

# Exploring Work Engagement among Chinese Student Affairs Educators: A Literature Review on Supply Chain and Sustainability Management

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## Abstract

Employee burnout and work engagement issues are a key focus in the field of human resource management. Through the literature analysis of the job characteristics of student affairs educators (SAE), SAE groups are prone to burnout and low work commitment. Through the combing of JD-R theory, it is found that JD-R theory still has some research space in improving the job input of SAE groups, solving work-family conflicts, and improving SAE health problems.

**Keywords:** Student Affairs, Work Engagement, Burnout, JD-R Model

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## Introduction

Employee burnout and engagement issues are a key focus in the field of human resource management. In most national universities, professional student affairs administrators are often seen as an important part of higher education personnel (Winston et al, 2013). Student affairs educator in Chinese colleges and universities with the function of student affairs are "an important part of the university teaching team and school education management team" in China (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017). Studying burnout and work engagement studied burnout and worked engagement in this group can inform research on work engagement in similar groups.

### The concept of Chinese and Western staff engaged in student affairs

#### 1) The title of Chinese and Western staff engaged in student affairs

The Western terms for student affairs administrators include Student Affairs Administrator, Student Affairs Professional, Student Affairs Staff, and Student Service Professional. These terms are interchangeable for student affairs practitioners, who provide services and support to students at colleges and universities (Miller & Winston, 1991). In past research literature, student personnel workers, student service experts, and student affairs educators have also been used in the West as the terms for Student Affairs Workers. However, the vast majority of academic papers use the concept of Student Affairs Administrator as the keyword (Li, 2013).

The main body engaged in student affairs work in China is "full-time Student Affairs Administrator", combined with the requirements of the Ministry of Education of China: handling student affairs requires "whole-process" and "all-round" educating students (Yang, 2018), that is, student affairs staff are required to pay attention to the ideological and moral guidance of students in the process of handling each student affairs. Moreover, the actual nature of the work of China's "full-time Student Affairs Administrator" is to carry out ideological education as the primary task. This is in line with Western student affairs educators' focus on "out-of-classroom student education, hands-on student education" is relatively close (Clevenger, 2015; Reece & Rish, 2020), so it is appropriate to use "Student Affairs Educator" (SAE) as a "bridge" to connect such groups with similar work in China and the West. The following SAE is also generalized to include the concepts of Student Affairs Administrator, Student Affairs Professional, and so on.

#### 2) The specific work of student affairs staff

In the West, the construction of the student affairs team of American colleges and universities is at the forefront of the world, and the professionalization and professionalization of the student affairs team of American colleges and universities have a wide impact on the world's higher education student affairs and have become a model for Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and many other countries to follow (Li, 2013).

SAE is an important part of human resource management in China's higher education, and its number and importance are increasing. China's Ministry of Education requires that the number of SAEs in each university must reach "a ratio of SAEs to students of more than 1:200" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017). In recent years, the scale of enrollment in Chinese universities has shown a straight-line increase, according to the data released by the official channels of the Ministry of Education of China,

"the general undergraduate enrollment in 2022 will be 4,679,400, an increase of 233,400 over the previous year", and as of March 2022, the SAE of Chinese universities reached 240,800, an increase of 52,000 over 2019 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2023). The SAE group is very large and annual growth.

China and the West have a lot in common in SAE group building: for example, the two countries have always attached importance to this group building, and the United States has major management departments and associations for this type of group, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, or NASPA, have identified ten basic competencies for student affairs practitioners, and experts from related associations have compiled a series of professional code books, such as The professional student affairs administrator clearly defining the nature of work and professional development direction of student affairs staff in the United States (Winston et al., 2013); China also has a special management department, which has formulated professional competency standards and professional development directions (Li, 2015). At the same time, there are such groups in the two countries with a large workload, many roles, heavy responsibilities, and high commonality of competence.

However, due to differences in national conditions and systems, Chinese and Western universities have certain differences in terms of the specific content, focus and entry threshold of student work. In order to facilitate comparison, the author combed through the relevant literature of China and the United States and sorted out the main differences as shown in Table 1 and Table 2:

**Table 1** Comparison of student affairs workers in the United States and China

	United States	China
Communication trigger points	Most students find SAE according to their business needs	Most of them are SAEs who take the initiative to find students for educational guidance
Primary transactions	Most of them are pure affairs, but also include the construction of moral education	Thought guidance is the first responsibility, and daily work is transactional content that occupies most of the time
Transaction characteristics	Specificity of tasks	Multiple tasks
Form of work	Dedicated educational design	All affairs run through ideological and moral guidance, and ideological guidance is rejected by one vote
Entry threshold	Student Service Professional generally requires at least a master's degree in student affairs, counseling, or higher education administration	A master's degree is generally required, and a major is generally not required, but a member of the Communist Party of China is required

**Table 2** Comparison of student affairs objectives in China and the United States (Huang & Wu., 2015)

United States	China
High-quality/complete learning experience	Improve the overall quality of students
Equal access to higher education	Cultivate well-rounded innovative talents
Students make greater progress, higher graduation rates	Establish working mechanisms and institutional norms for managing students
Enhance career education and lifelong learning	Create a good nurturing environment
Develop responsible and dedicated citizens	Maintain the stability of colleges and universities and social stability

### The problem of burnout in SAE

SAE work is different from general transactional labor work, it does not directly act on labor products but acts on the most active and active "people" in social productivity, and it is easy to produce problems such as large workload, complicated work, excessive emotional investment and role conflicts in the work, and eventually lead to burnout. As the opposite of burnout, work engagement will also decrease (Bakker & Leiter, 2010). This has been studied in both Chinese and Western academic circles.

#### 1) Western student affairs administrators are prone to burnout

Teaching in colleges and universities is a complex and demanding task that teachers need to be fully involved in every day (Fried, 2001; Elliott & Crosswell, 2001; Day, 2004), teachers will face burnout in increasingly stressful work environments (Nias, 1996). As a member of the university faculty, Western college student affairs administrators also experience varying degrees of burnout. Western researchers have been studying burnout among student affairs professionals since 1982 (Forney et al, 1982). The study of Holmes also showed that the turnover rate of master's degree students in student affairs within 6 years of graduation is 60%, and the main reasons for leaving are low wages, higher burnout, and lower work status (Holmes, 1983). Howard-Hamilton et al. demonstrated that female student affairs professionals exhibit higher levels of emotional exhaustion (Howard-Hamilton et al.,1998). Research by Brewer and Clippard showed that there was an inverse correlation between student support staff fatigue and overall job satisfaction (Brewer & Clippard, 2002). A survey by Tull found that 50-60% of student affairs professionals leave within five years of their first five years of employment (Tull, 2006). Lombardi studied mid-level student affairs professionals and found that negative job satisfaction leads to burnout (Lombardi, 2012). Stoves research showed that the higher the emotional connection with students, the more likely it is to develop compassion fatigue among student support service staff (Stoves, 2014). Marshall et al. (2016) study proves that burnout is the reason for student affairs professionals to leave. According to Marshall et al., the field of student affairs management tends to place extremely high and unrealistic demands on the time and energy of its members and generate burnout. A 2022

Gallup workforce study of 12,319 full-time U.S. employees found that 35% of college student affairs staff always or often feel burned out (Marken & Agrawal, 2022).

**Table 3** A table of the work transactions of a common SAE on a given day

TIME	ITEM
AM 7:10-7:45 AM	From home to work
AT 8:00-8:20	Go to the classroom and check on the students' arrival
AM 8:30-8:45 AM	Back in the office to start dealing with daily affairs, approving student leave applications
AM 8:50-10:00 AM	Write work report materials
AT 10:00-11:00	Talk to students with psychological problems
AT 11:00-11:20	Have some communication and feedback with the parents
AT 11:20-11:45	Write work report materials
AM 11:45-PM00:10	Have lunch
PM 00:30-1:20	Use the time after lunch to organize a class meetings for class 1
PM 1:20-1:50	Prepare lesson
PM 2:00-3:40	Take career guidance classes to student
PM 4:00-5:00	Hold a class meeting for Class 2
PM 5:30-5:50	Have dinner
PM 6:00-7 : 00	Use the time after dinner to organize a group building activity for class 3
PM 8:00-9:40	Come to the student dormitory and talk with the students
PM 9:50	Go home

(Source: Internet College of Anhui University)

### Relevant models for promoting work inputs

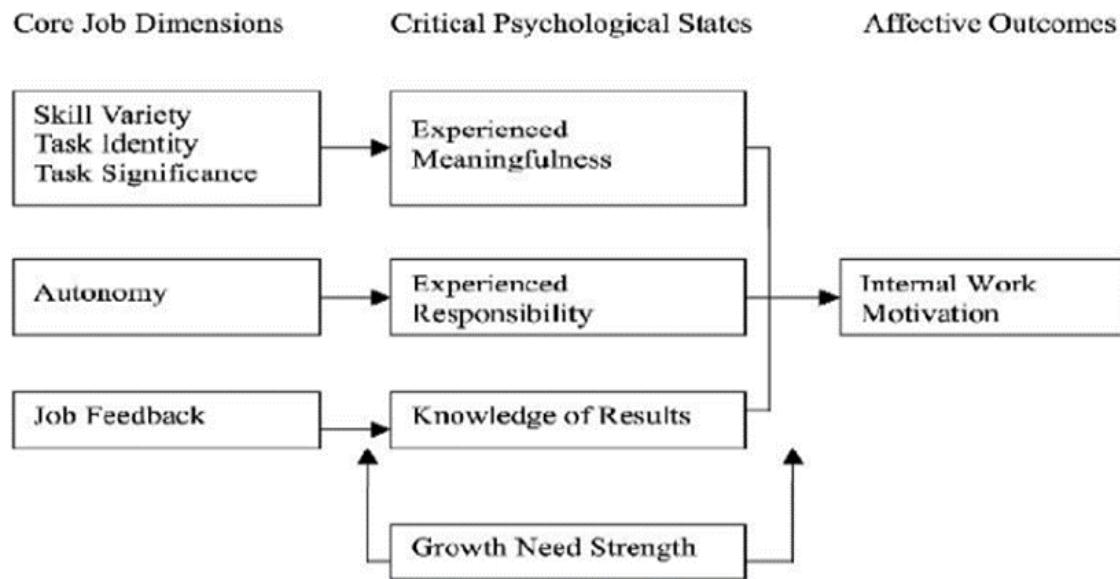
The J-DR model is an important model of management, which can be applied to explore the problems of employee burnout and work engagement in the field of human resources. According to previous studies, SAE is prone to burnout. So how can you reduce burnout and increase their engagement?

According to Work Engagement: A Handbook of Essential Theory and Research edited by Bakker et al. in 2010, the current academic community directly revolves around burnout and work engagement with more representative theoretical models. There are Job characteristics model (JCM), Conservation of resources model (COR), Job demands-control model (JD-C), and Effort-reward imbalance model. ERI), Job demand-resource model (JD-R), etc.

#### 1) The main theories on work input

The Job characteristics model (JCM) believes that work autonomy, work integrity, work importance, work feedback and skill diversity are the five core characteristics of work, which can produce three

key psychological states to promote employees to show intrinsic self-motivation, good work performance, high work recognition, low absenteeism rate and turnover rate and other work output performance (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) (Figure 1). In contrast to the JD-R model, the JCM model only emphasizes the importance of work resources, but does not make specific assumptions about job demand (Bakker & Leiter, 2010).



**Figure 1** Job characteristics model

The Conservation of resources model (COR) believes that various resources are important factors in obtaining new resources and improving welfare. Individuals invest resources in order to respond to threatening situations and protect themselves from negative influences; Individuals strive to protect the resources they have acquired, and strive to accumulate them, resulting in positive outcomes (Hobfoll et al, 2003) (Figure 2). The assumptions about work resources in the JD-R model are consistent with the two main assumptions of the COR model, which is the specific application of COR theory in organizational contexts.

Job demands-control model (JD-C) believes that job pressure is the result of the joint influence of job demand and job control, when the job requirements are higher, and the degree of influence of employees on their job behavior is low, greater job pressure will be perceived, the advantage of the model is that it clarifies the impact of the structure of task configuration on employee health (Karasek, 1979) (Figure 3). It is a heuristic model that includes two specific sets of working conditions, job demands and job resources, in its prediction of employee well-being, regardless of occupational group (Demerouti et al., 2001).

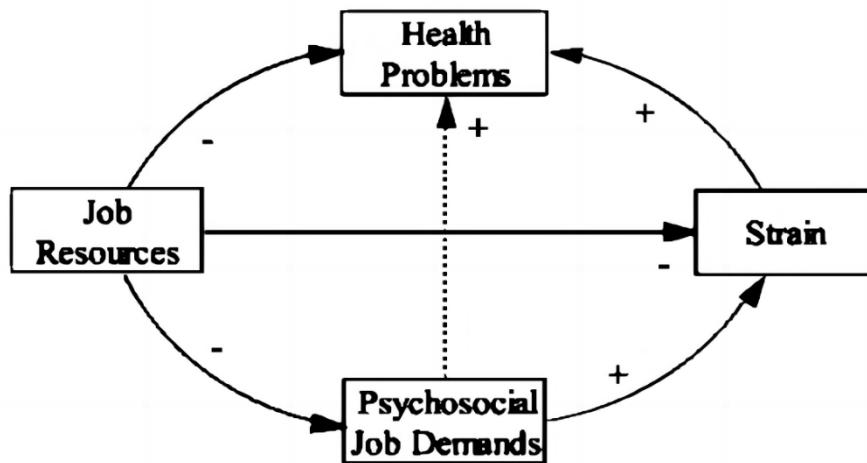


Figure 2 Conservation of resources model

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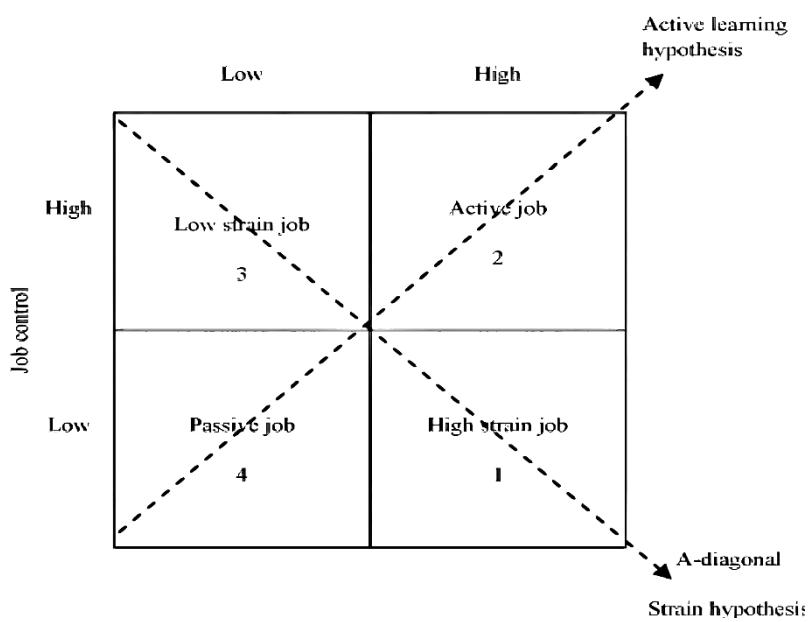
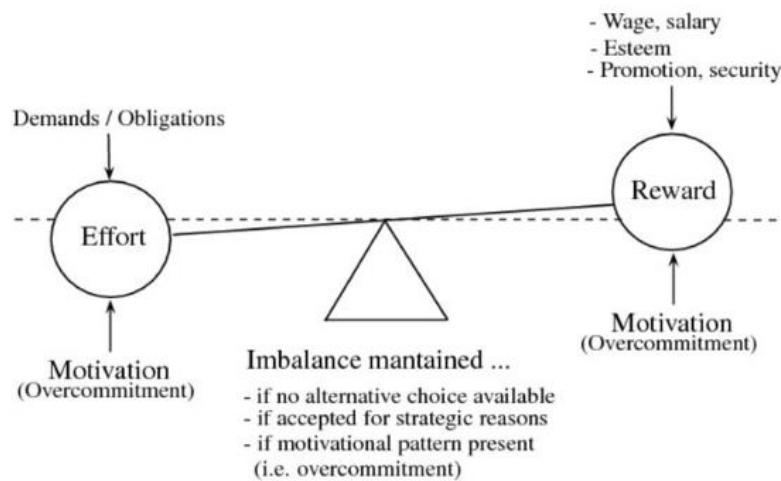


Figure 3 Demands-control model

The Effort-reward imbalance model (ERI) argues that individual self-regulation function mainly depends on social exchange through social roles, and the positive effects of social roles on emotional and motivational self-regulation are conditional on social exchange. Individuals devote time and effort to job, etc., and receive

money, respect, and status from the organization as compensation based on a social exchange contract. If the organization does not give the individual a corresponding return, it can cause individual-related nervous responses, which can lead to emotional distress and stressful experiences (Siegrist, 1996) (Figure 4). Compared with the ERI model, the JD-R model not only covers job requirements and job control and social support, but also includes other aspects, such as performance feedback, career development opportunities, etc., which is more comprehensive than the ERI model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).



**Figure 4** Effort-reward imbalance model

Compared with the above four theories, it is generally believed that JD-R theory integrates various views of job pressure and motivation in previous theories, integrates many different requirements and resources, and makes the model more flexible because it can be targeted at the job requirements and job resources of a particular occupation (Bakker et al, 2023; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Van Veldhoven, et al., 2020). Moreover, JD-R theory has the best match with SAE's working environment and job characteristics, and JD-R theory can be selected to analyze issues such as burnout and job engagement in SAE.

## 2) The core content of the JD-R model

### Job characteristics and influencing factors

JD-R theory states that certain physiological, social, or psychological aspects of the work and organizational environment may directly or indirectly affect employees' physical health, job behavior, and job performance (Demerouti et l., 2001), and any job characteristics can be classified as job requirements and job resources, but according to different research backgrounds and objects. The specific content of job requirements and job resources will vary (Bakker et al., 2023), as detailed in Table 4.

Job requirements are the "negative factors" that consume individual energy at job, requiring individuals to pay continuous physical or psychological efforts, so there is a certain physiological and psychological consumption, such as the amount of job tasks, role conflicts, time pressure, psychoemotional requirements, interpersonal relationship requirements, job insecurity, etc., although the job requirements are not necessarily

negative for the individual, but if the job requirements are difficult to achieve, it will produce job pressure, which in turn affects the level of job engagement (Bakker et al., 2023).

Job resources are "positive factors" in job, factors related to physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects at job and have one or more of the following functions (Lesener et al., 2020): (1) promote the achievement of job goals; (2) reduce job requirements and the psychological and physical costs associated with them; (3) Promote individual growth, learning in development, and so on. Such as support from the organization, leadership support (Mazzetti et al., 2023) (e.g., affirmation of job), support from colleagues (e.g., helping to achieve work goals, et al) (Christian et al., 2011; Halbesleben, 2010). These resources help employees achieve their work goals and reduce the physical and psychological costs of their job.

**Table 4** List of characteristic factors of JD-R model operation

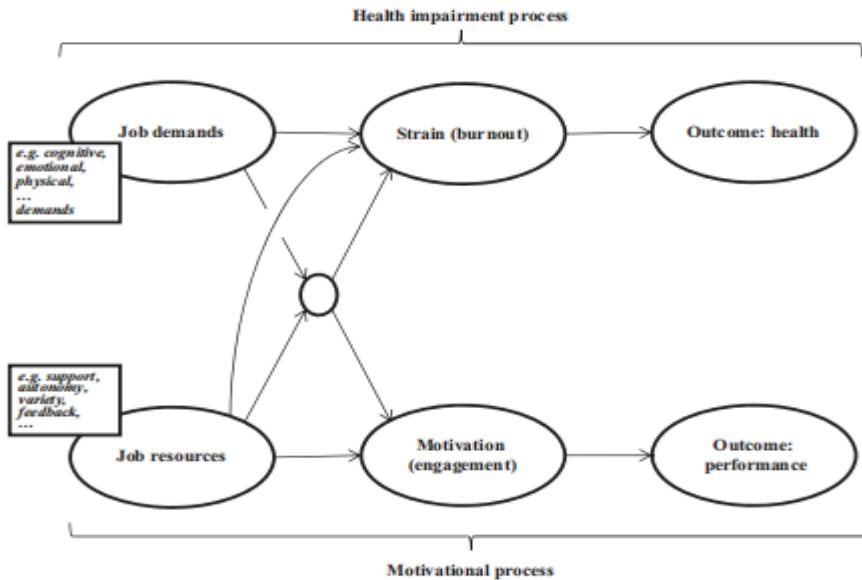
Questionnaire name	Influencing factors	researcher
Word engagement questionnaire	physical, cognitive, emotional, mental	Kahn (1990)
Gallup Q12	involvement, enthusiasm	Harter et al. (2002)
The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale	Vigor, dedication, absorption	Schaufeli et al. (2002)
MAY Scale	cognitive, emotional, physical engagement	May et al. (2004)
JES Scale	Physical Engagement, Emotional Engagement, Cognitive Engagement	Rich et al. (2010)

#### Individual characteristics and influencing factors

The factors that affect job engagement at the individual level include the study of individual characteristic factors, such as optimism and self-efficacy (Halbesleben, 2010; Mazzetti et al, 2023), responsibility (Christian et al, 2011), emotional intelligence (Akhtar et al, 2015), Young also includes the study of demographic variables such as gender, age, education, job position, position, length of service, etc (Young et al, 2018).

#### Three core assumptions

First, the two-process hypothesis states that there are two paths of loss and gain of job on employees (Alarcon, 2011; Christian et al., 2011; Halbesleben, 2010; Nahrgang et al, 2011). In the attrition path, the type, number or intensity of job demands lead to increased stress and burnout, deplete employees' physical health, emotions, and may lead to conditions such as sick leave, exhaustion, low job performance (Demerouti et al, 2001; Li et al., 2023) .In the gain path, job resources (e.g., skill diversity, social support, feedback) meet basic psychological needs and increase employee engagement, resulting in high organizational commitment, high retention intention, high job performance, etc (Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2013). (See Figure 5 for details).



**Figure 5** Dual-process model diagram of job requirements and resources

Second, the Buffer hypothesis: that is, job resources can buffer the wear and tear of high job requirements on employees, that is, job resources can mitigate the negative impact of job requirements on employees (Lavoie-Tremblay et al., 2014; De Jonge & Huter, 2021). Job resources play a moderating role in the impact of job requirements on employee burnout: the negative impact of job requirements on employee burnout is weakened under high job resources; The negative impact of job requirements on employee burnout is enhanced with low job resources (Bakker et al., 2005).

Third, the Boost hypothesis: that employees are better able to translate high job resources into high levels of job performance in challenging environments (high job requirements). Under high job requirements, employees will be more fully engaged in job, call on existing job resources to complete job goals, and obtain more new resources. For example, being forced to complete a project in a very limited amount of time boosts employee performance. That is to say, under high job requirements, employees will make full use of job resources to better engage in job and achieve job goals (Bakker et al., 2007; Tadić, M. et al., 2015; Breevaart & Bakker, 2018; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

### 3) Job requirements for JD-R model

According to the basic assumptions of JD-R theory, many scholars have constructed a job requirement-resource model according to the specific job situation, and explained and verified the mechanism of job input through the model, such as the model constructed by Bakker in 2008 (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008) (Figure 6), after continuous exploration, Bakker et al. proposed a more complete JD-R model in 2017 on the basis of integrating the research of other students (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) (Figure 7).

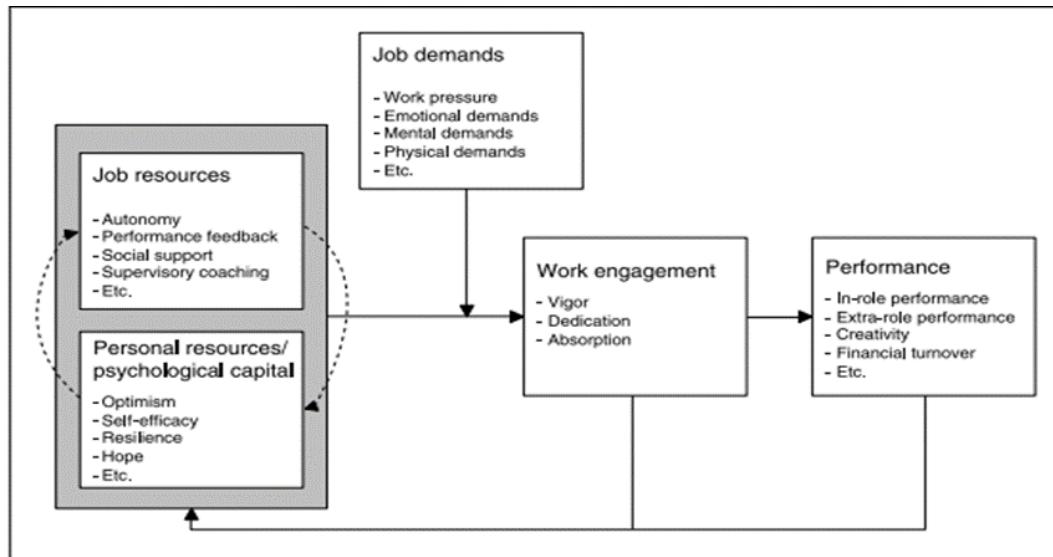


Figure 6 JD-R model

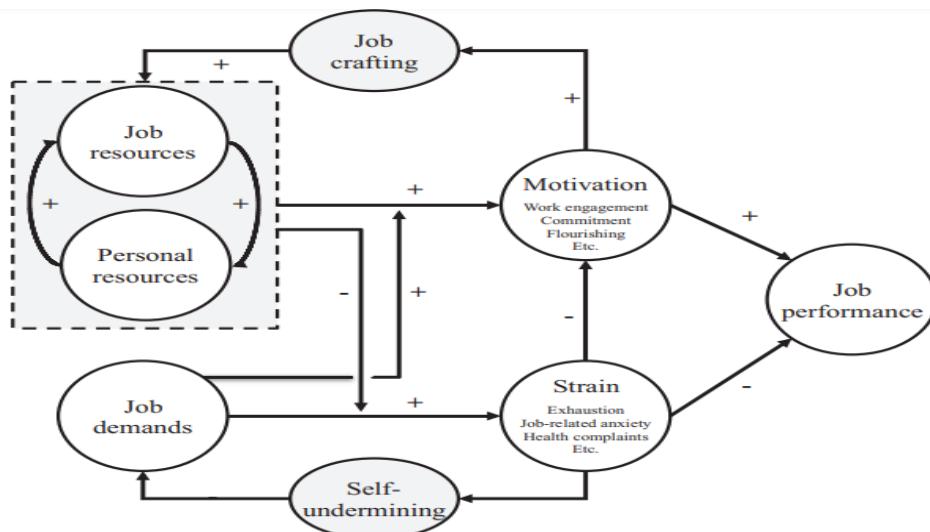


Figure 7 Improved JD-R model

The JD-R model is a highly integrated theoretical model that can be applied to the study of the relationship between job requirements, job resources, personal resources and job engagement (Bakker et al., 2023). In specific research, researchers can construct complete or incomplete models of job requirements-resources according to different research situations and objectives. The JD-R model is applicable to all job situations as well as specific occupations, and each occupational group will have different job characteristics depending on the job environment, such as nurses and police officers paying special attention to emotional and physical needs, but programmers and scientists paying more attention to cognitive needs (Bakker et al., 2023). The SAE job has certain particularities, and the JD-R model can introduce the research of SAE job input problems.

#### 4. The research prospect of SAE job input based on JD-R model

The above highlights the concept of SAE in China and the West, burnout and job engagement in this group, and theories that can be used to increase job engagement, especially JD-R theory. According to the Google Scholar search engine, there are only 27 valuable literature searched after the combination of student affairs and JD-R, and most of the research analysis of the causes of SAE job engagement is mainly carried out in the way of empirical induction or theoretical speculation, lacking a systematic and integrated SAE burnout and individual characteristic factors of job input. The empirical study of job characteristic factors lacks research on the mechanism of each influencing factor, and lacks the construction of SAE job engagement structure model. There is some room for research in this field, and we look forward to making breakthroughs in the following aspects in future research:

##### 1) Use JD-R theory to study the job engagement of SAE groups

It can be seen from the above that the West's exploration of job input is relatively deep, China's research on job input lags behind the West in both theory and empirical evidence, and has not yet formed a complete system, and the main research objects are mainly aimed at enterprise employees, and there are fewer studies on the job engagement of SAE groups in Chinese universities. Future research can combine the educational scenarios of different countries and use JD-R theory to study the characteristics of SAE work, the characteristics of roles and the characteristics of the working environment.

At the same time, university SAEs are particularly prone to burnout because of their unique work needs, such as long working hours, large workloads, role conflicts, changeable job environments, and the need for a high degree of empathy (Lynner, 2023; Bakker & Schaufeli, 2000). However, the observable behavior of employees who have experienced burnout is often difficult to explain (Bakker et al., 2014), and as a result, many opportunities are missed where interventions can be applied to mitigate SAE burnout. Therefore, it is necessary to apply JD-R theory more widely to the study of SAE community job engagement.

##### 2) Add fairness sensitivity factors to JD-R theory

Due to the unequal distribution of job resources and job requirements in the process of job development, it is a real and natural problem, such as in the same unit, due to the inconsistency of special job, the tasks assigned by the leader to employees are prone to inequality, and the distribution of job resources is also prone to inconsistencies. In the JD-R model, the interaction between fairness sensitivity and job resources and job requirements of research subjects is less studied, and the concept of fairness sensitivity is introduced, which has important theoretical value. In future research, variables such as SAE fairness sensitivity can be introduced to the job requirements and the mechanism of job resources on job input in the JD-R model to verify the multiple interactions between fairness sensitivity and job resources, job requirements and job inputs.

##### 3) Improve the relationship between job and family in SAE with the help of JD-R theory

In actual job, SAE is prone to work-family conflicts due to its large workload and complicated job affairs. Ten Brummelhuis combines spillover theories with JD-R theory to propose that family needs and resources may affect job outcomes through individual resources at the same time (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Aw investigated the work-to-home spillover effect, where employees feel a sense of personal fulfillment

when they offer help and assistance to their colleagues, but also feel more fatigued, and exhaustion can lead to withdrawn behavior at home and reduce family performance (Aw et al., 2021). Du et al. found that when employees have a rich family life, that is, after full interaction with their children, there is a positive correlation between job requirements and task performance (Du et al., 2020). Demerouti (2023) suggests that the needs of individuals, families, jobs, and organizations may enhance the impact of various resources on work engagement (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023). Meanwhile, during the COVID-19 pandemic, SAE is working from home, blurring the lines between home and the world of work. Landolfi found that job life began to interfere with family life, but household resources were also used to buffer the impact of job demands (Landolfi et al., 2021). According to the nature of SAE job, it is necessary to further explore SAE work-family conflict in combination with JD-R theory to improve their work engagement.

#### 4) Improve SAE health with the help of JD-R theory

Burnout often leads to negative health-related outcomes (Demerouti et al, 2001), which is amply demonstrated in SAE, which may manifest as sleep disturbances, headaches, respiratory infections, gastrointestinal infections, musculoskeletal disorders, myocardial infarction, and cardiovascular disease in terms of physical health (Ahola, 2007; Armon et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2011). One of the reasons JD-R theory is respected by many scholars is that it helps guide interventions (Bakker et al., 2023). For example, JD-R theory suggests that if the organizational climate promotes attention to employee mental health, employees can actively report to leaders when they experience stress at work, and leaders can regularly implement structural interventions to protect employees' mental health, thereby increasing work engagement and performance (Dollard, 2010). This kind of research inspires us to explore measures to improve the health of SAEs in conjunction with JD-R theory.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we review the concept, job characteristics, burnout, work engagement, and application of JD-R theory in SAE groups, which is a review and reflection on the literature on improving SAE work engagement in the field of human resource management, and hope that through review and thinking, it can have a positive role in promoting scholars' research on SAE work engagement in the future.

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