

Defining and Advancing a Systems Approach to Achieving Educator Wellbeing: An Integrative Review of Wellbeing in Higher Education

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Abstract

Educators are crucial for student success in higher education, yet they often experience high levels of occupational stress which threaten their wellbeing. Informed by a conceptual framework initially developed for addressing worker wellbeing in the healthcare sector, another sector where workers experience high levels of occupational stress, this article explores how educator wellbeing is influenced by factors within the teaching environment, institutional environment and the external environment. Through an integrative review of existing literature, this article synthesises their findings to identify work system factors, individual factors, and outcomes and consequences of educator wellbeing across these domains. The resulting framework offers practical guidance for universities to identify, assess and respond to potential threats to educator wellbeing, ultimately enhancing the prospects of student success and meeting organisational goals without compromising the wellbeing of educators.

Keywords: Wellbeing; educator wellbeing; occupational stress; higher education; university faculty; academic staff.

Introduction

Arguably one of the most critical contributions to achieving student success in higher education is a highly proficient academic workforce of educators who can provide high quality, student-centred learning experiences (Ingraham et al., 2018). Nonetheless, modern universities present an increasingly complex and demanding work environment which may threaten educator wellbeing and the wellbeing of higher education employees has been found to be considerably lower than general population norms (Fetherston et al., 2021; Wray & Kinman, 2022). Workplace or occupation stress has been identified as a predictor of diminished wellbeing and mental health among academic staff (Shen & Slater, 2021) and can contribute to burnout (Sabagh et al., 2018), a state characterised by emotional and mental exhaustion, feelings of hopelessness, cynicism, a lowered sense of work-oriented personal accomplishment, negative self-concept and diminished self-efficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Burnout negatively affects an educator's capacity to provide effective support to students by leading to depersonalisation, unfavourable interactions with students and peers, lowered self-efficacy and reduced teaching competence and performance (Poalses & Bezuidenhout, 2018; Sabagh et al., 2018). As a result, educator wellbeing has an impact on the wellbeing of university students (Brewster et al., 2022; Gunson et al., 2016; James et al., 2019; Savage & Morrissey, 2021).

Given these interdependencies and the reliance of the higher education sector on a high functioning workforce, addressing educator wellbeing through evidence-informed policy and practice is likely to result in a healthier higher education teaching workforce and provide better outcomes for students. Existing comprehensive models of workplace wellbeing have considered the constituent elements of mentally healthy (or unhealthy) workplaces and "the practical means by which workplaces can enhance and support the mental health and wellbeing of workers" (Alagaraja, 2021; Harvey et al., 2014, p. 5). Such models



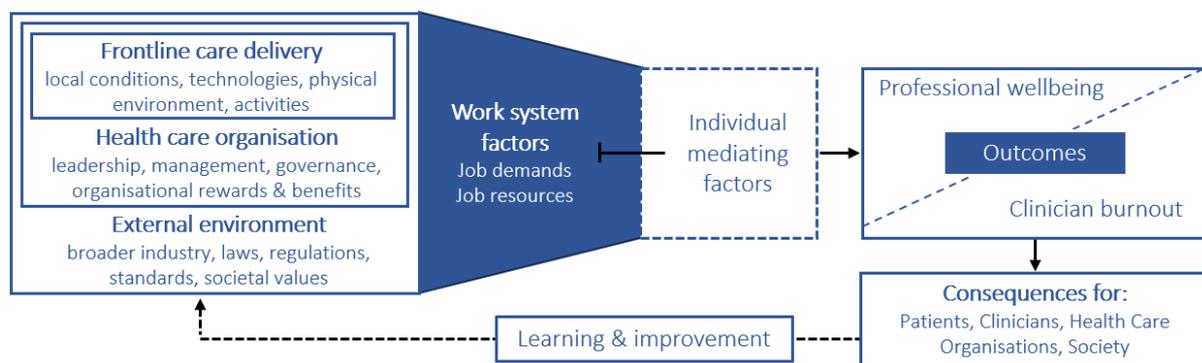
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seldom address the distinctive sector-specific requirements of particular types of workplaces and their workforces. Applying a sector-specific wellbeing model is crucial to accurately identify, assess and address the unique challenges and dynamics of a particular industry and its workforce. Generalized models may overlook industry-specific nuances, hindering the precision of wellbeing assessments and interventions. A specialised model ensures a more precise approach based on the development of targeted strategies and interventions.

Research in the health sector, where workers experience high levels of occupational stress related to the nature of that industry (Cordioli et al., 2019), advances an holistic, yet sector specific approach to wellbeing that recognises the institutional, structural and cultural factors influencing occupational stress. One of the most comprehensive of these is the systems model of clinical burnout and professional wellbeing developed by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM, 2019). The model, shown in Figure 1, was created to draw attention to the importance of clinical wellbeing for achieving patient wellbeing and to advocate for the adoption of a “systemic approach to burnout that focusses on the structure, organization, and culture of health care” (NASEM, 2019, p. 3). Based on the dual objective of addressing wellbeing and improving patient care outcomes, it was recognised that wellbeing and burnout are not only the concern or response of individuals but are instead created in the context of a broader system. The resultant NASEM systems model of wellbeing considers individual wellbeing (and its corollary burnout) in the context of the broader organisational and macroenvironment. It posits that frontline care delivery, organisational and external environments influence each other and that decisions made at each of these levels influence the work system factors of job resources and demands which contribute to burnout or professional wellbeing. Other factors which are unique to individuals such as coping strategies and resilience are believed to mediate the effects of the factors on burnout and professional wellbeing. This model highlights the consequences of clinician burnout or professional wellbeing for patients, clinicians, and health care organisations. It suggests efforts to reduce burnout and foster wellbeing are achieved through learning and continuous improvement processes.

Figure 1

Systems Model of Clinical Burnout and Professional Wellbeing



Note. Adapted from NASEM (2019, p. 4-5)

Although several systematic literature reviews have been undertaken in relation to the wellbeing of educators in a higher education context (e.g. Khan et al., 2019; Ohadomere & Ogamba, 2021; Singh et al., 2020; Urbina-Garcia, 2020; Watts & Robertson, 2011) these have been somewhat narrow in focus and a comparable systems model of wellbeing for educators has yet to be developed and widely adopted. To support the development of such an approach, this article adopts the elements of this model as an analytical frame to understand educator wellbeing and the factors identified as contributing to burnout and professional wellbeing within a contemporary academic context. It was determined that this model would provide an appropriate frame for the following reasons relating to both the work environment and the workers. Significant parallels can be drawn between the healthcare sector and the higher education sector operating environments due to the high stress environment and high level of regulatory intervention. Furthermore, in both contexts a client focus dominates service provision with educators and healthcare professionals often prioritising the wellbeing of those they serve—students and patients respectively—at the expense of their own wellbeing (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020; Huhtala et al., 2021).

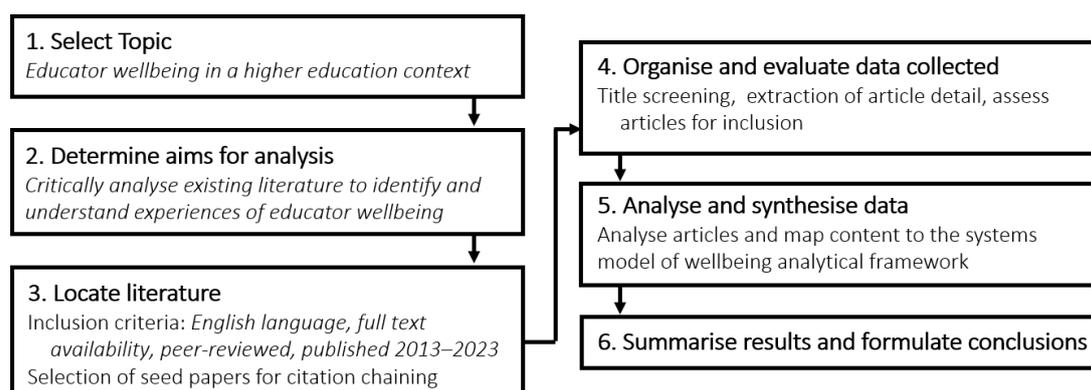
Method

The aim of the review was to identify and survey significant literature on educator wellbeing in higher education and unite it into an integrated, conceptual synthesis. An integrative review methodology was used to allow for “[c]ritical analysis of empirical, methodological, or theoretical literature, which draws attention to future research needs” (Toronto, 2020, p.3). Because educator wellbeing in higher education has been studied from various methodological and disciplinary perspectives and published in diverse sources, an integrative review approach was selected to synthesise the diverse literature and generate “new frameworks and perspectives” (Torraco, 2005, p. 386).

As shown in Figure 2, we followed Kutcher and LeBaron’s (2022) six step integrative review process. A systematised rather than systematic approach (Grant & Booth, 2009) to locating literature was applied as the purpose of the review was not to provide an exhaustive analysis of the literature but rather to identify and understand experiences of educator wellbeing in a higher education context. Peer-reviewed literature published between 2013 and 2023 was located using educational databases commonly used in higher education literature reviews (Bearman et al., 2012)—EBSCO, ERIC, and ProQuest Education—to identify foundational papers meeting the inclusion criteria. The five seed papers selected for citation chaining were Larson et al. (2019), Lee et al. (2022); McGaughey et al. (2022); Ross et al. (2023); and Wood (2022). These papers were selected based on relevance, recency, and examination of both antecedents and consequences of educator wellbeing and/or occupational stress. The multi-disciplinary nature of higher education scholarship means that terminology and keywords used can vary significantly (Bearman et al., 2012). To ensure key papers were located, the five seed papers were entered into Research Rabbit, a literature mapping tool that scans scholarly journal articles using keyword and citation mapping to identify similar articles and sources referenced by and citing them (Sharma et al., 2022).

Figure 2

Integrative Review Process



Note. Adapted from Kutcher and LeBaron (2022)

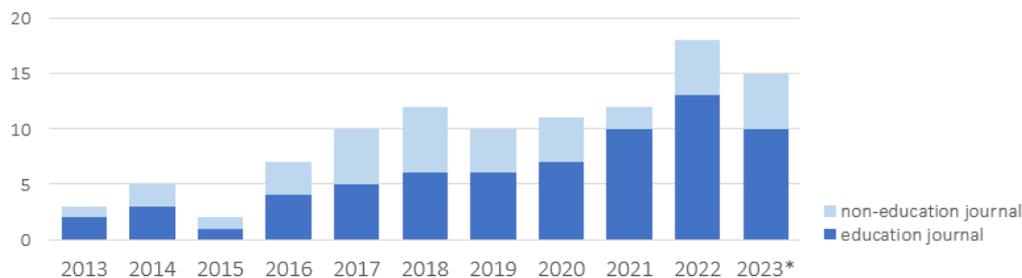
When evaluating the papers collected, we were deliberately agnostic with respect to the ‘quality’ metrics of publishing outlets as journal rankings are not always a reliable proxy for individual article quality (Bankovsky, 2019; Jarwal et al., 2009). Instead, as an integrative review our focus was on providing a broad view of the “phenomenon of interest” (Toronto, 2020, p. 2), “synthesizing knowledge from different lines or fields of research, and...inferring generalizations” (Jackson, 1980, p. 438) from a “fragmented and interdisciplinary” literature base (Synder, 2019, p. 333). Furthermore, inspired by the calls of Amy Verhaeghe, Ela Przybylo and Sharifa Patel (2018) to recognise the gendered and colonial foundations of pedagogical publishing, we believed it was important to attempt to include the voices and experiences of academics from a range of countries and institutions in an act of allyship (Roh & Galbler, 2020).¹ For similar reasons we also sought to include papers from education journals as well as those with a broader disciplinary remit. In the first stage of screening, we scanned titles of identified articles for relevance. Papers where a higher education focus was not clear were included at this stage. Full paper details were then exported from Research Rabbit to an Excel spreadsheet. The next stage of screening involved the authors

¹ We recognise restricting our search based on language, due to our poor proficiency in languages other than English, impacted this breadth (Toronto & Remington, 2020, p. 80).

together assessing each article against the inclusion criteria. Additional sources were identified through forward and backward citation chaining of included articles. Citation chaining is a supplementary search strategy commonly used in literature reviews to complement database searches and locate relevant evidence on a topic that did not appear in initial database searches (Hirt et al., 2023). As shown in Figure 3, 105 papers published between 2013 and mid 2023 were included in the review with the majority sourced from education-focussed journals.

Figure 3

Record of Papers Reviewed by Date and Journal Type



The themes identified in the literature were mapped to key elements distilled from the NASEM systems model of wellbeing. This included individual protective and risk factors mediating wellbeing and the work systems factors influencing wellbeing operating at the educator–student interface of teaching delivery, the organisational level of the university, and broader sectoral and societal influences. The consequences for various stakeholders, with a focus on students and educators, as well as initiatives for learning and improvement are discussed across these elements. Figure 4 presents the structure for the presentation of the results; however, it should be noted that there is a high degree of overlap and interaction between these elements.²

Figure 4

Framework for Presentation of Results



Work System Factors Influencing Educator Wellbeing

Job Demands-Resources theory has been a popular approach for investigating wellbeing in a higher education context (Huang & Wang, 2022; Karatuna et al., 2022; Mudrak et al., 2018; Naidoo-Chetty & du Plessis, 2021; Wood 2022). Job Demands-Resources theory posits that stress and burnout are higher when job demands are high and resources are low; conversely, wellbeing is higher when job demands are low and resources are sufficient (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001). Burnout is experienced by educators exposed to the cumulative negative effects of work demands that exceed their available coping capacity. Burnout affects the health (Young et al., 2017) and working performance of academics, ultimately diminishing their productivity, job satisfaction (Khan et al., 2019), motivation to teach competently (Rinas et al., 2023) and perceptions of their efficacy as educators (Sabagh et al., 2018). Just as the NASEM systems model of professional wellbeing

² A mapping of example papers to model elements is provided in the Appendix.

identified multiple interdependent levels that impact on the work systems that create wellbeing, in the higher education context work demands and resources operate at and are influenced by multiple levels. This includes decisions at the frontline teaching delivery interface, the university level focussed on university systems and practices, and the sectoral level focussed on the broader higher education environment.

Frontline Teaching Delivery Factors Influencing Wellbeing

Frontline teaching delivery is the micro work system level where interactions among educators, students and student support professionals occur and includes the conditions, technologies, activities, and physical environment in which teaching takes place. Positive student–educator interactions and relationships can promote wellbeing for educators and students (Riva et al., 2020), however, moral distress and diminished wellbeing can result when educators experience a pressure to teach a greater number and diversity of students (Ross et al., 2023) but are unable to support students in the way they wish (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). The literature reviewed suggests that many educators engage in a high level of emotional labour to support students through actions such as processing large numbers of extensions in a short time period, managing disclosures, providing emotional support for trauma or mental health issues, supporting a positive student experience, and fostering student–educator relationships (Abery & Gunson, 2016; Berry & Cassidy, 2013; Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2020; Lawless, 2018; Tunguz, 2016). High levels of emotional labour increase the risk of stress and burnout (Berry & Cassidy, 2013). When this labour is perceived by educators as unrewarded and unrecognised workload (Kinman, 2019) and an invisible and uncompensated expectation (Lawless, 2018), it increases the “potential for significant stress and emotional conflict as staff strive to engage in high quality education” (Abery & Gunson, 2016, p. 69). A dominant theme across this work is that the toll this emotional labour takes is magnified by a lack of recognition of and support for this caring role which has been worsened by the increasing complexity of student support needs, particularly relating to mental health (Butler et al., 2017; Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2020; Naidoo-Chetty & Du Plessis, 2021).

Wellbeing is impacted by workload intensification while perceptions of work–life balance are associated with control over work, and the autonomy and flexibility to control one’s own schedule can bolster educator wellbeing (Wray & Kinman, 2022). However, this autonomy and flexibility is increasingly squeezed by workload demands and time pressure. Growing work intensity and the methods of accommodating heavier demands including increasing total hours worked by working on weekends (without additional payment), extending workdays, and sacrificing breaks, family time, holidays and exercise, are negatively associated with wellbeing outcomes (Wood, 2022; Young et al., 2017). Even with this additional work, Butler et al., (2017) recounted the experience of one of the authors in responding to the unrelenting pace of work and attendant anxiety and near constant fear of falling behind and having to catch up.

The wellbeing implications of excessive workload demands are also evident in studies which identified a bleed of teaching and administrative work into non-teaching periods such as resubmissions by failing students, supplementary and deferred assessment, and updating course materials (Lee et al., 2022). However, in addition to inadvertent impacts of student actions on educator wellbeing which are caused by structural and administrative processes, some are more deliberate in nature. An example is the psychological harm, mental distress and impact on educator wellbeing caused by repeated exposure to hurtful, insulting and abusive commentary made by some students in teaching evaluations which can reduce some educators to tears or cause them to lose sleep in anticipation of such feedback (Lakeman et al., 2022). Non-constructive student commentary has also been found to have a negative impact on educators’ professional confidence and mental health more generally (Hutchinson et al., 2023). Women and educators from marginalised groups are subjected to a higher proportion of abusive student evaluation comments (Heffernan, 2021) and other microaggression associated with “everyday brief, low-intensity events that convey negative messages toward marginalized groups” (Ogunyemi et al., 2020, p. 97). This can include a focus on an educator’s accent (Ramjattan, 2023), questioning their subject matter expertise and English communication skills, or exhibiting aggressive behaviours (Sarfo Ankomah, 2022). Such behaviours may also be influenced by external influences such as the shift from student to customer (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020) and institutional responses to student transgressions (Frisby et al., 2014).

University Level Factors Impacting Educator Wellbeing

While the reviewed studies identify dimensions of the teaching interface that constitute job resources such as peer support, positive relationships with students, job control and the perceived meaningfulness of work, the job demands imposed by the university appear to outweigh these resources (Padilla & Thompson, 2016; Salimzadeh et al., 2017; Wood, 2022). Institutional factors that impact educator wellbeing include how educators perceive and experience the organisational culture via dimensions such as leadership and management, organisational support, governance, organisational rewards, and policies that dictate, for example, educator workload and performance assessment. Institutional conditions largely determine job resources and can either reduce or exacerbate job demands and their detrimental impacts on wellbeing (Sabagh et al., 2018).

In addition to high personal costs for individual educators, educator burnout and poor wellbeing also has high educational, social and economic costs for students and universities. The organisational impacts of compromised educator wellbeing include lower levels of productivity, engagement, organisational commitment and performance and higher staff turnover intentions (Sabagh et al., 2018; Salimzadeh et al., 2017). Educators experiencing burnout may have less ability to empathise with, encourage or support their students (Sabagh et al., 2017). Depersonalisation and emotional exhaustion—common symptoms of burnout—can impact the ability to respond to student concerns (James et al., 2019). The performance and self-efficacy of educators with compromised wellbeing may also present as less engaging teaching, lower quality curriculum that is not regularly updated, and the provision of less useful formative and summative feedback to inform student learning (Sabagh et al., 2017). This can create a cycle where students may express dissatisfaction with teaching and classroom management which can further diminish educator job satisfaction and efficacy (Frisby et al., 2014). The lower self-efficacy of burned-out educators may also present reputational risks to universities due to perceived impacts on teaching quality (Rinas et al., 2023; Roos & Borkoski, 2021; Sabagh et al., 2018) and a corresponding impact on student attraction and industry/professional body stakeholders and prospective graduate employers' attitudes (Kaushal et al., 2021). Notwithstanding these potential reputation and quality risks, universities have a legal obligation to provide a mentally, psychosocially and physically safe working environment (Wray & Kinman, 2022).

Inclusive wellbeing strategies targeted at academics, professional staff and students can be successful in reducing stress and increasing wellbeing (Brewster et al., 2022), particularly when they “cohesively embed cultural and structural change across the whole institution” (Brewster et al., 2022, p. 549). However, many universities are yet to put the conditions in place for wellbeing programs to succeed (McDonald et al., 2022). For example, focussing on UK universities, Wray and Kinman (2022) found that perceptions of how well universities manage employees' psychological health and safety are typically poorer than for other types of organisations and that universities are perceived to prioritise productivity over staff wellbeing. Academics operate “in a hypercompetitive environment where rejection and criticism are normal features of everyday life” (Ross et al., 2023, p. 3) which runs counter to the need for collegiality and support from other educational professionals to ensure educator wellbeing (Dinu et al., 2021; Savage et al., 2021). This culture is created and fed by institutional metrics-driven performance management and promotion which has been found to have profound implications for educator wellbeing. Escalating managerialism and quantitative demands such as publication targets, teaching workloads and administrative requirements imposed by institutions that are not usually achievable within available time, place heavy job demands on academics (Chetty & Du Plessis, 2017) and are linked to occupational stress (Shin & Jung, 2014).

Academics with high levels of autonomy report higher job satisfaction and moderated stress (Shin & Jung, 2014). However, they face considerable challenges balancing the demands of teaching and research workloads where expectations of improved quality and quantity of research outputs and research income have increased but the time available to engage in these activities has decreased (Lee et al., 2022; Tham & Holland, 2018). Ongoing academic staff are expected to shoulder the administrative and emotional work of managing a largely contractual and precariously employed teaching workforce as well as carrying increasing personal teaching and administration loads (Murray et al., 2014). The widespread adoption of blended learning (Wood, 2022), often without additional resourcing or adequate technology and associated training (Dinu et al., 2021), has contributed to increased job demands. Although it is well known that the provision of adequate equipment, resourcing and professional development are essential to wellbeing (Dinu et al., 2021; Gunson et al., 2016; Lawrence & Herrick, 2019), there appears to be little appetite or capacity to employ additional teaching or support staff (Lee et al., 2022) or to address worsening student–staff ratios (Wood, 2022). A related source of stress and anxiety is associated with institutional pressure and procedures requiring educators to identify, pre-empt and manage an increasing number and more complex forms of contract cheating and other breaches of academic integrity (Ross et al., 2023). Perceptions of organisational support are also negatively impacted by institutional performance management, probation, promotion and tenure processes that devalue teaching and only reward and incentivise research (Lee et al., 2022; Shin & Jung, 2014).

While opportunities to build and demonstrate competence at work, the presence of meaningful relationships and perceived organisational support are particularly important for early career educators (Crome et al., 2019), there is evidence that perceived and actual levels of organisational support constitute a job resource and can enhance wellbeing of educators at all levels (Poalses & Bezuidenhout, 2018). This organisational support can take many forms. For example, Qamar (2023) found that when the managers of educators exhibit servant leadership attributes such as emotional support and empathy, wellbeing outcomes improve, as do educator resilience and efficacy. The recognition of teaching excellence through an authentic and transparent reward system has a positive impact on job motivation (Akafo & Boateng, 2015), while expressions of care, solidarity, collegiality and communities of practice—though often at odds with the individualised incentives and competitive nature of academia—are also important supports for educator wellbeing (Askins & Blazek, 2015; Plotnikof & Utoft, 2022). Without a supportive culture, wellbeing can be further eroded as some educators may be unwilling to disclose or seek help for mental illness because they fear stigma and career consequences (Smith & Ulus, 2020). Indeed, the stigmatisation and

responsibilisation of work-related stress and mental health can discourage faculty from accessing university-provided supports and make them more likely to disclose mental health issues to a colleague (Price et al., 2017). This reliance on peers creates unintended associated emotional labour and may increase the risk of burnout for those providing collegial pastoral care (Lawless, 2018; Tunguz, 2016), however, reframing this support as an act of resistance to institutional demands may maintain educators' wellbeing (Plotnikof & Utoft, 2022; Young et al.; 2017).

Influence of the Broader Higher Education Environment on Educator Wellbeing

While individual universities have a clear duty of care to support educator wellbeing (Lee et al., 2022), their actions are shaped and constrained because “the external conditions within which universities operate ... have not been created by university management but by governments and policymakers” (Butler et al., 2017, p. 472). This external higher education environment encompasses political, market, professional, and societal factors at the national and global scales such as global university rankings, national higher education policy, laws, regulations and standards, and societal values.

Many papers posited that the dominant neoliberal agenda, founded on metrification, marketisation and the transformation of universities from a teaching-led model to a consumer and profit-led business model has increased stress and burnout in academia (Berry & Cassidy, 2013; Lawless, 2018; Masusuria & Cole, 2017; Stratford et al., 2023; Taberner; 2018). The intensifying ranking, competition and audit culture in higher education (Berg et al., 2016; Sarpong, 2023) trickles down to the educator level, where individual educators are held responsible for organisational reputation through national student surveys, government research and teaching evaluation programs, international university ranking systems, and institutional or discipline accreditation programs. An instructive example of this phenomenon is provided by Prasad et al. (2019) who document business school academics' stress and depression resulting from pressures to achieve accreditation through an international accrediting body. Schuelka et al. (2021) provide an interesting counterpoint highlighting how Bhutanese cultural values of happiness and wellbeing are a protective factor for academics' wellbeing.

Significant staff losses in higher education at the height of the pandemic heightened existing precarity-related stress caused by already high levels of workforce casualisation across the sector (Losa-Iglesias et al., 2022; Loveday, 2018; Rothengatter & Hill, 2013). These sector-wide staff reductions exacerbated time and workload pressures at the frontline teaching level. There is also evidence that educators responded to the isolation and mental health impacts of the pandemic by developing innovative practices designed to increase relatedness and to improve their own and their students' wellbeing (Averill & Major, 2020) or by resisting pressures through a relational ethic of care (Plotnikof & Utoft, 2022). Other crises such as war exacerbate stressors on the entire system within which educators work, with a study of Ukrainian academics demonstrating the severe consequences of “teaching in the conditions of a full-scale war” for educator burnout, emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and lowered perceptions of personal accomplishment (Tsybuliak et al., 2023, p. 5). South African educators expressed similar challenges to wellbeing and teaching efficacy associated with working in challenging local conditions (Hardman, et al., 2022).

Individual Factors Influencing Educator Wellbeing

Across the literature reviewed there is growing awareness that the wellbeing of educators is deteriorating, as evidenced by increasingly elevated levels of anxiety (Berg et al., 2016), occupational stress (Lee et al., 2022; Urbina-Garcia, 2020), burnout (Turner & Garvis, 2023), reduced wellbeing, psychological distress, negative emotions, and depression (Sabagh et al., 2018; Salimzadeh et al., 2017, 2021). The decline is a result of the cumulative effects of neoliberal pressures and work-related demands, compounded by limited resources and strained coping capacities (Khan et al., 2019; Melin et al., 2014; Naidoo-Chetty & du Plessis, 2021). Key stresses for academic staff are associated with teaching/research conflict, administration, overwork, professional development and seeking promotion (Darabi et al., 2017; Fetherston et al., 2021; Heng et al., 2020; Meng & Wang, 2018). This suggests that educators are impacted by policies, decisions and experiences operating at multiple levels of the higher education system. However, occupational stress is the outcome of a combination of structural constraints and personal characteristics (Meng & Wang, 2018) and individual mediating factors may either provide a protective function or present a risk to educator wellbeing and experiences of occupational stress or burnout. This impact can be observed in the findings that the negative impact of a perceived lack of value placed on teaching and the academics occupying education-focussed roles (Ross et al., 2022) can be countered by strong personal values that give meaning to teaching and a professional identity based on a deep care for student learning which can sustain educators and counter other pressures that reward research over teaching (McCune, 2021; Mudrak et al., 2018; Young et al., 2017).

The literature reports that while experiences of occupational stress are felt by both veteran and emerging educators (Crome et al., 2019; Naz et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2020, Stratford et al., 2023), intersectional factors appear to play an important role. For example, wellbeing was found to be lower for women and educators of minority ethnic status in a historically disadvantaged university environment in South Africa (Simons et al., 2019). Assessments of wellbeing were also found to be

lower in female, untenured and Black educators due to internalised trauma caused by experiences of workplace racism (Tunguz, 2016) and gendered expectations of educator care (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016).

Certain psychographic factors were identified as contributing to educator wellbeing in a positive or protective fashion. It is posited that traits such as emotional intelligence (Marinaki et al., 2017), agreeableness, openness to experience (Akanni & Oduaran, 2017), motivation (Sabagh et al., 2018), self-esteem (Losa-Iglesias et al., 2022) and optimism (Barkhuizen et al., 2014), positive reframing and acceptance coping strategies (Shen & Slater, 2021) support educators' ability to manage occupational stress. By contrast, personality traits such as neuroticism were positively correlated with educator burnout (Sabagh et al., 2018). There was also evidence that a caring orientation in educators such as empathy, understanding and responsiveness is correlated with burnout (Kiltz et al., 2020; Kordts-Freudinger, 2017). Indeed, it may be that the fundamental characteristics of effective educators, such as caring deeply about students and their learning, caring about high quality and ethical research, or caring for peers, may be also make them vulnerable to stress and burnout, as they may prioritise students, colleagues and institutional imperatives before their own wellbeing (Butler et al., 2017).

University programs focussing on staff wellbeing often prioritise the development of individual resilience as a solution to wellbeing (Brewer et al., 2019; McDermid et al., 2016). There are, however, limits to resilience as a response to facilitating wellbeing and a focus on individual personality traits and dispositions may overshadow consideration of the effect of the higher education operating environment and wider processes and conditions on wellbeing (Joseph, 2013; Loveday, 2018; Ross et al., 2022). The higher education ecosystem has become increasingly competitive, complex, and volatile (Young et al., 2023) and educators' experiences of stress is "a product of the multiple systems in which the academic interacts" and the interaction between different parts of the higher education ecosystem (Ross et al., 2023, p. 14). An excellent example of this interaction can be found in the impact on educator wellbeing caused by work–family conflict and poor work–life balance associated with struggling to meet workload demands (Zábrowská et al., 2018). Integration between work and family life, and strong support from family and friends, are predictors of higher wellbeing, however, these relationships can be compromised by long-term excessive workloads (Lee et al., 2022; Naidoo-Chetty & du Plessis, 2021). Relatedness via disciplinary, professional and union networks are also supportive of wellbeing (Larson et al., 2019). Mentoring relationships and peer networks with educators both inside and outside employing institutions and in other countries are important for academics to share support and effective educational practices, within and between disciplines and between early career and experienced educators (Stratford et al., 2023; Woloshyn et al., 2023). The importance of collective solidarity for educator resilience and wellbeing was particularly evident in COVID-era studies (de los Reyes et al., 2022; Plotnikof & Utoft, 2022). However, women and minority groups often have less access to critical networks and require more support to build them (King & Upadhyay, 2022; Young et al., 2017).

Advancing a Systems Approach to Educator Wellbeing

As evidenced in this review, there is already, at least in the published research, a strong recognition of the demands faced by university educators. Although these demands predate the COVID-19 pandemic (Kinman & Johnson, 2019; Watts & Robertson, 2011) it focussed attention on employee wellbeing (de los Reyes et al., 2022; Schwab et al., 2022; Shen & Slater, 2021). For many educators, the stress of the pandemic was exacerbated by the rapid shift to emergency remote education (McHenry et al., 2023; Schwab et al., 2022) while simultaneously managing health concerns and responding to pastoral concerns and the digital poverty experienced by many students (Hardman et al., 2022; Husbands & Prescott, 2023) alongside experiences of loneliness, isolation, digital fatigue and high levels of anxiety (Hurria, 2023). These cumulative demands on educators demonstrated the complex and dynamic environment educators work within and the potential threats to wellbeing as well as their resilience (Turner et al., 2023). This perseverance and resourcefulness cannot be taken for granted. The wellbeing of educators has significant implications for educators, their students, their colleagues and society at large (Peters et al., 2022) and the numerous studies in this review evidencing educator burnout due to excessive and prolonged stress should be a clarion call for the sector to create healthy and safe organisations. Despite this, the university wellbeing agenda has remained resolutely "centred on individual's ability to cope with stress and not on its underlying causes" (Wood, 2022, p. 338). Indeed, while supporting academics' mental health and wellbeing has been framed as a priority, approaches have tended to be "more focused on corporatisation and student satisfaction while unconsciously neglecting its impact on the well-being of academic staff" (Ohadomere & Ogamba, 2021, p. 67). Performative wellbeing supports provided by universities may be well-intentioned but unless they address underlying structural factors at the frontline teaching, leadership and institutional levels, they realistically have little prospect of improving educator wellbeing (Brewer et al., 2019; Brewster et al., 2022; McDonald et al., 2022). This integrative review, informed by the NASEM model—which considers individual wellbeing in the context of the broader organisational and macroenvironment—demonstrates that applying a multi-layered systems approach to higher education wellbeing can assist in identifying these underlying structural factors, effective existing practices and gaps in the ways institutions support educator wellbeing.

Adopting a systems approach to wellbeing foregrounds the complex and interdependent range of job demands and resources within the higher education ecosystem and their consequences for wellbeing and the benefits of adopting such a systematised approach are manifold. First, it challenges the dominant approaches in higher education which are centred on bolstering staff and student resilience and enhancing individual mediating factors without addressing job demands (Wood, 2022). This failure to recognise the impact of job demands, and the role of universities and broader university policy in creating these conditions, responsabilises individual educators for their own wellbeing, creating the potential for burnout and individualised shame for poor wellbeing outcomes. Second, a systems approach acknowledges the complex interactions and relationships between actors and factors, such as the co-dependency of educator and student wellbeing and the impact of the external environmental and institutional factors on the teaching delivery interface. Third, adopting a systems approach to wellbeing offers potential for scholars and institutions to enact an important element of the model that is not yet evident in the literature, namely the need for learning and continuous improvement in understanding and addressing educator wellbeing. Finally, it presents opportunities for educators, students and institutions to act in solidarity to (re)consider their own roles, expectations and potential to influence the wellbeing of themselves and others in the higher education system.

Higher education institutions have an obligation to actively identify potential threats to educator wellbeing and develop interventions at the level of the teaching interface within their own institutional context which buffer any negative impacts created by the external environment. While universities may have little control over the external environment, they are the bridge between sector conditions and educators. Institutions can advocate for their staff and control how they are treated at work, by determining whether attention and resources are directed in ways that support or detract from educator wellbeing. Universities are also the bridge between individual educators and students. Therefore, interventions must address the causes of stress and, particularly, job demands, rather than simply seeking to exploit or grow individual staff resilience and coping mechanisms as there is a limit to which these may continue to be relied on (Ross et al., 2022, 2023). The papers in this review provide ample evidence that a combination of support, professional development, adequate technology and manageable educator-to-student ratios enhance wellbeing (Dinu et al., 2021; Gunson et al., 2016; Lawrence & Herrick, 2019; Roos & Borkoski, 2021). Indeed, even factors that might be considered by some to be solely the responsibility of the individual to manage, such as work/life balance, peer support and networks, job control and perceived meaningfulness of work, can be positively influenced by the actions and cultures of higher education institutions. Evaluative case studies of institutional interventions that have been demonstrated to support educator wellbeing could be a useful focus for future research. Adopting a systems approach may provide a framework for scholars to evaluate the scope of the demands, resources and supports for wellbeing in different disciplines, types of higher education institutions, and for different types of educators and educational support staff. As many of the papers reviewed privilege the experience of academic educators, the nuanced experiences of the wide range of staff who perform an educator role in higher education, such as support and professional staff, should also be the subject of further research.

Although attempts were made to include papers from a range of countries (including Bhutan, China, Croatia, Ukraine, Canada, Nigeria, and South Africa), the sample was dominated by papers from a UK and Australian context so the influence of national context could not be compared. This, alongside disciplinary differences, and types of universities (e.g., well-funded elite research-intensive universities compared to regional or teaching-oriented universities) could also be the focus of future research.

Conclusion

Many of the findings presented in this integrative review are not new. Indeed, their focus on creating positive work environments, proactively monitoring wellbeing, reducing administrative burdens, and providing support to prevent and alleviate burnout systems and facilitate recovery from burnout, have long been advocated. However, the extent to which universities have been able to successfully act on this knowledge at a broad scale and in cognisance of the wide range of influences on wellbeing is not yet evident in the literature and it may be assumed, is not yet a dominant feature of the current higher education landscape. Given the importance of educator wellbeing perhaps adopting a systems approach to wellbeing should be prioritised.

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Appendix

Mapping of Key Themes to Elements of the Systems Model with Example References

Model element: Individual mediating factors influencing wellbeing	
Factors diminishing wellbeing	Intersectional disadvantage (Simons et al., 2019; Tunguz, 2016) Lack of social support, poor work-life balance or work/family conflict (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016; Wray & Kinman, 2021; Zábrodská et al., 2018) Psychographic factors (Sabagh et al., 2018) Caring (empathy, understanding) (Kiltz et al., 2020; Kordts-Freudinger, 2017) Work-family conflict (Zábrodská et al., 2018)
Protective factors	Work-family integration (Lee et al., 2022; Naidoo-Chetty & du Plessis, 2021) Coping strategies (Shen & Slater, 2021) Psychographic factors (Akanni & Oduaran, 2017; Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Marinaki et al., 2017; Sabagh et al., 2018) Resilience (Brewer et al., 2019; McDermid et al., 2016)
Model element: Work system factors impacting educator wellbeing at the frontline teaching delivery level	
Job Demands	Excessive workload, and encroachment on personal time (Lee et al., 2022; Wood, 2022) Emotional labour (Abery & Gunson, 2016; Berry & Cassidy, 2013; Lawless, 2018; Lennie, 2020) Complex student support needs (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2020; Naidoo-Chetty & Du Plessis, 2021; Ross et al., 2023). Non-constructive student feedback (Hutchinson et al., 2023; Lakeman et al., 2022; Tucker, 2021) Microaggressions and disrespect from students (Ramjattan, 2023; Sarfo Ankomah, 2022)
Job Resources	Positive teacher-student relationships (Riva et al., 2020) Job control, flexibility and autonomy (Wray & Kinman, 2022) Meaning and purpose in work (McCune, 2021; Mudrak et al., 2018) Professional relationships and social support (Dinu et al., 2021; Savage et al., 2021)
Model element: Work system factors impacting educator wellbeing at the university level	
Job Demands	University prioritising productivity over wellbeing (Wray & Kinman, 2021) Unmanageable research performance expectations and teaching workloads (Lee et al., 2022; Shin & Jung, 2014; Tham & Holland, 2018) Inadequate administrative and technological support (Dinu et al., 2021; Murray et al., 2014; Wood, 2022) Performance, promotion and tenure processes that devalue teaching (Shin & Jung, 2014; Lee et al., 2022) Low levels of organisational support (Wray & Kinman, 2021) Pressure to manage complex academic integrity issues (Hamilton & Wolsky, 2022; Ross et al., 2023)
Job Resources	Cohesive staff and student wellbeing initiatives (Brewster et al., 2022) High levels of academic autonomy (Shin & Jung, 2014) Organisational culture and organisational support (Crome et al., 2019; Poalses & Bezuidenhout, 2018) A culture of collegial care and support (Askins & Blazek, 2017) Rewards and recognition (Akafo & Boateng, 2015) Adequate equipment, resources, training and development (Dinu et al., 2021; Gunson et al., 2016; Lawrence & Herrick, 2019)
Model element: Work system factors at the broader higher education environment level	
Job Demands	Neoliberal higher education business model (Berry & Cassidy, 2013; Lawless, 2018; Lennie, 2020; Maisuria & Cole, 2017) COVID-19 pandemic (Littleton & Stanford, 2021) Casualisation/precarity (Loveday, 2018; Rothengatter & Hill, 2013) Intensifying ranking, competition and audit culture in higher education (Berg et al., 2016)
Job Resources	External professional support (Wray & Kinman, 2021) Academic networks outside employing institution (Larson et al., 2019) Societal values that prioritise wellbeing (Schuelka et al., 2021)