

Understanding Faculty Migration and Retention Challenges in China's Higher Education System

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Abstract

Teacher migration from private to public higher education institutions has emerged as a critical challenge in China, threatening the stability and quality of private universities. This review synthesizes existing scholarship to examine the primary drivers of faculty turnover, including insufficient policy and financial support, low professional status and social recognition, ineffective performance evaluation systems, and inadequate compensation and benefits. Private institutions often adopt public university governance models without adaptation, limiting flexibility in faculty management and weakening institutional competitiveness. The review also identifies gaps in the literature: most studies analyze these factors in isolation, lack regional contextualization, and rely heavily on quantitative or policy-based approaches, with limited qualitative insights into teachers' lived experiences. To address these gaps, future research should integrate qualitative case studies with mixed-methods and longitudinal designs to provide more nuanced, context-specific insights into migration dynamics. Comparative analyses across regions and institution types are also needed to capture structural differences and policy impacts. Such multidimensional approaches could inform more comprehensive policy development and institutional reforms aimed at strengthening retention, enhancing job satisfaction, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of private higher education in China.

Keywords

Teacher migration, private higher education, faculty retention, institutional governance, compensation, China.

1. Introduction

In recent years, teacher migration from private to public higher education institutions in China has become an increasingly significant concern. As of April 24, 2012, the Ministry of Education reported 2,138 public colleges and universities (excluding independent colleges) and 403 private institutions [1]. Despite their proliferation, private colleges and universities face chronic challenges in talent management, hindering their long-term sustainability and competitiveness in the education sector.

The core of these challenges lies in the inability of many private institutions to establish an independent system for managing academic talent. Often, private colleges replicate governance models and personnel policies from public institutions without contextual adaptation [2]. This limits innovation and responsiveness in managing faculty, particularly in areas such as workload management, performance evaluation, and professional growth opportunities. Talent loss—especially the migration of skilled and experienced teachers—has consequently emerged as a critical issue, weakening institutional foundations and eroding educational quality [3][4].

1.1. Insufficient Policy and Financial Support for Private Institutions

A key driver of teacher migration is the incomplete and inconsistent policy framework governing private higher education. Although the Law on the Promotion of Private Education emphasizes the public service nature of private educational institutions and their role in cultivating socialist citizens [5], it provides limited structural or financial support. Most private colleges operate under enterprise-style self-financing models, which restrict their ability to invest in faculty development and infrastructure [6].

This operational model prioritizes cost reduction over academic quality. In an effort to minimize expenditures, many private institutions increase faculty workloads without offering corresponding research support, academic incentives, or meaningful career development paths [7]. Consequently, faculty are often unable to meet promotion requirements or engage in scholarly work, prompting many to seek employment in public universities where conditions are more favorable [8][9].

1.2. Low Social Recognition and Professional Status

Social perception significantly affects teachers' professional identity and job satisfaction. Private colleges are often viewed by the public as second-tier institutions, largely enrolling students who were not accepted into public universities. This perception extends to faculty, who are often regarded as less competent or reputable than their counterparts in public institutions [10].

The social stigma associated with teaching in private institutions reduces professional status and peer recognition. Furthermore, parents and employers typically view private degrees as less prestigious, which affects teachers' morale and sense of purpose. This status gap contributes to a professional environment where faculty feel undervalued, ultimately motivating them to migrate to public institutions with greater prestige and social legitimacy [11][12].

1.3. Unfair and Ineffective Performance Evaluation Systems

Private colleges frequently employ performance assessment systems that are both unscientific and overly subjective. Faculty evaluations often prioritize academic titles and credentials, while undervaluing teaching effectiveness, student engagement, and innovation [13]. The assessment process is frequently influenced by administrative subjectivity, resulting in evaluations that lack fairness and transparency [14].

Moreover, student feedback mechanisms are often unreliable. Many students rate instructors based on grades received rather than pedagogical quality. The absence of a well-structured incentive system—such as pathways for promotion, merit pay, or public recognition—further diminishes faculty motivation and retention. In contrast, public universities tend to offer clearer, merit-based systems for faculty development, making them more attractive employers [15].

1.4. Inadequate Compensation and Benefits

Compensation is a direct and powerful determinant of faculty retention. Private colleges typically offer lower salaries and fewer benefits compared to public institutions, largely due to their reliance on tuition fees as their primary revenue source [16]. In addition, salary structures are often opaque and inconsistent, lacking principles such as “more work, more pay” or reward systems for high performance [17].

Beyond monetary compensation, private institutions often fail to offer adequate housing, healthcare, research funding, and job security—all of which are essential to faculty satisfaction and long-term engagement [18][19]. This economic insecurity compels many teachers to seek

employment in the public sector, where compensation packages are more stable and comprehensive.

2. Conclusion and Future Research Perspectives

A review of the existing literature underscores that while several factors contributing to teacher migration have been identified—such as lack of national support, low social recognition, inadequate evaluation systems, and poor compensation—most studies have examined these issues in isolation. There is limited empirical research that integrates these factors into a comprehensive framework specific to teacher migration patterns between private and public institutions [20]. Furthermore, existing research often relies on quantitative data or policy analysis, with relatively few qualitative case studies exploring the lived experiences and decision-making processes of affected teachers.

There is also a gap in region-specific analyses. Much of the literature discusses the issue at the national level without contextualizing it in diverse local settings, such as underdeveloped provinces where private institutions may face even more acute challenges. Additionally, few studies offer actionable institutional-level strategies beyond general policy recommendations. To address these gaps, future research should adopt a qualitative case study approach to capture in-depth insights from private institution faculty who have migrated—or considered migrating—to public schools [21]. This perspective will help contextualize the interplay of financial, professional, and social factors in real-world decision-making. In addition, mixed-methods studies that integrate survey data with interview findings could provide both breadth and depth in understanding the drivers of teacher migration. Longitudinal research is also needed to trace teachers' career trajectories over time and examine how policy changes, institutional reforms, and labor market dynamics influence migration decisions. Furthermore, comparative studies across regions and between different types of private institutions could reveal context-specific patterns and challenges [22][23]. Future studies may also employ policy analysis and institutional benchmarking to evaluate the effectiveness of current retention strategies and to propose evidence-based reforms [24]. Such multi-faceted research will not only inform national and institutional policies but also contribute to strengthening teacher retention, enhancing job satisfaction, and ensuring the long-term viability of private higher education in China.

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