Academic Burnout and the Quality of Students' Thesis Proposal Background (A Correlational Study)

M. Hasan Nugroho
Universitas Islam Negeri Mataram, Mataram, Indonesia
210107123.mhs@uinmataram.ac.id

Ribahan
Universitas Islam Negeri Mataram, Mataram, Indonesia
Ribahan@uinmataram.ac.id

Miftahul Jannah
Universitas Islam negeri Mataram, Mataram, Indonesia
miftahuljannah950@uinmataram.ac.id

Jaelani
Universitas Islam Negeri Mataram, Mataram, Indonesia
Allanj@uinmataram.ac.id

Abstract

Academic burnout has become a growing concern in higher education, especially among students engaged in cognitively demanding tasks like thesis writing. This study examines the relationship between academic burnout and the quality of the "Background of the Study" section in undergraduate theses among English Education students at Universitas Islam Negeri Mataram. Using a quantitative correlational design, the research investigates whether burnout—measured in terms of exhaustion and disengagement—affects academic writing performance. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 31 final-year students who met specific inclusion criteria. The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) measured burnout levels, while a rubric-based assessment evaluated writing quality. Due to non-normal data distribution, Spearman's Rank Correlation was used for analysis. Results revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between exhaustion and writing quality, indicating that higher levels of exhaustion are associated with poorer academic writing. However, disengagement showed no significant relationship with writing quality. These findings suggest that exhaustion plays a more critical role in diminishing students' cognitive performance during thesis writing. The study contributes to the existing literature on academic burnout and provides practical insights for educators, academic advisors, and institutions. Understanding how exhaustion impairs writing can support the development of targeted interventions, particularly in stress management and academic writing support, within faith-based higher education settings.

Keywords: academic burnout, exhaustion, disengagement, thesis writing, writing quality

Introduction

Academic burnout is a psychological condition that emerges from prolonged exposure to academic stress, typically characterized by two key components: exhaustion and disengagement (Mohebi et al., 2018). Exhaustion refers to emotional and cognitive fatigue due to academic demands, while disengagement involves a sense of detachment and reduced motivation toward learning tasks (Lindsäter et al., 2022). This phenomenon is increasingly common among university students, particularly those engaged in complex academic responsibilities such as thesis proposal writing (Asni et al., 2024; Rahmania El Barusi & Kurniawati, 2024).

In the context of English Education programs, students are expected to demonstrate advanced academic writing proficiency, conduct literature synthesis, and construct logical and persuasive arguments. These expectations are especially evident in the Background of the Study section of a thesis proposal, which plays a pivotal role by setting the research context, justifying the problem, integrating relevant literature, and explaining the significance of the study (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Crafting this section requires higher-order thinking skills such as critical analysis, synthesis, and academic reasoning, making it one of the most intellectually demanding parts of the thesis (Ade Johan, 2024; Ayala et al., 2024). For students experiencing burnout, cognitive overload can impair their ability to maintain clarity, coherence, and depth in this section (Stajkovic & Stajkovic, 2024).

Despite the importance of this component, many students struggle to produce a well-written Background of the Study due to mental fatigue, decreased concentration, and reduced motivation (Sinval et al., 2025; Yusof et al., 2023). Previous research indicates that academic burnout is linked to poor time management, procrastination, and diminished academic performance (Balkis, 2013; Govicar et al., 2024; Khurshid et al., 2025). These issues can directly affect writing quality, leading to disorganized structure, weak argumentation, and delayed thesis completion (Balkis, 2013).

Although there is substantial research on the general effects of burnout on academic achievement (Chong et al., 2025; Madigan & Curran, 2021; Qin et al., 2025), few studies have specifically investigated its impact on students' ability to produce a high-quality Background of the Study section (Chong et al., 2025). This gap is significant, as the section not only reflects students' academic reasoning but also determines the strength of their research foundation.

This study focuses on English Education students at Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Mataram, who experience unique academic and spiritual demands. As an Islamic-based institution, UIN emphasizes not only academic excellence but also religious obligations and moral development. Students are often required to balance

thesis writing with religious activities, coursework, and institutional expectations. These overlapping responsibilities may increase their susceptibility to burnout. Additionally, English Education students are held to higher standards in academic writing, as they are expected to produce scholarly work in English with logical structure and academic rigor.

Given these challenges, it is essential to investigate how academic burnout affects students' writing quality, particularly in the Background of the Study section. Understanding this relationship can support the development of targeted interventions and student support systems. Therefore, this research aims to examine the correlation between academic burnout and the quality of the Background of the Study section in undergraduate theses proposals written by English Education students at UIN Mataram. The findings are expected to inform more effective academic guidance, stress management programs, and mental health initiatives that promote both academic achievement and student well-being.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative correlational design to examine the relationship between academic burnout and the quality of thesis background writing. This design was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to determine the statistical association between two measurable variables—academic burnout and students' writing performance. Quantitative research is commonly used in studies related to academic burnout and performance because it enables researchers to identify patterns, establish relationships, and draw conclusions based on statistical evidence (Madigan & Curran, 2021).

The population in this study consisted of 128 final-year students in the English Education Department at Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Mataram. Using purposive sampling, a sample of 31 students was selected based on the criteria that they were in the process of writing their thesis proposals and were willing to participate by completing the burnout questionnaire and submitting their thesis background sections for assessment. Although the total population consisted of 128 students, this study employed a purposive sample of 31 participants, which aligns with recommendations for correlational research. According to statistical power analysis (with effect size r = 0.30, α = 0.05, and power = 0.80), a minimum sample size of 31 is considered adequate to detect a medium effect with sufficient statistical power. This justification is supported by (Demerouti et al., 2021) whose guidelines are commonly used in psychological research involving burnout. While the relatively small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population, it remains appropriate for testing the existence and strength of correlation between academic burnout and writing quality. The primary goal of correlational studies is not

generalization but the identification of statistically significant relationships between variables, which this sample size sufficiently allow

The instruments used in this study were the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) and a rubric-based assessment. The OLBI consisted of 16 items measured on a 4-point Likert scale, designed to capture two key dimensions of academic burnout: exhaustion and disengagement. This inventory has been widely validated in psychological and educational research, with consistently high internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.80 to 0.90), making it suitable for use in higher education contexts. Meanwhile, the rubric-based assessment was developed to evaluate the quality of the Background of the Study section in students' thesis proposals. The rubric included criteria such as clarity and coherence, grammar and language use, integration of relevant literature, proper referencing, and overall structure, each scored on a 10-point scale, resulting in a maximum total of 50 points. The writing assessment rubric was adapted from the model proposed by Swales and Feak (Belcher, 1995), which outlines the essential components of a well-structured academic introduction. To ensure content and face validity, the rubric was reviewed by academic experts, including thesis advisors and writing lecturers, who confirmed its relevance and clarity for evaluating students' academic writing. Additionally, inter-rater reliability was maintained by involving two independent academic reviewers in evaluating each thesis section. In cases of scoring discrepancies, a third evaluator was consulted to ensure fairness and consistency in the assessment process. This multi-rater strategy reinforced the objectivity and reliability of the writing quality evaluation.

Data collection was conducted in two phases. First, students completed the OLBI questionnaire either online or in printed form. Second, participants submitted their Background of the Study sections for scoring by academic reviewers using the provided rubric. Ethical clearance and informed consent were obtained prior to data collection.

The normality of the data was tested using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Since some variables did not follow a normal distribution, Spearman's Rank Correlation was used to analyze the data. This non-parametric statistical method was employed to determine the relationship between students' burnout levels and the quality of their writing in the thesis background section.

Findings

Analysis of Exhaustion Scores and Background of Study Quality

The exhaustion scores in the dataset range from 9 to 32, with an average of around 20. This indicates a moderate level of mental and physical fatigue experienced by the students. Students who scored higher in exhaustion also tended to produce lower-quality thesis sections, particularly in the Background of Study. For instance, the student with the highest exhaustion score, 32, scored 23 in the Background of Study, suggesting that high levels of exhaustion correlate with diminished cognitive resources necessary for quality writing. Previous research supports this connection, with studies indicating that mental and physical fatigue impair cognitive functioning and hinder academic performance . Exhaustion increases cognitive load, making it harder for students to maintain focus, organize their thoughts, and synthesize information effectively. As burnout intensifies, students may struggle with critical thinking, leading to a less coherent and well-structured thesis.

Normality Test and Its Impact on Data Analysis

The results from the normality test are essential in determining the appropriateness of using Pearson's correlation, a parametric test that assumes the data follows a normal distribution.

Table 1. Normality Test

One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test					
		EX	DIS	OLBI	BOS
N		31	31	31	31
Normal Parameters[a,b]	Mean	19.5161	14.5161	34.0323	17.7419
	Std. Deviation	4.44875	4.89129	8.46358	7.06148
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.095	.187	.137	.271
	Positive	.095	.187	.137	.155
	Negative	-.092	-.120	-.097	-.271
Test Statistic		.095	.187	.137	.271
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.200[c,d]	.007[c]	.144[c]	.000[c]

a. Test distribution is Normal.

b. Calculated from data.

c. Lilliefors Significance Correction.

d. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test revealed that the data for Exhaustion (EX) and Total Burnout (OLBI) followed a normal distribution. Specifically, the test statistic for Exhaustion (EX) was 0.095, with an asymptotic significance of 0.200, which is greater than the 0.05 threshold. This indicates that the data for Exhaustion (EX) is normally distributed, and thus, Pearson's correlation could have been an appropriate method

for analyzing relationships involving this variable. Similarly, the Total Burnout (OLBI) variable had a test statistic of 0.137 and an asymptotic significance of 0.144, which is greater than 0.05, signifying that this data also follows a normal distribution.

The analysis of the relationship between Exhaustion (EX) and the Background of Study (BOS)

The analysis of the relationship between Exhaustion (EX) and the Background of Study (BOS) was conducted using Spearman's Rank Correlation due to the non-normal distribution of the data. The results revealed a significant positive correlation between Exhaustion (EX) and the quality of the Background of Study (BOS) section in the theses.

Table 2. The Spearman's rho correlation

Correlations			EX	BOS
Spearman's rho	EX	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.373[*]
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.039
		N	31	31
	BOS	Correlation Coefficient	.373[*]	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.039	.
		N	31	31

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

This finding contrasts with the relationship observed between Exhaustion (EX) and BOS, where a significant positive correlation was found. The lack of correlation between Disengagement (DIS) and BOS may indicate that although students may experience a decline in motivation, this does not directly affect the quality of their Background of Study writing. One possible explanation could be that disengaged students may still complete the necessary academic tasks, including writing the Background of Study, albeit with less enthusiasm or effort, but without a noticeable decline in the quality of the written work.

The analysis of the relationship between Disengagement (DIS) and Background of Study (BOS)

The analysis of the relationship between Disengagement (DIS) and Background of Study (BOS), conducted using Spearman's Rank Correlation, reveals no significant association between these two variables. The Spearman's rho correlation coefficient is 0.026, with a p-value of 0.890, which is well above the 0.05 significance threshold. This indicates that Disengagement (DIS), which represents a

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loss of motivation and emotional detachment from thesis work, does not have a meaningful impact on the quality of the Background of Study (BOS) in the theses analyzed.

This result suggests that while students who experience disengagement may feel less involved or motivated in their academic work, it does not directly translate into a deterioration in the quality of their written work, specifically in the Background of Study section. This finding could imply that students, even when disengaged, are still able to perform the structural and research-oriented tasks required for their thesis, such as composing the Background of Study, despite their diminished motivation or interest.

Discussion

Impact of Exhaustion on Academic Performance

The data indicates a significant correlation between the level of exhaustion (mental and physical fatigue) and the quality of the students' writing, with exhaustion scores ranging from 9 to 32 and a mean score of 19.5. Higher exhaustion scores were associated with lower-quality "Background of Study" sections. For instance, the student with the highest exhaustion score of 32 produced a relatively low-quality thesis section (score of 23). This pattern aligns with previous research, such as the studies by (Madigan & Curran, 2021), which indicate that physical and mental fatigue significantly impair cognitive functioning. Exhaustion increases cognitive load, making it more difficult for students to organize their thoughts and engage deeply with the material. As fatigue accumulates, students find it challenging to maintain focus and to synthesize information effectively, which diminishes their ability to produce coherent, structured, and critical academic writing.

In particular, as the level of exhaustion increases, students may experience a reduction in their cognitive resources, limiting their capacity to think critically and formulate well-organized arguments. This aligns with (Schaufeli et al., 2002), who found that burnout, especially exhaustion, reduces cognitive functioning, which directly impacts academic output. Thus, interventions aimed at reducing fatigue, such as providing adequate breaks, promoting healthy sleep habits, and managing academic workload, may help alleviate this negative impact and improve writing quality.

The Role of Disengagement in Writing Quality

Disengagement, which reflects the loss of motivation and emotional detachment from academic work, also plays a significant role in students' writing

quality. Disengagement scores in this study ranged from 8 to 31, with a mean score of 14.5. Students with higher disengagement scores consistently demonstrated lower-quality thesis sections. For example, a student with a disengagement score of 31 produced a "Background of Study" section with a score of 23, indicating that a lack of motivation severely hampers academic effort. This finding supports the conclusions of (Koutsimani et al., 2019) who highlighted that disengagement results in lower academic effort, poor performance, and a lack of investment in academic tasks.

Disengagement undermines students' intrinsic motivation to engage with the material, leading them to produce superficial, poorly-researched, and underdeveloped academic writing. Students who disengage from their studies may struggle to maintain interest in their projects, resulting in diminished writing quality. To counteract disengagement, institutions should focus on fostering intrinsic motivation by incorporating engaging and relevant teaching methods, promoting academic curiosity, and offering support for students struggling with mental health issues. Encouraging active participation, peer support systems, and creating an environment that promotes collaboration may also help mitigate disengagement.

The Combined Impact of Burnout on Academic Writing

The total burnout scores, which combine both exhaustion and disengagement, offer a comprehensive understanding of how overall burnout affects academic writing quality. Burnout scores in this study ranged from 20 to 63, with most students scoring between 30 and 40. As burnout levels increased, so did the challenges in producing high-quality academic writing. For instance, a student with a total burnout score of 63 had a "Background of Study" section score of 23, indicating a strong negative correlation between burnout and writing quality. This finding corroborates the research by (Schaufeli et al., 2002) who found that burnout leads to both emotional exhaustion and disengagement, which together severely hinder academic performance.

The combined effects of exhaustion and disengagement manifest in students' diminished ability to concentrate, process information, and articulate well-organized arguments. Burnout reduces students' cognitive resources, making it harder for them to engage with the material deeply and produce thoughtful analysis. Interventions targeting the prevention and reduction of burnout, such as promoting time management skills, stress reduction techniques, and creating a more balanced academic workload, could help students maintain their cognitive and emotional energy, ultimately improving their academic output.

The Role of Coping Strategies and Motivation

While this study does not directly assess coping strategies, existing research suggests that the way students cope with stress plays a crucial role in determining the impact of burnout on their academic performance. Adaptive coping strategies, such as seeking academic support, practicing time management, and engaging in relaxation techniques, help students manage burnout more effectively. Conversely, maladaptive strategies like avoidance and procrastination exacerbate burnout, leading to poorer academic performance. (Katsatasri et al., 2024) found that students using positive coping mechanisms tend to exhibit lower burnout levels and better academic outcomes. Therefore, universities could benefit from offering programs that teach students effective coping strategies, thus helping them manage burnout and maintain higher levels of academic engagement and performance.

Motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, is also crucial in mitigating burnout's effects on academic work. Students who experience higher disengagement levels often report lower motivation, which exacerbates their burnout and further diminishes writing quality (Dincer et al., 2019). He emphasized the importance of intrinsic motivation in fostering sustained academic engagement and success. Encouraging students to connect with their academic work on a personal level, aligning assignments with their interests, and creating a supportive learning environment could help boost intrinsic motivation, thereby improving writing quality even in the face of burnout.

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for higher education institutions, particularly in shaping campus policies that address academic mental health. Given the clear association between academic burnout—especially exhaustion—and the decline in the quality of academic writing, universities should consider implementing comprehensive mental health support programs. These could include regular mental health check-ins, accessible counseling services, academic writing workshops, and stress-management training. Moreover, integrating mental health awareness into the academic curriculum could help students identify early signs of burnout and seek appropriate support. By addressing the root causes of academic burnout and promoting resilience through institutional policies, universities can help improve not only students' well-being but also the overall quality of academic outputs such as undergraduate theses.

Conclusion

This study concludes that academic burnout, particularly the component of exhaustion, significantly affects the quality of the "Background of the Study" section in undergraduate theses proposals. A moderate negative correlation was found between exhaustion and writing quality, indicating that students who experience greater mental and physical fatigue tend to produce lower-quality academic writing. In contrast, disengagement was not significantly correlated with writing performance, suggesting that reduced emotional attachment or motivation does not necessarily impair students' ability to complete structured academic tasks.

These findings emphasize the importance of recognizing and addressing academic burnout as a barrier to effective thesis writing. Universities, especially Islamic-based institutions like UIN Mataram, should implement proactive measures such as stress management workshops, structured academic support, and advisor training to help students navigate the cognitive demands of thesis writing. Future research is encouraged to explore students' coping strategies in greater depth to better understand how resilience influences writing performance amid academic pressure.

Suggestion

Based on the research findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, academic institutions—particularly English education programs—should consider integrating psychological support mechanisms such as academic counseling or peer mentoring to help students cope with stress and exhaustion during the thesis writing process. Providing workshops or sessions focused not only on writing skills but also on managing academic workload and emotional regulation may help students maintain better psychological balance.

Second, supervisors and lecturers are encouraged to adopt a more holistic mentoring approach that acknowledges both the cognitive and emotional challenges faced by students. Creating a supportive supervisory environment may reduce student anxiety and improve the quality of their academic writing.

Third, future research may expand on this study by including larger sample sizes and exploring how other psychological constructs—such as motivation, self-efficacy, or anxiety—interact with academic writing. It would also be valuable to investigate intervention-based approaches that can mitigate burnout and improve academic outcomes. Lastly, institutions should consider evaluating not only the products of academic writing but also the psychological processes behind them, thus supporting students in a more comprehensive and humane way.

Given the significant impact of burnout on students' academic performance, it is imperative that universities treat academic mental health not as a peripheral issue, but as a core component of student success and institutional quality.

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