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Association between Workload and Psychological Well-Being of Faculty Members in the University of Kirkuk

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Abstract:

Background: Excessive workload is a critical concern for most professors worldwide and contributes to adverse psychological outcomes. The current trends of increased academic, research, and administrative activities at universities generate an urgent need to address this problem.

Aim: To assess the association between faculty members' academic workload and their psychological well-being.

Methods: A correlational study was conducted at the University of Kirkuk, Iraq, in 2025-2026. The final sample consisted of 402 faculty members recruited using a multistage sampling strategy. After providing informed consent, the participants completed a questionnaire that included items on socio demographic and academic characteristics, as well as their academic workload and psychological well-being. The results were analysed descriptively and inferentially using SPSS version 26.0 and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient.

Results: Over half of the faculty members (53.5%) reported a high level of academic workload, while over two-thirds of the participants (68.4%) demonstrated a moderate level of psychological distress. The analysis revealed a positive correlation between the academic workload and psychological distress ($r_s = 0.248$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that higher academic workload is associated with increased psychological distress and decreased psychological well-being.

Conclusion: The study demonstrated a significant association between faculty members' academic workload and their psychological well-being in the sample. Therefore, it can be concluded that increased academic workload among faculty members at the University of Kirkuk leads to psychological distress and adversely affects their psychological well-being. Thus, there is a need to reduce academic workload to maintain the psychological well-being of faculty members in Iraqi universities.

Keywords: Psychological well-being, Faculty workload, Higher education, University of Kirkuk, Iraq

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, faculty workload has become a critical concern for academic institutions worldwide. The academic profession is marked by rigorous, overlapping demands, including teaching, student assessment, research, administrative responsibilities, and mentoring (1). Faculty members are central to the mission of higher education institutions, and when these diverse academic responsibilities converge, job demands may exceed available time and capacity (1,2).

Workload, defined as the total volume of tasks and responsibilities assigned to an individual within a given timeframe, encompasses both quantitative dimensions, represented by the number of hours and tasks, and qualitative demands, including task complexity, emotional labor, and competing priorities, placed on faculty within higher education institutions (3,4).

When excessive, workload constitutes a key psychosocial risk factor and a well-established occupational stressor with serious implications for faculty health (1,2,5). Faculty workload can negatively affect job satisfaction, which in turn may reduce psychological well-being (6,7). The World Health Organization has noted that adverse working conditions contribute to mental disorders among working-age adults, highlighting the broader health implications of excessive workloads (5). In higher education, these demands often intensify because faculty are expected to perform multiple roles simultaneously while facing limited institutional resources. Several recent studies across diverse academic settings have shown that faculty members experience substantial workload pressures. In the Philippines, 80% of faculty members reported an extremely high workload (8), and another study found that 82% faced an extensive workload (9). Faculty workload has also been linked to increased attrition, with high exhaustion, low organizational support, and elevated rates of depression and anxiety identified as key predictors of faculty intentions to quit in higher education (10).

University campuses have increasingly become high-pressure environments, requiring faculty to teach larger classes, secure competitive grants, publish in top-tier journals, and fulfill extensive administrative and service obligations within shrinking institutional budgets (11). These compounding demands frequently produce role ambiguity, role overload, and resource inadequacy, all of which are recognized antecedents of occupational stress (12).

Beyond its occupational implications, excessive workload has been shown to directly compromise faculty psychological well-being. Psychological well-being refers to an individual's positive mental state, encompassing emotional balance, life satisfaction, a sense of purpose, and the ability to cope effectively with stress (13). In academic settings, psychological well-being is especially important because faculty members must maintain consistent performance across teaching, research, and service responsibilities (11,13).

When work demands become excessive, psychological well-being may be undermined by heightened stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, frustration, a reduced sense of purpose, and symptoms of depression (13–16). Evidence indicates that mental health concerns are highly prevalent among university faculty, with over 70% of faculty from 16 countries reporting moderate to high levels of psychological distress, and up to 55% of academics in major universities reporting depression, anxiety, and burnout (17). Furthermore, rigid evaluation metrics and mounting publication pressure may constrain faculty autonomy, creating conditions that can significantly erode psychological well-being over time (11). The present study is theoretically grounded in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (18), which posits that excessive job demands, such as a high workload, deplete employees' physical and psychological resources, ultimately leading to burnout and impaired well-being. Conversely, adequate job resources can buffer these detrimental effects. This framework provides a theoretically coherent and empirically supported lens for systematically examining the relationship between faculty workload and psychological well-being.

Although faculty workload is widely recognized as a significant concern in higher education, empirical evidence directly linking excessive workload to psychological well-being among university faculty remains limited, particularly in under-researched contexts such as Iraqi universities, including the University of Kirkuk. Previous

research indicates that excessive workload and intensified academic demands are associated with reduced faculty well-being and increased burnout. For instance, (19) found that rising academic demands negatively affect faculty well-being. This evidence gap underscores the need for context-specific investigation. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the nature and strength of the correlation between faculty workload and psychological well-being among faculty members at the University of Kirkuk, to generate context-specific evidence to inform the development of healthier and more sustainable academic work environments in Iraqi higher education institutions.

METHODS

Design and setting

This study used a quantitative correlational design to examine the relationship between faculty workload and physical well-being at the University of Kirkuk, Iraq, from 25 November 2025 to 2 February 2026. The University of Kirkuk is a public institution that has offered higher education since 2003 and currently comprises nineteen colleges and central administrative units, with 1,830 members, including the university presidency and internal departments. Several colleges also offer morning and evening shifts.

Participants and sampling

The study population comprised permanent faculty members at the University of Kirkuk. A multistage probability sampling method was used. First, 10 colleges were selected using probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling, and 40 faculty members were chosen from each college (target sample size = 400). Participants were then selected through proportional stratified sampling by sex and academic rank. Eligible faculty members were recruited from each subgroup until the required number was reached. The university president and vice president were purposively included, resulting in a final sample of 402 participants.

Measures

Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire to examine the relationship between workload and psychological well-being among faculty members at the University of Kirkuk. The questionnaire was translated into Arabic and back-translated into English to ensure conceptual equivalence. It consisted of four parts: sociodemographic data, institutional and academic work context, workload assessment, and psychological well-being assessment.

- Academic workload was measured using a four-item standardized scale adapted from (20) and later used by the Netherlands Labor Authority (21). Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Totally Disagree) to 5 (Totally Agree), with total scores ranging from 4 to 20; higher scores indicated greater workload. Scores were categorized as low (4–9.33), moderate (9.34–14.67), and high (14.68–20).
- Psychological well-being was assessed using a nine-item psychological distress scale, in which higher distress scores indicated lower psychological well-being. The first eight items were adapted from the Psychosocial Safety Barometer. (21,22) to assess work-related mental and physical exhaustion, fatigue, and reduced energy. The ninth item was developed by the researcher based on prior research (23,24) to measure satisfaction and motivation to perform teaching and research duties despite workload pressure. Participants responded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Items 1–8 were scored in the original direction, whereas Item 9 was reverse-coded before analysis (1 = Always, 5 = Never). Total scores ranged from 9 to 45, with higher scores indicating greater psychological distress and lower psychological well-being. Scores were categorized as mild (9–21), moderate (21.1–33), and severe (33.1–45).

Content validity was confirmed by a panel of 13 experts, comprising 11 faculty members from the College of Nursing and two psychiatric consultants. The pilot study included 40 participants (10 from each of four colleges) who were outside the main study sample, ensuring that pilot participants were excluded from the final sample to prevent overlap with the primary data collection. The questionnaire required approximately 10–15 minutes to complete. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding values of 0.86 for the psychological well-being scale and 0.84 for the workload scale, both indicating good internal consistency (25).

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the College of Nursing, University of Kirkuk (Approval No. 3/7/2784; October 20, 2025). Institutional permission was subsequently granted by the Presidency of the University of Kirkuk on October 22, 2025. Before data collection, participants were informed of the study's objectives, procedures, and confidentiality measures, and written informed consent was obtained. Participation was voluntary; participants could withdraw at any time without penalty, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by not collecting personally identifiable information.

Statistical analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, summarized participants' characteristics, workload, and psychological well-being. Because the continuous variables were not normally distributed, Spearman's rank correlation was used to examine the relationship between workload and psychological well-being.

RESULTS

The study included 402 eligible faculty members: 400 from 10 colleges and 2 from central administrative leadership positions (the University President and the Vice President for Scientific Affairs). All participants completed the questionnaire, yielding a 100% response rate. Most participants were male (n = 247, 61.4%) and aged 30–39 years (n = 167, 43.8%). The majority were married (n = 323, 80.4%), and over half reported having 1–3 children (n = 205, 51%). Regarding academic qualifications, the majority held a doctoral degree (n = 213, 53%).

In the institutional and academic work context, the largest proportion held the rank of Assistant Lecturer (n = 168, 41.8%). Although 233 participants (58.1%) reported no formal administrative role, a multiple-response analysis indicated that a subset held dual leadership positions, such as serving as both dean and head of department. Tasks and responsibilities were assessed using multiple-response items; full-time teaching was the most frequently reported task, accounting for 398 selections (34.9% of total responses). Nearly half of the participants (n = 199, 49.5%) reported responsibility for 3–5 additional tasks beyond their primary duties, while 12.7% (n = 51) reported more than six additional tasks.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of participants reported high (n = 215, 53.5%) or moderate (n = 177, 44.0%) levels of academic workload, with only a negligible proportion reporting a low workload level (n = 10, 2.5%). The overall mean score of 15.45 (SD = 3.325) fell within the high-workload range, indicating that academic workload among faculty members at the University of Kirkuk is predominantly high.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the majority of participants (n = 275, 68.4%) experienced a moderate level of psychological distress, while 18.4% (n = 74) reported mild distress and 13.2% (n = 53) reported severe distress. The overall mean score (M = 26.76, SD = 5.739) fell within the moderate psychological distress range.

Spearman's correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between academic workload and psychological distress ($r_s = 0.248$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that higher academic workload was associated with greater psychological distress among faculty members, thereby diminishing psychological well-being (Table 2).

Table 1: Overall Assessment of Faculty Members' General Academic Workload

Workload	No	%	M ± SD	Assessment
Low	**10**	**2.5**	**15.45 ± 3.325**	**High Workload**
Moderate	**177**	**44**		
High	**215**	**53.5**		
Total	***402***	***100***		

No: Number, **%**: Percentage, **M:** Mean for total score, **SD:** Standard Deviation for total score, **Low** = 4.00 – 9.33, **Moderate** = 9.34 – 14.67, **High** = 14.68 – 20.

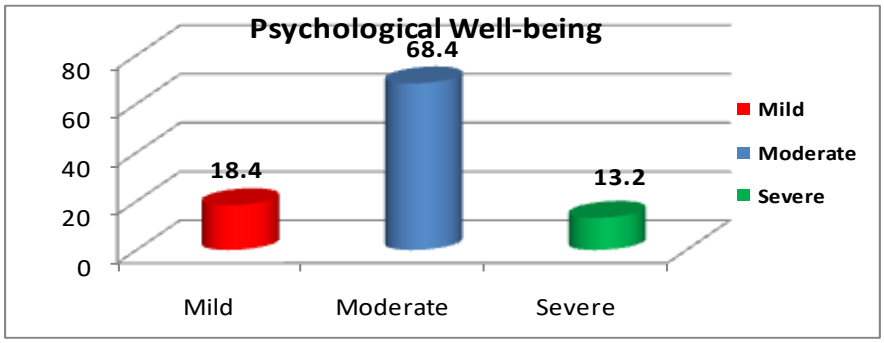


Figure 1: Levels of Psychological Distress among Faculty Members (N=402)

Mild = 9.0 – 21.0, **Moderate** = 21.1 – 33.0, **Severe** = 33.1 – 45.0. The overall mean score was 26.76 (SD = 5.739), falling within the moderate range.

Table 2. Spearman's correlation (r_s) between academic workload and physical well-being among faculty members (N= 402).

Scales	r_s	p value
Psychological Well-being (PWB) –Academic Workload (AWL)	0.248**	0.001**

**p < 0.001 (2-tailed).

**Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

DISCUSSION

As shown in Table 2, a statistically significant positive correlation was found between academic workload and psychological distress among faculty members (r_s = 0.248, p < 0.01), indicating that higher workload levels were associated with greater psychological distress and, consequently, lower psychological well-being. As noted in the methodology section, the scale operationalized psychological well-being using distress scores; thus, higher scores reflected greater distress and lower well-being. This relationship may be explained by the multifaceted responsibilities of faculty members, including teaching, research supervision, administrative duties, and the pressure to publish in high-impact journals for promotion. Collectively, these demands may contribute to mental fatigue and increased psychological distress.

To the best of our knowledge, few studies have directly examined the relationship between academic workload and psychological well-being, particularly at Iraqi universities. Nonetheless, the present findings align with the overall direction of prior research. (26) demonstrated that among Saudi faculty members, adverse psychosocial work factors, elevated stress, and burnout were associated with poorer mental health, indicating that increased psychosocial strain reduces psychological well-being. A sector-wide report on Dutch universities (21) documented moderate levels of tiredness and psychological distress among faculty members, suggesting reduced psychological well-being consistent with the elevated strain observed in the present study. Similarly, (27) found that higher perceived academic workload was positively associated with poorer mental health and increased psychological distress (r ≈ 0.36–0.38).

In Karnataka, India (16) identified strong positive correlations between teaching-related stress and psychological distress (r = 0.58, p < 0.001), as well as moderate-to-strong associations with administrative stress (r = 0.44) and research-related stress (r = 0.41). Although these correlations are higher than those observed in the present sample, all studies converge on a consistent pattern: increased academic workload is associated with elevated psychological distress and reduced psychological well-being among university faculty members.

The present findings should therefore be interpreted within the specific socio-academic context of the University of Kirkuk, which reflects broader structural challenges in Iraqi higher education, including heavy teaching loads, limited research support, and extensive administrative responsibilities. These pressures may intensify the adverse effects of workload on faculty psychological well-being and may be further compounded by socio-cultural expectations that require academics to fulfill multiple roles simultaneously. Accordingly, this study provides preliminary empirical evidence from a largely underrepresented population and may serve as a foundation for future research on faculty psychological well-being in Iraqi and comparable academic settings. These findings underscore the need for institutional strategies to reduce workload pressures, including workload redistribution policies, protected time for research, and enhanced administrative support.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between workload and psychological well-being among faculty members at the University of Kirkuk. The findings revealed that more than half of faculty members reported a high level of workload. The findings also indicated that the majority of participants exhibited a moderate level of psychological distress, reflecting diminished psychological well-being. A significant positive correlation was found between workload and psychological distress, indicating that higher workload was associated with greater psychological distress and, consequently, reduced psychological well-being among faculty members.

Recommendations

Therefore, the present study contributes to the literature by addressing an important research gap at both the international and local levels. Based on these findings, university administrators and policymakers should develop evidence-based workload management strategies, including policies that ensure equitable workload distribution. Institutional support should also be strengthened through protected research time, regular monitoring of psychological well-being, and stress-management programs. These measures are essential for protecting the psychological well-being of faculty members at the University of Kirkuk and across Iraqi higher education institutions.

Limitations of the study

However, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the correlational design does not permit causal conclusions about the relationship between workload and physical well-being. Second, the study was conducted at a single university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Third, reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias. Finally, the limited availability of comparable studies, particularly in Iraq, restricted the scope of comparative discussion.

Future research should use

Longitudinal or experimental designs are recommended to examine causal relationships between workload and psychological well-being. Multi-institutional studies across Iraqi universities are also recommended to improve the generalizability of findings. In addition, future studies should incorporate validated, standardized measures of psychological well-being to strengthen research validity.

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