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A Study on the Pathways of Self-Cultivation among Young University Faculty: A Deep Case Analysis from the Field of Law

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Abstract: In the context of ongoing reforms aimed at strengthening China's higher education faculty, fostering effective self-cultivation mechanisms among early-career academics has become a strategic priority. This paper presents an in-depth longitudinal case study of a young legal scholar who successfully transitioned from an undergraduate background in English to becoming a doctoral supervisor in civil procedural law within a decade. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, archival documents, and reflective narratives collected over ten years, the study identifies a co-driven developmental mechanism shaped by the interplay of internal motivation and external support. Internally, a clear professional vision, sustained growth in self-efficacy, and strategic cross-disciplinary knowledge integration served as core drivers. Externally, institutional policy incentives, access to international academic platforms, and participation in professional communities provided critical scaffolding. Building on these insights, we propose an integrated four-dimensional self-cultivation pathway-comprising goal orientation, competency enhancement, resource support, and evaluative feedback-as a practical framework for supporting early-career faculty development. The findings offer both theoretical contributions to non-Western understandings of teacher agency and actionable implications for university leadership seeking to optimize faculty development systems.

Keywords: young university faculty; self-cultivation; internal motivation; external support; professional development; case study; interdisciplinary transition

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Strategic Imperative of Young Faculty Development

The strategic drive to establish world-class universities and first-class disciplines has placed an unprecedented emphasis on the overall quality, research capacity, and pedagogical expertise of the academic workforce. Within this national agenda, the professional development of young faculty members-generally defined as those under the age of 40-has emerged as a core priority. These early-career academics constitute the essential backbone and future leadership of the higher education system, carrying the dual responsibility of advancing scientific innovation and nurturing future generations of students. Consequently, their growth trajectory directly influences the long-term sustainability and international competitiveness of the academic landscape [1].

However, the path to professional maturity for young scholars is often fraught with systemic complexities. Despite their high academic potential, many early-career faculty members must navigate a challenging environment characterized by substantial teaching loads, rigorous publication requirements, and the pressure of securing research funding. These structural demands are frequently compounded by a lack of structured mentorship and the inherent uncertainty of career advancement paths. In light of these challenges, recent policy guidelines emphasize the transition toward "self-directed cultivation mechanisms." This paradigm shift encourages young teachers to move beyond passive participation in institutional programs and instead proactively shape their own professional development through strategic planning and individual agency [2].

1.2. Personal Agency Amidst Structural Opportunities

While institutional interventions, such as formal mentoring schemes, pedagogical workshops, and research start-up grants, are widely implemented across universities, scholarly attention has remained relatively limited regarding the micro-processes of individual development. Specifically, there is a significant research gap concerning how young faculty members actively construct their unique developmental pathways through personal initiative and strategic engagement with available institutional resources. Understanding this internal drive is crucial, as top-down policies often yield varied results depending on the individual's capacity to internalize and act upon these opportunities.

This gap is particularly salient in complex cases involving disciplinary transitions, where scholars must overcome significant credential gaps and undergo profound identity reconfiguration. In such scenarios, the individual is not merely a recipient of institutional support but a dynamic agent who must bridge disparate knowledge systems and re-establish professional legitimacy within a new academic community [3]. These cases offer rich, granular insights into the dialectical relationship between individual initiative and structural opportunity, revealing how professional identity is negotiated and refined over time through persistent effort and environmental interaction.

1.3. Research Objectives and Theoretical Framework

The present study addresses this critical lacuna through a comprehensive ten-year qualitative case analysis of Dr. L, a legal scholar at a leading law school, who successfully navigated a transition from an English language background to becoming a recognized researcher in civil procedure. By documenting a decade of professional evolution, this research aims to provide a longitudinal perspective on the "self-cultivation" process within the specific context of the academic environment [4]. The transition from a humanities-based background to a specialized legal field serves as a powerful lens through which to examine the resilience and strategic adaptability required of modern academics.

Guided by the theory of self-efficacy and the conceptualization of professional identity, this study explores the intricate interaction between internal motivations and external support systems. We investigate how these factors converge to shape the self-cultivation trajectory of a young university teacher undergoing a significant disciplinary shift. By analyzing the critical incidents, decision-making processes, and developmental milestones of Dr. L, we seek to answer how individual agency can be effectively leveraged to achieve professional excellence despite the hurdles of disciplinary boundaries. This exploration provides valuable theoretical and practical implications for both individual faculty members seeking growth and institutions aiming to optimize their talent support mechanisms [5].

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Self-Cultivation as Agentic Professional Development

The conceptual foundation of self-cultivation (*zi wo pei yu*) finds its historical roots in traditional philosophy, yet it has undergone a significant transformation within the context of contemporary higher education. In the modern academic landscape, self-cultivation is defined as a proactive and deeply reflective process through which faculty members systematically enhance their moral character, pedagogical competence, and scholarly capacity. This process is distinct from conventional professional development in that it moves beyond the passive reception of institutional training. Instead, it prioritizes individual autonomy, goal-directed learning, and high-level metacognitive awareness, allowing scholars to navigate their career paths with a clear sense of purpose and self-regulation [6].

In today's increasingly competitive and performance-driven academic environment, self-cultivation represents a sophisticated form of agentic professionalism. It shifts the responsibility of growth from the institution to the individual, emphasizing that scholars must take full ownership of their professional evolution. This agentic perspective posits that young faculty are not merely subjects of environmental pressures but are active participants capable of transforming their professional identities. By engaging in continuous self-reflection and purposeful skill acquisition, academics can effectively align their personal developmental goals with the broader strategic objectives of their institutions, ensuring a more resilient and sustainable career trajectory [7].

2.2. Internal Motivation: Vision, Efficacy, and Integration

Internal motivation, which is deeply rooted in an individual's personal values, intellectual interests, and core self-concept, serves as a primary predictor of long-term professional engagement and persistence. For academics undergoing significant disciplinary transitions, the role of internal drivers becomes even more pronounced. This study identifies three critical elements within this motivational framework. First, a compelling professional vision is essential, as it provides a stable long-term direction that guides the scholar through periods of ambiguity. Second, robust self-efficacy—the fundamental belief in one's capacity to master new domains and execute complex tasks—acts as a psychological buffer against the inevitable setbacks and steep learning curves associated with changing fields [8].

Third, the capacity for interdisciplinary integration allows transitioning scholars to redefine their professional identity. Rather than viewing their previous background as a liability or a deficit, agentic individuals learn to synthesize knowledge across disparate fields, turning their unique intellectual heritage into a distinct scholarly advantage. This integrative capability enables the creation of novel research perspectives that might be overlooked by those trained within a single, traditional silo. When vision, efficacy, and integration converge, they form a powerful internal engine that sustains the scholar's drive toward professional excellence and academic legitimacy [9].

2.3. External Support: Policy, Platforms, and Networks

While internal motivation is the engine of growth, external structural factors play a decisive role in mediating the success of self-cultivation efforts. Institutional environments that offer supportive policies—such as protected research time, targeted start-up funding, or strategic reductions in initial teaching loads—provide the essential "breathing room" required for intensive professional development. Without these structural affordances, even the most motivated scholars may face burnout or stagnation. Therefore, the interaction between individual agency and institutional support is not merely additive but synergistic, where the environment provides the necessary platforms for individual potential to be realized [10].

Beyond local institutional support, broader platforms for international exposure and professional networking are equally vital. Participation in international visiting fellowships, high-level academic conferences, and global research collaborations serves to broaden a scholar's intellectual horizons and validate their scholarly standing within the wider academic community. Furthermore, professional communities of practice offer critical social dimensions of support, including collaborative opportunities, peer validation, and emotional resilience [11]. These networks facilitate the exchange of tacit knowledge and provide a sense of belonging, which is particularly important for scholars navigating the complexities of identity reconfiguration during a disciplinary shift.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

To capture the nuanced and evolving nature of professional development over a significant period, this study employed a qualitative, longitudinal case study design. The longitudinal approach is particularly well-suited for investigating "how" and "why" questions in complex, real-world contexts where the phenomenon—in this case, the self-cultivation trajectory of a university teacher—is inseparable from its environmental and temporal context [12]. By tracing a decade-long journey from 2014 to 2024, the researchers were able to observe the dynamic shifts in professional identity and the incremental accumulation of scholarly capital. This method allows for a deep dive into the causal mechanisms and turning points that characterize a successful disciplinary transition, providing a level of granular detail that cross-sectional studies often fail to capture.

3.2. Participant and Context

The subject of this case study, Dr. L (a pseudonym), serves as a professor at a top-tier law school in western China. His academic background is notably unconventional, offering a prime example of cross-disciplinary adaptation [13]. Dr. L completed his Bachelor's degree in English in 2011, which provided him with a unique linguistic and international perspective before he transitioned into the legal field. He subsequently earned an LL.M. in Civil Procedural Law in 2014 and received his Ph.D. in 2017 under the supervision of a renowned legal scholar.

The rapid ascent of Dr. L's career serves as the focal point of this analysis. By 2024, within only seven years of entering academia as a full-time faculty member, he had published over 20 peer-reviewed articles, including high-impact contributions to prestigious Chinese law journals such as *Zhengfa Luntan* (Tribune of Political Science and Law). Furthermore, he secured a prestigious national-level research grant, won multiple provincial-level teaching excellence awards, and achieved the status of doctoral supervisor. This exceptional record of productivity and recognition in both research and pedagogy makes his trajectory a valuable "revelatory case" for understanding agentic professional development [14].

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The study utilized a comprehensive triangulation of data sources to ensure the validity and depth of the findings. Primary data consisted of three semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between 2022 and 2024, with each session lasting between 90 to 120 minutes. These interviews focused on Dr. L's subjective experiences, motivational shifts, and strategic responses to institutional challenges. To supplement these narratives, the research team gathered extensive archival materials, including Dr. L's curriculum vitae (CV), teaching portfolios, original grant proposals, award certificates, and years of student evaluations. Additionally, media reports and institutional records documenting his public engagements and academic influence were reviewed to provide an external perspective on his professional standing.

The analysis followed the rigorous systematic steps of thematic analysis. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English by a bilingual research team to ensure conceptual equivalence. Using NVivo 14 software, initial codes were generated inductively from the raw data, which were then iteratively organized into broader themes aligned with the theoretical framework of self-efficacy and professional identity. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, intercoder reliability was established through the dual coding of 20% of the transcripts by two independent researchers, resulting in a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of 0.82. This high level of agreement indicates a robust and consistent interpretation of the data, providing a solid foundation for the subsequent discussion of the research findings.

4. Findings

4.1. Internal Drivers of Self-Cultivation

The longitudinal analysis reveals that Dr. L's professional transformation was fundamentally propelled by three interwoven internal forces that formed the psychological core of his self-cultivation process. First, his professional vision served as a strategic compass during the early stages of his disciplinary transition. Rather than viewing his career through a narrow academic lens, Dr. L articulated a clear identity as a "scholar-practitioner." This vision was dedicated to bridging the often-cited gap between abstract legal theory and the complexities of courtroom practice. This long-term orientation significantly influenced his decision-making, guiding his selection of specialized courses, the formulation of his research agenda, and the evolution of a teaching philosophy that emphasizes the practical utility of legal doctrine.

Second, the growth of self-efficacy played a crucial role in sustaining his momentum. In the context of a challenging career shift, self-efficacy is not static but is built through a series of "mastery experiences." For Dr. L, each significant milestone—such as passing the National Unified Legal Professional Qualification Examination with an outstanding score of 437/600, ranking first in graduate admissions, and successfully publishing his initial research paper—served as empirical evidence of his burgeoning competence. These achievements reinforced his belief in his own capabilities, creating a virtuous cycle where increased effort led to higher achievement, which in turn bolstered the confidence required to tackle even more complex academic challenges.

Finally, Dr. L demonstrated remarkable cross-disciplinary leverage. Rather than concealing his background in English language and literature, he strategically deployed these skills as a unique scholarly asset. He utilized his linguistic proficiency to translate complex foreign judgments, excel in the precision-oriented field of legal writing, and introduce nuanced comparative perspectives into his civil procedure courses. As he reflected during the interviews, his prior language training provided a foundation of precision and clarity—qualities that are indispensable assets in any academic discipline, but particularly so in the rigorous domain of law.

4.2. External Enablers and Strategic Engagement

While internal drivers provided the initial impetus, Dr. L's professional growth was significantly amplified by timely and robust external support systems. Institutional policies at his university provided the necessary structural affordances for his development. For example, the university granted him a strategic half-year research leave prior to his doctoral defense and provided matching funds for a prestigious joint doctoral program at the University of California, Davis (UC Davis). Furthermore, the university's merit-based promotion system provided rapid institutional validation, allowing him to advance from lecturer to associate professor in only 2.5 years, and to full professor in 6.5 years. This rapid progression not only rewarded his past efforts but also provided the professional platform required for greater academic influence.

International exposure and professional networks further served as critical external enablers. Dr. L's year at UC Davis was a transformative period that extended beyond linguistic improvement; it exposed him to advanced empirical legal research methods, which became the methodological foundation for three of his core publications. Simultaneously, his active participation in the Chinese Civil Procedure Law Society integrated him into a high-level community of practice. This connection with senior scholars provided him with collaborators, mentors, and advocates who validated his research and integrated him into the national academic discourse. Critically, the data suggests that Dr. L did not merely wait for these opportunities to arrive; he actively sought them out through high levels of agentic engagement, demonstrating that external support is most effective when met with individual initiative.

4.3. A Co-Driven Developmental Cycle

The findings indicate that internal motivations and external enablers do not operate in isolation; rather, they function synergistically within a recurring and self-reinforcing developmental cycle. This co-driven process can be conceptualized as a continuous loop: Vision → Deliberate Action → Strategic Resource Mobilization → Achievement → Enhanced Self-Efficacy → Refined Vision. In this model, a clear professional vision prompts deliberate action, which in turn requires the scholar to strategically mobilize available external resources. The resulting achievements provide the mastery experiences necessary to boost self-efficacy, which then allows the individual to refine and expand their original vision for the future.

This cycle repeated across various stages of Dr. L's career, with each iteration increasing in both scope and social impact. As shown in the findings, the transition from a "novice" in a new discipline to a "doctoral supervisor" was not a linear path but a series of ascending spirals. By successfully navigating this cycle, Dr. L was able to transform a perceived disciplinary deficit into a cross-disciplinary advantage. This holistic perspective emphasizes that the "self" in self-cultivation is always situated within a supportive environment, yet it is the individual's agency that orchestrates these diverse elements into a coherent and successful career trajectory.

5. Discussion

The longitudinal case analysis of Dr. L's professional trajectory provides significant insights into the mechanisms of academic growth within the contemporary higher education landscape. Our findings extend current models of faculty development by proposing a four-dimensional self-cultivation pathway. This framework emphasizes that professional maturity is not merely the result of temporal progression but is a deliberate construct involving the strategic alignment of internal psychological states and external structural affordances.

5.1. Goal Orientation: Constructing a Value-Aligned Vision

The first dimension of the proposed self-cultivation pathway is goal orientation. Unlike traditional career planning, which often focuses on linear advancement, goal orientation in the context of self-cultivation involves establishing a value-aligned professional vision. This vision acts as a teleological anchor, providing both long-term direction and immediate meaning to the scholar's daily activities. In the case of Dr. L, his commitment to becoming a "scholar-practitioner" allowed him to filter through numerous institutional demands and prioritize those that contributed to his core identity. This suggests that for young faculty, the ability to articulate a stable professional "self" is a prerequisite for navigating the high-pressure environment of modern academia. When goals are intrinsically motivated and aligned with personal values, they foster a deeper sense of professional agency and resilience against external volatility.

5.2. Competency Enhancement: Synergizing Domain and Transferable Skills

The second dimension involves a dual approach to competency enhancement. Our analysis demonstrates that successful disciplinary transitions require the systematic building of domain-specific expertise-such as mastering the intricacies of civil procedural law-while simultaneously leveraging transferable skills from one's original background. Dr. L's experience proves that language proficiency and critical thinking are not merely secondary tools but can be transformed into primary competitive advantages. This finding challenges the "deficit narrative" often associated with interdisciplinary transitions, which typically views a change in field as a loss of time or expertise. Instead, we argue for a "surplus model" of development, where the integration of diverse intellectual heritages fuels scholarly innovation. By strategically framing their unique backgrounds, transitioning academics can produce novel research perspectives that bridge disparate fields, thereby contributing to the "new engineering" and "new humanities" initiatives currently prioritized in the academic sector.

5.3. Resource Support: Proactive Mobilization of Social and Institutional Capital

The third dimension of the pathway is the proactive mobilization of resource support. The findings underscore that self-cultivation is not an isolated endeavor conducted in a vacuum; rather, it is a socially situated process. Successful scholars are those who can proactively access and utilize institutional, international, and social capital to scaffold their growth. Dr. L did not view institutional policies or professional networks as passive structures but as dynamic resources to be engaged with through agentic action. Whether through securing international visiting fellowships or participating in high-level academic societies, his ability to cultivate a robust external support network provided the necessary "breathing room" and validation for his internal development efforts. This highlights the importance of "resource literacy" among young faculty-the ability to identify, navigate, and secure the diverse forms of support necessary for sustainable career progression.

5.4. Evaluative Feedback: The Iterative Refinement of Professional Practice

The final dimension of the framework is the systematic use of evaluative feedback to drive iterative improvement. In the self-cultivation pathway, performance data-ranging from student evaluations and peer reviews to publication outcomes and grant awards-are not viewed merely as administrative hurdles but as essential inputs for metacognitive reflection. Dr. L utilized these feedback loops to continuously refine his pedagogical methods and research strategies. This process of "reflection-in-action" allows scholars to adjust their professional practices in real-time, ensuring that their developmental trajectory remains aligned with both their internal vision and external industry standards.

This integrated four-dimensional framework resonates with Self-Determination Theory by emphasizing autonomy, competence, and relatedness, yet it specifically contextualizes these psychological needs within the policy-intensive academic ecosystem. It demonstrates that when young faculty members take ownership of these four dimensions, they can transform from passive participants in institutional systems into active architects of their own professional destinies. This model provides a replicable strategy for other early-career academics facing similar challenges of identity reconfiguration and high-performance expectations.

6. Implications and Conclusion

6.1. Policy and Institutional Implications

For university administrators and policymakers, the findings of this study suggest that effective faculty development requires a shift in perspective-from viewing faculty as passive recipients of training to recognizing them as active agents of their own professional growth. Structural support, while necessary, is insufficient on its own; institutional systems must be designed to recognize and nurture individual agency. To

this end, several practical recommendations emerge. First, universities should create flexible onboarding and development pathways specifically tailored for interdisciplinary hires, acknowledging that these scholars may require different types of support during their initial transition phases.

Second, it is essential to combine material incentives, such as research funding and protected time, with reflective practices like structured mentoring and portfolio development. This dual approach ensures that scholars have both the resources to work and the cognitive tools to reflect on their progress. Finally, promotion and tenure criteria should be broadened to value diverse forms of scholarly contribution. By recognizing interdisciplinary innovation and practical social impact alongside traditional metrics, institutions can encourage young faculty to pursue bold, cross-boundary research that addresses complex contemporary challenges.

6.2. Practical Guidance for Young Faculty

For early-career academics, the story of Dr. L provides an empowering and replicable blueprint for success. The core message is that self-cultivation is not a solitary or isolated endeavor; rather, it is a dialogic and dynamic process occurring between personal commitment and institutional opportunity. Young scholars are encouraged to proactively define their professional vision early on and to seek out "mastery experiences" that build self-efficacy. They should not perceive their diverse academic backgrounds as obstacles, but as unique vantage points from which to generate innovative insights.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of "agentic engagement"-the act of intentionally seeking out resources, building networks, and utilizing feedback to refine one's practice. By taking ownership of their developmental journey, young teachers can navigate the high-pressure environment of higher education with greater resilience. This proactive stance allows individuals to transform systemic pressures into catalysts for personal and professional excellence, ensuring they remain adaptive and engaged in an era of rapid educational transformation.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

Despite the depth of insight provided by this longitudinal analysis, certain limitations must be acknowledged. This study employed a single-case design, which, while offering high internal validity and rich detail, limits the direct generalizability of the findings to all academic contexts. The specific success of Dr. L may be influenced by idiosyncratic factors related to his specific discipline or the unique institutional culture of his university. Therefore, caution should be exercised when applying these specific findings to vastly different academic environments.

Future research could address these limitations by conducting comparative studies involving multiple transition cases across various disciplines, such as moving from the natural sciences to the social sciences, or by examining faculty at different types of higher education institutions. Additionally, quantitative research could be utilized to test the four-dimensional self-cultivation framework on a larger scale, identifying which factors most significantly correlate with career satisfaction and scholarly productivity. Nonetheless, the ten-year trajectory of Dr. L offers a compelling and hopeful model for cultivating resilient, adaptive, and socially engaged academics who are capable of thriving amidst the complexities of modern higher education.

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