

## **The Growth of Academic Identity in the Early Career Stage in Chinese Higher Education**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This doctoral study explores how early career academics experience their sense of belonging to the academic profession and how they experience the teaching-research nexus during the transition of their institution from a teaching- to a research-led environment with an ethnography-informed phenomenology approach. Moreover, it examines the complexity of the transition and the role that ECAs play in the university repositioning. This study seeks to place the investigation in a broader frame of social and cultural analysis to go deep into the everyday experiences of the ECAs around issues of their sense of identity, as well as their ways of connecting and bringing about changes in their work communities during a changing environment. It will shed light on scholarly debates on the growth of academic identity in the early career stage and faculty development in China.*

**Keywords:** ECAs, Chinese HE, Academic identity, phenomenology

## **INTRODUCTION**

As China integrates into the global knowledge economy in an increasingly important way, there is a growing political desire to develop its higher education system to meet both the internal needs of the transition to a market economy and the external pressures to remain globally competitive (Zha, 2011). Under this condition, a series of higher education reforms which could be categorized into three stages (i.e. massification, internationalization and pursuit of world-class) are driven by the government (Mok, 2016; Wang & Mok, 2014; Yang, 2015).

By replacing the 211 and 985 Projects, the Double First-class Scheme is a reform-based performance-related attempt to help higher education institutions optimize their disciplinary structures by recruiting talented scholars and scientists worldwide. More importantly, this new Scheme hopes to effectively eliminate the monopoly of past 211/985 universities on governmental resources and encourage more comprehensive development of Chinese higher education. This Scheme also led a number of universities making transition from teacher-oriented to research-oriented ones. Meanwhile, the university repositioning brought a series of changes to academics, especially those in their early career stage.

While the emerging body of research focusing on the growth of academic identity is encouraging, what is still missing to this point is precisely how ECAs' academic identity is shaped overtime and how do they experience particular changes in terms of their sense of belonging and teaching-research relationship in the field of social sciences. This dissertation study aims to address three main questions:

1. How do ECAs experience their sense of belonging to the academic profession during the transition of teaching-intensive universities in Chinese higher education system?
2. How do ECAs experience the teaching and research nexus through the transition of their institutions from a teaching- to a research-led environment?
3. In what ways do ECAs facilitate their research career during the transition? And what factors influence this?

### **TEACHING-RESEARCH NEXUS**

The relationship between teaching and research has recently been a controversial issue in higher education (Horta et al., 2011; Zhang & Shin, 2015). The relationship matters, partly because of its implication for higher education

structure and resources and partly because of its intrinsic importance in helping to define higher education. Since the relationship between teaching and research is important to the higher education system, understanding the nature of the nexus with reference to the operations level and disciplinary variation could support HE managers to design the reward mechanisms (Song, 2018) and incentives policy (Zhang et al., 2019) for faculty staff in a specific HE context.

There is an old Chinese saying goes like ‘teaching others teachers yourself (教学相长)’ which means that the capacities of teachers will be strengthened during their teaching activities. In the higher education context, previous studies on teaching-informed research (e.g. Willcoxson et al., 2011) and research-informed pedagogy (e.g. Mathieson, 2019) evidently support the existing nexus between teaching and research. Currently, both quantitative and qualitative studies seek to find out the nexus and understand how does the nexus operate crossing various disciplines in universities (Boyd et al., 2010; Connolly et al., 2021), but very few studies look at the academic’s experience of the nexus let alone applying the nexus to faculty development. Past studies have captured the teaching-research nexus and have explored the relationship primarily in terms of disciplinary and pedagogical practices. The direct experience of ECAs as subjects conducting teaching and research is also useful in providing an in-depth understanding of the nexus. The implementation of the ‘Double First-class Scheme’ policy has led to the quest for organizational change in terms of organizational culture and research development in many Chinese universities. At the same time, this transition has given this study an opportunity to observe these changes and to gain insights into the nexus between teaching and research from the perspective of ECAs.

### **METHODOLOGY**

A paradigm or worldview of a researcher is “a basic of belief that guide action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17). This study adopts the social constructionist’s worldview that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences-meaning directed toward certain objects. Under social constructionist’s paradigm, Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen as the major methodology to the doctoral study.

The document data not only serve as the backdrop of the study but also situate the discussion in a wider context. The main documents analyzed are from the Chinese government, Ministry of Education, and the universities. Documents

from the government related to faculty development included government plans at the national and municipal levels, policy initiatives, and regulations. Documents from the universities related to faculty development included strategic planning (vision, expectations, etc.), annual reports, HRM and incentive policy. Newsletters of universities included official policies and public opinions from faculty, staff, and administrators related to ECA and faculty development.

Qualitative research is concerned with the depth of data rather than generalizability. In terms of the number of people interviewed, data saturation occurred as a sign of sufficiency. For this study, the number of participants was determined by analyzing data after a pilot study. Participants (8 ECAs) in this study are recruited according to several criteria such as age (under 35 years old), sex, research field, type of PhD awarding institution from four universities which are located in Eastern (Coastal), Central (middle), Western, and Northeastern regions of China. In the main study, focused ethnographic observations are carried out in several scenarios like classroom, supervision of undergraduate dissertation, and departmental meetings. The short-term field observations in this study mainly contribute to a better understanding of the context in which participants work and live daily. These understandings better informed the design and implementation of in-depth phenomenological interviews which focuses on participants' life history, details of experience and acute reflection (Seidman, 2019).

### **CONTRIBUTION TO COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION**

The study on the experience of Chinese academics in their early career stage in teaching-intensive higher education institutions is significant for several reasons. First of all, ECAs is the largest group of the academy and the most important intellectual reserve. Their experience on academic profession is helpful for policy-makers, senior management of HEIs and faculty developers to design the learning and development policies that facilitate the research development and strengthen the nexus of teaching and research. The 'Double First-class' Scheme replaces the 985 Project and reflect the focus on Chinese higher education reform has been shifted by the government from building individual prestigious universities to promoting the overall quality of higher education and faculty development. As knowledge carriers and producers, academics in universities are regarded as the basis of innovation and knowledge reproduction in China, and also the early career stage as the most vigorous period of academic vitality (Freebody,

2010). However, their stories of academic growth have not yet been adequately chaptered. In fact, there are limited ways of understanding of what is entailed in the process of decision-making and academic development, particularly their motivations, experiences, struggles, and possibilities.

Second, a close investigation on the transition of teaching-intensive university will shed some light on the ‘Double First-class’ Scheme and its quest for creating world-class universities and disciplines. China, in recent years, has aggressively moved to advance its higher education through setting up world-class universities. This research makes a contribution to the literature of comparative higher education study.

Furthermore, this study is valuable to researchers who are interested in the growth of academic identity in Chinese higher education context over time. While scholarship on identity formation has opened up a new conceptual framework for understanding the growth of identity with the life-course and social-cultural developmental approach (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), which indicates that professional agency should be conceptualized from a subject-centered socio-cultural and life-long learning perspective, turning attention to subjects’ construction of their identity position at work, and focusing on how they negotiate agency in education and working life to construct meaningful careers and life courses. Through phenomenological interviews and field observations, this study will answer the above mentioned research questions with rich and in-depth qualitative data, which includes the life history, personal experiences, and reflections of ECAs and will enable the researcher to recognize the mechanisms by which they construct their identity of the academic profession and how they experience the nexus between teaching and research during periods of transition. The research finding may contribute to the faculty developers for facilitating ECA’s research career in practice. There has been growing literature on faculty development with different concentrations on JCIHE (e.g. Kwiek, 2014; Djiraro Mangué & Gonondo, 2021 and Ruan, 2020), this emerging study will enrich the scholarly debate on these topics.

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