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## The Professionalization of University Academic Journals in the New Era: Necessity and Possibility

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### Abstract

[Objective] To explore the necessity and feasibility of specialized development of university academic journals in the new era, and to provide references for journals to rationally adjust their publishing orientation. [Method] By combining inductive summarization, logical analysis, and literature research, a research framework of “the inherent-the normative-the actual-the enabling” is constructed to comprehensively investigate the contemporary connotations, developmental demands, practical contradictions, and effective pathways of specialized development of university journals. [Results] The transition of journals from comprehensive to specialized is imperative for adapting to disciplinary development in the new era, breaking existing dilemmas, and addressing the Matthew effect. However, they still face contradictions between embedding in academic communities and preserving university “reserved territories,” between constructing professional academic platforms and inertially relying on institutional protection, and between professional journals receiving significant attention and university publishing units being marginalized. [Conclusion] It is necessary to achieve precise positioning and overall planning at the macro-level top design, transform concepts and deepen actions in meso-level framework reconstruction, and upgrade internal cultivation and external integration at the micro-level support, thereby opening a new chapter in the development of university journals in the new era. [Objective] To explore the necessity and feasibility of specialized development of university academic journals in the new era, and to provide references for journals to rationally adjust their publishing orientation. [Method] By combining inductive summarization, logical analysis, and literature research, a research framework of “the inherent-the normative-the actual-the enabling” is constructed to comprehensively investigate the contemporary connotations, developmental demands, practical contradictions, and effective pathways of specialized development of university journals. [Results] The transition of journals from comprehensive to specialized is imperative for adapting

to disciplinary development in the new era, breaking existing dilemmas, and addressing the Matthew effect. However, they still face contradictions between embedding in academic communities and preserving university “reserved territories,” between constructing professional academic platforms and inertially relying on institutional protection, and between professional journals receiving significant attention and university publishing units being marginalized. [Conclusion] It is necessary to achieve precise positioning and overall planning at the macro-level top design, transform concepts and deepen actions in meso-level framework reconstruction, and upgrade internal cultivation and external integration at the micro-level support, thereby opening a new chapter in the development of university journals in the new era.

## Full Text

### Professional Development of University Academic Journals in the New Era: Why Is It Necessary and How Is It Possible?

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## Abstract

[Purpose] This paper explores the necessity and feasibility of professional development for university academic journals in the new era, providing reference for journals to rationally adjust their operational positioning. [Methods] Combining inductive synthesis, logical analysis, and literature review, this study constructs a research framework of “nature—ought—reality—cause” to comprehensively investigate the era-specific connotation, developmental demands, practical contradictions, and effective pathways of professional development for university journals. [Findings] The transition from comprehensive to specialized journals is essential to adapt to disciplinary development in the new era, break existing dilemmas, and address the Matthew effect. However, this transition faces three key contradictions: the tension between embedding in academic communities and clinging to universities’ “private plots,” the conflict between constructing professional academic platforms and inertially relying on institutional protection, and the disparity between the high value placed on professional journals and the marginalization of university publishing units. [Conclusions] Professional development requires precise positioning and coordinated planning at the macro-level top-down design, conceptual transformation and deepened action in meso-level framework reconstruction, and internal cultivation combined

with external integration at the micro-level support enhancement, thereby opening a new chapter in university journal development in the new era.

**Keywords:** university academic journals; specialization; comprehensiveness; journal positioning; transformation and development

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Universities have long been the primary locus of academic journals in China. Beginning with the *Soochow Monthly*—China’s first university journal founded in the early 20th century—Chinese university academic journals emerged on the historical stage with a comprehensive disciplinary orientation. After decades of ups and downs, universities continued this comprehensive positioning following the reform and opening-up, embarking on paths of launching new journals or resuming suspended ones. The turn-of-the-century expansion further proliferated comprehensive university journals, which became the dominant form. However, in recent years, as scientific research has deepened, the vast number of university academic journals has faced severe challenges precisely because of their “comprehensiveness,” exhibiting overall homogenization of content and sluggish quality improvement. Former Minister of Education Yuan Guiren characterized university journals as “comprehensive, scattered, small, and weak,” emphasizing the importance of positioning reform. In 2015, the Ministry of Education and the former State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television jointly issued the *Opinions on Further Strengthening and Improving University Publishing Work*, encouraging university publications to pursue distinctive development paths and encouraging comprehensive university journals to transform into specialized academic journals. In 2021, the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Science and Technology issued the *Opinions on Promoting the Prosperous Development of Academic Journals*, supporting existing academic journals to rationally adjust their positioning, encouraging multidisciplinary comprehensive journals to transition toward specialization, highlighting advantageous fields, refining professional content, developing distinctive columns, and moving toward “specialized, refined, distinctive, and innovative” development. Consequently, the professional development of university academic journals has become a crucial issue for regulatory authorities and university publishing professionals.

Existing scholarship offers valuable perspectives on this topic. Regarding necessity, some scholars argue that comprehensive university journals have fallen into traps of being “academic patchworks,” featuring “thousands of journals with identical faces and low-level repetition,” and becoming “lifeless and characterless.” Some social science journals even produce “academic garbage” and facilitate academic corruption, making specialization an important direction and fundamental trend that demands urgent transformation. Regarding feasibility, scholars find that comprehensiveness and specialization are not mutually exclusive. The former, a historical product, no longer suits modern scientific and technological development, and comprehensive research builds upon extensive specialized research. A rational journal layout should have specialized journals

comprising the majority, with most publications pursuing specialization. Regarding significance, scholars contend that professional development offers clear advantages, continuously strengthening journal brands and quality. This aligns with scientific development's demands on university journals, represents an effective path for enhancing competitiveness, expanding influence, and achieving high-quality development, and may even be the optimal approach for elevating comprehensive university journals' academic standards. Scholars have also examined transformation experiences and outcomes through cases such as *Journal of Water Resources Economics*, *Journal of China University of Petroleum*, *Journal of Food Science and Technology*, and *Journal of Industrial Science*, discussing aspects like disciplinary positioning, special columns, editorial teams, and distribution methods. Additionally, pathways to facilitate professional development have been proposed, including “characterization” as an intermediate zone between comprehensiveness and specialization, and “digitalization” closely related to specialization in the internet era.

Overall, existing research provides important reference value, yet it tends toward case analyses and experience sharing with insufficient systematic investigation, focusing more on specific issues than holistic studies, leaving room for further research. This paper breaks through previous research patterns, closely adhering to the contemporary context of the new era, and constructs a systematic, holistic research framework of “nature—ought—reality—cause” to focus on why university academic journal professional development is necessary and how it is possible. Specifically: at the nature level, it clarifies the concept of “professional development” for journals in the new era; at the ought level, it analyzes why university academic journals “should” transition from comprehensiveness to specialization; at the reality level, it explores the internal contradictions in current professional development against the backdrop of over a century of comprehensive journal history; and further, it identifies an effective pathway with less resistance between ought and reality, addressing how professional development “can be made possible” at the cause level. This study not only responds to the historical debate between comprehensiveness and specialization in university journals, providing theoretical foundations for regulatory management and policy formulation, but also helps university academic journals find their position in the new wave of development, thereby fully realizing their important functions in academic exchange, cultural dissemination, theoretical innovation, and scientific and technological advancement.

## 1. Nature: The Era-Specific Connotation of Professional Development of University Academic Journals

Nature describes what things “originally are.” At this level, university academic journals pursuing scholarship and serving readers in the new era must return to the original meaning of professionalism, which carries sufficient era-specific connotation.

### **1.1 Specialization of Journal Content Through Precise Positioning**

Professionalism and comprehensiveness are relative concepts, distinguished primarily by how many first-level disciplines a journal covers. Professionalism fundamentally features content specialization, requiring journals to concentrate and integrate publishing resources by centralizing disciplinary scope based on their actual conditions and professional characteristics, thereby improving professional quality by strengthening specific areas. Specifically, university academic journals should precisely align content production with disciplinary hotspots, industry development, or regional needs through analysis of their host universities' specific disciplinary advantages, assessment of existing regional industry resources, and consideration of journal development space. They should then establish personalized publishing positioning, clear topic scopes, and distinctive columns centered on improving content quality, attracting professional authors and readers, and achieving differentiated development, highlighted features, refined quality, and specialized strength.

### **1.2 Expertization of Talent Teams Through Open Journal Operation**

In the new era, building talent teams that transcend “institutional” barriers to serve cross-university academic communities represents an intrinsic requirement for professional development. This relies first on “vertically integrated” expert editorial teams. For direction-setting, professional guidance from editorial boards is essential, tapping into university advantages in disciplines and talent to leverage authoritative experts' leading role. For implementation, the professionalism of frontline editors must be respected, building a professional editorial team with solid expertise, broad academic vision, and strong commitment to journal development to guarantee high-quality specialized journal construction. Second, this is reflected in “horizontally connected” author and expert teams, where the editorial team serves as a fulcrum, sourcing manuscripts from high-level domestic and international authors, continuously strengthening academic confidence, and enhancing journal professionalism.

### **1.3 Professionalization of Dissemination and Distribution Through Media Convergence**

University academic journals are essentially carriers of academic communication. With rapid information technology development, specialized university journals exhibit digital and clustered characteristics by adapting to media convergence trends. Digitalization refers to journals adopting market-oriented operational thinking centered on “digital platform construction, first-time publication, and open precise push,” building digital dissemination platforms through self-established portals, WeChat official accounts, and cooperation with domestic and international databases, thereby expanding distribution through intensive, accurate, and timely dissemination. Clustering refers to different university journals, based on consensus on professional development, breaking through limitations of editorial offices, host institutions, and geographical distribution to

collaborate, organically embedding multi-journal group publishing models into single-journal operations to further expand professional journals' influence and dissemination power.

## 2. Ought: The Developmental Imperative for Journals to Transition from Comprehensiveness to Specialization

Ought describes what things “should be.” At this level, as products of China's planned economy and early higher education stage, the transformation of comprehensive university journals toward specialization follows the tide of the times and promotes journal development, with inherent developmental demands reflecting the necessity of moving from comprehensiveness to specialization. It should be noted that this paper does not deny the value of comprehensive university journals; on the contrary, they can leverage interdisciplinary research advantages and are crucial for higher education and scientific development in the new era. However, most current university academic journals fall far short of being truly qualified comprehensive journals, making professional transformation urgent.

### 2.1 Aligning with the Main Direction of Disciplinary Development in the New Era

In the new era, knowledge and information are growing at unprecedented rates, and social division of labor is becoming increasingly refined and specialized. On one hand, various research paradigms are competing and developing, with research content and fields continuously subdividing to form a modern disciplinary system. On the other hand, disciplines are maturing internally, giving rise to creative, cohesive, and vibrant academic communities that produce numerous specialized achievements. In 2015, the State Council issued the *Overall Plan for Promoting the Construction of World-Class Universities and First-Class Disciplines*, aiming by mid-21st century to have the number and strength of world-class universities and disciplines rank among the world's best, essentially establishing China as a higher education powerhouse. Connecting this era of disciplinary refinement, academic community formation, and first-class discipline construction with university academic journals reveals an inherent developmental demand: disciplinary development requires highly specialized academic journals to publish and disseminate scholarly achievements, thereby promoting in-depth and refined academic research, strengthening academic communities, and advancing first-class discipline construction.

Currently, compared to specialized journals, “patchwork” comprehensive journals that fail to demonstrate interdisciplinary research advantages still constitute the majority of university academic journals, unable to meet universities' disciplinary construction and research development needs. This disproportionate ratio not only contradicts academic journals' fundamental attribute of “pursuing truth and disseminating scholarship,” but also causes university journal

quality to lag behind disciplinary development levels, which will eventually deconstruct the synergistic relationship between journals and disciplinary development. Admittedly, comprehensiveness is an inherent characteristic of university academic journals, determined by China's specific historical context and academic conditions at the time, but it is not immutable. As "Double First-Class" construction deepens, comprehensive operation has become a constraint on new era demands, while specialization represents a better solution whose effects on disciplinary growth, scientific advancement, and Double First-Class construction deserve in-depth exploration.

## 2.2 Breaking Through the Existing Dilemmas of Comprehensive Journal Positioning

Across university academic journals, the problem of stagnant quality under comprehensive positioning is widespread, making it difficult to achieve interdisciplinary research heights at the micro level and hindering overall journal development at the macro level. Therefore, relying on professional development to break existing dilemmas represents a realistic choice.

First, regarding content planning. On one hand, most university academic journals are structured around frameworks of "humanities and social sciences" or "natural sciences," with numerous sub-columns, conducting topic planning and manuscript selection based on comprehensive disciplinary coverage and complete column arrays, resulting in a "general store" structure that is comprehensive yet disordered. On the other hand, university academic journals lack distinctive features and show obvious content homogenization, presenting a "thousands of journals with one face" pattern. Since "content is king," university academic journals must break the dual shackles of "disciplinary patchwork" and "thousands of journals with one face" by transforming publishing forms and clarifying disciplinary boundaries to improve content quality, pushing journals from "comprehensive, scattered, small, and weak" toward "specialized, refined, distinctive, and deep."

Second, regarding manuscript attraction. Constrained by "comprehensive and scattered" column settings, unclear problem boundaries, and unremarkable operational characteristics, most comprehensive journals struggle to cultivate researchers' sense of identity and belonging, and lack attraction for innovative achievements, resulting in low manuscript quality. Professional development focuses on tracking frontier fields in specific disciplines, generating an "agglomeration effect" through proactive layout of published paper directions to stimulate interest from relevant experts and scholars, and promoting the flow of more high-quality achievements. In other words, the more specialized the journal, the more it can attract expert attention and gather quality disciplinary achievements.

Third, regarding academic communication. For readership, thousands of comprehensive university journals with similar positioning struggle to generate read-

ing interest and are unfavorable for building loyal, stable readerships. For database indexing, compared to specialized journals, comprehensive university journals account for a lower proportion in international databases and domestic core journal catalogs, with weaker academic communication functions. For international exchange, European and American academia has very few comprehensive journals, and dialogue and exchange between domestic university journals and European and American journal circles are impeded by positioning differences. As academic interactions become increasingly frequent, specialization is the mainstream of world-class academic journals, and only by seizing professional development opportunities can journals more efficiently disseminate the latest academic research achievements.

### 2.3 Addressing the Polarization Under the Matthew Effect in Journals

Currently, a “Matthew effect”—where the strong become stronger and the weak become weaker—manifests in key elements like manuscript sources and academic influence between university journals and other academic journals. For example, academic journals led by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ professional journal group generally have strong influence. Despite their small number, they occupy half of domestic core journal catalogs, and combined with specialized journals’ “agglomeration effect,” they more easily attract attention, retaining their own units’ quality manuscripts while attracting more high-level achievements from other units. In turn, abundant, high-quality manuscripts bring higher citation rates, academic prestige, and economic benefits, further strengthening their “monopoly” on first-class manuscripts and consolidating their core journal status. Conversely, university academic journals lacking fixed author groups have lower proportions in core journal catalogs or authoritative databases. Among the 844 journals in the CSSCI source journal catalog (2021–2022) (including extended editions), university journals account for only 10.78%, with impact factors (IF) and total citation frequencies (TC) both below core journal averages. Thus, some university journals become fallback options after rejection by core journals, making quality manuscripts hard to obtain. Over time, download volumes, reprint volumes, and citation rates stagnate, making it harder to enter core journal ranks and creating a vicious cycle.

Looking internationally, polarization between domestic and foreign academic journals is even more pronounced. Foreign journals have already established a systematic academic journal cluster dominated by professional and thematic journals, conducting extensive academic exchange activities and absorbing domestic and international first-class achievements through powerful publishing and distribution platforms. In short, Chinese journals have yet to control discourse power on the international academic stage, and university academic journals occupy an even more marginal position domestically, trapped by the Matthew effect’s curse. For university academic journals, addressing polarization under the Matthew effect necessitates professional transformation to further clarify operational positioning, highlight characteristics, and improve quality.

### 3. Reality: The Practical Contradictions in the Professional Development of University Academic Journals

Reality describes the actual or practical state of things. In fact, while developmental demands continue to expand, truly few university academic journals have embarked on professional transformation, requiring further exploration of practical contradictions. This necessitates tracing historical origins, analyzing current institutional frameworks, and examining specific practical conditions.

#### 3.1 The Contradiction Between Embedding in Academic Communities and Upholding the University's "Private Plot"

Since their founding, Chinese university academic journals have served as "windows" to showcase their institutions' achievements and "gardens" for faculty and researchers, bearing the mission of serving university teaching, research, and talent cultivation. In the latter half of the 20th century, as journal allocation by institution continued, relatively closed and self-contained universities had both the need to showcase their academic achievements and the demand to cultivate researchers across internal disciplines, making multidisciplinary comprehensive academic journals the optimal choice. In 1998, the Ministry of Education's *Management Measures for University Journals* defined "university journals as academic theoretical publications hosted by higher education institutions that primarily reflect their teaching and research achievements," indirectly reflecting this inward orientation. In summary, throughout nearly a century of journal history in the 20th century, university academic journals, especially university journals, prioritized meeting internal disciplinary construction needs, becoming academic "private plots" for their own faculty and students to some extent. In the 21st century, facing exposed problems, the Ministry of Education reoriented its approach in 2002, stating: "Journals are run by universities, but this does not mean authors are only internal faculty or readers only university scholars; these are two different concepts." This provided reliable justification for outward professional positioning that transcends institutional boundaries and embeds in academic communities.

However, the century-long historical mission of university academic journals cannot change overnight, and academic community formation cannot be accomplished in a day. Taking talent teams as an example, university journal operations are accustomed to relying on "comprehensive and scattered" internal editor, expert, and author pools, while professional development would exclude most experts whose disciplinary backgrounds don't align with journal positioning, making transformation risks self-evident. Moreover, operational standards are lacking for which specialized journals to launch among complete disciplinary arrays and what criteria to use for selection. Currently, large numbers of university academic journals remain confined to service-for-the-university thinking, adhering to their founding positioning to defend this "one-acre-three-point private plot." According to CNKI data, from 2015–2016, 70 comprehensive social science university journals selected for CSSCI published 17,426 papers, includ-

ing 5,630 internal papers (32.3%). Similarly, among 50 journals joining the “China University Series of Professional Journals” from 2018–2022, total internal submissions accounted for nearly 30%, with the highest reaching 59.65%. Nine journals had internal paper proportions exceeding 40%, while only three had proportions below 10%. These two categories represent the cream of thousands of university academic journals, with other ordinary university journals showing even more pronounced inward operation patterns. Thus, a prominent contradiction exists between outward professional development that embeds in academic communities and inward comprehensive operation that defends the university “private plot.” Failure to “cut off one’s arm to save the body” in time will affect the functional performance of university academic journals in the new era.

### **3.2 The Contradiction Between Constructing Professional Academic Platforms and Inertially Relying on Institutional Protection**

Under the current management system, university academic journals demonstrate strong dependence on their host institutions during transformation. Specifically, regarding operational conditions, university academic journals are hosted by their respective universities, with office space and funding sourced from these institutions, giving universities natural discourse power over journal operation and development. Regarding personnel, journal chief editors are generally university leaders in name, with actual leaders appointed by host institutions and frequently rotated, while editorial staff are selected by host institutions and mostly incorporated into public institution establishment management without 后顾之忧 (worries about future livelihood). Regarding manuscript sources, the inward comprehensive positioning of university academic journals both meets university faculty’s needs for paper publication in professional title evaluation, project completion, and degree attainment, and guarantees their own manuscript quantities. Therefore, during long-term operation, the management system for university academic journals has gradually evolved into a protective, inertially dependent system. Under this system, journals appear to operate in fierce competition but face little survival pressure regarding economic benefits, personnel management, or manuscript quantity. Many university publishers have grown accustomed to inherent journal management models, developing “bad habits” under institutional protection, such as passively waiting for submissions, lacking proactive outreach and solicitation of quality manuscripts, and even displaying perfunctory attitudes. Consequently, they lack the courage for change and transformation, resulting in insufficient transformation motivation.

University academic journal professional transformation aims to embark on a “specialized, refined, distinctive, and innovative” development path, shifting from passive to active operation, from serving as closed “gardens” and display “windows” to constructing professional academic platforms. However, as scholars have noted, “the particularity of university comprehensive journals always

makes them exceptions to press reform and transformation.” Under inertially dependent systems, the institutional obstacles to constructing professional academic platforms cannot be underestimated, while transformation motivation is clearly insufficient. For some university academic journals, professional transformation remains a difficult choice.

### **3.3 The Contradiction Between Professional Journals Being Highly Valued and University Publishing Units Being Marginalized**

Currently, it is undeniable that professional journals receive recognition from all sectors: first, journal evaluation institutions widely include professional journals from various fields in index databases, while comprehensive journals are included in much smaller numbers and proportions; second, professional journals dominate the journal guidance catalogs issued by research and teaching institutions, basically occupying high-level reward categories, while comprehensive journals are fewer in number and generally receive lower reward levels; third, relevant government departments have repeatedly encouraged university academic journals to transform into professional journals in guiding documents. However, in stark contrast, university publishing units as the practical subjects of professional transformation occupy quite awkward positions, even described as “marginalized,” resulting in relatively weak resources for specialized operation.

Taking university journal editorial offices as examples: on one hand, the marginalization of editorial departments leads to insufficient organizational support for professional transformation. Unlike publishing units with independent legal status, editorial departments, as university functional departments, are either directly affiliated units or teaching support units in larger cases, or typically attached to secondary schools or administrative departments without independent establishment in smaller cases. Moreover, since universities focus on teaching and research, editorial departments are generally not among primary departments. This not only leads to problems like bureaucratization and non-professionalization but also makes it difficult to incorporate journal construction and talent cultivation into core university management agendas, limiting support for journal professional development. On the other hand, the marginalization of editorial staff identity and roles undermines the team foundation for professional transformation. First, regarding identity definition, although editorial work is no less professional than general teaching and research, universities often manage editorial staff according to administrative or support staff standards, placing them at a disadvantage in professional title evaluation and position grading, resulting in a sense of absence. Second, regarding role positioning, editorial staff tend to be broad but not deep in their involvement, with insufficient grasp of disciplinary frontiers, and most juggle multiple roles like editorial affairs, administration, and party affairs, eventually becoming overwhelmed, overly dependent on peer reviewers, and potentially reduced to supporting roles in academic research, affecting journal

team building.

#### 4. Cause: Effective Pathways for the Professional Development of University Academic Journals

Cause means making it so—transforming it into a certain state. Addressing the above contradictions, this paper analyzes effective pathways for university academic journal professional development from three levels—macro-level top-down design, meso-level framework reconstruction, and micro-level guarantee enhancement—to maximize smooth transformation and gradually construct a new university journal system with specialized journals as basic units.

##### 4.1 Macro-Level Top-Down Design: Achieving Professional Development Through Precise Positioning and Coordinated Planning

University academic journal professional development involves overall layout and structural adjustment. In recent years, decision-making and management departments have repeatedly pointed out directions for university academic journal development in guiding policies, and relevant top-down designs will continue to be refined and strengthened.

**4.1.1 Tailoring Measures to Individual Journals to Promote Differentiated Transformation** University academic journal professional transformation should not adopt a “one-size-fits-all” approach but should implement categorized policies based on actual conditions. First, a minority of existing university academic journals publish papers in only one disciplinary category or even first-level discipline, representing relatively high specialization that can be considered quasi-specialized journals. To pioneer transformation into specialized journals, they should either continuously strengthen specialization by deeply focusing on first-level or even second-level disciplines, or maintain disciplinary boundaries to expand and strengthen disciplinary categories. They can also consider breaking the “university name + journal” naming model and renaming according to professional directions to further highlight disciplinary attributes. Second, for most multidisciplinary ordinary university journals, constrained by practical contradictions, professional transformation is a staged process. The first stage should pursue characterized operation, upholding the philosophy of “what others don’t have, I have; what others have, I excel in; what others excel in, I make distinctive,” concentrating superior internal and external resources to focus on a specific field, emphasizing topic planning, characteristic columns, and journal design. The second stage must recognize that characterization does not equal specialization, requiring quantitative change to transform into qualitative change when characterization matures. Third, for a small number of university academic journals with content orientation deviations, low publication quality, or inadequate implementation of the “three-review” system, mechanisms for rectification and supervision management systems should be further improved to foster healthy academic publishing environments. For the very few journals

with long-term violations, inability to publish normally, or no longer meeting publication conditions, cleanup and standardization should be promoted, with deadlines for suspension and exit to continuously optimize journal layout and resource allocation.

**4.1.2 Leveraging Advantages to Promote Focused Transformation** Focusing on key points and grasping essentials to leverage advantageous resource effects can create focal points for university academic journal professional transformation. Currently, leverageable advantages mainly include host university strengths, regional characteristics or unique cultural traditions, and segmented industry support. First, academic journals of specialized universities (e.g., finance and economics, agriculture, language) or comprehensive journals with outstanding disciplinary strength should focus on host university advantageous disciplinary resources, scientifically assessing development prospects to make journals more dedicated to specific disciplinary directions. For example, social science journals of finance and economics universities like *Journal of Shanxi University of Finance and Economics* and *Journal of Nanjing University of Finance and Economics* have significantly enhanced influence by translating economic disciplinary resources into operational advantages, successfully transforming from multidisciplinary comprehensive journals to management and economics comprehensive journals. This pathway also applies to journals of China's "Double First-Class" construction universities, i.e., enhancing journal-first-class discipline matching to expand and strengthen specialized journals. Second, some university academic journals can focus on serving regional development, based on analysis of regional characteristics and cultural traditions, excavating academic resources to achieve precise positioning and promote "hundred flowers blooming" specialized academic research. For instance, *Journal of Jiangnan University (Humanities & Social Sciences)* and *Journal of Nantong University (Social Sciences Edition)* have respectively developed columns on "Grand Canal Cultural Belt Construction Research" and "Yangtze River Delta and Yangtze River Economic Belt Economic Forum," demonstrating unique roles in inheriting and promoting local culture. Finally, some journals can also focus on industry development needs, such as *Modern Animal Husbandry*, which transformed from a comprehensive journal to a specialized one and embarked on a win-win path of professional development and serving Henan's animal husbandry industry.

**4.1.3 Collaborative Cooperation to Promote Clustered Transformation** Whether for dissemination and distribution, talent team specialization, or long-term significance in catching up with international academic publishing groups, university academic journals require collaborative cooperation to promote professional transformation through clustered publishing. University journals can unite with other publications, professional societies (associations), and research institutions to achieve resource pooling and reorganization through digital means, creating cross-departmental, cross-institutional, and cross-regional

cooperation platforms. This not only facilitates economies of scale to enhance overall journal visibility but also breaks journal boundaries, promoting the upgrade from single-journal independent operation to multi-journal collaborative operation. Current cases offer references: in philosophy and social sciences, multiple prestigious university journals jointly established the “China University Series of Professional Journals” (online journals), including 12 disciplinary professional journals like *Journal of Economics* and *Journal of Political Science* constructed according to disciplinary classification, integrating a batch of “separate governance” comprehensive journals into a series of professional journals combining prestigious universities’ research advantages. In natural sciences, some journals with similar disciplinary advantages have formed professional journal clusters like Chinese Optics Journals Network, Chinese Geoscience Journals Network, and Materials Journals Network under professional society (association) support, effectively enhancing journal influence. Notably, whether cross-disciplinary alliances or same-discipline clusters, university journals should target frontier hotspot research in professional fields to lay foundations for constructing professional academic platforms and even professional journal systems.

## 4.2 Meso-Level Framework Reconstruction: Enhancing Professionalism Through Conceptual Transformation and Deepened Action

Based on macro-level direction-setting, meso-level framework reconstruction requires university publishers to reshape journal frameworks ideologically and practically, enhancing professionalism and further advancing professional development.

**4.2.1 Updating Operational Concepts Ideologically** Breaking through inward and closed operational thinking and establishing professional operational concepts can drive university leaders, internal and external experts, and scholars to recognize the era value of journal transformation and deepen understanding and identification with professional operation, thereby enhancing resource support and reducing transformation resistance. First, establish quality-first open thinking. On the professional transformation path, manuscript quality should be the primary criterion: on one hand, maintain strict standards and dare to reject substandard papers; on the other hand, operate openly regardless of origin, widely absorbing high-level research achievements from inside and outside the university. While this may initially reduce submissions, overcoming short-term difficulties will gradually lead to healthy development. Second, uphold a reform spirit that time waits for no one. As disciplinary differentiation intensifies in the new era and “Double First-Class” construction continues, world-class international journals have entered domestic vision as new reference systems, continuously absorbing domestic quality manuscripts. Under multiple pressures, university publishers should follow disciplinary and journal development laws, enhancing the sense of crisis, urgency, and responsibility for professional development, and accelerate transformation with a spirit of seizing the day. Third, cultivate proactive work styles. University academic journals must

compete for manuscripts not only with other university journals but also in the more intense specialized journal field. University publishers should overcome passive work states caused by insufficient survival pressure and departmental marginalization, cultivating proactive work styles that fully mobilize editorial staff enthusiasm and initiative for smooth transformation.

**4.2.2 Accelerating Content Construction Through Action** Implementing targeted publishing strategies and taking concrete actions to accelerate content construction is essential. Specifically, regarding content positioning, both demand principles and difference principles should be followed to further define topic scope and prevent new homogenization. The former requires publishers to focus on disciplinary development needs, elevate publication content depth, demonstrate scientific value and research significance, and timely capture reader and author needs to generate resonance. The latter requires publishers to pay attention to subsequent development space, actively cultivate undiscovered virgin land or find “gaps” in promising hotspot disciplines, avoiding clustered hotspots and similar content positioning to achieve professional development based on individuality and differentiation. Regarding content planning, new era university academic journals should have both characteristic column designs and problem-centered special issue planning. On one hand, they should identify professional disciplinary positioning and create professional journal advantages by establishing several relatively stable, advanced, and innovative characteristic columns as “flagship products” that demonstrate specialized journals’ disciplinary attributes and generate academic “agglomeration effects” to attract high-quality manuscripts. On the other hand, they should organize special issues around key and difficult problems, integrating, refining, and 统领 “disciplines” through problem-centered approaches—a method particularly worth trying for comprehensive journals that cannot clarify disciplinary boundaries in the short term. For example, finance and economics university journals can use topics like “digital economy development” that interest economics, management, and statistics for special research, further targeting disciplinary development and business research needs, continuously strengthening management and economics characteristics, and ultimately shaping distinctive professional operation models.

### **4.3 Micro-Level Guarantee Enhancement: Advancing Professional Operation Through Internal Cultivation and External Integration**

University academic journal professional development is ultimately executed by publishing units. Among various journal publishing elements, people are the most important and the primary productive force. Therefore, from a human perspective, micro-level guarantee enhancement can promote concrete implementation of professional development.

**4.3.1 Building a Professional Publishing Team with Higher Internal Standards** A high-level, high-standard, high-quality professional publishing team is the basic prerequisite and important guarantee for university academic

journals to shift from comprehensiveness to specialization. From top to bottom, experts and scholars should lead journal operation. Specifically, the conventional president-as-chief-editor model should be broken, inviting experts and scholars who can truly invest in journal transformation to serve as chief editors, executive deputy chief editors, and other key positions. This not only leverages their broad academic vision, deep academic foundation, and solid professional 素养 to guide journals toward academic frontiers but also guides professional work and controls journal quality, while utilizing their academic influence and appeal to enhance author and reader attention and support, attracting more quality manuscripts. From bottom to top, professional editors should consolidate foundations. First, editing and proofreading should be separated, academic editing and copyediting separated, with dedicated editorial affairs staff equipped to create space for academic editors to deepen disciplinary involvement and promote effective insight into professional hotspot issues and social development needs. Second, editors should be scholarized and professionalized, with emphasis on enhancing editors' professional 素养, vigorously absorbing and cultivating quality editors with professional disciplinary backgrounds, deepening their communication with authors and peer reviewers, and gradually making them experts in relevant topics and columns or even disciplinary fields. Finally, editors' identity and status should be comprehensively improved with smooth career promotion channels, while reasonable job mobility should be implemented for editors whose disciplinary backgrounds don't align with transformation directions.

#### **4.3.2 Proactively Integrating into Academic Communities with an Open External Posture**

External resources like authors, experts, and readers are key factors affecting journal professional development. University academic journals should transform past inward and closed development models, proactively integrating into academic communities with open postures to form inseparable empathetic relationships. First, targetedly excavate author resources to obtain more sufficient and higher-quality manuscripts. Based on professional subdivision, editorial departments should strengthen interaction with scholars in relevant fields through proactive solicitation, regular commissioning, increased remuneration, and academic conference organization to actively absorb and develop author resources. Simultaneously, they should smooth submission channels like online submission systems and email to expand authors and manuscripts while breaking the concentration of internal submissions. Second, build peer reviewer teams aligned with journal positioning to further ensure manuscript quality. Peer review is a necessary supplement for paper selection and an important pathway for journals to integrate into academic communities and achieve scholar participation. Editorial departments should continuously invite accomplished experts and scholars in the field to participate in review, improving reviewer databases and enhancing professional journal review precision. Additionally, dynamic management of expert teams should be strengthened, using elimination systems to promptly replace inactive or irresponsible reviewers and improve review efficiency. Third, actively enhance journal reader

recognition and promote digitalization of publishing work. Publishing units should actively promote integration of print journals with new media using digital communication media like websites, apps, and WeChat, achieving one-time production and multiple releases to expand reader coverage and strive to form brand effects in a short time, enhancing journal influence and recognition.

In the new era, Chinese university academic journals are not only important platforms for advancing academic research and conducting academic exchange but also major positions for disseminating ideological culture and achieving cultural innovation. Currently, the transition of university journals from comprehensiveness to specialization is no longer a distant vision drawn by regulators and scholars in official residences and studies but is driven by the major trend of disciplinary development in the new era and forced by the unpromising survival and development space of comprehensive journals with huge individual differences. Facing practical contradictions between professional development and existing journal positioning, current management systems, and operational resource conditions, this paper proposes the following pathway directions: at the macro-level top-down design, the “four beams and eight columns” for university journal professional development should be constructed; at the meso-level framework reconstruction, effective renewal from both ideological and practical aspects should demonstrate enormous potential for accessing professional journal systems; at the micro-level guarantee enhancement, professional publishing teams should be built internally while returning externally to academic communities to further promote in-depth professional development. University journal professional development is nothing less than a profound transformation in China’s publishing world, yet the pathways proposed in this paper are mostly theoretical discussions, and many difficulties beyond the article’s scope will be encountered during transformation. Therefore, both operational traditions should be respected and flexible adaptation should meet practical needs. Additionally, this paper is mainly based on inductive synthesis, logical analysis, and literature research, lacking sufficient survey data support. Future research will further strengthen investigation and use empirical methods to obtain more scientific conclusions.

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