

## Self-efficacy and Burnout: Higher Education Facilitators Share Their Stories of Shifting Practice During a Time of Crisis

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### Abstract

This South African-based exploratory study examines the differing experiences of higher education facilitators who were faced with having to rapidly transition to fully online engagement as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown regulations. This study used a qualitative case study approach to understand why some facilitators were able to rise to the challenge with relative ease while others struggled to cope, citing feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and low levels of personal achievement (each an associated dimension of burnout). Engaging with these facilitators, and the thematic analysis which followed, led to four major themes: balance is everything; technology as help or hindrance; adaptation rather than replication; and a loss of agency, with its associated sub-theme—everyone is exhausted. The findings revealed that those who presented with high levels of self-efficacy were able to avoid the onset of burnout during this time of crisis, while those with relatively low self-efficacy levels could not. Interestingly, emotional exhaustion featured as a significant factor across all participants, even those with high levels of self-efficacy. These findings underscore the importance of implementing support strategies that will help all facilitators to bolster their levels of resilience to mitigate the effect of the next crisis, whatever form it may take.

**Keywords:** self-efficacy; emotional exhaustion; burnout; resilience; online facilitation; higher education; pandemic; COVID-19

### Introduction and background

In 2020, educational institutions across the globe entered the fray against the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. Schools and campuses were quickly shut down and institutions were forced to move all teaching fully online, resulting in the need for significant adjustments to teaching practice almost overnight. One of the first countries to be affected by these changes was China, which launched the government-supported “Disrupted Classes, Undisrupted Learning” initiative (Huang et al., 2020). Another was Singapore, which rapidly implemented measures to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning remained as consistent as possible, with particular emphasis on recognising and supporting the needs of students during this time (Lim, 2020). Other countries, such as the United States, looked ahead to schools reopening, and the importance of putting measures in place that would address the social and emotional needs with which students might present once restrictions were lifted (Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). The study of Green et al. (2020) addressed the effect Australian students faced having being cut off from their collegiate and campus support, while others investigated connectivity challenges in Indonesia (Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2020), loss of employment, isolation, or having to deal with the passing of a family member (Cordaro, 2020; Ferren, 2021; Moir, 2022). Although some attention

was given to the effect of the health crisis on the work, family, and social lives of teaching staff (Aperribai et al., 2020; Lizana et al., 2021) the attention appeared to be firmly focused on students, particularly when viewed from the context of South Africa (Landa et al., 2021; Le Grange, 2021; Motala & Menon, 2020). More recent studies have begun to emerge that address factors such as resilience, burnout, and emotional wellbeing among South African teachers during the pandemic (Malesa, 2022; Padmanabhanunni et al., 2023; Spies, 2022). However, the majority of these studies appear to focus on teachers at public and private schools in the country, with few addressing the same issues among facilitators at universities or other institutions of higher education. This study aims, at least in part, to address this apparent gap by engaging with members of the academic team affiliated to a South African-based private higher education institution (PHEI). Through their shared experience of what it was like to facilitate online during the pandemic, the intention is to better understand the connection between self-efficacy and burnout, as a way to determine which skills or strategies can be put in place to build greater resilience among the institution’s academic team—that will enable them to weather the next crisis, whatever form it might take.

## Theoretical framework

Two independent, but interrelated, constructs have guided this study; namely, self-efficacy and burnout. The former is underpinned by the socio-cognitive theory of Bandura (1977, 1997), the latter was first defined as a syndrome “characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment” (Maslach & Schaufeli, 2018, p. 6). Maslach, working in collaboration with Susan Jackson in 1981, and later with Susan Jackson and Richard Schwab in 1996, developed a psychological measurement for burnout known as the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI).

These two constructs have informed the theoretical framework for this study and are summarised in Fig. 1.

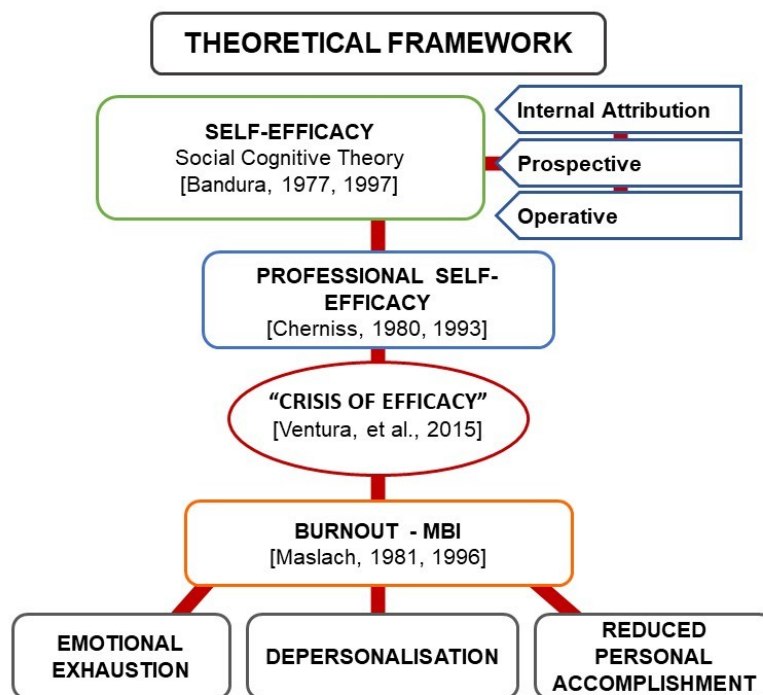


Figure 1 Theoretical framework based on self-efficacy and burnout (Source: Researcher’s own)

## **Self-efficacy**

The construct of self-efficacy has been investigated under two theoretical frameworks (Flammer, 2004). In the 1950s, social theorist Julian Rotter viewed self-efficacy from the perspective of “locus of control” (Rotter, 1954, as cited in Flammer, 2004, p. 13813), referring to the “place where control of desired reinforcement for behaviours is exerted” (ibid). Internal control implies control that comes from within a person; external control suggests that the place of control is outside the person (Flammer, 2004, p. 13813). Bandura’s (1977, 1997) social cognitive theory provided the second theoretical framework through which to address self-efficacy, and comprises a key component of the framework for this study. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is future-orientated. It determines which activities or actions an individual chooses, how much effort will be exerted in realising that action, and how long that person will persist when encountering obstacles that challenge those actions. Essentially, self-efficacy affects how someone thinks, feels, and acts. People with high levels of self-efficacy tend to not shy away from challenging tasks (Bandura, 1997; Schwarzer & Hallum, 2014, Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). They generally set themselves higher goals and see these goals through to fruition (ibid). Salanova et al. (2011) add to the discussion by positioning self-efficacy as “an important personal resource” that acts as a key predictor in the “development of the motivation and erosion processes of burnout and engagement” in the workplace (Ventura et al., 2015, p. 279).

## **Burnout**

Burnout can be described as “a progression of unsuccessful attempts by an individual to cope with a variety of conditions that are perceived to be threatening” (Travers & Cooper, 1996, p. 30). While high levels of “exhaustion and cynicism, and low levels of professional efficacy are general indicators of burnout” (Ventura et al., 2015, p. 282), there is also empirical evidence to support the idea that exhaustion and cynicism exist at the very core of burnout (Green et al., 1991). Additional studies have established that burnout is a direct consequence of what Ventura et al. (2015, p. 282), refer to as “a crisis in efficacy”. Cherniss (1993) argues that this same lack of confidence in one’s own abilities leads to the onset of burnout. According to Maslach et al., (1996) burnout is evidenced by three separate but interrelated concepts: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and diminished personal achievement. According to the MBI, emotional exhaustion refers to “feelings of fatigue, and drained emotional energy” (Padmanabhanunni et al. (2023), p. 122). Depersonalisation can be explained as a sense of feeling disconnected, detached, and experiencing a lack of sympathy, while low levels of personal achievement can occur when individuals experience an inability to adequately relate to the people with whom they work or engage (Maslach et al., 1996).

## **Literature review**

This literature review will briefly address self-efficacy and burnout before providing examples of studies (conducted before, and in the wake of, the pandemic) that have investigated the connection between these two constructs as experienced by those who teach.

## **Self-efficacy in teachers**

While some teachers appear to thrive regardless of the challenges that are thrown their way, others seem to be derailed at the slightest sign of increased pressure or change in routine and procedure (Tschannen & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001). From a social cognitive perspective this may be attributed to the level of self-efficacy of those teachers, and their belief in their ability to “plan, organize, and carry out activities that are required to attain given educational goals” (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007, p. 612). Tschannen and Woolfolk-Hoy (2001) posit that efficacious teachers are better able to handle institutional requirements than their less efficacious counterparts, and are more confident in their ability to facilitate the desired learning outcomes of their students—even

those who are considered more problematic or demotivated. Schwarzer and Hallum (2008) suggest that the quality of teacher engagement is positively aligned with personal coping resources and optimistic scenario prediction, whereas teachers with lower levels of self-efficacy are more inclined to indulge in negative thinking and to entertain pessimistic outcomes, both of which can be viewed as potential precursors to burnout.

### **Burnout in teachers**

Burnout can be defined as a “dysfunctional response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors at work” and tends to occur in professions that are more people-centric, such as teaching (Maslach, 1999; and Maslach & Leiter, 1999, as cited in Zhu et al., 2018). According to Zysberg et al. (2016, p. 3), burnout can occur due to environmental or work-related stressors, such as “conflicting job requirements [and] lack of professional know-how and training”, or personal factors such as “tenure, experience and personality traits”. Burnout has been associated with diminished performance at work, personal withdrawal, disruptive behaviour, absenteeism, and depression (Maslach et al., 2001; Swinder & Zimmermann, 2010 cited in Zysberg et al., 2016), so it is understandable that the phenomenon of burnout, and how it can be prevented, has been widely studied. However, much investigation is still required in the context of a global pandemic (Rabe-Steinberg, 2021; Sokal et al., 2020; Yang, 2021).

### **Teacher self-efficacy and burnout: Pre-pandemic**

Kokkinos (2007) conducted a study to understand the connection between the demands placed on teachers and certain personality characteristics, and the interaction of these with the three dimensions of burnout as described by Maslach, Jackson and Leiter (1996, p. 4): “emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment”. The study found that certain personality characteristics closely related to the MBI scale; for example, “neuroticism was negatively associated with personal accomplishment and positively associated with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization” (Kokkinos, 2007, p. 230). In related studies, Fives et al. (2007), Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007), and Zhu et al. (2018), using the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES), identified that the greater a teacher’s sense of self-efficacy the less likely they were to experience the emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation associated with burnout. A 2020 study conducted among university teachers in Pakistan found that teacher self-efficacy may decrease if teachers believe that factors such as their students’ background, context, or apparent academic abilities are thought to be more significant than their ability to teach them (Naoreen et al., 2020).

### **Teacher self-efficacy and burnout during the pandemic**

The forced isolation that came about as a consequence of the lockdown regulations changed the work context and the social interaction between teachers and their students (Klapproth et al., 2020; Pellerone, 2021; Rabagliettie et al., 2021). It’s possible that the dramatic change exacerbated the levels of burnout experienced by teachers, or even caused it (Pellerone, 2021, p. 498). A study by Rabagliettie et al., (2021) noted a strong correlation between burnout and the pervasively low levels of teacher self-efficacy among Italian teachers in the effective use of technology to meet the requirements of online learning. In China, Ma et al. (2021) discovered that although teacher self-efficacy increased in terms of the use of technology during the pandemic, this contrasted with the findings of the Italian study (in which teacher self-efficacy in online delivery declined as teachers attempted to unsuccessfully translate their practices for contact delivery to an online setting). A longitudinal Canadian study, initiated at the onset of the pandemic, surveyed 1278 Canadian teachers and evidenced how the efficacy of the teacher, their attitude towards change, and their perception of support, correlated with resilience and burnout (Sokal et al., 2020). The study showed that in the first 3 months of the pandemic, exhaustion and cynicism increased, but so did “classroom management and a sense of achievement” (Pressley,

2021, p. 499). Each of these studies provides some insight into the interplay of self-efficacy and burnout as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe. Although this study interrogates these same constructs, it does so from a South African higher education context; a perspective not readily encountered in the current literature.

## Research design and methods

A qualitative approach was adopted for this study because of its suitability for exploring real-world subjects in which the feelings and emotions of the participants have a key role (Arghode, 2012). This explorative study was prompted by an interest in the connection between self-efficacy and the notion of burnout in a higher education setting, and in a South Africa context, during the pandemic. By engaging with facilitators contracted to the PHEI in question, the researcher was able to gain insights into how the transition to online delivery was experienced during this time of crisis, and begin to formulate possible support strategies that could be used by this and other higher education institutions to build resilience among its teaching staff.

## Population and sample

Facilitators contracted to the selected PHEI provided the population for this study. These individuals all reside in urban and semi-urban areas across South Africa. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that only facilitators who were active during the pandemic were invited to participate. An online survey was sent to the 1220 facilitators who met this criterion. From these, 188 responses were received: 129 were from women, and 57 were from men. The data from this survey was not used for comparative statistical analysis, but to identify the sample group.

## Questions and scoring

Table 1 provides three examples of the questions that addressed self-efficacy, and three that focused on the burnout domain of emotional exhaustion, the five possible responses, and how each was scored.

**Table 1** Examples of survey questions and how they were scored (Source: Researchers' own)

SELF-EFFICACY	To what extent were you able to navigate the institutional LMS to successfully facilitate your module/s online?	To what extent were you able to navigate the internet in order to provide links and /or additional resources for your online students?	To what extent were you able to use your synchronous sessions to maximize interaction between students in your online modules?	SCORE
Example Only	I could do a great deal (4)	I could do some (2)	I could do quite a bit (3)	9
Example Only	I could do nothing (0)	I could do very little (1)	I could do some (2)	3
EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION	I had trouble sleeping and woke up feeling exhausted	I found it hard to concentrate and could be absentminded	Between the demands of teaching online and my family – I had very little left to give	SCORE
Example Only	I never felt like this (0)	I felt like this a few times (1)	I felt like this once a week (2)	3
Example Only	I felt like this once a week (2)	I felt like this a few times each week (3)	I felt like this every day (4)	9

Scoring ranged from zero to four (0–4) in both sections, with zero being “I could do nothing”, and four being “I could do a great deal” in the section focusing on self-efficacy; and zero for “I felt highly motivated”, to four for “I felt overwhelmed” in the section focusing on burnout.

From the scores tallied, eight individuals were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews to gain a deeper understanding of their stories. Four were individuals who had presented with high levels of self-efficacy and minimal indicators of burnout, and four had low self-efficacy scores and high burnout indicators. Ethnicity and tenure were not considered—simply the scores that were achieved for each category, and the participants' ability to share their experience of

facilitating their modules fully online during the pandemic. Ethical clearance was sought from the PHEI (Ref:00084) prior to any engagement, and each of the participants gave informed consent.

### **Tools and data collection**

Because participants resided across the country, the Microsoft Teams platform was selected to conduct the semi-structured interviews. Prior to these sessions participants were sent their survey scores and the questions relating to the sections in the survey that would be used to guide the discussion. Sessions were booked for 1 hour, and recorded with the consent of the participants. Each session was manually transcribed later. Manually transcribing the recordings rather than relying on an automated process allowed for a richer understanding of the personal insights shared by the participants during the telling of their stories.

Data collected during the semi-structured interviews was analysed using the six-phase reiterative approach to theme development as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021). This model supports the notion that the “qualitative analysis process is cyclic without finite interpretation and requires researchers to return repeatedly to data and the coding process throughout the analysis process” (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p. 103). Using an inductive approach allowed for the “research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in the raw data, without [any] restraints imposed by structured methodologies” (Thomas, 2003, p. 2).

### **Questions asked and themes explored**

The overarching intention behind this study was to determine the connection between self-efficacy and burnout as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic by facilitators contracted to a South African-based PHEI. Participants with high levels of self-efficacy were encouraged to share their experience of facilitating online during this crisis, and why they believed they were able to avoid succumbing to the symptoms associated with burnout. In the same manner, those participants who had presented with low levels of self-efficacy were asked to share their stories, and the effect their experience of burnout had on their lives and their teaching practice during that time. The interview sessions were guided by the scores achieved on the survey and the further unpacking of the questions that were posed to gain a more detailed understanding of each.

## **Discussion**

### **Context and general participant information**

The PHEI which provides the population and sample for this study was founded in South Africa in 1991. Over the last 3 decades several contact campuses have been established across the country. Collectively, these sites offer both contact and distance tuition to approximately 18,500 students, and employ in the region of 1220 facilitators to deliver its qualifications. The eight purposively selected participants were provided with agreed pseudonyms. A summary of their survey scores is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2** Summary of sample group survey scores (Source: Researcher’s own)

Group One	Participants			
High SE, low burnout	Paula	Layla	Craig	Louise
Self-efficacy / 40	<b>36</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>36</b>
Emotional exhaustion / 16	6	6	6	8
Depersonalisation / 16	2	5	4	4
Diminished personal accomplishment / 16	4	4	5	6
<b>Total for burnout</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>18</b>
Group Two	Participants			
Low SE, high burnout	Siva	Nelly	Alison	Hannah
Self-efficacy / 40	<b>8</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>12</b>
Emotional exhaustion / 16	13	14	14	14
Depersonalisation / 16	14	14	12	11
Diminished personal accomplishment / 16	14	14	12	11
<b>Total for burnout</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>36</b>

### Reporting on the identified themes

A thematic analysis of the narratives shared by the eight participants resulted in four themes and one sub-theme:

1. Balance is everything
2. Technology as help or hindrance
3. Adaptation rather than replication
4. Loss of agency
  - i. Everyone is exhausted

#### Theme 1: Balance is everything

Theme 1 arose out of discussions about finding some balance between work and family commitments during the pandemic. Ilić-Kosanović (2021) and Parham and Rauf (2020) note that balance is not always easy to achieve, especially for those facilitating in higher education settings where the prevalence of technology creates an environment where students could access their facilitators at any time of the day or night. Achieving a sense of balance was even more challenging during the pandemic—work and life were happening in the same place, resulting in blurred boundaries between the two (Adisa et al., 2022). When participants in this study were asked about their ability to maintain a work–life balance during the pandemic, they all highlighted the importance of achieving their own sense of balance.

Craig shared that he believed that “balance is everything” and that by having certain “levers in place” he was able to cope and to see the results of the work he had put in. Nelly, on the other

hand, could find no such balance, explaining that she was “a mess”, with hours and days blurring into each other. Her inability to find a workable balance left her feeling that she was never able to “get to everything [she] needed to”. Two other participants who struggled to achieve any real sense of work–life balance were Siva and Hannah. Siva shared that “every day felt almost identical”, leaving him exhausted. Hannah suggested that “there simply was no balance to be found. Work happened and family happened, but it was all mixed up, part of the same blur. Days of the week and what they used to represent just went out of the window”.

### **Theme 2: Technology as help or hindrance**

Theme 2 further explored this notion of technology as being a benefit or an obstacle, and suggested that while some saw the pivot in mode of delivery as an opportunity to rethink their practice, supported by technology, others were less confident in their ability to leverage the tools that were available to make the necessary shift. Those who did rise to the occasion displayed high levels of professional self-efficacy while those who could not (or would not) experienced what Ventura et al. (2015) refer to as a “crisis in efficacy” and a diminished sense of personal achievement in terms of meeting the needs of their students. The following extracts highlight how two of the self-efficacious participants approached this new reliance on technology, followed by two others who were less convinced of their abilities.

I love technology, it’s always been a passion . . . I suppose I see technology as a challenge rather than a hardship. (Paula)

I would figure out how a tool worked and whether it would serve a purpose for me in my module. Same with the internet. I don’t let it faze me. I also refused to let it beat me. (Layla)

I don’t mind the discussion board tool, but . . . setting up “auto graded tasks”, there I just get scared that I am going to push the wrong button or create something that doesn’t work properly when my students try it, so I just stick to what I know I can do. (Nelly)

There are some things you just can’t do online, well not as well as when you are in the classroom. That whiteboard functionality for example, that is just too clumsy for my liking. (Siva)

It became clear that where there was a reluctance to embrace technology or at least be prepared to explore the options afforded by certain tools, there was also a tendency to default to what was familiar in terms of style of delivery.

### **Theme 3: Adaptation rather than replication**

Adaptation rather than replication became the focus of Theme 3. Again, the divide between those who had scored 31/40 and above in the self-efficacy questions, and those who had low scores of 18/40 and below was clear. Although participants such as Alison admitted to still trying to lecture her students as she would in a contact environment, Nelly spoke about her decision to “stick to what she knew”, rather than exploring alternatives, and Hannah seemed to insist that some things simply did not translate into an online learning environment. The self-efficacious participants, however, seemed to have adopted an entirely different approach, and readily shared how they had gone about doing things such as making recordings for students to work through before the synchronous sessions (Paula), how they had adopted a multi-modal approach (Louise), or had found ways to introduce a sense of routine during a time that felt so chaotic for many.

When you are not physically with your students you have to adjust, you can’t just deliver a lecture behind a laptop screen and think that you have done your job—no way, it just doesn’t work like that. (Layla)

The sudden changes brought about by the pandemic and subsequent lockdown regulations found institutions scrambling to find ways to support their students as they transitioned to fully online

engagement almost overnight (Babbar & Gupta, 2021). Without a blueprint to guide them, the PHEI at the centre of this study implemented a series of teaching and learning strategies deemed to be in the best interests of their students. How this shift in practice was communicated, however, led to Theme 4.

#### **Theme 4: Loss of agency**

The selected strategies were rolled out without consultation or input from those expected to execute them, resulting in facilitators feeling that their capacity to direct their practice, and have some semblance of control during this time of crisis had been removed, especially in the initial stages of the pandemic.

They didn't ask what we thought, or if it would work, they just told us what to do, and that was that. (Craig)

So, an explanation about why decisions were being made and being told in that in advance would have helped. "So, this is what's happening, and this is why it's happening, and we're doing this because it allows a student to do XYZ." So that you know what's coming, you can predict it and that gives you confidence because you know what you need to do to be ready. But that never happened. (Paula)

When speaking to other participants, even those who had found ways of reclaiming their sense of agency over time, mention was made of the emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation attached to the radical changes that came about so quickly; not only those imposed on their lives by the lockdown regulations in the country, but also those that occurred as a consequence of institutional expectations.

Guidance is one thing, being told what to do with no room for our own ideas was something else. (Alison)

Reference to emotional exhaustion, even among the four participants with high self-efficacy scores, highlighted this aspect of burnout as most prevalent, and its link to a perceived loss of agency led to its inclusion as the sub-theme: Everyone is exhausted.

It was just physical, physical exhaustion and tiredness. Because, with all of the work we were doing, your brain is just working constantly in terms of "how does this work" and "how am I going to do this" . . . it actually felt like brain burnout. (Hannah)

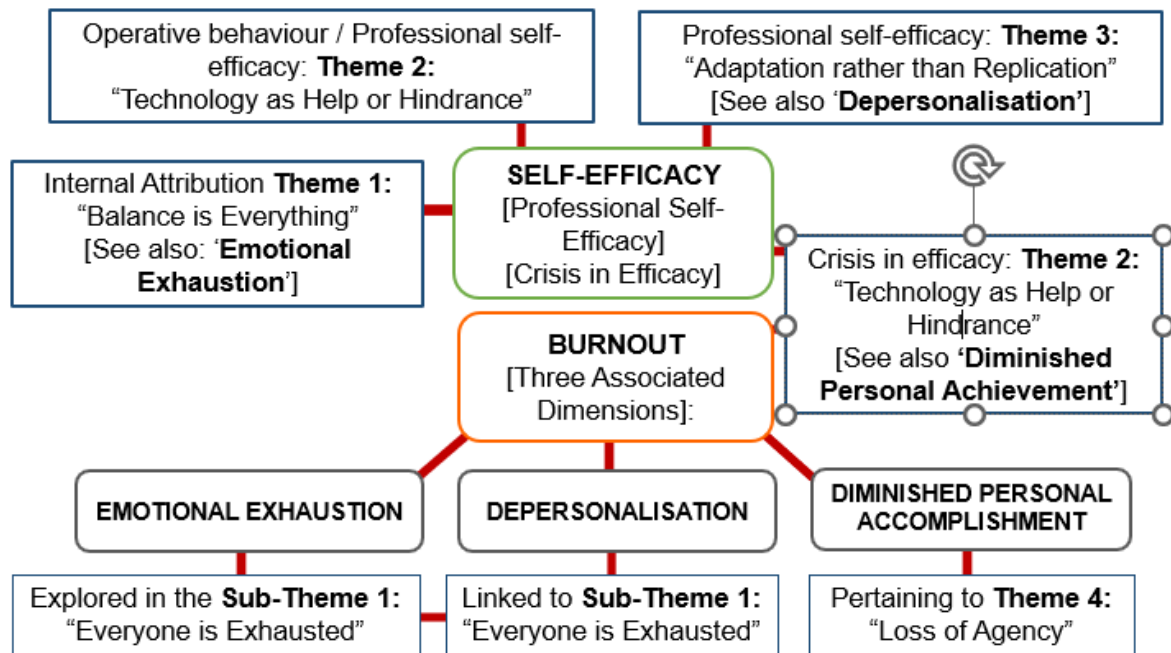
I think there were definitely days when I was just on autopilot; I knew what had to be done, so I did it, but I really was [just] going through the motions. (Nelly)

The approach taken by the PHEI to instruct rather than discuss, or to call on the expertise of their teaching and learning staff during this crisis, was probably borne out of necessity and having to react quickly and decisively to an unfamiliar and critical situation. Perhaps there was some reliance on the "potentially normalised presumption within higher education institutions that academics are [inherently] resilient", meaning that facilitators would simply just go ahead and do what needed to be done (De los Reyes et al., 2022, p. 47). Participants acknowledged the need for decisions to be made and instructions to be issued, but the way in which these were delivered (without room for their voice) gave rise to negative sentiments.

Collectively, the findings of this study suggest the importance of building greater resilience amongst the facilitators at this, and other higher education institutions, with the intention of mitigating the level of burnout experienced by so many during the pandemic. "Developing teacher resilience and perseverance through a strong community of practice, purpose, attention, opportunities, respect, and professional development" is a concept strongly supported by existing research (Mullen, et al., 2021, p. 14).

## Themes as aligned to the theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study focuses on the construct of self-efficacy as presented by Maslach (1997). It includes professional self-efficacy (Cherniss, 1993), crisis in efficacy (Ventura et al., 2015), and the psychological construct of burnout as developed by Maslach, Jackson and Leiter (1996) and Maslach, Jackson and Schwab (1996), highlighting the associated dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and diminished personal achievement. The link between these constructs and the themes that were developed is illustrated in Fig. 2.



**Figure 2** Identified themes aligned to the theoretical framework (Source: researcher's own)

Although “Theme 1: Balance is everything” spoke to the internal attribution of self-efficacy and how actual and future behaviour is linked to an individual’s level of internal attribution where they see themselves as the cause of their own actions (Bandura, 1997), “Theme 2: Technology as help or hindrance” highlighted the participants’ varying levels of professional self-efficacy and their sense of personal achievement. “Theme 3: Adaptation rather than replication” focused on the participants’ ability to rethink and modify their teaching practice to accommodate the change in mode of delivery. Again, those who were unwilling or unable to adapt chose instead to “stick to what they knew” and attempted to replicate contact classroom practice online. Those who chose this path noted an increased sense of depersonalisation and detachment from their students, while those who were willing to adapt evidenced heightened levels of professional self-efficacy. “Theme 4: Loss of agency”, highlighted the notion of having some sense of control over one’s choices and actions. Those who felt devoid of agency reported a diminished sense of personal achievement and heightened emotional exhaustion; however, even those who were able to handle the approach taken by the institution reported some measure of emotional exhaustion brought about by these top-down decisions.

## Building resilience

According to Arslan et al. (2020) as cited in Padmanabhanunni, et al., (2023), resilience is an important factor in protecting against the onset of experienced burnout, particularly in the domain of emotional exhaustion. Gu and Day (2007, p. 1302) define resilience as the “capacity

to continue to ‘bounce back’, to recover strengths or spirit quickly and efficiently in the face of adversity”. In an educational context, several studies speak of the importance of building resilience among teaching staff as way to avoid the onset of burnout (Beltman, 2021; Mullen et al., 2021; Wang, 2021). Richards et al. (2016, p. 530) concur and posit that “teachers who develop higher levels of resilience feel less emotionally drained, derive a greater sense of satisfaction from their work, and can interact positively with others”. Gu and Day (2007) add to the discussion by suggesting that focusing on building and maintaining teacher resilience will have a direct effect on the quality of teaching as well as the academic achievements of students. As Mullen et al. (2021, p. 14) suggest, an institution that sets high standards, provides clear administrative goals, and allows for “meaningful participation of teachers in decision-making” will create an environment in which teachers can experience a greater sense of agency and purpose, leading to increased resilience, improved morale, and a reduced susceptibility to burnout.

## **The effect of this research**

The intention of this research is to contribute to a South African perspective which will address, albeit only in part, the apparent gap in current literature regarding the constructs of self-efficacy and burnout as experienced by online facilitators in higher education settings. As noted, a PHEI provided the context for this study, one that is relatively underrepresented in South African literature. As such, this research adds to the narrative surrounding online higher education in this fairly niche context. Furthermore, Masalimova et al. (2024, p.2), refer to the momentum towards online learning that has occurred in countries such as South Africa since the pandemic, noting that “online learning has evolved from a mere emergency measure to a fundamental component of higher education systems”. This would suggest the need to further investigate these systems and identify meaningful ways in which facilitators may be supported.

The findings of this research align with many of the international studies referenced which highlight that self-efficacious individuals have the ability to cope with stress-inducing situations, remain focused on their goals, and successfully ward off the onset of burnout. There is also alignment in the role that supportive leadership can play in minimising anxiety during times of crisis by ensuring greater transparency and opportunity for collaboration when decisions regarding practice are formulated. This alignment with international findings further strengthens the suggestions made in this study regarding the promotion of resilience among facilitators, and the role of leadership in the process.

## **Recommendations for further study**

This study was positioned in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic which would certainly have influenced the experience and types of stories shared by the participants. Understanding how self-efficacy and burnout are experienced by facilitators dealing with the “normal” day-to-day challenges of online engagement would offer valuable insights into these constructs and how to mediate their effect. The PHEI at the centre of this study also offers a very specific context—one that is comparatively unusual in the context of higher education in South Africa. As such, further studies to explore the experiences of online facilitators at other public higher education institutions in the country would be of interest.

Although information regarding the age, tenure, and online teaching experience of the participants was gathered via the online survey, this data was not explored in any meaningful detail; however, it certainly prompts further exploration. Understanding whether levels of self-efficacy and experienced burnout have any correlation to the age, tenure, and/or experience of facilitators would add another dimension to understanding their experience of online facilitation,

and could allow institutions to develop resilience-focused support strategies that are more closely tailored to the needs of the individual.

Desmond-Hellman (2020), High et al., (2021), and Nandy et al., (2021) posit that it is not unrealistic to believe that another crisis such as that experienced in 2020 and 2021 could occur again in the future, and that higher education institutions need to ensure that they are far better prepared than they were the last time. Ross et al. (2023, p. 16) concur, and urge that understanding how academics and higher education institutions can “adapt to stress and build resilience has never been more urgent”.

## Conclusion

The study explored the complex relationship between self-efficacy and burnout among higher education facilitators who were forced to move to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings confirmed the critical role of self-efficacy in determining how they facilitated this transition, with those possessing higher self-efficacy showing greater resilience and a lower tendency to be susceptible to burnout. However, emotional exhaustion emerged as a strong theme across all participants, emphasising the notion that all, even highly efficacious individuals, were not immune to the psychological toll of the crisis. From the thematic analysis, key areas of concern became clear, such as the struggle to maintain a balance between professional and personal responsibilities, the role of technology as both enabler and barrier, the need for adaptation over replication in online teaching, and the effect of institutional decision-making on facilitator agency. These findings highlight the importance of institutional support and training in the assimilation of digital tools for teaching, and encouraging resilience among facilitators. In the years since the pandemic, South African higher education institutions will have undoubtedly learned lessons from this time to ensure that they are better prepared to respond to the unforeseen. As this study confirms, critical among these strategies should be the prioritisation of developing facilitators who are more self-efficacious and resilient. Focusing on these qualities during times of crisis and in everyday practice will contribute to sustainable and effective higher education in an increasingly digital world.

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