

Summary
More Pain Than Gain:
Effort-Reward Imbalances Within a University Student Population

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Context and Research Aims:

Although the university experience is often highly rewarding, educational journeys with ‘more pain than gain’ are an unfortunate reality for many students. Despite the widespread prevalence of psychological distress that affects students across universities in many different countries, existing student-stress research remains largely atheoretical. To address this gap, a theoretical investigation of student stress, using Siegrist’s (1996) effort-reward imbalance (ERI) model, was conducted within a university context. Whilst this model was originally designed to explain employee stress, and has since been examined in school settings and medical teaching hospitals, this study offers the first investigation of its generalisability to a university context. Furthermore, to highlight novel individual differences that influence the effects and prevalence of ERI, resilience, overcommitment, and imposterism (i.e., perceptions of being an intellectual ‘fraud’) were considered.

Methodology:

An online survey was employed (N = 2,451) to identify whether discrepancies between efforts expended and rewards obtained influence student-distress outcomes. University students from at least 15 courses/disciplines and 40 universities (representing all Australian states/territories) were sampled.

Results:

Almost half of the student sample demonstrated detrimental ERIs, and higher ERIs were associated with higher burnout and withdrawal intentions. Burnout partially accounted for (mediated) the relationship between ERI and withdrawal intentions for first-year students, and fully mediated this relationship for students in subsequent years. Unexpectedly, resilience did not buffer the relationships between ERI with burnout or withdrawal intentions. As expected, higher levels of imposterism and overcommitment predicted higher ERI levels.

Implications:

As this study provides the first investigation of the ERI model within a traditional university context, the generalisability of Siegrist’s (1996) model has been extended to tertiary settings and academic-based outcomes (i.e., student withdrawal). This study also identifies novel individual differences that influence ERI levels, and thus, highlights specific student groups that may be targeted in future interventions. In light of the present results, ERI-related interventions may be implemented at three levels. Specifically, the development of individual-focused programs, university strategies, and government policies, may help to minimise detrimental ERIs and empower students to experience university journeys with substantially ‘less pain than gain’.