

The Hidden Cost of Academic Excellence: Academic Burnout among Moroccan CPGE Students

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i2.2635>

APA Citation: Ouhejjou, M. (2024). The Hidden Cost of Academic Excellence: Academic Burnout among Moroccan CPGE Students. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 6(2).666-672. <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i2.2635>

Received:

03/01/2024

Accepted:

13/04/2024

Keywords:

student burnout, CPGE, Morocco, academic exhaustion, MBI-SS, higher education, well-being

Abstract

Student burnout has emerged as a salient concern in high-stakes academic environments worldwide; yet its manifestation within Morocco's Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Écoles (CPGE) remains conspicuously underexplored. Characterised by an exceptionally demanding curriculum, relentless competitive pressure, and a cultural milieu that invests considerable social prestige in academic attainment, the CPGE system constitutes a particularly fertile ground for the chronic academic stress that precipitates burnout. The present study examined the prevalence and dimensional structure of burnout among 101 Moroccan CPGE students (58 female, 43 male) through an adapted version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI-SS; Schaufeli et al., 2002), applying Maslach and Leiter's (1997) tripartite model of exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced academic efficacy. The findings attest to alarmingly elevated exhaustion (subscale $M = 4.03/5$), moderate but pervasive cynicism ($M = 3.48$), and a bifurcated efficacy picture in which residual goal-motivation coexists with markedly attenuated classroom confidence ($M = 3.60$). Taken together, these results position this population within an intermediate stage of burnout whose trajectory is unlikely to self-correct without deliberate intervention at the classroom, institutional, and policy levels. Future longitudinal and gender-comparative research is recommended to build a more robust empirical foundation for evidence-based well-being initiatives within Morocco's elite preparatory sector.

1. Introduction

Few institutional pathways in Morocco carry the symbolic weight of the Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Écoles (CPGE). Modelled on their French counterparts, these programmes channel the country's highest-achieving secondary graduates toward the competitive entrance examinations of the grandes écoles — elite engineering, business, and scientific institutions whose diplomas function as gateways to professional distinction and social mobility (WENR, 2022). The prestige attached to CPGE enrolment is inseparable from a cultural economy in which academic credentials are understood not merely as personal achievements but as corollaries of familial honour and collective aspiration.

The structural features of the programme are exceptional in their intensity. Over a two-year cycle, students assimilate dense syllabi across mathematics, physics, and engineering or economics, while preparing simultaneously for the concours — the national competitive examination. Near-weekly oral examinations (khôlles or colles) serve as both diagnostic and ranking instruments, and the expectation of extended daily independent study is both implicit and, by student accounts, inescapable. The system is, in short, engineered for selectivity — and that selectivity comes at a measurable human cost. Moroccan CPGE students additionally contend with French-medium instruction that, for many educated in Arabic-medium secondary

schools, constitutes a formidable cognitive and affective burden (Belghiti et al., 2016), alongside economic pressures that amplify the perceived consequences of failure.

The concept of burnout — first elaborated by Freudenberger (1974) and theorised as a tripartite syndrome by Maslach and Jackson (1981) — was extended to the academic domain by Schaufeli et al. (2002) through the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI-SS). Within this framework, emotional exhaustion reflects the depletion of cognitive and affective resources; cynicism denotes growing detachment from one’s studies; and reduced academic efficacy captures the erosion of belief in one’s capacity to perform meaningfully. The consequences are well-documented: decreased academic performance, heightened dropout risk, disrupted sleep, and increased vulnerability to depressive symptomatology (Dyrbye et al., 2008; Salmela-Aro & Upadaya, 2014). Despite the breadth of this international literature, no peer-reviewed empirical study has yet applied the MBI-SS to Moroccan CPGE students — a lacuna the present study directly addresses.

The study pursues three objectives: to document burnout prevalence across all three MBI-SS dimensions; to interpret findings in light of the Moroccan CPGE’s structural and cultural specificities; and to derive evidence-grounded implications for practice and policy. These objectives are operationalised through three research questions: to what extent do Moroccan CPGE students exhibit academic burnout as measured by the MBI-SS; how do the system’s structural, cultural, and linguistic specificities amplify generic burnout stressors; and what interventions does the evidence suggest as appropriate responses?

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The tripartite burnout model, developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981) and refined by Maslach et al. (1996), remains the dominant conceptual framework in the field. Its adaptation for students — the MBI-SS (Schaufeli et al., 2002) — reconceptualises the three dimensions for the academic context: exhaustion as the fatigue generated by cumulative study demands; cynicism as growing indifference toward one’s studies; and reduced efficacy as the erosion of perceived academic competence. Two complementary theoretical traditions further anchor the present analysis. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) posits that environments systematically frustrating the needs for autonomy and competence — as high-stakes competitive programmes characteristically do — precipitate the motivational erosion that manifests as cynicism and disengagement. The transactional stress-coping model of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), meanwhile, locates burnout in the chronic gap between perceived demands and perceived coping resources — a gap that, in the CPGE context, is both wide and structurally sustained. Together, these frameworks provide both the descriptive taxonomy and the explanatory mechanism that the present study draws upon.

2.2. Burnout in High-Pressure Contexts and the Moroccan Specificities

Across comparable high-stakes educational systems — French CPGEs, Chinese Gaokao preparation, Indian IIT-JEE tracks — the literature consistently identifies emotional exhaustion as the most pervasive burnout dimension (Walburg, 2014), with cynicism intensifying progressively among students whose initial motivation was primarily extrinsic. Studies of the Chinese context add a culturally specific amplifier: collectivist norms and familial academic investment mean that burnout is experienced not merely as personal distress but as anticipated familial shame, constraining help-seeking behaviour and generating systematic underreporting of symptoms (Zhang et al., 2007; Li et al., 2020). The Indian context contributes evidence of study demand overload — where content volume exceeds available cognitive processing capacity — compounded by sleep deprivation that degrades the recovery processes needed to moderate exhaustion (Salmela-Aro & Upadaya, 2014; Dyrbye et al., 2008).

These international patterns are recognisable in the Moroccan CPGE, yet three contextual specificities plausibly amplify burnout risk beyond what the comparative literature alone would

predict. The first is the cultural economy of academic achievement described above, which renders the acknowledgement of struggle socially threatening and suppresses help-seeking. The second — largely invisible in the international burnout literature — is the linguistic complexity of French-medium instruction for students whose primary academic language is Arabic; this constitutes a structural inflation of cognitive load that accelerates depletion across every hour of study (Belghiti et al., 2016; Doiz et al., 2013). The third is the institutional scarcity of psychological support infrastructure, which renders the individual student’s coping repertoire the only available buffer against chronic academic demand — a condition that, when that repertoire is itself depleted, structurally guarantees unchecked burnout progression (WHO, 2021).

3. Methodology

The study adopts a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, appropriate to the primary objective of documenting burnout prevalence and dimensional structure at a defined point in time (Creswell, 2014). The measurement instrument was an adapted version of the MBI-SS (Schaufeli et al., 2002), comprising fifteen items across three subscales — Emotional Exhaustion (EX1–EX5), Cynicism (CY1–CY4), and Academic Efficacy (EF1–EF6) — rated on a five-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Higher scores on Exhaustion and Cynicism indicate greater burnout severity; higher Efficacy scores indicate stronger perceived competence.

The participant pool comprised 101 CPGE students recruited via non-probability convenience sampling through institutional and personal networks, with data collected between March 9 and April 12, 2024, via Google Forms. Of these, 58 identified as female (57.4%) and 43 as male (42.6%). No demographic variables beyond gender were collected — a limitation that precludes subgroup comparisons by track, year, or region. Participation was voluntary, responses were fully anonymised, and the study was conducted in accordance with the standard ethical principles governing educational research. Data analysis proceeded through item-level and subscale-level descriptive statistics, with gender retained as an exploratory grouping variable.

4. Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all fifteen items. Table 2 consolidates the three subscale means.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for All MBI-SS Items (N = 101)*

Item	Statement	M	SD	Agree / Strongly Agree (%)
EX1	I feel emotionally drained by my studies.	3.87	0.89	59.5%
EX2	I feel used up at the end of a day at CPGE.	4.42	0.74	88.2%
EX3	I feel tired when I get up in the morning and have to face another day at the CPGE.	4.23	0.81	72.3%
EX4	Studying or attending a class is really a strain for me.	3.73	1.02	50.5%
EX5	I feel burned out from my studies.	3.91	0.84	62.4%
CY1	I have become less interested in my studies since my enrollment at the CPGE.	3.39	1.30	35.6%
CY2	I have become less enthusiastic about my studies.	3.76	1.01	49.5%
CY3	I have become more cynical about the potential usefulness of my studies.	3.55	1.12	38.6%
CY4	I doubt the significance of my studies.	3.22	1.29	24.7%
EF1	I can effectively solve the problems that arise in my studies.	3.39	0.89	34.7%
EF2	I believe that I make an effective contribution to the classes that I attend.	3.31	0.96	29.8%

EF3	In my opinion, I am a good student.	3.48	0.84	42.6%
EF4	I feel stimulated when I achieve my study goals.	4.16	1.03	81.2%
EF5	I have learned many interesting things during the course of my studies.	3.93	0.92	74.3%
EF6	During class, I feel confident that I am effective in getting things done.	3.37	0.95	34.6%

Table 2. *Subscale-Level Means and Standard Deviations*

Subscale	Items	M	SD
Exhaustion	EX1–EX5	4.03	0.90
Cynicism	CY1–CY4	3.48	1.20
Academic Efficacy	EF1–EF6	3.60	0.98

4.1 Emotional Exhaustion

Exhaustion yielded the highest aggregate mean ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.90$), with all five items above the scale midpoint. The peak item — EX2: “I feel used up at the end of a day at CPGE” ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.74$) — was endorsed by 88.2% of respondents; only 3.0% disagreed. EX3 ($M = 4.23$; 72.3% agreement) confirmed that depletion extends into students’ pre-academic mornings, a hallmark of chronic rather than episodic stress. The burnout self-identification item EX5 — “I feel burned out from my studies” — returned $M = 3.91$, with 62.4% in agreement and only 9.9% disagreeing. Female students reported consistently higher exhaustion means, most notably on EX2 (Female $M = 4.57$ vs. Male $M = 4.21$), though these differences are reported as descriptive only given sample size constraints.

4.2 Cynicism

The Cynicism subscale returned $M = 3.48$ ($SD = 1.20$), with greater inter-individual variability (SD range: 1.01–1.30) than exhaustion. The highest item was CY2 — “I have become less enthusiastic about my studies” ($M = 3.76$) — endorsed by 49.5% of respondents, while the lowest was CY4 — “I doubt the significance of my studies” ($M = 3.22$). This gradient is interpretively significant: students have lost enthusiasm but have not, in the majority of cases, concluded their studies are meaningless — a distinction bearing directly on the type of intervention most likely to succeed.

4.3 Academic Efficacy

The Efficacy subscale produced the widest internal range ($M = 3.31$ to 4.16). The strongest items — EF4: “I feel stimulated when I achieve my study goals” ($M = 4.16$; 81.2% agreement) and EF5: “I have learned many interesting things” ($M = 3.93$; 74.3%) — indicate that goal-orientation and intellectual engagement remain largely intact. Against these, classroom-specific confidence items registered markedly weaker scores: EF2 ($M = 3.31$; 29.8% agreement), EF1 ($M = 3.39$), and EF6 ($M = 3.37$). The result is a bifurcated profile — dispositional motivation intact, situational classroom confidence substantially eroded — that constitutes the most theoretically consequential finding of the study.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpreting the Three Dimensions

The aggregate burnout profile — high exhaustion, moderate cynicism, bifurcated efficacy — is broadly consistent with the patterns documented in comparable elite preparatory contexts, yet distinctive in its intensity and internal configuration. The exhaustion mean of 4.03, with 88.2% of respondents depleted at the end of each academic day and depletion carrying over into the following morning, positions this population at the severe end of the spectrum relative to comparable MBI-SS studies (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Salmela-Aro & Upadaya, 2014). In the terms of Maslach and Leiter’s (1997) burnout theory, this is the signature of chronic rather than episodic stress — a distinction of considerable practical importance, since strategies calibrated

for episodic stress will not be effective with a population whose recovery processes are themselves compromised.

The cynicism gradient — motivational erosion without existential disenchantment — is, in the terms of Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, most plausibly the product of frustrated autonomy and thwarted competence needs rather than a stable cognitive reorientation. Students have not concluded their studies are purposeless; they have lost the enthusiasm with which they engaged with them. This distinction has direct practical implications: re-engagement strategies premised on restoring intrinsic motivation through increased student agency, diversified assessment, and meaningful feedback relationships are likely to find more purchase than motivational persuasion or value clarification, which addresses a problem the data do not, in the majority of cases, confirm.

The efficacy bifurcation is the study's most original analytical contribution. The sharp divergence between goal-orientation items (EF4, EF5) and classroom-performance items (EF1, EF2, EF6) suggests a decoupling of dispositional motivation from situational confidence that is, it is postulated, a specific product of the CPGE's comparative pedagogical architecture. In a system where performance expectations are set by the highest-achieving peers and weekly colles rank students against one another, even an objectively adequate student may experience their classroom presence as insufficient. The result is, in Bandura's (1997) terms, a systematic underestimation of actual competence — a vulnerability that, left unaddressed, is likely to accelerate further burnout progression.

5.2. The Moroccan Context as Amplifier

Reading these data as nothing more than a Moroccan instantiation of a universal burnout pattern would, it is argued, be distorting. Three contextually specific amplifiers operate here. The cultural economy of CPGE enrolment renders burnout symptoms socially threatening to acknowledge, generating a gap between experienced and reported distress that any intervention strategy must explicitly account for. The linguistic complexity of French-medium instruction — a compound cognitive burden in which the effort of linguistic decoding runs concurrently with disciplinary understanding — constitutes, in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) terms, a structural multiplier of perceived demand rather than merely an additional stressor. And the scarcity of institutional psychological support leaves the individual student's coping repertoire as the primary — frequently the only — buffer against accumulating demands. When that repertoire is depleted by chronic exhaustion, unchecked burnout progression becomes, in effect, structurally guaranteed. This is not an argument against individual resilience; it is an argument that individual resilience is not a substitute for institutional responsibility.

5.3. Implications for Practice and Policy

At the classroom level, the efficacy findings point to the recalibration of feedback practices as the most immediately actionable intervention — moving from the comparative logic of the colle toward formative, competence-affirming feedback that enables students to develop an accurate appraisal of their own performance (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The exhaustion data provide grounds for revisiting content pacing and building structured cognitive rest into instructional practice (Boksem & Tops, 2008). At the institutional level, dedicated psychological support infrastructure — counsellors familiar with high-performance academic stress, peer support programs, and systematic early-identification mechanisms — is urgently required, alongside a cultural shift in the institutional messages conveyed about struggle, rest, and help-seeking. At the policy level, integrating student well-being indicators into CPGE evaluation frameworks, diversifying assessment modes, and addressing the linguistic dimension of instruction through transitional language support and language-sensitive content pedagogy represent the most consequential systemic levers available.

5.4. Limitations

Four limitations deserve acknowledgement. The cross-sectional design yields a descriptive snapshot rather than a developmental trajectory and cannot establish causal direction. Self-report bias — likely amplified by the social desirability dynamics identified above — may result in systematic underestimation of burnout prevalence, particularly on the cynicism and efficacy subscales. The demographic sparseness of the participant profile precludes subgroup comparisons by track, year, or socioeconomic background. And the absence of Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each subscale within this specific population means the instrument's psychometric properties in the Moroccan CPGE context remain unverified. Future research should address these gaps through longitudinal designs, qualitative triangulation, richer demographic profiling, and formal psychometric validation.

6. Conclusion

The present study provides the first empirical examination of academic burnout among Moroccan CPGE students using the MBI-SS framework. The findings converge on a coherent and concerning profile: exhaustion near-universal in its reach and chronic in its character; cynicism prevalent in the form of motivational erosion rather than academic disenchantment; and efficacy bifurcated between intact goal-orientation and substantially eroded classroom confidence. Three principal conclusions follow. Burnout in this population is neither incidental nor self-correcting — it is structurally produced by the intersection of demand overload, cultural amplification, linguistic complexity, and institutional support scarcity. It demands a systemic rather than merely symptomatic response, implicating teachers, institutional leaders, and policymakers simultaneously. And it reveals a tension at the heart of elite education that no system can afford to ignore indefinitely: the CPGE was designed to identify and develop exceptional academic talent; it was not designed to exhaust, disengage, and erode the confidence of the very students it selects. The sustainability of elite education depends, ultimately, on its willingness to reckon honestly with the human costs it generates.

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