

Staying or Leaving? Investigating the Effects of Professional Development and Work-Life Balance on Turnover Intention in Chinese Private Universities

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of professional development and work-life balance on turnover intention among young academic staff in Chinese private universities. Drawing on Organizational Equilibrium Theory and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, the study employs a quantitative, correlational design using survey data from 287 early-career faculty members in Shijiazhuang, China. Structural equation modeling was used to test hypothesized relationships. Results indicate that professional development significantly and negatively affects turnover intention, affirming its role as a key motivator in faculty retention. Surprisingly, work-life balance was found to have a significant but positive effect on turnover intention, suggesting that even faculty with balanced lives may seek opportunities elsewhere if professional growth is lacking. These findings underscore the importance of an integrated institutional strategy that combines personal well-being with meaningful career development opportunities. The study contributes to both theory and practice by offering insights into the complex factors shaping turnover intention in a non-Western, private higher education context.

Keywords: Turnover intention, professional development, work-life balance, young academic staff, private universities

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, China's education landscape has witnessed a dramatic transformation, marked by an accelerated growth in the number and influence of private higher education institutions. This expansion has been fueled by rising demand for tertiary education, government policy reforms, and the increased emphasis on specialized and market-responsive training (Hu & Ghasemy, 2024). As these private universities become integral to the broader educational ecosystem, a critical challenge has emerged—retaining qualified and committed academic staff. Faculty turnover has become a persistent and growing issue that threatens the institutional stability, academic quality, and long-term sustainability of private universities in China (Xingrong, 2024).

Turnover intention, defined as the likelihood or intent of an employee to leave their current position, has been recognized as a critical antecedent to actual turnover behavior. While some degree of faculty mobility may contribute to knowledge exchange and institutional innovation, excessive turnover—especially among young academic staff—can have deeply detrimental effects. It disrupts curriculum continuity, affects student learning outcomes, increases recruitment and training costs, and undermines institutional cohesion (Li & Wu, 2025). In China's private higher education sector, which faces intense market competition and operational pressures, the implications of high turnover are especially severe (Yunrui, 2023).

Several national surveys and institutional reports underscore the gravity of this issue. For example, the Zhaopin 2023 employment report highlights that turnover rate in education-related sectors—particularly in private institutions—consistently exceed 20%. Young faculty members, especially those with less than five years of experience, are the most likely to consider leaving. These early-career academics often face significant professional challenges, including limited opportunities for advancement, unbalanced workloads, lower compensation compared to their public-sector counterparts, and an institutional culture that prioritizes teaching effectiveness over scholarly development (Wang & Jiang, 2024), (Jusoh & Yue, 2019). These stressors collectively shape their job satisfaction and influence their intentions to remain in or exit the profession (Song & Ke, 2022).

A growing body of research has pointed to internal organizational factors as primary contributors to faculty turnover intention. Among these, professional development and work-life balance stand out as two of the most salient and actionable determinants. Professional development encompasses ongoing opportunities for faculty to enhance their skills, engage in scholarly activities, and grow their academic careers. When such opportunities are lacking or poorly structured, faculty may feel undervalued or stagnant, prompting them to seek opportunities elsewhere (Ningsih et al., 2022). Likewise,

work-life balance—the ability to manage and fulfill both professional obligations and personal responsibilities—plays a significant role in faculty well-being, motivation, and long-term commitment to an institution (Kakar, 2019); (Pulungan & Tiarapuspa, 2024); (Song & Lin, 2020).

Despite the importance of these factors, empirical investigations into their impact within the context of Chinese private universities remain limited. Most existing studies have either focused on public universities or have treated turnover intention as a monolithic construct without exploring its antecedents in detail (Tang et al., 2023). Furthermore, literature from Western contexts cannot be directly applied due to China's unique socio-economic, institutional, and cultural conditions, such as Confucian work ethics, hierarchical leadership structures, and recent higher education policy reforms. This gap necessitates a more nuanced, context-specific examination of what drives turnover intention among young academics in Chinese private universities.

From a theoretical standpoint, understanding faculty turnover intention through the lens of professional development and work-life balance offers an opportunity to explore the intersection between organizational support mechanisms and individual well-being. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model provides a useful framework for conceptualizing supportive workplace conditions—such as meaningful development opportunities and manageable workloads—can buffer stress and reduce intentions to quit (Bocean et al., 2023). Similarly, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivators, such as personal growth and job satisfaction, in retaining employees (Ratnawita et al., 2023).

The significance of this study is both practical and scholarly. Practically, the findings can inform institutional policies and management strategies aimed at improving retention among early-career faculty in private universities—a population often overlooked in policy discussions. By identifying the specific organizational and personal factors that contribute to turnover intention, the study can help institutions design targeted interventions to enhance faculty engagement and reduce attrition. Scholarly, the study contributes to a growing but still underdeveloped body of literature on higher education workforce dynamics in non-Western contexts, particularly within privately operated institutions in emerging economies. Moreover, this research aligns with broader national and global concerns about maintaining a stable, motivated, and high-performing academic workforce. In the post-pandemic era, as higher education institutions grapple with new expectations around flexibility, digitalization, and employee well-being, insights into turnover intention are more crucial than ever. For China, retaining qualified faculty in private universities is not merely an institutional issue—it is a matter of national development, as these institutions play a vital role in expanding educational access and fostering human capital for the knowledge economy.

In summary, this study seeks to examine how professional development and work-life balance influence turnover intention among young academic staff in Chinese private universities. By focusing on a population that is both highly vulnerable to turnover and essential to institutional growth, the study aims to generate evidence-based insights that can guide both policy and practice in China's evolving higher education sector.

Research Question

This study is guided by the central research question:

- RQ1: What is the influence of professional development and work-life balance on turnover intention among young academic staff in Chinese private universities?

This question aims to investigate how two critical organizational factors—professional development and work-life balance—shape the turnover intention of early-career faculty members. By focusing specifically on academic staff with fewer than five years of experience in private higher education institutions, the study explores the underlying dynamics that contribute to faculty dissatisfaction and voluntary exit. The findings are expected to yield insights into how Chinese private universities can improve faculty retention through supportive policies, targeted development programs, and practices that foster work-life integration.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Turnover Intention in Higher Education

Turnover intention, often regarded as a reliable predictor of actual employee turnover, has become a critical issue in higher education, particularly in the rapidly expanding private university sector in China (Chen et al., 2014). Academic staff turnover threatens institutional continuity, depletes human capital, and increases recruitment and training costs. Studies have shown that a large proportion of Chinese university faculty—especially those in private institutions—have contemplated changing careers, moving to public universities, or leaving academia altogether (Du & Liu, 2019; Zhao, 2013).

The problem is particularly acute among early-career academics, who often cite low job security, limited research opportunities, high workloads, and insufficient institutional support as major sources of dissatisfaction. While public universities tend to offer more stable employment conditions and better remuneration, private universities struggle to compete for talent and retain staff over the long term (Sun, 2022). Faculty in these institutions often face performance pressures without adequate structural support, resulting in frustration, burnout, and intentions to leave (Zhang et al., 2022).

Despite widespread acknowledgment of this challenge, there remains a gap in research that empirically isolates the key drivers of turnover intention within private Chinese higher education. In particular, few studies have explored the role of organizational factors such as professional development and work-life balance in shaping young faculty members' career decisions.

Professional Development and Turnover Intention

Professional development (PD) encompasses a range of activities designed to enhance academic staff's knowledge, skills, and career progression, including training programs, workshops, mentoring, research opportunities, and conference participation. It serves as a signal of institutional investment in faculty growth and has been linked to higher levels of job satisfaction, motivation, and organizational commitment (García Torres, 2019; Coldwell, 2017).

Empirical studies have shown that access to professional development opportunities significantly reduces faculty turnover intention. For instance, Xu (2014) found that perceived availability of PD among young faculty in Chinese private colleges was positively correlated with job satisfaction and negatively related to intention to leave. Similarly, Avalos (2011) emphasized that high-quality professional development—especially when aligned with personal goals and teaching responsibilities—can serve as a retention tool for education institutions.

However, the implementation and impact of PD vary widely across institutions. Reynolds et al. (2002) noted that professional development programs often suffer from limited scope, insufficient funding, or lack of alignment with faculty needs, which undermines their effectiveness. In the context of private universities in China, these shortcomings are exacerbated by budgetary constraints and underdeveloped institutional infrastructures, leaving many young academics disillusioned with their career prospects (Xu, 2014).

Thus, while professional development is frequently cited as a retention strategy, its actual influence on turnover intention remains underexplored, especially in private institutions where such opportunities may be scarce or inequitably distributed.

Work-Life Balance and Turnover Intention

Work-life balance (WLB) is another critical factor influencing turnover intention among academic staff. It refers to the ability to successfully manage work obligations alongside personal and family responsibilities (Clutterbuck, 2003). Achieving balance is associated with greater employee well-being, reduced stress, and improved job satisfaction (Haar et al., 2014).

In academia, WLB can be particularly difficult to achieve due to heavy teaching loads, research pressures, administrative responsibilities, and the expectation of after-hours availability (Owens et al., 2018; French et al., 2020). These pressures are often intensified in private universities, where faculty are expected to teach more courses or fill gaps left by staffing shortages (Marcus, 2021). For early-career faculty, who may also be managing young families or other life transitions, the absence of work-life support can result in emotional exhaustion and higher turnover intention (Watanabe & Falci, 2014).

Multiple studies confirm that a poor work-life balance is significantly associated with employees' intent to leave. Noor (2011) found that job satisfaction and organizational commitment mediate the relationship between WLB and turnover intention. Ghayyur and Jamal (2012) also reported a direct positive correlation between WLB challenges and employees' intent to resign, regardless of demographic variables. More recent work by Boccoli et al. (2022) further links WLB with psychological well-being and institutional engagement, noting that flexibility, autonomy, and organizational support are key enablers of balance.

In China, the socio-cultural context complicates the WLB equation further. The strong cultural emphasis on hard work and self-sacrifice can make it socially difficult for faculty to prioritize personal well-being over professional duties (Rozario et al., 2004). Yet, as pressures rise—especially in post-COVID environments—there is growing recognition that burnout and role conflict must be addressed to ensure long-term faculty retention (Wang et al., 2021).

Despite these developments, studies investigating the specific effects of WLB on turnover intention within Chinese private universities remain scarce. There is a need for targeted research that accounts for institutional constraints, cultural values, and the lived experiences of young faculty members navigating both professional and personal expectations.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding why young academic staff in Chinese private universities consider leaving their institutions requires a framework that addresses both motivational and organizational dynamics. This study draws upon two foundational theories in organizational behavior—Organizational Equilibrium Theory (March & Simon, 1958) and Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory (Herzberg et al., 1959)—to explain the mechanisms through which professional development and work-life balance influence turnover intention.

Organizational Equilibrium Theory

Organizational Equilibrium Theory, developed by March and Simon (1958), posits that employees will remain in an organization when there is a perceived balance between their contributions and the inducements received from the

organization. Contributions may include time, effort, skills, and emotional commitment, while inducements refer to tangible and intangible rewards such as salary, career development opportunities, recognition, and supportive working conditions. When this balance is disrupted—when employees feel that they are giving more than they are receiving—they are more likely to develop turnover intentions and eventually leave the organization.

Two key constructs underpin this theory: the desirability of movement and the ease of movement (Trevor, 2001). The desirability of movement is closely related to job satisfaction and perceived organizational support. In the context of this study, the availability and quality of professional development and work-life balance practices serve as major components of organizational inducements. If young academic staff perceive these inducements as inadequate relative to their workload and career aspirations, they may be more inclined to leave the institution.

This theory is particularly relevant in the setting of Chinese private universities, where young faculty often face long working hours, limited research support, and constrained promotion pathways—factors that may tip the balance toward dissatisfaction and withdrawal.

Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959) distinguishes between two types of factors influencing job attitudes: motivators and hygiene factors. Motivators—such as achievement, recognition, responsibility, and opportunities for advancement—are intrinsic to the work and lead to job satisfaction. Hygiene factors—such as salary, working conditions, supervision, and institutional policies—are extrinsic and, while not necessarily satisfying in themselves, can cause dissatisfaction if absent or perceived as inadequate.

Within this theoretical framework, professional development aligns with motivator factors. It represents an intrinsic value that enhances a sense of achievement, competence, and career progression. Faculty members who perceive meaningful opportunities for development are more likely to experience job satisfaction and are less likely to consider leaving their positions.

On the other hand, work-life balance functions as a hygiene factor. Although it may not lead to higher satisfaction when present, its absence can lead to significant dissatisfaction and burnout. Faculty members struggling to manage excessive workloads, personal responsibilities, and institutional expectations may experience emotional exhaustion, prompting them to consider leaving the organization despite otherwise fulfilling roles.

Herzberg's theory is particularly useful in understanding how different institutional interventions influence faculty turnover intentions. While improving hygiene factors (e.g., providing work-life balance policies) may help reduce dissatisfaction, enhancing motivator factors (e.g., offering quality professional development) is essential for promoting long-term engagement and institutional loyalty.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

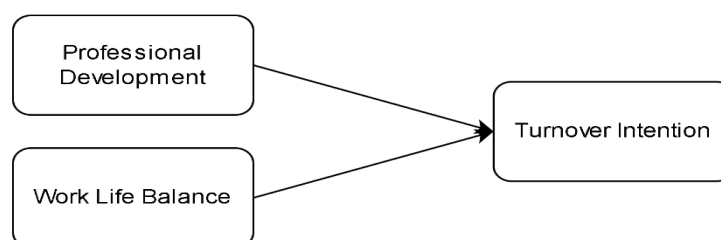
This study examines how professional development and work-life balance influence turnover intention among young academic staff in Chinese private universities. The conceptual framework (Figure 1) is informed by Organizational Equilibrium Theory (March & Simon, 1958) and Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory (Herzberg et al., 1959), which together highlights the importance of organizational support and job-related motivators in shaping employees' decisions to stay or leave.

Professional development refers to institutional support for faculty growth through training, research opportunities, and career advancement. Prior research shows that adequate professional development increases job satisfaction and reduces turnover intention (García Torres, 2019). In private universities, where such support may be limited, lack of development can lead to disengagement and attrition.

H1: Professional development negatively affects turnover intention.

Work-life balance reflects an individual's ability to manage work and personal responsibilities. Poor balance is associated with stress, burnout, and higher turnover intention, especially in academic settings with high workloads and limited flexibility (Jo, 2008; Noor, 2011).

H2: Work-life balance negatively affects turnover intention.



Source(s): Authors own work

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the study

This framework proposes that both professional development and work-life balance are key predictors of turnover intention. The study tests these direct relationships using quantitative data from young faculty in private Chinese universities.

5. METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, non-experimental, correlational research design to examine the relationships between professional development, work-life balance, and turnover intention among young academic staff in Chinese private universities. The correlational approach was selected as it enables the investigation of the strength and direction of associations between variables without manipulation. This design is particularly suitable for social science research aiming to explore trends, patterns, and relationships in a real-world context.

Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of full-time academic staff aged 35 years or younger employed in private colleges in Shijiazhuang City, the capital of Hebei Province, China. According to official statistics from the Shijiazhuang Municipal Education Commission, this group included a total of 1,017 eligible faculty members. A sample size of 280 was calculated using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. To allow for non-responses, the sample size was increased by 40%, resulting in the distribution of 392 questionnaires. Ultimately, 287 valid responses were received, reflecting a response rate of approximately 73%. A non-probability, convenience sampling technique was adopted due to its practicality and cost-effectiveness. Faculty members were invited to participate voluntarily, and efforts were made to ensure ethical standards, including informed consent and confidentiality.

Instrumentation

The study used a structured self-administered questionnaire developed from previously validated instruments. All constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). Professional development was assessed using a 7-item scale adapted from Xu (2014), focusing on the perceived usefulness of institutional development initiatives. Work-life balance was measured with a 6-item scale based on Bachechi (2020) and Koontz (2024), capturing participants' ability to balance work and personal life. Turnover intention was measured using a 5-item scale adapted from Kissi et al. (2023), assessing respondents' intention to leave their academic positions. The questionnaire also included a demographic section to capture background variables such as age, gender, academic title, and years of experience.

Data Collection & Analysis

Data was collected in January 2023 using an online survey hosted on Google Forms. Participants received the survey link via email and social media platforms. The survey began with an informed consent form explaining the study's purpose, risks, and voluntary nature of participation. Responses were collected anonymously to protect participant confidentiality. The estimated completion time for the survey was 10 to 15 minutes. Once completed, the responses were downloaded, screened, and prepared for analysis.

The data were initially cleaned and screened using SPSS 26.0. Procedures included checks for missing data, outliers, and normality based on skewness and kurtosis values. Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, and frequencies were computed to describe the sample and study variables. Common method bias was assessed using Harman's single-factor test to ensure no single factor accounted for the majority of the variance. To test the hypothesized relationships, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was performed using SmartPLS 4.0. The analysis followed a two-step process: first, the measurement model was evaluated for convergent and discriminant validity using factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR); second, the structural model was assessed to estimate the strength and significance of the hypothesized paths between professional development, work-life balance, and turnover intention.

6. RESULTS

Demographics of Respondents

A total of 287 valid responses were collected from young academic staff in private universities in Shijiazhuang, China. The demographic profile of the respondents is summarized in Table 1. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 148 male respondents (51.56%) and 139 female respondents (48.44%), indicating a nearly equal representation of male and female faculty members in the sample.

In terms of age, the majority of respondents (68%) were between 30 and 35 years old, while 32% were aged 25 to 29. This confirms the study's focus on early-career academics. Regarding marital status, 45% of participants reported being married, while 32% were single. A notable 18% were divorced, and 5% selected "other," reflecting some diversity in family structures.

The length of employment revealed that the majority (56.44%) had between one to five years of work experience, while 43.56% had been employed for more than five years. This suggests a substantial proportion of faculty members are still in the early or middle stages of their academic careers, making them a relevant group for exploring turnover intention. In terms of academic rank (Zhicheng), the largest group held the title of Lecturer (54%), followed by Professor (21%), Associate Professor (17%), Assistant (6%), and a small proportion (2%) who reported no academic title. This distribution indicates a broad representation of academic levels among respondents, with a significant concentration at the mid-career level.

Regarding education level, 61% of respondents held a PhD, while 31% held a master's degree, and 8% held a Bachelor's degree. This suggests that the academic staff sampled are highly qualified, with the majority having attained doctoral-level education.

The diversity in respondents' demographic characteristics—including gender, academic rank, work experience, and education—provides a robust foundation for analyzing the influence of organizational factors such as professional development and work-life balance on turnover intention in the private higher education context.

Table 1. Demographics of Respondents

Variable	Level	Frequency	Valid Percent
Gender	Male	148	51.56
	Female	139	48.44
Age	25-29	92	32
	30-35	195	68
Marital Status	Single	88	32
	Married	129	45
	Divorced	52	18
	Others	9	5
Length of employment	1-5 years	162	56.44
	More than 5 years	125	43.56
Academic title (Zhicheng)	None	7	2
	Assistant	16	6
	Lecturer	153	54
	Associate Professor	50	17
	Professor	61	21
Education level	Degree	24	8
	Master	89	31
	PhD	174	61

As shown in Table 2, the mean score for Turnover Intention was 5.294 (SD = 1.321), indicating a relatively high tendency among respondents to consider leaving their positions. Work-Life Balance had a mean of 4.442 (SD = 0.778), suggesting generally positive perceptions, though with some variability. In contrast, Professional Development recorded a lower mean of 3.346 (SD = 0.772), highlighting a perceived lack of growth opportunities. These results reflect underlying concerns that may contribute to increased turnover intention among young faculty in Chinese private universities.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Constructs

Construct	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Turnover Intention	5.294	1.321	0.850
Work-Life Balance	4.442	0.778	0.965
Professional Development	3.346	0.772	0.521

Construct reliability and validity

Table 3 summarizes the internal consistency and validity indicators for the study's key constructs. All three constructs—Professional Development, Work-Life Balance, and Turnover Intention—demonstrated strong reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.867 to 0.924, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. The composite reliability (rho_c) values also ranged from 0.904 to 0.934, confirming internal consistency.

In addition, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all constructs were above 0.50, indicating adequate convergent validity. Specifically, AVE values were 0.674 for Professional Development, 0.702 for Work-Life Balance, and 0.652 for Turnover Intention. These results confirm that the measurement model is both reliable and valid for further structural equation modeling.

Table 3. Construct Reliability Analysis

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho a)	Composite reliability (rho c)	AVE
Professional Development	0.905	0.960	0.925	0.674
Turnover Intention	0.867	0.872	0.904	0.652
Work-Life Balance	0.924	0.943	0.934	0.702

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion, which compares the square root of the AVE values (shown in bold) with the correlations between constructs. As shown in Table 4, each construct's square root of AVE is greater than its correlations with the other constructs, indicating acceptable discriminant validity.

Specifically, the square root of AVE values for Professional Development (0.821), Turnover Intention (0.808), and Work-Life Balance (0.838) exceed their respective inter-construct correlations. This confirms that the constructs are empirically distinct and measure different underlying concepts. These results support the adequacy of the measurement model and validate the use of these constructs in the structural analysis.

Table 4. Discriminant Validity- Fornell & Larcker Criterion

Construct	Professional Development	Turnover Intention	Work Life Balance
Professional Development	0.821		
Turnover Intention	-0.062	0.808	
Work Life Balance	0.206	0.050	0.838

Path Coefficient

The structural model results, shown in Table 5, indicate that both hypothesized relationships are statistically significant. Professional Development has a significant negative effect on Turnover Intention ($\beta = -0.487$, $t = 7.273$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that as perceived professional development increases, the likelihood of turnover intention decreases. This supports Hypothesis 1.

Additionally, Work-Life Balance has a significant positive effect on Turnover Intention ($\beta = 0.271$, $t = 2.597$, $p = 0.005$). While this relationship is statistically significant, the positive direction was unexpected, indicating that faculty who report higher work-life balance may still consider leaving their positions. This finding, although supporting Hypothesis 2 in terms of significance, may warrant further investigation to explore underlying contextual or institutional dynamics influencing this outcome.

Together, these results confirm that both professional development and work-life balance are significant predictors of turnover intention among young academic staff in Chinese private universities.

Table 5. Path Coefficients

	Original sample (O)	Sample means (M)	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values
Professional development -> Turnover Intention	-0.487	-0.483	0.067	7.273	0.000
Work life Balance -> Turnover Intention	0.271	0.243	0.104	2.597	0.005

7. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how professional development and work-life balance influence turnover intention among young academic staff in Chinese private universities. The results offer important contributions to our understanding of faculty retention in private higher education institutions, particularly within the unique cultural, organizational, and economic contexts of China.

The finding that professional development negatively influences turnover intention is consistent with existing literature (Coldwell, 2017; Xu, 2014; García Torres, 2019). Faculty who perceive greater access to professional development—such as research support, mentorship, training, and promotion pathways—are less likely to consider leaving their institutions. This supports the assumptions of Organizational Equilibrium Theory, which posits that employees remain in an organization when they believe the inducements (such as career advancement) match or exceed their contributions. For young academics, professional development not only enhances competence but also serves as a signal that their institution values and invests in their long-term potential.

This finding also reinforces Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, wherein professional development acts as a motivator—an intrinsic factor that leads to job satisfaction and engagement. In private university settings, where staff often face resource constraints and limited advancement prospects compared to public institutions, opportunities for professional growth can

serve as a critical retention mechanism. The implication is clear: institutions that wish to retain early-career faculty must prioritize structured and sustained development programs that align with individual academic goals.

Conversely, the result that work-life balance positively correlates with turnover intention is unexpected and invites deeper reflection. In contrast to a wealth of studies suggesting that good work-life balance reduces stress and enhances retention (Jo, 2008; Noor, 2011; Haar et al., 2014), this study found that faculty members who reported higher work-life balance also reported greater intentions to leave. This may appear counterintuitive, but it reflects a more complex interplay of motivations and institutional realities.

One possible explanation lies in the differentiation between satisfaction with personal time and fulfillment in professional roles. Faculty who achieve balance in their daily lives may nonetheless feel professionally unchallenged or underappreciated. In contexts where teaching-heavy workloads dominate, and research or promotion opportunities are scarce, faculty may use their balanced time to prepare for transitions—such as applying for positions in more prestigious or better-resourced institutions. Alternatively, those who lack work-life balance may feel too constrained or overworked to pursue external opportunities, even if dissatisfied.

This unexpected finding could also be influenced by the unique characteristics of private higher education in China, where institutional conditions vary widely, and career stability is less assured. The finding suggests that work-life balance alone is insufficient as a retention strategy if not accompanied by developmental incentives, recognition, and clear career trajectories. It aligns with the view that hygiene factors (such as work-life policies), while important, must be complemented by motivators (such as growth and achievement) to drive commitment and retention, as posited by Herzberg.

Taken together, the study's results emphasize the need for an integrated approach to faculty retention—one that simultaneously addresses both personal well-being and professional aspiration. Institutions that focus solely on one dimension risk misaligning with the broader expectations of young academic staff, who increasingly seek meaningful, stable, and growth-oriented careers.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that well-being and retention are not always positively correlated in predictable ways, especially in transitional educational systems. The findings challenge simplistic assumptions and highlight the importance of context-specific interpretations of motivational and behavioral outcomes.

8. IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the existing literature on academic turnover by providing empirical evidence from the underexplored context of Chinese private universities. It reaffirms the relevance of Organizational Equilibrium Theory and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory in explaining faculty retention behavior, particularly among early-career academics. By confirming that professional development serves as a significant motivator that reduces turnover intention, the study supports the theoretical proposition that employees evaluate their commitment based on the balance of perceived inducements and personal contributions.

At the same time, the unexpected positive relationship between work-life balance and turnover intention introduces a novel theoretical insight. It suggests that faculty perceptions of well-being may not always align with institutional loyalty, particularly when growth opportunities are limited. This finding prompts a re-examination of assumptions within motivational theory and highlights the need to explore moderating or mediating variables, such as job satisfaction, institutional prestige, or career ambition, which could explain this dynamic more comprehensively in future research.

Furthermore, the study advances theory by reinforcing the idea that motivational drivers in professional settings are context-dependent. In transitional educational systems like China's private higher education sector—where institutional legitimacy, governance, and career pathways are still evolving—faculty may weigh professional growth more heavily than work-life policies in making career decisions.

Practical Implications

The findings offer actionable insights for institutional leaders and policymakers aiming to improve faculty retention. First, it is clear that investment in professional development must be a central strategy. Institutions should establish structured programs that include mentorship, funded research opportunities, promotion transparency, conference support, and ongoing skills training. These initiatives not only enhance academic capabilities but also communicate long-term institutional commitment, which is crucial for retaining early-career faculty.

Second, while maintaining a work-life balance remains important, it should not be treated as a standalone retention tool. Institutions need to integrate well-being initiatives with career advancement pathways. Faculty members who enjoy work-life balance but see little opportunity for professional progression may still consider it exciting, as the findings indicate. Therefore, balance must be paired with engagement and purpose to achieve meaningful retention outcomes.

Finally, academic leaders should routinely assess faculty perceptions of their development and support systems through surveys or focus groups. This will help identify hidden dissatisfaction that may not be apparent through turnover statistics alone but could indicate latent attrition risk. For private universities competing with better-resourced public institutions, such feedback loops are essential for strategic human resource planning.

9. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to examine how professional development and work-life balance influence turnover intention among young academic staff in Chinese private universities. Drawing on Organizational Equilibrium Theory and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, the research provides empirical evidence that helps illuminate the factors driving faculty retention and departure in a rapidly evolving higher education landscape.

The findings revealed that professional development has a significant negative impact on turnover intention, affirming that young faculty are more likely to stay when they perceive meaningful opportunities for growth, skill enhancement, and career advancement. This aligns with existing research and supports the idea that development-oriented environments foster loyalty and institutional commitment. Conversely, the study uncovered a surprising positive relationship between work-life balance and turnover intention. While work-life balance is traditionally seen as a retention factor, the results suggest that when it exists in isolation—without parallel support for professional growth—it may not be sufficient to retain early-career faculty. Instead, individuals who achieve balance may still pursue better professional prospects elsewhere if they perceive stagnation in their current roles.

These findings underscore the importance of a holistic approach to faculty retention that addresses both personal well-being and professional aspirations. Institutions must recognize that improving work-life balance alone is not a substitute for developmental support, especially in private university settings where structural and reputational disadvantages may already pose challenges in competing for talent.

Based on these conclusions, several recommendations are proposed. First, university administrators should design and implement structured professional development programs that are accessible, relevant, and aligned with faculty career goals. These programs might include mentorship schemes, internal research grants, teaching workshops, and transparent promotion pathways. Second, work-life balance policies should be integrated with long-term career planning. Providing flexible working conditions, wellness programs, and manageable workloads must go hand-in-hand with opportunities for advancement and academic recognition. Third, institutions should establish regular mechanisms to assess faculty needs and satisfaction, such as annual surveys or development reviews, to proactively identify factors contributing to dissatisfaction or attrition risk. Finally, future research should explore potential mediators or moderators—such as job satisfaction, institutional commitment, or career motivation—that may explain the nuanced relationship between work-life balance and turnover intention.

In sum, retaining young academic staff in private universities requires more than policy reforms or one-size-fits-all strategies. It calls for a thoughtful, evidence-based approach that views faculty not just as employees but as long-term partners in the institution's growth and success. By aligning individual aspirations with institutional support, private universities in China can take meaningful steps toward building a stable, motivated, and high-performing academic workforce.

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