

University tenure reform sparks controversies and debate

News Team*

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Tongji University in Shanghai has ignited a debate over academic accountability and university governance by revising its faculty appointment system to end open-ended appointment agreements for professional and technical positions (Figure 1).

According to a notice issued on July 31 concerning appointments, performance reviews and contract renewals for 2026, faculty members — including those already holding tenured positions — will be brought under a system of periodic assessment. Employees in the university's original appointment system and those in pre-tenure positions will generally be reviewed every three years, while tenured faculty members will undergo a comprehensive review every six years, with an interim assessment after the first three years.

The consequences may vary according to different situations. Faculty members who fail to meet the required standards could face reduced pay, reassignment, suspension of their eligibility to supervise graduate students or, in serious cases, non-renewal of their contracts. Those deemed outstanding under criteria established by individual schools may be exempted from parts of the assessment process, although detailed exemption rules have yet to be made public.

Notices on Tongji's official recruitment website show that several schools

have been still recruiting candidates under the university's tenure-track system, including tenured professors and associate professors, in 2026. The School of Mathematical Sciences, for example, advertised 10 positions for external candidates applying to the tenure system this April. However, the document clearly states that "The university will introduce term-based performance reviews for professional and technical positions and will no longer sign open-ended appointment agreements."

What remains, therefore, is tenure as a job category, but not necessarily tenure in its conventional sense as a guarantee of long-term academic employment. Under the revised system, even a tenured professor will remain subject to recurring reviews carrying potentially serious employment consequences.

Supporters see the reform as a necessary attempt to make senior academics accountable and remove the perception that a tenured position is an "iron rice bowl".

Li Zhimin, executive vice-president of the Chinese Society of Educational Development Strategy, argued in an article on Chinese Education Online, or eol.com, that some academics become less productive after obtaining senior titles and long-term appointments.¹ Such professional inertia, he said, can

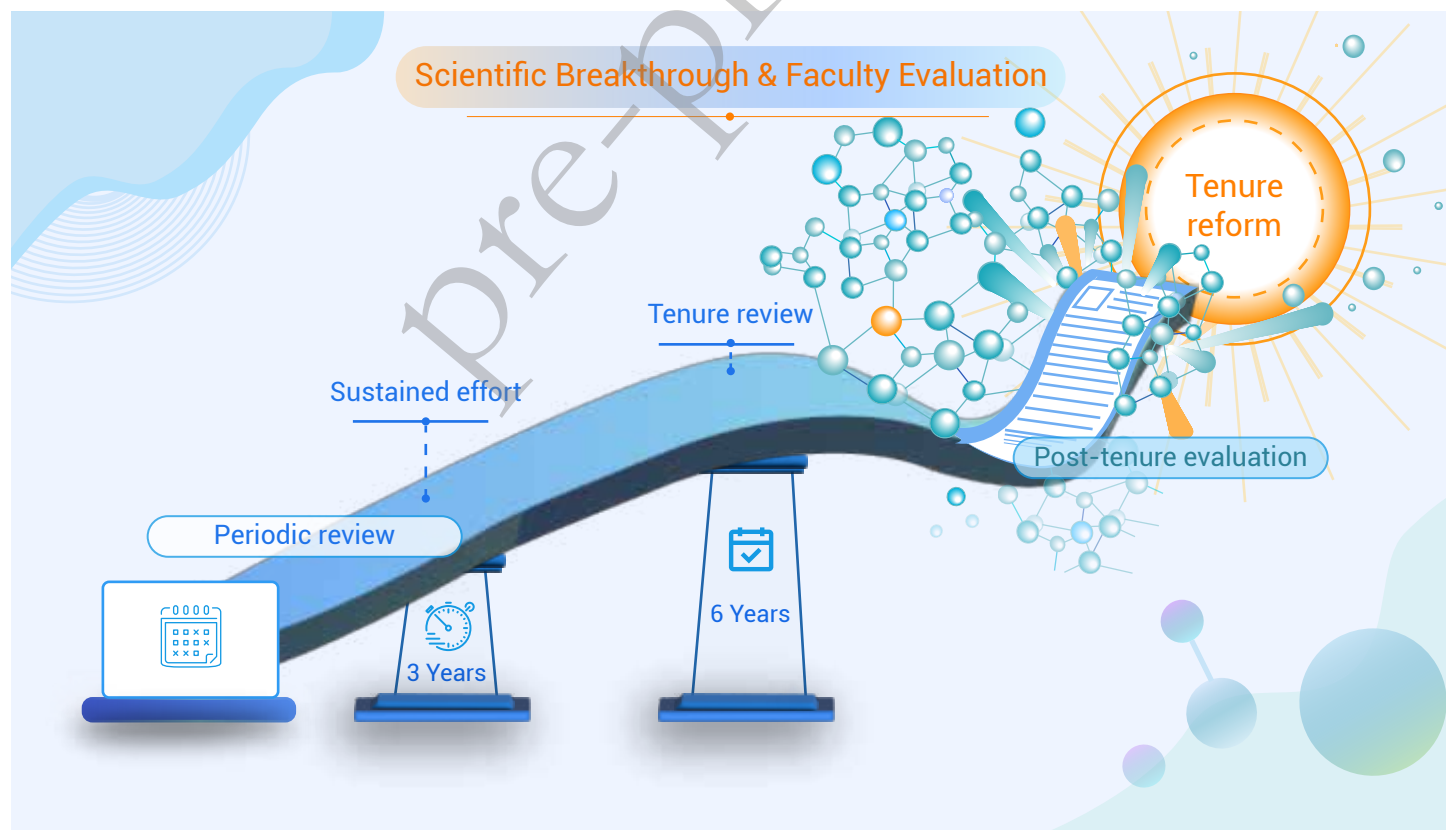


Figure 1. The bridge of sustained research efforts

hinder the continuing improvement of teaching and research.

By bringing all professional and technical personnel into a unified system of periodic assessment, Li wrote, Tongji is pushing a new mechanism under which faculty members can move up or down, and enter or leave the system, according to their performance. In his view, this could curb complacency among established academics while giving younger scholars a fairer opportunity to compete and advance.

Yet the controversy is not principally about whether professors should be accountable. It is about who defines academic performance, who conducts the assessment and whether recurring reviews will encourage better scholarship or merely more measurable output.

Xiong Bingqi, director of the 21st Century Education Research Institute,

warned in a media interview that the reform could hollow out the existing tenure system.² If tenured faculty remain exposed to salary reductions, reassignment and possible non-renewal, he argued, tenure may cease to provide meaningful employment security.

Xiong also pointed to a structural weakness in faculty evaluation at many Chinese universities: criteria are often determined by administrative departments and weighted toward visible research outputs, including the number of papers published in core or leading journals and the acquisition of research projects and funding.

Teaching is much more difficult to measure, Xiong wrote, adding that universities can count how many courses a professor teaches or how many students he or she supervises, but such figures reveal relatively little about the quality of instruction, the time invested in mentoring or the intellectual development of students.

A more demanding assessment system could therefore intensify the long-standing tendency to value research output over education. It may also encourage academics to pursue short-term, readily publishable projects instead of uncertain research that requires years of work but could eventually produce more important results.

Periodic post-tenure review is not inherently incompatible with that objective. The decisive question is whether it operates as professional peer assessment or as administrative performance management, said Xiong. He

also argued that reforming university employment systems requires a corresponding reform of university governance. Where academic, educational and administrative powers remain insufficiently separated, more frequent assessment may simply expand administrators' authority over academic careers. He therefore called for evaluation to move away from administrative judgment and toward professional assessment.

A commentary published by Huxiu, a widely followed commentary account on Sohu.com, raised a related concern about the proposed exemptions. If individual schools are allowed to formulate their own exemption criteria, it asked, could those standards ultimately be determined by administrators – and if so, who would supervise the administrators?

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DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.