

# What We Know about Work Stress Among Chinese University Lecturers: A Literature Review

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the concept, development, and influencing factors of work stress among university lecturers. Work stress primarily originates from factors such as inadequate professional skills, heavy workloads, career development pressures, strained colleague relationships, and family life, exerting profound effects on lecturers' psychological, behavioral, and physiological well-being. Previous research explores this through methods like surveys and case studies, proposing strategies involving collaboration among lecturers, school organizations, the government, and society to alleviate work stress. However, current research on university lecturers' work stress has some limitations. Looking forward, future research on university lecturers' work stress expands in four directions: First, systematically exploring the positive effects of work stress among university lecturers; second, standardizing qualitative and quantitative research on work stress; third, delving into university lecturers' work stress from the perspective of psychological contracts; and fourth, conducting research on work stress among different types of university lecturers for a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Chinese university, Lecturers, Work stress, Stressors, Stress management.

## 1. Introduction

In the midst of a rapidly changing world, various sectors undergo transformative shifts, and the education industry is no exception. With China actively promoting national strategies like "Strengthening the Country through Science and Education," "Building a Strong Human Resources Nation," and advocating for a "Cultural Powerhouse," higher education becomes a focal point of societal discourse, garnering widespread attention [1]. Against this backdrop, the evolution and reforms within higher education are remarkable, particularly the reform of performance-based salaries for university lecturers and the "Four Fixes and One Appointment" reform (which includes fixing job positions, staff composition, personnel quotas, and staffing levels, along with adopting a universal appointment system). These reforms open new avenues for the development of universities [2].

However, these changes inevitably bring about a sense of instability for university lecturers. They raise questions and challenges concerning the job security of lecturers, further intensifying the work stress they experience. Research data illustrates that university lecturers face increasingly heavy workloads and pressures [3]. These stressors and the resulting sense of urgency significantly impact lecturers' mental and physical well-being, as well as deeply influencing their work-life balance. Consequently, this also has far-reaching effects on the quality and effectiveness of teaching [4].

Therefore, it is imperative to systematically review existing research outcomes to gain a deeper understanding of the current state of work stress among university lecturers and their coping strategies. This endeavor not only provides relevant recommendations for educational administrators and lecturers on stress management and alleviation but also contributes to fostering a positive and beneficial environment. Such an environment facilitates the enhancement of lecturers' mental and physical well-being, allowing them to better

engage in teaching, research, and societal service.

## 2. The Concept and Development of Lecturers' Work Stress

The term "stress" originates in physics, describing the phenomenon in which an object generates internal forces when subjected to external forces attempting to distort it. In 1914, American psychologist Cannon introduces the concept of stress to the field of psychophysiology, leading to increased attention in stress research. Meanwhile, Gray's research indicates that stress results from an imbalance between personal expectations and reality [5].

Summers and other researchers propose that work-related stress arises from incongruence between individual expectations and actual experiences [6]. As early as 1978, Kyriacou and Sutcliffe define lecturers' work stress as unpleasant, negative emotional experiences caused by work-related factors [7]. In 2018, Chen and Yan identify lecturers' stress as stemming from a lack of contentment, leading to confusion and emotional responses [8]. Lin found that university lecturers' stress mainly arises from dissatisfaction with the work environment in 2019 [9]. Lv views lecturers' work stress as an unpleasant emotional experience resulting from various work-related factors in 2020 [10].

In conclusion, scholars worldwide provide diverse definitions of stress, work stress, and lecturers' work stress across different perspectives and domains. Despite the absence of a unified authoritative concept, some regard work stress as a stimulus variable, while others consider it a response variable. Additionally, some scholars perceive it as a variable that emerges from interactions between individuals and their environment. Furthermore, work stress is frequently seen as a multidimensional construct, necessitating context-specific research.

Despite the varying articulations, the fundamental understanding of university lecturers' work stress remains

consistent: it emerges due to incongruence or imbalance between external circumstances and a lecturer's personal experience, resulting in discomfort.

### 3. Research Methods and Prevalence of Lecturers' Work Stress

In the study of lecturers' stress, the most commonly used method is the lecturer self-report questionnaire. Lecturers often employ a grading system in their self-reports to quantify stressors for research purposes. Other methods include interviews, case studies, and physiological stress indicators. Currently, three typical models exist for studying lecturers' stress:

a. Kyriacou and Sutcliffe's Lecturer Stress Model: This model suggests that potential stressors transform into actual stressors under the influence of lecturers' personality traits, impacting their physical, psychological, and behavioral well-being. Inadequate coping may lead to chronic symptoms.

b. Tan's Lecturer Stress Theory Model: This model distinguishes potential from actual stressors and further refines Kyriacou and Sutcliffe's model. It emphasizes the regulatory roles of lecturer individuality, school mechanisms, and evaluation in stress stimuli and responses [11].

c. Tian's Lecturer Stress Model: This model explores the interrelationships between stress, tension, and certain mediating variables [12].

Currently, profound reforms in the education system are underway, bringing instability and change that pose new challenges for university lecturers. These reforms have diminished their sense of job security and belongingness, subsequently increasing their work-related stress. Data support this trend; for instance, Liu's survey of over 600 university lecturers shows that 17% often feel nervous, with 11% experiencing nervous disturbances [13]. Studies by Wang indicate that among 513 lecturers from 16 universities, 72.7% experience significant or high levels of work stress [14]. Cai and Mo's research also reveals that 90% of over 9,000 lecturers from 19 universities in Guangdong Province are in a suboptimal health state, with 20% experiencing various health conditions [15].

As educational reforms deepen, university lecturers face pressure not only from title evaluations but also from teaching, research, and societal service [16]. These factors collectively contribute to greater psychological stress and role conflicts among university lecturers in the current context.

### 4. Sources and Impact of Lecturers' Work Stress

A multitude of stressors affect university lecturers, and research on these sources is still in the exploratory phase. Through empirical analysis using a self-designed questionnaire, Zhang identifies five stressors: inadequate professional skills, relationships with leadership, colleague interactions, teaching tasks, and workload [17]. Zhang's findings reveal that the inherent characteristics of educational work itself, such as overwhelming workloads, extended working hours, the challenges of innovative teaching, and intricate interpersonal relationships, contribute significantly to lecturers' stress [18]. Zhou points out that stringent title evaluation criteria, extensive research responsibilities, and unreasonable student evaluations stand as the primary sources

of lecturers' stress. Insufficient leisure time and local favoritism also contribute to this stress [19]. Research by Chen and Yan among lecturers in various provinces and cities discovers stress sources, including performance expectations, inherent job stress, professional pressures, personal qualities and accomplishments, and role-related pressures [20].

Moderate stress can stimulate lecturers' potential and enhance teaching quality. However, lecturer stress predominantly manifests negative effects. Excessive stress has resulted in psychological and physiological discomfort among lecturers, thereby diminishing their effectiveness [21]. Elevated stress initially triggers subtle shifts in lecturers' psychological states, rendering them powerless. Over time, this situation culminates in adverse behavioral and physiological alterations like irritability, headaches, anxiety, and voice loss, significantly impeding their professional growth. This phenomenon was corroborated by Kyriacou and Sutcliffe's 1977 study on British lecturers.

### 5. Stress Relief Strategies

High stress among university lecturers, originating from diverse sources, detrimentally affects their work. Hence, addressing lecturers' stress is crucial across three key areas: the individual, the university, and government and society.

First, self-management and regulation are crucial for lecturers. Zhou suggests that lecturers can effectively reduce stress by approaching tasks with a problem-centered rather than emotion-centered perspective and seeking appropriate outlets to express their feelings. Zhang proposes both preventive strategies (avoiding stressors, aligning demands and resources, altering behavior, expanding coping resources) and coping strategies (monitoring stressors, concentrating resources, eliminating stressors, tolerating stressors, and reducing arousal). Researchers focus on several aspects. Chen and Yan point out that maintaining an optimistic attitude and developing psychological coping abilities are essential for managing stress. Luo believes that individual lecturers play a critical role in stress regulation. Liu emphasizes the importance of enhancing individual self-care abilities.

Secondly, universities invest more to foster a human-centric environment with lecturers at the core. University administrators take lecturers' stress seriously, recognizing it's not solely an individual issue; organizational factors contribute to lecturers' stress and have a significant impact on the institution. Lin proposes universities improve lecturers' compensation, enhance living conditions, establish welfare systems, refine evaluation criteria, create harmonious work environments, and set up lecturers' counseling services to help alleviate stress. Li and colleagues suggest that universities provide effective stress management measures and cultivate a supportive environment [22]. Chu and colleagues emphasize the role of universities as the primary bearers of lecturers' stress regulation. Lin asserts that universities genuinely improve compensation, enhance material conditions and mental well-being, effectively reducing stress from both perspectives.

Last, the government and society foster a supportive environment for lecturer development, enhancing their compensation, welfare, and social status moderately, and establishing a strong social support system. Wang argues that lack of government support, changing social policies, and increased national curriculum demands are three major

contributors to excessive lecturers' stress [23]. With substantial support from the state and society, reforms related to universities and lecturers help them better cope and engage in their work with a positive attitude. Li suggests that the government should increase educational investment and promote a societal culture of valuing education and lectures. Excessive societal expectations on lecturers without commensurate compensation and benefits contribute to increased stress, leading to a significant gap between expectations and reality. Furthermore, reasonable and stable criteria for academic titles and research management systems also help lecturers reduce the pressures of expectation.

Building upon previous research, Zhang and other researchers point out that prolonged excessive stress leads to maladaptive symptoms like fear, lack of concentration, memory decline, and stomach ulcers. Liu and other researchers indicate that during periods of transition, university lecturers commonly face social pressure. Only 3.5% of lecturers feel no pressure, 39% feel some pressure, while around 60% experience significant or very significant pressure. Hence, most lecturers generally face considerable stress.

## 6. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Although global research on university lecturers' stress is extensive, covering aspects like the concept of lecturers' stress, its sources, prevalence, research methods, and alleviation strategies, there are still gaps in existing research, both internationally and domestically.

First, a lack of research on the positive effects of lecturers' stress is evident. Current studies predominantly concentrate on stress's negative impacts on university lecturers, with limited exploration of how stress can potentially motivate. This suggests an incomplete understanding of lecturers' stress.

Second, existing stress research primarily relies on qualitative descriptions. Empirical research, particularly localized studies on university lecturers' stress, is limited. The focus often centers on the stress concept and alleviation strategies. Only a few studies empirically delve into stress sources among lecturers, some uncritically adopting Western stress assessment tools without accounting for cultural influences on lecturers' stress.

Third, a notable research gap exists in exploring the psychological contracts between universities, lecturers, and students. Current research mainly stems from psychological, organizational behavior, and management viewpoints. However, lecturers' stress is intimately linked to universities, students, and the evolving psychological contracts between any of these parties, which significantly impacts lecturer stress.

Fourth, both Western and Chinese research on sources of lecturers' stress remains exploratory. Disparities in research timelines, methods, samples, and analytical approaches have prevented a unified consensus on stress sources. Despite the intricate nature of stress sources, a systematic study of these among lecturers is imperative for standardization.

Given these research gaps, future research on university lecturers' stress could focus on four key areas:

First, focus on targeted investigations into the positive effects of lecturers' stress. Stress has dual aspects, and further

attention is needed to explore how excessive stress can be transformed into motivation.

Second, integrate qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative research on lecturers' stress should standardize concepts, stress sources, and coping strategies. Quantitative research should incorporate localized methods, accounting for cultural differences.

Third, explore lecturers' stress from the psychological contracts perspective. Analyze dynamic changes in psychological contracts between universities, lecturers, and students, and how these changes influence lecturer stress.

Fourth, conduct in-depth segmented research on lecturers' stress. Given varying lecturer demographics like gender, age, roles, and career stages, along with distinct perceptions of stress at different life and career phases, in-depth segmented research is crucial for comprehensive understanding of lecturer stress.

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