

SECTION: ARTICLES

Precarious working conditions for teachers and mental health in higher education: a narrative literature review

Precarização do trabalho docente e saúde mental no ensino superior: uma revisão bibliográfica narrativa

Condiciones laborales precarias para el profesorado y salud mental en la educación superior: una revisión narrativa de la literatura

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ABSTRACT

The restructuring of labor in Brazil since the 1990s has intensified the process of precariousness in the relationship between capital and labor, directly impacting the educational field and the working conditions of teachers. This article aims to investigate, through bibliographic research, the impacts of the precariousness of teaching work on the physical and mental health of university professors. Based on a qualitative and exploratory approach, it analyzes how the flexibilization of labor relations, the intensification of productive demands, and the commodification of education have compromised the well-being of teachers, generating stress, anxiety, depression, and a loss of meaning in teaching. The effects of the expansion of distance education and the growth of the private sector are also discussed, factors that intensify the vulnerability of these professionals in the face of unstable employment, work overload, and the absence of effective policies for their appreciation. The

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study also highlights the importance of collective resistance and teacher mobilization as strategies to confront this adverse scenario. It is concluded that recognizing and combating the effects of precarious employment is essential to ensure fairer working conditions and to preserve the health of teachers and the quality of higher education.

Keywords: teaching work; precariousness; higher education; mental health; commodification of education

RESUMO

A reestruturação do trabalho no Brasil, desde a década de 1990, intensificou o processo de precarização das relações entre capital e trabalho, repercutindo diretamente no campo educacional e nas condições de atuação dos docentes. Este artigo tem como objetivo investigar, por meio de uma revisão bibliográfica do tipo narrativa, os impactos da precarização do trabalho docente na saúde física e mental dos professores do ensino superior. Com base em uma abordagem qualitativa e exploratória, analisa-se de que maneira a flexibilização das relações de trabalho, a intensificação das exigências produtivas e a mercantilização da educação têm comprometido o bem-estar dos docentes, gerando estresse, ansiedade, depressão e perda do sentido da docência. São também discutidos os efeitos da expansão do ensino a distância e do crescimento do setor privado, fatores que intensificam a vulnerabilidade desses profissionais diante de vínculos instáveis, sobrecarga laboral e ausência de políticas efetivas de valorização. O estudo destaca, ainda, a importância da resistência coletiva e da mobilização docente como estratégias para enfrentar esse cenário adverso. Conclui-se que reconhecer e combater os efeitos da precarização é essencial para assegurar condições de trabalho mais justas e preservar a saúde dos professores e a qualidade do ensino superior.

Palavras-chave: trabalho docente; precarização; ensino superior; saúde mental; mercantilização da educação.

RESUMEN

La reestructuración del trabajo en Brasil, desde la década de 1990, intensificó el proceso de precarización de las relaciones entre capital y trabajo, repercutiendo directamente en el ámbito educativo y en las condiciones de desempeño de los docentes. Este artículo tiene como objetivo investigar, mediante una revisión bibliográfica de tipo narrativa, los impactos de la precarización del trabajo docente en la salud física y mental de los profesores de educación superior. Basado en un enfoque cualitativo y exploratorio, se analiza de qué manera la flexibilización de las relaciones laborales, la intensificación de las exigencias productivas y la mercantilización de la educación han comprometido el bienestar de los docentes, generando

estrés, ansiedad, depresión y pérdida del sentido de la docencia. También se discuten los efectos de la expansión de la educación a distancia y del crecimiento del sector privado, factores que intensifican la vulnerabilidad de estos profesionales frente a vínculos laborales inestables, sobrecarga de trabajo y ausencia de políticas efectivas de valorización. El estudio destaca, además, la importancia de la resistencia colectiva y de la movilización docente como estrategias para enfrentar este escenario adverso. Se concluye que reconocer y combatir los efectos de la precarización es fundamental para garantizar condiciones de trabajo más justas y preservar la salud de los profesores y la calidad de la educación superior.

Palabras clave: trabajo docente; precariedad; educación superior; salud mental; mercantilización de la educación.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Marxist conception, what distinguishes human labor from animal labor is the intermediation of culture and intentionality, wherein the product of labor already exists ideally in the worker's imagination from the outset; to eliminate this intentionality is to denature labor of its human essence (Borges; Yamamoto, 2014). In this sense, considering that the concept of labor varies according to the concrete context in which it is situated, the rise and consolidation of capitalism constituted milestones of substantial changes in the way labor is understood.

Based on neoliberal ideals, particularly from the 1970s onward, labor ceases to be understood as a necessity for subsistence, and the worker comes to be seen as a commodity essential to the accumulation of capital. In this context, the proletarians are deprived of the means of production and begin to sell their labor power to the capitalist, who seeks to maximize surplus value, whether through the extension of the working day or by the improvement of productive efficiency (Marx, 2013). Consequently, the expropriation of the labor process occurs, a phenomenon in which workers are stripped of control over the productive process and the means of production, being subjugated to the dominion of capital and losing control over the conditions and rhythm of their own labor, in addition to being alienated from the final product they create (Costa; Mueller, 2020). In view of this, the historical transition and transformation of the labor process, under capitalist modes, not only redefined the value and function of labor but also shaped the structure and demands of the labor market.

The incessant pursuit of efficiency and profit has led to the necessity of adapting the forms of work organization to new economic and technological conditions. It is within this context that the flexible work model emerges as a strategic response enabling companies to reduce costs, respond rapidly to market fluctuations, and increase productivity. However, under the motto

of 'entrepreneurship of the self' and under the illusion of benefits such as greater work-life balance, this new model brings with it precarization (Costa; Mueller, 2020).

The flexible work model, which includes practices such as uberization, part-time work, and temporary hiring systems, results in job insecurity, the absence of traditional benefits, unstable wages, and the reduction or even the outright absence of labor rights (Costa; Mueller, 2020). Moreover, the objective of flexibilization is generally not to improve the quality of life of employees, but rather to increase productivity and reduce company costs. This means that employees are required to be available on a full-time basis, without set schedules or days of rest.

In this sense, among the various categories of workers affected by the flexibilization and precarization of labor relations, higher education faculty face specific difficulties, which reflect the tensions and challenges experienced by these professionals in the context of labor flexibilization. Due to the growing demand for higher education and the expansion of educational institutions, many faculty members find themselves in temporary work positions, hired as adjunct professors, substitutes, or through part-time contracts (Avila, 2021; Fávero; Bechi, 2020). This situation creates multiple vulnerabilities for educators, directly and indirectly affecting their mental health (Lemos, 2014).

However, before addressing these harms, it is important to question what mental health is. According to Dejours (1986), mental health concerns the capacity for adaptation and the freedom to pursue physical, psychic, and social well-being, not being restricted merely to the absence of physical illnesses. In revisiting the definition of health, Dejours (1986) retrieves the notion of variability, asserting that what characterizes physical and emotional well-being is the capacity for variability, rather than stability. On the basis of this thesis, accepting and respecting such variability is fundamental to the promotion of health, including mental health.

Health is the freedom to give this body the possibility of resting, it is the freedom to give it food when it is hungry, to make it sleep when it is sleepy (...). It is, therefore, the freedom of adaptation. (...) Psychic well-being, in our understanding, is simply the freedom that is left to each person's desire in the organization of their life (Dejours, 1986, p. 11).

Considering that psychic well-being consists in having the freedom to desire and to have possibilities in life, the author proposes a definition of mental health that goes beyond the mere absence of mental illnesses. It is in the absence of desire that psychological conditions such as depression, anxiety, and others find fertile ground (Dejours, 1986). Therefore, when studying the mental health of faculty members, it is necessary to take into account the work environment in which they are inserted, observing not only the absence of illnesses, but also

positive aspects and factors that contribute to coping with contradictions and limitations (Karasek; Theorell, 1990).

In the context of the precarization of education, job insecurity is one of the main consequences for faculty members. With the flexibilization of labor, few faculty members work under exclusive dedication regimes (Bosi, 2007). The presence of temporary and permanent professors hired on a per-class-hour basis, the absence of a career plan, and the use of additional resources (such as research grants) as a form of faculty compensation are factors that exacerbate this situation (Bosi, 2007). These working conditions not only limit opportunities for professional development but also heighten the sense of instability and insecurity among professors.

Furthermore, the lack of a structured career plan prevents faculty members from envisioning a clear and stable future in their professions, while inadequate remuneration devalues the role of educators and compromises the quality of education offered (Bosi, 2007). Without guarantees of stability, many professors face constant uncertainties regarding the renewal of their contracts, which negatively impacts financial security and long-term planning. According to Avdzejus and Ribeiro (2020), the perception of instability and insecurity is common and persistent among faculty members, more pronounced in private educational institutions, yet also present among professors in public institutions under temporary contracts.

The intense and continuous erosion of workers' rights, coupled with the insecurity brought about in all spheres by the new forms of employment, which in addition to being precarious, provisional, and temporary, also allow the employer to discard the working human being simply and swiftly, directly impacts the reduction of individual and collective purchasing power, and, beyond that, the impoverishment of entire fractions of the working classes (Avdzejus; Ribeiro, 2020, p. 7).

Furthermore, precarization can lead to excessive workload and suboptimal working conditions. Faculty members in precarious positions often assume multiple roles within the same institution or teach at different institutions to ensure sufficient income (Avdzejus; Ribeiro, 2020), which can result in exhausting working hours and little time available for class preparation, research, extension activities, professional development, and private life.

According to Dal Rosso (2008), this intensification of academic work is related to pace, productivity, and labor demands, requiring increasingly multifaceted faculty members and, consequently, less specialized in their areas of training. Another consequence of this is the loss of professional identity, as the professor ceases to be a specialist and becomes a service provider (Rosa; Vieira, 2023).

The situation is further aggravated when universities lose their autonomy, because their goals, objectives, and management are determined by external influences, such as governments or private entities (Bosi, 2007). With the commodification of education, the quality of academic production comes to be measured by the quantity of work produced, rather than by its quality. This means that the academic elite, or those who are most valued, are not necessarily those who produce high-quality work or who are specialists in their field, but rather those who produce more in quantitative terms (Bosi, 2007). This system leads professors to believe that their success is based on their individual capacity, when, in fact, it is determined by productivity criteria established by the market (Rosa; Vieira, 2023).

This emphasis on productivity generates alienation and loss of autonomy, as professors come to focus on meeting quantitative targets, rather than developing quality work that meets educational and research needs, in addition to contemplating their own preferences (Castro Neta; Cardoso; Nunes, 2021). Moreover, by encouraging this excessive competitiveness, it becomes difficult for faculty members to organize and mobilize themselves to change the system, for the academic environment is already naturally highly competitive, and this competition is intensified by a struggle for scarce resources and the maintenance of status (Bosi, 2007).

Faculty demobilization is further aggravated when one takes into account the fact that temporary professors often have fewer opportunities to fully integrate into academic communities and to participate in institutional decisions. In this sense, the weaker the union organization and the power of resistance, the greater the intensity and pace of precarization (Rosa; Vieira, 2023).

Given the current context, it becomes essential to investigate the multiple ramifications of precarization in higher education, above all its effects on the mental health of faculty members. Evidence already indicates that job insecurity, the fragmentation of professional trajectories, and the intensification of labor demands contribute to occupational stress, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of alienation among professors (Avdzejus; Ribeiro, 2020; Bosi, 2007). Nevertheless, a significant gap is observed in the literature, especially with regard to the analysis of this phenomenon in light of the recent transformations that have reconfigured the world of work. Understanding the consequences of precarization, therefore, demands not only examining working conditions and their impacts on the psychic health of faculty members, but also critically reflecting on the effects of this process on the quality of education offered. In this sense, this research is justified by the need to deepen this debate, capturing its nuances and implications in the contemporary scenario.

From the reflections presented, the central problem of this research emerges, expressed in the following question: what are the aspects that have contributed to the precarization of

academic work in higher education and to the illness of professors? This question seeks to understand the dynamics that render teaching activity increasingly unstable and exhausting, analyzing how working conditions, the intensification of academic demands, and the market logic of higher education affect the health and well-being of these professionals.

Thus, the present study has the general objective of investigating, through a narrative bibliographical review, the phenomenon of the precarization of academic work and its impacts on the physical and emotional health of professors working in higher education.

As specific objectives, it is intended to: 1) conduct a historical review of the precarization of academic work, in light of the changes that have occurred in the world of work, driven by the processes of capitalist restructuring; 2) discuss the current working conditions of university professors, in order to understand how these conditions undermine the mental health of these professionals.

To answer the research problem and achieve the proposed objectives, this article has been organized into two sections. In the first, the methodological procedures for carrying out the study are presented. In the second, a reflection is offered on the recent transformations in academic work in higher education, situating the process of precarization within the context of changes in educational policies and the organization of academic work. In this same section, the repercussions of these transformations on the working conditions of university professors are analyzed, with an emphasis on their impacts on mental health and on the different forms of psychic suffering identified in the literature. Finally, the final considerations are presented, in which the main contributions of the analysis are synthesized and the contemporary challenges related to the valorization of academic work in higher education are highlighted.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

The present study is characterized as qualitative research of an exploratory nature, developed through a narrative bibliographical review. The qualitative approach, according to Minayo (2012), seeks to understand subjective aspects of reality, such as meanings, values, beliefs, and experiences, allowing for an in-depth analysis of the multiple dimensions that involve the phenomenon under investigation.

The research is also classified as exploratory, as it aims to provide a broad understanding of the studied phenomenon (Gil, 2017), based on the existing bibliographical production on the subject. Thus, it seeks to familiarize the researcher with the object of study, render it more explicit, and enable the construction of hypotheses that may guide future research of a more in-depth nature (Lösch; Rambo; Ferreira, 2023).

The narrative bibliographical review was adopted for allowing the critical and interpretative analysis of the existing scientific production on the precarization of academic work and its impacts on mental health in higher education, without the pretense of exhaustiveness typical of systematic reviews, but with rigor in the selection and analysis of sources (Lima; Mito, 2007).

The search for studies was conducted in the SciELO and Pepsic databases due to their relevance in disseminating scientific productions in the fields of Education, Psychology, and Human Sciences. The searches were carried out from August to October 2025, using the following descriptors: academic work (trabalho docente), precarization (precarização), higher education (ensino superior), mental health (saúde mental), and academic productivity (produtivismo acadêmico). The terms were combined with one another through the Boolean operator AND, with the aim of refining the results and ensuring greater adherence to the investigated theme.

As inclusion criteria, studies were considered that: (a) directly addressed academic work in higher education; (b) discussed aspects related to the precarization of labor, working conditions, or the mental health of faculty members; (c) were available in full; (d) were scientific articles, dissertations, or theses. As exclusion criteria, studies were disregarded that: (a) addressed other educational levels without articulation with higher education; (b) did not present a direct relation to the object of the research; (c) were duplicated among the databases consulted.

Regarding the temporal delimitation, priority was given to the selection of productions published between 2000 and 2025, a period marked by the intensification of transformations in the world of academic work and by the expansion of higher education in Brazil. However, classical authors were also included, whose theoretical contributions are fundamental for the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, regardless of the publication period.

The selection process of the works occurred in three stages: (1) reading of the titles and abstracts of the studies identified in the databases; (2) application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria; (3) full reading of the selected texts. At the end of this process, approximately 20 academic productions were analyzed, comprising the corpus of the research.

The analysis of the selected material was carried out through critical and interpretative reading, with the aim of identifying convergences, divergences, and analytical categories related to the precarization of academic work and its impacts on mental health. From this process, the discussion was organized into two thematic axes: (1) precarization of work in

higher education; (2) working conditions and health of faculty members. The interrelation between these axes is explored in the next section.

The detailed description of the methodological procedures adopted aims to ensure greater transparency and rigor in the investigative process, thereby contributing to the analytical consistency and reproducibility of the research.

PRECARIZATION OF WORK IN HIGHER EDUCATION: TRANSFORMATIONS IN WORKING CONDITIONS AND FACULTY HEALTH

In the context of the structural crisis of capitalism in the 1970s, the prevailing neoliberal project drove the incessant search for new spaces for accumulation, leading to the appropriation of essential goods by the market dynamic (Oliveira, 2009). In this way, education, historically conceived as a public good and a fundamental right, was progressively transformed under market logic, a process that occurred as knowledge came to be treated as a tradable and profitable commodity (Rosa; Vieira, 2023; Santos; Almeida Filho, 2008). Thus, what in its essence should be an instrument of human formation and social emancipation becomes a highly profitable sector, based on principles of competitiveness and speculation. This paradigm shift created an educational system shaped by hegemonic economic interests, in which education came to be understood as a service and, as such, accessible “not through citizenship, but through consumption” (Santos; Almeida Filho, 2008, p. 27).

The valorization of efficiency, productivity, and cost reduction leads to the adoption of educational models that prioritize financial return, to the detriment of the quality of teaching, critical formation, and the working conditions of faculty. Under the influence of international organizations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the country adopted policies that aligned education with competition, flexibility, and privatization, reducing public investment in higher education and encouraging the expansion of the private sector (Alves; Gonçalves, 2019). In this scenario, according to Santos and Almeida Filho (2008), the university was a sphere profoundly affected:

[t]he loss of priority of the public university in state public policies was, above all, the result of the general loss of priority of social policies (education, health, social security) induced by the economic development model known as neoliberalism or neoliberal globalization, which, from the 1980s onward, imposed itself internationally. In the public university, this meant that the institutional weaknesses identified, and they were not few, instead of serving as justification for a broad political-pedagogical program of reform of the public university, were declared insurmountable and used to justify the widespread opening of the public university to commercial exploitation. Despite political declarations to the contrary and some reformist gestures, underlying this first confrontation of the university with neoliberalism is the

idea that the public university is unreformable, just as the State is, and that the true alternative lies in the creation of the university market. The unbridled and deregulated manner in which this market emerged and developed is proof that there was a fundamental option in its favor. And the same option explained the decapitalization and dismantling of the public university in favor of the emerging university market, with transfers of human resources that sometimes constitute a scenario of primitive accumulation on the part of the private university sector at the expense of the public sector (Santos; Almeida Filho, 2008, p. 16).

This scenario reveals how the deliberate strategy of weakening the public university aims to strengthen an increasingly deregulated university market oriented toward capital accumulation. Whereas it was once conceived as a space for the production and dissemination of critical knowledge, the university currently suffers external pressures that prioritize economic efficiency, the attraction of private resources, and training geared toward market demands.

In this context, public institutions are doubly attacked: on the one hand, they suffer from a lack of investment, which reduces their funding and hinders their academic autonomy; on the other, they are viewed as inefficient and incapable of meeting contemporary educational demands, which justifies the expansion of the private sector and the opening of higher education to market logic (Santos; Almeida Filho, 2008). Instead of investing in improvements to strengthen public higher education, institutional weaknesses have been used as an argument to promote its privatization, transferring resources and qualified professionals to the private sector. In this sense, the expansion of private institutions and distance learning (EaD) figure among the main pillars of this transformation (Schlesener; Lima, 2021).

As a direct result of state incentives for the creation and growth of private universities, to the detriment of investment in the expansion of public education, the majority of enrollments in higher education, which until the 1980s were concentrated in the public sector, came to be absorbed by private institutions from the 1990s onward (Bielschowsky, 2020; Bosi, 2007). Still according to Bielschowsky (2020), the expansion of the private sector did not occur in a decentralized manner, but rather with the concentration of a large part of new enrollments in large business conglomerates, which came to dominate the educational market, often backed by government incentives and deregulation policies.

In this way, the flexibilization of labor relations became a central element of this process, and the logic of profitability imposed cost reduction as a strategy for these institutions. With the justification of adapting institutions to the demands of a competitive market, faculty members came to be hired under increasingly precarious regimes, characterized by instability and the absence of labor rights (Bosi, 2007; Schlesener; Lima, 2021). Part-time hourly work, for example, became a common practice in the private sector, subjecting professors to highly

variable remuneration, dependent on the number of classes taught, and depriving them of important benefits, such as career plans, stability, and social security protection (Bosi, 2007; Costa; Mueller, 2020). Moreover, the fragmentation of employment ties led many faculty members to accumulate contracts at different institutions to guarantee a minimum income, resulting in exhausting work schedules, little time for research and extension activities, and negative impacts on their mental health and well-being (Bosi, 2007).

Another crucial point in this dynamic was the expansion of distance learning (EaD), which presented notable and exponential growth from the 2000s onward, especially in the private sphere. According to Bielschowsky (2018), this educational modality was widely used as a means of expanding higher education without requiring large investments in infrastructure and the hiring of in-person faculty. This enabled an even greater reduction in costs for private institutions, which came to operate with a smaller faculty body, often hired without stable employment ties. As a consequence, between 2004 and 2016, the number of enrollments in distance learning courses jumped from 59.6 thousand to 1.5 million, representing a significant portion of the expansion of higher education.

However, this significant increase in EaD was not accompanied by a guarantee of teaching quality. According to Bielschowsky (2018), in 2016 only five institutions concentrated 58% of EaD enrollments, and the majority of these courses presented scores below the minimum standard in the National Examination of Student Performance (Enade). Thus, it is possible to affirm that, although the EaD model has expanded access to higher education, it has also contributed to intensifying the precarization of teaching, through the poor remuneration of academic work, the lack of career stability, the impairment of the quality of academic training, and the transformation of university teaching into an impersonal and massified service.

In the public sector, precarization manifested itself primarily through cuts in state resources invested in education, which directly resulted in a reduction in the opening of public competitions and an increase in temporary hires (Rosa; Vieira, 2023). In Paraná, for example, the number of temporary professors jumped from 564 in 2002 to 2,035 in 2016 (Schlesener; Lima, 2021). As a consequence, many faculty members came to accumulate ties with different institutions, facing exhausting workloads and difficulties in reconciling teaching, research, and extension activities (Bosi, 2007; Rosa; Vieira, 2023).

Concurrently, evaluation mechanisms that emphasize academic productivity based on quantitative metrics were also adopted, representing another dimension of precarization, since this model imposes a logic of extreme competition among faculty members, pressuring them to increase their scientific output and to reduce their dedication to teaching and extension (Bosi, 2007; Sguissardi; Silva Júnior, 2009). This productivist logic, imposed by funding agencies and academic evaluation programs, leads to a race for publications and

research projects, without adequate time for reflection and for the quality of teaching (Glatz; Yaegashi, 2025). Thus, university faculty members, in addition to facing the precarization of contractual conditions, must contend with an environment of extreme competitiveness, which undermines their health and quality of life (Bosi, 2007).

The reduction of financial support for infrastructure and research has intensified the fragility of professors' work, especially in areas such as the Humanities and Social Sciences, which suffer from budget cuts and less institutional valorization (Schlesener; Lima, 2021). The lack of funding compromises not only the quality of teaching, but also the continuity of academic and scientific projects, as well as the maintenance of public infrastructure, making the academic environment increasingly dependent on private partnerships and external fundraising. In this scenario, this reduction in investments is directly related to the weakening of academic freedom, since the autonomy of faculty members and researchers depends, to a large extent, on institutional funding for the conduct of critical and socially relevant studies, which are not always aligned with market demands or the interests of large educational conglomerates and private funders (Santos; Almeida Filho, 2008). Consequently, the university distances itself from its historical role as a space for reflection and social critique, becoming an environment where research and teaching are increasingly oriented by criteria of profitability and commercial applicability.

In light of the foregoing, it can be stated that the process of structuring the university under the principles of economic efficiency came to guide not only the funding and management of institutions, but also resulted in structural changes. As a consequence, one may cite the widening of inequalities in access to higher education and the reduction in the quality of education offered (Bielschowsky, 2020), in addition to the direct impact on the working conditions of faculty members, with the flexibilization of contracts, the fragmentation of academic careers, and the imposition of quantitative metrics for the evaluation of teaching productivity. The aforementioned transformations, by redefining the foundations of professional practice, generate harm across the multiple dimensions of teaching, compromising both the physical and mental health of professors, as well as their interpersonal relationships and their very perception of the meaning of the profession.

With regard to the physical dimension, the literature indicates that symptoms such as musculoskeletal pain (Araújo; Pinho; Masson, 2019; Lago; Cunha; Borges, 2015), vocal alterations (Coelho et al., 2021; Soares; Mafra; Faria, 2019), headaches, back pain (Soares; Mafra; Faria, 2019; Tundis; Monteiro, 2018), physical exhaustion (Lago; Cunha; Borges, 2015), and hypertension (Soares; Mafra; Faria, 2019) are recurrent complaints among faculty members. This can be mainly related to long working hours, the need to reconcile multiple employment ties, and the lack of adequate conditions for the performance of teaching duties. In private institutions, this scenario tends to be even more aggravated, due to the greater

prevalence of temporary contracts, remuneration based on class hours, and the accumulation of employment ties.

Furthermore, in the context of distance learning (EaD), these challenges are even more characteristic. According to Mill, Santiago, and Viana (2008), the need to spend long hours seated, often in inadequate positions and without proper ergonomics, can further aggravate musculoskeletal pain, which is already a recurrent complaint among faculty members. Another symptom that may be intensified is headaches, due to prolonged screen exposure, combined with the increased incidence of visual problems.

In the psychological dimension, symptoms such as mental fatigue, insomnia, and distress (Souza et al., 2017) prevail, accompanied by the high incidence of common mental disorders (CMD) (Campos; Vêras; Araújo, 2020). Among the most frequent CMDs, depression and anxiety stand out (Soares; Mafra; Faria, 2019), which appear recurrently. According to Batista et al. (2016), in a study conducted based on 254 medical records of faculty members attended by the medical board of a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Paraíba, depression was responsible for 52% of medical leaves.

Frequently, these psychological symptoms are associated with occupational stress, which manifests through emotions such as hostility, tension, anxiety, frustration, and depression, triggered by factors present in the work environment (Glatz; Yaegashi; Caetano, 2024; Oliveira; Castañeda; Yaegashi, 2021). Continuous exposure to these stressors can lead to the development of Burnout Syndrome, a condition marked by intense emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of professional ineffectiveness, which has gained increasing prominence in studies on the occupational health of faculty members (Campos; Vêras; Araújo, 2020). In this sense, factors such as excessive bureaucratic demands, pressure and unrealistic expectations, lack of autonomy, work overload, and the naturalization of stress stand out as potentially triggering elements of exhaustion (Braz, 2025).

Another concerning factor is the deterioration of the quality of rest and sleep among faculty members, a direct consequence of occupational stress. The need to meet exhausting deadlines, handle multiple tasks, and fulfill institutional demands leads many professors to have difficulty establishing an adequate rest routine. Many professionals forgo physical activities, leisure time, and dedication to family life in favor of work (Rosa; Cecílio, 2023).

Interpersonal relationships constitute an equally significant dimension, frequently impacted by the precarization of working conditions, which compromises the quality of interaction between colleagues and students. The scenario of academic capitalism (Costa; Goulart, 2018), increasingly competitive and marked by a scarcity of time for professional exchanges, job insecurity, productivity demands, and task accumulation, hinders the formation of a

collaborative environment and favors isolation (Yaegashi et al., 2024). In this context, productivity assumes centrality, to the detriment of social bonds and the health of the faculty member.

In the case of distance learning (EaD), these challenges are even more evident, for the virtualization of interactions reduces the opportunities for exchange among faculty members. This lack of face-to-face contact and communication can intensify the feeling of isolation, making work even more solitary. Furthermore, as Moraes (2021) points out, the teacher-student relationship also weakens, since the impersonal dynamic of EaD hinders the creation of bonds and the provision of more individualized support to students, as interactions in this modality are often limited to control and assessment.

Finally, another point that may be affected concerns the very meaning of academic work, due to the possible perception that teaching has lost its intellectual character and has become a mere bureaucratic service (Fritz; Peixoto, 2022). Still in this regard, as a result of the incentive for high academic productivity, many professors do not consider themselves productive, even when working long hours (Borsoi; Pereira, 2013). This difficulty in establishing a genuine connection with the product of their own labor, resulting from the alienation from the educational purpose, is a direct consequence of the need to produce more in less time, without considering the quality or the meaning of what is being produced.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study aimed to investigate, through a narrative bibliographical review, the phenomenon of the precarization of academic work and its impacts on the physical and emotional health of professors working in higher education.

The analysis of the literature evidenced that the process of precarization of academic work in higher education is linked to broader transformations in educational policies and in the organization of academic work, especially in a context marked by the growing mercantilization of education, the flexibilization of labor relations, and the intensification of productivity demands. Together, these elements configure a scenario of increasing vulnerability, contributing to the rise in cases of stress, anxiety, depression, and other forms of psychic suffering. Thus, it can be affirmed that the reconfiguration of labor organization constitutes a phenomenon directly related to the physical and mental health of professors, to social relations in the educational environment, to the quality of education offered, and to the very meaning attributed to teaching.

Given these challenges, the pursuit of dignified working conditions and of policies that value education and its professionals must constitute a continuous effort, not only on the part of

educators, but of society as a whole, even though it encounters persistent structural barriers. In this context, it becomes essential to recognize the role of collective resistance and faculty mobilization as essential strategies for rethinking the organization and practices of higher education. Nevertheless, faced with the ongoing dismantling of public education, reformulating an institution so thoroughly shaped by capital's imperatives cannot be achieved through well-meaning proposals alone. It demands, rather, a commitment to substantive public policies, meaningful regulation, and investment that actually prioritizes education's renewal.

Although the prospects for change are complex, recognizing the gravity of precarization and its repercussions already represents a fundamental step, insofar as the articulation among professors, educational institutions, unions, and civil society configures a collective movement for transformation. Thus, it becomes possible to envision a more optimistic scenario, guided by strategies that not only mitigate the already consolidated damages, but also build paths capable of reconfiguring the reality of academic work and, thereby, preserving an education more committed to its social role.

Finally, as a limitation of this study, it should be noted that it is a bibliographical research, based on the analysis and interpretation of academic productions already published on the subject. Although this type of investigation allows for the gathering and systematization of different theoretical contributions, it does not enable the direct analysis of the concrete experiences lived by faculty members in specific institutional contexts. In view of this, it is suggested that future research may deepen this discussion through empirical investigations that examine working conditions and the processes of teacher illness in specific institutional contexts. Qualitative studies, such as interviews and focus groups with university professors, can contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences related to the precarization of work. Likewise, quantitative research and comparative studies among different higher education institutions, such as public and private, face-to-face and distance learning, may broaden the understanding of how distinct institutional models and educational policies influence working conditions and the mental health of faculty members.

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF GENERATIVE AI

A generative artificial intelligence tool (ChatGPT 5.3) was used exclusively for orthographic revision and linguistic enhancement of the text. All intellectual content, including the conception, analysis, interpretation, and writing of the work, is the responsibility of the authors.

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