



Analysis on the Obstacles to Career Development of Young Returned Overseas Teachers in University

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Abstract

Young returned educators are a vital segment of university faculty, significantly contributing to the growth and advancement of higher education institutions. Nevertheless, they often encounter challenges in adjusting to the pedagogical and scholarly practices due to variances in operational norms between domestic and international universities. This research, grounded in field theory, explores the teaching, scholarly, and administrative dimensions within universities. It includes an empirical investigation through interviews with 16 young returnee educators in the humanities and social sciences across six universities in Zhejiang Province. The focus of this paper is on identifying and analyzing the professional development impediments faced by these educators, offering recommendations for enhancing their career trajectories within the university context, considering national, institutional, and individual perspectives.

Subject Areas

Psychology, Public Policy

Keywords

Young Returned Overseas Teachers, Career Development, Obstacle Factors

1. Introduction

The strategic enhancement of education and talent has notably fortified university faculties, attracting a significant influx of young professionals from overseas to bolster higher education in China [1]. Universities, research institutions, and key enterprises exhibit a pronounced demand for such returnees, with approx-

imately 84% employed in academic institutions, underscoring their role as primary employers of high-caliber, internationally-educated talent [2]. These returnee educators, equipped with advanced degrees from foreign institutions, have become instrumental in advancing China's higher education sector [3]. Their contributions span various domains, including discipline development, curriculum design, pedagogical innovation, global engagement, and fostering enriching teacher-student dynamics [4]. Their integral role in the strategic mission of establishing world-class universities highlights their impact on the internationalization of academic research and national modernization efforts [5]. Despite their academic prowess and significant research contributions, challenges concerning adaptability and satisfaction among these educators persist. Research by Ma and Zhang (2020) indicates adaptability issues in ideological, lifestyle, cultural, and academic aspects for young returnee educators [6]. Likewise, Li and Zhu's (2020) empirical study across 48 universities reveals low overall satisfaction among returnee educators regarding compensation, cultural integration, autonomy, and team dynamics [7]. Furthermore, Wu *et al.*'s (2020) findings corroborate the existence of negative perceptions towards career progression in academia among this demographic [8]. Consequently, these insights point to pressing adaptation and development challenges faced by young returnee educators within the university context. In an era marked by China's unique socialist development and the quest for modernization, universities bear the critical mission of strengthening national higher education. Amidst the accelerated drive to build world-class universities and disciplines, returnee educators emerge as a vital force. However, a paradox exists: the growing demand for these educators contrasts starkly with the inadequate fulfillment of their developmental needs. This paper delves into the underlying issues impeding the adaptation and professional growth of overseas returnee educators in university settings, exploring the causative factors and proposing solutions to bridge the gap between their high demand and the current challenges in meeting their developmental needs after recruitment.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Research Design

2.1. Theoretical Foundation

American anthropologist and ecological psychologist U. Bronfenbrenner proposed the influential biological-ecological system theory of human development in his book "The Ecology of Human Development". The theory advocates that individuals will actively interact and interact with the surrounding environment during the development process, so individuals do not exist in isolation. The human development ecosystem mainly includes microsystems, which are the environments that are in close contact with individuals and have a direct impact on their development, and mesosystems, which are the processes and connections between two or more microsystems. The exosystem refers to the environment in which individuals do not participate but have an indirect impact on

them, and the macrosystem refers to the vast social environment and ideological background in which individuals grow [9]. There are intricate connections and interactions between different systems, and individuals have developed through these connections and interactions.

Based on Bronfenbrenner's theory, Elliott and colleagues developed the academic acculturation model, and their research on the academic acculturation of international students in the UK posits that studying abroad represents an immersion into a novel ecosystem. Prior to this experience, each student is at the center of a multi-layered original ecosystem [10] [11]. The journey of studying abroad involves a "decontextualization" into this new ecosystem, entailing a disintegration and subsequent reconstruction of various subsystem levels from the original system. This process prompts international students to re-evaluate and reflect upon the concepts and norms ingrained in their original ecosystem. There are generally three potential outcomes: adherence to the original ecosystem, integration into the new ecosystem, or a fusion of both. A successful transition hinges on the individual's effective navigation and management of these old and new ecosystems.

2.2. Research Design

The methodology of this research primarily involves one-on-one in-depth interviews, utilizing both internet communication and face-to-face interactions for data collection. The items to be recorded in the interview include the interview time, location, and specific contents such as "1. Can you briefly introduce your educational and work experience? 2. How have you adapted to working since returning? Are there any aspects that you find challenging to adapt to?" and others. The focus of this study is on young educators who, having completed their doctoral studies abroad, are now employed in universities within Mainland China. Our selection criteria for interviewees were twofold: Firstly, they must be teaching in the fields of humanities and social sciences, as evidence suggests these disciplines pose unique challenges for returnees compared to the natural sciences [12]. Secondly, their age must be below 40 years. This age criterion aligns with the standards set by both domestic and international bodies and is reflective of the age limitations commonly observed in Chinese youth programs for social and natural science projects, which generally range from 35 to 40 years. Thus, for the purposes of this study, "young returnee educators" specifically refers to individuals under 40 years of age, who have earned their doctorates in humanities and social sciences from institutions outside Mainland China, and are currently engaged in academic and research roles in Chinese universities. We employed convenience and snowball sampling strategies to select 16 young "returnee" educators in the humanities and social sciences from eight universities in Zhejiang Province. Each participant engaged in an in-depth interview lasting between 1 - 2 hours, focusing on the core topic of barriers to career development. The group consisted of 12 female and 4 male teachers, all of whom obtained their doctoral degrees from institutions in Europe, Asia, Oceania, and

the Hong Kong region of China. Their ranks included 11 lecturers, 4 associate professors, and 1 professor. Their tenure at their current institutions ranged from 1 to 8 years, with 13 of them being married with children.

3. Analysis of Factors Hindering Career Development

3.1. Inadaptation for Living Environment

This research involved a survey and interview study of young returnee educators from six universities, including Zhejiang University, Zhejiang Ocean University, Ningbo University, Hangzhou Normal University, Zhejiang University of Technology, and Jiaying University. The participants, predominantly with a minimum of three years of overseas experience in developed regions like Europe, America, Japan, and South Korea, commonly reported experiencing “migration syndrome” upon their return. The survey revealed that over 80% of these educators faced difficulties adjusting to the natural environment initially. Key concerns included environmental pollution and food safety. Notably, 20% opted to return solo, leaving their families abroad due to concerns about their young children’s adaptation to the local environment. Confronted with the dual challenges of high living costs and limited disposable income, these educators grappled with various issues, including housing, children’s education, and overall living conditions. Such factors adversely impacted their focus on personal and professional growth, posing significant barriers to their development.

3.2. Inadaptation for Cultural Environment

The cultural disparities between Chinese and Western societies are pronounced, with significant variations even within Asia. Young returnee educators, having pursued their studies abroad at a formative age, assimilated the educational culture, methodologies, and social norms prevalent in their host countries. This assimilation often results in challenges when they re-enter their native cultural milieu, frequently leading to temporary social isolation, anxiety, and, in some cases, depression. Such cultural incongruence directly impacts the efficiency and effectiveness of these educators in various aspects of their university roles, encompassing interpersonal relationships, teaching methodologies, research practices, and broader societal contributions.

3.3. Inadaptation for Academic Environment

Academic adaptability emerges as a pivotal challenge for young returnee educators upon their return to China, with nearly half experiencing difficulties in this regard. The mismatch with the local academic framework manifests in various aspects, including the academic system, institutional mechanisms, research environment, and pedagogical approaches. Many returnee educators encounter obstacles within the domestic academic landscape, especially when seeking involvement in international collaborative projects or prestigious funding opportunities. For instance, applying for initiatives like the Senior Scholars Fund Project

typically requires professorial status and esteemed titles such as the “National Outstanding Youth Fund” or “National Excellent Youth Fund”. With these awards being scarce and selection criteria stringent, young educators, particularly those unfamiliar with the local academic milieu, face heightened challenges. Moreover, about 75% of these educators perceive the influence of “circle culture” or networking on academic success, where factors like the reputation of one’s alma mater, mentor, or workgroup significantly impact their research output efficiency and career trajectory.

3.4. Inadaptation for Change of Work Focus

The majority of young educators returning from overseas primarily concentrated on scientific research prior to their repatriation. Upon joining universities, they are confronted with a broader spectrum of responsibilities, notably achieving a balance between teaching and research activities. The synergy between teaching and research is essential; educators are expected to integrate research into their teaching methodologies, thereby enriching the educational experience and fostering a mutually reinforcing relationship between these two domains. Nevertheless, approximately 70% of surveyed educators reported struggling to maintain this equilibrium. Beyond their academic and pedagogical roles, some also assume administrative duties, further complicating their workload. Consequently, this multifaceted responsibility spectrum often impedes their ability to focus singularly on research, particularly in the initial stages of their career development.

3.5. Inadaptation for Change of Research Direction

Young returnee educators, having engaged in extensive academic training overseas, are often deeply entrenched in international research trends and lack familiarity with recent developments within the domestic research community. They tend to prioritize their research interests fostered during their graduate studies. Yet, about half of the respondents acknowledged a disconnect between their prior research focus and the more pragmatic demands of domestic academia. To align with local research priorities and “ground” their work in the national context, many of these educators opt to shift their research direction. This realignment poses a significant challenge, particularly for those in the early stages of their academic careers.

4. Strategies for Improving Teacher Professional Development

4.1. Improving Teachers’ Self Literacy

4.1.1. Try to Adapt to the Domestic Academic Environment

It’s a widespread occurrence for returnees to undergo a period of “acclimatization” within their workplaces, particularly in distinctive environments like universities, where each educator possesses a unique working paradigm. Young returnee educators must swiftly acclimate to the new academic landscape and fa-

miliarize themselves with the domestic university system. They should demonstrate initiative and responsibility, actively seeking project participation and publishing scholarly papers, benefiting both their personal growth and their academic disciplines. Additionally, maintaining a humble and inquisitive demeanor, excelling in communication with peers, can facilitate mutual understanding and foster learning opportunities. Engagement in domestic academic seminars and exchanges with local scholars is crucial for building academic networks, thereby enhancing access to scholarly resources and fostering a vibrant exchange ecosystem. Regular publication of research findings is also essential, as it allows peers to recognize their work, potentially leading to increased collaboration opportunities and career advancement.

4.1.2. Strengthen Physical and Mental Exercise

The issue of adaptation for returnees is both widespread and universal. In the face of various challenges post-return, young “returnee” educators in universities should maintain a positive and optimistic outlook. They need to objectively assess the differences and gaps between domestic and international standards, and rationally address the shortcomings in domestic universities’ systems, management, and cultural environments. The adaptation of young returnee educators to the academic environment of domestic universities is a bidirectional process. It not only requires the state and universities to further deepen reforms in academic assessment, research evaluation, and administrative management, but also demands that returnee educators refine their physical and mental resilience to integrate swiftly with the work environment of domestic universities. On this basis, they can fully leverage their international advantages gained from studying abroad, laying a solid foundation for resolving their own developmental challenges.

4.1.3. Accumulate Social Capital

Social capital is a critical factor in the professional development of young educators. Many young returnee teachers, embarking on their academic careers, find themselves at the initial stages of establishing their academic networks within China. Often, these educators transition directly to university positions after completing their doctoral studies abroad, leaving them with nascent academic standing and limited scholarly connections in both domestic and international arenas. In a society like China, where relational dynamics and “favors” are heavily emphasized, these factors significantly influence the higher education sector. Consequently, cultivating strong academic relationships becomes a vital “calling card” for broadening one’s academic network. In this context, the adage, “Having friends in high places makes officialdom easier” rings particularly true.

4.2. Improving Governance Capacity and Service Level

4.2.1. Enhancing the Service Capabilities

In managing the recruitment, evaluation, and support of young returnee talents, university administrations must adopt a talent-centric approach. This involves

enhancing service consciousness, improving the quality of services provided, and addressing any gaps in support. Simplifying administrative processes and delegating authority where appropriate are also crucial steps. Additionally, universities should adopt a demand-responsive strategy, acknowledging the material and cultural needs of returnee educators. Developing a compensation system that reflects the societal standing and contributions of university educators is imperative. Furthermore, cultivating an organizational culture that reveres educators and prioritizes education—one that is rich in tradition, appealing, and cohesive—is essential for fostering a harmonious educational environment.

4.2.2. Balancing Power of Administrative and Academic

To secure the stable and progressive development of higher education, a balanced interplay between administrative and academic authorities is vital. Firstly, universities should govern according to established laws, fortifying their management rules and clarifying the demarcation between administrative and academic powers. This includes judiciously allocating power resources. Secondly, bolstering the mechanisms of academic influence is crucial. This involves standardizing the formation of academic committees, including professorial, subject-specific, teaching, and degree committees. These bodies should institutionally support and represent the perspectives of professors, experts, and other academic staff. Thirdly, reinforcing the significance of academic authority while managing its function across various disciplines is essential. This entails navigating the interplay between academic democracy, freedom, and oversight, and mitigating any undue dominance in the academic realm through legal frameworks.

4.2.3. Conducting Teacher Training

Pre-job training serves as a valuable tool for new educators, facilitating their adaptation to the work environment and enhancing their understanding of educational theories and pedagogical skills. This training not only elevates the professional competencies of “new teachers” but also bolsters their abilities in teaching and research. Such support is instrumental in helping them navigate the challenges encountered in their career development. Given the often limited teaching experience of young returnee educators, university departments can effectively bridge this gap by implementing comprehensive teacher training programs, with a particular emphasis on developing teaching skills.

4.2.4. Reducing the Teaching Load for Young Returnee Educators

The pressure encountered in teaching has become a significant factor affecting the professional development of young returnee educators. This pressure arises partly from the scale of teaching responsibilities and partly from the volume of teaching hours they are required to undertake. Interviews have revealed that young returnee educators perceive large class sizes and excessive teaching hours as substantial sources of stress in their teaching roles. Therefore, it is important to focus on rationalizing the allocation of class sizes in universities and on re-

ducing the teaching hours for young returnee educators, thereby supporting a balanced development in their professional careers.

Furthermore, regarding the management of young returnee educators, universities should design care-oriented management plans that promote their professional development. These plans should align the development of young returnee educators with the overall growth of the university, thereby formulating relevant management measures and strategies. The management of young returnee educators should be distinctly directive and motivational, aimed at enhancing their enthusiasm in teaching and academic work. It involves dynamic management throughout their entire career development process, guiding the alignment of their professional goals with the developmental objectives of the university. In doing so, universities can retain young returnee talent, thereby facilitating the mutual growth of both the educators and the institution.

4.3. Promoting the Implementation of National Security Policies

In terms of implementing national policies, improvements can be made in the following areas: During the process of attracting outstanding returnee talents back to China, a uniform and applicable system should be established to ensure the effective implementation of talent introduction policies. From a systemic and financial perspective, universities should ensure the cultivation of ideological and political literacy among young returnee educators. Special funds should be set up for young returnee talents without titles, increasing financial support for these educators and addressing their initial research funding needs. This approach enables young returnee talents in universities to commence their academic research smoothly and confidently upon their return. Additionally, there should be an emphasis on academic culture and the reshaping of the academic ecosystem. Promoting the spirit of academic freedom and independence throughout society is crucial. Universities should be transformed into beacons of intellectual, cultural, and academic excellence within the broader community.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of career development obstacles for young returned educators in universities, as explored in this research, offers valuable insights into the multifaceted challenges these educators face. These challenges, ranging from adaptation to the local environment, cultural and academic systems, to balancing work responsibilities and aligning research directions, highlight a complex interplay of factors impacting their professional trajectory. Key takeaways from this study include:

5.1. Adaptation Challenges

The returned educators experience significant difficulties in adjusting to the living, cultural, and academic environments upon their return to China. This includes dealing with environmental concerns, cultural dissonance, and mismatches with the local academic framework.

5.2. Work and Research Balance

Educators struggle to maintain a balance between teaching, research, and administrative duties, which can hinder their ability to focus on their core competencies and professional growth.

5.3. Professional Development Strategies

To address these challenges, the study suggests multiple strategies:

- Improving educators' self-literacy and adaptability to the domestic academic environment.
- Strengthening physical and mental resilience to cope with adaptation challenges.
- Accumulating social capital to establish robust academic networks.

5.4. Institutional Support and Policy Implementation

The role of universities and national policies is critical. This involves:

- Enhancing service capabilities and balancing administrative and academic power.
- Implementing comprehensive teacher training programs and reducing teaching load.
- Developing care-oriented management plans focused on the professional growth of educators.
- Implementing effective national talent introduction policies and promoting academic freedom and independence.

In summary, this research underscores the importance of a holistic approach in addressing the challenges faced by young returned educators. By focusing on both individual adaptation strategies and systemic improvements at institutional and national levels, there is a significant opportunity to enhance the professional development and integration of these valuable contributors to China's higher education landscape. This concerted effort will not only benefit the individual educators but also contribute to the broader goals of academic excellence and innovation within the educational system.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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