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Learning motivation, engagement and burnout among university students

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to highlight the associations between engagement, burnout and academic performance among university students. The Maslach Burnout Inventory-Student Survey, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale and the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire were administered to a sample of 202 undergraduate students. The results indicated, as expected, significant and negative correlations between burnout and engagement, consistent with the specialty literature, confirming the/other research in the specialty literature. Significant correlations were also obtained between learning motivation, engagement and burnout. K-Means Cluster Analysis was used in order to split the participants into two clusters: cluster 1 defined as distressed students and cluster 2, well-functioning students.

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1. Introduction

Burnout reflects a relationship of hostility and alienation between the person and his/her job, the opposite of which is engagement, a relationship of reconciliation and acceptance (Schaufeli, Martínez, Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002). Initially, burnout was considered to occur only among individuals who worked with other people, but now the concept of burnout also includes academic life. Student activities such as attending classes, submitting assignments, working with deadlines and working long hours can be seen as work, although the students are not employed (Law, 2007).

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Schaufeli and his colleagues (2002a) define the dimensions of academic burnout as exhaustion (physical and not solely emotional), cynicism and lack of efficacy. Maslach and Leiter (1997) assume that engagement is characterized by energy, involvement. Burnout and exhaustion are regarded as two distinct dimensions that are moderately and negatively related (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). Student burnout can lead to higher absenteeism, lower motivation to do required course work, higher percentage of dropout and has a negative effect on academic achievement (Yang, 2004). Research also shows that student burnout and engagement could indicate how well students will function in their future working environment, the achievement strategies used during university being able to predict work burnout and engagement in the future career (Salmela-Aro, Tolvanen, & Numri, 2009).

The three dimensions of burnout were defined as follows: exhaustion refers to a person's levels of emotional and physical resources, to the feelings of tiredness; cynicism indicates the interpersonal distancing element of burnout, the negative response towards particular work and not being cognitively and emotionally involved with work (Maslach, Leiter & Schaufeli, 2008); reduced efficacy is the self-evaluation element of burnout, the individual experiencing feelings of incompetence, and a lack of ability, skill and productivity in his or her work. The dimensions of engagement were defined as follows: vigor represents the energy, the willingness and the persistence no matter the difficulties; dedication refers to the significance, the enthusiasm, the inspiration and the pride in one's work; absorption is characterized as being fully determined and focused on one's work, (Schaufeli et al., 2002b).

2. Purpose of study

The aim of this research was to highlight the associations between learning engagement, burnout and academic performance among undergraduate university students. The main hypothesis is that burnout and engagement are negatively correlated. We also expect that learning motivation is positively associated with engagement and negatively associated with burnout dimensions.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedure

The participants were 202 undergraduate first year students (97 students) and second year students (131 students), from a Romanian university (159 female, 43 male). The research design is correlational. The participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study. The questionnaires were completed during class time, were anonymous and no compensation was offered.

3.2. Instruments

Burnout was assessed with the Romanian version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Student Survey (MBI-SS), (Schaufeli et al., 2002). The MBI-SS consists of 15 items that constitute three scales: Exhaustion (5 items), Cynicism (4 items) and Efficacy (6 items). The Alpha Cronbach coefficients for the Romanian version were high: .86 for the Exhaustion scale, .90 for the Cynicisms scale, .88 for the Efficacy scale and .88 for the entire scale.

Engagement was assessed with the Romanian version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), with items referring to work or job replaced by studies or class (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). The UWES consists of 17 items which measure the three underlying dimensions of work engagement: Vigor (6 items), Dedication (5 items) and Absorption (6 items). The Alpha Cronbach coefficients for the Romanian version were high: .82 for the Vigor scale, .91 for the Dedication scale, .89 for the Absorption scale and .92 for the entire instrument. For both instruments, all items were scored on a 7 point frequency rating scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always).

Academic motivation was assessed using several scales from the motivation section of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (Duncan & McKeachie, 2005): Intrinsic motivation (4 items), Extrinsic motivation (4 items), Task value motivation (6 items), Control of learning beliefs motivation (4 items), and Test anxiety motivation (5 items). The Alpha Cronbach coefficients were the following: .74 for the Intrinsic motivation scale, .62 for the Extrinsic motivation scale, .90 for the Task value scale, .68 for the Control of learning beliefs scale, .80 for

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