

STRESS AND STRESS MANAGEMENT IN A HIGHER EDUCATION TOURISM INSTITUTION

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Review

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Abstract

In modern societies stress has become a widespread phenomenon and therefore an issue of major concern to employees, organizations and the state. Organizations (i.e. management) that want to be competitive in the dynamic environment of today have to handle the problem of stress successfully. Higher education is not immune to this problem. The overall purpose of this analysis is to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of stress among scholars in tertiary education. Teachers' work has always been considered to be very stressful. The aim of this research has been to find out how they combat stress operatively and strategically in a tourism educational institution.

The case study method was used and data was collected in semi-structured interviews. Content analysis of the interviews was used to determine stress perception, assessment, and management on an individual and institutional level.

While employees show great awareness regarding the effects of stress on their lives and apply several coping techniques, the institution seems to be rather uninformed about stress and, what is more, seems to generate causes of stress. Based on these findings, strategies are proposed for stress management within institution.

So far research on occupational stress among academics has been conducted mostly in Anglo-Saxon environments. This paper gives an in-depth insight into this issue in a context of a Slovenian tertiary education institution.

Keywords Stress, Stressor, Job burn-out, Tourism education, Coping strategies, Stress management

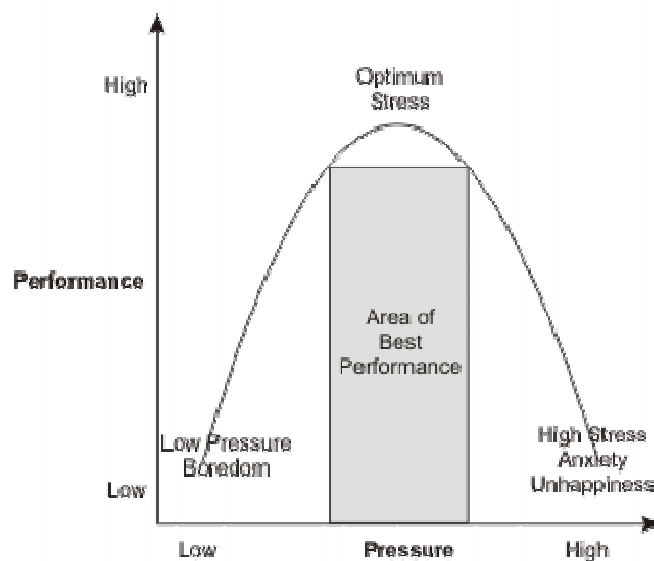
INTRODUCTION

Stress has become an inevitable part of our lives. Stress arises as a result of our relations with the constantly changing environment and our adaptation to it. A Canadian psychologist Hans Selye, the founder of the theory of stress, defined stress "as the nonspecific response of our body to any demand for change" (cited in Le Fevre et al., 2003, pp.726-744). Looker and Gregson (2003) describe stress as the mismatch between perceived demands and the perceived abilities to cope. Additionally, stress has been simply described as an unavoidable consequence of life (Sorenson, 2007).

Individuals cope with stress differently; thus we speak about positive stress (eustress) and negative stress (distress). What one experiences as distress is a stimulation for another or even a welcome turn in life. This paper deals mainly with distress, with an emphasis on stressors specific to a higher education institution, troubles caused by stress on employees of that institution, and strategies for living with stress.

The relationship between stress and performance is explained as an inverted U relationship as shown in Figure 1. The left and the right side of the graph below represent zones of distress, due to very little or too much of pressure on an individual to carry out an important task. The area of eustress means situations when abilities are higher than demands and we have a feeling of progress, satisfaction and creativity. Curves can be narrower or wide ranging, depending on an individual's experience of pressure.

Figure 1: **Stress and performance – the inverted “U” relationship between pressure and performance**



Source: Mind Tools (2011)

Youngs (2001) says that teachers' work is ranked as second most stressful behind air control. Similarly, research conducted by Sorenson (2007, p.11) reveals that: "...there is no shortage of factors within schools that can cause stress. Some school systems actually create a culture characterized by tension, stress, and anxiety." Consequently, stress has become a condition of twenty-first-century education.

Several researchers have pursued surveys on stress among teachers recently (Buckholdt and Miller, 2010; Bracci, 2009; Zabukovec and Demšar, 2009; Depolli Steiner, 2008; Sorenson, 2007; Crossman and Harris, 2006; Jerman, 2005; Johnson, 2005) and all agree that stress is teachers' professional risk, but this does not mean that teachers have to suffer the consequences caused by stress. An individual has to confront stress because it poses obstacles to his or her personal and professional development. Organisations have to be aware of problems caused by stress (i.e. less efficiency, motivation, creativity, fluctuation, absenteeism, additional expenses, etc.) and have to develop methods and tools to manage stress. Managers have a series of potential remedies at their disposal to mitigate employee stress (Upson et al., 2007). According

to Ross and Altmaier (cited in Nel, 2005), stress management can be grouped into two categories: preventive coping and combative coping. Nevertheless, stress management will bring results only if the institutional level is combined with the individual one.

1. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH DESCRIPTION (METHODOLOGY)

The aim of the research was to provide an overview of stress in the lives and work of higher educational teachers in the case of a faculty of tourism. The study will identify the main stressors and methods applied to manage them.

Research questions:

- What burdens does the higher educational environment place on employees?
- What are the strategies applied by the organization and those applied by individuals to confront stress?

The survey has an aim to elicit insight into stress in an academic sphere. Our approach is based on a phenomenon approach focused on participants' subjective experiences since we want to find out what aspects of academics' work and life are perceived as stressful and how they combat them. The research method used is that of a case study. Following Merriam's (2002) recommendations, a case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The sample was small, purposeful and studied in-depth. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, with open-ended questions used to elicit responses reflecting individual's concerns, feelings and experience. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour. The participants were selected based on their experience and qualifications, all of them being typical academics in the middle of their career who combine family life and career. Both sexes were represented.

While collecting, analysing and interpreting data an inductive method was applied. We tried to avoid bias as a possible consequence of the researcher's subjectivity and confronted our findings with works of other Slovene and international authors.

Table 1: **Sample questions**

<i>Question</i>	
1	Describe typical obligations of your workplace and those out of work
2	Good stress - what do you like best about your work?
3	A comparison with stress in enterprises
4	What aspect of work and life do you find most stressful and which have negative effects on your physical and psychological state?
5	How do you perceive distress - symptoms of stress: physical, psychological and behavioural?
6	How do you manage and reduce occupational stressors and stressors at home?
7	What can organization (i.e. management) do in order to help employees exposed to stressors?

A set of questions was prepared as a basis for a combination of the informal conversational interview and the general interview guide. The questions are included in Table 1.

The interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim, allowing quotes from interviews in the paper to illustrate and highlight the issues under discussion.

2. ANALYSIS AND DATA INTERPRETATION

Data were analysed through the method of general analytical strategy developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). The major phases of data analysis therefore consisted of data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification.

Examining the transcripts of interviews the frequency of certain patterns was studied, patterns were combined, and statements coded and recorded.

Data were divided into three categories (Table 2):

- Stress perception and assessment (typical burdens, sources and symptoms of stress, a comparison with enterprises)
- Stress management (individual level)
- Stress management (organizational level)

Table 2: A review of pattern coding allocation on participants and categories

categories participants	Stress perception and assessment	Stress management- individual level	Stress management- organizational level
(X)	XR1,XR2,XR3,XR4, XR5,XR6, XR8,XR9, XR10,XR13,XR14	XU1,XU2,XU3, XU4, XU6,XU8,XU9	XO1, XO5,XO6
(Y)	YR1,YR2,YR3, YR5,YR6,YR7, YR8,YR9, YR10,YR15,YR16	YU1,YU2,YU4, YU5, YU7, YU8	YO2, YO5,YO7,YO8,
(Z)	ZR1,ZR2,ZR3,ZR4, ZR6, ZR8,ZR9, ZR11,ZR12, ZR13,ZR17	ZU1,ZU2, ZU6,ZU7,ZU8, ZU9	ZO3,ZO4 ZO6

2.1. Stress perception and assessment (typical burdens, sources and symptoms of stress, a comparison with enterprises)

The statements of participants indicate that they have a very heterogeneous work and various burdens, including lectures and seminars, exams, mentoring and tutoring, preparing materials for students, their own study obligations, research work, administrative tasks, attending meetings, etc. We have to point out that they operate in a highly competitive environment: on a tertiary level there are eight vocational colleges in Slovenia offering two-year tourism and hospitality courses and five faculties offering three-year tourism courses (including hospitality subjects) as well as courses for postgraduates (Slovenia, like the UK, France or Spain has no post-secondary, non-tertiary VET). Besides, there are more faculties in the process of accreditation. However, experts (Lebe et al., 2009) assess that for the needs of the tourism and hospitality industry of Slovenia three faculties and three colleges would be sufficient. Thus, in times of fierce competition and limited financial support from the government all these institutions struggle for students especially when unfavourable demographic trends affect the enrolment numbers of students. They also confront an increased competition for international students. Their graduates are expected to be well prepared for the real business world, to cope with the changing skill requirements and the rapid technological development. The stakeholders demand more attractive and flexible study programmes and research responsive to market changes. Thus, teachers are under constant pressure to keep pace in teaching and research, as well as maintain their professional and personal development. The burdens our participants indicated as the most stressful were dissertation work, engagement in various subjects, research obligations, safety of jobs, ambiguous roles, non-transparent leading, too little opportunities for empowerment, climate in the organization, different obligations outside the university and consequently, a constant lack of time. Interestingly, these factors largely correspond with general causes of stress in other sectors as reported by Boštjančič (2011) for Slovenia and by Eurostat (2009) for 27 EU countries. However Slovene workers experience stress as the second most overloaded workforce in EU (following Greece).

This also illustrates how certain stressful situations, which can be mastered singly, cause a high degree of stress and represent insidious stress when combined. Cunningham (1997) warns that an individual can master one or two stressful situations a week, but if there are more of them and they last longer, they cause cumulative stress which cannot be controlled any more.

Analogical research results about stressors have been reported by several international authors. The major stressors of the staff as indicated in a research on an Australian university (Dua, 1994) were: workload, job significance, work politics, interpersonal dealings at work, work conditions, university reorganization. Cooper et al. (cited in Dua, 1994, p.60) have identified intrinsic job factors, e.g. poor working conditions, work overload, role conflict and role ambiguity, career development, job security, poor relationships at work, and organizational culture, e.g. lack of participation in decision-making. Authors agree upon variables that represent stressors within the organization: Ivancevich et al. (2008) emphasise that stress at work is complemented by factors from the outside environment: family, personal and social problems. Participants of our

survey too face numerous factors such as: taking care of small children, housework, provision of basic life necessities.

“If only I had more time to work longer, but I don’t; I have to go to the kindergarten to fetch the little ones...”

“From three to nine o'clock I have to be with children, this is my second job.”

Nevertheless, there are positive stressors (eustress) in pedagogic work: participants have a lot of satisfaction, including working with students, lecturing, a variety of tasks and flexibility of working time.

“You need to have a talent for pedagogic work.... I think I've got it, I enjoy working with students. I encourage discussions and creative thinking, it gives me a lot of satisfaction...”

“...it is a positive stressor, to broaden horizons of students, as well as mine ...”

Other researchers report about teachers having similar experiences (Constanti and Gibbs, 2004, p.247): “I have realized that if I'm not enthusiastic about what I do, the students are not enthusiastic about the subject; if I'm down, I think it affects their overall performance.”

Nel (2005) explains that stress is necessary for people to be successful. Exposure to stress over a period of time can be a stimulus for growth in a certain area. People have to find their own balance to decrease the risk of the effects of ongoing stress.

Among symptoms of distress participants mention primarily emotional and behavioural signs: tiredness, frustrations, irritability, aggression and a loss of interest, among physical signs they experienced sudden waves of heat, feeling out of breath, racing heart, nervous twitches, etc. However, similar to results of other research (Looker and Gregson 2003; Cunningham, 1997), our participants are more aware of the psychological than physical symptoms of stress. Looker and Gregson (2003) note that “...people live and work most of the time under stress so these feelings are familiar to them and they do not pay any attention to them” (p.70). In other words, we do not notice the signs of stress or we do not connect them with stress.

The worst outcome of stress is burnout, often connected with teachers' work, due to a long lasting exposure to high levels of stress. Johnson (2005, p.22) gives a good example, quoting an interviewee who says resignedly: “Life is to be endured, not enjoyed”. Furthermore, Cunningham (1997, p.171) warns: “Burnout is as much a result of the inability to take in new energy as it is the inability to let out negative energy and stagnation”. The results of our research have not revealed any such consequences.

2.2. Stress management (individual level)

Stress has to be maintained on a proper level. There needs to be an appropriate relationship between tension and relaxation. This balance - as Looker and Gregson (1993) recommend - can be achieved in two ways: by shedding some burdens or taking new ones and by improving abilities to manage stress. Jerman (2005) further suggests that attitude must be completely different: threats should be turned into challenges.

Our participants use several techniques to manage stressors: a healthy life style, regular exercise, proper nutrition, they do not smoke, do not eat too much or drink alcohol, maintain regular sleep, in spite of lack of time they try to go in for their hobbies, maintain friendly relations, are conscious of positive thinking, laughter and relaxation.

“... I like mixing with people.... talking.... I never shut myself away.”

Only one of participants practices meditation. None of them mentioned the need for professional help, so we assume stress can be controlled.

They set realistic goals, try to manage their time efficiently. Some have problems when shedding burdens: “I cannot say no unless it is really critical. And then I say no to everything, including when I need not.”

They try to moderate their perfectionism: “... I always seek perfection... when I was about to finish my thesis, I delayed it... is it good enough? Then I compared it with others and they were worse. And my mentor said it was excellent...”

Surprisingly, none of the participants mentioned the advantages of mentoring as suggested by Demšar and Zabukovec (2009). Interestingly, Newell (1995, p.157) reports on one such successful attempt: “Mentoring was recently initiated as a pilot scheme at Staffordshire University, with thirty-two mentors and mentees being involved. The university was able to identify some success from the system within six months.”

Mentoring is an efficient strategy against stressors like role ambiguity and conflicts, work overload, promoting and awarding; therefore it should be introduced and promoted. Furthermore, Demšar and Zabukovec (2009) add that mentoring has positive effects on mentors and their self-image as well and strengthens bonds among teachers. Interestingly, Weber and Ladkin (2008) explored the importance of mentorship as adjustments to workloads among tourism and hospitality academics from around the world. The authors examined career advancement and career barriers and found that mentoring was not identified as an important career advancement tool among respondents, nevertheless they assumed that it might be the case that respondents benefited from a mentor in a more informal manner through personal network or contacts.

2.3. Stress management (organizational level)

Stableness and quality of changes concerning individuals (new behaviours in lifestyle, etc.) can be achieved when they are supported and consistent with measures and politics on an institutional level. As for organizations, Cunningham (1997) proposes that stress needs to be optimized, because too little stress can be as harmful as too much of it. They lead to apathy, boredom and loss of interests and cause rustout as the other pole of burnout. Both are caused by distress due to too little or too much burdening.

But Le Fevre et al. (2003, p.734) believe that management must not seek to manage stress to an optimal level, much less induce stress in their employees, as part of any endeavour to increase performance: "There would appear to be little or no evidence in the occupational stress literature to support the assertion that a reasonable amount of stress, pressure, or anxiety in the workplace leads to high performance. We suggest therefore, that it may be time to explicitly reject this stance."

Among organizational measures Treven (2005) recommends the application of control strategies over factors causing stress and various programmes for employees to manage stress (workshops on stress management, workshops on relaxing methods, etc.). Organizations are also suggested to create a favourable organizational climate, set strategies of planning and developing careers, as well as motivating employees.

However, participants in our research listed very few applied organizational measures to manage stress operatively, let alone strategically: limited possibilities for empowerment, periodic informal meetings, excursions, etc. There are still numerous methods not utilized: one can change workplace, rotations could be welcome. But not always:

"As I see, it could be even worse: some teachers in other faculties get new subjects each year."

However, the higher education sphere brings some good aspects as well: time flexibility, work schedules, a lot of work can be done at home, etc.

Le Fevre et al. (2003) believe that the key contribution of management lies in assisting employees to experience the stressors of the workplace as eustress. Employees should be given support to make positive interpretations of their environment. This may necessitate investment in coaching and a variety of related personal development interventions. And above all, they have to empathize and engage in understanding how employees experience stressors. As one of our respondents indicates:

"There's management and there are all the others... They are probably overloaded and could shift some obligations to us. It'd give us motivation, challenges, inclusion in decision making... Stress would be distributed evenly."

As Bruce (2006) puts it, management has to make employees feel like partners. Making everyone feel like partners in the business is one way managers empower their people. Additionally, they have to encourage entrepreneurial thinking, explain how the business is run and help employees feel as if they own the business.

In sum, as far as the institutional level is concerned, the results are not satisfactory from the point of view of our interviewees. Participants spoke mainly about the need for more transparency in management performance and the flow of information, more participation in the decision making process of their work, clear rules, less administration and ambiguity. Therefore, we can conclude that the institution could improve the current situation with stress management programmes for employees, i.e. programmes for combating stress and for health improvement.

As Donaldson-Feilder et al. (2008, p.11) say, managers act as “gatekeepers” to their employees' exposure to stressful working conditions and are vital to the identification and management of stress in the workplace. This means that managers need to understand what behaviours they should show in order to manage their employees in a way that minimizes work-related stress. As suggested by Ivancevich et al. (2008, p.240), managers could take certain actions to create a supportive work environment. For example, they could set an example by being a source of support for subordinates. They could encourage open communication and maximum exchange of information. Next they could provide subordinates with timely performance feedback, presented in an encouraging, nonthreatening manner. Further they could provide for mentoring of the less experienced by more senior members of the work group. They could also work to maintain and increase work group cohesion.

2.4. Discussion: tertiary tourism education in Slovenia - a stressfull competitive field

As mentioned before Slovenian tertiary education in tourism is characterised by numerous players as a result of the significant increase in numbers of tertiary tourism courses. Thus, intense competition among course suppliers is noticed. Actually, concerns about the possible over-supply of graduates in tourism education have been expressed from the very emergence of the first private college of tourism in Slovenia in 1995. During the period of transition in Slovenia, it's orientation towards the market economy, joining the EU, together with numerous economic and social changes, the education system went through several reforms and bursts of private initiatives. Similarly, tourism and hospitality witnessed a substantial growth and development of the college and higher education programmes. Actually, the choice of programmes is not so wide: colleges offering two-year tourism and hospitality courses are obliged to offer a unified programme, whilst on a higher education level students can choose among different professional and university programmes: some faculties offer programmes with more general knowledge in economics, while others have several subjects related to tourism and hospitality. But their international ambitions are rather limited; international students are scarce and remain limited to Erasmus exchanges, while institutions are not active outside national boundaries. Distance learning is not developed. Similarly, graduates are not inclined to search employment outside Slovenia.

The employment framework for these programmes is thus limited though of considerable importance for Slovenia's economy (Hribar, 2009): this sector has contributed 12.3 % to Slovenia's GDP in 2008, which is slightly over 2 % more than the average in Europe or in the world. Around 116,000 people are employed in the tourism sector, which represents 13.6 % of the active population (the EU 10.4 %; the world 7.6 %).

The UK and Australia have undergone the growth of tourism courses in the late 1980s. It caused strong reactions and debate (Evans, 1993; Ryan, 1995; Amoah and Baum, 1997; Leslie and Richardson, 2000). Some academics expressed the pros (Ryan, 1995), some the cons (Evans, 1993) of the number of tourism courses on offer and their diversity. The UK also had to face the disappointing fact that employers in the tourism

industry preferred non-tourism graduates in employment selections (Amoah and Baum, 1997; Dale and Robinson, 2001), moreover, many employers considered that the best breeding ground for recruitments was the university of life (Evans, 1993). The author even suggested stopping the introduction of new courses and reducing the intake of undergraduates to courses. In response, Ryan (1995) noted that the expansion of courses should not be unexpected having in mind the growing importance of the tourism industry. As to the diversity of syllabuses and tendencies toward homogeneity in tourism education provision, Amoah and Baum (1997) pointed out that to impose uniformity would be to stifle creativity within tourism education.

In 2005, there were already an estimated 150 tourism degree programmes in the UK alone with about 10,000 students (Airey, 2005). We believe that Slovenian course providers can learn much from the British example and we agree with Ryan (1995) who pointed out that the tourism industry would always attract students; so it should not be denied to students as an area of study simply because all graduates cannot enter the tourism industry. Certainly the future of the faculty of tourism studied in this case is challenging; within endeavours for greater competitiveness they will have to create attractive programmes, keep pace with the needs of the tourism industry and try to exceed employability of their graduates. But management has to keep in mind the stressful position of the teachers and try to create a pleasant working environment first. In exchange for devoted teaching, learning, research, publishing, administrative and other tasks.

CONCLUSION

To manage stress is an imperative for a normal life because we live in times of stress. Stress is caused by a number of sources and we encounter them everywhere. Stress in the workplace is usually connected to stress in our private lives. That is why there has to be a holistic approach to stress management including both components from work and private life.

An assumption that we can live without distress would be very naive. Stress is a feeling produced by an individual in relationship with the environment so it can also be controlled and managed. Stressful situations can be turned to one's profit and kept in the area of a good stress or eustress.

This case study produced some interesting findings. Higher educational teachers in this case study are well aware of distress and recognize causes of their stress. They are familiar with different physical and psychological signs of distress as well. Research from other foreign (comparable) environments gave rather analogous results. This is hardly surprising, considering that our subjects are highly educated people and stress is nowadays a ubiquity.

Burdens of teachers are numerous. Their work requires a lot of expert knowledge, professionalism, research and pedagogical engagement. These jobs lead to a high risk of physical illness and psychological strain.

The participants in our research show familiarity with (and application of) most techniques for dealing with, reducing and avoiding distress. On the organizational level, as noticed within our small sample, activities in this direction are only sporadic and usually not targeted at stress relief. However, we suggest further research focusing on organizational measures that would provide additional valuable information, as well as on how employees interpret these stimuli in the workplace.

Thus, the results of this research cannot be generalized. Considering discussions of Easterby-Smith et al. (2005), in qualitative research, with small patterns and in-depth research of a specific phenomena, generalization is not a principal goal. We agree with Gmelch and Burns (1994) too, that academics are all but a homogeneous group of professionals. That is why it would be inappropriate to examine stress without regard to the professional and personal characteristics of individuals. However, findings of this analysis may encourage further research into this topic.

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