

# **A Narrative Inquiry into the “Up-or-Out” System implemented in Universities of City C of China**

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates the impact of the "up-or-out" system, a common practice in Chinese universities for over two decades, on academic staff. While intended to foster innovation and competition, this system, which requires academics to achieve certain milestones within a set timeframe or face termination, has raised concerns about its long-term effects. This research explores two key areas 1) the internal motivations and drivers that fuel academics' research progress, and 2) the effectiveness of the "up-or-out" system itself, specifically examining its relationship with scholars' abilities. This study adopts a narrative inquiry approach, focusing on the lived experiences and psychological well-being of academics. Through in-depth interviews with ten participants – two Ph.D students and eight young scholars from various universities – the research seeks to understand the system's impact beyond its perceived efficiency. The study analyzes how the "up-or-out" system shapes academics' mindsets and behaviors, exploring the emotional toll it may exact while also considering its influence on research productivity and career paths. The findings reveal moderate opposition to the "up-or-out" system among interviewees, suggesting a lack of universal acceptance and perceived benefit. Furthermore, the system appears to fall short of its intended goal of boosting productivity. Participants' output averaged only 2.5 academic articles per year, significantly lower than the expected standard of 4. The research suggests that while the "up-or-out" system aims to enhance academic output, it may inadvertently limit the full expression of scholarly talent and potential, hindering rather than helping academics reach their full capabilities.



**Keywords:** Up-or-Out System, Chinese Universities, Academic Career, Faculty Evaluation

## Introduction

The “up-or-out” system was first proposed by Harvard University in 1716. In order to stimulate the academic potential of newly hired young scholars, Harvard University reformed the tenure of junior young scholars, assigning them a three-year employment period. It was later on extended to 8 years, after which if the lecturers were promoted to the title of associate professor, they would obtain a lifetime employment contract (long-term employment contract), or else they would be dismissed and leave. The disadvantage of this reform measure was that the university had too much power. Under the young scholars’ awareness of rights and self-protection, Harvard actually did not strictly implement the “up-or-out” system for more than 100 years, and “up” was almost settled as the norm, forming a situation in which fixed-term young scholars and tenured professors coexisted for many years. It was not until 1860 did Harvard University proposed that new young scholars must be promoted within a certain term of employment, otherwise they would not be reappointed. Since then, the “up-or-out” system has been formally formed and implemented, which other universities have followed suit. This is considered to be the predecessor of the division between the probation period and the lifelong tenure (Chait et al., 1982).

In the meantime, Yale and Brown University applied a different model – an assistant professor was one of the candidates for highly selective professorship. At that time, less than half of Yale’s teaching assistants became professors, and all six professors served as Yale’s assistant professors. The significance of this model was to regard the position of junior academic staff as the first step of the academic ladder, and then moving up to senior professional titles.



Both of the abovementioned models constantly mingled into each other, and gradually formed a dual-track approach – some young scholars obtained the tenure after a probation period, while those who failed to get promoted managed to be reemployed as young scholars or assistant professors over and over again, who in regards to the service time could match that of their colleagues with senior titles, which became a factual tenure. This method had also been followed by many US universities. Both of the above models had coexisted for a long time.

The “up-or-out” system came into China way later than in the West – it was first introduced to Tsinghua University in the 1990s, and then Peking University in 2003. In order to build a first-class academic staff in line with the international standards and fully stimulate the vitality and competitiveness of young scholars, Peking University reformed the appointment and promotion system of young scholars. Following the hierarchical elimination system of Harvard University, different types of appointment contracts are signed according to different professional titles. Professors are given long-term teaching posts, associate professors and lecturers are given fixed term teaching posts, and if the latter fail to “move up” on the ladder of professional titles within the specified period appointed in the contract, the university will not renew the contract with them. Although the reform plan has been opposed by many young scholars, the university carries out anyway – after some modifications. By and by, other Chinese universities included in the “985” and “211” projects have applied the “up-or-out” system. Although the specific criteria differ in different universities, the main aim remains the same – to strengthen the assessment of academic staff within the termed period, and “kick out” those who fail to meet the academic demands from the university.

From then on, the “up-or-out” system became one of the key reforms of the personnel system in Chinese universities (Liu, 2022).

Since the introduction of the “up-or-out” system from the US into China first by Tsinghua University in the 1980s, this system has gradually radiated into the majority of Chinese universities, especially the ones on the “985” “211” “double first-class”



projects, requiring the newly employed assistants and young scholars to be promoted in their academic titles within a certain period of time (“up”), or else either the contract between them and the university will be terminated, or they will get transferred to a non-academic position in the university.

Along with the cancellation of the “authorized strength” guaranteeing a lifetime of a secure position, the “up-or-out” system has indeed helped to eliminate those who either lack academic capabilities or are too lazy to contribute anything to the university, as a result boosting the corresponding university’s world ranking. For example, the QS world ranking of Tsinghua University in 2012 was no. 48, whereas in 2022 it soared up to no. 17. (<https://www.qschina.cn>) On the other hand, however, it also inflicts great pressure on the “young scholars”. This dissertation will explore into the cause of their pressure and the problem of sourcing it in depth.

### **Research objective**

1. To explore the inner needs and inner stimuli required for academic members’ motivation to progress in their area of research.
2. To study the ability of the “Up-or-Out” system and the relationship with the abilities of scholars

### **Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative method called narrative inquiry. It first formally appeared as a qualitative study method in the journal *Education Research*, where Connelly and Clandinin (1990) published *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, stating that narrative inquiry is not only a phenomenological view of experience, but also a methodology for studying experience. Its philosophical basis and the whole research paradigm are different from the quantitative research based on positivism, and are also different from other narrative research methods such



as “narrative analysis”, “thematic analysis”, “textual analysis”, and “structural analysis”, which are also characterized by “narrative”. (Clandinin, 2013)

### **1. Population and sample**

This study collects data from 2 Ph.D students and 8 young scholars from 4 universities where the “up-or-out” policy is implemented and will apply the path-goal theory, the goal-setting theory and the immaturity-maturity theory based on the data and analyses provided by those literatures, none of which have applied the three abovementioned theories. All 4 universities are located in City C.

The term “young scholar” refers to any scholars under the age of 45, and includes both lecturers who are on an “up-or-out” contract, and associate professors who have successfully obtained a tenure.

### **2. Research Instrument**

In the data analysis stage, through the method of narrative transcription, the story of the research object is placed in three-dimensional narrative exploration space such as timeliness, individual and society, and location, and different story plots or fragments are recombined with a certain theme, that is, to construct a complete narrative under a specific theme. Narrative rewriting can be divided into two steps: transcriptional rewriting and story rewriting. The former removes the words that are unclear or have no clear meaning in the original interview text, and the latter rewrites the removed text into a third person narrative, adding the researcher’s interpretation perspective and relevant details.

### **3. Data collection**

This study has collected interviews participated by 2 PhD students and 8 young scholars. The interviews lasted for 1 to 2.5 hours, and the content includes their reason for working or wanting to work in universities, their expectations about the job before entering universities, their planning of teaching and research, their opinion regarding the “up-or-out” system, and their personal feelings regarding the work affected by the system.



Data processing is mainly carried out through the following three steps. First, sorting out and analyzing interview data, establishing an open coding system, and forming repetitive codes for relevant research questions. In this process, the “indigenous concept” used by the interviewees is used as the coding label, such as “interest”, “freedom”, “pressure” and other words. Second, transcribing the interview content, removing unclear words and incoherent sentences. Third, the above open codes are classified meaningfully through spindle codes, and the attributes, dimensions and relationships of these classifications are clarified in the process of repeated comparisons. In this study, “sensitive concepts” such as research enthusiasm, following system and adaptive system are used to guide the classification process, so as to ensure the “reliability” and “relevance” of the classification results.

## Result

The case studies of Ph. D students and Lectures reveal the multifaceted challenges faced by young scholars navigating the academic landscape within the constraints of the "up-or-out" system. Ph. D students a brilliant mathematician driven by a deep passion for research, exemplifies the system's potential to stifle ambitious long-term projects. His pursuit of the Goldbach Conjecture, a highly challenging endeavor, clashes with the pressure to publish quickly to meet tenure requirements. This pressure may force him to compromise his research goals, potentially limiting his intellectual growth and hindering his pursuit of groundbreaking discoveries. Furthermore, the limited resources and intellectual support available in institutions that offer job security present another significant obstacle.

Lecturers who are scholars in the humanities face a different set of challenges. Navigating academic politics, including the need to conform to established norms and gain the approval of senior faculty, can be a significant hurdle. The pressure to publish quickly may lead to prioritizing short-term gains, such as publishing in established



journals, over pursuing original and independent research. This can stifle intellectual curiosity and potentially compromise the quality and originality of their work. Form highlight several key concerns about the "up-or-out" system. Firstly, it can create undue pressure on young scholars to prioritize short-term productivity over long-term intellectual growth, potentially discouraging ambitious and innovative research. Secondly, it may incentivize scholars to conform to existing norms and prioritize the approval of senior faculty, hindering intellectual freedom and autonomy. Finally, the system can exacerbate existing power imbalances within academia, with senior faculty exerting significant influence over the career trajectories of junior scholars. The importance of intellectual freedom and autonomy for academic success is evident in both cases. A system that prioritizes short-term productivity and conformity may stifle innovation and hinder the development of truly original research. To address these concerns, alternative career pathways and evaluation systems that better support the diverse needs and research goals of academic scholars are crucial. Further research, including quantitative data collection and comparative analysis across disciplines and institutions, is necessary to fully understand the implications of the "up-or-out" system for the future of academic research and the well-being of the academic community. This analysis provides a preliminary understanding of the challenges faced by young scholars navigating the academic landscape within the context of the "up-or-out" system.

The above examples outline the plight of the young scholars typically, and accord well with the three chosen theories of this study. Given the mentioned shortcomings of the implementation of the “up-or-out” policy in Chinese universities, though, there are still hope and promises for the improvements and reformations of the system in the future, reassuring current PhD students and future young scholars regarding their dream job and choices. Instead of on the whole giving up their intended track and retreating to other fields where they can avoid the sharp and strict choice between either moving up or getting out but dwelling for good in a domain perhaps not never so ideal, current



PhD students and future young scholars may be able to look at the bright and comforting elements of the “up-or-out” policy already existing in the documents of some universities, and anticipate further reformations and betterment of it in the near future once they formally step into the academic kingdom.

Even if the newly hired young scholars do not benefit from an ideal “up-or-out” policy immediately, they may be assured that it won’t be too many years after their entry into a university before a qualitative reformation of the system, and, it goes without saying, they surely will keep in mind that no policy on earth, no matter how considerate and how well it is improved and reformed, can be perfect.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

From the practical experience at home and abroad, it is indeed reasonable to encourage competition and promote mobility in the reform of the personnel system, but the reform of the personnel system should not be rushed, and universities need to clarify the scope of application of the system. First, “moving up or getting out” does not have universal applicability. Due to the large gap in the history, level, orientation and development needs of colleges and universities, different types of colleges and universities take different personnel system measures. In the process of implementing the system, we should take into account the balance between teaching and scientific research, efficiency and fairness, current and long-term, local and overall, and avoid blind adoption of “crowding up”. China Agricultural University is one of the few double-top universities that have not implemented the “up-or-out” policy. Ke Bingsheng, then president of China Agricultural University, once wrote an article to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of the “up-or-out” system and the concerns of domestic implementation. (Ke, 2014) It is difficult to ensure the consistency of policy formulation and implementation, and it is easy to have problems left over from history. The development of colleges and universities has its own characteristics and laws. The system is not suitable for colleges and universities characterized by teaching. Teachers who lack scientific research but have strong teaching ability can consider transferring



to some universities characterized by teaching. The basic function of the teaching position is teaching. The employment contract is flexible, with different terms, and can be renewed continuously. There is no problem of “leaving without promotion”. The basic function of the research position is scientific research. As long as the scientific research funds are sufficient, you can stay in the position, and you don't need to “move up or get out”. Second, domestic universities lack the atmosphere of free flow of talents. Different colleges and universities have different standards for “going up or down”, and the institutional guarantee system for the free flow of talents is not sound enough. There is no large environment for the free flow of talents in China, and colleges and universities also lack such tradition and culture. The traditional concept of “one appointment for life” still has a great influence. Many teachers subconsciously believe that college teachers themselves are “lifelong system”, and do not understand the reasons for implementing the reform of “promotion or leaving”. Teachers who leave because of “going up or down” are easy to be labeled as “unqualified” and “incompetent”. The dynamic management concept of “graded flow”, “top of the competent, top of the average, and bottom of the mediocre” is difficult to implement. Third, the supporting safeguard measures of the “up-or-out” system are insufficient. Some colleges and universities often fail to fulfill the promise of talent introduction truthfully or need to postpone it, the recruitment plan is unclear, the post setting is unclear, and the supporting guarantee cannot keep up with the actual needs. For example, there are certain deficiencies in the rights and interests protection of enrollment resources, scientific research conditions, and funding. In terms of enrollment resources, there are different degrees of restrictions on postgraduate enrollment of pre-employed teachers. Some colleges and universities do not have the qualification to enroll doctoral students, and some colleges and universities cannot independently enroll postgraduate students. The scientific research guarantee is insufficient, and the research work will also be greatly limited. It is difficult for young teachers to carry out research independently. They need to rely on a large scientific



research team to carry out research work smoothly. The achievement of scientific research results depends largely on the level and working conditions of the team.

### **Recommendation**

The specific requirements should also be flexible rather than fixed, like, for instance, the leaders could require that “in so-and-so much time, you should be able to carry out at least one of the following, including but not limited to: publish three papers, win a provincial prize for teaching, get three patents, etc.”, this will leave the young scholars with more autonomy, making them feel that they are indeed adults (mature) that can make decisions and choices for themselves, rather than children (immaturity) that do not know what’s good and important for them, thus needing authorities to tell them what to do.

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