

What is burnout and what does it feel like?

In this blog post, Tessa Warinner, wellbeing adviser at the School of History, Classics, and Archaeology, discusses 'Burnout' – a rising concern in academia. Tessa discusses what it feels like, its prevalence, impact, and signposts helpful resources for managing it. This post belongs to the **Hot Topic theme: Critical insights into contemporary issues in Higher Education.**

I'm sure you've come across the term 'burnout' while scrolling through your social media and news feeds. I've personally noticed an increase in public conversation about it since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Like many psychological terms, the actual meaning of it can get lost in the chatter. The World Health Organisation (WHO) characterises burnout as 'an occupational phenomenon'. They define it as

"a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed."

They said that the three main dimensions are as follows:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job
- reduced professional efficacy.

In my experience as a wellbeing adviser, I've frequently had both students and staff tell me they're feeling burnt out. They usually tell me about experiencing symptoms that closely resemble the Maslach Burnout Inventory, which is the go-to questionnaire for measuring if a person is experiencing this phenomenon. Some of the symptoms are:

- **Exhaustion:** feeling emotionally drained, frequently

frustrated with your work, feeling at the end of your rope, and feeling like it's too much effort to directly interact with people at work.

- **Depersonalisation (or a loss of empathy for others):** feeling afraid that your job has made you more callous towards others, you are out of patience by the end of the work day, and you feel like you are too tired to get up to face another day at work.
- **Personal achievement:** feeling like you haven't accomplished anything worthwhile, you don't feel you're positively influencing others, and you struggle to create a relaxed work environment for yourself and others.

If any of these resonate with your personal experience, you are far from alone. Mental Health UK released a 2024 report about the YouGov poll they ran about burnout. They found that 91% of workers reported feeling extremely stressed out in the past year. One in five workers reported needing to take time off work for burnout symptoms in the past year. It's safe to say that at least one person in your inner circle has felt burned out at some point in their lives. I guess that means you're in good company, right?

Can students experience burnout?

The current definitions of burnout are worded for people working in jobs. In my experience, I have found that students frequently report burnout symptoms while completing their degree. Going to lectures, working on assessments, and attending exams can involve as much energy as someone working a full-time job. Coupled with the rigorous academic expectations that come with attending the University of Edinburgh, it's natural to feel worn down by it. Academic burnout appears to be under-studied, but a 2023 study found that out of the 22,983 students they included in the sample, over half of them were currently experiencing it. They also found that certain factors such as being male, having higher

marks than the class average, and smoking cigarettes led to higher levels of academic burnout.

This study highlights the importance of understanding how burnout does not occur in a vacuum. I tell students (and my co-workers) that it is a very stressful time to work and study. We're collectively doing our best to cope with trying to see our friends and family, exercise, do chores, drink enough water, get eight hours of sleep, keep our screen times low, not get Covid-19, manage our money while we deal with the cost-of-living crisis, and watch our government deal with global geopolitical instability. In my professional opinion, experiencing at least some burnout symptoms is a normal response to these abnormal circumstances.

What can be done if you feel burnt out?

If anything from this post resonates with your experience, it's worth taking this burnout quiz by HealthCentral. This is not a diagnostic tool, but it can help you organise your thoughts around how you're feeling. It can help structure further conversations with medical and mental health professionals. There is also a great book called *Burnout: Solve Your Stress Cycle* by Emily and Amelia Nagoski, which does a deep dive into the phenomenon and has practical tips to help you feel better.

If you are a current University of Edinburgh student and don't know where to start addressing burnout, it's worth referring into Student Wellbeing Services using our referral form. A wellbeing adviser can meet with you to discuss your situation and come up with a bespoke support plan for you. Personally, I usually recommend taking time to rest and getting clinical help to help alleviate burnout. I would put them in touch with their student adviser to discuss the logistics around taking a leave of absence or an authorised interruption of studies, if this is what the student would like. I'm very mindful that students are typically reluctant to take any significant time

off as they would like to graduate within four years, so I would usually find ways to build in more time for rest in their busy schedules. I would also help them find ways they can access therapy to talk more about their feelings. This can be through the University Student Counselling Service or external services located around the city.

If you are a staff member, time and clinical help are also the way to go. I would recommend speaking with your line manager first to discuss your current workload and obligations. There is also the University Occupational Health Service if you don't feel comfortable speaking with them. They will be able to point you in the direction of appropriate services.

All in all, burnout is a very common phenomenon that at least one person in your inner circle has experienced. Having it is no reflection on your character, or your ability to withstand stressful circumstances. No matter what, you're going to get through it. You're going to be okay.



Tessa Warinner

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Unveiling innovation in Online Learning: The HCA TEL Learn Ultra Showcase

In this post, Rose Day, Learning Technologist at the School of History, Classics, and Archaeology (HCA), highlights the HCA TEL Learn Ultra Showcase. The showcase features some of the innovative courses and provides insightful commentary from course organizers and learning technologists who played pivotal roles in their development. This post also belongs to the Spotlight on Learn Ultra series.

HCA TEL Learn Ultra Showcase

Starting the 23/24 academic year with a bang, HCA, along with the rest of the university, transitioned from Blackboard Learn to the new and improved Learn Ultra interface. This monumental shift aimed to deliver a more intuitive and accessible experience for both instructors and students. The process involved significant changes in the way courses were delivered online and in person, marking a transformative journey for everyone involved.

The HCA TEL Learn Ultra Showcase, spearheaded by our dedicated Learning Technologists, stands as a testament to this journey. This showcase highlights some of the most exemplary online courses within the School of History, Classics, and Archaeology (HCA) at the University of Edinburgh. Not only does it feature the innovative courses themselves, but it also provides insightful commentary from course organisers and learning technologists who played pivotal roles in their development.

Breathing Life into Ancient History: Ulf-Dietrich Schoop's Bronze Age Civilizations Course

One standout course in this showcase is Ulf-Dietrich Schoop's "Bronze Age Civilizations of the Near East and Greece." This course is a prime example of how creative use of technology can enhance the learning experience. Schoop, the course organiser, envisioned an immersive virtual exhibition space where students could display their work and explore their peers' contributions. However, his initial vision faced some practical challenges.

"I was thinking about creating a virtual exhibition space for my Honours/MSc level course 'Bronze Age Civilisations' where students could display some of their work for the course and look at other students' efforts," Schoop explains.

"While my original plans were not realistic, Rose suggested ThingLink to me, which proved to be a very interesting tool."

ThingLink, a versatile digital tool, allowed Schoop to create an engaging and interactive learning environment. The idea was to develop a non-linear and playful space that invites students to wander around and discover both expected and unexpected elements. The result is a virtual museum with interconnected rooms, each of which representing different geographical settings covered in the course. The atmosphere of this digital museum is both intriguing and slightly eerie, akin to an "alone-in-a-slightly-creepy museum" feeling.



Ulf-Dietrich Schoop, notes

“The interconnected rooms are AI-generated 360° images; I think the (unintentional) weirdness of the AI imagery works quite well as a contrast to the ‘realness’ of the displays,”

This blend of AI-generated content and student-created displays offers a unique and immersive learning experience. However, the creation of this virtual space was not without its challenges. Schoop realised that adjustments were necessary to accommodate student-generated content.

“The museum is still a bit empty; in particular, student-generated content is missing. I realised that I had to adjust the course format to allow this to be added,” he reflects.

The flexibility of ThingLink proved to be one of its greatest strengths:

“ThingLink seems to be a very versatile tool which can be used in different ways. Neither AI-generated content nor 360° images as in my example here are necessary (I had quite a bit of fun with those, though). It works quite well with other

tools we often use such as Media Hopper content,” Schoop adds.

Mastering Online Teaching: David Kaufman’s Courses on Imperial Game and British Foreign Policy

<https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/shca/wp-content/uploads/sites/1603/2024/08/kaufman-vid.mp4>

Another highlight of the showcase is David Kaufman’s courses: “An Imperial Game? Cricket, Culture & Society (online)” and “Empire or Continent? British Foreign Policy in the Era of the Great War (online).” Kaufman, with extensive experience in writing online courses for the MSc in History, aimed to refine his teaching methods to enhance clarity, accessibility, and flexibility. Kaufman explains:

“My aim for both of these courses was to essentially refine what I had been doing in the previous 8-or-so courses that I had written for the MSc in History (online). Essentially, over the years I have tried to do three things: make the structure as clear as possible for the students to follow, second, to try to provide information to the students (both in terms of how the course will be delivered, as well as what will be the focus of each seminar) on Learn, so that students do not need to contact me during the semester, the answers should be easy to find on the courses, and last, that the course can be delivered to a diverse group of students (in terms of location, availability, specific knowledge of the topic, stage of the programme, etc.),”

Kaufman’s emphasis on providing accessible information to students aligns with Anderson’s (2004) recommendations in “The Theory and Practice of Online Learning.” Anderson advocates for designing online courses that allow students to easily access necessary information and resources without needing to contact instructors frequently, thus fostering a more self-sufficient learning environment.

In “Empire or Continent?”, Kaufman employed a traditional chronological approach, grouping seminars into pre-war, war, post-war, and inter-war periods. This structure aimed to highlight the two main elements of the course while maintaining a coherent timeline.

<https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/shca/wp-content/uploads/sites/1603/2024/08/imperial-game-vid.mp4>

For “An Imperial Game?”, Kaufman took a thematic approach, focusing on class, empire, race, politics, and gender.

“For this course, I wanted to focus more on themes – Class, Empire, Race, Politics, Gender – through linked topics that looked to provide examples of how a sport like cricket was both shaped by these factors, but would allow students to see how cricket could shine new light on these key themes,” Kaufman notes.

The thematic approach in “An Imperial Game?” resonates with the findings of Ke and Xie (2009) who suggest that thematic and problem-based learning approaches in online courses can enhance critical thinking and deeper engagement with the subject matter.

Embracing the Future of Education

The HCA TEL Learn Ultra Showcase not only presents innovative courses but also serves as a platform for sharing best practices and lessons learned. The collaboration between course organisers like Schoop and Kaufman and learning technologists exemplifies the synergy needed to push the boundaries of online education. Their combined efforts result in courses that are not only informative but also engaging and dynamic. As the landscape of education continues to evolve, the HCA TEL Learn Ultra Showcase remains a beacon of innovation, demonstrating the potential of technology to enrich the learning experience. Through the showcase, educators and students alike can explore new possibilities and

embrace the future of online education.

References

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Rose Day



As a Learning Technologist in HCA, Rose provides advice, guidance and support for a number of technology-enhanced learning initiatives. Rose works with staff to support and develop the use of these learning technologies in teaching, learning, assessment and research.

Rose's activities include advocating the use of learning technologies and helping staff with the design, development and evaluation of learning resources. This is achieved through a programme of courses, workshops and events, providing occasional informal 1:1 support, and creating and delivering online support materials.

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