

# Teacher burnout in Japanese higher education

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In this brief paper, teacher burnout in Japanese higher education is described. In particular, faculty burnout, work-related stressors, and career fit are described. A case of a typical full-time contract English teacher is used to illustrate burnout within the current Japanese higher education context. The paper concludes with a number of practical suggestions for both contract teachers and university leadership.

本論では、日本の高等教育における教員の燃え尽き（バーンアウト）について考察する。特に、大学教員のバーンアウト、仕事関連のストレスの要因、そして職業への適合について論じる。典型的な専任契約教員の例を用いて、高等教育の現場における教員のバーンアウトについて詳述する。結論では、契約教員及び大学首脳部に対していくつかの実践的な提案を行う。

As of May 1, 2012, there were 783 private, public, and state-run universities in Japan (Aoki, 2012). Generally speaking, there are three levels of teaching faculty members at most institutions: tenured, full-time contract, and part-time. Naturally, the duties and responsibilities, along with remuneration, vary greatly with each type of position. Part-time teachers' primary responsibility is teaching, while full-time contract and tenured teachers have additional duties such as office hours, curriculum/materials development, and committee work.

In recent years, the ranks of full-time contract teachers have swelled. Typically, the length of these contracts is between one and four years. As a result of recent legislation, it is unlikely that longer contracts (including renewals or extensions) will be offered in the future because of tenure implications (see Rivers, 2013). A December 2012 search of the Japan Research Career Information Network (JREC-IN) <[jrecin.jst.go.jp](http://jrecin.jst.go.jp)> for full-time contract English teaching positions found a number of openings in various regions of the country. A sample of these postings can be seen in the Appendix. All of these positions were one-year contracts, with between two and four extensions possible, effectively making the duration of these contracts between three and five years. These positions are given titles such as "Contract English Instructor" or "Non-Tenured Associate Professor" to distinguish them from the other levels of faculty members.

## A typical contract teacher

To illustrate the teaching conditions faced by contract teachers, the case of a single full-time contract teacher (a composite based on the author's acquaintances) will be used. In the 1990s, James arrived in Japan on The Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET Programme) as an assistant language teacher (ALT). Like many recent university graduates, James had not determined his long-term goals and his career aspirations. Although James enjoyed his life and work in Japan, he had no intention of staying long term, nor did he plan on becoming a career educator. However, during his second year of teaching as an ALT, James came to the realization that he truly enjoyed teaching and helping others learn. In order to advance in his teaching career, James completed a master's degree while continuing to work full-time as an ALT. Upon completion, he was able to make the transition from the lower secondary level to higher education by obtaining a full-time contract position at a medium-sized private university in Tokyo.

At first glance, it would appear that James has a successful career in higher education. Unfortunately, this is not entirely true. In his early 40s, he has completed a number of limited-term contract positions at several universities during the past decade. He has remained committed to professional development and is an active member of several domestic professional organizations. Also, he regularly publishes and presents both domestically and internationally. Despite his commitment and efforts, James has not been able to advance in his career and he is still working as a full-time contract teacher. This lack of advancement in itself is not a problem, but he is beginning to have a sense of urgency because only a year and a half remain on his contract and he will soon be forced to find a new position. As a married man with two small children, James is reluctant to relocate his family every three to five years because of the instability it creates. As a result, James is looking for a tenured position to be able to provide stability for his family. Although James may not be aware of it yet, he may be experiencing the onset of faculty burnout.

### Burnout

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* gives a broad definition of burnout as “exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration” (Burnout, 2011). Minter (2009) describes faculty burnout as a “lack of desire and motivation to achieve a balance among professorial responsibilities in the areas of: teaching, scholarship, service, and student care-giving and peer relationships” (p. 1), and “when one experiences detachment (especially from students, staff, peers and clients) and a loss of satisfaction or sense of accomplishment” (p. 1). Despite rates of burnout in higher education being approximately half that of the general workforce (Lackritz, 2004), it is a serious issue that warrants attention. Minter (2009) calls the higher education environment a “breeding ground for burnout” (p. 2) for several reasons:

- Information about work-related stress and burnout is not readily available.
- Unlike most occupations in which low performers are dealt with quickly, low performers in higher education are “tolerated” for longer periods of time (p. 3), and the tenure system ensures that even marginal tenured professors are “well protected by the establishment” (p. 3). These underperforming individuals can cause additional stress for their colleagues.

- University educators are also at risk because of the stress created by maintaining relationships with a large number of people such as students, staff, and administrators (Lackritz, 2004).

To deal with burnout, teachers have a number of coping mechanisms. When faced with exhaustion, one tries to create an emotional and cognitive distance from work (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). To do this, one may become increasingly cynical and negative towards others (Watts & Robertson, 2011). They may consider people as impersonal objects to create emotional distance. For example, they may use derogatory labels for students, have distant attitudes, use physical distancing, and experience psychological withdrawal (Maslach et al., 2001).

Faculty burnout gradually progresses through three stages over time. The three stages are *stress arousal*, *energy conservation*, and *exhaustion* (Minter, 2009). Returning to the case of James, it is quite possible that he is in the first stage of faculty burnout, stress arousal. He is beginning to feel stress and frustration as the result of job instability created by limited-term contracts. Although he was able to transition from being an ALT to a full-time university instructor, he has been unable to advance by obtaining a tenured position, despite meeting all of the required qualifications such as years of teaching experience and a number of academic publications. Quite simply put, James is acutely aware of “the joyless quest for promotion and tenure” (Perlmutter, 2007).

In addition to beginning to feel stress and frustration, James is starting to feel detachment, particularly from other faculty members in his department. Although he is a full-time instructor, he is acutely aware of both the subtle and overt distinctions that are continually made of the three ranks of faculty members at his university. An obvious example is the department meetings which are for only tenured faculty members. Despite having made a substantial commitment in terms of time and energy to his university, James is not involved in any decisions which have a direct impact on him and his students.

### Work-related stressors

In academia, there are a seemingly countless number of stressors that can lead to burnout: salary, institutional policies, administrative expectations, and institutional bureaucracy (Minter, 2009). Additional stressors are ill-equipped students and heavy course loads (Watts & Robertson, 2011).

Back to the case of James, the biggest work related stressors are financial in nature. Although he receives a modest income as a full-time contract instructor, he does not receive annual bonuses nor does he qualify for a severance package upon retirement. Unlike his tenured colleagues, he also does not receive a research budget to cover professional development expenses such as academic conferences and professional associations.

There are a number of institutional policies that are sources of frustration. A full-time contract teacher's primary responsibility is teaching, so limited assistance is provided for those who wish to develop themselves professionally. James has a modest discretionary fund, which is intended for materials development and cannot be used for memberships in professional organizations, nor can it be used to attend academic conferences. Another policy concerns his working hours. His contract specifies that he must be on campus 38 hours and 45 minutes each week. This is a striking contrast to part-time teachers, who are only on campus when they have classes, and many tenured professors, who are not on campus when they do not have classes or meetings.

In addition to his teaching responsibilities, James has a wide range of other duties such as materials development, student interview tests, and special classes. He is required to maintain office hours and is expected to be available to complete a variety of tasks when needed. Although it is not specified in the terms of his contract, there is the perception that he is always available to complete proofreading, editing, and rewriting tasks for colleagues in other departments.

Even in the classroom, stressors abound for James. One stressor is ill-equipped students. As a result of the low birthrate in Japan, lower ranked universities are struggling to meet their enrolment quotas. This has forced many universities to accept students that are not suited for higher education. About this shortcoming in academic ability, educational writer Taiji Yamauchi observed, "There are university students who don't know how to multiply" (Aoki, 2012, para. 4).

In addition to classes filled with ill-equipped students, James has a relatively heavy course load. He is required to teach ten 90-minute courses each week. Unfortunately, James has little input into the course offerings that he teaches. He only teaches large compulsory classes for freshmen and sophomores and does not teach seminar courses like his tenured colleagues. Even more frustrating is the fact that all

major aspects of his courses (textbook, syllabus, and evaluation methods) have been set by the administration. Further adding to the workload is the wide range of courses that he is teaching.

### Career fit

In academia, faculty members are expected to make contributions in a number of areas such as teaching, scholarship, service, and student-care-giving (Minter, 2009). Naturally, keeping everything in balance can be challenging. Career fit is defined as "the extent to which an individual is able to focus their effort on the aspect of work that they find most meaningful" (Shanafelt et al., 2009, p. 990). In a large-scale study of 465 faculty physicians, it was found that time spent on personally meaningful activities significantly reduced burnout (Shanafelt et al., 2009). Although this study focused on faculty physicians, there are possible implications for all faculty members in higher education. Faculty members who are able to spend time on personally meaningful activities (e.g., scholarship, service) are less likely to suffer from burnout.

Returning to James, his current position does not allow him to focus his efforts on personally meaningful activities. Although tenured faculty are expected to make contributions in a number of areas, a full-time contract teacher's primary responsibility is to teach compulsory freshmen and sophomore classes. Despite his commitment to scholarship, his institution does not give him formal opportunities to be involved in research initiatives.

### Coping with burnout

#### *For teachers*

When faced with burnout, Coombe (2008) suggests that most teachers react to burnout in three ways. The most extreme reaction is ending their teaching careers. Another reaction is downshifting by changing roles or relinquishing duties. The third and final reaction is changing their self-identities as teachers by changing their focus. Coombe gives a personal example of changing her self-identity by becoming more involved with TESOL Arabia (Coombe, 2008).

Before finding oneself mired in a state of burnout, one needs to occasionally think about the symptoms of burnout. The renowned Mayo Clinic has a short list of questions to assess if an individual is at risk. Examples of these questions are: "Have you become cynical or critical at work?", "Do you lack the energy to be consist-

ently productive?", and "Are you troubled by unexplained headaches, backaches or other physical complaints?" (Job Burnout, 2010).

Although these general warning signs of burnout are useful, awareness of the three stages is needed. In the stress arousal stage, there are physiological and psychological symptoms such as irritability, anxiety, headaches, and stomach problems (Three Stages, n.d.). In the energy conservation stage, one tries to alleviate stress. Some symptoms of this stage are procrastination, fatigue, social withdrawal, and substance abuse (Three Stages, n.d.). In Stage 3, exhaustion, many become aware that they have a problem. Symptoms include chronic depression, chronic stomach or bowel problems, and chronic mental or physical fatigue (Three Stages, n.d.). Fortunately, burnout progresses sequentially through the three stages and preventative measures can be taken at any time.

In the case of James, in addition to being aware of the warning signs and stages of burnout, the best course of action would be for him to address the factors which lead to faculty burnout. In particular, he should work on redefining his self-identity as a teacher. Although it appears that he does not have chances to become involved at his institution, opportunities are available to him. Instead of waiting to be invited to join existing research projects, James could initiate a classroom research project and disseminate his findings in the institution's *kiyo*. This may help him overcome the common perception that language teachers are inferior to faculty members in other departments (Ferguson & Donno, 2003) and provide an impetus for interdisciplinary collaboration with his colleagues.

Also, James is not limited to collaboration with colleagues at his institution. Many professional organizations provide not only opportunities for professional development, but also outlets for publications and presentations. He can also make contacts with Japanese teachers by participating in reading circles and *kenkyukai* (Tomei, 1999). In addition to the structured networks provided by professional organizations, social media allows professionals from around the world to form informal personal learning networks (PLNs).

Finally, James cannot overlook the importance of socialization. By socializing with both full-time and part-time colleagues, he can share his concerns and also his successes with like-minded individuals. Not only would this help combat his feelings of isolation and marginalization, but it would also generate a sense of solidarity with his colleagues.

### For university leadership

Faculty burnout should be a concern to university leadership because it has "detrimental effects on student experience and attainment, and the success of the institution as a whole" (Gillespie et al., 2001, as cited in Watts & Robertson, 2011, p. 35). By continuing to turn a blind eye to burnout, universities are providing a disservice to both their faculty members and their students.

As Lackritz (2004) suggests, universities could be proactive and take preventative measures. Information could be made readily available about the stages of faculty burnout and the underlying stressors. In addition, distributing a self-administered version of a faculty burnout questionnaire such as the *Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey* (Maslach et al., 2001) or the *Burnout Cycle Inventory* (Minter, 2009) would help raise awareness of the seriousness of the issue. As a result of raised awareness, faculty members will be in a better position to recognize the underlying stressors if they emerge and take preventative measures.

In addition to raising awareness of stressors, actions can be taken in an attempt to reduce them. Although it may not be possible to reduce financial stressors, it is possible to alleviate some of the classroom-related stressors. For example, instead of giving only compulsory freshmen classes to the full-time instructors, opportunities to teach upper year elective classes that are personally and professionally meaningful should be given. The problem of ill-equipped students can be addressed by general curriculum reform such as making adjustments to the syllabi and materials. Everyday work stressors such as paperwork can also be reduced by providing a "concise and clear package" of necessary documents and instructions (Tomei, 1999).

Lastly, career fit should also be addressed. When faculty members are hired, attempts should be made to match work responsibilities with their personal interests. For example, a faculty member that has a keen interest in scholarship will certainly suffer from burnout if the position does not provide research opportunities. Ideally, career fit should be addressed on a regular basis because the needs and interests of faculty members change with the progression of time.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, faculty burnout is an issue that must not be overlooked by individuals or university leadership. Teachers need to know the warning signs and the stages of burnout and

some preventative measures that they can take. They also need to realize that their colleagues may be struggling with similar issues which can be alleviated or even eliminated when as a group, rather than as individuals, action is taken. At the institutional level, by addressing work-related stressors and career fit, university leadership can reduce faculty burnout and in the process make the university a better place for both students and faculty members.

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## Appendix: Sample of full-time contract positions advertised on JREC-IN, December 2012

	Institution type	Position title	Contract length	Number of classes	Other duties
Institution A	private	Full-time contract English instructor	1 year, renewable 4 times	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• office hours</li> <li>• oral interviews</li> <li>• committee meetings</li> <li>• attend university events</li> <li>• monthly department meetings</li> </ul>
Institution B	private	Contract English instructor	1 year, renewable 2 times	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• various administrative functions and duties as requested</li> </ul>
Institution C	public	English instructor	1 year, renewable 2 times	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 office hours</li> <li>• teaching materials development</li> <li>• other duties</li> </ul>
Institution D	national	Non-tenured associate professor	3 years, not renewable	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• curriculum development</li> <li>• materials development</li> <li>• special classes</li> </ul>