Reassessing Role Stressors as Drivers of Organizational Commitment:Evidence from Contract-Based Lecturers in Chinese Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload on affective, continuance, and normative commitment among contract-based university lecturers in Jiangsu Province, China. While role stressors are traditionally viewed as detrimental to employee well-being, this study proposes that, under specific academic and cultural conditions, they may positively reinforce organizational commitment. Drawing on Role Theory, Organizational Commitment Theory, and the Job Demands–Resources Model, a structural equation modeling approach (SmartPLS 4.0) was used to analyze data from 305 valid responses. Results indicate that all three role stressors significantly and positively affect the three dimensions of commitment, suggesting that complex academic roles can serve as motivational challenges when supported by institutional frameworks. These findings contribute to a contextualized understanding of stressor–commitment relationships in non-tenured academic settings and offer implications for role management, performance appraisal, and contract policy reforms in higher education institutions.

Keywords: role ambiguity; role conflict; role overload; organizational commitment;

INTRODUCTION

The steady rise in contract-based academic jobs has created serious concerns about how well faculty integrate into their institutions and remain committed over time. While these positions often come with higher teaching and service demands, they are rarely matched with sufficient institutional support. This imbalance increases work-related stress (Amadi, 2024; Hassard et al., 2021). Among the main causes are role, related stressors—role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload, which are critical factors in maintaining both productivity and morale (Eichberger et al., 2021; Strassburger et al., 2023). Unclear job roles, conflicting responsibilities, and excessive workloads can drain faculty members' psychological resources and shape their organizational attitudes, particularly their affective, continuance, and normative commitment.

In the current study, the higher education industry in China, specifically in Jiangsu Province, serves as an example of campus restructuring of labour. Contract-based faculty has become a growing trend in the province, which has led to a massive push for institutional expansion. The policies that were made to increase research productivity and the competitiveness of institutions globally have also contributed to a disjointed employment structure and work pressures (Cooke & Xu, 2024; Wang & Jones, 2021). In this case, contract lecturers are often forced to balance teaching, research, and administrative roles and duties, and they have to deal with the insecurity of their jobs and the lack of opportunities to advance their careers. Such conditions create an increase in role strain and highlight the conflict between institutional priorities and faculty health.

Role ambiguity occurs when lecturers are unsure about their job responsibilities or expectations, often leading to mental strain and reduced emotional commitment to the institution (den Kamp et al., 2024). Role conflict happens when different job demands clash, making it hard to meet all requirements effectively. If unresolved, it can lower morale and create emotional distance from the workplace (Beehr et al., 1976; Koura et al., 2025). Role overload occurs when the workload exceeds the available time and resources, leading to fatigue and weakened loyalty to the institution (Hecht, 2001; Sohail et al., 2025). Although workplace stress has been widely studied, little research has examined how these three types of stress affect different aspects of organizational commitment in higher education, especially for non-permanent staff. Many past studies have either treated commitment as a single concept or focused only on permanent faculty, overlooking how different stressors might influence emotional, calculative, and moral forms of commitment (Leathwood & Read, 2022; Yao et al., 2024).

This study addresses that gap by examining how role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload each affect the three dimensions of organizational commitment—affective, continuance, and normative—among contract-based lecturers in Jiangsu Province. Drawing on Role Theory (Kahn et al., 1964), Organizational Commitment Theory (Meyer & Allen, 1991), and the Job Demands–Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), the study makes several contributions. First, it separates organizational commitment into three distinct components and explores their links with specific stressors, providing a more detailed understanding than most prior research. Second, it uses data from a setting marked by job insecurity and increasing academic demands, offering fresh insights into Chinese higher education. Finally, it provides practical suggestions for university leaders and policymakers on improving role clarity, managing workloads, and strengthening institutional support for contract lecturers. These steps can help build healthier, fairer, and more sustainable academic workplaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHSES

Hypotheses Development

Role ambiguity refers to unclear expectations, poorly defined responsibilities, or insufficient information needed to perform tasks effectively, which elevates strain and undermines job attitudes (Zheng et al., 2024). Contemporary evidence links role ambiguity to lower job satisfaction and weakened identification- and citizenship-related outcomes across sectors (De Clercq & Pereira, 2024). In contract-based academic roles, shifting policies, inconsistent evaluations, and uncertain advancement can intensify these effects; recent work on Chinese higher education documents stress and engagement patterns consistent with demand–resource imbalances (Tian et al., 2024; Zheng et al., 2024). Accordingly, role ambiguity in such contexts is expected to shape affective, continuance, and normative commitment. The association between role ambiguity and affective commitment is generally negative in high-strain settings; however, resource-rich contexts can buffer this pattern. In China, teachers' social connectedness and job control bolster engagement and, in turn, organizational commitment, indicating that ambiguity does not invariably erode affective ties (Li et al., 2025). Resource-based buffers, such as perceived organizational support and leadership, mitigate the impact of high demands and ambiguity on adverse outcomes (De Clercq & Pereira, 2024; Ramaci et al., 2024; Yong et al., 2025). Moreover, perceived career growth correlates with stronger commitment, suggesting that career prospects can offset the demotivating effects of ambiguous roles (Wang, 2024). On this basis, the following hypothesis is advanced.

H1a: There is a positive relationship between role ambiguity and affective commitment.

Continuance commitment makes up the perception of the costs of leaving an organization by the employee. Role ambiguity can increase external uncertainty and increase the perceived termination risks in situations where there is uncertainty regarding the labor market. According to the organizational commitment theory (RodríguezFernández et al., 2024), employees may be committed to their jobs not because of a strong attachment to the job itself, but rather due to the feeling that they are held captive by their investments and cannot find alternative employment. The views are supported by empirical studies of Homayed et al. (2024) and Allam (2024), who revealed that role ambiguity seems to support continuance commitment in certain situations where the perceived costs of leaving the organization are high.

H1b: There is a positive relationship between role ambiguity and continuance commitment.

Normative commitment refers to an employee's sense of moral obligation to remain with an organization. Within the framework of the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, it can be proposed that experiencing role ambiguity in the absence of adequate work resources reduces perceptions of organizational fairness and weakens employees' moral attachment (Kitayama & Salvador, 2024). However, in certain cultural contexts, particularly those that value loyalty and collectivism, as is common in East Asian academic settings, ambiguity may be interpreted as a reflection of institutional hierarchy (Godbersen, 2024; Ho, 2024). In such environments, faculty members, especially those in early or mid-career positions, may adapt to unclear organizational structures in ways that foster loyalty and a heightened sense of responsibility toward their institutions.

H1c: There is a positive relationship between role ambiguity and normative commitment.

Role conflict refers to the experience of incompatible demands and expectations within one's professional role, often leading to psychological stress and cognitive dissonance (Anglin et al., 2022). Within the framework of Role Stress Theory, role conflict is conceptualized as a significant stressor that disrupts an employee's ability to fulfill expectations from multiple stakeholders (Huang et al., 2024). In higher education settings, particularly for contract-based lecturers, conflicts between teaching, research, and administrative expectations are common and can significantly shape their attitudinal commitment to the organization. The association with role conflict in the case of affective commitment is usually complicated. Although conflict is normally linked to an emotional strain, the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory proposes that, in cases where people feel moderately the conflict in their roles but still have a chance to close networks or institutional sources, they might develop a stronger emotional attachment to their organization as a way of coping (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In addition, the study by Cai et al. (2024) and Yong et al. (2025) demonstrates that affective commitment might not decrease in the environment where conflict is viewed as a transient or controllable threat. Role conflict, in collectivist societies such as those in China, can be internalized as professional responsibility, which in turn strengthens emotional commitment to the institutional objectives. Accordingly

H2a: There is a positive relationship between role conflict and affective commitment.

Continuance commitment is defined as the perceived cost of quitting a given position. Paradoxically, role conflict may enhance the person in question's resolve to remain in the position. Contract workers are willing to stay when contractual work offers them unequal demands, yet they have no feasible other jobs, or they feel unsafe in the industry. This stand is supported by the Organizational Commitment Theory (Joo, 2025), which assumes that people weigh the economic and social costs of a job change. Empirical data by Cai and Ali (2024) and Allam (2024) also suggest that unresolved conflict in high-control contexts has the propensity to increase continuance commitment through the escalation of perceptions of risk to an act of departure. Continuance commitment under the condition of role conflict, therefore, can be envisaged as a consequence of an adaptive reaction to an estimate of the economic and social costs of exit. Thus:

H2b: There is a positive relationship between role conflict and continuance commitment.

Concerning normative commitment, which reflects moral obligation, the presence of role conflict may generate varying responses depending on contextual norms. In institutional cultures where loyalty and duty are emphasized, especially in Confucian-influenced societies, lecturers may feel obligated to endure professional role clashes for the broader good of the institution. Studies by Chang (2024) and Li et al. (2025) highlight that in such contexts, perceived sacrifices made in navigating role conflict may deepen one's sense of obligation.

Accordingly:

H2c: There is a positive relationship between role conflict and normative commitment.

Role overload can be defined as a situation that happens when employees believe that the number of activities or the complexity of those activities that they are given is in excess of the available time, material or staff to execute those activities properly (Huang et al., 2024). This is quite common in academic circles, especially for contract-based lecturers who necessarily must cope with a host of different responsibilities with little support at the institutional level. Role Stress Theory explains that overload is a stress factor that can impair psychological

well-being and form workplace attitude (Homayed et al., 2024). However, its effects on the different aspects of organizational commitment should vary depending on the differing contextual factors and coping strategies of individuals. In the case of affective commitment, some scholars argue that role overload may diminish emotional attachment due to heightened exhaustion and role fatigue. Nevertheless, the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory suggests that individuals may engage in affective investment to secure future resources (Li et al., 2025). Empirical studies such as those by Cavanaugh et al. (2000) and Shukla & Srivastava (2016) highlight that when employees perceive overload as a challenge rather than a hindrance, it can foster increased engagement and emotional bonding with the organization. In collectivist environments like China, enduring demanding workloads may be interpreted as fulfilling institutional loyalty. Therefore:

H3a: There is a positive relationship between role overload and affective commitment.

Continuance commitment, initially perceived as the cost of leaving an organization, can be further enhanced when employees face role overloading. When people become too involved in multidimensional demands, quitting can be viewed as resulting in losses in their professional identity, status, and future gains. Research findings of Schmidbauer et al. (2025) and Setthakorn et al. (2024) state that job-embedded employees tend to build more continuance bonds, despite tough role requirements. In this regard, continuance commitment could also be strengthened by the existence of discrete labor markets, which restrict possible employment alternatives. Therefore, given situations of role overload by virtue of limited labor markets, contract lecturers, among others, can have relatively fewer exit options and thus reinforce their dependence on their current roles.

H3b: There is a positive relationship between role overload and continuance commitment.

Concerning normative commitment, which reflects a sense of moral duty or obligation to remain, role overload may paradoxically reinforce this sentiment, especially when excessive demands are framed as institutional needs. In Confucian-influenced professional settings, such as Chinese academia, individuals often internalize role pressure as a form of societal contribution. Studies by Takamatsu (2024) and Li et al. (2025) suggest that perceived organizational reliance can elevate normative commitment, even in high-strain conditions. Thus:

H3c: There is a positive relationship between role overload and normative commitment.

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in three core theoretical perspectives that collectively explain how role stressors influence various forms of organizational commitment among contract-based university lecturers in Jiangsu Province, China.

The theory of role stresses argues that conflicting expectations cause strain, lack of clarity of responsibilities, and work overload, and this undermines attitudes to work. Recent research indicates that role ambiguity and role conflict are associated with emotional exhaustion, which is a contributor to disengagement and lower commitment, in both service and public-sector contexts (Mwakyusa, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). Forces in contingent contracts and teaching-research tensions, which are found in universities, exacerbate these dynamics; studies done in China report how role pressure and job stress translate into commitment-related outcomes via burnout and satisfaction pathways (Wang et al., 2020; Feng et al., 2025). The research on commitment profiles also shows that the configuration with affective commitment is associated with fewer adverse outcomes as compared to one with continuance or normative motives, which highlights the importance of affective bonds when it comes to safeguarding well-being (Stark et al., 2025). Collectively, the current evidence confirms the applicability of the theory: role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload undermine the conditions of longterm organizational attachment among contract-based faculty, and performance, satisfaction and retention in precarious academic jobs.

JD–R theory frames these processes as an imbalance between demands and resources: sustained exposure to high demands with inadequate autonomy, support, or clarity produces health impairment and motivational loss, while sufficient resources buffer strain and sustain engagement (Bakker, 2023; Demerouti, 2023). Recent extensions toward “JD-R 3.0” integrate evolving stressors such as after-hours connectivity and institutional

volatility, highlighting cumulative load in knowledge work and education systems (Li et al., 2025). Empirical studies relate resource shortages to poor performance and well-being and find teacher connectedness and job control to have greater engagement and commitment through motivational mechanisms (Lee and Jo, 2023; Li et al., 2025). It is based on this evidence that the current framing considers job stress to be the proximal process in which role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload are related to organizational commitment in its process of dampening the affective bonds, shifting continuance calculus, and eroding normative alignment among contract lecturers. In this light, the strain-reducing effect of interventions that enhance autonomy, feedback, and procedural clarity is expected to prevent the decline of commitment trajectories in the context of higher education.

Taken together, these theories provide a robust framework in Figure 1 for understanding how role stress dimensions, often heightened in contingent academic employment, may diminish or reshape faculty members' commitment to their institutions.

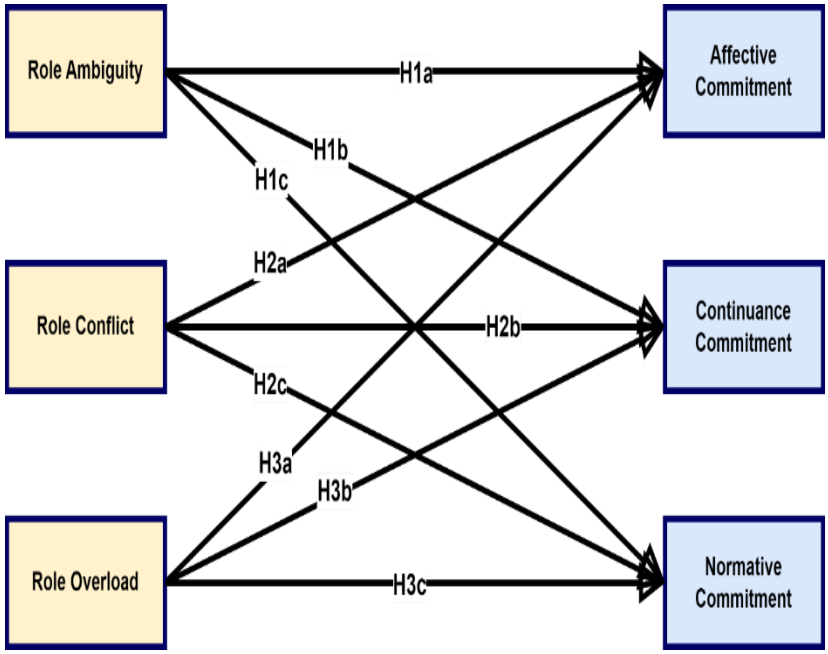

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of this study

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative survey design to examine the structural relationships among role stressors (role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload) and their effects on affective, continuance, and normative commitment among contract-based university lecturers in Jiangsu Province, China. The survey approach enabled the collection of standardized data suitable for hypothesis testing and multivariate analysis. Guided by role stress theory and organizational commitment theory, the study focused on assessing the direct effects of job-related stressors on different forms of organizational commitment. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed using SmartPLS 4.0 to estimate the measurement and structural models and to evaluate the strength and significance of the hypothesized relationships.

Measures and Instruments

This study utilized a structured, self-administered questionnaire composed of established and validated measurement scales to assess the targeted constructs. The instrument comprised reflective indicators for six latent variables: affective commitment, continuance commitment, normative commitment, role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 7 = "Strongly Agree."

The measurement scales were modified after other previous peer-reviewed studies to achieve construct reliability and content validity. Affective commitment was measured with a six-item scale according to Schoemael et al. (2015) and Fernandez-Lores et al. (2016), whereas normative and continuance commitment were measured with five items, respectively, in line with Allen and Meyer (1990) and with the supplement of Hadi and Tentama (2020) and McGee and Ford (1987), respectively. Each of the role ambiguity and role conflict had six items, based on Shepherd and Fine (1994), Netemeyer et al. (1990), and Pandey and Kumar (1997). An eight-item scale based on Coverman (1989) and Hecht (2001) was used to assess role overweight.

Table 1. Adaptation of Items for Constructs

Construct	**Source(s) of Measurement Items**
Affective Commitment	Schoemmel et al. (2015); Fernandez-Lores et al. (2016)
Normative Commitment	Allen and Meyer (1990); Hadi and Tentama (2020)
Continuance Commitment	Allen and Meyer (1990); McGee and Ford (1987)
Role Ambiguity	Shepherd and Fine (1994); Netemeyer et al. (1990)
Role Conflict	Netemeyer et al. (1990); Pandey and Kumar (1997)
Role Overload	Coverman (1989); Hecht (2001)

A multi-step refinement process was conducted to strengthen the instrument's content validity. Initial item wording was modified for contextual alignment with contract-based university lecturers in Jiangsu Province. A panel of three academic experts reviewed the items for semantic accuracy and relevance. Subsequently, a pilot study with 30 lecturers was carried out to test clarity, consistency, and readability. Minor linguistic adjustments were made based on feedback to enhance interpretability across varied academic disciplines. The finalized instrument was then administered for the main data collection.

Sample and Data Collection

The target population for this study comprised contract-based university lecturers employed in public and private higher education institutions across Jiangsu Province, China. Jiangsu was selected due to its high density of tertiary institutions and growing dependence on contingent academic staff, making it a relevant setting for investigating the impact of role-related stressors on organizational commitment dimensions. The data collection was carried out through a mixed-mode strategy combining online surveys (email distribution) and offline channels (hard-copy distribution). Of the 976 questionnaires disseminated, 305 valid responses were retained after screening for completeness and accuracy, yielding a valid response rate of 31.3%.

The final sample represented diverse academic disciplines and institutional types, enabling a robust analysis of variables such as RA, RC, RO and their associations with AC and NC. Demographic characteristics, as shown in Table 2, reveal a near-balanced gender circulation (53.1% male, 46.9% female). The sample skewed toward mid-career professionals, with 58.7% of respondents aged between 31 and 50 years. Educational attainment was also varied: 52.5% held a bachelor's degree, 29.8% a master's degree, and 17.7% a doctorate. In terms of monthly income, most respondents reported earnings between 11,000 and 20,000 RMB, reflecting typical compensation levels for non-tenure-track academic staff in the region.

Table 2. Construct reliability and validity analysis

Demographic Variable	**Category**	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Gender	Male	162	53.1%

	Female	143	46.9%
Age	20–30	72	23.6%
	31–40	85	27.9%
	41–50	94	30.8%
	50+	54	17.7%
Degree	Bachelor's	160	52.5%
	Master's	91	29.8%
	Ph.D.	54	17.7%
Monthly Salary (RMB)	5,000–10,000	74	24.3%
	11,000–15,000	92	30.2%
	16,000–20,000	83	27.2%
	21,000+	56	18.4%

Common Method Bias and Non-Response Bias

In order to enhance validity, the research conducted tests of common method bias (CMB) and non-response bias. CMB was tested by Harman's single-factor test and confirmatory factor analysis. The one-factor explained only 38.4% of the variance, and the poor fit of the single-factor model with the full model reflected the absence of a problem with CMB (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The procedure by Armstrong and Overton (1977) was used to measure Non-response bias in comparison of early and late respondents. The results indicated that there were no significant differences, implying that response timing did not influence the results.

RESULTS

Assessment of Construct Reliability and Validity

The evaluation of the measurement model reliability and convergent validity in terms of SmartPLS 4.0 is provided in Table 3. The findings are the presence of strong internal consistency (with Cronbach alpha values of 0.943-0.963 and composite reliability of 0.957-0.969) that is greater than the 0.70 standard (Hair et al., 2017; Bagozzi et al., 1981). The convergent validity was confirmed, as all item loadings exceeded 0.88, and the average variance extracted (AVE) value ranged from 0.795 to 0.821, which is greater than the value of 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The constructs in general have high reliability and adequate convergence.

Table 3. Internal consistency and convergent validity results

Variables	**Loadings**	**CR**	**AVE**	**Cronbach's α**
Affective Commitment		0.960	0.800	0.950
AC1	0.885			
AC2	0.894			
AC3	0.889			

AC4	0.905			
AC5	0.895			
AC6	0.897			
Continuance Commitment		0.958	0.821	0.946
CC1	0.904			
CC2	0.912			
CC3	0.910			
CC4	0.907			
CC5	0.898			
Normative Commitment		0.957	0.815	0.943
NC1	0.901			
NC2	0.901			
NC3	0.892			
NC4	0.913			
NC5	0.908			
Role Ambiguity		0.962	0.807	0.952
RA1	0.894			
RA2	0.903			
RA3	0.910			
RA4	0.895			
RA5	0.902			
RA6	0.886			
Role Conflict		0.959	0.795	0.949
RC1	0.901			
RC2	0.889			
RC3	0.900			
RC4	0.882			

RC5	0.890			
RC6	0.889			
Role Overload		0.969	0.796	0.963
RO1	0.894			
RO2	0.905			
RO3	0.891			
RO4	0.883			
RO5	0.894			
RO6	0.884			
RO7	0.889			
RO8	0.896			

The constructs' discriminant validity was evaluated through the Fornell-Larcker criterion. As shown in Table 4, the square root of each construct AVE (on the diagonal) is greater than the correlations with all other constructs (off-diagonal values). This is reassuring in that every construct is more proximate to its indicators than any other latent variable in the model, and thus the satisfactory discriminant validity is achieved (Bagozzi et al., 1981).

Table 4. Discriminant validity using AVE

AVE	**AC**	**CC**	**NC**	**RA**	**RC**	**RO**
Affective Commitment	0.894					
Continuance Commitment	0.225	0.906				
Normative Commitment	0.309	0.270	0.903			
Role Ambiguity	0.218	0.265	0.210	0.898		
Role Conflict	0.256	0.283	0.296	0.245	0.892	
Role Overload	0.257	0.259	0.247	0.269	0.279	0.892

The measurement model fit was assessed to ensure the adequacy of the construct structure, with results presented in Table 5. The model exhibited satisfactory fit indices: Chi-square = 790.489 ($p < 0.001$), SRMR = 0.031, NFI = 0.930, d_{ULS} = 0.638, and d_G = 0.448. These values lie within the recommended thresholds, indicating that the measurement model fits the data well and demonstrates structural robustness (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 5. Goodness of fit indices

Goodness of Fit Index	**Model Fit Result**
Chi-square	790.489 ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$)

SRMR	0.031 (< 0.08)
d_ULS	0.638 (low discrepancy)
d_G	0.448 (low discrepancy)
NFI	0.930 (> 0.90)

Note: SRMR denotes the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual; d_{ULS} refers to the Unweighted Least Squares discrepancy; d_G represents the Geodesic discrepancy; and NFI stands for the Normed Fit Index. The reported values satisfy the recommended model fit criteria for PLS-SEM (SRMR < 0.08; NFI > 0.90).

SmartPLS 4.0 was utilized to assess both the measurement and structural components of the model. Variance inflation factors (VIFs) were examined to evaluate multicollinearity. All inner VIF values for the predictor constructs ranged from 1.116 to 1.137, which are well below the recommended thresholds of 3.3 and 5.0 (Hair et al., 2017), indicating no multicollinearity issues across the structural paths. In terms of explanatory power, the model demonstrated R^2 values of 0.118 for Affective Commitment, 0.143 for Continuance Commitment, and 0.129 for Normative Commitment. These figures indicate that role stressors, namely, role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload, explain between 11.8% and 14.3% of the variance in the organizational commitment dimensions. As per Hair et al. (2017), R^2 values exceeding 0.10 are considered acceptable for exploratory research, supporting the model's explanatory adequacy. The strong model fit indices, SRMR = 0.031, NFI = 0.930, and low discrepancy metrics (d_ULS = 0.638, d_G = 0.448), indicate that the model has good predictive relevance and internal consistency. According to Henseler et al. (2015) and Hu and Bentler (1999), these values fall within acceptable ranges, further validating the robustness of the structural model.

Direct Effect

The structural model (see Fig. 2) was analyzed using SmartPLS 4.0 to test the proposed hypotheses (H1–H9). To assess the predictive relationships among variables, path coefficients, statistical significance levels, and R^2 values were evaluated. Table 5 presents the standardized path estimates, standard errors, confidence intervals, and outcomes for each hypothesis.

Table 6. Path coefficient for direct effect

Hypothesis	**Causal Path**	**Estimate**	**S.E.**	**p-value**	**Result**
H1a	RA → AC	0.128	0.060	0.034*	Supported
H1b	RA → CC	0.175	0.058	0.003**	Supported
H1c	RA → NC	0.113	0.058	0.054+	Supported
H2a	RC → AC	0.176	0.059	0.003**	Supported
H2b	RC → CC	0.197	0.058	0.001**	Supported
H2c	RC → NC	0.225	0.059	0.000***	Supported
H3a	RO → AC	0.173	0.059	0.004**	Supported
H3b	RO → CC	0.157	0.058	0.007**	Supported
H3c	RO → NC	0.154	0.058	0.008**	Supported

Note: $p < 0.05$ (*), $p < 0.01$ (**), $p < 0.001$ (***).

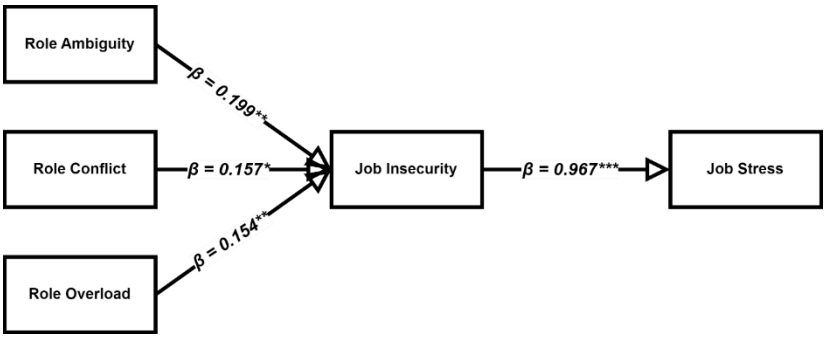

Figure 2. Path Coefficient.

The structural model was tested to examine the direct effects of role stressors, namely, RA, RC, and RO, on the three dimensions of organizational AC, CC, and NC. Hypothesis H1a assessed the impact of RA on AC and yielded a statistically positive result (β = 0.128, p = 0.034), thereby supporting H1a. H1b tested the influence of RA on CC and also returned a significant positive relationship (β = 0.175, p = 0.003), affirming support for H1b. H1c evaluated the path from RA to NC, which demonstrated a marginally significant effect (β = 0.113, p = 0.054), offering tentative support. Hypotheses H2a–H2c focused on the influence of RC, all of which were strongly supported: RC significantly predicted AC (β = 0.176, p = 0.003), CC (β = 0.197, p = 0.001), and NC (β = 0.225, p < 0.001). Finally, Hypotheses H3a–H3c examined the effects of RO and showed consistent significant relationships with AC (β = 0.173, p = 0.004), CC (β = 0.157, p = 0.007), and NC (β = 0.154, p = 0.008), thereby supporting all three hypotheses. These findings indicate that each role stressor contributes positively and significantly, albeit to varying degrees, to employees' organizational commitment dimensions.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study offer important empirical insights into how role stressors, namely, role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload, can positively influence affective, continuance, and normative commitment among contract-based university lecturers in Jiangsu Province. Contrary to conventional expectations in stress literature, the findings suggest that increased role demands do not necessarily reduce organizational commitment; instead, in certain academic contexts, they may reinforce lecturers' psychological investment in their institutions. These results are particularly noteworthy when interpreted through the lens of Organizational Commitment Theory (Meyer & Allen, 1991) and the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Within high-demand environments, such as Chinese academia, contract-based lecturers may perceive role complexity and workload pressure as indicative of institutional trust and opportunity. As a result, greater role ambiguity may stimulate cognitive engagement and adaptive behaviors that enhance emotional attachment (affective commitment), as seen in recent empirical studies by Stride et al. (2022) and den Kamp et al. (2024).

This observation that there is a positive relationship between role conflict and continuance commitment among the contract lecturers in this study is in line with the concept of rational adaptation. Although such an employee has a role conflict, it is convenient to feel that their role as an employee in an institution can be very helpful, and their role in terms of profession is quite useful, particularly in a highly competitive academic labour market in China. This explanation is consistent with the results of Leung et al. (2011), who argue that, under the assumption of a limited labor market, individuals agree to experience high stress in exchange for expected career gains, thereby enhancing their commitment to continue. The findings have also indicated that role overload positively influences normative commitment, which could be because of the cultural instilled values of duty and perseverance in the academic environment of China. The increased workload on lecturers could be accompanied by a greater sense of moral responsibility towards meeting the expectations set by the institutions, especially when they believe that long-term job opportunities would be based on the intensity of performance. This is reminiscent of previous findings by Cheng and Chan (2008) and Leithwood et al. (2020), who theorized that perceived role expectations would allow normative commitment through institutional pressure.

Taken together, these findings challenge the unidirectional assumption that stressors uniformly reduce commitment. Instead, they suggest that under certain contextual and cultural conditions, such as contract-based employment in a competitive higher education sector, role stressors may be interpreted as signals of institutional

engagement, performance relevance, and professional growth. This reinforces the need for localized theory testing and nuanced modeling of workplace dynamics in higher education.

CONCLUSION

Universities can actively transform role stressors into conditions that foster organizational commitment when academic demands are carefully structured and adequately resourced. From a managerial perspective, administrators should move beyond generic workload controls and adopt differentiated workload allocation systems that recognize teaching intensity, research expectations, and service responsibilities. Workloads should be challenging yet attainable, with explicit benchmarks that reduce uncertainty and prevent chronic overload. Clear role expectations, accompanied by regular feedback mechanisms, mentoring schemes, and transparent evaluation criteria, can substantially reduce role ambiguity and help contract-based lecturers align personal effort with institutional goals. At the same time, role conflict can be mitigated through improved coordination across departments, clearer prioritization of tasks, and evaluation systems that acknowledge the multidimensional nature of academic work rather than emphasizing a single performance metric.

Role overload, while often viewed as detrimental, can function as a motivating challenge when supported by appropriate resources. Universities should pair high expectations with tangible support, such as protected research time, access to teaching or research assistants, administrative simplification, and formal recognition of academic contributions. At the policy level, contract arrangements should prioritize predictability and fairness by offering clearer renewal pathways, performance-linked incentives, and transparent promotion criteria. Such measures strengthen affective attachment, enhance rational calculations about long-term investment in the institution, and reinforce normative commitment by signaling organizational care and reciprocity. Collectively, these interventions reduce burnout risk while sustaining engagement and loyalty among non-permanent academic staff.

While the study offers meaningful theoretical and practical insights, several limitations should be clearly acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional research design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions regarding the relationships among role stressors, job stress, and organizational commitment. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track how sustained exposure to role stressors influences commitment trajectories over time and to better establish temporal ordering. Second, the reliance on self-reported survey data raises concerns about common method bias and perceptual subjectivity, even though procedural remedies and statistical checks suggest that bias is limited. Subsequent studies could strengthen validity by incorporating multi-source data, including supervisor assessments, administrative records, or objective indicators of workload and performance.

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