

# Cultivating Academic Innovation Talents in Universities: The Impact of “Up-Or-Out” Employment System

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**Abstract:** The “up-or-out” system is an employment model widely practiced in universities. It involves the establishment of postdoctoral or full-time research positions, regular evaluations of non-permanent faculty, and the selection of outstanding innovative talents. Originating from the innovative practices of the American university tenure system, this model provides incentives for scientific spirit and academic innovation, complementing the tenure track. However, this system presents challenges in practice, such as survival pressure for new teachers, career anxiety, re-employment difficulties, and impacts on the long-term development of innovation capabilities. Solutions lie in innovating the evaluation models, emphasizing humanistic care, and fully respecting teachers’ rights. The system should serve as a means to enhance academic competitiveness rather than undermine the dignity of educators. Only in this way can the “up-or-out” system truly play a positive role in promoting academic progress and innovation.

**Keywords:** Up-Or-Out; Innovative Talents; University Appointment System; Career Anxiety.

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## 1. Introduction

Outstanding innovative talents refer to individuals with exceptional innovation capabilities, remarkable achievements, and influence in specific fields. These talents are valuable resources in various sectors, particularly in scientific research, technological innovation, engineering design, and medical fields. Their accomplishments and contributions are crucial for advancing industry development and social progress. Therefore, all sectors need to cultivate and attract more outstanding innovative talents to drive innovative development and continuous progress.

The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasizes the focus on cultivating outstanding innovative talents and utilizing global talents. General Secretary Xi Jinping has stated, “Talents are the strategic resource for achieving national rejuvenation and gaining an advantage in international competition.” Innovation is the primary driving force for development, and talents are the foundation of innovation. Cultivating outstanding innovative talents is key to achieving national scientific and technological self-reliance and strength. History and practice have shown that those who possess top-tier innovative talents hold the advantage and dominance in scientific and technological innovation. Ultimately, hard power and soft power rely on talent strength. Especially in the current context of increasingly intense international technological competition, strengthening the autonomous cultivation of outstanding innovative talents is not only a necessary means to enhance our core competitiveness but also an important strategic task for realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

In response to the national emphasis on talent cultivation and innovation development, universities are actively exploring appointment systems that meet the needs of the times to enhance the vitality of the faculty. Universities have successively implemented a series of measures, including the

construction of teacher ethics, optimization of the faculty structure, reform of appointment and management models, and adjustments to teacher promotion and salary systems. Some innovative models, such as the “up-or-out” system, aim to select and cultivate outstanding innovative talents for universities. This model involves setting up various types of postdoctoral or full-time research positions, with regular evaluations of non-permanent faculty to select reserve talents for university development. However, due to the lack of complete internal and external support conditions, unreasonable faculty structure, immature performance evaluation mechanisms, and insufficient professionalism in personnel management, the overall effect of the reforms still falls short of the expected goals [1].

In practice, the introduction of the “up-or-out” system has brought about a series of challenges and controversies. Some schools have deviated in the implementation process, leading to increased career anxiety among teachers, reduced sense of identity and belonging, loss of confidence, and dignity crises [2,3]. The mental health of educators is crucial, especially when dealing with complex career dynamics, such as China’s “up-or-out” policy. Additionally, dismissed teachers may face re-employment difficulties, being mistakenly perceived by other universities as lacking research competence or innovative ability.

Against this background, exploring the realization paths for the autonomous cultivation of academic innovation talents in universities becomes particularly important. Although the “up-or-out” appointment system, as an attempt, provides new ideas for the selection and cultivation of outstanding innovative talents, the challenges it faces in implementation cannot be ignored. Only by addressing these issues can we better meet the nation’s demand for high-end innovative talents and provide strong talent support for solving key core technological problems.

This paper aims to explore the realization paths for the autonomous cultivation of academic innovation talents in

universities. Specifically, it will analyze the current “up-or-out” system, the challenges faced, and the improvement measures. Through an in-depth discussion of these strategies, this paper aims to provide references and insights for enhancing the cultivation of academic innovation talents in universities.

## 2. The Origin and Development of the “Up-or-Out” System

Since the 1990s, influenced by the new public management movement and profound changes in the global academic labor market, the academic appointment model characterized by the American tenure system began to spread globally, exhibiting core institutional convergence and diverse forms [4]. The differences in higher education governance, traditional legal regulations, the legal status of university teachers, and the academic labor market among various countries have resulted in a complex and diverse landscape of academic appointment system reforms. For instance, Germany adopts a top-down reform path led by the state and regulated by legislation [5]; the fundamental goal of academic personnel system reform in China’s leading research universities is to cope with the increasingly intense global competition and stimulate research output in a new management environment [6]. In Finland, universities have proactively promoted personnel system reforms aimed at enhancing international competitiveness after gaining independent legal status [7].

The “up-or-out” system originated from the tenure track system in American universities. Unlike the traditional tenure system, the “up-or-out” system emphasizes fixed-term evaluations, where faculty members’ academic achievements and performance are assessed within a certain period. Those who fail to meet specific standards are dismissed. Young faculty members are required to secure a tenured position, such as associate professor or professor, within the initial 6-8 years of their employment; otherwise, they must leave the institution. Currently, the “up-or-out” system is commonly applied to mid-level positions such as lecturers and assistant professors. This system aims to break the traditional “iron rice bowl” mentality among university faculty and enhance research performance by stimulating faculty members’ work vitality. Its origin reflects new thoughts and reflections on faculty management and academic development.

The “up-or-out” policy has certain advantages. Firstly, it avoids focusing solely on educational background and emphasizes academic ability and actual performance. Through this policy, evaluation and promotion no longer rely heavily on academic credentials and educational experience but rather on individuals’ actual achievements in teaching, research, and academic contributions. This helps motivate faculty and researchers to continuously improve their professional levels and strive for excellence, rather than relying on past degrees and seniority. Additionally, the “up-or-out” policy can promote mobility within the academic community, encouraging more talents to stand out in the competition, breaking the inherent academic hierarchies and power structures, and creating a fairer and more open academic environment. This policy enables schools and research institutions to attract and retain the best academic talents, thereby enhancing overall academic standards and research capabilities. Overall, the “up-or-out” policy emphasizes academic ability and actual contributions, fostering healthy competition and continuous progress in the

academic community.

The introduction of the “up-or-out” system presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it provides academic personnel with a career development path that is more internationally comparable and predictable. On the other hand, it may bring about a series of risks such as academic career differentiation, the singularity of universities’ diverse missions, and the quantification of academic work.

## 3. Challenges of the “Up-or-Out” System

Among various faculty appointment and promotion mechanisms, the “up-or-out” system is regarded as a system that simultaneously encompasses assessment, selection, and incentive functions. Originating from centuries of practice in American universities and widely adopted in countries such as Germany, Finland, and Sweden, this system demonstrates its inherent effectiveness. However, both the United States and Germany, which implement the “up-or-out” system, also face similar issues.

The American tenure system has been controversial since its inception, with debates intensifying in the 1990s and continuing into the 21st century. These controversies often focus on problems arising from the operation of American universities, such as the difficulty of balancing teaching and research, significant professional pressure on faculty, and unfair treatment of women and minorities [8]. In Germany, academic reserve talents face severe career challenges: they often find it nearly impossible to achieve promotion, frequently sign short-term contracts, and experience immense survival pressure, leading to a substantial loss of excellent talents. In 2015, then German Education Minister Johanna Wanka asserted that Germany’s entire system for academic reserve talents had deviated from the correct path [5]. The “pre-appointment and tenure system” being promoted in Chinese universities has certain similarities with the American tenure system, and some issues arising from its implementation in American universities are also occurring in Chinese universities. The negative impacts of the “up-or-out” system include the following aspects.

Firstly, universities may impose overly stringent assessment pressure on young faculty members for their own benefit, reflecting an excessive pursuit of academic performance and university rankings while neglecting the balance between faculty work and life and the intrinsic requirements of academic innovation. Issues such as the dominance of administrative power in university evaluations, the tendency to prioritize research over teaching, and inadequate protection of faculty rights are also prevalent [9]. In some universities striving to improve their rankings, the assessment standards are often excessively strict, frequently benchmarked against top-tier universities, without corresponding improvements in platform support and remuneration, creating an imbalanced assessment environment. Additionally, one-size-fits-all, hasty assessment methods often overlook the fact that innovation and development in disciplines require long-term accumulation and gradual progress. Innovation is a process that requires long-term accumulation and deep sedimentation, rather than simple, random creation. In academic research and innovation, every breakthrough depends on summarizing previous experiences and in-depth exploration. The process of innovation often requires extensive research and thinking,

with continuous experimental validation and theoretical refinement to achieve substantial results. Furthermore, the difficulty and time required for innovation vary significantly across different disciplines. In theoretical sciences, innovation often requires prolonged theoretical accumulation and experimental validation to achieve a meaningful breakthrough, whereas in engineering and technology, innovation focuses more on practical application and engineering practice, requiring constant trials and improvements to achieve practical results.

Secondly, the “up-or-out” system may exacerbate career anxiety and survival pressure for faculty members, contravening the safety and esteem needs in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. According to Maslow’s theory, human needs progress in a hierarchy, starting from physiological needs, followed by safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization needs. These needs constitute the motivation for human behavior, guiding individuals’ actions and efforts. The “up-or-out” system links faculty appointments with fixed-term academic achievements, meaning faculty members must achieve sufficient academic accomplishments within a certain period or face losing their jobs. This form neglects the fulfillment of faculty members’ basic survival and esteem needs, the most fundamental levels in Maslow’s theory. Under the “up-or-out” model, faculty members may feel that their survival needs are threatened due to the tension between their job security and continued employment. This uncertainty increases their career anxiety and pressure. Additionally, the system may damage faculty members’ esteem needs, as their appointments and performance are directly tied to their academic achievements, potentially leading to insufficient recognition and respect for their work and accomplishments, causing dissatisfaction and resentment. This, in turn, may negatively affect their job performance and innovation drive. Furthermore, the “up-or-out” model may impact faculty members’ long-term development and self-actualization needs, as it emphasizes short-term evaluations and appointments, potentially lacking long-term career development security, affecting their career planning and development paths. This could result in frustration in their pursuit of long-term academic development and self-actualization, affecting their academic innovation drive and long-term growth.

Moreover, Liu et al. (2023) systematically analyzed data and classified university faculty into four types: academic bureaucrats, academic elites, academic heavyweights, and academic realists, distinguishing between the “powerful minority” and the “weak majority” in academia [10]. They argued that the segmentation in academia might intensify with changes in faculty evaluation policies under the dual management structure of Chinese universities. As faculty evaluation policies change, resources such as research funding, experimental equipment, and teaching loads may increasingly favor the “powerful minority,” further reducing the resources available to the “weak majority.” This will lead to an uneven distribution of resources within universities, affecting overall academic productivity. Faculty members long in the “weak majority” position may face greater psychological pressure and career burnout, impacting their career development and quality of life. This not only harms individuals but also negatively affects the overall academic atmosphere in universities. In a highly competitive environment, some faculty members might resort to unethical means to obtain resources and opportunities, leading to

academic corruption and malpractice, further damaging academic reputation and social trust.

Finally, teaching often becomes a “secondary” task, neglected and marginalized. Faced with increased competitive pressure, faculty members often devote more time and energy to research projects and academic papers to meet the academic achievement requirements of the “up-or-out” system [12]. In this scenario, faculty members may adopt strategies to cope with teaching tasks, such as simplifying teaching content, reducing interaction time with students, or delegating teaching responsibilities to teaching assistants or graduate students, thereby affecting teaching quality and students’ learning outcomes. However, innovation is not achieved overnight but requires long-term accumulation, repeated practice, and continuous exploration. In the field of education, teaching plays a crucial role as a means of nurturing future talents. Firstly, teaching is the primary means of knowledge transmission and accumulation. Through teaching, students can systematically learn and master traditional knowledge, understand the historical development and evolution of disciplines, and thereby establish a comprehensive understanding and recognition of the discipline. This provides a solid foundation for students’ future innovative practices and research work, enabling them to stand on the shoulders of their predecessors and conduct more in-depth and extensive exploration and innovation. Therefore, teaching is an essential way to cultivate students’ innovative abilities and thinking. Through teaching, students can master traditional knowledge and develop critical thinking, creative thinking, and problem-solving skills. Teachers can inspire students to think and explore actively through heuristic teaching, case analysis, and experimental inquiry, cultivating their self-directed learning and innovative awareness, thus laying a good foundation for their future innovative practices.

#### 4. Strategies for the “Up-or-Out” System

The introduction of the “up-or-out” system presents both opportunities and challenges. Firstly, it provides academic personnel with a career development path that is more internationally comparable and predictable, allowing them to plan their future careers more clearly. Secondly, this system may enhance the dynamism of academia, promote the mobility and exchange of talents, and thereby accelerate knowledge innovation and dissemination [11]. However, on the other hand, the “up-or-out” system may also bring about a series of risks and challenges. For example, it might lead to the fragmentation of academic careers, forcing some excellent scholars to leave academia due to various reasons, thereby affecting the overall level of academia. Additionally, universities might excessively pursue quantitative academic work metrics, neglecting the diverse missions of education, leading to the singularity of educational goals and a decline in teaching quality. Therefore, when introducing the “up-or-out” system, it is crucial to fully consider its potential impacts and take appropriate measures to mitigate potential risks, ensuring the positive effects of the system reform.

When implementing the “up-or-out” policy, the following aspects should be noted:

(1) Set Reasonable Performance Goals According to Discipline Characteristics

Firstly, performance goals should be set based on the

characteristics of different disciplines and the varying difficulties of innovation. Different disciplines face differentiated research pressures and innovation challenges. For example, in fundamental science fields such as mathematics, physics, and chemistry, there are usually stringent requirements for theoretical exploration and experimental validation. Researchers need to continuously conduct in-depth academic exploration and experimental research to discover new theories or laws. Therefore, the research pressure in these fields may be more focused on requirements for fundamental research achievements. In contrast, in applied science fields such as engineering, technology, medicine, and agriculture, research goals are more inclined toward solving practical problems and application innovation. Therefore, the research pressure in these fields may be more reflected in the requirements for innovation in technical applications and solutions. Additionally, in social science fields such as economics, political science, and sociology, research often involves studying social phenomena, human behavior, and social institutions, so research pressure may be more focused on data analysis, theoretical construction, and policy recommendations. Schools should develop corresponding research evaluation standards and incentive mechanisms based on the characteristics and needs of different disciplines, encouraging faculty to conduct innovative research in their respective fields and promoting interdisciplinary collaboration for more comprehensive academic development.

#### (2) Comprehensive Consideration of Faculty Performance

Secondly, comprehensively consider faculty performance by clearly and transparently defining the specific standards and requirements of the policy to ensure all participants have a consistent understanding, avoiding misunderstandings and dissatisfaction due to information asymmetry. Performance goals should not only focus on faculty's research capabilities and academic achievements but also on their teaching effectiveness and social impact. Such a performance evaluation system can provide faculty with ample development space, avoiding an overemphasis on short-term research outcomes at the expense of teaching and community service. Emphasize student participation and feedback: listen to students' voices, and pay attention to their needs and feelings. Establish effective feedback mechanisms to timely understand students' learning situations and feedback, adjust teaching methods and content, and improve teaching effectiveness and quality. Establish a fair and just evaluation system to ensure the evaluation process is objective and transparent, eliminating any form of bias or discrimination.

#### (3) Provide Comprehensive Training and Support, Reflecting Humanistic Care

Finally, universities should provide necessary support for faculty development. To offer better training and support for faculty, schools can establish comprehensive training and support systems covering teaching, research, and management. This system should provide specialized training courses and personalized guidance services according to different faculty needs, helping them improve their overall qualities and enhance their teaching and research levels. Meanwhile, schools should also strengthen care and support for faculty, including material and spiritual aspects. Establish comprehensive welfare benefits and career development mechanisms to provide a good working environment and development space, stimulating their work enthusiasm and innovation drive. Additionally, schools should cultivate a

good academic atmosphere and culture, encouraging faculty to innovate and explore bravely. By formulating corresponding policies and measures, provide platforms and stages for faculty innovation, stimulating their innovative potential. When implementing the "up-or-out" system, for faculty who do not pass the assessment, an extension period can be granted, and active communication and interaction should be conducted to reflect humanistic care. This approach can fully respect faculty's rights and dignity while balancing academic development and university management needs.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the "up-or-out" system, as a new mechanism for selecting and cultivating outstanding innovative talents in universities, has demonstrated its unique advantages and faces many challenges in practical application. To address these challenges, universities should set reasonable performance goals based on the characteristics of different disciplines, comprehensively consider faculty performance from multiple dimensions, emphasize transparent and fair evaluation systems, and provide comprehensive training and support, reflecting humanistic care. By improving and perfecting this system, it can better motivate faculty to pursue academic excellence and innovation, thereby promoting the development of higher education and research in China. Only within a scientific, reasonable, and humanized system environment can more outstanding innovative talents be genuinely cultivated and attracted, providing strong talent support for achieving national scientific and technological self-reliance and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

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