



Coping with Covid-19 Among Academics: Comparative Insights from Iran, Sweden, and International Contexts

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The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted higher education globally, forcing universities to shift to digital platforms and remote work, profoundly affecting the psychosocial and professional well-being of academics. A growing body of empirical research has examined how academic communities responded to this crisis, focusing on psychological resilience, job satisfaction, teleworking challenges, and meaning-making coping strategies. Drawing on comparative studies conducted in Iran, Sweden, and across multiple countries (1-10), this text provides a synthesis of how academics coped with the pandemic and how context influenced their strategies and outcomes.

According to a quantitative study in the Swedish and Iranian contexts, the findings showed that in Iran, the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing structural and economic challenges within higher education. Academics faced limited access to reliable digital infrastructure, inadequate technical support, and difficulties in creating a conducive home environment for work. Despite these challenges, the Iranian academic population demonstrated a notable degree of psychological resilience (4). The study showed that many academics adopted adaptive coping strategies, such as cognitive reframing, acceptance, and spiritual reflection, to manage pandemic-related stress. Religious and cultural frameworks played a central role in shaping coping behaviors in Iran. Spirituality and collective values emerged as protective factors, helping individuals maintain a sense of coherence and existential meaning during the crisis (10). Social support from family and colleagues was also critical in mitigating feelings of isolation and burnout.

Nonetheless, the challenges of teleworking – including increased workloads, gendered domestic responsibilities, and blurred boundaries between personal and professional life – negatively impacted job satisfaction for many (4).

In Sweden, where digital infrastructure and flexible working arrangements were more robust prior to the pandemic, the academic community experienced a different coping trajectory. Studies found that academics generally appreciated the flexibility of remote work and reported relatively high levels of job satisfaction (1). Autonomy and the ability to self-regulate one's work were key factors associated with positive outcomes. Nevertheless, Swedish academics also faced challenges. Emotional fatigue, social isolation, and difficulties in maintaining work-life balance were commonly reported, especially among women and early-career researchers (2). As in Iran, coping strategies varied, but in Sweden, existential and secular meaning-making strategies were more prevalent. Participants often turned to nature, creative activities, and mindfulness practices as ways to manage stress and maintain well-being (2). These strategies reflected broader cultural values related to self-reliance, emotional regulation, and individualism.

International comparative studies further expanded the understanding of coping during the pandemic. The multi-country survey by Zandi et al. (2023) found that academics across different regions employed a combination of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. Problem-solving, time management, seeking information, and enhancing digital skills were frequently used to meet the new demands of remote

teaching and research. At the same time, emotion-focused strategies – including acceptance, emotional expression, and spiritual coping – were highly context-dependent. While academics in some countries leaned toward religious or community-based coping, others adopted secular existential approaches. The study revealed that personal beliefs, cultural norms, and institutional support all influenced the choice and effectiveness of coping methods. The result indicated that job satisfaction among academics during remote work was closely linked to institutional responsiveness. Access to digital resources, clear communication from leadership, and availability of peer support contributed to more positive experiences. In contrast, a lack of organizational support often exacerbated stress and led to feelings of disconnection and reduced motivation (10).

Moreover, recent studies indicate that academics and university students have employed various coping strategies to manage challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, Nurunnabi et al. found that Chinese college students engaged in seeking social support, avoidance, mental disengagement, and responsiveness to humanitarian issues (11). Similarly, Son et al. reported that university members in the USA sought support from others and adopted a range of coping strategies to help themselves (12).

In general, these findings underscore the importance of considering both cultural and structural dimensions when supporting academic staff during crises. They also highlight the need for universities to adopt holistic approaches to crisis preparedness, combining technological infrastructure with psychosocial resources tailored to diverse cultural and institutional settings. Coping with COVID-19 among academics was a complex, multi-layered process influenced by individual, cultural, and institutional factors. Iranian and Swedish cases, along with international data, reveal a rich variety of coping strategies – ranging from spiritual and collective coping to secular meaning-making and problem-focused adaptation. As higher education continues to evolve in response to global crises, understanding these coping mechanisms can inform more resilient academic environments that support both professional performance and personal well-being. It is also suggested that universities adopt the following strategies during crises and pandemics: psychological and emotional support, workload flexibility, professional development and training, health and safety measures, financial and career support, and strengthened community connections.

Footnotes

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