WHY RETENTION POLICIES DO NOT TRAVEL: THE CONDITIONS BEHIND TENURE SYSTEMS AND INCENTIVE CONTRACTS FOR ACADEMIC STAFF

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Abstract. *Policymakers who seek to reduce academic staff turnover often borrow measures from other higher education systems. This paper argues that tenure guarantees, incentive contracts, decasualisation targets, workload norms and transparent career paths do not act on turnover directly. Each works through an intermediate state, such as embeddedness, exhaustion, perceived fairness or uncertainty, and only under a specific condition. Evidence from the United States, China, South Korea, Australia, Russia and Belarus is compared with administrative data for Uzbekistan. A measure transferred without its condition does not remove turnover but moves it to the part of the workforce that official reports do not show. A selection rule is proposed in which the degree of employment formalisation in an institution is assessed before any retention measure is chosen.*

Keywords: *academic staff turnover; policy transfer; tenure; incentive contracts; casual academic employment; employment formalisation; Uzbekistan*

Introduction

Countries that seek to reduce academic staff turnover often study measures applied elsewhere. The usual product of such a study is a list of measures, while the question that decides whether a measure can be transferred remains open: which condition made it work, and does that condition exist in the receiving system? No measure works in isolation. It operates together with the pay system, the procedure for approving staff establishments, labour law and the financial autonomy of institutions. This paper examines five measures widely discussed in the literature, identifies for each the problem it was designed to solve, the condition under which it works and its unintended side effect (Table 1), and proposes a rule for selecting measures in a system where a large share of academic work is performed outside the main staff.

Tenure: a guarantee that moves instability elsewhere

Tenure systems in the Anglo-American tradition were designed to protect academic freedom by making dismissal after a probationary period difficult and costly. Retention was a by-product rather than the purpose. A less discussed property of tenure is that it creates a two-tier labour market inside the institution. When enrolment changes, funding is cut or programmes are revised, the institution absorbs the shock through staff on fixed-term contracts, and the more secure the upper tier, the stronger the shock to the lower one. Turnover is therefore not reduced but moved to the part of the workforce that official reports do not show, while the reports improve because tenured staff, who stay, form their core.

Visibility is an issue for the statistics themselves. The 2025 retention survey of the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources covered 3,791 employees at 505 institutions in the United States and found that one in four was likely to look for a new job within a year, down from one in three in 2023, with pay as the main reason (Schneider & Bichsel, 2025). Faculty were not included because they are surveyed separately, so widely cited turnover figures for higher education in fact describe administrative and support staff.

China shows what happens when the system is transferred. Tenure-track employment arrived in 1994 and is now used in 34 of the country's 39 leading universities. A scoping review of the Chinese literature found that only seven of 112 articles published between 1995 and 2022 were empirical. It also reported that about 60% of tenure-track staff obtain tenure in American universities compared with 25–30% in China, that evaluation periods range from three to nine years with criteria that are not transparent, and that some leading universities have abandoned the system since 2022 (Wang & Wang, 2024). Under the same name, the system serves as a guarantee in one country and as a screening barrier in another.

South Korea illustrates a different trap. A study of 22 international faculty members at research-focused universities found unclear contract terms, frequently changing evaluation requirements and limited participation in governance. Most participants, particularly in the humanities, nevertheless preferred to stay, because labour markets in their home countries were even harder (Lim & Kim, 2026). Staying for lack of alternatives is entrapment rather than retention. Such staff appear as retained in reports even when their effort and initiative have declined, so an improving turnover figure can conceal deterioration. Australia shows the limits of targets. When the Universities Accord asked universities to cut casual and fixed-term employment, each responded in its own way, and where no financial or

organisational incentive existed, the commitment tended to remain a document rather than a change in practice (Smithers et al., 2025).

Incentive contracts: the measured output rises, the purpose is another matter

Incentive contracts, widely used in Commonwealth of Independent States countries, link pay to measurable output on the expectation that good performers will stay and poor performers will leave. An evaluation at a Russian regional university based on six years of data found that the number of publications increased after the contract was introduced but their quality indicators did not change. Pay, incentive payments and participation in professional development affected publication counts, whereas only incentive payments and professional development affected quality (Antosik & Shevchenko, 2018). What worked was not the form of the contract but the money and development opportunities attached to it. Across Russian universities, pay under these contracts rewards publishing and holding administrative posts, whereas teaching adds little to it (Prakhov & Rudakov, 2021).

In Belarus the effective academic contract has not yet been introduced, but it is expected to attract highly qualified researchers, retain young staff and improve ranking positions (Fursevich, 2025). The expected result is thus asserted with confidence where the measure has not been introduced and remains unconfirmed where it has. Incentive contracts also presuppose a growing wage fund. If the fund is fixed, incentive payments are taken from some staff and given to others, the losing group is likely to perceive the change as unfair, and the measure redistributes turnover across groups rather than reducing it.

Measures act through intermediate states

None of these measures affects turnover intention directly. Each operates through an intermediate state, and if that state does not change, the measure has no effect. A scoping review of voluntary turnover intention in the public service reaches a similar conclusion, with much of the effect transmitted through mediating variables (Silva et al., 2025). Four paths can be distinguished. The first runs through the cost of leaving: embeddedness raises it, but under job insecurity ties outside the workplace stop holding staff and instead strengthen turnover intention (Peltokorpi & Allen, 2024). The second runs through exhaustion, which workload norms can address and pay rises cannot, so the two measures are not substitutes. The third runs through perceived fairness, which is most often violated in promotion and can be repaired only by making procedures transparent. The fourth runs through uncertainty: short contracts and uncertain research funding push staff out of academia, while stable permanent jobs outside it pull them away (Kallio et al., 2024).

Choosing a measure therefore means choosing an intermediate state, and that requires measuring first which state is broken.

Table 1

Retention measures, the conditions they require and their side effects

Measure	Problem addressed	Condition for it to work	Observed side effect
Tenure guarantee	Dependence of academic freedom on management decisions	The group outside the guarantee remains small	Instability moves to the unguaranteed group and disappears from reports
Reducing the share of fixed-term contracts	Instability of employment relationships	Financial and organisational reasons for the institution to comply	The target may be met only on paper
Incentive contract	Equal pay for staff with different results	A growing wage fund and a measure close to the purpose	The measured indicator rises, the unmeasured one declines
Workload norm	Excessive load and the resulting exhaustion	A clearly defined calculation base	The norm is met formally by counting all posts
Transparent career path	Uncertainty about the future	Criteria are published and kept stable	Frequent changes in criteria reduce trust further

Note. Compiled by the author from the literature reviewed.

An illustration from Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan shows how a measure loses its effect when its condition is missing. The national student–teacher ratio norm sets 16 students per teacher for the humanities, social sciences, pedagogy and economics (Ministry of Justice registration No. 3345, 2022), but it does not specify which posts count as teachers. In the 2025/2026 academic year the 18 institutions specialising in economics and business had 28.3 students per post when all posts were counted and 60.1 per main post, with 52.8% of posts lacking main-position status. In the 8 agricultural institutions, whose norm is 15.8, the corresponding figures were 16.2 and 18.3, with 11.4% of posts outside the main staff (author's calculations based on Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, 2026). The norm itself is not wrong, but its base is undefined, so it can be met by adding posts rather than by reducing the actual workload.

The only national measure aimed directly at retaining staff with academic degrees, an allowance of up to 30% of the position salary for holders of the candidate

of sciences or PhD degree and up to 60% for doctors of science, applies only to state organisations (Cabinet of Ministers, 2019). Yet the share of posts without main-position status is 22.8% in state institutions, 51.5% in private institutions and 56.7% in foreign institutions (Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, 2026). The measure is strongest where the problem is mildest and absent where the problem is most severe.

A rule for selecting measures

These observations suggest a rule for selecting retention measures. The first question is how formalised employment is in the institution. Where formalisation is weak, the other measures lose their effect: a workload norm is met through posts that exist on paper, and transparent promotion is irrelevant to hourly staff who hold no position from which to be promoted. In such institutions, stabilising the form of the contract should come first. Where employment is well formalised, further strengthening of contracts adds little, and workload, fairness and career paths come first. In both cases results must be measured again after a measure has been applied; in China the system was applied for 28 years while its effect remained almost unmeasured (Wang & Wang, 2024).

The rule is a working hypothesis derived from the literature and national data, and testing it requires comparing retention in subsequent years across groups of institutions that applied each measure. Staff outside the main establishment are not a problem in themselves, since practitioners bring knowledge that textbooks lack. The problem arises when they carry the main part of the teaching load, and it is this condition that should be checked before any foreign measure is adopted.

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