

Ethical Challenges in Chinese Higher Education: An Analysis of Faculty Misconduct, Causal Factors, and Remedial Strategies

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Abstract: Ethical misconduct among Chinese university faculty has risen alarmingly, damaging both student welfare and academic credibility. This study identifies key ethical challenges, analyzes their root causes, and proposes remedial strategies. Through a comprehensive review of cases reported by the Chinese Ministry of Education and analysis of relevant policies, we employed a multi-level framework to examine contributing factors. The study revealed four primary areas of concern: teaching negligence, academic misconduct, abuse of power in student relationships, and corruption. These issues stem from individual value deviations, market economics' negative impacts, eroding social values, and inadequate institutional oversight. Addressing these challenges requires enhanced ethics education, improved evaluation mechanisms, positive campus cultures, and strengthened supervision systems. This research offers insights for policymakers and administrators in China and similar emerging higher education systems.

Keywords: University faculty; Professional ethics; Ethical misconduct; Higher education

1. Ethical Standards in the New Era

The professional ethics of university teachers in China have evolved to meet the demands of a new era, encompassing a comprehensive set of moral norms, behavioral standards, and professional qualities. These ethics reflect teachers' commitment to education, care for students, academic rigor, and social responsibility, forming the cornerstone of their professional identity. At the heart of these standards lies the expectation of firm political beliefs, aligning with the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and actively promoting socialist core values in educational settings.

The ethical framework emphasizes the cultivation of noble moral character among educators. Teachers are expected to embody virtues such as honesty, integrity, and self-discipline, translating these qualities into fair treatment of students and unwavering professional integrity. This moral foundation extends to all aspects of their work, from classroom interactions to student evaluations and career guidance.

Professional competence constitutes another crucial element of teachers' ethics. Educators are called upon to continually enhance their subject knowledge and pedagogical skills, embracing technological advancements and innovative teaching methodologies. This commitment to professional growth is seen as essential for fostering students' critical thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities. The ethical standards also underscore the importance of selfless dedication to students' holistic development. Teachers are encouraged to attend to the individual needs of students, providing not only academic instruction but also emotional support and practical assistance when needed. This ethos of care extends beyond the classroom, with teachers expected to contribute to broader societal development through policy consultation, cultural preservation, and community service.

These ethical principles are reinforced by official policies, notably the 2019 "Notice on Strengthening and Improving the Construction of Teachers' Ethics and Style in the New Era." This document, guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, establishes teachers' ethics as a primary criterion for evaluating educational quality and advocating for the integration of socialist core values throughout the teaching profession^[1].

2. Current Ethical Challenges and Manifestations

Despite these comprehensive ethical standards, recent analyses of cases violating the "Ten Guidelines for Teachers' Professional Conduct" reveal significant challenges within Chinese academia. These ethical transgressions manifest primarily in four key areas: teaching negligence, academic misconduct, abuse of power in student relationships, and corruption.

In the realm of teaching, the allure of economic benefits in a market-driven economy has led some educators to prioritize off-campus activities over their primary teaching responsibilities. This shift in focus often results in perfunctory teaching practices, characterized by inadequate preparation and a lack of engaging, interactive instruction. A case in point is the 2024 incident at Huazhong University of Science and Technology, where a professor was reported for delivering substandard courses, significantly compromising the quality of education provided to doctoral students^[2]. The research domain has not been immune to ethical breaches, with academic misconduct and plagiarism emerging as prevalent issues. Driven by career pressures and personal interests, some teachers have resorted to data manipulation and plagiarism, undermining the integrity of academic research. A notable example is the 2019 case involving Professor Zhang Yuqing of Tianjin University, who unethically granted authorship to his high school-aged daughter, highlighting the extent of ethical compromises in pursuit of academic recognition^[3].

Perhaps most disturbing are the ethical violations in teacher-student relationships, manifesting as abuse of power and sexual misconduct. Some teachers have exploited their authority to manipulate grades, allocate academic opportunities, and even coerce students into inappropriate relationships. The 2022 cases at Southwest University and East China Normal University, involving accusations of sexual coercion and assault by doctoral supervisors, underscore the severity of this issue and its profound impact on students' well-being and academic pursuits^[4]. Corruption and the misuse of power for personal gain represent another significant ethical challenge. From admissions processes to research project allocations and student evaluations, instances of bribery and favoritism have tainted various aspects of academic life. These practices not only violate principles of fairness and meritocracy but also erode the fundamental trust essential for the functioning of educational institutions.

The stark contrast between the high ethical standards set for university teachers in China and the reality of ongoing ethical violations highlights the complex challenges facing the academic community. These ethical lapses pose a serious threat to the integrity of higher education, the welfare of students, and the broader goals of social progress. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, including enhanced ethical education for teachers, robust oversight mechanisms, and the cultivation of a culture of integrity within academic institutions. Only through concerted efforts to bridge the gap between ethical ideals and practice can the Chinese higher education system fulfill its crucial role in nurturing well-rounded, morally grounded individuals capable of contributing to national development and social advancement^[5].

3. An Analysis of Causes and Proposed Solutions

The ethical conduct of university teachers plays a pivotal role in shaping the moral landscape of academia and guiding student development. However, recent years have witnessed a concerning trend of ethical transgressions among educators in Chinese higher education institutions. This phenomenon stems from a complex interplay of individual, social, and institutional factors, necessitating a comprehensive approach to address these challenges effectively.

At the individual level, a significant cause of ethical lapses is the deviation from core values traditionally associated with the teaching profession. The pervasive influence of market economics has led some educators to prioritize material interests over professional ethics. This shift in values often manifests in behaviors such as engaging in unauthorized part-time work, compromising teaching quality and students' interests. Compounding this issue is a lack of self-discipline among some teachers, who struggle to maintain ethical boundaries when faced with various temptations, leading to compromised standards in student evaluations and academic assessments.

The broader social environment, particularly the intensified competitive pressures brought by the market economy, has exacerbated these ethical challenges. The misapplication of market principles to the educational sphere has resulted in some teachers abusing their power for personal gain, accepting bribes, and engaging in other unethical practices to secure resources and opportunities. Moreover, prevailing social trends emphasizing short-term achievements and material success have eroded ethical standards, fostering an environment conducive to academic misconduct such as plagiarism and fraud.

At the institutional level, imperfect evaluation mechanisms in universities have contributed significantly to the problem. Many institutions predominantly focus on quantitative indicators such as research output and teaching workload, while the assessment of professional ethics remains relatively weak. This imbalance can inadvertently incentivize teachers to prioritize measurable achievements at the expense of moral cultivation. Furthermore, insufficient supervision and management within universities have created loopholes that enable unethical behavior to persist, often with inadequate consequences to serve as effective deterrents.

To address these multifaceted challenges, a comprehensive strategy targeting education, evaluation, culture, and supervision is essential. Enhancing the education and training system forms the foundation of this approach. Universities should implement regular ideological and political theory training, featuring expert interpretations of Party policies and Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. These sessions, delivered through varied formats such as lectures, seminars, and online modules, aim to elevate teachers' po-

litical awareness and theoretical understanding. Complementing this, professional ethics training should utilize case studies and role model examples to illustrate ethical norms and inspire good practices.

Refining evaluation mechanisms is crucial for reinforcing ethical behavior. A comprehensive evaluation system should incorporate ideological, political, and ethical performance alongside traditional metrics like research output and teaching quality. This system should employ multiple assessment methods, including self-evaluation, peer review, student feedback, and leadership appraisal, to gain a holistic view of a teacher's performance. Transparency in the evaluation process, coupled with a fair reward and discipline system, can significantly motivate ethical conduct while deterring misconduct.

Fostering a positive campus culture is equally important in cultivating an ethics-friendly environment. Universities should organize activities that promote professional ethics, such as themed events, competitions, and the recognition of ethical role models. Encouraging teachers to engage in social practice and volunteer work can also enhance their sense of responsibility and dedication. These efforts collectively contribute to an atmosphere that values and reinforces ethical behavior.

Strengthening supervision and management provides the necessary oversight to ensure adherence to ethical standards. Establishing dedicated ethics supervision bodies with clear reporting channels allows for prompt investigation of ethical concerns. A robust accountability system, implementing graduated disciplinary measures for violations, is essential. This system should extend to leadership, holding them responsible for the ethical climate within their units.

By integrating these strategies, universities can create an environment that not only discourages unethical behavior but actively promotes integrity. This comprehensive approach addresses the root causes of ethical issues while providing support and incentives for maintaining high professional standards. Through these concerted efforts, the academic community can work towards enhancing the integrity of the teaching profession, ultimately benefiting students, institutions, and society at large.

In conclusion, addressing the ethical challenges facing Chinese university teachers requires a nuanced understanding of the underlying causes and a multifaceted approach to solutions. By simultaneously targeting individual values, social influences, and institutional structures, it is possible to create a more robust ethical framework for higher education. This not only safeguards the integrity of academic institutions but also ensures that they fulfill their crucial role in nurturing morally grounded, competent professionals who can contribute positively to national development and social progress.

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