

# **The Vanishing Safeguard: Economic Forces Behind the Global Decline of Tenure in Higher Education**

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*Historically essential for academic freedom and job security in higher education, the tenure system is facing a global decline driven by economic pressures and neoliberal policies. This paper explores the historical development of tenure in the United States and worldwide, focusing on how financial constraints and market-oriented reforms are reshaping academic employment. The study highlights the reduction in tenure-track positions, increased reliance on adjunct (part-time) and contingent faculty, and the resulting challenges to academic freedom, research quality, and institutional stability. It also examines the impact of these trends on various regions, including Europe, Asia, and Australia, where similar shifts are occurring due to austerity measures and market-driven approaches. The paper argues for a balanced approach that maintains academic integrity while adapting to financial realities, providing insights into the broader implications for the future of higher education.*

*Keywords: tenure decline, academic freedom, neoliberal policies, higher education economics, adjunct faculty trends, precarious academic employment*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The tenure system (known in some countries as permanent or continuing academic appointments) has long been a foundational element of higher education, providing job security for faculty members and protecting academic freedom. However, tenure is increasingly under threat worldwide as economic pressures and shifting institutional priorities significantly decline tenure-track positions. There has been a significant shift in tenure positions in the last 40 years to contingent faculty (McNaughtan et al., 2018). A survey of four-year U.S. institutions conducted by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP; 2022a) reports that 53.5 percent of respondents have replaced some of their tenure-eligible positions with contingent faculty in the last five years. This paper explores the historical development of tenure in the United States and globally, examines the economic forces contributing to its decline, and assesses the broader implications for universities.

## **The Historical Evolution of Tenure**

Tenure in higher education has its roots in the early 20th century, particularly in the United States. The AAUP played a pivotal role in formalizing tenure with the 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, which emphasized the importance of protecting faculty members from undue dismissal and ensuring their ability to conduct research without external interference (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 1940). This concept of tenure was built on the ideals of academic freedom and job security, which were seen as essential for fostering an environment where intellectual inquiry could thrive without fear of retaliation. Globally, systems of secure academic employment (tenure or its equivalents) have evolved differently across various regions. In Europe, secure academic positions have traditionally been linked to civil service protections, particularly in countries like Germany, where becoming a professor typically entails gaining a highly secure, state-employed position (Clark, 1983). This system, known as “Berufung,” has historically offered lifelong employment to attract and retain high-quality faculty, though recent reforms have introduced some flexibility to this model (Enders, 2001).

In contrast, the United Kingdom’s system of academic appointments was significantly restructured in the late 20th century. The Education Reform Act of 1988 marked an important change, allowing universities to employ academic staff more flexibly (effectively abolishing the previous tenure system in the UK) (Becher & Trowler, 2001). This shift aimed to increase institutional autonomy and accountability but also led to a decline in the traditional security associated with academic appointments (Becher & Trowler, 2001). As a result, many UK universities now operate with a mix of permanent and fixed-term contracts, reflecting a broader trend toward casualization in the academic workforce. The tenure landscape in many developing countries is markedly different, often shaped by local political, economic, and social conditions. In regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, the concept of tenure is either nascent or non-existent. In these areas, the lack of political stability and economic constraints often make long-term employment guarantees impractical, leading to a reliance on short-term contracts and adjunct positions (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). This situation is compounded by limited funding for higher education, which restricts opportunities for secure academic employment and affects the overall quality of education (Teferra & Altbach, 2004).

In the United States, the debate over tenure has also been influenced by broader societal and political shifts. The rise of the “gig economy” and the increasing demand for accountability in public institutions have led to calls for reforming or even abolishing tenure. Proponents of these changes argue that tenure is costly and creates complacency among faculty, while critics warn that eliminating tenure could undermine the foundations of academic freedom and compromise the quality of education (Tolley, 2018; Flaherty, 2020). Flaherty (2020) shared how the University of Colorado at Boulder planned to replace tenured and tenure-track faculty with instructors to cut their budget in 2020. The question this raises is what message is sent to students about the quality of their education when the value of higher education is in doubt (Flaherty, 2020). Given these global variations and recent trends, the future of tenure remains uncertain. As higher education continues to evolve in response to changing societal needs, economic pressures, and political climates, the tenure system will likely undergo further transformations worldwide. Understanding its historical evolution and the factors influencing its current state is crucial for engaging in informed discussions about its future role in academia.

## **The Many Reasons for Tenure Decline**

Current trends have further complicated the tenure system worldwide. Prominent reasons for the decline of tenure positions are economic pressures (Musselin, 2009), shifting institutional priorities (Giroux, 2014), emphasizing market-driven approaches (Marginson, 2012; Phillips, 2024), changing public beliefs in the value of a college education, declining student demographics, and a shift to online course offerings (especially after the Covid-19 pandemic) (Greenfield, 2024; Kakuchi, 2023; DeNovellis, 2020). Economic pressures result from reduced government aid, economic downturns, decreases in student enrollment, high inflation, and the devaluation of college education. The rise of neoliberal policies in the 21st century, emphasizing market-driven approaches and accountability in higher education, has reassessed tenure’s role

and relevance (Marginson, 2012; Phillips, 2024). Another contributing factor is changing public perception of the value of a college education. In the United States, a third of Americans do not believe in the value of a college education, while another study showed 62 percent of Americans see “little” to “some” value in a college education (Greenfield, 2024). With the rising costs of higher education, Americans are second-guessing the value of a college degree and whether a degree is needed at all. In addition, as universities shift to delivering courses online, the demand for tenure-track and tenured professors has decreased as institutions have hired nontraditional faculty (DeNovellis, 2020). Higher education institutions have found that shifting to online courses and programs allows them to compete, increase student enrollment, and save money with less overhead and lower salary costs (DeNovellis, 2020). This trend accelerated globally with the turn to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. To overcome these challenges, universities are shifting to contingent faculty. Moreover, economic pressures following the 2008 global financial crisis have accelerated these changes. Many institutions have faced budget cuts (Nietzel, 2023) and have turned to more flexible staffing models to reduce costs. This shift has sparked concerns about the erosion of academic freedom and the long-term sustainability of the tenure model (Musselin, 2009). Another consequence of economic pressures resulting in a decline of tenured positions is the faltering faculty morale of those left behind. For example, Quinn (2024b) shared that several faculty members remained very concerned about their supposed job security even after West Virginia University (WVU) eliminated 143 faculty positions and many academic programs. The remaining faculty, other stakeholders, and students expressed a lack of confidence in the administration at WVU (Quinn, 2024b). As quoted in the *Inside Higher Ed* article, “There was no such thing as tenure protection anymore because tenured faculty were being cut, and it was unclear [why] they were” (Quinn, 2024b).

In a report by AAUP (2022b), 37 percent of faculty were tenured or tenure-track, whereas 20 percent were full-time contingent, and 43 percent were part-time contingent in 2019 (AAUP, 2022b). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2011) reports that 53.7 percent of institutional faculty were tenured in 2000. The decline in tenure-track positions can largely be attributed to economic pressures faced by universities worldwide. In the United States, reductions in state and federal funding have forced institutions to cut costs, often by hiring adjunct faculty who are far less expensive and more flexible than tenured professors (Ehrenberg & Zhang, 2005). This shift has been particularly pronounced since the economic downturn of 2008, which led to widespread budget cuts across public higher education institutions (Ehrenberg, 2012). The Covid-19 pandemic added to many universities’ financial hardships (Nietzel, 2023). In addition, as public funding for universities continues to decline, institutions are increasingly dependent on tuition revenue and private donations, driving a shift towards a more market-oriented approach to education (Zumeta, 2011). According to Surjadi (2024), “over 500 private, nonprofit four-year institutions have closed in the last 10 years,” in the United States; Surjadi also reports that for-profit institutions closed in this period. With reduced birthrates, rising costs of higher education, and students’ skepticism over the value of a four-year degree, institutions have seen a dramatic loss of tuition revenue (Surjadi, 2024). Similarly, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the number of American tenured or tenure-track faculty has decreased from 70 percent in 1970 to approximately 30 percent in 2020 (Belkin, 2020). This erosion is expected to continue by an additional 10 percent over the next generation (Belkin, 2020). Belkin further reported a shift toward adjunct labor as a cost-saving measure, noting the implications for academic quality and faculty morale. The increasing reliance on adjunct professors, who often work without benefits and for low pay, raises concerns about the sustainability of academic careers and the quality of education students receive (Belkin, 2020).

### **Tenure Decline as a Global Phenomenon**

The decline of tenure is not confined to the United States; it is a global phenomenon driven by similar economic pressures and neoliberal policies prioritizing financial efficiency over academic stability. In Australia, for example, the higher education sector has seen a significant reduction in tenured positions (known locally as continuing appointments), with universities increasingly relying on casual and contract staff to manage costs (Connell, 2013). This trend reflects a broader neoliberal agenda in education (Connell, 2013) and has dramatically reduced the proportion of tenured faculty on continuing appointments (Bexley,

James, & Arkoudis, 2011). The shift toward a more flexible workforce in Australia is part of a broader trend where financial considerations outweigh the traditional values of academic freedom and job security. Studies in Australia have shown that this trend has led to job insecurity among academic staff and potentially undermined education and research quality due to increased workloads and decreased job satisfaction (May, Strachan, & Peetz, 2013). Megan Kimber (2003) underscores this divide, writing that “casualisation presents a fundamental challenge to the academic profession as it is splitting it in two—the tenured core and the tenuous periphery” (p. 49). The result is a precarious academic underclass—low-paid, under-supported, and increasingly excluded from the full life of the university. This fragmentation deepens inequality and threatens the integrity, cohesion, and long-term sustainability of the academic profession.

South Korea has also witnessed major changes in academic employment conditions that impact university management. According to Lee (2023), an oversupply of PhD graduates, a decrease in birthrates, and financial difficulties have South Korean universities looking for ways to save money on faculty salaries and benefits. South Korea also saw the impacts of global neoliberalism and a shift toward market-oriented management styles in universities (Lee, 2023). In Lee’s study, full-time, non-tenured-track (FTNT) faculty were only offered one- to two-year contracts with very little chance of promotion or obtaining tenure status, leading to these faculty feeling less committed to the institution. Lee also found that FTNT faculty had low job satisfaction. Similarly, in Japan, the post-World War II tradition of virtually guaranteed academic employment has been gradually eroded by government policies encouraging universities to adopt more flexible hiring practices. As a result, only about half of academic staff in Japan now hold tenured or permanent positions (Kakuchi, 2023). Japanese universities have faced pressures to adopt corporate management styles, focusing on efficiency and performance metrics rather than long-term academic commitments. This shift has led to increased fixed-term contracts and reduced tenure-track positions, reflecting a significant departure from the traditional model of lifetime employment and academic freedom. Tenure in Japan remains inconsistent and often opaque, shaped by institutional norms and a seniority-based culture rather than standardized criteria. Most early-career academics, both local and foreign, begin on fixed-term or tenure-track contracts lasting 3–5 years, facing unclear performance expectations in research, teaching, and service (Kaneko, 2009; Yonezawa, 2021). Foreign faculty often experience additional challenges such as language barriers, exclusion from governance, and limited mentorship (Brotherhood et al., 2019; Brown, 2019). Despite strong engagement, tenure-track faculty report high stress and little institutional support, with tenure denial typically resulting in contract termination (Sakurai & Mason, 2023; Takagi, 2018). These conditions contribute to growing academic precarity and call for transparent, equitable reforms in tenure practices.

In Europe, austerity measures following the 2008 financial crisis have led to hiring freezes and an increase in temporary contracts, weakening the traditional tenure system across the continent. In countries like Italy and Spain, budget cuts have forced universities to reduce permanent (tenured) faculty positions, leading to a rise in precarious employment for academic staff (Musselin, 2010). The introduction of performance-based funding models in several European countries has further exacerbated this trend, as universities are pressured to demonstrate financial prudence and adaptability in the face of reduced public funding (Enders & Musselin, 2008). This has significantly transformed the academic profession, with increased reliance on short-term contracts and adjunct positions. Even in Nordic countries, where higher education has traditionally enjoyed strong state support, the trend toward the erosion of tenure is becoming apparent. In Denmark, recent reforms have introduced fixed-term appointments and performance-based contracts to increase flexibility and accountability in the academic workforce (Aagaard & Schneider, 2016). These changes, however, have also reduced traditional tenure protections. Similarly, in Finland, universities have moved towards a more corporate governance model, with increasing numbers of academics employed on temporary contracts and a growing emphasis on external funding and performance metrics (Tirronen & Nokkala, 2009).

In Canada, the landscape of academic employment is also shifting. The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) has reported a significant rise in the number of part-time faculty and a corresponding decline in full-time tenured positions over the past two decades (CAUT, 2018). This shift is driven by financial constraints and a move towards more flexible staffing models that allow universities to

adjust rapidly to changing enrollment patterns and budgetary pressures (Macdonald, 2013). The move toward contract faculty in Canadian universities has been described as a “silent crisis,” with far-reaching consequences for both academic staff and students (Field, Jones, & Stephenson, 2014).

In the United Kingdom, formal tenure for academics was eliminated in the late 1980s, and today most faculty are employed on open-ended contracts that can be terminated for redundancy rather than enjoying ironclad tenure. Moreover, the introduction of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) has created a more competitive, performance-driven environment for UK universities, which are now incentivized to focus on short-term metrics rather than long-term academic commitments (Brown & Carasso, 2013). This shift has led to an increase in fixed-term contracts and a decline in secure faculty positions, mirroring the trends seen in the United States. According to a British Journal of Sociology of Education study, “The rise of performance-based funding has exacerbated job insecurity among academics, particularly early-career researchers, who are increasingly employed on short-term contracts” (Brown, 2015, p. 390). For example, as of 2020 roughly 32% of UK academic staff were employed on fixed-term contracts (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2022), indicating the prevalence of insecure positions in the UK academic workforce.

The global decline of tenure reflects a broader trend toward market-driven educational models that view faculty as flexible labor rather than long-term institutional assets. This shift is often justified by the need for financial efficiency and adaptability in a rapidly changing economic environment. However, critics argue that the erosion of tenure undermines academic freedom, reduces job security, and ultimately compromises the quality of education and research (Giroux, 2014). As tenure becomes less prevalent globally, there is a growing need to explore alternative models that can balance the demands of financial efficiency with the need to maintain academic integrity and stability in higher education institutions.

The rise of the neoliberal approach to higher education, which treats universities as businesses and students as customers, has further exacerbated this trend. Neoliberal policies advocate for reduced government spending on public services, including education, and promote privatization and competition to increase efficiency and cut costs (Harvey, 2005). This model emphasizes cost-efficiency, market-driven curricula, and revenue generation through research grants, often at the expense of academic freedom and long-term faculty investment (Giroux, 2014). According to Giroux (2014), the corporatization of higher education reflects a broader ideological shift that values profit over learning, and managerial efficiency over educational quality (p. 12).

In the private sector, the influence of neoliberal policies on higher education is often discussed in publications like *Forbes* and *The Wall Street Journal*. These sources highlight how universities, facing increasing financial pressures, adopt business-like approaches that undermine the traditional tenure system. For instance, a recent *Forbes* article noted that the decline in tenure is partly driven by the need for universities to remain financially viable in a competitive global market (Forbes, 2023). The article argued that universities are being forced to cut costs to maintain their financial stability, which often means replacing tenured faculty with lower-paid, non-tenure-track staff (Forbes, 2023). Part-time adjunct faculty earn more than a third less than a tenure-track faculty member, and a full-time adjunct faculty member may earn up to half that of their tenure-track counterparts (McNaughtan, García, & Nehls, 2017). Adjunct faculty also rarely receive benefits, saving higher education institutions money (McNaughtan et al., 2017).

The shift to adjunct labor has significant implications for the academic profession. A study published in the *Journal of Higher Education* found that the increase in non-tenure-track positions has led to a decline in job security, academic freedom, and faculty governance (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001). As Baldwin and Chronister (2001) state, “The erosion of tenure-track positions threatens the very foundation of academic life by undermining the security and autonomy that are essential for effective teaching and research” (p. 78). Furthermore, the lack of long-term job security can lead to reduced faculty morale and a decrease in the quality of education provided to students, as adjunct faculty may lack the institutional support and resources necessary to excel in their roles (AAUP, 2022a). Commonly, most universities also exclude contingent faculty from institutional governance, with little to no interaction with other faculty, no voice in departmental meetings or college activities, and limited engagement with students outside of class (McNaughtan et al., 2017). An implication, per Kovalesski and Arghode (2021), is that more research is

needed to understand how universities can create conducive environments and faculty engagement to provide the best learning outcomes for students regarding their non-tenured faculty.

Internationally, the impact of economic pressures on tenure is also evident in how universities structure faculty roles. In the United Kingdom, for example, introducing performance-based assessments like the REF and TEF (as noted above) has created a more competitive environment for universities, which are now incentivized to focus on short-term performance metrics rather than long-term academic commitments (Brown & Carasso, 2013). This shift has led to an increase in fixed-term contracts and a decline in tenure-track positions, mirroring trends seen in the United States. In countries like Australia and Canada, tenure erosion follows a disturbingly familiar trajectory. In Australia, universities have increasingly turned to casual staff to cut costs and adapt to fluctuating enrollments—a strategy that has dramatically reduced the proportion of tenured faculty (Bexley et al., 2011). As Bexley et al. (2011) note, “The casualization of the academic workforce has implications for academic identity and the traditional role of the university, raising questions about the future of the tenure system” (p. 114). Meanwhile, in Canada, a similar story is unfolding. The shift toward contract faculty has been described as a “silent crisis,” with far-reaching consequences for academic staff and students (Field et al., 2014).

These economic pressures and policy shifts highlight a fundamental change in the role and structure of higher education. As universities increasingly prioritize financial efficiency over academic stability, the traditional tenure system is being dismantled, with significant consequences for the academic profession and the quality of education. The decline of tenure reflects a broader trend towards the marketization of higher education, where financial considerations are increasingly prioritized over educational values and academic freedom. The increasing use of adjunct faculty and the growth of precarious employment conditions have sparked debates on whether tenure still serves its original purpose or has become an outdated concept needing reform (Giroux, 2014).

### **The Role of Tenure in Supporting Universities**

Tenure has traditionally played a critical role in supporting the mission of universities by ensuring academic freedom, fostering long-term research projects, and promoting institutional stability. Tenured faculty members, protected from arbitrary dismissal, can explore controversial or innovative research topics without fear of losing their positions. This protection is crucial for the advancement of knowledge and the pursuit of truth, allowing scholars to challenge prevailing paradigms and contribute to intellectual diversity (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). According to Schuster and Finkelstein (2006), “tenure provides a foundation for academic freedom, a central pillar of scholarly inquiry that allows faculty to engage in creative, unconventional, or even controversial research without external interference” (p. 89). Moreover, tenure fosters long-term research projects that require sustained focus and institutional support. Tenured faculty are more likely to engage in research with a considerable risk of failure and a high potential for groundbreaking discoveries. These long-term commitments are essential for advancing knowledge in complex fields such as medicine, engineering, and the social sciences. As Geiger (2015) notes, “the security of tenure encourages faculty to undertake ambitious research projects that might not yield immediate results but are crucial for scientific progress and innovation” (p. 154).

Tenure also contributes to the stability of academic institutions by creating a stable core of experienced faculty members who provide continuity in teaching and curriculum development. Tenured professors often take on leadership roles within the university, contributing to the governance and strategic planning that shape the institution’s future. This stability is essential for maintaining education quality and building a strong academic community. According to Shin and Teichler (2014), “the tenure system helps maintain a stable and committed faculty, which is vital for the long-term development and reputation of academic institutions” (p. 45). Additionally, tenure helps attract and retain high-quality faculty, enhancing the university’s reputation and its ability to compete globally. Universities with a strong tenure system are more likely to attract scholars who are leaders in their fields, as tenure provides job security and academic freedom highly valued in the academic profession. This ability to attract top talent improves the quality of education and enhances the university’s research output and reputation. As Gumport (2000) explains, “the

promise of tenure is a critical factor in recruiting and retaining distinguished scholars, which in turn enhances a university's standing and its ability to attract research funding and talented students" (p. 89).

However, the decline of tenure and the rise of adjunct and contingent faculty present significant challenges for universities. Without the job security that tenure provides, faculty may be less willing to pursue risky or groundbreaking research, potentially stifling academic innovation. A study by Kezar and Sam (2010) found that non-tenure-track faculty are less likely to engage in research and service activities due to a lack of institutional support and job security. This shift towards a contingent workforce undermines the traditional academic model and may lead to a decline in the quality of education and research output (Kezar & Sam, 2010). According to Kezar and Sam (2010), "the increase in contingent faculty has significant implications for academic quality, as these faculty members often have limited access to professional development opportunities and are less integrated into the academic community" (p. 312). Furthermore, there is the question of whether institutions have the infrastructure to effectively recruit, onboard, and support contingent faculty. Ashcraft et al. (2021) found that non-tenured faculty believed they were not supported and did not have the resources that tenured faculty enjoy, while the non-tenure-track faculty members had heavier teaching workloads.

Furthermore, the heavy reliance on adjunct faculty, who often juggle multiple jobs with little institutional support, can lead to a decline in the quality of education, as these instructors may have less time and resources to dedicate to students. Research shows that students taught by adjunct faculty may receive less rigorous instruction and have fewer opportunities for mentorship and academic advising (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001). Students experience less engagement and interaction with adjunct faculty. The overreliance on adjuncts can also negatively impact faculty morale and student outcomes, as it creates a tiered faculty system. As Maxey and Kezar (2016) point out, the growing reliance on adjunct faculty has created a two-tiered system that undermines faculty morale and diminishes the overall quality of the educational experience. At most higher education institutions, contingent faculty are often excluded from governance and decision-making processes, leading to a loss of institutional knowledge and weakening the academic community (Altbach, 2011; Maxey & Kezar, 2016). Consequently, contingent faculty are less likely to feel a sense of belonging within the institution (Maxey & Kezar, 2016).

Typically, non-tenured faculty are faced with much lower pay, are assigned lower-division courses, lack job security, are not peer-reviewed, and have limited promotional opportunities. This exclusion can undermine the sense of shared purpose and mission that is essential for maintaining a vibrant and cohesive academic environment (Altbach, 2011). As Altbach (2011) argues, "while flexibility is important, the erosion of tenure threatens the long-term stability and academic integrity of institutions by creating a fragmented and disjointed faculty" (p. 38).

On the other hand, some argue that the flexibility provided by a non-tenure-track workforce allows universities to adapt more quickly to changing educational demands and economic conditions. This flexibility can be particularly important in fields that are rapidly evolving or in institutions that are trying to manage tight budgets. For example, non-tenure-track faculty can be hired on short-term contracts to teach specialized courses that reflect current trends in the job market, ensuring that students receive relevant and up-to-date education (Gappa, Austin, & Trice, 2007). According to Gappa et al. (2007), "the flexibility of employing non-tenure-track faculty allows institutions to respond more effectively to shifts in student demand and changes in the external environment" (p. 210). This move toward adjunct faculty reduces costs and allows universities to remain flexible in adjusting staffing levels in response to fluctuating student enrollment and changing educational demands (Maxey & Kezar, 2016).

In conclusion, while the flexibility provided by a non-tenure-track workforce may offer some short-term benefits, the decline of tenure poses significant risks to the long-term mission and stability of universities, including academic excellence. Tenure remains a critical mechanism for supporting academic freedom, fostering long-term research, and maintaining institutional stability. Universities must carefully balance the need for flexibility with preserving the core values and traditions that have long defined higher education. Institutions must be prepared to support and practice inclusion of the non-tenure-track workforce.

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The global decline in tenure-track positions represents a significant shift in higher education landscape, driven by economic pressures and neoliberal policies prioritizing financial efficiency over academic stability and freedom. This paper has explored how the historical evolution of tenure, particularly its development and transformation in different regions, has been deeply influenced by economic constraints, policy reforms, and changing institutional priorities. As tenure becomes increasingly rare, several key conclusions emerge about the future of academia and the potential consequences of these trends. This paper makes a timely and critical contribution to academic literature by offering a comprehensive, globally comparative analysis of the economic and policy-driven forces behind the decline of tenure in higher education. Unlike prior research that often narrows on the U.S., this study expands the lens to include diverse systems in Europe, Asia, Australia, and Canada, highlighting how austerity measures, neoliberal reforms, and declining public investment have reshaped academic employment worldwide. By synthesizing labor economics, higher education policy, and institutional governance, the paper illustrates how the erosion of tenure undermines academic freedom, research quality, and institutional stability. Rich with empirical data, case studies, and cross-national comparisons, it bridges scholarly analysis with real-world relevance. The paper also advances the conversation by proposing future research directions and exploring hybrid policy alternatives to tenure, positioning itself not only as a critique of market-driven reforms, but as a constructive blueprint for safeguarding academic integrity in a changing global education landscape.

Economic pressures have emerged as a primary driver behind the global decline of tenure-track positions. Across continents, from the United States to Europe, Asia, and Australia, universities face reduced government funding and a heightened need for financial efficiency. The reliance on adjunct and contingent faculty is often seen as a cost-saving measure that allows institutions to maintain financial viability amid fluctuating enrollment and budget constraints. As noted by Ehrenberg and Zhang (2005), the shift towards adjunct faculty is a critical strategy for managing budget shortfalls but has significant implications for the stability of academic careers and the quality of higher education. The emphasis on financial efficiency has led to restructuring the academic workforce, with long-term commitments being replaced by short-term, flexible contracts. The adoption of neoliberal policies in higher education has further accelerated the decline of tenure. These policies promote a market-oriented approach to higher education, viewing universities as businesses and students as customers. This shift has led to prioritizing revenue generation, cost-cutting, and performance metrics over the traditional academic values of intellectual exploration and stability (Giroux, 2014). As universities increasingly adopt business-like models, tenure's security and academic freedom are often seen as incompatible with the need for flexibility and adaptability in a competitive global market. This trend is evident in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia, where policy reforms have shifted academic employment toward more precarious, performance-based contracts (Marginson, 2012).

The decline of tenure has profound implications for academic freedom and the quality of education. Tenure has historically served as a safeguard for academic freedom, allowing scholars to pursue innovative, controversial, or unconventional research without fear of dismissal. As tenure-track positions become scarce, faculty members may feel pressured to conform to institutional norms and avoid research topics that could jeopardize their job security. Another scenario is that faculty may spend less and less time on scholarly activities (i.e., research, writing, grant proposals, manuscripts, conference presentations, book chapters) without the lure of tenure. Ashcraft et al. (2021) found that tenure-seeking faculty pursued and engaged in significantly more effort towards scholarly work than tenured or non-tenured faculty; without the draw of tenure, this would likely influence the amount of new scholarly contribution. This shift could stifle innovation and reduce the diversity of thought within academic institutions, impacting the progress of knowledge across disciplines (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). Moreover, the increasing reliance on adjunct faculty, who often lack the job security and resources necessary for effective teaching and mentorship, can undermine the quality of education and the student experience (Coates & Goedegebuure, 2010).



While the decline of tenure offers universities short-term flexibility in managing financial constraints and changing educational demands, it also poses significant risks to academic institutions' long-term mission and stability. A balanced approach is needed to address these challenges, one that considers both the economic realities facing higher education and the foundational values that tenure was designed to protect. This could involve exploring alternative models that offer a degree of job security and academic freedom while allowing for greater flexibility in faculty employment. Developing hybrid models that combine tenure elements with performance-based evaluations or renewable contracts could provide a pathway forward, balancing the need for stability with adaptability in a rapidly changing educational landscape. Given the complex and evolving nature of the tenure system and its decline, further research is needed to understand the full implications of these changes for higher education. Future studies should focus on the impact of tenure decline on different disciplines, the experiences of adjunct and contingent faculty, and the effects on student outcomes and institutional performance. Gourley and Madonia (2021) studied how tenure affects teaching quality and the use of student course evaluations, finding that professors put less effort into their teaching once awarded tenure. As suggested by Gourley and Madonia (2021), future research could test their findings at universities without a tenure track. Additionally, policymakers and educational leaders must engage in ongoing dialogue about the future of tenure and the best ways to support academic freedom, innovation, and quality in an increasingly market-driven higher education environment.

Finally, in his article "Growing Trend of Attacks on Tenure," Quinn (2024a) discusses the future of tenure and how it faces increasing challenges from various legislative proposals across the United States. Quinn notes that, despite these proposals not fully succeeding in banning tenure, they have significantly weakened tenure protections, reflecting a broader trend of attacks on academic freedom and job security in higher education. This indicates a growing uncertainty about the future of tenure as more U.S. states consider measures that could potentially undermine its foundations. The decline of tenure-track positions globally reflects broader economic, political, and social transformations within higher education. As universities navigate these changes, they must carefully balance the need for financial sustainability with the core values of academic freedom, stability, and excellence that tenure was designed to uphold. The future of higher education will depend on finding innovative solutions that address these challenges while preserving the integrity and mission of academic institutions.

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