Beyond teaching: understanding the emotional and administrative burden of university academics -A qualitative case study.

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Abstract
Background
While teaching and research are recognised as the core responsibilities of academic staff, increasing attention is being paid to the hidden demands of university work, specifically emotional labour, administrative duties, and invisible workloads such as student care, departmental service, and institutional compliance. These under-acknowledged responsibilities significantly affect academic productivity, well-being, and institutional engagement. This study investigates how academic staff at a South African university experience and manage these demands, and how they influence teaching, research output, and personal health.

Methods
A qualitative case study was conducted at a South African public university from January to March 2025. A purposive sample of 20 academic staff (12 women, 8 men) across five faculties, Humanities, Sciences, Engineering, Education, and Health Sciences, was selected. Data collection included 18 semi-structured interviews and 2 focus group discussions, focusing on emotional strain, administrative burden, institutional support, and job satisfaction. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis, with triangulation enhancing credibility.

Results
Most participants (85%) reported moderate to severe emotional strain, often linked to student mental health support and unstructured pastoral care roles. Administrative overload, including excessive meetings, compliance reporting, and bureaucratic tasks, was identified as a key barrier to research productivity. Female academics reported disproportionate emotional workload expectations. A perceived lack of institutional support contributed to burnout, with 60% of participants expressing intent to scale back research or exit academia prematurely.

Conclusion
Emotional and administrative labour are deeply embedded in academic life and significantly affect staff morale, identity, and sustainability. Recognising these demands is crucial to institutional well-being and academic success.

Recommendations
Universities should formally acknowledge hidden workloads in staff evaluations and planning. Resilience training, digital streamlining, and wellness support systems must be prioritized. Future research should examine long-term effects on staff retention and academic quality.

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Background Information

Universities worldwide are increasingly confronting the complex and often invisible burdens borne by academic staff. Beyond their core responsibilities of teaching and research, academics are now expected to fulfil a growing array of emotional and administrative duties, tasks that are seldom acknowledged in institutional workload models or formal performance evaluations. These "hidden workloads" have become a defining feature of contemporary academic life. In the South African context, these challenges are amplified by historical inequalities, ongoing transformation mandates, and the psychosocial needs of a diverse and frequently underprepared student population. Legacies of apartheid, persistent socioeconomic disparities, and high student-to-staff ratios further intensify the strain on academic professionals. At

Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), such systemic pressures are especially pronounced. Staff members are routinely involved in emotionally intensive student support, bureaucratic compliance, and quality assurance tasks, much of which falls outside the traditional academic performance framework.

This study investigates the nature and consequences of these under-recognised burdens, focusing on how they affect academics' professional identities, well-being, productivity, and long-term career trajectories. Traditionally, academic roles have been conceptualised as a triad encompassing teaching, research, and community engagement. However, this balance has shifted significantly over the past two decades. Influenced by neoliberal reforms, universities have adopted corporate management styles, emphasising performance metrics, research competitiveness, institutional branding, and audit cultures. Within this changing landscape, academics face growing pressure to meet accountability standards while simultaneously supporting students grappling with poverty, trauma, and mental health challenges. For many, particularly women and early-career staff, this emotional labour has become both routine and unrecognised, contributing to psychological exhaustion. At the same time, administrative responsibilities such as curriculum development, policy compliance, committee participation, and documentation have expanded, often at the cost of time for research and teaching preparation. In underfunded and understaffed institutions, the convergence of these demands threatens the sustainability, equity, and morale of academic work.

Objectives of the Study

To explore the nature and extent of emotional and administrative burdens experienced by university academics.

To examine how these responsibilities affect academic performance, well-being, and career sustainability.

To analyse gendered patterns in emotional labour distribution within academic institutions.

To assess institutional responses and identify gaps in support for academic staff.

To propose strategies for improving workload allocation and institutional policy.

Research Questions

How do emotional and administrative burdens affect university academics' performance and well-being, and what institutional strategies can promote equitable and sustainable workload management?"

Methodology

Study Design

This study employed a cross-sectional qualitative case study design to explore the emotional and administrative burdens experienced by academic staff. A cross-sectional approach was chosen to capture perspectives at a specific point in time, while the qualitative case study method enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences in relation to workload, emotional labour, and institutional support.

Study Setting

The research was conducted at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), a South African public university located in Umlazi Township, Durban, in the KwaZulu-Natal province. MUT primarily serves historically disadvantaged students and operates within a resource-constrained environment, making it an ideal context for studying the hidden workload pressures affecting academic staff. Data were collected over a three-month period, from January to March 2025, during the academic year's first semester.

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide in-depth and diverse insights into the emotional and administrative responsibilities experienced by academic staff. A total of 20 academic staff members participated in the study, comprising 12 women and 8 men, drawn from five faculties: Humanities, Sciences, Engineering, Education, and Health Sciences.

Inclusion Criteria:

Full-time employment at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) for a minimum of one year

Active engagement in teaching, research, and institutional service during the time of study

Willingness and ability to reflect on experiences related to workload, emotional labour, and institutional support

Provision of informed written consent for participation

Exclusion Criteria:

Part-time, adjunct, or contract-based academic staff

Academic staff with less than one year of service at MUT

Staff not currently involved in teaching or institutional service (e.g., on sabbatical or long-term leave)

Individuals who declined to participate or were unable to provide informed consent

Those who expressed unwillingness to be audio-recorded or participate in follow-up communication for member checking

Bias

To minimize potential biases, several strategies were employed:

The researcher maintained a reflexive journal to acknowledge and monitor personal assumptions.

Data were triangulated using both interviews and focus group discussions, enhancing credibility.

Participants were given summaries of their interview responses to confirm accuracy and interpretation.

An independent qualitative researcher was involved in coding a portion of the data to validate thematic consistency.

Study Size

The final study included 20 academic staff members, comprising 18 participants in one-on-one semi-structured interviews and 2 focus group discussions (with 5 participants each, 3 overlapping with individual interviews). The initial design anticipated a range of 50–100 students and 5–10 faculty but based on research scope revision and emphasis on academic staff experience, the focus narrowed to academics only. The sample size was guided by data saturation, interviews continued until no new themes emerged. Saturation was reached by the 16th

interview, with four additional interviews and focus groups conducted to validate theme robustness.

Data Measurement / Sources

Data collection was conducted through:

Semi-structured interviews (n=18) using a flexible guide covering key topics such as administrative responsibilities, emotional labour, job satisfaction, and institutional support.

Two focus group discussions to capture shared experiences and stimulate dialogue.

All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim, and anonymized.

Supplementary institutional documents (e.g., staff workload policies and departmental meeting notes) were also reviewed to support triangulation.

Statistical Analysis

As a qualitative study, thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework:
Familiarisation with data
Generating initial codes
Searching for themes
Reviewing themes
Defining and naming themes

Producing the report

NVivo software was used for data organisation and coding. No quantitative statistical methods were employed. There were no missing data, as all scheduled interviews and focus groups were completed in full and transcribed accordingly.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Mangosuthu University of Technology Research Ethics Committee, and it was approved on 11 February 2022. All participants provided informed written consent before participating in interviews and focus group discussions. They were assured of the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw at any time

without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Audio recordings were securely stored, used only for transcription and analysis, and destroyed upon completion of transcription in accordance with MUT's ethical and data protection guidelines.

Results and Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, which aimed to explore the emotional and administrative burdens experienced by academic staff at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). The results are organised to show participant recruitment and eligibility, demographic characteristics, and key emergent themes derived through thematic analysis. The integration of individual interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis allowed for a comprehensive understanding of participants lived experiences and institutional dynamics.

Participants

A total of 35 academic staff were initially identified as potential participants through faculty administrators and professional networks.
Potentially eligible academic staff: 35
Contacted and invited to participate: 28
Responded and screened for eligibility: 23
Confirmed eligible and consented: 20
Completed interviews and/or focus groups: 20
Among the 20 final participants:
18 took part in one-on-one semi-structured interviews
10 participated in two focus group discussions (with 3 individuals overlapping with the interview sample)
No individuals withdrew from the study after providing consent.

Descriptive Data

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 20 academic staff participants. The sample represented a cross-section of faculty backgrounds, academic ranks, and gender.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n = 20)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	12	60%
	Male	8	40%
Age Range	30–39	6	30%
	40–49	9	45%
	50–59	5	25%
Academic Rank	Lecturer	9	45%
	Senior Lecturer	6	30%
	Associate Professor/Professor	5	25%
Faculty Affiliation	Humanities	4	20%
	Sciences	4	20%
	Engineering	4	20%
	Education	4	20%
	Health Sciences	4	20%
Years in Academia	1–5 years	3	15%
	6–10 years	7	35%
	11–20 years	10	50%

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis revealed four key themes, supported by a total of 12 initial codes. These themes reflect participants' perceptions and lived realities of emotional and administrative burdens, their institutional contexts, and coping mechanisms.

Table 2: Summary of Themes and Corresponding Codes

Theme	Associated Codes	
1. Emotional Labour and Student Support	Student trauma, Emotional exhaustion, Gendered expectations, Pastoral care	
2. Administrative Overload	Compliance tasks, Repetitive reporting, Committee fatigue, Bureaucratic inefficiencies	
3. Institutional Support and Recognition	Lack of wellness support, Ignored emotional labour, Unbalanced workload models	
4. Coping and Career Intentions	Burnout, Withdrawal from research, Career exit contemplation	

Figure 2 reveal that administrative and emotional burdens are significantly impacting university academics. A striking 90% of participants reported that administrative tasks such as excessive meetings, reporting obligations, and compliance protocols undermined their ability to focus on research. Similarly, 85% experienced moderate to severe emotional strain, often driven by persistent student support demands and limited access to psychological services. Additionally, 80% cited a lack of institutional support, highlighting the need for responsive leadership and structural reforms. Notably, 70% of female academics reported disproportionately high levels of emotional labour, reflecting entrenched gender expectations. Alarmingly, 60% of participants considered exiting academia or reducing their research engagement due to burnout and stress.

Impact of Emotional and Administrative Burden on Academic Staff
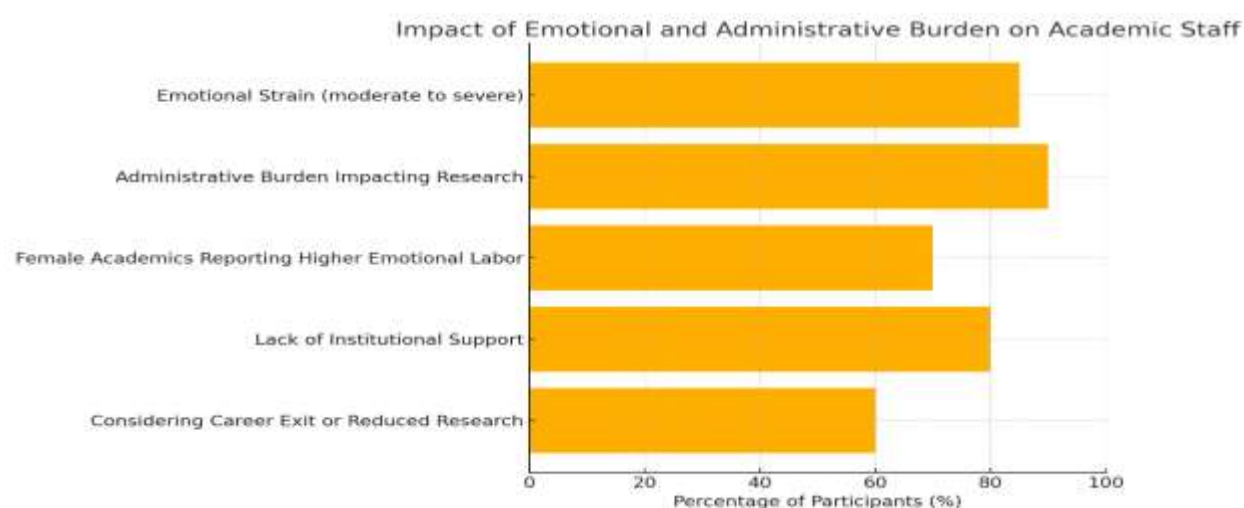
Figure 1: The graph indicates the impact of emotional and administrative burden on academic staff

Figure 2 illustrates the weight of these burdens, showing a near-equal split between emotional labour (55%) and administrative workload (45%) as sources of academic stress. This balance suggests that both dimensions are deeply intertwined and must be addressed holistically. Emotional labour, encompassing tasks like pastoral care and student counselling, is just as demanding as the bureaucratic load placed on academics. Together, these stressors create a work environment that is unsustainable and undervalued. Without intentional reforms such as improved workload allocation, recognition of invisible labour, and strengthened support systems, universities

risk losing valuable academic staff and diminishing both teaching quality and research productivity.
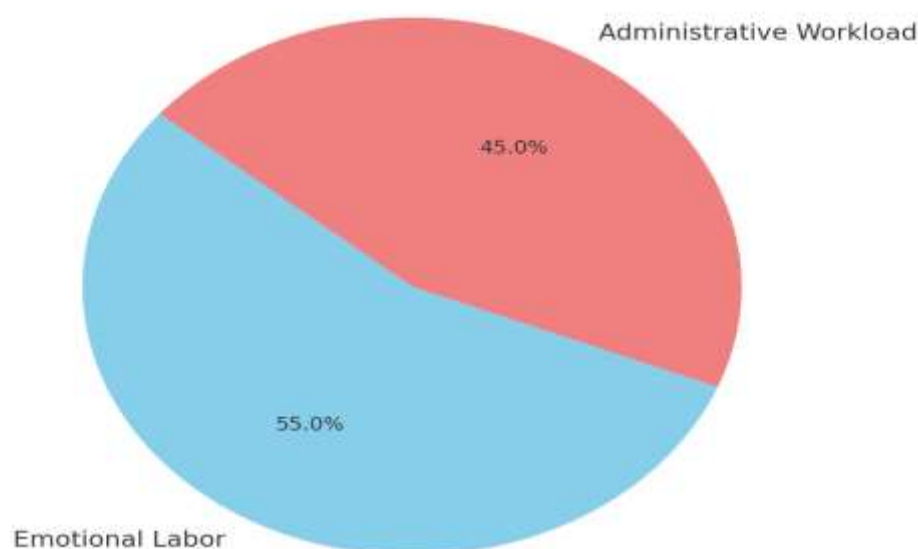
Figure 2: The graph indicates the distribution of the burden among university academics.

Figure 3 presents a conceptual flow from two primary stress domains, emotional labour and administrative workload, toward the broader goal of sustained academic transformation. Emotional labour, often driven by student mental health crises and academic support roles, places an invisible psychological toll on academic staff, particularly women. Administrative workload, characterized by bureaucracy, committee work, and policy compliance, reduces time for teaching and research. The visual arrangement implies that these two factors are not isolated but mutually reinforcing, leading to cumulative stress, diminished academic productivity, and increased risk of burnout. The final node, "transformation," suggests that without deliberate institutional reforms such as equitable workload models, emotional support systems, and streamlined administration, these pressures will continue to undermine staff morale and academic quality. This diagram effectively communicates the need for systemic change, not just individualized coping strategies, to foster a healthier academic environment.

Figure 3: The graph represents the relationship between emotional labour, administrative workload, and academic transformation

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the pervasive emotional and administrative burdens carried by academic staff, with significant implications for their professional productivity, personal well-being, and retention in higher education. These burdens are particularly intensified in under-resourced institutions like Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), which serve historically disadvantaged communities and face persistent structural constraints. A striking 90% of participants reported that administrative responsibilities, such as compliance reporting, departmental committee work, and performance documentation, consume significant time and hinder research productivity. This aligns with previous studies, such as Houston et al. (2006), who found that growing managerialism in universities has resulted in academic staff spending more time on bureaucratic tasks at the expense of scholarly work. Similarly, Szelényi and Denson (2020) observed that administrative intensification negatively affects publication output, particularly among academics in teaching-intensive institutions.

The current findings reaffirm these concerns in the South African context, where compliance demands are often duplicated across multiple internal and external quality assurance bodies. In this study, participants described these tasks as time-consuming, repetitive, and demotivating, echoing the notion of the "audit culture" described by Shore and Wright (2000), where academics are increasingly subject to performance metrics that add burden without enhancing teaching or research quality. Approximately 85% of participants reported moderate to severe emotional strain, primarily due to their unstructured roles in providing student mental health support, especially in cases of trauma, poverty, or psychosocial distress. This finding supports international literature indicating that emotional labour is an under-recognised yet central component of academic work. For instance, Gill (2009) argued that neoliberal university reforms have eroded collegial support systems, leaving academics individually responsible for managing both pedagogical and pastoral roles. In South Africa, these burdens are magnified by high student-to-staff ratios and the socio-economic vulnerabilities of students. Participants in this study described the emotional toll of being "first responders" to student crises, often without training or institutional backing. Similar patterns are reported by Joubert and Rothmann (2007), who linked emotional exhaustion in South African academics to unstructured emotional caregiving in environments with limited psychological services.

The study also revealed a clear gender divide, with 70% of female academics reporting a greater emotional workload compared to their male colleagues. This supports the work of O'Connor (2014), who found that women in academia are disproportionately expected to provide student mentorship and emotional support, responsibilities that are rarely accounted for in formal workload calculations or promotion criteria. This unbalanced expectation not only affects well-being but also restricts female academics' ability to engage in research, which may exacerbate gender disparities in publication output and career progression, an issue also observed by Misra et al. (2012). Alarmingly, 60% of participants indicated they had contemplated reducing research engagement or leaving academia altogether due to stress, fatigue, and lack of institutional recognition. This aligns with findings by Winefield et al. (2003), who linked poor job satisfaction and high burnout levels to staff turnover in higher education. In resource-constrained environments like MUT, where academic support services are limited, the risk of long-term academic disengagement is particularly acute. These findings resonate with Marginson's (2006) critique of the corporatization of academia, where the emphasis on outputs and accountability systems devalues the human and relational dimensions of academic labour.

Generalisation

Despite the limitations, the study's insights are transferable to similar institutions facing increasing performance pressures, limited mental health infrastructure, and high student needs. The patterns observed, particularly regarding emotional labour, administrative overload, and gendered expectations, resonate across many higher education systems in the Global South. Institutions experiencing comparable structural and resource challenges may find these findings useful for initiating context-sensitive reforms.

Conclusion

The study concludes that emotional and administrative responsibilities are not peripheral but central challenges affecting university academics' ability to thrive. These hidden burdens contribute to stress, diminished productivity, and declining institutional morale. If left unaddressed, they threaten the academic profession's sustainability, particularly among early-career and female scholars. Recognition and reform are urgently needed to protect the academic workforce and maintain the quality of teaching and research.

Limitations

This study was conducted at a single South African university, which limits the generalizability of the findings across different institutional types or geographic contexts. Additionally, while the sample was diverse across faculties, it was limited to 20 participants, which may not capture all the nuances of academic experiences. As a qualitative case study, the findings offer depth but are not statistically generalizable.

Recommendations

To address the challenges identified, universities should formally recognise emotional labour and administrative responsibilities in performance evaluations and workload models. Faculty development initiatives must include training in emotional resilience and stress management to better equip staff for the psychological demands of academic work. Administrative processes should be streamlined through the adoption of digital platforms, reducing duplication and inefficiencies. Additionally, workload policies must be gender-sensitive, acknowledging and addressing the unequal distribution of emotional responsibilities often borne by female academics. Lastly, future research should incorporate longitudinal monitoring to assess how these burdens evolve over time and influence staff retention and student outcomes.

Biography

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

Acknowledgements

Competing Interests

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Author Contributions

I, the author, contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and research were performed by Mbanjwa S.T. The first draft was written by Mbanjwa S.T.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. Due to ethical considerations and confidentiality agreements, individual participant data cannot be publicly shared. However, anonymized and aggregated data may be provided for academic or research purposes upon institutional approval.

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