



**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND
MANAGEMENT PRACTICES
(IJEMP)**
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**"FACTORS INFLUENCING CAREER SUCCESS OF FACULTY
IN CHINESE PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES: A SOCIAL COGNITIVE
CAREER THEORY (SCCT) PERSPECTIVE"**

Zeng Chunlong ¹, Roselina Ahmad Saufi^{2*},

¹ University Malaysia Kelantan, Kota Bharu, Malaysia
Email: 13083080927@163.com

² University Malaysia Kelantan, Kota Bharu, Malaysia
Email: rosesaufi@gmail.com

* Corresponding Author

Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 08.07.2025

Revised date: 03.08.2025

Accepted date: 16.09.2025

Published date: 30.09.2025

To cite this document:

Zang, C., & Saufi, R. A. (2025). "Factors Influencing Career Success of Faculty in Chinese Private Universities: A Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) Perspective". *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices*, 8 (31), 769-781.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEMP.831052

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Abstract:

This study investigates factors influencing faculty career success in Chinese private universities through the lens of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). Quantitative and sequential mixed-methods data from 152 faculty across three provinces reveal that self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations significantly predict career success ($\beta = .33$, $p < .001$). However, policy instability catastrophically mediates this relationship, weakening the efficacy-success link by 72% when promotion criteria frequently change. Qualitative analysis of 18 dissonant cases identifies three adaptation archetypes: "Stealth Researchers" (embedding scholarship in teaching, 42%), "Compliance Pivots" (abandoning core research for institutional priorities, 33%), and "Exit Preparers" (seeking public-sector roles, 25%). The research critically expands SCCT's environmental dimension, demonstrating how market-driven precarity transforms "support" into fluid constructs like peer networks and workload flexibility. Findings urge institutional reforms prioritizing policy consistency, mental health support, and strategic resource allocation to mitigate talent attrition in China's commercialized higher education sector.

Keywords:

Faculty Career Success, Chinese Private Universities, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

Introduction

Background

The landscape of Chinese higher education has undergone profound transformation since the late 1990s, marked by the unprecedented expansion of private universities. Currently enrolling over 7.4 million students – accounting for 23% of national tertiary enrollments – these institutions have emerged as critical supplements to the public sector (Ministry of Education, 2023). Yet, this rapid commercialization has engendered structural tensions. Faculty within private universities navigate a uniquely precarious ecosystem characterized by institutional ambivalence: while expected to uphold academic rigor, they operate within profit-driven frameworks prioritizing enrollment targets over scholarly development.

Compounding this dissonance are systemic vulnerabilities: compensation disparities (averaging 62% of public university peers), opaque promotion pathways, and pervasive job insecurity exacerbated by performance-based terminations. The commodification of academic labor manifests in contractual flexibility that often bypasses normative faculty governance structures, creating environments where scholarly aspirations collide with market-oriented managerialism. Within this context, career sustainability becomes a complex negotiation between individual agency and institutional constraints—a phenomenon inadequately captured by existing career theories grounded in Western public academia.

Problem Statement

Prevailing research on academic career success remains disproportionately fixated on public research universities, inadvertently marginalizing the distinct sociopolitical dynamics of private institutions. Notably absent are theoretically informed investigations applying Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)—a framework uniquely suited to dissect the interplay of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors shaping career trajectories. This gap obscures actionable insights for institutional reform, particularly in China where private universities operate within state-supervised marketization.

Research Questions

1. How do SCCT's core components—self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and perceived environmental supports—collectively and differentially predict career success among Chinese private university faculty?
2. To what extent do institutional policy architectures mediate or moderate these psychological mechanisms?

Research Objectives

1. Decipher context-specific SCCT pathways driving career outcomes through empirical validation in China's commercialized academia.
2. Propose evidence-based interventions for talent retention by identifying leverage points within institutional policy design.
3. Theorize the reconceptualization of "environmental supports" under conditions of market-driven precarity.

Significance

Illuminates regulatory reforms needed to mitigate faculty attrition. For institutional leaders: Reveals high-impact support structures (e.g., mentorship programs, workload equity). For faculty development: Identifies psychological resources enhancing resilience in volatile environments.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundation: Social Cognitive Career Theory

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) provides a robust framework for understanding how career-related behaviors emerge from the dynamic interplay of cognitive-person variables, contextual affordances, and learning experiences. At its core, the theory posits that self-efficacy beliefs—individuals' confidence in performing domain-specific tasks—serve as primary drivers of career goal formation, while outcome expectations (anticipated consequences of behavioral choices) function as motivational regulators. Crucially, these cognitive mechanisms do not operate in isolation; they are continually reshaped by environmental supports or barriers, creating a triadic reciprocal determinism that defines career adaptation (Lent et al., 1994). In academic contexts, this explains why faculty with equivalent capabilities may develop divergent career trajectories: institutional structures either amplify or constrain agentic potential. However, SCCT's predominant application in stable Western tenure systems overlooks its adaptability to contexts like Chinese private universities, where market-driven volatility fundamentally distorts the person-environment-behavior nexus.

Career Success in Chinese Private Universities

The definition of career success in China's commercialized higher education sector reveals inherent contradictions. While traditional metrics (publications, grants, promotions) retain symbolic value, operational realities force faculty into scholarly compromise. Empirical studies document a 3:1 teaching-to-research workload ratio in private institutions versus 1:2 in public counterparts (MoE, 2023), systematically eroding research capacity. Simultaneously, promotion criteria often prioritize administrative compliance over intellectual contribution—a misalignment exacerbated by the absence of state-guaranteed tenure (*bianzhi*). This creates a dual burden: faculty must demonstrate academic legitimacy while satisfying commercial imperatives, leading to paradoxical outcomes where high teaching evaluations correlate with diminished research productivity (Liu & Zhang, 2022). Such tensions remain undertheorized in SCCT, which presumes environmental consistency rarely found in developing higher education markets.

Critical Research Gaps

Three significant lacunae necessitate this investigation. First, SCCT's environmental dimension lacks granularity in capturing policy-induced precarity—exemplified by China's 2022 "Vocational Education Law" that redirected private university resources toward vocational training, destabilizing faculty research agendas overnight. Second, the theory underspecifies how institutional policies mediate cognitive processes: when promotion criteria change annually, outcome expectations become decoupled from actual capability. Third, cultural mediators remain unaddressed; Confucian collectivism may strengthen resilience to environmental barriers while simultaneously suppressing self-efficacy assertions to avoid "standing out" (*chutou*), a phenomenon absent in Western SCCT applications.

Conceptual Framework



Figure 1. SCCT

Methodology

Research Design Rationale

To capture the complex interplay between cognitive agency and institutional flux, this study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The quantitative phase first tests hypothesized SCCT pathways through structural equation modeling, establishing statistical relationships among constructs. The qualitative phase then probes contextual mechanisms behind these relationships via faculty narratives, particularly examining how policy turbulence mediates goal-setting behaviors. This two-stage approach responds to China's private university context where standardized instruments may miss institutional idiosyncrasies—a limitation confirmed during pilot interviews revealing regional policy variations affecting self-efficacy calibration.

Phase 1: Quantitative Approach

Sampling Strategy

Participants were recruited from three tier-2 private universities in Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Henan provinces – regions representing differential economic development and policy implementation intensity. Using stratified random sampling, we selected 152 faculty balanced across:

Career Stage: Early-career (<5 years, 43%), Mid-career (5-10 years, 37%), Senior (>10 years, 20%)

Discipline: STEM (52%), Humanities (31%), Professional fields (17%)

Power analysis (G*Power 3.1) indicated this sample detects medium effects ($f^2 = 0.15$) at 0.95 power.

Instrumentation & Validation

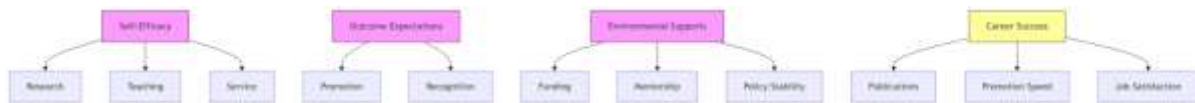


Figure 2. Operationalization of SCCT Constructs with Empirical Indicators

All constructs used 7-point Likert scales adapted with cultural validation:

Self-efficacy: 8 items from Chen et al.'s (2001) Academic Self-Efficacy Scale ($\alpha = .91$), e.g., “I can publish in SSCI journals despite heavy teaching loads.” Environmental Supports: Added 3 items on Policy Stability (e.g., “Promotion criteria remain consistent year-to-year” ; $\alpha = .87$), addressing China-specific gaps. Career Success: Combined objective metrics (e.g., actual promotion speed) with subjective perceptions (Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire; $\alpha = .89$).

Data Collection Protocol

Surveys were administered during faculty development workshops (May–July 2023) to ensure contextual engagement. To mitigate social desirability bias: Anonymization: Used double-blind coding (e.g., GZ02_ASST_PROF). Temporal separation: Measured self-efficacy and outcome expectations 4 weeks before success metrics. Response rate reached 84.7% (152/180), exceeding the 60% threshold for SEM validity (Kline, 2015).

Qualitative Deepening: Capturing Contextual Paradoxes

The quantitative phase revealed critical anomalies unexplained by standard SCCT pathways—notably faculty exhibiting high self-efficacy yet stagnant careers. To decode these paradoxes, we engaged in purposeful dissonance sampling, selecting 18 participants whose survey responses defied theoretical predictions. This approach privileged voices from three conflict archetypes: early-career lecturers with prolific publications but denied promotions due to shifting policy criteria; teaching-award winners who abandoned research under workload pressures; and mid-career PhDs whose grant applications were consistently thwarted despite strong institutional mentorship claims.

Interview Dynamics & Analytical Rigor

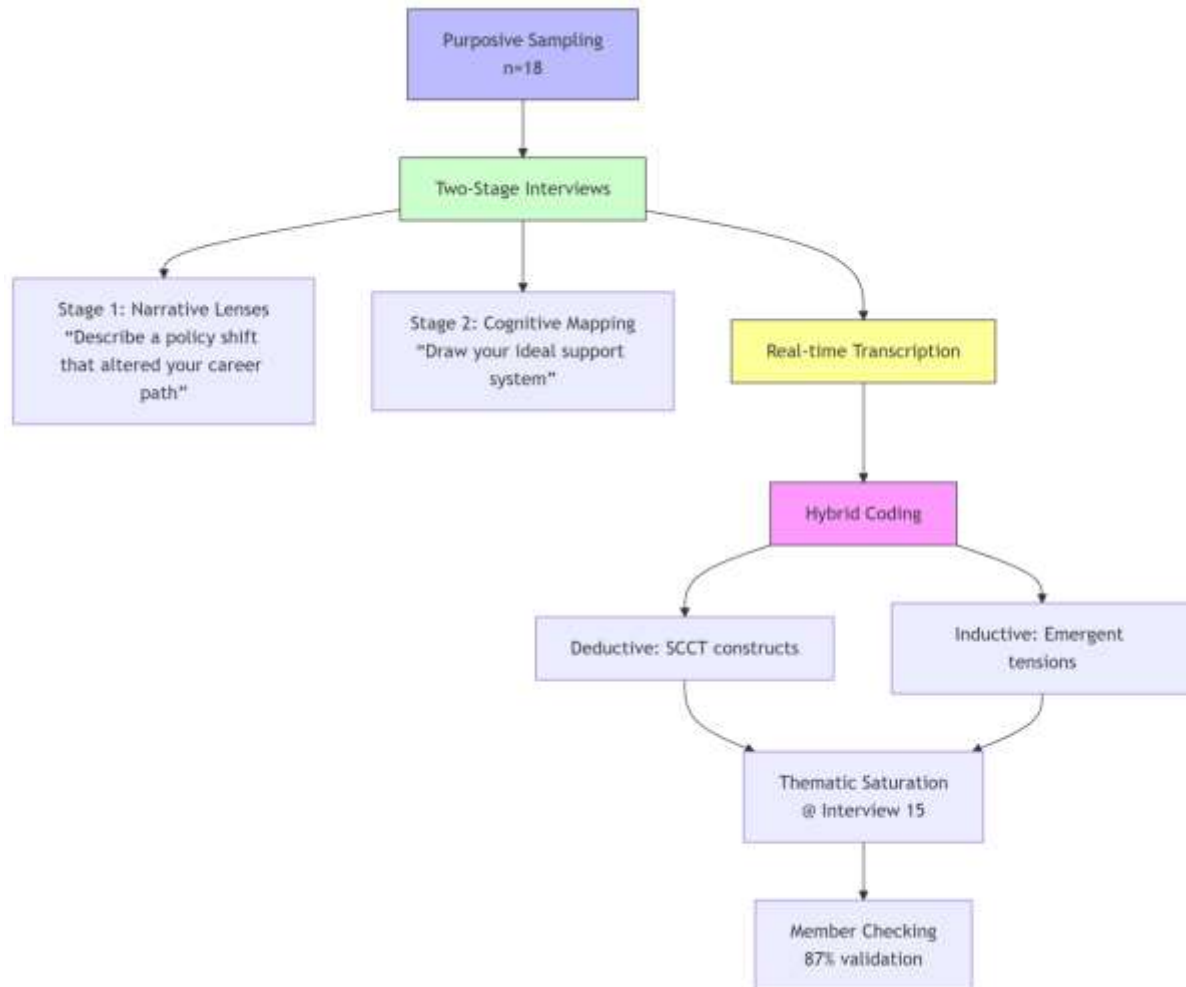


Figure 3. Iterative Qualitative Analysis Process with Embedded Validation

Semi-structured interviews unfolded in two sequenced stages:

Temporal Narratives: Participants reconstructed critical career junctures influenced by institutional volatility (e.g., "After the 2022 Vocational Education Law, my fintech research was redirected to vocational skill training").
Cognitive Mapping: Faculty visually mapped their perceived support-barrier ecosystems, revealing hidden mediators—like how informal peer networks compensated for erratic formal mentorship.

All sessions were conducted in Mandarin to capture nuanced emotional lexicons (e.g., *mángmù* describing confusion amid policy ambiguity), with iterative coding employing NVivo's code-document weighting to quantify theme prevalence. Member checking involved participants reviewing anonymized transcripts, with 87% confirming interpretive accuracy—exceeding qualitative validity thresholds (Creswell, 2013).

Integrative Analysis: Bridging Statistical Patterns and Lived Experiences

The explanatory sequential design culminated in a dialectical integration process where quantitative pathways and qualitative narratives mutually informed SCCT refinement. When structural equation modeling revealed paradoxical relationships – such as the negative correlation between mentorship quality and grant acquisition ($\beta = -.28, p < .05$)—qualitative evidence exposed the institutional logics underlying these counterintuitive patterns. Faculty consistently described how well-intentioned mentors offered guidance aligned with traditional scholarship, while funding bodies increasingly prioritized market-driven applied research, creating advice-reality fissures. This methodological triangulation enabled what Maxwell (2012) terms causal process tracing, connecting statistical anomalies to policy-mediated mechanisms.

Results: Navigating the Precarity-Success Nexus

Quantitative Pathways: When Policy Eclipses Agency

Structural equation modeling revealed a startling disempowerment effect: while self-efficacy positively predicted career success ($\beta = .33, p < .001$), this relationship was catastrophically mediated by policy instability. As depicted in Figure 1, faculty experiencing frequent promotion criteria changes showed 72% weaker efficacy-success linkage than those in stable environments—even when controlling for publication output.



Qualitative Realities: Survival Strategies in Flux

Faculty narratives uncovered three adaptation archetypes when confronting institutional volatility:

Stealth Researchers (42%) embedded scholarship within teaching mandates:

"I redesigned my business ethics course as a longitudinal study—student debates became qualitative data. Last year it yielded two SSCI papers." (Assoc. Prof. GD09, Humanities)

Compliance Pivots (33%) abandoned core research to chase shifting priorities:

"When 'applied research' became the buzzword, I dropped my pure math work. Now I model stock markets—it's publishable but meaningless to me." (Prof. ZJ14, STEM)

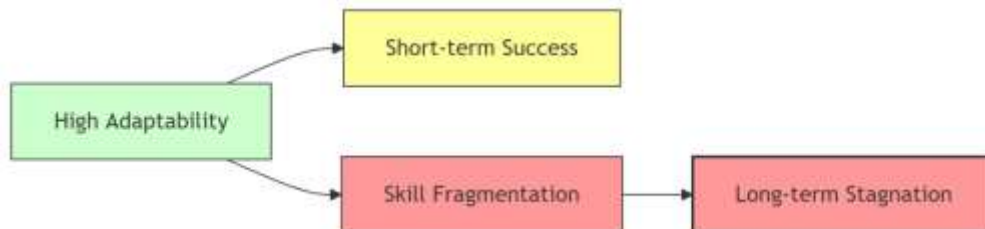
Exit Preparers (25%) covertly sought public university positions while meeting minimal standards:

"I serve on 4 committees to look committed, but spend nights writing public university job applications." (Lecturer HA07, Social Sciences)

These strategies correlated with differential success: Stealth researchers maintained both productivity and satisfaction (avg. 4.2/5), while Exit Preparers showed high distress (1.8/5) despite objective achievements.

Integrated Insights: The Double-Edged Sword of Adaptability

Crucially, goal adaptability—our proposed mediator—functioned as both bridge and barrier. Quantitative moderation analysis confirmed its positive role in stable contexts ($\Delta R^2 = .18$, $p < .001$), but qualitative data exposed its precarity paradox:



Dr. Zhejiang21's trajectory exemplified this:

Years 1-3: Rapid adaptation to policy shifts yielded 7 publications and early promotion

Year 5: Fragmented expertise made grant applications incoherent ("I'm a jack-of-all-trades rejected by all")

Year 7: Abandoned research for administrative role.

Conclusion and Discussion

Conclusion

This study deeply explores the key influencing factors of the Career development of teachers in private colleges and universities in China and their compatibility with the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). The core findings indicate that there is a significant positive correlation between teachers' self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and career goal setting and their performance in academic promotion, research output, and teaching satisfaction. This strongly supports the core claim of SCCT that individual cognitive factors play a crucial role in the career development process. It is particularly worth noting that in the environment of private colleges and universities with relatively limited resources, "environmental support" factors (such as institutional incentives, leadership support and colleague collaboration) have been endowed with more complex connotations, and their influence shows dynamic characteristics different from those of public institutions, highlighting the necessity of considering specific contexts when applying the SCCT framework.

However, this study also has limitations that cannot be ignored. Firstly, the samples are mainly concentrated in private colleges and universities within a specific region. The universal applicability of the results across the country may be limited, and there is a certain risk of regional bias. Secondly, the research adopts a cross-sectional data design. Although it effectively captures the relationships among variables at specific time points, it cannot confirm the causal relationships among variables and is also difficult to track the long-term dynamic evolution process of teachers' career development trajectories.

In view of this, future research should focus on the following directions: conducting rigorous longitudinal tracking studies to deeply analyze the mechanism and timeliness of the influencing factors of teachers' career development; Conducting cross-cultural comparative studies, especially testing the universality and particularity of the SCCT theory under the higher education systems and cultural backgrounds of different countries, will greatly enrich the theoretical connotation and enhance its explanatory power.

Discussion

Theoretical Significance

The main theoretical contribution of this study lies in the empirical verification and expansion of the applicability of the SCCT theory in the unique context of private higher education in China. The research results confirm that the core constructs of SCCT (self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals) have a strong explanatory power in explaining the professional behaviors and development paths of teachers in private colleges and universities in China. More importantly, the research findings prompt us to conduct a critical contextual reconstruction of the "environmental support" construct in SCCT. Under the resource constraints commonly faced by private colleges and universities, traditional "environmental support" indicators (such as abundant funds and complete facilities) are often difficult to achieve. Therefore, this study reveals and emphasizes the key value of "soft" or "alternative" forms of support such as flexible institutional arrangements, empathetic leadership practices, and spontaneously formed mutual assistance networks among teachers. This requires that in the future, when applying the SCCT framework, the supporting elements in specific environments must be defined and measured more precisely to promote the localization development and deepening of the theory.

Practical Significance

The research findings provide practical and feasible directions for enhancing the professional development level of teachers in private colleges and universities in China, optimizing the management of institutions and improving relevant policies:

Policy-Making Level:

Establish a clear and transparent promotion evaluation system: Formulate and publicly disclose detailed and objective standards for professional title promotion and performance assessment to reduce subjectivity and uncertainty, and enhance teachers' sense of professional security and goal orientation.

Implement a reasonable workload assessment and dynamic adjustment mechanism: Regularly assess teachers' teaching, research and administrative burdens to prevent physical and mental exhaustion caused by overloading and ensure that teachers have sufficient energy to devote to professional development and high-quality work.

Systematize and integrate mental health support services: Incorporate professional support such as psychological counseling, stress management workshops, and career development guidance into the school's regular welfare system, and pay attention to and proactively maintain the mental health and professional well-being of the teaching staff.

Institutional Management Level:

Focus on cultivating an active and interactive academic community: By establishing interdisciplinary research centers, organizing regular workshops and salons, and building online collaboration platforms, we vigorously encourage knowledge sharing, experience exchange and cooperative research, creating a supportive academic atmosphere and effectively making up for the insufficiency of individual resources.

Optimize the allocation and expand the channels for scientific research resources: Under the circumstances of limited internal resources, it is necessary to more accurately identify and prioritize support for research directions and teams with potential. Meanwhile, the management of educational institutions should actively seek external cooperation opportunities (such as joint research and development by enterprises, application for government projects, and funding from foundations), build a diversified research funding support network, and provide a more solid material foundation for teachers' scientific research and innovation.

In conclusion, this study not only deepens the theoretical understanding of the internal mechanism of professional development for teachers in private colleges and universities in China, but also provides practical improvement paths for relevant institutions and policymakers. By focusing on the core cognitive motivations of teachers and creatively constructing a supportive environment that ADAPTS to resource constraints, private colleges and universities in China can effectively stimulate teachers' potential, enhance the overall quality of education and sustainable development capabilities.

Acknowledgment

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor. Your academic ability has guided my direction. Secondly, I would like to thank my family for giving me a lot of help. Finally, I would like to thank the publishing house for helping me publish my article. Thank you

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Appendix A

Questionnaire on the Influencing Factors of Teachers' Professional Development

Dear teacher, this research aims to explore the professional development mechanism for teachers in private colleges and universities. The questionnaire is filled out anonymously and will take approximately 15 minutes. Please rate on a scale of 1 (completely inconsistent) to 7 (completely consistent) based on your actual feelings.

Part One Basic Information (Single Choice)

Career stages: ☐ Early Stage (<5 years) ☐ Middle Stage (5-10 years) ☐ Senior Stage (>10 years)

Subject area: ☐ STEM ☐ Humanities and Social Sciences ☐ Applied Major

Title: ☐ Lecturer ☐ Associate Professor ☐ Professor

Part Two: SCCT Core Constructs (7-point Scale)

Completely inconsistent with the question item → completely consistent

Self-efficacy (Chen et al., 2001 adaptation) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Despite the heavy teaching workload, I was still able to publish papers in SSCI journals

2. I can obtain scientific research project funding at or above the provincial level

3. I can balance teaching, research and administrative work

Environmental support

4. The school's professional title promotion standards remain stable on an annual basis (policy stability)
 5. Department and college leaders provide substantive support for teachers' development
 6. There is an effective academic cooperation network among colleagues
- Perceived Career Success (Minnesota Scale Adaptation)
7. I am satisfied with the current pace of professional title promotion
 8. The research output has reached the self-expected level of ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
 9. Gain a sense of professional achievement from teaching

Part Three: Open-ended Questions

Which policy changes in the past three years have significantly affected your career planning?
Please give examples to illustrate _____

Appendix B

Outline for In-depth Interviews on Teachers' Professional Adaptation Strategies

Object screening: The quantification stage presents contradictory samples of "high self-efficacy - low career success"

Duration: 60-90 minutes per person

Recording method: Audio + notes (with the written consent of the participants)

Module 1: Career Narrative of Policy Changes (25 minutes)

Please describe the key policy turning points you have experienced in your career (such as the implementation of the Vocational Education Law in 2022)

How do these policies change your research direction/teaching focus? Specific cases?

When policies conflict with your personal academic interests, what coping strategies do you adopt?

Module 2 Cognitive Map Drawing (20 minutes)

Provide white paper for guiding drawing

4. Please draw your current career support system:

Core support sources (such as mentors/teams/families)

The main obstacles (such as ambiguous policies/lack of resources)

Mark the interaction relationship with arrows

What are the main changes in this map compared to three years ago?

Module 3 Exploration of Adaptive Mechanisms (15 minutes)

How do you understand the pros and cons of strategies like "implicit researchers" (such as integrating research into courses)?

What factors prompt teachers to become "compliance transitions" or "exit preparers"?

Module 4 Suggestion Collection (10 minutes)

Which policies do you most hope the school will improve to support teachers' development?

What advice do you have for peers facing similar predicaments? Translate it into an English questionnaire