

Factors of Retaining Faculty Members in Private Universities in Hainan Province, China

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Abstract: *Faculty members are the cornerstone of academic excellence in higher education, and their retention is directly tied to the stability, quality, and reputation of universities. In Hainan province of China, the expansion of private higher education institutes has outpaced the supply of skilled academic professionals. This study investigated the faculty members' perception of retention. The key 3 factors retaining faculty members are discussed: (1) organizational support, (2) job satisfaction and (3) organizational commitment. By focusing on the unique context of Hainan's private universities, this article advocates for comprehensive HR strategies tailored to the needs of faculty, including transparent evaluation mechanisms, equitable compensation, institutional recognition, and clear professional pathways.*

Keywords: Faculty member, retaining, private universities, job satisfaction, organizational support, organizational commitment

Introduction

The background

Higher education is essential for driving economic growth in today's global economy, regardless of a country's level of development (Echevarria, 2009). In China, private universities have emerged as a major force in expanding access to higher education, with over 789 institutions serving nearly 10 million students by the end of 2023. Despite their rapid development, these institutions face high turnover rates averaging 8-10% annually, due to inadequate salaries, low social status, poor working conditions, limited professional growth opportunities, and insufficient institutional support. However, these institutions face acute challenges in retaining qualified faculty, especially in provinces like Hainan, where the expansion of private higher education has outpaced the supply of skilled academic professionals. As Khan, et. al., (2021) stated that faculty members play a pivotal role in building institutional reputation. Faculty members provide the knowledge and skills necessary to students, to address market needs. Letting go of skilled, professional and enthusiastic faculty members can have a huge impact on any higher education institution's reputation and in fulfilling the market needs.

The problems

In recent decades, private universities have emerged as a vital force in China's higher education system, significantly contributing to its expansion and reform. However, these institutions face substantial challenges, particularly regarding faculty recruitment and retention. This issue is especially acute in Hainan Province, where private universities are hindered by systemic, institutional, and personal factors that adversely affect faculty stability and institutional development.

Existing literature highlights a range of persistent challenges confronting faculty in Hainan's private universities. Studies point to social prejudice, low salaries, poor employment conditions, unbalanced faculty structures, and an overall lack of institutional support (Zhou, 2019; Xie, 2021; Yang, 2023). These factors discourage new graduates and qualified professionals from entering or remaining in private university positions. Furthermore, performance evaluation systems overly emphasize quantifiable results, neglecting vital academic contributions such as lesson planning and research, thus reducing faculty motivation (Gao, 2023).

In addition, data indicates that private universities prioritize enrollment and income generation over supporting faculty members' scientific research, which negatively impacts faculty retention and research capabilities. A survey by Ge (2020) found that 34.7% of academic faculty are comfortable in their roles, while 42.3% are uncertain or considering leaving, highlighting psychological instability. The pressures of teaching and research, an incomplete appointment system, and income-living expense imbalances contribute to faculty dissatisfaction. A study by Xu and Yang (2019) revealed a high turnover rate, with 18.65% of young and middle-aged faculty and 12% of older faculty leaving in 2018. Faculty departure disrupts research and teaching continuity, impairs institutional cohesion, and increases administrative costs.

Despite the extensive attention paid to faculty retention in higher education research globally, little empirical work has been done to explore the specific conditions in Hainan's private universities. This article addresses a gap in the existing literature and provides practical insights for university administrators by focusing on the unique context of Hainan's private universities. Drawing upon both Western and Chinese literature, the study highlights how job satisfaction, organizational support, and organizational commitment are critical to faculty retention as the following conceptual framework:

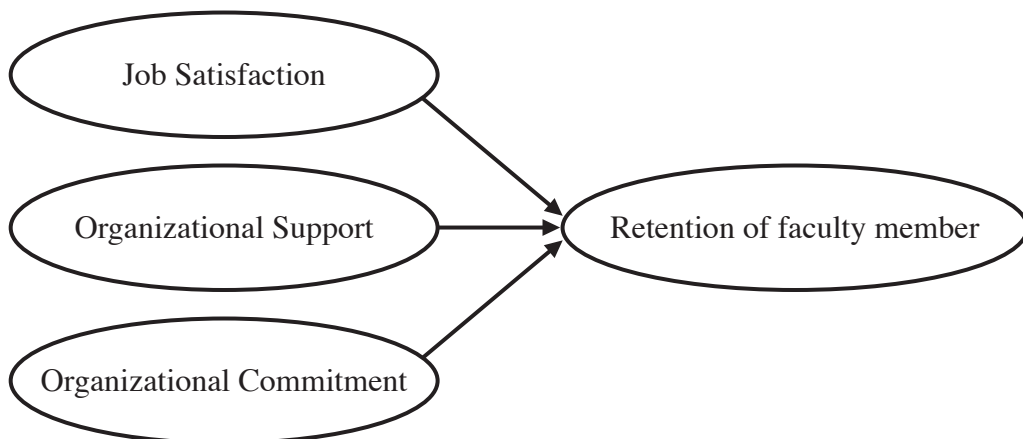


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

Research questions

1. What are the key factors affecting faculty member retention in private universities in Hainan province?
2. What practical strategies can administrators and decision-makers in Hainan private universities implement to improve faculty retention?

Rationale of the study

Retention of faculty members

Retention faculty members means the process of keeping the faculty members who are willing to stay in the universities, and the practices organizations use to prevent precious faculty members from quitting their jobs, which in turn enable the faculty to hold onto their excellent and talented faculty members for a longer time.

In the perspective of dual drive of compensation and employee participation, scholars stated that salary fairness is a fundamental variable for retention, but the effect of a single salary incentive is limited (Khalid & Nawab, 2018). Employee participation in decision-making (such as academic autonomy and management discourse power) significantly enhances the willingness to stay, especially in highly competitive industries (such as the FMCG field). Gender inequality significantly weakens the willingness to remain in office, and there is a call for fair institutional design.

A research constructed the “individual-organization-environment” triangular model: At the individual level, job burnout and psychological capital are key variables; At the organizational level: Leadership style and the quality of colleague relationships significantly affect retention; At the environmental aspect: Policy guarantees such as regional educational resource investment and children’s education support are indispensable (Perryman & Calvert, 2020) .

To verify the moderating effect of “Workload” on the retention of college teachers, Espinoza et al. (2020) showed that the flexible working system can increase the retention rate by 12%-18%.

Guo (2019) focused on the policy context of Chinese universities, and pointed out that the stability of the establishment guarantees and the career development channel is the core variable for the retention of teachers within the system. The investment of resources in emerging disciplines such as AI ethics education affects the retention of cross-disciplinary teachers. Meanwhile, Jiang et al. (2024) developed AI-based learning platforms (such as wechat mini-program teaching tools), and through technological empowerment, reduce teachers’ workload and indirectly enhance their willingness to stay.

Based on the literature reviews above, the researcher identified the 3 key dimensions of compensation, workload and career growth.

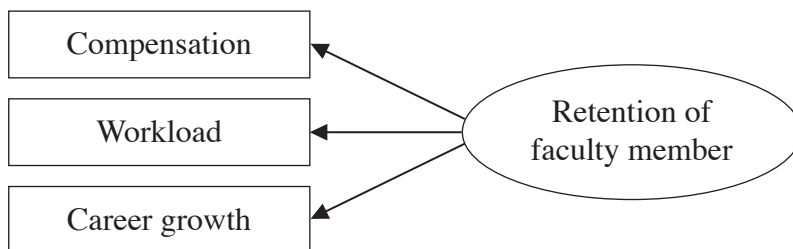


Figure 2 Variables of Retention of Faculty Members

Factor of Organizational Support

Organizational support means the ways organizations support employee contributions and well-being through policies and practices. The core of the theory lies in understanding how employees perceive the organization, in particular how much the organization values its contributions and its concern for employee well-being.

The Theory of Organizational Support (OST) is grounded in Reward Theory (Gouldner, 1960), Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), and the personification of organizations, proposing that employees develop attitudes and behaviors based on how they perceive their organization values them. A central construct in OST is Perceived Organizational Support (POS), which refers to employees' beliefs about the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being. This concept shifts the focus from faculty members' commitment to the organization alone to also include the organization's commitment to faculty members, offering a more balanced view of the employer-faculty members relationship. When faculty members perceive strong organizational support, they are more likely to reciprocate with higher job satisfaction, organizational commitment, loyalty, and discretionary behaviors.

Several scholars have provided expanded definitions of organizational support: encompassing both tangible (e.g., compensation, training) and intangible (e.g., empathy, recognition) forms of organizational support (Eisenberger & Shanock, 2021). Organizational support is described as the institution's systemic efforts to empower employees, emphasizing subjective employee perception of support aimed at boosting effectiveness and satisfaction (Mello, 2022; Shore & Shapiro, 2020). While organizational support is focused on the role of institutional equity, leadership support, mental health care, and resource allocation in shaping POS (Wang, 2022; Li, 2020).

McMillian (1997) extended the understanding of POS by introducing a multi-dimensional model comprising two main types of support: 1). Instrumental Support which means the functional assistance enabling work performance, including: material support, personnel support, and information support, and 2). Socioemotional Support which means the emotional and relational care, including: intimacy support (care and empathy), esteem/respect support (recognition, respect), and network integration.

Chinese scholars have contributed localized insights into POS. Rong (2004) proposed six HR-related dimensions influencing POS: emotional care, financial support, safe working conditions, job security, and career development. Xu (2005) and Ling (2005) emphasized that the two pillars of POS are: 1). whether employees feel valued by the organization, and 2). whether they feel cared for emotionally and socially. Additionally, some researches show that POS is also influenced by procedural justice which means fair decision-making, especially in performance appraisals (Zhang et al., 2023).

In conclusion, organizational support is a vital factor in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors. It represents the mutual relationship between employees and organizations, driven by both policy and perception. Based on the theories and researches related above, the researcher identified the 3 key dimensions of Organizational support: the degree of recognition of employee contributions, organization cares about employee's life and procedural justice.

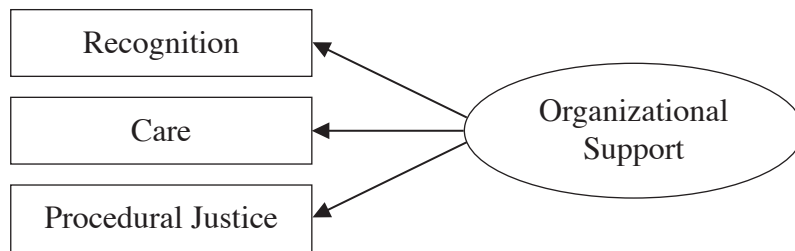


Figure 3 Variables of Organizational Support

Factor of job satisfaction

Job satisfaction means an individual's overall positive evaluation of their working experience. Job satisfaction is a measure of an employee's contentedness with their job, showing the feeling of enjoyment or fulfilment that a person derives from their work, encompassing factors through the quality of working conditions, the effectiveness of leadership, and the extrinsic rewards received for their work. Contemporary scholars (Lee & Lee, 2024) Consider job satisfaction as the long-term fulfillment of psychological, social, and economic needs, alongside subjective experiences of growth and purpose.

Recent literature explores job satisfaction through various organizational and individual lenses as below.

1) Individual related

Job satisfaction of faculty members is positively or negatively affected by a variety of factors according to the university environment and individual characteristics (Choi & Choi, 2021). Therefore, in studying the job satisfaction of faculty members, the personal characteristics, such as gender, position, teaching major, employment period, self-efficacy, personality traits

2) Organization related

Leadership: Supportive, communicative, and empowering leadership strongly enhances teacher satisfaction. Transformational leadership is especially effective (Cao & Jiang, 2024; Aldridge & Fraser, 2016)

Work Environment: Positive work conditions, peer relationships, and effective management structures significantly predict job satisfaction (Poza, 2000; Locke, 1976; Elovainio et al., 2000).

Extrinsic Rewards: Pay, promotion, working conditions, recognition, and professional development opportunities are central to job satisfaction (Locke, 1976; Sousa-Poza, 2000).

Based on the theories and researches related above, this article identified the 3 key dimensions of Job satisfaction: leadership, working conditions and extrinsic reward.

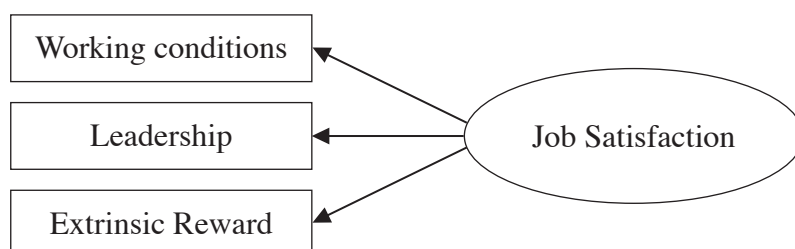


Figure 4 Variables of Job Satisfaction

Factor of organizational commitment

Organizational commitment means the psychological attachment an faculty member has to their universities which influences their decision to remain and contribute to its success.

In the 1990s, Mayer and Allen (1991) proposed that organizational commitment can be divided into three dimensions: affective commitment, normative commitment, and continuance commitment. This three-dimensional structure became a classic dimension unanimously recognized by scholars later. Among them, affective commitment refers to the intensity of employees' willingness to invest in and participate in various activities of the organization, including three emotional characteristics: one is willing to sacrifice or contribute to the interests of the organization; the other is to be proud of being a member of the organization; The third is the recognition of the organization's goals and values. Normative commitment is characterized by a strong sense of mission or responsibility in the organization. For example, employees are willing to give back to the organization with their loyalty and commitment after receiving the organization's training and cultivation. Continuance commitment is manifested in that when individuals leave the organization, they will bring certain economic losses to individuals, such as loss of welfare benefits, impaired technical ability, loss of interpersonal relationships and other useful factors, and the individual feels that the organization can provide for themselves, the opportunity for promotion, leaving the organization will cause a lot of personal losses, and so on.

The three-factor model of organizational commitment is generally supported, and many scholars' related research later adopted the Mayer and Allen dimensional division. Ling et al. (2011) clearly points out that cultural and psychological factors play a decisive role in employees' organizational commitment behavior in the definition of organizational commitment. At the same time, they were the first to propose a dimensional division suitable for China, their empirical research on the organizational commitment of Chinese employees finds that the organizational commitment of Chinese employees contains five factors: affective commitment, normative commitment, ideal commitment, economic commitment, and opportunity commitment. The organizational commitment structure of Chinese employees also contains affective commitments and normative commitments, the meaning of which is consistent with the Meyer and Allen model. The meaning of economic commitment and opportunity commitment is embodied in the three-factor model's continuance commitment factor. However, the ideal commitment factor in the model of Ling et.al. (2011) is not involved in the Western model. Chinese scholars believe that this is caused by the differences between Chinese and Western cultures and social realities (Ling et. al., 2011; Liu, 2009).

Scholars have conducted extensive research on the variables of organizational commitment. Statistical analysis by Yao and Kongruang (2025) validates that organizational commitment is one of the key variables influencing retention. Organizational commitment significantly impacts turnover intention; faculty members with high organizational commitment tend to have higher retention, and it plays a more crucial role than job satisfaction in increasing retention. Additionally, Sudaryono (2014) emphasized that organizational commitment is important for organizational development, promotes employee loyalty and engagement, and promotes long-term stability.

Based on the theories and researches related above, the researcher identified the 3 key dimensions of organizational commitment: affective commitment, continuance commitment and normative commitment.

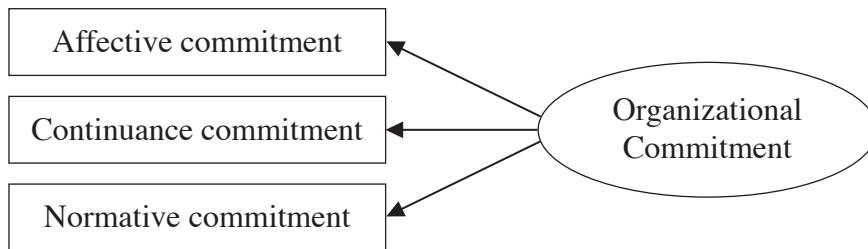


Figure 5 Variables of Organizational Commitment

Discussion and Suggestion

As Shan (2025) suggested, institutions must move beyond simply offering monetary rewards or symbolic recognition. What matters more is how these rewards are perceived, particularly in terms of fairness, consistency, and alignment with faculty contributions and expectations. Thus, universities should implement transparent, well-communicated reward systems that include both tangible (e.g., salary increments, bonuses) and intangible (e.g., praise, professional growth opportunities) elements. Faculty members in private universities are generally young, with relatively low educational qualifications and professional titles. They need to further improve their professional skills. Moreover, the lack of promotion opportunities and opaque promotion processes drive teachers to seek other opportunities as well, which emphasize the importance of professional development support. Therefore, high-quality professional development opportunities are particularly important for them in career growth. Universities should encourage faculty members to pursue full-time or on-the-job further education and organize high-quality workshops or seminars to enhance their teaching abilities and research levels.

Song and Ke (2022) found that the more satisfied the faculty members were with their work, the better the organizational commitment was. The increase of job satisfaction would result in stronger organizational commitment, which was proven to be a stronger predictor of retention than job satisfaction itself. That meant that even though faculty members have high job satisfaction, they may still report high turnover intention if organizational commitment was weak. However, there were lacked of the attention of the faculty members' needs and they faced with the multiple adaptive challenges such as getting the title of a technical post, housing and payment in private universities, in which case the support from organizations was important. When organizational commitment was played their roles, the faculty members could view it in a positive attitude, so their job satisfaction would increase. Secondly, universities do not equate satisfaction with retention. Even satisfied faculty may leave if they perceive better career development, job security, or institutional prestige elsewhere. Hence, universities must enhance not just work satisfaction but also long term commitment through ethical leadership, research support, and inclusion in strategic decision-making processes.

The organizational support is mainly reflected in creating a fair, warm and harmonious organizational atmosphere for faculty members and solving the difficulties they encounter in their work. Fair and impartial leadership and good interpersonal relationships can provide faculty members with psychological support and enhance their strength to overcome difficulties. In terms of procedural justice, Zhou and Ma (2022) advised that the pay distribution process should be open and transparent that the faculty members should be assured that the distribution results can reflect their ability and efforts, even though the distribution standards cannot be tailored for every faculty member, but should be relatively fair for the majority of faculty members. Different references can produce a completely different sense of justice. Meanwhile, faculty members should be aware that education is a kind of service labor and that some types of work input and performance are tangible, while many are intangible which are difficult to achieve absolute fairness through the quantitative measurement of distribution standards.

Chen (2023) pointed out that some private universities adopt a family-style leadership system, with the investor concurrently serving as the president and holding excessive power. Meanwhile, the participation of faculty and staff in school decision-making is relatively low, and teachers are merely passive executors. Participatory democracy is one of the important goals of the transformation of modern university management. Only when faculty members become the masters of the school and enjoy sufficient autonomy in their work decisions can they have a sense of belonging in the school.

In conclusion, private universities should improve their leadership and management in a targeted manner, build and optimize work resources, and reduce the negative impact brought by work requirements, so as to continuously enhance faculty members' subjective well-being and increase their intention to stay.

The significance of this article

By identifying the key factors retaining faculty members in private universities in Hainan province, this article will provide insights into the aspects that affect faculty members' decisions to stay or leave. Understanding these factors can help universities develop targeted strategies to improve retention, ensuring a more stable and experienced faculty.

The article will offer actionable recommendations for administrators and decision-makers in Hainan's private universities. By understanding the psychological state of faculty members, administrators will be better equipped to create a supportive work environment that addresses faculty concerns, enhance institutional culture and academic quality, while also contributing to the broader body of knowledge on factors retaining faculty members in private universities and providing a foundation for future comparative studies.

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