

Navigating Dual Roles: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Chinese Early Career Academics' Experience on Teaching and Research Nexus

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

The academic profession in China has traditionally been seen as a "golden bowl," signifying a well-paid and stable job. However, recent HE reforms have significantly altered the landscape of academic careers. These changes have intensified and reshaped academics' experiences of teaching and research. This study will uncover how ECAs navigate their university roles amidst these reforms. Specifically, it examines how these changes influence ECAs' identity, focusing on their dual roles as teachers and researchers and the interplay between teaching and research. The study involved 25 participants, all social sciences academics, who obtained their degrees and tenure within the past five years. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study conducted an in-depth analysis of the **virtual** interview data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The findings suggest that ECAs face increasing uncertainty in their academic pursuits and job security due to the current university HR system, which deliberately differentiates between "old people" and "new people."

Full paper

Literature Review:

The landscape of higher education in China has undergone dramatic changes, shifting the long-held perception of the academic profession as a stable and lucrative career choice. Historically, academic positions in China were viewed as prestigious and secure, offering a "golden bowl" of benefits. However, recent higher education (HE) reforms aimed at modernising and enhancing the competitiveness of Chinese universities have disrupted this stability.

Previous studies have highlighted the increasing pressures academics face due to these reforms. Performance-based assessments, increased emphasis on research output, and differentiated treatment of academics based on tenure and experience are common features of the recent new managerialism within higher education reform in China (Xu & Poole, 2023). Such measures have intensified the pressures on early career academics (ECAs), who must now balance teaching responsibilities with the demands of high-impact research. Song and Lai (2022) suggest that university academics diligently researching how to improve their teaching is a matter of conscience.

The dual roles of teaching and research, once seen as complementary, are now often in conflict due to the heightened emphasis on research output in Chinese universities (Lai et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2020). Many ECAs report feeling overwhelmed by the expectation to publish in high-impact journals while maintaining high teaching standards (Xu & Poole, 2023). This pressure leads to a sense of fragmentation in their professional identities as they struggle to fulfil the dual demands effectively.

Moreover, the current university appraisal system in China deliberately differentiates between "old people" (established academics) and "new people" (recently tenured academics). This differentiation manifests in various forms, such as disparities in job security, resource allocation, and professional development opportunities. ECAs, therefore, face significant uncertainties regarding their academic careers, further complicating their professional experiences (Liu, 2022).

Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilising Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to delve into the lived experiences of ECAs. Data was collected through virtual interviews with 25 social sciences academics who have attained their doctorate and tenure within the past five years. This methodology allows for an in-depth understanding of how ECAs perceive and navigate the tension between their teaching and research roles posed by the ongoing HE reforms.

Findings:

Findings suggested the differential experiences and expectations of established academics ("old people") versus Early Career Academics (ECAs) in higher education institutions. The analysis reveals distinct disparities in contract structures, teaching autonomy, and research demands. Firstly, established academics benefit from non-periodic contracts, with no stringent performance or teaching requirements, often resulting in lower salaries. In contrast, ECAs face periodic contracts with high performance expectations. Regarding teaching autonomy, established academics possess considerable freedom in designing and selecting courses, leveraging their extensive experience. ECAs, however, encounter limited autonomy, often constrained by departmental guidelines and lacking the liberty to innovate in their teaching methods.

The research expectations also diverge significantly. Established academics engage in research driven by personal intellectual pursuits, free from external pressures. Conversely, ECAs are compelled to balance their research ambitions with the pressures of performance metrics and institutional demands, affecting their overall research focus and output. Furthermore, the study has identified the uncertainty inherent in this dual academic system. This uncertainty is driven by external triggers, such as policy changes or funding fluctuations, which necessitate internal transformations within academic institutions. These dynamics contribute to a complex environment that influences the professional trajectories and work conditions of both established academics and ECAs.

Conclusion:

The HE reforms in China have reshaped the academic profession, particularly for ECAs, who face a more precarious and demanding environment. The study has highlighted the need for a more balanced approach to academic assessment that recognizes the interdependent situation of teaching and research. Universities should consider implementing policies that support ECAs in both roles, fostering a

more sustainable and integrated professional development path. By addressing these areas, universities can create a more supportive environment that enables ECAs to thrive both as educators and researchers, ultimately enhancing the overall quality of higher education in China.

References

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