

Stress, Duties, Satisfaction and Burnout: Experiences of Non-Japanese Teachers at Japanese Universities

Brian Cullen

This paper investigates the experiences of long-term non-Japanese teachers working at Japanese universities. Based on responses to a questionnaire, it was found that teachers take on a wide range of duties, some of which are considered meaningful and others far less so. In general, bureaucratic work and constant administrative changes were seen as causes of stress, while teaching was generally considered to be enjoyable. While some teachers experience burnout at certain times of the academic year, little serious burnout is reported and teachers are generally satisfied with their career choice.

この論文は日本の大学で長期に渡り働いている外国人教師に対する調査です。アンケートへの回答に寄ると教師はやり甲斐がある無しに関わらず、幅広い職務を引き受けていることがわかりました。一般に、お役所的な仕事と、絶え間ない規定の変更がストレスの原因と見なされましたが、教育は一般的に楽しいと考えられています。学年の特定の時期に燃え尽き症候群を経験する教師もいますが、深刻な症状は報告されておらず、教師は一般的に自分の仕事の選択に満足していると思われます。

1. Introduction

The average age of long-term non-Japanese teaching professionals has risen,

and it is worthwhile to consider how these teachers are coping in the profession after many years of teaching. This paper is by no means the first to examine this topic (see for example, Murray, 2013), but rather an attempt to keep the topic active in the discourse community and to provide an up-to-date snapshot of teachers' experiences. For the long-term health and sustainability of the EFL community in Japan, this look at how teachers are thriving or surviving in the profession is an important topic that should be considered periodically.

One issue that can potentially threaten this sustainability is the rising level of burnout that has been recognized in many professions (Maslach et al., 2001) including medical professionals (Rosales, Labrague, and Gilbey, 2013), social workers (Daley, 1979), lawyers (Tsai, Huang, and Chan 2009), and teachers (Hakanen, Bakker, and Schaufeli 2006). More particularly for language teaching, it has been raised as a potential issue within ESL internationally (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Coombe, 2008; Jacobson, 2016) and for EFL teachers in Japan (Murray, 2013). Maslach et al (2001) defines burnout as “a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, and is defined by the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy.” Teachers in Japan have probably experienced all three of these stressors to a certain degree and this study enabled the participants to describe their experiences in their own words.

While burnout is an extreme response, this study also attempts to create a multi-textured picture of teachers' experiences by asking about other issues including duties, workload, causes of stress, and types of work that are considered meaningful and less meaningful.

2. Listening to Teachers' Experiences

The questionnaire was administered mainly in the form of open-ended questions using Google Forms. The questions and a link to the online form are shown in Appendix 1.

Most of the teachers are personal contacts. The study includes 29 responses from teachers who have been teaching at Japanese universities for a long

time. This is not intended to be a quantitative study, but rather a snapshot to help identify and discuss key issues in the experiences of these teachers, particularly related to workload, job satisfaction, stress, and burnout. In order to keep the richness of this snapshot, the results are shared mainly in the teachers’ own words with only minor interpretation.

3. Results

Participant Information

Figures 1-6 and Table 1 show some basic information for the participants. Most participants were male North Americans in their late 40s or older. The number of female respondents was low, so a second call for participation was put out on a message board for female educators in Japan. This number unfortunately remains low, and readers will get a fuller picture from Nagatomo, Brown, and Cook (2020). Just over two-thirds of the participants worked full-time and the others part-time. Most have lived in Japan and worked in universities for more than 20 years, and have good conversational fluency in Japanese, but poor reading skills.

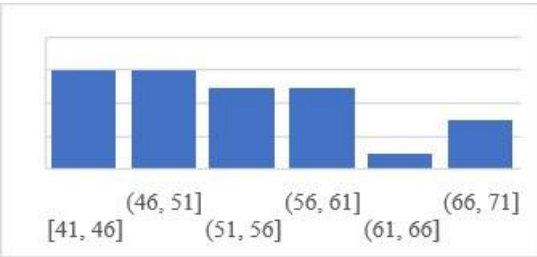


Figure 1. Age

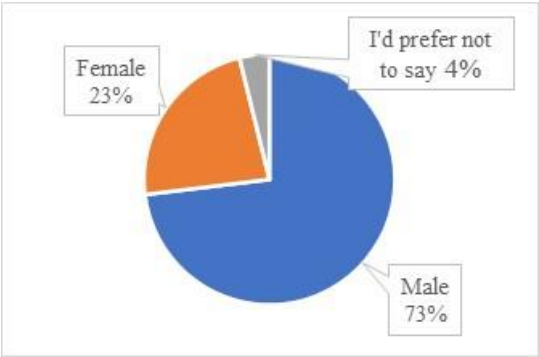


Figure 2. Gender

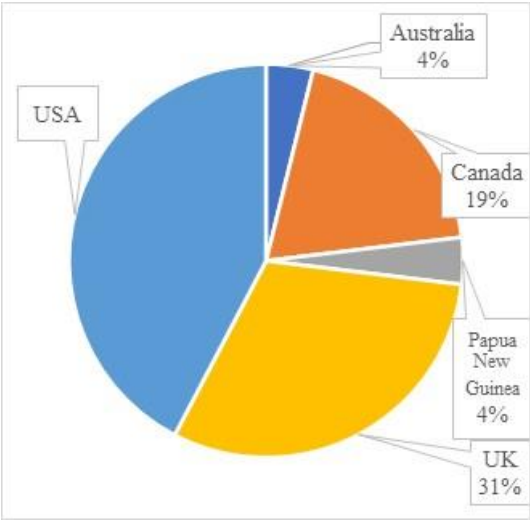


Figure 3. Country of Origin

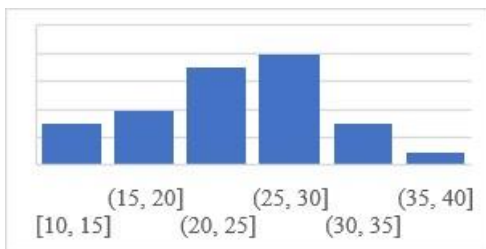


Figure 4. How many years have you worked in Japan?

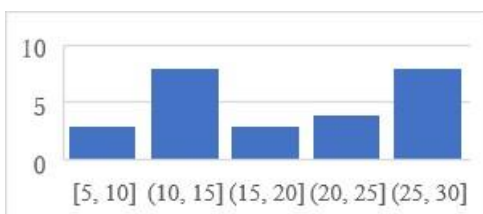


Figure 5. How many years have you worked at a Japanese university?

Level	n
I am able to read, write, and engage in meetings.	11
I am able to speak and understand, but can not read Japanese much.	8
I have survival Japanese.	4
A little short of meeting level Japanese, although I participate in meetings.	1
I passed N2, but I struggle a lot with reading and writing, and especially formal Japanese.	2
I'm all right with general conversation and everyday tasks, but more complicated situations (like university meetings, doctor visits, going to the bank) are challenging for me.	1

Table 1. Which best describes your Japanese language ability?

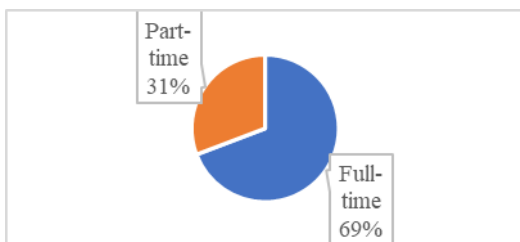


Figure 6. How would you describe your working situation?

Workload

Figures 7-8 show data related to classes and meetings, two major components of the workload at Japanese universities. Figure 7 shows the huge range in class load per week which ranges from 2 to 20. Figure 8 shows that most teachers have only one meeting or none per month, but some have as many as 8. In general, part-time teachers have a much bigger class load than full-timers. Full-timers tend to take on more responsibility as they get older which results in more meeting attendance (discussed further below).

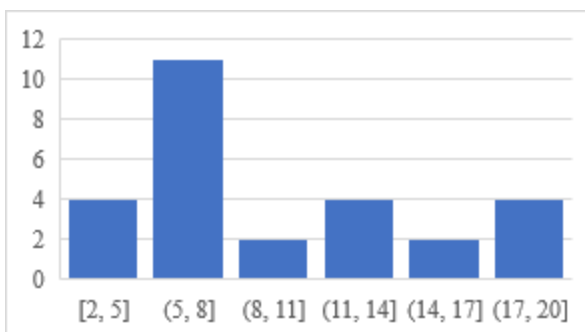


Figure 7. How many classes do you teach per week?

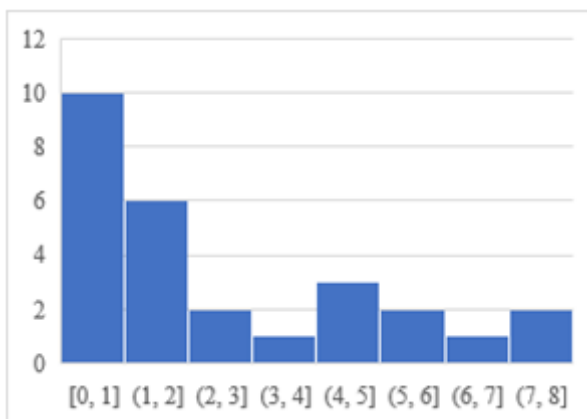


Figure 8. How many meetings do you usually attend per month?

For full-timers, the workload has become heavier...

- “There is more of it... [work has] increased pretty dramatically.”
- “More meetings / more materials development”
- “Paperwork has increased”
- “There were a few courses I taught just by showing up and occupying students' time for 90 min, but those days are over — now, on-demand courses require demanding preparation, if not execution.”
- Grunt work that university professors in Japan are saddled with, work that would be done by dedicated administrators in other countries.
- Our university is under investigation by the labor standards office because of the excessive burden on employees, and yet the university continues its inefficient practices.”

For some part-timers, the workload seems to have changed little.

- “It's pretty much the same.”
- “Virtually unchanged. I am responsible for teaching my classes and little else.”

But for many other part-timers, demands and responsibilities have increased without any improvement in pay or other conditions:

- “Generally, classes are larger and more is expected of part time staff.”

- “I have seen more being expected with less security and pay.”
- “More required classes per semester, more administrative tasks forced onto teachers, ever increasing awareness that to Admin. I am but a tooth on a cog, as opposed to being part of a team.”

Duties

Apart from teaching classes, both full-time teachers and part-time teachers reported their regular duties as planning curriculum, teaching classes, evaluating students, and materials creation. Full-time teachers reported having a much wider range of responsibilities and duties which included:

- Program coordination, program development
- Coordinating part-time teachers
- Coordinating overseas study, helping with various international events and programs
- Organizing PD
- Managing the department
- Research
- Filling out forms
- Supervising graduate students
- Administrative work
- Committee work
- Global Jinzai course selection / implementation
- Entrance exam related duties: preparing exams, marking exams
- Demonstration lessons
- PR
- Open campus events
- Budget management
- Journal manager, co-editor, layout work

Many full-timers also report an increase in responsibility and workload as they get older: “I’ve taken-on various tasks as volunteers were needed. This included new student interviews, textbook and curriculum committees, open campus events, judging speech contests, escorting student study-tours, participating in pull-out programs and creating materials as **needed.**”

Meaningful or satisfying work

As with any job, some of the duties and tasks are seen as more meaningful than others. Perhaps, this is a more important job criterion for teachers

than for other jobs because many teachers have traditionally entered the teaching profession as a vocation. For example, Flanagan (2003, p.79) attempts to “identify the function of teaching, cultural/ideological transmission as a moral imperative, which separates teaching from most, if not all, other occupations.” While this may or may not be true for any particular teacher at a Japanese university, meaningful work is important because “meaningful work, or work that is significant, facilitates personal growth, and contributes to the greater good, has been linked to better mental health,” (Allan, Kinsey, Dexter & Parker, 2018. p.1).

Even when work is seen as meaningful or significant, however, it can be unenjoyable or yield low satisfaction. For example, we can imagine a teacher seeing the significance and importance of giving effective feedback on students’ written work, yet getting little satisfaction from it. Allan et al (2018, p.1) note that “job satisfaction negatively predicted depression and stress”, and that finding both meaning and satisfaction in work are important for long-term mental health. Below are teacher examples of work that they find meaningful or satisfying.

- “I lead a team that runs a special program for students. It's wonderful for students and an absolute ton of work for our team. I take 50+ students abroad for 3 weeks each year.
- “I love that I have complete autonomy in teaching, as I teach a lot of content courses with no coordinator.”

Many of the participants report that teaching classes and interaction with students is the most enjoyable part of the job.

- “I like teaching or I wouldn't be doing it.”
- “My main job satisfaction is interaction with students. That is always rewarding and ultimately outweighs any other pressures.”
- “Teaching is wonderful .”
- “I feel really fortunate to have a job that I enjoy as much as I do.”
- “Teaching is a satisfying profession and it is fun to interact with students.”

And for some who less satisfied, they recognize that teaching at university

is much better than alternative jobs: “Better than shingling roofs outdoors in the Australian summer. WE have a lot of freedom, flexibility, and free reign/time far different than any 40-50-60 hours a week job that I had before university teaching..”

To summarize, reported job satisfaction is high and interaction with students is a source of both meaning and satisfaction.

Work that Offers Little Meaning or Satisfaction

In contrast to the meaningful and satisfying work described in the previous section, many participants gave detailed reports of elements of their work that they perceived as yielding little meaning or satisfaction.

- “I am an advertisement to our student body that we are an International University.”
- “Creating videos to display at open campus; shooting and editing videos for our university's president, so that he can show the video of him discussing something with a colleague to 600 students simultaneously.”
- “I serve on 2 dept committees, and three university committees, none of which are very important.”
- “I'm class adviser for students I don't know at all, which is painful when they ask for letters of recommendation.”
- “I left a tenured position where I coordinated, attended meetings... Now I am blissful at having to do none of that.”
- “I not only fill out forms, but I am an excellent inkan stamper. My stamped inkan is always straight up, the ink coloring is uniform, and it presents a professional image to the person who looks at it. It is not your typical gaijin stamp inkan that is smeared, not centered and so on.”
- “There are various meetings each month, the value of which is... questionable. We are required to hold meetings X times per year regardless of necessity. The job includes a great deal of lengthy email correspondence in Japanese and filling out countless forms. Special events that occur outside of the semester make it difficult to take leave to visit my country.”
- “As a full-timer, I didn't feel the excitement for the job that I had initially expected I would. Administrative duties and expectations that I felt fell outside of my role of instructor lessened my satisfaction.”

Stress

Apart from the meaning and satisfaction derived from work, when considering the long-term welfare and experiences of teachers, it is also useful to consider sources of stress, and teacher examples are given below to illustrate common experiences.

Bureaucracy and Administrative Work

- “Huge amounts of email text in Japanese that seem unnecessary.
- “Most stressful is purposeless/unnecessarily complex forms, filled in to satisfy someone's desire for rigidly following largely pointless rules.””
- “Make work” tasks which are clearly designed so some office can keep or increase its budget.
- “Lengthy, pointless meetings.... Useless meetings in which decision are decided through top down decision making - often at the hands of those not even involved in the classes in question, lack of English support for staff (for institutions claiming to be ‘international’)”

Cultural Differences and Gender Issues

- “Interculturally there are differences to various procedures at work (e.g. meetings, filling in paperwork, and so on) that are stressful, sometimes it can be more challenging than other times to adapt effectively and appropriately across such differences especially when the other side is not very flexible
- “There are some miscommunications which have led to meaningless extra labor and stress. There is a fundamental difference of opinion about educational conditions. For classes that are supposed to be interactive, I believe there should be a limit on the number of students. My supervisor appears only to care about satisfying the administrators and thinks the more students in the class, the better.”
- “Japan's work culture needs to catch up to its own labor laws.”
- “Many of the conflicts are both cultural and because there are unexamined assumptions baked into the system, I feel that there are very few shared goals where I work.
- “The system is set up for men by men with little regard to the gendered roles that women are tasked with. This leads to high stress rates and depression in men, it leads to few women in leadership positions - and those there are often stressed out. The

system isn't working for anyone.”

Required to be a Performer

- “Expectations to be "entertainment" for the students stressed me out, and practicing for a yearly talent show put on only by the English instructors was demeaning. It took up to 3 hours a week for a full semester to prepare for what I consider was white people putting on a show for the benefit of the school's image and not necessarily for the needs of the students. I took to locking my office door and making myself as unobtrusive and invisible as possible in order to focus on my own students and classes, while still trying to maintain the team spirit. I felt like a fraud and that gave me stress.”

Colleagues

- “At times colleagues create a lot of stress. Being one of the only females in the staff room and listening to colleagues who often make sexist and non-politically correct comments is stressful.”
- “Poorly behaved coworkers, ineffective systems in place to deal with harassment and bullying, lack of support for mental health concerns - more so for students. Gendered notions regarding job hunting and roles on campus for students.”
- “In a previous job one colleague refused to talk to me for several months - I don't know why!”

Problems with the Boss

- “I felt that the people supervising me at my past job were not great to work under.”
- “I despise duplicity and superficial behavior, especially from people in positions of power over me. I get along with pretty much everyone else fine, except the occasional treacherous, petty colleague who thinks it's cool to elevate himself by putting others down.”
- “Unclear parameters from the bosses, top down inefficiency, unfair allotment of classes amongst teachers.”
- “My university's boss is a despicable tyrant who delights in cutting teachers' pay and bonuses and freezing their salaries. He is admired by the heads of the other gakuens in this region for his disregard for workers, especially foreigners, and his ability to

violate labor laws with impunity.”

Covid 19

- “Covid-19 caused a huge amount of stress as my department was very unsupportive - issuing directions to part-time staff of what should be done, but no support or explanation as to how to do it.”
- “Reworking materials for online teaching and dealing with the added time needed to go through online assignments is a major source of stress, as is learning to use MS Teams.”

Money and Job Security

- “I find my salary unsatisfactory.”
- “Job insecurity”
- “Over a decade - more or less the same work for the same salary.”

Stress for Part-Timers

- “Having to “re-invent the wheel” depending on the school, the demands of different departments, the changing needs of the government, etc, etc.... Curriculum, hours, length of semesters, duties - they are all ever-changing, often without rhyme or reason. It gets demoralizing and the job loses its meaning. It becomes a bunch of hoops to jump through that have been arbitrarily set by others who are often not even teaching.”
- “Each university has a different approach to staff registration and support. Repetitive input of information each year is stressful.”
- “I had a very different idea of what it meant to teach at the university level before I entered it full time. I recognize now that the teaching part of EFL in university is not necessarily that different in content and expectation than that of an eikaiwa class, particularly in first-year classes - many uni instructors even use the same texts and curriculum that are used in the large eikawa chains in Japan. However, the administrative and extra-curricular expectations (ie; writing papers, participating in conferences, attending meetings, etc...) are far more intense than that of eikaiwa teaching, and they are tasks that are a tacit part of the job if you expect to keep on teaching at the university level.”

4. Coping with Stress

Even when faced with very similar circumstances, people respond very differently to stress. As Oswald et al. (2006) have shown, there are strong links between cortisol response and personality. It is useful to hear how teachers are coping with work stresses and what coping mechanisms are used.

In response to the question, “how well are you coping with stress?”, some responses indicated little problem:

- “Well”
- “Fair”
- “I am coping fine. I don’t have any children to cause me stress at home, so I don’t go to work stressed out.”
- “Pretty well. I have helpful and friendly colleagues.”
- Most of the time fine, but when I do feel overwhelmed, it is difficult to any take time off or maintain a good work-life balance.
- Other teachers do not seem to be coping as well:
- “Not well. My supervisor at my previous position was wonderfully reasonable and understanding. If I had such a supervisor now, my stress would be reduced.”
- “Not very well.”
- “Not sleeping or eating in the most regular of patterns, a bit manic now!”
- “I began to experience various physical symptoms that some people suggested to me were signs of an anxiety disorder.”
- “Drinking too much.”

Some teachers have developed techniques to help:

- “I go running and try to have a better work life balance.”
- “sometimes use the ‘militantly positive’ approach before moving on”
- “I cope with any stress through exercise and talking with friends.”
- “I ride a bicycle.”
- “Some exercise and standing desk use.”
- “My home life has, thankfully, been a low-stress place for me.”

Some teachers have realized that their own thinking causes much of the stress and that they have more control than they realized:

- “I realize that most of the stresses were self-created because of expecting much of my students, but most of these stresses are out of my control. That has made my life much easier.”
- “Getting too caught up on all the good ideas you have for changing education or using your students for your research is a sure way of having burnout. If you have a hobby or strong interests outside of teaching English, you will never have to worry about burn out.”
- “A lot of the stress comes from my own inability to deal with it. There are annoying things at work – colleagues who are difficult to read and deal with, sudden, inexplicable decisions from the top, the inability to actually get a message to someone at the top – but if I were able to let that go, things would be easier for me, I’m sure.”
- “The COVID-19 crisis has changed everything. What used to seem so troublesome and dramatic is now just a day by day occurrence. Stress is disappearing with the new perspective.”
- “I sleep great at night now that I realize how truly insignificant I am in the grand scheme of things.”

5. Burnout?

As discussed in the introduction section of this paper, burnout has become a serious issue in many professions including teaching. One of the questions asked participants directly: “Have you ever experienced burnout in your job?”

- “There are certainly days when I'd rather be building houses or digging ditches, but then I realize how good my job is.”
- “There have been times when I've felt overloaded to the point of breakdown. I don't think I've experienced burnout. I have the same level of enthusiasm I had 20 years ago.”

Many of the teachers reported feeling “burnout” at certain times, particularly coming up to the end of the semester. This temporary phenomenon can probably be seen as accumulated fatigue rather than serious burnout.

- “In the latter half of the semester that I find it hard to keep up the kind of zeal and high morale that I might've had at the

beginning of the semester.”

- “By the time I start to feel burned out, particularly with students or a class, it is usually around the end of the semester or end of the school year. I very much appreciate the summer and spring holidays to refresh my courses for the next year and focus on things other than teaching, like research.”
- “Not sure if you would say burnout but I often feel like it near the end of the semester.”

A more serious potential cause of burnout is the longer-term stresses of job security and financial issues:

- “I feel burned especially in that job hunt rat race where hunting for a job and filling in all of the forms is basically a full time job!”
- “...when every new campus that can’t simply explain the tax and pension system or any other aspects of campus work life in a good quality induction program as opposed to just feeling like an interchangeable ‘cog!’”

Conclusions

Overall, the results of this study give reason for optimism. While it involved a small number of teachers, the comments and insights provided were very rich. To summarize, most teachers are fairly satisfied with their jobs, especially teaching classes, and are able to adequately cope with stressful bureaucracy and cultural differences. However, as demographic and education reform changes continue in Japan over the coming years, the EFL discourse community in Japan needs to stay aware of this topic and to readdress it periodically to take snapshots of the experiences of teachers in the profession. This need was recognized by some participants in the study who pointed out the importance of this topic: “Stress in the workplace is an important topic, hopefully you get some valuable information to examine this issue.... I’m pleased to see research being done on teachers and their needs.” While burnout does not appear to be a serious issue at the present time, continual reappraisal of teachers’ experiences is advisable.

References

- Allan, Blake A., Chelsea Dexter, Rebecca Kinsey, and Shelby Parker. 2018. “Meaningful Work and Mental Health: Job Satisfaction as a Moderator.” *Journal of Mental Health* 27(1):38–44.

- Brouwers, A., and W. Tomic. 2000. "A Longitudinal Study of Teacher Burnout and Perceived Self-Efficacy in Classroom Management." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 16(2):239–53.
- Daley, M. R. 1979. "Burnout: Smoldering Problem in Protective Services." *Social Work* 24(5):375–79.
- Flanagan, Frank. 2003. "Teaching as a Vocation?" *Oideas* Spring 2003:79–89.
- Hakanen, J. J., A. B. Bakker, and W. B. Schaufeli. 2006. "Burnout and Work Engagement among Teachers." *Journal of School Psychology* 43(6):495–513.
- Nagatomo, D. H., Brown, K. A., & Cook, M. (Eds.). (2020). *Foreign female English teachers in Japanese higher education: Narratives from our quarter*. Candlin & Mynard ePublishing.
<https://www.candlinandmynard.com/female-teachers.html>
- Maslach, C., W. B. Schaufeli, and M. P. Leiter. 2001. "Job Burnout." *Annual Review of Psychology* 52(1):397–422.
- Murray, A. 2013. "Teacher Burnout in Japanese Higher Education." *The Language Teacher* 37(4):51–54.
- Oswald, L. M., Zandi, P., Nestadt, G., Potash, J. B., Kalaydjian, A. E., & Wand, G. S. (2006). Relationship between Cortisol Responses to Stress and Personality. *Neuropsychopharmacology*, 31(7), 1583–1591.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.npp.1301012>
- Rosales, R. A., L. J. Labrague, and L. R. Gilbey. 2013. "Nurses' Job Satisfaction and Burnout: Is There a Connection." *International Journal of Advanced Nursing Studies* 2(1):1–10.
- Tsai, Feng-Jen, Wei-Lun Huang, and Chang-Chuan Chan. 2009. "Occupational Stress and Burnout of Lawyers." *Journal of Occupational Health* 51(5):443–50.

Appendix

<https://forms.gle/pnGdEpdonzAUsg8D6>

Basic Information

Your Name (use a pseudonym if you prefer)

Your email (optional)

How old are you now?

Gender

Where are you originally from?

How many years have you lived in Japan?

How many years have you worked at a Japanese university?

Which best describes your Japanese language ability?

- I am able to read, write, and engage in meetings
- I am able to speak and understand, but can not read Japanese much
- I have survival Japanese.
- Other...

How would you describe your working situation?

- Full-time Part-time Other...

Work Load

How many classes do you usually teach per week?

How many meetings do you usually attend per month?

Comment on other work that is part of your job (e.g. coordination, materials creation, filling in forms etc):

Comment on how your work changed over the years:

Causes of Stress

Comment on your job satisfaction

Which of the following are a cause of significant stress in your job? (Check all that apply)

- Teaching Meetings
- Administrative work
- Filling in forms Relationship with colleagues
- Other...

Comment on any sources of stress in more detail

How well are you coping with any stresses?

Have you ever experienced burnout in your job?

Any other overall comments?