



# A Literature Review on Learning Burnout among International Undergraduates

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**ABSTRACT:** Learning burnout has become an increasingly salient issue in contemporary higher education, particularly among international undergraduate students who face intensified academic demands alongside cross-cultural adaptation challenges. This literature review synthesizes international and Chinese studies published between 2021 and 2025 to examine the conceptualization, measurement, and underlying mechanisms of learning burnout among international undergraduates. Drawing on recent empirical evidence, the review highlights learning stress as a core antecedent of burnout and academic self-efficacy as a key mediating psychological resource shaping students' responses to academic stress. Special attention is given to international undergraduates studying in highly competitive and internationalized higher education contexts, such as China, where cultural and institutional factors may further intensify burnout risk. By integrating theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, this review clarifies major research trends, identifies methodological limitations, and outlines future research directions aimed at advancing understanding of learning burnout and informing institutional practices to support international undergraduates' academic well-being.

**KEYWORDS:** Learning burnout; International undergraduates; Learning stress; Academic self-efficacy; Higher education.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Learning burnout has become an increasingly salient issue in contemporary higher education under conditions of intensified academic demands and expanding internationalization. As universities raise performance expectations and academic workloads, students face growing psychological pressure. These challenges are particularly acute for international undergraduate students, who must adapt to unfamiliar academic

systems, cultural norms, and language environments while meeting rigorous academic standards.

Learning burnout, derived from occupational burnout theory, is commonly conceptualized as emotional exhaustion, disengagement from learning, and reduced academic accomplishment. Empirical studies consistently indicate that learning burnout is associated with decreased academic engagement, lower academic performance, and heightened psychological distress (Asikainen & Salmela-Aro, 2022; Gong et al., 2023). Consequently, identifying mechanisms underlying learning burnout has become a key concern in higher education research.

International undergraduates are especially vulnerable to learning burnout due to the cumulative effects of academic and cross-cultural stressors. Beyond common academic pressures, international students frequently experience language barriers, cultural adjustment difficulties, and limited social support, which contribute to elevated learning stress and increased burnout risk (Gradiski et al., 2022; Kaggwa et al., 2023).

Learning stress has been widely identified as a primary antecedent of learning burnout; however, recent research suggests that this relationship is not purely direct. Academic self-efficacy—students' beliefs in their ability to successfully perform academic tasks—has emerged as a critical psychological resource shaping responses to academic stress (Bandura, 1997). Studies published between 2021 and 2025 indicate that academic self-efficacy negatively predicts learning burnout and mediates the relationship between learning stress and burnout (Chen & Liu, 2021; Liu et al., 2022).

Within the Chinese higher education context, existing research on learning burnout has focused predominantly on domestic students, with limited attention to international undergraduates (Fan, 2023). Moreover, findings from Western contexts may not fully capture the distinctive



academic and cultural characteristics of Chinese universities. Shanghai, as one of China's most internationalized metropolitan cities, provides a unique setting characterized by rigorous academic standards and culturally hybrid pedagogical practices, underscoring the need for context-sensitive synthesis (Lin & Zhao, 2023).

This review draws on peer-reviewed journal articles retrieved from major international databases (e.g., Web of Science, Scopus) and Chinese databases (e.g., CNKI), focusing on studies published between 2021 and 2025. Keywords included "learning burnout," "academic stress," "academic self-efficacy," and "international undergraduate students." Studies were selected based on their relevance to higher education

## **II. CONCEPTUALIZATION AND MEASUREMENT OF LEARNING BURNOUT**

Learning burnout has been extensively examined in higher education research as a multidimensional psychological condition reflecting students' maladaptive responses to prolonged academic demands. Although the concept was initially developed within occupational psychology, recent scholarship has increasingly adapted it to educational contexts, particularly in studies focusing on university students. Contemporary literature emphasizes that learning burnout is not a short-term emotional reaction but a relatively stable psychological state that develops through sustained exposure to academic stressors combined with insufficient coping resources (Asikainen & Salmela-Aro, 2022).

In educational settings, learning burnout is most commonly conceptualized as comprising three interrelated dimensions: emotional exhaustion, disengagement from learning, and reduced academic accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted by academic tasks, often resulting from heavy workloads and continuous performance pressure. Disengagement reflects a detached or indifferent attitude toward learning activities, instructors, or academic goals, while reduced academic accomplishment involves negative self-evaluations of learning competence and academic effectiveness. Empirical studies conducted across diverse cultural contexts consistently support this tripartite structure, confirming its conceptual robustness in higher

contexts and empirical or theoretical contributions to burnout research.

Accordingly, this literature review synthesizes international and Chinese studies published between 2021 and 2025 to examine learning burnout among international undergraduates, with particular attention to learning stress and the mediating role of academic self-efficacy. In addition to recent empirical studies, several foundational works were included to provide theoretical grounding for key constructs such as learning burnout and academic self-efficacy. By integrating theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, this review aims to clarify key mechanisms underlying learning burnout and inform future research and institutional practice in international higher education.

education research (Gong et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2022).

Recent studies published between 2021 and 2025 have further refined the understanding of learning burnout by emphasizing its dynamic and contextual nature. Rather than treating burnout as a fixed personal trait, scholars increasingly conceptualize it as a process that emerges when academic demands persistently exceed students' perceived coping capacity (Asikainen et al., 2022). From this perspective, learning burnout develops gradually through the accumulation of stress and the erosion of motivational and cognitive resources. This process-oriented conceptualization is particularly relevant for international undergraduates, whose academic adaptation often occurs simultaneously with cross-cultural adjustment.

Within international student populations, learning burnout has been shown to manifest in ways that extend beyond conventional academic exhaustion. Research suggests that language barriers, unfamiliar instructional practices, and limited participation in classroom interactions may intensify feelings of disengagement and inefficacy among international undergraduates (Gradiski et al., 2022). In such contexts, burnout reflects not only academic fatigue but also culturally induced distancing from learning processes. These findings highlight the importance of contextual sensitivity when applying burnout concepts to international undergraduate populations.

The measurement of learning burnout has evolved alongside conceptual developments, with increasing attention to reliability, validity, and cross-cultural applicability. The Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI-SS) remains the



most widely used instrument, operationalizing learning burnout through emotional exhaustion, cynicism toward learning, and academic efficacy. Recent empirical studies confirm the structural validity and internal consistency of this instrument across multiple higher education contexts (Asikainen & Salmela-Aro, 2022). However, growing evidence suggests that direct application of Western-developed scales may inadequately capture the learning experiences of international students without contextual adaptation.

In response to these limitations, recent research has increasingly employed revised or localized burnout scales that incorporate culturally and academically specific indicators while retaining the core dimensions of burnout. Studies conducted in Chinese higher education contexts, for example, often emphasize learning-related exhaustion, academic alienation, and perceived inefficacy within structured and performance-oriented learning environments (Fan, 2023; Gong et al., 2023). Validation research indicates that such localized instruments demonstrate satisfactory psychometric properties among both domestic and international student samples, supporting their use in cross-cultural research settings.

Despite these methodological advances, challenges remain in the measurement of learning burnout. Most existing studies rely on self-report questionnaires, which may be influenced by social desirability bias and culturally specific response patterns. In addition, cross-sectional research designs dominate the literature, limiting understanding of the developmental trajectory of burnout over time. Recent scholars therefore advocate for longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to better capture the dynamic nature of learning burnout and its interaction with psychological resources such as academic self-efficacy (Asikainen et al., 2022).

Overall, the conceptualization and measurement of learning burnout provide a critical foundation for examining burnout mechanisms among international undergraduates. While the core dimensions of burnout appear stable across contexts, their antecedents and manifestations are shaped by institutional, cultural, and individual factors. For international undergraduates, learning burnout is closely intertwined with learning stress and academic self-efficacy, underscoring the need for integrative analytical frameworks. This perspective establishes a theoretical basis for subsequent discussions of learning stress and the mediating role of academic self-efficacy in shaping learning burnout.

### **III. LEARNING STRESS AS A CORE ANTECEDENT OF LEARNING BURNOUT AMONG INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATES**

Learning stress has been widely recognized as one of the most critical antecedents of learning burnout in higher education research, particularly in studies focusing on university students. In educational psychology, learning stress is generally defined as the psychological strain that arises when students perceive academic demands as exceeding their available coping resources. Recent studies emphasize that learning stress reflects not only objective academic workload but also students' subjective evaluations of performance expectations, academic competition, and future uncertainty (Zhang & Wu, 2023). Within increasingly competitive and outcome-oriented higher education systems, learning stress has become a pervasive experience that plays a central role in the development of learning burnout.

Empirical research published between 2021 and 2025 consistently demonstrates a strong positive association between learning stress and learning burnout. Sustained exposure to high levels of learning stress has been shown to predict emotional exhaustion, disengagement from learning activities, and diminished academic motivation across diverse educational contexts (Asikainen & Salmela-Aro, 2022; Gong et al., 2023). These findings suggest that learning stress accelerates the depletion of students' psychological and motivational resources, thereby increasing their vulnerability to burnout. Importantly, learning stress is often cumulative in nature, with its negative effects intensifying over time when academic pressures remain unresolved.

For international undergraduates, learning stress is shaped by the interaction of academic demands and cross-cultural adaptation challenges. In addition to common academic stressors such as examinations, heavy coursework, and performance expectations, international students frequently encounter language-related difficulties, unfamiliar instructional styles, and uncertainty regarding assessment criteria (Gradiski et al., 2022). These academic challenges are often compounded by the need to adapt to different classroom norms, teacher-student relationships, and expectations for independent learning, which can further heighten stress and undermine academic confidence.



Language proficiency has been identified as a particularly salient source of learning stress among international undergraduates. Even in English-taught programs, students may struggle with discipline-specific terminology, instructors' accents, or culturally embedded academic discourse, increasing cognitive load and performance-related anxiety (Liu & Wang, 2022). Persistent language-related stress not only interferes with academic comprehension but also contributes to emotional exhaustion and disengagement from learning over time, thereby facilitating the development of learning burnout.

Cultural differences in pedagogical practices further intensify learning stress for international students. Research indicates that mismatches between students' prior educational experiences and host-country instructional approaches can generate uncertainty and stress. For example, students accustomed to interactive or discussion-based learning may experience stress in teacher-centered environments, while those from highly structured systems may struggle with the emphasis on autonomy and critical thinking in internationalized curricula (Lin & Zhao, 2023). Such pedagogical incongruence may weaken students' sense of control over learning, increasing susceptibility to burnout.

Beyond academic factors, social and psychological stressors play an important role in shaping learning stress among international undergraduates. Limited social support, feelings of isolation, financial pressure, and concerns related to visa regulations and future career prospects often coexist with academic stressors, forming a complex stress profile (Gradiski et al., 2022; Kaggwa et al., 2023). Recent studies suggest that these non-academic stressors indirectly contribute to learning burnout by amplifying academic stress and accelerating emotional exhaustion.

Within the Chinese higher education context, learning stress among international undergraduates has attracted increasing scholarly attention, particularly in highly internationalized cities such as Shanghai. Research indicates that rigorous academic standards, competitive learning environments, and structured evaluation systems characteristic of Chinese universities contribute to elevated learning stress among international students (Fan, 2023). Cultural norms emphasizing academic achievement and effort may further intensify perceived pressure, especially among students who associate academic success with family expectations or future mobility opportunities.

Although learning stress is consistently identified as a powerful antecedent of learning burnout, recent literature emphasizes that stress does not uniformly lead to burnout outcomes. Individual differences in psychological resources play a crucial role in shaping how students perceive, interpret, and respond to academic stressors. In particular, academic self-efficacy has emerged as a key factor influencing the extent to which learning stress translates into learning burnout (Chen & Liu, 2021). This perspective highlights the importance of examining not only the presence of learning stress but also the mechanisms through which stress affects burnout.

Overall, existing research positions learning stress as a fundamental mechanism underlying learning burnout among international undergraduates. However, learning stress alone is insufficient to fully explain variations in burnout outcomes. Understanding how psychological resources shape the translation of learning stress into learning burnout is therefore essential. This perspective provides a conceptual bridge to the subsequent discussion of academic self-efficacy, highlighting how individual cognitive resources mediate the impact of learning stress on learning burnout among international undergraduates.

#### **IV. ACADEMIC SELF-EFFICACY AND LEARNING BURNOUT AMONG INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATES**

Academic self-efficacy has been widely examined in educational psychology as a central cognitive resource shaping students' motivation, persistence, and emotional responses to academic challenges. Derived from social cognitive theory, academic self-efficacy refers to students' beliefs in their capacity to successfully organize and execute actions required to attain academic goals (Bandura, 1997). In recent higher education research, academic self-efficacy has increasingly been positioned as a critical factor influencing learning burnout, particularly in contexts characterized by high academic pressure and sustained learning stress.

Empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025 consistently demonstrate a negative relationship between academic self-efficacy and learning burnout. Students with higher levels of academic self-efficacy tend to report lower emotional exhaustion, reduced disengagement from learning, and a stronger sense of academic accomplishment (Chen & Liu, 2021; Zhao et al.,



2022). These findings suggest that academic self-efficacy functions as a protective psychological resource that buffers the negative effects of academic demands. Rather than eliminating stressors, self-efficacy shapes how students interpret and cope with stress, thereby influencing burnout outcomes.

For international undergraduates, academic self-efficacy plays a particularly salient role due to the complexity of their learning environments. International students are often required to perform academically while adapting to unfamiliar instructional practices, language environments, and evaluation standards. Research indicates that when international undergraduates possess strong academic self-efficacy, they are more likely to perceive academic challenges as manageable and to engage in adaptive coping strategies, such as seeking academic support or adjusting learning strategies (Liu & Wang, 2022). In contrast, students with low academic self-efficacy are more likely to interpret academic difficulties as evidence of personal inadequacy, increasing emotional exhaustion and disengagement.

Recent literature increasingly emphasizes the mediating role of academic self-efficacy in the relationship between learning stress and learning burnout. Quantitative studies employing regression analysis and structural equation modeling provide consistent evidence that learning stress negatively predicts academic self-efficacy, which in turn predicts higher levels of learning burnout (Nikdel & Fariborz, 2020; Liu et al., 2022). This mediating mechanism suggests that learning stress contributes to burnout partly by undermining students' confidence in their academic abilities. As academic self-efficacy declines, students' capacity to regulate emotions and sustain motivation is weakened, accelerating the development of burnout.

This mediating process is particularly evident among international undergraduates, whose self-efficacy may be more vulnerable to contextual stressors such as language barriers and cultural mismatch. Studies indicate that repeated academic difficulties, misunderstandings in classroom communication, or negative feedback experiences may disproportionately affect international students' self-efficacy beliefs (Gradiski et al., 2022). Over time, reduced self-efficacy may intensify the impact of learning stress, leading to a stronger association between stress and burnout compared with domestic student populations.

Within the Chinese higher education context, recent studies highlight the importance of

academic self-efficacy in shaping international students' learning experiences. Research conducted in highly competitive academic environments, such as universities in Shanghai, suggests that strong academic self-efficacy mitigates emotional exhaustion and disengagement even under conditions of high learning stress (Fan, 2023; Chen & Liu, 2021). These findings underscore that academic self-efficacy does not merely influence academic performance but also plays a central role in protecting students' psychological well-being.

Importantly, recent literature cautions against viewing academic self-efficacy as a static individual trait. Instead, self-efficacy is increasingly conceptualized as a malleable cognitive resource shaped by learning experiences, feedback, and institutional support (Asikainen & Salmela-Aro, 2022). This perspective highlights the potential for educational interventions aimed at enhancing academic self-efficacy—such as mastery-oriented feedback, academic skills training, and culturally responsive teaching—to indirectly reduce learning burnout among international undergraduates.

Overall, existing research positions academic self-efficacy as a key psychological mechanism linking learning stress to learning burnout. While learning stress serves as a primary antecedent of burnout, academic self-efficacy influences the extent to which stress translates into emotional exhaustion and disengagement. Understanding this mediating role is therefore essential for developing comprehensive models of learning burnout and for informing institutional strategies aimed at supporting international undergraduate students in high-pressure academic environments.

## **V. SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

This literature review synthesizes recent international and Chinese scholarship on learning burnout among international undergraduates, with particular attention to learning stress and academic self-efficacy as core explanatory mechanisms. Across studies published between 2021 and 2025, a consistent pattern emerges in which learning burnout is conceptualized as a multidimensional outcome shaped by prolonged academic stress and moderated by students' psychological resources. Emotional exhaustion, disengagement from learning, and reduced academic accomplishment remain the most widely accepted dimensions of



learning burnout, demonstrating conceptual stability across cultural and institutional contexts.

The reviewed literature clearly positions learning stress as a primary antecedent of learning burnout. Empirical findings consistently indicate that sustained academic pressure, performance expectations, and cumulative stressors significantly increase international undergraduates' vulnerability to burnout. Importantly, recent studies emphasize that learning stress operates as a dynamic and accumulative process rather than as an isolated academic burden. For international undergraduates, learning stress is further intensified by language challenges, pedagogical mismatches, and cross-cultural adaptation demands, underscoring the need to situate burnout research within specific educational and cultural contexts.

At the same time, academic self-efficacy has emerged as a critical psychological mechanism shaping the stress–burnout relationship. The reviewed evidence suggests that academic self-efficacy functions both as a protective resource and as a mediating variable, influencing the extent to which learning stress translates into learning burnout. International undergraduates with stronger academic self-efficacy are better able to interpret academic challenges as manageable, maintain engagement, and regulate negative emotions, thereby reducing burnout risk. This mediating mechanism provides a more nuanced explanation of why similar levels of learning stress may result in divergent burnout outcomes across individuals.

Despite these advances, several limitations and research gaps remain evident in the existing literature. First, although research on learning burnout among international undergraduates has increased, studies remain disproportionately concentrated in Western higher education contexts. Research conducted in non-Western settings, particularly within rapidly internationalizing systems such as Chinese higher education, is still relatively limited. Context-specific factors—including pedagogical traditions, evaluation systems, and sociocultural expectations—require greater empirical attention to avoid overgeneralization from Western-centric models.

Second, methodological limitations persist across the literature. Most studies rely on cross-sectional self-report designs, which constrain causal inference and obscure the developmental trajectory of learning burnout. Longitudinal research is needed to examine how learning stress, academic self-efficacy, and burnout evolve over time, particularly during key transition periods in international students' academic journeys. In

addition, greater use of mixed-method approaches could provide deeper insights into international undergraduates' lived experiences of stress and burnout.

Third, while academic self-efficacy has been widely examined, other potential psychological and contextual moderators remain underexplored. Future research could integrate additional cognitive and motivational variables, such as resilience, academic belonging, or perceived institutional support, into burnout models. Such integrative frameworks would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how individual and environmental factors jointly shape learning burnout among international undergraduates.

Finally, the reviewed literature highlights important implications for higher education institutions. Rather than focusing solely on reducing academic stressors, universities should adopt holistic strategies that strengthen international students' psychological resources, particularly academic self-efficacy. Institutional practices such as transparent assessment criteria, culturally responsive teaching, academic skills support, and formative feedback may play a crucial role in mitigating learning burnout by enhancing students' sense of academic competence and control.

In conclusion, learning burnout among international undergraduates is best understood as a context-sensitive outcome of sustained learning stress, shaped by individual psychological resources and institutional environments. By synthesizing recent research, this review underscores the importance of integrative models that place learning burnout at the center while systematically examining its antecedents and mediating mechanisms. Future research grounded in diverse educational contexts and rigorous methodologies will be essential for advancing theoretical understanding and informing effective interventions to support international undergraduates' academic well-being.

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