

Competency Research on Ideological and Political Theory Course Teachers in Chinese Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review (2019–2025)

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ABSTRACT

Systematic research on competency began in the 1970s and became a prominent field of study by the late 20th century. Following the introduction of competency concepts into education, teacher competency and higher education faculty competency have become research hotspots. In the past decade, with increasing societal emphasis on ideological and political (IPT) education, IPT courses, and IPT teacher workforce development, research on IPT course teachers' competency in higher education has emerged as an increasingly important topic. Studies on conceptual frameworks, model construction, enhancement strategies, as well as relationships between competency and performance, and competency and teaching ability have yielded significant results. However, issues remain regarding research scope, content, methodology, and practical application, necessitating continued improvement in future studies.

Keywords: IPT course teachers in higher education, Competency, Systematic literature review.

1. INTRODUCTION

Competency-based research methodology has generated widespread global influence. Internationally, the formal conceptualization of "competency" originated with McClelland (1973). Since the 1980s, Chinese scholars have increasingly engaged with competency research, applying it extensively in human resource management and education. IPT course¹ teachers' competency represents a core element determining the effectiveness of moral education² in IPT courses. Since the 2019 National Symposium on IPT Course

Teachers³, research in this field has grown rapidly, becoming a cross-disciplinary focus of attention.

However, existing research exhibits fragmented themes, diverse theoretical perspectives, and significant context-dependency, lacking a systematic knowledge integration framework. This has prevented scholars from achieving a holistic understanding of the research landscape and its evolutionary logic. Accordingly, this study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to systematically search, screen, and analyze 207 core Chinese and English academic publications (including journal articles and dissertations) published between 2019 and 2025.

Drawing from "simple causal," "contingency," and "process" perspectives, the researchers identify 17 core research threads in this field and construct an integrative knowledge framework encompassing

1. Ideological and Political Theory (IPT) courses are mandatory courses in Chinese higher education institutions that focus on Marxist theory, socialist core values, Chinese history, and moral education. They are a distinctive feature of China's higher education system aimed at cultivating students' political awareness and moral character.

2. "Lide Shuren" (立德树人) is the fundamental task of education in China, emphasizing the cultivation of moral character as the foundation for nurturing talent. It can be translated as "fostering virtue and cultivating talent" or "moral education and talent cultivation."

3. This symposium, chaired by President Xi Jinping on March 18, 2019, marked a pivotal moment for IPT education reform in China, establishing new standards and expectations for IPT teachers.

"Antecedent–Process–Context–Outcome" (APCO). Finally, from dimensions of research themes, theoretical perspectives, research contexts, and research design, we propose future research directions and potential pathways. This study aims to address: What core themes and developmental trajectories have emerged in IPT course teachers' competency research? How can an integrative knowledge framework be constructed to systematically present the current state of research? What future research directions merit deeper exploration? The ultimate goal is to construct a knowledge taxonomy for IPT course teachers' competency research and provide academic support for building a high-quality, professional teacher workforce.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology. Compared with traditional narrative reviews, SLR minimizes researcher bias through clearly defined literature search, screening, analysis, and synthesis procedures, ensuring transparency, reproducibility, and reliability of findings. The specific steps follow the standardized pathway of "formulating research questions—systematic literature search—establishing screening criteria—data extraction and coding—synthesis and framework construction."

Using China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and Web of Science Core Collection as primary databases, Chinese search terms included "college IPT course teachers" combined with "competency" or "literacy," while English search terms were "ideological and political theory course teacher" AND ("competency" OR "competence" OR "literacy"). The timeframe was limited to January 1, 2019, through December 31, 2025. Initial searches yielded 1,246 articles.

Three rounds of screening were conducted: (1) reading titles and abstracts to eliminate clearly irrelevant or non-academic publications; (2) reading full texts to exclude studies not focused on higher education IPT course teachers or not using "competency" as a core analytical concept; (3) supplementing key literature through snowball sampling of references. This process yielded 207 valid publications, including 162 Chinese journal articles, 32 dissertations, and 13 English-language papers.

Content analysis of selected literature began with descriptive statistics analyzing publication

trends, research methods, and journal distribution. Subsequently, thematic coding and categorization extracted core propositions regarding competency drivers, development processes, contextual influences, and performance outcomes. Building on this foundation and drawing from the classic "Antecedent–Process–Outcome" (APO) framework in organizational behavior, while incorporating the Context dimension emphasized in international business research, we constructed the "Antecedent (A)–Process (P)–Context (C)–Outcome (O)" integrative analytical framework (APCO framework) applicable to this field. This framework aims to systematically present the logical relationships among variables.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Since competency concepts were introduced into Chinese education research in the 1980s, high-frequency authors include Chen Hongyan (7 articles), Feng Haoqing (4 articles), Wen Long (3 articles), Jin Jiaxin (3 articles), Ma Shuqiang (3 articles), and Li Jianhua (3 articles). Over the past five years (2019–2025), research in this field has demonstrated "explosive" growth, with publications increasing rapidly from 2019, peaking during 2022–2024. In 2025, literature focusing on "digital-intelligent competency" and "the Spirit of Educator" has become a new growth area, confirming this field's characteristic responsiveness to national strategies and contemporary themes.

Research has primarily been published in IPT education specialty journals such as Journal of School Party Building and Ideological Education, Leading Journal of Ideological & Theoretical Education, and Heilongjiang Researches on Higher Education, as well as comprehensive education journals including Journal of Yangzhou University (Higher Education Study Edition) and Higher Education Forum. English-language publications appear in journals addressing corporate social responsibility and education, such as Journal of Business Ethics and Sustainability.

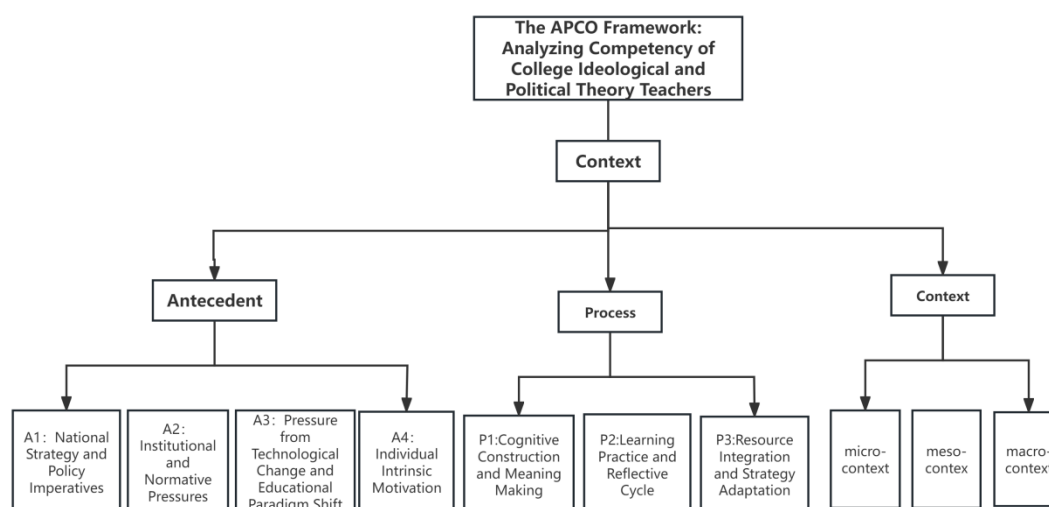


Figure 1 APCO integrative framework for IPT course teachers' competency research.

Early-stage research (2019–2021) focused on foundational theory construction and general model exploration, addressing the meta-question of "what core competencies should IPT course teachers possess in the new era" (Jin & Gu, 2019; Chang, 2021). Mid-stage research (2022–2024) moved toward refinement and contextualization—on one hand focusing on competencies of specific groups such as newly hired and young teachers (Feng, 2019; Wang & Cao, 2023; Cui, 2025), and on the other closely aligning with national education digitalization strategies, with digital competency emerging as a research frontier (Chen & Sun, 2024; Shen, 2025). Recent research (2024–2025) has further evolved into discussions of "digital-intelligent competency," emphasizing deep integration of technological rationality and educational essence in the AI era (Zhang, 2025), while expanding competency's value connotations and practical domains through new contexts such as "the Spirit of Educator"⁴ (Wang & Zhuang, 2025) and "Comprehensive IPT Education"⁵ construction (Ouyang & Fang, 2024).

Based on deep coding and synthesis of the literature, we have organized the APCO integrative

framework for current IPT course teachers' competency research (see "Figure 1").

3.1 Research on Antecedents of IPT Course Teachers' Competency (Antecedent)

Research indicates that IPT course teachers' competency development is driven by multi-level factors, constituting the research starting point.

- National Strategy and Policy Drivers (A1) represent the most macro and powerful driving factors. These include top-level designs such as "Comprehensive IPT Education" construction (Ouyang et al., 2024), the Education Digitalization Strategic Action (Chen et al., 2024), and reform opinions on teacher workforce development in the new era, which directly define new connotations and requirements for competency.
- Institutional and Normative Pressures (A2) refer to normative expectations formed by universities' internal evaluation, promotion, and training systems, as well as academic communities and public opinion. Incorporating teaching innovation and digital teaching outcomes into professional title evaluation constitutes institutional incentives or constraints (Chen et al., 2025).
- Technological Change and Educational Paradigm Transformation Pressures (A3) indicate that technologies including artificial intelligence and big data not only require teachers to master new tools (digital skills) but also drive profound

4. "The Spirit of Educator" (教育家精神) was formally proposed by President Xi Jinping in September 2024, encompassing ideals such as dedication to education, moral cultivation, enlightenment through knowledge, and commitment to students' holistic development.

5. "Da Sizhengke" (大思政课), Comprehensive IPT Education) refers to an integrated approach that extends ideological and political education beyond traditional classroom settings to encompass the entire campus environment, social practices, and collaborative efforts across disciplines.

reshaping of teaching philosophy, models, and teacher-student relationships, forming the new dimension of "digital-intelligent competency" (Zhang, 2025).

- Teachers' Individual Intrinsic Motivation (A4) includes teachers' professional identity, sense of mission for moral education, willingness for continuous learning, self-efficacy, and personal career development plans (He, 2025; Yuan, 2024).

3.2 Research on IPT Course Teachers' Competency Enhancement Processes (Process)

The process dimension reveals intermediate transformation pathways from antecedents to outcomes, serving as the key to opening the "development black box".

- Cognitive Construction and Meaning Generation (P1) refers to how teachers understand and internalize external requirements, such as the "Six Requirements"⁶ and "the Spirit of Educator," transforming them into personal educational beliefs and action guidelines. This involves complex psychological and cognitive activities including policy interpretation, value identification, and role reconstruction (Wang & Zhuang, 2025).
- Learning, Practice, and Reflection Cycles (P2) constitute the core mechanism for competency enhancement. These include specific actions such as participating in targeted training (Cui, 2025), conducting teaching experiments (e.g., blended learning), engaging in action research, participating in teaching research communities, and individual teaching reflection (Liu, 2022).
- Resource Integration and Strategy Adaptation (P3) involves teachers proactively obtaining and integrating various resources—such as digital teaching resources, on- and off-campus practice bases, and peer support—and flexibly adjusting teaching strategies according to different teaching contexts and task requirements (Yan et al., 2024).

6. The "Six Requirements" (六要) were proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2019, stipulating that IPT teachers should: (1) have strong political beliefs, (2) possess profound feelings for the nation, (3) demonstrate innovative thinking, (4) maintain a broad vision, (5) exercise strict self-discipline, and (6) embody integrity.

3.3 Research on IPT Course Teachers' Competency Environmental Ecology (Context)

Contextual elements are not merely background but profoundly moderate the intensity and direction of antecedent-to-process and process-to-outcome relationships.

- Micro-context encompasses individual teacher and group characteristics, such as teaching experience, disciplinary background, personal experiences (Hu, 2024), and the cultural atmosphere of teaching and research offices or teams. New teachers and experienced teachers face distinctly different developmental challenges and pathways (Duan, 2024).
- Meso-context refers to institutional organizational ecology, including university type, mission positioning, emphasis on IPT courses, institutional support provided, resource investment, and campus culture, which constitute teachers' immediate "micro-environment" for development (Shen, 2024).
- Macro-context encompasses the broader sociocultural atmosphere, stage-specific characteristics of technological development, and requirements for higher education universalization and high-quality development. These macro factors establish the contemporary stage and fundamental constraints for teacher development.

3.4 Research on Outcomes of IPT Course Teachers' Competency Enhancement (Outcome)

The outcome dimension reflects multiple performance indicators of competency enhancement, divisible into direct results and derivative benefits.

- Direct Teaching Performance represents the most core outcome, manifested as improved classroom teaching quality, enhanced student satisfaction and identification, teaching competition awards, and teaching achievement outputs (Liu, 2022).
- Teacher Professional Development is reflected in teachers' personal growth in knowledge, skills, and attitudes, such as enhanced digital literacy, strengthened research capabilities, and improved

professional well-being and identity (Ding, 2024).

- Organizational and Ecological Contributions are manifested in the radiating effects produced by excellent teachers and teams, such as developing replicable teaching models, promoting collective development among teaching research offices or regional teachers, contributing quality teaching resources, and enhancing the overall brand of institutional IPT education (Wang, 2022).

3.5 Research Methods and Theoretical Perspectives

Regarding research methods, empirical research predominates (approximately 65%), primarily quantitative research combining questionnaire surveys with statistical analysis (e.g., Shen, 2024, 2025), with considerable research also employing Delphi method and Analytic Hierarchy Process for indicator model construction (e.g., Cui, 2025; Hao, 2023). Qualitative research accounts for approximately 25%, mainly adopting grounded theory (Wang & Jia, 2024), case studies (Teng, 2022), and in-depth interviews. Mixed methods and purely theoretical speculative research remain relatively scarce.

Regarding theoretical perspectives, institutional theory is most widely applied, used to explain the influence of external pressures such as policies and social norms on competency requirements and teacher behavior. Stakeholder theory ranks second, analyzing how multiple demands from students, institutions, and society shape teacher roles. Additionally, the resource-based view (explaining personal and organizational resource investment), social cognitive theory (explaining self-efficacy), and teacher professional development theory are employed to varying degrees.

3.6 Limitations of Existing Research

Despite significant achievements, existing research still exhibits limitations in integration.

First, research themes remain fragmented. Existing studies separately explore model construction, status assessment, digital literacy, and group characteristics, but lack an overarching framework to organically connect them, making it difficult to present the field's overall landscape and internal logic.

Second, theoretical application is fragmented. Although institutional theory, stakeholder theory, and resource-based view are widely used, dialogue and integration among multiple theories remain insufficient, failing to provide penetrating explanations of the competency generation mechanism for IPT course teachers as a unique role.

Third, while contextual complexity is prominent, analysis remains insufficient. IPT course teachers' competency development is deeply influenced by multi-level contexts including macro policies, meso institutional ecology, and micro personal experiences, but most research either focuses on single levels or insufficiently explores the moderating effects of context.

Fourth, revelation of the "process black box" remains limited. Substantial research focuses on antecedent drivers and outcome performance indicators, but insufficiently reveals the dynamic mechanisms of the intermediate transformation process—"how to enhance"—from cognition to action, from individual to collaborative.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

4.1 Deepening and Expanding Research Themes

Future research needs to deepen process mechanism studies, employing more longitudinal tracking, narrative inquiry, and design-based research methods to thoroughly reveal specific transformation mechanisms of teacher competency at "cognition–practice–reflection" stages, particularly key processes such as internalization of "the Spirit of Educator" and integration of digital-intelligent technology.

Beyond teaching effectiveness, greater attention should be paid to competency enhancement's impact on students' long-term value formation, teachers' professional vitality, and disciplinary community building—expanding the breadth of medium- to long-term, latent outcome variables.

Simultaneously, "challenge" research should be strengthened, focusing on potential issues during competency enhancement such as overload burden, technology anxiety, innovation risks, and ethical dilemmas, exploring their causes and mitigation strategies.

4.2 Diversifying and Enriching Research Perspectives

The hallmark of any mature research field is first the richness of research perspectives. Current IPT course teachers' competency research exhibits relatively narrow perspectives, primarily manifested in insufficient refinement of research subject group classifications. Most current studies treat higher education IPT course teachers as a single group without further segmentation. Although scattered studies on young IPT course teachers exist, their quantity remains insufficient.

From the perspective of winning over youth to win the future, using advanced competency concepts to construct competency models and indicator systems for young IPT course teachers, and applying competency models to selection, performance management, and training systems for young teachers—providing scientific bases for selecting, evaluating, and training still-malleable young IPT course teachers—carries significant value and will inevitably produce important effects on overall improvement of young IPT course teachers' competency.

Looking holistically at perfecting research perspectives for IPT teacher competency, future research perspectives can be enriched as follows: from the institutional classification angle, universities can be categorized into vocational colleges and undergraduate institutions, engineering-focused and humanities-focused universities, private and public schools. From the personnel angle, by age group, segmentation can distinguish young teachers and mid-career teacher groups; by region, categories can include economically developed provinces and central-western regions. From the correlation angle, research can address competency-performance relationships, competency and faculty recruitment, etc.

Additionally, promoting multi-theory dialogue and integration is essential—combining institutional theory with community of practice theory to analyze how policies are implemented through teacher communities; combining conservation of resources theory with the job demands-resources model to explore sustainable pathways for teacher competency development under resource-limited conditions. Cross-disciplinary theoretical perspectives should also be introduced, drawing from learning sciences, communication studies, and computer-supported

collaborative learning (CSCL) theories to deepen understanding of new teacher competency characteristics in digitalized, collaborative educational scenarios.

Approaching from different research perspectives can substantially expand the scope of IPT course teachers' competency research, thereby facilitating more comprehensive, detailed, and targeted model construction and strategy formulation.

4.3 Strengthening Empirical and Scientific Research Methods

Regardless of how IPT teacher competency is modeled, its core orientation must be improving IPT work practice. Consequently, constructing IPT teacher competency models and cultivation methods based on data analysis from practice represents the most feasible research paradigm. This means that truly scientific IPT teacher competency models must inevitably be systematic presentations based on big data analysis.

Currently, research on higher education IPT teacher competency has been limited to single regions or individual universities, with sample size and geographic distribution limitations potentially affecting research representativeness and persuasiveness.

Future research requires emphasis on optimizing and innovating research design. Mixed research methods should be adopted, combining the breadth of large-sample surveys with the depth of case studies and ethnography. New technologies including social network analysis, text mining, and learning analytics should be actively applied to analyze data such as teachers' online teaching research interactions and teaching reflection texts.

Long-term longitudinal studies should be conducted, establishing teacher professional development portfolios and collecting multi-timepoint data to capture the dynamic, non-linear characteristics of competency development. Additionally, greater adoption of action research and participatory design research is warranted, positioning teachers as co-researchers who jointly diagnose problems, design interventions, and evaluate effectiveness, thereby enhancing research's practical relevance and ecological validity.

5. CONCLUSION

Through systematic review of IPT course teachers' competency research from 2019 to 2025, this study constructs an integrative APCO knowledge framework, systematically organizing the field's complex logical network from "driving factors" to "performance outcomes," traversing "development processes" and "contextual moderation."

Research findings indicate that this field has rapidly evolved from early-stage conceptual model construction to exploration of deep issues including digital empowerment, spiritual guidance, and contextual adaptation, demonstrating robust vitality and practical orientation.

Future research needs to build upon the existing solid foundation to further penetrate the process black box, integrate theoretical perspectives, refine contextual analysis, and innovate research methods, thereby constructing more explanatory and guiding theories of IPT course teacher competency development with Chinese characteristics. This will provide sustained knowledge contributions and practical wisdom for forging a high-quality, professional IPT course teacher workforce that "reassures the Party and satisfies students".

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independent completed by Professor Junjie Tian.

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