

Analysis of Career Development Paths for Contract Employees in Universities

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of accelerated connotative development in higher education and the profound reform of personnel systems in Chinese universities, the labor contract employment model has emerged as a key institutional mechanism for institutions to optimize human resource allocation and alleviate shortages in staffing. It plays an indispensable role in sustaining the orderly progress of teaching and research, and ensuring the efficient operation of university campuses. Currently, contract employees in universities generally grapple with significant challenges, including narrow promotion channels, subpar salary and welfare benefits, inadequate training resources, and a weak sense of professional identity. These challenges not only hinder the fulfillment of employees' personal career goals but also threaten the stability of university human resources and impede improvements in overall institutional efficiency. Grounded in the practicalities of university personnel management, this paper systematically analyzes the dilemmas and root causes confronting contract employees, explores scientific, feasible, and institution-specific development pathways, and offers theoretical insights and practical references for universities to refine their personnel management systems and foster the coordinated development of employees and the institution.

Keywords: Contract Employees; Career Development; Personnel Management; Universities

1. Introduction

Currently, China's higher education has transitioned into a phase of connotative development centered on quality enhancement, driving an escalating demand for diversified and professional human resources. Characterized by flexible recruitment, strong adaptability, and cost efficiency, the labor contract system has become a vital strategy for universities to alleviate shortages in institutional staff quotas and revitalize their employment systems, effectively bridging talent gaps in roles such as teaching assistance, administrative management, and logistical services. Nevertheless, entrenched traditional institutional management paradigms persist, leading to conspicuous disparities between contract employees and institutional staff in terms of remuneration, benefits, and career advancement opportunities. This has resulted in significant bottlenecks in contract employees' career development and a significant brain drain phenomenon. Consequently, this undermines the legitimate rights and interests of contract employees, while also constraining the enhancement of university education quality and core competitiveness. Hence, systematically investigating the development dilemmas and viable solutions for university contract employees has emerged as an imperative task in the ongoing reform of university personnel management.

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2. Current Situation and Key Problems of Contract Employees in Universities

The number of contract employees in Chinese universities is steadily growing, and their job roles are becoming increasingly diverse. They are predominantly concentrated in non-core positions such as teaching assistance, administrative management, and logistical support, while some universities have gradually extended this employment model to core functional areas including teaching and research, solidifying their status as an integral component of the university human resource workforce. Nonetheless, contract employees encounter significant challenges in their career progression, which manifest prominently in the following aspects:

2.1. Narrow Promotion Channels and Limited Development Space

The existing promotion system in universities is primarily tailored for institutional staff, effectively barring contract employees from mainstream promotion routes and title evaluation frameworks. This exclusion has resulted in a conspicuous lack of clear career development pathways for this cohort. In managerial roles, contract employees are largely restricted to fundamental and supportive tasks, with minimal opportunities to advance into middle or senior management positions. For professional and technical roles, the title evaluation mechanisms for contract employees are either incomplete or poorly implemented. As a result, their professional competencies struggle to gain recognition through title advancement, leading to a pronounced "glass ceiling" in their career progression. Additionally, universities demonstrate limited flexibility in reassigning contract employees, and mechanisms for horizontal mobility and internal job rotation remain underdeveloped, further constraining their career growth potential.

2.2. Low Salary and Welfare Levels and Incomplete Security System

Low salary and welfare levels constitute a key factor constraining contract employees' sense of career belonging. Currently, the salaries of contract employees in universities are generally lower than those of institutional staff in equivalent positions. Under the salary model of "basic wage + performance-based wage", their basic wage standards are low, the distribution of performance wages is inclined toward institutional staff with an unreasonable distribution mechanism, and there is a lack of a regular salary growth mechanism. An obvious phenomenon of "equal work for unequal pay" exists in some positions. In terms of welfare guarantees, some universities fail to pay the "five social insurances and one housing fund" in full in accordance with regulations, or adopt the minimum standard for the contribution base. There is a significant gap between their welfare benefits—such as paid leave, health check-ups, and children's school enrollment—and those of institutional staff, resulting in markedly inadequate job security and a weak sense of belonging among contract employees.

2.3. Insufficient Training Opportunities and Restricted Capacity Improvement

There is a distinct inclination in the allocation of university training resources, where high-quality training resources are mainly tilted toward institutional staff, leaving contract employees with relatively limited access to training opportunities. Furthermore, the existing training programs are mostly focused on basic job skills, lacking systematic and targeted career development training that fails to meet the needs of their professional capacity improvement and career progression. Meanwhile, due to the relatively high mobility of contract employees, universities exhibit low enthusiasm for investing in their training. Some contract employees engaged in teaching-related work are even denied access to the university teacher qualification examination, which further hinders the improvement of their professional capabilities and makes it difficult for them to meet the talent requirements of universities' connotative development.

2.4. Weak Professional Identity and Poor Sense of Belonging

The identity gap between "institutional staff" and "non-institutional staff" has led to contract employees being frequently regarded as "informal employees". They receive unfair treatment in areas such as selection and commendation, democratic participation, and campus culture construction, and are prone to negative emotions such as inferiority and anxiety, resulting in a weak professional identity. In addition, the term of labor contracts for contract employees is generally short (mostly 1-3 years), with significant uncertainty regarding contract renewal. These employees face occupational risks such as position optimization and non-renewal of contracts, and their occupational anxiety is prominent, making it difficult for them to develop the willingness to serve universities for a long time.

3. Analysis of the Causes of Development Dilemmas

The development dilemmas faced by contract employees in universities are not caused by a single factor, but by the combined effect of multiple elements, including university personnel management concepts, system design, and resource allocation. These causes can be deeply analyzed from the following three dimensions:

3.1. Outdated Management Concepts and Persistent Identity Discrimination

The traditional management philosophy of "institutional priority" is deeply entrenched in the personnel management practices of universities. The majority of institutions still view contract employees as supplementary labor rather than an integral component of the core human resource team. This perspective perpetuates the phenomena of "valuing institutions over contracts" and "prioritizing employment over training". University administrators exhibit insufficient awareness of the career development needs of contract employees, failing to integrate them into the overall strategic planning of university human resources. Persistent identity discrimination remains a pervasive issue, which has emerged as a fundamental barrier constraining their career progression.

3.2. Imperfect System Design and Lack of Systematic Security

Universities lack special career development systems tailored for contract employees, and core mechanisms such as promotion, title evaluation, and salary growth remain underdeveloped, leaving their career development without clear rules and reliable basis. Meanwhile, the management of labor contracts in universities is not standardized: some universities have problems such as illegal signing of labor contracts, ambiguous contract terms, and opaque contract renewal mechanisms, which impair the legitimate rights and interests of contract employees. In addition, the incentive and assessment mechanisms are inadequate, and the assessment indicators lack scientificity and pertinence. This makes it difficult to objectively evaluate employees' work performance, effectively stimulate their work vitality, and also hinders the ability to attract and retain outstanding talents.

3.3. Unreasonable Resource Allocation and Insufficient Development Support

High-quality resources in universities, including human resources, training resources, and funding resources, are all inclined toward institutional staff. Most contract employees are assigned to low-end positions, with seriously inadequate investment in training and salary support. Meanwhile, universities have insufficient in-depth cooperation and exchanges with enterprises, scientific research institutions, and other sectors of society, failing to establish a diversified career development platform for contract employees and thus leading to narrow career development channels for them. In addition, as university funds continue to tilt toward core fields such as teaching and scientific research, non-institutional contract employees have become key targets for fund optimization, which further exacerbates the imbalance in resource allocation and restricts their career progression.

4. Exploration of Development Paths for Contract Employees in Universities

To address the development dilemmas confronting contract employees in universities, it is necessary to proceed from the reality of university personnel management, adhere to the integration of problem orientation and goal orientation, and construct scientific, feasible and pragmatic career development paths from four dimensions—system improvement, platform construction, humanistic care, and cooperation expansion—so as to realize the coordinated development of employees and universities.

4.1. Improve the System and Break Identity Barriers

Based on the job characteristics of contract employees, a diversified promotion system covering management positions, professional and technical positions, and skilled positions should be constructed, with clear promotion criteria, standards, and procedures formulated for each type of position to break down identity barriers. The threshold for title evaluation of contract employees should be appropriately lowered, and a title evaluation mechanism featuring the same standards as institutional staff and differentiated assessment should be established. A merit-based pathway for contract employees to obtain formal institutional status should be established, incorporating factors such as working years, work performance, and skill levels into the merit system to provide opportunities for outstanding contract employees to obtain institutional establishment. The salary distribution mechanism of "equal pay for equal work and distribution according to work contribution" should be improved, the regular salary growth and welfare guarantee systems should be refined, the management of labor contracts should be standardized, and open-ended employment contracts should be signed in accordance with the law to ensure the stability of employees' positions.

4.2. Build Development Platforms and Strengthen Capacity Improvement

The training of contract employees should be included in the overall university training plan. Personalized training programs should be formulated according to the needs of different positions, the training content should be enriched, the training methods should be innovated, the investment in training funds should be increased, and the pertinence and effectiveness of training should be improved. The channel for contract employees engaged in teaching-related work to apply for the university teacher qualification examination should be opened to help them improve their professional

capabilities. A flexible job rotation and horizontal mobility mechanism should be established to encourage employees to exchange and practice among different positions and departments, so as to enrich their work experience and broaden their career horizons. The incentive and assessment mechanisms should be improved, a combined quantitative and qualitative assessment index system should be established, and the assessment results should be directly linked to salary, promotion, training and other aspects to fully stimulate the work enthusiasm and initiative of employees.

4.3. Strengthen Humanistic Care and Enhance Professional Identity

A regular communication mechanism should be established to conduct regular heart-to-heart talks with contract employees, timely understand their work status, career development needs and living difficulties, smooth the channels for expressing demands, and timely respond to and properly solve their reasonable demands. Identity discrimination should be abandoned, and contract employees should be included in the core system of university human resources, and given the same opportunities as institutional staff in aspects such as selection and commendation, democratic participation and campus culture construction. The construction of campus culture should be strengthened to create an equal, respectful and inclusive campus atmosphere, attention should be paid to the physical and mental health of employees, psychological counseling and health check-ups should be carried out, and practical difficulties such as employees' housing and children's enrollment should be solved to enhance their professional identity and sense of belonging.

4.4. Strengthen University-Enterprise Cooperation and Expand Development Channels

Cooperation with relevant enterprises and scientific research institutions should be strengthened to build a diversified practical development platform, providing contract employees with opportunities for practical training and skill improvement, helping them understand the development trends of the industry and enhance their professional competitiveness. Social resources should be actively connected to provide employees with services such as title evaluation, professional qualification certification and employment recommendation, so as to broaden their career development channels. Advanced experience in the management of contract employees from domestic and foreign universities should be learned, inter-university exchanges and cooperation should be strengthened, management experience and practical achievements should be shared, and the management model of contract employees should be optimized to achieve a win-win situation for individual employees, universities, and society.

5. Conclusion and Prospect

As an important component of university human resource teams, contract employees in universities play an irreplaceable role in supporting teaching and scientific research, ensuring campus operation, and improving service quality. The emergence of their career development dilemmas is closely associated with factors such as outdated university personnel management concepts, imperfect system design, and unreasonable resource allocation. To resolve this dilemma, universities need to establish scientific personnel management concepts, break down identity barriers, continuously improve relevant systems, construct development platforms, strengthen humanistic care, expand cooperation channels, and provide contract employees with clear development paths and sufficient development support, thereby promoting the coordinated development of employees' personal value and university development.

With the continuous deepening of the reform of China's higher education personnel system, the labor contract employment model will be further promoted and refined in universities. In the future, universities need to continuously pay attention to the development needs of contract employees, constantly optimize their career development paths, and break down institutional and mechanism obstacles. Meanwhile, relying on relevant national laws, regulations, and policy support, universities should effectively safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of contract employees, fully stimulate their work vitality and creativity, and enable them to make greater contributions to the high-quality development of China's higher education.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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