Original article

Academic talent mobility in the building of an international education hub: A case study of retention and attrition in the digital transformation of a Hong Kong university

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Abstract:
This study investigates the mechanisms underlying faculty mobility during liberal arts university reforms, using L University in Hong Kong, China as a case study within the push–pull theoretical framework. Based on interviews with 24 faculty members who joined or departed during the period of digital transformation, the study examines patterns of academic turnover amid institutional change. The findings show that faculty departures are predominantly driven by "push" factors, particularly inadequate administrative support, excessive workloads, and perceived compensation inequities. In contrast, recruitment is largely shaped by "pull" factors, including access to resources, opportunities for collaboration, and supportive working environments. The results further identify a threshold effect of compensation equity, accompanied by marked disciplinary cultural differences: faculty in the humanities and social sciences place greater emphasis on academic autonomy and disciplinary identity, whereas data science faculty prioritize infrastructural capacity and innovation support. Additionally, digital transformation has amplified latent value tensions and cultural negotiations across disciplines. Accordingly, universities should implement differentiated talent management strategies, enhance discipline-specific support systems, and foster institutional ecosystems that balance resource equity with cultural inclusivity to sustain faculty stability and strengthen organizational attractiveness during reform processes.

1. Introduction

With the accelerating internationalization of higher education, academic mobility has become a critical factor shaping universities' organizational capacity and educational quality. The stability, circulation, and structural composition of faculty not only sustain the academic community but also influence whether teaching reforms can generate replicable institutional practices and sustainable innovation mechanisms. As the only city hosting five universities ranked among the global top 100, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) is actively positioning itself as an international higher education hub and a global center for high-level academic talent. To this end, the Education Bureau has established a dedicated task force to strengthen international outreach and attract overseas scholars and students (The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, 2024). Within this policy context, L University, grounded in a strong humanistic tradition, seeks to enhance its competitiveness through interdisciplinary research and curriculum restructuring as part of its digital humanities reform agenda. However, the institution simultaneously confronts challenges related to faculty turnover and enrollment pressures. Against this backdrop, examining the motivational structures, decision-making processes, and institutional triggers underlying faculty inflows and outflows during the transition period offers critical insights into the organizational costs of reform and provides empirical evidence to inform talent governance and reform implementation in higher education.

Differences in education governance structures and pro-

fessional systems between mainland China and Hong Kong, China shape faculty risk perceptions and mobility tendencies through policy expectations, resource allocation mechanisms, and career mobility frameworks. Ongoing education reforms in mainland China, including workload reduction initiatives, teacher rotation systems, and evolving patterns of resource distribution, have reconfigured teachers' workloads, professional identities, and career development pathways, thereby influencing their mobility intentions and career decisions (Gupta & Zhao, 2023; Wu, 2020). In Hong Kong, where Chinese and Western institutional traditions intersect, faculty mobility is likewise affected by centralized governance arrangements, shifting socio-political contexts, and identity-related tensions (Kikuchi, 2022; Wong & Wong, 2022). These contrasting institutional environments and organizational cultures offer a comparative lens for understanding faculty mobility at L University. They also underscore the importance of situating individual decision-making processes within specific reform contexts to examine the dynamic interactions between organizational systems and academic career trajectories.

This study seeks to examine the factors driving faculty turnover at L University in Hong Kong within the context of higher education reform, as well as to explore how universities respond to and manage the impacts of academic mobility during periods of institutional transformation.

Building on the above research context, this study adopts a qualitative research design and conducts semi-structured interviews with 24 faculty members who joined or departed from L University during the period of educational reform. The interviews systematically capture participants' mobility experiences, motivational structures, critical triggering events, and institutional recommendations. Through coding and thematic analysis, the study identifies key push and pull factors, with particular attention to dimensions such as administrative support, workload, resource allocation, collaborative opportunities, and the working environment in shaping mobility decisions. Furthermore, the analysis compares disciplinary variations in resignation motivations and institutional perceptions across different academic units, thereby elucidating how disciplinary culture, organizational climate, and institutional arrangements influence faculty professional behavior.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 The interplay between higher education reform and academic mobility

Higher education reform and academic mobility are interactively linked, playing a critical role in fostering innovation capacity and supplying talent to the global knowledge economy. The examination of personnel mobility within reform processes has therefore emerged as a central research theme, as academic movement directly influences institutional quality and organizational stability in higher education (Yin et al., 2024; Yang, 2023). Cross-national evidence demonstrates that education reforms frequently reshape academic labor markets through policy instruments and resource reallocation, thereby triggering or intensifying mobility flows. For instance, Japan's Top Global Universities Project (Huang, 2018) and

Germany's Excellence Initiative (Bloch et al., 2017) have enhanced institutional attractiveness to international scholars through strategic investment and resource restructuring. Similarly, the Bologna Process in Europe (Musselin, 2004) has lowered structural barriers to inter-institutional mobility and facilitated cross-border academic movement through regulatory harmonization. Collectively, these experiences suggest that internationalization-oriented reforms transform the opportunity structures governing academic mobility, while mobility patterns, in turn, shape reform outcomes and the broader organizational ecology of higher education.

Among various forms of academic mobility, faculty movement should be examined within the broader context of policy transformation and the restructuring of professional systems. Menter & Flores (2021) argue that neoliberal and globalizing forces are reshaping teacher education, underscoring the growing importance of continuous professional development in sustaining teacher competence and instructional effectiveness. The expansion of international and domestic continuing professional development (CPD) markets, as observed in Sweden and other countries, illustrates how policy frameworks and market mechanisms shape teachers' professional capital, learning opportunities, and career expectations, thereby influencing mobility and retention decisions (Langelotz & Beach, 2024). At the international level, the OECD has emphasized improving teacher quality across multiple education systems, while reform initiatives in Nordic and East Asian countries reflect a convergence of policy visions aimed at professionalizing teaching careers. However, when coherent policy design across the teacher career lifecycle is lacking, stability in teacher retention and mobility patterns may be undermined (Woo et al., 2023). Furthermore, Williams et al. (2022) highlight that inadequate working conditions—such as low compensation, limited job security, restricted career advancement opportunities, and weak incentive structures—significantly intensify teachers' turnover intentions and contribute to persistent workforce instability.

2.2 A comparative lens on teacher mobility in the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong

Significant differences in institutional arrangements, governance logics, and socio-cultural contexts between mainland China and Hong Kong, China generate distinct push and pull mechanisms through which universities attract and retain academic talent. In mainland China, education policy instruments reshape workload intensity and employment stability, which are subsequently translated into mobility pressures through the interconnected dynamics of labor processes, career return structures, and professional expectations. For example, the "Double Reduction" policy introduced in 2021 altered teachers' time allocation and task composition by reducing formal instructional hours while expanding after-school service responsibilities. The resulting increase in workload has elevated occupational stress costs, prompting some educators to view lower-pressure positions or alternative institutions as more viable career options (Gupta & Zhao, 2023). Similarly, teacher rotation initiatives designed to equalize staffing distribution

may, in practice, generate implementation tensions, weakened incentive structures, and reduced job stability. When organizational commitment and perceived career security are undermined, teachers are more likely to seek employment environments offering greater certainty and predictability (Wu, 2020). Moreover, disparities in professional learning opportunities between public and private institutions influence the pace and expected returns of human capital accumulation. When public school teachers encounter greater constraints in accessing professional development resources, external labor markets are more readily evaluated as offering superior career prospects (Poole & Li, 2023).

Hong Kong universities have long served as major hubs for global academic talent due to their high levels of internationalization, substantial institutional autonomy, and strong traditions of academic freedom. This attractiveness is reinforced by supportive institutional arrangements governing research activities and academic career development. However, within increasingly complex socio-political contexts, identity tensions can shape faculty members' interpretations of reform agendas, thereby influencing their organizational identification and willingness to engage in institutional change (Wong & Wong, 2022). The broader social and political environment further mediates career decision-making through mechanisms such as sense of belonging, perceived occupational security, and value alignment, leading faculty to adopt more risk-sensitive evaluations when deciding whether to remain or exit (Wang & Yang, 2023). During reform implementation, tensions between professional autonomy and governance structures become particularly salient. As schools adopt more centralized governance and hierarchical organizational structures, teachers experience reduced autonomy in pedagogical practice, which constrains their professional judgment and contributes significantly to turnover intentions (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

2.3 The push-pull framework: Explaining academic mobility in institutional transitions

Academic talent mobility represents a critical phenomenon in the functioning of the global higher education system, with its underlying mechanisms reflecting the interaction and overlap of institutional environments, organizational conditions, and individual decision-making. This study adopts the push–pull theory as its central analytical framework to examine the drivers and causal pathways of faculty mobility at L University in the context of educational reform. Originally proposed by Lee (1966) in the study of population migration, the theory posits that migration decisions are shaped by the combined effects of "push" factors at the place of origin and "pull" factors at the destination, while being moderated by individual characteristics and intervening barriers (p. 47). Applied to higher education, this framework enables the translation of organizational constraints and opportunities into categorizable motivational structures, providing a systematic and comparable analytical lens for understanding academic career choices.

In the globalized academic labor market, "push" factors typically denote the pressures that drive scholars to leave their current institutions, including inadequate allocation of research resources, restricted academic autonomy, limited promotion opportunities, and diminished career development expectations. Conversely, "pull" factors refer to the attractive mechanisms of the destination institution, encompassing research support, institutional reputation, competitive remuneration, and quality of the living environment (Altbach, 2004). Within this framework, faculty mobility can be conceptualized as a response to changes in the relative structure of returns and risks: when constraints at the home institution accumulate and undermine expected benefits, while external opportunities significantly enhance potential returns, the propensity to move is more likely to be activated and translated into actual mobility behavior.

Academic mobility should not be viewed as a linear, one-way process of "leaving and entering," but rather understood within the broader context of labor market dynamics and occupational stratification. As Bauder (2015) highlights, institutional barriers, professional network structures, and the valuation of human capital influence scholars' transferability and access to opportunities, thereby shaping both mobility pathways and destination distributions. Crucially, macro-level education reforms and policy adjustments alter the internal ecology of universities by restructuring governance models, resource allocation mechanisms, and evaluation criteria, generating new push and pull forces. Reform instruments such as the Research Assessment Exercise and Excellence Initiatives often reshape the risk–return structures of academic labor through performance indicators, competitive resource distribution, and organizational restructuring, thereby reinforcing internal incentives and constraints and intensifying the institutional pressures that inform faculty decisions to stay or leave (Chen & Barnett, 2000).

At an extended level of the push–pull framework, Cai & Hall (2016) further highlight the multidimensional drivers of academic mobility. Pull factors are oriented toward professional development and self-actualization, encompassing opportunities for international experience, alignment with research interests, cross-cultural engagement, growth through challenging work, and intrinsic motivations such as curiosity, autonomy, and creativity. Correspondingly, push factors, beyond structural constraints, also include life and psychological pressures, such as family responsibilities, labor market disparities, and job-related fatigue. This extension balances structural determinants with individual meaning-making, offering a more nuanced theoretical foundation for analyzing, classifying, and comparing the mechanisms underlying faculty mobility at L University in the context of educational reform.

Luczaj (2021) demonstrates that the mobility of international scholars is shaped by multiple factors, with push forces arising from domestic economic decline, corruption, and political instability, and pull forces stemming from academic resources and favorable working conditions in host countries. In the context of L University, push forces are primarily reflected in heightened workload and an uncertain institutional environment during the reform process, whereas pull forces are manifested in academic freedom, opportunities for interdisci-

plinary development, and the appeal of international teaching platforms.

This study employs the push–pull theory as its analytical framework to examine the internal and external drivers of faculty mobility at L University in the context of educational reform, and to analyze the interactions between these forces at multiple levels. The framework provides a robust theoretical basis for understanding intra-organizational mobility while highlighting the tensions between institutional change and individual decision-making during reform processes. Through this lens, the study explores the complex mechanisms underlying faculty mobility decisions and illuminates the significant impact of educational reform on career choices and organizational restructuring.

3. Methodology and data collection

This paper investigates the full decision-making process of faculty retention and departure at L University following the transition to digital liberal arts education. The insights gained can inform university administrators in Hong Kong and other organizations facing similar organizational and change challenges, enabling the development of more effective strategies for talent retention. The study also examines the factors influencing retention and exit decisions across different academic disciplines. The findings provide valuable guidance for policymakers in higher education reform, supporting the design of more targeted and effective talent development policies.

This study employs a qualitative research design to closely examine the decision-making processes and influencing factors for faculty retention and turnover at L University in Hong Kong during its reform and transformation. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 24 faculty members who either joined or left the university during this period. The primary aim of these interviews was to investigate whether faculty decisions to join or depart were primarily influenced by the university's reform initiatives, and to uncover the specific underlying motivations behind these choices. Accordingly, the study provides an in-depth exploration of the mechanisms and factors shaping faculty members' decisions in the context of institutional change.

3.1 Research design and case background

This study focuses on L University in Hong Kong as a key case. Renowned for its high-quality liberal arts education, the university emphasizes small-scale teaching and fosters close teacher–student relationships and interactive learning environments, ensuring that students receive personalized educational experiences. This educational philosophy has long underpinned L University's notable achievements in liberal arts and undergraduate education. In response to evolving societal and educational demands, however, liberal arts education at L University has undergone significant institutional restructuring (Baker & Baldwin, 2015). Curriculum redesign, the incorporation of academic and career orientation, and the integration of technology and extracurricular teaching methods aim to enhance the overall learning experience while responding

effectively to pressures from global educational competition (Freeland, 2009). These reforms not only reflect a renewal of educational philosophy but also highlight the structural adjustments undertaken by L University to strengthen its position in the international higher education landscape.

The transformation of liberal arts education at L University has also introduced potential challenges for faculty mobility. Prior to 2016, the university's emphasis on humanities and undergraduate education resulted in relatively low research performance and rankings, which in turn intensified enrollment pressures from Asian parents and students (Jung et al., 2016). In response, L University initiated a strategic shift toward becoming a research-oriented institution while reinforcing its core commitment to liberal arts education. This transformation has diversified academic responsibilities but has also required faculty to navigate new balances between teaching and research, thereby increasing workload and professional demands.

Since 2016, L University in Hong Kong has pursued strategic transformation toward a research-oriented liberal arts institution, exemplified by the expansion of its graduate school and the strengthening of graduate education. In 2022, the university further advanced its digital and artificial intelligence initiatives, integrating AI and data science into the curriculum. This transformation reflects innovation in teaching practices and aims to cultivate faculty as leaders in innovative pedagogy. While these changes provide new development opportunities, they have also increased competitive pressures and workload demands for faculty members.

According to the University Statistics Handbook, the total number of employees at L University increased from 972 in 2023 to 1,146 in 2024. Notably, the proportion of overseas faculty particularly those with doctoral degrees and international study backgrounds has declined (Lingnan University, 2023, 2024). This trend highlights underlying challenges faced by L University during its educational transformation, especially in attracting and retaining high-caliber international scholars. This study focuses on this transformation period, aiming to uncover the decision-making processes of faculty navigating multiple pressures, including institutional reforms, disciplinary integration, and personal career development.

3.2 Participants and sampling strategy

This study employed a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to ensure the sample captured diverse perspectives and reflected the core research questions. All participants were full-time teaching and research staff at L University in Hong Kong who had either joined or left the institution during the transition period (2018–2023). The final sample comprises 24 faculty members, balanced across colleges and mobility status: 12 from the Graduate School and 12 from the Data Science School; within each college, 6 were newly hired during the transition, and 6 departed within the same period. Efforts were made to include a range of academic ranks (professor, associate professor, assistant professor) and research fields within each subgroup to obtain rich and diverse narratives. Detailed background information for the participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Social demographic background information of the research sample.

Number	Gender	Status (Hired/Laid off)	Department
A01-A06	Evenly distributed	Hired	Graduate School
A07-A12	Evenly distributed	Hired	Data Science College
B01-B06	Evenly distributed	Laid off	Graduate School
B07-B12	Evenly distributed	Laid off	Data Science College

*Note: To protect the anonymity of the participants, only the range of job titles is shown here. During the actual sampling process, diversity in terms of job title, age and gender was taken into account.

3.3 Data collection process

Data were primarily collected through semi-structured interviews conducted either in person or online. The interview guide was developed based on the push–pull theory framework, with core questions including:

(1) During the transition period, what were the primary push or pull factors influencing your decision to leave or join L University in Hong Kong?

(2) Among these factors, which was the most influential, and to which category did it belong?

(3) From your perspective as a faculty member, what specific recommendations would you make for the university's transformation and reform?

Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. With participants' informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. This study received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of L University in Hong Kong. All participants signed informed consent forms, and their personal information and interview data are kept strictly confidential. All materials will be securely destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

3.4 Data analysis methods

All 24 interview transcripts were imported into NVivo 12 for systematic analysis. The study employed reflexive thematic analysis, following these steps:

First, the researchers repeatedly read all transcripts and conducted open coding to generate initial codes. Guided by the push–pull theory framework, these codes were then summarized, compared, and clustered into more abstract themes (i.e., sub-nodes), such as "insufficient administrative support" and "cooperative opportunities." The first researcher performed the initial coding, with regular discussions held with co-researchers to clarify coding definitions and boundaries. Through dialogue and consensus, the reliability and depth of the analysis were enhanced.

Next, the preliminary theme sets were cross-checked against the full dataset to ensure they accurately reflected the data. Redundant themes were merged, and overly broad themes were subdivided. This process resulted in a coherent, internally consistent, and clearly distinguishable theme structure. Ultimately, four main parent nodes—pushing factors, pulling factors, most influential factors, and suggestions—and 15 child nodes were established (Table 2).

Using NVivo's matrix coding query and comparison functions, the study systematically examined the manifestation patterns of different groups (new hires vs. resignations; Graduate School vs. Data Science School) across each theme. Representative quotations were selected to illustrate complex relationships and underlying logics, enabling the construction of a rich, data-driven explanatory narrative.

4. Result analysis and research findings

4.1 Topic coding and node distribution

Through systematic coding and thematic analysis of the interview data from 24 participants, this study generated a thematic structure comprising four parent nodes and 15 child nodes. All interview content was incorporated into the analysis until no new themes emerged, indicating that thematic saturation had been achieved. The frequency distribution of nodes is presented in Table 2, reflecting the prevalence of each theme within the dataset and providing a basis for subsequent inter-group comparisons. Importantly, the core of qualitative analysis lies in interpreting the narratives, tensions, and meanings underlying these themes, rather than in their statistical representativeness.

4.2 Comparative analysis of group differences in pulling and pushing factors

Comparative analysis using matrix coding and narrative methods revealed fundamental differences in the decision-making narratives between newly hired teachers (Group A) and departing teachers (Group B).

The narratives of departing faculty are marked by frustration and a sense of alienation driven by push factors. Among these, "insufficient administrative support" emerges as the most detrimental theme. For example, Teacher B02 (Graduate School) described: "The reform blueprint was grand, but when it came to implementation, the administrative system simply couldn't keep up. A simple problem-solving process could be delayed for several months, and this invisible waste simply couldn't meet the demands." Similarly, "increased workload and lack of recognition" represents another core push factor. Teacher B09 (Data Science School) noted: "Apart from teaching and research, we were required to undertake a large amount of 'invisible work', but these had very low weights in the performance evaluation, feeling like running a marathon without an end."

In contrast, the narratives of newly hired faculty are dominated by the opportunities and potential associated with pull factors. "Interdisciplinary collaboration opportunities" and "strategic resource investment" were cited as the most attractive elements. Teacher A05 (Data Science School) stated: "What attracts me is that the school clearly regards the intersection of data science and humanities and social sciences

Table 2. Node encoding frequency statistic.

Parent node	Child node	Coding Frequency	Number of Respondents
Push factors	Lack of Admin Support	10	10
	Inadequate Compensation	6	6
	High Workload	8	8
	Unfair Resource Allocation	6	6
	Cultural Misfit	4	4
Pull Factor	Abundant Resources	8	8
	Collaboration Opportunities	10	10
	Work Environment	8	8
	Competitive Compensation	6	6
Most Influential Factor	Admin Support	6	6
	Compensation	8	8
	Resources	6	6
	Work Environment	4	4
	Cooperation Opportunities	4	4
Suggestions	Training & Development	8	8
	Communication Mechanisms	6	6
	Fair Resource Allocation	6	6
	Policy Adjustment	8	8

as a strategic priority and has provided substantial financial support and appointment mechanisms. This is not just empty talk." Teacher A11 (Graduate School) added: "The working environment here places more emphasis on the construction of an academic community rather than pure performance competition, which gives me the possibility to conduct long-term and in-depth research."

4.3 Analysis of the most influential factors

A detailed analysis of individual faculty decision-making revealed that, despite the interplay of multiple factors, there is typically a single "balancing factor" that plays a decisive role in the decision. Cross-group analysis (Table 3) indicates that the nature of this balancing factor systematically differs between faculty who remained and those who departed.

For departing faculty, the most influential factors are primarily "insufficient administrative support" and "unequal compensation." This suggests that when fundamental conditions for basic job effectiveness and fairness are persistently lacking, they outweigh other positive factors and ultimately drive the decision to leave.

In contrast, for newly hired faculty, "resources and platform support" and "opportunities for collaboration and career development" play a more decisive role. This indicates that once basic salary expectations are met, scholars' decision-making tends to prioritize conditions that maximize long-term academic capital and career growth potential.

Table 3. Node encoding frequency statistic.

Factor	Resign Group (n=12)	Hire Group (n=12)
Lack of Admin Support	6	0
Compensation	4	4
Resources	2	4
Work Environment	0	2
Collaboration Opportunities	0	2

4.4 Analysis of inter-college differences

The academic culture of each discipline acts as a significant filter shaping how faculty perceive, interpret, and respond to institutional transformation. Comparison of narratives across the two colleges revealed substantial differences in these responses.

Faculty in the Graduate School (Humanities and Social Sciences) express concerns rooted in academic autonomy, cultural identity, and the preservation of disciplinary meaning. They report considerable anxiety about the potential erosion of humanistic evaluation standards under the "technological rationality" embedded in digital transformation. Teacher B04's comment exemplifies this sentiment: "When 'influence' and 'data visualization' become new hard currencies, how should

the value of our time-consuming research results be measured? I feel that the spiritual core of our discipline is being replaced by a strange language."

Faculty in the Data Science Institute focus on infrastructure competitiveness, innovation velocity, and ecological positioning. They perceive the transformation as an inevitable opportunity but are highly sensitive to the specific conditions that sustain their global competitiveness. Teacher A08 emphasized: "Our field is evolving extremely rapidly, and the school's support system must also be equally agile. Continuous data resource acquisition, computing power upgrades, and talent replenishment are key factors determining whether we can remain at the forefront of academia."

4.5 Findings

Based on a multi-dimensional analysis of in-depth narratives from 24 faculty members, the core findings of this study can be synthesized into four interrelated and progressively developed explanatory themes. Together, these themes illuminate the complexity of faculty mobility decisions within the context of digital transformation.

4.5.1 The critical role of administrative support in stability and destabilization during reform

This study found that "insufficient administrative support" was the most frequently coded core issue among departing faculty and was identified as the most influential factor (Tables 2 and 3). This is not an isolated complaint; rather, it reflects the systemic vulnerabilities faculty face during structural reforms. Interview narratives (e.g., B01, B03) suggest that the uncertainties associated with digital transformation when coupled with unclear policy interpretation, ineffective resource allocation, and insufficient emotional support significantly exacerbate faculty anxiety and insecurity. These findings align with Harrell et al. (2004), who identified "systemic stress" as a key driver of teacher attrition during reform periods. The study further highlights that in the context of higher education digital transformation, the role of administrative support should extend beyond traditional logistical functions to encompass change leadership and scaffolded support for faculty.

4.5.2 The attraction of developmental capital varies by academic discipline

Resources and opportunities for collaboration are core drivers of talent attraction, but their significance varies across disciplines. In Data Science (e.g., A04, A05), faculty prioritize "hard" capital such as advanced facilities and data, and a "horizontal" ecosystem oriented toward industry applications. In contrast, in the Humanities and Social Sciences (e.g., A01), faculty value "soft" capital such as time autonomy and academic networks, as well as "vertical" intellectual inheritance. This indicates that talent attraction policies attempting to serve all disciplines uniformly are inherently inefficient. A university's competitive advantage lies in its ability to cultivate a differentiated, highly calibrated ecosystem of resources and collaborations that meets the distinct needs of scholars across

disciplines during digital transformation.

4.5.3 The dual role and effect of compensation equity

Push (resignation) and pull (hiring) factors were frequently mentioned together in the interviews, with some respondents (e.g., B02, A02) identifying them as the most critical factor (Table 3). This aligns with Adams' (1965) classical equity theory. Data analysis revealed the nuanced role of salary in faculty decision-making. For departing faculty, when salary falls below their perceived fairness threshold, it functions as a strong push factor. For example, Teacher B02 (Graduate School) reflected: "I could accept the challenges during the transition period, but I could not accept that my income was completely disconnected from the additional workload and market value. When promises of a salary increase were repeatedly broken, the message was clear: your efforts are not valued." This illustrates that a salary below psychological expectations is interpreted as a negative organizational signal.

For newly hired faculty, a competitive salary serves as a necessary "entry ticket", but its long-term motivational effect is quickly overshadowed by development opportunities. Teacher A10 (Data Science School) noted: "The salary offered met my expectations, which was important, but ultimately what persuaded me to join was the clear plan allowing me to lead the interdisciplinary laboratory." Thus, salary fairness constitutes a fundamental decision threshold, but its symbolic meaning and perceived equity are crucial in shaping its influence on faculty mobility decisions.

4.5.4 Digital transformation intensifies deep-seated academic and cultural negotiations

Reform represents, at its core, a redistribution of power and resources across disciplines, giving rise to profound "cultural politics." This dynamic is particularly evident in the narratives of faculty in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Their concerns often extend beyond specific policies to broader conflicts within disciplinary value systems. Teacher B06 (Graduate School) articulated this tension: "When 'data-driven' and 'impact indicators' become the sole discourse, the interpretive and critical thinking approach we have long practiced seems to have overnight become synonymous with 'outdated.' I feel that the soul of our discipline the questioning of meaning itself is being marginalized by a technology-driven revolution dominated by efficiency." This narrative suggests that, for some faculty, the decision to depart arises from the perception that the academic paradigm they embody, along with its underlying values, is increasingly marginalized under the organization's new vision. Consequently, faculty mobility reflects not only individual career choices but also a microcosm of disciplinary boundary negotiation under the macro pressures of institutional transformation.

In conclusion, faculty mobility at L University in Hong Kong is far more than a simple cost–benefit calculation. It represents a complex social process shaped by the interplay of individual career considerations, disciplinary cultural logics, and organizational system efficiency within the broader context of macro-level transformation. These findings underscore that university talent strategies must move beyond a simplistic

focus on resource accumulation toward a refined, culturally sensitive ecosystem approach to governance.

5. Discussion and implications

This study examines the key factors influencing faculty mobility at L University in Hong Kong within the context of digital humanities education reform. The discussion is structured into three levels: a summary of the main findings, an analysis of their theoretical implications, and practical recommendations for L University and other similar institutions.

5.1 Key empirical patterns and findings

This study identified the specific "push" and "pull" factors influencing faculty decision-making. The primary drivers of faculty departures are insufficient institutional support and excessive workload, a situation that is likely to be exacerbated as digital transformation progresses. Conversely, the main factors attracting new faculty are abundant resources and opportunities for collaboration. A key finding is the threshold effect of fair compensation, highlighting that salary functions not only as a baseline requirement but also as a critical signal of organizational equity.

Perceived unfair remuneration can act as a powerful push factor; however, once compensation reaches an acceptable level of fairness, it functions primarily as a baseline "access threshold" rather than a primary motivator.

Moreover, significant differences exist between colleges: faculty in the Graduate School focus more on the effectiveness of administrative management and the alignment of organizational culture, whereas faculty in the School of Data Science place greater emphasis on resource utilization and the operational reliability of technical infrastructure.

5.2 Theoretical contribution and dialogue with existing literature

Our findings both support and extend the application of push-pull theory (Lee, 1966) to the context of digital transformation and reform in higher education. While the theory effectively conceptualizes mobility as a balance of positive and negative forces, our data reveal that periods of institutional change introduce unique nuances.

First, the significance of administrative support as a driving factor aligns with concerns about personnel loss due to "systemic stress" (Harrell et al., 2004). However, in the context of digital reform, insufficient support extends beyond logistical provision to include a lack of clear guidance and emotional scaffolding during changes in work practices. This reframes administrative support from a fixed resource to a dynamic element of change management.

Second, our findings on remuneration equity enrich the understanding of academic mobility through the lens of equity theory (Adams, 1965). Mobility is influenced not only by absolute compensation levels but also by individuals' perceived fairness, both internal and external. This resonates with Mamiseishvili's (2018) work on international faculty job satisfaction, while highlighting that fairness perceptions are context-dependent, particularly during organizational reforms

that alter resource allocation mechanisms.

Third, disciplinary differences in mobility motivation (Graduate School vs. Data Science School) demonstrate that push-pull factors are not universal, but are shaped by disciplinary culture and identity. This extends research on academic tribes and territories (Becher & Trowler, 2001), showing that digital transformation is not only a technological enhancement but can also constitute a cultural threat to established humanities paradigms, thus serving as a salient driving force. This perspective moves beyond traditional resource- and compensation-focused frameworks to incorporate considerations of academic identity and cultural misalignment.

Fourth, our results provide a complementary perspective on talent mobility at the macro level, as exemplified by Mok et al. (2022) in his analysis of Chinese international students' return decisions. While Mok applies push-pull theory to transnational mobility emphasizing home-country development opportunities and host-country immigration policies our study applies the same framework to internal institutional mobility during reform. Here, push and pull factors operate within the same national and institutional ecosystem, yet are reshaped by internal policies induced by digital transformation. This comparison illustrates that while the push-pull mechanism is broadly applicable, its constituent factors such as administrative inefficiency or disciplinary culture rigidity are highly context-dependent, and often more pronounced in closed-system institutional reforms than in open-system international migration.

5.3 Practical suggestions for L University in Hong Kong University and peer institutions

Based on the experiential model, we offer targeted recommendations aimed at retaining existing faculty and attracting new talent.

5.3.1 A dual-track strategy: Mitigating push factors and enhancing pull factor

The discussion on retaining existing faculty emphasizes mitigating external pressures and can be summarized in three key strategies: strengthening administrative support during reform, ensuring fair and transparent remuneration, and effectively managing the workload associated with these changes.

Higher education institutions could establish a "Professor Support Center" as a direct and comprehensive mechanism to assist faculty with project applications, financial management, and international collaborations. In particular, such centers should provide specific guidance on reform-related processes. To ensure that support measures align with academic needs during transitional periods, administrative efficiency assessments involving faculty participation should be conducted regularly (Williams et al., 2022).

Second, institutions should establish a fair and transparent compensation framework to ensure both internal equity and external competitiveness through regular and impartial evaluation. The framework should be clearly linked to research outputs, appropriately reward supervisory responsibilities, and reflect service performance. This system should be comple-

mented by a transparent annual adjustment mechanism and performance-based incentives, enabling faculty to recognize and value their contributions (Mamiseishvili & Lee, 2018).

In addition, institutions should employ effective workload management tools to address the surge in responsibilities during reform and to mitigate routine operational obstacles. Organizations must actively intervene—for example, by implementing a "task bookkeeping model" to monitor training, mentoring, and consultancy duties and establish a transparent and equitable workflow. Providing additional compensation or personnel support is essential to offset the short-term workload increases induced by reform, thereby preventing faculty burnout and reducing turnover.

With regard to attracting new faculty members, higher education institutions should focus on two key areas. Specifically, they must effectively showcase their resources and collaborative ecosystems, with particular emphasis on enhancing onboarding support and facilitating integration into the academic community.

First, during the recruitment process, institutions should actively highlight existing and planned digital infrastructure, research funding support, and interdisciplinary collaboration platforms to provide psychological reassurance and material support to faculty. Simultaneously, "research matchmaking" activities should be institutionalized to establish close connections between newly hired faculty and potential collaborators across colleges, transforming vague notions of "opportunity" into concrete and structured platforms.

Second, higher education institutions should assign experienced mentors or advisors to new faculty, particularly those at early career stages, to facilitate both academic and social integration. Incorporating the university's distinctive knowledge core—such as its liberal arts tradition—into onboarding programs can foster a sense of belonging and cultural identity among newly recruited faculty from the outset.

5.3.2 Differentiated policies for different disciplines

A one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective; resource allocation and support strategies must be tailored to the specific context of each discipline.

For graduate schools and other humanities/social science units, emphasis should be placed on enhancing administrative reliability, clearly communicating the role of digital tools in traditional research, and fostering a supportive departmental culture to alleviate cultural adaptation anxiety.

In contrast, for data science colleges and other science, technology, or digitally oriented units, the priority should be to ensure transparent and sufficient allocation of technical resources, provide high-performance computing facilities, and invest in experimental research funding to meet their core operational requirements.

5.4 Limitations and future research directions

Although this study employs a qualitative approach to explore the motivations underlying faculty mobility at L University in Hong Kong within the context of educational reform, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size is relatively small (n = 24) and drawn from a single campus, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, participants were primarily from the Graduate School and the Institute of Data Science, which may not fully represent faculty from other departments and could introduce a disciplinary bias in the results.

Although this study provides a comprehensive analysis of a specific case, its limited scope underscores the need for broader, mixed-methods research to validate and extend its findings. Future studies that incorporate additional disciplines, institutions, and longitudinal data will strengthen the theoretical understanding and practical governance of faculty mobility in the context of higher education reform. Quantitative approaches, such as multi-institutional surveys, could be employed to empirically examine the prevalence and interplay of the identified push-pull factors, including the "threshold effect" of compensation equity and the varying importance of cultural fit across disciplines.

6. Conclusion

This study employs the push-pull framework as its core theoretical lens to conduct an in-depth qualitative examination of faculty mobility during educational reform at L University in Hong Kong. Our findings indicate that decisions to stay or leave are influenced by dual anxieties: departures are primarily driven by internal push factors, whereas new hires are mainly motivated by external pull factors. Moreover, we observed significant differences in how faculty from different colleges perceive flexibility, particularly between the Graduate School and professional science/technology colleges, suggesting that each academic unit may face distinct challenges in implementing institutional policies.

These findings offer practical insights for institutional governance. Strategies to retain and attract talent should evolve from a generalized approach to a tailored, context-sensitive model. University administrators should address two key dimensions: protection and collaboration. To mitigate talent loss, emphasis should be placed on enhancing administrative efficiency and ensuring fair, transparent policies to reduce critical push factors. Simultaneously, introducing external expertise, investing in strategic management, and fostering a collaborative and open learning environment are essential to strengthen key pull factors. Given that disciplinary differences strongly shape faculty needs, curriculum design and institutional support must be customized to the specific requirements of each department.

Thus, this study not only validates the relevance of the push-pull framework in analyzing faculty mobility in higher education, but also highlights the complex interplay of environmental, organizational, and cultural factors that drive such mobility. Nevertheless, the current study is limited in scope, and the collection of large-scale quantitative data to corroborate our findings remains challenging. Future research should aim to examine the long-term effects of educational reform on teaching quality, expand the framework to include more institutions and disciplines, and develop a multidimensional understanding of academic labor mobility. Such continuous

and rigorous investigation has the potential to provide valuable guidance for universities worldwide, helping them cultivate more efficient, attractive, and sustainable talent ecosystems in the era of academic transformation.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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