

Constructing a Model for Identifying Young Educational Leadership Talent in Local Universities: A Differentiated Career Pathway Perspective

Xiansheng Wei, Muhd Khaizer Omar, Suhaida Abdul Kadir, Siti Sabihah Ghazali

Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: khaizer@upm.edu.my

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Abstract

Local universities have long operated under resource constraints. As governance reform deepens and universities are expected to serve regional development more directly, institutional sustainability increasingly depends on whether a credible pipeline of young educational leadership talent can be identified and developed. In many local institutions, however, identification practices remain strongly shaped by metric-centred evaluation, especially publication outputs and grant/project rankings, making leadership potential, organisational contribution, and developmental promise less visible in decision-making. This conceptual paper synthesises research literature and policy documents to propose a differentiated career pathway framework for identifying young educational leadership talent in local universities. The framework distinguishes academic leadership, administrative governance, and hybrid pathways; combines Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) with Key Intangible Performance Indicators (KIPs); and links identification decisions to role-based practice and longitudinal developmental follow-up. By shifting attention from one-off outcomes to pathway fit and process-based evidence, the framework offers an operational reference for improving identification and cultivation practices in resource-constrained local universities.

Keywords

Differentiated Career Pathways, Young Educational Leadership Talent, Talent Identification, Local Universities, KPIs, KIPs

1. Introduction

Universities worldwide are being reshaped by digitalisation and new demands for institutional responsiveness, which makes governance capacity and leadership development increasingly salient. In the Chinese context, national-level policy discourse has repeatedly emphasised coordinated development across education, science/technology, and talent, reinforcing expectations that higher education institutions strengthen governance capacity and build sustainable talent pipelines for quality-oriented development (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019).

Local universities are central to this agenda because they shoulder regional service missions while operating with comparatively limited resources and fewer high-end platforms (Jiang et al., 2024). Yet, in many institutions, the mechanisms used to recognise “promising” young academics are still heavily aligned with conventional academic metrics. Recent analyses of China's research evaluation reform highlight the persistence of indicator-driven practices and the difficulty of capturing more developmental and contextual forms of contribution (Liang et al., 2025; Mallapaty, 2020; Shu et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2025). As a consequence, such metric-centred identification logics may generate an adverse selection effect, analogous to the “bad money drives out good” phenomenon, whereby easily measurable academic outputs gain disproportionate visibility, while individuals with latent educational leadership potential and organisational capacity remain marginal to formal recognition processes.

This paper addresses a practical and theoretical question: how can local universities identify young educational leadership talent in a way that identifies diverse role potentials rather than relying on a single academic promotion logic? Building on a differentiated career pathway perspective, this paper proposes a conceptual identification framework that differentiates academic leadership, administrative governance, and hybrid pathways, which combines evidence based on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) with leadership-relevant Key Intangible Performance Indicators (KIPs), and links identification decisions to role-based practice and longitudinal developmental follow-up. The framework is intended to provide a context-sensitive reference for strengthening leadership succession in resource-constrained local universities.

2. Context and Significance of the Study in Local Universities

2.1. Context and Problems in Local Universities

Early-career academics in local universities carry substantial teaching responsibilities while navigating constrained research platforms and limited mentoring support. Under such conditions, career decisions are often shaped by short-term survival pressures and incentive signals embedded in promotion systems, which can lead to mismatches between individual effort allocation (e.g., prioritising immediately countable outputs) and institutions' longer-term needs for governance participation and educational improvement. Existing evidence suggests that heavy

workload and resource constraints may intensify stress, burnout, and turnover intention, further complicating the formation of stable developmental trajectories (Liu et al., 2022; Olupeliyawa et al., 2021; Pei et al., 2024). Under these conditions, young lecturers contribute substantially to curriculum work, student learning, and teamwork. Yet their growth pathways and role transitions are often constrained by institutional arrangements and resource allocation (Shu et al., 2021).

Existing evaluation systems in many institutions continue to use visible indicators, such as publication counts, project levels, and research awards, as primary proxies for “developmental potential”, while governance capacity, organisational contributions, and value-oriented leadership, dimensions closely related to educational leadership, lack institutionalised observation and documentation mechanisms (Shu et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2025). The strong coupling of promotion mechanism and scientific research performance makes it difficult to translate the equally important work of teaching management, team support and student training into substantial advantages of promotion or appointment, which objectively weakens the willingness of young teachers to regard participation in governance as a long-term career development path (Wang et al., 2024).

At the organisational level, many local universities, especially those facing financial and staffing pressures, still rely on a single “academic promotion path”. The differences in the required competencies for different positions have not been adequately addressed, and mechanisms for tiered identification and sustained support for young scholars are still incomplete (Han & Xie, 2025; Pei et al., 2024; Wang, 2021). Hence, many promising young lecturers repeatedly weigh administrative responsibilities against research pressures or remain cautious about governance roles due to the absence of clear developmental channels.

This paper advances a differentiated career pathway perspective to identify young educational leadership in resource-constrained local universities, distinguishing among academic, administrative, and hybrid development paths, transcending prior approaches based merely on academic progression. It further proposes an evidence-based approach that integrates Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) with leadership-related Key Intangible Performance Indicators (KIPs). This shifts talent identification from a one-off assessment to a process grounded in sustained behavioural and procedural practices. This study integrates path matching, empowerment mechanisms, and dynamic adjustments into a coherent identification-development chain, constructing a flexible mechanism that can adapt to different capability structures and development potentials, providing a practical reference for local universities with limited resources.

2.2. Significance of the Study

This paper, from a theoretical perspective, introduces differentiated career paths into research on youth education leadership in local universities, integrating early career development and leadership potential identification into a unified analytical framework. Unlike previous studies that separately examined cadre selection

mechanisms, leadership behaviour, or teacher professional development, this research focuses on local universities with limited resources, a singular “research-oriented” evaluation system, and organisational culture constraints. It analyzes how career paths and opportunity structures shape the governance roles of young scholars and their likelihood of being identified. Through contextual analysis, it reveals the tension between evaluation logic, organisational structure, and development opportunities, thus providing a contextualized theoretical perspective for constructing an analytical framework for higher education leadership.

Practically, to address the prevailing “research-only” evaluation mindset and gaps in leadership succession in local universities, this study advances a pathway-based approach to identifying young educational leadership talent. It calls for differentiated assessment of competency profiles and developmental intent across academic leadership, administrative governance, and hybrid career routes (Liu, 2017). The framework can help resource-constrained local universities identify young lecturers with coordination capacity and value-oriented leadership potential earlier and more accurately, thereby building a more stable pipeline for leadership succession. Clearer and more predictable identification criteria and development routes may also reduce over-reliance on narrow academic metrics in promotion decisions, widen viable career choices for faculty, and provide an operational reference for strengthening governance effectiveness and institutional resilience.

3. Definition of Core Concepts

3.1. Definition and Characteristics of Local Universities

According to China’s higher education governance structure and administrative affiliation, universities in China can be broadly classified into centrally administered universities, universities jointly established by central ministries and provincial governments, locally administered public universities, and private institutions (Cai, 2012; MOE, 2022). Among locally administered universities, some are relatively well-resourced and enjoy stronger institutional foundations, whereas others are located in more remote regions and face constraints in terms of funding, infrastructure, and their capacity to attract academic resources and talent. This study focuses on local universities, which are managed by provincial or municipal governments and primarily serve regional economic and social development. Compared with centrally affiliated universities, such local institutions often face limited financial investment, relatively weak disciplinary foundations, and a scarcity of research platforms. Their development is also more dependent on the regional economic structure and local policy orientation. Because they are oriented toward local industries and social needs, local universities tend to exhibit stronger applied and regional-adaptive characteristics in programme offerings, talent cultivation, and scientific service (Liu, 2017; MOE, 2018).

These features suggest that local universities operate in close connection with their regional contexts: resource provision, governance priorities, and develop-

mental constraints interact to shape a distinctive resource configuration. Consequently, cultivating educational leaders needs to be grounded in available resources while also responding to regional social demands and the institution's mission. In this respect, local universities differ markedly from research-intensive universities. Differences are evident in leadership talent pathways, the competencies emphasised for development, and both the availability and the forms of organisational support.

3.2. Educational Leadership

Educational leadership is a comprehensive capability to influence others, coordinate resources, and shape organisational culture to promote continuous improvement in educational organisations, rather than mere managerial activity based on positional authority (Bush, 2020). In higher education contexts, Educational leadership particularly emphasizes integrating academic and administrative resources within complex governance structures, supporting faculty professional development, and sustaining institutional value orientations (Evans, 2014; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010).

High-performing educational leaders typically combine strategic vision, integrative coordination capacity, relationship-building skills, and professional influence. They are able to grasp the institution's overarching strategy and to translate reform initiatives into effective implementation under institutional constraints and relatively limited resources. Given that influence within universities is largely grounded in interpersonal networks and shared values, communication competence, the cultivation of trust, and ethical judgement become indispensable elements of educational leadership (Bolden et al., 2019; Bryman, 2007). Fostering the continuous growth and learning of teachers and their teams is widely regarded as a core mission that distinguishes educational leadership from routine administrative management in higher education (Evans, 2017).

Educational leadership in this study refers to the competencies teachers display when they engage in university governance-articulating direction, coordinating work, building relationships, shaping shared values, and supporting professional growth. Given the realities of local universities-resource constraints, relatively flat structures, and heavy administrative demands-key indicators of young leadership potential include practical problem-solving, cross-departmental collaboration, and sensitivity to organisational context (Henkel, 2002).

3.3. Definition and Characteristics of Young Educational Leadership Talent

In today's Chinese higher education context, "young lecturer" generally refers to academic staff aged 40 and below. This cutoff largely reflects the personnel policies and career-development practices commonly used in local universities (Chen & Li, 2016; Yan, 2012). Consistent with this study's focus, "young educational leadership talent" refers to lecturers aged 40 and below who have already taken

on-or are likely to take on-certain governance-related responsibilities, and who show leadership promise in academic development, organisational coordination, and value-oriented educational guidance.

Existing research and everyday practice in universities suggest that many people in this group have a strong disciplinary base and a high capacity to learn, making them one of the most “growable” cohorts on campus. Unlike seasoned administrators, they are still in a period of expanding roles and building capabilities, so their leadership is often seen less in titles and more in what they actually do. For instance, they may step up to coordinate work within teaching or research teams, actively connect across units, or show ownership and good judgement when dealing with curriculum improvement, student learning support, or the on-the-ground delivery of projects (Bolden et al., 2019). Young lecturers are also more receptive to new institutional arrangements, technologies, and governance approaches and more sensitive to institutional development agendas; thus, they are widely regarded as an important potential force for governance reform and organisational innovation in universities (Leithwood et al., 2020).

In local university contexts, the characteristics of young educational leadership talent are strongly context-dependent. On the one hand, young lecturers face multiple pressures across teaching, research, and administration and must demonstrate problem-solving and coordination capacities under resource constraints. On the other hand, their leadership potential may be distributed across different developmental tracks, such as teaching leadership, research organisation, managerial coordination, or cross-boundary collaboration. Therefore, identifying young educational leadership talent should not rely solely on academic metrics; rather, it should attend to behavioural and contextual indicators in governance practice, including value orientation, communication capacity, team-support behaviours, and organisational understanding.

3.4. Differentiated Career Pathways

Differentiated career pathways refer to designing multiple relatively clear development routes based on lecturer’s competency profiles, role requirements, and career goals, rather than relying on a single or one-sided promotion way. This study attempts to provide better-matched opportunities across teaching, research, and educational governance, balancing individual development with organisational effectiveness.

The “academic talent framework” proposed by Niewiesk and Garrity-Rokous (2021) emphasizes supporting sustainable development for diverse types of academics through differentiated career pathways design, thereby preventing early-career faculty from being locked into a single “research-rank promotion” track. For local universities under resource constraints, building differentiated career pathways such as teaching-oriented, research-oriented, and educational leadership-oriented routes can help young lecturers with governance potential grow in more appropriate roles and provide a clearer institutional basis for subsequent

leadership talent identification.

Recent studies further note that early-career development in universities often follows a single pathway, with promotion mechanisms relying more on existing performance than on future potential or role fit (Niewiesk & Garrity-Rokous, 2021). In the absence of clear stratification and differentiation, many faculty enter a particular track before they are fully prepared, while universities fail to offer growth support aligned with diverse competency structures. This “path dependence” not only limits the realization of individual strengths but may also weaken overall organisational capacity.

Research indicated that faculty development support systems are more likely to become homogeneous and rigid, making it difficult to distinguish faculty needs across stages (Chen & Li, 2016; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010). Under such conditions, young lecturer with educational leadership potential often lack opportunities to demonstrate and develop organisational coordination, institutional understanding, and value-based leadership, resulting in their latent contributions being neither identified nor utilized in time.

Accordingly, universities should move beyond a single “academic competence” logic and establish multiple career pathways—such as teaching, research, and educational leadership—based on lecturers’ differing strengths and interests, while aligning identification, development, and deployment mechanisms. Only within a more differentiated and flexible institutional framework can diverse competencies among young lecturers be more fully developed, contributing to a more resilient and composite talent structure supporting long-term institutional goals. **Table 1** presents three career pathways and their respective characteristics.

Table 1. Differentiated career pathways and core identification dimensions for young educational leadership talent in local universities.

Career Pathway	Typical Roles/Positions	Core Competency Focus	Representative Identification Indicators
Academic Leadership Pathway	Discipline coordinator; Research team leader; Programme director; Member of academic committees	Academic vision; research organisation; curriculum leadership; disciplinary coordination	Quality and coherence of publications; leadership in funded projects; ability to organise research teams; curriculum development contributions; peer recognition
Administrative Governance Pathway	Department vice head; functional office coordinator; task-force leader; policy implementation roles	Institutional understanding; coordination capacity; procedural management; cross-unit collaboration	Effectiveness in administrative tasks; coordination across units; policy execution capacity; communication with multiple stakeholders; feedback from supervisors and peers
Hybrid Development Pathway	Teaching reform project leader; interdisciplinary programme coordinator; university-industry liaison	Integrative thinking; boundary spanning; innovation capability; stakeholder engagement	Leadership in cross-disciplinary initiatives; teaching innovation outcomes; external collaboration performance; evidence of bridging academic and administrative domains

3.5. The Connotation and Conceptual Extension of Talent Identification

Talent identification is considered as a forward-looking management process whose core task is to identify individuals who can assume key responsibilities and support organisational development in the future (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Talent identification places greater emphasis on future potential than on current results. It therefore calls for a broader evaluation of an individual's learning capacity, adaptability, and behavioural patterns as they appear in different contexts, rather than relying mainly on a single, narrow route of promotion (Dries, 2013). Talent identification, therefore, considers achieved performance alongside future growth potential and role fit.

Early research on artistic giftedness emphasized that outstanding achievement does not emerge from isolated performances, but from the interaction of creativity, intrinsic motivation, and sustained long-term investment (Winner, 1996). In sport, early competitive success can mask athletes who develop later but have strong long-term potential. This has led scholars to argue for multidimensional evaluation frameworks that track technical, psychological, and physical development over time (Vaeyens et al., 2008). Building on this developmental perspective, recent international research has highlighted the non-linear and context-dependent nature of talent trajectories, underscoring the importance of longitudinal support systems and environmental conditions in shaping talent outcomes (Baker et al., 2019). In gifted education, talent is commonly treated as a developmental process shaped by motivation, psychosocial skills, and sustained opportunities for growth (Subotnik et al., 2018).

Nowadays, educational leadership is not seen as something that automatically follows from position or seniority; rather, it develops through the combined influence of school culture, role-based practice, and developmental opportunities (Leithwood et al., 2020). Hence, identifying young lecturers with educational leadership potential should not only rely on publication counts or research funding, but also focus more on behavioural manifestations in concrete contexts such as teaching, research collaboration, student support, and curriculum development. Effective leadership development is often grounded in sustained observation of individuals' behaviours and learning trajectories, rather than one-off assessments or selection procedures (Day & Dragoni, 2015).

From this viewpoint, the value of talent identification is not to "select the best" from a homogeneous pool but to match organisational strategy and role requirements by placing the "most suitable person" in the "most suitable position" (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). For resource-constrained local universities, developing a scientific talent identification mechanism concerns not only the stability of a mid-level leadership pipeline but also whether young lecturer with governance awareness and organisational capacity can be seen and supported early in their careers. Only when such potential educational leaders are identified in a timely manner and intentionally incorporated into developmen-

tal pathways can local universities gradually build a more resilient educational leadership capacity under conditions of external volatility and internal resource constraints.

4. Methodology

This study is a theoretical exploration that combines conceptual model construction with policy text analysis. The data sources comprise three categories: first, domestic and international research literature focusing on educational leadership, young lecturer development, and talent identification, with particular emphasis on empirical studies and review articles published over the past decade; second, national and local policy documents related to higher education governance, talent development, and performance evaluation, along with institutional documents from some local universities; third, the author's empirical observations from local universities are integrated into the study to supplement understanding of operational details and practical contexts.

4.1. Selection Criteria

Policy and institutional materials were selected to reflect both regulatory authority and day-to-day operability. Priority was given to documents issued by national ministries and provincial/municipal education authorities, especially those that shape governance arrangements, faculty evaluation and incentives, talent development, and succession practices. Materials were retained only when their relevance to locally administered universities was explicit, typically through references to regional service missions, resource constraints, or governance reform requirements, and when their provenance was traceable through public portals or formal institutional circulation. Texts that were largely ceremonial, repetitious, or lacking actionable guidance were excluded to reduce interpretive noise.

Institutional artefacts, such as appraisal templates, committee documentation formats, task logs, and training programme briefs, were treated as exemplars of routine governance processes. They were used to illustrate how KPI and KIP evidence can be documented within existing administrative workflows rather than to provide exhaustive coverage of institutional practice.

4.2. Analytic Procedure

The synthesis drew on a thematic logic that moved iteratively between the organising constructs of the study and recurring patterns in the materials. Reading and coding were guided by KPIs, KIPs, and differentiated career pathways, while attention was kept on constraints repeatedly embedded in policy language and institutional routines—most notably research-dominant evaluation signals, reliance on informal impressions, limited HR capacity, and role conflicts in early-career work. Themes were refined through repeated comparison across literature, policy texts, and institutional artefacts, then used to specify the four functional compo-

nents of YELTI: the identification basis, pathway matching, enabling mechanisms, and dynamic adjustment. The resulting model is therefore grounded in convergent patterns across the three material streams while remaining oriented to operational feasibility in resource-constrained contexts.

To enhance operational clarity, **Table 2** summarizes an evidence-oriented specification of KPIs and leadership-related KIPs and illustrates how each element can be documented through routine institutional data and multi-source feedback.

Table 2. Operationalization of KPIs and KIPs for identifying young educational leadership talent.

Dimension	Sub-dimension	Observable evidence (examples)	Primary data sources	Assessment mode	Illustrative indicators (examples)
KPI (visible performance)	Research quality & contribution	Publications, grant records, project roles	HR/research system, CV, institutional repository	Quantitative + qualitative check	Publication quality/fit; contribution role (PI/Co-I); consistency over time
	Teaching quality & improvement	Course evaluation trends, peer observation, teaching awards	Teaching evaluation system, peer review forms	Quantitative + qualitative	Improvement trajectory; evidence of reflective teaching; student learning outcomes
	Curriculum/programme contribution	Course (re)design, programme accreditation tasks	Curriculum committee minutes, programme docs	Qualitative + document audit	Leading course redesign; alignment with outcomes; coordination across units
	Student development outcomes	Advising outcomes, supervision completion	Graduate office, advising logs	Mixed	Timely completion; student progression; evidence of developmental support
	Service delivery & task completion	Completion of assigned institutional tasks	Office records, task force deliverables	Mixed	On-time delivery; quality of deliverables; reliability under constraints
	Organisational coordination	Coordination in cross-unit tasks; meeting facilitation	Task-force logs, minutes, peer feedback	Qualitative + rubric	Aligning stakeholders; clarifying roles; resolving bottlenecks
KIP (leadership-related intangible performance)	Influence without authority	Ability to mobilise colleagues without positional power	Peer feedback, project collaboration traces	Qualitative	Persuasion, negotiation, coalition building; voluntary followership
	Sensemaking & institutional understanding	Interpreting policy/strategy into workable actions	Reflective notes, supervisor feedback	Qualitative	Explains policy implications; anticipates implementation risks; translates strategy into actions

Continued

Accountability & ownership	Willingness to take responsibility under ambiguity	Supervisor notes, case examples	Qualitative	Owns outcomes; follows through; manages uncertainty constructively
Conflict management & ethical judgement	Handling disputes, fairness, integrity	Incident narratives, 360-degree feedback	Qualitative + critical incidents	De-escalation; principled compromises; fairness and transparency
Team support & capacity building	Mentoring peers; enabling others' success	Mentoring logs, mentee feedback	Mixed	Coaching behaviour; sharing resources; creating psychological safety
Developmental orientation & learning agility	Learning from feedback; adaptive improvement	Portfolio evidence, training records	Mixed	Incorporates feedback; rapid learning; reflective practice and iteration
Value-based leadership	Educational commitment; student-centered orientation	Student feedback, reflective statements	Qualitative	Demonstrates educational purpose; aligns decisions with student development
Boundary spanning	University-industry/government links; cross-disciplinary work	MOUs, project records	Mixed	Initiates partnerships; acts as bridge; coordinates external stakeholders
Digital/data-informed practice	Uses data to diagnose problems and improve governance	System logs, analytics outputs	Mixed	Data-informed decisions; builds dashboards/portfolios; evidence-based improvement

4.3. Making KIPs Observable and Less Impression-Based

To mitigate impression-based judgement, KIPs should be assessed through structured, auditable evidence rather than informal perceptions. This study therefore proposes a “triangulated evidence chain” for KIPs: (a) behaviourally anchored rubrics that translate abstract constructs (e.g., coordination, influence without authority, sensemaking) into observable behavioural descriptors at different proficiency levels; (b) critical-incident documentation (short narratives linked to specific tasks, decisions, and outcomes) to provide verifiable traces of leadership behaviour; and (c) multi-source feedback (e.g., supervisor, peer, and where appropriate, student/partner perspectives) to reduce single-rater bias.

In practice, local universities can adopt a lightweight rubric format (e.g., 3 - 4 performance levels with behavioural anchors) for a small set of high-leverage KIPs such as coordination capability, accountability/ownership, and ethical judgement. Ratings should be supported by at least one piece of documentary evidence (e.g.,

meeting minutes, task logs, project summaries, mentoring records) or a critical-incident note. Periodic rater calibration (brief consensus meetings among department heads/mentors) can further enhance inter-rater consistency without introducing heavy administrative burdens.

Importantly, KIP assessment is not positioned as a stand-alone psychometric instrument in this conceptual paper. Rather, it is an evidence-supported judgement process that becomes more objective as behavioural anchors, multi-source inputs, and auditable traces accumulate over time.

Where appropriate, institutions may adapt established approaches such as behaviourally anchored rating scales and structured 360-degree feedback instruments to local role requirements, with periodic calibration to enhance consistency.

5. Synthesis of Current Practices

5.1. Current Practices of Identifying Young Educational Leadership Talent

Focusing specifically on identification practices, several typical patterns can be observed in the daily operation of local universities. In many institutions, young lecturers' leadership potential is primarily demonstrated in everyday teaching, research collaboration, and school-level or departmental affairs, for example, serving as course leaders, organisers of teaching-research activities, or members of school/college projects. However, governance-related performance is often not within the "field of vision" of prevailing evaluation systems. Behaviours closely associated with leadership, such as coordination, team support, and communication, lack standardised mechanisms for documentation and feedback and thus often rely on the impression-based judgements of individual managers (Bryman, 2007). The problem, therefore, is not a lack of promising young lecturers but rather the lack of institutionalised settings and mechanisms that can identify and track such potential consistently.

Existing studies suggest that talent identification in local universities often resembles incidental discovery rather than deliberately designed proactive scouting. Lecturers are frequently perceived as "leadership-suitable" because they have once taken charge of departmental affairs, a college project, or a major event and were noticed by an individual leader through performance in a specific task, rather than through structured development processes and evidence-based assessment procedures. Unfortunately, these issues were identified years ago (Bolden et al., 2008; Deem et al., 2003). As a result, identification outcomes depend heavily on whether opportunities happen to arise, whether administrative positions happen to be available, and whether managers are familiar with specific individuals, rather than on transparent competency standards and stable procedures.

In addition, local universities commonly lack external perspectives and cross-institutional comparisons when identifying young educational leadership talent. Assessments are largely conducted internally, which can be influenced by organi-

sational culture and interpersonal networks. Some faculty with organisational sensitivity and governance awareness may remain “low visibility” for long periods due to limited platforms for demonstration (Middlehurst, 2018). In terms of incentive mechanisms, the close linkage between promotion and research metrics makes it difficult for faculty to balance governance responsibilities, while the weight of governance tasks themselves remains relatively low in performance evaluations and recognition systems (Liu, 2022). Under such conditions, young lecturer’s engagement in governance often stems from responsibility or relational trust rather than being viewed as a clear, predictable career pathway. Taken together, these factors weaken local universities’ capacity for systematic identification and sustained development of young educational leadership talent.

5.2. International and Domestic Experience in Identifying Young Educational Leadership Talent

1) Practices in China

In Chinese universities, the identification of young educational leadership talent is often embedded within existing personnel evaluation systems. A common approach remains to treat research outputs as the primary proxy for young academics’ potential. Publication counts, project tiering, and research awards provide visible and quantifiable internal benchmarks. While such indicators are administratively convenient, they substantially weaken the assessment of capabilities that are central to governance practice, such as communication and coordination, organisational judgement, and value-based leadership (Liu, 2022). In some local universities, managers also attempt to infer organisational capability by observing faculty performance in routine administrative affairs—for example, course administration, departmental coordination, or academic event organisation. These activities can indeed reveal early competencies in policy execution and teamwork; however, the criteria are often discretionary and heavily dependent on supervisors’ personal judgements.

In recent years, some institutions have increasingly recognized that the development of young talent is both staged and systemic and have begun to explore more comprehensive identification approaches. For instance, some researchers draw on scientometric methods to examine young scholars’ latent growth trajectories through collaboration networks and research influence, thereby offering new perspectives for identifying young academics with organisational impact (Haunschild & Bornmann, 2023; Lu et al., 2021). Other teams have developed competency frameworks for young scientific and technological talent, emphasizing innovation capability, teamwork, and organisational contribution, which provides cross-domain theoretical references for identifying educational leadership potential (Zhu & Zhang, 2025). In addition, studies have noted that young academics’ development is shaped by regional policy environments, resource allocation, and organisational culture (Liu, 2017; Zhu & Zhang, 2025); thus, local universities should account for external structural constraints when designing talent

support systems. Overall, these explorations suggest that domestic practices are gradually shifting from single-factor indicators toward more developmental and multidimensional approaches, though the field remains at an early stage.

2) Practices Internationally

Across different national higher education systems, young lecturers' leadership potential is rarely identified through a single indicator. Instead, it tends to surface gradually through professional development arrangements and routine organisational operations (Nowack & Mashih, 2012; Smither et al., 2005). In the United States, some universities place leadership development in authentic settings, using project management, cross-unit collaboration, and structured feedback to observe how faculty perform in complex tasks (Atwater & Waldman, 1998; Nowack & Mashih, 2012; Smither et al., 2005). Early initiatives-such as the 360-degree feedback programme applied at the University of West Florida-were used to support the development of mid-level academic managers and to help participants gain multidimensional awareness of their communication, coordination, and decision-making patterns. Subsequent work on multisource feedback suggests that 360-degree feedback can strengthen self-insight and reflective learning, particularly when it is accompanied by coaching and follow-up goal setting (Nowack & Mashih, 2012; Smither et al., 2005).

Evidence from a single-case implementation suggests that a leadership team may be able to accelerate a shift toward a more digital-oriented organisational culture within roughly one year, although the pace and sustainability of such change are likely to be context dependent (Ghamrawi & Tamim, 2023). At a system level, evidence also suggests close associations between leadership styles and digital transformation performance in public higher education (Carvalho et al., 2022). Meanwhile, a systematic review on barriers to digital transformation indicates that limited faculty digital competence, organisational resistance to change, and resource constraints jointly impede the implementation of digital strategies (Gkrimpizi et al., 2023). Collectively, these findings imply that identifying young educational leadership talent should consider capabilities related to leading digital teaching, promoting data-informed decision-making, and enabling cross-unit collaboration, rather than focusing only on conventional administrative or academic indicators.

In the United Kingdom, external evaluation regimes and institutional design have increased the visibility of teaching quality and student outcomes. Universities create conditions under which early-career academics' diverse competencies can be more comprehensively represented. The implementation of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), for instance, has made teaching quality, learning experience, and student outcomes non-negotiable responsibilities, indirectly encouraging early-career academics' engagement in teaching organisation and academic service (Office for Students, 2024). In parallel, some universities provide integrated development frameworks that span teaching, research, service, and leadership, allowing young lecturers to understand organisational logics through

varied tasks and to build governance awareness through authentic responsibility (Advance HE, 2025). For example, the University of Glasgow’s Early Career Development Programme encourages early-career staff to accumulate experience in teamwork, curriculum development, and small-scale project management, thereby laying foundations for subsequent role transitions (University of Glasgow, 2025).

Compared with the UK’s emphasis on institutionalised pathways, Australian universities often highlight national-level capability frameworks that guide institutional practice. The “Learning Leaders” initiative launched by the Australian learning and teaching council suggests that early-career academics’ organisational influence is closely related to their performance in interdisciplinary collaboration, teaching innovation projects, and problem-solving (Scott et al., 2008). Accordingly, many Australian universities deliberately design development programmes in which early-career academics rotate through coordination and management tasks, enabling their organisational strengths and weaknesses to become visible as they support team goals and implement teaching reforms.

These experiences converge on one core implication: young educational leadership talent is typically identified progressively through authentic educational contexts. Whether through multi-source feedback in the US, multidimensional evaluation systems in the UK, or task-based participation in Australia, leadership is treated as a capability that becomes visible through practice, interaction, and developmental trajectories, rather than being inferred from narrow academic outputs alone. Such context, process, and interaction-oriented identification provides valuable insights for understanding how local universities can more scientifically recognize young lecturer’s governance potential.

6. Developing Identification Strategies and the YELTI Model

When identifying young educational leadership talent, local universities face a dual set of constraints. On the one hand, they operate under limited resources, restricted leadership positions, and largely undifferentiated career structures. On the other hand, they are also shaped by entrenched evaluation inertia-especially the “research-only” orientation-which makes it difficult to directly replicate practices from comprehensive or research-intensive universities. From the perspective of differentiated career pathways, this study proposes an identification approach structured around a core sequence: potential identification - pathway matching - sustained development. Building on three reference pathways-academic leadership, administrative governance, and hybrid development-the paper constructs a context-sensitive and operational Young Educational Leadership Talent Identification Development Model (YELTI) (see Figure 1). The model systematically clarifies the internal logic of key questions: what to look for, who should do what, and how to follow up over time. In brief, the YELTI model consists of four inter-related components:

Identification basis: multidimensional criteria combining KPIs and KIPs;

Pathway matching: differentiated cultivation aligned with academic leadership, administrative governance, and hybrid pathways;

Enabling mechanisms: tools such as role-based practice, internal/external appraisal, and digital profiling;

Dynamic adjustment: a long-cycle process in which development portfolios and re-matching mechanisms enable continuous refinement.

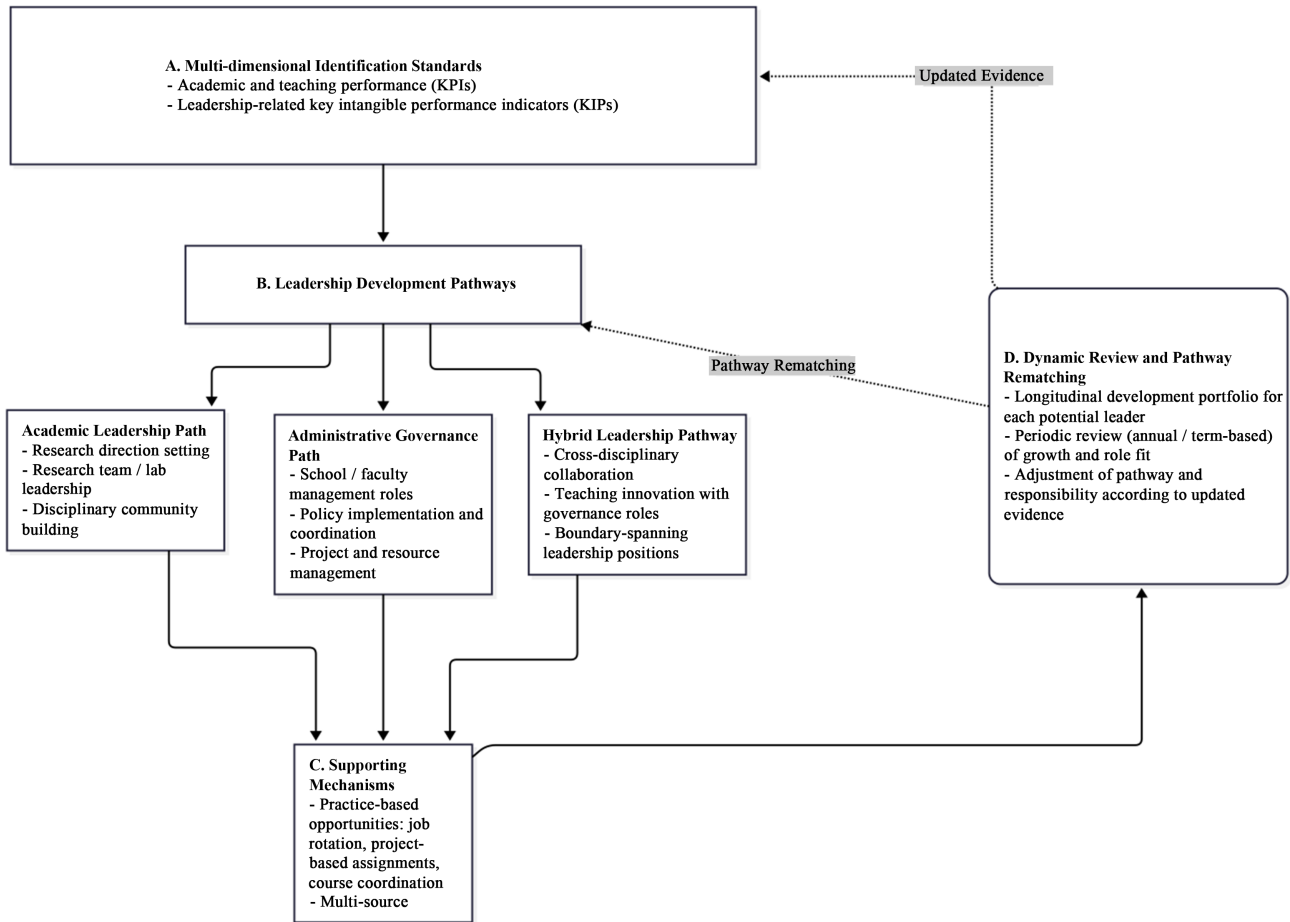


Figure 1. The YELTI model (Source: Authors' elaboration based on the literature and policy documents.).

A Multi-dimensional Identification Standards Framework. The model integrates multidimensional identification criteria (KPIs and KIPs), differentiated career pathways, supporting mechanisms, and dynamic review processes into a coherent identification-development chain under resource-constrained conditions.

To operationalise identification criteria, this study distinguishes between KPIs and KIPs, as summarized in **Table 3**.

In terms of identification criteria, local universities should attend simultaneously to observable achievements and less visible leadership potential. Indicators such as publication quality, project level, curriculum development, teaching feedback, and student development outcomes may serve as baseline conditions for inclusion in the candidate pool, reflecting young lecturers' professional com-

petence and work engagement. However, educational leadership potential is often manifested through a set of KIPs that are not easily captured through simple metrics. Examples include the ability to coordinate diverse roles and interests in cross-unit work, to build consensus and drive implementation in academic teams, to assume responsibility and negotiate workable compromises in conflict situations, to support colleagues and students' growth, and to demonstrate a stable and coherent understanding of institutional rules and organisational dynamics.

Table 3. Key performance indicators (KPIs) and key intangible performance indicators (KIPs) for identifying young educational leadership talent.

Dimension	Indicator Type	Indicator Category	Description	Typical Evidence Sources
Professional Foundation	KPI	Academic outputs	Quality of publications, projects, or recognized scholarly outputs demonstrating disciplinary competence	Journal articles; funded projects; academic awards
	KPI	Teaching performance	Course delivery quality, curriculum development, and student learning outcomes	Teaching evaluations; curriculum materials; peer reviews
Organisational Engagement	KPI	Institutional participation	Participation in committees, task forces, or institutional projects	Appointment records; project documentation
	KPI	Role responsibility	Completion of assigned coordination or management tasks	Administrative records; supervisor reports
Leadership Potential	KIP	Coordination capability	Ability to align diverse interests and facilitate cooperation across units	Peer feedback; meeting observations; project reflections
	KIP	Communication effectiveness	Clarity, responsiveness, and trust-building in formal and informal interactions	360-degree feedback; colleague interviews
Developmental Orientation	KIP	Learning agility	Willingness and capacity to learn from experience and adapt to new roles	Reflective notes; professional development records
	KIP	Role motivation	Intrinsic willingness to engage in governance or leadership-related responsibilities	Development interviews; self-statements
Value-Based Leadership	KIP	Responsibility awareness	Readiness to assume responsibility and sustain commitment under pressure	Supervisor assessments; critical incident reviews
	KIP	Ethical judgment	Fairness, integrity, and sensitivity to institutional values	Peer evaluation; ethics committee feedback

Continued

Organisational Understanding	KIP	Institutional literacy	Understanding of policies, procedures, and governance processes	Policy application cases; administrative training records
	KIP	Systemic thinking	Ability to connect individual actions with broader institutional goals	Strategic discussions; planning documents
Boundary-Spanning Capacity	KIP	Collaboration orientation	Openness to interdisciplinary or cross-sector collaboration	Joint projects; external cooperation records
	KIP	Integration capability	Ability to integrate teaching, research, and service functions	Programme reports; project outcomes

Such characteristics typically emerge in routine contexts—teaching and research group activities, collaborative projects, task forces, and student-related coordination. They therefore require intentional documentation through daily observation, peer and student feedback, and periodic developmental conversations, rather than relying on one-off impressions. In other words, identification standards in local universities should combine KPI with KIP, so that decisions are not made solely on what a person has achieved, but also on how results are achieved and why certain actions are taken.

6.1. Pathway Design: Moving Beyond a Single Route to Administration

In terms of development pathways, local universities should avoid offering only a single, linear route toward administrative appointment. Instead, they should pre-define several relatively clear career channels aligned with lecturers' competence profiles and developmental aspirations. For those who demonstrate strengths in discipline development, research team organisation, and major project management, institutions may encourage engagement in academic leadership roles—for example, participation in academic committees, research platforms, and strategic planning for disciplinary directions. For those with stronger institutional understanding, operational coordination ability, and cross-unit integration capacity, institutions may gradually assign administrative governance responsibilities through positions in school/college leadership teams, functional departments, and reform-oriented task projects. At the same time, a limited but important space should be reserved for hybrid development among faculty who combine teaching innovation, research integration, and external collaboration—for example, leading interdisciplinary teaching reform initiatives, university-local government platforms, or industry-education integration projects.

Through a “pathway anticipation + practice-based validation” approach, young lecturers are no longer “randomly appointed when needed,” but instead accumulate governance experience along clearer trajectories and refine their role identities through structured practice.

6.2. Clarifying the Hybrid Development Pathway and Managing Role Conflicts

The hybrid development pathway does not indicate a lack of specialisation. Rather, it represents a boundary-spanning form of specialisation in which an individual demonstrates integrative capability across academic and governance domains (e.g., teaching innovation with institutional coordination, industry-university collaboration, interdisciplinary programme design, or data-informed governance initiatives). The defining feature is not “doing everything”, but the capacity to connect domains and translate across logics, stakeholders, and constraints.

Because hybrid roles may generate role overload and conflicting performance expectations (e.g., research outputs vs. coordination responsibilities), the YELTI model treats role conflict as a design issue rather than an individual deficit. Institutions can mitigate tensions by specifying (a) a primary “home” domain for evaluation (academic unit or functional unit), (b) time allocation and task boundaries for the secondary domain, and (c) joint mentoring and feedback arrangements that align expectations across domains. In addition, hybrid development can be staged through time-bounded rotations or project-based assignments, allowing role fit to be validated through practice without locking individuals into unsustainable dual obligations.

To ensure that leadership potential is observed in authentic contexts, **Table 4** maps key identification channels to concrete practice arenas and observable leadership signals.

Table 4. Identification channels and practice arenas for young educational leadership talent in local universities.

Identification Channel	Practice Arena	Typical Roles or Activities	Observable Leadership Signals	Primary Evaluation Sources
Teaching and Curriculum Roles	Courses and programmes	Course leader; curriculum coordinator; teaching reform project member	organisation of teaching tasks; coordination among instructors; responsiveness to student needs	Teaching evaluations; peer observation; curriculum review records
Research Collaboration	Research teams and projects	Project coordinator; team secretary; cross-disciplinary collaborator	Facilitation of collaboration; mediation of task allocation; sustained team contribution	Project reports; co-author networks; supervisor feedback
Departmental and College Governance	Academic units	Programme director; committee member; task force participant	Policy understanding; procedural compliance; consensus building	Meeting minutes; chair evaluations; administrative records
Institutional Task Projects	University-wide initiatives	Member of reform task groups; major event organiser	Cross-unit coordination; problem-solving under constraints	Project summaries; leadership reflections; internal reviews

Continued

Student Development and Support	Student affairs and advising	Academic advisor; internship coordinator; student support liaison	Responsibility awareness; communication effectiveness; mentoring orientation	Student feedback; advising logs; case documentation
Inter-institutional Collaboration	Regional or sectoral platforms	Joint programme coordinator; alliance project member	Boundary-spanning capability; adaptability in unfamiliar contexts	Partner feedback; cooperation agreements; external evaluations
Professional Development Programmes	Leadership and training schemes	Participant in leadership programmes; action learning projects	Reflective capacity; learning agility; leadership aspiration	Training portfolios; reflection reports; mentor assessments
Digital and Data-Supported Contexts	Institutional information systems	Contributor to digital governance initiatives; data-informed decision support	Evidence-based reasoning; systemic thinking	System logs; analytics outputs; project dashboards

6.3. Identification Channels and Practice Arenas for Young Educational Leadership Talent in Local Universities

Regarding identification channels and practice arenas, local universities can make targeted adjustments without exceeding existing resource constraints. Internally, positions such as course leaders, key members of teaching-research sections, members of college task forces, and organisers of major institutional events can be treated as priority observation settings. Performance in these roles can be systematically incorporated into the identification of young leadership talent. At the inter-institutional level, regional university alliances, disciplinary conferences, and joint training programmes can create opportunities for cross-university collaboration, offering additional evidence through how young lecturers communicate, demonstrate accountability, and coordinate in unfamiliar environments.

Where feasible, external experts can be invited to conduct structured interviews for potential young administrators, or joint evaluations can be conducted with peer institutions and professional associations. In particular, for academic leadership positions, moderate incorporation of external peer assessment can help reduce bias introduced by “acquaintance culture” and internal relational networks.

6.4. Digital Transformation: Using Analytics as a Complementary Lens

With the advancement of digital transformation, data analytics and knowledge-graph techniques can provide a robust supplement to existing talent identification methods. By integrating information such as collaboration networks, research involvement, academic impact, and teaching or administrative performance, institutions can systematically develop comprehensive profiles. This approach enables more precise identification of potential leadership talent who serve as key inter-

disciplinary connectors or demonstrate sustained contributions to teaching innovation.

A key consideration is that such information should be used to complement, rather than substitute for, managerial judgement, providing an additional lens for recognising “hidden backbone” contributors. When these dynamic indicators are embedded within internal information systems and connected to individual development profiles, they can yield more coherent and actionable evidence to better inform decisions on role allocation and targeted developmental support.6.5 Process management: treating identification as a long-cycle, revisable process

Table 5 summarizes the dynamic identification-development cycle embedded in the YELTI model, highlighting how leadership potential is continuously observed, supported, reviewed, and re-aligned over time.

Table 5. The YELTI model: dynamic identification-development cycle.

Stage	Core Purpose	Key Activities	Main Actors	Evidence Generated	Decision Focus
Initial Identification	Detect early leadership signals	Screening based on KPIs; observation of KIPs in routine tasks	Department heads; peers; teaching teams	Performance records; peer notes; basic portfolios	Whether leadership potential is present
Pathway Matching	Align potential with suitable pathway	Preliminary assignment to academic, administrative, or hybrid pathways	College leadership; HR units	Pathway rationale notes; role assignment records	Which pathway best fits current capability profile
Role-Based Practice	Expose potential through authentic tasks	Participation in committees, projects, coordination roles	Assigned mentors; project leaders	Task outputs; reflective logs; interim feedback	How potential translates into practice
Formative Feedback	Support learning and adjustment	Multi-source feedback; mentoring conversations	Supervisors; mentors; peers	Feedback summaries; mentoring notes	Whether growth trajectory is positive
Developmental Portfolio Review	Consolidate longitudinal evidence	Periodic review of teaching, research, and governance contributions	College committees; HR	Updated development portfolios; review reports	Whether pathway alignment remains appropriate
Pathway Adjustment (if needed)	Reduce early path lock-in	Re-matching through rotation, project reassignment, or open competition	Institutional leadership; HR	Adjustment records; justification documents	Whether redirection improves fit and motivation

Finally, identification should be treated as a long-term process that is continuously revisable, rather than a one-time selection gate. Institutions can establish concise developmental records for key young lecturer and periodically review per-

formance across teaching, research, and governance practice, paying attention to whether competence structures and role identities have shifted substantively. If a lecturer shows limited growth potential along the originally assumed pathway but demonstrates stronger potential in another direction, institutions can provide moderate opportunities for reorientation-through open competition, rotational assignments, or project-based collaboration-thereby reducing excessive “path dependency” in early career decisions. At the cultural level, local universities also need to gradually weaken the single-minded “research-only” evaluation tendency, communicate the value and promotion routes of different career pathways, and ensure that governance contributions can receive reasonable recognition and returns.

Through these interrelated measures, local universities can progressively form a more flexible and continuous mechanism for identifying young leadership talent without substantially increasing costs. Truly high-potential faculty will no longer be pushed to the front merely because they “publish more” or happen to be “present at the right time.” Instead, they can be deliberately identified, developed, and matched to suitable roles through ongoing observation, pathway alignment, and institutional support. This, in turn, helps build a more stable base of educational leadership capacity to sustain long-term institutional development.

6.5. Linking the Framework to Testable Propositions

Early-career academics’ engagement in governance is shaped by individual capability, the visibility and perceived fairness of evaluation signals, and the clarity and predictability of career opportunity structures. When identification relies solely on narrow KPIs, governance-related efforts may be rationally avoided because they yield low recognition and high opportunity costs. Conversely, integrating KIPs into identification standards can increase the perceived legitimacy of governance engagement by making leadership-relevant behaviours visible, documentable, and institutionally valued. Similarly, differentiated pathways can reduce role ambiguity and perceived risk by clarifying what kinds of contributions “count” and how governance engagement translates into career development.

On this basis, two theoretically informed propositions are formulated for subsequent empirical testing:

P1. In local universities, an identification approach that combines KPIs with KIPs is likely to be associated with a higher willingness among early-career academics to undertake governance roles.

P2. Clearly differentiating academic, administrative, and hybrid career pathways is expected to reduce early-career academics’ perceived risks of engaging in governance-related activities.

6.6. Operational Feasibility under Limited Administrative Capacity

The YELTI model is designed to be “resource-adaptive” rather than administratively heavy. For HR-constrained local universities, a minimum viable implemen-

tation can be adopted through three streamlining principles. First, leverage existing data infrastructures: routine teaching evaluation systems, research management platforms, and task-force documentation already produce a substantial portion of KPI evidence and some KIP traces (e.g., coordination records in minutes and deliverables). Second, reduce portfolio complexity by using a concise “one-page portfolio” updated annually, focusing only on (a) a small set of KPI indicators aligned with institutional priorities and (b) 3 - 5 high-leverage KIPs assessed with short rubrics and linked evidence. Third, embed reviews into existing governance cycles (e.g., annual appraisal, promotion review, or departmental performance meetings) rather than creating separate HR-intensive procedures.

Under this streamlined approach, the “long-cycle process” does not imply frequent or bureaucratic re-assessments. Instead, it emphasises continuity of evidence: light-touch, periodic updates that accumulate auditable traces of leadership potential and enable pathway re-matching when significant role-fit changes emerge.

7. Conclusion

This study is situated in the context of China’s local universities and looks at how young educational leadership talent can be developed through differentiated career pathways. It argues that current identification practices still lean heavily on publication counts and research projects as the main signals. These indicators are easy to administer, but they do not adequately reflect young academics’ strengths in organisational coordination, value-oriented leadership, or cross-boundary collaboration.

Building on lessons from both Chinese and international work on educational leadership development, this study proposes a differentiated career-pathway approach to identifying young educational leadership talent. It differentiates three routes-academic leadership, administrative governance, and hybrid pathways-and combines conventional Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) with Key Intangible Performance Indicators (KIPs) to shift identification from a results-only logic toward a development-focused one. In practice, role-based experiences, developmental portfolios, and data-informed evidence (e.g., collaboration patterns and sustained contributions) are used to connect identification with ongoing development, so that leadership potential can be documented, discussed, and strengthened over time rather than judged from one-off performance signals.

The analysis points to several areas where current practice needs to be recalibrated. In setting identification criteria, institutions should uphold basic academic standards while giving more weight to governance-related behaviours and organisational contributions, and should make both the willingness to participate in governance and the quality of that participation visible in evaluation. At the level of career development, earlier signalling, differentiated support, and sustained opportunities for practice can offer young lecturers clearer and more predictable routes, reducing the sense that research outputs are the only credible path forward. In day-to-day operation, local universities can work within resource constraints by using role design, inter-institutional partnerships, selective external re-

view, and incremental improvements to information systems to embed routines that recognise emerging leaders and provide continuing developmental support.

This study does not aim to provide a one-size-fits-all “standard model.” It offers an analytical framework that links local conditions with a clear structure for action. In local universities, identifying young educational leadership talent is more than picking extra candidates for leadership roles. It requires changes in evaluation priorities, role design, development support, and organisational culture. When these adjustments are made, differentiated career pathways can be put into practice and, even with limited resources, local universities can build stronger and more sustainable educational leadership capacity. Consistent with this logic, the framework yields two testable propositions for future empirical work. P1 predicts that integrating KPIs with KIPs will be associated with stronger willingness among early-career academics to undertake governance roles. P2 predicts that clearer differentiation among academic, administrative, and hybrid pathways will reduce perceived risks of governance engagement.

8. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study relies mainly on literature analysis and conceptual synthesis. It offers an analytical framework for identifying young educational leadership talent in local universities from a differentiated career-pathway perspective, but the framework has not yet been tested empirically. Its applicability and effectiveness have not been examined through surveys, in-depth interviews, or longitudinal case studies. The KPI/KIP dimensions also remain conceptual and have not been translated into validated scales or assessment tools.

The study focus is largely on resource-constrained local universities in China. This limits how far the findings can be extended to other institutional types, such as research-intensive universities, or to higher education systems shaped by different national and regional governance arrangements.

Subsequent research can strengthen the framework through mixed-methods designs, combining quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and longitudinal tracking to refine and validate the proposed identification model. Related work can also develop practical instruments for the KPI/KIP dimensions to improve usability in real settings. Alongside these efforts, big-data analytics and knowledge-graph techniques may help capture leadership potential through behavioural and relational data, enabling comparisons across institution types and contexts. Future studies can also examine the two propositions advanced in this paper using quantitative analysis and in-depth case evidence, to further evaluate the applicability and explanatory power of the YELTI model in identifying and developing young educational leadership talent.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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