

The Impact of the Right to Disconnect on Job Stress and Job Satisfaction: A Case Study of Part-Time Research Assistants

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the impact of the right to disconnect on job stress and satisfaction among part-time research assistants in Taiwan. As digital devices increasingly intrude on personal time, employees experience physical and mental erosion due to persistent work pressure. Implementing the right to disconnect is a crucial policy tool for protecting mental health and promoting work-life balance. Research indicates that short periods of voluntary disconnection yield significant benefits for both physical and mental health. Conversely, constant work connections across office and home environments exacerbate occupational strain. Analysis of company-level policies demonstrates that formalizing these rights is associated with markedly higher job satisfaction and can effectively mitigate the intention to leave.

By examining the unique dual status of student assistants, this paper identifies blurred boundaries between academic growth and labor tasks as primary stressors. The research proposes a three-tier time model—working, on-call, and private—to clarify these boundaries. This structured approach ensures that assistants can effectively recharge, thereby reducing burnout and fostering a more sustainable academic research environment.

KEYWORDS: Right to Disconnect, Part-time Project Assistants, Job Stress, Job Satisfaction, Labor Rights

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Motivation

In recent years, the rapid expansion of higher education in Taiwan has led to a substantial increase in the number of graduate programs, making Taiwan one of the countries with the fastest growth in graduate education worldwide (Liu & Lin, 2013). Correspondingly, the proportion of graduate students employed as project or research assistants while enrolled has continued to rise. The duties of project assistants typically include experimental operations, data collection, and administrative support. However, despite the rapid expansion of this form of part-time academic employment, the associated labor protections and institutional arrangements have not been adequately developed. As a result, research assistants increasingly face problems such as ambiguous labor rights, heightened work pressure, and declining job satisfaction (Lin, 2016; Zhang, 2015).

At the international level, similar challenges have been observed in countries such as Japan and the United States. In Japan, the rights of project assistants have gradually been safeguarded through the establishment of formal institutional frameworks, whereas in the United States, labor conditions are regulated through relatively well-developed graduate education and employment systems. In contrast, Taiwan's regulatory framework governing project assistants remains underdeveloped, and relevant legal protections require strengthening (Lin, 2016).

Research assistants are generally regarded as integral members of the academic system; however, their dual identity as both students

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and workers often renders their role particularly ambiguous. Although they undertake a substantial number of labor-intensive tasks, they frequently lack clear labor contracts and adequate legal protections. Moreover, insufficient attention to occupational safety has led to recurring workplace accidents (Gan, 2021), while neglect of basic labor rights—such as working hours, wages, and insurance coverage—has further intensified stressors. In addition, the working environments and management practices for project assistants vary considerably across higher education institutions. Significant disparities exist between public and private universities in terms of labor conditions, access to learning resources, and levels of institutional support. Compared with private universities, elite institutions generally offer higher stipends and more comprehensive labor protections, leading to marked differences in project assistants' experiences of job satisfaction and work-related stress (Liu & Lin, 2013; Lin, 2016).

1.2 Research Objectives

As discussed above, the work-related stress and job satisfaction of part-time project assistants have emerged as critical factors affecting graduate students' learning experiences and overall quality of life. How to balance academic demands with labor rights, while simultaneously reducing work-related stress and enhancing job satisfaction, has therefore become a key issue confronting higher education systems. Accordingly, this study aims to address three main research objectives. First, it seeks to examine the sources of work-related stress among part-time project assistants. Second, it aims to assess the factors influencing project assistants' job satisfaction. Third, it proposes policy recommendations to improve the working conditions of part-time project assistants. Methodologically, this study employs a literature review and in-depth interviews with three participants. The interview data are systematically coded, categorized, and analyzed to examine their implications.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Right to Disconnect

Traditionally, workers provided their labor at designated workplaces, and the physical commute between home and the workplace served as a clear boundary separating work from private life (Qin, 2023). However, with the advent of “Labor 4.0,” the extensive application of information and communication technologies (ICTs) within factories and offices has fundamentally transformed workplace structures (Cheng & Xu, 2017). Digital technologies have blurred the temporal and spatial boundaries between work and private life, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish working time and space from personal time and space. Although online technologies enable remote work arrangements that may generate mutual benefits for both employers and employees, they also give rise to problems such as excessive working hours (Liu Huang, 2016).

At present, there is no EU-level legislation specifically dedicated to regulating the right to disconnect. Nevertheless, the European Parliament's 2021 resolution on the right to disconnect provides a clear definition of this right, describing it as workers' entitlement, outside of working hours—including rest days, holidays, maternity leave, parental leave, or other forms of leave—to refrain from carrying out work-related tasks, activities, or electronic communications (such as phone calls, emails, and other messages), without suffering any adverse consequences as a result (European Parliament, 2021). Similarly, Urbane (2022) defines the right to disconnect as employees' right not to engage in work-related electronic communications during non-working hours and periods of leave.

EU member states have adopted diverse measures to protect the right to disconnect. For example, France amended its Labor Code in 2016, stipulating in Article L2242-17 of the *Code du travail* that employers must negotiate with employees regarding the procedures for exercising the right to disconnect and establish mechanisms for the reasonable use of communication tools (Qin, 2023). Likewise, Portugal's dedicated legislation on remote work provides that, except in cases of force majeure, employers are prohibited from contacting employees during their rest periods (Qin, 2023). In contrast, Taiwan has not yet enacted a specific law on the right to disconnect. Nonetheless, elements of this concept can be identified within existing regulations. For instance, the

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Ministry of Labor’s 2017 revision of the *Guidelines on Working Hours Outside the Employer’s Premises* sought to protect workers whose labor arrangements differ from the traditional model of working at designated locations, offering guidance on rest periods for certain industries. Furthermore, the *Taipei City Guidelines on the Protection of Labor Conditions for Home-Based Work*, approved in 2023, explicitly state that employers should respect workers’ reasonable right to disconnect during leave or outside agreed working hours, and encourage the implementation of this right through collective bargaining, labor–management agreements, or other negotiated arrangements (Yu, Shi, & Li, 2023).

2.2 Work Stress

Scholars have proposed varying definitions of work stress. These definitions are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Definitions of Work Stress

Author	Definition
Lazarus	Work stress is a subjective experience that arises when individuals perceive they are unable to mitigate or resolve external threats.
Karasek	Stress emerges from the interaction between job demands and decision latitude.
Lu Luo	Work stress is the result of continuous interactions between individuals and their environments.
Siegrist	Work stress is a reaction to an imbalance between effort expended at work and the rewards received.

Work stress has been shown to generate negative outcomes such as fatigue, detachment, and irritability (Mayerl, Stolz, Waxenegger, Rasky, & Freidl, 2016). Prolonged exposure to stress may further lead to mental health problems, including anxiety and depression (Bhui, Dinos, Stansfeld, & White, 2012), as well as adverse physical health effects (Neupane & Nygård, 2017). Therefore, understanding how workers recover from work stress is equally important.

In the literature on stress recovery, two major theoretical frameworks are frequently compared: the effort–recovery model and the conservation of resources theory. Their key distinctions are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Theories of Stress Recovery

Author	Theory	Definition
Meijman & Mulder	Effort–Recovery Model	The mental and physical effort invested in work leads to physiological, behavioral, and subjective load reactions. When work ceases, individuals are able to return to their baseline state, thereby reducing fatigue and work stress.
Hobfoll, & Lilly	Conservation of Resources Theory	Work consumes individuals’ resources. Stress arises when resources that have already been lost or are at risk of loss cannot be adequately replenished, prompting individuals to prevent further loss or to invest remaining resources in alternative domains expected to yield returns.

These two theories differ in their core assumptions. The effort–recovery model posits that resources can only be restored through the cessation of work, suggesting that work stress can be alleviated primarily through rest. In contrast, the conservation of resources theory emphasizes the interchangeability and fluidity of resources, proposing that individuals actively select and invest in resources they expect to obtain in order to avoid further resource loss and the resulting work stress.

Given that this study focuses on part-time project assistants and taking into account the characteristics of their work arrangements, a review of the literature identified three particularly relevant factors influencing work stress: workload, job autonomy, and coworker support. These three dimensions are examined to explore their effects on work stress.

Workload is a task-oriented construct that focuses on employees’ task completion demands (Spector & Jex, 1998). When working

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hours are extended or deadlines approach, individuals tend to experience higher-than-usual stress (Sorenson et al., 1985). However, stress is not caused solely by high quantitative workload; any workload that imposes psychological or physiological strain on individuals may result in work stress (Sutherland & Cooper, 1990, as cited in Huang, 2009).

Job autonomy refers to the degree to which employees can control their behaviors and outcomes at work (Ganster & Fusilier, 1989). Differences in individuals' perceived levels of autonomy significantly influence their perceptions of work stress (Zeuge et al., 2023). Within the demand–control model, research has shown that under high-demand conditions, employees with greater decision latitude experience less psychological strain than those with lower levels of control (Karasek, 1979). When employees are free to choose how to accomplish their tasks, they tend to experience lower levels of stress even when job demands are high (Ganster & Fusilier, 1989). Nevertheless, job autonomy may also blur work boundaries, potentially triggering anxiety and irritability and increasing psychological strain (Park, Feng, & Li, 2018).

Finally, support from coworkers—manifested through shared goals and frequent collaboration—has been shown to reduce perceived stress (Wolgast & Fischer, 2017). Coworker support can reduce role ambiguity, alleviate role conflict, and mitigate role overload, thereby diminishing the negative effects of work stress (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Supervisor support similarly helps to reduce role conflict and role ambiguity, and employees' perceived work stress tends to decrease as perceived supervisory support increases (Naidoo, 2018; Kang & Kang, 2016). Moreover, positive workplace interactions, such as emotional support or instrumental assistance, facilitate physiological recovery, reduce negative psychological effects, and enhance individuals' resilience to work stress (Heaphy & Dutton, 2006). Conversely, a lack of trust among coworkers may intensify employees' work stress (George, 2016). Negative workplace interactions—such as hostility or social exclusion—have been shown to exert a stronger influence on individuals' perceptions of work stress than positive interactions (Heaphy & Dutton, 2006).

Drawing on the workload scale developed by Spector and Jex (1998), the job stress model proposed by Karasek and Demands (1979), and Chiaburu and Harrison's (2008) discussion of coworker support, this study constructs its interview guide accordingly. As the present research focuses specifically on the effects of recovery on work stress, only the decision latitude dimension of job autonomy within the job stress model is incorporated into the analysis.

2.3 Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is commonly understood as the emotions and attitudes employees develop toward their work environment and job content, and it is reflected in both psychological and physiological dimensions (Hoppock, 1935). It is regarded as an evaluative indicator of employees' work experiences, whereby higher levels of satisfaction arise when individuals' cognitions, feelings, and thoughts toward their work are predominantly positive or pleasurable (Locke, 1973). Job satisfaction has also been conceptualized as work-related affect associated with various facets of employment, including the job itself, compensation, promotion opportunities, supervisors, and interpersonal relationships (Churchill, Ford, & Walker, 1974). From another perspective, it reflects the degree of congruence between individuals' needs, expectations, and values and their work and work environment (Seashore, 1975). In the Taiwanese context, domestic scholars have tended to emphasize satisfaction with job-related factors such as salary, working hours, and workplace location (Zhang, 1989), or to highlight the influence of the work environment and compensation systems on job satisfaction (Wen, 2006).

Beyond definitional approaches, scholars have examined job satisfaction through various theoretical lenses. From a need-based perspective, Maslow's hierarchy of needs categorizes human needs into five levels—physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization—and argues that the satisfaction of higher-level needs is contingent upon the fulfillment of lower-level needs (Maslow, 1954). Similarly, the ERG theory classifies human needs into existence, relatedness, and growth, proposing that these needs may operate simultaneously rather than hierarchically (Adams, 1963). Herzberg's two-factor theory distinguishes between motivators

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and hygiene factors, suggesting that the absence of hygiene factors leads to dissatisfaction, even if their presence does not necessarily enhance satisfaction (Herzberg, 2017). In contrast, social exchange theory emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between employees' contributions and organizational returns, positing that employees experience satisfaction when they perceive fair rewards or adequate organizational support (Blau, 2017).

This study draws on the revised Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ; *Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire*) developed by Tsai, Huang, and Yeh (2003). Given that prior studies have varied in their conceptualizations of organizational citizenship behavior, the revised instrument integrates multiple scales and retains four dimensions: job growth, working conditions, supervisory competence, and job independence/autonomy. As the present study aims to examine whether the implementation of the right to disconnect influences the job satisfaction of part-time project assistants, the interview guide is developed with reference to three of these dimensions: working conditions, supervisory competence, and job independence/autonomy.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Research Methods and Participants

This study first adopts a literature review to synthesize research on the right to disconnect, work stress, and job satisfaction, with the aim of clarifying cross-national differences between right-to-disconnect policies in other countries and those in Taiwan. It further examines how the effort–recovery model and conservation of resources theory differ in their accounts of how work stress develops, and integrates three work-stress antecedents that are especially relevant to project assistants—workload, job autonomy, and coworker support—to explore how the implementation of the right to disconnect influences work stress. Finally, the study reviews literature on determinants of job satisfaction, including job challenge, organizational culture, and coworker–leadership relations, to assess whether the effects of these factors vary depending on the extent to which the right to disconnect is implemented.

In addition to the literature review, this study employs in-depth interviews. Through iterative exploration of both external and internal factors, in-depth interviewing enables the collection of more authentic and nuanced information (Wan, 2004). Participants were recruited using snowball sampling. In total, three currently enrolled graduate students who concurrently served as part-time project assistants were interviewed. Full-time project assistants were excluded to avoid confounding the study's objectives, as individuals holding only a worker identity (rather than a dual student–worker identity) might respond from a fundamentally different standpoint. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and followed a semi-structured format, allowing the study to elicit richer and more diverse perspectives within a bounded analytic framework.

3.2 Data Analysis

3.2.1 Implementation of the Right to Disconnect Among Part-Time Project Assistants

This subsection examines how the right to disconnect is implemented in the work of part-time project assistants. Project assistants can generally be categorized into part-time and full-time positions. Full-time project assistants have agreed-upon working hours, and their daily working time is typically calculated based on timekeeping records. In contrast, part-time project assistants often lack formal regulations governing daily working hours and typically do not have fixed start and end times. As a result, their working time is easily extended beyond nominal boundaries. If one counts the time during which they are unable to fully disconnect from work, their work-related availability frequently exceeds the standard eight-hour workday. This suggests that the working time of part-time project assistants is difficult to define and delimit.

Moreover, because part-time project assistants occupy a distinctive dual status as both students and workers, the boundary between work and private time becomes particularly ambiguous when tasks overlap with their own academic development. For example, when literature searches serve both project needs and the assistant's thesis work, it becomes difficult to classify that time as either

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working time or personal time. Consequently, even when part-time project assistants seek to exercise their right to disconnect in order to protect private life, the blurred boundary between work and personal time undermines the feasibility and effectiveness of such protection.

Although defining “normal” working hours for part-time project assistants is inherently difficult, prior to the interviews this study informed participants that the standard working hours of full-time project assistants would be used as a reference point for distinguishing between work and personal time. Given the urgency of project timelines and the possibility of ad hoc assignments from commissioning bodies or project leadership, part-time project assistants often must use personal time to meet deadlines, avoid an even larger workload the next day, or prevent the risk of contractual non-compliance. Yet this practice clearly compresses their private time and directly conflicts with the core principle of the right to disconnect, which aims to protect workers’ ability to sever work-related ties during non-working hours.

Beyond urgent work assignments, the need to remain reachable is a major source of intrusion into part-time project assistants’ private time. Whether through phone calls, LINE messages, or emails, assistants must monitor work-related communications during personal time to determine whether issues are urgent. In addition, because project stakeholders often include commissioning agencies, principal investigators, professors, and project assistants, their working schedules differ substantially, making it difficult to establish a fixed time window for communication. Consequently, part-time project assistants frequently need to remain in contact with project participants across both work time and personal time.

Taken together, the primary obstacles to implementing the right to disconnect for part-time project assistants lie in (a) the difficulty of defining working time and (b) the higher communication costs project stakeholders would face if strict disconnection were enforced—costs that may increase work complexity and potentially elevate the risk of project non-compliance.

3.2.2 Effects of the Right to Disconnect on Work Stress

One major source of work stress among part-time project assistants is workload. In addition to their assigned tasks, part-time project assistants may face increased demands due to assisting colleagues, handling miscellaneous administrative duties, project delays caused by commissioning agencies’ inability to convene meetings on schedule, or sudden changes such as earlier-than-expected submission deadlines. These factors collectively tighten project assistants’ schedules.

When part-time project assistants must assume more tasks within the same deadline, they experience higher levels of stress. Furthermore, because part-time project assistants typically lack established norms regarding regulated working hours, the strict implementation of the right to disconnect may shorten the time available to complete tasks while leaving the workload unchanged. This effectively increases workload intensity, thereby elevating perceived work stress.

The interviews further indicate that work stress increases when project assistants’ private time is interrupted by work demands, particularly when they must forgo rest to meet work requirements. When work tasks disrupt existing daily routines and assistants remain unable to disconnect from work even during personal time, they report pronounced fatigue and psychological strain, which in turn heightens perceived work stress. Although intrusions into private time increase work stress, part-time project assistants appear to prefer using personal time to work—particularly when facing short-term, high-intensity workload—because doing so may help them mitigate the immediate burden of an excessive workload.

Overall, the findings suggest that, relative to working during personal time, a high workload more strongly amplifies perceptions of work stress. Therefore, if the implementation of the right to disconnect is to yield positive outcomes for part-time project assistants, a necessary precondition is to consider how their workload can be reduced.

3.2.3 Effects of the Right to Disconnect on Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction among part-time project assistants declines when they perceive that their working hours exceed those of colleagues,

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when they receive compensation that they regard as non-equivalent to their effort, or when extended working hours continually compress their personal time. Although ensuring the right to disconnect may reduce dissatisfaction, if such implementation results in a heavier workload the following day, it may instead generate more negative emotions and thereby reduce job satisfaction.

In addition to the compression of private time by work demands, disruptions to personal plans—whether short- or long-term—also provoke negative emotions, such as irritability and distress. In contrast, having a fixed period of private time that is freely controllable and entirely free from work interruptions—even if brief—can improve rest quality and enhance job satisfaction.

Accordingly, the presence or absence of the right to disconnect substantially influences part-time project assistants' job satisfaction. Even a limited period of fully discretionary private time, coupled with the assurance that personal plans will not be repeatedly disrupted by work demands, appears sufficient to increase part-time project assistants' perceived job satisfaction.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 CONCLUSIONS

4.1.1 Patterns of Right-to-Disconnect Implementation for Part-Time Project Assistants

The implementation of the right to disconnect for part-time project assistants in Taiwan currently faces two major obstacles. First, the dual identity of part-time project assistants as both students and workers makes it difficult for them to assert the right to disconnect. When assistants' academic pursuits are intertwined with project content, it becomes challenging to determine whether activities such as information searching should be classified as work time or private time. This phenomenon substantiates prior observations that the rapid expansion of project assistant positions has been accompanied by insufficient supporting measures, resulting in ambiguous labor protections (Lin, 2016; Zhang, 2015).

Second, unlike full-time project assistants, part-time project assistants do not have regulated working hours; instead, they often operate under effectively unlimited "on-call" availability. When project timelines are advanced for any reason or when urgent tasks arise, part-time project assistants frequently must set aside personal matters and prioritize work. Even if they do not consistently work eight hours per day like full-time project assistants, prolonged standby requirements prevent them from securing uninterrupted rest, thereby rendering the right to disconnect largely absent in practice.

4.1.2 Sources of Work Stress Among Part-Time Project Assistants

This study finds that the work stress experienced by part-time project assistants largely stems from the inability to effectively implement the right to disconnect. Because their work requires frequent communication with multiple stakeholders and stakeholders' schedules are difficult to align, clear norms for appropriate contact times are often lacking. As a result, part-time project assistants commonly use rest periods to manage work-related communications, undermining their ability to obtain adequate recovery time. In addition, urgent work demands sometimes generate short-term surges in workload, increasing work intensity beyond assistants' capacity and thereby producing work stress—consistent with Spector's (1998) findings. Similarly, when deadlines are advanced and assistants work for prolonged periods, they experience higher stress than usual, aligning with Sorenson et al.'s (1985) results.

Beyond identifying stress-inducing factors, the study also identifies stress-buffering mechanisms. When part-time project assistants can obtain assistance from professors when encountering difficulties, or when they maintain harmonious daily interactions with professors, work stress attributable to other sources is reduced. These findings suggest that professor support and positive workplace interactions can mitigate work stress among part-time project assistants, consistent with prior research (Rennie, 2018; Kang, 2016; Heaphy, 2006).

Overall, whether stress is triggered by task assignments or routine communications, part-time project assistants experience work stress whenever they perceive their rest time as interrupted and their recovery time as incomplete. After experiencing work stress,

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they consistently express a desire for uninterrupted rest as the primary means of alleviating fatigue and physical discomfort caused by prolonged work, rather than seeking alternative compensation. Accordingly, the formation and recovery pattern of work stress among part-time project assistants appears consistent with the effort–recovery model proposed by Meijman and Mulder (1998), which posits that individuals can restore expended energy only through rest, thereby reducing load reactions and returning to baseline functioning.

4.1.3 Factors of Job Satisfaction Among Part-Time Project Assistants

This study finds that the most influential factor shaping job satisfaction among part-time project assistants is the availability of a fully controllable, uninterrupted period of private time—in other words, the complete realization of the right to disconnect. After investing substantial effort in their work, part-time project assistants seek a period of time that is exclusively theirs. Whether this time is used for rest or for pre-emptively distributing the next day’s workload, as long as it is not disrupted by task assignments or work-related communications, assistants report higher job satisfaction.

The researcher contends that Blau’s (2017) social exchange theory provides a useful explanation: for part-time project assistants, freely controllable private time functions as the “reward” they seek in exchange for the effort they invest at work. Even when assistants voluntarily use that private time to engage in project-related work, the mere fact that they retain full discretion over it appears to enhance their job satisfaction.

4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

As discussed in the preceding analysis of the right to disconnect, the work of part-time project assistants cannot be clearly delineated by fixed start and end times, leading to persistent confusion between working time and private time. Because the right to disconnect protects workers’ ability to refuse work-related demands during non-working hours—including performing tasks and responding to work communications—part-time project assistants face substantial difficulty in requesting meaningful implementation of this right when working time cannot be clearly defined.

In addition to the absence of explicit working-hour regulations, the lack of overlapping shared working time among project participants is another major barrier to implementation. Due to the organizational characteristics of commissioning agencies, vertical communication within these organizations tends to be slow, meaning that leadership directives may only reach part-time project assistants during evening hours. Commissioning agencies may also convene ad hoc meetings or issue urgent task requests due to public opinion pressures or other contingencies, further undermining assistants’ control over private time. Moreover, participating professors often have teaching responsibilities and other duties, making it difficult to establish consistent communication schedules; consequently, project-related communications may cluster in the evening. To ensure project progress, part-time project assistants are thus required to remain responsive during personal time and to complete tasks outside regular hours.

These factors imply that strict and comprehensive enforcement of the right to disconnect could increase the risk of contractual non-compliance or raise the costs of project completion. However, ensuring that a project is completed on time cannot be a legitimate justification for the unreasonable encroachment upon part-time project assistants’ private time. Part-time project assistants should retain full control over their private time, and the right to disconnect therefore remains necessary. As one participant noted, implementation must also be evaluated for feasibility. In the absence of established precedent for applying the right to disconnect to part-time project assistants, a partial implementation approach may serve as an initial step.

To explore partial implementation, it is first necessary to clarify what “partial” might mean. The researcher argues that the right to disconnect is conceptually indivisible, as it entitles workers to refuse work demands during non-working time. Consequently, it is difficult to specify which categories of work demands should be permitted during non-working hours.

For this reason, the researcher proposes that partial implementation should focus on redefining “private time.” This proposal does

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not seek to rigidly define part-time project assistants' start and end times or total working hours; rather, it subdivides time—previously treated as a binary distinction between work and private life—into three categories: working time, standby time, and private time. Working time may follow the eight-hour standard for normal working hours specified in Article 30, Paragraph 1 of Taiwan's Labor Standards Act, with the start and end times to be agreed upon in advance. Standby time refers to periods that are not formally working time but during which assistants must remain reachable for communications or potential task arrangements; during standby time, assistants may still schedule personal activities. Given their student status, part-time project assistants already handle personal matters during designated working time, provided that academic responsibilities are maintained, thereby making the distinction between working time and standby time less salient in practice. However, given the nature of their work arrangements, overly rigid boundaries between working and private time would likely intensify workloads and impede project progress. Accordingly, the central purpose of standby time is to provide a buffer zone between working time and private time—an intentionally pre-reserved “grey area” that mitigates the disruptions strict implementation might impose on all parties. Finally, private time refers to periods during which assistants can fully control their activities without interruption. As the term implies, no work demands should be imposed during this period, including work-related communications. Because disruptions to sleep and recovery rhythms can generate work stress, private time is recommended before bedtime to protect the integrity of rest.

As participants emphasized, protecting the right to disconnect first requires that participants share a common understanding of when contact is acceptable. The above recommendations are intended to provide a practical reference point, encouraging participants to contact part-time project assistants—and other project stakeholders—only during working time and standby time. As Participant A01 stated, prohibiting contact during private time is fundamentally grounded in respect for individuals' rest. Accordingly, this study's focus on the right to disconnect is not intended to increase the difficulty or costs of project completion, but rather to reduce work stress and enhance job satisfaction among part-time project assistants by institutionalizing this right.

4.3 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

4.3.1 Limitations Related to the Study Sample

This study recruited participants through snowball sampling. Because the participants were to some extent acquainted, and because the suitability of prospective participants may have been informally assessed during recruitment, sampling bias may have occurred. Future studies should increase the sample size to reduce bias arising from participant referrals and researchers' preliminary judgments.

In addition, all participants were affiliated with colleges of social sciences, which may account for certain findings being specific to this disciplinary context. Future research could broaden the sampling frame to include graduate students from science and engineering colleges to assess whether disciplinary differences lead to distinct patterns of findings. Moreover, full-time project assistants could be included to enable comparative analyses between full-time and part-time project assistants.

4.3.2 Directions for Future Research

The researcher suggests that future studies could examine the implementation of the right to disconnect among other occupations with similar work characteristics, comparing similarities and differences across contexts. By drawing on the institutional arrangements and labor protections in these sectors, it may be possible to assess whether such practices can be adapted for part-time project assistants.

Furthermore, the proposed tripartite division of time into normal working time, standby time, and rest/private time is intended to accommodate part-time project assistants' right to disconnect while minimizing disruptions to project progress. Nevertheless, this approach cannot fully guarantee the right to disconnect and may continue to infringe on assistants' rest rights. Future research may therefore adopt an institutional perspective to develop more comprehensive protection mechanisms that safeguard the labor rights

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of part-time project assistants.

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