

Exclusion or Integration: A Study on the Integration of High-Level Young Returnee Talents in Universities

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Abstract: In recent years, high-level young returnee talents have become a major new source of faculty in high-level research universities. Due to their overseas education and professional experience, such talents often differ from domestic faculty in academic interests, research approaches, professional identity, personal pursuits, and values, leading to segmentation and differentiation between groups. Exploring the processes, patterns, and problems of integration for high-level young returnee talents in universities, and analyzing the phenomena, trends, and pathways of their transition from exclusion to integration, is of great significance for building university faculty and advancing the high-quality development of higher education. Starting from the concept of “university integration”, this paper identifies the characteristics of high-level young returnee talents, investigates their integration status through empirical research, and proposes countermeasures to improve integration and enhance cohesion and synergy.

Keywords: Universities; Returnees; Young people; High-level talents; Faculty; Integration

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1. Introduction

Currently, scholarly discussions on the integration of high-level young returnee talents in universities show diverse perspectives worldwide, focusing on cultural adaptation, academic environment integration, career development paths, and value differences, yielding abundant theoretical achievements^[1-2]. The academic adaptation and organizational integration of such talents have become a focal research topic domestically and internationally. Overseas studies mainly center on reverse cultural re-adaptation and academic career development theories, while Chinese research often combines qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods^[3-4].

In recent years, high-level young returnee talents have become a critical new component of faculty in high-level research universities. As China accelerates the development of a globally competitive talent

system and improves supporting policies for attracting overseas high-level talents, growing numbers of returnees choose to teach in universities, which have become their top workplace destination ^[2]. Statistics show that more than 70% of young high-level overseas talents recruited through national talent programs work in universities, making them an indispensable force in China's university faculty.

However, their overseas backgrounds often create gaps between returnees and domestic faculty in academic interests, research paradigms, professional identity, personal goals, and values, resulting in group segmentation and differentiation ^[5-7]. While returnee scholars bring new perspectives and vitality to Chinese higher education, they also face challenges in cultural adaptation, teaching philosophies, and career development that require attention ^[2-3]. For high-level young returnee talents, reverse cultural re-adaptation coincides with role transition. The dual identity of "young high-level talent" and "returnee" may create barriers to academic career development and hinder the full use of their strengths ^[3].

This paper explores the processes, laws, and challenges of integration for high-level young returnee talents in universities, analyzes the shift from exclusion to integration, and provides implications for faculty development and higher education. It defines "university integration", identifies the traits of returnee talents, uses survey methods to assess integration, and offers evidence-based suggestions to strengthen integration and synergy.

2. Core concepts and theoretical foundations

2.1. Definition of "university integration"

"University integration" is a multi-dimensional, dynamic concept covering adaptation to the organizational environment, identity construction in the academic community, and interactive integration with domestic colleagues. From an organizational behavior perspective, integration refers to the process of alignment between individuals and organizations, reflected in the acceptance and internalization of organizational values, norms, and social networks.

Existing literature identifies three dimensions of integration for high-level young returnee talents:

Academic integration: adaptation of teaching philosophies, adjustment of research directions, and acceptance of academic evaluation systems ^[3, 5];

Interpersonal integration: relationship building with administrators, colleagues, and students, and integration of domestic and overseas academic networks ^[3, 8];

Institutional integration: understanding and adaptation to university governance, promotion rules, and resource allocation mechanisms ^[4, 6].

2.2. Characteristics of high-level young returnee talents

As a distinctive group, high-level young returnee talents show clear collective features. Tan (2023) describes them as pioneers in reverse cultural adaptation and key actors in cross-border academic mobility ^[4]. Their main traits include:

Composite capital structure. Chen (2022), using field theory, finds that returnees possess well-rounded capital: deep cultural capital, strong symbolic capital, and extensive social capital ^[5]. This structure supports integration but may also cause frictions if capital types mismatch local field rules.

Dual value systems. Influenced by long-term overseas exposure, returnees may hold values, thinking patterns, and behavioral norms that differ from domestic contexts ^[7]. This duality can be a unique strength

but also a source of integration barriers.

High career expectations. Returnees typically have high expectations for academic environments, resources, and development space. Sun (2021) notes that excessive expectations predict passive coping and weaker adaptation ^[6].

2.3. Analytical framework of exclusion and integration

“Exclusion” and “integration” are core concepts for understanding returnee adaptation. Exclusion operates on three levels:

Institutional exclusion: low recognition of international publications, implicit promotion barriers ^[3, 5];

Cultural exclusion: misunderstandings and communication gaps due to academic cultural differences ^[6, 8];

Relational exclusion: marginalization due to closed academic cliques and networks ^[3, 8].

Integration is a multi-layered, gradual process. Ji (2024), using trade-off theory, identifies a balancing mechanism among mindset, adaptation, and career development, driven by dynamic alignment between personal values and social needs, two-way interaction between cultural adaptation and professional integration, and coordination between short-term goals and long-term vision ^[2]. This framework supports understanding the transition from exclusion to integration.

3. Practical difficulties in integration

3.1. Barriers in academic work

Many studies confirm that young returnee scholars face acute challenges during early academic adaptation in China ^[3, 5]. Using qualitative methods, Sun (2024) studied 13 young returnee faculty and found three major difficulties: inadequate academic performance, weak integration in academic interactions, and poor fit with academic systems ^[3].

Returnees often show strong teaching motivation but lack skills and experience, leading to low returns on heavy effort. Research, the foundation of academic survival, encounters many obstacles. Blurred work-life boundaries and unclear role definitions create multiple stressors ^[3]. The imbalance between teaching and research, and tensions between quality and quantity, epitomize academic integration difficulties ^[5].

Chen (2022), using field theory and interviews with 14 young returnees at University H, identified dilemmas including role transition from student to scholar, teaching-research imbalance, quality-quantity tensions, and weak integration into academic networks ^[5]. These difficulties stem from institutional differences between Chinese and overseas university systems.

3.2. Segmentation and differentiation in interpersonal relations

Interpersonal separation between the returnee and the domestic faculty is prominent. Sun (2024) notes that returnees feel confused about their roles with administrators, colleagues, and students, and struggle to connect with domestic or overseas networks, making it hard to enter mainstream academic circles ^[3]. This difficulty reflects identity tension between two academic cultures and the relative closure of domestic academic communities.

Yang (2017) used narrative inquiry to track four novice returnee English instructors over 18 months and found that their professional identity evolved from research-focused novices to multi-role teacher-scholars ^[8]. In teaching, they blended Chinese and Western models; in research, they used persistence, compliance, or

entrepreneurship to adapt and align with domestic and international communities^[8]. Interpersonal integration thus requires active agency.

Yet integration efforts do not always succeed. A small number of returnees show negative tendencies such as weak ideals, declining political motivation, weak accountability, excessive individualism, and pragmatism, shaped by globalization risks, managerial misconceptions, and weak grassroots Party organizations^[7].

3.3. Challenges in institutional adaptation

Institutional barriers are especially severe. Most young returnees start at the bottom of the promotion pyramid, facing strict academic evaluation and intense competition with little guidance on “rules of the game”^[3]. This gap reveals structural differences between Chinese and international evaluation systems.

Sun (2021) used in-depth interviews with four new returnee faculty and found that adaptation was shaped by administrative support, insufficient research facilities, imperfect systems, cultural gaps, and individual factors^[6]. Although most can adapt, the process is uneven, and ongoing challenges remain^[6].

Tan (2023) shows that institutional conditions strongly influence job satisfaction. Explicit predictors include job demands and resources; satisfaction with appointment relates to job demands, while satisfaction with environment, income, and career reflects resource access^[4]. Supportive institutional arrangements thus directly improve integration.

4. Factors influencing integration

4.1. Individual factors: Agency and adaptation strategies

Individual capacities and strategies play decisive roles. Sun (2024) highlights self-adjustment, extraversion, openness, and relational choice as key enablers^[3]. Yang (2017) emphasizes proactivity and reflection in identity construction; despite structural constraints, returnees use their academic capital to negotiate favorable positions^[8].

Overseas experience also shapes perceptions of teaching, research, and professional identity, with effects varying by duration and context^[8]. Sun (2021) underscores psychological readiness: low pre-return preparation, unrealistic expectations, and passive coping undermine adaptation^[6].

Tan (2023) finds that strong, voluntary motivation to return predicts higher job satisfaction and better integration, suggesting that talent recruitment should prioritize intrinsic commitment^[4].

4.2. Organizational factors: Support systems and institutional environment

Organizational support strongly predicts integration. Sun (2024) identifies peer and university support and academic lineage as critical enabling factors^[3]. Yang (2017) highlights the academic environment, community norms, departmental culture, and interpersonal dynamics^[8].

Chen (2022) links integration difficulties to field constraints: heavy teaching loads with little experience, large classes, weak research mentorship and funding, research-biased management, simplistic quantitative evaluation, and rigid appointment pressures^[5]. These organizational barriers hinder integration.

Ji (2024) recommends strategic talent policies to balance adaptation, patriotism, and career growth, aligning individual value with social needs, underscoring the role of institutional support^[2].

4.3. Environmental factors: Cultural differences and field rules

Contextual factors exert deep, structural effects. Sun (2024) identifies institutional internationalization and academic cultural gaps as powerful constraints^[3]. Sun (2021) confirms that cultural divergence shapes academic adaptation^[6].

From field theory, Chen (2022) argues that rule differences between overseas and Chinese universities underlie integration struggles. Returnees' habitus often conflicts with local field logics, creating career obstacles^[5]. Such structural differences are harder to resolve than material conditions.

Sun (2020) links value differences to globalization risks, negative social norms, managerial biases, and weak grassroots Party organizations, which jointly shape returnees' values and behavior^[7].

5. From exclusion to integration: Pathways and mechanisms

5.1. Individual adjustment and reconstruction

The transition starts with individual agency and proactive identity rebuilding. Key strategies include:

Realistic expectation adjustment. Unrealistic expectations and passive coping reduce adaptation; returnees should build sound psychological readiness before returning^[6].

Active conversion of academic capital. By leveraging overseas academic capital and taking initiative, returnees can navigate constraints and secure advantageous positions in local fields^[8].

Integrated dual identity. Successful integration requires creative synthesis, not passive assimilation or rigid adherence to overseas models. Blending Chinese and Western teaching practices signifies high-quality integration^[8].

5.2. Organizational support and inclusion

Organizational support is foundational for overcoming exclusion. Based on field theory, Chen (2022) proposes a comprehensive pathway^[5]:

Teaching: targeted training, reasonable teaching loads, and scaled-back class sizes to ease adaptation;

Research: support for academic networking, funding expansion, and guidance toward domestic priorities;

Management: institutional reform, greater inclusivity, quality assurance, and teaching-research coordination.

Sun (2021) advocates multi-level coordination across government, universities, and individuals to accelerate smooth adaptation^[6].

5.3. Cultural dialogue and integration

Cultural dialogue enables deep, sustainable integration. Ji (2024) shows that balanced integration arises from dynamic alignment of personal values and social needs, two-way cultural and professional adaptation, and coherent goal planning^[2].

Integration is mutual adaptation, not one-way assimilation. Returnees absorb local academic culture while introducing global perspectives to drive innovation.

Sun (2020) proposes values education guided by Marxism, people-centered principles, and the unity of universality and nationality. Strengthening leadership by grassroots Party organizations and innovative cultivation helps returnees develop sound values, representing deep cultural integration^[7].

6. Countermeasures to improve integration

6.1. Improve the system for uniting, guiding, and serving talents

A full-cycle talent service system should cover pre-recruitment, onboarding, and long-term support. Pre-recruitment communications should realistically describe conditions to set proper expectations. Customized support plans should reflect disciplinary and personal needs. Continuous tracking should resolve daily and professional challenges ^[2-6]. Returnees should be included in campus groups, given platforms for exchange, and encouraged to participate in governance. Talented and politically integrated returnees should be supported for management roles to promote diversified development.

6.2. Optimize academic evaluation and promotion systems

Evaluation and promotion systems strongly shape integration. Tan (2023) shows that job demands have dual effects: excessive pressure reduces satisfaction, while appropriate demands boost engagement ^[4]. Systems should balance stimulation and wellness.

Reforms include: a classified evaluation system that equally recognizes international and domestic achievements; robust peer review to ensure fairness; and reasonable appointment assessments with adequate adaptation periods ^[3, 5]. Universities should foster a collaborative academic ecosystem that discourages utilitarianism, excessive competition, and cliquishness.

6.3. Build academic communities and support networks

Strong academic communities and networks improve integration. Sun (2024) confirms the value of mentorship, institutional support, and academic connections ^[3]. Universities should implement mentoring or buddy systems with experienced domestic faculty, create interdisciplinary platforms, and help returnees maintain global links to avoid network isolation ^[3, 8]. Their overseas research training often supports innovative perspectives; organized research initiatives should amplify these strengths. Those leading exploratory “from 0 to 1” research should receive stable, long-term support with reduced evaluation frequency. For high-potential scholars pursuing “from 1 to 0” reverse translational research, universities should facilitate team matches to provide resources and space for growth.

6.4. Foster an inclusive organizational culture

Inclusive culture underpins sustainable integration. Universities should embrace openness, diversity, and respect for returnees’ backgrounds as assets for innovation ^[2, 5]. Ji (2024) shows that integration succeeds when personal values align with institutional goals, culture interacts with career development, and short- and long-term objectives are balanced ^[2]. Institutions should encourage self-organization, tolerate diverse career paths, promote innovation, accept risk, and patiently support returnee development.

7. Conclusion

High-level young returnee talents are a vital new force in high-level research universities, and their integration critically affects faculty quality and higher education. This paper defines “university integration”, identifies returnee characteristics, analyzes difficulties in academic, interpersonal, and institutional dimensions, explores individual, organizational, and environmental drivers, and outlines multi-level pathways

from exclusion to integration.

Integration is dynamic, multi-dimensional, and reciprocal, requiring individual agency, institutional support, and cultural dialogue. Current challenges remain substantial, and the transition from exclusion to integration depends on coordinated efforts by individuals, organizations, and policymakers.

Future research may: conduct longitudinal studies to trace dynamic integration patterns; compare returnees from different disciplines, countries, and university types; and empirically test how integration relates to research productivity, organizational commitment, and retention.

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