

**PhD Students Burnout , the Rewarding Experience**

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***Abstract:***

*The current article is an attempt to report and synthesize the factors and the effects of burnout on PhD students . The study aims at qualitatively exploring the existence of burnout syndrome signs among foreign language doctoral students . The study also attempted to identify the factors reflected in burnout syndrome and their impact on doctoral students research achievement . To collect the data , a qualitative semi-structured interview was used to gauge PhD experience as seen from the eyes of 6 English language doctoral students at Blida 2 university and Bouzerea University . Findings of the interview responses showed that English language doctoral students constantly experience different periods of burnout reflected in their high level of stress and anxiety , lack of sleep , fear of work deadline and inability to accomplish their research . This challenge has not only impacted their mental health but also negatively influenced their physical health . However , despite the burnout they encountered , students acknowledged the rewarding end of the PhD experience . In this respect , although students cannot completely eliminate the challenge of burnout but they can reduce it to write their thesis in a non-stressful environment .*

***Key words :*** *burnout syndrome , anxiety , mental health , physical health , PhD process , rewarding experience.*

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## **Introduction**

Pursuing a PhD degree is a beneficial and a rewarding experience . A doctorate is an advantage itself . However , earning this qualification is also characterized by different challenges and drawbacks . PhD students may experience periods of burnout during the long process of research .

PhD is a challenging and a demanding experience in students educational life . Burnout is a natural experience that PhD students face throughout the research process. The feeling of exhaustion reflected in the stress , anxiety , fatigue , insufficient sleep , health problems and reluctance for completing the work are also caused by the training environment. Furthermore , students burnout and mental health problems are responsible for students low achievement . They significantly cause low grades and accomplishment ( Eisenberg 2009 , Hysenbegasi et al 2005 , Hunt et al 2010 as cited in Nagy et al 2019 )

Furthermore , PhD is a personal achievement and the result of a long hard work and willingness to overcome different challenges . Part of their PhD process , students face the problem of detachment and reluctance in accomplishing the PhD research . The emotional fatigue , stress and anxiety they feel may reduce their motivation , enthusiasm and self-efficacy to keep on working . A feeling of inability and cold emotions students develop during this experience hamper them from sustaining on writing their theses and finishing them in the given deadline .Therefore , it is worthy to recognize how difficult this experience is and how it shapes the beliefs of a PhD student and above all how this far from easy experience shapes the mental and physical health of a PhD student .

In sum , PhD is a benefit to every student . Despite the fact that accomplishing PhD studies is a challenging task for postgraduate students , in fact it is extremely a rewarding experience .

### **The objective of the study**

The main objective of the present study is to understand the context of PhD students and explore their research work experience under the pressure of certain circumstances and prevailing factors . On one hand the study aims at ascertaining whether burnout symptoms exist among PhD students and exploring the effects of this challenging phenomenon on students mental and physical health . On the other hand , the study explores the doctoral process as the most rewarding and beneficial experience for PhD students .

### **Research questions**

To achieve the research objectives , the current study sought to explore the following research questions :

- 1- Do doctoral students experience burnout symptoms during their PhD research process ?
- 2- Do doctoral students view PhD research as a beneficial experience ?

### **Literature review**

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Reviewing the literature about post graduate students burnout , it is evident that there is a lack of research methodologies about this issue despite the fact that most researchers acknowledge the existence of burnout in students academic life and recognize the challenges of this phenomenon .( Nagy et al , 2019 ) . The issue of burnout has been considered as a real challenge for doctoral students and has attracted the attention of many researchers .

Regarding the literature written about burnout , there exists no ample agreement among researchers on the definition of this psychological phenomenon . For instance , Maslach . Christina was one of the most famous psychologists who studied the dynamics of burnout by conducting personal interviews and self-report questionnaires . According to Maslach ( 1976 ) burnout factors and effects varies in severity . In many cases , burnout is associated with different indexes like long periods of stress , mental illness , cynicism , detachment from work accomplishment , family problems , alcoholism and even suicide . Burnout means carrying higher emotions overload that makes people disconnect just like the electricity wire . According to Maslach , burnout is not inevitable , it can be reduced by changing some social factors . It is worthy to train people to socialize with each other and focus on the source of stress to sustain their psychological well being . Understanding the motivation of their work and recognizing the expectations of their work . The researcher ended by developing the Maslach Burnout Inventory ( MBI ) questionnaire to measure burnout . One of these questionnaires was the MBI – General Survey for Students . The questionnaire was designed to university and college students to measure three scales of burnout : exhaustion , cynicism and professional efficacy .

An interesting study that explored the negative impact of burnout on the quality of the PhD research was conducted by Nagy et al ( 2019 ) . The researchers explored biomedical doctoral students state of burnout and health problems in the United States . The team utilized self-report questionnaires to measure the dimension of burnout and identify the mental health symptoms . In addition to that , students academic achievement and outcomes were also assessed through psychiatric interviews . The findings of the study demonstrated that students burnout was significantly related to dropping out the work , health problems and certain psychiatric disorder . The participants also showed high levels of anxiety and stress which caused them some depression symptoms . This exhaustion negatively influenced the quality of their scientific research and academic productivity . The researchers recommended to promote the relationship between advisers and students to guarantee continuity and accomplishment as well as to provide financial support for students .

Similarly , Gardner ( 2009 ) explored the challenges that doctoral students face when completing their post graduate studies and their attribution . The researcher claimed that among 100% of PhD students who succeed in their doctoral contest only 50% of them are able to accomplish their doctoral education . Different factors and challenges contribute to doctoral students dropping out from PhD education . Gardner stated that inability , focus , initiative and mental health are the major factors of students dropping out . In addition to these challenges , the researcher identified

other challenges related to department problems , poor advising , poor relationship with advisers and lack of financial support .

In this context , Corner et al ( 2017 ) investigated the relationship between supervision activities and doctoral students burnout and the effects of this relationship on students completion of post graduate studies . According to the researchers , the doctoral journey is characterized by intellectual and emotional challenges . A prolonged work under stress and in a threatening supervisory environment will certainly lead to burnout and cynicism . In this respect , the researchers explored PhD students perceptions of supervision . To reach the aim of the research , 248 doctoral students from different universities completed a Doctoral Experience Survey to measure students experience under supervision and burnout . Findings of the study indicated that despite the fact that students were satisfied with supervision activities , they showed symptoms of experienced burnout and experienced lack of satisfaction to complete their studies because of the supervision inequality . The researchers concluded that the relationship between supervisor and students is the most important factor that determines the success of the doctoral process . Students who had a good involvement with their supervisors and worked in a relaxing supervisory atmosphere succeeded to complete their PhD theses and never thought of dropping out .

Another interesting study that supported the idea of the negative impact of academic burnout and stress among graduate and post graduate students on their outcomes and achievement was conducted by Allen et al ( 2020 ) . The researchers explored the effects of the duration and the quality of sleep on Master and PhD students stress , exhaustion , cynicism and inefficacy . To collect the data of the study , a large size of students was collected . 2689 master and doctoral students completed an online survey . Results of the study showed that most participants slept between 4 to 6 hours every night . Therefore , students with good quality and long duration of sleep showed a low level of exhaustion and cynicism as compared to students with poor quality and duration of sleep . The researchers concluded that good sleep habits decreases students exhaustion and burnout and results good outcomes and work achievements .

Some studies revealed that burnout was also related to Covid 19 pandemic . The Covid 19 pandemic period precipitated the predisposition to burnout as well as mental and physical health problems . In a recent study , Andrade et al ( 2023 ) demonstrated that Covid 19 did not only impact public health but also academic life problems among university students . Covid 19 influenced students mental health and burnout syndrome . To conduct the study , 419 Master and PhD students in different European universities participated in the data collection . Findings revealed that students with high level of supports from university and good sleep quality showed low level of burnout . Findings also showed that students burnout symptoms were related to thinking about dropping out , taking depression medicines and drinking alcohol .

On the other coin of the research , PhD is a pursuit for a minority of graduate students. It the most respected achievement in education . In this context , Stubb et al

( 2012 ) explored doctoral students perceptions about their theses projects and how they engaged in PhD studies . To collect the data , 669 students from medicine , humanities and behavioral sciences participated in the study . The findings revealed that students perceive the PhD journey as an advantageous experience which ends with a rewarding product . The study findings also revealed that among the factors that contribute to students disengagement in completing their research are the students environment and the feeling of exhaustion . Similarly , Bryan & Guccione ( 2018 ) conducted a qualitative interview study to identify students perceptions about doctoral values and the experienced PhD process . The study provided a conceptual model of doctoral value to enhance the benefits of the doctoral experience as a rewarding journey despite the obstacles students encounter .

From the above review of the literature , it is evident that most of the studies conducted on PhD students were conducted mainly with medical , healthcare and human sciences students. As a result , the current research is an attempt to explore the phenomenon of burnout reflected in foreign languages doctoral students . Based on the research literature , the current study will explore the challenge of burnout doctoral students encounter during the doctoral process that ends as a rewarding journey and a triumph .

### **Methodology**

The current research sought to explore a psychological phenomenon prevailing in a social context . An exploratory design with a qualitative strand was used to ascertain beliefs about the relationship between doctoral students burnout and its effects on their research experience . To collect the data 6 doctors who have recently completed their PhD research participated in the study . Four participants graduated from the English Department of Ali Lounici University , Blida 2 and two graduated from Bouzerea University of Algiers . During their doctoral process , 3 students were assisting undergraduate students at university and 3 students were working as teachers in secondary and middle schools .

Most researchers agreed on assessing burnout either by addressing self-report questionnaires based on Maslach Burnout Inventory ( MBI) or the Burnout Assessment Tool , or by conducting psychiatric clinical interviews . Thus , in order to collect the data from the participants , a semi-structured interview was used . The interview aimed at gauging the students participants responses about their experience with burnout factors and effects . The interviewees responses were inductively and thematically interpreted .

### **Findings and discussion**

PhD is a burnout inducing experience . Findings of the current research revealed that factors associated with English language PhD students burnout are mainly the high level of stress , health problems , quality of sleep and supervision support . These findings were thematically categorized in regard to the interview questions .

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The participants were interviewed about the different kinds of stress they experienced throughout the PhD process . Findings of the interview revealed that the doctoral studies were too stressful for all the participants . They felt anxious and nervous , they also felt a high level of tension . The participants also claimed that they worried about their theses all the time even in their free time . Some of the participants revealed that they usually took medicines to reduce stress and avoid the problem of cynicism . Some of the participants suffered from severe physical health problems and one of them had a surgery . Another factor of burnout is the intensive time commitment . Students sacrificed their time and substantial efforts to complete their research under the deadline constraint . They also explained the fact that they were stressed by the workload and the deadlines they had to complete their theses .

Respectively , anxiety is also induced from limited time and deadline to submit the research . Writing the PhD thesis is time consuming in terms of gathering data and analyzing them . Moreover , publishing articles and attending conferences is an overwhelming task for students who have a strict limited time . The interviewees were either working at university or working in a secondary or middle schools . That is why it was not easy for them to balance between studying and teaching in terms of responsibility and time intensive working . Thus , this negatively impacted the students mental and physical health .

Burnout was also reflected in the participants quality and duration of sleep . The participants responded that they did not have a good sleep quality and they had few hours of sleep duration . The students indicated that they were unable to sleep when they had a high level of exhaustion or when they had a loaded work completion . This finding supports the finding in Allen et al ( 2020 ) study in revealing the quality and duration of sleep effect on students physical and mental health .

The Covid 19 pandemic had not only affected the social life of doctoral students but also influenced their research . The six participants of the current study encountered the challenge of Covid 19 under the close of the institutions . Therefore , their research methodology procedures were interrupted , limited or postponed . The participants revealed that they worried all the time about how to observe their case study . According to them , technology helped them during the pandemic in terms of addressing online questionnaires or making phone call interviews to collect their data. This aligns with , Andrade et al ( 2023 ) study about doctoral students research achievement during the lockdown period .

Four of the participants revealed that satisfaction with their supervisors relationship . They acknowledged the assistance , the support and the motivation they received from their dear supervisors . They experienced an ambience and social and emotional caring from the part of their supervisors . On the other hand the two other participants were really disappointed with the supervision activities they received from their supervisors . Therefore , it is concluded that a supportive supervision relationship and a positive supervision atmosphere can provide solid directions and positive agreement between the supervisor and supervisee . A caring supervision helps the doctoral student in organizing their work and managing their time to accomplish the research effectively . However , uncomfortable supervision

atmosphere hinders the doctoral students' productivity and increases the burnout syndrome . Moreover , students failure of achieving the research deadline because of poor supervision can lead to dropping out from PhD work .

As far as the effect of burnout on the participants idea of dropping out , the current study contrasted the studies of Gardner ( 2009 ) and Nagy et ( 2019 ) which identified dropping out from PhD work as a main effect of burnout . The six participants of the current study stated that they never thought of dropping out . Despite the fact that three of the participants were teaching elsewhere with full time jobs , they decided to take the risk and the burden of working and studying . Thus , the participants revealed their satisfaction of completing their theses despite the obstacles they faced .

Although , it is difficult to combat burnout , there exist certain strategies and plans to reduce the level of burnout syndrome . As a result to the aforementioned factors , it is recommended to improve the well-being and self-care of PhD students . It is necessary to provide psychologists to support students during the training process and the thesis accomplishment . For the sake of empowering them to attend psycho-educational meetings and workshops to recall their problems . Psychologists assist students by encouraging them to plan their work effectively . They need to create a balance between research work and life pursuit . Working like a horse will certainly kill the students . As a result , to overcome the challenge of burnout students need to recharge their batteries from time to time . They tend to have a break , play video games , watch their favorite film , go out for a walk to get ready to work again with a strong energy .

The most important finding is that the six PhD students participants were highly motivated to pursue their PhD research despite the challenges they encountered . The interview revealed that students were diving into research and had an immense workload , they declared that they had limited time for entertainment and few opportunities for holidays rest . Regarding the value of the PhD experience , the participants were asked about the reason that empowered them to complete their post graduate studies . Most of the interviewees revealed that they can have job offer as a teacher researcher after the PhD . Respectively , the participants were asked about how they view this experience . The responses varied , some viewed the experience as a nightmare and others looked back at this experience as a dream which happily ended as they wished . Despite the fact of being difficult for them , they assumed that they did it with joy . This indicates that PhD requires maintaining interest and enthusiasm and keeping passionate to carry on the research .

Accordingly , PhD is a triumph not all graduate students can achieve . It can be a rewarding dream more than being a difficult experience . This idea was evident in the interviewees responses when asked about the reward of being a PhD doctor . Most of the participants asserted that they realized a childhood dream or a family dream to be a doctor . They appreciated the idea of being a researcher and meeting educated and intellectual people . They wanted to improve their skills deeply in various research areas . The three participants who were teaching in secondary and

middle schools , were eager to stop teaching in these contexts and wished to be hired at university .

Consequently , instead of focusing just on the thrilling challenges and the disadvantages of the PhD process , it is important to recognize how rewarding is this experience and highlight the enjoyable and exciting things and moments drawn during this experience . The first and last goal of a research is to be rewarded , this is a truth that every PhD student has to consider at the beginning of the research .

### **Conclusion**

Due to the challenges related to PhD students life when completing their post graduate studies and doing research , different factors contribute to the ill-balanced PhD experience and reluctance in completing the PhD thesis . Sacrificing years from their life for the scientific research can certainly predispose the risk of burnout among PhD students . It is very important to recognize these factors to decrease the challenge of dropping out and achieve the reward of defending the thesis successfully .

Based on the current research findings , the PhD students participants presented a high level of burnout symptoms reflected in their constant stress , anxiety , lack of sleep and physical illnesses . It was evident from the interviews responses that when the level of burnout increases , students low level of motivation to accomplish the research experience decreases

The current research represents a number of limitations The study data collection was based on just one tool that is the interview unlike the other studies which used both self-report questionnaires and interviews to provide more validity and reliability to the research . However , besides the interview used in the current study , the study intended to adapt Maslach burnout inventory questionnaire to measure students burnout and efficacy during the PhD process . As a result to certain limitations , the questionnaire was not addressed to the PhD students and only the interview was utilized . In addition to that , the sample size was insufficient which results a limited exploration of the research . The small sample of the study was conducted on female doctoral students . It can be concluded that gender may play an important role in developing burnout syndrome . Findings may differ with male participants . For this reason , further studies on the factor of gender in developing burnout are needed .

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