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# 'I'm not burning out, I'm rusting out': investigating the causes of rustout in teacher educators in Ireland and the United Kingdom

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Higher Education-Based Teacher Educators (TEs) are responsible for the preparation of future teachers across the continuum of education. However, despite their significant role in the education ecosystem, their well-being and professional satisfaction often remain overlooked in research and policy. For example, while burnout among academics is extensively studied, it remains under-researched, particularly among TEs. Even less attention is paid to rustout, a phenomenon characterised by professional underutilisation, intellectual stagnation and unfulfillment. Rustout is not a universal experience. However, its presence acknowledges that occupational stress is non-linear and nuanced and that it can vary depending on organisational and personal resources. Like its better-known counterpart, burnout, untreated rustout can have individual and organisational consequences, such as poor mental health, career dissatisfaction and accelerated employee turnover. Through an analysis of surveys and interviews with TEs across Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK), we explore the factors that may contribute to rustout. Guided by rustout literature and validated through collaborative reflection, this paper reveals three core themes: (1) administrative overload and erosion of autonomy, (2) misalignment between professional aspirations and job tasks and (3) systemic barriers to professional growth. Some participants reported being 'prevented from thriving', while others actively sought ways to mitigate rustout through new challenges or external opportunities. More broadly, the study shines a light on the 'silence' surrounding rustout in academia. The findings also highlight the detrimental effects of rustout on individual well-being and suggest that it is not merely a pre-retirement phenomenon but can emerge at various stages of a TE's career. Practical implications emphasise the need for Higher Education (HE) sectors and leaders to put 'rustout' on the mental health literacy agenda, to balance job demands with resources and to acknowledge the trade-off that can occur when operational efficiency is prioritised over professional well-being.

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## Introduction

Teacher Educators (TEs) based in Higher Education (HE) are responsible for educating pre-service teachers (PST) in accredited early childhood, primary, secondary and further education and training programmes (Swennen et al., 2010). TEs are typically academically and professionally accomplished and bring substantial school-based experience, at classroom and management levels, to their role. In addition to the traditional academic duties of lecturing, research and service, the work of the TE involves other responsibilities, including, but not limited to, placement supervision, mentoring and professional engagement with placement-based teachers and management (Bullough and Draper (2004); Fitzsimons et al., 2024). These often involve significant administration, travel and, in many cases, relationship-building with stakeholders and pastoral support for PSTs. The TE is expected to be a high-quality practitioner while simultaneously developing and maintaining a research-active profile (MacPhail and O'Sullivan (2019)). More broadly, the work of the TE in Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK) is taking place against a backdrop of diminishing funding and heightened external accountability measures, such as programme reaccreditation and inspection processes (Fitzsimons and Smith, 2025a; Wood and Quickfall, 2024). Despite these crucial responsibilities, TEs often face undervaluation within academic circles, which impacts their professional standing and may exacerbate their experiences of stress and pressure (Kosnik and Beck, 2008).

Despite the growing awareness of mental health issues in various sectors, the well-being of TEs, among other members of university faculties, is often overlooked (Sundukova and Vvedenskaya, 2024). This may be because the primary focus of HE management has traditionally been on student mental health, with universities potentially prioritising their well-being over faculty concerns (Hammoudi Halat et al., 2023). The stigma associated with mental illness and its perceived professional risks may also discourage academics from discussing it (Wynaden et al., 2014). Moreover, the perception of privilege may contribute to the silence surrounding mental health in HE. Despite calls from within the field, little public attention has been paid to the impact of the competitive nature of academic work, the isolation, the pressure to 'perform' and the familiar sting of rejection felt by faculty (Jaremka et al., 2020; Smith and Ulus, 2020).

This is of concern, since studies confirm that academics in all fields are working under conditions of anxiety, with escalating numbers presenting for counselling and other support (Morrish, 2019). The long-term sustainability of HE staff, including TEs working under these conditions, is of concern and may lead to an exodus from academia (Heffernan and Heffernan, 2018; Wood and Quickfall, 2024). One occupational outcome appears to be burnout: a well-documented syndrome following an imbalance between job demands and personal resources (WHO, 2019). A growing body of research has explored the adverse effects of burnout and stress in academics, including those who work in the field of TE (Fitzsimons and Smith, 2025a; McDaniel et al., 2024; Turner and Garvis, 2023). Unsurprisingly, however, its equally intrusive but more subtle opposite, rustout, has received considerably less attention.

**Rustout.** It is important to note that recent research suggests boredom may have a bright side. For example, Schott and Fischer (2023) argue that it may act as a catalyst for reflection on professional goals and the specific workplace practices that contribute to a sense of deterioration. Yet while it can be useful, its persistence in some circumstances may reflect a deeper misalignment between workplace factors and an employee. For example, if an employee believes they are no longer able to grow

professionally or personally, the stagnation could lead to rustout (Leider and Buchholz, 1995).

Rustout refers to a state of mental and emotional decline due to a lack of stimulating work, excessive routine tasks and a persistent sense of intellectual boredom (Howard, 1978). It is the deterioration of a person resulting from the underuse of their potential, captured most succinctly by a sense of 'underbeing' (Leider and Buchholz, 1995, p. 7). Those experiencing it feel professionally stagnant or dissatisfied and have a sense of tedium about the future of their work, preventing them from reframing their experiences constructively or learning from them.

Rustout manifests when individuals are under-stimulated as a result of repetitive administrative burdens, routine tasks and unchallenging work environments (Gmelch and Chan, 1994; Clouston, 2015). Like burnout, it is a protracted and often discrete process of psychological erosion (Etzinger, 1988). However, the similarities go further than that: the RustOut–BurnOut scale (RO–BO) (Gmelch and Chan, 1994) frames them as contrasting outcomes of occupational stress. Both involve an imbalance of occupational stress and performance (Gmelch and Chan, 1994). However, while burnout arises from the emotional exhaustion accompanying work overload, resulting in high stress and over-stimulation, rustout results from the underutilisation of an employee's skills and talents (Clouston, 2015). Its emergence, therefore, comes from the absence of positive stress that may follow excitement, creativity and a sense of achievement. Unfortunately, it may be for this reason that it appears to be a relatively understudied occupational phenomenon: researchers tend to be more interested in the impact of too much negative stress than the impact of too little positive stress (Leung, 2007).

Many factors compound feelings of rustout in the workplace, though they can be broadly categorised into two main domains: (i) a worker being prevented from doing what they want to do, or (ii) a worker being forced to do something they do not want to do (Clouston, 2015). In both cases, the individual's ability to make choices, be in control, feel challenged, or engage in personally meaningful activities is restricted. For example, taking responsibility without having the power to influence the outcome of events can affect an individual's capacity to feel agency and achievement within the workplace (Howard, 1978; Ryan and Deci, 2020). The resultant lack of fulfilment can exacerbate feelings of stagnation that contribute to the progression of rustout (Tang, 2023).

The urgency of acknowledging and addressing rustout across HE has been exacerbated by a series of 'work quakes', including the COVID-19 pandemic, the current funding crisis and the ever-present performance culture of academia (Cadigan, 2021). TEs are not shielded from this phenomenon. For example, the repetitive nature of duties, heavy administrative responsibilities and creeping metrication of their identity can potentially make some susceptible to rusting out. The potential for feelings of disengagement and professional stagnation to grow within this climate is real (Shahid et al., 2024). The implications of unchecked rustout for the profession are significant, potentially compromising the mental health of the TE and, thus, the quality of teacher training. As Ryan and Deci suggest, 'an atmosphere conducive to thriving students requires thriving teachers' (2020). Therefore, it is imperative to understand the phenomenon more fully and develop effective interventions and support systems in HE.

One of the most widely recognised frameworks for examining occupational well-being, which can offer insights into rustout, is the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Within this framework, job demands, including work overload and excessive administrative burden, can

deplete employee resources, such as mental and physical health. In contrast, job resources, such as autonomy, meaningful engagement and opportunities for professional development, can act as a buffer against the negative impact of demands. Schaufeli (2017) argues that it is a valid tool for academics and organisations to explore workplace engagement and burnout. As such, it can also provide a unique lens through which to understand the concept of rustout.

For example, recent studies exploring professional well-being in HE have pointed to systemic antecedents, including work overloads that prevent academics from engaging in core duties such as research (Morrish and Priaux, 2020). This JD–R imbalance is significant, since members of HE faculty, which include TEs, are often quantitatively measured by metrics such as the number of journal articles they publish, the ranking of journals the publish in and successful funding applications within a given academic year. While reliance on these indicators arguably offers an objective overview of performance, it can undermine the intrinsic motivation of faculty members and the complexities of their jobs (Dillon, 2022). At a deeper level, however, the problem seems to be one of oil and water, as work overload and quality research do not mix well. For example, research is deep work, it is ‘hard to replicate, improves personal skill and adds value’ (Ferreira, 2022, n.p.). It requires time and space. However, these resources are often in limited supply in demanding Initial Teacher Education (ITE) contexts. The paradox is evident: most academics are required to be research-active and enjoy this aspect of their role, but they are often prevented from attending to it by work overload (job demands). As their professional identity is often fused with the quality and quantity of their work output, it is understandable that this may impact their overall health and well-being and sense of workplace satisfaction and achievement (Knights and Clarke, 2014; Mantai and Marrone, 2023).

As above, the RO–BO scale (Gmelch and Chan, 1994) frames rustout and burnout as contrasting outcomes of occupational stress. Clouston’s (2015) rustout theory emphasises the impact of choice and control, underutilisation and unchallenging work environments on professional satisfaction. Complementing these, the JD–R Model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017) identifies the balance of job demands and resources as central to occupational well-being. This study draws on these frameworks to analyse and interpret the factors contributing to rustout among TEs, offering a theoretically grounded perspective on this important topic.

**The present study.** This research is situated within a broader study on occupational stress among HE-based TEs in Ireland and the United Kingdom. Within the initial study, the authors identified the prevalence, contributing factors and protective factors associated with burnout and well-being within this group (as reported in Fitzsimons and Smith, 2025b; Fitzsimons et al. 2025). Understanding that occupational stress can be experienced on a continuum (as described in the RO–BO scale), the impetus for this study emerged from the subtle yet recurring patterns observed in the data, which suggested that some, though certainly not all, TEs were experiencing professional underutilisation and stagnation—factors associated with rustout (Gmelch and Chan, 1994; Clouston, 2015). This study, therefore, expands the theoretical framework of occupational stress by examining rustout, utilising the same constructs from the original dataset, which aligns with the ethical approval and scope of the initial research. The term ‘rustout’ is less well-known than its counterpart, burnout and as a result, the phrase appears infrequently in the dataset. However, several TE narratives reflect experiences that provide evidence of the essence of rustout: intellectual boredom,

frustration with repetitive tasks and a perceived lack of professional purpose or meaning. The authors believe this warrants further investigation. This paper offers an initial exploration of the potential causes of rustout among some TEs in HE settings in Ireland and the UK. The following questions guided this analysis:

1. What factors contribute to the development of rustout among TEs in Ireland and the United Kingdom?
2. How can rustout be avoided and job satisfaction be maintained?

The study aims to broaden our understanding of how occupational stress can manifest in HE contexts and propose tentative solutions to enhance the experience of TEs, and thus the quality of ITE provision.

## Method

**Data collection.** The qualitative data discussed in this study are drawn from two sources. Firstly, a survey was distributed via email to a sample of 1500 TEs working on accredited teacher education programmes in HE settings in Ireland and the UK, using participants’ email addresses on their Institutional websites. The traditional recruitment method was effective. However, the authors were cognisant that in this era of heightened cybersecurity, people are cautious about clicking links embedded in emails from unknown senders. Therefore, the survey recruitment notice was later placed on the X/Twitter platform and shared directly with HE academics working in ITE. Darko et al. (2022) argue that the combined approach may help achieve a more diverse population sample, for example, across age and geographic location. Given the nature of their work, there is no ideal time to survey TEs. However, informal conversations with TEs suggested that the post-Christmas period might provide a window of opportunity for a higher participation rate. As such, the authors chose January–March 2024 for survey distribution. The survey included open-ended questions designed to capture more detailed information about the cohort’s experiences of burnout, stress and well-being (reported in Fitzsimons and Smith, 2025a; 2025b; Fitzsimons et al., 2025). The second data source for this study is drawn from a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with a subset of survey respondents to gain deeper insights on occupational stress and rustout. Interviews were of 40–60 min duration, conducted in-person or online, audio-recorded and transcribed by the first author. Combining data from multiple sources allows us to explore the phenomenon with breadth and depth (Nowell et al., 2017). However, we are cognisant that while secondary analysis can provide valuable insights, it is limited by the scope and nature of the original data collection. To counter this and add rigour to our analysis, we conducted a second round of in-depth interviews with participants and engaged in member-checking of themes.

**Participant profile.** The survey was completed by 154 TEs working across the early childhood, primary, secondary and further education and training sectors. The gender distribution among respondents was 110 females (71.4%), 43 males (27.9%) and one non-binary individual. The sample spanned a broad age range: 23 individuals (14.9%) were aged 18–35, 49 (31.8%) fell into the 36–45 age bracket, 44 (28.6%) were between 45 and 55, and 38 respondents (24.7%) were over 56 years old. Regarding their years of experience in ITE, 43 participants (27.9%) had 1–4 years of experience, 46 (29.9%) had been teaching for 5–10 years, 38 (24.7%) had been teaching for 11–20 years, and 27 (17.5%) had over 21 years of experience. The roles held by participants within their work contexts varied: 13 (8.8%) were Teaching Assistants or Teacher Fellows, 6 (4.1%) served as Assistant

Lecturers, 67 (45.6%) were Assistant Professors, 52 (35.4%) held Associate Professor positions, and 9 (6.1%) were Professors; 7 individuals (4.5%) preferred not to disclose their role. Geographically, respondents were distributed as follows: 69 (45.4%) from the Republic of Ireland, 12 (7.9%) from Northern Ireland, 36 (23.7%) from England, 21 (13.8%) from Scotland, 14 (9.2%) from Wales, and 2 (1.3%) chose not to answer. All four Teacher Educator sectors were represented: 5 participants (3.2%) from Early Childhood Teacher Education, 53 (34.5%) from Primary Teacher Education, 72 (46.8%) from Secondary Level Teacher Education, and 24 (15.6%) from the Further Education and Training sector. From this sample, 14 individuals were selected for follow-up interviews to provide representation across country, sector, age, gender, and role.

**Analysis.** For this secondary analysis, our goal was to examine patterns across the data (survey and interviews) in relation to the lower end of the occupational RO–BO scale, reflective of rustout. Therefore, we followed the principles of Thematic Analysis (TA), guided by the framework outlined by Clarke and Braun (2017). We employed a deductive approach guided by pre-existing concepts of rustout from the literature (Clouston, 2015; Gmelch and Chan, 1994). However, we remained open to emergent codes to capture unexpected insights, balancing the deductive approach with an inductive perspective.

In the first phase, the first author reviewed the data by re-reading the survey responses and interview transcriptions and re-listening to audio files. During this stage, annotations and memos were made to capture initial observations; latent references to concepts such as low stimulation, dissatisfaction, professional stagnation, or underutilisation; and narrative segments speaking to the broader issue were noted for future analysis. This iterative process ensured a thorough understanding before coding began. Second, a coding framework was developed based on the existing rustout literature (Gmelch and Chan, 1994; Clouston, 2015). The codes were applied to data extracts that reflected the key indicators of rustout. For example, Repetition (R) refers to repeated, mundane, or unchallenging tasks. Underutilisation of Skills and Expertise (UoE) represents feeling one's potential is being wasted or one is lacking opportunities to apply expertise, and Erosion of Autonomy (EA) represents descriptions of limited power, excessive oversight, or constraints on decision-making.

Data that aligned with these pre-existing categories were coded. However, emergent codes—such as 'Seeking New Challenges' (SNC) and 'Adaptive Strategies' (AS)—were also incorporated to capture insights beyond the initial framework.

Following this, the codes and data were discussed and grouped into potential themes that captured the broader aspects of the data set. For example, the code 'Loss of Autonomy' was refined into the theme 'Responsibility without due support' to reflect participants' broader descriptions of constrained decision-making. Through a refinement process, the themes were revisited to ensure alignment with participant experiences, the research questions, and overall coherence. Next, in line with the principles of collaborative reflection and to add rigour to our analysis (Urry et al., 2024), the draft themes were shared with a sample of interview participants ( $n=5$ ). This sample was chosen with demographics in mind (country, gender, age, length of time working in ITE and ITE sectors). This process ensured that the identified themes resonated with participants' experiences and provided additional depth to the analysis.

Finally, the JD–R model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017) was applied in the last stage of analysis as an interpretive framework to contextualise and deepen understanding of the factors contributing to rustout. This framework was used to map themes such as 'Feeding the Machine' onto job demands (e.g.

administrative burden and compliance tasks) and 'Use My Skills' onto job resources (e.g. opportunities for meaningful engagement). Rather than driving the initial coding process, the JD–R model provided a lens to understand the relationships between emergent themes. As such, the JD–R model provided a loose structure to narrate the discussion of rustout as a phenomenon that is felt within the individual but is strongly shaped and influenced by broader systemic and organisational factors.

**Ethics.** To maintain confidentiality, participants were not asked to identify their HE institution. Because of the small sample size, demographic data are not presented with participants' statements to ensure anonymity is preserved. This is particularly important, as the field of ITE is relatively small in comparison with other HE sectors.

## Findings and discussion

**'Don't rock the boat.'** Most TEs felt stimulated and energised by the variety that their role offers, with some indicating, 'I am never bored with what the role has to offer, our days are dynamic' (interview). Others concurred, 'It gives me joy—like being on a conference committee or a board, where I get to meet different people and spend time thinking about interesting topics' (survey). Newer entrants to HE-based TE indicated, 'I enjoy my job and my move to HE has been a refreshing and challenging change in my career path' (survey). However, beneath the dominant narrative, several participants described a sense of routinisation, professional underutilisation and limits to control and choice. In line with the rustout framework, these factors limited their opportunities to engage in professionally meaningful activities (Gmelch and Chan, 1994; Clouston, 2015). Yet despite its potential negative impact on professional well-being, rustout remains a largely unspoken-about phenomenon within TE circles and the wider academic community. It possibly reflects sectoral or cultural norms that prioritise outward performativity over personal well-being, discouraging open discussions about professional dissatisfaction and its implications:

Rustout exists in Teacher Education. Absolutely. However, I have no experience of ever having a conversation with anyone around it. No line manager ever named it, it has never been mentioned in a communal setting or in a one-to-one setting. I don't mean just mentioning rustout—no one has ever asked 'do you feel fulfilled or do feel you have opportunities to use your skills and talents in a meaningful way?' (Interview)

One potential explanation for the lack of open conversation about rustout may be the stigma associated with disclosing boredom in professional work contexts (Cleary et al., 2016). However, at a deeper level there may be an implicit understanding between individuals and organisations to maintain the status quo, particularly when performance expectations are being met. In their study of stagnation in academia, Shahid et al. (2024) describe this as workplace *inertia*. As one participant in this study reflected,

It suits everyone not to talk about it; when everyone is working and doing their jobs—then don't disturb anything. Everything is cosy. It suited me as an educator; the boxes were being ticked, but it also suited my organisation; nothing was being rocked. (Interview).

Another respondent suggested, 'The conversation doesn't happen, it's just 'did you get the job done', it's not about work satisfaction, you are lucky to have your job' (interview). However, this organisational silence does not mitigate the adverse outcomes

associated with rustout, which can significantly affect TEs and, by extension, the quality of ITE. For instance, in a follow-up interview one TE reported that the experience of short-term rustout left them feeling ‘frequently deeply unhappy’ (interview), citing ‘the frustration with constantly repetitive work’. Another articulated the detrimental effects of rustout, stating, ‘The negative side of rustout is that you become demotivated, lethargic, or you go into free-wheeling mode—I know how to do this, I’m good at it, I can do it with my eyes closed, but I know that’s not healthy for me in the long term’ (interview). Moreover, several participants described a wider sense of stagnation, reporting that they were ‘functioning without thriving’ in their roles. As one TE observed, ‘I am functioning at my job, but I’m not thriving and I am looking elsewhere. It’s isolating and competitive, and the better you are at it, the more of the administrative side of the job you get. It’s lacking opportunities to be creative’ (survey). These narratives reflect the characteristics of rustout as conceptualised by Leider and Buchholz (1995), who identify it as a state of ‘underbeing’ with consequences for both the person and the organisation.

The experience of rustout, as described by participants, challenges assumptions that it is confined to the latter end of a long career. Instead, participants noted that rustout could emerge after extended periods in the same role if opportunities for professional growth and creativity are limited: ‘In teacher education circles, rustout doesn’t just happen with people coming close to retirement; it can happen to people who are stuck in the one role for 10 or 15 years or more when you become pigeon-holed’ (interview). Another participant suggested the critical career phase when rustout tends to manifest: ‘It’s not something I’ve seen in newer entrants to ITE because of the challenges involved in getting to know the job, building your career, etc. It’s the 7-, 8-, 9-year mark when there isn’t an opportunity to be stimulated’ (interview). Another concurred: ‘It’s the 7-year itch, you’ve been doing something creative and then you reach a point where you are doing the same thing on repeat’ (interview). These reflections resonate with the conceptualisation of rustout as a consequence of qualitatively meaningful underload (Gmelch and Chan, 1994; Leider and Buchholz, 1995).

Within this discussion, participants spoke of SNC to avoid professional stagnation. For example, some TEs try to ‘balance’ professional rustout by drawing meaning from external activities such as voluntary work. In contrast, others seek organisational opportunities to keep them professionally alive. Nevertheless, systemic issues, including perceived ‘salary traps’ and concerns about losing seniority, further exacerbate the issue. As one participant reported, ‘I would take a big salary hit (if I leave), and I just can’t afford to do that’ (survey). Another noted, ‘It’s also a security trap; it’s not always possible to carry seniority with you to a new role, and that can be off-putting for many, so they may stay in their role’ (interview). In such ways, cultural norms prioritising stability over innovation may inadvertently engender feelings of rustout. The reluctance to ‘rock the boat’ may benefit the organisation in the short term but can have long-term repercussions on individual well-being.

**‘Sadly, the element of the job I love is often overshadowed’.** Several TEs in this study indicated that the increasing administrative burden associated with ITE meant they could not devote the time they would like to what they saw as the professionally meaningful aspects of their role: ‘Sadly, the elements I love about the job –face-to-face teaching with the students, opportunities for course innovation and opportunities to undertake research—are often overshadowed by the other administrative aspects of the role’ (survey). Another reported, ‘Research is an expectation, yet

there’s no time allocated for this to happen. It is a part of my work that I find both personally enriching and professionally supportive. However, the demands of a heavy workload make keeping this aspect of my practice afloat a challenge’ (interview). In such ways, some participants feel they are held back from pursuing meaningful work, reflecting Clouston’s first antecedent of rustout (2015).

The factors contributing to this sense of being prevented from engaging in meaningful work included administrative overload; external compliance and metrication of identity; structural limitations on autonomy; and a deeper disconnect between the TEs’ core values and workload. For example, several participants highlighted the sentiment that ‘other more satisfying academic work has to be put to the side in the knowledge that the longer you spend on that (emails), the longer the list of emails grows (survey). However, this work is obligatory as it serves ‘to get people in and out of the system’, and ‘tick(s) the right boxes’ for the organisation’ (interview). Some expressed discontent at the repetitive nature of some aspects of the role and reflected that ‘the better you are at it, the more of the administrative side of the job you get’ (survey). This ‘relentless’ engagement with the more mundane administrative duties can create a barrier to course innovation and other creative aspects of the role that require thought and time. It also meant that, as is common among employees experiencing rustout (Clouston, 2015), participants sometimes felt apathetic or even disincentivised from doing the best that they could. As one TE summarised, ‘I see myself now as a highly paid administrator and not a lecturer or teacher educator.’

Indeed, research has suggested that the expectation for immediate responses, brought about by social distancing measures, new technologies and a student-as-customer culture, can negatively impact staff’s cognitive faculties (Ferreira, 2022). Some participants cited a lack of attention, focus and motivation, preventing them from developing their research profiles. Ferreira (2022) explains this job–resource imbalance as the constant pull and interruption of administrative burdens, contributing to the paradox of the academic being exhausted yet at the same time not doing enough. This is particularly relevant for TEs, who, despite their other duties, are expected to be as research-active as traditional academic counterparts and, in many cases, ‘compete with academics from other fields for promotion’ (survey). This demonstrates how TEs may be prevented from pursuing their interests while being forced to engage in tasks they find less desirable and, in some cases, of low significance (Clouston, 2015).

More broadly, participants highlighted how the structural/external limitations placed on them can undercut their autonomy. Ryan and Deci (2020) suggest that such experiences undermine the ability to use one’s initiative and the ownership workers see over their actions. Elsewhere, this has been seen to predict low job satisfaction among academics more broadly (Shin and Jung, 2014). In line with that pattern, one TE argued, ‘I think the biggest source of frustration is a lack of autonomy ... not being involved in decision-making, and a power game that plays out and curtails autonomy’ (survey). Another claimed that constraints on their autonomy emerge from inadequate funding within the HE sectors, which has a trickle-down effect on TEs’ ability to flourish in their role: ‘You get the responsibility for doing the job and you can do it, but you know in order to do it well you need support or finances, but there is a block put on that, which is very frustrating’ (interview). Another TE concurred, ‘It’s very hard to sit there and watch this happening. You know you have the skills to make this so much more innovative, but it just can’t happen’ (interview). Cumulatively, these barriers—administrative overload, compliance-driven tasks and autonomy constraints—contribute to a sense of dissatisfaction in some TEs. One

participant stated, 'I often feel I have produced nothing at the end of the week, and there is no sense of development' (survey). The lack of being able to move forward could result in them feeling like 'just an overloaded cog of a broken machine' (interview). These reflections resonate with Clouston's (2015) theory that excessive perceived low value job demands can suppress one's sense of professional purpose.

**Feeding the machine.** Rustout appears to occur when there is a misalignment between the skills and expertise of the individual and the tasks they feel 'forced to do, and forced really is the word' (interview). For example, HE institutions rely on technological systems being operationalised to ensure the effective running of the organisation. Thus, employees are required to have sufficient skills to negotiate the systems. However, the pace of technological advancement may lead to a sense of 'change sickness' (Howard, 1978) among some TEs: 'There is a new system every year, each one more convoluted and legalistic than the previous one.' Though revised systems may be 'cost-effective for the HEI' (survey), there was a sense that they increased the workload of TEs who had to keep up to speed with changes. Across the full dataset there was a perception that frequent systemic change contributed to an unbalanced workload, as captured by one respondent who stated, 'A good 70% of my workload now is almost just admin, which is very depressing' (survey). This is not dissimilar to the alienation experienced by bored employees in other person-facing roles, such as social work, which have become increasingly outcome-oriented following the rise of neoliberalism (Butler-Warke et al., 2020). Moreover, it is not always clear how the new required skills are meant to aid their career advancement: 'The system demands logistical and technical knowledge that I've had to gain, but it's not helping me in other areas of work' (interview). The sentiment of 'feeding the machine' (interview) captures the essence of rustout as predicted by the JD-R model, where some TEs feel their roles are losing the intellectual and creative engagement that initially drew them to the profession. This is a known tension in the HE sector (Morrish et al., 2019).

**'A square peg in a round hole'.** Similarly, several participants felt compelled to engage with tasks that do not align with professional aspirations, akin to being 'a square peg in a round hole' (survey). In agreement with this metaphor, another TE reflected on the growing distance they saw between the job they applied for and the one they were in: 'When you are asked to do something, you really don't have a choice; you are seen as a 'safe pair of hands' for that role, and therefore you have to do it' (interview). Another stated that 'the job descriptor is so vague you could be asked to do anything really, and you put up and shut up'. Consistent with the JD-R model and the premise of self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2020), this dissatisfaction operates at a deep and individualised level, where misaligned tasks can act as stressors and hinder professional growth. Advancing this argument, one respondent, who had not personally experienced rustout, reflected on observing several 'brilliant highly qualified TEs—they had these great skills, managerial skills, team leader skills, research skills—but they felt stuck in a role with no end date, their skills weren't being used and the job satisfaction was gone' (interview). Consistent with this perspective, another described how TEs could become trapped if they are 'pigeon-holed into a role, and they are left in that comfort zone rather than being challenged or invited to try something that might stimulate or get the creative juices flowing' (interview). These reflections further underscore the possibility of operational efficiency overtaking intellectual engagement and professional fulfilment in the HE sectors.

It is interesting to note an alternative viewpoint proposed by Schott, Fischer (2023), who suggest workplace boredom can, in some instances, create a 'seeking state' that prompts people to seek novelty. This can include developing new ways of doing things. For example, one respondent reflected on how being bored encouraged them to address its roots: 'What is it that is causing me to be dragged down by this piece of work or responsibility ... Can I do something to address it, or can I ask somebody for help? Can I see what I can do in other arenas of my life, so I am stimulated in areas other than work?' (interview). Others, recognising the systemic antecedents, suggested their organisation could better use TEs' skills: 'Is it boredom or burnout? Especially in relation to placement, I have been doing it for years. There must be better ways to organise things to ensure the expertise of experienced staff is used in more effective ways' (survey). In such ways, temporary stagnation or boredom may have adaptive value for the individual and the organisation. However, this adaptive potential largely depends on the culture of an organisation.

**'Who is looking after the teacher educator?'** Organisational inertia towards rustout can allow it to take hold within the workplace (Leider and Buchholz, 1995). One TE remarked, 'You have these very bright individuals, go-getters, who find the tasks too easy—they can sit with rustout for a period, but then they get frustrated when support isn't forthcoming, and they are gone' (interview). This sentiment is consistent with evidence from Yang et al. (2019), who suggest that a perceived lack of organisational support and a sense of challenge can contribute to stagnation across sectors. The crux of the issue was captured by a participant who reported, 'That whole area is ignored; the TEs are looking after their students, but who is looking after the teacher educator?' (interview). Developing this, another TE suggested a preventative approach is lacking because of a lack of open discussion around professional fulfilment at their university:

The person themselves can become a bit helpless within this culture, and people are happy if we are getting good results, so the conversation doesn't happen. There is a belief that the TE is a well-educated person, they are able to look after themselves, so there is a lack of attention to the person as a professional—people are interviewed at the start of their career, and there is a lot of work put into that, but maybe that needs to be repeated after a year, 5 years, 10 years, not in a threatening way. (interview)

The extent to which the organisation can identify and respond to the causal factors of rustout may influence its spread in the workplace. The JD-R model suggests that job resources, such as rewards and incentives, can partially shield employees by increasing motivation and productivity. This relationship is supported by Bakker et al. (2005), who found that high resources, such as autonomy and performance feedback, can buffer high job demands among academics. Similarly, Hakanen et al. (2006) demonstrated that job resources like professional development opportunities, supportive work environments and personal enthusiasm mitigated the harmful effects of high job demands among Finnish teachers.

**Summary.** Despite its implications for both the individual and the organisation, rustout remains an unspoken and under-researched area in teacher education. Cultural and sectoral norms prioritising operational efficiency and metrics over well-being appear to discourage open discussions about professional dissatisfaction. This silence may benefit the organisation and the

individual in the short term, but the inaction has longer-term consequences for both.

Although exploratory, this study finds that the causal factors for rustout in TE are systemic, often intersecting with those contributing to burnout. They include work overload, which forces the TE to focus on the job's more mundane and invisible aspects to the detriment of other more professionally meaningful areas of their practice, such as research, teaching, or service. The ongoing erosion of TEs' autonomy, following a complex interplay of internal and external HE issues, may contribute to disengagement and dissatisfaction. Moreover, the 'change sickness' that can come with constant change can contribute to a sense of professional unfulfillment. In combination, these factors demonstrate a see-saw tension that emerges from being 'forced' but simultaneously 'prevented' from something else. The findings suggest some TEs can respond to their rustout adaptively, either seeking new challenges within the workplace or more fulfilling employment elsewhere. However, others may feel more constrained as a result of financial or personal circumstances and may remain in situ.

**Implications.** By exploring its causal factors, this study highlights the importance of putting rustout on the mental health literacy agenda within the ITE sector. Organisations and leaders who fail to acknowledge the existence of rustout and identify ways to prevent it from occurring, or who fail to address it, may lose valuable talent, expertise and institutional memory. We extend the theoretical understanding of rustout by challenging the notion that it is caused by lazy individuals who have settled into their roles and need more pressure to be productive or engage in 'quiet quitting' (Howard 1978). This study also shows how rustout might emerge at earlier career stages in teacher education. This suggests that stagnation can result from extended exposure to qualitative underload (low-value tasks) rather than proximity to retirement.

By integrating the JD–R model, organisations can be proactive in preventing rustout by ensuring a balance between the demands of the job and the available resources. First, at a practical level, this involves acknowledging the systemic issues that may lead to its emergence. For example, there is a need to acknowledge that the growing administrative burden associated with the work of the TE is often unsustainable and not appropriately recognised in many instances within University settings. Acknowledging the reality of the administrative burden associated with ITE provision, providing adequate time, support and resources, and offering opportunities for TEs to manage their workload effectively are core to addressing the phenomenon of rustout. Next, we encourage Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to consider how TEs can be supported to 'play to their strengths' and increase opportunities to allow them to engage in the aspects of their work they find personally rewarding and enriching. We agree with Shahid et al. (2024), who suggest rotation schedules might be considered for administration-heavy roles. Furthermore, if sustainable careers are a priority for HEIs, leaders should proactively identify opportunities for professional development and mobility within the organisation to support growth, renewal and career enrichment (Gmelch and Chan, 1994; Shahid et al., 2024). Although measures such as these may be viewed as 'wishful thinking' (Ferreira, 2022), the data in this study demonstrate the potential longer-term implications for research and student experience across HEIs. Moreover, as HEIs frequently 'talk the talk' about student well-being, they must now show they can 'walk the walk' regarding teacher educator well-being. In contrast to the popular cultural notion that it is preferable to burnout rather than rustout, both extremes may ultimately result in disengagement and checking out from the

workplace. This underscores the importance of finding optimum satisfaction in one's occupation. Without change, some employees may be present but quietly rusting.

**Limitations and future research.** While we have explored participants' experiences with rustout, we acknowledge that divergent voices and experiences of occupational stress were evident in the sample. Some TEs experienced burnout, some reported optimum stress levels and others agreed with the sentiment 'I would crave a bit of rustout.' However, given the word count constraints and the newness of the topic, we purposefully chose to prioritise the analysis of rustout-related data. We are also aware that the data provide a snapshot in time and, therefore, cannot accurately reflect the dynamic nature of the RO–BO scale (Gmelch and Chan, 1994). The authors are also cognisant that for some individuals the experience of rustout may be part of a broader existential questioning or malaise about their purpose and meaning and not solely related to their professional role. Despite these limitations, the authors hope this paper will act as a starting point to encourage further exploration of the organisational and individual factors that may contribute to this phenomenon. For example, future studies could consider if rustout disproportionately affects female TEs or those with specific roles within ITE. Finally, we believe there is merit in extending future studies to school-based teachers, as anecdotal evidence suggests that rustout may be even more prevalent in this sector.

#### Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available, as approval for this was not sought during the ethics approval process.

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### Author contributions

Sabrina Fitzsimons: Writing—review & editing, writing—original draft, resources, project administration, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, data curation, conceptualisation. David S. Smith: writing, editing, data analysis, supervision.

### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

### Ethical approval

This research was conducted with ethical approval from the Dissertation Review Panel, School of Applied Social Studies at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland (12/12/23) and the Faculty Ethics Review Panel for the Institute of Education at Dublin City University, Ireland (15/12/23). To preserve anonymity, this paper does not include demographic information (such as gender, ITE sector, role, etc.) in the presentation of survey and interview quotes.

### Informed consent

Following ethics approval, data collection took place between January and May 2024. All participants received a plain language statement outlining the purpose and scope of the research before taking part in the survey or interviews. Informed consent was obtained online for the survey. Informed consent was obtained either online or in person for the interviews. Following participation in the survey and/or interview, participants were provided with debriefing material.

### Additional information

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