

Teaching Competition-Driven Professional Development of Young Female University Teachers: Current Status and Optimization Pathways

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Abstract: Currently, teaching competition for young university teachers has garnered nationwide attention, aiming to promote innovation and reform in higher education teaching, enhance teachers' instructional capabilities, and improve the quality of education. In practice, the competition has significantly impacted teachers' teaching proficiency and the advancement of teaching reforms. Observations from participation at the university, provincial, and national levels reveal that young female university teachers exhibit high levels of interest, active engagement, and deep involvement in the competition, with some outstanding participants experiencing accelerated professional growth. This study focuses on young female university teachers, deepening the comprehensive understanding of teaching competition from a policy perspective. Through case analysis, it explores the professional development status of young female teachers in the context of teaching competition and proposes pathways and measures to optimize their professional development under the impetus of these competitions.

Keywords: Young teachers; Teaching competition; Professional development; Female teachers

Online publication: July 7, 2025

1. Introduction

The Young University Teachers Teaching Competition (hereinafter referred to as the "Youth Teaching Competition") has evolved into an important platform for enhancing teaching capabilities, innovating teaching models, and integrating teaching with research through its institutionalized and large-scale design^[1]. In recent years, the empowering effect of the Youth Teaching Competition on the professional development of young teachers has become increasingly evident. Particularly, young female teachers, facing structural challenges such as childbirth pressures and family role conflicts in the early stages of their careers^[2], are more inclined to leverage the competition platform to improve their teaching skills and achieve professional breakthroughs. This study examines the impact of the Youth Teaching Competition on the professional development of young female university teachers, using University A as a case study. Through empirical data analysis, it explores the actual state of the competition's policy orientation in the professional development of female teachers and seeks to

optimize pathways for their growth under the competition's influence.

2. Policy perspective: Key features of the Youth University Teachers Teaching Competition

In recent years, with the introduction of policies such as the Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Educational Evaluation in the New Era and the Guidance on Strengthening the Reform of University Teacher Team Construction in the New Era, the state has identified teacher team development as a core task for the high-quality advancement of higher education^[3], emphasizing the comprehensive enhancement of teaching capabilities and professional competencies. Against this backdrop, the Youth Teaching Competition, as a key implementation mechanism, has become a vital platform for fostering the professional growth and teaching innovation of young teachers. Since its inception in 2012, the national Youth Teaching Competition has successfully identified and cultivated a group of outstanding young teachers through its hierarchical and institutionalized design, significantly contributing to teaching reform and innovative development in higher education. Based on policy texts and practical analysis, the Youth Teaching Competition exhibits the following five core features.

2.1. The authority of the organization that organizes the competition

The Youth Teaching Competition has established a three-level system of university-provincial/municipal-national, forming a top-down organizational structure. The national competition is jointly hosted by authoritative institutions such as the All-China Federation of Trade Unions and the Ministry of Education^[4], with specific implementation by the China Education-Science-Culture-Health and Sports Trade Union and the Department of Teacher Work under the Ministry of Education. Provincial/municipal competitions are organized collaboratively by local education trade unions and administrative departments. For example, the organizing committee of the 7th National Youth Teaching Competition (2024) includes offices, evaluation committees, supervision committees, and arbitration committees, with the office located at the China Education-Science-Culture-Health and Sports Trade Union. The competition is held biennially, with local and university-level events adhering to the guiding principles of the national competition while adapting to local and institutional contexts.

2.2. The subjectivity of young teachers participating in the competition

The competition aims to enhance the teaching capabilities and professional development of young teachers, explicitly limiting participants to university teachers aged 40 or younger. Participants must uphold the national constitution and laws, implement the Party's educational policies, practice socialist core values, possess solid ideological and ethical qualities, teach ethics, and have at least three years of front-line teaching experience. This design highlights the competition's focus on young teachers and ensures participants' rich teaching experience and professional competence. The 7th National Youth Teaching Competition attracted 159 participants from 130 universities across 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, with an average age of 36.1 years old^[5]. This data demonstrates that the competition has become a key platform for young teachers to showcase their teaching skills and exchange innovative methods.

2.3. Diversification of incentive mechanisms in competitions

In teaching competitions for young faculty in higher education institutions, the reward system is designed to balance individual and collective honors, forming a three-level progressive incentive structure at the university,

provincial (municipal), and national levels. This ensures that the rewards align with national standards while adapting to local conditions, providing categorized guidance and integrating spiritual recognition with career development support. For example, the finals of the 7th (2024) National Teaching Competition for Young Faculty in Higher Education Institutions awarded both individual and collective prizes to participants and their institutions, respectively. Individual prizes included first, second, and third places for each group, with requirements to reflect teaching performance in faculty professional title evaluations and provide preferential treatment in relevant honors and awards. For first-prize winners who meet eligibility criteria, the competition organizing committee may recommend them for the “National May 1st Labor Medal ^[6]” following regulations. Additionally, institutions with extensive participation, high engagement, and outstanding organizational efforts received excellent organization awards. Such diversified honors and rewards not only recognize the teaching competence and achievements of the awardees but also provide robust support for their professional growth. Meanwhile, the inclusion of collective honors reinforces the importance universities attach to the competition, further enhancing its appeal and influence.

2.4. The advanced nature of the competition concept

The proposal and evolution of teaching competitions for young faculty in higher education not only adhere to the fundamental principles of education but also reflect contemporary trends and the new mission of education. An analysis of the competition guidelines across different editions reveals three key aspects of its advanced core concept.

(1) Emphasis on moral education and holistic development

The competition consistently upholds fostering virtue through education as its fundamental tenet, emphasizing that teachers should not only impart professional knowledge but also prioritize moral education and the comprehensive development of students. This philosophy aligns closely with the demands of education in the new era, embodying the essential mission of educational work.

(2) Focus on teaching innovation

The competition encourages young faculty to explore innovative teaching methods and approaches, stimulating their enthusiasm and creativity in pedagogy. This drive for teaching innovation is also a necessary response to the evolving learning needs of students and the broader trends in modern education ^[7].

(3) Promotion of the spirit of educators

The competition advocates for the model worker spirit, dedication to labor, and craftsman spirit, while championing the spirit of educators as its guiding principle. It seeks to identify and nurture outstanding teachers who are passionate about education, uphold strong ideals and convictions, possess noble ethics, demonstrate profound knowledge, and exhibit compassion—teachers who lead by example and practice what they preach.

2.5. The comprehensiveness of the competition connotation requirements

The National Teaching Competition for Young Faculty in Higher Education Institutions encompasses diverse disciplines, including humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, medicine, and ideological and political education, fully reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of higher education and the multidimensional, holistic essence of teaching ^[8].

(1) Focus on foundational teaching skills

The competition explicitly emphasizes strengthening young faculty’s fundamental teaching skills and

pedagogical training. It evaluates participants' overall course mastery and teaching proficiency through three key aspects: instructional design, classroom teaching, and teaching reflection, covering elements such as teaching philosophy, content analysis, classroom organization, teacher-student interaction, demeanor, teaching style, and the application of instructional technology.

(2) Emphasis on innovation and inspiration

The competition encourages participants to incorporate cutting-edge research findings and the latest technological advancements^[9]. Teachers are urged to integrate research projects and real-world application cases into their teaching, designing innovative and thought-provoking content. Active learning methods such as group discussions and in-class assessments are promoted to enhance student engagement, while teaching reflection facilitates continuous self-improvement.

(3) Highlight the integration of ideological and political education in the curriculum

Beyond professional knowledge and teaching skills, the competition underscores instructors' ethics and their fundamental mission of fostering virtue through education. From syllabus design to lesson planning and classroom delivery, ideological and political education and moral elements are seamlessly embedded^[10]. This approach ensures the organic fusion of ideological education with disciplinary knowledge, achieving a deep integration of knowledge transmission, skill cultivation, and value guidance, serving as a key benchmark for assessing participants' comprehensive teaching competence.

3. Case perspective: Youth teaching competition and professional development of female teachers at University A

Since 2014, the Shanghai Youth Teaching Competition has been held biennially. To align with this and cultivate potential candidates, University A established a three-level competition system of departmental-university-municipal, with annual departmental and university-level competitions. Over 11 years, this system has provided a platform for showcasing teaching excellence, fostering a culture of teaching innovation, and enhancing educators' sense of responsibility^[11].

3.1. Profile of young female teachers at University A

Using October 2024 data as the research sample, University A has 1,923 faculty members engaged in front-line teaching, including 1,103 males and 820 females. Among them, 912 hold senior professional titles, while 1,011 hold intermediate or junior titles. Notably, female teachers are underrepresented in senior positions but constitute a relatively higher proportion in intermediate and junior roles. Of the 940 front-line teachers aged 40 years old or younger, 444 are male and 496 are female. Considering the age limit for the Youth Teaching Competition, female teachers hold a numerical advantage in eligibility.

3.2. Participation in teaching competitions and professional title advancement of young female teachers at University A

3.2.1. Participation and awards in university-level and municipal competitions

As of now, University A has not participated in the national-level Youth Teaching Competition. This analysis primarily focuses on data from university-level and municipal competitions held between 2014 and 2024. During this period, 6 municipal and 11 university-level competitions were organized. On average, 300 teachers participated in the preliminary college-level rounds per session. Based on quota regulations, 360 teachers

advanced to the university-level finals, and 30 progressed to the municipal competitions, reflecting a municipal participation rate of 8.33%. This figure illustrates the competition's reach, appeal, and competitiveness.

Among the 360 teachers in the university-level finals, 129 were male and 231 were female, with an average age of 33.5 years old. Female teachers accounted for 62% of participants. Across different sessions, their participation rates ranged from 44% to a peak of 71.6%, consistently surpassing male teachers (**Figure 1**). The oldest female participant was 40 years old, the youngest 26 years old, with an average age of 33.4 years old. Notably, the maximum age has decreased annually, and the overall average age has shown a declining trend.

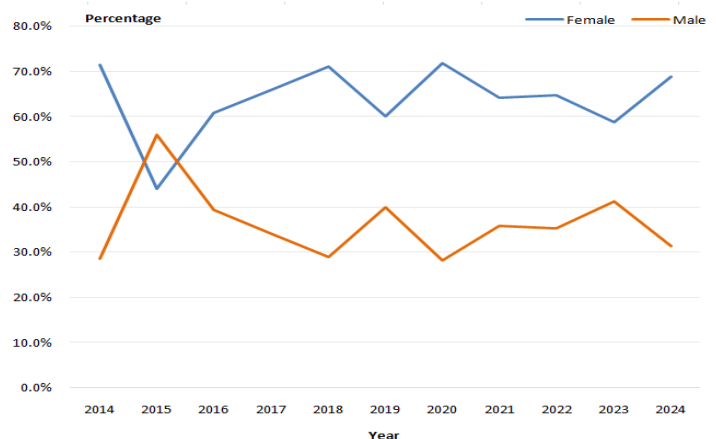


Figure 1. Gender ratio changes of finalists at University A (2014–2024).

In the 6 municipal competitions, 30 teachers represented University A, including 6 males and 24 females. Female teachers dominated with an 80% participation rate. In each session, male participants never exceeded one, while female teachers maintained an overwhelming majority (**Figure 2**).

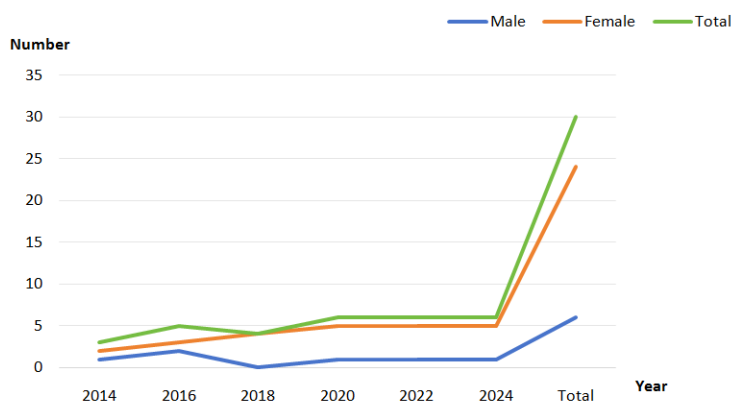


Figure 2. Gender distribution of University A participants in municipal competition (2014–2024).

Among the 360 teachers who advanced to the university-level finals, a total of 174 were awarded prizes, including 59 first prize winners and 115 second prize winners. The gender breakdown shows 50 male awardees compared to 124 female awardees. Female teachers demonstrated significantly higher overall winning rates and outperformed male teachers across all award tiers.

In the municipal competition, among the 30 participating teachers, 3 received first prizes and 8 were

awarded second prizes. The gender distribution of municipal awardees reveals a striking disparity: only 1 male teacher was honored compared to 10 female recipients, representing an overwhelming 90.9% female award rate. Female teachers completely dominated the highest honors, sweeping all first prizes. Among second prize winners, females accounted for 7 out of 8 awards (87.5%), with only 1 male teacher receiving this recognition. For detailed distribution patterns, please refer to **Figure 3**.

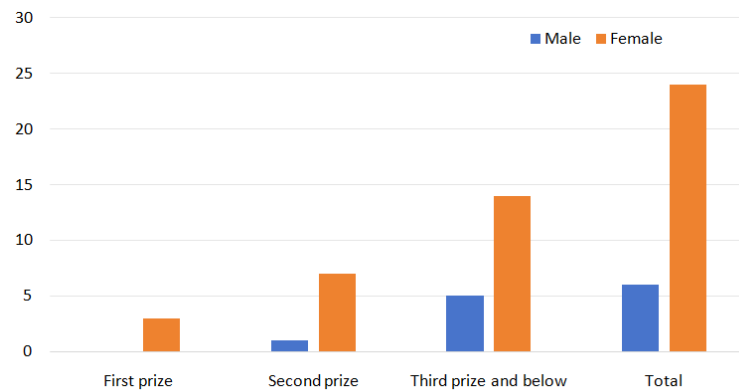


Figure 3. Gender distribution by ward level for University A in municipal competition (2014–2024).

3.2.2 The professional titles of the award-winning teachers

As of October 2024, among the 360 teachers who participated in the university-level finals:

21 held senior professional titles, 172 held sub-senior professional titles, and 167 held lecturer or below junior professional titles. In terms of gender distribution, male teachers accounted for a higher proportion in full professor positions, while female teachers showed significantly higher representation at the associate professor and lecturer/below levels.

Among the 174 award-winning teachers in the university-level finals, 13 were full professors, and 91 were associate professors. Notably, 61 teachers (34.7%) received promotions after winning awards, including 17 male teachers (16 promoted to full professor, 1 to associate professor), 44 female teachers (4 to full professor, 40 to associate professor). Key observations at the university-level competition: Female teachers accounted for over 71% of participants and awardees, with a 34.7% promotion rate. Male teachers represented less than 30% of participants, under 20% of awardees, but had a slightly higher 36.0% promotion rate (**Figure 4**).

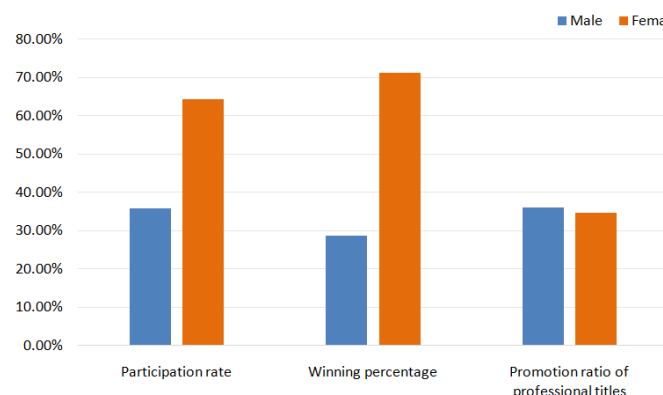


Figure 4. Promotion rates by professional title for award-winning teachers at University A (2014–2024).

3.2.3. Post-competition professional advancement of municipal-level participants

Among the 30 teachers who participated in the municipal competition, 13 (43.3%) achieved professional title promotions post-competition, with distinct gender disparities:

- (1) Male participants ($n = 6$):
 - 3 promotions (50% promotion rate)
 - 2 to Full Professor
 - 1 to Associate Professor
- (2) Female participants ($n = 24$):
 - 10 promotions (41.7% promotion rate), all to Associate Professor
- (3) In the municipal competition:
 - Female percentage: 80%
 - Female award rate: 90.9%
 - Female promotion rate (41.7%) lagged behind males (50%)

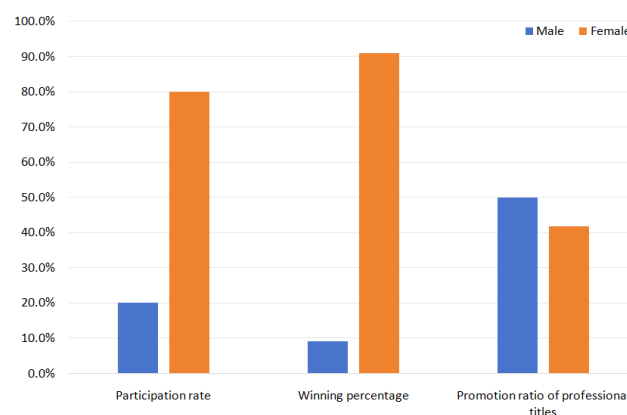


Figure 5. Changes in faculty promotion after participating in municipal competition (2014–2024).

3.3. Key findings from data analysis

The professional growth of young teachers is a multidimensional concept, with professional title promotion serving as a critical milestone. Within the evaluation system for professional title advancement, teaching competence and performance constitute a significant metric. Based on data analysis linking teaching competition performance to professional title promotions at University A, the following conclusions emerge.

3.3.1. Gender distribution of participants

Female teachers hold a numerical advantage among competition participants. Despite University A being a science and engineering institution, female teachers under 40 eligible for the competitions are proportionally higher in number. Additionally, female representation is notably greater at the associate professor level and below.

3.3.2. Individual participation enthusiasm

Young female teachers demonstrate significantly higher participation rates and enthusiasm than their male counterparts in university-level and municipal competitions, reflecting a stronger drive for professional advancement. In recent years, participation rates among female teachers under 30 have remained consistently

high, with even newly hired female teachers (within two years of employment) actively engaging and excelling. Interviews reveal that female teachers view competitions as platforms for self-improvement, exploring more effective teaching methods, and enhancing their teaching influence to secure further career opportunities.

3.3.3. Competition performance

Female teachers outperform male teachers in both total awards and top-tier accolades. Their numerical advantage in participation directly translates into higher award totals, with female teachers also achieving superior results in municipal competitions. This suggests that female teachers exhibit stronger presentation skills, teaching capabilities, and overall competence in higher-level competitive settings.

3.3.4. Professional title advancement post-competition

Despite their competition success, female teachers experience lower promotion rates than male teachers, with notable disparities in promotion levels. Female promotions are predominantly concentrated at the associate professor level, while male teachers are more likely to advance to full professor. This indicates potential gender disparities in how competition achievements are weighted during title evaluations. Interviews reveal that while competition awards provide an edge in securing teaching-related projects (e.g., curriculum development or pedagogical reform initiatives), their influence on promotion criteria remains limited, even within “teaching-focused” career tracks.

4. Vision perspective: Reflections and recommendations

To enhance the competition’s impact on female teachers’ professional development, the following measures are proposed.

4.1. Improve the competition incentive system to enhance the professional development competitiveness of female teachers

4.1.1. Establish a diversified incentive mechanism framework

Higher education institutions should develop a multi-level incentive system that integrates teaching competition awards as a core component of professional title evaluations. By appropriately increasing the weight of these awards in promotion assessments and providing substantial recognition and rewards to outstanding participants, universities can effectively stimulate faculty enthusiasm and competitive engagement in such competitions.

4.1.2. Optimize the competition selection and training system

A targeted selection process should be implemented, identifying promising young faculty through multidimensional evaluations including student teaching evaluations, peer reviews, teaching development achievements, pedagogical research activities; selected candidates should then undergo a refined cultivation program featuring personalized mentorship from senior professors and past award winners focused group workshops multiple rounds of simulated competition drills.

4.1.3. Emphasize team support and performance incentives

Institutions should foster collaborative environments through collective lesson preparation sessions, teaching demonstration observations, interdisciplinary team teaching rehearsals and cross-departmental research team seminars and exchanges ^[12].

4.2. Fostering a healthy competition ecosystem to enhance young female teachers' proactive development awareness

4.2.1. Expand promotion to amplify the impact of teaching competitions

Leverage both internal and external media platforms to widely communicate the value and positive influence of teaching competitions. This will enhance female teachers' awareness, participation, and engagement in competitions, and increase institutional and societal recognition of the competition's significance and outcomes ^[13].

4.2.2. Establish feedback mechanisms and continuous improvement pathways

Systematically collect and analyze female teachers' competition experiences and outcomes. Regular feedback sessions should be organized, with results directly linked to professional title promotions and performance evaluations.

4.3. Addressing development needs and mental health to ensure sustainable professional growth

4.3.1. Create professional development support platforms

- (1) Facilitate peer learning by inviting internal and external experts to provide career planning and development guidance
- (2) Enhance skills through subsidized participation in academic conferences to broaden scholarly perspectives
- (3) Boost motivation via initiatives like the "Women's Excellence Fund," offering material and honorary awards for outstanding teaching/research achievements ^[14].

4.3.2. Strengthen mental health services

Proactively monitor mental well-being through:

- (1) Regular mental health workshops and counseling services
- (2) Timely psychological support for teaching-related stressors

5. Conclusion

This study highlights teaching competitions as a valuable platform for young female faculty's professional development, demonstrating their strong participation and outstanding performance. However, the limited translation of these achievements into career advancement reveals systemic barriers in current evaluation systems. To maximize the competition's impact, institutions should reform promotion criteria to better recognize teaching excellence while fostering supportive ecosystems that value both teaching and research ^[15]. Addressing these challenges will unlock the full potential of teaching competitions in advancing faculty development and educational quality.

Funding

2024 Special Project for the Construction of Women's Civilization at the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology; 2024 Teacher Development Project of the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology (Project No.: CFTD2024YB32)

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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