

THE PATH TO EXCELLENCE: FOSTERING PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AMONG YOUNG FACULTY IN CHINESE PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

China's private higher education, since the era of reform and opening up, has witnessed remarkable growth, evolving from humble beginnings into a significant force in the educational landscape. These institutions have played a vital role in advancing higher education, contributing to its transition from elitism to accessibility, catalyzing systemic reforms, and fulfilling the diverse demands of society. In terms of quantity, private colleges and universities are now an indispensable component of China's higher education landscape. However, challenges persist, with many private institutions struggling to match the standards of their public counterparts. The pivotal determinant of private college competitiveness lies in the establishment of high-caliber faculty teams. Young faculty members, in particular, are the linchpin for elevating private institutions to higher echelons [1]. Recent years have seen significant improvements in both the number and quality of private colleges and universities in China, with a total of 773 institutions by 2020. However, young faculty members in these institutions face substantial internal and external pressures, along with uncertainties about their professional prospects [2]. This paper delves into the challenges faced by young faculty members in private colleges and universities, offering targeted strategies and recommendations to enhance their professional development. These measures aim to foster a conducive environment for the growth of young faculty members within the private higher education sector.

Keywords: Private higher education, young faculty members, Professional development, Chinese education reform, Faculty competitiveness

1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening up, China's private higher education has experienced from scratch and from small to large. It has made considerable development and progress in both school scale and school quality. Private colleges and universities have made great contributions in promoting the transition of higher education from popularization to popularization, deepening the reform of higher education system and mechanism, and meeting the diversified needs of society for higher education. In terms of quantity, private colleges and universities have become an indispensable development force of China's higher education. However, there is still a large gap between private colleges and public colleges in school running level, and the phenomenon of low-level and low-level development of private colleges and universities is still common. The key to enhance the competitiveness of private colleges and universities is to establish a high-level and high-quality team of faculty members. High quality young faculty members are the backbone of building high-level private colleges and universities [1].

In recent years, with the deepening of China's teaching reform and the encouragement and recognition of private teaching, both the number and quality of private colleges and universities in China have been greatly improved. By 2020, there were 773 private colleges and universities in China. Young faculty members are the most important part of the teaching staff in private colleges and universities in China, and most of them are facing great internal and

external pressure and anxiety about the professional development prospects of private colleges and universities [2]. Therefore, this paper analyzes the plight of the professional development of young faculty members in private colleges and universities, and puts forward targeted countermeasures and suggestions on this basis, which is conducive to promoting the development of young faculty members in private colleges and universities.

According to the National Education Statistics in 2019, the total number of full-time faculty members in Colleges and Universities under the age of 44 in China reached 1175600, accounting for about 67.56% of the total. The proportion of young faculty members in private colleges and universities is much higher than this proportion. Therefore, young faculty members are the absolute main body of faculty members in private colleges and universities. The growth of young faculty members determines the future of private colleges and universities. In real life, difficult professional development, high life pressure and low salary have become the labels of young faculty members in Colleges and universities. The embarrassing situation of young faculty members in private colleges and universities has seriously affected their growth and development, and has also become a constraint on the development of private colleges and universities [1]. Therefore, it is particularly urgent to study the influencing factors and policy supply of young faculty members' professional development in private colleges and universities.

This research delves into the challenges faced by young faculty members in their professional development within China's private colleges and universities. The study centers on three young college faculty members from Guangzhou College of Commerce, who will serve as both the research subjects and participants. The research will adopt a qualitative approach to conduct in-depth interviews. To ensure the interviews' relevance to the study's objectives, participants must meet three criteria: First, they must be faculty members of private colleges and universities in China. Second, they must fall within the category of young faculty members. Third, they should currently encounter difficulties and possess ideas for professional development.

It is essential to acknowledge that the three participants from Guangzhou College of Commerce may not represent the perspectives of all young faculty members in private colleges and universities across China regarding the professional development challenges they face. Consequently, this study will have certain limitations in terms of its generalizability and broader applicability to the entire population of young faculty members in private institutions

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research Paradigm

The research paradigm adopted in this research is interpretivism. Interpretivism is a theoretical framework that emphasizes the understanding of social phenomena, where researchers subjectively engage in comprehending the life stories and meaning construction of the participants through personal experiences [3]. During the interview process, I carefully observed the participants' emotions and empathetically placed myself in their position to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives regarding the professional development of young faculty members in private colleges and universities. By employing interpretivism, this study seeks to capture the nuanced insights and subjective experiences of the participants, providing valuable insights into their professional development challenges.

2.2 Relevant past to current studies

2.2.1 Private colleges and universities in China

Yiyong (2022) provided a comprehensive overview of the developmental history of private colleges and universities in China, offering insights into their status and role within the country's educational landscape [4]. Lin (1999) conducted a comparative analysis of the characteristics of China's public and private universities, emphasizing the significance of private universities in the higher education system. Chen proposed that both public and private universities should leverage their respective strengths to contribute effectively to the advancement of education in China [5]. Additionally, Xia & Wu, (2020) addressed the challenges confronted by private colleges and universities in China and offered constructive measures to address these issues [6].

2.2.2 Young Faculty Professional Development in Private Colleges and Universities of China

In the past, the majority of scholarly attention has been directed towards the general group of faculty members in private colleges and universities, with relatively less focus on the specific professional development challenges faced by young faculty members in these institutions. In recent years, there has been a growing scholarly focus on the development of faculty members in private colleges and universities. Zhou & Zhang (2017) highlighted several challenges in this domain, including an unbalanced team structure with a low proportion of high professional titles and a skewed age distribution with fewer mid-career faculty members. Moreover, the social status and welfare treatment of faculty in private colleges and universities were perceived to be comparatively low. Additionally, the level of scientific research in these institutions was identified as an area in need of improvement [7].

Yiyong (2022) identified faculty stability as a persistent issue hindering the healthy growth of private colleges and universities. Many faculty members, especially young faculty members, often view private institutions as a mere "springboard" or "practice base," resulting in a significant teacher turnover rate, reaching as high as 20% - 30% in some private colleges and universities [4]. (Lu & Li, 2020) proposed that a key reason for this turnover is the lack of equal legal status and treatment between faculty members in private universities and their counterparts in public universities. This discrepancy has implications for faculty retention and development in private institutions [8].

By adopting a qualitative research approach grounded in real-life experiences, this study establishes close connections with the reality of young faculty members in private colleges and universities. It delves into the constraining factors of the professional development predicament encountered by young faculty members from a micro perspective, taking into account the individual experiences of these faculty members. Based on the findings, corresponding recommendations are put forth to address these challenges and foster their professional growth.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research design

Using purposive sampling, this study selects three full-time faculty members under the age of 45 from Guangzhou College of Commerce, chosen for their strong communication skills, keen observation, and reflective abilities. To protect the privacy of the participants, pseudonyms comprising letters and numbers are used in place of their real names.

The interviews are conducted in a one-on-one, face-to-face format within the faculty members' lounge at the school. Prior to the interviews, each participant is presented with a written consent form outlining the purpose and detailed content of the interview process. The primary objective of these interviews is to encourage the faculty members to candidly discuss the challenges they encounter in their career paths, analyze the underlying reasons for these difficulties, and subsequently propose solutions that can benefit others facing similar issues. By participating in these interviews, the respondents gain a better understanding of their own professional development obstacles and the factors influencing them.

3.2 Participant and setting

This research focuses on selecting faculty members from Guangzhou College of Commerce as the research participants for two main reasons. Firstly, Guangzhou College of Commerce holds historical significance as one of the first private colleges and universities established in China in 1999. Its extensive experience in private undergraduate education makes it a representative case for study. Secondly, my affiliation with Guangzhou College of Commerce through my work allows me to have extensive contacts within the institution. This close connection enhances the rapport and trust with the interviewees, facilitating open and honest discussions during the interviews. Ensuring the authenticity of the interview materials is of utmost importance, and the familiarity with the institution aids in obtaining valuable insights from the participants. Table 1 provides basic background information about the three selected participants for the interview.

Tables 1: Basic information of Participants

Participants	Age	Educational background	Professional title	Faculty	Interview time
1	26	Master	Assistant	Accounting	30 minutes
2	27	Master	Lecturer	Accounting	43 minutes
3	34	Master	Lecturer	Auditing	58 minutes

3.3 Data collection technique

The data collection technique utilized in this study involved conducting semi-structured interviews with the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 30-60 minutes. Prior to commencing the interviews, explicit consent was obtained from all the participants. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed, resulting in the accumulation of approximately 5000 words of text data. To facilitate the data analysis process, the collected data were coded and analyzed using the software Atlas.ti 9. This rigorous approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration and interpretation of the participants' perspectives on the professional development challenges faced by young faculty members in private colleges and universities.

3.4 Data analysis

The analysis of interview data in this study incorporates the theme analysis method proposed by Attride-Stirling (2001) and Thomas & Harden (2008) ^[9,10]. The analysis process consists of two main steps:

Step 1: Data Coding

The interview data is encoded and categorized using Atlas.ti 9, attributing concepts and meanings to the data. This process results in the generation of 24 initial codes that represent various aspects of the participants' responses.

Step 2: Cluster Analysis

Building on the initial coding, a cluster analysis is conducted to identify patterns and relationships within the data. This analysis aids in grouping similar codes together, forming three overarching themes that correspond to the three research questions of the study. These themes are focused on the professional development challenges faced by faculty members in private colleges and universities, the factors influencing these challenges, and the proposed solutions to address these dilemmas.

The integration of the theme analysis method allows for a systematic and comprehensive exploration of the interview data, leading to a deeper understanding of the professional development issues encountered by young faculty members in private colleges and universities, and facilitating the generation of meaningful insights to inform the study's conclusions and recommendations.

3.5 Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations in this study were diligently adhered to throughout the entire research process. Prior to conducting the interviews, explicit knowledge and consent were obtained from all participating individuals, ensuring that they were aware of the study's objectives and voluntarily agreed to take part. The interviews were conducted with utmost sensitivity and professionalism, ensuring no harm or discomfort was caused to any of the participants. To safeguard the confidentiality of the participants, all recorded and transcribed documents were handled with strict confidentiality in compliance with the research ethics code. Personal information or any identifying details that could potentially compromise the anonymity of the participants were removed from the data, and pseudonyms were used in place of real names. The data were securely stored and only accessible to the researchers involved in the study. Respecting and upholding research ethics is of paramount importance to maintain the integrity and validity of the study and to safeguard the welfare and rights of the participants.

4. Results and discussions

4.1 Difficulties in professional development of faculty members in private colleges and universities

Participant 1 (P1):

P1 expressed that her academic writing and research abilities were not at a high level, leading to increased pressure when the school emphasized scientific research. Additionally, as a young teacher with only two years of experience, she felt significant pressure in lesson preparation. Teaching different classes each semester left her little time for other tasks. P1 stated, "I teach different classes each semester, I'm always preparing and I don't have time to do anything else." Participant 2 (P2):

P2 exhibited anxiety regarding a perceived mismatch between her abilities and the demands of her job. She cited four career dilemmas she faced. First, she expressed academic anxiety due to having only a master's degree while universities now prefer higher doctorate degrees. Second, lacking experience in the corporate sector made her feel less equipped for effective teaching. Third, she felt her teaching skills had not improved after three years of experience and lacked communication with students. P2 said, "I have not benefited from teaching and learning, that is, my personal ability has not been improved, there is no progress, and I am stagnant, which makes me very anxious." Lastly, she felt her scientific research abilities were relatively weak, which she considered a disadvantage as a college teacher.

Participant 3 (P3):

P3, being the only one of the three interviewees with a child, faced the challenge of balancing family and work responsibilities. Additionally, the relatively low salary levels for faculty members in private colleges caused anxiety about income. Moreover, P3 expressed concerns about scientific research, stating, "If the future work focuses on scientific research, I will be anxious about whether I can be competent for such work because at present, writing papers and doing scientific research is still a big personal challenge."

These findings shed light on the diverse professional development challenges experienced by young faculty members in private colleges and universities, encompassing issues related to academic qualifications, teaching skills, scientific research abilities, and work-life balance. The participants' narratives provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of the challenges they face, forming the basis for further analysis and recommendations in this study.

4.2 Factors leading to the difficulties of private college faculty members' professional development

Participant 1 (P1):

P1 emphasized that the school played a crucial role in the difficulties of professional development for private college faculty members. She noted that the schools did not offer sufficient support or opportunities to enhance faculty members' qualifications. Furthermore, P1 perceived the research environment in the school to be weak, leading to a lack of enthusiasm among faculty members to improve their scientific research and academic capabilities. Additionally, she mentioned her uncertainty about pursuing a PhD, indicating the presence of personal dilemmas affecting career advancement decisions.

Participant 2 (P2):

P2 highlighted the limited funding received by Chinese private colleges and universities from the government, which heavily relied on student tuition fees to sustain their operations. As private institutions aimed to generate profits, they often compromised on teacher benefits and provided limited financial support for teacher training. Compared to their counterparts in public colleges and universities, P2 observed that faculty members in private institutions had lower social status and recognition. Moreover, private universities were found to have limited involvement in scientific research and academic projects, contributing to a lack of enthusiasm among faculty to pursue research and academic advancement.

Participant 3 (P3):

P3 pointed out that the national policies in China favored public schools, resulting in limited resources for private colleges and universities, making it more challenging for them to achieve significant development. Additionally, the

social recognition of private college faculty members was comparatively low, leading to fewer opportunities for collaboration with enterprises on projects. From the perspective of the school, P3 identified two aspects: the profit-driven nature of private colleges and universities often led to reduced investments in infrastructure, teacher training, and support systems. Moreover, she believed that the school lacked a comprehensive system to cultivate and enhance faculty members' teaching abilities.

These findings underscore the multifaceted factors influencing the professional development difficulties faced by private college faculty members. Issues related to institutional support, financial constraints, social recognition, and the school's commitment to teacher training and development collectively contribute to the challenges experienced by young faculty members in their professional growth in private colleges and universities.

4.3 Measures to address the professional development dilemma of young faculty members in private colleges and universities

Participant 1 (P1):

P1 expressed her willingness to pursue a doctorate degree to enhance her education and actively acquire relevant professional certifications. She emphasized the importance of the school providing more platforms for faculty members to improve their academic qualifications and suggested training opportunities that focus on enhancing scientific research abilities. P1 proposed inviting academic experts to offer guidance to faculty members in the institution, which would contribute to their overall professional growth.

Participant 2 (P2):

Similar to P1, P2 also emphasized the desire to improve her education. Externally, she believed that increasing teacher salaries would boost motivation and commitment to their work. Additionally, she called for greater support from the school to enhance the educational background of faculty members. P2 recommended establishing collaborations between the university, enterprises, and public colleges and universities to provide training for faculty from private institutions, elevating their teaching and research capabilities. She also wished for greater understanding and respect for faculty members in society and envisioned more opportunities for private college faculty members to collaborate on projects with enterprises.

Participant 3 (P3):

P3 shared her efforts to engage in academic research to foster her academic abilities and develop a passion for scientific research and academic writing. She expressed her intention to learn from exceptional faculty members within the school and adopt advanced teaching methods to elevate her teaching proficiency. Regarding government measures, P3 emphasized the importance of treating private and public colleges and universities equally in terms of policies. Internally, she hoped for improvements in various management systems within the school, such as the promotion mechanism for professional titles, the rational arrangement of faculty members' curriculums, and the establishment of incentive mechanisms, all of which could positively impact faculty members' professional development.

These findings offer valuable insights into the proactive measures suggested by young faculty members to address the professional development dilemmas they face in private colleges and universities. Their proposals encompass a range of initiatives, including self-improvement through education and research, enhanced institutional support, collaboration opportunities, societal recognition, and improvements in internal management systems. Implementing these measures could significantly contribute to enhancing the professional development of young faculty members in private institutions. Table 2 summarizes and encodes the three themes studied in this article based on the conversation content of the participants.

Table 2: Codes on the Three Themes

Themes	Codes
Difficulties	Balance family and work
	Lack of corporate practice experience

	Low level of scientific research
	Poor educational background
	The salary level is low
	The teaching level is difficult to improve
Factors	Be restricted in applying for research projects
	Lack of school support
	Lack of support from government policy
	Lack of training of faculty members
	Low social identity
	Personal will is not firm
	Private colleges and universities aim at making profits
	The academic atmosphere is weak
	The quality of students is poor
	Improve personal ability
Measures	Promote education
	Raise faculty members' salaries
	Raise the level of scientific research
	Society gives more respect and recognition
	The government gives policy support
	The school improves the mechanism for training faculty members
	The school supports faculty members to improve their qualifications
	University-enterprise cooperation

4.4 Discussion

Indeed, the findings from Table 3 highlight a significant and common difficulty faced by young faculty members in private colleges and universities, which is their low level of scientific research. This code emerged as a prominent theme and was mentioned by all participants, with Participant 2 emphasizing it in particular. This finding is in line with past studies, such as the one conducted by Zhou & Zhang (2017), which supports the notion that the level of scientific research is a critical aspect influencing the professional development of faculty members in private higher education institutions [7].

By acknowledging this shared challenge, researchers and policymakers can better focus their efforts on developing targeted strategies and interventions to enhance the scientific research capabilities of young faculty members, thereby fostering their professional development and contributing to the overall improvement of private higher education institutions in China.

Table 3: Professional development difficulties discussed by three participants and the corresponding frequency

		1: Participant 1 18	2: Participant 2 26	3: Participant 3 23	Totals
Balance family and work	3			1	3
Lack of corporate practice experience	3		3		3
Low level of scientific research	7	2	3	2	7
Poor educational background	4	1	2	1	4
The salary level is low	4		1	3	4
The teaching level is difficult to improve	4	1	2	1	4
Totals		4	11	10	25

Based on the insights presented in Table 4, it is evident that the professional development dilemma of faculty members in private colleges is influenced by multiple factors. Notably, all three interviewees identified the lack of personal willpower as a significant contributing factor. This finding suggests that individual motivation and determination play a crucial role in overcoming career challenges and advancing in the academic field.

In addition to personal willpower, the study also highlights other key factors contributing to the professional development dilemma of faculty members in private colleges. These factors include the lack of government and school support, which can affect the resources and opportunities available to faculty members for professional growth. Furthermore, the academic atmosphere being perceived as not strong can impact the overall research and scholarly environment, potentially hindering faculty members' development. Additionally, the quality of students can also be a factor, as it can influence the effectiveness of teaching and research engagement.

These findings are consistent with the study conducted by Fan & Qi (2021), which adds weight to the validity and reliability of the identified factors. Understanding these multifaceted challenges is essential in formulating targeted interventions and strategies to address the professional development dilemmas faced by faculty members in private colleges [1]. By addressing these issues comprehensively, private higher education institutions can create an environment that fosters faculty growth and development, ultimately benefiting both faculty members and the overall quality of education in private colleges.

Table 4: Factors leading to the difficulties discussed by three participants and the corresponding frequency

		1: Participant 1 18	2: Participant 2 26	3: Participant 3 23	Totals
Be restricted in applying for research projects	2		1	1	2
Lack of school support	2	1	1		2
Lack of support from government policy	3		3	1	3
Lack of training of teachers	2		1	1	2
Low social identity	1		2	1	1
Personal will is not firm	3	1	1	1	3
Private colleges and universities are at making profits	2		1	1	2
The academic atmosphere is weak	3	1		1	1
The quality of students is poor	3	1	2		3
Totals		5	11	3	23

Based on the insights provided in Table 5, it is evident that the respondents identified several key measures to address the problem of faculty members' professional development in private universities. Among these measures, the most frequently mentioned one is improving their academic qualifications. This finding underscores the importance of advanced education and continuous learning for faculty members in private colleges and universities to enhance their expertise and stay updated with the latest developments in their respective fields.

Following the emphasis on improving academic qualifications, the respondents also highlighted the significance of enhancing personal abilities and scientific research levels. These measures are essential for faculty members to excel

in their teaching and research responsibilities, thereby contributing to the overall academic environment and reputation of the institution.

Additionally, the respondents recognized the crucial role of school support in addressing the issue of professional development. School support can encompass various aspects, such as providing platforms for faculty to enhance their academic qualifications, allocating resources for research activities, and establishing a conducive environment for professional growth and collaboration.

These findings align with the study conducted by Chen (2008), which emphasizes the importance of institutional support in promoting faculty members' professional development [11]. By implementing these measures, private universities can foster a culture of continuous improvement and provide faculty members with the necessary tools and opportunities to thrive in their careers. Ultimately, investing in faculty professional development contributes to the overall advancement and success of private higher education institutions in China.

Table 5: Measures to address the difficulties discussed by three participants and the corresponding frequency

		1: Participant 1 18	2: Participant 2 26	3: Participant 3 28	Totals
● Improve personal ability	4	1	1	2	4
● Provide education	5	1	2	1	6
● Raise teachers' salaries	2		1	1	2
● Raise the level of scientific research	4	2	1	1	4
● Society gives more respect and recognition	1		1		1
● The government gives policy support	1			1	1
● The school improves the mechanism for training teachers	1			1	1
● The school supports teachers to improve their qualifications	4	2	1		4
● University-enterprise cooperation	1		1		1
Totals		9	8	7	24

5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis and discussions conducted in this study, it is evident that young faculty members in private colleges and universities in China face numerous difficulties in their professional development. These challenges encompass low salaries resulting from the lack of government financial support and the institutions' profit-driven approach. Additionally, the increasing academic qualifications required by colleges and universities, especially doctorate degrees, create anxiety among private university faculty. Moreover, the lack of practical experience, coupled with the poor quality of students and insufficient teaching training, impedes the improvement of young faculty members' teaching levels. The overall weak academic level of faculty in private institutions further exacerbates the professional development dilemma faced by these educators.

Private colleges and universities play a significant role in the higher education system, and young faculty members are crucial to the future development of these institutions. To address the professional development dilemma faced by faculty in private colleges and universities, several implications can be drawn: At the government level, policies should ensure equal treatment of private and public universities, providing increased support to private institutions. This support can significantly impact the development of faculty members. At the school level, improving faculty salaries can enhance their motivation and dedication to their work. Offering more platforms for faculty to enhance their academic qualifications, such as collaboration with public universities, enables them to improve while actively engaging in scientific research. Schools should also enhance internal management systems, including promotion mechanisms for professional titles, faculty training systems, and effective incentive mechanisms, all of which positively influence the professional development of faculty. Faculty in private colleges and universities should take proactive steps to enhance their personal abilities. Improving scientific research skills while advancing academic degrees, learning effective paper writing methods, and engaging in research and academic projects are crucial steps. Moreover, emphasizing teaching skills and learning from exemplary faculty can significantly improve the overall teaching level.

While this study enriches academic research on the professional development of faculty in private colleges and universities in China, it does have certain limitations. Firstly, the small scale and limited scope of the survey restrict the generalization of conclusions. Future research should encompass a broader range of institutions and participants to yield more comprehensive insights. Additionally, adopting more diverse research methods and exploring various research directions will lead to a more comprehensive and reliable understanding of the challenges and potential solutions in this field. These improvements are vital for further enhancing and refining future research endeavors.

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