AOSIS

Reigniting work engagement through coping for burned-out academics: An open distance learning context

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Orientation: The South African higher education landscape is undergoing significant change because of government mandates, the post-coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and digitalisation. This has led to an increase in job demands, contributing to burnout among academics and necessitating effective coping strategies to sustain their work engagement.

Research purpose: This research sought to understand the lived experiences of academics and the coping strategies they use to remain engaged in their work despite experiencing burnout.

Motivation for the study: It was necessary to hear the lived experiences of academics in a comprehensive open distance e-learning institution and the coping strategies they use to maintain work engagement despite experiencing burnout, as this is underexplored.

Research approach/design and method: An interpretive qualitative design was used to explore the diverse experiences of academics. Data from semi-structured interviews with purposively selected academics were analysed using content analysis to extract key themes.

Main findings: The lived experiences presented an integrative approach by academics, combining emotional intelligence and personal and professional coping strategies to reduce burnout and enhance work engagement and personal well-being.

Practical/managerial implications: The conceptual framework highlights the importance of using an integrated approach, combining emotional intelligence and coping strategies to strengthen optimal psychological well-being and functioning, to enhance personal wellbeing, increase work engagement and lower burnout among academics.

Contribution/value-add: This research offers insights into burnout's impact on academics and presents a framework to assist academics in managing burnout stressors while enhancing work engagement and overall well-being.

Keywords: burnout; comprehensive open distance e-learning institution; coping strategies; emotional intelligence; well-being; work engagement.

Introduction
Orientation

'I think it's just the constant demands and the multiplicity. So when you finish one thing, you pick up the next, you pick up the next, you pick up the next … I'm still coping, I'm still hanging in there, but … something could take me out quite quickly.'

Interview with an academic (P2WM).

The above quote succinctly captures one academic's reflection on the ongoing demands and challenges faced over the past five years in the higher education sector in South Africa, demonstrating not only the unrelenting pace and volume of work but also an underlying resilience that tempers their experience of potential burnout. These demands are influenced by government directives, the aftermath of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, shifts in the broader education landscape and the integration of digital technologies driven by the institutional demands of digitalisation and digitisation (Boonsiritomachai & Sud-On, 2021; Fernández-Suárez et al., 2021; Motseki et al., 2021). This resulted in increased stress among academics, who are also responsible for teaching and learning, community engagement and research. While these stressors can contribute to burnout, some academics demonstrate resilience by maintaining their work engagement despite these challenges (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). This delicate balance of coping

amid substantial professional demands necessitates a closer examination of the coping strategies that academics employ to sustain work engagement.

The increasing trend of burnout among academics is seemingly going to continue to increase and will have profound implications for academics' well-being (Naidoo-Chetty & Du Plessis, 2021; Urbina-Garcia, 2020). The demands on academics in South Africa are challenging because of post-COVID-19 pandemic changes and challenges in students' socio-economic status, technological advancement, political legislation and higher student-to-academic ratios (Darabi et al., 2017). Academics and higher educational institutions are directly impacted as academics' well-being correlates with educational quality and productivity (Barkhuizen et al., 2014b; Bezuidenhout & Cilliers, 2010; Dano, 2018). This necessitates focused interventions by policymakers to nurture sustainable academic environments through collaborating with mental health professionals to devise strategies to mitigate the impact of stress. Additionally, students' learning experiences are being compromised by faculty distress, having consequential negative effects on their learning experiences. Therefore, addressing academic burnout is essential not only for their well-being but also for maintaining institutional effectiveness and student success. To counteract its compounding effects, it is crucial to explore the coping strategies academics employ to sustain work engagement despite increasing job demands.

Research purpose and objectives

Previous studies primarily employed quantitative methods to identify coping mechanisms that academics use to handle workplace stress, yet these studies lacked the personal insights of the academics themselves. The purpose of this research was to deepen our understanding of how academics at a comprehensive open distance e-learning (CODeL) university remain engaged in their work despite experiencing burnout. By focusing on coping strategies and incorporating the perspectives of academics, the researcher sought to uncover both existing and new strategies. Through this approach, the researcher aimed to develop a framework to assist academics in managing stressors contributing to burnout and increasing work engagement.

Literature review

A growing body of research examines the dichotomous relationship between work engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) and burnout (Bakker et al., 2014, 2023; Maslach & Leiter, 2017). Other studies have explored how aspects of a job can lead to work stress or work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & De Vries, 2021; Bakker et al., 2014, 2023). Researchers have extensively relied on the job demands-resource (JD-R) theory and used quantitative instruments to determine the levels of burnout and engagement among various professional groups (Bakker et al., 2014, 2023; Bakker & De Vries, 2021; Demerouti et al., 2021). However, while quantitative research has provided

substantial insights into the predictors and outcomes of burnout and work engagement, there is limited research on the lived experiences of academics who navigate burnout and the coping strategies they use to sustain their work engagement.

Urbina-Garcia (2020) conducted a systematic literature review of 28 studies on the mental health of academics and found that only three studies investigated the coping strategies academics use to face work demands with only two exploring the lived experience of academics. The academic workload has undergone significant changes over the years, reflecting a marked shift from what was once considered a minimally stressful profession to a role now fraught with numerous pressures and demands. Barkhuizen and Rothmann's seminal articles (2008, 2014b) trace this evolution, noting an increase in role conflict, work overload and job insecurity, among other issues. This escalation in stressors coincides with substantive changes in the higher education landscape, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and digitalisation (Khoza, 2021; Naidoo-Chetty & Du Plessis, 2021). As a result, academic staff are under tremendous pressure to manage these changes and still meet the demands of their job, usually sacrificing their well-being or work–life balance.

The 2013 White Paper by the Department of Higher Education and Training marked a significant policy shift, requiring higher education institutions with large student populations to increase their contributions to national and international research. This shift aimed to support the country's transition to a knowledge-based economy, as outlined in the National Development Plan for Higher Education (DHET, 2001), which set the ambitious goal that by 2030, 75% of university academic staff should hold doctoral degrees. These initiatives have significantly increased the pressure on academic staff, as growing student enrolments demand higher levels of student success, greater research output and compliance with publication standards (Barkhuizen et al., 2014a; Bezuidenhout & Cilliers, 2010).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic introduced further complexities, exacerbating existing challenges and introducing new ones. As detailed by Khoza (2021), academics were thrust into an abrupt transition to online teaching and learning, compounded by travel restrictions and a significant impact on mental health because of increased isolation and uncertainty. These pandemic-induced changes necessitated a re-evaluation of traditional academic roles and highlighted the urgent need for research focusing specifically on their effects on the academic community. Institutions like the CODeL university in South Africa, which serves over 350 000 students through digital platforms, faced unique challenges that were not typically encountered by traditional universities. During COVID-19, academics at this CODeL university faced additional challenges. They shifted from blended to fully online teaching, implemented decolonised curricula and migrated to a new learning management system. They also reported

on strategic objectives and facilitated online exams, further adding to their already overwhelming workloads (CODeL Institution, 2022; Van Der Walt & Fynn, 2021).

Burnout has become a significant concern within academic circles, characterised by exhaustion, cynicism and a decline in professional efficacy. Initially described by Freudenberger (1975) and later expanded by Maslach and Jackson (1981), burnout was recognised by the World Health Organization (2019) as an occupational phenomenon, highlighting its prevalence and significance in work environments. The condition is primarily driven by excessive work demands that surpass an individual's capacity to cope. In the academic context, this is often manifested through high workloads, substantial student-to-academic ratios and low job satisfaction, particularly within the South African academic sphere (Rothmann, 2003).

Maslach's tripartite model of burnout – comprising exhaustion, cynicism and reduced professional efficacy – has significantly influenced the empirical and clinical approaches to understanding and managing this condition (Maslach & Leiter, 2017). Contemporary research suggests that the operationalisation of burnout could benefit from a broader inclusion of psychosocial and organisational variables such as job demands (Bakker et al., 2014, 2023), job control (Häusser et al., 2010) and workplace support (Demerouti et al., 2021). Systematic reviews by Khan et al. (2019) and Urbina-Garcia (2020) highlight the pervasive nature of burnout within academia, exacerbated by toxic social environments and insufficient support at universities.

The JD-R model, developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), provides a robust framework for addressing burnout by advocating for a balance between job demands and resources. This model is instrumental in enhancing work engagement and reducing burnout through strategic job redesign and resource allocation (Bakker, et al., 2014, 2023). It emphasises the need for organisational and conceptual changes to mitigate the impacts of burnout, thereby improving not only individual well-being but also overall work engagement and performance.

Work engagement, characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption in work, is another crucial aspect of academic life. Initially conceptualised by Khan (1990) and later expanded by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), work engagement has been significantly linked to the experience of 'flow' – a state of complete immersion in activities that balance challenge and skill, as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). This state is crucial for enhancing work engagement, which, in turn, influences organisational productivity and employee well-being.

Recent studies continue to explore the dynamics of work engagement by employing innovative methodologies that integrate psychological, emotional and cognitive factors (Bakker & De Vries, 2021; Yan & Donaldson, 2023). The JD-R model again serves as a valuable framework here,

illustrating how a balance between job demands and resources can affect stress levels and engagement outcomes (Bakker et al., 2014, 2023; Bakker & De Vries, 2021; Demerouti et al., 2021). By developing supportive managerial relationships and creating conditions conducive to flow, organisations can achieve enhanced work engagement and improved employee well-being (Bakker & De Vries, 2021; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Van Oortmerssen et al., 2020).

The increased stressors in academia necessitate effective coping strategies to manage the demands of the profession. Historically categorised into problem-focused and emotion-focused types by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), these strategies involve cognitive and behavioural efforts tailored to manage demands that surpass individual capacities. Effective coping can mitigate adverse effects such as poor-quality lecturing, conflicts with peers and students and general disengagement from institutional roles (Shrivastava, 2020). Adaptive coping strategies, including emotional, social support, leisure, religious and experiential coping, play a pivotal role in reducing burnout and increasing work engagement among academic staff (Kassim et al., 2019). The flexibility in coping strategies, as highlighted in research by Du Plessis and Martins (2019), is essential for effectively navigating the complex demands of academic environments. This adaptive approach not only addresses immediate stresses but also equips academics with the resilience to manage future challenges in the dynamic landscape of higher education. During this research, work engagement was viewed from a positive psychology perspective, or what McDonald et al. (2021) described as positive human functioning, that uses scientific understanding to create and help individuals thrive or flourish. Burnout was viewed from an existential positive psychology perspective, which is studying the human well-being experience of employees by focusing on understanding flourishing (work engagement) despite suffering (burnout symptoms) (Wong et al., 2022).

Understanding and addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by academic staff requires a comprehensive approach that integrates the management of burnout and the employment of effective coping strategies to mitigate burnout and, therefore, enhance work engagement.

Previous research shows that coping strategies such as emotional support, social connections and leisure activities help mitigate stress and prevent burnout among academics. However, this study goes further by developing a framework that enhances work engagement and reduces burnout. It also addresses inconsistencies in the effectiveness of these strategies across different academic contexts and disciplines. This holistic approach is essential for sustaining academic productivity and well-being in the face of evolving educational demands and challenges. Executing this holistic approach through an interpretivist lens allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the strategies individuals use to mitigate burnout.

Research design

Research approach and strategy

This study, situated within the interpretive research paradigm, emphasises the interpretation of individuals' lived experiences. Interpretivism, which recognises the complexity and unique perspectives of individuals in work situations, provides an intersubjective lens for viewing research data (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Rasid et al., 2021; Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

A qualitative strategy was deemed most appropriate for this study to explore academics' subjective lived experiences and the impact of burnout on their work engagement. This study employed a qualitative research design using an interpretive approach for data collection and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This inductive approach assisted with accessing and interpreting the subjective experiences of academics within their unique context, as derived from the perspectives they shared during semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Using an interpretive approach allows researchers to understand how participants make sense of their experiences with a phenomenon (Rasid et al., 2021). The study's unit of analysis was academic staff members at a CODeL Institution experiencing burnout symptoms.

Research method

Research setting

This study was situated in a CODeL university in South Africa.

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

The research participants were selected from the academic staff complement at the CODeL university. Participation was voluntary for the participants who met the inclusion criteria of being employed at the university for more than 2 years, who were between the ages of 35 years and 60 years, who fell in the academic categories of lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor or full professor and who in their opinion were experiencing burnout symptoms.

Research participants and sampling methods

Purposive sampling was used to select nine participants, four of which were lecturers, four senior lecturers and one full professor, rich in experience of the research phenomenon and willing to share their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The sample that complied with the selection criteria is reflected in Table 1. Using this sampling strategy assured the researcher of active participation and of obtaining quality-rich data as the participants believed that their contribution would be critical and impactful to the study.

Data collection methods

As part of the call to participate, a motivational letter outlining the study's intent, purpose and inclusion criteria was sent via email to all academics inviting them to contact the researcher to participate in the study. Participants who showed interest in the study were requested to complete an intake form that outlined the inclusion criteria parameters, thereby ensuring that the participants met the inclusion criteria. Semi-structured interviews effectively elicit participants' knowledge and experiences concerning the topic (Roulston & Choi, 2018). This approach provided insights into participants' experiences, motivations and perspectives, offering dependable and comparable qualitative data (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Participants were asked the following questions:

- Considering your day-to-day job as an academic, what would you say are the factors that result in you experiencing symptoms of burnout?
- To what extent would you say do these symptoms of burnout affect your ability to remain relatively well functioning and engaged at work so that you remain productive?
- What are the coping strategies you apply to manage your burnout and remain relatively engaged in your work?
  - On a personal level
  - On a professional level
- What enabling recommendations would you like to make to your employer to improve the work environment of academics that will lead to a decrease in burnout and enhance work engagement?

Data recording

The interviews were recorded using MS Teams, as necessitated by the CODeL Institution's COVID-19 policy. In accordance with De Vos et al. (2011), participants signed an informed consent form, which included permission for recording and for the interviewer to document electronic field notes for later reflection during data analysis. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by a transcriber, ensuring the accuracy, integrity and quality of the data. To maintain research integrity, the transcriber signed a confidentiality agreement, ensuring that no personal information or data from the interviews would be used for purposes other than the research study. This agreement also protected the participants' privacy, confidentiality and anonymity.

TABLE 1: Overview of the research participants' characteristics ($N = 9$).

Participant number	Title	Age category (years)	Race category	Gender	Tenure (years)	Pseudonym
1	Dr	41–45	White	Female	6–10	P1WF
2	Prof	46–50	White	Male	11–15	P2WM
3	Ms	46–50	White	Female	15–20	P3WF
4	Dr	46–50	African	Female	2–5	P4AF
5	Ms	56–60	White	Female	21–25	P5WF
6	Ms	35–40	African	Female	2–5	P6AF
7	Dr	51–55	White	Female	11–15	P7WF
8	Mr	46–50	African	Male	6–10	P8AM
9	Mr	35–40	African	Male	2–5	P9AM

Dr, Doctor; Prof, Professor; Ms, Miss; Mr, Mister.

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

According to Guba and Lincoln (1989) and Johnson et al. (2020), ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research requires a focus on credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. This study adhered to these principles by implementing rigorous data collection and validation procedures. Credibility was maintained by accurately transmitting and transcribing interview data while preserving respondents' authenticity and original understandings. Regular consultations with co-authors further reinforced the objectivity and contextual accuracy of the findings. Dependability was established by applying consistent methods and maintaining an audit trail, ensuring that findings could be replicated by other researchers. Confirmability was strengthened through rigorous verification of data to minimise researcher bias, alongside transparent documentation and co-author reviews. Lastly, transferability was enhanced by providing a detailed description of the research context and linking findings to established psychological theories, allowing for broader applicability in similar academic settings.

Data analysis and reporting

This study employed content analysis, combining Tesch's (1990) qualitative techniques with Terre Blanche et al.'s (2006) interpretive steps to code data into themes. The researcher systematically organised data from recorded interviews and field notes for easy retrieval and interpretation. Transcripts were reviewed using a bottom-up approach to induce themes based on natural data patterns, linking them to the research questions. Themes and related topics were coded, and commonalities identified using descriptive labels. Properties were connected to sub-themes, and all data were consolidated for analysis. Using Tesch's (1990) steps, the researcher examined themes for commonalities, discrepancies and omissions. A Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was used to organise themes, sub-themes and verbatim quotes, enabling rich data analysis.

Ethical considerations

Creswell and Creswell (2017) highlight that ethical research practices require informed consent, confidentiality and data protection to safeguard participant rights and integrity. Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa CEMS/IOP Research Ethics Committee (No. 2021/CEMS/IOP/039), University of South Africa College of Human Sciences research Ethics Review Committee (No. 34538445_CREC_CHS_2022) and University of South Africa Research permission sub-committee (RPSC) of the senate research, innovation, postgraduate degrees and commercialisation committee (SRIPCC) (No. 2022_RPC_004). Participation was voluntary, with all participants providing informed consent before engaging in semi-structured interviews. To maintain anonymity, privacy and confidentiality, responses were recorded and transcribed using pseudonyms. For example,

P1WF was assigned to Participant 1, where the first letter of race and gender served as identifiers (see Table 1). All transcriptions were securely stored on the primary researcher's password-protected hard drive, ensuring compliance with ethical data management standards.

Results

The primary aim of this research was to explore the coping strategies that academic staff at a CODeL Institution in South Africa employ to remain engaged in their work despite experiencing burnout symptoms. Four themes emerged from the interview data: (1) burnout stressors, (2) coping on a personal level, (3) coping on a professional level and (4) emotional intelligence. These themes, sub-themes and properties are shown in Table 2 and provide an illustration of the data structure and how the themes emerged from the raw data.

Theme 1: Burnout stressors

The results indicated that the main factors contributing to burnout among academic staff at the CODeL Institution included inefficient operations, heavy workloads and systemic issues. Participants pointed out that poor support from non-academic departments and inadequate technological infrastructures were major stressors:

'[A] challenge that literally makes me want to leave [*the CODeL institution*] is the support that is almost absent from the structures that are supposed to be supporting us … When you send an email, there's no response.' (P8AM)

'The biggest flaw for me as an academic at [*CODeL Institution*] is our technological systems and processes. Having systems that work, systems that are not always down … and having people who are designated to assist us when we have system glitches.' (P9AM)

TABLE 2: Grouping of themes into sub-themes and related properties.

Theme	Sub-theme	Properties
1. Burnout stressors	1.1. Inefficient systems	• Administrative support departments
		• Technological systems
	1.2. Heavy workload	• Administrative burden
		• Tuition versus research duties
	1.3. Systemic factors	• Management negligence
		• Organisational culture
2. Coping on a personal level	2.1. Self-care activities	• Exercise
		• Adequate rest
		• Relaxing activities
	2.2. Personal support structures	• Family and friends
	2.3. Spirituality	
3. Coping on a professional level	3.1. Time management strategies	• Prioritising tasks
		• Setting boundaries
		• Managing expectations
	3.2. Support from colleagues	• Working collaboratively
		• Emotional support
		• Mentors and role models
	3.3. Tenure and experience	
	3.4. Working from home	• Benefits
4. Emotional intelligence	4.1. Sense of purpose	• Making a difference
	4.2. Positive reframing	• Positive self-talk
		• Optimism

These inefficiencies caused delays in communication and placed undue administrative burdens on academic personnel. This heightened workload, primarily because of these dysfunctional systems, was a key driver of academic burnout:

'The students are going to send an email to [*support department*], and there's no response … And I end up now being all over. I can't concentrate on my research. I can't concentrate on my teaching and learning because I have to do extra work that is supposed to be done by someone else.' (P8AM)

Additionally, the results showed that the escalation in administrative duties prevented academics from focusing on their essential roles in teaching and research, leading to considerable stress and feelings of being overwhelmed and frustrated:

'Most of our colleagues will say that you cannot say 70% is tuition and then 30% is research because my time I completely dedicated to tuition … I don't have time for the other things … because you've given me this tuition load, you've given me this admin load … I don't have time to do other things.' (P6AF)

'The frustration, I promise you, say 99.9% of the frustrations and irritations from [*CODeL institution*] is admin and systems that are not working properly.' (P5WF)

Furthermore, the results highlighted organisational factors including management negligence and an unhealthy organisational culture, which academics perceived as significant contributors to burnout:

'I think some of the day-to-day problems that are maybe a bit of disillusionment with where you see problems and then you advise as best you can … people will not take the advice … I see the problem, I advise on the problem, and then nothing happens, and then everybody in the department struggles.' (P2WM)

Participants further provided insights into the organisational culture of the institution, with participants voicing frustration and disappointment with the discrimination and devaluation of a particular ethnic group's contributions, the ongoing and persistent non-responsive culture and the punitive culture of penalising those individuals who voice concerns:

'To sit in meetings where you are forced to sit and listen how they openly talk about how to work out white people.' (P3WF)

'I mean, this culture, the culture of non-response and what-what has been going on for a long time.' (P8AM)

'[*CODeL institution*] have a very punitive culture, so people who speak out about things that are wrong, are just managed out.' (P7WF)

Theme 2: Coping on a personal level

Coping on a personal level provides insights into the psychological, emotional and behavioural strategies that academics use to manage the challenges, stressors and changes they encounter in their lives. Most participants mentioned that they engaged in some form of self-care, such as exercise, adequate rest or partaking in relaxing activities to promote their physical, mental and emotional well-being. These activities provided solace, relief and an increased sense of well-being. Participant 3WF mentioned riding her horse for exercise and a form of mental reprieve from daily stressors:

'I ride my horse … a horse is very sensitive. You have to focus on something else, otherwise they pick up your tension … I have to let go of all my tension … So I'm fully in that moment, totally absorbed … I think it's important to be able to do something that totally absorbs you and forces you to think of something else.' (P3WF)

While two participants, P4AF and P7WF, found recreational reading and writing to be relaxing activities, one participant, P1WF, mentioned that partaking in extramural activities with her children helped her to relax and forget about her problems. Participant 6AF highlighted that taking breaks and getting enough sleep were crucial for managing stress and promoting rejuvenation:

'If I feel that I'm overwhelmed, sometimes just to take a day … days where you can feel your body's telling you, I cannot take it, you know. And for me, the biggest thing that heals me, it's just to sleep … It helps rejuvenate me.' (P6AF)

Participants emphasised the vital role of family and friends as personal support structures by providing comfort, understanding and a safe space during tough times, noting the importance of taking breaks from work to attend family events for mental engagement and distraction:

'I try to zone out and just spend time with my family … I put my laptop away … I just pretend as though I don't have things are outstanding or things that are bothering me. But you know, that works in that moment because you are able to be present.' (P9AM)

Participant 2WM highlighted the value of confiding in trusted individuals like a spouse and receiving supportive messages from family and support groups for motivation and emotional support:

'When I'm in a difficult situation, I would speak to somebody. I'd speak to my wife … I think that helps extensively just being able to vent … and sometimes just getting that advice back … those encouraging messages through the day … from men's groups … from your brother … from your wife, or from your son … they encourage you and they just keep pushing you.' (P2WM)

Participants mentioned that they found resilience, optimism and purpose through their spiritual beliefs when dealing with life's challenges. Participant 1WF, in particular, emphasised the significant, positive influence of spirituality and spiritual practices in her life, often describing it as transformative and a way to temporarily escape worldly concern:

'So in my way, the way that I'm flourishing is that I really give it over to my spiritual context … the difficulties of life, that's a given. Change is a given. But I know where I'm going afterwards, so for me, that's what's making me tick. That's what makes me flourish.' (P1WF)

Theme 3: Coping on a professional level

Increased stress in professional settings is often linked to poor time management, which can lead to missed deadlines.

Many participants in the study reported that they used various time management strategies, such as prioritising tasks by creating lists or setting boundaries, such as attending to emails during designated time slots, to mitigate stress and manage their workloads more effectively. Participant 9AM further mentioned the importance of goal setting and rewarding yourself when tasks are completed:

'I've set up tasks and I try to make my tasks to be reasonable for a 24-hour day … If finish those tasks, even though I have other tasks, I try to coach myself that, remember, this is what you set yourself to do for today. You've done it, it's okay, you can sit down, you can have coffee, you can watch a football match … I find that I am able to do that if I've completed the tasks that I've set for the day.' (P9AM)

Participant 6AF also mentioned the importance of managing expectations through proactively communicating her current commitments or tasks. This helped in managing others' expectations about the delivery timeframe, which helped establish healthier boundaries in the workplace:

'So if someone is asking you to do something, let them be aware what you're currently dealing with so that they don't expect you to give … they don't give you something now and they think in two hours they're going to get it back.' (P6AF)

Participants stressed the importance of colleague support, teamwork and open communication, citing these elements as key to creating a supportive atmosphere. They valued collective problem-solving, shared responsibilities, knowledge exchange and empathetic interactions for enhancing efficiency and fostering a positive, collaborative environment. Additionally, they recognised mentors and role models as crucial for providing learning opportunities, therapeutic support and fresh perspectives. Participant 2WM succinctly described this viewpoint:

'So these conversations and reflections with mentors and colleagues is one other thing that I do … After having these conversations … two things happen. The first thing is that you get to release the load from your shoulders by just talking … the second thing is that you get a fresh perspective on issues … [*they*] share from their own point of view what they think how you could navigate this and the other.' (P9AM)

Tenure provides stability and builds support networks, while experience enhances problem-solving skills, resilience and adaptability. Participants noted the value of past experiences in developing these skills. Participant P5WF used her experiences for coping and planning, and Participant 2WM, with 20 years of experience, became a key adviser and source of institutional knowledge:

'And because of my long 20 odd year record, I'm asked by many people 'How do you do this? What's the policy?' (P2WM)

'Okay, lessons learn from previous experiences too. Have your plan B and C, workaround, apply your mind, find a way.' (P5WF)

Many participants valued working from home as it saved commuting time and reduced unnecessary meetings, allowing them to use this extra time more productively for work. They viewed remote work as a strategy to prevent burnout and reduce stress by minimising constant scrutiny when taking breaks, thus enhancing their autonomy:

'That's my most productive space. I don't spend time, wasting time going to the office, driving in traffic, especially with loadshedding.' (P3WF)

Theme 4: Emotional intelligence

During interviews, participants expressed a strong sense of purpose in impacting students' lives. Participants 3WF and 1WF focused on making practical and motivational differences, respectively, in their students' educational journeys, highlighting their commitment as academics:

'That's why I came to academia, to make a difference. I'm a true academic. I saw things going wrong in practice, I wanted to translate that into something understandable to be able to help the students and really get them to practically understand what they need to be doing.' (P3WF)

'At the end of the day, I want to help my students to find their way and their purpose in why they've decided to study.' (P1WF)

Additionally, many participants practiced positive reframing, using techniques like positive self-talk to nurture personal growth, thereby enhancing their self-efficacy and agency:

'I have to be able to do some positive things every day.' (P3WF)

'So you don't say I'm going to create an exam paper, you tell yourself, I'm going to create a brilliant exam paper … and I'm going to be so proud of it … I create all that emotion and everything around that to try and create that goal, you know, and then I go for that. And that keeps me going.' (P3WF)

Participant 2WM also mentioned the optimism he felt about education's transformative power, inspired by celebrating small career victories and appreciating students who overcame socio-economic hurdles, which provided them with purpose and motivation to handle their own work challenges:

'I cope with the fact that you have the victories in the day. I think that helps me a lot professionally … I think it's the victories at work that really motivate you … I think it's those victories that really encourage you and then you overcome whatever the difficulties and keep pushing.' (P2WM)

Discussion

The study aimed to investigate how academics at a CODeL institution in South Africa coped with burnout while remaining engaged at work. It sought to provide an understanding of the CODeL context, define burnout and work engagement and examine coping strategies that academic employ to remain engaged in their work. The overarching goal was to develop a framework to assist academics in coping with stressors linked to burnout and thereby improving work engagement. Additionally, the study aimed to recommend strategies to enhance the work environment for academics, thereby reducing burnout and enhancing work engagement.

The four themes identified encapsulate participants' experiences with coping strategies to maintain work engagement. The proposed framework (Figure 1) shows the complex relationship among these themes. Burnout stressors are a primary factor influencing how individuals respond, as well as the pressure exerted on both personal and professional coping strategies. These coping strategies are intertwined, indicating that coping occurs across multiple domains simultaneously, with ongoing interactions between personal and professional aspects. Emotional intelligence is fundamental, underpinning the model and enhancing the effectiveness of these coping strategies, thereby enhancing personal well-being and work engagement. This framework highlights the supporting role of emotional intelligence in coping strategies, particularly through being motivated (sense of purpose), having self-awareness (optimism) and emotional regulation (positive reframing), which are all key components of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). While emotional intelligence alone does not eliminate burnout stressors, it enhances individuals' ability to manage stressors effectively, contributing to better psychological well-being and sustained work engagement (Cichoń et al., 2023). Developing these skills is, therefore, crucial for strengthening coping strategies rather than serving as a standalone solution to burnout.

The framework also highlights the integration of coping on a professional level, coping on a personal level and emotional intelligence within a unified circle, suggesting that using these strategies in a cohesive manner is essential to effectively reduce burnout and improve both work engagement and personal wellbeing. The objective of this framework is to offer a multi-level understanding of burnout mitigation, emphasising the significant interplay between emotional capabilities and coping strategies to enhance work engagement.

Findings from this study revealed that the CODeL institution's challenges with inefficient systems, heavy workloads and systemic factors significantly contributed to academic staff burnout, in line with broader literature on workplace stress (Urbina-Garcia, 2020). These inefficiencies led to academics becoming overloaded with administrative tasks, deterring them from fulfilling their primary teaching and research roles. The dynamics of high job demands versus inadequate job resources, as discussed by Bakker and Demerouti (2023), clearly manifest here, with such imbalances exacerbating stress and burnout. Furthermore, the organisational culture and management practices at CODeL were crucial in this context. Perceived management negligence and negative aspects relating to the organisational culture contributed to stress, supporting findings by
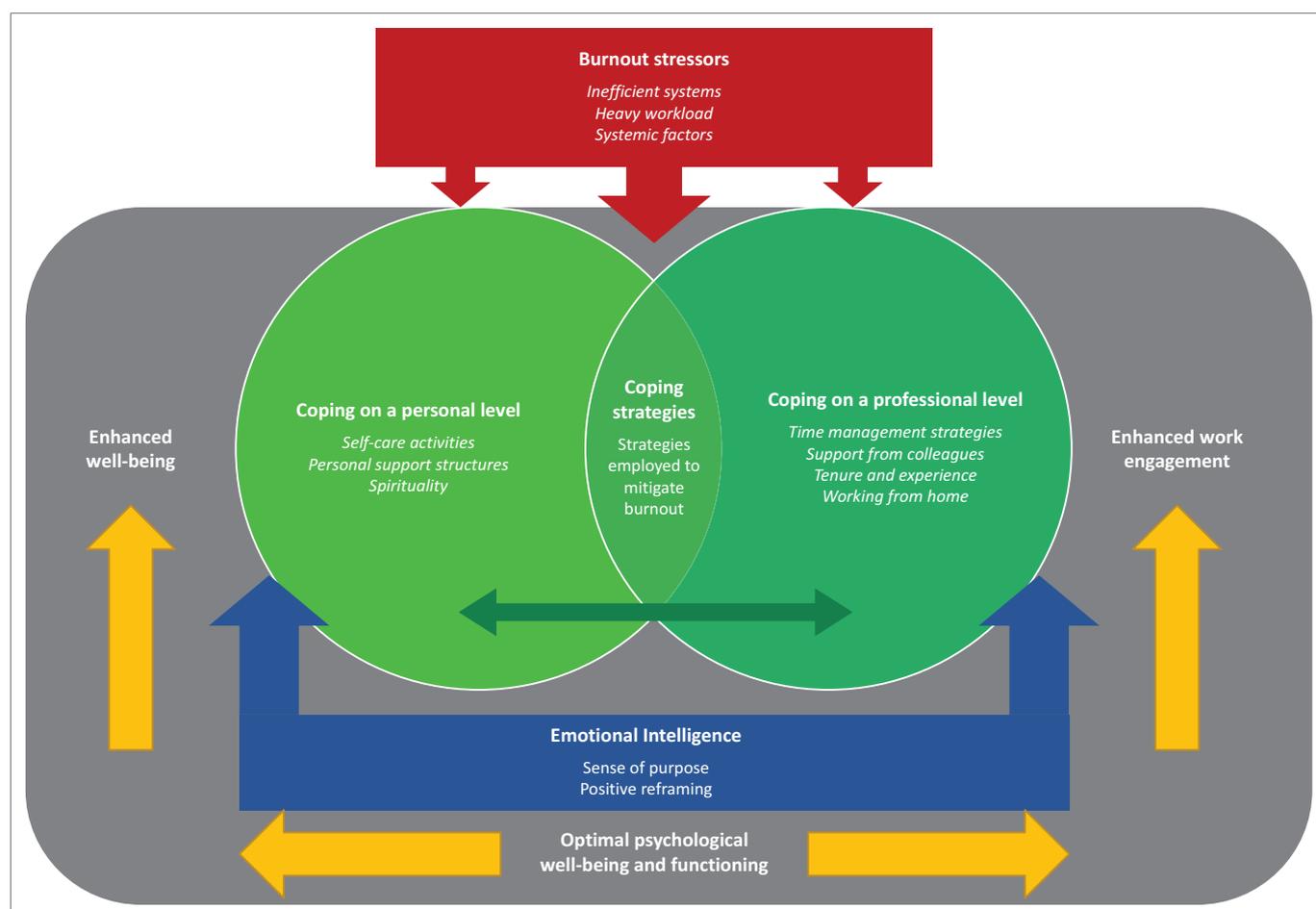

FIGURE 1: A framework for coping strategies to enhance academics' work engagement amid burnout.

Barkhuizen et al. (2014a) and Sharma et al. (2022), which associate poor management with increased employee stress and organisational inefficacy. The study highlights that academics rely on adequate coping strategies to mitigate burnout, demonstrating the necessity for academic institutions to strengthen support systems that address these stressors more effectively, a need also emphasised by Bakker et al. (2014, 2023).

The findings further suggest that academics effectively manage workplace stress through using personal-level coping strategies such as self-care, support networks and spirituality. Supporting literature highlights the benefits of these practices; for instance, engaging in physical activities, ensuring adequate rest and participating in relaxing activities have been shown to uplift mood, reduce stress and enhance psychological well-being (Vergeer & Biddle, 2021). The restorative role of sleep in stress recovery and its positive impact on cognitive and emotional well-being is also well documented (Junça-Silva & Mendes, 2023). What this study emphasised was the role that emotional intelligence plays coupled with these coping strategies. Enhancing emotional awareness and regulation is important in recognising stress and engaging in self-care (Coleman, 1995; Manikandan et al., 2022). Emotional intelligence also improves communication skills, enabling academics to effectively express their needs and seek support. Combining emotional intelligence with personal-level coping strategies not only mitigates burnout but also enhances work engagement and overall well-being (Cichoń et al., 2023). This integrated approach suggests that engaging and nurturing effective emotional intelligence could be key to supporting academics' mental health and productivity.

This study also highlighted how professional-level coping strategies are crucial in mitigating academic burnout, focusing on the importance of effective time management, supportive relationships with colleagues, the benefits of tenure and experience and the advantages of working from home. According to the literature, these strategies not only help manage stress but also enhance emotional intelligence, which is critical for improving communication, adaptability and resilience in professional settings (Fiorilli et al., 2019; Urbina-Garcia, 2020). Emotional intelligence plays a key role in enabling academics to articulate their needs clearly and collaborate effectively, thus reducing feelings of detachment and preventing burnout (Gong et al., 2019). Additionally, the presence of mentors and the accumulation of experience are invaluable, providing academics with the tools and insights needed to navigate challenges more effectively. This aligns with findings from positive psychology that emphasise the significance of learning from experienced colleagues and the impact of supportive relationships on personal growth and resilience (Carter & Youssef-Morgan, 2019; Cross et al., 2019).

The shift towards remote work, extensively studied in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, has also been shown to be a beneficial coping mechanism. It allows for greater flexibility and autonomy, leading to increased productivity through reduced commuting times and fewer non-essential meetings, which in turn supports a healthier work–life balance (Aczel et al., 2021; Aksoy et al., 2023). These professional coping strategies, although diverse, collectively enhance academic well-being, work engagement and provide balance. When interconnected with personal-level coping strategies, they reflect a holistic approach to managing both professional and personal stressors, as depicted in this study's conceptual framework. This comprehensive strategy is critical for sustaining both personal well-being and professional efficiency in academia.

The findings further suggest that emotional intelligence is the key factor influencing how a person copes on both a personal and a professional level, with a constant interplay between these two. Drawing on Marinaki et al.'s (2017) definition, emotional intelligence is integral to managing one's own emotions and those of others, and it is crucial for maintaining work engagement and general well-being. Studies such as those by Paul et al. (2020), Rothmann (2020) and Steger (2012) further validate that combining emotional intelligence with a sense of purpose enhances psychological well-being and job performance. The adoption of strategies like positive reframing, linked to emotional intelligence, significantly reduces burnout risks and increases resilience (Cichoń et al., 2023; Marais-Opperman et al., 2021; Seligman, 2018). These approaches help align individuals' actions with their values and goals, promoting personal and professional growth. Moreover, optimal psychological well-being and functioning or eudaimonic well-being, as described by Potgieter and Botha (2020), are conceptualised on individual and societal levels (Potgieter & Botha, 2020). On an individual level, the pursuit of meaningfulness, self-actualisation and personal growth are seen as components of a well-lived life, and on a societal level, there is a commitment to socially shared goals and values.

In this study, the optimal psychological well-being and functioning on an individual level can be described as academics' subjective experiences that what they do has personal significance and meaning and provides them with personal and professional growth, and on a societal level, their commitment to their socially shared goals and values is to their students, their profession and the organisation (Potgieter & Botha, 2020; Rothmann, 2020). This holistic approach highlights the importance of emotional intelligence in achieving both personal satisfaction and broader societal contributions in academic settings.

This study highlights that personal and professional coping strategies are interdependent, working together rather than separately. Central to this study's framework is emotional intelligence, serving as the fundamental element that influences both personal and professional-level coping strategies. The framework portrays emotional intelligence, along with personal and professional coping, as

interconnected components of a unified strategy aimed at preventing burnout. By integrating these elements, individuals can improve both their work engagement and overall personal well-being, offering a well-rounded approach to combat burnout. These insights are vital for developing interventions that promote well-being, work engagement and job satisfaction in organisational contexts.

Limitations and recommendations

A key limitation of the research is the contextual specificity of the findings, which are specific to a unique educational setting and cannot be generalised to other types of universities, either nationally or internationally. Given that the operational contexts of other institutions significantly differ from that of a South African CODeL institution, future research should include a more diverse sample from universities in both the public and private sectors to develop a comprehensive framework. The study employed a single data collection method and did not seek the views of management, which may have provided insight on the engagement of academics. However, the focus of this study was on understanding the lived experiences of academics and the coping strategies they employ to enhance work engagement amid burnout stressors.

Finally, the data revealed the significance of the concern academics had for the well-being of their students. This suggests future research should explore the consequences of poor educational outcomes for students with academic burnout. The well-being of academic staff and students may be linked, necessitating the development of effective strategies for both groups. This holistic approach will deepen our understanding of the dynamics of burnout within the higher education landscape and facilitate the promotion of healthier work environments for all stakeholders involved.

Conclusion

This study revealed the coping strategies academics used to enhance work engagement and mitigate burnout, providing crucial insights and leading to substantial recommendations across the field of Industrial and Organisational Psychology (IOP), to the CODeL and other educational institutions, as well as broader organisational contexts, academics and other employees. It highlights the need for industrial and organisational psychologists to fully comprehend and address the unique stressors that precipitate burnout among academics, especially in the unpredictable South African higher educational landscape. This understanding is vital for developing evidence-based interventions involving employee wellness departments and employee assistance programmes.

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Authors' contributions

B.W., L.S. and A.v.N. contributed equally to this article. B.W., L.S. and A.v.N. contributed to planning the study and then writing the introduction, background and motivation and problem statement section. B.W., L.S. and A.v.N. then proceeded to conducting the review of literature. B.W. collected the data. L.S. and A.v.N. analysed the data and wrote up the findings, contributions and conclusions sections.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, B.W., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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