"Up-or-Out" System: Young Teachers in Chinese Universities

Gangyi Ren
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6003-5959
School of Materials Science and Engineering, Shandong University, China; College of Education, Fujian Normal University, China
rengy@sdu.edu.cn

Ye Zuo
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0404-9587
School of Electrical Engineering, Shandong University, China
zuoye2021@sdu.edu.cn

Zheng Dong*
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2067-4649
School of Electrical Engineering, Shandong University, China
dongzheng@sdu.edu.cn
*corresponding author

Jun Wang
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4954-2794
School of Materials Science and Engineering, Shandong University, China
jw707@sdu.edu.cn

Abstract

Against the backdrop of academic capitalism, this study explored the implementation of the "up-or-out" system in Chinese universities and its impact on young teachers through a mixed-methods design combining 86 valid questionnaires and 17 in-depth interviews. The study findings reveal that the system, a localised adaptation of the United States tenure-track system, suffers from value misalignment and rigid quantitative assessment, leading to academic alienation, group-specific dilemmas, and structural injustice. Drawing on academic capitalism, new institutionalism, and social stratification, the study interprets these tensions as consequences of the system's localised transplantation rather than isolated implementation failures. It clarifies four core conflicts—incentive empowerment versus alienation backlash; individual capacity versus structural constraints; quantitative metrics versus qualitative judgement; and rigid enforcement versus flexible adaptation—and shows that group differences are rooted in stratified resource access rather than individual ability. It proposes optimised paths featuring value return, classified adaptation, enhanced guarantees, and dynamic adjustment to balance institutional logic,

Education as Change
Volume 30 | 2026 | #21414 | 26 pages
https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/21414
ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)
© The Author(s) 2026

Published by the University of Johannesburg and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

academic essence, and individual demands, providing theoretical and practical support for university personnel system reform.

Keywords: up-or-out system; young university teachers; academic capitalism; university personnel system; academic evaluation; tenure-track localisation; academic inequality

Introduction

Against the global wave of academic capitalism, the United States-originated tenure-track system has triggered university personnel system reforms worldwide (Park, Sine, and Tolbert 2011). In this context, China's universities have introduced and promoted the "up-or-out" system as a core personnel reform measure. Operating via clear assessment cycles and rigid promotion criteria, it bears the strategic mission of enhancing higher education quality and building world-class universities and disciplines (Wang and Jones 2021; Yang, Cai, and Cai 2024). Driven by policies, the system has been widely adopted across top-tier double first-class universities to ordinary colleges as a key tool for selecting high-quality academic talents and energising faculty teams.

However, full implementation has exposed tensions between the system's performance orientation and the essence of academic professions. Interviews with young university teachers show that the system has created pressing practical issues: excessive research output pressure (Li and Yang 2024), academic time squeezed by administrative tasks (Naidoo-Chetty and du Plessis 2021), and academic resource monopolisation by elites (Zhang, Xiong, and Yue 2026). They also face dual anxieties from relocation allowance repayment risks (Solomon and du Plessis 2023) and the 35-year-old age threshold (Horta and Li 2024). Notably, group-specific dilemmas persist: Humanities and social science teachers grapple with core journal publication monopolies and misaligned research-assessment timelines (Jiang 2025); science and engineering teachers, despite faster research commercialisation advantages, are hindered by outdated equipment and cumbersome administration (Zhao and Wang 2023); female teachers struggle to balance research pressure and family care (Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden 2013); and ordinary college teachers face insufficient resources and arbitrary assessment adjustments (Liu and Yang 2025). These issues erode young teachers' professional security and identity, threatening healthy development of the academic ecosystem.

Existing research mostly focuses on single-institution or discipline-specific cases, lacking cross-group comparisons across university types, disciplines, and genders. Most studies only describe survival dilemmas superficially, failing to explore the game mechanisms between institutional logic and individual demands, or failing to reveal structural contradictions behind group differences from an educational equity perspective (Liu et al. 2025). These gaps prevent a comprehensive understanding of system implementation and hinder targeted theoretical support for optimisation.

To respond to these gaps, this study adopted a mixed-methods approach that integrated questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Using 86 valid questionnaires and 17 in-depth interviews with young teachers from double first-class and ordinary colleges, the study explored the system's implementation, young teachers' survival characteristics and core conflicts, and educational equity issues behind group differences. The study's innovations include overcoming single-case limitations via cross-group comparisons to present differentiated system impacts; analysing underlying contradictions between academic capitalism and public welfare, and between short-term assessment and long-term academic development; and proposing critical, feasible optimisation paths to provide theoretical and practical guidance for China's higher education sustainability.

Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

Definition of Core Concepts and Institutional Origin Research

Existing studies generally hold that the up-or-out system is a localised adaptation of the American tenure-track system, whose core lies in implementing a personnel management model for young teachers that features "promotion leading to tenure (or permanent employment) and dismissal for failure to meet standards" through fixed assessment cycles (usually three to six years) and rigid promotion criteria (Schenker and Smith 2016). Foreign research focuses on the historical evolution of the tenure-track system, arguing that it emerged during the process of professionalising American higher education. Its core value lies in balancing academic freedom with institutional management autonomy: It not only protects teachers from external interference and allows them to focus on academic exploration but also provides rigid criteria for institutions to select high-quality academic talents (Si 2023). With the rise of the academic capitalism trend, foreign research has gradually shifted to the issue of the alienation of the system's performance orientation, exploring the inhibitory effect of quantitative assessment standards on academic innovation (Huang 2018).

The introduction of this system in Chinese universities began with pilot programmes at top-tier universities in the 1990s, initially aiming to break the inertia of the traditional personnel system characterised by "lifetime employment without dismissal and promotion without demotion", and to eliminate the promotion barrier of a seniority-based hierarchy (Wang and Wang 2023). Since the 21st century, with the advancement of the double first-class initiative and the infiltration of academic capitalism, national-level personnel reform policies have continued to exert efforts, promoting the full-scale implementation of the "tenure-track and permanent employment" system. This has led to the rapid spread of the up-or-out system from top-tier universities to local and ordinary colleges, forming a "bandwagon effect" (Zhang 2022). Domestic research in China has focused on the localised adaptation of the up-or-out system, forming two opposing viewpoints. Proponents argue that the system has broken the "iron rice bowl" dilemma in traditional university personnel management, forcing young teachers to improve their research and teaching capabilities through clear assessment incentives. This aligns with the demand for high-end academic talents in the construction of double

first-class universities (Wang and Jones 2021). Opponents point out that Chinese universities lack the academic autonomy tradition and supporting guarantee systems on which the tenure-track system relies. In the process of localisation, a distorted orientation of "emphasising assessment over support" and "prioritising research over teaching" has emerged, which is disconnected from the essential demands of academic professions (Xu and Poole 2024). Furthermore, some studies focus on the diffusion path of the system, arguing that policy-driven initiatives and institutional competition are the core drivers behind the rapid spread of the up-or-out system from top-tier universities to local colleges. However, a lack of differentiated institutional design across universities at different levels has exacerbated practical chaos (Zhang and Wang 2025).

Research on the Survival Dilemmas and Group Differences of Young Teachers

As the direct recipients of the up-or-out system, the living conditions of young teachers have become a core topic in existing research. Most empirical studies have found that the rigid assessment pressure brought about by the system has led young teachers to fall into the predicament of research alienation that is characterised by "prioritising quantity over quality". To meet quantitative indicators such as paper publications and project applications, they have to abandon long-term basic research and turn to areas where results can be easily achieved in the short term (Lai, Shi, and Lam 2024). Meanwhile, problems such as academic time being occupied by administrative work, unequal distribution of research resources, and opaque promotion standards have further exacerbated young teachers' professional anxiety and survival pressure (Liu et al. 2025).

In terms of group difference research, existing studies have gradually paid attention to the differentiated dilemmas caused by disciplines, genders, and institutional levels. At the disciplinary level, humanities and social science teachers face the challenge of mismatched assessment cycles and research rules due to the long cycle of research output and limited slots in core journals, a predicament that has been highlighted by most scholars (Jiang 2025); science and engineering teachers, despite having advantages in the speed of research commercialisation, also encounter problems such as shortage of experimental resources and high costs of team collaboration (Zhao and Wang 2023). At the gender level, female teachers need to balance research assessment with family care, facing more prominent role conflicts, and their promotion difficulty is significantly higher than that of male teachers (Li et al. 2025). At the institutional level, young teachers at double first-class universities can access more research resources but face more stringent assessment standards; young teachers at ordinary colleges are constrained by insufficient resources and arbitrarily adjusted assessment standards, resulting in more complex survival dilemmas (Liu and Yang 2025).

Limitations of Existing Research

Overall, existing research has outlined the implementation status of the up-or-out system, the survival dilemmas of young teachers, and directions for optimisation, but there are still obvious limitations. First, the research perspective is relatively singular.

Most studies focus on individual institutions or specific disciplines, lacking cross-case and cross-group comparative analyses of young teachers from universities at different levels and in different groups, making it difficult to fully present the overall picture of system implementation. Second, the research depth is insufficient. Existing studies mostly remain at the surface level of dilemma description and countermeasure proposal, failing to deeply explore the underlying game mechanisms between institutional logic and individual demands, or to interpret the structural contradictions behind group differences from the perspective of educational equity. Third, there are limitations in research methods. Most studies rely on questionnaire surveys and lack long-term tracking and in-depth interviews with young teachers, making it difficult to capture the dynamic changes and real demands behind their survival dilemmas. Based on the above research gaps, this study conducted cross-group and in-depth empirical research to address the shortcomings of existing studies.

Theoretical Foundations

Academic Capitalism Theory

Systematically proposed and defined by American higher education scholars Slaughter and Leslie in their 1997 book *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University* (Hoffman 2012; Slaughter and Leslie 1997), the core viewpoint of academic capitalism theory is that with the penetration of market logic into the field of higher education, universities have gradually transformed from "academic communities" to "knowledge-producing enterprises". Academic activities have increasingly shown market-oriented and commercialised characteristics, with research outcomes becoming the core carrier for universities to compete for resources and obtain benefits (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). The theory holds that the rise of academic capitalism has driven universities to establish performance-oriented personnel management systems. The academic value of teachers has been quantified into measurable and exchangeable indicators, and the public welfare and autonomy of academic professions have gradually weakened (Fredricks-Lowman and Smith-Isabell 2020).

In this study, academic capitalism theory served as the core framework for interpreting the institutional logic of the up-or-out system. The promotion of the up-or-out system is essentially the result of the combined effects of the wave of academic capitalism and the national demand for higher education competition. Its design of rigid quantitative assessment and performance-oriented promotion is a specific manifestation of market logic in university personnel management. This theory helps us understand why the system has given rise to problems such as research alienation and excessive pressure: When academic value is simplified into quantitative indicators such as papers and projects, teachers' academic exploration deviates from its essence, trapping them in the dilemma of "conducting research for the sake of assessment". Meanwhile, with the help of this theory, we analysed the tension between the logic of academic capitalism and academic public welfare, providing theoretical support for system optimisation.

Institutionalism Theory

Institutionalism theory focuses on the interaction between institutions and individual behaviour, arguing that institutions shape individuals' behavioural choices and interest demands by setting rules, norms, and value orientations. At the same time, individuals' practical feedback drives the transformation and improvement of institutions. This theory emphasises that the implementation effect of an institution depends not only on the institutional design itself but also on the social environment, cultural background, and supporting systems in which the institution operates. Ignoring the local context during localisation can easily lead to "acclimatisation" of the institution (Ingram and Clay 2000). Institutionalist studies further show that organisations facing uncertainty tend to imitate the structures of prestigious peers—mimetic isomorphism—and that formal structures may be decoupled from day-to-day practice (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Applying institutionalism theory to this study effectively interprets the localised dilemmas and group differences of the up-or-out system. On the one hand, this system originated from the American academic ecosystem, and its operation relies on mature academic autonomy, sound guarantee systems, and diverse evaluation cultures. However, Chinese universities lack the corresponding institutional foundation, leading to a disconnect between institutional design and practical scenarios, which results in problems such as rigid assessment standards and insufficient support guarantees. On the other hand, the behavioural choices and dilemma feedback of young teachers from different groups are essentially the result of the interaction between individuals and institutions. Different groups, such as teachers in humanities and social sciences, science and engineering, female teachers, and teachers at ordinary colleges, have varying levels of adaptability to institutional rules due to differences in their own characteristics and resource endowments, thus forming differentiated survival dilemmas. These sources of feedback promote partial adjustments and optimisation of the system.

Social Stratification Theory

The core of social stratification theory is to explore the distribution pattern of social resources and group differences. It holds that the unequal distribution of social resources leads to hierarchical differences among different groups, which results in differentiated development opportunities and survival dilemmas (Baturenko 2021). Drawing on Bourdieu's (1988) analysis of the academic field, this tradition treats universities as hierarchical spaces in which agents compete for economic, cultural, and symbolic capital, whose distribution is shaped by position, discipline, and social origin. The theory emphasises that the stratification structure is not fixed; institutional design and policy arrangements affect the pattern of resource distribution, and reshape the hierarchical relationships between groups.

In this study, social stratification theory provided an important perspective for interpreting the group differences of young teachers within the context of the up-or-out system. There is a hierarchical pattern of research resources and academic power within universities: Top scholars and senior teachers control more project resources, journal discourse power, and review power, while young teachers are at the bottom of the resource distribution hierarchy, facing the dilemma of "academic elite monopoly" and "resource shortage". This stratification pattern further exacerbates the dilemma differences among young teachers from different groups. Young teachers at double first-class universities, in science and engineering disciplines, and male teachers can more easily obtain resource inclinations, so their survival pressure is relatively alleviated; young teachers at ordinary colleges, in humanities and social sciences, and female teachers have weaker resource acquisition capabilities—they fall into more prominent survival dilemmas. With the help of this theory, we explored the issue of unequal resource distribution behind group differences, providing theoretical guidance for building a fair academic ecosystem.

Research Design

Research Objectives

Based on the dual backgrounds of academic capitalism and institutional localisation, this study focused on the core contradictions in the implementation of the up-or-out system. The study had three major research objectives. First, systematically clarify the implementation status of the system among young teachers from universities at different levels and different groups, and accurately capture the differentiated manifestations in the process of system implementation. Second, deeply analyse the survival dilemmas, core demands, and group differences of young teachers, explore the game mechanisms between institutional logic and individual demands, and reveal the structural causes behind the dilemmas. Third, based on the research findings, propose targeted and feasible paths for system optimisation combined with relevant theories, providing practical guidance for improving university personnel management systems and building a fair and healthy academic ecosystem, and addressing the gaps in existing research such as insufficient cross-group comparisons and lack of research depth.

Research Methods

To achieve cross-group comparisons and in-depth mechanism exploration, this study adopted a mixed-methods research approach. Questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews were integrated to balance the breadth and depth of the research and address the limitations of single research methods.

Questionnaire Survey Method

Young teachers in the up-or-out assessment period at target universities were selected as the survey objects to ensure representation across disciplines, genders, and institutional levels. The questionnaire design covered several dimensions, including

perception of assessment standards, support systems, institutional fairness, work pressure, salary and benefits, professional security, work–life balance, conflicts between performance orientation and academic ideals, job satisfaction, and turnover intention. A 5-point Likert scale was adopted to ensure the quantifiable analysis of data. The questionnaire was designed using the Delphi Method, which is an anonymous, multi-round, structured expert consultation and consensus decision-making method that realises the structured extraction of collective expert wisdom, ensuring that the questionnaire design is scientific and rational (Shelton, Haynes, and Creghan 2022).

In-Depth Interview Method

On the basis of the questionnaire survey, 17 interviewees were selected, covering double first-class universities and ordinary colleges, humanities and social sciences, science and engineering disciplines, and young male and female teachers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, focusing on core issues such as assessment experiences, core dilemmas, resource acquisition experiences, institutional cognition, and optimisation suggestions. NVivo software was used to analyse the interview texts and to explore the underlying logic of institutional games and the true expression of individual demands.

Research Objects

A combination of online questionnaire distribution and offline paper questionnaires was adopted. Two universities were selected from each of the eastern, western, and southeastern regions of China, covering double first-class universities and ordinary colleges. A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed, and 86 valid questionnaires were collected. SPSS software was used for relevant statistical analysis to quantitatively present the overall characteristics and group differences of young teachers' survival dilemmas. Two sampling decisions deserve emphasis. The sample intentionally over-represents ordinary colleges and humanities and social sciences fields, where the literature suggests dilemmas are most acute, and it does not cover vocational colleges, remote-area universities, or the most research-intensive elite campuses. The findings illuminate the mechanics of the system, but they are not statistically generalisable to the whole of Chinese higher education.

The interviewees consisted of 17 people, comprising nine men and eight women, 10 with research directions in science and engineering, and seven in humanities and social sciences. Among them, six were from double first-class universities and 11 from ordinary colleges.

Data Collection and Analysis

Questionnaires were distributed online through university faculty communities and academic forums, and offline with the assistance of the human resources departments of sample universities. After collection, the questionnaires were subjected to validity screening. Preset interviewees were contacted, and they were informed about the

purpose, process, and confidentiality principles of the interviews in advance. Semi-structured interviews were conducted after signing the informed consent form. Within 24 hours of the interview conclusion, audio recordings were transcribed into interview texts, which were then organised and sorted.

SPSS software was used to conduct descriptive statistics on the valid questionnaire data, presenting the overall situation of young teachers' survival dilemmas. NVivo software was used to conduct hierarchical coding and word frequency analysis on policy texts and interview texts, extract core categories, and form a text analysis report. Quantitative data and qualitative data were integrated to interpret the underlying causes behind the data. This avoided the limitations of a single data type, and formed comprehensive and rigorous research conclusions.

Ethical Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the authors' institutions. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board before data collection began. All participants were informed in advance of the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality safeguards. They signed consent forms before participating. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any time without penalty. All names and identifying details were removed from the data. Raw materials have been stored in encrypted form accessible only to the research team, and no individual respondent can be identified from the reported results.

Findings

Survey Patterns: Pressure, Support and Fairness

Questionnaire findings show that both double first-class universities and ordinary colleges consider papers and projects as the core indicators in the up-or-out assessment, with clear and definite requirements for indicators. However, it was generally reflected that the time for completing academic output within the assessment cycle was relatively tight. In terms of the perception of support systems, it was generally reflected that universities were not doing well in providing support services such as teaching ability training, psychological counselling, and career planning. In terms of institutional fairness, the biggest problem identified was that teachers generally believed that the assessment and evaluation process was not open and transparent, and there may have been cases of behind-the-scenes manipulation. Teachers' main work pressure came from paper publication, on the one hand, and the need to take on administrative service work, on the other hand. In addition, teaching tasks occupied too much research time, which also brought pressure. Such work pressure led to difficulty balancing work and life for teachers and to low job satisfaction. By comparing double first-class universities and ordinary colleges, it was found that double first-class universities had much higher satisfaction with the school support system, especially research funding. This could be due to the government giving priority to double first-class universities for financial allocations. The work pressure of ordinary colleges was reported as greater than that of

double first-class universities, which may have been because ordinary colleges blindly raise assessment standards without providing relevant funds and experimental conditions. This leads to excessive pressure on teachers; a gender-based discussion showed that the overall trends of the two genders were similar, with slight differences in some dimensions. The main differences were reflected in the work–life balance dimension: more female than male participants reported that "work takes up a lot of rest time, making it difficult to accompany family members" and "working overtime for a long time, resulting in sub-health status", which may have been due to the traditional concept that women are expected to take on more family affairs than men. A discipline-based discussion showed that there were significant differences between the two disciplines in some dimensions. Teachers in humanities and social sciences were more likely to believe that the assessment cycle could not match the time of academic output, which may have been caused by the characteristics of humanities and social sciences research, such as long cycles and difficulty publishing papers. In the perception of support systems, science and engineering disciplines had significantly more research funding than humanities and social sciences, which was likely due to the government giving priority to science and engineering disciplines when allocating funding.

Career Motivation: The Weight of Material Security



Figure 1: Word cloud of career choice motives

Through NVivo, an analysis was first conducted on the reasons for career choices among all interviewees. In the word cloud diagram of Figure 1, "allowance" stands out with the largest font size, indicating that economic incentives are a key consideration for career choices. High-frequency keywords such as "research", "settlement", and "academic" point to multiple drivers including academic pursuit, settlement needs, and professional belonging. Words such as "pressure", "stable", and "improve" further reflect the demands for pressure relief, job stability, and personal development in career choices. The appearance of peripheral nodes such as "doctoral", "undergraduate", "ordinary", and "top" further reflects the potential impact of educational background, institutional level, and disciplinary differences on career choice preferences. This word

cloud indicates that the career choices of current academic practitioners were the result of a comprehensive trade-off among "economic incentives, academic pursuit, and life security", showing differentiated characteristics under different disciplinary and institutional backgrounds.

Assessment Indicators: The Primacy of Papers and Projects

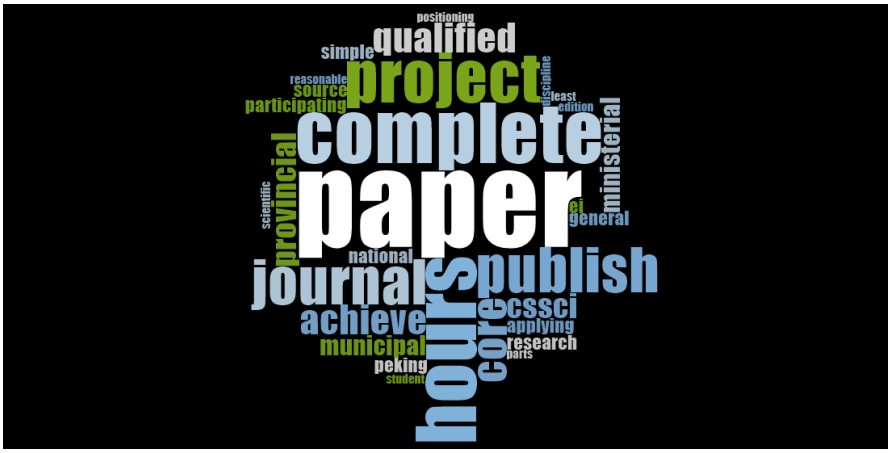


Figure 2: Word cloud of assessment indicators as described by young teachers

Through NVivo, an analysis was conducted on the assessment indicators of all interviewees. The word cloud diagram in Figure 2 intuitively presents the distribution of high-frequency keywords through font size and colour coding. "Paper" has the largest font size, confirming that paper publication is the assessment content that gets the most concern. High-frequency keywords such as "complete", "project", "publish", and "journal" correspond to the core dimensions of the assessment system. Words such as "core", "qualified", and "ministerial" reveal a dual evaluation logic of achievement form and administrative level; peripheral words such as "cssci", "ei", "provincial", and "national" reflect the differentiated requirements of the evaluation for achievement level, project level, and participating subjects. This word cloud reveals that the current academic assessment system is centred on "quantifiable academic achievements". Moreover, through the distinction between "cssci" and "ei", and the comparison between "peking" and "general", it reflects the differentiated orientation of assessment indicators under different disciplines and institutional levels.

Pressure Sources: The Academic Machine and Its Human Cost



Figure 3: Word cloud of pressure sources reported by young teachers

Through NVivo, an analysis was conducted on the sources of pressure among all interviewees. The word cloud diagram in Figure 3 highlights the academic scene as the core field of pressure. The prominent display of emotional keywords such as “worried” and “pressure” intuitively reflects widespread anxiety among interviewees; high-frequency words such as “project”, “papers”, and “standards” point to academic output and evaluation standards as the main sources of pressure; words such as “health”, “young”, and “senior” further imply the impact of pressure on physical and mental health and the differentiated experiences of groups at different career stages. Peripheral words such as “engineering”, “humanities”, “cssci”, and “experimental” further reflect the potential impact of disciplinary differences and institutional levels on pressure perception. This word cloud indicates that the pressure of current academic practitioners stems from the multiple interweaving of “academic output requirements, career development realities, and physical and mental health consumption”, showing differentiated characteristics under different disciplinary and institutional backgrounds.

Policy Demands: From Standards to Fair Distribution



Figure 4: Word cloud of young teachers' core demands and policy suggestions

The word cloud diagram generated by NVivo in Figure 4 systematically analyses the core demands and specific suggestions of interviewees for academic policy optimisation: In the word cloud diagram, "young" stands out with the largest font size, highlighting young academic groups as the core concern of policy optimisation. High-frequency keywords such as "academic", "standards", "allowance", "resource", "discrimination", "seniority", and "monopoly" point to the pain points faced by young scholars, such as rigid evaluation standards, unequal resource distribution, seniority discrimination and monopoly, as well as their demands for improved subsidies and fair protection. The appearance of peripheral nodes such as "cssci", "sciences", "overseas", and "female" further reflects the differentiated demands for policy optimisation due to disciplinary differences and group characteristics. This word cloud indicates that interviewees' policy suggestions focus on the coordinated optimisation of young scholar support, fair resource distribution, evaluation mechanism reform, and life guarantee improvement, showing targeted characteristics under different disciplinary and institutional backgrounds, and providing an empirical basis for the precise adjustment of academic policies in China.

Discussion

Four Core Conflicts in the Operation of the Up-or-Out System

Conflicts in Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Up-or-Out System: Incentive Empowerment vs. Alienation Backlash

On the effectiveness of the up-or-out system, academia holds two opposing views—the "incentive theory" and "alienation theory"—with core disagreements over the system's overall impact on academic development and teacher growth.

Proponents of "incentive empowerment" argue that the system's rigid assessment effectively breaks the "iron rice bowl" in university personnel management, prompting young teachers to boost research and teaching output efficiency. It is effective in energising faculty and selecting high-quality academic talents (Yang, Cai, and Cai 2024). Many studies based on double first-class universities find that post-implementation, young teachers published more papers, secured more projects, and universities' overall academic competitiveness improved, which aligns with the demands to nurture high-end talent in double first-class construction (Qian et al. 2025). Some studies further note that the system's clear promotion paths guide young teachers' career development, mitigate ambiguity in traditional seniority-based promotion, and stimulate academic innovation (Wang and Jones 2021).

Advocates of "alienation backlash" reach the opposite conclusion, arguing that overemphasis on performance deviates academic activities from their essence. This harms the academic ecosystem and young teachers' growth (Van Houtum and Van Uden 2022). Covering mostly ordinary colleges and humanities/social sciences, these studies identify research alienation—prioritising quantity over quality and research over teaching. To meet short-term indicators, young teachers abandon long-term basic/innovative research for utilitarian, quick-result topics, and even engage in academic misconduct such as paper fraud. Excessive pressure also heightens professional anxiety, weakens identity, and drives outstanding young teachers to resign—contradicting the system's talent-gathering goal.

The root of this conflict lies in sample limitations and divergent evaluation dimensions. Incentive theory focuses on resource-rich double first-class universities with sound assessments, emphasising quantitative gains. Alienation theory focuses on under-resourced ordinary colleges and humanities/social sciences, highlighting academic quality loss and individual experiences. No comprehensive judgement across university levels and disciplines has been formed.

Conflicts in Attributing Group Dilemmas: Individual Ability vs. Structural Constraints

Regarding young teachers' survival dilemmas under the system, existing research opposes "individual attribution" and "structural attribution", differing on the core causes of dilemmas.

The individual attribution view holds that dilemmas stem mainly from insufficient individual ability and professionalism. It notes that young teachers lack research innovation, project application skills, and academic accumulation, leaving them unable to meet assessment standards. Others struggle with time management, failing to balance research, teaching, and administration. A few studies add that biased professional mindsets—pursuing short-term gains, avoiding risks, and lacking long-term academic patience—also hinder their ability to cope with pressure.

The structural attribution view emphasises that dilemmas arise from institutional and social structural constraints; they are unrelated to individual ability (Liu et al. 2025). Core causes include inadequate localisation, rigid assessments, unequal research resource distribution, and academic power monopolies. Specific manifestations include mismatched assessment-research cycles for humanities/social sciences, insufficient experimental resources for science/engineering, and work–family conflicts for female teachers. In addition, arbitrary assessment adjustments and poor support in ordinary colleges worsen pressure; these issues remain unresolvable by improving individual ability (Liu and Yang 2025).

This conflict reflects differing understandings of the institution–individual relationship. Individual attribution ignores structural impacts, overemphasising initiative; structural attribution downplays ability differences, neglecting adaptability gaps. Neither fully explains dilemma formation mechanisms.

Conflicts in Assessment Orientation: Controversies over the Applicability of Quantitative Assessment vs. Qualitative Evaluation

Academic debates on the system's assessment orientation focus on the applicability of quantitative vs. qualitative evaluation and their integration.

Quantitative assessment proponents argue that indicators (paper count, journal rank, project level, citations) are objective, operable, and comparable, avoiding subjectivity in standardised personnel management (Ioannidis and Maniadis 2023). They note that quantitative standards unify evaluation for large, diverse young teacher groups, reducing costs and improving efficiency, while clearly reflecting academic output to guide promotions and avoid seniority bias or favouritism. Some add that quantitative assessment is inevitable for universities competing for resources and that must demonstrate academic strength under academic capitalism.

Critics advocating qualitative evaluation argue that academic value is diverse and cannot be fully measured by quantitative indicators (Hicks et al. 2015). Over-reliance ignores research quality, teaching contributions, social services, and innovation, leading to overemphasis on papers and projects. High-quality basic research is overlooked for being hard to quantify, while low-quality utilitarian research is rewarded. Disciplinary differences—longer, less quantifiable cycles for humanities/social sciences vs. more quantifiable science/engineering outputs—make unified quantitative standards unfair,

squeezing humanities/social sciences' development space. They advocate a diversified system centred on qualitative evaluation and supplemented by quantitative indicators to balance quality and disciplinary differences.

Debates also exist on integrating the two. Some argue that they complement each other, with quantitative indicators ensuring objectivity and qualitative evaluation balancing quality and individual differences. Others note that immature qualitative mechanisms—vague standards, high operational difficulty—breed subjectivity and corruption, making integration unfeasible and worsening assessment chaos (Ioannidis and Maniadis 2023).

Conflicts in System Optimisation Paths: Choice Dilemmas Between Rigid Strengthening vs. Flexible Adaptation

Academia opposes "rigid strengthening" and "flexible adaptation", differing on whether to enhance assessment rigidity or improve adaptability.

The rigid strengthening view holds that implementation chaos stems from unclear standards and poor execution, not systemic flaws; optimisation requires greater rigidity (Shu 2024). This view advocates unified standards across university levels and disciplines, refined promotion indicators and review processes, and strict enforcement of "dismissal for failure to meet standards" to eliminate favouritism and compromise promotions, ensuring deterrence and incentives. Some propose expanding system coverage to ordinary colleges for standardised personnel management upgrades.

The flexible adaptation view argues that core issues are inadequate localisation and inflexibility. Optimisation requires differentiated systems based on university level, discipline, and group (Hinostroza-Paredes, Candido, and Säntti 2024). It calls for abandoning one-size-fits-all assessments with extending cycles and weakening quantitative indicators for humanities/social sciences (focusing on quality and influence); and strengthening resource guarantees for science/engineering (balancing basic research and transformation). Universities should gain more autonomy to adjust designs to their positioning, offer flexible policies for women and special groups, and improve support to reduce pressure. Some advocate weakening rigid dismissal rules, and establishing transfer mechanisms for teachers who fail assessments to reduce talent loss (Xu and Poole 2024).

This conflict reflects differing understandings of systemic core value. Rigid strengthening emphasises standardisation and deterrence, and it ignores academic autonomy and group differences; flexible adaptation emphasises institutional fit and individual protection, but faces implementation complexity and discipline. Neither fully addresses how to balance rigidity and flexibility.

International Dialogue: Tenure-Track Regimes in Comparative Perspective

The Chinese up-or-out system is usually discussed as a local adaptation of the American model, but comparison with European systems complicates that genealogy and sharpens what is distinctive about China. In the United States, the tenure-track is a decentralised institutional practice. Each university designs its own criteria and timelines, peer review is externalised, and the institution's governing board—not the state—makes the final decision (Chait 2002). Europe has no single model. Germany retained the Habilitation as a second doctorate until recently and has been experimenting with junior professorships and tenure-track packages; France centralises recruitment and evaluation through national councils; the United Kingdom combines permanent contracts with periodic research assessment under the Research Excellence Framework; and the Nordic countries have long relied on broadly permanent employment, with precarity concentrated among postdocs rather than established staff (Fumasoli, Goastellec, and Kehm 2015; Kehm and Teichler 2013). Cross-national surveys show that job satisfaction and job stress vary more with national employment regimes than with individual effort, and that the intensification of academic work—longer hours, metric-driven publication—has become a global pattern (Shin and Jung 2014; Ylijoki 2003).

Against this comparative backdrop, three features of the Chinese case stand out. First, diffusion is policy driven rather than institutionally autonomous. The spread of the up-or-out system tracks state directives and the incentives of the double first-class initiative, so that even ordinary colleges adopt elite benchmarks as a condition of legitimacy (Zhang and Wang 2023). Second, administrative intervention is strong and direct: Evaluation criteria, journal rankings and even age limits are embedded in administrative categories, and academic review is routinely interwoven with bureaucratic rank—a feature absent from both the American and European cases. Third, the system imposes mandatory age thresholds, most visibly the "35-year-old" limit on recruitment and title promotion, which has no counterpart in American tenure practice and only weak parallels in Europe (Horta and Li 2024). These features together define a distinct regime: the global tenure-track script, implemented through Chinese administrative hierarchy, with neither the institutional autonomy that legitimises the American model nor the employment protections that cushion the European ones. The localised system is not a flawed copy of one model but a third thing—a state-coordinated, hierarchy-embedded variant of academic precarity. This reading also explains why the standard reform vocabulary (more autonomy, more flexibility, better peer review) has limited traction unless it is renegotiated with the administrative logic in which the system is embedded.

Critical Reflection and Future Prospects of the Up-or-Out System in Chinese Universities

The above analysis clarifies the complex picture of the system's localisation in China. It carries policy expectations of energising faculty and boosting research output, but its operation has also generated value misalignment, group injustice, and practical

alienation. Understanding these problems requires situating the system in the triple context of academic capitalism, institutional transplantation, and social stratification.

Positioning Deviation and Logical Defects in Localisation Transplantation

The system's localisation suffered from initial positioning deviations. First, value instrumental distortion: The United States tenure-track system centres on protecting academic freedom and fostering innovation, with elimination as a secondary talent selection function. In China, however, competitive elimination's instrumental value was overemphasised, while academic protection and talent cultivation were weakened, reducing the system to a tool for forcing quantitative output—disconnected from academic essence, and root of the "assessment over support" criticism.

Second, inadequate localisation ignored Sino–United States academic ecosystem differences. Chinese universities lack the academic autonomy that underpins the tenure-track system, with excessive administrative interference in academic evaluation. Most universities, especially ordinary ones, lack sound research and talent support but blindly copy top-tier assessment standards, leading to system "acclimatisation" (Liu et al. 2025). Third, neglect of group differences: Insufficient consideration of disciplinary (humanities/social sciences vs. science/engineering) and gender differences during introduction exacerbated assessment unfairness and group-specific dilemmas.

Assessment Orientation Alienation: Quantitative Supremacy Disconnected from Academic Essence

Practical debates on quantitative vs. qualitative evaluation have evolved into "quantitative supremacy" alienation. Most universities prioritise quantitative indicators for promotion, ignoring research quality, teaching contributions, social services, and innovation, pushing young teachers into utilitarian "research for assessment" dilemmas. As noted, they abandon long-term basic research for quick results, even engaging in misconduct, which contradicts innovation goals. This alienation is more severe in humanities/social sciences due to mismatched achievement-assessment cycles (Jiang 2025).

Group Dilemma Differentiation: Structural Injustice and Imbalanced Resource Distribution

System dilemmas show significant group differentiation. At the institutional level, young teachers at double first-class universities access more resources and platforms, with controllable pressure. Ordinary college teachers face insufficient resources and arbitrary assessments, and they are trapped in "strict assessment, weak support" (Liu and Yang 2025). Disciplinarily, science/engineering teachers, despite easier quantification, lack experimental resources and face administrative time drains; humanities/social sciences struggle with core journal monopolies and long output cycles.

Gender-wise, female teachers face greater work–family conflicts and promotion difficulties (Li et al. 2025). Practically, structural constraints—rather than individual ability—dominate dilemma formation, confirming the need for mixed-methods research to explore underlying mechanisms.

System Implementation Chaos: Coexistence of Excessive Rigidity and Insufficient Flexibility

System implementation suffers from "rigidity imbalance". On the one hand, excessive rigidity—strict "dismissal for failure" without special consideration or flexible mechanisms—leads to loss of outstanding young teachers, which contradicts talent-gathering goals. On the other hand, opaque standards and irregular reviews persist, with favouritism and seniority bias undermining rigidity. This worsens anxiety and trust crises (Liu et al. 2025). Imperfect support (relocation allowances, start-up funds, title alignment) further amplifies dilemmas.

Future Prospects: Constructing Localised Optimisation that Balances Rigidity and Flexibility

System optimisation requires addressing localisation gaps, group injustice, and assessment alienation to build a "value return, classified adaptation, and enhanced guarantees" system to balance institutional logic, academic rules, and individual demands.

Value Return: Reshaping the Institutional Orientation of Academic Guidance

To resolve alienation, a return to academic essence is required by abandoning "quantitative supremacy" and prioritising academic innovation and talent cultivation. Drawing on the United States tenure-track system's strengths, there needs to be a balance of competitive elimination and academic protection, integration of quality, teaching, and social services into assessments, and weakening of an over-reliance on quantitative indicators—this responds to integration proposals. Strengthening academic autonomy, reducing administrative interference, and protecting young teachers' research freedom could avoid utilitarianism.

Classified Adaptation: Building a Differentiated Institutional System

One-size-fits-all assessments should be abandoned to build differentiated systems. Double first-class universities should retain strict standards, focusing on innovation and international competitiveness; ordinary colleges should align with their positioning, lowering quantitative thresholds to prioritise teaching and regional social services. For disciplines, humanities/social sciences cycles should be extended and evaluation optimised; science/engineering resource guarantees should be strengthened. Flexible policies for women and special groups could be offered, with improvements in maternity and family support to enhance equity. International evaluation reforms offer workable reference points here: long-cycle, output-independent evaluation of basic

research in Europe (for example, the project-based funding of the European Research Council and the Finnish multi-year evaluations) and flexible peer-review experiments in North America, together with the principle of the Leiden Manifesto and the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment that metrics should serve, not replace, expert judgement (DORA 2012; Fumasoli, Goastellec, and Kehm 2015; Hicks et al. 2015).

Improved Guarantees: Strengthening Resource Support and Rights Protection

Structural constraints should be addressed by enhancing support. Research investment could be increased, with resources tilted towards young teachers. Power monopolies could be broken and distribution optimised. Life and career support could be improved (relocation allowances, housing subsidies) and career paths could be clarified to reduce anxiety. Standardised assessment, review, and appeal mechanisms could be established to protect rights and eliminate subjectivity.

Dynamic Optimisation: Establishing a System Feedback and Adjustment Mechanism

Based on institutionalism's institution–individual interaction perspective, regular feedback mechanisms should be established to balance rigidity and flexibility. Young teacher demands could be collected, and standards per academic trends and university positioning could be dynamically optimised. Blind imitation and rigidity should be avoided to encourage personalised models that prevent involution. Inter-university experiences can be strengthened for sharing and research, with localised success cases summarised. The system's adaptation to China's higher education development could be promoted.

Conclusion

Focusing on China's university up-or-out system, this study centred on the "game between institutional logic and individual demands", integrating multiple theories and mixed research methods to explore system-related issues and to construct optimisation paths. It addressed core research questions, filled existing research gaps, and provided theoretical and practical support for university personnel system reform and academic ecosystem optimisation.

Core Research Conclusions

Institutional Origin: Value Misalignment and Irrational Diffusion in Localisation Transplantation

China's up-or-out system is a localised adaptation of the United States tenure-track system, with its diffusion driven by irrational "policy push + institutional competition". Unlike the original system's core positioning, localisation caused value misalignment, overemphasising the instrumental role of competitive elimination while weakening academic protection and talent cultivation. This reduced it to a quantitative assessment

tool. Combined with Sino–United States academic ecosystem differences and ordinary colleges' blind imitation, this forms the root cause of system practice alienation.

Practical Status: Prominent Assessment Alienation and Structural Differentiation of Group Dilemmas

Current system practice suffers from multiple alienations, with group-specific structural dilemmas. Quantitative supremacy in assessment leads to academic utilitarianism, and the misalignment between research output cycles and assessment timelines is more acute in humanities and social sciences. Young teachers face significant dilemma differences due to institutional level, discipline, and gender that are rooted primarily in structural constraints rather than individual ability. System implementation is overly rigid and insufficiently flexible, and inadequate supporting guarantees worsen these dilemmas.

Clarified Conflicts: Underlying Logic and Resolution Directions of Four Core Contradictions

This study clarifies the underlying logic of the system's four core contradictions. System effectiveness varies by institution and discipline, requiring a balance between instrumentality and value; structural constraints are the main cause of dilemmas, with optimisation focusing on resource distribution and institutional adaptation; quantitative and qualitative assessment should complement each other to build a diversified evaluation system; rigid norms and flexible inclusiveness must be balanced, abandoning extreme opposites.

Optimisation Paths: A Localised and Improved System Based on Differentiation and Diversification

System optimisation requires a localised improvement framework to achieve three balances: Align academic essence with instrumentality by repositioning to prioritise academic innovation; balance unified norms with group differences through differentiated assessment standards; and reconcile competitive incentives with rights protection by enhancing supporting guarantees and dynamic adjustment mechanisms to adapt to academic development and individual needs.

Research Contributions

Theoretical Contributions

This study expands the application of theories such as academic capitalism in university personnel system research and advances institutional transplantation theory in higher education. It integrates multiple theories to construct an analytical framework, clarifies core conflicts, and fills gaps in cross-group comparative research.

Practical Contributions

The study presents the dilemmas and demands of different teacher groups to provide empirical support, proposes differentiated optimisation paths aligned with hierarchical university operation realities, and emphasises structural fairness and rights protection to guide academic ecosystem optimisation and higher education high-quality development.

Research Limitations

The sample lacks full coverage of remote universities and vocational colleges, which limits external validity. Long-term tracking of the assessment process is absent, failing to capture dynamic evolution. The focus on institution–individual interaction overlooks the perspectives of managers and policymakers.

Future Research Prospects

Future research should expand sample coverage and conduct longitudinal tracking to verify conclusion universality; integrate multiple perspectives to analyse multi-stakeholder game mechanisms; and examine how the up-or-out system interacts with other personnel reforms, such as salary systems, faculty development programmes, and workload rules, to form a coherent institutional framework.

Funding

The Philosophy and Social Sciences Research Project of Shandong Provincial Universities (Number: 2025ZSZX003); Shandong University Education and Teaching Reform Research Project (Number: 2024Y066); Postgraduate Education Reform Project of Shandong Province (Number: XYJG2024027).

References

Baturenko, Sergei A. 2021. “Social Stratification in the Sociological Theory of P. Bourdieu”. *Moscow State University Bulletin. Series 18. Sociology and Political Science* 27 (2): 26–43. https://doi.org/10.24290/1029-3736-2021-27-2-26-43.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1988. *Homo Academicus*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Chait, Richard P., ed. 2002. *The Questions of Tenure*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

DiMaggio, Paul J., and Walter W. Powell. 1983. “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields”. *American Sociological Review* 48 (2): 147–160. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101.

DORA. 2012. “San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment”. https://sfdora.org/read/.

Fredricks-Lowman, Imani, and Natesha Smith-Isabell. 2020. “Academic Capitalism and the Conflicting Ideologies of Higher Education as a Public Good and Commodity”. *New Directions for Higher Education* 192: 21–27. https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20388.

Fumasoli, Tatiana, Gaële Goastellec, and Barbara M. Kehm, eds. 2015. *Academic Work and Careers in Europe: Trends, Challenges, Perspectives*. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-10720-2.

Hicks, Diana, Paul Wouters, Ludo Waltman, Sarah de Rijcke, and Ismael Rafols. 2015. “The Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics”. *Nature* 520 (7548): 429–431. https://doi.org/10.1038/520429a.

Hinostroza-Paredes, Yenny, Helena Hinke Dobrochinski Candido, and Janne Säntti. 2024. “Chilean and Finnish University-Based Teacher Educators’ Agentic Approaches to Academic Career Path Development”. *Higher Education Research & Development* 43 (2): 315–331. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2023.2240728.

Hoffman, Steve G. 2012. “Academic Capitalism”. *Contexts* 11 (4): 12–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504212466325.

Horta, Hugo, and Huan Li. 2024. “Ageism and Age Anxiety Experienced by Chinese Doctoral Students in Enacting a ‘Successful’ Career Script in Academia”. *Higher Education* 88 (4): 1429–1444. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01176-9.

Huang, Futao. 2018. “Quality Deficit Belies the Hype”. *Nature* 564 (7735): S70–S71. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-018-07694-2.

Ingram, Paul, and Karen Clay. 2000. “The Choice-Within-Constraints New Institutionalism and Implications for Sociology”. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (1): 525–546. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.525.

Ioannidis, John P. A., and Zacharias Maniadis. 2023. “In Defense of Quantitative Metrics in Researcher Assessments”. *PLOS Biology* 21 (12): e3002408. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.3002408.

Jiang, Xiaohua. 2025. “Navigating Challenges in Social Science Research: The Impact of Halo Effect and Inadequate Academic Socialization on Chinese Young Researchers”. *Studies in Higher Education* 50 (1): 64–79. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2328830.

Kehm, Barbara M., and Ulrich Teichler, eds. 2013. *The Academic Profession in Europe: New Tasks and New Challenges*. Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4614-5.

Lai, Manhong, Lan Shi, and Iatfei Lam. 2024. “How Academics Interpret and Deal with Performance Measures: A Case Study of Two Universities in Mainland China”. *Higher Education Research and Development* 43 (1): 134–148. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2023.2228229.

Li, Jian, Eryong Xue, Jing Li, and Yukai Wei. 2025. “A Systematic Review of Factors Influencing Teachers’ Anxiety in Balancing Teaching and Personal Life”. *Asia Pacific Education Review*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-025-10100-y.

Li, Tingsong, and Xi Yang. 2024. “Conflict or Facilitation? Faculty Members’ Teaching Time and Their Research Performance”. *Higher Education* 87 (5): 1433–1451. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01071-3.

Liu, Shubo, Mengna Lv, Qiuli Huang, and Xu Zhang. 2025. “Exploring Means–Ends Decoupling in the Tenure Track System of China’s ‘Double First-Class’ Universities: An Institutional Logics Perspective”. *Asia Pacific Education Review*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-025-10055-0.

Liu, Yang, and Xuhui Yang. 2025. “Research on the Current Situation of Occupational Stress among Young University Teachers in China”. *Journal of Contemporary Educational Research* 9 (1): 234–240. https://doi.org/10.26689/jcer.v9i1.9547.

Mason, Mary Ann, Nicholas H. Wolfinger, and Marc Goulden. 2013. *Do Babies Matter? Gender and Family in the Ivory Tower*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Meyer, John W., and Brian Rowan. 1977. “Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony”. *American Journal of Sociology* 83 (2): 340–363. https://doi.org/10.1086/226550.

Naidoo-Chetty, Mineshree, and Marieta du Plessis. 2021. “Job Demands and Job Resources of Academics in Higher Education”. *Frontiers in Psychology* 12: 631171. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.631171.

Park, Sangchan, Wesley D. Sine, and Pamela S. Tolbert. 2011. “Professions, Organizations, and Institutions: Tenure Systems in Colleges and Universities”. *Work and Occupations* 38 (3): 340–371. https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888411412725.

Qian, Yuchen, Liyin Zhang, Xin Liu, and Jiang Li. 2025. “Enhancing China’s Incentive System for Scientific Innovation: A Review and Recommendations”. *Minerva* 63 (3): 557–578. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11024-024-09554-y.

Schenker, Theresa, and Bryan Smith. 2016. “Alternatives to the Tenure Track”. *CALICO Journal* 33 (2): i–iv. https://doi.org/10.1558/cj.v33i2.30874.

Shelton, Kaye, Christine A. Haynes, and Kathleen A. Creghan. 2022. “Fundamentals of Delphi Research Methodology”. In *Research Anthology on Innovative Research Methodologies and Utilization Across Multiple Disciplines*, 473–497. Hershey, PA: IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-3881-7.ch024.

Shin, Jung Cheol, and Jisun Jung. 2014. “Academics Job Satisfaction and Job Stress across Countries in the Changing Academic Environments”. *Higher Education* 67 (5): 603–620. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9668-y.

Shu, Jun. 2024. “Cultivating Academic Innovation Talents in Universities: The Impact of ‘Up-Or-Out’ Employment System”. *International Journal of Education and Humanities* 15 (3): 84–88. https://doi.org/10.54097/nnmfwv92.

Si, Jinghui. 2023. “No Other Choices but Involution: Understanding Chinese Young Academics in the Tenure Track System”. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 45 (1): 53–67. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2022.2115332.

Slaughter, Sheila, and Gary Rhoades. 2004. *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Slaughter, Sheila, and Larry L. Leslie. 1997. *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Solomon, Shihaam, and Marieta du Plessis. 2023. “Experiences of Precarious Work within Higher Education Institutions: A Qualitative Evidence Synthesis”. *Frontiers in Education* 8: 960649. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.960649.

Van Houtum, Henk, and Annelies van Uden. 2022. “The Autoimmunity of the Modern University: How Its Managerialism Is Self-Harming What It Claims to Protect”. *Organization* 29 (1): 197–208. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508420975347.

Wang, Siyi, and Glen A. Jones. 2021. “Competing Institutional Logics of Academic Personnel System Reforms in Leading Chinese Universities”. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 43 (1): 49–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2020.1747958.

Wang, Xin, and Wen Li Wang. 2023. “The Tenure Track Employment System in Colleges and Universities in China: A Scoping Review of the Chinese Literature”. *Frontiers in Psychology* 14: 1271110. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1271110.

Xu, Wen, and Adam Poole. 2024. “‘Academics without Publications Are Just Like Imperial Concubines without Sons’: The ‘New Times’ of Chinese Higher Education”. *Journal of Education Policy* 39 (6): 861–878. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2023.2288339.

Yang, Xi, Xinlan Cai, and Jia Cai. 2024. “The Effect of the Tenure Track on Faculty Member’s Job Insecurity and Innovative Work Behavior”. *Higher Education* 88 (5): 1927–1946. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01194-1.

Ylijoki, Oili-Helena. 2003. “Entangled in Academic Capitalism? A Case-Study on Changing Ideals and Practices of University Research”. *Higher Education* 45 (3): 307–335. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022667923715.

Zhang, Xinqu, and Peng Wang. 2025. “The Politics of Higher Education in China: The Signal–Response Mechanism, Downward Tiered Pressure Escalation, and the Double First-Class University Initiative”. *Comparative Education* 61 (2): 202–224. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2024.2376986.

Zhang, Youliang, Weiyan Xiong, and Yun Yue. 2026. “Involution Life in the Ivory Tower: A Chinese University's Teacher Perceptions on Academic Profession and Well-Being under the Double First-Class Initiative”. *Asia Pacific Education Review* 27: 599–611. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-024-10002-5.

Zhang, Zhibai. 2022. “Evaluating China’s Double First-Class Project from the Perspective of Economics”. *Higher Education Policy* 35 (1): 234–254. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-020-00207-9.

Zhao, Siqi, and Hong Wang. 2023. “The Impact of Teaching-Research Conflict on Turnover Intention: Cross-Level Interaction Effect of Justice Climate”. *Frontiers in Psychology* 14: 1283477. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1283477.