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# Generational Pressure and Workload of Early-Career University Teachers Under Delayed Retirement: a Population-Institution Policy Analysis

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**Abstract: China's population aging continues to deepen. At the end of 2025, the population aged 60 and above reached 323.38 million, accounting for 23.0% of the total population. Starting in 2025, the gradual delayed retirement policy was formally implemented. the proportion of senior professional-title positions in universities is subject to strict institutional constraints. Delayed retirement extends the time senior teachers occupy positions and, together with the continuous expansion of doctoral graduates, may create a structural contradiction of "entry expansion-exit rigidity, " potentially compressing early-career university teachers' promotion space. Based on official statistics, policy texts, and existing empirical studies, this paper constructs a population-institution analytical framework and examines the impact of delayed retirement on the career situation of early-career university teachers through three mechanisms: first, age norms and time pressure for promotion in the life course; second, the position stock game in the generational contract; and third, insufficient organizational support and the individualization of pressure. This paper argues that delayed retirement policy requires supporting "participation-exit" mechanisms, a burden-reduction list, differentiated evaluation, and organizational support. This paper is a policy analysis and narrative review and does not collect primary data. Based on official statistics, policy documents, and published empirical studies, this paper constructs a population-institution analytical framework.**

**Keywords: Delayed Retirement; Early-Career University Teachers; Generational Pressure; Workload; Policy Analysis**

## 1. Introduction

Universities are complex fields affected by delayed retirement: academic accumulation has a long "maturity period, " and delayed retirement helps use senior teachers' human capital more fully [1]. However, senior professional-title positions in universities are constrained by staffing quotas, professional-title ratios, and funding, and position mobility is already limited. Delayed retirement further reduces this position mobility.

Meanwhile, the scale of doctoral graduates continues to expand, raising promotion pressure on early-career university teachers. Existing studies focus on the macro effects of delayed retirement, senior teachers' academic output, and early-career teachers' occupational pressure. Yan and Niu (2014) found that about 60.9% of teachers aged 35 and below were in an overloaded working state [2]. Wu et al. (2025) identified four types of pressure sources: research and academia, teaching and talent cultivation, administrative arrangements, and career development [3]. Li (2025) found that more than 70% of early-career university teachers had a high sense of time anxiety [4]. However, fewer studies link delayed retirement to their generational pressure, workload, and institutional support.

This paper asks three questions: First, how does delayed retirement change the promotion prospects of early-career university teachers through population and institutional mechanisms? Second, what types of workload do they face? How are these workloads related to generational relations? Third, what gaps exist in institutional support? What are possible policy responses? the theoretical contribution of this paper is twofold: it extends life course theory from "individual life time" to "generational resource time, " explaining how delayed retirement reshapes the structure of generational career opportunities by changing the pace of position release; it also supplements organizational support theory by pointing out that insufficient organizational support translates structural pressure into

individualized coping strategies. This paper is a policy analysis and narrative review; it does not collect primary data and does not draw on unpublished or uncollected interview data..

## 2. Policy and Demographic Background

### 2.1 Population Aging and Delayed Retirement Policy

Population aging is the macro background of delayed retirement policy, and the two together constitute the structural conditions of the career situation of early-career university teachers. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, at the end of 2025, the national total population was 1, 404.89 million, the population aged 60 and above reached 323.38 million, accounting for 23.0% of the total population; annual births were 7.92 million, and the birth rate was 5.63‰. The population has experienced negative growth for the fourth consecutive year [5]. To address pension payment pressure and insufficient labor supply, in September 2024, the 11th session of the Standing Committee of the 14th National People's Congress passed the "Decision on Implementing the Gradual Delay of the Statutory Retirement Age, " stipulating that starting from January 1, 2025, the statutory retirement age for male employees shall be delayed by one month every four months, gradually from 60 to 63 years old; the statutory retirement age for female employees originally set at 55 shall be gradually delayed to 58 years old [6]. This policy background provides a macro premise for understanding the career situation of early-career university teachers.

### 2.2 University Position Structure and the Supply-Demand Contradiction in the Academic Labor Market

A structural contradiction has formed between the rigid constraints on senior professional-title positions in universities and the expanding scale of doctoral graduates. Senior professional titles are scarce resources, and differences across institutions are significant. For example, the ratio of full senior, associate senior, intermediate, and junior positions at Northeast Agricultural University is 25:35:30:10 [7]. On the supply side, the scale of doctoral graduates continues to expand-in 2024, 171, 100 doctoral students were enrolled, and 676, 300 doctoral students were in school [8]. On the demand side, the position stock of senior professional titles is basically fixed, and delayed retirement extends the retention time of senior teachers. This demographic structural contradiction of "entry expansion-exit rigidity" is a key background for understanding the career situation of early-career university teachers.

### 2.3 National Policy Attention to Early-Career Teachers

National policies have already paid attention to the burden and evaluation pressure of early-career teachers, but there may be an implementation gap between policy texts and teachers' actual experiences. In 2025, the Ministry of Education and six other departments issued the "Guiding Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of Early-Career University Teacher Teams in the New Era, " which explicitly proposed "reducing the non-teaching and non-research burden of early-career teachers, solving living difficulties, paying attention to physical and mental health, and enhancing the occupational well-being of early-career teachers"; in terms of evaluation, it requires "comprehensively considering the characteristics of early-career teachers' career aspirations, disciplinary fields, and position roles, scientifically determining evaluation indicators, and scientifically setting evaluation cycles" [9]. Policy attention provides institutional space for improving the situation of early-career teachers, but more specific implementation mechanisms are needed.

## 3. Analytical Framework: Population-Institution Perspective

This paper constructs a "population-institution" analytical framework comprising three interrelated mechanisms. The framework integrates life course theory, organizational support theory, and a demographic perspective.

Mechanism one focuses on age norms and time pressure for promotion in the life course. The academic profession has clear age thresholds, such as the age limit of 35 for recruitment and age limits for youth funds. These age norms, together with delayed retirement, jointly shape early-career university teachers' "sense of time urgency. " the concept of "age grading" in life course theory plays a role here: societal expectations about "what should be completed at what age" and institutional age limits reinforce each other.

Mechanism two focuses on the position stock

game in the generational contract. Delayed retirement changes the pace of position release. Under the condition of a fixed position stock, the extended retention time of senior teachers directly reduces promotion opportunities for early-career university teachers. The demographic perspective further reveals that when the scale of doctoral graduates continues to expand while the position stock of senior professional titles remains unchanged, the intensity of generational competition will rise systematically.

Mechanism three focuses on insufficient organizational support and the individualization of pressure. Eisenberger et al. (1986) organizational support theory points out that an organization's care for and recognition of employees enhances employees' organizational commitment and reduces turnover intention [10]. In the university context, when instrumental, emotional, and academic support are insufficient, structural pressure cannot be buffered at the organizational level and is instead borne by individuals. Liu Penggang et al. (2025) survey shows that 46.53% of early-career teachers relieve pressure through "self-comfort and determination, " which is precisely a manifestation of the individualization of pressure [11].

The contribution of this framework lies in extending the focus of life course theory from "individual life time" to "generational resource time, " explaining how macro retirement policy reshapes the structure of generational career opportunities by changing the pace of position release.

## 4. Mechanism Analysis

### 4.1 Mechanism One: Age Norms and Time Pressure for Promotion

China's academic labor market has explicit age thresholds, which, when superimposed on delayed retirement, intensify the promotion time pressure of early-career university teachers. Research by Horta and Li (2024) shows that most universities set the upper age limit for lecturer and assistant professor recruitment at 35, and the Young Scientists Fund of the National Natural Science Foundation of China requires male applicants to be no older than 35 and female applicants no older than 40. In the academic labor market, scholars in the early career stage generally face similar "tournament-style" career script pressure: if they fail to obtain a youth fund or a stable position before age 35, subsequent career success may be extremely difficult [12]. The superimposed effect of this age norm and delayed retirement deserves attention. Delayed retirement extends the time senior teachers remain in their positions, exposing early-career teachers to a longer "waiting period. " Under the up-or-out system, the probationary period is usually 3+3 years; doctoral graduates are about 30 years old and need to complete promotion before age 36. If the mobility of senior professional-title positions decreases due to delayed retirement, the promotion time window for early-career teachers will further narrow. The superposition of age norms and delayed retirement exposes early-career teachers to "dual time pressure": they must complete promotion before the age threshold while facing an extended waiting period caused by reduced position mobility.

### 4.2 Mechanism Two: Position Stock Game and Generational Crowding

Under the condition of a fixed position stock of senior professional titles, delayed retirement will intensify position competition between generations. Guo Lei et al. (2025) explicitly point out that China's public universities, "constrained by established staffing quotas, professional-title structures, and funding amounts, etc., have made senior professional titles a scarce resource, " and that delayed retirement "will inevitably, to a certain extent, crowd out the employment space of the young labor force" [1]. This judgment is empirically supported by Zhang Dan and Cao Yuan (2022): some older female teachers explicitly stated that they "worry about affecting others' promotion opportunities, " indicating that generational competition has been perceived within the teacher group [13]. From a demographic perspective, this crowding is not only a conflict of generational interests but also a structural imbalance between the expanding scale of doctoral graduates and the rigidity of the position stock of senior professional titles. Therefore, the root of generational crowding should be understood as a contradiction between the size of population cohorts and the rigidity of the position system, rather than a purely generational moral issue.

### 4.3 Mechanism Three: Insufficient

**Organizational Support and the Individualization of Pressure**

Insufficient organizational support translates structural pressure into individualized coping strategies. Research by Wu Chunming et al. (2025) shows that administrative arrangements are an important pressure source for early-career university teachers. Higher education is in a period of an "evaluation pandemic, " and functional departments of universities, in dealing with evaluations, inspections, awards, and standardization processes, exhibit "large and comprehensive" and "formalistic tendencies "; the boundaries of administrative work continue to expand, and teachers' academic and teaching rhythms are frequently disrupted [3].

In terms of overwork, a survey of 927 university teachers by Yang Jing et al. (2024) shows that the average weekly working time of university teachers is 51.64 hours, the proportion of severe overworkers reaches 50.81%, and the proportion of non-overworked workers is only 28.26%. In addition, 84.44% of respondents work more than 40 hours per week, and 16.44% are in severe overwork (working more than 70 hours per week) [14]. These data indicate that university teachers (including early-career teachers) are generally in an overloaded working state.

Administrative burden is not directly caused by delayed retirement but is an inherent feature of university administrative management and the evaluation system. However, the two have a superimposed effect: the greater the promotion pressure, the more likely early-career teachers are to "accept all tasks without refusal" and take on administrative tasks to accumulate "impression scores, " thereby further compressing research time. This paper proposes a theoretical hypothesis to be tested: this "performative task-taking" mechanism is a key link in the transformation of structural pressure into individual strategies and needs to be verified by future empirical research.

## 5. Discussion and Policy Implications

### 5.1 Structural Transmission Chain

This paper proposes a transmission chain to be tested: delayed retirement to reduced position mobility to intensified promotion anxiety to "performative task-taking" in administrative tasks to fragmentation of research time to insufficient institutional support to individualization of pressure. This chain is based on this paper's synthesis of existing literature but has not yet been systematically tested with primary data. This chain suggests that delayed retirement is not only a pension policy but also an occupational structure policy. By changing the pace of position release, it affects early-career teachers' career expectations and work strategies. The value of the demographic perspective lies in revealing that the driving force of this transmission chain comes from the structural imbalance between population cohort size and position stock, rather than purely "generational interest conflict. " This paper explicitly labels this transmission chain as a theoretical hypothesis to be tested, rather than a proven fact. Future research can verify the causal relationships of each link through longitudinal qualitative research or large-scale questionnaires.

### 5.2 Policy Implications

First, establish a "participation-exit" mechanism. Universities should clarify the appointment term, conditions, and evaluation methods for delayed retirement teachers. Guo Lei et al. (2025) suggest drawing on the U. S. Practice of "reemployment after retirement, " determining teachers suitable for delayed retirement through gradient divisions based on "years of service, " "age+years of service, " or "rank+years of service, " and that teaching by honorably retired teachers does not occupy university staffing quotas [1]. However, under China's institutional environment, this suggestion requires supporting conditions: delegation of staffing quota management authority, adjustment of total performance pay, and clarification of personnel management authority, etc.

Second, implement the burden-reduction list. The Ministry of Education and six other departments (2025) have proposed "reducing the non-teaching and non-research burden" [9]. Universities should translate this into operational measures at the school/department level, such as establishing a "whitelist" for administrative affairs, reducing unnecessary meetings, and integrating digital management systems.

Third, implement differentiated evaluation. For early-career teachers, it is inappropriate to simply apply the same quantitative standards as those for senior teachers. It is possible to explore evaluation methods combining long and short cycles and establish an interactive mechanism in which teaching and research mutually reinforce

each other. Li Yuqian (2025) suggests "flexibly setting project application or completion deadlines by distinguishing gender, professional field, etc., " and "replacing the 'biological age' limits of various talent support programs with 'faculty age' or other relevant limits" [4].

### 5.3 Research Limitations

This paper is a policy analysis and narrative review. The limitations are: no primary qualitative or quantitative investigation was conducted; the literature is mainly focused on Chinese universities; and the effects of policy implementation still need to be tracked. Future research can expand the sample, include early-career teachers from different regions and disciplines, and adopt a mixed-methods design.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper argues that in the background of delayed retirement policy, early-career university teachers face composite pressure of "generational crowding-dual burden-support deficit. " the structural root of this pressure lies in the imbalance between the expanding size of population cohorts and the rigidity of the position stock of senior professional titles. When designing supporting policies for delayed retirement, universities should not only consider "how to retain senior teachers" but also simultaneously consider "how to create development space for early-career teachers. " Future research can further track the implementation effects of delayed retirement policy and compare differences in support policies for early-career teachers across universities and their impact on teachers' career development.

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