Understanding and Managing Occupational Stress:
Strategies For International Student Advisers

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Abstract

Working to meet the needs of international students in tertiary settings, particularly in recent years, create unique demands and considerable stress for International Student Advisers (“ISAs”), with burnout being considered as a possible outcome over time. Workload and role problems have been identified as the factors consistently related to burnout, and these factors have been reported as issues for International Student Advisers.

Whilst anecdotal evidence exists to support this claim, there is no Australian empirical data to address this issue.

A survey was conducted with 62 International Student Advisers to assess the major stressors which impact on working lives and to determine the level of burnout of this population. Seventy five percent of the sample indicated a level of emotional exhaustion which is classified as a high risk for burnout. The most frequently reported sources of stress intrinsic to the job were work overload and imposing high expectations on one’s self. The most frequently reported organisational stressor was feeling unsupported by the organisation.

Respondents identified a range of strategies to reduce stress at work, The authors also suggest ways of coping with the demands of work, given organisational constraints.

Introduction

Work related stress is of increasing concern to organisations because of the economic costs due to reduced productivity and increased absenteeism. There is considerable research that provides evidence that work related stress could effect physical and emotional health, morale and job dissatisfaction.

The dramatic changes in higher education sector in recent years have placed additional demands and pressures on university staff at all levels, resulting in organisation climates conducive to occupational stress. In addition, working to meet the needs of working with international students, particularly in recent years, create unique demands and stress for International Student Advisers (“ISAs”).

We can all share anecdotal stories to support this view, but there is no empirical data addressing this issue.

The goals of this study were to:

- identify the current major stressors impacting on ISAs;
- assess the current level of burnout of ISAs;
- determine if any factors were associated with higher levels of stress and burnout;
- identify perceptions of ISAs for improvements for the quality of working life; and
- identify perceptions of ISAs regarding the positive aspects of their role.

Cooper and Sutherland (1988) present a succinct model of organisation stress which identifies the major sources of workplace stress and the impact of stress on the individual and the organisation:

Model of Organisational Stress: INSERT DIAGRAM HERE

The five categories of workplace stress were examined in this study. The study did not explore the individual characteristics which may also contribute to employee and organisational symptoms of ill health.
Burnout has been described as a process of increasing disillusionment, the “progressive loss of idealism, enthusiasm and energy and purpose … as a result of the conditions of their work” Edelwich and Brodsky (1980).

Burnout is regarded as a slowly developing process that starts without warning and, up to a point, evolves unrecognised. Gradually the individual starts to feel emotionally strained and begins to change his or her attitude towards the job in a process that finally results in burnout.

Maslach (1993) asserts that the burnout syndrome is initiated by emotionally demanding relationships between workers and the recipients of the services. Over time workers become emotionally exhausted and drained. In order to cope with the emotional stresses, they develop an attitude of detached concern, which can result in impersonal cynical attitude or complete detachment. This depersonalisation is the second phase of burnout and results in deteriorating relationships, which increases the emotional strain and results in reduced feelings of personal accomplishment.

In their review of empirical studies on burnout, Schaufel and Buunk (1996), conclude that workload and role problems as well as job dissatisfaction and lack of social support are the factors most strongly and consistently related to burnout.

This study examined whether these findings are replicated with ISAs.

Study design

The sample was drawn primarily from ISAs who attended a symposium conducted by Council for International Students of Western Australia (CISWA) for ISAs in Perth in Sept 1998. I was asked to present a paper on coping at work and took the opportunity to collect data from the participants following my presentation. I also invited via e-mail any person who was on the ISANA net who was interested in this survey to complete the questionnaire and send it back to me.

A questionnaire was developed based on a number of previous questionaries addressing occupational stress issues for different work populations.

The questionnaire asked participants to identify their main roles as ISAs in the organisation, specify the number of International students and ISAs in their organisation, and asked participants to indicate their length of experience in the organisation and as student advisers.

The questionnaire listed a broad range of occupational stressors based on 5 categories of work place stress identified by Cooper et al (1993): factors intrinsic to the job, the individuals role in the organisation, career development, relationships at work and organisational structure and climate. Respondents were asked to rate on a five point scale from “no stress” to “excessive stress” how each of these factors impacted on their work.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach and Jackson 1986) scale was used to assess levels of burnout. The MBI has three sub-scales that measure three aspects of the burnout syndrome:

- Emotional exhaustion – assesses feelings of being emotionally exhausted by one’s work
- Depersonalisation – measures an impersonal response to the recipients of one’s service; and
- Personal accomplishment - assesses the feelings of competence and successful achievement in one’s work.

A high degree of burnout is reflected in high scores on the emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation sub-scales and low scores on the personal accomplishment sub-scale.

I used the MBI scale only with the WA sample, as I decided it would be too cumbersome to attach this to the questionnaire for the ISANA net.

Finally, open-ended questions were included asking respondents to indicate the two most rewarding aspects of the job, and asking for suggestions to improve job satisfaction.
Profile of respondents

Of the sixty-two people who completed the questionnaire, 42 were WA ISAs attending the CISWA symposium. Thus this data is primarily representative of WA experiences.

The respondents worked in a diverse range of organisations including universities, school, TAFE colleges and private international colleges. The numbers of international students at these organisations ranged from 10 to 5500 and the number of ISAs ranged from 1 through to 25.

Fifty two percent of respondents had worked in their organisations for more than five years, and 52% had worked as ISAs for more than 5 years.

The roles of ISAs varied across organisations. Eighty two percent were involved in counselling, 59% provided academic support, 56% provided administrative support, 43% provided advice regarding housing, 33% homestay issues and 37% language support.

The roles of ISAs in organisations with smaller numbers of international students were more diverse, than organisations with larger numbers of students, larger numbers of ISAs and consequently more specialised roles.

Findings

The factors that caused stress for ISAs are set out in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 lists the factors which are intrinsic to the work and Table 2 lists the factors which are related to the role in the organisation. The factors are listed from most frequently reported stressor to least frequently occurring stressors.

Table 1: Frequency of response to factors intrinsic to work as stressful or very stressful.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors intrinsic to work</th>
<th>Stressful/very stressful (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling overloaded by work</td>
<td>72.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imposing high expectations of self</td>
<td>65.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling responsible for well being of students</td>
<td>61.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being interrupted by telephone calls</td>
<td>51.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being interrupted by visitors</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with strong emotions</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern for student safety</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with different language levels</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations (students/organisation) of weekend work</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending meetings</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with many cultures</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with homestay requests/visits</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern for own safety</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Frequency of response to factors related to role within the organisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role in organisation</th>
<th>Stressful/very stressful (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling unsupported by organisation</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of clear definition</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little say in decision making</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office politics</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image of position in organisation</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation in organisation</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling unimportant in organisation</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of job security</td>
<td>39.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of peer consultation</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with boss</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Burnout scores

Table 3 indicate the frequencies of scores as percentages on the three burnout scales for the Western Australian respondents (N=44).

Table 3: Frequency as % on Burnout Scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burnout subscales</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Exhaustion</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depersonalisation</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Accomplishment</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is evident that 75% of the advisers were experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion but only a very small percentage (6.8%) indicated high levels of depersonalisation or reduced personal accomplishment (13.6%).

Overall stressor score

An overall stressor score for each ISA was calculated by adding the rankings for all 25 factors. Thus the stressor score could range from 25 (no stress) to 125 (Maximum stress). Because of missing data, the sample size was 43 ISAs.

The range of stress scores of the ISAs is shown below. The mean score was 76 (S.D 15.02; Range 44-109)

A significant correlation was found between stressor score and burnout scores on the emotional exhaustion scale and the depersonalisation scale

Who sees themselves as under the most stress?

Participants were classified as either “high stressor” or “low stressor” ISAs according to this score. Those respondents who scored below the mean were classified as “low stressor” ISAs and those who scored above the mean were classified as “high stressor” ISAs. These scores were used to examine whether work factors or work experience impacted on self reported levels of stress. The conclusions were:

- There were no differences in stressor score in relation to length of time spent working as an ISA or length of time employed by the organisation, and
- Comparisons between these two groups indicated that advisers with low stressor scores were more likely to work in organisations with 100 or less international students. (N = 16), compared with advisers who worked in organisations where there were 1000 or more international students (N =21).
When comparing which factors were the most frequently reported sources of stress for advisers the following differences were found:

- 67% of advisers in large organisations reported that they were stressed due to feeling overloaded by their workload, compared to 33% of advisers in small organisations;
- 65% of advisers in large organisations reported that they were stressed due to interruptions by telephone calls, compared to 35% of advisers in small organisations;
- 68% of advisers in large organisations reported that they were stressed by interruptions by visitors, compared to 32% of advisers in small organisations;
- 65% of advisers in large organisations were stressed by the lack of clear definition of their role, compared with 35% of advisers in small organisations;
- 66% of advisers in large organisations felt stressed due to feeling unsupported by their organisation compared to 33% of advisers in small organisations.

What are the most rewarding aspects of the job and how could job satisfaction be improved?

Participants responses to these open ended questions indicated a number of common themes. The most rewarding aspects of the job included:

- the satisfaction of helping students reach their goals (n=30)
- forming relationships with the international students (several mentioned the opportunities of developing continuing relationships after the students complete their studies) (n=16)
- getting to know other cultures (n=12)
- positive feedback, appreciation from students (n=10)

Suggestions for reducing stress and improving job satisfaction, could be classified into two main clusters:

- Organisational support - which included more consultation, better communication, inclusion in decision making at organisational level, clearer expectations of what the job involves, training/staff development,
- Self care activities - which included suggestions such as don’t take work home, find balance between work and home life, joke with others (Friday funnies), less self criticism, delegate

Networking with others doing similar work was also suggested as a strategy.

Conclusions and solutions

It is apparent from these findings that the most frequently reported source of organisational stress for ISAs was feeling overloaded by their workload. Of the sample that completed the Burnout scales, 75% were experiencing a level of emotional exhaustion that is classified in the literature as high risk for burnout. If, as Maslach (1993) asserts, emotional exhaustion is the first phase of the burnout syndrome, this data suggests that a number of ISAs are emotionally exhausted but not yet at the stage where they have become detached or have a low sense of achievement in relation to their job.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that for many ISAs, there are certain peak times where work loads are very heavy – (e.g. beginning and end of each semester). Perhaps this is a factor which prevents most ISAs from moving through all three phases of the burnout syndrome.

There have been some studies that have evaluated the effectiveness of burnout interventions: Freedy and Hobffoll (1994), Higgins (1986), Pine and Aronson (1983).

Interventions focus on teaching individuals various stress management techniques including relaxation training, cognitive stress management, and time management. Whilst it is difficult to make generalisations about the effectiveness of the interventions, because of different training, different sample sizes and different timeframes, one conclusion can be drawn. Teaching coping
skills can reduce the symptoms of emotional exhaustion. However, personal accomplishment and depersonalisation seem resistant to change: Schaufeli and Buunk (1996).

Based on these findings and my experience in conducting stress management programs at Curtin University for staff across the university, I believe would be of great value for ISAs to be pro-active about self-care at work.

One initiative in the International Office at Curtin University is for interested staff to attend a six session stress management program, which focused on teaching meditation. It is planned to follow this with a six-session program teaching other stress management techniques.

I am also involved in conducting a weekly support group for administration staff, where issues of self-care at work are addressed. The feedback from the participants attending this group is positive and many report acquiring new strategies to cope with the demands of their work. All of the factors identified in this study as sources of significant stress have been discussed in these groups and participants share strategies and ideas for coping with these factors.

One of the most useful strategies for coping with stress at work has been to teach staff to use Covey’s “Circle of Concern/Circle of Influence”: Seven Habits of Highly Effective People (1989).

Covey encourages employees to look at issues in terms of whether they are issues that they can do something about. The aim is for people to break the habit of blame and complain about factors outside of their control eg university budgets, the Asian economic crisis, the One Nation Party and, instead, seek strategies to respond in a positive way to factors where they can have a direct influence.

Increasing numbers of workers’ compensation stress claims is objective evidence that our work environments are becoming more stressful. While organisations may be seen as slow to implement workplace interventions eg job rotation, job redesign, incentive and reward programs which could address the stressors, we need to look at our own patterns which contribute to our level of stress at work eg lack of tolerance, poor impulse control, lack of self awareness. Work can thus become an opportunity for the development of useful life skills, as well as providing us with the rewards of the job.

References


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