

Doc. dr. Jasmina Starc

Business and Management College

Novo mesto

Slovenia

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JOB STRESSORS OF HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHERS AND ASSOCIATES

Abstract: Due to a considerable strain in their personal and professional development, individuals have to deal with stress on a daily basis. The distinction between private and work life is becoming increasingly blurred and there are discrepancies between the requirements of the job, the abilities and knowledge of employees on the one hand, and the roles played by them in their lives on the other hand, which leads to poorer performance, creativity and competitiveness. Higher education teachers and associates also deal with stress directly and indirectly in their educational work, basic research and professional work as well as in other tasks included in the wider field of work in terms of content. The paper presents the opinions of fully employed higher education teachers and associates about the stress factors they face in their workplace, which they experience differently due to their personality traits, experience, their inner energy and motivation as well as due to the impact of the narrower and wider environment. It has been established that stress is closely associated with the following: the requirements concerning the advancement to the same or higher title, low public esteem of educational work, administrative work, poorly paid job and poorly motivated students. The least stress is caused by the following: tutoring, contact hours, providing for safety and healthy work of students and participating in the preparation of students for professional practice and consultation.

Key words: stress, stressors, higher education teachers, higher education associates.

1. Stress and kinds of stress

Stress is a physiological, psychological and behavioural response of an individual trying to adapt and accustom oneself to internal and external stressors. A stressor is an event, situation, person or object experienced by the individual as a stressful element, the result of which is stress. Stress and stress factors are not the same for all nor are they managed with equal ease. They are determined by the personality of the individual, his/her experiences, energy levels, circumstances in which stress has appeared as well as by the wider and narrower living environment of the person. The attitude towards life, person's stability and the quality of interpersonal relations with the people around him/her also play an important role. Therefore, a certain event might prove to be a stress factor for one person and an encouragement for another (Dernovšek, Gorenc and Jeriček, 2006, p. 8).

We are all subjected to the impact of stress, which can affect anyone since it is an important and essential element of our lives. It is an unavoidable consequence of our relations with the constantly changing environment, which we have to adapt to (Treven, 2005). A certain amount of stress is useful and necessary for normal life. It namely stimulates us to become more efficient. The difficulties, however, arise when there are too many stressful situations or if these are long-lasting. The consequences of daily strain are reflected in different disorders characterised by (Boštjančič, 2011, p. 23): *emotional signs* (changing mood, fear, anxiety, feelings of guilt or helplessness, unpleasant feelings, cynicism, desire for revenge...), *cognitive signs* (forgetfulness, disorganisation, indifference, concentration difficulties, doubting one's abilities, pessimism, lack of motivation...), *physical signs* (tiredness and exhaustion, joint and muscle pain, sleeping disorders, shallow breathing, weakened immune system, digestive disorders, bigger or smaller appetite, high blood pressure...) and *behaviour* (poorer efficiency, decline in motivation, irritableness, losing one's temper, procrastination, self doubt, doubting one's choice of profession...).

Stress has negative as well as positive consequences and not all stressors are harmful or worrisome. We know positive stress, where we can quickly and easily adapt to changes, and negative stress, where we experience difficulties trying to adapt or when not being able to adapt at all (Mielke, 1997). It is difficult to define the border between the two since this depends on one's processing of the stimulus received from the environment. The same stimulus can trigger completely different

responses in different people. Negative stress means constant emotional and psychological pressure and shock, leading to illness which can either be the result of a brief stress impact or long-lasting exposure to stressful circumstances. The latter destroys the balance of the immune system (Božič, 2003). On the other hand, positive stress fills us with self-confidence and we feel in control, capable of mastering any kind of demand or task (Looker and Gregson, 1993, p. 30). Positive stress endows us with motivation, energy and creativity. We experience it in moments when we believe we are able to cope with a certain demand and when we feel that we can easily face the challenge. We also feel the desire to act instantly and experience excitement of expectation prior to action (Schmidt, 2001, p. 10).

2. Requirements of higher education teachers and associates

Higher education teachers and associates teach and do research work as well as participate in the administration and management of higher education institutions.

The work of a higher education teacher includes teaching and indirect educational tasks, basic research and professional work confirmed by the title, participation in the management of the institution through membership in school bodies and committees. Teachers participate with their professional expertise in the preparation of internal rules defining the area of teaching. They further participate in preparing students for professional practice and in the supervision of the implementation of practice. They provide for safety and healthy work of students, participate in the implementation of part-time studies and in-service training, as well as manage the tasks which are part of the wider professional area of their work. They are also expected to possess additional functional knowledge, have appropriate teaching qualifications and are involved in ongoing professional and research training in the subject they are teaching. They have active knowledge of one world language, are computer literate, exhibit leadership qualities, communicativeness, ambitiousness, objectivity, and, as a special requirement, have been elected to the title for their specific area.

They are also responsible for work results and for the means of work: professional, conscientious and quality work in line with the code of conduct for teachers. Higher education associates are responsible for carrying out their work and tasks in the participation with others and according to the higher education teacher policy, as well as for the

execution of delegated tasks, and for the results achieved in the area of teaching and research. They are required to respect the rules regulating the rights and obligations of students, be acquainted with and respect the legislative provisions in the area of higher education. They should further take part in the realisation of the vision and development strategy of the institution, in the leadership and guidance of others participating in the teaching process. They are responsible for the reputation of the institution, the abuse of work time and work means for personal purposes and/or for the interests of political, religious, or competitive parties, have a sense of belonging and respect professional secrecy.

The requirements of higher education teachers and associates are defined in the staffing structure and in the employment contracts. They insure the transparency, define the responsibilities and quality in all work areas of the individual. Quality and responsibility must be the focal part of higher education and functioning of each and every higher education institution. Quality and not only the assurance of quality must be present at the academic and professional level and finds expression in the evaluation of research work, teaching, achievements of employees, students, graduates in national and international environment, and in the attraction of higher education. The National programme of higher education 2011-2020 requires of all higher education institutions that they ensure quality and are of quality. Measure 17: Drafting of missions of higher education institutions and profiling of institutions (National programme, English draft, pp. 28-32) defines the quality and responsibility of every higher education institution and its staff, which should be achieved via individual elements of quality and responsibility: ethics in higher education, internal and external system of quality assurance, improvement of study programmes, educational excellence and improvement of spatial conditions and equipment of institutions. A person with higher education is expected to possess the ability of ethical judgement, be an active supporter of humanity, constantly trying to improve the quality of the teaching process, and be responsible for the preparation, quality performance and development of competencies expected of graduates. S/he is responsible for didactic training and for ongoing updating of knowledge and skills, development of new teaching approaches and methods, and for a greater use of ICT in teaching and learning.

3. Stress in teaching professions

The teaching profession is supposed to be one of the three most stressful professions (Kyriacou, in: Pšunder, 2007). Pšunder (2007) believes that

there are individuals who constantly experience stress at their workplace. They can only cope with it with great difficulty and might even become ill. On the other hand, there are others for whom the same workplace does not represent any major difficulties and who experience the situation as a positive challenge.

According to certain data, the age group under greatest strain are teachers between 35 and 55 years of age. Novice teachers are full of energy and ideas, which they want to implement in their work, but after a few years in the profession they start encountering various obstacles, which leads to increased dissatisfaction with the profession. The first few years are thus of crucial importance for teachers since this is the time when they will either continue teaching or leave the profession altogether (Silvar, 2007). The beginning teachers are mostly worried about discipline problems and how to cope with the teaching methods and contents. Veteran teachers, on the other hand, worry about whether they will be able to withstand the increasing strain and provide for the students with so many different needs (Marentič Požarnik, 2003).

Youngs (2001, pp. 38-40) speaks about nine key groups of situations causing teachers stress: (1) *expectations* (teachers are worried that they will not be able to fulfil their own expectations or those of others, the set goals are either too high or too low, they are not creative enough); (2) *self-fulfilment* (teachers feel their ideas and personal values are not visible in the classroom, the results of their work are not noticed, they are locked in the »world of education« and thus cut off from the »world of reality«); (3) *personal needs* (stress appears due to the teacher's need for higher status and respect, only rare acknowledgement on the part of the superiors, disappointment connected with the low public esteem of their work, slow promotion and low pay); (4) *relations with students* (stress is caused when the teacher realizes that students are not prepared for life, that their interests and abilities are so varied that not all their needs can be provided for, the discipline of the children in the classroom is worsening, and grades do not reflect the students' development and progress); (5) *competence* (the teacher experiences stress because of increasingly difficult communication with students, waning physical strength and competence brought about by old age and difficult life experiences); (6) *internal conflicts* (teachers experience stress due to increased responsibility in decision making, because they are being judged by the environment, they doubt their efficiency and performance, can adapt only with great difficulty to the required programme, work methods and materials, are always pressed for time, experience moments of despair, guilt and

helplessness due to lack of self-discipline, tiredness, poor teaching preparation); (7) *conflicts of values and situations* (teachers experience stress due to the need for constant search of answers to the most varied questions about education and teaching, the frustration when faced with different values and experiences at work, due to the realisation that the profession is held in low public esteem, the feeling that students do not respect knowledge, tradition or achievements, and due to the inner conflicts when trying to balance personal convictions with social norms); (8) *acceptance by the society* (teachers experience stress due to marital problems or situations, lack of time for oneself and for the family, and due to the inability to perform all the tasks connected with extended schedules and work load); (9) *limitations of the profession* (teachers experience stress due to the insufficient autonomy in the classroom, the administrative load, frequent interruptions of work because of meetings, trips, seminars, student absences, own illness).

Each and every teacher has experienced a stressful situation because of at least one or more factors listed above. It is, however, important that the cause of stress is discovered and the stressor with a negative impact found so as to enable the teacher to take action and alleviate harmful effects. Youngs (2001) claims that the differences in experiencing stress between women or men cannot be easily established since the teaching profession is mostly performed by women. As for the school type, the same author believes that work in larger schools is more stressful and demanding and that a high level of stress is experienced by teachers teaching in difficult working conditions, where there are poor relations with colleagues or a negative class atmosphere etc.

4. Methodology

Research purpose refers to stress factors in professors and associates in higher education. The issue of stress in teachers working in higher education has become increasingly interesting for researchers, having in mind that due to great tension and everyday facing with complex tasks, the distinction between private and work becoming increasingly blurred, the profession has become more and more stressful. Stress factors are expressed both directly and indirectly, permeating educational work research and professional work, as well as other tasks included in the contents of the broader work field, experienced by teachers in different ways, depending on their personality, inner energy and motivation and environmental influences.

Having in mind that this is a complex research field, it opens up numerous questions, among which: what are the factors that lead to stress in teachers and associates at higher education level, how they react to stress, what jobs are more or less stressful, in what a way faculty organization, i.e. managing structures influence creation of stressful situations, etc. **The question** permeating the research is the following: Which stress factors are present in higher education, or, what causes stress of teachers and associates in higher education and how they deal with it?

The research **aim** is to establish the factors causing stress in higher education teachers and associates and how they cope with it.

Research tasks:

- to study the causes of stress and find out the principal ones,
- to research the different ways of coping with stress,
- to establish to what extent employers provide for coping with stress.

General hypothesis: the profession of teachers and associates in higher education teaching are stressful.

Working hypotheses:

1. stress of teachers and associates working at higher education level is caused by a number of factors;
2. reactions to stressful situations are versatile;
3. organizational factors (faculty management) are significant facilitators in coping with stress.

Research method

Having in mind the nature of the research problem and other elements of the research project, we applied the descriptive non-experimental method of empirical pedagogical research.

Sample

The population in our study were higher education teachers and associates employed at higher education institutions in Slovenia. Out of 216 higher education teachers and associates participating in the research 105 were men (48.6%), and 111 women (51.4%). There were 151 (69.9%) higher education teachers and 47 (21.8%) higher education associates; 18

(8.3%) of them were deans or deputy deans. According to their titles, 20.4% of the respondents were assistant teachers, 6% lecturers, 8.8% senior lecturers, 30.1% assistant professors, 17.1% associate professors and 17.6% full professors. The sample, however, is not representative, therefore the results cannot be generalised.

Data collection

Data were collected during the first three weeks of March 2012 via an anonymous on line questionnaire for higher education teachers and associates whose e-mail addresses are accessible on the web pages of individual higher education institutions where they are employed.

Description of measuring instruments

The data acquired with the questionnaire were: demographic data, data about the professional career, opinions about stressors, responses to stressful situations, consequences of stress, coping with stress at work, how employers provide for coping with stress. The format used for the questions was the Likert type opinion scale. The scale included stages from 0 to 4 and 1 to 5, in the logical continuum from the minimum to maximum acceptance of an opinion.

5. Results and interpretation

In order to find out which factors impact the levels of stress among higher education teachers and associates, we used the scale of 45 stressors (five stage Likert scale: 0 – situation does not cause stress, 4 – situation causes extreme stress). The scale of stressors present in higher education institutions was created on the basis of the job description for higher education teachers and associates. We also studied the Criteria for the evaluation of teaching of higher education teachers and associates and the requirements stipulated by the Higher Education Act. We defined those stress factors which are directly and indirectly part of and connected with educational work, basic research and professional work, participation in the management of the school, i.e. in different bodies and committees, administrative tasks, relationship with colleagues, school management and students, working conditions, the evaluation of teaching and other professional tasks with which the mission of the school is carried out. The table presents the average level of agreement about the extent to which individual stressors impact higher education teachers and associates.

Table 1: Stress factors of higher education teachers and associates

Stress factors	Average	Std. deviation
Lectures	2.34	1.00
Seminar exercises	2.12	0.99
Laboratory exercises	1.88	0.96
Individual work with students	1.86	0.94
Testing	2.25	1.12
Mentorship of diploma theses	2.23	1.04
Co-mentorship of diploma theses	1.99	0.96
Consultations	1.83	0.94
Tutorship	1.73	0.93
Contact hours	1.73	0.92
Modern teaching methods	1.90	0.88
Preparation for teaching	2.16	0.97
Subject development	2.38	1.08
Following the development of the profession	2.22	1.13
Preparation of textbooks and other study materials	2.55	1.09
Basic research and professional work	2.64	1.14
Participation in the management of the school, different bodies and committees	2.82	1.26
Participating with professional expertise in the preparation of internal rules regulating the area of teaching	2.71	1.26
Participation in preparing students for professional practice	1.86	1.00
Participation in the supervision of professional practice (visits of students and mentors)	1.90	1.05
Provision for safety and healthy aspects in the work of students	1.78	0.89
Participation in the implementation of part-time studies	2.12	1.08
Administrative tasks	3.22	1.23
Criticism of the school management	2.88	1.24
Criticism of colleagues	2.70	1.22
Disagreements between you and the management	2.99	1.37
Disagreements between you and colleagues	2.86	1.30
Low public esteem of educational work	3.26	1.21
Criteria for advancement to the same or higher title	3.52	1.31
Poorly paid work	3.21	1.26
Working time	2.10	1.09
40 hour presence at work	2.37	1.32
Schedule of teaching hours	2.43	1.15
Working conditions	2.47	1.16
International exchange – visiting higher education teacher or associate	2.29	1.25
Responsibility	2.58	1.14
Autonomy at work	1.88	1.04
Night work or work during the weekend	2.80	1.45

Unmotivated students	3.14	1.23
Establishing and maintaining discipline during teaching	2.38	1.18
Improper behaviour of students towards you	2.34	1.28
Disrespect on the part of the students towards you and your work	2.38	1.32
Disrespect on the part of the colleagues towards you and your work	2.73	1.31
Disrespect on the part of the management towards you and your work	2.98	1.40

The following factors were found to be the greatest sources of stress: requirements for advancement to the same or higher title ($\bar{x} = 3.52$), low public esteem of educational work ($\bar{x} = 3.26$), administrative tasks ($\bar{x} = 3.22$), poorly paid job ($\bar{x} = 3.21$), unmotivated students ($\bar{x} = 3.14$), disagreements between the teacher and management ($\bar{x} = 2.99$) and disrespect on the part of the management towards the teacher and his/her work ($\bar{x} = 2.98$). We can thus claim that *requirements for advancement to the same or higher title*, which was the most highly assessed factor, is a very stressful situation for 22.3% of the higher education teachers and associates, and for 31.3% of them it represents an extremely stressful situation. All higher education institutions were namely required to adopt new and stricter habilitation standards, stipulated in the Minimum criteria for elections to the titles for university teachers, scientific researchers and assistants set by the Agency of the Republic of Slovenia for quality assurance in higher education. Higher education teachers and associates are aware that without fulfilling the requirements they will not be elected to the same or higher title, which might mean the end of academic career for some of them since very few are willing to accept a title lower from the present one. *Low public esteem of educational work* represents a moderately stressful situation for 30.2% of the respondents, for 25.9% of them it is a very stressful situation and for 17.9% of the higher education teachers and associates it is an extremely stressful situation. *Administrative tasks* represent for the majority (27.2%) a moderately stressful and for 25.9% of the higher education teachers and associates an extremely stressful situation. *Poorly paid work* is perceived by 31.6% as moderate stress, for 18.9% as a very stressful situation and for 20.8% as an extremely stressful situation. *Unmotivated students* are experienced by 27.6% of the respondents as moderately stressful, and by 24.8% as very stressful. *Disagreements between teachers and management* are perceived by a third (36%) as very stressful or extremely stressful. *Disrespect on the part of the management towards teachers and their work* is perceived by less than half of the respondents (42%) as very or extremely stressful.

Among the mild stressful factors and factors causing almost no stress, the respondents listed their direct educational work, such as: tutorship (\bar{x} =1.73), contact hours (\bar{x} =1.73), providing for safe and healthy work of students (\bar{x} =1.78), consultations (\bar{x} =1.83), individual work with students (\bar{x} =1.86) and preparing students for professional practice (\bar{x} =1.86).

Since stress impacts negatively the work productivity of the individual, we wanted to find out how higher education teachers and associates cope with stress in their working environment. The respondents could choose from 21 possibilities (five stage Likert scale: 0 – I never cope with stress in the suggested way, 4 – I always cope with stress as suggested).

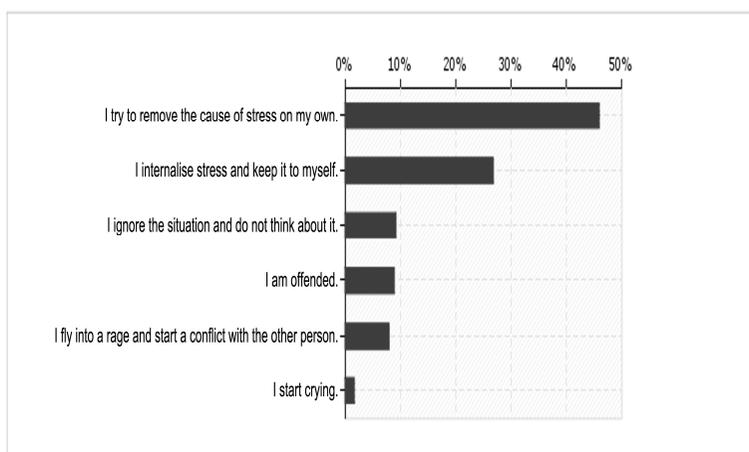
Table 2: Coping with stress at work

Coping with stress at work	Average	Std. deviation
Take time to decide in peace what is causing stress.	3.02	1.07
Set priorities.	4.00	0.83
Set achievable goals.	3.80	0.88
Seek professional help when necessary.	1.85	1.16
Talk to the partner.	3.36	1.29
Talk to the colleagues.	3.24	1.01
Talk to the management.	2.33	1.11
Calm down and study the issue thoroughly.	3.62	0.95
Use relaxation techniques.	2.54	1.30
Perceive stress as a challenge.	2.75	1.22
Afford oneself more rest and sleep.	2.76	1.01
Exercise.	3.32	1.22
Go for a walk.	3.38	1.08
Take a break, drink a cup of coffee and/or smoke a cigarette.	2.74	1.25
Listen to music.	2.86	1.13
Watch television.	2.65	1.15
Read.	3.21	1.10
Spend time with the family.	3.76	1.02
Socialize with friends.	3.22	0.95
Have hobbies.	3.13	1.21
Absent oneself from work.	1.25	0.56

The majority of higher education teachers and associates cope with stress by setting priorities (\bar{x} =4.00), which is done frequently by 51.9% and always by 26.9% of the respondents; they set themselves achievable goals (\bar{x} =3.80), spend time with the family (\bar{x} =3.76), calm down and study the issue thoroughly (\bar{x} =3.62), and go for a walk (\bar{x} =3.38). The smallest number of higher education teachers and associates (15.3% rarely; 3.7% from time to time; 0.5% always) decide to absent themselves from work (\bar{x} =1.25), seek professional help when necessary (\bar{x} =1.85), talk to the management (\bar{x} =2.33), use relaxation techniques (\bar{x} =2.54), and watch television (\bar{x} =2.65).

Higher education teachers and associates were asked how they usually reacted to the stressful situations at work.

Graph 1: Reactions to a stressful situation

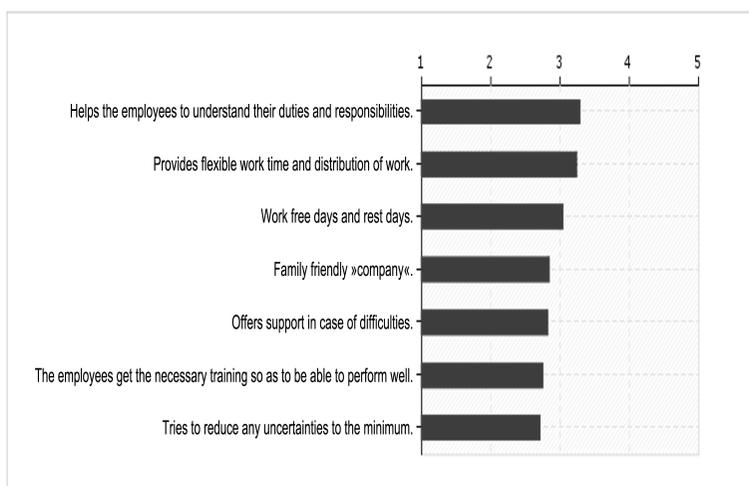


We established that 146 of the respondents (67.6%) try to remove the cause of stress or the stressor on their own, 85 of them (39.4%) internalize stress and keep it to themselves. The situation is ignored or not thought about by 29 of the respondents (13.4%), 28 (13.0%) of them are offended, 25 (11.6%) fly into a rage and start a conflict, while only few (5 or 2.3%) of them start crying.

To cope with stress and manage it successfully should not be left to the individual. The management should provide for activities which enhance the person's resilience against stress, therefore we were interested as to

what extent the management of higher education institutions actually provides for coping with stress.

Graph 2: Provisions of higher education institutions for stress management



Higher education teachers and associates believe that the higher education institution where they are employed carries out activities to enhance their resilience to stress. The respondents were able to choose among seven possibilities (five stage Likert scale) 1 – not true at all, 5 – completely true). Most frequently, the employer ensures that higher education teachers and associates understand their duties and responsibilities ($\bar{x} = 3.28$), provides for flexible working hours and for distribution of work among the employees ($\bar{x} = 3.24$), gives them work free days and rest days ($\bar{x} = 3.04$). The institution is a family friendly »company« ($\bar{x} = 2.84$), it offers support in case of difficulties ($\bar{x} = 2.82$), provides the necessary training so as to enable good performance ($\bar{x} = 2.75$) and tries to bring the uncertainties to the minimum ($\bar{x} = 2.70$).

Since thinking about changing the job or the career, and seeking different work are all indicators of satisfaction with work and successful stress management, we also asked the higher education teachers and associates whether they were thinking of leaving the profession and stop teaching, whether they were planning to change the career and actively seek a job elsewhere.

Table 3: Thinking about changing the career

Questions	YES	NO
Have you ever thought about leaving the profession of a higher education teacher or associate?	123 (56.9%)	93 (43.1%)
Would you stop teaching at this point in your career if that were possible?	65 (30.1%)	151 (69.9%)
Do you actually plan to leave the teaching profession within the next 6 months?	10 (4.6%)	206 (95.4%)
Are you actively seeking a different job (outside education)?	20 (9.3%)	196 (90.7%)

Of the responding higher education teachers and associates, 123 (56.9%) have thought about leaving the present profession; 151 (69.9%) of them would not stop teaching if it were possible; 206 (95.4%) of them are not planning to leave the teaching profession within the next 6 months, and only 20 (9.3%) of the respondents are actively seeking a job somewhere outside teaching.

6. Conclusion

All higher education teachers and associates are aware of the need to be trained for new approaches to work with the students (direct educational work), for performing tasks outside the lecture room (indirect educational work), for developing new competencies in students and passing on new knowledge, as well as for developing their own professionalism (basic and professional research), the use of modern ICT technology.

The competencies listed above can trigger different levels of stress in the individual higher education teacher and associate because there exists in every individual a personal criterion about what is too much, too little or just enough stress. Stress, however, can hardly be avoided. It is therefore crucial for us to know our ideal stress level, which can become a trap only if we allow it to happen; if we feel helpless in face of life's challenges.

The research offers an insight into how important the stress factors are for the higher education teachers and associates, how they manage it and to what extent the employers provide appropriate conditions for coping with stress.

We established that higher education teachers and associates perceive instruction in the lecture hall and educational work outside the lecture hall as moderately stressful situations, which contribute to a state of readiness, thereby favourably impacting teachers' physical and

psychological abilities, stimulating motivation and enhancing self-confidence, creativity and productivity. Such stress should be perceived as *positive stress* since it triggers a feeling of competence in coping with the demands, raises self-confidence and the belief that teachers can master any kind of demand or task.

However, the basic research and professional work confirmed with the title are experienced by the higher education teachers and associates as very or as extremely stressful situations, which they experience as a psychological burden. This, in turn, can develop into *negative stress*. Negative stress is caused by excessive anxiety and a work load which disturbs the person's balance. It develops when we are faced with tasks we cannot perform or have to perform them under time strain, etc. The management of higher education institutions is aware that managing stress successfully is a very important task not only for ensuring the health of the individual but also the vitality, performance and competitiveness of the higher education institution. The respondents are of the opinion that the management does implement activities which enable the staff to face unavoidable stress and to manage it successfully. It does this by providing the staff with the understanding of their tasks and responsibilities, by providing flexible time and appropriate distribution of work as well as work free days and rest days. Even though it has not been the subject of direct observation in the research, it can be concluded that professional stress is a phenomenon influencing all the subjects in a sense, regardless of sex, age, working position, title and experience. Coping with stress is versatile. Majority of subjects overcomes stress in a rational way. The questions that have remained unanswered to be dealt with in a future research refer to the following: what are the differences in the observed aspects of stressfulness of the professions, factors causing stress and ways of overcoming it in regard to the variables like, e.g. sex, title, status in the management structure (dean, deputy dean...) in order to compare and establish significance of the differences, if there are any and to gain an insight into the similarities and differences in the problems caused by stress in the observed sub-samples, possible differences in the ways of coping with stress, etc.

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Biographical note

Dr Jasmina Starc (1968) is the dean of the College of Business and Management, Novo Mesto, Slovenia. She obtained her Master and Ph degree in personnel management from the Faculty of Organizational Sciences in Kranj. She teaches at the first, second and third level of university studies. She is an author of scientific papers and a co-author of a monograph in the field of personnel and education management. She has participated in conferences as an invited speaker and a member of program – organizational boards. She has been a member of editor boards in professional journals and a peer-reviewer in foreign journals.