Article

Influence of tenure policies on job satisfaction, motivations, and experiences of language teachers in Macau's higher education

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Abstract: Despite being controversial, teacher tenure policies are understudied, particularly in higher education contexts outside the Western world. Using semi-structured interviews with 15 university faculty members, this study explored how tenure systems influence the teaching practices, motivations, and job satisfaction of language teachers in Macau's universities. It was revealed that Macau implemented competitive, "up or out" tenure policies that were based on research output. Faculty were anxious as vague expectations heightened research priorities over teaching quality and student support. Requirements also strained collegial relationships as faculty goals focused on promotion. Veteran professors demonstrated resilience, maintaining intrinsic motivation despite policies. They advocated improving policies by promoting transparency, balancing workloads, accommodating disciplines, and communicating effectively. Using empirical data, this study identifies key policy implications for supporting teacher motivation while balancing inequality constraints. It provides empirical insight into optimizing tenure for teacher engagement and fulfillment.

Keywords: tenure system; Macau' higher education; job satisfaction; language teachers; unequal world

1. Introduction

Intangibles related to teacher tenure are pivotal to the discourse on educational reform, particularly when it comes to job satisfaction among educators. Historically, tenure has been conceived as a two-fold mechanism. As a protective bastion for educators, it ensures that those with proven instructional competence are not subject to arbitrary dismissals (Coleman et al., 2006; Goldhaber and Walch, 2016; Jacobs, 2016; Kahlenberg, 2016). This protective element plays an important role in enhancing teacher recruitment and retention efforts, providing a form of job security that is posited as a counterbalance to the relatively low remuneration associated with teaching. Consequently, monopolistic tendencies in the employment market for teachers are purportedly mitigated. In contrast, the tenure system has been critically analyzed, with some researchers arguing that tenure evaluation protocols are often inadequate, failing to adequately assess a teacher's pedagogical competence (Nir and Ifanti, 2016). Further, tenure may deter the motivation of teachers toward pedagogical excellence and make it more difficult to remove subpar educators from the system (Barrett et al., 2021; Loeb et al., 2015).

Due to reforms to tenure policies, educators have experienced diminished job security, narrowing a more prominent public discussion regarding the necessity of reimagining tenure (Kahlenberg, 2016). Several factors contribute to the consequences of these policy shifts, including the influence on teacher turnover rates, which can be

both alleviated as well as exacerbated, thereby affecting student outcomes (Feng and Sass, 2017). It is argued by advocates of tenure reform that such changes can encourage academic faculty to pursue scholarly research and improve their pedagogical skills. However, such reforms may also result in higher rates of career-related anxiety and affective disorders among the teaching cohort (Ren and Zhou, 2023).

The role of the individual teacher in contributing to student success has been empirically validated, with research indicating a significant correlation between teacher quality and student performance on standardized assessments, along with more sustained educational trajectories (Aaronson et al., 2007; Chetty et al., 2014; Ewange, 2018; Goldhaber and Hansen, 2012). Considering this correlation, teacher layoff processes and consequences are important policy issues. Even though these issues are critical, there is a dearth of scholarly research on how teacher staffing policies have evolved, especially within the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy (Chudgar et al., 2014).

In recognition of the gaps within the existing literature, this paper attempts to examine the tenure system as it operates within Macau's higher education institutions, with an emphasis on its ramifications for the job satisfaction of language teachers. This study was developed due to the lack of research specifically addressing the impact of tenure reform on the professional lives of them. Using a methodological approach that involves collecting data through semi-structured interviews, followed by qualitative analysis to interpret the data, this study seeks to provide new insights into the impact of tenure on teachers. To strengthen pedagogical practices, boost teacher morale, and improve the educational experience of EFL learners, this inquiry aims to elucidate strategies.

2. Literature review

As a matter of policy and reform, teacher tenure has long generated debate and discussion. Teachers are protected by tenure from unfair termination and create stability within their profession (Meese, 2015). Tenure provides various employment benefits for teachers, including due process rights in dismissal cases. Critics, however, contend tenure reduces teacher accountability and makes it exceedingly difficult to remove ineffective teachers (Goldhaber and Theobald, 2021, 2022). This section provides an overview of the current research condition on teacher tenure systems through the review of recent studies.

2.1. Teacher tenure impacts

It has been widely observed that teacher tenure systems have an impact on teacher workforce dynamics, student achievement outcomes, and school policies and practices, as outlined in a significant body of literature. Several studies examine how tenure affects key teacher workforce factors such as retention, recruitment, labor supply, and dismissal rates. According to several studies, tenure provides meaningful retention incentives for particular teacher demographics. Barrett et al. (2021) found that eliminating tenure increased teacher attrition rates in North Carolina, with the largest spikes occurring among retirement-eligible teachers and teachers with lower

performance ratings. According to the authors, weaker teachers who are nearing retirement value job protection the most. Similarly, the review of the literature (Podolsky et al., 2019) found that weakening tenure has little impact on the dynamics of the broader teacher labor market.

However, Han (2020) indicates that tenure policies may discourage the retention of truly ineffective teachers. The author (Cooper, 2015) analyzed California's tenure laws and determined they created a significant barrier to dismissing chronically underperforming teachers, contributing to a lack of workforce quality. As he evaluates potential copycat lawsuits in other states, the author argues that well-designed tenure systems must optimize student outcomes through the selective dismissal of teachers (Cooper, 2015). The results of a study on Tennessee (Rodriguez, 2020) indicate that most administrators believed recent tenure reforms had improved dismissal processes, but that few changed staffing practices afterwards, indicating the reforms met procedural objectives but had little or no impact on workforce quality.

It is generally believed that tenure has a mixed impact on the workforce. Studies concur that tenure protections provide meaningful retention incentives for teachers, particularly those with weaker performance or more experience (Barrett et al., 2021; Grissom and Bartanen, 2018). Excessive restrictions may, however, prevent removing the lowest-performing teachers, implying the need to balance appropriate protections with flexibility (Goldhaber and Theobald, 2022). It is necessary to conduct more research to quantify such trade-offs and optimize systems to ensure the quality of teachers. Studies find tenure provides meaningful retention incentives, particularly for demographics like senior teachers and poor performers (Barrett et al., 2021) who benefit most from protections (Goldhaber and Theobald, 2022). However, overly rigid policies are likely to deter the removal of chronically ineffective teachers, thereby raising concerns regarding workforce quality. The limited empirical research makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about indirect effects on student achievement. In contrast, studies suggest that tenure has a strong influence on school policies depending on how well reforms are implemented and communicated to stakeholders (Dinerstein and Opper, 2022).

As a result of these studies, a nuanced picture of teacher tenure is provided. The purpose of tenure is to provide teachers with reasonable employment security without evading accountability (Brown and Kurland, 1990). However, finding the right policy balance has been difficult. It is imperative to disentangle specific tenure provisions that are beneficial as opposed to detrimental to attract and retain an excellent, dedicated teaching workforce. Further research should identify implementation and communication strategies that optimize tenure's role in fostering constructive school cultures by conducting large-scale empirical studies.

2.2. Student achievement effects

Researchers have also examined the effects of teacher tenure on student achievement outcomes. Some rigorous studies have found that tenure protections have limited or no impact on student performance. Eliminating tenure in North Carolina did not improve student performance (Barrett et al., 2021). It is concluded that there is insufficient empirical evidence to support claims that recent tenure reforms have

increased student achievement systematically (Podolsky et al., 2019). Tenure statutes, however, are alleged to indirectly negatively affect student achievement by preventing the dismissal of chronically ineffective teachers (Lester, 2013). According to the analysis of the Vergara v. California case (Cooper, 2015), California's tenure laws unconstitutionally limit the termination of weak teachers, thereby affecting educational equality. Even though the case does not demonstrate a causal connection between tenure and achievement, it illustrates the concern that ironclad protections may shield poor-performing teachers.

Generally, empirical research has not established a definite relationship between tenure and student achievement. However, some reform advocates maintain that overly rigid tenure policies encourage continued ineffective teaching, theoretically disadvantaging students over time. Further research incorporating longitudinal student achievement data across diverse contexts could provide more definitive insights on potential indirect and cumulative effects (Duerden and Witt, 2010). There is also a need for qualitative studies to better understand how administrators and teachers perceive the relationship between tenure and achievement.

2.3. School practice and policy effects

There are a few studies that examine the impact of teacher tenure on school policies, practices, operations, and cultures in addition to the workforce and achievement impacts. School leaders found that the changes improved dismissal processes, but did not significantly change how teachers are hired, evaluated, or provided professional development (Rodriguez, 2020). As a result, teachers largely agreed the reforms created accountability on paper but that messaging gaps and conflicting policies diluted the impact in practice. This illustrates that thoughtful implementation and communication strategies are more important than policy changes alone. Meanwhile, tenure's role can be conceptualized as a proactive approach to supporting teaching excellence throughout an educator's career (Katsigianni and Ifanti, 2016). As a result of the author's proposal, integrated systems were suggested that identified state and district responsibilities, required professional growth, and provided structured mentoring and professional development opportunities for tenured teachers (Katsigianni and Ifanti, 2016). In such proposals, tenure will be leveraged as a means of cultivating quality and leadership in post-tenure teaching (Baker et al., 2023).

The relationship between tenure and staffing policies, salary structures, teacher leadership pathways, and organizational climate factors including trust, morale, and collaboration may be further illuminated by additional research utilizing policy analysis, surveys, and qualitative methods. It has been suggested by exploratory studies (Goldhaber and Theobald, 2021, 2022) that tenure's practical effects in schools are heavily influenced by reform implementation, messaging, and system design choices.

2.4. Teacher tenure reform issues

It is interesting to note that a significant portion of the tenure literature focuses on evaluating tenure reforms and analyzing stakeholder responses. Common themes

include tracing policy changes over time, measuring teacher and administrator perceptions, and identifying recurring reform challenges. Several studies chronicle recent waves of teacher tenure reform across different state and district contexts. Among the major shifts in Lithuania's tenure policy (Židonis and Sutkuvienė, 2019) were the transition from a highly centralized system of tenure to a decentralized one, as well as other sweeping market-based education reforms. Over time, these seismic policy shifts impacted teacher morale, perceptions, and resistance, according to the study. In the United States, an article (McNeal, 2012) advocates reforming tenure by establishing uniform teacher evaluation systems through new federal legislation and regulations. Consequently, the author argues that teacher employment rights and accountability would be appropriately balanced (McNeal, 2012). This article traces the evolution of teacher tenure laws in America and calls for increased federal involvement in the future. These studies illustrate how teacher tenure policies have evolved as a result of political pressures, social changes, and evolving educational priorities (Kosnik et al., 2020; Perry and Mee, 2022). Tracing policy shifts over time can illuminate change dynamics. Research also finds reform implementation is often rushed with inadequate stakeholder engagement, fueling teacher resistance (Židonis and Sutkuvienė, 2019). Teachers frequently rely on informal peer networks to make sense of complex tenure changes, underscoring the need for sustained communication and support (Drake et al., 2019). Reforms can be tracked longitudinally within specific jurisdictions to reveal the relationship between approaches to policy change and subsequent outcomes of tenure systems. Further comparative research could provide insight into patterns across tenure reform efforts nationally and internationally.

A subset of articles examines how school administrators and teachers perceive and respond to teacher tenure reforms, for example, to explore sense making processes among teachers and leaders experiencing recent tenure reforms (Rodriguez, 2020). Among administrators, outdated information was heavily relied upon, whereas teachers relied upon peer networks to gain an understanding of reforms. This highlights the crucial importance of active, sustained internal communication when making major policy changes. In addition, an increase in teacher resistance to reform due to limited commitment and expedited implementation times (Flores, 2019; Židonis and Sutkuvienė, 2019). As a result of these studies, buy-in must be actively developed and transparent communication be provided when reforming complex institutions like teacher tenure (Goldhaber and Theobald, 2022). Several unifying themes in tenure reform response patterns across diverse demographic groups worldwide may be identified through additional research using surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Incorporating teacher and administrator perspectives highlights key considerations for crafting viable policies that skillfully balance competing interests (Day et al., 2019). Due to the limited contexts studied to date, further research will be necessary to generalize findings.

In several articles, common recurring obstacles are identified when reforming tenure systems. Corporate-style performance metrics are not appropriate for evaluating university teaching faculty, as tenure decisions require holistic and nuanced evaluations (Mu and Hatch, 2020). Another analysis of China's tenure track system (Wang, 2021) revealed it narrowly overemphasizes faculty research output, resulting in rifts between administrators and professors who value teaching and service. As a

result of these studies, we can see the inherent challenges inherent in establishing objective, multifaceted tenure evaluation criteria that encompass educators' complex work. Furthermore, another article on Chinese tenure track systems (Si, 2022) concluded that excessive workloads and uncertainty about meeting tenure expectations strain junior faculty. The resulting competitive pressure fuels organizational dysfunction. Comparative analysis could shed light on whether these issues generalize across very different cultural and institutional contexts. As a result, research indicates that tenure's legal and organizational complexity poses predictable reform challenges.

2.5. Global perspectives on teacher tenure

It is becoming increasingly common to contrast policies and practices across different international educational systems as a subset of tenure studies emerges. The research (Cooper, 2015) compared K-12 school tenure with university tenure, revealing key differences in development, implementation, and reform. States should develop tenure policy innovations that allow for local flexibility within the overarching state standards that require professional growth. Professors in China believe that in the quest to build elite "world-class" universities, research takes precedence over teaching and service, thus causing a disconnect between faculty and administration (Kim et al., 2017). Several studies also analyze tenure policy alternatives and reforms. The authors of a Chinese study (Yang et al., 2023) found that tenure-track contracts increased faculty productivity but decreased research quality, which led them to propose targeted improvements. In addition, another related article (Xue, 2021) assessed whether competitive education systems result in excessive workloads in students, as well as recent reforms aimed at reducing student academic burdens. Studies reveal significant cross-national differences in how tenure is conceptualized, implemented, and governed. This includes alternative models like renewable fixed-term contracts (Marotta, 2019). Comparative work also finds common tensions around balancing educator protections with demands for oversight and flexibility. Global perspectives can uncover best practices for adapting tenure to diverse cultural and institutional settings (Leal Filho et al., 2022; Raithel et al., 2021). Further cross-cultural empirical research is needed to elucidate patterns in tenure systems, reforms, and outcomes.

Those studies illuminate the similarities and differences between tenure conceptualizations, implementations, and reforms across the globe. Further cross-national research can uncover best practices for balancing educator protections with flexibility and accountability demands. Identifying alternative approaches by studying tenure systems in diverse cultural contexts is beneficial.

2.6. Navigating unequal terrains

As a consequence of unequal global contexts, language teacher motivation is influenced by a complex interplay of individual, systemic, and social factors (Kubanyiova, 2020; Rahmati and Sadeghi, 2021). Motivation is influenced by teachers' self-efficacy, beliefs, and ability to adapt to online teaching environments (Gao and Zhang, 2020; Song and Kim, 2016; Yuan and Zhang, 2017). For example, Gao and

Zhang (2020) demonstrated how EFL teachers in China developed information and communication technology (ICT) skills by understanding student needs and integrating classroom methods into online delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on beliefs about effective teaching methods and exercising professional agency, Song and Kim (2016) found that Korean teachers' motivations changed over time.

The workplace policies and conditions have a significant impact on teacher motivation (Jiang et al., 2016; Li and Zhang 2021). Researchers examined how research productivity policies affected Chinese EFL university teachers in 2022, while Rahmati and Sadeghi (2021) examined the contradictions that demotivated Iranian language teachers. Sadeghi and Ashegh Navaie (2021) found, however, that most Iranian teachers supported equity by using online professional development. Inequality and global injustice play a crucial role in shaping the motivation of language teachers at the societal level (Kubanyiova, 2020; Sadeghi and Pourbahram, 2023). Kubanyiova (2020) argued that teachers should be trained to respond ethically to unequal contexts as "responsive meaning makers" who are sensitive to social injustices. According to Sadeghi and Pourbahram's (2023) review, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of teachers for the promotion of equity in online education.

In addition, studies have shown that experienced teachers are better at channeling demotivating societal factors (Sato et al., 2022). As a result of intrinsic motivation, Chilean EFL teachers buffered pandemic demands as motivational forces, according to Sato et al. (2022). It is consistent with Song and Kim's (2016) findings that veteran Korean teachers' motivations varied depending on their capacity for exerting professional agency. The motivation of language teachers is influenced by a complex interaction between individual mindsets, workplace policies, and societal inequalities (Kubanyiova and Crookes, 2016; Sadeghi and Pourbahram, 2023). To promote motivation within unequal global contexts, research emphasizes teacher agency as well as collaboration, support, and awareness of injustice.

2.7. Teacher tenure in non-western contexts: The case of Macau

While much of the literature on teacher tenure focuses on Western contexts (Bellibaş and Gümüş, 2019; Xu and Sukjairungwattana, 2022), there is a notable gap in studies examining these systems in non-Western contexts. Different from the Mainland China-based studies (Kim et al., 2017; Si, 2022; Wang, 2021; Xue, 2021; Yang et al., 2023), the case study of Macau provides an excellent opportunity to explore the function of tenure systems within various cultural and educational frameworks. The research on Macau's educational system has yet to fully address the implications of its tenure policies on teacher practices and motivations (Madikizela-Madiya, 2022). It is the objective of this review to propose research questions that can guide the exploration of these implications, such as the impact of tenure on professional development, teaching methodologies, and the overall educational environment in Macau. In light of the complexities discussed, further research is recommended to understand the tenure system in Macau, its impact on teacher practices, as well as professional choices within it. Our understanding of the global

diversity of tenure policies and their effects on education would be enhanced by such inquiries, which would not only fill a significant void in the existing literature.

2.8. Research questions

Having reviewed an extensive body of literature, it is evident that teacher tenure systems are associated with a wide range of positive as well as negative outcomes (Chetty et al., 2014; Duerden and Witt, 2010; Leal Filho et al., 2022; Wang, 2021). A contentious topic, tenure remains so from its inception as a safeguard against arbitrary dismissal for educational professionals to contemporary debates surrounding its role in perceived educational stagnation and inequality. The contrast between the protection of teachers' rights and the pursuit of educational excellence is particularly pronounced. Further, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding tenure systems in non-Western contexts, such as Macau. There is a significant gap in the understanding of the global dynamics of teacher tenure systems and the implications for education as a whole, which is not trivial.

Research Question 1: How is teacher tenure defined within Macau's educational system, and what specific policies and regulations govern its implementation and governance?

An important aspect of this question is that it attempts to establish a clear definition of tenure in Macau in order to allow for a precise comparison with other systems and ensure that subsequent findings are contextualized appropriately.

Research Question 2: In what ways does the tenure system impact the teaching practices, classroom engagement, and motivational drives of educators within the higher education sector in Macau?

A detailed examination of this question will provide insight into the extent to which tenure influences pedagogical choices, teacher innovation, and motivation. It is essential to understand whether tenure facilitates educational growth or promotes complacency among educators.

Research Question 3: What professional decisions are made by educators within the tenure system in Macau, and how do tenure policies influence these decisions?

As part of this question, educators will be asked to examine their decision-making process and determine the role tenure plays in their decisions. The course is intended to examine the relationship between policy and practice as well as the influence tenure may have on professional pathways within the Macau educational landscape.

3. Method

3.1. Context and participants

In this qualitative study, 15 language-related academic staff from Macau's universities were interviewed using semi-structured interviews to investigate their tenure and job satisfaction (**Table 1**). The participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling methods. Recruitment was aimed at English teachers with a variety of backgrounds, including age, gender, teaching experience, and tenure status. Through this purposeful diversity, diverse perspectives could be captured. The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions addressing the

following topics: (1) experiences with Macau's tenure policies and processes; (2) perceived impacts of tenure on teaching motivations, identity, and practices; (3) influences of tenure on professional decisions and career paths; and (4) factors affecting job satisfaction and workplace anxiety. To obtain additional details, follow-up probes were used as necessary.

With participant consent, interviews were conducted in person and audio recordings were made. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 min and occurred in a quiet location that was convenient to the participants. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and identifying information was removed before analysis. Participants had the opportunity to review and modify transcripts to ensure accuracy.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants.

Participant	Gender	Affiliation	Position	Years of Teaching
Participant 1	Male	University A	Assistant Professor	10
Participant 2	Male	University A	Lecturer	4
Participant 3	Male	University A	Lecturer	4
Participant 4	Female	University A	Lecturer	2
Participant 5	Male	University B	Lecturer	11
Participant 6	Male	University A	Assistant Professor	3
Participant 7	Male	University A	Assistant Professor	10
Participant 8	Female	University C	Lecturer	2
Participant 9	Female	University B	Lecturer	18
Participant 10	Male	University B	Assistant Professor	18
Participant 11	Female	University C	Lecturer	19
Participant 12	Female	University D	Associate Professor	21
Participant 13	Female	University D	Associate Professor	26
Participant 14	Male	University E	Lecturer	9
Participant 15	Male	University A	Assistant Professor	8

3.2. Data collection and analysis

These language teachers participated in semi-structured interviews between May and August 2023. On average, participants had 11 years of teaching experience (range 2 to 26). Six female and nine male participants were included in the sample. Although there are only two Associate Professors in the sample, it is almost impossible to tell how many of them will be tenured, since the Macau tenure system is highly complex. There are five different Macau universities represented in the sample, ensuring a diversity of tenure statuses.

As part of reflexive thematic analysis, transcripts were analyzed inductively while reflecting on the researcher's active role in interpreting meanings and themes by coding data inductively. The initial open coding identified salient ideas within each transcript. Similar codes were then grouped into conceptual themes related to the research questions. Themes were refined through repeated cycles of reading transcripts, discussing codes/themes among researchers, creating thematic maps, and reviewing interpretations against the data. The final themes represent patterned meanings across

the dataset regarding the experiences and implications of Macau's tenure policies on academics.

4. Results

The diversity of tenure status, experience, and institutions provided rich insights into the influence of tenure policies on teaching practices, motivations, and job satisfaction in the local setting.

4.1. Defining and implementing tenure policies

The Macau participants overwhelmingly referenced "up or out" tenure systems when defining teacher tenure policies. Participant 15 describes it as follows: "Up or out is real, but tenure for life is a myth. We have up or out policies, but after promotion, you can still get dismissed."

Participants indicated that these systems require faculty members to meet certain promotion standards within a specified timeframe or face termination. The requirements were vague, varied from institution to institution, and frequently changed. Another professor noted that their university had no clear publication requirements, but rumors of the need for 12 articles in six years (Participant 7). It was reported that one participant had four policy revisions in five years, causing uncertainty: "They have changed the requirements again and again." (Participant 13).

Several participants contrasted Macau's "up or out" tenure practices with more protective systems abroad, arguing that Macau does not offer tenure-for-life positions that offer guaranteed job security after promotions (Participants 1, 15). Despite the drawbacks, some participants accepted the policies as necessary motivators. As Participant 14 explained: "The tenure track system is an inevitable game rule. Competition is required for development."

Most participants described tenure policies being implemented through renewable 2-year contracts, regular performance reviews, and promotion applications. Department leaders often attended meetings during reviews to discuss progress and deficiencies. Many participants noted that the review criteria were opaque and inconsistent.

4.2. Effects on teaching practices and engagement

In response to the question about tenure's effect on teaching, participants stated that research requirements reduced instructional planning time and student support. Due to heavy workloads, it is difficult to balance teaching and research, with research taking priority in practice (Participants 3, 7, 10). Participant 10 stated: "Research diverts time from innovative teaching activities." Several participants noted that requiring high teaching loads while mandating research output led to unrealistic expectations (Participants 6, 7).

Several participants reported focusing more on research by minimizing innovative teaching activities and office hours. In the opinion of Participant 8, "I would devote less time to students and more time to research for tenure." However, some believed that integrating research and teaching was beneficial to both students and faculty. Tenure expectations decreased participants' motivation and engagement

in teaching. Most participants cited focusing on promotion at the expense of teaching students (Participants 2, 15). As Participant 2 stated: "Thoughts would be dominated by how to meet the tenure requirements." Others became discouraged upon learning tenure policies undervalued teaching (Participants 10, 12). According to a few participants (Participants 9 and 10), teaching has intrinsic rewards greater than extrinsic incentives.

4.3. Influences on professional decisions and peer relationships

Most participants indicated that tenure policies strongly influenced their professional decisions and identities as academics. Participants 2 and 15 described tenure requirements dominating their goals, priorities, use of time, and sense of purpose for years. According to Participant 15, "My only goal in the past few years has been promotion. I cannot handle anything else." Some participants reported declining leadership or service roles in favor of conducting research.

Despite tenure pressures, a few participants valued social contributions and refused to neglect teaching (Participants 8, 10). Generally, job satisfaction was low when it came to pay, administration, and work-life balance. Several faculties, however, expressed satisfaction with their achievements as teachers, and researchers, and perceived growth (Participants 9, 15). Participant 15 explained: "I am satisfied with my hard work and results rather than the system." There was a sense of confidence among participants 1, 4, and 6 that persistence would enable them to achieve tenure expectations. Participants 13 and 15 expressed concerns regarding shifting promotion criteria and contract instability even after tenure. Participant 13 stated, "You cannot relax after your promotion. You may be terminated at the renewal of your contract."

Some participants perceived tenure to impact collegial relationships in a non-competitive and collaborative manner, as colleagues could co-author papers (Participants 2, 12). Some participants, however, felt peers competed for limited funding, titles, and promotion positions (Participants 3, 6, 14). As Participant 6 stated: "All of us want grants, so we are competing for resources." There have been several reports of faculty jealousy and isolation caused by comparison mindsets (Participants 8-14). According to Participant 14, "I rarely talk to colleagues now to avoid stress." Others attributed strained relationships to differences in tenure security and instability rather than competition. Participant 15 explained that "it is based on how people perceive the system, not the system itself."

4.4. Anxiety, pressure, and coping strategies

A majority of participants expressed moderate to high anxiety about meeting tenure expectations. Core concerns included unclear promotion criteria, shifting standards, contract instability, and comparisons with peers. Faculty members who were younger and newer experienced higher levels of anxiety and pressure (Participants 3, 13). Many participants described overwhelming, relentless stress. According to Participant 15, "I am used to this state now. It is more than anxiety."

However, a few veteran professors had lowered anxiety by accepting, confidence in their records, or focusing on personal growth rather than external benchmarks (Participants 9, 12). The participant stated that initially, he was anxious, but over time

he calmly accepted his decisions. As a means of coping with tenure pressures, participants reported that they focused on controllable day-to-day progress (Participants 6, 15) and lowered unhealthy expectations about work-life balance (Participants 10, 13). Most reported outlets like exercise, leisure activities, and peer support reduced anxiety. However, one admitted to isolation and withdrawal as disengagement coping mechanisms (Participant 14). Participants 6 and 13 requested more humane and transparent policies that provide support for work-life balance and mental health.

4.5. Gender, age, and discipline effects

Most participants did not perceive any significant differences in tenure experiences based on gender or discipline when queried. However, they believed tenure expectations and pressures disproportionately affected junior faculty members. "Up or out" policies are alleged to exploit untenured professors by threatening contract termination (Participants 12, 13). Some claim that tenure systems are designed to extract maximum productivity from young academics before burnout occurs, at which point they can be replaced (Participant 13). Participants 8 and 13 proposed different performance metrics for different disciplines and career stages. Participant 8 suggested that standards should take into account the differences in research timelines and norms between disciplines.

Several suggestions were made by participants for improving tenure policies. Among the most frequently suggested changes were clearly defining tenure criteria and standards (Participants 7, 15), balancing research goals with teaching quality and social contributions (Participants 6, 8), allowing flexibility in performance timelines based on other duties (Participants 7, 13), and separating pure teaching and research positions (Participants 12, 13). The participants advocated enhancing transparency, communication, and faculty voice in policy reforms (Participants 1, 7). In addition, some participants advocated nuanced evaluation systems that were based on individual contexts rather than rigid quantitative measures (Participants 6, 8). Participants (15) recognized that altering deeply entrenched institutional norms around tenure is a highly complex and challenging process.

4.6. Clustering keywords
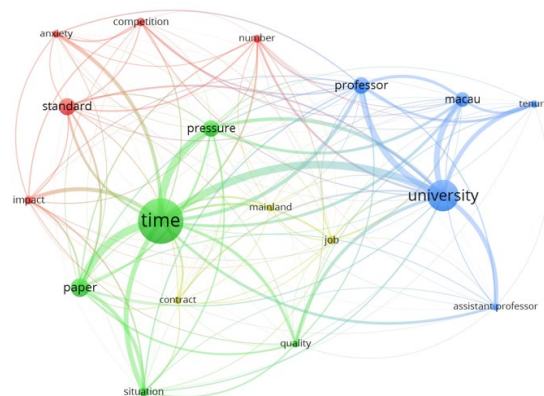
Figure 1. Clustering keywords related to English teachers' concerns of tenure track in Macau.

Figure 1 shows the three clusters of keywords generated by VOSviewer 1.6.20 according to the results from all the participants.

Several participants described the pressures and constant demands to publish papers for tenure (Participants 2, 15). The green cluster of keywords provides insight into how tenure policies affect faculty experiences and research production. Many participants expressed concern that these pressures lowered research quality, as academics rushed to publish in subpar journals to meet numerical requirements (Participants 8, 15). Many individuals believe rigid quantitative paper requirements encourage the "watering down" of research, which is contrary to the spirit of thoughtful scholarship (Participants 8, 13). However, some participants explained that high-quality research requires sufficient time, a factor rigid tenure timelines frequently fail to take into account (Participants 12, 13). According to some faculty members (Participants 7, 13), fixed research timelines are unrealistic due to family obligations, student demands, and administrative duties. Additionally, participants (Participants 12, 14) pointed out that research quality is determined by aptitude, interest, and resources, not just time. The green cluster demonstrates how tenure policies that emphasize rushed paper production over careful scholarship lead to time pressures that negatively affect meaningful research as a result. Participants advocate reassessing rigid requirements to allow flexible timelines that accommodate varied situations and disciplines. They advocate emphasizing thoughtful, impactful research quality over meeting numeric paper targets.

Participants' perspectives regarding tenure standards, associated pressures, and resulting effects are illustrated in the red cluster. Similar to the green one, vague or shifting standards generated high levels of anxiety regarding meeting research and promotion criteria (Participants 7 and 15). As professors uncertainly compared themselves against peers (Participants 8, 14), inconsistent standards also created unconstructive competition. The participants also stated that explicit tenure standards provided direction, but still elevated stress, as professors struggled to exceed minimums (Participant 15). Additionally, rigid numerical standards created pressure for papers to be published quickly, sometimes regardless of quality or interest (Participants 8, 10). The participants viewed both unclear and hyper-focused standards as generating anxiety, unhealthy competition, and undesirable research behaviors. Many participants recommended balancing standards with support systems in order to reduce pressure and promote quality research that is grounded in individual strengths (Participants 6, 12). As a result of this cluster, tenure standards are shown to profoundly affect motivations, collegiality, and research impact, highlighting the need to align standards, numbers, and competitions with educational principles.

The blue cluster reveals contextual insights into Macau's tenure policies and practices. Participants noted that tenure systems varied across Macau's universities, both public and private (Participants 1, 14). Furthermore, they noted that cultural differences influenced tenure locally, contrasting Macau's "up or out" model with perceived tenure protections abroad. The participants also noted that tenure incentives vary based on the stage of one's career. In contrast, tenured professors may become disconnected from students as they focus exclusively on research (Participant 10). Despite the shortage of professors in Macau's small university sector (Participants 6, 14), many participants noted ambitious research goals and unclear tenure pathways for

assistant professors. Consequently, this cluster shows that Macau's unique tenure practices differ from those of other regions and countries due to its blended cultural environment. For Macau's universities and educational development, tailored solutions are required to optimize tenure due to local variations, early career pressures, and complex professor needs.

5. Discussion

This qualitative study elicited rich, subjective perspectives on how tenure systems shape teaching practices, motivations, collegial relationships, and job satisfaction for Macau's university faculty. Results reveal tenure strongly focuses academics on research productivity for promotion but at the perceived cost of teaching time, pedagogical investment, work-life balance, and mental health. Strained social relations and ingrained institutional dynamics surrounding tenure exacerbate these issues. Findings suggest a critical need for transparency, work-life balance, customized evaluation metrics, and renewed valuing of educators as humans first and researchers second in reforming Macau's university tenure policies. Results have been analyzed thematically in order to provide insights that are aligned with the three research questions:

5.1. Research question 1: Defining and implementing tenure in Macau

The findings revealed that Macau predominantly implements "up or out" tenure policies, requiring professors to meet research and promotion benchmarks within strict timeframes or face termination of contracts (Participants 1, 15). In general, Macau's tenure systems lack permanent protections comparable to "tenure for life" models in Western contexts, according to the literature (Madikizela-Madiya, 2022). There is a competitive "publish or perish" culture described by participants that echoes studies of Chinese university tenure systems that emphasize faculty research output (Kim et al., 2017; Si, 2022; Wang, 2021).

In contrast, participants (Participants 7–13) noted ambiguity and frequent policy changes, which led to uncertainty regarding tenure expectations. The unstable policy environment contrasts with Lithuania's shift from centralized tenure governance to decentralized tenure governance. Unlike Lithuania's comprehensive reforms, Macau's vague, shifting standards impede intentional professional planning and fuel anxiety.

The finding that tenure implementation centers on renewable contracts, reviews, and promotion applications (Participants 3, 6) corresponds with Chinese universities' extensive use of short-term contracts before tenure (Kim et al., 2017). In contrast to the opaque, inconsistent tenure criteria described locally (Participants 1, 14), Mainland Chinese emphasizes objective metrics, such as publications (Si, 2022). Macau's system is characterized by an ambiguity of expectations. As a result, Macau's hybrid cultural context shapes unique tenure policies because standards are vague and frequently changed, creating uncertainty compared to more structured mainland systems.

5.2. Tenure impacts on teaching practices and motivation

The results demonstrated that tenure requirements reduced time for instructional planning and student support as faculty prioritized research (Participants 3, 10). This aligns with studies showing that Chinese tenure systems overemphasize research productivity, compromising teaching quality (Wang, 2021). In contrast to arguments that tenure can cultivate post-tenure excellence (Baker et al., 2023), some participants valued integrating research and teaching (Participant 8).

In accordance with evidence that Chinese faculty feel disconnected from students while pursuing tenure (Wang, 2021), the finding that tenure expectations decrease teaching motivations (Participants 9, 10) is consistent. As shown by studies on veteran teachers exercising professional agency (Song and Kim, 2016), some Macau participants experienced intrinsic rewards in teaching despite extrinsic incentives (Participants 9, 10). The results also corroborated concerns that unrealistic tenure requirements force faculty to minimize teaching contributions. In spite of this, some participants retained teaching motivations, consistent with the resilience of experienced educators (Sato et al., 2022; Song and Kim, 2016). This demonstrates that intrinsic drive is capable of withstanding demotivating policies. The literature substantiates the finding that research-focused tenure systems undermine teaching motivations in China.

5.3. Tenure policies and professional decisions

Observations that tenure requirements dominate participants' goals and priorities (Participants 2, 15) support research showing that tenure expectations lead to excessive workloads for Chinese faculty (Si, 2022). Nevertheless, a few participants valued social contributions despite tenure pressures (Participants 8, 10), demonstrating professional agency similar to veteran teachers (Song and Kim, 2016).

Competition strained collegial relationships (Participants 3, 14) is consistent with studies of rifts resulting from individualistic Chinese tenure policies that isolated faculty (Si, 2021). The Macau participants, however, described collaboration as co-authoring (Participants 2, 12), in contrast to an exclusively competitive environment.

While tenure influenced professional decisions, a minority of faculty retained alternate priorities, aligning with teachers who buck demotivating policies through intrinsic values (Kubanyiova, 2020; Song and Kim, 2016). Although there was some competition locally, pockets of cooperation existed, distinguishing Macau from more rigidly individualistic tenure systems. The literature confirms that Chinese tenure systems strain workloads and relationships through competition. Despite pressures, some faculty members in Macau maintained motivation and collegiality, similar to teachers worldwide who resist control by adhering to their values (Kubanyiova, 2020; Song and Kim, 2016).

5.4. Limitations and future research directions

This study illuminates how restrictive tenure policies in Macau's higher education system undermine the autonomous motivation of English language teachers, exacerbating anxiety and diminishing teaching quality, consistent with findings from previous research (Jiang et al., 2016; Rahmati and Sadeghi, 2021). However, our study

uniquely highlights the resilience displayed by veteran teachers, which appears to be fostered through supportive collegial networks, aligning with the work of Gao and Zhang (2020) and Kubanyiova (2020). The anxiety stemming from unclear tenure expectations could be mitigated by implementing explicit policies that balance research and teaching responsibilities, as advocated by Kubanyiova and Crookes (2016). Our findings also underscore the complexity of teacher motivation within the unequal global context of academia, suggesting that transparent policies, collegiality, and equitable tenure systems are crucial for sustaining teacher engagement, echoing the conclusions of Sadeghi and Pourbahram (2023). This study contributes to the literature by contextualizing these dynamics within Macau, offering insights that may inform similar non-Western educational settings.

It is necessary to note that while the study provides rich qualitative insights, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. In future studies, the sample size of 15 could be expanded to enhance the generalizability of the findings. This study was replicated across only 5 Macau universities, despite representing a variety of disciplines and career stages. Replicating this study across a broader range of institutions might enhance its representativeness. Participants were self-selected for the study, resulting in bias. Using randomized or purposive sampling approaches could better control for self-selection effects. Furthermore, the present study relied solely on self-reported interview responses. Qualitative perceptions could be enhanced by combining them with quantitative metrics, archival information, or observational data.

The small sample size of this exploratory qualitative study limited its generalizability; larger mixed-methods studies across more Macau universities may provide a more representative picture. Further contextualization of these issues may be gained from comparative studies of Macau and other Chinese and Western settings (Bellibaş and Gümüş, 2019; Leal Filho et al., 2022). In addition, classroom observations and student evaluations could be used to examine the relationship between tenure status and teaching practices. A longitudinal study of faculty motivations across career stages within tenure systems may also provide richer insights over time (Xu and Sukjairungwattana, 2022).

6. Conclusion

This exploratory qualitative study aimed to elucidate the influence of tenure policies on the job satisfaction, motivations, and experiences of language-related academics in Macau's higher education context. Interviews with 15 faculty members provided rich insights into how tenure systems affect faculty teaching practices, professional decisions, collegial dynamics, and affective experiences.

As a result of the study, Macau has implemented competitive "up or out" tenure policies that emphasize research output and promotion benchmarks. In addition, vague and shifting tenure expectations contributed to faculty uncertainty and anxiety. The pressures of tenure requirements tended to prioritize research over meaningful teaching practices and student support. Furthermore, tenure goals often dominated faculty priorities and resulted in strained collegial relationships. Due to demotivating policies, veteran professors were also able to retain intrinsic motivations for quality instruction and exercise professional autonomy. Even within restrictive systems,

resilience can be cultivated over time. In addition to providing constructive suggestions for improving local tenure policies, the study also identified ways to increase transparency, balance responsibilities, flexibility in accommodating disciplines, and enhance communication.

An important contribution of this research is to fill a significant gap in the literature regarding the under-examined dynamics of tenure systems in Macau. In light of the lack of prior empirical studies on this topic, this project provided preliminary qualitative insights that will inform future mixed-methods and comparative studies to further contextualize the issues. Policymakers and institutions seeking to improve tenure protocols should consider these findings to increase faculty job satisfaction, motivation, teaching excellence, and collegiality.

This study identified key areas for improving teacher support, intrinsic engagement, and growth within often restrictive systems by revealing how tenure policies shape the day-to-day experiences of language academics in Macau. Based on these findings, we offer data-driven insights on how evaluation procedures, workload expectations, and communication practices can be improved to enhance teaching quality. In addition, the research illuminates important implications for understanding teacher motivation in contexts of inequality, power dynamics, and global policy constraints. Using exploratory qualitative research as a foundation for more comprehensive studies that can develop nuanced understandings of how to promote professional fulfillment and educational quality from the inside out, this investigation demonstrates the value of exploratory qualitative research.

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