

A Multidimensional Support Framework for Addressing Job Burnout: A Theoretical Exploration in the Chinese Context

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Abstract: This conceptual paper explores strategies for mitigating job burnout among university administrators through the integration of multidimensional support systems. Drawing on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, the study identifies key challenges faced by administrators, including unbalanced workloads, insufficient support structures, and limited opportunities for professional development. The analysis highlights the critical role of organizational support, work support, social support, and family support in alleviating burnout and enhancing administrators' well-being. By applying the JD-R framework, this paper offers strategic recommendations for strengthening support mechanisms, reducing burnout, and fostering higher levels of job engagement. These insights contribute to the development of practical solutions aimed at enhancing administrators' professional experiences and advancing the overall competitiveness of higher education institutions.

Keywords: Support, Burnout, Administrative Staff, Universities, Job Demands-Resources

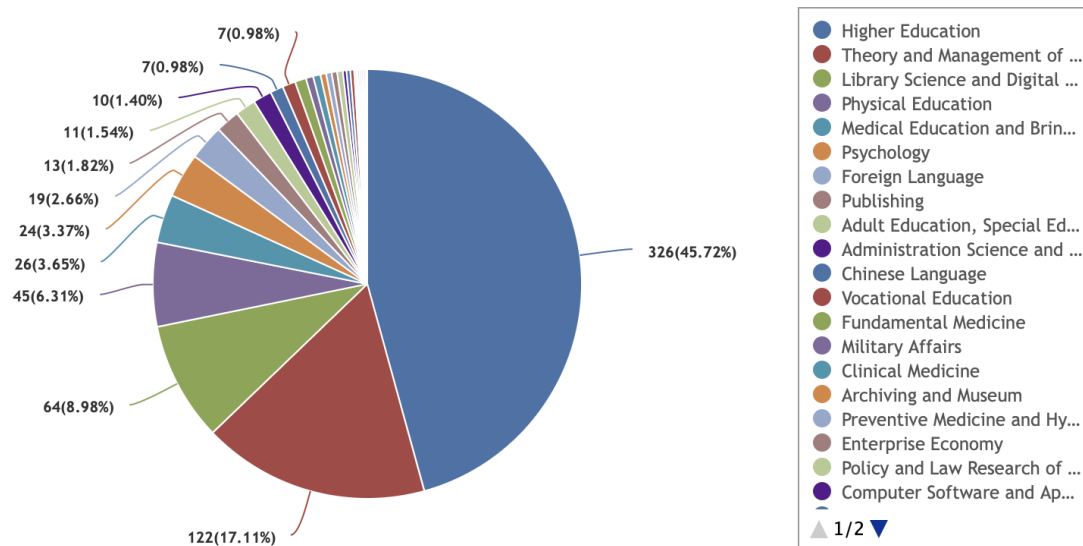
1. Introduction

Job burnout has become a critical global issue (Otterbach et al., 2021). It was revealed from a 2022 survey that over half of managers (53%) across multiple industries and companies globally are experiencing burnout (Karagöl & Kaya, 2022). In China, which in 2022, 14.4% of employees reported experiencing moderate burnout, while 41.4% were facing severe burnout, particularly within higher education sector (Statista, 2023).

From the perspective of research, the number of research on burnout in high education has grown exponentially. 620 articles on burnout in China have been published between the first article in 2003 and the 2025. According to a visual study of the CNKI database, the primary focus is on higher education, with a total of 326 articles accounting for 45.72%; (2) research on theory and management of education, with a total of 122 articles accounting for 17.11%; (3) research on library science and digital library, with a total of 64 articles accounting for 8.98%, and other more influence factor analysis focusing on burnout, as shown in Figure 1, indicating that burnout in China has become a significant research topic, particularly in the context of higher education.

While university administrative staff in China are essential to the effective operation of higher education institutions, supporting academic programs, student services, financial administration, and institutional governance. They serve as intermediaries between faculty, students, and leadership, ensuring regulatory compliance and institutional efficiency (Fang & Zuo, 2024). However, despite the important role that administrators play, their jobs are often demanding, with heavy workloads and limited support mechanisms compared to teachers, which can significantly affect job satisfaction and well-being, and can lead to burnout in the long run (Guo, 2023).

Burnout among university administrative staff has become a growing concern in China's higher education sector. With increasing workloads, bureaucratic demands, and role ambiguity, administrative personnel often experience high levels of stress, leading to emotional exhaustion, reduced efficiency, and declining job satisfaction (Li & Wang, 2018). Given that Chinese universities are expanding rapidly, administrative staff play a critical role in ensuring institutional stability and operational efficiency. However, limited research has focused on the specific burnout challenges faced by this group, making it essential to explore the factors that influence their well-being.



Data source: CNKI database, obtained by collating primary data from 2002 to 2025. <https://www.cnki.net/>.

Figure 1. Classification of literature about burnout on CNIK, China, 2002-2025

Existing research on higher education had predominantly focused on faculty and students, while research on administrative staff remain underexplored. Administrative professionals are required to navigate complex bureaucratic structures and adapt to institutional reforms, yet they often lack adequate supports and career advancement opportunities (He, 2023). The imbalance between job demands and available resources intensifies workload pressures and contributes to occupational burnout and high turnover rates, ultimately affecting the stability and efficiency of university governance systems (Karakose et al., 2021).

Support mechanisms, including organizational, social, work, and family support, have been recognized as key protective factors in reducing burnout. Organizational support, such as clear job expectations and resource allocation, can help alleviate stress, while social and family support provide emotional reassurance (Koroglu & Ozmen, 2022). Despite growing recognition of these factors, there remains a lack of comprehensive research examining how different types of support collectively impact burnout in the context of Chinese universities.

To address these gaps, this study aims to bridge this research gap by providing a conceptual perspective on the relationship between support and burnout among university administrative staff in China. By integrating existing theories and empirical findings, this research seeks to develop a framework that explains how various support mechanisms contribute to mitigating burnout. The study will address the following research questions: (1) Do different types of support influence burnout levels among university administrative staff? (2) What are the key support factors that effectively reduce burnout in the Chinese university system? Answering these questions will provide valuable insights for higher education institutions to develop targeted interventions, fostering a healthier and more sustainable working environment. The findings aim to inform policy recommendations for enhancing administrative efficiency and fostering a more sustainable higher education workforce.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Job Burnout

Job burnout is a psychological syndrome that arises due to prolonged exposure to work-related stressors, particularly among service professionals. It is typically characterized by three key dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1986). Emotional exhaustion refers to the depletion of emotional and physical energy due to excessive job demands. Depersonalization manifests as a detached or cynical attitude towards work and colleagues, often as a coping mechanism. Reduced personal accomplishment reflects a decline in self-efficacy, where individuals feel ineffective and unfulfilled in their roles (Maslach et al., 2001). Among university administrative staff, these burnout dimensions are particularly relevant due to the demanding nature of their work, which involves balancing institutional policies, faculty needs, and student services. In this study, job burnout among university administrators is defined as the emotional strain experienced due to excessive workload and balancing teaching with administrative duties.

2.2 Support

Support in the workplace is a crucial job resource that mitigates the negative effects of job demands while enhancing employee well-being and performance. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model highlights the role of job resources in reducing burnout and fostering motivation, emphasizing that sufficient support can buffer the strain caused by excessive workloads and high role ambiguity.

One key form of support is organizational support, which refers to the extent to which employees perceive that their institution values their contributions and prioritizes their well-being (Wei, 2021). Universities that implement supportive policies, such as flexible work arrangements, professional development programs, and access to mental health resources, create a more positive work environment.

In addition to organizational support, work support from supervisors and colleagues is essential in reducing job strain. This includes emotional support, such as expressing empathy and encouragement, as well as instrumental support, which involves providing practical assistance and resources (Vander Ross et al., 2022). Given the collaborative nature of administrative tasks, a strong support system within the workplace facilitates smoother operations, fosters teamwork, and alleviates the pressures associated with heavy workloads and role ambiguity (Zheng, 2022).

Beyond the workplace, family support also plays a significant role in shaping employees' well-being, particularly for administrative staff who must balance professional and personal responsibilities (Zhou, 2023). Family members who provide emotional encouragement, assist with household duties, and demonstrate an understanding of work-related challenges can help mitigate work-family conflicts. Research suggests that employees with strong family support experience lower stress levels and greater job satisfaction, as they feel more capable of managing both personal and professional demands without feeling overwhelmed (Liu, 2020).

Furthermore, social support from friends, broader social networks, and community resources contributes to emotional resilience and stress management. Engaging in social activities and maintaining strong interpersonal connections outside of work provides employees with a sense of belonging and psychological relief, alleviating job burnout (Viswesvaran et al., 1999).

Ultimately, the presence of multiple sources of support, such as organizational, work, family, and social support, creates a protective framework that enhances job satisfaction, reduces burnout, and promotes mental well-being among university administrative staff. Universities that cultivate a supportive work culture not only improve employee retention and performance but also contribute to institutional stability and efficiency. By ensuring that administrative staff have access to sufficient resources and support systems, higher education institutions can foster a more sustainable and productive work environment.

2.3 University Administrative Staff

University administrative staff are non-academic professionals responsible for the daily operations, governance, and strategic management of higher education institutions (Li & Wang, 2018). They facilitate institutional stability by ensuring regulatory compliance, resource allocation, and policy execution. Unlike faculty members, administrative staff primarily handle managerial, logistical, and support functions that enable effective teaching, research, and student services (Liao et al., 2023).

Administrative staff roles vary across institutions but generally encompass several key areas. In academic administration, they oversee course scheduling, faculty coordination, and accreditation compliance to ensure smooth academic operations. Student services responsibilities include managing enrollment, career services, and student welfare programs (He, 2023). In financial and resource management, they handle budget planning, funding allocation, and procurement to maintain institutional sustainability. Their role in institutional governance involves policy implementation, strategic planning, and regulatory compliance, ensuring adherence to national and regional education policies (Li, 2023). Additionally, in human resources and development, they facilitate staff recruitment, training, and performance evaluation, contributing to workforce effectiveness and institutional growth.

2.4 Underpinning Theory

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model is a widely applied framework for analyzing the relationship between job characteristics, employee well-being, and work performance. Developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2004), this model categorizes workplace factors into two key dimensions: job demands and job resources. Job demands refer to aspects of a job that require sustained effort and can lead to strain, such as workload, time pressure, and emotional demands. In contrast, job resources are physical, social, or psychological factors that help employees manage job demands, enhance motivation, and achieve work-related goals (Bakker & De Vries, 2021). The JD-R model is applicable across various occupational settings, including education, healthcare, and corporate environments, making it a robust framework for examining employee engagement, stress, and performance.

In the context of university administrative staff, this model is particularly relevant in analyzing how the availability (or lack) of support impacts their stress, engagement, and job performance. Supports are critical job resources that can mitigate the negative effects of excessive job demands. According to the JD-R model, support helps employees cope with

high job demands by providing guidance, reducing workload stress, and improving overall work efficiency (De Beer et al., 2022).

By applying the JD-R model, this study can systematically assess how excessive job demands (e.g., workload, role ambiguity, bureaucratic inefficiencies) and limited job resources (e.g., career growth, supervisor support, recognition) contribute to stress, burnout, and turnover, ultimately impacting institutional effectiveness (Alarcon, 2011).

Administrative staff in universities are essential for the efficient operation of academic institutions. They handle a wide range of tasks, including managing schedules, coordinating projects, and facilitating communication. Despite their importance, administrative staff often face high levels of job demands, such as tight deadlines, multitasking, and role ambiguity, which can lead to stress, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction (Karakose et al., 2021). At the same time, they frequently lack access to sufficient job resources, such as support, which is critical for mitigating the negative effects of job demands.

According to the JD-R model, support helps employees cope with high job demands by providing guidance, reducing workload stress, and improving overall work efficiency. For university administrative staff, the presence of a supportive work environment, such as mentorship programs, structured feedback systems, and team-based problem-solving, which can buffer the impact of workload pressure, role ambiguity, and bureaucratic inefficiencies, reducing emotional exhaustion and increasing job satisfaction (Bakker et al., 2004).

Applying the JD-R model to this study, support serves as buffering mechanisms in the health impairment process and enhancing factors in the motivational process: In the health impairment process, high job demands, such as excessive workloads, frequent policy changes, and administrative inefficiencies, which can lead to stress and burnout (Van Woerkom et al., 2016). However, adequate supervisory and peer support can act as a protective factor, alleviating stress and improving role clarity.

2.5 Conceptual Model

The proposed conceptual model, as illustrated in Figure 2, aims to examine the relationships between various types of support and burnout among university administrative staff in China. Drawing from the JD-R model, the model suggests that support, in its various forms, such as organizational, work, family, and social support, plays a crucial role in buffering the negative impact of high job demands on burnout (De Beer et al., 2022; Alarcon, 2011).

The model postulates that these forms of support can reduce emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, while enhancing job satisfaction and a sense of personal accomplishment (Bakker & De Vries, 2021; Karakose et al., 2021). By acting as both buffering and enhancing mechanisms, support influences the health impairment and motivational processes described in the JD-R model. Ultimately, the model highlights how various types of support contribute to reducing burnout and improving the well-being of administrative staff in the higher education sector.

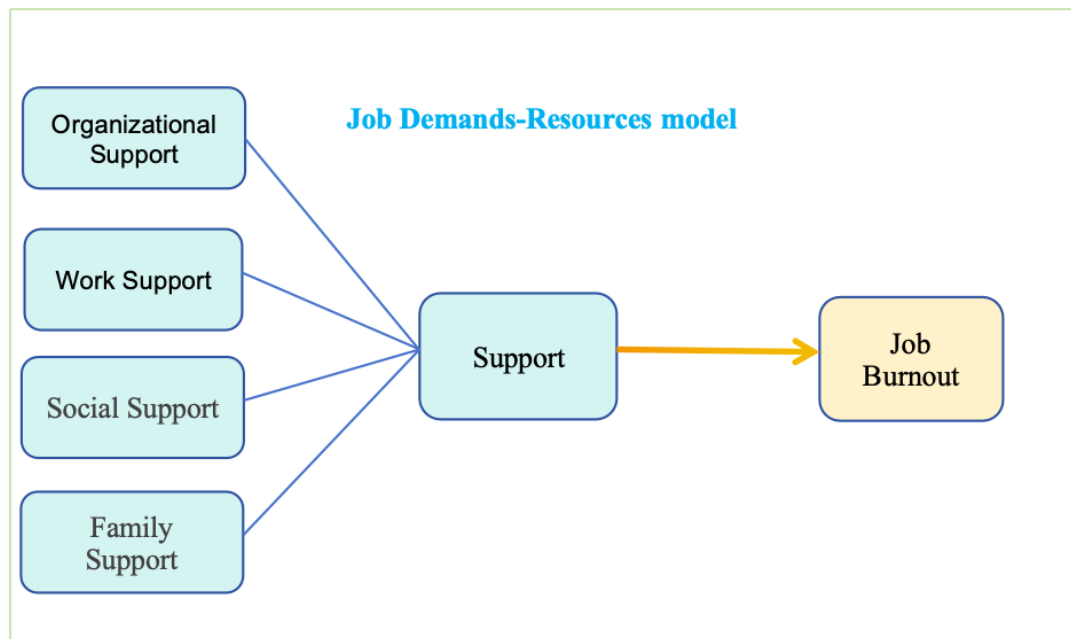


Figure 2. Proposed conceptual model (Bakker & De Vries, 2021)

3. Burnout among University Administrative Staff in China

3.1 Unique Stressors Faced by University Administrative Staff in China

University administrative staff in China experience significant work-related stress due to heavy workloads, bureaucratic complexity, and high expectations from multiple stakeholders. Their responsibilities include managing academic affairs, coordinating faculty and student services, implementing government policies, and handling financial and operational tasks (Wu, 2020). These multifaceted duties require constant attention to detail and adherence to strict institutional guidelines, adding to their daily pressures.

Unlike faculty members, administrative staff often have limited career progression opportunities and face continuous pressure to meet performance targets while complying with stringent regulations. Additionally, long working hours and the expectation to be available beyond office hours contribute to mental and physical exhaustion (Zhou, 2022). The combination of these factors leads to prolonged stress, reducing job satisfaction and increasing the risk of burnout.

3.2 Factors Influencing Burnout

The burnout experienced by university administrative staff in China is shaped by distinct cultural and systemic factors: The burnout experienced by university administrative staff in China is deeply influenced by the country's centralized and bureaucratic university system. Decision-making authority is predominantly concentrated at the top, leaving administrative staff with limited autonomy in their roles. This lack of control over their work processes leads to frustration, reduced job satisfaction, and a sense of inefficacy in their daily tasks (Bao, 2023).

In addition to bureaucratic constraints, workplace culture further intensifies burnout among administrative staff. The influence of the "996" work culture (9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week), although more common in private sectors, has also permeated the university environment. Many staff members face unspoken expectations to work overtime and maintain high efficiency, despite their already demanding workload (Chen, 2023).

Moreover, performance evaluation systems contribute to the growing pressure experienced by administrative staff. Universities frequently implement key performance indicators to assess staff efficiency, adding stress and uncertainty about job security (Dinibutun et al., 2020). Combined with China's collectivist culture, which prioritizes dedication to work over personal well-being, employees struggle to establish a healthy work-life balance, further exacerbating burnout.

Burnout among university administrative staff is a global issue, though its causes and severity differ across higher education systems. In the United States and Europe, burnout is primarily driven by job insecurity, budget constraints, and increasing administrative workloads due to reduced faculty involvement in governance (Boston Consulting Group, 2024). However, workplace flexibility and mental health support programs are more common, helping to mitigate stress. In Japan and South Korea, rigid hierarchical structures and high work expectations contribute to burnout, similar to China, but recent policies in Japan aim to reduce excessive working hours, while South Korea has emphasized workplace mental health initiatives. Meanwhile, in Southeast Asia, burnout issues due to resource constraints and bureaucratic inefficiencies, but the stress level may be lower due to less rigid institutional cultures (Demerouti et al., 2021).

Overall, while burnout is a concern in many countries, the hierarchical nature, high expectations, and cultural work ethic in China create unique challenges for university administrative staff. Addressing burnout requires structural reforms, better support systems, and a shift toward a more balanced work culture.

4. Effects of Support on Burnout

Support plays a crucial role in alleviating burnout among university administrative staff by reducing stress and enhancing overall well-being. Different types of support (eg. organizational, social, work and family support) help mitigate the negative effects of excessive workload, bureaucratic pressure, and job insecurity. Additionally, various mediating and moderating factors influence the effectiveness of support mechanisms in preventing burnout.

One key form of support is organizational support, which refers to the extent to which employees perceive that their institution values their contributions and prioritizes their well-being (Wei, 2021). Universities that implement supportive policies, such as flexible work arrangements, professional development programs, and access to mental health resources, create a more positive work environment.

In addition to organizational support, work support from supervisors and colleagues is essential in reducing job strain. This includes emotional support, such as expressing empathy and encouragement, as well as instrumental support, which involves providing practical assistance and resources (Vander Ross et al., 2022). Given the collaborative nature of administrative tasks, a strong support system within the workplace facilitates smoother operations, fosters teamwork, and alleviates the pressures associated with heavy workloads and role ambiguity (Zheng, 2022).

Social support from colleagues and supervisors is essential in fostering a positive work environment and buffering against burnout. Supportive relationships encourage open communication, shared problem-solving, and emotional reassurance, which can help administrative staff cope with job-related stress (Geng et al., 2017). Regular team-building activities, peer mentoring programs, and strong leadership engagement contribute to a culture of mutual support, improving morale and job engagement.

Family support plays a critical role in maintaining work-life balance, as emotional encouragement and practical assistance from family members help individuals manage stress. A strong support system at home enables administrative staff to recover from work-related fatigue and maintain overall well-being. When universities acknowledge the importance of work-life balance through family-friendly policies, employees are better equipped to handle professional challenges without experiencing severe burnout (Jin, 2022).

The effectiveness of support systems in preventing burnout is influenced by various factors, such as personal coping strategies, job demands, and individual resilience. Employees with high self-efficacy and strong problem-solving skills may benefit more from institutional and social support. Additionally, organizational culture and leadership styles moderate the impact of support mechanisms, as workplaces that promote open communication and recognition further enhance the effectiveness of support interventions.

5. Implications for Policy and Practice

Addressing burnout among university administrative staff requires strategic policy interventions and practical measures to create a healthier work environment. Given the increasing demands on administrative personnel, universities must implement targeted support mechanisms to enhance employee well-being, boost productivity, and establish a sustainable academic administration system. Without such measures, burnout can lead to reduced efficiency, higher turnover rates, and a decline in institutional performance.

To mitigate these risks, university leaders and policymakers should prioritize policies that promote fair workload distribution, career development opportunities, and accessible mental health resources. Establishing transparent performance evaluation criteria, providing structured career advancement pathways, and integrating mental health services into the workplace can help alleviate stress (Liu, 2024). Additionally, flexible work arrangements, such as hybrid schedules and task delegation, offer practical solutions to improve job satisfaction and reduce excessive workloads.

Building on these institutional policies, further emphasis should be placed on strengthening different forms of support. Institutional support can be enhanced through stress management training, mentorship programs, and administrative task automation to reduce manual workload (Wu, 2020). Social support is equally vital, with collaborative work environments, peer networking initiatives, and active supervisor engagement playing a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and emotional security.

In the long run, well-implemented support policies contribute not only to reduced burnout but also to sustainable improvements in staff retention, job performance, and overall institutional efficiency (Zhang, 2021). A resilient and well-supported administrative workforce leads to better decision-making, increased morale, and higher operational effectiveness, ultimately benefiting both university operations and student services. By prioritizing burnout prevention and investing in holistic support strategies, universities can create a healthier and more motivated administrative workforce, ensuring long-term institutional success.

6. Conclusion

This research highlights the critical issue of burnout among university administrative staff in China, emphasizing its causes, consequences, and the role of support systems in mitigating its effects. Burnout is primarily driven by excessive workloads, bureaucratic pressures, and high-performance expectations, all of which are exacerbated by limited career progression opportunities and rigid institutional structures. The study underscores the importance of various support mechanisms, including institutional, social, work, and family support, in reducing stress and improving overall well-being.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of different support strategies on burnout reduction, particularly through longitudinal studies that track changes in employee well-being over time. Additionally, comparative research across different educational systems could provide deeper insights into how cultural and policy differences influence burnout and its management. Further investigation into the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as flexible work policies, digital task automation, and workplace mental health programs, would also be valuable in refining burnout prevention strategies.

In conclusion, addressing burnout among university administrative staff requires a systematic and proactive approach. Strengthening institutional and psychological support systems is essential for fostering a healthier work environment and ensuring sustainable academic administration. By implementing evidence-based support strategies, universities can not only improve employee satisfaction and retention but also enhance institutional efficiency and effectiveness, ultimately benefiting the entire academic community.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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