

## TENURE AS A THREAT TO SUSTAINABILITY IN PHILIPPINE TERTIARY EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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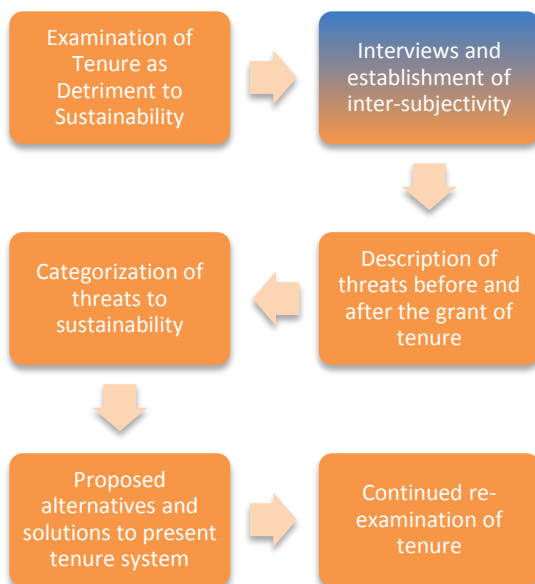
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### Graphical abstract



### Abstract

Tenure has been described by Siow as one of many unusual personnel practices in academia, while Frey, Botan, and Kreps describe it as a motivator for faculty to choose academia over industry [1-2]. Interviews and interactions with academics from three universities in Metro Manila, the Philippines, along with the author's experience and interpretation of the findings, however, lead to the conclusion that tenure encourages work-life imbalance in the attempt to obtain it and then mediocrity after it is granted. This paper compares tenure policies in three universities in Metro Manila, the Philippines, seeking to interrogate present policies, with data being coded into categories and inter-subjectivity being maintained by validating the observations made by the author with colleagues. For sustainability to be achieved, it is recommended that there be: (1) an increase in hiring of adjunct and visiting faculty; (2) recalibration of quantitative and qualitative indicators in determining faculty performance; and (3) high-value and long-term, but not lifetime, contracts to replace tenure. Compensation as a factor in educational sustainability and an increased number of reviewed institutions are recommended for future study.

**Keywords:** tenure, performance appraisal, tertiary education, sustainability, higher education, administration of educational institutions, compensation

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Adult life brings certain responsibilities, one of which is to obtain gainful employment. In public and private enterprises, employment can be regular or contractual. In the Philippine context, regular employment is obtained after a probationary period ranging from three to six months, while contractual employment lasts for five months, and is then renewed upon the discretion of the parties involved [3]. Academia, on the other hand, has certain differences from other enterprises, in that regular employment is obtained

after a probationary period that normally takes years [4]. This assumes that the academic is on what is called a tenure-track appointment. Those who are not on this track receive contracts that last for either a semester or an academic year [5]. It is in these differences that academia presents certain challenges to its own sustainability.

The author's experiences as an academic are the impetus for this paper, with an over decade-long career across three universities. Across this time span, the author's appointment has been renewed on

annual contracts, with no possibility of tenure except for his present appointment.

Tenure, however, can be perceived with a mix of fascination and mirth. The prospect of lifetime employment is appealing and at once anachronistic, with employment trends indicating that people no longer remain in one company for the rest of their lives [6]. While the idea is for academics to achieve greater professional heights after receiving tenure, the reality is that there are academics who have spiraled into mediocrity after receiving tenure, with these observations being supported by literature [7].

The reality of this scenario is encapsulated in a university administrator's admonition to attendees in a new employees' orientation that the author was part of, when the audience was told that tenure should be the beginning of an academic career instead of being the end of one [8].

With sustainability being the overarching goal of an educational institution, it may be a challenge to achieve the same if its human resources, specifically the teaching and research faculty, are replaced every few years because of their inability or lack of willingness to meet the requirements for tenure. Issues of commitment may also be considered, in the temporal contexts of the attempt to obtain tenure and after it has been given. Alternatives to tenure as a way of attracting and retaining talented faculty are ripe for consideration and discussion if educational institutions are committed to improving the quality of instruction and research in their respective milieus.

The paper seeks to describe the state of tenure policies of three tertiary education institutions in the Philippine capital, interrogate these, and ultimately suggest an alternative to the system in place.

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

Institutional memory in the form of tenure policies both past and present of three universities in Metro Manila, the Philippines, is used in the presentation. Of these three universities, one is publicly listed, one is privately owned, and one is a state university. Interviews with policy makers and department chairs both present and former lend context to the policies. Given that the author either had worked, or is working, in these institutions, his own interpretation is inevitably factored into the analysis and conclusions.

A phenomenological point of view is used. Epistemological and ontological questions are bound to occur, as the author as observer and the author as interpreter or analyst cannot be separated. Even so, the possibility of solipsism is avoided through the establishment of inter-subjective agreement. This agreement is obtained in the discussion of the author's observations, analysis, and conclusions with the interviewees themselves as well as academics who are not employed by any of these institutions. To create order in the presentation of findings, these have been coded and categorized [9-10].

## 3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Policies and Minimum Requirements

Unlike in First World countries where Assistant Professorships are given to academics who have at least a PhD or equivalent degree, Assistant Professorships in the Philippines may be given to academics who have a Master's or equivalent degree. As such, it follows that tenure track appointments may be given to academics at the Instructor level, that is, those who do not have Master's degrees just yet [11-12]. Table 1 illustrates the minimum requirements for receiving tenure from the Instructor level in the three universities surveyed.

**Table 1** Comparison of Policies and Minimum Requirements from the Instructor Level in Three Metro Manila Universities

Component	Publicly-Owned University	Privately-Owned University	State University
Time to obtain a Master's or Equivalent Degree	Three years, with possibility of extension	Two years, with possibility of extension	Five years, with possibility of extension
Publication	None	None	One publication as sole or lead author in a refereed journal
Extension / Service	None	None	Explicitly stated
Time to Tenure	Six consecutive semesters, with possibility of extension	Two years, with possibility of extension	Five years, with possibility of extension
Institutional Focus	Teaching	Teaching	Teaching and Research
Teaching Load	30-54 units in an academic year	30-60 units in an academic year	24-42 units in an academic year
Decision-Makers and Levels	Department Chair → Dean → Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs	Department Chair → Dean → Chancellor	Majority vote of tenured department faculty → Dean →, Academic Personnel and Fellowship Committee → Chancellor

### 3.2 Observations Before Tenure

The previous table assumes that an academic is taken in at Instructor level where, usually, the academic comes without a Master's degree or is currently taking coursework leading to a graduate degree. Tenure becomes challenging to obtain when one considers the teaching load. Looking at the publicly-owned and privately-owned universities, it can be inferred that graduate school work for the academic becomes a second priority, and a far one at that. This may force the academic to make a choice between sacrificing the quality of teaching and sacrificing the quality of graduate school work.

Some academics have also found a way to exploit the stipulation requiring them to have a Master's or equivalent degree. Instead of getting an advanced degree in their discipline, e.g., Communication Studies, they chose to get degrees in Educational Administration or Instruction, which are perceived to be easier than specialist disciplinary degrees [13]. As a result, they become professional educators, but not professionals in the discipline that they teach.

However, with the given tendency of systems to correct themselves, the stability of these academics' employment was threatened, when university administrators implemented a policy that required faculty to have advanced degrees related to their disciplines. Those who had Education-related degrees were transferred to the College of Education which, as a result, experienced a surplus of faculty. The creation of this policy has had negative effects on the sizing of departments and student-teacher ratios, with one department taking a surfeit of personnel from

other departments that are now hard-pressed to find qualified personnel.

While such a policy can be described as heading towards the right direction, it does not address the most telling issue about tenure: there are no further performance reviews that can affect employment, i.e., leading to an appointment being terminated because of poor performance. Tenure is terminated only by the recipient (1) reaching mandatory retirement age; (2) resignation; and (3) conviction by a competent court of a crime involving moral turpitude.

The time for a decision to grant tenure is also a factor that negatively influences the chances for tenure to be granted. Two or three years of (part-time) graduate work in the Philippines may get a candidate only as far as the proposal writing stage.

In the state university's case, the teaching load is lighter than in the other two universities. A 12-unit per-semester load, equivalent to four classes a week, qualifies as a full-time appointment. The short, or summer, term is by default considered "Teacher's Leave," and if teaching loads for this term are given, it is at most a six-unit load, equivalent to two classes every day for five weeks. Even as the time for a decision to grant tenure is five years, the challenge in obtaining tenure at this institution though is the publication requirement. Even as one may be able to publish in a refereed journal, one or more tenure-giving levels may question the pedigree of the journal.

There are also committee assignments that tend to detract from the finite time allotted to teaching, graduate work, and research. It has become accepted practice in the three universities to give

committee work to the youngest members of the faculty; the politics of academic departments is such that those who have “paid their dues” can unilaterally reject a committee assignment or resign the same, on top of having a say on their class schedules. Junior members of the faculty who may be as assertive as the senior members may very well have to contend with this assertiveness when the senior members vote yes or no in regard to their tenure.

In the case of all three universities, some academics who have been identified as assets have left for other institutions or other careers altogether. Presumably, there are reasons other than tenure for these moves. Still, it cannot be gainsaid that the up-or-out provision that is explicit in tenure policies influences these decisions.

One of the recent proposals in the state university is to toughen even more the requirements for tenure by 2016. Tenure-track appointments will begin at the Assistant Professor level, with actual tenure being granted at the Associate Professor level. An Assistant Professor must have a Master's or equivalent degree at the time of appointment. A candidate for tenure will have seven years to get a PhD or equivalent terminal degree. On top of that, the publication requirement has been increased from one to five [14].

### 3.3 Observations After Tenure

In his stay in the three universities surveyed, the author has observed that fewer than one in three tenure-track appointees ultimately receives tenure. This is a threat to the sustainability of the university, or at least the department, that grants tenure. After an investment quantified in years of having the appointee on the faculty and in the finances spent for wages and opportunities such as fellowships, the appointee ultimately leaves the university. The faculty profile consequently is affected, in that there is a full complement of Associate and Full Professors and Instructors (upper-level and lower-level academics), while there is a lack of (middle-level) Assistant Professors. From the point of view of the academic, years of working towards tenure that ultimately end up for naught means massive opportunity costs [15].

For those who do get tenure, complacency appears to be option, practice, and reality. Ideally, after obtaining a Master's degree (and receiving tenure), an academic sets out to obtain a PhD or equivalent degree. The actual appears to be far from the ideal, in the instances of academics who have contended themselves with their Master's degrees for more than a decade now. At the same time, research productivity is low to non-existent, a reminder of the fact that publication is not a requirement for tenure in two of the three universities surveyed. Even as teaching and research universities have dissimilar foci, it is a given in the context of higher education that both components receive weighting. This ideal weighting becomes lost in the actual conduct of daily life [16].

During the interviews with colleagues both present and former, the riposte to this argument has been that certain life events, having children and taking care of elderly parents being among these, negatively impact the drive towards continuous improvement. This negative impact on their drive would not have been possible, or at the very least would not have such strength, had they not had tenure. The literature shows that juggling academic and parental responsibilities is possible, even at the doctoral level. One can be pregnant before the viva, and come out with both child and degree [17]. Where there is no continuous improvement, the university that employs the academic is short-changed, and the students who attend the university do not receive the best possible education.

One of the justifications used for the tenure system is the assurance that tenured faculty can exercise academic freedom, that is, to do research on topics that may not be popular from the purview of school administrators. The same academic is also free to express opinions contrary to that of administrators' without fear of reprisal. However, adequate legal safeguards can be built into contracts so that “at-will” employment does not apply to a member of the faculty. The same safeguards can also ensure that no member of the faculty is discharged from the service for doing what may be considered unpopular [18-19].

Recent news involving Dr Mehmet Oz of Columbia University comes to mind, with his purportedly having made misleading claims regarding weight loss treatments, something that can be considered dishonesty in both academic and professional circles. As a result, his peers have written to appeal for his appointment to be given up [20-21]. The termination of an appointment is not possible where tenure has been perverted to protect those who practice “bad science” in the absence of a criminal conviction.

Another instance of this complacency at work was found in one of the universities, where a faculty member that has been consistently rated as “Needs Improvement” on student evaluations continues to teach, on top of maintaining an important administrative post in the college, on account of her having had tenure for over two decades.

These instances of complacency suggest that tenure may be used as *carte blanche*, in perversion of its original purposes, among which is to ensure that faculty may engage in research that is not exactly popular but ultimately beneficial, and that they may serve as a voice of reason in contravention of possible abuses by university administrators or even government.

The use of qualitative indicators as a research method behooves the researcher to leave an image that summarizes the entire paper, which is that of a bad marriage. The irony is that while the university could be so picky in whom it give its hand to, it will find itself unable to initiate divorce proceedings should the relationship sour.

### 3.4 Situational Awareness: A Categorization of Threats

The threats that tenure presents against the sustainability of tertiary education institutions can be

summarized in three ways: (1) policy; (2) people; and (3) resources. These threats are present, whether before the grant of tenure or after it. Table 2 illustrates these categorizations:

**Table 2** Categories of Tenure-Related Threats to Sustainability in Tertiary Education Institutions

Before Grant of Tenure	Threat Category	After Grant of Tenure
Policy	Length of time to obtain	Lack of review processes that affect employment
	Exploitation of rules by those attempting to obtain tenure	Policy changes that affect only department sizing and student-teacher ratios
People	Work-Life Balance	Disincentive towards advanced studies
	Committee Work and Schedule Issues	<i>Carte blanche</i> leading to "bad science" or lack of effort to improve teaching effectiveness
Resources	Opportunity costs when a faculty up for tenure resigns or does not get tenure	Years of resource allocation to faculty with decreased or no motivation towards continuous improvement

### 3.5 Recommendations Towards Sustainability

Several recommendations may be considered in addressing the issues facing both universities and academics, as follows: (1) an increase in the hiring of visiting and adjunct faculty; (2) recalibration of quantitative and qualitative indicators for determining who is granted tenure or similar standing; and (3) the use of contracts that have similarities to the ones given to elite athletes with respect to compensation amount and duration.

An increase in the hiring of visiting and adjunct faculty, especially in this time of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) integration, will allow universities to share expertise and talent, while at the same time ensuring that the faculty has appropriate and sufficient qualifications [22].

The recalibration of quantitative and qualitative measures for granting tenure ensures that those who sign a tenure-track agreement have goals that are written down and agreed to by both the hiring department and the hired academic. More than the mere signing of contracts, what is important is the presence of honest and consistent conversations about institutional and personal goals, and time horizons. In universities where student evaluations are primarily used to rate faculty, it must be made clear that students are not mere customers in the usual business sense, but are heavily involved in a process that requires rigor and vigor from them [23-24]. As such, student evaluations must be balanced by peer evaluations, lest the former be unduly influenced by factors such as grading and the personality of the academic [25]. Research and publication requirements must be instituted or rationalized even in teaching universities, so that every member of the faculty produces knowledge, as

opposed to repeating it to students semester after semester. These are merely a few examples of Key Performance Indicators that can be rethought to ensure that the tenure system sets up candidates for success.

Instead of tenured faculty having a lifetime appointment, a high-value and long-term contract, e.g., one that lasts for ten years, may encourage continuous improvement and ensure that institutional goals are consistently met. A change of thinking regarding the process of giving appointments may be helpful; instead of an appointment that is good until retirement at age 65, perhaps the appointment can be looked at as a tour of duty, to borrow phraseology from the military, a commitment between university and academic to ethically accomplishing a mission that is clearly defined and time-bound [26]. Much like an elite athlete with a spectacular but ultimately limited employment, an academic who receives a long-term contract receives one, and will continue to receive one, because of superior performance. The analogy also requires us to follow through in regard to compensation; the academic must be well remunerated.

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

Tenure is a university policy that must continue to be examined and re-examined. In a time that has rendered the concept of lifetime employment obsolete, tenure appears to be a holdover from an earlier age. Comparing the policies of three universities in Metro Manila, the Philippines leads to the conclusion that tenure is a threat to sustainability from the purview of institutions, academics, and even students. From policies and realities that make it unreasonably



challenging to obtain tenure, to the shortcuts that some academics take to circumvent these policies, it can be seen that tenure is a system that can stand improvement. From the loss of excellent teachers and researchers to the overstaying of a heretofore performing but now complacent academic, it can be concluded that a better system must be imagined and subsequently implemented.

It is with the desire to improve a system that several recommendations are made. Hiring visiting and adjunct faculty may foster the exchange of knowledge without having to rely excessively or exclusively on faculty or staff finishing their graduate degrees. A recalibration of the quantitative and qualitative indicators leading to tenure may help both universities and academics smooth the road to tenure and ultimately, sustainability. Probably a controversial recommendation in this paper is the rescission of the lifetime employment provision in tenure contracts in favor of long-term contracts that have similarities to those signed by elite athletes, in that the academic is well-paid for a particular duration, after which the possibility of renewal is present. A ten-year contract may strike a balance between institutional and personal needs, where a university has recourse to getting out of a potentially unproductive relationship. At the same time, an academic is motivated to remain as productive in a state of tenure as he was before it, with the assurance of compensation that nourishes a life of both body and mind.

Even as this aspect is not part of the scope of this paper, it does bear mentioning that compensation can be considered in future articles as a threat to sustainability [27-28]. In a country where an employee with a high school degree in the Business Process Outsourcing industry makes USD1000 while an Assistant Professor with a graduate degree makes about 70% of that amount, there may not be much economic incentive in staying in the halls of academia [29-30]. This issue of pay equity is beyond the scope of the present paper, even as the author recognizes it as worthy of further study, especially in the context of Third World countries.

In the writing of this paper, it has been explicitly stated that the author's personal memory was mined as part of the methodology. While it is recognized that tenure has its beauty and benefits, it does not follow that there is no better system. An open discussion among academics will be salutary, as it is them who stand to benefit from a well thought-out rework of the system, even as this same rework may take years of study and implementation. Even as a discussion that centers on the overhaul of a time-honored system will elicit heated reactions, it is not enough reason for such a discussion to be stifled. More important than the compensation and employment packages of individuals in an educational institution are the sustainability of the same educational institution from which the employment is obtained, and the quality of instruction and research produced by the institution. The combination of a university that is better able to use its capital, with a corpus of motivated faculty teaching students who benefit from their learning and research creates the prospect of a virtuous circle that

must be considered, the pecuniary considerations of all parties notwithstanding.

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