

A Study on the Impact of Psychological Contract on Turnover Intention among University Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study used standardized questionnaires to investigate the relationship between psychological contract and turnover intention among university teachers. Results show teachers' overall psychological contract performance level is high. There were significant differences in psychological contract scores across demographic variables like age, marital status, education level, years of service, and position. Correlation analysis found a significant negative relationship between teachers' psychological contract and turnover intention. The research indicates that psychological contract is a key factor affecting teachers' professional stability. University administrators should adopt modern management approaches to target-enhance the psychological contract levels of different teacher groups, thus reducing turnover intention and ensuring teaching faculty stability.

KEYWORDS

University teachers; Psychological contract; Turnover intention

1 Introduction

University teachers are the core driving force of higher education development. However, in recent years, university teachers' turnover has occurred frequently, affecting the teaching workforce's stability and posing a risk to higher education (Zeng, 2015). Contracts are generally divided into written and psychological contracts. Written contracts are legally-binding written agreements like employment contracts. In contrast, psychological contracts are teachers' subjective perceptions and internal expectations of the school's responsibilities, an informal spiritual agreement constraining members' behavior. Research shows a positive correlation between psychological contract and teachers' job performance (Wu, 2021). Turnover intention is an individual's willingness to leave the organization, a preliminary psychological stage before actual turnover. Previous studies indicate that psychological contract breach is a key factor for employee turnover (Lv, 2023). For example, Wu et al (2019) found it increases turnover intention among new - generation employees and Si et al (2024) confirmed a significant negative correlation between psychological contract and turnover intention among physicians .

What characteristics define university teachers' psychological contract as knowledge workers, and how does it influence their turnover intention? These questions need further exploration. So, this study examines the impact of psychological contract on turnover intention among university teachers, aiming to offer a strong theoretical basis and targeted practical guidance for university administrators to support faculty stability and the healthy development of higher education institutions.

2 Research methods

2.1 Research subjects

The study targeted university teachers as subjects. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed, with 251 valid responses collected.

2.2 Research tools

2.2.1 Psychological contract scale

The measurement of psychological contract used the scale developed by Si (2015). The scale has three dimensions (transactional, relational, and developmental) and 15 items, scored on a Likert five-point scale. To fit this study's context, "employee" and "company" in the original scale were replaced with "teacher" and "school".

2.2.2 Turnover intention scale

Turnover intention was measured using the revised turnover intention questionnaire by Li (2015). It employs a 5-point scoring system; higher total scores indicate a stronger inclination to leave.

2.3 data processing

This study used SPSS 19.0 for descriptive statistics and correlation analysis.

3 Research results and analysis

3.1 Overall status of psychological contract

The total average score of psychological contract was 3.7, higher than the median of 3, indicating high psychological contract fulfillment among teachers. The average scores for each dimension also exceeded 3, suggesting teachers were relatively satisfied with transactional (e.g., remuneration, working conditions), relational (e.g., interpersonal atmosphere, organizational identification), and developmental (e.g., training opportunities, career prospects) aspects. This reflects their high recognition and sense of belonging towards the school.

3.2 Analysis of demographic differences in psychological contract

3.2.1 Differences by age

Independent samples t-tests showed significant differences in the total score and all three dimensions of psychological contract between teachers under 40 and those aged 40 and above (Table 1). Specifically, teachers under 40 scored higher on transactional, relational, and developmental dimensions. This suggests younger teachers emphasize practical needs, workplace relationships, organizational identification, and personal career development. The reason might be the generational shift in professional values. Early- and mid-career teachers in the advancement phase have multiple needs, while those over 40 may prioritize work-life balance. Therefore, universities should adopt differentiated management strategies: offer incentives and career planning for early- and mid-career teachers, and emphasize job autonomy and stability for senior teachers.

Table 1 Differences in psychological contract dimensions by age

Dimension	Aged below 40		Aged 40 and above		t
	M	SD	M	SD	
Transactional Dimension	19.78	3.74	17.64	4.68	3.94***
Relational Dimension	15.17	2.45	14.26	3.24	2.45**
Developmental Dimension	23.5	3.86	21.09	4.97	4.21***
Total Score	58.44	8.92	52.99	11.94	4.03***

** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

3.2.2 Differences by marital status

As shown in Table 2, significant differences in the total score and all dimensions of psychological contract were found among teacher groups with different marital statuses. Married teachers scored significantly higher than unmarried teachers. This might be because unmarried teachers have fewer life concerns and lower professional ambitions, while married teachers, with additional family responsibilities, focus more on job income and future development to maintain their family's living standard. Therefore, to get better compensation or promotion in the school, they show higher recognition and loyalty to the school and are more willing to make efforts.

Table 2 Differences in psychological contract dimensions by marital status

Dimension	Married		Unmarried		t
	M	SD	M	SD	
Transactional Dimension	19.15	4.179	15.86	4.502	4.6***
Relational Dimension	14.91	2.758	13.45	3.521	2.98**
Developmental Dimension	22.78	4.345	19.17	5.021	4.78***
Total Score	56.84	10.241	48.48	12.126	4.68***

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

3.2.3 Differences by education level

One-way ANOVA showed significant differences in psychological contract by education level (Tables 3). Post-hoc tests revealed that teachers with bachelor's degrees scored significantly lower than those with master's degrees on transactional, relational, developmental, and total scores. Moreover, bachelor's degree holders scored significantly lower than doctoral degree holders in relational and developmental dimensions and the total score. Education level is crucial for

teachers' career development. Higher education levels are associated with better roles, harmonious work environments, greater work recognition, and more institutional training and promotion opportunities, which foster a more positive psychological contract among teachers.

Table 3 ANOVA of psychological contract dimensions by education level

Dimension	Bachelor's Degree		Master's Degree		Doctoral Degree		F
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Transactional Dimension	17.02	4.73	19.15	4.26	18.29	4.17	4.57*
Relational Dimension	13.27	3.25	15.12	2.63	14.51	3.26	7.81**
Developmental Dimension	20.42	5.1	22.62	4.45	22.44	4.52	4.36*
Total Score	50.71	12.22	56.9	10.25	55.24	11.13	6.1**

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

3.2.4 Differences in Psychological Contract Dimensions by Years of Service

ANOVA results showed significant differences in the transactional dimension, developmental dimension, and total psychological contract score based on years of service (see Tables 4). Post-hoc comparisons revealed that teachers with 1–2 years of service scored significantly lower than those with 6–10 years and over 10 years of service in the total score and all dimensions. The reason may be that the initial 1–2 years represent a phase of psychological contract establishment and exploration. If the school fails to meet their ideal expectations during this stage, their psychological contract level can significantly decrease. After five years of service, teachers enter a more stable phase and can clearly perceive the manifestations of each dimension of the psychological contract.

Table 4 ANOVA of psychological contract dimensions by years of service

Dimension	Less than 1 year		1–2 years		3–5 years		6–10 years		More than 10 years		F
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Transactional Dimension	21	2	15.91	4.63	17.83	4.59	19.63	3.81	20.5	3.57	7.45***
Relational Dimension	15	1.73	13.67	3.3	14.4	3.32	15.13	2.65	15.16	1.82	1.97
Developmental Dimension	24	1.73	19.58	5.47	21.4	4.9	23.21	3.97	24	3.34	6.15***
Total Score	60	1	49.15	12.73	53.62	11.84	57.98	9.23	59.66	7.63	6.32***

*** $p < 0.001$

3.2.5 Differences by position

As shown in Tables 5, significant differences were found in psychological contract and its dimensions among teachers with different positions. Post-hoc tests indicated that teaching staff scored significantly lower than both supporting and administrative staff on all dimensions and the total score. Supporting staff also scored significantly lower than administrative staff on the transactional and developmental dimensions and the total score. Teaching staff often face high demands in teaching, research, and service with potentially limited compensation and promotion opportunities compared to their contributions. Supporting staff may hold lower organizational status. Administrative staff, often with greater authority and resource access, likely experience better career development and benefits, leading to higher psychological contract fulfillment.

Table 5 ANOVA of psychological contract dimensions by position

Dimension	Teaching Staff		Supporting Staff		Administrative Staff		F
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Transactional Dimension	17.05	5.11	18.51	3.9	20.18	3.57	11.37***
Relational Dimension	13.85	3.42	14.96	2.86	15.15	2.34	4.85**
Developmental Dimension	20.37	5.35	22.31	4.43	23.75	3.45	11.97***
Total Score	51.27	13.06	55.78	10.07	59.08	8.15	11.37***

** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

3.3 Overall status of turnover intention

The average score for teachers' turnover intention was 2.24, indicating a medium to low level. This suggests that the majority of university teachers do not have a strong intention to leave. This phenomenon may be attributed to the relatively stable work environment, clear career development paths, and relatively sound welfare security system in universities, which collectively make teachers less prone to developing strong thoughts of leaving.

3.4 Correlation analysis between psychological contract and turnover intention

To verify the relationship between teachers' psychological contract and turnover intention, this study used Pearson correlation analysis. Table 6 shows that the total score of psychological contract and its three dimensions were negatively correlated with turnover intention, suggesting that higher psychological contract fulfillment is linked to lower turnover tendency. This result is consistent with Li (2015). Specifically, the negative correlation between the transactional dimension and turnover intention indicates that when teachers' transactional needs (e.g., salary and benefits) are met, their likelihood of leaving decreases as these material conditions affect their decision to stay and boost dependence and loyalty. The significant negative correlation between the relational dimension and turnover intention reveals that a positive atmosphere can reduce teachers' willingness to leave as they are more likely to have a sense of belonging and satisfaction in a harmonious environment. The negative correlation between the developmental dimension and turnover intention highlights the impact of career development space on turnover intention; teachers are more likely to stay long-term when they see promotion paths and prospects. University administrators should focus on teachers' psychological contracts and take measures like improving compensation, optimizing the work environment, and providing career opportunities to strengthen teachers' identification and belonging, reduce turnover rates, and ensure teaching faculty stability.

Table 6 Correlation analysis between psychological contract and turnover intention

	1	2	3	4	5
1.Transaction Dimension	—				
2.Relational Dimension	0.67***	—			
3.Developmental Dimension	0.83***	0.72***	—		
4.Total Psychological Contract Score	0.93***	0.85***	0.95***	—	
5.Total Turnover Intention Score	-0.63***	-0.59***	-0.65***	-0.68***	—

*** $p < 0.001$

4 Recommendations

Improve the compensation and professional title promotion systems, and provide targeted training and mentorship for different teacher groups to help new faculty integrate quickly. Safeguard time for teaching and research, establish special awards, and increase opportunities to participate in management. Foster a positive team atmosphere through regular team-building activities. Ensure transparent and fair decision-making, encourage teacher involvement in institutional development, enhance their sense of belonging, and reduce turnover intention.

About the Author

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