

DYNAMICS OF MANDATORY SERVICE: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO ACADEMICS' EXPERIENCES^{*}

ZORUNLU HİZMETİN DİNAMİKLERİ: AKADEMİSYENLERİN DENEYİMLERİNE TEORİK VE PRATİK YAKLAŞIMLAR

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Abstract:

This qualitative phenomenological study investigates the lived experiences of academics who have completed or are currently undergoing mandatory service in Türkiye. The study draws on written responses from 12 participants representing a balance of gender and postgraduate education backgrounds, half having studied domestically and half internationally. To contextualize these experiences, four theoretical frameworks were applied: Job Demands–Resources, Organizational Support, Occupational Stress, and Social Identity Theory. Findings identify repetitive patterns of institutional disregard, emotional exhaustion, a sense of workload imbalance, and a sense of disconnection with professional identity. In comparison, the participants who graduated abroad indicated more difficulty in cultural and organizational adjustment, and gendered relations shaped perceptions of support, inclusion, and role definitions. The findings indicate that the mandatory service duties tend not to correspond to the recipients' academic preparations, generating stress and identity conflict that will prevent integration and psychological well-being at work. These findings highlight the need to rethink mandatory academic service programs in consideration of equity, psychological support, and responsiveness of institutions to the needs of the workforce. This study offers insights into workforce policy in higher education, with suggestions for institutions facing service obligations or decentralized academic placements.

Keywords: Mandatory Service, Occupational Stress, Organizational Support, Identity Conflict, Job Demands–Resources

Öz:

Bu nitel fenomenolojik çalışma, Türkiye'de zorunlu hizmetini tamamlamış veya halen sürdürmekte olan 12 akademisyenin yaşam deneyimlerini, cinsiyet ve lisansüstü eğitim geçmişi (yurt içi ve yurt dışı) dengesi gözeterek incelemektedir. İş Talepleri–Kaynakları, Örgütsel Destek, Mesleki Stres ve Sosyal Kimlik Teorileri doğrultusunda yürütülen çalışmada, kurumsal ilgisizlik, duygusal tükenmişlik, iş yükü dengesizliği ve mesleki kimlikten kopma gibi örüntüler ortaya çıkmıştır. Yurt dışı mezunları kültürel ve örgütsel uyumda daha fazla zorluk yaşarken, cinsiyet ise destek ve aidiyet algılarını şekillendirmiştir. Bulgular, zorunlu hizmetin çoğu zaman akademik hazırlıkla örtüşmediğini; bu durumun strese ve kimlik çatışmasına yol açarak işyeri uyumunu ve psikolojik iyi oluşu olumsuz etkilediğini göstermektedir. Çalışma, eşitlik, psikolojik destek ve kurumsal duyarlılık açısından zorunlu hizmet programlarının yeniden düzenlenmesi gereğine işaret etmektedir. Ayrıca, devlet kaynaklı hizmet yükümlülükleri veya merkezi olmayan akademik yerleştirme sistemlerinde kurumsal uygulamaların iyileştirilmesine yönelik pratik öneriler sunarak, işgücü politikaları ve yükseköğretimde uyum tartışmalarına katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Zorunlu Hizmet, Mesleki Stres, Örgütsel Destek, Kimlik Çatışması, İş Talepleri–Kaynakları

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INTRODUCTION

Mandatory service policies in graduate education represent a unique form of state intervention in the academic labor market. In countries such as Türkiye, these policies require newly appointed academics, often recent graduates of master's or doctoral programs, to serve in predetermined institutions, frequently located in underserved or rural regions. While the stated aim is to promote institutional equity and nationwide access to academic expertise, the lived experiences of those assigned to these roles remain significantly understudied. Workplace research has consistently emphasized the importance of organizational support, stress management resources, and a sense of autonomy in fostering employee satisfaction, engagement, and long-term retention.

Yet, these insights are predominantly drawn from voluntary employment settings. As a result, they may not fully reflect the experiences of individuals working under compulsory or placement-based conditions. Most of the existing scholarship on mandatory service focuses on areas such as the military, civil service, or healthcare. There remains a significant gap in the literature when it comes to the academic profession, a field defined by high levels of autonomy, intellectual depth, and international mobility. Academics, particularly those holding advanced degrees from institutions abroad, typically begin their careers with expectations around institutional support, research opportunities, and academic freedom.

When such individuals are assigned to institutions without considering their professional alignment or long-term career aspirations, a mismatch may occur between their academic identity and the realities of their work setting. Over time, this disconnect can contribute not only to emotional fatigue and disengagement but also to broader systemic issues, such as voluntary attrition and brain drain, especially among those with access to global academic networks.

This study explores how early-career academics interpret and respond to their experiences with mandatory service. Adopting a phenomenological approach, it examines the impact of such assignments on their well-being, motivation, and sense of professional identity and belonging. A particular focus is placed on how gender and postgraduate education background, whether domestic or international, influence these experiences, especially concerning institutional expectations and individual adjustment.

To better understand these dynamics, the study draws on four interconnected theoretical frameworks: Job Demands–Resources (JD-R), Organizational Support Theory, Occupational Stress Theory, and Social Identity Theory. Combined, these perspectives provide valuable insights into how heavy workloads, insufficient support, identity tensions, and structural constraints may shape emotional and behavioral responses. Although each of these frameworks has been applied extensively in organizational and occupational psychology, their joint application to mandated academic work remains limited, offering a novel contribution to the field. By integrating these perspectives, this study provides a theoretically grounded, context-specific contribution to understanding the psychosocial impacts of mandatory service in academia. It addresses the question: How do academics

experience and interpret their mandatory service assignments, and how are these experiences shaped by gender and postgraduate education background? In doing so, the paper contributes to both scholarly debates on institutional support and practical efforts to improve higher education workforce policies in systems that rely on compulsory placement.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The landscape of higher education is undergoing significant transformations, influenced by global trends, political climates, and evolving educational needs. Among these shifts, the experiences of faculty members, encompassing their training, mobility, satisfaction, and retention, emerge as critical factors shaping the efficacy and integrity of academic institutions. This study aims to contribute to these discussions by addressing a notable gap: the experiences of academics bound by mandatory service obligations, particularly in Türkiye.

Faculty training programs such as the Program for Selecting and Placing Students for Graduate Education Abroad (YLSY) and the Faculty Member Training Program (ÖYP) in Türkiye have played central roles in shaping academic careers. While both aim to professionalize academic pathways, DeNeef (2002) and others have noted the lack of inquiry into the long-term outcomes and institutional obligations tied to these programs. In the case of Türkiye, mandatory service obligations are often integral to such programs, yet the lived experiences of those serving under these policies remain underexplored. Similar service-based programs in countries like China and South Korea have been studied in terms of effectiveness and compliance, but few have focused on the identity and emotional outcomes experienced by the service-bound scholars.

The mobility of scholars has also been a key area of concern. Akçiğit (2020) and Ermiş Beyhan (2023) underscore Türkiye's growing brain drain problem, pointing to limited academic freedom, bureaucratic rigidity, and job insecurity as major push factors. This trend intensified after the 2016 coup attempt, leading to an exodus of scholars and heightened political sensitivity surrounding academic employment (Grove, 2016). Greenfield (2023) further identifies a decline in academic freedom across several national contexts, illustrating how political interference directly affects scholarly autonomy and retention. The phenomenon is not unique to Türkiye; several nations with state-sponsored graduate education programs also face high attrition when returning scholars experience institutional mismatch. For example, studies in South Korea and China have shown that government-sponsored return programs often lead to tensions between institutional expectations and personal career goals, particularly when support structures are insufficient (Kim, 2010; Jonkers, 2010).

Job satisfaction and organizational support are strongly associated with retention outcomes. Rosser (2004) and Gamson et al. (1990) emphasized that institutional investment in faculty well-being through mentorship, clear role expectations, and reduced administrative burdens can significantly mitigate burnout. More recently, Bang et al. (2023) illustrated that perceived institutional support positively influences academic engagement

and loyalty. Furthermore, Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, and Sowa (1986) argued that perceived organizational support enhances employees' affective commitment to the institution, as well as their expectation that increased effort toward achieving organizational goals will be recognized and rewarded. Burnout involves exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy, stemming from chronic work stress and shaped by the organizational context (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). In contrast, a lack of perceived organizational support can result in early departure, professional disengagement, or migration to private or international institutions.

A growing concern in many systems, including Türkiye's, is the mismatch between the expanding student population and stagnant faculty hiring. Akçiğit (2020) and Pedró (2023) note that high student–faculty ratios undermine teaching quality and increase stress, particularly in underfunded or regional universities. Responses such as increased recruitment funds (García, 2023) highlight awareness of the issue, but the sustainability of such interventions remains questionable. Moreover, heavy teaching loads often limit early-career academics' ability to publish, network, or engage in professional development, reducing their long-term growth potential.

Finally, relational and identity-based dynamics within academia deserve more attention. Cry et al. (2023) argue that academic social structures and informal relationships shape a sense of belonging, peer support, and recognition factors essential for professional identity. For academics in mandatory service roles, these aspects can be even more fragile, especially when placements are misaligned with personal or professional expectations. In addition, gender dynamics in academia, such as unequal mentoring access and higher emotional labor demands, often remain underexplored in the context of compulsory work settings.

In summary, while the literature touches on faculty training, academic migration, job satisfaction, and institutional stressors, it often overlooks how these intersect with mandatory service conditions. This study addresses that gap by using empirical data to explore how institutional demands, perceived support, and identity tensions shape the lived realities of scholars fulfilling compulsory service. By focusing on the Turkish context, the research offers both localized insights and transferable frameworks for examining similar policies globally.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding how individuals experience and respond to mandatory academic service requires a multi-theoretical approach. This study draws on four interconnected frameworks—Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Model, Organizational Support Theory (OST), Occupational Stress and Coping Theories (OSCT), and Social Identity Theory (SIT)—to explore how institutional structures and individual interpretations shape the well-being, motivation, and identity of academics.

The Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) offers a framework to understand the interaction between institutional demands and the resources

provided to meet them. Within the academic context, mandatory service often entails high demands, such as teaching overloads, relocation stress, or administrative tasks with varying levels of institutional support. The JD–R model helps explain how these factors affect professional performance and psychological well-being. Additionally, this model integrates key insights from Occupational Stress and Coping Theories (OSCT), which shed light on how individuals respond to stressors, particularly when facing constraints outside their control.

Complementing this is Organizational Support Theory (OST), which emphasizes the role of perceived institutional care and recognition in shaping employee attitudes and outcomes (Kurtessis et al., 2017). For early-career academics placed into mandatory positions, perceptions of fairness, value, and support from the institution may critically influence their motivation, commitment, and sense of belonging.

Finally, Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Harwood, 2020) contributes to understanding how academics construct and maintain their professional identities within the institutional setting. Mandatory placements especially, those perceived as misaligned with one's qualifications or aspirations can disrupt identity integration and sense of belonging. SIT allows for the exploration of how group membership (e.g., disciplinary, institutional, or cultural) interacts with perceived exclusion, recognition, or alienation. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing the interaction between structural obligations and subjective experience. They inform the following research questions:

JD–R Model: How do mandatory service requirements contribute to job demands for academics? What resources are provided by institutions to help manage these demands?

Organizational Support Theory: How do academics perceive institutional support during mandatory service? How does perceived support influence their attitudes and behaviors?

Occupational Stress and Coping Theories: What coping mechanisms or stress responses emerge in the context of mandatory academic service?

Social Identity Theory: How do academics perceive their professional identity within the academic community? How does mandatory service affect their sense of belonging and identification with their role?

3. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of academics who have completed or are currently undergoing mandatory service in Türkiye. Phenomenology, as defined by Van Manen (1990), seeks to understand the meaning of lived experience by focusing on how phenomena present themselves in consciousness. This approach was chosen to illuminate how participants make sense of their assigned academic roles, with particular attention to the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of their experience.

Twelve participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Six had completed their postgraduate education in Türkiye, and six had studied abroad. The sample

was evenly distributed by gender (six women and six men) and represented a range of disciplines within public universities. Snowball sampling was particularly useful in this study due to the difficulty of accessing academics who had completed mandatory service. This method enabled initial participants to refer others with relevant experiences, creating a chain of referrals within a hard-to-reach population. As Creswell (2013) highlights, snowball sampling is well-suited for qualitative studies that focus on specific groups and shared experiences, especially when participants are not easily identifiable. Sampling was concluded at twelve participants, as thematic saturation was reached and no new patterns emerged.

Data were collected using asynchronous written reflections. Participants were provided a set of open-ended questions based on four theoretical lenses: The Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model, Organizational Support Theory, Occupational Stress Theory, and Social Identity Theory. These questions invited participants to describe perceived workload, institutional support, emotional strain, coping responses, and shifts in identity within their assigned roles. Responses were submitted in writing to allow participants flexibility and time for reflection, which also minimized time pressure and social desirability bias.

All participants signed informed consent forms prior to data collection. The data collection period spanned approximately six months, ensuring that participants had sufficient time to respond thoughtfully. This format enabled the elicitation of rich, descriptive, and introspective accounts aligned with phenomenological inquiry.

Data were analyzed using a phenomenological coding framework adapted from Creswell (2007). The coding process included identifying significant statements, clustering meaning units, and constructing textural and structural descriptions to represent the essence of participants' experiences. To ensure systematic analysis, transcripts were color-coded, with each color representing a different thematic dimension. Bracketing techniques were used to suspend researcher preconceptions, and iterative memo writing helped trace emerging analytical threads. This methodological design allows for a deep, contextual understanding of how early-career academics navigate the psychological, institutional, and identity-related dimensions of mandatory service.

4. CONTEXT: SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS AND MANDATORY SERVICE IN TÜRKİYE

For graduate studies, the Ministry of National Education (MEB), through the General Directorate of Higher Education and Overseas Education (HEOE), offers two distinct scholarship programs. The first is the “Selection and Placement of Students to be sent for Postgraduate Studies Abroad” (YLSY), which supports both master’s and PhD degrees. In this program, universities report their staffing needs to HEOE, which then opens positions for eligible applicants. Scholars who complete their studies abroad are required to return within 60 days and serve at their designated universities to have their repayment obligations waived. Notably, the duration of study is counted toward retirement. Alternatively, scholars may repay the total amount instead of completing mandatory service (HEOE, 2023; Kuzu,

2017). In 2022, the USA and England were the most selected destinations. Living allowances were set at \$2,240 and £1,520, respectively, for that year; however, no rationale for these figures was provided (Resmi Gazete, 2022). As of May 2025, updated allowance amounts have not been officially announced. These stipend levels are insufficient to cover basic living expenses in many parts of the USA and the UK, making it difficult for scholarship recipients to maintain a decent standard of living while studying abroad. For example, minimum wages in the USA range between \$7.25 and \$17.00 per hour, further highlighting the gap between provided support and actual living costs (Economic Policy Institute, 2023). Adjustments based on regional cost-of-living differences have been widely suggested.

The second program is the Faculty Member Training Program (ÖYP), coordinated by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK), which supports graduate studies within Türkiye. Unlike YLSY recipients, ÖYP participants are employed as research assistants throughout their studies, receiving lecturer-level salaries and benefits. They are obliged to serve in the institution where they are employed for a duration equal to their study period. Government employees are also eligible, though this study focuses solely on academic participants (YÖK, 2021). The Post-doc program, which imposes double-length service requirements, is beyond the scope of this study.

A key legal distinction exists between these two programs. ÖYP participants, being state employees, perform actual service during their studies and receive salaries accordingly. If they fail to meet their mandatory service obligations, they are required to repay the salaries received not scholarships. In contrast, YLSY scholars are not employed but are scholarship recipients, and in the case of non-compliance, they are required to repay the full scholarship amount. This distinction is critical, especially given the numerous legal disputes related to the ÖYP program.

Both programs also require scholars to sign financial guarantee agreements involving co-signers. This requirement has been shown to heighten anxiety and financial stress among participants (Çelebi & Tatik, 2012; MEB, 2020).

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analyzed thematically, guided by the four theoretical frameworks (JD-R, OST, OSCT, and SIT). Coding was conducted using a structured, theory-informed template, enabling the identification of significant statements, clustering of meaning units, and categorization under core constructs such as job demands, emotional exhaustion, institutional neglect, and identity conflict.

Gender and postgraduate education background (domestic vs. international) were included as comparative lenses. Participant files were anonymized and renamed (e.g., YD 1–6 for international graduates, YI 1–6 for domestic). To support interpretive depth, color-coded transcripts, participant-specific summary documents, and theme–quote matrices were created. A data saturation review confirmed that no substantially new themes emerged beyond the twelfth transcript.

To enhance trustworthiness, an audit trail was maintained, peer debriefing sessions were held, and analytic memos documented the evolution of themes. Triangulation was achieved through cross-comparison between participant groups and theoretical constructs. Supplementary materials, including summary tables, coded files, and thematic visuals are archived and available upon request.

6. FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of the written responses revealed recurring patterns across participants' experiences of mandatory academic service. These findings are organized around the four theoretical frameworks that guided this study: Organizational Support, Job Demands–Resources, Occupational Stress, and Social Identity. Gender and postgraduate education background (domestic vs. international) were used as interpretive lenses throughout the analysis.

Table 1 presents illustrative quotes that reflect how each participant experienced key themes during their mandatory service. The quotes are organized by theme, gender, and postgraduate background, offering insight into how structural conditions intersected with social identity in shaping participants' narratives.

Table 1: Thematic Matrix of Participant Quotes

Theme	Example Quote	Gender	Postgraduate Background
Organizational Support	I felt like a temporary outsider. No one explained anything...	Female	Domestic
Organizational Support	My supervisors were supportive only in appearance...	Female	International
Job Demands and Resources	The teaching load left me exhausted...	Male	Domestic
Job Demands and Resources	They gave me tasks beyond my position...	Female	Domestic
Occupational Stress	I was constantly anxious that I wouldn't meet expectations.	Male	International
Occupational Stress	Even my presence was ignored. That stress built up silently.	Female	Domestic
Social Identity	I never really felt like part of the department.	Male	Domestic
Social Identity	As a woman, I had to prove myself twice as much...	Female	International

These quotes reflect clear patterns: female participants, particularly those with international training, described a notable lack of institutional guidance. Male participants more frequently emphasized performance pressures and lack of academic infrastructure. Both groups, however, highlighted emotional strain and adaptation challenges in varying ways.

6.1. Organizational Support

A recurrent theme across narratives was a perceived lack of institutional support. Participants frequently expressed a sense of abandonment, citing inadequate mentoring,

limited administrative assistance, and an absence of structured orientation. Female participants, particularly those with international degrees, voiced stronger concerns regarding support gaps. Participants were assigned numbers as indicated above (e.g., YD 1–6 for international graduates, YI 1–6 for domestic graduates)

"I felt like a temporary outsider. No one explained anything, and I had to figure out everything alone." (Female, Domestic Graduate YI-1)

"My supervisors were supportive only in appearance; practically, I was left to survive on my own." (Female, International Graduate, YD-1)

Several international graduates indicated that their expectations shaped by more structured and autonomous academic environments abroad were misaligned with the organizational culture they encountered upon return.

"I was shocked by how disorganized everything was. I came back with enthusiasm, but it faded fast." (Male, International Graduate YD-2)

Domestic graduates, while also dissatisfied, tended to express resignation rather than surprise:

"It's how things work here. You learn by failing. That's the unwritten rule." (Male, Domestic Graduate YI-4)

These statements reveal a normalization of institutional neglect among domestic graduates, contrasted by frustration and disillusionment among international returnees. While male participants more often described institutional limitations in logistical terms, female participants also emphasized the emotional impact of isolation and lack of acknowledgment.

6.2. Job Demands and Resources

Participants frequently described overwhelming workloads and constrained autonomy as key challenges during their mandatory service. These demands were particularly burdensome for those placed in under-resourced institutions or in teaching-intensive positions. Across the dataset, participants highlighted difficulties balancing administrative tasks, teaching loads, and personal development goals.

"The teaching load left me exhausted; I barely had time for research." (Male, Domestic Graduate, YI-3)

"My time was consumed by paperwork and endless meetings. There was no room for intellectual work." (Female, Domestic Graduate, YI-1)

While both male and female participants noted these issues, females tended to frame them in terms of fairness and role misalignment, especially when assigned tasks unrelated to their academic expertise.

"They gave me tasks beyond my position just because I was new and a woman. It felt exploitative." (Female, Domestic Graduate YI-5)

International graduates expressed frustration with the rigidity of role assignments and the lack of recognition for their prior training.

"I returned expecting to apply my research, but I was assigned routine courses that had nothing to do with my field." (Male, International Graduate YD-5)

"I was trained abroad in research-intensive environments, but here I was doing administrative chores." (Female, International Graduate YD-1)

Participants also reported a general lack of control over their schedules, institutional expectations, and academic priorities. This sense of powerlessness contributed to feelings of inefficacy and professional stagnation.

"You're told what to do, when to do it, and how, not much room to think or grow." (Male, Domestic Graduate YI-4)

Overall, the narratives illustrate that job demands during mandatory service often exceed institutional resources and personal capacity. This mismatch creates not only logistical overload but also cognitive and emotional strain, particularly for international returnees who expected merit-based task assignments and flexibility.

6.3. Occupational Stress

Emotional exhaustion and psychological stress were widespread across participants, with many describing persistent fatigue, anxiety, and demotivation. The experience of stress was not uniform; rather, it was shaped by gender, academic background, and institutional context. Male participants frequently associated their stress with high-performance expectations, lack of institutional clarity, and fear of not meeting administrative or teaching standards.

"I was constantly anxious that I wouldn't meet expectations." (Male, International Graduate, YD-5)

"There was always pressure to publish, teach, and handle admin work, all at once. You can't win." (Male, Domestic Graduate, YI-6)

Female participants more commonly described the emotional toll of social isolation, lack of inclusion, and being undervalued in the institutional environment.

"Even my presence was ignored. That stress built up silently." (Female, Domestic Graduate, YI-1)

"I had to carry the emotional labor in the department without being acknowledged for it." (Female, International Graduate, YD-3)

In some cases, institutional neglect was experienced not only as professional discouragement but also as a personal affront, leading to internalized stress and identity struggles.

"They assigned me work but offered no mentorship or guidance. I started questioning my competence." (Female, International Graduate YD-1)

Several participants emphasized the chronic nature of stress, with some noting that the longer the service continued, the more their emotional energy deteriorated. Others described coping strategies such as compartmentalizing, withdrawing socially, or focusing solely on survival.

"I stopped trying to change anything and just focused on doing the minimum to get through." (Male, Domestic Graduate, YI-3)

The data clearly suggest that stress in mandatory service contexts is not only about workload it is also about the emotional experience of exclusion, undervaluation, and the absence of meaningful professional connection. that job demands during mandatory service often exceed institutional resources and personal capacity. This mismatch creates not only logistical overload but also cognitive and emotional strain, particularly for international returnees who expected merit-based task assignments and flexibility.

6.4. Social Identity and Belonging

Participants' narratives revealed that mandatory service not only shaped their work experiences but also deeply influenced their sense of academic identity and belonging. This theme was especially salient among international graduates who experienced cultural dissonance upon returning to institutions with hierarchical and rigid structures.

"In my doctoral program abroad, I was treated as a peer. Here, I am constantly reminded I am junior and must stay silent." (Male, International Graduate, YD-2)

Female participants, in particular, expressed feelings of marginalization and invisibility within their departments.

"It took months before anyone even asked about my background or area of expertise. I felt invisible." (Female, Domestic Graduate YI-5)

"I constantly had to justify my presence and prove I belonged especially as a woman who studied abroad." (Female, International Graduate, YD-1)

The assignment of peripheral tasks, limited access to departmental decision-making, and exclusion from research networks exacerbated these experiences of disconnection.

"I was not invited to any collaborative projects. It was clear I was not seen as a full academic." (Male, International Graduate, YD-6)

A few participants also described a gradual erosion of their academic self-concept, expressing doubt about whether they still identified with their discipline or institutional role.

"I started to feel like I was no longer a scholar, just someone filling a slot in the system." (Female, Domestic Graduate, YI-5)

Despite these challenges, a small number of participants noted instances of peer support or opportunities to mentor students, which provided moments of reconnection and validation.

"The only thing that kept me going was my students. I felt like I mattered when I was in the classroom." (Female, Domestic Graduate, YI-1)

These findings suggest that mandatory service assignments can undermine academics' professional identity and sense of community, particularly when institutional environments lack inclusivity and recognition. For those with international training, the contrast in academic culture intensified the identity disruption, leading to a heightened sense of dislocation and loss of professional purpose that stress in mandatory service contexts is not only about workload, it is also about the emotional experience of exclusion, undervaluation, and the absence of meaningful professional connection. that job demands during mandatory service often exceed institutional resources and personal capacity. This mismatch creates not only logistical overload but also cognitive and emotional strain, particularly for international returnees who expected merit-based task assignments and flexibility.

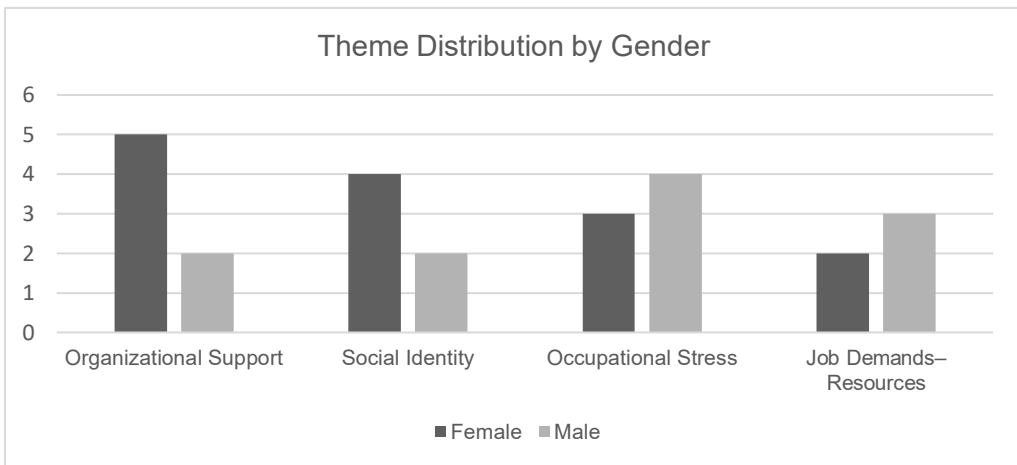


Figure 1: Gender-Based Distribution of Key Themes.

Figure 1 shows how Organizational Support and Social Identity were more prominently discussed by women, reflecting their experiences of exclusion and the desire for institutional validation. Men more often discussed Occupational Stress and Job Demands, emphasizing performance anxiety and lack of autonomy.

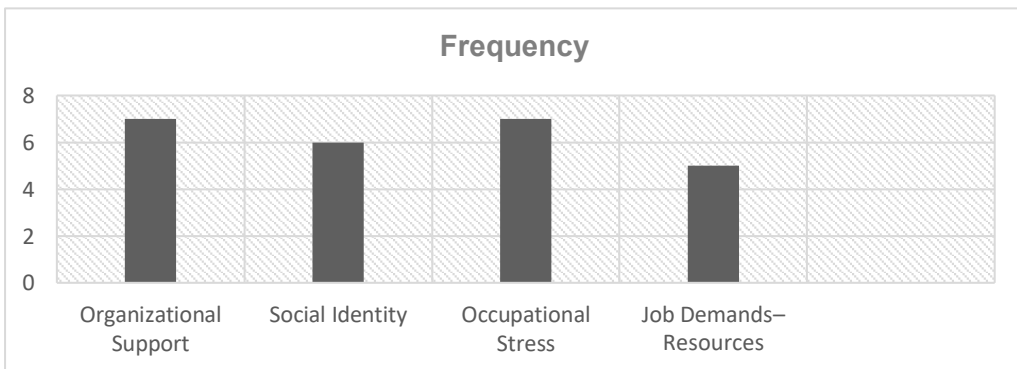


Figure 2. Overall frequency of major themes among participants

Figure 2 highlights the prevalence of Organizational Support and Occupational Stress across the entire sample. These issues emerged consistently, regardless of gender or educational background, reinforcing the centrality of institutional shortcomings in shaping the experience of mandatory service.

7. COMPARATIVE PATTERNS BY EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

The analysis revealed notable differences between participants who completed their postgraduate education domestically and those who studied abroad (Table.2). International graduates more frequently described misalignment between institutional expectations and their own academic identities. They expressed stronger feelings of exclusion, particularly in forming collegial networks or being recognized for their expertise. These participants often reported that their prior training did not translate effectively into their assigned roles, resulting in frustration and disengagement.

In contrast, domestic graduates were more likely to interpret institutional neglect or lack of resources as normative rather than personally targeted. They demonstrated more familiarity with local academic hierarchies and bureaucratic expectations, which appeared to ease their initial adjustment, even when dissatisfaction persisted.

This comparison underscores that postgraduate education background shapes not only the content of participants' experiences but also their interpretive lens. Expectations, professional identity, and coping responses varied considerably, reinforcing the value of educational background as a key analytical dimension in understanding how mandatory service is experienced.

Table 2: Key Thematic Differences Between Domestic and International Postgraduate Participants

Common Themes	International Graduates	Domestic Graduates
Lack of institutional support	Disconnection from institutional culture	Acceptance of structural limitations as normative
Emotional exhaustion	Identity conflict related to academic mismatch	Familiarity with local bureaucracy
Heavy workload	Greater expectations unmet due to prior exposure abroad	Lower expectations regarding mentorship or development
Feelings of alienation	Challenges forming professional networks in unfamiliar settings	Smoother peer integration due to shared academic culture

8. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that mandatory academic service is a complex and emotionally charged process that can disrupt professional identity, autonomy, and institutional integration. Drawing on four theoretical lenses, the analysis showed that structural and cultural mismatches between academic training and institutional assignment lead to high job demands, limited organizational support, emotional strain, and identity conflict. These effects were particularly pronounced among participants with international

postgraduate education, who experienced sharp dissonance between expectations formed abroad and the realities encountered upon return. Gender further moderated experiences, with women disproportionately reporting social exclusion, emotional labor, and a lack of recognition.

From a Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) perspective, most participants reported excessive teaching and administrative workloads, which were not sufficiently offset by institutional resources or support mechanisms. This aligns with Bakker and Demerouti's (2007) assertion that job strain arises when high demands are not buffered by adequate resources. Similar findings have been reported in studies of early-career academics across Europe and Asia, where unbalanced job demands have been linked to burnout and turnover intentions (Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Shin & Jung, 2014). In the present study, the demands extended beyond workload to include emotional and cognitive strain stemming from limited autonomy, unclear role expectations, and administrative opacity.

Organizational Support Theory (OST) further illuminated the perceived absence of institutional care and mentorship. Female participants, in particular, described feelings of being undervalued and invisible within their departments. These experiences are consistent with prior research highlighting the gendered nature of institutional support in academia (Misra et al., 2012; Morley, 2013). Low perceived organizational support has been repeatedly associated with reduced job satisfaction, psychological withdrawal, and career stagnation (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Eisenberger et al., 1986). Male participants in this study expressed similar concerns, though their emphasis often centered on procedural inefficiencies and the lack of meritocratic evaluation mechanisms.

Occupational Stress Theory helped explain participants' reports of chronic fatigue, anxiety, and emotional detachment. These symptoms are indicative of the exhaustion and disengagement phases of prolonged stress exposure, particularly in environments where expectations exceed coping capacity (Leka et al., 2010; Winefield et al., 2003). Several participants described adopting survival strategies such as minimal compliance or emotional disengagement. These reactions mirror broader findings from occupational stress studies in higher education, which emphasize that academic stress is not only workload-driven but also rooted in identity threats and value misalignment (Kinman & Wray, 2020; Tytherleigh et al., 2005).

International graduates reported profound disconnection from institutional culture, which eroded their sense of professional identity and belonging. Their experiences echo the findings of studies on academic return migration, where returnees often face devaluation of foreign credentials, lack of institutional fit, and feelings of cultural isolation (Ackers, 2005; Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Similarly, female participants expressed that they had to "overperform" to be noticed, reflecting broader concerns about gendered recognition in academia (Harwood, 2020; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2014). The intersection of returnee status and gender appeared to amplify the challenges of adjustment and inclusion.

Collectively, these findings reinforce and expand upon previous literature on academic dissatisfaction, burnout, and institutional mismatch. Studies from other contexts—such as state-assigned postings in public health (Gupta et al., 2011) and compulsory service in rural education (Nguyen et al., 2017)—also highlight how top-down deployment models can erode motivation and retention, particularly when individual agency is limited. In the academic sector, mandatory service policies are often framed as tools for equity and redistribution. However, this study shows that when implemented without sufficient attention to flexibility, institutional responsiveness, and career alignment, they can exacerbate structural inequalities and alienation.

In summary, while service obligations are intended to address disparities in faculty distribution, they may inadvertently undermine faculty morale, career satisfaction, and long-term retention. These risks are especially acute when institutional processes fail to recognize individual differences in training, identity, and adjustment needs. Therefore, rethinking mandatory service models through the lens of organizational justice, gender equity, and professional support is essential to mitigating unintended harm and fostering inclusive academic environments.

9. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study offer several practical applications for policymakers, institutional administrators, and academic development professionals. First, mandatory service policies should be redesigned to better align with the professional training and individual characteristics of academics. This could involve differentiated models of service based on postgraduate education background or discipline, as well as greater autonomy in assigning roles. These steps would improve alignment between training and institutional needs while reducing emotional fatigue. Gender-sensitive workload distribution is also crucial, particularly given the disproportionate stress experienced by female academics in this study.

Second, higher education institutions must invest in structured onboarding processes and mentoring programs that help service-bound academics integrate into their departments. Institutions should offer both psychological and social support mechanisms to assist new academics in navigating unfamiliar institutional cultures. Role clarity and transparency in expectations are equally important to reduce ambiguity and anxiety.

Third, long-term academic engagement and retention can be supported through targeted capacity-building strategies. These might include research support, networking opportunities, and professional development resources tailored to the unique challenges of those in mandatory service. Building institutional cultures that affirm academic identity, especially for returnees and early-career academics can counteract feelings of marginalization and strengthen commitment to the institution.

Finally, the theoretical and methodological approach used in this study offers a comparative lens for evaluating mandatory service practices in other countries and sectors. While focused on Türkiye, the dynamics described here, such as institutional neglect,

identity disruption, and resource mismatches may apply to other contexts where professionals are assigned roles through centralized systems or public service contracts. As such, the study provides a foundation for broader policy discussion and reform aimed at promoting equity, well-being, and professional integration across institutional settings.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the complex dynamics of mandatory academic service in Türkiye by analyzing the lived experiences of twelve early-career academics. Using a phenomenological approach grounded in four theoretical frameworks, the research revealed that institutional neglect, emotional fatigue, role misalignment, and identity conflict are core issues affecting service-bound scholars. Gender and postgraduate education background emerged as significant mediators, with women and international graduates reporting heightened vulnerability to exclusion, undervaluation, and identity dissonance.

The findings suggest that while mandatory service policies are intended to distribute academic expertise equitably across institutions, their implementation often lacks responsiveness to individual backgrounds, training, and institutional culture. From a theoretical standpoint, this study reinforces the JD–R model's assertion that job stress results from a mismatch between demands and resources. It confirms Organizational Support Theory's insight that perceived care and mentorship are critical for institutional integration. Furthermore, the chronic stress and identity erosion observed in participants aligns with both Occupational Stress Theory and Social Identity Theory, demonstrating the interconnectedness of psychological, structural, and social dimensions of academic work.

This research also contributes to a more global understanding of state-sponsored service programs. Similar challenges have been observed in countries such as China, South Korea, and Indonesia, where returnee scholars encounter institutional cultures that may not value international experience. By focusing on Türkiye, this study adds a contextualized case that echoes broader global patterns of academic mobility, structural inequality, and identity tension.

Ultimately, this study calls for policy reforms that incorporate flexibility, support, and fairness into the design of mandatory service programs. Institutions and policymakers must recognize that equity is not only about assigning positions, it is about ensuring that those positions allow academics to thrive, grow, and contribute meaningfully. Without such attention, service obligations risk becoming mechanisms of professional stagnation rather than development.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Like other studies, this one also has limitations. A primary limitation is its geographical focus on Türkiye, suggesting that the results might vary in different cultural or country contexts. Additionally, due to the scarcity of literature on the mandatory work of academicians, this study lacks a comprehensive comparative analysis. Nevertheless, it may serve as a foundational point for scholars aiming to conduct further research on this topic.

This study is also based on a small, purposively selected sample of twelve participants, which limits the generalizability of its findings. Furthermore, while the study focused on postgraduate education background and gender, other relevant variables, such as academic discipline or institutional rank, were not examined in depth, purposively selected sample of twelve participants, which limits the generalizability of its findings.

Given these limitations, future research could benefit from examining these dynamics in larger and more diverse samples, particularly across different types of institutions such as research-intensive and teaching-oriented universities. Comparative studies involving academics with and without mandatory service obligations may also shed light on how these experiences influence professional identity formation. Longitudinal designs that track participants before, during, and after mandatory service could provide deeper insight into how perceptions of institutional support and belonging evolve over time. For example, future studies might follow internationally educated academics over a multi-year period to capture their adaptation trajectories. Another useful direction would involve comparative institutional case studies, for instance, between urban and rural universities to examine how local organizational culture moderates the effects of mandatory service experiences.

Statement of Research and Publication Ethics

The publication processes of the article were carried out in accordance with the principles stated under the title "Compliance with Ethical Rules" of the Karadeniz Technical University Journal of Social Sciences, Institute of Social Sciences. Ethical committee approval for the research part of the study was granted by the Ethics Committee of Batman University.

Author Contributions Statement

The article, handled as a single-authored work, was entirely produced by the author.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There are no potential conflicts of interest declared by the author in the article.

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