



# Research on Teacher Development Challenges in Private Higher Education Institutions in Sichuan Province

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**Abstract:** Private higher education institutions form a vital component of China's education system. Faculty members' professional growth and development determine the future of these universities. Teachers in private universities face multiple career challenges. This study conducted questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews with teachers at five private undergraduate institutions in Sichuan, China. Research uncovers current challenges: low institutional identification among faculty, low research confidence, compressed time for academic accumulation, low institutional investments in teacher development against high assessment objectives, and low base salaries exacerbating livelihood anxieties. This study proposes recommendations from teachers, institutions, and government policymakers, to address these predicaments.

**Keywords:** private university teachers, career development, development challenges

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## 1. Introduction

Private universities play a significant role in expanding educational resources and promoting higher education popularization in China. According to Sichuan Provincial Department of Education in May 2025, there are 18 civilian-run universities in Sichuan, 13 of which are in Chengdu and Meishan. Despite the commendable results, the private universities in the Chengdu-Meishan region face numerous challenges. The teacher issue lies at the core. Unlike most state-funded universities, private institutions face issues such as low faculty salaries, unstable welfare benefits, narrow career advancement paths, high turnover rates, and frequent legal disputes over rights. The persistent predicament of young faculty at private institutions severely erodes their psychological capital for professional dedication, inevitably hindering the long-term development of these universities. Research into the factors contributing to this professional dilemma and corresponding policy responses is urgently needed. Since 2021, the Ministry of Education and five other departments have issued the "Guiding Opinions on Strengthening the Reform of the University Faculty Team in the New Era", delegating professional title evaluation authority directly to universities[1]. Institutions now conduct autonomous evaluations and hire faculty based on specific positions. However, the ambiguous status of private school teachers has raised questions about whether university-appointed professional titles possess universal recognition, continuity, and reliability. Teachers' working motivation inevitably declines, significantly diminishing their professional recognition. Faced with identity challenges, private teachers often resort to passivity and resignation. This study aims to uncover the contradictions and predicaments within the teacher group.

## 2. Theoretical review

Recently, academic research on university management has increasingly focused on the career development and faculty building in private institutions. Research on the professional predicaments faced by private university faculty uncovered numerous obstacles to their career development: inconsistent institutional positioning, changing evaluation criteria, lack of systematic faculty development programs, absence of high-caliber academic mentors, and profit-oriented management[2]. Other scholars contend that current evaluations of private institutions reveal unsatisfactory outcomes, with faculty development constrained by multiple factors: poor faculty stability, excessive teaching workloads, lack of systematic academic cultivation, and low institutional commitment among teachers[3]. Some scholars further suggest that current legal frameworks for faculty rights protection only outline broad principles, leading to frequent implementation disputes. Faculty's legal status remains difficult to enforce, with their rights often subject to implicit infringement. Consequently, scholars urged private universities to optimize internal management systems, collaborate with government agencies, and establish diversified redress channels to fundamentally safeguard faculty rights. Empirical research to explore factors associated with resignation tendencies among private university faculty studied employee engagement, perceived organizational support, and psychological capital, indicating that highly engaged faculty exhibit weaker resignation tendencies. Faculty engagement can be stimulated when institutions provide robust professional development opportunities. Perceived organizational

support also positively correlates with teachers' willingness to remain in their positions. When faculty perceive a supportive organizational culture and feel their urgent growth needs are taken seriously, their identification with the institution strengthens. Furthermore, scholars urge attention to teachers' emotional exhaustion, advocating that institutions provide mental health support and emotional counseling. Teachers with higher psychological capital demonstrate greater willingness to contribute, leading to stronger faculty stability[4].

### 3. Research Process and Methodology

This study conducted in-depth fieldwork among faculty at five private undergraduate institutions in the Chengdu-Meishan region. Field research spanned 73 days from May to late July in 2025. Data collection primarily relied on questionnaires supplemented by interviews, with conclusions drawn from both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The questionnaire design adopted the "Identity Recognition Measurement Scale for Teachers in Private Universities" developed by Li Wei. It explored the challenges across three dimensions of "identity recognition": teachers' awareness of the professional competence, the perception of the occupational value, and their institutional (organizational) identity recognition. Semi-structured interviews provided precise and effective supplementation to the questionnaire findings, while supporting the recommendations to address practical challenges. Researchers distributed the survey and successfully collected 242 responses. After careful screening, 9 questionnaires were found to contain missing data or obvious signs of perfunctory responses. Ultimately, 233 valid questionnaires were obtained, yielding a response rate of 96.28%. The first seven questions of the questionnaire cover demographic data of respondents, such as gender, age, professional title, working hours and the primary source of the performance-based income. The second part presents the Identity Measurement Scale, comprising 22 assessment items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. A score of 1 indicates "completely disagree," while 5 signifies "completely agree." Example questions are shown in Table 1:

**Table 1. Example questions for three dimensions**

Professional Competence	Q9 I care not only about students' academic achievements but also their growth and development.
	Q12 I am competent in academic research work and possess the capacity for sustained scholarly inquiry.
	Q13 I proactively pursue learning and training to enhance my professional expertise and skills.
Institutional Identity	Q14 Our university consistently ranks among the top private institutions for comprehensive strength and societal influence.
	Q20 Teachers at private universities receive equal respect from society as those at public institutions.
	Q21 The university provides me with a platform and opportunities for professional development.
Occupational Value	Q24 In today's workplace environment, I believe the university teaching profession offers greater security compared to other occupations
	Q25 I am satisfied with the flexible working hours and the winter/summer breaks.
	Q29 Pursuing a career as a university teacher allows me to realize my life value.

### 4. Findings from questionnaires

This survey explored the challenges faced by private university faculty across three dimensions of identity recognition: professional identity awareness, occupational identity perception, and institutional (organizational) identity recognition. Results revealed varying scores among faculty regarding career development, resource support, and social recognition. First, faculty generally demonstrated high levels of mission commitment (average score 3.53) and occupational value recognition (average score 3.83), particularly in their attitude toward student growth and development (3.87 points), reflecting their passion and sense of responsibility toward education. However, the survey also revealed significant dissatisfaction regarding institutional recognition, such as professional development platforms (2.08), income and benefits (2.01), and social respect (2.08). Younger teachers and those with longer tenure reported lower perceptions of support for professional development, highlighting an urgent need for schools to improve in these areas.

Furthermore, it is also found that teachers' perceived support for teaching and research resources is closely linked to their job satisfaction. The adequacy of resources directly impacts teachers' work vitality and sense of job security. Therefore, schools should prioritize diversified resource allocation to enhance teachers' career development opportunities. The perceived lack of societal respect for private university faculty affects teachers' professional confidence and psychological well-being. It is recommended that publicity campaigns and policy guidance be implemented to elevate societal recognition of private university educators.

## 5. Findings from interviews

### 5.1 "Marginalized Tribes" and "Marginalized Groups"

Over the years, private universities have secured significantly fewer funded research projects and teaching competition honors than the national average for higher education institutions. Beyond disparities in research capabilities, a well-known key factor lies in "resource allocation." Public universities monopolize most of the high-quality social capital, reflecting their elevated "social status" within the system. The concentration of capital directly impacts the fairness of the playing field. This skewed distribution of social capital relegates private universities to a "marginal position," meaning their faculty members are even more excluded from equitable platforms. Interviewee Y stated, "We typically invest more time and effort preparing grant proposals, only to be shut out every time. The university imposes strict quantitative requirements for the 'act' of applying, yet shows 'no concern' for the 'outcomes' of the projects applied for. This makes the whole process feel like a mere formality, and gradually everyone has become disengaged and disillusioned." Respondent L discussed the role of professors who have moved from public institutions to part-time positions or re-employment at their current institutions. He believes that "no valuable experience has been gained from such individuals" and "it is difficult to find mentors." Interviewee H identified two root causes for this predicament: First, "the university knows it cannot provide a solid research platform," so it adopts a hands-off management approach. Second, "Schools simply refuse to make long-term investments in faculty," thus "withholding resources" and "failing to offer systematic training." Multiple interviewees also mentioned the anxiety and helplessness stemming from their institution's latest senior faculty promotion criteria, which now mandate new research grants.

### 5.2 "Main Force" or "Laborers"

To cut costs, private universities commonly suffer from insufficient faculty reserves. Even newly hired teachers must handle multiple courses simultaneously, facing massive course preparation workloads. Each course also entails invisible work like coordinating with teaching coordinators. Worse, management flaws often lead to frequent schedule changes, leaving teachers feeling "overwhelmed." Respondent H noted, "Courses in one department span across diverse categories, yet administrators insist multiple instructors teach the same subject. This means each teacher handles at least 3-4 courses for one time. We spend all day preparing lessons—how can we possibly have energy for research or educational reform projects?" Respondent C described themselves as both a "lecturing machine" and a "meeting machine." This approach violates educational principles, leaving faculty exhausted from constant demands and significantly eroding their professional aspirations and institutional loyalty. Furthermore, private universities traditionally prioritize streamlined administration, often assigning non-teaching tasks like administrative duties to faculty positions. To satisfy superficial projects, they even forcibly assign teachers to participate in training sessions that are "academically irrelevant," "superficial," and "vague," eroding teachers' valuable time for academic development. This has led many to share the bitter sentiment: "They expect the ox to plow the fields but won't let it graze."

### 5.3 Challenges in Welfare and Benefits

In this round of in-depth interviews, nearly all faculty members reported receiving pitifully low base salaries despite their diligent and self-sacrificing efforts. Multiple institutions contribute to the Five Insurances and One Housing Fund at the city's minimum standard for enterprise employees. Even those who attain senior professional titles receive pensions calculated solely based on their active-duty social security contributions, barely sufficient to sustain a subsistence level of living. Interviewee Y remarked, "At my institution, since contributions are based solely on base salary, senior titles don't result in significantly higher social security payments than intermediate ones." Y further questioned, "A senior title earned at a private university is no different from a 'senior manager' title in a company. The extra few thousand RMB per month are only available while teachers are still in their prime." If educators seek post-retirement benefits by transferring to public institutions, they face issues like "previous titles not being recognized" or "former employers refusing to provide verification". Amid such existential anxieties, professional pride becomes a distant concern.

## 6. Conclusions

The predicament faced by faculty at private universities in Chengdu and Meishan stems from the combined influence of external and internal factors. Strategies to overcome these challenges require concerted efforts from three key stakeholders. Specifically, teachers facing current challenges must urgently recognize their own independence. Waiting and complaining will not bring about a "turning point." Whether the external circumstances improve or not, the only true "backing" lies within the individuals themselves. Private universities must engage in deep self-reflection to align more closely with

national strategic needs—such as vocational education at the undergraduate level and applied talent cultivation—to find their niche in serving regional economies. The government should act as an impartial arbiter, optimizing support for higher education resources. Therefore, the challenges facing the development and growth of teachers in private universities are not insurmountable, and the key lies in policy support, change of attitudes, and strategic developmental adjustments of the institutions themselves.

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