

## Competence and professionalism of Chinese college teachers

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### **Abstract**

University teachers play a crucial role in shaping students' future development. Their abilities and professional spirit directly impact teaching quality and student learning outcomes. Therefore, understanding and enhancing the competencies and professionalism of Chinese university teachers are essential for optimizing education quality and promoting comprehensive student development. This study utilized descriptive research to determine the relationship between teacher competence and professionalism in China with a total of 385 college teachers from three Chinese universities involved in this research. Results showed that majority of the respondents were female, 26-35 years old, master's degree holders and serving the university for 6-10 years. The respondents strongly agreed on all the indicators under teaching competence giving importance to content and academic competence. In terms of teachers' professionalism, the respondents strongly agreed on all the indicators giving high regard to obligations and working relationships beyond the classroom. There exists no significant difference of responses on teacher competence when respondents were grouped according to profile except for sex under digital competency and research competency. Also, there exists no significant difference in teacher professionalism except for the highest educational attainment under teachers' character and subject and pedagogical knowledge. There exists no significant relationship between teacher competence and professionalism which implies that competence does not guarantee professionalism and vice versa. A teacher might have strong competence but lack professionalism. In the end, an action plan to enhance the Chinese university teachers' competence and professionalism was proposed. Hence, Chinese universities may invest in professional development of their faculty, leading to a more skilled and proficient teaching force that ultimately benefits student learning outcomes.

**Keywords:** college teachers, competence, professionalism

## Competence and professionalism of Chinese college teachers

### 1. Introduction

Amidst the wave of knowledge economy and globalization, higher education is gradually becoming a vital component of national competitiveness. Chinese university teachers, as the core force of higher education, play a crucial role in enhancing educational quality and nurturing outstanding talents (Cheng, 2018). With the rise of the knowledge economy and the deepening of globalization, higher education, as a significant force in cultivating high-quality talents and promoting social progress, is increasingly prominent. University teachers are not only disseminators of knowledge but also leaders of innovative thinking (Liu, 2020). Their work competence and Professionalism directly affect the quality and level of higher education.

Teachers must also be aware that with the increasingly complex and dynamic international environment and domestic demands, university teachers still face numerous challenges in terms of their work competence and Professionalism (Wu,et. al.,2020). They need to continuously enhance themselves in knowledge updates, technological innovation, and teaching method reforms to adapt to the development needs of higher education in the new era (Xu,et. al.,2018). On the other hand, scholars from home and abroad have conducted extensive research on the abilities and professional qualities of university teachers (Huang, 2019). Some scholars have explored how to improve university teachers' teaching abilities and professional literacy from the perspectives of teacher education, training, and evaluation (Chen,et. al.,2020). Others have analyzed the influencing factors of university teachers' professional attitudes, values, teacher-student relationships, etc. from the perspectives of educational psychology and sociology (Zhang, 2018).

These studies have provided important theoretical support and practical references for our understanding of university teachers' abilities and professional qualities. Teacher competence refers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities that educators possess to effectively teach and facilitate learning in their respective subjects or fields. It encompasses a wide range of competencies, including subject matter expertise, pedagogical knowledge, classroom management skills, communication abilities, and the capacity to assess student learning. On the other hand, teacher professionalism encompasses broader aspects of a teacher's role and conduct within the educational context. It involves qualities such as ethical behavior, continuous professional development, commitment to students' well-being and learning outcomes, collaboration with colleagues and stakeholders, adherence to professional standards, and reflective practice. Together, teacher competence and professionalism contribute significantly to the quality of education. Competent teachers are better equipped to engage students, deliver effective instruction, assess learning outcomes accurately, and adapt teaching strategies to meet diverse student needs. Professionalism ensures that teachers uphold ethical standards, maintain accountability, and continuously seek opportunities for growth and improvement. Ultimately, both competence and professionalism are essential for creating conducive learning environments and fostering positive educational outcomes for students.

Smith,et. al.,(2023) point out that in the increasingly diverse and inclusive demands of the educational field, some teachers may face challenges insufficient to meet the needs of multiculturalism and special education. The lack of understanding and support strategies for special groups of students may result in their inability to effectively meet the learning needs of all students in the classroom, thus , affecting the enhancement of teachers' abilities and professional competence. Garcia,et. al.,(2020) indicate that some teachers lack awareness and skills in educational research and teaching innovation, and they have insufficient updates and applications of teaching methods and educational theories. This may lead to their teaching processes being overly traditional and rigid, unable to fully stimulate students' interests and potentials, thus, affecting the enhancement of professional competence and teaching abilities. However, there are still some limitations and shortcomings in current research on the abilities and professional qualities of Chinese university teachers. Firstly, most of the existing research

focuses on the experience and practices of Western countries, lacking in-depth analysis and research on the actual situation of China. Secondly, most existing research focuses on macro-level improvement of university teachers' professional literacy and abilities, lacking in-depth analysis and summation of specific practical cases. Therefore, this study will combine the actual situation of Chinese universities, through survey questionnaires, to delve into the current status of Chinese university teachers' competence and professionalism, in order to provide more specific and practical references for relevant research and policy-making. Higher education teachers should not only have practical experience and authenticity but also continuously improve their teaching skills and attach importance to the reform of basic education. It is necessary to improve the structure of the professional quality of education workforce to improve the quality of education.

**Objectives of the Study** - This study determined the relationship between competence and professionalism of Chinese college teachers. Specifically, it assessed the competence of Chinese college teachers as to content/academic competence, assessment strategies, learning environment creation competency, digital competency and research competency; determined the teacher professionalism with regard to teachers' character, commitment to change and continual improvement, subject and pedagogical knowledge, and obligations and working relationships beyond the classroom; tested the significant relationship between the two variables and proposed an action plan to enhance the competence and professionalism of Chinese college teachers based on the results of the study.

## 2. Methods

**Research Design** - The researchers used a descriptive study to determine if a relationship exists between Competence and Professionalism. Descriptive research is a research methodology that aims to systematically gather information and provide an accurate portrayal of a phenomenon, situation, or population (Bordens, et. al., 2023). It focuses on describing characteristics, frequencies, and relationships of variables without manipulating them (Neuman, 2024). It typically addresses questions such as *who, what, where, when, and how*, but not necessarily "why" (Bordens, et. al., 2023). Researchers can employ various data collection methods, including surveys, observations, case studies, and document analysis (Neuman, 2024).

**Participants of the Study** - The primary participants of this study are university teachers. The survey was mainly be conducted in the form of online questionnaires. Prior to the initial survey, the researcher got feedback from university-level leaders, middle-level administrators, and teachers to ensure the language items of the questionnaire are understood and modified the necessary items for better comprehension and to ensure more effective completion of the questionnaire. The survey organization included three universities in Guangdong, China, which had a total population of 2,927. The questionnaires were sent out randomly Through the star application of the questionnaire, 385 questionnaires were collected From those who responded. The selection criteria for participating teachers in this study was explicitly defined. It includes factors such as years of teaching experience, qualifications, and teaching loads. Emphasis was placed on obtaining informed consent from participating teachers to ensure they understand the purpose of the assessment, how data would be collected, and how information would be used. Participants were assured that their data would be treated confidentially, and assessment results would be presented in a summarized and anonymous manner to protect their identities. It was also emphasized that participation in the assessment is voluntary, and teachers have the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without facing any negative consequences.

**Instrument of the Study** - The data were collected using a questionnaire comprising three (3) sections. The first section includes demographic information such as gender, age, education level, and professional title. The second section assesses teachers' teaching competence, teaching skills, assessment strategies, ability to create learning environments, digital skills, and research abilities to confirm their capabilities, lifted from Teachers' Competency Self-Evaluation Framework that is designed to foster self-reflection and improvement through honest self-assessment. It is specifically tailored to aid teachers in identifying their strengths, as well as pinpointing areas of weakness or potential for growth. Furthermore, it seamlessly incorporates experiential

learning pedagogy at appropriate junctures. Initially, eighteen crucial facets pertinent to teachers' daily lives have been meticulously chosen for inclusion in this self-evaluation framework. These encompass Communication Skills, Subject Matter Expertise, Professional Development, Stakeholder Satisfaction, Ethical Standards, Gender Sensitivity, and numerous others. This framework was developed by the Central Board of Secondary Education in India, ensuring its alignment with the highest standards of educational practice.

The third section evaluates teachers' professionalism based on their personality, commitment to change and continuous improvement, subject and pedagogical knowledge, and extra-classroom obligations and work relationships, from Teacher Professionalism Questionnaire adopted from Tichenor, et. al., (2009) and Hasan (2015) and was tailored for Malaysian teachers. It has four dimensions namely teachers' character, commitment to change and continual improvement, subject and pedagogical knowledge, and obligations and working relationships beyond the classroom. It was used internationally to evaluate the professionalism of the teachers. Overall Cronbach Alpha value in four dimensions is between 0.81 to 0.89. using Likert scales for quantitative measurements. The researcher collected data using both Google Forms and hard copies of the questionnaire to ensure that all information provided by respondents is used solely for research purposes. To further determine the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, the researcher conducted a pilot test. The pilot test yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.8, interpreted as excellent, indicating that all items could be used for data collection. According to the results, the dimensions of teacher competence and professionalism all exceed 0.8, meeting the requirements for reliability. This indicates that the questionnaire is good for large scale distribution.

**Data Gathering Procedures** - Based on the combination of literature review and empirical research, this study first collected relevant literature for retrospective analysis to gain an in-depth grasp of the theory and practice of Competence and Professionalism in Chinese. After receiving feedback from the research consultant, the questionnaire was tested for reliability by a statistician to ensure that it was suitable for the study. Distribution of the questionnaire started after approval and was monitored and returned by the researcher. The researcher was responsible for monitoring and returning the questionnaires. Based on a combination of literature review and empirical research, this study first collected relevant literature for retrospective analysis to gain an in-depth grasp of the theory and practice of Competence and Professionalism in Chinese teachers. After receiving feedback from the research consultant, the questionnaire was tested for reliability by a statistician to ensure that it was suitable for the study. Distribution of the questionnaire started after approval and was monitored and returned by the researcher. The researcher was responsible for monitoring and returning the questionnaires. This study assessed the competence of Chinese universities in terms of content/ academic competence, pedagogical competency, assessment strategies, learning environment creation competency, digital competency, and research competency. research competency assessed Teachers' Competence from teachers' characters, commitment to change and continual improvement, subject and pedagogical Teachers' Competence was assessed in terms of teachers' characters, commitment to change and continual improvement, subject and pedagogical knowledge, obligations and working, and the relationships behind the business. relationships beyond the classroom. The relationship between Competence and Professionalism in Chinese teachers was also explored. At the same time, it also discusses the methods and measures that Chinese universities should adopt to provide practical basis and theoretical support for Chinese university teachers to improve Competence and Professionalism.

**Data Analysis** - The data analysis process involved collating, encoding, and analyzing the desired documents and figures using a variety of statistical measures. These measures included weighted mean, Pearson-Product Moment Correlation, Regression Analysis. All of which were selected based on the objectives of the study. Additionally, statistical software, specifically PASW version 18, was employed to facilitate the interpretation of data.

**Ethical Considerations** - Ethical considerations were meticulously observed throughout the research process to uphold the integrity and credibility of the study. Privacy and ethical concerns were paramount when administering the questionnaire and conducting research activities. Measures were taken to ensure that all

information collected was solely utilized for research purposes. Prior consent from participants was obtained through formal letters and correspondence, ensuring their willingness to participate and answer relevant questions. Moreover, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, with respondents not required to provide their names on the questionnaire. Participants were assured that their voluntary participation would not result in any harm, prioritizing their safety and security above all else. Ethical considerations ensured that the study respects the autonomy of teachers and does not infringe upon their rights as individuals or professionals. Emphasis was placed on honesty and transparency in all aspects of the assessment, from data collection to reporting of results. The objectives and potential impacts of the study were clearly outlined. Potential risks to participants were considered, and measures were taken to minimize harm. This includes ensuring that the assessment process does not have a negative impact on the teaching environment or the well-being of teachers. An explanation of how the study contributes positively to teachers' professional development and overall improvement of the educational environment was provided.

### 3. Results and discussion

Table 1  
*Summary Table on Teachers' Competence*

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Content/Academic Competence	3.74	Strongly Agree	1
Pedagogical Competency	3.66	Strongly Agree	4.5
Assessment Strategies	3.66	Strongly Agree	4.5
Learning Environment Creation Competency	3.65	Strongly Agree	6
Digital Competency	3.68	Strongly Agree	3
Research Competency	3.72	Strongly Agree	2
Composite Mean	3.69	Strongly Agree	

*Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 - 1.49 = Strongly Disagree*

Based on the data from Table 1, teachers' ratings in various dimensions have reached the level of "Strongly Agree", with a composite average value of 3.69. This indicates that teachers have a high level of recognition for their content/academic ability, teaching ability, assessment strategies, learning environment creation, digital ability, and research ability. Specifically, teachers have the strongest recognition for their "content/academic ability" and "research ability", with composite average values of 3.74 and 3.72 respectively. The recognition for "teaching ability, assessment strategies", "learning environment creation", and "digital ability" is slightly lower, but the composite average values are all above 3.65, strongly agreed Content/Academic Competence got a weighted mean of 3.74; teachers strongly agree that they have a thorough understanding of the subject matter. This indicates that teachers possess the necessary knowledge and expertise in their respective academic fields, enabling them to effectively deliver content to students (Brown,et. al.,2021). Both pedagogical competency and assessment strategies received a weighted mean of 3.66, indicating a strong agreement among teachers in these areas. This suggests that teachers are proficient in designing and implementing effective teaching strategies and assessment methods to promote student learning and development (Smith,et. al.,2020). Learning Environment Creation Competency got a weighted mean of 3.65; teachers also demonstrate a strong agreement in their ability to create conducive learning environments. This implies that teachers are capable of fostering supportive and engaging learning atmospheres that facilitate student learning and participation (Garcia,et. al.,2019). As to digital competency, teachers exhibit strong digital competency, as reflected by a weighted mean of 3.68. This suggests that teachers are adept at integrating digital technologies into their teaching practices to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes (Chen,et. al.,2018). Research Competency got a weighted mean of 3.72, teachers demonstrate strong research competency. This indicates that teachers are proficient in conducting educational research, staying updated with the latest developments in their fields, and applying research findings to improve their teaching practices (Lee,et. al.,2019).

These data are consistent with previous research results. For example, Shulman (2013) showed that when organizations provide greater support, recognition, and motivation in work, employees form a stronger organizational commitment, thereby strengthening their sense of identity with the organization and actively

improving their level of work input. Rothmann (2007) pointed out that employees with a higher sense of organizational support greatly improved their vitality and dedication level in the enterprise. Their work then had a positive impact on their level of work input. Li (2006) confirmed that organizational fairness and organizational support have a significant impact on work input. Zou (2017) believe that the organizational support of new teachers can positively predict their work input, the higher the sense of organizational support, the higher the work input of new teachers.

Table 2

*Summary Table on Teachers' Professionalism*

Indicators	WM	VI	Rank
Teachers' Character	3.74	Strongly Agree	2.5
Commitment to Change and Continual Commitment	3.74	Strongly Agree	2.5
Subject and Pedagogical Knowledge	3.72	Strongly Agree	4
Obligations and Working Relationships Beyond the Classroom	3.75	Strongly Agree	1
Composite Mean	3.74	Strongly Agree	

*Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 - 1.49 = Strongly Disagree*

Based on the data from Table 2, teachers' ratings in various dimensions earned a composite mean of 3.4. This indicates that teachers have a high level of recognition for their professional level in terms of "Teacher Character", "Commitment to Change and Continuous Commitment", "Subject and Teaching Knowledge", and "Obligations and Relationships Outside of Classroom Work". Specifically, teachers have the strongest recognition for their "Obligations and Relationships Outside of Classroom Work", with a composite average value of 3.75. The recognition for "Teacher Character" and "Commitment to Change and Continuous Commitment" is also very high, with composite average values of 3.74. The recognition for "Subject and Teaching Knowledge" is slightly lower, but the composite average value is still high at 3.72, reaching the level of "Strongly Agree".

Teachers character got a weighted mean of 3.74; teachers strongly agree with possessing positive character traits essential for effective teaching. Teachers also exhibit a strong commitment to change and continual improvement, as indicated by the weighted mean of 3.74. Subject and pedagogical knowledge got a weighted mean of 3.72, teachers demonstrate a high level of subject and pedagogical knowledge. Teachers strongly agree with fulfilling obligations and maintaining positive working relationships beyond the classroom, as evidenced by the weighted mean of 3.75. The present data set aligns with prior research outcomes. Notably, a study conducted by Shulman (2013) demonstrated that when organizations offer enhanced support, acknowledgment, and motivation in the workplace, employees cultivate a stronger organizational commitment. This, in turn, fortifies their identification with the organization and prompts them to actively enhance their work output. Furthermore, Rothmann's (2007) indicated that employees who perceive a high degree of organizational support exhibit a substantial improvement in their vitality and dedication within the enterprise. Subsequently, their work positively impacts their work output. Similarly, Li (2006) confirmed the significant influence of organizational fairness and support on work output. Zou (2017), posited that the organizational support extended to new teachers can positively anticipate their work output, wherein a heightened perception of organizational support corresponds to an elevated work output among these teachers.

Table 3 presents the relationship between teachers' competence and their professionalism. By comparing teachers' character, commitment to change and continual commitment, subject and pedagogical knowledge, as well as obligations and working relationships beyond the classroom, we can gain insights into the interactions among these factors. Firstly, the correlation between teachers' character and other factors is very weak, and the p-values are all greater than the significance level (Brown, et. al., 2019). This suggests that there may not be a direct statistically significant relationship between teachers' character and their professionalism. However, when we focus on specific teacher competencies, we find some significant correlations.

There is a significant relationship between pedagogical competency and assessment strategies with teachers' character (Jones, 2010; Wang, et. al., 2020). This indicates that teachers exhibit more prominent

character traits when demonstrating stronger pedagogical competency and using more effective assessment strategies. This is consistent with previous research findings, supporting the close relationship between teaching competence and professionalism.

Table 3  
*Relationship Between Teachers' Competence and Teachers' Professionalism*

Content/Academic Competence	r-value	p-value	Interpretation
Teachers' Character	0.036	0.486	Not Significant
Commitment to Change and Continual Commitment	-0.027	0.594	Not Significant
Subject and Pedagogical Knowledge	-0.025	0.62	Not Significant
Obligations and Working Relationships Beyond the Classroom	-0.003	0.948	Not Significant
<b>Pedagogical Competency</b>			
Teachers' Character	.105	0.04	Significant
Commitment to Change and Continual Commitment	0.008	0.873	Not Significant
Subject and Pedagogical Knowledge	-0.045	0.378	Not Significant
Obligations and Working Relationships Beyond the Classroom	0.048	0.345	Not Significant
<b>Assessment Strategies</b>			
Teachers' Character	.125	0.014	Significant
Commitment to Change and Continual Commitment	0.046	0.363	Not Significant
Subject and Pedagogical Knowledge	-0.026	0.617	Not Significant
Obligations and Working Relationships Beyond the Classroom	0.001	0.982	Not Significant
<b>Learning Environment Creation Competency</b>			
Teachers' Character	0.044	0.393	Not Significant
Commitment to Change and Continual Commitment	-0.002	0.963	Not Significant
Subject and Pedagogical Knowledge	0.037	0.467	Not Significant
Obligations and Working Relationships Beyond the Classroom	-0.004	0.941	Not Significant
<b>Digital Competency</b>			
Teachers' Character	0.061	0.236	Not Significant
Commitment to Change and Continual Commitment	0.038	0.46	Not Significant
Subject and Pedagogical Knowledge	-0.018	0.723	Not Significant
Obligations and Working Relationships Beyond the Classroom	-0.02	0.699	Not Significant
<b>Research Competency</b>			
Teachers' Character	0.046	0.372	Not Significant
Commitment to Change and Continual Commitment	0.022	0.66	Not Significant
Subject and Pedagogical Knowledge	0.002	0.97	Not Significant
Obligations and Working Relationships Beyond the Classroom	-0.024	0.643	Not Significant

Legend: Significant at  $p$ -value < 0.05

Additionally, there is no significant relationship between subject and pedagogical knowledge and teachers' character (Johnson, et. al., 2018). This may suggest that teachers' level of subject knowledge does not directly impact their character traits. However, there are some significant relationships with other competencies, such as teaching competence and assessment strategies (Wang, et. al., 2020). Although the data in Table 4 provide preliminary insights into the relationship between teacher competence and professionalism, further research is needed to delve deeper into these relationships. Through broader data collection and more sophisticated analytical methods, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the associations between teacher competence and professionalism. Furthermore, deeper insights can be deduced into the nature of these relationships through survey research, field observations, and qualitative studies (Robinson, et. al., 2019). These methods can help us identify potential causal relationships and influencing factors, thereby providing more effective strategies and approaches for enhancing teacher professionalism. There are complex and diverse relationships between teachers' competence and their professionalism. Through ongoing research and exploration, we can better understand these relationships and provide more effective support and guidance for teacher professional development.

Table 4  
Proposed Action Plan for Chinese University Teachers

Key Result Areas (KRAs) / Objective	Strategies/ Activities	Success Indicator	Person/ Office Responsible
1. Teacher Competence 1.1 Learning Environment Creation Competency  Objective: <i>To equip teachers with the skills and knowledge to create effective and engaging learning environments for all students.</i>	a. Design and deliver workshops on topics like: <i>-Classroom Design and -Management</i> <i>-Differentiated Learning</i> <i>-Technology Integration</i> <i>-Collaborative Learning</i> <i>-Culturally Responsive Teaching</i> b. Tailor professional development opportunities to meet the needs of teachers at different stages of their careers. c. Integrate Learning Environment Creation into ongoing school improvement initiatives and teacher evaluation process. d. Partner with school administrators, parents, and community members to create a supportive environment for teachers.	90% of teachers are empowered to create effective and engaging learning environments that foster student success for all.	University Administrators Dean, Program Chairs or Department Head HR
2. Teacher Professionalism 2.1 Subject and Pedagogical Knowledge Objective: <i>To equip teachers with in-depth subject knowledge and effective pedagogical skills to improve student learning outcomes</i>	a. Establish subject-specific Teaching Learning Communities (TLCs) where teachers can collaborate, share best practices, and support each other in deepening their subject knowledge. b. Offer workshops on effective instructional design principles like lesson planning, innovative teaching strategies and assessment techniques. c. Partner with universities, subject matter experts, and educational organizations to provide high-quality professional development opportunities.	90% of teachers become subject-matter experts and adept practitioners of effective teaching methods, ultimately leading to improved student learning and success.	University Administrators Dean, Program Chairs or Department Head HR Partner Universities

#### 4. Conclusions and recommendations

The respondents strongly agreed on all the indicators under teaching competence giving importance to content and academic competence. In terms of teachers' professionalism, the respondents strongly agreed on all the indicators giving high regard to obligations and working relationships beyond the classroom. There exists no significant relationship between teacher competence and professionalism. This implies that competence does not guarantee professionalism and vice versa. A teacher might have strong competence but lack professionalism. An action plan to enhance the Chinese university teachers' competence and professionalism was proposed.

School administrators may strengthen interdisciplinary training and resource support to promote interdisciplinary integration among teachers. They may also implement teacher-led learning plans to enhance teachers' professional levels and teaching abilities. The Guidance Office may implement home-school cooperation projects to promote communication and collaboration between home and school. Also, they may establish platforms for teacher-student communication to facilitate interaction and exchange between teachers and students. The Human Resource Office may provide continuous support for teachers' professional development to improve the teacher training system. Also, they may establish a sound teacher incentive mechanism to motivate teachers for continuous development and innovation. The Community Extension Office may strengthen the cultivation of teachers' social responsibility and encourage active participation in social welfare activities. The proposed action plan may be tabled for discussion, implementation, and evaluation. Future researchers may explore other topics that might affect or influence teacher competence and professionalism such as work-life balance, professional growth, and teaching quality.

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