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Research on the Construction of Modern University Governance System from the Perspective of Institutional Governance Logic

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Abstract: The centre of gravity in university governance is shifting from administrative direction to institutional steering, yet many institutions still exhibit a familiar gap: rules are in place, but governance performance lags. Drawing on the new institutionalist division of institutions into regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars, this paper treats institutional governance logic as an operating mechanism in which rule constraints, value commitment, and behavioral expectations are nested within one another, and uses that mechanism to account for the distance between written rules and governing practice. The diagnosis proceeds at three levels. Hollow charters and blurred boundaries of authority and responsibility belong to the regulative level; misplaced incentives in evaluation and promotion systems belong to the normative level; and the weakening of the academic community at the grassroots belongs to the cultural-cognitive level. Against this diagnosis, the paper examines how Guangxi College of Water Resources and Electric Power has aligned its programme clusters with water conservancy and energy industry chains, devolved management responsibilities to secondary colleges, and developed a campus culture rooted in its water-related identity.

Keywords: Institutional governance logic; Modern university system; Governance system; Charter implementation; Programme cluster development

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1. Introduction

Chinese higher education has entered the stage of massification, and the number of higher education institutions and the total enrolment have for many years ranked among the largest in the world. The organisational complexity produced by this expansion, together with the demand for regulatory coherence generated by the drive for governance modernisation, now bears on universities simultaneously. The National Outline for Medium and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development (2010-2020), issued in 2010, listed the construction of a modern university system as an important component of structural reform. Since

then, university charters have been reviewed and approved, the Regulations on Academic Committees in Higher Education Institutions have come into force, and implementing opinions on the system of presidential responsibility under Party committee leadership have been issued. The stock of internal institutional texts in Chinese universities is now fairly complete [1].

In the international literature, new institutionalism forms one main line of inquiry into university governance. March and Olsen emphasise that institutions shape organisational choice by directing attention and generating behavioural expectations, and that organisations subjected to institutional pressure tend to converge. Domestic discussion has concentrated more heavily on the legal force of university charters, the improvement of corporate governance structures, and the practical operation of presidential responsibility under Party committee leadership.

Existing research has largely addressed how institutional arrangements ought to be designed. It has pressed less hard on the question of why institutions fail in operation. This paper starts from that question and employs institutional governance logic as its analytical framework, shifting attention from institutional texts to the way institutions actually run [2]. The argument proceeds through five stages: the framework is defined, the diagnosis follows, construction pathways are proposed, the author's own institution supplies a case, and the paper closes with conclusions and limitations.

2. The content of institutional governance logic and its analytical framework

Institutional governance logic refers to the mechanism by which institutions actually operate in the course of governance: what they constrain, what they endorse, and what those subject to them come to expect. The formulation extends institutions from rules written on paper to a mechanism that generates behavioural expectations. A document can be issued within days, whereas expectations form only through practices that recur. The same clause may produce quite different governance effects in different institutions, and the explanation usually lies not in the clause itself but in the operating environment into which it is inserted.

To analyze how institutions work, Scott's division of institutions into three pillars offers a serviceable instrument.

The regulative pillar rests on coercion and sanctions, and corresponds to university charters, laws and regulations, and systems of accountability and discipline. It operates through compulsion; it takes effect quickly and its boundaries are clear.

The normative pillar centers on obligation and the way things ought to be, and corresponds to academic ethics, professional norms for teachers, and the shared values that accumulate in the course of running an institution. It operates through expectation, sustained by the approval and disapproval of peers [1].

The cultural-cognitive pillar rests on habit and on what is taken for granted, and corresponds to the university's spirit and the behavioral dispositions that an academic community deposits over time. It operates through the sense that things have always been done this way. It is the least visible pillar and the hardest to change.

The three pillars differ greatly in the speed at which they operate. The regulative pillar can be erected within a short time by issuing a document. The normative pillar requires a period of consensus-building across the profession. The cultural-cognitive pillar usually forms over years. A governance system is fragile most often not because one pillar is missing, but because only one of them has been built.

3. Practical difficulties in modern university governance: A diagnosis based on institutional logic

3.1. The regulative level: Hollowed charters and blurred authority

The charter is called the fundamental law of a university, but most charter provisions are framed as principles and lack operable interfaces. The links between the charter and higher-level law, and between the charter and specialised internal regulations, are also insufficiently tight, so that when disputes arise it is often impossible to identify a clause that can be applied directly.

Further problems appear once a charter has been approved. Many institutions devote their main effort to drafting and submitting the text and invest insufficiently in clearing up and aligning the accompanying regulations, so conflicts between older rules and the new charter are not uncommon. When an administrator meets such a conflict, the usual response is to follow the habit of many years' standing, and the charter's force is diluted through these routine choices[3]. The charter itself has no designated department to maintain it, and few track continuously whether its provisions are carried out or to what extent. A document without a maintenance mechanism can hardly be expected to exert real constraint in governance.

A more common problem is that boundaries of authority and responsibility are clear only on paper and become distorted in operation. The relationships among Party committee leadership, presidential responsibility, academic autonomy and democratic oversight are usually established through formulations such as "uphold", "strengthen" and "give play to". Whether an item of business originates from one body or another, which body reviews it first, and how objections are handled are often left without procedural provision. Where procedure is absent, the actual allocation of power depends on the habits of the officials involved. The academic committee is the most instructive case. The charter states that the committee holds review authority, but whether review occurs before or after a decision frequently depends on how meetings are arranged, which produces the familiar sequence in which a decision is taken, and opinions are sought afterward.

3.2. The normative level: academic logic yielding to administrative logic

Evaluation systems are where the normative pillar is most concentrated. In current appraisal schemes, the number of publications and the level of research projects function as hard indicators, while teaching, practical training supervision and student development, which resist quantification, function as soft indicators [4]. The indicators themselves are not malicious, but they define what is worth pursuing. Teachers accordingly direct their energy towards what can be measured, and the slow, painstaking work of talent cultivation remains chronically undervalued.

The misaligned incentives in appointment and promotion systems are especially visible in vocational colleges. The cultivation of technical and skilled talent depends on teachers spending long periods in training workshops, taking part in real engineering projects, and developing curricula jointly with enterprises, and this work is precisely what is hardest to convert into appraisal points. A teacher who does the arithmetic will find that publishing one paper yields a higher return than supervising a cohort of students through six months of practical training. Behavioural drift follows, in direct contradiction to the intentions behind the institutional design.

3.3. The cultural-cognitive level: A weakened sense of community

Channels for teacher participation in governance mostly exist, but they are highly formalistic. Items reviewed by faculty congresses are usually proposals that have already been settled, and opinions raised by delegates

lack a route to feedback. Once a teacher's concern extends beyond personal remuneration, there is rarely an institutionalised place in which to express it.

In organisational terms, the pattern in which the university runs its colleges rather than the colleges running the university is widespread. The university is the subject of operation, while colleges resemble the executing periphery, lacking discretionary space in programme design, staffing and the use of funds, and therefore finding it difficult to develop a sense of responsibility for their own development. Regular horizontal mechanisms for exchange among teachers and among disciplines are also scarce, so that connections outside teaching activities remain thin.

Campus culture building readily stalls at the level of decoration and events. Culture festivals, ornamental stones and noticeboards appear year after year, yet they are not necessarily connected to professional spirit or occupational ethics. From a student's point of view, these activities are something the institution requires participation in, rather than something that belongs to the programme they are studying.

3.4. Summary

The three levels of problems are not independent of one another. The regulative level has rules but lacks enforcement, the normative level has indicators but lacks consensus, and the cultural-cognitive level has activities but lacks spirit. The real difficulty lies in the rupture among the three logics. Where coercive force does not reach, norms fail to engage; where norms have not yet formed, habits cannot take hold either.

4. Construction pathways for a modern university governance system

4.1. Regulative reconstruction: The university charter as fundamental law

The purpose of a charter is to establish the hierarchy of validity among internal rules. Three steps are broadly feasible.

First, charter revision should become routine. Operating conditions, industrial demand and the requirements of higher authorities all change, and a charter left untouched for a decade will drift away from actual practice. Revision should nevertheless not be frequent, and it requires a fixed assessment cycle and accessible channels for proposals.

Second, a three-tier structure of charter, specialised regulations and implementing rules should be built on this basis. The charter establishes the basic institutional arrangements and the structure of authority; specialised regulations set out rules for particular domains; implementing rules translate these into procedures and forms. Each tier becomes more specific as it descends and more constrained as it ascends, and every internal rule should be traceable to a provision of the charter [3].

Third, and most important, the statutory interfaces should be written clearly. The relationships among Party committee leadership, presidential responsibility, academic autonomy and democratic oversight need to be translated into procedure: who proposes an item of business, which body conducts prior review, who takes the decision, how objections are recorded once handled, and to whom oversight findings are reported. Once procedure is specific, boundaries of authority no longer depend on individual interpretation.

One further matter is often overlooked: designating the body responsible for maintaining the charter. Interpretation, assessment and proposals for revision should have a clearly assigned department, which reports periodically to the institution's decision-making body on implementation. A charter without a maintenance body leaves the document's fate to chance.

4.2. Normative reconstruction: Restoring academic logic to the centre

Academic committees need to move from advisory bodies to governing bodies. Prior review is the minimum requirement: any matter involving academic standards that fails to secure the committee's approval should not enter the decision-making process. Objections should be recorded, minority views admitted into the minutes, and committee members' terms staggered so that the committee is not dominated by a single discipline or a single cohort.

Evaluation systems in modern university governance should be organised around teaching and research while accommodating the wider characteristics of higher education, so that the criteria for promotion and appraisal become more complete. Uniformity has no place here. A single yardstick cannot measure all university teachers. In higher vocational colleges, where the vocational dimension of education is most pronounced, practical training is a key component of the governance system[5]. Evaluation can be built around this feature, taking course design and the priorities of student cultivation as its points of departure, so that the resulting system is more defensible.

Appointment, title and remuneration systems should be bound to academic norms. Professional ethics and academic integrity should operate as veto conditions, and there should also be clear procedures for determining violations and channels for appeal, so that rules are not applied arbitrarily.

4.3. Cultural-cognitive cultivation: Activating grassroots academic organisations

Colleges should be built into genuine pivots of governance. Personnel, decision-making and financial authority should be devolved to a moderate degree, giving colleges discretionary space in programme development, teacher appointment and the use of funds, along with corresponding responsibility. Second-tier faculty congresses, programme development committees, teacher seminars and grievance channels should all operate routinely, giving teachers a stable position in participation rather than being consulted on an ad hoc basis.

The university's spirit needs ritual and narrative to persist. Matriculation ceremonies, retirement honours for teachers, programme culture festivals and the compilation of institutional history look trivial, but they perform an important function: they show members what the community values.

Campus culture in higher vocational colleges contains a further element that is easily overlooked, namely occupational culture. Students spend three years at the institution before entering sectors such as water conservancy and electric power, where safety responsibilities are unusually heavy and where the emphasis on procedure, discipline and accountability far exceeds that in most industries. Bringing safety regulations, operating standards and occupational integrity into everyday teaching and campus life, through codes of conduct in training workshops, the apprenticeship tradition in work placements, and the job stories of distinguished alumni, is itself cultural education. Such content need not be sought elsewhere. Provided an institution is willing to invest effort in gathering it, it can form something that other institutions cannot simply copy.

4.4. A coordinated loop: Institutionalising oversight and evaluation

Oversight needs to proceed on several fronts at once. Party discipline inspection, internal audit, staff oversight and oversight by society and industry each cover part of the field, and the priority is to share information so that each inquiry does not proceed in isolation from the others[5]. Governance performance should enter the indicator systems used in inspection tours, annual reviews and institutional evaluation, so that the quality of governance becomes a matter that can be questioned.

Institutional operation also requires feedback and revision mechanisms. A practical approach is to conduct an annual institutional health check: collecting the points at which implementation stalls, producing a list of problems and a register of revisions, and assigning responsible departments and deadlines. Institutions thereby acquire the capacity to renew themselves, rather than waiting until problems have accumulated beyond avoidance and then conducting a concentrated clean-up.

5. Conclusion

The construction of a modern university governance system depends not on the multiplication of rules but on the coupling of the regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive logics[6]. The framework of institutional governance logic accounts for the gap between text and practice that is common in higher education institutions: institutional failure usually arises not from an absence of rules but from a lack of normative support and cultural identification, so that rules cease to operate as soon as a situation falls outside their terms.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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