

Exploring Faculty Mobility Amid Regional Economic Disparities: A Qualitative Analysis of Teacher Outflow from Guangxi's Private Universities

Abstract

Faculty mobility presents significant challenges for private universities in less developed regions, particularly in Guangxi, China. This study investigates the factors driving faculty members' decisions to leave or stay, alongside the perspectives of administrators on retention efforts. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with faculty members and administrators to uncover the economic, institutional, and personal factors influencing mobility decisions. The findings reveal that inadequate salaries, inconsistent management practices, limited professional development opportunities, delayed salary payments, and challenges in student management are key drivers of faculty outflow. These difficulties are further exacerbated by broader regional disparities, such as Guangxi's weaker economic development and insufficient institutional resources, which undermine the competitiveness of private universities. Despite these structural disadvantages, some faculty members choose to stay due to personal and family commitments, restricted career alternatives, or a belief in the potential for institutional improvement. The study also highlights specific advantages of working in Guangxi, such as the accessibility of research funding, streamlined professional title evaluations, and the appeal of the region's natural beauty and relaxed lifestyle, which can contribute to faculty retention. By applying Push-Pull Theory and Person-Environment Fit Theory as analytical frameworks, this study sheds light on the complex interplay of factors influencing faculty mobility and retention in less developed regions, offering a deeper understanding of these dynamics. Practical recommendations include addressing core institutional weaknesses, such as improving salaries and management practices, while capitalizing on regional strengths to attract and retain talent. The study concludes with implications for future research, calling for comparative and longitudinal studies to further examine faculty mobility and retention strategies in disadvantaged regions, contributing to the global discourse on equity and sustainable development in higher education.

Keywords: Faculty mobility; Private universities; Regional disparities; Higher education development; Faculty retention strategies

Introduction

Faculty mobility is a critical issue in higher education systems worldwide, particularly in regions with significant economic disparities. Economically developed regions often attract faculty from less developed areas, leading to a concentration of talent in wealthier regions and exacerbating inequalities in educational resources (Wu, 2010). This phenomenon is not unique to any one country but is observed globally, such as the migration of educators from rural to urban areas or from developing to developed countries. Faculty migration has profound implications for education quality, research capacity, and regional development. It often deprives less developed areas of skilled educators, exacerbating regional disparities, while simultaneously enhancing the academic and economic advantages of more developed regions (Wu & Donald, 2007; Song, 2012; Adeoti & Olufunke, 2015;

Weerasinghe & Wickramasinghe, 2024). Understanding the drivers of faculty mobility is therefore crucial for mitigating its negative effects and ensuring equitable access to quality education across regions.

In China, regional economic imbalances have created a stark divide between developed and less developed areas, leading to widespread faculty outflow from economically disadvantaged regions to more prosperous ones. Guangxi, an economically less developed province in China, provides a compelling case for examining this phenomenon. Faculty outflow from Guangxi's private universities has become a pressing issue, negatively impacting teaching quality, research output, and the overall development of the local higher education system (Zhou & Zhang, 2020). This outflow further deepens the regional disparities in educational resources, as less developed areas struggle to retain skilled educators while wealthier regions benefit from an influx of talent. Research indicates that rural and economically disadvantaged areas struggle to retain teachers due to low salaries, heavy workloads, limited professional development, and inadequate support (Xu & Shen, 2001; Zhang et al., 2017). These challenges are particularly acute in private universities, which often lack the financial resources and institutional stability of public universities, making it even harder to attract and retain faculty.

While existing studies have explored various aspects of teacher mobility and retention in rural and disadvantaged regions, there is a lack of systematic research on faculty mobility in higher education, particularly in private universities in less developed regions like Guangxi. Although some studies have touched on this area, much of the current literature focuses on primary and secondary education (Li & Chen, 2021; Wang et al., 2016). For instance, research has highlighted the importance of economic factors, such as low salaries and limited opportunities for career advancement, in driving teacher turnover in rural schools. However, these studies often overlook the unique challenges faced by faculty in higher education, particularly in private universities, which operate under different economic and institutional constraints. Faculty in private universities often face additional pressures, such as reliance on tuition-based funding, limited access to research grants, and less job security compared to their counterparts in public institutions. These factors create a distinct set of challenges that warrant further investigation.

Additionally, while studies have identified economic and institutional factors as key drivers of faculty mobility, there is limited qualitative research that examines the lived experiences and perceptions of faculty members themselves. For example, research by Zhu and Liu (2019) highlights the importance of personal-environment matching in influencing teachers' mobility decisions, but more detailed insights into how faculty perceive and navigate the economic and institutional disparities between their current and potential workplaces are needed. Faculty decisions to leave less developed regions are often influenced not only by external factors, such as salaries and institutional resources, but also by internal perceptions of professional growth, work-life balance, and the overall quality of life in their current and destination regions. Exploring these lived experiences can provide a more nuanced understanding of the factors driving faculty mobility and inform targeted strategies to address them.

Furthermore, studies such as Zhou (2007) and Zhong (2007) have emphasized the structural challenges in retaining educators in rural and less developed areas, yet they do not fully address the specific dynamics within private universities. Private universities in less developed regions often face unique

challenges, such as limited funding, lack of government support, and competition with public institutions for talented faculty. These challenges are compounded by broader regional disparities, which create a cycle of disadvantage for private universities in less developed areas. Faculty outflow from these institutions not only undermines their ability to provide quality education but also perpetuates regional inequalities in higher education, as students in less developed regions are left with fewer opportunities to access high-quality teaching and research.

Moreover, while some research exists in this area, it lacks a systematic approach to understanding the factors driving faculty mobility in private universities in less developed regions. Existing studies often focus on isolated factors or specific cases, resulting in a lack of comprehensive frameworks or models that capture the complex interplay of economic, institutional, and personal factors influencing faculty decisions. This underscores the pressing need for updated and systematic research to effectively address the current challenges and opportunities in faculty retention, particularly within rapidly developing and increasingly complex higher education systems worldwide. For example, the rapid advancement of online education has profoundly reshaped the higher education landscape, increasing reliance on digital teaching platforms, altering faculty workloads, and shifting institutional priorities. These developments may have further impacted faculty mobility patterns, underscoring the importance of examining the evolving drivers of faculty outflow in a more holistic and nuanced manner.

To address these gaps, this study aims to explore the drivers of faculty outflow from Guangxi's private universities through a qualitative lens. Specifically, the study seeks to achieve the following objectives: (1) to explore the lived experiences of faculty members leaving Guangxi's private universities, (2) to identify the key drivers of faculty outflow in the context of regional economic disparities, and (3) to understand how faculty members perceive the differences between less developed regions and their destination institutions. By focusing on the lived experiences and perceptions of faculty members, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the economic, institutional, and personal factors that influence their mobility decisions. The study also aims to uncover how faculty members' outflow experiences reflect broader patterns of regional inequality in higher education, offering insights into the systemic challenges faced by less developed regions in retaining academic talent.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

What are the primary factors influencing faculty members' decisions to leave Guangxi's private universities?

How do faculty members perceive the economic and institutional differences between less developed regions and their destinations?

How do faculty members' outflow experiences reflect broader patterns of regional inequality in higher education?

These research questions are designed to capture the complex interplay of factors influencing faculty mobility, from economic and institutional drivers to personal perceptions and lived experiences. By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute to the global literature on faculty mobility, regional disparities, and higher education development, while offering practical insights for policymakers and university administrators seeking to address the challenges of faculty retention in less developed regions.

This research is particularly significant because it focuses on a region and institutional context that has received limited attention in the existing literature. While faculty mobility is a global issue, its drivers and consequences are shaped by local economic, institutional, and cultural factors, making it important to examine specific cases such as Guangxi's private universities. By providing a detailed and systematic analysis of faculty mobility in this context, the study seeks to fill a critical gap in the literature and inform strategies to mitigate faculty outflow, improve educational equity, and support the sustainable development of higher education in disadvantaged areas. Understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for addressing the challenges faced by Guangxi's private universities but also for advancing broader efforts to reduce regional inequalities in higher education and promote inclusive development.

Literature review

Faculty mobility has been extensively studied within the field of education, particularly in the context of challenges faced by rural and economically disadvantaged regions. However, while much of the existing research has focused on teacher mobility in primary and secondary education, there has been comparatively limited exploration of faculty mobility in higher education. This literature review synthesizes key studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors driving teacher mobility, the challenges associated with teacher retention, and the broader implications for regional inequalities in education (as summarized in Table 1).

Economic and institutional factors are consistently identified as critical drivers of teacher mobility. Studies highlight "push" factors such as low salaries, poor working conditions, heavy workloads, and limited career development opportunities in rural or less developed areas (Xu, 2010; Zhang et al., 2017). These factors create significant challenges for retaining teachers in disadvantaged regions. Conversely, "pull" factors in urban or developed regions, such as higher salaries, better benefits, and institutional support, attract teachers away from rural areas (Zhou & Zhang, 2020). These findings align with the push-pull theory, which explains migration decisions as a balance between negative factors in the origin region and positive factors in the destination region.

Retaining teachers in rural and economically disadvantaged areas remains a persistent challenge. Studies such as Wang and Li (2017) and Zhu and Liu (2019) emphasize that heavy workloads, inadequate institutional support, and limited opportunities for professional development are key contributors to teacher turnover. For example, Zhu and Liu (2019) apply the personal-environment matching theory to explore how mismatches between teachers' expectations and their work environments lead to turnover intentions. These challenges are particularly acute in rural areas, where the lack of resources and support further exacerbates educational inequalities.

Teacher mobility has significant implications for regional disparities in educational resources. Research by Wu and Donald (2007) and Song (2012) demonstrates how teacher migration deepens inequalities in access to quality education, particularly in rural areas. Wu (2010) further explores how economic transitions and school expansions in China have influenced educational inequality, showing that less developed regions are often left behind in terms of access to skilled educators. These findings highlight the critical role of teacher retention in addressing regional disparities in education.

A notable limitation of the existing literature is its predominant focus on teacher mobility in primary and secondary education. Studies such as Wang et al. (2016) and Zhou (2007) examine rural teacher retention in basic education but fail to address the unique challenges faced by faculty in higher education. This gap leaves critical questions unanswered, particularly regarding faculty mobility in private universities. Although some studies touch on faculty mobility in higher education, they often lack a systematic approach. For instance, Zhou and Zhang (2020) analyzed rural teacher retention using game theory but did not extend their analysis to private universities located in economically disadvantaged areas. Similarly, Zhong (2007) examines employment challenges for graduates but does not focus on faculty mobility. Li and Chen (2021) conducted a qualitative analysis identifying challenges in the professional development of teachers in economically disadvantaged regions, but their study was limited to primary and secondary education, with little attention to higher education. This lack of systematic research underscores the need for a deeper exploration of the drivers of faculty mobility in higher education, particularly in less developed regions like Guangxi.

Private universities face distinct challenges that differentiate them from public institutions. These include a heavy reliance on tuition-based funding, limited government support, and fierce competition with public universities for talented faculty. Despite their significance, these factors are often overlooked in existing research, which predominantly focuses on public institutions or rural primary and secondary schools. The unique pressures faced by private universities, particularly those in economically disadvantaged regions, remain underexplored. This oversight highlights the need for targeted studies that examine the specific dynamics of faculty mobility in private universities. Such research could shed light on the economic, institutional, and social factors influencing their ability to attract and retain academic talent. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding how private universities can contribute to reducing regional inequalities in higher education and improving access to quality education in disadvantaged areas.

Table 1: Summary of Literature Review

Authors and Year	Research Methods	Results	Research Gaps
Zhou (2007)	Case study	Analyzed rural teacher teams in Western China.	Focused on rural primary education; no attention to private universities or higher education faculty.
Zhong (2007)	Policy analysis	Examined employment challenges for graduates.	Did not focus on faculty mobility or its drivers in higher education.
Wu & Donald	Sociological analysis	Explored inequality under the Hukou system.	Did not address faculty mobility or its

Authors and Year	Research Methods	Results	Research Gaps
(2007)			implications for higher education.
Wu (2010)	Quantitative analysis	Examined educational inequality during China's economic transition.	Did not focus on faculty mobility or its impact on higher education.
Xu (2010)	Qualitative analysis	Highlighted heavy workloads as a factor in teacher dissatisfaction.	Focused on general teacher workload; no specific focus on higher education faculty.
Song (2012)	Quantitative analysis	Highlighted the role of education in poverty reduction in China.	Did not address faculty mobility or its impact on higher education.
Wang et al. (2016)	Case study	Explored targeted poverty alleviation through education.	Focused on rural primary education; no focus on faculty in higher education.
Wang & Li (2017)	Survey and statistical analysis	Analyzed teacher turnover and turnover intentions in economically disadvantaged areas of Yunnan Province.	Limited to primary and secondary education; no focus on private universities or higher education.
Zhang et al. (2017)	Empirical study	Identified hidden reasons for rural young teacher turnover.	Focused on rural high schools; no analysis of faculty in higher education.
Zhu & Liu (2019)	Analytical perspective based on personal-environment matching theory	Explored rural young teachers' willingness to stay.	Focused on primary and secondary education; limited attention to faculty in higher education.
Zhou &	Game theory analysis	Proposed strategies for	Did not address

Authors and Year	Research Methods	Results	Research Gaps
Zhang (2020)		retaining teachers in economically disadvantaged areas.	private universities or faculty mobility in higher education.
Li & Chen (2021)	Qualitative analysis	Identified challenges in the professional development of teachers in economically disadvantaged regions.	Focused on primary and secondary education; limited attention to higher education.

While many studies provide quantitative insights into teacher mobility, there is a lack of qualitative research that examines the lived experiences and perceptions of faculty members. Such qualitative insights are critical for understanding the nuanced factors driving mobility decisions, particularly in the context of regional disparities and institutional challenges. Quantitative data alone cannot capture the complex interplay of economic, institutional, and personal factors that influence faculty decisions to leave or remain in a particular institution or region.

This study aims to address these research gaps by exploring the drivers of faculty outflow from Guangxi's private universities through a qualitative lens. By focusing on the lived experiences and perceptions of faculty members, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the economic, institutional, and personal factors influencing their mobility decisions. The findings will contribute to the global literature on faculty mobility, regional disparities, and higher education development, while offering practical insights for policymakers and university administrators. By addressing the unique challenges faced by private universities in economically disadvantaged regions, this research will help inform strategies to improve faculty retention and reduce regional inequalities in higher education.

Methodology

This study investigates the factors driving faculty outflow from Guangxi's private universities by detailing the research design, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, participants' demographics, and ethical considerations. A qualitative approach was adopted to provide an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of faculty members and administrators, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the research questions.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, which is particularly suited to exploring complex social phenomena that require an in-depth understanding of individual experiences and perceptions (Creswell, 2013). By focusing on the lived experiences of participants, this approach allows for a rich, human-centered exploration of the interplay between economic, institutional, and personal factors influencing faculty decisions. The qualitative design was chosen to capture the subjective and contextualized experiences of faculty members and administrators, which are critical to understanding the dynamics of faculty outflow and retention in the context of regional disparities.

The study combines semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method with document analysis to provide additional institutional context. This combination ensures that the study captures both the subjective perspectives of participants and the broader institutional factors influencing faculty mobility.

Data Collection

The primary data collection method for this study was semi-structured interviews, conducted with three groups of participants: faculty members who have left Guangxi’s private universities, faculty members who have chosen to remain, and administrators from Guangxi’s private universities. These interviews provided detailed insights into participants' motivations, perceptions, and experiences. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide a balance between consistency across participants and flexibility to explore unique insights (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). A semi-structured protocol ensured that all participants were asked similar questions aligned with the research questions while allowing for follow-up questions to probe deeper into their experiences. For example, participants were asked, "What were the primary factors that influenced your decision to leave (or stay) in Guangxi’s private university?" and "How do you compare the salary, benefits, and workload at your previous institution in Guangxi with those at your current institution?" This approach ensured consistency across interviews while allowing participants to elaborate on their unique experiences.

The interviews were conducted in person or via video conferencing, depending on participant availability and preferences. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants’ consent for transcription and analysis. Purposeful sampling was used to select 25 participants, including 18 faculty members and 7 administrators. This sampling strategy ensured a diverse range of perspectives, including those of individuals who had left, those who had stayed, and those responsible for faculty management and retention. In addition to interviews, institutional documents such as recruitment policies, salary structures, workload expectations, and retention strategies were analyzed. Document analysis provided additional context for understanding the institutional factors influencing faculty mobility and retention. This method also allowed for triangulation of data, enhancing the credibility and validity of the findings (Bowen, 2009).

Participants’ Demographics

The study included a total of 25 participants, comprising 18 faculty members and 7 administrators from Guangxi’s private universities. The demographic details of the participants are summarized in Table 2: Participant Demographics, which provides an overview of the gender, age range, education background, and years of teaching or administrative experience for each participant group. This table is placed after the description of the sampling strategy to provide a clear visual representation of the participants’ demographics.

Table 2: Participant Demographics

Participant Group	Number	Gender	Age Range	Education Background	Years of Teaching/Administrative Experience
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Participant Group	Number	Gender	Age Range	Education Background	Years of Teaching/Administrative Experience
Faculty Members Who Left	10	6 male, 4 female	30-50 years	Master's (7), PhD (3)	3-10 years
Faculty Members Who Stayed	8	5 male, 3 female	28-45 years	Master's (6), PhD (2)	2-15 years
Administrators	7	4 male, 3 female	35-55 years	Master's (5), PhD (2)	5-20 years

The faculty members who had left Guangxi's private universities were aged between 30 and 50 years, with most holding a Master's degree (7 participants) and a smaller number holding a PhD (3 participants). Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 10 years. Faculty members who had chosen to stay were slightly younger, aged between 28 and 45 years, with the majority also holding a Master's degree (6 participants) and a smaller number holding a PhD (2 participants). Their teaching experience ranged from 2 to 15 years. Administrators were aged between 35 and 55 years, with most holding a Master's degree (5 participants) and a smaller number holding a PhD (2 participants). Their administrative experience ranged from 5 to 20 years. This diverse sample ensured that the study captured a wide range of perspectives, including those of faculty members and administrators with varying levels of experience and educational backgrounds.

Data Analysis

The study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis to analyze the interview data. This method was chosen for its systematic yet flexible approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were read and re-read to ensure familiarity with the data. During this process, initial impressions and ideas were recorded. Subsequently, two coders independently conducted the initial coding to ensure the reliability of the process and reduce individual bias. Meaningful segments of data related to the research questions were identified and labeled with codes such as "low salary," "career development," and "regional inequality." After completing the initial coding independently, the two coders discussed and refined the codes, resolving any discrepancies through consensus.

The codes were then grouped into broader categories based on their similarity and relevance to the research questions, and these categories were further clustered into overarching themes, such as "economic push factors," "institutional pull factors," and "regional inequality in higher education." A coding tree was developed to visually represent the hierarchical structure of codes and themes, enhancing the transparency of the analytical process. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data and aligned with the theoretical framework. This process included

cross-checking the themes against the original data to confirm their validity and relevance. Saturation was achieved when no new themes or insights emerged, indicating that the analysis had captured the full range of participant perspectives.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the transcripts were returned to participants for comments and/or corrections, allowing them to verify the accuracy of the data and clarify any ambiguities. Additionally, a consistency review was conducted to assess the reliability of the coding process. The degree of agreement between the two coders was calculated to measure inter-rater reliability, ensuring that the assigned categories were consistent and aligned with the research objectives. Finally, the themes were integrated into a coherent narrative that addressed the research questions and theoretical framework, providing a comprehensive understanding of the findings. Each theme was clearly defined and named to highlight its relevance to the study, with supporting quotes from participants included to illustrate key points.

By employing two coders, developing a coding tree, and conducting inter-rater reliability checks, the study ensured a rigorous and transparent analytical process. The use of participant validation further strengthened the credibility of the findings, demonstrating the researchers' commitment to accurately representing participants' perspectives.

Results

The results of this study highlight a range of factors influencing faculty mobility in Guangxi's private universities, shedding light on why some faculty members choose to leave while others decide to stay. Faculty members who left often cited systemic challenges such as low salaries, poor management practices, lack of professional development opportunities, and delayed salary payments. These issues were compounded by administrative structures and unfair treatment, which created an environment of dissatisfaction and frustration. Additionally, faculty members pointed to regional disparities, such as Guangxi's weaker economic development, as a broader context for their decisions to seek opportunities elsewhere.

For faculty members who chose to stay, personal and family considerations emerged as a primary factor, along with limited alternatives and a sense of hope for institutional improvement. Some participants also highlighted unique advantages of working in Guangxi, such as the relative ease of applying for research projects and the region's natural beauty and slower pace of life. However, these benefits were often overshadowed by persistent challenges, such as difficulties in student management and limited institutional support.

Administrators acknowledged many of these issues, pointing to economic constraints and management challenges as significant barriers to faculty retention. They also recognized the impact of regional inequalities on their ability to compete with institutions in more developed provinces. While some retention strategies, such as small bonuses and workshops, have been implemented, administrators admitted these measures are often insufficient to address the deeper structural problems.

Table 3: Key Themes and Supporting Quotes from Interviews

Theme	Participant Group	Supporting Quotes
Low Salaries and Economic Challenges	Faculty Members Who Left	“The salary here is far lower than what I could earn in other provinces for the same amount of work.”
	Administrators	“We simply don’t have the budget to compete with universities in more developed provinces.”
Poor Management Practices	Faculty Members Who Left	“The policies change so often that it’s impossible to plan anything. What’s decided today may be reversed tomorrow.”
	Faculty Members Who Stayed	“Sometimes it feels like the management doesn’t know what they’re doing. It’s frustrating, but I’ve learned to adapt.”
Administrative Practices and Unfair Treatment	Faculty Members Who Left	“It’s not about how well you perform; it’s about who you know and whether you can please the leadership.”
	Faculty Members Who Stayed	“There’s a lot of favoritism here. If you don’t have connections, it’s hard to get ahead.”
Lack of Professional Development	Faculty Members Who Left	“There’s no proper system for teacher training or career development. I felt like I was stuck in one place.”
	Faculty Members Who Stayed	“Although I hope for more opportunities for research funding or training programs to motivate me to stay here, Guangxi stands out compared to other regions for its relatively easier process of achieving higher professional title evaluations.”
Mandatory Office Hours for New Teachers	Faculty Members Who Left	“Why should I waste my time sitting in the office when I could use that time for research or preparing for classes?”
	Faculty Members Who Stayed	“The office hour requirement feels unnecessary and isn’t something commonly seen in other provinces. However, I’ve adapted to it and now use the time productively, such as working on my research papers.”

Theme	Participant Group	Supporting Quotes
Delayed Salary Payments	Faculty Members Who Left	“The salary payments were always late. It made it hard to trust the institution.”
	Faculty Members Who Stayed	“Sometimes the salary comes late, but I’ve learned to manage. It’s not ideal, but I can’t leave right now.”
Student Management Challenges	Faculty Members Who Left	“We are left to deal with student complaints on our own, and the administration rarely supports us. It’s exhausting.”
	Faculty Members Who Stayed	“The students can be difficult to manage, and the administration doesn’t always back us up. But I stay because I enjoy mentoring students and helping them grow, even if it’s challenging.”
Personal and Family Considerations	Faculty Members Who Stayed	“My family is here, and I don’t want to disrupt my children’s education by moving to another province.”
Limited Alternatives	Faculty Members Who Stayed	“I don’t have a PhD, so my options are limited. It’s easier to stay here than to start over somewhere else.”
Hope for Institutional Improvement	Faculty Members Who Stayed	“I believe things can change, and I want to be part of making that change happen.”
Economic Constraints	Administrators	“The region’s weaker economic development limits what we can offer in terms of salaries and benefits.”
Management Challenges	Administrators	“We are aware of the issues, but we are limited in what we can do without more support from the government and stakeholders.”
Retention Strategies	Administrators	“We’ve tried to offer small bonuses and workshops, but it’s not enough to address the deeper issues.”
Regional Inequality	Faculty Members Who Left	“It’s not just about the university; it’s about the region. Guangxi simply doesn’t have the resources to offer what other provinces can.”
	Administrators	“The economic disparities between Guangxi and other regions make it hard to attract and retain

Theme	Participant Group	Supporting Quotes
		talent.”
Opportunities for Research Projects	Faculty Members Who Stayed	“It’s easier to apply for and get approval for research projects and teaching grants here compared to more competitive regions.”
Natural Environment and Lifestyle	Faculty Members Who Stayed	“The local scenery is beautiful, and the slower pace of life here is something I enjoy.”
	Faculty Members Who Left	“I liked the natural environment in Guangxi, but the other problems outweighed the benefits.”

Table 3: Key Themes and Supporting Quotes from Interviews provides a detailed summary of the study’s findings, organized by themes, participant groups, and supporting quotes. Each theme represents a major issue or factor identified during the interviews, with direct quotes illustrating the perspectives of faculty members and administrators. The table serves as a visual representation of the results, offering readers an accessible way to understand the key issues raised by participants.

The first section of the table highlights the challenges faced by faculty members who chose to leave private universities in Guangxi. A recurring theme among participants was dissatisfaction with low salaries, which many identified as a primary factor. As one participant explained, “The salary here is far lower than what I could earn in other provinces for the same amount of work.” Additionally, poor management practices, including frequent policy changes and a lack of transparency, were frequently cited. Faculty members also expressed frustration with administrative structures that prioritized favoritism over merit, further undermining morale. Other significant stressors included delayed salary payments and the challenges of managing students without sufficient administrative support, all of which contributed to their decisions to leave.

The second section of the table examines the perspectives of faculty members who chose to stay at Guangxi’s private universities. While many acknowledged facing similar challenges to those who left—such as difficult-to-manage students and a lack of administrative support—they offered distinct reasons for remaining. One participant shared, “The students can be difficult to manage, and the administration doesn’t always back us up. But I stay because I enjoy mentoring students and helping them grow, even if it’s challenging.”

Other participants cited personal and family ties to Guangxi, limited alternative opportunities, and optimism about institutional improvements as key reasons for staying. Some also highlighted benefits like the ease of applying for research projects, simpler professional title evaluations, and the region’s natural beauty. As one faculty member explained, “Although I hope for more opportunities for research funding or training programs to motivate me to stay here, Guangxi stands out compared to other regions for its relatively easier process of achieving higher professional title evaluations.”

The final section of the table focuses on the perspectives of administrators, who acknowledged the economic and structural challenges faced by Guangxi's private universities. Administrators noted that the region's weaker economic development limited their ability to offer competitive salaries and benefits, making it difficult to attract and retain talent. They also recognized the impact of management challenges and regional inequalities, with one administrator stating, "The economic disparities between Guangxi and other regions make it hard to attract and retain talent." While administrators have implemented some retention strategies, such as small bonuses and workshops, they admitted these measures are insufficient to address the deeper systemic issues.

In summary, Table 3 provides a comprehensive overview of the study's findings, illustrating the complex interplay of economic, institutional, and personal factors influencing faculty mobility in Guangxi's private universities. By including direct quotes from participants, the table brings their experiences and perspectives to life, offering valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by faculty members and administrators.

Discussion

This study investigated the drivers of faculty outflow from Guangxi's private universities, focusing on the lived experiences of faculty members, the key factors influencing their mobility decisions, and the broader implications of regional disparities in higher education. The findings align closely with the research objectives and questions, offering valuable insights into the economic, institutional, and personal factors shaping faculty mobility in less developed regions. Faculty members who left consistently cited low salaries, poor management practices, and the lack of professional development opportunities as primary drivers of their decisions. These findings reflect challenges highlighted in previous research on teacher mobility in less developed areas of China, such as the lack of competitive salaries and inadequate institutional support (Wang & Li, 2017; Zhang et al., 2017). Additionally, systemic issues like delayed salary payments and administrative inefficiencies further exacerbated faculty dissatisfaction, aligning with Xu's (2010) observation that heavy workloads and poor administrative support are common challenges for educators in less developed regions.

Faculty members also perceived significant disparities between Guangxi and more developed regions in terms of salaries, benefits, and institutional support. These perceptions reflect broader patterns of inequality in China's education system, where economically disadvantaged regions struggle to compete with wealthier provinces for academic talent (Wu, 2010; Zhou & Zhang, 2020). The study demonstrates that faculty outflow from Guangxi's private universities is not only an institutional issue but also a reflection of systemic regional inequalities. Administrators acknowledged these challenges, pointing to economic constraints and regional disparities as significant barriers to faculty retention. These findings align with Wu and Donald's (2007) analysis of structural inequalities in China's education system, where less developed regions face persistent challenges in retaining talent due to limited financial and institutional resources.

The study's findings can also be interpreted through two key theoretical frameworks: Push-Pull Theory and Person-Environment (P-E) Fit Theory. Push-Pull Theory is particularly relevant to understanding the dynamics of faculty outflow in Guangxi's private universities. The "push" factors identified in this

study include systemic challenges such as low salaries, delayed payments, poor management practices, and administrative inefficiencies, which create dissatisfaction and drive faculty members to leave. Conversely, the “pull” factors include the higher salaries, better benefits, and more supportive institutional environments offered by universities in more developed regions. These findings align with Zhu and Liu’s (2019) application of Push-Pull Theory to rural teacher mobility, where economic and institutional disparities act as key drivers of turnover. Similarly, P-E Fit Theory emphasizes the alignment between individuals’ needs and the resources provided by their work environment. Faculty members who left Guangxi’s private universities often experienced a mismatch between their professional expectations (e.g., career development opportunities, institutional support) and the realities of their work environment. This misalignment echoes the findings of Zhou (2007), who observed that teachers in less developed areas often leave due to the absence of a supportive and fulfilling work environment. On the other hand, faculty members who stayed cited personal and family considerations or a sense of hope for institutional improvement as factors that mitigated the misfit, consistent with Zhu and Liu’s (2019) observation that personal factors can influence decisions to remain in challenging work environments.

This study contributes to the research area by addressing a gap in the literature on faculty mobility in less developed regions. While much of the existing research focuses on faculty retention in developed regions or elite institutions, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by private universities in economically disadvantaged areas. By focusing on the specific context of Guangxi’s private universities, this study sheds light on how faculty outflow mirrors broader patterns of regional inequality within China’s education system. It contributes to ongoing discussions on equity and development in higher education (Wu, 2010; Song, 2012; Adeoti & Olufunke, 2015; Weerasinghe & Wickramasinghe, 2024). The integration of Push-Pull Theory and P-E Fit Theory enriches the understanding of faculty mobility decisions, offering a theoretical foundation for future research. From a practical perspective, the findings provide actionable recommendations for improving faculty retention, such as offering competitive salaries, improving management practices, and providing structured professional development opportunities. Additionally, leveraging Guangxi’s unique advantages—such as the ease of applying for research projects, the accessibility of obtaining higher professional titles, and the region’s natural beauty—could play a significant role in attracting and retaining faculty members who value these benefits.

The findings also have important implications for future research. Comparative studies could explore faculty mobility in other less developed regions to identify common challenges and region-specific factors influencing faculty retention. Longitudinal studies could examine the impact of retention strategies and policy changes on faculty mobility in Guangxi and similar regions. Further research could also include the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as students and government officials, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing faculty mobility. Finally, future studies could investigate innovative strategies for addressing regional disparities, such as government incentives, institutional collaborations, or technology-driven solutions to support faculty development and retention.

In summary, this study provides valuable insights into the drivers of faculty outflow from Guangxi’s private universities, highlighting the complex interplay of economic, institutional, and personal factors.

By addressing the research objectives and questions, the study contributes to the global literature on faculty mobility, regional disparities, and higher education development. At the same time, it underscores the importance of addressing systemic challenges and leveraging regional strengths to improve faculty retention. These findings call for continued efforts to address regional inequalities in higher education, ensuring a more equitable and sustainable development of the sector.

Conclusion

This study explored factors influencing faculty mobility in Guangxi's private universities, identifying challenges such as low salaries, poor management, delayed payments, limited professional development, and regional economic disparities that hinder competitiveness. Despite these issues, some faculty stay due to personal ties, limited alternatives, or appreciation for Guangxi's unique advantages, such as ease of applying for research projects, simpler professional title evaluations, natural beauty, and a slower pace of life. The findings highlight the need for competitive salaries, improved management, professional development, and leveraging regional strengths to attract and retain talent. Addressing these issues through institutional reforms, government support, and innovative strategies can enhance faculty retention, reduce regional disparities, and promote sustainable development and equity in higher education.

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Ethical Approval and Consent

This study was conducted in full compliance with ethical research standards and received approval from the relevant ethics committee. All participants were provided with comprehensive information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential implications prior to their involvement. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring they fully understood their rights and the voluntary nature of their participation. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or negative consequences. To safeguard participants' privacy, confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained throughout the research process. Participant data were anonymized, and pseudonyms were used in place of real names. Any identifying details were removed from the data to further protect identities. All information was securely stored to prevent unauthorized access. The researcher upheld a neutral and unbiased stance during interviews and analysis to foster an open environment where participants could freely express their perspectives without influence. By adhering to these strict ethical standards, the study ensured the rights, dignity, and well-being of all participants were protected at every stage of the research process.

This study was approved by the relevant ethics committee, and all participants provided informed consent prior to their participation.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

The author(s) hereby declare that no generative AI technologies, including but not limited to Large Language Models (e.g., ChatGPT, Copilot) or text-to-image generation tools, were utilized in the writing or editing of this manuscript.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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