

Study on the Issues and Improvement Strategies for the Development and Services of Returnee Scholars

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Abstract: With the intensification of global educational mobility, the number of Chinese returnee scholars has been continuously increasing, becoming a significant driving force for national scientific progress and economic transformation. This paper explores the issues and improvement strategies related to development and services for returnee talent, analysing the challenges they face in academic reintegration, career development, policy support, and social adaptation and proposing systematic solutions. The research finds that returnee scholars in regional universities face challenges in academic reintegration, such as insufficient academic infrastructure, evaluation systems that emphasize quantity over quality, and difficulties in adapting to academic norms. Additionally, internal university management and service mechanisms are lagging, lacking targeted career guidance and long-term communication mechanisms. In non-academic fields, such as entrepreneurship, there are issues with policy support and development platforms, including financing difficulties and uneven resource distribution. These challenges stem from the disconnect between the existing support system and the new needs of returnee scholars. Based on this, the paper suggests optimizing talent recruitment policies, establishing a tiered and categorized support system and long-term guarantee mechanisms, enhancing financial support and infrastructure construction to alleviate financing constraints and promote technology transfer, and improving institutional frameworks to enhance administrative efficiency and focus on social integration.

Keywords: Returnee Scholars, Academic Reintegration, Policy Support, Social Adaptation

1. Introduction

In recent years, the continuous increase in the number of Chinese students studying abroad and returning home reflects the significant trend of globalized educational mobility. According to a 2018 report by the Ministry of Education of China, in 2017, 608,400 Chinese students went abroad for studies, and 480,900 of them returned [1]. According to the Center for China and Globalization (CCG), the number of Chinese students pursuing overseas education for their studies recovered from 450,900 in 2020 to 661,200 in 2022, despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic [2]. These returnees have acquired valuable knowledge and skills from their overseas studies, contributing to China's economic and technological development.

Recognizing the importance of returning scholars, the Chinese Government has implemented various policies to attract and support them, such as the "Thousand Talents Plan" and other talent recruitment programs. However, despite these efforts, returning scholars still face multiple challenges

of academic reintegration, career development, policy support, and social adaptation. The complexity of these challenges requires in-depth study to ensure that they can fully realize their potential.

Existing research has explored this issue to some extent. Ma Yuping and Pan Suyan analysed the reasons, contributions, and obstacles of Chinese returnee scholars through empirical data. They found that economic growth, WTO accession, government incentives, and open policies are key "pull factors" attracting returnee talent. Returnees have made significant contributions to scientific research, technological economy, and academic leadership, but they face challenges such as interpersonal pressure, funding shortages, and limited political participation [3]. The study highlights the potential of Brain Gain and Brain Circulation, noting that the domestic environment's limitations on returnees' contributions require further research. Current research often focuses on specific areas (e.g., academic fields) and lacks comprehensive analysis of the multidimensional experiences of returnee scholars and specific improvement strategies, especially systematic research in the new post-pandemic context.

Building on this foundation, this paper aims to explore the issues and improvement strategies related to development and services for Chinese returnee scholars. It analyzes the challenges they face in academic reintegration, career development, policy support, and social adaptation and proposes practical solutions. Returnee scholars serve as vital bridges connecting domestic and international knowledge and technology, contributing to national scientific and technological progress and economic development while also seeking new opportunities in their personal career development and family life.

By synthesizing existing research and analysis, this paper seeks to uncover the root causes of these issues and propose systematic solutions to optimize the support system, enhancing the contribution of returnee scholars to national development. This study not only addresses gaps in current research but also provides insights for policymakers and educators to formulate more effective policies and programs that meet the needs of returnee scholars, promoting their personal growth and social integration.

2. The Importance of Development for Returnee Scholars

2.1. National Development Perspective

The returnee scholar group generally possesses high academic qualifications, international perspectives, strong language skills, and cross-cultural communication abilities [4]. These traits enable them to bring international perspectives and advanced knowledge systems, significantly contributing to the improvement of China's scientific research and education quality. China's talent strategy aims to attract and cultivate international talent, with returnee scholars being a core part of this strategy. The government supports returnees through various policies, such as the "Youth Thousand Talents Plan", the "Chunhui Program," and special research funds, encouraging them to contribute upon their return. Research indicates that the Youth Thousand Talents Plan attracts high-quality talent back to China, significantly enhancing their academic publication productivity, which is, on average, 27% higher than their peers who remain overseas [5]. This data fully demonstrates the role of returnee talent in driving technological progress and knowledge innovation. For example, the rapid development of the Zhongguancun Science Park is attributed to the introduction of advanced overseas technology and management experience by returnee talent, making it an important window for China's participation in global technological innovation [6].

From a broader perspective, returnee scholars, as mediators of advanced foreign knowledge and technology, are crucial resources for China's economic structural transformation. They drive the innovation of science, technology, and production methods, helping "technology-intensive" industries gradually replace traditional "labor-intensive" industries. This not only enhances industrial competitiveness but also helps overcome the bottlenecks in the development of high-tech industries

under Western economic sanctions. Further research confirms that the human capital accumulation brought by returnee scholars significantly improves China's technological innovation level, laying a solid foundation for the country's long-term development [7].

2.2. Individual Development Perspective for Returnee Scholars

For returnee scholars, returning to China offers opportunities for career development in emerging fields. Surveys indicate that 53% of returnee scholars chose to return to seek career advancement in key industries such as biopharmaceuticals and artificial intelligence. Additionally, family factors are a significant driving force, with 71% of Chinese overseas returnees citing family as their primary motivation for returning, a notable increase from 41% in 2013. Although returning may not lead to immediate salary increases, the need for career stability and family reunification often becomes a more critical consideration [8].

It is important to note that the decision to return is influenced by multiple factors. Besides emotional factors (such as family values), capital factors (such as academic exchange opportunities and preferential policies), and force majeure factors (such as visa restrictions), the favorable domestic pandemic control environment since 2020 has also become a significant reason attracting students to return. These factors collectively shape the trend of returnee scholars returning to China [7].

3. Existing Issues

Firstly, returnee scholars often face difficulties in academic reintegration upon returning to China. They may be unfamiliar with Chinese academic norms, which becomes particularly evident when applying for research funding and publishing papers. Domestic academic norms include local journal ranking systems, funding application procedures, and the construction of academic networks. Research indicates that returnee scholars frequently encounter "reverse culture shock" and challenges related to the "lack of local academic networks" (such as *guanxi*). Due to the absence of local academic networks, returnee scholars may struggle to effectively utilize *guanxi* to access academic resources and establish collaborative relationships, posing obstacles to securing funding and publishing papers. Additionally, the evaluation system in Chinese universities traditionally emphasizes the quantity of research output, such as the number of published papers and their inclusion in specific databases. This system presents a challenge for returnee scholars who may be more accustomed to evaluation methods abroad that focus on research quality and impact. Studies have found that this emphasis on quantity leads to difficulties in balancing teaching and research. Returnee scholars often need to quickly publish papers to meet assessment requirements, which may sacrifice teaching quality and time for in-depth research. Some scholars mentioned in interviews that their energy is diverted by the demand for numerous publications, making it difficult to focus on teaching innovation. Furthermore, they may be unfamiliar with the review processes and preferences of domestic journals, increasing the difficulty of publishing papers [9].

Digging deeper, studies show returnees grappling with the demands of high-impact journals like SCI and SSCI, a challenge made thornier by systemic biases in fields like humanities and social sciences, piling on yet more pressure. Studies show that work pressure, exploitative management, family responsibilities, cultural adaptation and norms, and competitive environments are specific issues hindering the development of returnee talent. These issues reflect the impact of the interaction between personal traits and external environments on academic development [10].

Secondly, the development of returnee scholars faces limitations in policy support and development platforms. Policy support plays a crucial role in the development of services for returnee scholars. From the perspective of internal university management, policy frameworks and institutional designs are relatively outdated. On one hand, there is a lack of regular communication

mechanisms that include opinion collection, conflict resolution, and problem-solving, and the refinement of service management systems needs improvement. On the other hand, the efficiency of functional departments' services is disconnected from actual needs, particularly the lack of specialized development plans and career training for returnees. Additionally, the mechanisms for contacting and supporting these individuals are inefficient, possibly due to resource constraints and outdated workflows within institutions. Meanwhile, the "management-oriented" characteristics of administrative services remain prominent, specifically reflected in complex assessment indicators and lengthy approval and reimbursement processes. This causes returnee faculty to expend significant energy on non-teaching and non-research tasks, further highlighting the lack of humanized design and professional support in service mechanisms [11].

4. Improvement Strategies

4.1. Policy Support

Policies should be designed to effectively attract and support returnees, considering their specific needs and challenges. Firstly, a tiered and categorized policy support system should be established. Current policies show significant field biases, focusing on science and engineering while neglecting humanities and social sciences and emphasizing top-tier talent while overlooking mid-level talent. It is recommended to develop differentiated support schemes covering basic research, applied technology, and cultural innovation, with particular emphasis on special support for non-popular disciplines and young scholars. For example, establishing a research start-up fund for returnee scholars in humanities and social sciences to eliminate resource allocation imbalances caused by disciplinary barriers.

Secondly, it is urgent to establish a long-term guarantee mechanism for policy implementation. To ensure that returning talent can play their roles in the long term, legislation can be used to specify the growth rate of talent funding and establish a central-local policy coordination system. For instance, the "Humboldt Scholars" career tracking program in Germany can be referenced to provide long-term continuous resource supply to returnees. Additionally, the collaborative efficiency of policy execution should be optimized. It is suggested to establish a one-stop digital government service platform and include administrative efficiency improvement in the performance evaluation system of functional departments. The "Returnee Talent Service Package" system implemented in Qianhai, Shenzhen, which reduces processing time by 76% through a dedicated agent model, can be promoted as a typical case. Furthermore, the human value orientation of policies should be strengthened. The challenges faced by returnee scholars in environmental adaptation and integration reflect institutional gaps in cultural adjustment and social network reconstruction. It is recommended to add cross-cultural adaptation training modules in talent programs at all levels, establish support networks for returnee scholars, and improve support services such as children's education and spouse employment.

4.2. Financial Support

Alleviating the financing difficulties of returnee enterprises can promote innovation. Research using the difference-in-differences (DiD) model found that policies have a positive impact on the innovation of returnee enterprises, especially in regions with high financing constraints and better institutional environments [12]. This provides important insights for policymakers and practitioners to design effective support policies. By establishing low-interest loans or venture capital funds for returnee enterprises and tax incentives for start-ups, financing constraints can be alleviated and innovation promoted.

There is room for improvement in infrastructure construction and training. By establishing advanced science parks and university-industry links, technology transfer can be promoted and

entrepreneurial activities supported, creating advanced parks similar to Zhongguancun to provide a high-quality environment for entrepreneurs, as demonstrated by the Chinese model [13]. Training should be provided to enhance the capabilities of returnee entrepreneurs, emphasizing the importance of university connections with overseas students.

5. Conclusion

Returnee scholars are an important talent resource for China's development, playing an irreplaceable role in promoting national scientific and technological progress, economic transformation and upgrading, and personal career development. However, this study finds that returnee scholars face multiple challenges in academic reintegration, career development, policy support, and social adaptation. Specifically, in the academic field, there are issues such as insufficient infrastructure in regional universities, evaluation systems that emphasize quantity over quality, and difficulties in adapting to academic norms. In non-academic fields, such as entrepreneurship, the limitations of policy support and development platforms restrict their innovation potential. Additionally, the imperfections in internal university management and service mechanisms further exacerbate these problems, such as outdated policy frameworks, lack of systematic communication mechanisms, and cumbersome administrative processes. The root of these problems lies in the existing support system's failure to fully match the new needs of returnee scholars and the new trends in the context of globalization, necessitating systematic improvements to optimize their contributions.

By comprehensively analyzing the multidimensional challenges faced by returnee scholars in development and services, this paper reveals the disconnect between policy support and actual needs, providing a theoretical basis and practical guidance for optimizing the management system of returnee talent. As the globalization of educational mobility deepens and international talent competition intensifies, China needs to further improve the support system for returnee scholars to fully realize their potential. The government should continuously optimize talent recruitment policies, expand support for non-popular disciplines and young scholars, and enhance policy execution efficiency through digital government platforms. Additionally, investment in development platforms for regional universities and central and western regions should be increased to reduce resource allocation disparities. On the social level, establishing support networks for returnee scholars and cross-cultural adaptation projects can promote their psychological adjustment and social integration. In emerging technology fields (such as artificial intelligence and green energy), returnee scholars will become key drivers. Future research should focus on the dynamic needs of returnee talent in the new post-pandemic context and the long-term evaluation of policy effects. These efforts will lay a solid foundation for China to build an innovative country and achieve sustainable development goals.

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