

Job Burnout amongst University Administrative Staffs in China

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It is widely accepted that administrative staff, as important components of a university's workforce, play a critical role in realizing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The worth of administrative staff is based on their productivity, and this has a significant impact on the viability of universities. In the higher education context, job burnout has many costs for the university and the staff themselves which are associated with a loss of job satisfaction, poor career identity, low organizational commitment, and poor well-being.

burnout

SDGs

sustainable education

university administrative staff

1. Introduction

Research has shown that education has always been an important driving force for sustainable and enlightened economic progress ^[1], and efforts have been made to implement sustainability at the university level ^[2]. Several scholars have suggested expanding the scope of sustainable development research in universities not only through research and teaching but also through policy actions, staff participation, and the co-management of the university environment itself ^[3]. In recent times, studies have discussed the contribution of staff to the sustainable development of universities ^[4].

It is indeed crucial to understand the workplace environment of university personnel in order to evaluate their ability to help achieve the SDGs, given that universities have certain policies and environmental, personnel, or development goals to adhere to ^[5]. Although many antecedents (such as individual personality, stress, emotions, and policies) affect the work environment of academic and administrative staff at universities, the significant indicators for staff to evaluate their workplace state are learning opportunities, health status, well-being, and decent employment conditions ^{[6][7]}.

Generally, the core agenda of the SDGs, such as targets 3, 4, and 8, aim to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being, quality education, and decent work for all, respectively ^[8]. Although one might expect to find positive correlations between the SDGs and healthy lives, well-being, quality education, and decent work, studies show that job burnout, as an occupational problem (World Health Organization, 2019), has negative associations with personal health, well-being, and decent work ^[9]. Consequently, these negative outcomes of burnout affect the teaching and research processes of academic staff members, while the administrative staff carry out their clerical, bureaucratic, and managerial work properly. Otherwise, the achievement of the United Nations' SDGs is not possible.

In China, higher education has expanded rapidly since 1999 (*China Statistical Yearbook*, various years). This surge in student enrollment, coupled with deteriorating teaching conditions and broad variations in education quality [10], have caused the duties of university staff to be more onerous and challenging. Survey data from Chinese university teachers from 2013 reveal that more than 36% of them experienced increasing pressures [11], with job stress emerging as a critical factor contributing to job burnout [12].

Much of the prior research in higher education has concentrated on academic staff, who primarily engage in teaching and research duties [13]. However, according to the *China Education Statistics Yearbook*, university administrative staff (UAS), who constituted nearly 15% of university staff at the end of 2019, have often been overlooked. Unlike academic staff, the gravity and density of the work of UAS are more intense. Repetitive and tedious work, complex interpersonal relationships, unexpected work content, and limitations due to managerial policies are more likely to cause UAS to work in the “white + black” and “5 + 2” working modes. To be specific, the former means working both days and nights, while the latter means working five days per week (Monday to Friday), with two days off (Saturday and Sunday), implying a seven-day work week. For example, UAS must deal with increasing workloads and novel challenges when providing services and advice to other staff, colleagues, teachers, and students [14]; these factors cause emotional and interpersonal issues since they deal with emotionally charged interactions between coworkers, the working environment, and the work practices themselves. These multifaceted demands contribute to a high incidence of job burnout among UAS.

In addition, job burnout issues should not be ignored. In the higher education context, job burnout has many costs for the university and the staff themselves which are associated with a loss of job satisfaction [15], poor career identity [16], low organizational commitment [17], and poor well-being [18]. These results hinder the development and implementation of SDGs. Hence, the burnout of administrative staff also requires attention in order to improve their well-being, job performance, health status, etc., to promote the implementation of the SDGs.

2. Job Burnout amongst University Administrative Staff Members in China

2.1. SDGs and Administrative Staff (UAS)

The United Nations devised the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This document proposes one framework for a 15-year plan aimed at protecting the Earth, empowering people, and ensuring prosperity, peace, and partnership. This ambitious agenda proposes that the sustainable development goals cannot be achieved without everyone's cooperation [19]. It is acknowledged that university staff are important contributors to promoting the sustainable development of higher education [20].

In this increasingly globalized world, universities have the obligation and responsibility to provide quality education to people from all societies because a high-quality education can, in theory, ensure the security, welfare, and prosperity of a nation [21]. University staff play an essential role in realizing these ambitions [22]. This is consistent with SDG 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning

opportunities for all. However, the cornerstone of a university is a sound administrative system, which determines the success of high-quality research and teaching [23]. Baltaru and Soysal [24] indicate that UAS, who are the personnel that implement the administrative system, play a crucial role in helping universities promote sustainable development through efficient operation and procedures that support academic teachers and students [25].

The question must be asked: what is the workplace environment of UAS? One of the issues affecting the UAS in China is job burnout, which poses a huge challenge to individuals' health and well-being [26]. Studies have shown that job burnout can seriously undermine health, employee well-being, and job performance [27]. This conflicts with SDG 4, which seeks to realize well-being and healthy living for all people of all ages. However, how is it possible to reduce the job burnout of UAS and promote the sustainable development of universities? SDG 8 provides the answer, which aims to create "decent work", enable staff to access a "safe and reliable work environment", and reduce unstable employment [28]. To be specific, decent work is defined as an occupation in which one's duties or tasks are meaningful, the income is reasonable, and the job meets the staff member's expectations [29]. Such conditions lead to increased productivity and high levels of autonomy [30], commitment, job satisfaction, and trust [31]. As stated in SDG 8, this trend is inherently linked to a reduction in job burnout [32][33].

2.2. A Job Demands-Resources Perspective on Burnout

2.2.1. The JD-R Model

The JD-R model has been extensively applied to interpret job burnout and engagement across different fields [9]. Demerouti et al. [34] devised the JD-R model to understand the factors that lead to burnout. The model divides all job characteristics into two groups: job demands and with job resources. The former means "the organizational, social or physical aspects of work that need sustained physical or mental effort and are thus correlated with psychological and physical costs" [34]. Meanwhile the latter refers to the psychological, physical, organizational, or social aspects of work that may: (a) contribute to the achievement of job goals; (b) reduce job demands and their accompanying psychological and physical costs; and (c) encourage individual growth and progress [34].

In the JD-R model, job demands are typically considered to be the negative organizational, social, or material aspects of a person's job, while job resources are the positive aspects [9]. The JD-R model hypothesizes dual processes that account for the relationship between employee well-being and job characteristics. One process involves damage to health: high job demands actively predict fatigue associated with workplace tasks, which leads to health and emotional problems [9]. The other process is of a stimulating character: having sufficient resources in place will positively predict motivation or engagement with one's job [9]. Taking into account that job burnout can be the result of two health-damaging conditions, one is the process of exhaustion induced by high job demands and the other is the process of failure to satisfy the demands resulting from insufficient resources [35].

Job burnout is regarded as an outcome of chronic work stress [16] and can occur when short-term stresses are not resolved or dealt with in effective ways. Demerouti et al. [34] indicated that job demands were largely linked to burnout or emotional exhaustion, while job resources were linked to job engagement. Similarly, while shortfalls in

job resources can trigger burnout, job resources can, to a certain extent, cushion the role of job demands in triggering burnout [36].

2.2.2. Emotional Job Demands, Job Autonomy, Colleague Support, and Burnout

This work explores the nature of the emotional job demands experienced by Chinese UAS and their correlation with job burnout. Emotional job demands are qualitative workplace issues that are characterized by the variety, intensity, and frequency of the interpersonal interactions required in one's duties [37]. Such demands need continuous individual effort and are linked to some costs [38]. Emotional job demands are generally viewed as harmful and stressful due to the valuable resources they consume and because they can simultaneously cause a person to feel emotionally uncontrollable in many circumstances [39]. In the context of higher education, Yin [40] argued that teachers experience high emotional job demands since they need to constantly manage or regulate their emotions in frequent and intense interactions with students, parents, and colleagues.

Prior studies have indicated that there is close link between serious outcomes and emotional job demands such as job dissatisfaction, burnout, and poor commitment [37]. It has also been observed that emotional job demands are inextricably linked to trait anxiety in employees [41] and work anxiety, as well as emotional exhaustion and health problems [42]. In terms of education, Yin et al. [43] revealed that there is a positive relationship between emotional job demands and the emotional exhaustion felt by academic staff and a negative relationship with job satisfaction and well-being.

The JD-R model views job autonomy as an essential resource in the workplace [9]. In accordance with this model, job autonomy has a positive impact on the well-being of employees due to the learning opportunities it offers, which benefit SDGs 3 and 4 since employees with greater autonomy have more opportunities to experiment with new ideas and behaviors [44]. This, in turn, can contribute to a variety of positive results, including better job security satisfaction and lower burnout levels [45][46], which is consistent with SDG 8. Conversely, workers with limited autonomy do not have the ability to choose how they respond to the demands placed upon them, leading to a lack of control and an inability to cope with potential stressors [38]. Over time, the draining of an individual's energy due to an inability to cope with job demands can elevate the risk of burnout [34].

Social support is described as the availability of resources, information sharing, and emotional attention from individuals' social networks. Although social support is often deemed to be a single construct in some research studies [47], other research contends that social support may vary in its sources and types. Prior research has identified that job burnout has a negative impact on social support [48]. Moreover, Lim [49] demonstrated that colleague support can effectively overcome the issues wrought by job insecurity on withdrawal behavior and job satisfaction, which helps to realize SDG 8.

2.3. Emotion Regulation as a Personal Resource

The JD-R model has been refined to include personal resources as an important factor [9]. Personal resources constitute the psychological profile that makes a person able to control and shape their environment [48]. These

resources serve as mediators between employee well-being and job demands [9]. Research has demonstrated that the satisfaction of individuals with their basic cognitive needs, for instance, ability, autonomy, and a sense of belonging, plays a mediating role between job demands and fatigue [50].

Emotion regulation is a significant personal resource in the higher education system in that it influences the sense of happiness of teachers/lecturers and the effectiveness of classroom management [51]. Emotion regulation is determined as “the process in which persons affect what emotions they possess, when they possess them, and how they experience and describe such emotions” [52]. Gross presented two extensive emotion regulation strategies, namely, cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression [53]. Reappraisal is an antecedent-centered emotion regulation strategy that seeks to explain underlying emotional situations in non-emotional terms. Meanwhile, suppression is an emotion regulation strategy based on a response that involves suppressing a person’s sustained expression of emotions [53].

Regarding the relationship between burnout and emotion regulation strategies, Gross and John [54] have reported that the persons who applied reappraisal strategies presented with a positive sense of well-being, better interpersonal functioning, and a lower likelihood of having to deal with job burnout issues, which is consistent with SDG 3. Conversely, those who employed suppression strategies exhibited worse interpersonal functioning, a poor sense of well-being, and a better capacity to cope with job burnout, which will hinder the achievement of SDG 3. Similarly, Buruck et al. [55] emphasized that reassessing emotional stimuli is a valid means of handling situations that trigger stress, while suppressing negative emotional behavior is less effective and may have serious outcomes for individuals. In accordance with the former determinations of personal resources, in combination with personal demands or vulnerability factors [9][56], reappraisal should be regarded as a type of personal resource that represents one person’s capacity to effectively control their emotions and adapt to their environment. In the meantime, suppression should be considered a personal demand that represents the inability of one person to deal with the emotional demands of the current environment. It is linked to additional effort and psychological or physical costs.

In the education sector, qualitative research conducted by Sutton [57] indicated that successful emotion regulation may reduce susceptibility to burnout. Additionally, quantitative research conducted by Brackett et al. [58] observed that the capacity of teachers to manage their own emotions is positively linked to their positive emotions, personal achievements, and job satisfaction. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the reappraisal strategy and suppression strategy present negative and positive correlations with job burnout, respectively [37]. The most recent empirical research has suggested the negative impact of suppression and the positive effect of reappraisal on the measures of well-being, like job satisfaction, and burnout [43].

With reference to the relationships among emotion regulation, job resources, and emotional job demands, Yin et al. [43] contend that cognitive reappraisal is a personal resource that enables individuals to manage their own emotions and adapt to their environment. Research has shown that teachers use cognitive reappraisals to resolve the effects of emotional job demands on teachers’ autonomy in their work [59]. Conversely, suppression is deemed to be a personal demand that reflects a person’s inability to deal with emotional job demands, requiring additional

cognitive and emotional effort and resulting in physical or psychological strains or costs. Studies suggest that the suppression of emotions exhausts teachers' cognitive resources and is associated with SDGs 4 and 8 due to the poorer quality of their work and their compromised job autonomy [60].

The role of support from colleagues as a crucial factor in creating a constructive school environment is one of the factors contributing to achieving SDG 8 [61]. When safety is guaranteed, it is possible that people may feel more comfortable about being themselves [62]. Therefore, trusted colleagues may help ameliorate perceptions of work stress and help to encourage a more relaxed environment that requires fewer coping strategies. Teachers who experience support from colleagues are far more likely to be authentic and use fewer emotion regulation strategies. Conversely, unsupportive colleagues may cause teachers to engage in "surface acting" to fake or cover their true emotions and opinions, while supportive colleagues may facilitate "deep acting" since individuals feel more valued in a genuinely supportive context [63]. According to Grandey's [64] emotion regulation model, emotion regulation at work, or emotional labor, is a central element. It is consequently hypothesized that colleague support has a positive relationship with reappraisal and a negative relationship with the suppression among UAS.

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