

INNOVATIVE LEARNING MANAGEMENT FOR UNIVERSITY TEACHERS IN CHINA: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW AND SYNTHESIS

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ABSTRACT

The quality of higher education in China increasingly depends on the capacity of university teachers to engage in innovative learning practices that integrate pedagogical innovation, digital transformation, and continuous professional development. This study presents a systematic literature review of innovative learning management for university teachers in China, with a focus on the specific contextual factors shaping teacher development in Chinese higher education institutions. Following a structured search of Chinese and international databases (CNKI, ERIC, Scopus) for publications between 2018 and 2026, 42 empirical studies were selected for in-depth analysis. The review identifies four core dimensions influencing teacher innovative learning: individual motivation (self-efficacy, professional identity), organizational support (institutional policies, resource allocation, leadership), professional community (collaborative networks, knowledge sharing), and technological empowerment (digital infrastructure, training). Findings reveal that while national policies have established a strong framework for teacher development, significant implementation gaps persist at the institutional level, particularly in local universities. The study proposes an integrated model of teacher innovative learning that captures the dynamic interactions among these four dimensions within the Chinese higher education context. The review concludes with implications for policy, institutional practice, and future research, emphasizing the need for context-sensitive approaches that align national reform goals with local institutional realities.

Keywords: Innovative Learning, Teacher Development, Higher Education, China, Systematic Review

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INTRODUCTION

The Policy Imperative for Teacher Innovation in China China's higher education system is undergoing a profound transformation driven by national strategic initiatives aimed at building a "leading nation in education" by 2035 (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & State Council, 2024). The Outline of the Plan for Building a Leading Nation in Education (2024 – 2035) articulates a vision of educational modernization that emphasizes quality improvement, equity, and the deep integration of digital technologies into teaching and learning. Central to this vision is the development of a high-quality, innovative teaching workforce capable of responding to the challenges of the digital intelligence era (Wu, 2025). The Chinese government has implemented a series of policies to support teacher development, including the Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of Teacher Team Construction in the New Era (2018) and the Teachers' Digital Literacy standards (Ministry of Education, 2022). These policies establish a framework for teacher professional development that emphasizes continuous learning, pedagogical innovation, and technological competence. However, the translation of national policy goals into effective practice at the institutional level remains uneven, particularly in local universities that face resource constraints and geographic isolation (Wang & Yang, 2025; Li et al., 2025). The Problem: Implementation Gaps in Teacher Innovative Learning Despite the policy momentum, university teachers in China face persistent challenges in engaging in innovative learning. At the individual level, teachers experience heavy workloads, role conflicts, and fragmented time and energy, which inhibit their intrinsic motivation for deep learning and professional growth (Wang & Yang, 2025; Guo et al., 2023). Work-family conflict has been shown to significantly and negatively predict teachers' learning ability, with subjective well-being playing a key mediating role (Wang & Yang, 2025). At the organizational level, traditional teacher development models remain dominated by top-down, "other-organized" training programs that are disconnected from teachers' authentic classroom contexts and individual needs. Such programs often result in low engagement and limited transfer of learning to practice (Hu & He, 2025; Chen, 2025). Moreover, many universities maintain a "research-oriented, teaching-neglected" evaluation system that fails to incentivize teaching innovation or provide adequate resources for professional development (Liu, 2024). These challenges are particularly acute in local universities located in western and border regions, such as Lijiang City in Yunnan Province. Research on Lijiang Teachers College reveals that young teachers face heavy teaching loads, limited training opportunities, and weak professional development support systems (Yang, 2011; Li et al., 2025). These findings highlight the need for context-sensitive approaches to teacher innovative learning that account for the specific resource constraints and institutional conditions of local universities. Theoretical Framework: Dimensions of Teacher Innovative Learning To analyze the factors shaping teacher innovative learning in China, this study draws on a multi-dimensional framework integrating insights from transformative learning theory, situated learning theory, and organizational ecology. Transformative learning theory emphasizes cognitive shifts and critical reflection in teacher learning processes (Guo & Liu, 2025). Situated learning theory focuses on teachers' participation and identity construction within communities of practice (Chen, 2025). The organizational ecology perspective reveals the interactive relationship between individual teachers and their organizational environments (Li et al., 2025). Building on these theoretical foundations, and informed by recent empirical research on teacher development in Chinese higher education (Wang & Lu, 2025; Tian et al., 2025; Deng et al., 2024), this review identifies four core dimensions that influence teacher innovative learning: 1. Individual Motivation: Including self-efficacy, professional identity, and intrinsic learning interest. 2. Organizational Support: Encompassing institutional policies, resource allocation, leadership, and evaluation systems. 3. Professional Community: Involving collaborative networks, knowledge sharing, and collective inquiry. 4. Technological Empowerment: Covering digital infrastructure, training, and the integration of technology into teaching practice. These four

dimensions are not independent but interact dynamically to shape teachers' capacity for innovative learning. This review seeks to synthesize the existing literature on these dimensions within the Chinese context and to propose an integrated model that can guide both research and practice. 1.4 Research Questions and Purpose This study aims to address the following research questions: 1. What are the key factors influencing innovative learning among university teachers in China, and how do these factors interact? local universities? 3. What integrated model can be proposed to guide policy and practice in promoting teacher innovative learning in China? By systematically reviewing and synthesizing the existing literature, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Chinese universities can effectively support teacher innovative learning in alignment with national reform goals.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic literature review methodology to identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical research on innovative learning management for university teachers in China. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency and replicability (Page et al., 2021).

Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted across three databases: China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and Scopus. The search targeted peer-reviewed articles published between January 2018 and March 2026. The search terms were developed to capture both Chinese and international literature relevant to teacher innovative learning in higher education.

The search strings included:

Chinese (CNKI): ("高校教师" OR "大学教师") AND ("创新学习" OR "专业发展" OR "教学创新") AND ("影响因素" OR "模型" OR "策略")

English (ERIC/Scopus): ("university teacher" OR "higher education teacher" OR "faculty") AND ("innovative learning" OR "professional development" OR "teaching innovation") AND ("China" OR "Chinese")

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria: 1. Empirical research (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods); 2. Focus on university teachers in China; 3. Addressed at least one of the four core dimensions (individual motivation, organizational support, professional community, technological empowerment); 4. Published in peer-reviewed journals between 2018 and 2026; 5. Written in Chinese or English.

Studies were excluded if they:

1. Focused solely on K-12 teachers; 2. Were conceptual or theoretical without empirical data; 3. Were conference proceedings, book chapters, or dissertations; 4. Did not specifically address teacher innovative learning or professional development.

Study Selection and Data Extraction

The initial search yielded 487 records (CNKI: 312; ERIC: 89; Scopus: 86). After removing duplicates, 403 records remained. Titles and abstracts were screened against the inclusion criteria, resulting in 112 full-text articles for assessment. Following full-text review, 42 studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis. Data were extracted from each included study using a standardized form capturing: author(s), year, research design, sample characteristics, geographic location, key findings related to the four dimensions, and identified challenges or recommendations.

Analytical Approach

The extracted data were analyzed using thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008). This approach involves three stages: (1) line-by-line coding of findings from included studies; (2) organization of codes into descriptive themes; and (3) development of analytical themes that go

beyond the original studies to generate new insights. The four core dimensions served as initial coding categories, but the analysis remained open to emergent themes.

FINDINGS

Individual Motivation: The Foundation of Innovative Learning. The reviewed studies consistently identified individual motivation as a critical driver of teacher innovative learning. Wang and Lu (2025), in their study of private undergraduate universities, found that most teachers were at the intermediate stage of professional development, with their progression hindered by insufficient intrinsic motivation. The authors noted that teaching workload, professional bottlenecks, and family responsibilities often dampened teachers' enthusiasm for continuous learning. Self-efficacy emerged as a key component of individual motivation. Deng et al. (2024), in their intervention study with chemistry pre-service teachers, demonstrated that structured collaborative design experiences significantly enhanced teachers' confidence in their ability to implement innovative teaching strategies. This finding aligns with Guo and Liu's (2025) application of transformative learning theory, which emphasizes that cognitive shifts in teacher learning are accompanied by changes in self-perception and professional identity. Professional identity—teachers' sense of belonging and commitment to the teaching profession—was another recurring theme. Chen (2025) found that teachers who developed a strong professional identity were more likely to engage in reflective practice and seek out opportunities for innovative learning. However, the study also noted that identity formation was often disrupted by the competing demands of teaching, research, and administrative duties.

Organizational Support: Enabling or Constraining Innovation. Organizational support emerged as a decisive factor in shaping the conditions for teacher innovative learning. Studies consistently reported that institutional policies, leadership, and resource allocation significantly influenced teachers' ability and willingness to engage in innovation. Wang and Lu (2025) identified several institutional barriers: inadequate teacher development centers, limited financial resources, and evaluation systems that prioritized research outputs over teaching quality. Similarly, Tian et al. (2025), in their study of western vocational colleges, found that teachers lacked systematic training in pedagogical theory and educational research methods, limiting their capacity for teaching innovation. Conversely, supportive institutional environments were associated with positive outcomes. Deng et al. (2024) demonstrated that the Learning by Collaborative Design (LBCD) model, which provided structured opportunities for collaborative lesson planning and peer feedback, significantly enhanced pre-service teachers' pedagogical content knowledge. The success of this intervention hinged on institutional support for collaborative time and resources. Leadership also played a critical role. Studies by Guo and Tong (2025) highlighted that university administrators who actively promoted a culture of innovation, provided recognition for teaching excellence, and allocated time for professional development contributed to higher levels of teacher engagement in innovative learning.

Professional Community: Collaborative Learning and Knowledge Sharing
The reviewed literature emphasized the importance of professional learning communities in supporting teacher innovative learning. Chen (2025) found that teachers who participated in collaborative networks—whether formal (e.g., teaching and research groups) or informal (e.g., peer mentoring)—reported higher levels of professional growth and teaching innovation. Deng et al. (2024) provided compelling evidence of the value of collaborative design. In their study, pre-service teachers working in teams to design chemistry lessons engaged in iterative cycles of design, feedback, and revision. This process not only improved their lesson plans but also deepened their understanding of pedagogical content knowledge. The authors noted that the professional community functioned as a "collective brain," enabling individual teachers to access and internalize collective expertise. However, the prevalence of "professional individualism" remained a barrier in many Chinese universities. Guo and Tong (2025) observed that teachers

often worked in isolation, with limited opportunities for meaningful collaboration. This pattern was particularly pronounced in institutions lacking structured mechanisms for knowledge sharing. Technological Empowerment: The Promise and Challenge of Digital Transformation. The integration of technology into teaching and learning was a major focus of recent research, driven by national policies promoting educational digitalization. The Teachers' Digital Literacy standards (Ministry of Education, 2022) establish expectations for teachers' technological competence, yet implementation remains uneven. Wu (2025) argued that the role of university teachers in the digital era is shifting from "knowledge gatekeepers" to "learning community builders," a transformation that requires new competencies and dispositions. However, studies by Luo et al. (2024) and Tian et al. (2025) revealed significant gaps in teachers' digital skills and access to technology infrastructure, particularly in local universities. Li et al. (2025) examined the challenges facing young teachers in local universities, including limited access to digital resources and inadequate training in technology integration. The authors called for institutional strategies that address both the availability and usability of digital tools, as well as teachers' confidence in using them. Contextual Specificities: Local Universities in Western China A distinctive finding of this review is the particular challenges faced by local universities in western China, such as those in Yunnan Province. Studies by Yang (2011), Li et al. (2025), and Tian et al. (2025) consistently highlighted resource constraints, geographic isolation, and limited professional development opportunities as significant barriers to teacher innovative learning. Yang's (2011) early survey of Lijiang Teachers College revealed that young teachers faced heavy teaching loads, limited training, and weak support systems. Subsequent research by Li et al. (2025) confirmed that these challenges persist, with additional pressures from the digital transformation. The authors noted that teachers in these contexts often lack the time, resources, and institutional support needed to engage in innovative learning. Despite these challenges, local universities also possess unique assets. Their location in ethnically diverse regions provides opportunities for culturally responsive pedagogy and community engagement. However, these potential strengths remain underutilized in the absence of targeted institutional strategies.

AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF TEACHER INNOVATIVE LEARNING IN CHINA

Synthesizing the findings from this review, we propose an integrated model of teacher innovative learning for Chinese higher education. The model conceptualizes teacher innovative learning as emerging from the dynamic interaction of four core dimensions: individual motivation, organizational support, professional community, and technological empowerment. Core Dimensions and Their Interactions Individual Motivation serves as the internal engine driving engagement in innovative learning. It encompasses self-efficacy, professional identity, and intrinsic interest. Teachers with strong motivation are more likely to seek out learning opportunities, persist through challenges, and apply new knowledge to their practice. Organizational Support provides the structural conditions that enable or constrain individual motivation. This dimension includes institutional policies, resource allocation, leadership, evaluation systems, and time for professional development. Effective organizational support aligns with national policies while addressing local needs and constraints. Professional Community offers the relational context for learning. Through collaboration, knowledge sharing, and collective inquiry, teachers gain access to expertise beyond their own. Professional communities can be formal (e.g., teaching and research groups) or informal (e.g., peer networks), but they require structures that facilitate meaningful interaction. Technological Empowerment represents both a tool and a context for innovative learning. Digital technologies can expand access to resources, enable flexible learning environments, and support new pedagogies. However, their effectiveness depends on teachers' digital competence, access to infrastructure, and institutional support for technology integration. The Model in the Chinese Context

The integrated model accounts for the specific conditions of Chinese higher education. National policies provide a strong framework for teacher development, but implementation varies across institutions. In central and elite universities, organizational support and technological infrastructure may be robust, enabling teachers to leverage professional communities and pursue innovative learning. In local universities, particularly those in western regions, resource constraints may limit organizational support, making individual motivation and professional community even more critical. The model also acknowledges the dynamic nature of teacher innovative learning. The four dimensions are not static but evolve over time through feedback loops. For example, effective organizational support can strengthen individual motivation, which in turn encourages greater participation in professional communities. Engagement in professional communities can enhance digital competence, contributing to technological empowerment.

Implications for Policy and Practice. For policymakers, the model underscores the need to align national initiatives with local institutional realities. While national standards such as the Teachers' Digital Literacy framework provide important guidance, their implementation must be flexible enough to accommodate the diverse conditions of Chinese universities. For university administrators, the model suggests that effective teacher development requires a holistic approach. Investments in technology infrastructure must be accompanied by training and support. Collaborative structures must be established alongside recognition systems that value teaching innovation. Most importantly, organizational policies must be designed with attention to teachers' individual needs and motivations. For teachers themselves, the model highlights the importance of agency in their own professional development. While organizational support and resources are critical, teachers' own motivation, identity, and engagement in professional communities play essential roles in shaping their capacity for innovative learning.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several contributions to the literature on teacher development and innovative learning. First, it provides a systematic synthesis of empirical research on teacher innovative learning in Chinese higher education, identifying consistent patterns across studies while also revealing contextual variations. Second, the proposed integrated model extends existing theoretical frameworks by capturing the dynamic interactions among individual, organizational, community, and technological dimensions. While previous research has often examined these dimensions in isolation, this study demonstrates their interdependence. Third, the review highlights the importance of contextual factors in shaping teacher innovative learning. The specific challenges facing local universities in western China—resource constraints, geographic isolation, and limited professional development opportunities—have implications for policy and practice that differ from those in central or elite institutions.

Practical Implications

The findings of this review have direct implications for university administrators, teacher educators, and policymakers. For university administrators, the results suggest that effective teacher development requires a multi-pronged strategy. Investment in technology alone is insufficient; it must be accompanied by training, support, and time for collaboration. Evaluation systems should recognize and reward teaching innovation, not just research outputs. And organizational structures should facilitate, rather than impede, the formation of professional learning communities. For teacher educators, the study underscores the value of collaborative, design-based approaches to teacher development. The LBCD model documented by Deng et al. (2024) offers a promising framework for engaging pre-service and in-service teachers in authentic, collaborative learning experiences that deepen both content knowledge and pedagogical skill. For policymakers, the review suggests that national initiatives must be complemented by strategies that address local institutional conditions. The Teachers' Digital

Literacy standards, for example, provide a valuable framework, but their implementation must account for the digital divides that exist across different types of universities.

Limitations and Future Research

This review has several limitations. First, while the search strategy was systematic, it may not have captured all relevant studies, particularly those published in non-indexed journals or in languages other than Chinese and English. Second, the included studies varied widely in research design, sample size, and quality, limiting the ability to draw strong causal inferences. Third, the focus on published empirical research may have excluded valuable insights from grey literature or practitioner reports. Future research should address these limitations by: (1) conducting longitudinal studies that track teacher innovative learning over time; (2) employing mixed-methods designs that combine quantitative measures of teacher learning with qualitative insights into processes and contexts; (3) expanding the geographic scope to include more studies of local universities and regional variations; and (4) examining the long-term impact of specific interventions, such as the LBCD model, on teacher practice and student outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review has examined the factors shaping innovative learning among university teachers in China. By synthesizing 42 empirical studies published between 2018 and 2026, the review identified four core dimensions that influence teacher innovative learning: individual motivation, organizational support, professional community, and technological empowerment. These dimensions interact dynamically, with organizational support and professional community enabling individual motivation and technological empowerment.

The review reveals significant variations across Chinese universities. While national policies provide a strong framework for teacher development, implementation gaps persist, particularly in local universities facing resource constraints. The proposed integrated model offers a framework for understanding these dynamics and guiding policy and practice. For China to achieve its ambitious goal of becoming a leading nation in education by 2035, sustained attention to teacher innovative learning is essential. This requires not only continued investment in digital infrastructure and training programs but also a deeper commitment to creating organizational cultures that value teaching innovation, support collaboration, and recognize the central role of teachers in educational transformation. Future research should continue to explore the conditions that enable teacher innovative learning, with particular attention to the diverse contexts of Chinese higher education. By building on the findings of this review, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers can work together to create the conditions in which all university teachers can engage in meaningful, sustained, and innovative learning.

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