

## Mechanisms of Occupational Stress among Higher Education Teachers in Transforming Universities: A Perspective from Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping

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### ABSTRACT

In the context of higher education transformation, the occupational stress of higher education teachers is increasing, but empirical research on universities in transition is still limited. This study takes the Transaction Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC) as a theoretical framework to explore the formation mechanism of occupational stress among higher education teachers. A mixed research design was adopted, combining questionnaires with semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistics, correlation and regression analyses, and qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analyses. Multiple linear regression analysis ( $\beta = .420$ ) confirmed that institutional stressors ( $\beta = .384, p < .001$ ) and workload ( $\beta = .202, p < .001$ ) were the main positive predictors of occupational stress, with institutional stressors having the most significant effect. Conversely, perceived lack of organizational support ( $\beta = .105, p < .05$ ) significantly exacerbated career stress. Early career higher education teachers and those with lower salary satisfaction reported higher levels of stress. The qualitative findings reveal that the stress structure of higher education teachers, driven by performance appraisal system and coupled with inadequate support mechanisms. Higher education teachers' professional stress is shaped by the interaction between institutional requirements and resource availability. Optimizing the evaluation system and strengthening organizational support are important ways to reduce career stress among higher education teachers.

**Keywords:** Occupational stress, Higher education teachers, Institutional stressors, Workload, Perceived organizational support

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, occupational stress among higher education teachers has become an important topic in higher education research. Although college and higher education teachers are often viewed as knowledge workers with a high degree of professional autonomy, their work environments have changed significantly with the transformation of higher education governance models (Carvalho & Videira, 2019). Performance evaluation, research output, and competition for resources have gradually become key factors affecting academic career development, requiring higher education teachers to constantly adjust their roles between teaching, research, and organizational affairs. Therefore, the professional pressure of higher education teachers is no longer a simple individual psychological problem, but deeply related to the institutional environment and organizational management (Cadena-Povea et al., 2025).

In China, the rapid expansion and continuous reform of higher education have further exacerbated this trend. The increase in teaching tasks, the continuous strengthening of the scientific research evaluation system, and the intensification of job competition have jointly promoted the job requirements of higher education teachers (Si, 2024). At the same time, the continuous adjustment of the appointment system and performance appraisal mechanism has also increased the uncertainty of academic career development. Existing studies show that workload, career promotion pressure, insufficient organizational support and low perception of return are key factors affecting the professional pressure of higher education teachers (Ahmad et al., 2024; Wang, 2024). Therefore, the professional pressure of higher education teachers gradually shows the composite characteristics of being shaped by the institutional environment and the dynamics of career development.

From a theoretical point of view, stress and coping theory (TTSC) provides an important framework for understanding the professional pressure of higher education teachers. The theory emphasizes that stress does not only come from external requirements, but also from individuals' cognitive evaluation of the situation under established resource conditions (Zhang et al., 2024; Huo et al., 2024). When organizational requirements do not match the resources available to individuals, they are more likely to react to stress. Therefore, considering institutional stressors and workload as the main situational demand variables, as well as perceived organizational support and job rewards as the key resource variables, can help to more systematically explain the formation mechanism of occupational stress among (Abraham et al., 2025).

Although studies have explored the professional pressure of higher education teachers from multiple perspectives, empirical research on local undergraduate colleges and universities in the transition stage is still insufficient (Pinho et al., 2024). Compared with traditional universities, colleges and universities in strategic transformation face higher performance expectations and more resource constraints, and the source of institutional pressure is more obvious. At the same time, the existing research rarely conducts a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between institutional factors, work characteristics and organizational support under the framework of unified theory, which limits the overall understanding of the stress formation mechanism to a certain extent (Li et al., 2025).

Take a university in Jiangsu Province in the stage of strategic transformation as the research situation. Based on the theory of stress and response (TTSC), examine the impact mechanism of institutional stress sources, workload, perceived organizational support and work return on the professional pressure of higher education teachers, and explore the path of organizational management optimization. This study integrates quantitative and qualitative analysis and aims to answer two core questions:

(1) In the context of strategic transformation of higher education, how do institutional stressors, workload and organizational support jointly affect the occupational stress of higher education teachers?

(2) From an organizational management perspective, how can effective support and coping strategies be constructed to alleviate the occupational stress of higher education teachers?

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Progress of Research on Occupational Stress among Higher Education Teachers

Occupational stress is the psychological and physiological reaction that occurs when the demands of the work environment exceed an individual's ability to cope with them (Lukan et al., 2022). With the transformation of the higher education system, the work structure and professional environment of higher education teachers have changed significantly. Research has shown that higher education teachers are not only required to undertake teaching and research tasks, but also to participate in administrative affairs, social services, and performance evaluation, resulting in a significant increase in job complexity (Semma et al., 2024). Traditionally, teaching in higher education has been viewed as a profession with a high degree of autonomy and stability; however, recent research has found that the strengthening of performance management systems in higher education has led to higher levels of occupational stress as teachers face greater evaluative pressures and occupational uncertainty (Johnson &

Coleman, 2025). In international studies, professional stress among higher education teachers is often attributed to increased workloads, intense competition for research performance, role conflict and inadequate organizational support. It has been noted that higher education teachers need to balance teaching quality, research output and social services, and that limited resource allocation and unitary evaluation criteria further exacerbate the stressful experience (Day et al., 2023). In China, with the deepening of higher education governance reform, the performance evaluation system continues to be strengthened. The number of papers published, access to research funding, and title promotion have gradually become the core indicators of academic career development, which has further institutionalized professional stress (Wu et al., 2026). Therefore, higher education teachers' career stress is no longer a purely individual psychological problem, but a complex phenomenon shaped by both organizational systems and educational policies.

**2.2 Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC)** The Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC) was proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as an important theoretical basis for explaining the formation mechanism of occupational stress. The theory suggests that stress is not a direct result of objective environmental factors, but rather a product of an individual's cognitive evaluation of environmental demands. When an individual perceives external demands to exceed his or her available resources or capabilities, stress is likely to arise. TTSC emphasizes two key stages in the stress process: primary evaluation and secondary evaluation. Research has shown that constantly adjusting evaluation policies, strict promotion standards, and the "promotion-or-retirement" system significantly increase the career anxiety of college teachers and may trigger burnout and the tendency to leave the profession (de Cordova et al., 2024). An important contribution of TTSC is to emphasize the situational and dynamic nature of stress. Even under the same working conditions, different individuals may experience different levels of stress (Cross Walker & Duxbury, 2025). In higher education contexts, external factors such as institutional reforms, performance evaluations and competition for resources do not automatically translate into stress, but rather influence stress levels through higher education faculty's perceived evaluations of organizational support, career development opportunities and job rewards (Shoab et al., 2025). Therefore, TTSC provides an important theoretical perspective for understanding individual differences in career stress among higher education teachers and a logical basis for the construction of the variable relationship model in this study.

**2.3 Institutional Stressors and Workloads:** Institutional stressors are stressors originating from organizational systems, policy reforms, and performance management mechanisms (Vega-Muñoz et al., 2026). In the context of higher education governance transformation, HEIs are increasingly adopting quantitative evaluation systems, with research output, funding acquisition and teaching performance as key evaluation indicators (Yu et al., 2025). Although these evaluation systems have improved organizational efficiency to some extent, they have also exposed higher education teachers to higher uncertainty and competitive pressure. Studies have shown that frequent changes in evaluation policies, strict promotion requirements, and the "promotion-or-leave" system significantly increase teachers' career anxiety and may lead to burnout and turnover (Zhang, 2024). At the same time, workload is still an important factor affecting higher education teachers' occupational stress. Increased teaching tasks, higher research requirements, and increased administrative burdens make the allocation of time and energy more challenging. Some studies have pointed out that emotional exhaustion and burnout are more likely to occur when work demands consistently exceed available resources. Thus, institutional stressors and workload tend to have a cumulative effect that together shape the stress experience of higher education teachers. This cumulative effect may be even more pronounced in colleges and universities in strategic transition, where higher education teachers not only need to fulfill established job requirements, but also need to adapt to changing organizational development goals.

**2.4 Perceived Organizational Support and Job Rewards:** Some studies have found that the level of stress among college teachers is related to the level of mental health, and that chronic stress may exacerbate burnout and affect the sustainability of professional development. Organizational support theory suggests that employees are more likely to develop positive work attitudes and thus reduce occupational stress when they perceive that the organization provides adequate resources, respect, and opportunities for development (Agrawal, 2026). For university faculty, organizational support is not only in terms of compensation and benefits, but also in terms of research resource allocation, career development opportunities, management communication mechanisms, and the overall work environment (Eisenberger et al., 2020).

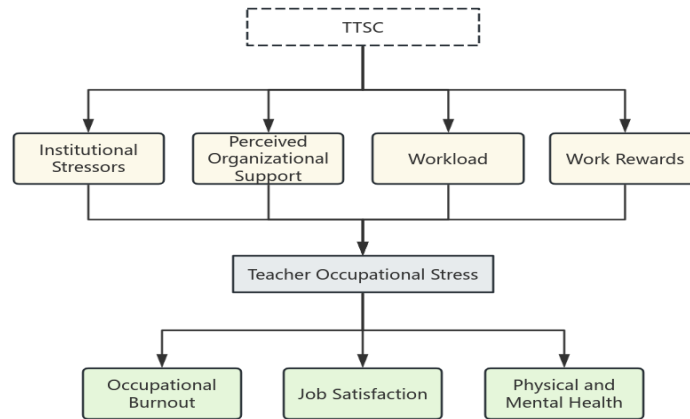
Job rewards usually include both material and non-material dimensions. Material rewards include salary levels, performance incentives, and welfare benefits, while non-material rewards include a sense of professional fulfillment, social recognition, and a sense of meaning at work. Research has shown that when higher education teachers perceive a significant imbalance between effort and reward, they are prone to a sense of unfairness, which increases stress levels (Oliver, 1990). On the contrary, a reasonable reward system can enhance higher education teachers' sense of professional identity and buffer the negative effects of institutional stress to some extent. Perceived organizational support and job rewards are regarded as important moderating variables and occupy a central position in career stress research (Raje, 2026).

**2.5 Higher Education Teachers' Occupational Stress Responses:** Occupational stress not only affects the emotional experience of higher education teachers, but also has a profound impact on job performance as well as physical and mental health. Burnout is often regarded as an important manifestation of occupational stress, the most obvious characteristics are emotional exhaustion and a diminishing sense of accomplishment at work. It has been shown that higher education teachers who have been exposed to high levels of stress for a long period of time are more prone to emotional exhaustion and a gradual decrease in work engagement (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). Job satisfaction is another important indicator of the professional experience of higher education teachers; it tends to decrease as stress levels increase, thus negatively affecting teaching quality and research output. In addition, occupational stress may damage to the physical and mental health of the individual. Some studies have found that the level of stress among higher education teachers' is related to the level of mental health, and that chronic stress may exacerbate burnout and affect the sustainability of professional development (Li, 2020). Examining higher education teachers' occupational stress from multiple perspectives of occupational stress responses contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of its formation mechanisms.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

**3.1 Research Approach:** This study adopts a mixed research methodology, following the core principles of mixed research design proposed by Creswell and Creswell (2017), combining questionnaire surveys with semi-structured interviews, in order to explore the current situation, causes and impacts of the occupational stress of higher education teachers in the transition period, and to further propose corresponding management and coping strategies. Using Suzhou Institute of Technology as a case study, the study focuses on the impact of organizational factors (e.g., institutional stressors, perceived organizational support, and job rewards) and job characteristic factors (e.g., workload) on the occupational stress of higher education teachers under the guidance of the Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC), and further explores the manifestations of occupational stress in terms of burnout, job satisfaction, and physical and mental health (Figure 1). This study proposes the following hypotheses: institutional stressors and workload are significant positive predictors of higher education teachers' occupational stress, while perceived organizational support and job rewards are negative predictors of occupational stress. In addition, there may be significant differences in occupational stress levels and related occupational stress responses higher education teachers with different occupational backgrounds.

**Figure 1. Model Based on TTSC Structure**



**3.2 Sample**

The population of this study was 750 full-time higher education teachers from nine colleges of Suzhou Polytechnic University. The sample size was estimated based on the method proposed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). The minimum sample size was 255 at 95% confidence level and 0.05 sampling error. In order to ensure a reasonable sample from different colleges, stratified proportional sampling method was used by allocating the number of questionnaires according to the number of faculty members in each college and randomly inviting faculty members to participate in each stratum. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed and 320 valid questionnaires were collected, with an effective rate of 91.4%. The sample covers higher education teachers with different disciplinary backgrounds, different titles, and different teaching ages. The inclusion criteria were faculty members who were engaged in teaching in Suzhou Polytechnic Institute, had complete job duties and volunteered to participate in the study. Exclusion criteria included administrators and those who did not complete the questionnaire to ensure the consistency and comparability of the data. In the valid sample, there were slightly more females than males. The age of the respondents was concentrated between 30 and 45 years, and most of them were married. The distribution of teaching age was relatively balanced, with a higher percentage of higher education teachers with more than six years of teaching experience. The majority of higher education teachers are titled as lecturers and are mainly engaged in teaching and research positions. The overall monthly income is concentrated on the middle-income level, and the overall salary satisfaction is on the middle level (Table 1). In addition, this study invited five university administrators to participate in semi-structured interviews, including two university-level leaders, one college dean and two department chairs. All interviewees were involved in university faculty appraisal, appointment, or academic management, had in-depth knowledge of university faculty development and performance systems, and were able to provide important insights from a management perspective. All participation was based on a voluntary principle and the data were made anonymous and used for academic research only.

**Table 1. Demographic characteristics (N = 320)**

Variable	Attribute	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
Gender	Male	147	45.94	45.94
	Female	173	54.06	100
Age	< 30	72	22.5	22.5
	30-35	81	25.31	47.81
	36-45	109	34.06	81.87
	> 45	58	18.12	100
Marital Status	Unmarried	108	33.75	33.75
	Married	212	66.25	100
Number of children	0	37	11.56	11.56
	1	112	35	46.56
	2	63	19.69	66.25
	No response (including unmarried)	108	33.75	100
Years of teaching	< 3	53	16.56	16.56
	3-5	81	25.31	41.87
	6-9	92	28.75	70.62
	≥ 10	94	29.38	100
Academic Title	No Title	71	22.19	22.19
	Lecturers	170	53.12	75.31
	Associate Professor	50	15.62	90.93
	Professor	29	9.06	100
Position Type	Teaching	105	32.81	32.81
	Research	60	18.75	51.56
	Teaching and Research	155	48.44	100
	No response	0	0	0
Monthly income level	< 4,000	32	10	10
	4,000-5,999	57	17.81	27.81
	6,000-7,999	77	24.06	51.87
	8,000-9,999	90	28.12	79.99
	≥ 10,000	64	20	100
Salary Satisfaction	Very Satisfied	53	16.56	16.56
	Satisfied	84	26.25	42.81
	Neutral	135	42.19	85
	Unsatisfactory	37	11.56	96.56
	Very Dissatisfied	11	3.44	100

**3.3 Data Analysis :** The Questionnaire on the Current Situation of Teachers' Occupational Stress in Suzhou Polytechnic aims to investigate the current situation of teachers' occupational stress in colleges and universities, its causes and its effects. Based on the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC) proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the questionnaire contains 41 questions and is divided into three parts: the first part collects demographic information; the second part measures sources of occupational stress, which including institutional stressors, perceived organizational support, and workload; and the third part assesses stress responses, covering psychological, physiological, and behavioral dimensions. All questions were scored on a five-point Likert scale. Prior to the formal survey, the study pretested 30 randomly selected higher education teachers and invited three experts to conduct item-objective congruence (IOC) content validity tests. Questionnaire entries were revised based on expert feedback. The pretest results showed that the overall Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.830 and the standardized  $\alpha$  was 0.841, indicating that the questionnaire had good internal consistency (Table 2). The results of the structural validity test showed a KMO value of 0.781 and a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity ( $\chi^2 = 1902.966$ ,  $df = 820$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Indicates that the data meets the conditions for further analysis (Table 3).

**Table 2. Confidence analysis (N = 30)**

Cronbach Alpha.	Cronbach Alpha based on standardized terms	Number of terms
.830	.841	41

**Table 3. Results of the KMO and Bartlett's Tests**

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
KMO Sampling Adequacy Coefficient.		.781
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approximate Chi-Square	1902.966
	Degrees of freedom	820
	Significance	.000

The semi-structured interview outline was designed to supplement the results of the questionnaire survey and provide insight into the main sources of occupational stress, key issues in organizational management, and potential improvement strategies. Interview topics revolved around the macro environment, performance evaluation system, appointment system, support mechanisms, organizational management strategies, and individual coping strategies, and follow-up questions were set based on the quantitative analysis. This study used a combination of questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews to collect data. The questionnaires were released through online survey platforms and official school communication channels. All questionnaires were filled out anonymously and participation was based solely on the principle of informed consent. The data collected were used for academic research only. After the questionnaire data collection and preliminary analysis are completed, interviews are carried out to further explain the quantitative results. Focus on the source of professional stress, outstanding problems in organizational management and the direction of improvement. Each interview lasts about 30-45 minutes. After the consent of the interviewee, the conversation was recorded and transcribed into text for subsequent qualitative analysis. SPSS is used for quantitative data analysis. First, using the descriptive statistical method, frequency (f), percentage (%), mean (M) and standard deviation (SD), present the overall level of occupational pressure in each dimension. Second, Pearson correlation analysis is used to test the relationship between institutional stressors, perceived organizational support, job rewards, workload, and occupational stress. Subsequently, significant predictor variables were identified through multiple regression analysis. In addition, independent samples t-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to compare the differences in occupational stress levels among higher education teachers with different background characteristics. Qualitative data were processed using thematic analysis. Interview data were coded, categorized and thematically summarized after transcription to identify the main causes, effects and coping strategies of professional stress among higher education teachers. Finally, the depth and completeness of the research interpretation is further enhanced by integrating qualitative and quantitative results.

**4. RESULTS**

**4.1 Quantitative Results:** The results of the descriptive statistics show that results indicated that among the occupational stressors, institutional stressors (M = 3.00, SD = 0.57) and workload (M = 2.93, SD = 0.61) had relatively high mean scores, while perceived organizational support had the lowest score (M = 2.72, SD = 0.67). In terms of occupational stress responses, job satisfaction (M = 2.95, SD = 0.81), burnout (M = 2.84, SD = 0.64), and physical and mental health (M = 2.81, SD = 0.80) were moderate (Table4).

**Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Occupational Stressors and Occupational Stress Responses (N = 320)**

Variable	Min.	Maximum value	Mean value	Standard deviation
Occupational Stressors				
Institutional Stressors	1	5	3	0.57
Workload	1	5	2.93	0.61
Job Rewards	1	5	2.84	0.62
Perceived organizational support	1	5	2.72	0.67
Occupational stress response				
Burnout	1	5	2.84	0.64
Physical and mental health	1	5	2.81	0.8
Job Satisfaction	1	5	2.95	0.81

The results of independent samples t-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that the occupational stress scores of different groups of higher education teachers did not exhibit significant differences ( $p > .05$ ) on the variables of gender, age, marital status, number of children, title, and type of position (Table5). However, there was a significant difference in occupational stress by age of teaching ( $F = 2.861$ ,  $p = .037$ ), with college and university faculty with less than 3 years of teaching experience reporting the highest levels of stress (M = 3.04, SD = 0.77). In addition, the level of monthly income ( $F = 9.080$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which is part of the job reward dimension, as well as salary satisfaction ( $F = 20.871$ ,  $p < .001$ ) showed significant differences in occupational stress scores (Figure 2).

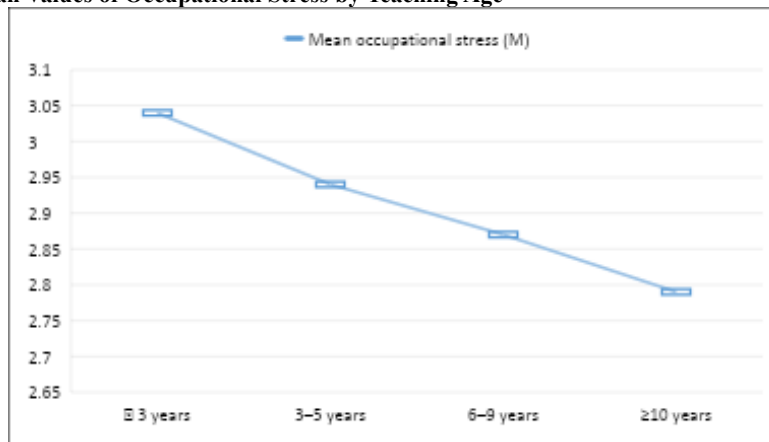
**Table 5. Between-Group Differences in Occupational Stress among High School Teachers (N = 320)**

Variable	Attribute	Frequency (n)	Mean $\pm$ standard deviation	Statistic	(p)
Gender	Male	147	2.87 $\pm$ 0.45	t = 0.106	0.916
	Female	173	2.86 $\pm$ 0.58		
Age	$\leq 30$	72	2.86 $\pm$ 0.37	F = 0.474	0.701
	30-35	81	2.87 $\pm$ 0.62		
	36-45	109	2.90 $\pm$ 0.53		
	$\geq 45$	58	2.79 $\pm$ 0.52		
Marital Status	Unmarried	108	2.91 $\pm$ 0.54	t = 1.126	0.261
	Married	212	2.84 $\pm$ 0.51		
Number of children	0	37	2.79 $\pm$ 0.54	F = 0.526	0.592
	1	112	2.87 $\pm$ 0.54		
	2	63	2.81 $\pm$ 0.44		
Years of teaching	$< 3$	53	3.04 $\pm$ 0.77	F = 2.861	.037*
	3-5	81	2.87 $\pm$ 0.33		
	6-9	92	2.83 $\pm$ 0.42		
	$\geq 10$	94	2.79 $\pm$ 0.56		

Academic Title	No title	71	2.97 ± 0.51	F = 1.846	0.139
	Lecturer	170	2.83 ± 0.47		
Position Type	Associate Professor	50	2.89 ± 0.46	F = 0.883	0.415
	Professor	29	2.73 ± 0.83		
	Teaching	105	2.89 ± 0.50		
Monthly income level	Research	60	2.91 ± 0.60	F = 9.080	<0.001***
	Teaching and Research	155	2.82 ± 0.51		
	< 4000	32	3.32 ± 0.75		
Salary Satisfaction	4000-5999	57	2.78 ± 0.39	F=20.871	<0.001***
	6000-7999	77	2.89 ± 0.34		
	8000-9999	90	2.85 ± 0.38		
	≥ 10000	64	2.69 ± 0.69		
Salary Satisfaction	Very satisfied	53	2.57 ± 0.65	F=20.871	<0.001***
	Satisfactory	84	2.83 ± 0.35		
	Neutral	135	2.89 ± 0.36		
	Unsatisfactory	37	2.93 ± 0.53		
	Very Dissatisfied	11	3.97 ± 0.98		

Note: \* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.001

**Figure 2. Comparison of Mean Values of Occupational Stress by Teaching Age**



Pearson correlation analysis indicates that all core variables are significantly correlated with each other (p < .01 or p < .05). The strongest correlation was between institutional stressors and burnout (r = .533, p < .01), followed by institutional stressors and physical and mental health (r = .436, p < .01), and workload and burnout (r = .412, p < .01). Perceived organizational support was similarly significantly associated with burnout (r = .442, p < .01) and physical and mental health (r = .306, p < .01). Correlations between job satisfaction and each of the stressor variables were relatively weak but still reached statistically significant levels (r = .131-.266, p < .05) (see Table6).

Multiple linear regression analyses revealed that the overall model is significant (F = 57.120, p < .001), with a coefficient of determination of R<sup>2</sup> = .420 and an adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .413. institutional stressors (β = .384, p < .001), workload (β = .202, p < .001), and perceived inadequate organizational support (β = .105, p < .05) were all significant predictor variables of occupational stress among higher education teachers. In contrast, insufficient work rewards do not reach statistical significance (β = .101, p = .068). Variance inflation factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.51 to 1.66, indicating that there is no serious multiple covariance problem (Table7).

**Table 6. Correlation Matrix of Occupational Stressors and Stress Responses (N = 320)**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Perceived Organizational Support	1						
Work Rewards	.473**	1					
Institutional Stressors	.461**	.540**	1				
Workload	.501**	.513**	.521**	1			
Physical and Mental Health	.306**	.378**	.436**	.388**	1		
Occupation Burnout	.442**	.396**	.533**	.412**	.366**	1	
Job Satisfaction	.131*	.191**	.262**	.262**	.197**	.191**	1

Note: \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01

**Table 7. Multiple Regression Analysis for Predicting Career Stress Among Higher Education Teachers (N = 320)**

Predictor Variables	B	Standard Error	β	t	p	VIF
Constant	0.835	0.136	-	6.121	0	-
Institutional Stressors	0.353	0.051	0.384	6.962	0.000***	1.649
Workload	0.174	0.048	0.202	3.653	0.000***	1.657
Perceived Organizational Support	0.082	0.041	0.105	1.984	0.048*	1.51
Work Rewards	0.084	0.046	0.101	1.831	0.068	1.65

**4.2 Qualitative Findings**

Based on semi-structured interviews with five university administrators, the thematic analysis identified four core themes: changes in the stress structure under strategic transformation, issues related to the performance evaluation and tenure system, organizational support and work environment factors, and individual coping strategies of higher education teachers. Overall, respondents generally perceived a significant change in the career stress structure of higher education teachers, from a predominantly teaching task to a composite structure integrating teaching, research and performance assessment. In the face of this status quo, focused on making the evaluation system better and making the support system stronger, and guiding higher education teachers to cope with stress through teamwork (Table 8).

**Table 8. Results of Interviews on Occupational Stress of Higher Education Teachers**

Theme	Sub-theme	Interview
Stress Structure	Survival-type stress surge	Teachers in higher education face the existential challenge of heavy tasks, fast pace, and high workload. Occupational stress shifts from teaching task-oriented to compound survival stress
	Multiple Requirements Superimposed	The triple requirements of teaching, research and performance evaluation have increased, the pressure has shifted from task-oriented to survival-oriented, and the institutional requirements have increased significantly.
Evaluation and Support System	Single assessment standard and lack of buffer	Teaching faculty feel marginalized because of the emphasis on research rather than teaching in the assessment; young faculty lack a buffer for growth under the "promotion-or-retirement" policy
	Hidden contributions are not recognized	Low student-teacher ratios result in teaching and student management tasks not being included in core evaluations and work not being recognized.
	Lack of development and psychological support	A large number of meaningless administrative forms at the grassroots level, and a lack of systematic Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) in schools
Coping Strategies	Organization: Classified evaluation and fault-tolerant mechanism	The "classification evaluation and dynamic assessment mechanism" should be implemented to break the thesis-only model, and the real humanistic care should be reflected in the "systematic burden reduction" and "establishment of fault-tolerance mechanism"
	Individual: team support and psychological capital	Teachers in colleges and universities should avoid working alone, rely on teams to carry out interdisciplinary cooperation, and improve their "psychological capital" to cope with the current competitive environment.

**5. Discussion**

On the basis of the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC), this study systematically examines the composition and formation factors of occupational stress of higher education teachers in the transition period. The quantitative results indicate that institutional stressors and workload are the main predictors of occupational stress, with institutional stressors having the strongest explanatory power. This finding is consistent with TTSC's core proposition that the degree of match between environmental demands and personal resources determines stress responses (Dang-Van et al., 2025). When organizations make higher performance demands without increasing support resources, individuals are more likely to experience negative psychological outcomes such as burnout and physical and mental fatigue. The results of the study indicate that during institutional transformation, increasingly stringent performance appraisal systems and job requirements lead to elevated role stress and performance-related stress among higher education teachers population (Xue et al., 2024; Decramer et al., 2012).

Correlation and regression analyses further confirmed significant associations between institutional stressors, workload, and insufficient organizational support. Suggests that career stress among higher education teachers is not caused by a single factor, but is the result of the interaction of multiple managerial and work-related factors. This is consistent with previous research that job demands, role conflicts and inadequate resources are key determinants of psychological well-being among higher education teachers (Ghasemi, 2025). The institutional factors perspective further extends existing research by highlighting its central role in the context of universities in transition. The study suggests that the adjustment of performance appraisal systems is an important factor in the change of stress structure during organizational transition. This finding enriches the current existing knowledge by highlighting the key role of the institutional environment in shaping occupational stress.

The group difference analysis showed that most demographic variables did not result in significant differences in occupational stress levels, while teaching age and salary-related variables did. This suggests a degree of generalization of occupational stress among higher education teachers in an organizational context with a relatively uniform institutional environment. Meanwhile, early career higher education teachers and those with lower income experience higher levels of stress, which may stem from limited accumulation of resources and financial pressures in the early stages of career development (Dizon-Ross et al., 2019). Prior research has shown that individuals in the early stages of their careers tend to face greater uncertainty and that financial rewards and job security are important determinants of job satisfaction. The results of this study further corroborate the explanatory power of career stage theory in the field of human resource management.

From an organizational management perspective, the qualitative findings complement the quantitative results. The results of the interviews showed that in the context of strategic transformation, higher education teachers must simultaneously cope with the multiple demands of teaching, research, and performance appraisal, while the organizational support mechanisms and appraisal systems are still evolving. Experts generally recommended exploring differentiated evaluation systems, improving support structures for higher education teachers' development, and enhancing higher education teachers' adaptive capacity through teamwork and mentorship. These findings provide empirical support for the TTSC perspective that resources play a key role in moderating stress responses, highlighting the importance of organizational support and developmental resources in alleviating higher education teachers stress.

This study has three main contributions. At the theoretical level, the study structurally extends the TTSC model by placing it in the unique context of transitioning universities. On the methodological level, the study triangulated qualitative interviews with quantitative self-assessment data through a management perspective. At the practical level, the study proposes a structured assessment reform framework for university management to establish differentiated performance indicators based on career development stages, systematically reduce repetitive administrative burdens, and implement targeted psychological and career development support systems.

Although this study provides valuable theoretical and practical observations, there are significant limitations. First, the sample was from only one college, which affects the universality of the findings. Second, the cross-sectional data limit inferences of a strict causal relationship between institutional demands and stress outcomes. The measurements are relatively homogeneous, and future research could use a longitudinal tracking design to examine the dynamics of occupational stress among higher education teachers during the process of organizational transformation and conduct cross-national or cross-cultural comparative studies to further enhance the scalability of the findings. Future studies may also adopt multilevel modeling to further explore the multilevel mechanisms of occupational stress among higher education teachers.

**6. Conclusion**

This study comprehensively explores the professional pressure of higher education teachers in transition. After integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence under the framework of TTSC, it is found that the pressure of higher education teachers is not only related to individual factors, but also depends on the interaction between institutional pressure and available resources. Institutional pressure sources and workload are the dominant factors that determine the pressure level of higher education teachers, while organizational support plays a key buffer role.

The study found that the professional pressure of higher education teachers is universal, among which the early stage of their careers and higher education teachers with low income and low salary satisfaction are more prominently affected. Career development stage and economic factors are factors that need to be focused on in the management of higher education teachers.

From a practical perspective, this study emphasizes the need for colleges and universities to break through the performance-oriented management model and establish a more balanced evaluation system. Strengthening organizational support, optimizing resource allocation, and providing targeted support for higher education teachers in the early stages of their careers are key strategies to relieve stress. Overall, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the multiple dimensions of occupational stress among higher education teachers and provides time-worthy references for organizational policy and management reform.

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