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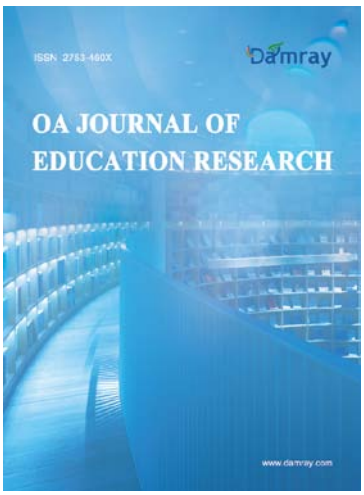
Reforming the Employment System of Teachers in Universities: Exploring the Current Situation and Difficulties under the "Up-or-out" Policy



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Abstract

The "up-or-out" policy, or the "tenure-track" system, originated in the United States. Tenure track is the pathway of academic job security and promotion. After the introduction of the "tenure-track" system, it has become the general direction of employment reform in public universities in China. At the same time, there are problems such as the administrative power dominating the assessment of universities, the status quo of "emphasizing research over teaching" and the lack of perfect guarantee of teachers' rights and interests. The study introduces the current situation implemented in Chinese universities by personnel management model, assessment mechanism and specification, competition and pressure, protection of rights and interests. Also, this study explores the dilemma and optimization direction of the reform of university teachers' employment under the current situation. In conclusion, colleges and universities can build a more secure protection system for the teachers under the policy, adhere to the principles of fairness, justice and openness, and develop to a more diversified and humanized way, so as to achieve the educational goals.

Keywords

"Tenure-track" system, "up-or-out" policy, assessment mechanism

1. Introduction

The "up-or-out" policy is also known as "tenure-tack" system. It originated in the United States, which was originally proposed for academic job security and then used to motivate faculty at universities and colleges. The track consists of three stages from assistant professorship to associate professorship to professorship. First, as an assistant professor, they sign an appointment contract with a university or college and to enter the entry level tenure track. Then they need to pass the assessment before they can be promoted to the tenure-track of associate professor or professor and become a tenured professor. If they are not promoted within the time limit, they will not be renewed. This "tenure-track" system is called "up-or-out" policy.

Prior to the 18th century, the United States had essentially tenure-track faculty positions without term limits. In 1716,

Harvard University began to sign a three-year contract with assistant professors. In 1760, it was stipulated that the contract could be signed for a maximum of eight years and the renewal would be decided at the end of the term, but the renewal was the norm until 1860, when Harvard University proposed that faculty members must obtain the title within a specified period of time in order to renew the contract, otherwise the contract would not be renewed. Since then, some top universities in the United States have also introduced this system, requiring faculty members to prove their ability to enjoy these rights and meet the criteria for granting tenure, and then they cannot be dismissed without special circumstances; and those who fail to pass the system must leave their universities or colleges, which finally established the "up-or-out" system, which finally established the "tenure-track" system. This system became common in America in the 1960s, and many other countries have started to establish the system closer to the North American version, using a hybrid of the old and new systems for faculty management (Huang Wenwu, 2020; Zhang Putian, 2018).

In China, the system was introduced by Tsinghua University in 1993, and then by Peking University in 2003, following the system of Harvard University, faculties who failed to promote their titles within the specified period were not employed by the university. In 2014, the Office of the National Education System Reform Leading Group formally approved a comprehensive reform plan for the employment system in colleges and universities. A number of universities have successively launched relevant reform measures of "tenure-track" system and adopted a mixed system of management. The assessment criteria of each university are not exactly the same, but they face the common dilemma (Zhang Putian, 2018).

2. Status of Implementation

2.1 Personnel Management Model

After the introduction of the "up-or-out" policy, a hybrid model of a new approach for newcomers and an old approach for old people has been adopted for the management of university teachers in China. The quality of work of university faculty under "tenure-track" system has indeed improved, but there is still a lack of motivation among tenured faculty under the traditional model. The low output of tenure-track faculty with equal treatment not only leads to psychological imbalance among newcomers, but also represents a huge cost for the faculty and the university. At present, Chinese universities and colleges focus on the establishment of new systems, but generally ignore the management of tenured teachers, which will certainly hinder the reform of China's university faculty management system in the long run. Many universities and colleges in the United States have adopted post-tenure review to evaluate tenured faculty members and implement reward and punishment mechanisms to link salary, leave and other items to the evaluation, thus promoting the quality of work (Aper JP and Fry JE, 2003).

2.2 Assessment mechanism and Specification

Chinese universities and colleges mainly examine research, teaching, and social services. The criteria have clear quantitative indicators and specific instructions for publications, types of research projects, and awards received. On the contrary, in an academic assessment, only a small number of schools in the United States indicate a clear number and specified journals. American universities also integrate the quality of teaching, the quality of student training, and the contribution to the construction of the curriculum into the assessment index, while the promotion conditions in teaching in Chinese universities only state a certain amount of classroom hours and no teaching accidents, which will make teachers have no motivation to participate in teaching, teaching work is gradually marginalized, and the focus of work is seriously biased towards research. Moreover, over-emphasis on quantifiable scholarly output will consume the interest and creativity of researchers. They will choose to produce results as soon as possible, leading to scholarly incompetence and utilitarianism.

Tenure procedures are prescribed at most colleges and universities. However, due to the humanistic atmosphere of Chinese society, "up-or-out" policy is often not strictly implemented in the evaluation, and sometimes there are disputes caused by overly aggressive dismissal. The fairness of this appraisal method, depending on the person, needs to be considered. Personnel appraisal in American universities is mainly reviewed by peers outside the university and approved by superiors. China's universities are implementing a personnel system managed by two levels: the department and the school, and administrative power occupies a dominant position, which leads to the repeated prohibition of academic corruption and the phenomenon of "nepotism". For example, the first batch of Wuhan University's "up-or-out" policy shows that all four of them are heavy "nepotism" from undergraduate to doctoral degree, while several top universities in the United States hardly keep their students in their positions. If they choose to hire outstanding students, students are required to exchange at another school for several years before returning to their own university. This not only avoids

unfair competition and ensures the standardization of the evaluation mechanism, but also promotes academic exchange.

2.3 Competition and Pressure

In recent years, China has led the world in the number of papers produced in natural sciences (Ren Meina & Liu Linping, 2021). The introduction of "up-or-out" policy has indeed screened excellent talents for our universities, but it has also put great pressure on teachers. In the current competitive environment, many outstanding faculty members are not necessarily promoted even if they meet the criteria. The overall pressure faced by teachers in China's universities is relatively high, which can easily generate burnout and psychological distress (Ren Meina & Liu Linping, 2021; Tia Xianpeng & Jiang Shujie, 2022). The pressure they face is no longer just academic publication, but also increasing promotion threshold and competition with other outstanding peers for places. Also, the shortage of officially budgeted posts causes the competition is "seniority" rather than "equality before academics". In the United States, there is no restriction of budgeted posts. The promotion of teachers depends more on their own ability, and the promotion is more of an incentive for teachers.

2.4 Protection of Rights and Interests

Although the employment practices of universities indicate that there are channels to apply for the protection of rights and interests through university grievance panels and employment committees, but dismissal disputes are all over the news, which shows that our universities and colleges need more appropriate ways to deal with teachers who have withdrawn from the mechanism. In many Western universities, teachers who are not successfully employed can go to other universities with less differences, and their development opportunities will not be significantly reduced or discriminated against, and if they achieve success in other universities, they still have the opportunity to be rehired back to their original universities. However, in China, teachers who are dismissed by the "up-or-out" policy are often considered as not having qualified academic ability by other universities and encounter difficulties in re-employment, so they can only choose to go to schools with a larger gap or withdraw from academic careers. This policy directly results in the invisible impairment of the terminated faculty's right to redress and the lack of opportunities to provide redress and compensation for the protection of their legitimate rights and interests.

3. Optimization of the Path

3.1 Adherence to the Principle of Fairness, Impartiality and Openness

Many studies show that teachers' willingness to leave, job satisfaction and organizational commitment under the "tenure-track" model are highly correlated with the perceived fairness of the appraisal process, so universities should adhere to the principles of fairness, justice and openness. First of all, universities should implement transparent and standardized management of procedures in recruitment and assessment, add more subjects that can be objectively evaluated such as external experts, and operate strictly according to rules and regulations, treating all candidates involved in recruitment and promotion equally, competing fairly and evaluating justly. The teachers who failed the assessment should be treated fairly without deciding who should stay and who should go according to the person. In addition, universities should actively and comprehensively disclose the information related to the "up-or-out" system, and according to Article 7 of the "Measures for Disclosure of Information of Colleges and Universities", the employment method of teachers closely related to the "up-or-out" policy is the basic information belong to school operation and provision of education services that colleges and universities must actively disclose. The concealment of the relevant clauses in many job announcements is disadvantageous to applicants and is related to the effective exercise of the right to choose their own employment (Xu Jing, 2020).

3.2 Diversification, Personalization and Humanization of the Assessment Mechanism

The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the General Plan for Deepening Education Evaluation Reform in the New Era, which states that the teacher evaluation system should be reformed, the phenomenon of teachers emphasizing research over teaching should be overcome and the conditions for employing and evaluating university teachers' titles should be standardized (2020). Colleges and universities should take more practical measures to implement the plan. First of all, universities can set up classified posts such as teaching posts, research posts and teaching and research posts, so that teachers can choose their own professional development orientation. At the same time, the classification assessment should be carried out. For the teaching posts, the quantitative as-

sessment of teaching tasks completed by teachers and the qualitative assessment of teaching performance should be adopted. For the research posts, the scientific, technical, economic, social and cultural values of the results should be evaluated (2018). In addition, differentiated assessment indicators should be set up according to the characteristics of disciplines and research fields to evaluate their outputs in a more personalized way.

Universities can conduct targeted and selective assessment on faculty members to serve as a supervisory role. For example, they could re-assess the members who fail the annual assessment and the tenured faculty members who lack motivation to work. For teachers with excellent assessment, in addition to salary, they can be encouraged through vacation, exemption from the assessment, and so on. Schools and faculties should also reward more and punish less, emphasize promotion over panning and assume more of a mentoring, support and motivational role. For teachers experiencing important events in social life such as childbirth or under significant stress, school should provide opportunities for deferred appraisal and more humanistic care. For teachers who fail the assessment, guidance and improvement plans should be provided to help them pass the assessment. For teachers who exit the mechanism, humane measures such as assistance in re-employment should be taken, and a supporting support system should be improved.

3.3 Improvement of the Protection System

Universities should actively raise funds to ensure the smooth flow of resources and provide better protection for teachers. For new teachers, in addition to providing housing resources or subsidized living support, they should also increase investment in training and provide sufficient teaching and research conditions, such as sufficient time, equipment and training and exchange opportunities. For teachers entering the track of long-term employment, in addition to basic income, welfare benefits and other guarantees, access to resources and promotion channels should be assured. For teachers who withdraw from the mechanism, they can be given buffer support in time to leave the school, economic support in the issuance of subsidies, and employment to provide transfer and referral opportunities, which involves universities to increase the investment in the funding of the protection system and employment resources referral. Then the circulation of the talent market and the optimal interests of human resources and market allocation can be guaranteed. In addition, the grievance channel is also a necessary part of the security system. At present, there are grievance panel and university employment committee involved in receiving complaints, while universities in the United States directly implement the work to the specific responsible departmental or university-level leaders and there is a clear description of the procedures, which reflects the degree of attention. Chinese universities should also include detailed descriptions of the procedures so that teachers' rights can be protected when they are treated unfairly.

4. Conclusion

The introduction of the “up-or-out” policy has increased competition in universities, enlivened the scholastic atmosphere and prevented the rigidity of the academic market. However, it has made it difficult to reverse the situation of emphasizing research over teaching. It has also exerted greater pressure on young teachers. At the same time, the fairness, impartiality and openness during the process need to be considered and guaranteed. In the path of localization of “tenure-track” system, the reform of university teachers' promotion needs to be carried out continuously, and the management of a mixed system needs to be explored gradually. We hope that our colleges and universities can uphold the principle of fairness, justice and openness under a perfect guarantee system, and develop to a more diversified and humane path, so as to achieve the educational goals.

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