with work as an indicator of satisfaction (Łaguna, 2012).

Zalewska argues that "being content with one's work is an attitude through which one's inner condition, evaluations, and judgments connected with the work environment are manifested. It is expressed through cognitive and affective mechanisms. The cognitive aspect of contentment is job satisfaction, whereas the affective aspect is identical with one's mood or well-being in the workplace. Thus, contentment is superior to satisfaction which, together with well-being, constitute contentment" (Zalewska, 2001, p. 201). Based on this approach, Kaczkowska-Serafińska emphasizes that contentment with work is a "positive attitude of employees to tasks, work conditions, supervisors and coworkers; it is a result

of influence of external factors: remuneration, material workplace conditions, relations with others, management style” (Kaczkowska-Serafińska, 2013, p. 146). Conversely, job satisfaction is a “higher level of contentment with work and is connected with the impact of both external and internal factors: learning opportunities, assigned responsibility, recognition” (Lisowska, 2017, p. 228).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the condition necessary to be satisfied with one’s work is to be content with it. One can say that job satisfaction is a broader category that includes the aspect of contentment with work, while the element that distinguishes contentment and satisfaction from work is the time at which they occur. This results from the fact that contentment with work is a situational and changeable response, whereas job satisfaction, as a “strong sense of contentment,” is a sum of the long-term effects of contentment (Lisowska, 2017; Wudarzewski, 2013) and “most often includes relatively lasting and repeatable tasks, with greater degree of complexity and difficulty” (Wudarzewski, 2013, p. 337).

Contentment can be viewed from both a general and a particularist perspective (Wołowska, 2013, p. 121). From a general perspective, contentment is identified with a general emotional attitude toward work and does not assume relationships between certain work factors. In the particularist perspective, it is described as a specific type that refers exclusively to some specific work factor (single factors can be independent of each other, and each can be the source of a different aspect of job satisfaction) (Wołowska, 2013, p. 121).

In light of the differences between contentment with work and job satisfaction, the present project focuses on academic teachers’ sense of contentment with their work and its relationship to professional burnout. Thus, the phenomenon of burnout also needs to be theoretically explored.

The literature on the subject presents several concepts. The most well-known is the one formulated by Maslach and Jackson, who define burnout as “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion... dehumanized perception of others... and [a] tendency to evaluate oneself negatively... that occurs frequently among individuals who do ‘people-work’ of some kind” (Maslach & Jackson, 1996, p. 1). It mainly affects professionals who

work with others, provide support and assistance, and whose work is based on frequent interactions with others (Fengler, 2000; Maslach, 2003; Pikuła et al., 2024; Świętochowski, 2011).

The concept has three fundamental components: 1) emotional exhaustion (which involves, among other things, increasing and lasting fatigue connected with a subjectively experienced absence of vital power and the will to act, somatic symptoms like digestive and immune system disorders, headaches, and insomnia); 2) depersonalization (physical and cognitive distance between oneself and others, leading to dehumanized perceptions and treatment of others); and 3) reduced personal accomplishment (manifested as a lack of adequate competence, decreased effectiveness, and a negative perception of one's professional achievements) (Maslach & Jackson, 1996; Maslach et al., 2001). Research by Maslach and Leiter (2011) shows that specific burnout components are interdependent. Job demands directly influence the progression of emotional exhaustion, while individual predispositions contribute to a growing dissatisfaction with one's professional accomplishments and increasing depersonalization in relationships with others. This, in turn, results in growing psychological costs for the affected person, as well as consequences for the hiring institution (such as increased absence, reduced productivity, reduced cooperation between employees, and a tendency to avoid responsibilities) (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

In addition to this classic approach, other researchers have proposed new models (see, e.g., Demerouti et al., 2001, 2003; Montero-Marín et al., 2011, 2012). Given the conceptual assumptions underlying the research tool used in this project, this article adopts an approach developed by Demerouti et al. (2001), who proposed the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model. The JD-R model assumes that "every profession has some specific risk factors which can lead to burnout in case of insufficient resources. Regardless of the type of job, professional burnout develops as a result of excessive job demands which are not modified using one's own resourcefulness. Understood in this way, burnout consists of two components: exhaustion and disengagement from work" (Baka & Basińska, 2016, pp. 31–32). In this model, the emphasis is not only on the emotional

but also on the physical and cognitive aspects of exhaustion. “They treat it as a result of a lasting, chronic tension caused by physical, emotional and cognitive job demands” (Demerouti et al., 2003, p. 15)

Demerouti et al. (2003) replace the term ‘depersonalization’ with ‘disengagement from work’. They define it as “an attitude of withdrawal from clients, coworkers, job content and the whole work-related context, for example, responsibilities, employee values and organizational culture. In addition, disengagement from work includes relations with the job itself, such as identification with one’s work and plans to stay in the profession” (Baka & Basińska, 2016, p. 32). This category is close to Maslach’s concept of “reduced personal accomplishment” (2003).

For the purpose of this project, the conceptual approaches of the contentment with work category according to Zalewska (2001) and the burnout category according to Demerouti et al. (2001) serve as the basis for developing a quantitative methodology and selecting the requisite tools and methods for statistical description.

Methodological assumptions

In order to investigate the relationship between contentment with work and professional burnout among academic teachers, a study was conducted between 1 May and 30 December 2024 at a university in southern Poland. The sample consisted of 163 university teachers with various scientific degrees and titles. The sampling was convenience. The study’s objectives were to identify and evaluate correlations between contentment with work and areas of burnout, as well as selected socio-demographic and work-related factors. The following research questions were formulated:

- P1: What is the relation between contentment with work and exhaustion and disengagement from work as areas of professional burnout?
- P2: Is there a correlation (and if so, how strong is it) between job contentment, burnout, and socio-demographic factors (age, gender,

experience, academic degree/title, and experience from other workplaces)?

A research hypothesis was formulated for P2:

- H: There is a correlation between contentment with work, burnout, and socio-demographic factors (age, gender, experience, academic degree/title, and experience from other workplaces). These factors determine the level of contentment and absence of burnout. When it comes to contentment, the literature describes these factors as personal. Wudarzewski (2013, p. 333), for example, lists age, gender, years of professional experience, academic degree/title, and needs.

The main hypothesis was further specified with the following hypotheses:

- H1: Age determines greater contentment with work and absence of burnout. Studies in this area, including Ang et al. (1993, pp. 31–39) and Pikuła et al. (2024), confirm that contentment with work increases with age, minimizing the risk of professional burnout.
- H2: Gender determines greater contentment with work and absence of burnout. Previous research (e.g., Clark 1996, 1997; Murray & Atkinson, 1981; Pikuła et al., 2024; Świętochowski, 2011) that takes the gender variable into account confirms that women are more content with their roles in social professions, reducing the risk of burnout.
- H3: Years of experience and academic degree/title determine greater contentment with work and absence of burnout. Studies in this area (e.g., Białas & Litwin, 2013; Jinnett & Alexander, 1999; Johnson & Johnson, 2000; Moorhead & Griffen, 1992) confirm that the more years of experience one has and the higher one's position, the greater their contentment. This is due to stabilization and the attainment of a certain professional status and its corresponding privileges, which also decrease the risk of burnout. The opposite results – namely, more years of experience and higher positions leading to lower levels

of job satisfaction – were presented by Clark and Oswald (1996). This was due to differences between expected and actual rewards obtained from certain promotions.

H4: Experience across multiple workplaces predicts greater contentment with work and the absence of burnout. Due to a lack of existing studies that include this variable, it will not be described in relation to the subject matter literature confirming the hypothesis.

The study was conducted using the survey method. The MSQ-SF questionnaire, developed by Weiss et al. (1967) and adapted by Borucki (1988), was used to assess contentment with work, and the OLBI questionnaire was used to evaluate professional burnout.

The scale developed by Borucki and used herein consists of 18 job items identified by Weiss et al. (1–18) and two factors developed by Borucki (19 and 20) (Jachnis, 2008, p. 143). Respondents indicated how much they agreed with certain statements on a 5-point Likert scale.

The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI), adapted by Baka and Basińska, measures two key burnout components: exhaustion and disengagement from work (Baka & Basińska, 2016, p. 32). The Polish-language version of the OLBI was developed by Cieślak with the permission of the questionnaire's author (Baka & Cieślak, 2010). The OLBI consists of 16 items across two subscales: exhaustion (8 items) and disengagement from work (8 items). Answers are indicated on a 4-point Likert scale (Baka & Cieślak, 2010).

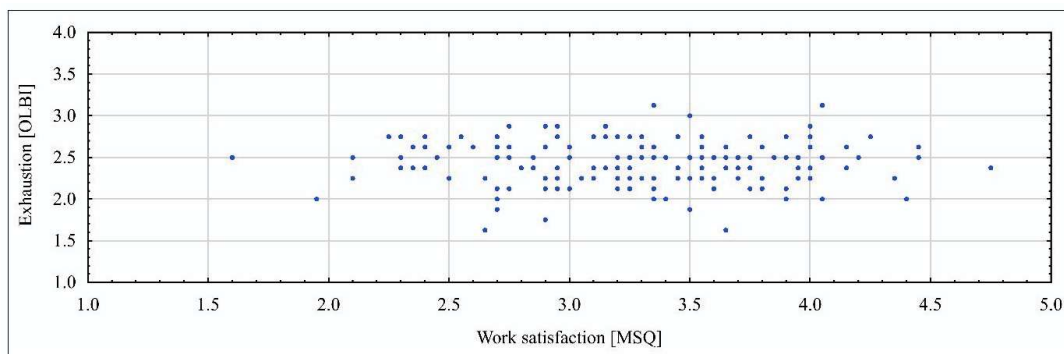
Data analyses were conducted using statistical methods and processed using Statistica 13.3. An alpha level of 0.05 was selected for all analyses. To answer the research questions about the differences between the two groups, the Mann-Whitney U-test was used, supported by the Glass rank-biserial coefficient (r_g). Correlation analysis was conducted using the Spearman correlation coefficient (r_s). Non-parametric methods of data evaluation were chosen due to the ordinal nature of the demographic variables and the non-normal distribution of the quantitative variables.

Results

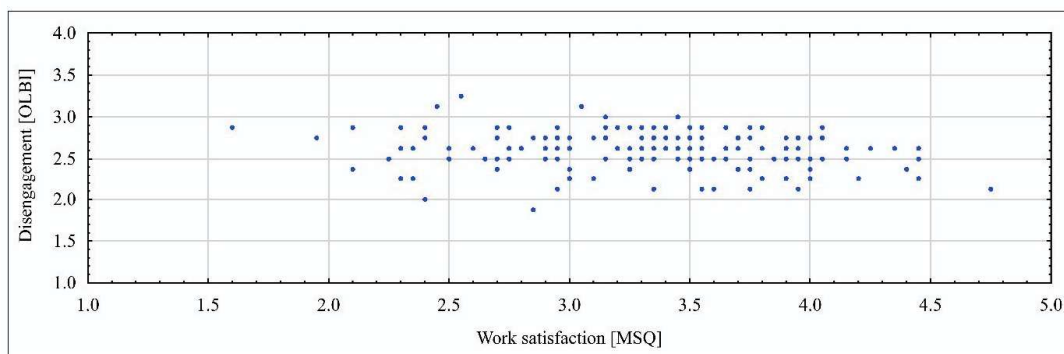
Exploring and identifying contentment with work and professional burnout in relation to socio-demographic variables is of particular importance for those who manage human potential in universities and design supportive measures. The study enabled an initial diagnosis of academic teachers' function in these areas. The analysis of the results and discussion are presented below.

Regarding the question about contentment with work in relation to exhaustion and disengagement from work as areas of professional burnout, Spearman's correlation coefficient was applied. The correlation summary is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Scatterplot of raw work satisfaction scores with professional burnout of university teachers in the areas of exhaustion (A) and disengagement (B)



A. Professional burnout: exhaustion.



B. Professional burnout: disengagement.

Note. N=163.

The data analysis revealed a statistically significant correlation between contentment and disengagement from work ($r_s = -0.19$; $p = 0.020$), whereas the correlation with exhaustion was not statistically significant ($r_s = -0.04$; $p = 0.627$). The correlation between disengagement from work and contentment was negative and weak. In short, the higher the level of contentment with work, the lower the level of exhaustion. However, this conclusion does not apply to the area of disengagement from work.

The analyses of the relations between contentment with work, professional burnout, and selected socio-demographic and work-related factors will be presented in order of the detailed hypotheses. First, differences in contentment and burnout by gender were analyzed using the Mann-Whitney U-test, and the results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Analysis of differences in psychological variables between men and women

Tested variables		Women N=103		Men N=58		z	p	r_g
		M	SD	M	S			
Work satisfaction		3.30	0.55	3.32	0.60	-0.34	0.734	0.03
Professional burnout	Exhaustion	2.41	0.27	2.47	0.25	-1.00	0.316	0.10
	Disengagement	2.60	0.22	2.60	0.23	-0.28	0.781	0.03

Note. N – number of observations, M – mean, SD – standard deviation, z – Mann-Whitney standard test value, p – significance, r_g – effect size

The analysis showed that academic teachers did not differ significantly in their level of work satisfaction (contentment) and burnout results (exhaustion and disengagement) by gender. The results were low or very low.

Another socio-demographic factor was the respondents' age. Table 2 presents a summary of the analysis using Spearman's correlation coefficient.

Table 2. Correlation analysis of psychological variables with age

Tested variables		Age	
		r_s	p
Work satisfaction		0.15	0.051
Professional burnout	Exhaustion	-0.07	0.346
	Disengagement	-0.02	0.813

Note. N=163, r_s – Spearman's coefficient, p – significance

Professional burnout did not correlate significantly with the respondents' age in either area (exhaustion or disengagement from work). The relation between contentment with work and age was within the statistical tendency. The analyses indicate that the level of contentment with work increases with age.

Spearman's correlation coefficient was also used to evaluate the relationships between contentment and burnout and years of experience and academic title. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlation analysis of psychological variables with work experience and title

Tested variables		Work experience		Title	
		r_s	P	r_s	p
Work satisfaction		0.21	0.007	0.19	0.014
Professional burnout	Exhaustion	-0.05	0.509	0.02	0.849
	Disengagement	-0.01	0.930	0.09	0.264

Note. N=163, r_s – Spearman's coefficient, p – significance

According to the analyses, neither area of professional burnout (exhaustion and disengagement from work) correlates with the level of experience or degree/title of university teachers. However, contentment with work correlated with both title and years of professional experience.

These correlations were positive and weak: the longer one's experience and the higher position they held, the greater their contentment with work.

The last investigated data component was the difference in psychological variables based on having experience in another academic unit, analyzed using the Mann-Whitney U-test. A summary of the results is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Analysis of differences in psychological variables between those with experience working at another university

Tested variables		Lack of experience N=53		With experience N=110		Z	p	r _g
		M	SD	M	SD			
Work satisfaction		3.24	0.56	3.33	0.57	-1.14	0.253	0.11
Professional burnout	Exhaustion	2.38	0.28	2.46	0.25	-1.84	0.065	0.18
	Disengagement	2.61	0.23	2.59	0.23	0.41	0.685	0.04

N – number of observations, M – mean, SD – standard deviation,

z – Mann-Whitney standard test value, p – significance, r_g – effect size

Teachers' level of contentment with work did not differ significantly depending on whether they had experience of working at another university. Similarly, there were no differences in the areas of professional burnout. However, it is worth noting that respondents with experience at other universities reported higher results in the area of exhaustion (statistical tendency).

Discussion and conclusions

Regarding the relationship between contentment with work and burnout in the two areas under study (exhaustion and disengagement from work), there was a statistically significant correlation between contentment with work and disengagement. This means that the higher the

level of contentment with work among university teachers, the more they can disengage from it; consequently, they experience less emotional, psychological, and physical overload (Świętochowski, 2011).

As for the socio-demographic variables, the analysis showed that academic teachers did not differ significantly by gender in their level of work satisfaction and burnout results (exhaustion and disengagement). Thus, the correlation between female gender and higher work satisfaction was not confirmed (Clark, 1996, 1997; Murray & Atkinson, 1981). This most likely results from the nature of the job itself and factors such as relationships with students, personal responsibility for the results of internal exams, the sense of autonomy, self-decisiveness of students, etc., as well as the different social status of university teachers compared to primary or secondary school educators (Świętochowski, 2011). Being satisfied with work reduces the risk of burnout among university staff.

With regard to age, professional burnout did not correlate significantly with teachers' age. However, the hypothesis that the level of contentment with work increases with age was confirmed. Thus, satisfaction among women and men increases with age, as confirmed by correlational analyses linking age and contentment factors (Ang et al., 1993; Pikuła et al., 2024; Świętochowski, 2011). It also minimizes the risk of professional burnout.

Professional experience and scientific degree/title do not correlate significantly with the areas of burnout studied. However, there were correlations between work satisfaction and both title and experience. Therefore, it was confirmed that contentment with work increases with years of professional experience (Białas & Litwin, 2013, p. 162; Jinnett & Alexander, 1999; Johnson & Johnson, 2000). A similar result was found regarding scientific degree/title. The higher one's title, the greater their level of satisfaction with work. The results also indicate that individuals who advance in their careers show high levels of contentment, as they are convinced that their future prospects improve with each promotion (Moorhead & Griffen, 1992; Ronen, 1978; Świętochowski, 2011). In addition, contentment, as determined by a sense of greater professional stability and holding a certain professional status and privileges, reduces the risk of burnout.

The last variable investigated was experience in other universities. This variable did not correlate with work satisfaction. However, academic teachers with experience at other universities scored higher in the burnout scale (statistical tendency) than those who had worked at only one workplace. The hypothesis regarding the first burnout area (exhaustion) was therefore not confirmed. The most likely explanation is that working in two places at once is more emotionally and physically demanding. In the event of changing one's workplace, the new place and the process of adapting to new conditions may contribute more to teachers' sense of exhaustion. There are no relevant literature references, so any comparisons or analogies are impossible.

The analyses indicate that academic teachers are content with their jobs. The majority of them do not experience burnout. Slight burnout was evident among respondents with experience in other workplaces. This means that managers of human potential in universities should focus particularly on empowering the youngest employees and staff members with experience in other working environments. Greater contentment with work facilitates behavioral changes and minimizes the risk of burnout (Białas & Litwin, 2013, p. 167).

Method limitations and further research

Like any method, the one used in this study has its limitations. First, the research must be further developed and conducted in a representative sample of university teachers. There is also a need to explore job satisfaction and burnout further among the youngest teachers, the least experienced academic teachers with the lowest scientific degrees and titles, and teachers who have just begun working in a new workplace/university. Such research will help diagnose the situation of these staff members and take supportive, empowering measures to prevent, for example, professional burnout, low levels of contentment with work, and, consequently, the outflow of teachers from universities or a decrease in the quality of their work.

Funding: The article presents a part of a study using an original tool – Educational and Developmental Needs Questionnaire (PER, Kwestionariusz Potrzeb Edukacyjno-Rozwojowych) developed by Joanna M. Łukasik. The research was conducted under the project: “Job satisfaction and risk of professional burnout among university staff”. Action 2.1 “Funding for research mini-projects – supporting scientific studies and development works in management influencing the socio-economic environment in the region” within the project “Greater potential of management and quality sciences through better use of the capital of Polish rural areas” under the “Regional Initiative of Excellence” programme 2024–2027. 011/2.1/2024, RID/SP/0039/2024/01. Project manager and executor: Joanna M. Łukasik, co-executor: dr Chrystian Firlej. Co-financed by the Minister of Science under the ‘Regional Initiative of Excellence’ programme. Agreement No. RID/SP/0039/2024/01. Subsidised amount PLN 6,187,000.00. Project period 2024–2027.

Conflict of interest: The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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