

Research on the Career Identity Dilemma and Reconstruction of Part-time Staff in Educational Institutions: A Case Study of a Postgraduate Entrance Examination Institution

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Abstract

With the advancement of education marketization, part-time staff in postgraduate entrance exam preparation institutions have become a key group for supplementing teaching resources and meeting diverse needs. However, their occupational identity dilemmas have become prominent due to temporary employment and marginal management. This study, framed by the theories of occupational identity and organizational identity, employs literature review, interviews, and questionnaire surveys to identify four core challenges faced by this group: 1) Ambiguous career positioning leading to a sense of marginalization; 2) Weak emotional connections and insufficient rights protection; 3) Imbalanced labor returns relative to input, weakening professional value recognition; 4) Lack of career planning and promotion channels. Social work can intervene by leveraging the characteristics of the education sector: reshaping occupational identity, promoting professional community development, and advocating policies and resource linkage to optimize institutional environments. This research provides theoretical support and practical guidance for addressing occupational identity issues and improving the education service ecosystem, while exploring feasible pathways for temporary workers to transition into educators.

Keywords

Part-time staff of postgraduate entrance examination institutions; career identity dilemma; reconstruction.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

In recent years, the popularity of China's postgraduate entrance examination has been steadily increasing. Although the number of applicants in 2024 showed a slight decline compared to previous years, it still remained at a high level of approximately 4 million.[1] This massive candidate pool has driven vigorous development in the postgraduate education industry. Demand for specialized services such as public course tutoring, one-on-one professional course coaching, and mock interview training remains strong. The need for instructors reflects diversified and flexible characteristics. Candidates increasingly require refined tutoring content, including public course instructors familiar with exam syllabi and question-setting patterns, as well as professional course instructors knowledgeable about specific university and program requirements. Moreover, postgraduate tutoring exhibits distinct cyclical patterns. For instance, during the pre-exam sprint phase and interview preparation stages, the demand for instructors surges dramatically in a short period. Flexible employment models have become a key choice for postgraduate education institutions, as they reduce labor costs and enable rapid response to short-term staffing needs. Consequently, the scale of part-time staff in these institutions has grown rapidly.

According to incomplete industry statistics, China's postgraduate entrance exam tutoring sector employed over 500,000 part-time workers in 2024, covering roles such as public course instruction, specialized subject teaching, interview guidance, and teaching assistants. Teaching-focused part-timers accounted for over 70% of the workforce, forming a crucial pillar of the tutoring service supply. These professionals include both university graduate students, young faculty members, and seasoned industry practitioners who leverage their expertise to provide tailored guidance.[2] However, the sector's professional identity remains underdeveloped despite its rapid expansion. Many view tutoring as a temporary gig or supplemental income, seeing it merely as a means to earn tuition fees or support household budgets, lacking a sense of professional belonging or mission. [3]Unclear status and inadequate protections—such as lack of standardized teacher training, absence of formal employment contracts, and delayed payment of hourly fees—make it difficult for some to build professional confidence, even leading to burnout. This identity crisis not only undermines staff motivation and teaching quality, resulting in inadequate preparation and perfunctory instruction, but also causes high turnover rates that disrupt educational continuity. When candidates switch instructors during critical preparation phases, it hinders learning progress and ultimately harms both student interests and the industry's reputation.

From a social work perspective, the professional identity challenges faced by part-time staff in postgraduate entrance exam preparation institutions are fundamentally adaptive dilemmas arising from institutional constraints and organizational environments, aligning with the service scope of corporate social work. Corporate social work, guided by the principle of helping individuals achieve self-reliance, addresses workplace issues through interventions at individual, group, and organizational levels, thereby enhancing employee well-being and organizational efficacy. Currently, domestic corporate social work practices are predominantly concentrated in traditional manufacturing and service sectors, while research and services targeting part-time staff in the postgraduate exam preparation industry remain relatively scarce. There is an urgent need to establish targeted intervention pathways to support the reconstruction of professional identity for this group. significance.

2. Research Design

2.1. Theory of Occupational Identity

The concept of career identity originates from Erikson's "identity theory," which highlights the pivotal role of self-concept formation during adolescence (ages 12-18) in shaping professional identity.[4]While scholars have proposed various definitions of career identity, no consensus has been reached due to differing research approaches. In organizational behavior, London integrated career identity into the framework of occupational dynamics, defining it as the degree of personal identification with work, encompassing job engagement and career advancement aspirations. [5]Schein, from a social identity perspective, conceptualized career identity as a form of social identity that distinguishes individuals from other groups, involving understanding of professional practices, personal talent development, and perception of career value. McGowan & Hart further refined the definition, describing it as shared attitudes, values, knowledge, beliefs, and skills among professional groups, emphasizing their close connection to occupational roles. Goodson & Cole proposed a constructivist perspective, viewing career identity as a continuous process of interpretation within specific contexts. Super's research, closely aligned with professional practice, posits that career identity is a self-concept formed through long-term engagement with a profession, encompassing familiarity with its nature, content, social value, and personal significance. This self-concept serves as the psychological foundation for excelling in one's role and achieving organizational goals, representing the developmental process of self-awareness in professional contexts.

2.2. Organizational Identity Theory

In recent years, the research on organizational identity has been deepened, and the essential difference between organizational identity and emotional commitment has been clarified. Organizational identity is a perceptual and cognitive construct, reflecting the degree of integration of the organization into the self-concept, and the individual and the organization are psychologically unified. Emotional commitment is the attitude of the employee towards the organization, and the individual and the organization are in an exchange relationship.

Ashforth & Mael, seminal figures in organizational identity theory, defined organizational identity as individuals' self-identification as members of an organization, fostering a sense of belonging and shared destiny.[6] By the late 1980s, this theory had evolved into a comprehensive framework centered on social identity theory and self-classification theory. Hog & Terry identified two core motivations in social identity theory: the uncertainty-reduction motive, which addresses individuals' need for social order and helps answer the question "Who am I?"[7]; and the self-enhancement motive, which boosts self-esteem through positive social identity recognition, thereby strengthening organizational identity. Later, Le Guoan et al. expanded the theory by proposing that positive social identity is jointly stimulated by self-esteem needs and intergroup comparisons.[8] Turner's self-classification theory categorizes self-concept into three levels: high-level identification with human groups, middle-level classification into in-groups and out-groups based on group identity, and low-level secondary personal categorization. These three levels only reflect inclusion relationships without implying value hierarchies. In postgraduate education institutions, part-time staff often struggle to establish strong psychological bonds with the organization due to temporary employment relationships and marginal management practices, resulting in generally low organizational identification..

3. The Career Identity Dilemma of Part-time Staff in Postgraduate Entrance Examination Education Institutions

3.1. Identity Dilemma: The Strong Perception of Marginalized People

The survey shows that most respondents are not sure whether they belong to the group of educators, and they think that there is a clear difference between part-time and full-time staff in postgraduate education institutions, which directly leads to the perception of part-time staff as the marginalized people and causes the dilemma of identity.

The identity crisis manifests in three key aspects: First, ambiguous professional labeling. Some postgraduate exam preparation institutions only highlight full-time faculty in their promotional materials, while never disclosing part-time staff's names or credentials. Internally, these workers are referred to as "temporary instructors" or "assistant teachers" rather than "tutoring teachers." This ambiguous labeling makes it difficult for part-time educators to establish professional identity. As interviewee A1 explained: "When parents ask if I'm a full-time teacher, I don't know how to respond. I can only say I handle this section of teaching, feeling like a temporary worker rather than a real teacher." Second, low organizational engagement. Respondents reported never participating in core activities like teaching seminars, curriculum development, or faculty training. They only receive teaching assignments through supervisors and are excluded from decision-making processes. Interviewee A4 noted: "We part-time teachers are never notified about syllabus updates or exam trend analyses. We have to prepare lessons using outdated materials, often missing crucial exam points, which is extremely frustrating." Third, insufficient social recognition. Some students and parents question part-time teachers' professional competence, believing they lack the experience of full-time instructors and struggle to predict exam trends. This external perception further exacerbates the identity crisis among part-time educators. Interviewee A8 shared: "A parent privately

approached the institution requesting a full-time teacher, stating that 'part-time teachers might not be familiar with the details of the college interview. Although the institution declined, I felt deeply aggrieved and began to doubt whether I could truly provide effective interview guidance.'

3.2. Weak sense of organizational belonging: Dual deficits in emotion and rights

Organizational belongingness is an important support for professional identity. However, the questionnaire survey shows that only a small number of respondents have a sense of belonging to the postgraduate education institution, which indicates that the organizational belongingness of part-time staff is generally weak. This problem mainly stems from the lack of emotional connection and the absence of rights protection.

Regarding emotional connection, most respondents reported that their interactions with institutional administrators and full-time colleagues were limited to work task coordination, with virtually no informal engagements like team dinners or experience-sharing sessions. This purely professional relationship makes it difficult for part-time staff to establish trust or emotional identification with the organization. Interviewee A5 stated: "Apart from attending classes and submitting teaching feedback, I hardly communicate with other members of the institution. I feel like an outsider. The institution's development and well-being don't concern me." From the perspective of rights protection, the issues are more pronounced, mainly reflected in three aspects: First, non-standard labor contracts. Respondents only signed service agreements with the institution rather than formal labor contracts, which only specified hourly fee standards without mentioning benefits like social insurance or paid leave. Interviewee A7 mentioned: "I've worked part-time at the institution for over three years without ever paying social insurance. Even when I take sick leave, my hourly fees get deducted, making me feel my rights aren't protected." Second, lack of work resources. Respondents reported that the institution didn't provide necessary resources like the latest exam materials or exclusive teaching courseware. Some staff had to purchase exam preparation materials and print teaching resources themselves, increasing financial burdens and work costs. Interviewee A2 said: "The institution only provided a basic lecture manual. The latest exam questions and university reference books had to be found independently. Sometimes I stayed up late organizing materials, which was extremely exhausting." Third, delayed salary settlement. Interviewees have faced tuition fee arrears, particularly after postgraduate entrance exam interview coaching. Some institutions withheld or delayed payments citing reasons like failed interview results or unmet enrollment quotas, while rights protection proved challenging. Interviewee A6 lamented: "After last year's coaching, the institution deducted 30% of my fees for two failed interview candidates. When I confronted the manager, they kept dodging responsibility. The matter was left unresolved, and now I have no trust in the institution whatsoever."

3.3. Low recognition of professional value: Imbalance between rewards and growth

Professional value cognition is the core of professional identity, which directly influences the work enthusiasm and engagement of part-time staff. Research findings indicate that part-time personnel in postgraduate entrance exam preparation institutions generally exhibit low professional value cognition, primarily stemming from the dual imbalance between labor compensation and professional growth.

Regarding compensation, respondents reported lower-than-expected hourly rates and unstable income. Most institutions operate on a basic hourly rate plus enrollment commissions model, with base rates typically ranging from 80-150 yuan per session—significantly below

full-time teachers '200-300 yuan per session. Enrollment commissions are tied to student enrollments, and part-time instructors must refund commissions if students withdraw due to personal reasons, leading to significant income fluctuations. Interviewee A3 explained: "I teach an average of 20 classes monthly. With a basic rate of 120 yuan per session and commissions, I could earn up to 3,000 yuan. After deducting expenses like materials and transportation, my net income barely covers basic needs, leaving little for pocket money—far from being a professional income." Concerning professional development, respondents noted institutions provided no postgraduate exam training and limited exposure to new teaching methodologies. Postgraduate exam preparation demands high timeliness and expertise, requiring instructors to update their knowledge annually based on exam syllabus changes and trend analysis. However, most institutions only require part-time staff to follow prescribed lecture materials, offering no training in exam interpretation, innovative tutoring methods, or online interactive teaching and personalized learning plans. Interviewee A10 admitted: "I prepared for the 2022 exam myself. With many exam focuses shifting now, I want to learn new tutoring techniques, but the institution doesn't support this. I have to pay for online courses myself, feeling stuck in the past with no hope of growth." This low-return and stagnant state has led many part-time workers to view postgraduate entrance exam tutoring as a short-term money-making scheme rather than a worthwhile career, gradually eroding their enthusiasm and commitment to this profession.

3.4. Break of career development path: lack of planning and channel

Career development expectation is an important support for career identity, but part-time staff in postgraduate education institutions generally face the problem of career development path fracture, which makes it difficult for them to establish long-term career planning.

On one hand, institutions lack career guidance for part-time staff. Respondents reported never receiving career development communication from their organizations, with some even unaware of promotion opportunities in part-time roles. Interviewee A9 stated: "I worked part-time at this institution for three years with consistently high teaching evaluations, yet no one ever mentioned transitioning to full-time positions or becoming a teaching team leader. It felt like I was stuck in a rut with no future prospects." On the other hand, promotion channels are severely blocked. Management positions such as teaching supervisors, course coordinators, and graduate exam planners are exclusively reserved for full-time staff, leaving part-timers out of the loop. Even when institutions offer policies for outstanding part-time teachers to transition to full-time roles, they often set unrealistic requirements like maintaining top 10% teaching evaluations for three consecutive years or relinquishing other part-time jobs—barriers most part-timers find unattainable. Moreover, graduate exam tutoring primarily operates on short-term project systems where part-time relationships end upon project completion, lacking continuity in career development and further reinforcing perceptions of career stagnation.

4. Path of Rebuilding the Professional Identity of Part-time Staff in Postgraduate Entrance Examination Education Institutions by Social Work Intervention

4.1. Individual Level: Implement Precision Empowerment to Reconstruct Individual Professional Identity

To address common challenges faced by part-time workers, including ambiguous identity, low self-worth, and competence anxiety, social workers can provide tailored one-on-one services for targeted empowerment. Using cognitive behavioral therapy, they help clients challenge irrational beliefs like "I'm just a temporary worker" or "My work has no value." Through

problem externalization techniques, they separate issues from the individual, guiding them to recognize unstable employment conditions rather than personal shortcomings. By adopting a strengths-based approach, social workers assist clients in compiling a "Personal Teaching Strengths Handbook" that highlights successful teaching experiences, positive student feedback, and unique pedagogical skills, thereby reinforcing their professional identity. For individuals experiencing burnout or frustration due to rights violations or low social recognition, social workers should create safe, confidential emotional support spaces. Techniques like active listening, empathy, and emotional journaling help manage negative emotions, with timely psychological support being crucial during high-pressure periods like exam preparation. When dealing with cases of malicious wage withholding or compensation fraud, social workers act as resource connectors and advocates, linking clients to legal aid, providing labor arbitration guidance, and supporting rights protection efforts to restore dignity and self-efficacy. To address the lack of professional development support for part-time teachers, social workers should conduct precise training needs assessments and connect clients with key resources. For instance, collaborating with teacher-training institutions, leading educational technology firms, or graduate entrance exam industry associations can secure free or low-cost modular training modules for exam trend analysis, online teaching techniques, and student motivation incentives. Additionally, establishing an in-house part-time faculty mentorship system allows experienced full-time instructors to provide one-on-one teaching guidance. Through lesson plan coaching and classroom observation feedback, this approach effectively enhances their professional competencies and teaching confidence.

4.2. Organization Level: Construct Support Network and Adapt to Industry Cycle Characteristics

To address the fragmented and isolated status of part-time educators while strengthening their sense of community and professional identity, group-based interventions prove highly effective. Social work interventions must account for the cyclical nature of postgraduate education, providing dynamic and seasonal organizational support. First, establish flexible peer support groups. Social workers can create part-time teacher development groups, organizing themed sessions during off-peak periods like lesson plan sharing and new semester planning workshops to facilitate knowledge exchange. During peak periods such as exam preparation, online flash Q&A groups or stress-relief sessions can offer immediate support. Second, build peer support platforms. Building on group work, social workers can help establish online and offline mutual aid networks. These networks serve not only as emotional support hubs but also as repositories of practical wisdom. Members can spontaneously organize collective lesson planning, share teaching resources, and even form collective voices against unfair treatment, thereby enhancing the group's bargaining power and risk resilience. Third, implement a "professional passport" system. Social workers can advocate for and design a visualized, cumulative professional development portfolio. This system records teaching hours, training participation, research achievements, student evaluations, and certifications. Endorsed by third parties (e.g., industry associations or social work agencies), this "passport" not only serves as official recognition of professional value but also becomes "hard currency" for career mobility, significantly boosting professional fulfillment and career continuity. Fourthly, promote the establishment of flexible incentive mechanisms in institutions. Social workers can recommend that institutional managers set up special incentive bonuses during peak business periods (such as pre-exam preparation), providing immediate recognition and material rewards to outstanding part-time teachers, thereby enhancing their work engagement and organizational belongingness.

4.3. Institutional Level: Explicitly Advocating Lists to Promote Systematic Rights Protection

The institutional intervention of social workers should extend beyond individual counseling and group activities to focus on optimizing industry standards and policy environments. To achieve this, a clear short-, medium-, and long-term "policy advocacy roadmap" should be established to systematize and proactively guide interventions. Short-term goal (within 1 year): Collaborate with local education and human resources departments to jointly issue the "Guidelines for Part-time Staff in Postgraduate Entrance Exam Preparation Institutions," specifying minimum standards such as maximum class hour fee settlement cycles, basic training obligations for institutions, and rights of part-time teachers to participate in teaching research activities, thereby reducing the scope for non-compliant employment practices. Medium-term goal (2-3 years): Work with labor inspection departments, education authorities, and industry associations to establish a qualification certification system for part-time teachers in postgraduate exam preparation. This system should incorporate teaching experience, student evaluations, and training participation duration into certification criteria, standardizing and visualizing professional competencies to provide a basis for salary determination and career development. Simultaneously, promote the establishment of an industry-specific complaint and dispute mediation platform for part-time teachers, along with a third-party supervision mechanism. Long-term goal (over 5 years): Actively accumulate practical evidence and research findings, collaborating with legal experts and labor protection departments to advocate for revisions to the national "Labor Contract Law" or the issuance of relevant judicial interpretations. These efforts should include adding provisions for flexible employment in education and specialized clauses to fundamentally address long-standing institutional challenges such as social insurance contributions (particularly proportional contributions for work-related injury and unemployment insurance), labor dispute resolution, and occupational injury recognition for part-time teachers.

5. Conclusion

This study focuses on part-time workers—a large yet often marginalized group in the booming postgraduate education industry—probing their occupational identity dilemmas, causes, and social work intervention pathways. Using occupational identity theory and organizational identity theory as analytical frameworks, combined with in-depth interviews and questionnaires, the research reveals a four-dimensional dilemma: identity confusion, weak organizational belonging, low career value perception, and career path fragmentation. These intertwined challenges reinforce each other, deeply embedding temporary workers' professional labels into their psychological and practical experiences, hindering the establishment of stable, positive educator identities. Theoretical contributions include expanding social work applications from traditional manufacturing and service sectors to emerging knowledge-intensive education, validating the effectiveness of occupational and organizational identity theories in explaining psychological states among flexible employment groups. Practically, proposed interventions provide actionable solutions for educational institutions to optimize human resource management and enhance faculty stability, while indirectly safeguarding the learning rights and experiences of postgraduate candidates.

Looking ahead, rebuilding professional identity among part-time staff in postgraduate education institutions remains a systemic endeavor requiring sustained collaboration across multiple stakeholders. Future research should focus on three key areas: First, conducting rigorous implementation evaluations of intervention models through action research to refine strategies. Second, exploring digital tools for social work interventions, such as leveraging big data analytics to track part-time teacher mobility trends or establishing nationwide support

platforms. Third, fostering a quadrilateral alliance among government, industry, institutions, and universities to better integrate social work interventions with educational policies, labor protections, and talent development initiatives, collectively advancing a fairer, healthier, and more sustainable educational ecosystem.

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