

# Balancing Academic and Managerial Logics: The unintended effects on promoting undergraduate teaching and learning

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**Abstract.** This study investigates managerial logic and academic logic by analysing the impact of institutional strategy on undergraduate teaching at a Chinese research university. By reviewing the university strategy and education strategy and interviewing academics from the Engineering faculty, this research provides empirical evidence supporting the argument that management concepts and practices are increasingly applied and recognised in higher education. At the selected university, academics are generally positive about having institutional strategies but have concerns about academic freedom at the same time. In particular, participants are concerned with the increasingly competitive environment for recruitment. Additionally, university-wide curriculum and pedagogy reform have the greatest impact on teaching practices. It appears that universities have the potential to adopt management practices in order to support academic practices. However, the balance is critical to sustaining higher education development.

**Keywords:** research university, institutional strategy, undergraduate teaching and learning, curriculum and pedagogy

## Introduction

Higher education was traditionally perceived as the responsibility of communities of scholars researching and teaching together in collegial ways (Deem, 1998). In recent years, higher education institutions have been increasingly challenged by scarcer resources and involved in an intense national and international competition framed by the global and national discourses and policies (Carpentier, 2021; Hazelkorn, 2015). To face the increasing challenge of resource allocation for an expanding variety of missions and stakeholders (Skelton, 2005; Stensaker et al., 2017), universities have begun to prioritise organisational effectiveness (Shin, 2011) to better face the challenges of resource allocation for various missions and stakeholders (Skelton, 2005; Stensaker et al., 2017).

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Against this backdrop, this research examines how the managerial logic impacts the academic logic in higher education institutions in relation to undergraduate teaching. The general tenor of the scholarly discussion is framed along a continuum. At one end, researchers argue that this is an inevitable trend in the context of the expansion and complexity of contemporary higher education institutions (Tight, 2014). At the other end of the continuum, aspirations and desires for the survival of traditional academic values against the managerial approach can be found (Blumenthal et al., 1997; Campbell & van der Wende, 2000). However, this does not imply that academic roles and identities fail to change while their survival is threatened by managerial rationales, but rather, that change does not automatically mean that academic interests and values are weakened or that academics refuse to engage with managerialist practices. Moreover, in practice, there are multiple logics interwoven within the institution. In higher education institutions, academics are incorporating and applying multiple logics as references for their practice due to external pressures such as performance metrics (Vican et al., 2020).

The purpose of this research is to provide empirical evidence on the impact of managerial concepts and practices on academic value and practices by interpreting academics' perceptions of university management. In this study, the institutional strategy is used as a representation of the management approach to understand the managerial logic, whereas the academic logic is scrutinised through interviews with lecturers involved in undergraduate teaching and learning about their opinions on the institutional logic. The empirical evidence is derived from a case study of a research-intensive Chinese university with global standing. The findings highlight that academics broadly recognise institutional strategy and understand that managerial approaches have relevance in enhancing teaching and learning activities. The academic logic points to the understanding that research, and not teaching, is conducive to academic promotions. In other words, academics are willing to embrace a managerialist approach in teaching, insofar as their research activities can take place as planned to support their academic careers.

## **Literature Review**

Institutional logics are usually defined as the widely recognised guiding principles for the behaviours of actors within organisations and refer to the belief systems and related practices that dominate in an organisational field (Scott, 2001, p. 139). However, because many competing institutional logics frequently coexist within the same organisation, this dominance is not always clear (Pilonato & Monfardini, 2022). The literature illustrates how managerial logic is contextualised in higher education institutions by using the concept of 'New Public Management' and how academic logic is interpreted by providing the scope of undergraduate teaching and learning, followed by a discussion of the relationship between managerial logic and academic logic in higher education.

*Managerial logic: New public management in higher education*

The university is commonly understood as a ‘professional bureaucracy’ (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 348) that relies on the standardisation of skills and the associated design parameters, training, and indoctrination. Universities hire duly trained specialists (professionals) for the operating core of teaching and research, and then give them considerable control over their work (Mintzberg, 1979). According to Mintzberg’s description, academics lead universities. In other words, academics, rather than managers or chief executives specialising in management, run universities. These characteristics suggest that applying the managerial concept in the higher education context is challenging. However, research shows that many universities have adopted managerial ideas and practices, which has led to deliberate organisational and cultural changes (Deem & Brehony, 2005). To understand the management practice, the distinction between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ managerialism (Trow, 1994) is first illustrated. Trow (1994) defined soft managerialism as the recognition of inefficiency and the invention of rational mechanisms to improve university performance, with the explicit agreement and consent of all those involved. Hard managerialism refers to the implementation of specific methods and ideas related to rewarding and punishing individuals who are perceived as untrustworthy and unable to improve or adapt on their own. (Trow, 1994). In practice, it is not always a deliberate choice to apply ‘soft management’ or ‘hard management’; it depends on the university and the discipline (Thomson, 1998). In other words, different higher education institutions and disciplines have different cultures, which leads to various types of management preferences. Taylor (2007) further analysed the response of institutional management by distinguishing between passive and active management. Passive management is essentially a non-interventionist approach, leaving the main responsibility of interpreting and delivering teaching and research to the individual academic faculty member. Active management involves a more proactive, interventionist approach to the development and assessment of the relationship between teaching and research (Taylor, 2007, p. 876). The divergent approaches to institutional management arise from variations in a balance between ideological and environmental elements. An ideology is a set of core beliefs and essential rationale. The dominance of ideological factors may lead to more passive management (Taylor, 2007), which assumes and relies on the academic staff’s independence in shaping the nature and interaction of their teaching and research. Trusting academics to uphold the group’s ideology consequently allows for a non-threatening and non-inquisitorial management style. By contrast, the preponderance of environmental factors may result in more active management. Pressure for increasing assessment, accountability, and value for money, as well as the impact of competition and market forces, drive institutions to specialise in particular areas of activity (Taylor, 2007, p. 876). In practice, the increasing similarity of higher education institutions is most evident in management reforms, especially performance-based management. Performance indicators are at the core of government policy and institutional management (Shin, 2010). Thus, to face external and internal changes more effectively and efficiently, higher education institutions now embrace more managerial

concepts. Despite critiques of management as a form of control that may reduce academic freedom by standardising the academic practice (Hoecht, 2006; Zhou, 2001), more institutional stakeholders have started to realise or even accept management (see, e.g. Coates et al., 2005; Marbun et al., 2020; McCaffery, 2018). However, academic practices are not always easy to measure. Moreover, how managerial ideas influence professional and academic values and practice is ambiguous.

According to Broucker and De Wit (2015), governments can use New Public Management as a toolbox, selecting instruments based on their perceived relevance (Broucker et al., 2018). Different national contexts have adopted New Public Management at varying stages and levels, which has made universities compete to attract students, secure funding for their research, and increase other types of revenue (Guarini et al., 2020). Therefore, the institutional responses can also be varied in incorporating the idea of New Public Management and corresponding managerial logic and practice. China has experienced substantial societal transformations and rapid advancements in science and technology since the late 1970s when its economy began to expand. The higher education sector has undergone restructuring based on marketisation, privatisation, and decentralisation (Mok, 2009). In particular, the Outline for Reform and Development of Education in China issued by the Communist Party of China in 1993 identified the reduction of centralisation and government control in general as the long-term goals of higher education reform (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 1993), so that ‘universities can independently provide education geared to the needs of society under the leadership of the government (Mok, 2009). In other words, higher education in China has become more autonomous while at the same time emphasising internal management (Bie, 2011).

### *Interaction and conflicts between managerial logic and academic logic*

Multiple logics within an organisation can lead to ‘institutional complexity’, which can be understood as tensions between constitutive elements of different logics (Austin, 1990). Academic and managerial logics co-exist in universities as a combination of professional/academic and managerial/administrative values at organisational and individual levels. These multiple logics can compete and may be difficult to reconcile, resulting in ambiguous goals and rules for individuals who react by either maintaining or changing their behaviour (Guarini et al., 2020, pp. 5–6).

The general tenor of this discussion typically takes one of two forms. One argues that this is an inevitable trend in the context of the expansion and complexity of contemporary higher education (Tight, 2014). The other desires the survival of traditional academic values against the managerial approach. Scholars often argue that academic logic should guide academics and perceive managerial logic as a threat to academic logic (Blumenthal et al., 1997; Campbell & van der Wende, 2000). Regarding the latter idea, scholars generally criticise the negative impact of managerial ideas from the perspective of collegiality, maintaining that academics can make decisions in universities and colleges collectively with the assistance and support of administrators, the more traditional and desirable alternative (Deem

et al., 2007; Tight, 2014). Moreover, some scholars argue that the shift of university management to this more corporate style appears as a direct threat to academic freedom (Henkel, 2005; Melo et al., 2010) of staff accustomed to having a greater degree of flexibility and autonomy in their work (Bellamy et al., 2003). Beckmann and Cooper (2013) critiqued that ‘the impact of managerialism in higher education has damaged not only the education process but society in general. Particularly, the social purpose of education, which is to generate a critically aware, empathetic citizenry freely engaged in democratic participation, has suffered erosion (p. 20)’.

From an empirical perspective, scholars argue that managerialism works against its own intentions of efficient and effective quality improvement (Bryson, 2004; Thornhill et al., 1996; Trow, 1994). For example, the extensive Canadian study conducted by Townley et al. (2003) discovered that managers’ initial enthusiasm for performance management was replaced by scepticism and cynicism due to a widening gap between the discourse of reasoned justification (e.g. achieving transparency, serving public interests) for managing performances and the practical operationalisation of such mechanisms. In addition, employees adapt their activities to ‘the simplifying tendencies of the quantification of outputs’ (Trow, 1994, p. 11). This so-called increased objectivity through quantifying outcomes is consistent with an instrumentalist perspective on the functioning of higher education organisations (Barnetson & Cutright, 2000).

A third view sees a ‘marriage’ between professionalism and managerialism, with academics losing some control over the goals and social purposes of their work but retaining considerable autonomy over their practical and technical tasks (Teichler et al., 2013, p. 17). In fact, there has been ‘passive acceptance’ or ‘tacit approval’ and even ‘positive support for many of the changes of increasing managerial ideas in the higher education sector’ (Locke & Bennion, 2011). Some academics approached the streamlined committee structures, quicker decision-making, and professionalisation of management with a positive attitude because this can help academics to not only focus on teaching and research in their institutions but also take advantage of new opportunities for engaging with external partners and accessing additional resources. (Locke & Bennion, 2011). However, there are academics who are marginalised by these developments (Marginson & Mollis, 2001), some who make compromises to reconcile their preconceptions of academia with their experiences of working in a corporatized university (Churchman, 2006), and a few who internalise a managerialist ideology for their career advancement (Deem & Brehony, 2005).

The desirability of these three positions is also subject to a range of views. Sauermann and Stephan (2013) suggested that academic and managerial logic both influence academic practice, and thus they coexist in academia. According to certain authors, the presence of multiple logics results in conflicts between them, whereby one logic becomes dominant, and the others are excluded (Greenwood et al., 2011; Lounsbury, 2002; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). Others observe coexistence and constellations of logics whereby different logics shift in relevance (Goodrick & Reay, 2011; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). Some scholars claim that multiple logics provide the basis for organisational existence (Battilana

& Dorado, 2010; Pache & Santos, 2013); still, others perceive that multiple logics bear the seeds of destruction for organisations (Tracey et al., 2011). Consequently, the interaction between various logic and its implications for organisations and individuals is ambiguous.

Previous studies provided many critiques of the negative impact of managerial concepts on higher education in terms of its academic value and practice. However, as the previous content implies, managerial logic should not be understood only from the perspective of performance indicators but also that of support and resources from the governing and managing sector of the institution. The research in this area can expand to investigate all institutional decisions related to teaching, rather than evaluation only.

Empirically, research on teaching quality is usually from the student perspective, including student learning outcomes (see, e.g. Biggs & Tang, 2011; Nilsen & Gustafsson, 2016) and evaluation of teaching (see, e.g. Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Shevlin et al., 2000), although there are many studies criticizing such an approach (see, e.g. Boring, 2017; Heffernan, 2022). Academics receive instructions from the institution and apply them in practice. Knowing how the perception and transformation of institutional decisions into practice occur is the key to understanding the interaction or conflicts between managerial and academic logics.

#### *Academic logic: Undergraduate education*

The culture of the academic profession may differ across nations, disciplines, and institutional types (Austin, 1990). Academic logic is understood from the perspective of academic practice in this research. The research university's practice is fundamentally placed in its threefold mission of research (the production of knowledge), teaching (the dissemination of knowledge), and service (both internal and to the community; Austin, 1990), with research as the central focus (Martin, 2018). This study focuses on the teaching dimension of the academic logic of higher education in research universities.

Higher education institutions have the dominant functions of cultivating a qualified workforce, training students for a research career, managing the provision of teaching efficiently and extending opportunities through teaching and relevant activities (Skelton, 2005). In the university context, teaching is a scholarly activity that draws on extensive professional skills and practices, with high levels of disciplinary and other contextual expertise (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010).

There is a rising notion among many institutions that the improvement of teaching and learning in higher education requires systematic and sustained research on the impact of curriculum, pedagogy, technology, and learning methods (Parpala et al., 2010). Research universities view teaching and learning-related research as a critical element in their research activities (Stensaker et al., 2017). This implies that teaching can be scientifically studied and improved with generally applicable recommendations. In research universities, it can be expected that undergraduate teaching is more standardised and structured with more scientific evidence. Therefore, academics can offer suggestions

for the management of the institution and teaching practices, and the university can provide widely accepted managerial practices for the academics. In other words, in higher education institutions, the managerial structure may not always be top-down when it comes to teaching. On the one hand, disciplines are diverse in higher education, and each has its own methods for effective teaching and learning. Therefore, it is difficult to implement common strategies from senior management in all the pedagogies and curricula. Moreover, due to the disciplinary distinctions and elevated professionalism in higher education, academics possess the most knowledge in their areas of specialization, in contrast to managers, who typically specialize in a limited number of disciplines or administrative and management roles. On the other hand, the bottom-up approach to teaching also allows students to be more engaged in the process; therefore, it provides teachers with a more comprehensive picture from the student's side and helps determine teaching priorities.

### **Analytical Framework and Research Questions**

The literature review revealed an insufficiency of empirical evidence on the relationship between managerial logic and academic logic or the impact of the management approaches on academic practice. Additionally, many studies gave conclusions regarding this topic without contextualising the research. In other words, the national and institutional characteristics may contribute to academics' perception of management concept and practices in higher education. Therefore, this research asks academics' perceptions of the institutional management on undergraduate education.

#### *Managerial logic through institutional strategy: A lens to understand how universities address undergraduate education*

To incorporate the New Public Management concept, including market rhetoric and managerial control practice (Lorenz, 2012), universities are adopting more managerial concepts regarding organisational strategies, structures, technologies, and management instruments from the private sector and applying them to higher education in recent decades (Deem, 1998). In particular, the idea of strategy comes from the academic field of business and management, but universities have adopted more of it as higher education has become more managerialist. Strategy provides a lens through which one can investigate management from the institutional perspective. As Ramsden (2003) suggested, since universities have become increasingly accountable for the quality of teaching, academics are required to improve their understanding of the institutional process, and institutional strategy can be one explicit channel allowing all stakeholders to understand the overall management of the university. In this study, I employ Mintzberg's (1987) concept of 'strategy as deliberate and emergent', so as to match the dynamic and organic environment of higher education institutions.

### *Research questions*

By incorporating the analytical framework of the institutional strategy, this study asks three questions:

- (1) Whether academics are aware of the institutional strategy regarding undergraduate teaching?
- (2) What are academics' attitudes towards the institutional strategy regarding undergraduate teaching?
- (3) Within the institutional strategy regarding undergraduate teaching, what elements are most recognised by academics?

## **Methodology**

### *Research methods*

When implementing an institutional strategy, the university strategy is first analysed, the organisation's highest strategic document (Johnson et al., 2009; Nickols, 2016). In the university context, it is primarily the long-term developmental strategy. This strategy outlines the overall institutional goals and direction, along with the strategic management activities that will achieve them (Easterby-Smith, 1987). To interpret the institutional strategy, documentary analysis is firstly applied. The process involves understanding the information relayed and the author's underlying values and assumptions, as well as any arguments developed (Cohen & Manion, 2011). In this research, the documents analysed comprised the selected universities' strategic documents, including university strategy and education strategy.

In addition, interviewing is an effective way to access people's perceptions, meanings and definitions of situations and constructions of reality (Punch, 2013). For this research, I applied the semi-structured interview because of its flexibility. An in-depth examination of the role of individuals is essential for comprehending how managerial reforms are implemented in the organisation so that the same reforms can be taken apart within the organisation and then re-assembled at individual level (Pilonato & Monfardini, 2022). Therefore, by interviewing academics who have different titles and stages of their career, this research aims to collect and present different opinions towards the institutional strategy. In total, 27 academics participated in the interview, 21 were males and six females. A total of 2 lecturers, 2 senior lecturers, 9 associate professors, and 14 professors were involved in this research.

According to the literature, scientific research on the effects of curriculum, pedagogy, technology, and student learning can be beneficial for developing higher education. In other words, research-intensive universities may have more resources to develop their education programs. This research is conducted in a Chinese research-intensive university, which is one of China's National Key Universities. This university, with a reputation for quality education, has always been popular among students across the country. This case was selected as a representative of how highly selective universities are reacting



to the changing environment by promoting more managerial concepts and practices in the Chinese higher education sector. Furthermore, the literature for STEM subjects has documented managerial trends (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). To narrow down the disciplines and minimise the potential impact of the different disciplines, I thus only selected the Engineering faculty for this study. Therefore, all participants in this study are from engineering disciplines. The research data were gathered towards the end of 2019 and completed in 2022 as part of the doctoral thesis. The majority of the interviews were conducted prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, and some participants were contacted again after the interview due to the information check during this period of time. For this reason, all data related to pandemics was purposefully left out of this research.

### *Data analysis*

The university's strategic documents underwent content analysis. All the information presented in the documents was collected. For one, I followed this procedure to establish the study's context. For another, the procedure enabled me to collect more details for the interview. Furthermore, I also aimed to identify the disparity between what the documents stated and what was actually happening according to the individuals' perspectives.

Thematic analysis was used for analysing interview transcripts because it is well suited to identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcripts from all of the interviews were first open coded after being read several times. Based on the open-coded data, axial coding was implemented to look for more analytical concepts (Corbin & Stauss, 2014). The emerging themes were identified, and then, all the coded data were sorted into themes, which were easily accessible, both for reading and exploring.

## **Findings**

This section consists of findings from the strategic documents and interviews. By presenting a comprehensive picture from strategic and practical perspectives, this research aims to answer the research questions.

### *Institutional strategy*

#### University strategy: Aligned with party committee and national development

The university strategy was found on the university website<sup>1</sup>. The selected university's overall goal is

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<sup>1</sup> The title of the strategic document and the website address cannot be listed owing to the anonymisation and research ethics.

to ‘be close to the socialist direction of running institutions, fully implement the party’s educational policy, persist in serving the people, serve the Communist Party of China in governing the country, serve the consolidation and development of the socialist system with Chinese characteristics, and serve reform and open up socialist modernisation with morality’. In this statement, the university explicitly emphasised that the coherence between the development of the university and the goal of the Communist Party is of great importance, and this direction and function of higher education is widely shared with all the universities in China owing to the political system. The value and philosophy of the Chinese Communist Party is an overarching model for personal development in higher education that is to cultivate the talents with core socialist values including national values of prosperity (fùqiáng 富强), democracy (mínzhǔ 民主), civility (wénmíng 文明), and harmony (héxié 和谐), social values of freedom (zìyóu 自由), equality (píngděng 平等), justice (gōngzhèng 公正), and rule of law (fǎzhì 法治), and individual values of patriotism (àiguó 爱国), dedication (jìngyè 敬业), integrity (chéngxìn 诚信), and friendship (yǒushàn 友善) (18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, 2012).

Guidelines for academics covered, in detail, recruitment, development, evaluation, and support. The recruitment process primarily included academics with ‘talent’ who are leaders in their respective fields. However, ‘talent’ primarily refers to research achievements and lacks any explicit mention of teaching capability. Regarding academic development, the strategy identified training as the primary method. The information regarding evaluation and promotion was not detailed, but it did mention an attempt to improve the system through comprehensive evaluations. Among the instructions for supporting academics, the document explicitly outlined guidance for improving the environment for academic development and encouraging teaching enthusiasm.

Overall, the university strategy seems abstract and contains overlapping information. Although it mentioned the expectation towards academics and the appropriate practice, for example, evaluation, there seems to be no explicit guidance on how academic work can be managed.

### Education strategy and quality assurance

In addition to the overall university strategy, I selected the publicly available report to interpret the undergraduate teaching at the university. The education strategy closely aligns with quality assurance and the yearly evaluation.

In this report, several targeted sections of undergraduate teaching emerged, including (a) teaching development and reform (pedagogy and curriculum, teaching material, graduation project or dissertation, innovation and entrepreneurship education and internationalisation of education); (b) quality assurance (enhancing academic management, upgrading the course evaluation system, improving teaching supervision, focusing on the multi-dimensional implementation of education quality, supporting teaching ability development); (c) expand the number of undergraduate students; and (d) generic and

transferrable skill development for undergraduate students (basic quality and ability, innovation and entrepreneurship skills, and employment). The listed practices were:

- Establish more undergraduate programmes;
- Provide additional curriculum;
- Create smaller classes;
- Invent new teaching methods;
- Cooperate with other colleges and universities;
- Develop the online platform and online courses;
- Improve the quality of teaching material;
- Enable opportunities for practical learning and teaching;
- Support graduation design or dissertations with academic writing and ethics;
- Organise competitions and events for entrepreneurship education;
- Offer courses, summer schools, and international exchange programmes in English to improve internalisation.

At the end of this report, two chapters specifically addressed the progress of the formulation and implementation of these strategic decisions in the previous academic year. The progress included applying systematic planning to fully implement the ‘2+X’ undergraduate training system and implementation of the learning-centred teaching facilities’ reform. The reflection on the remaining issues is that the curriculum ideology’s educational potential has not been fully utilised, the teacher-performance evaluation system needs improvement, and the teaching-material system and demonstrations are not outstanding.

The education strategy, or in this specific case, the quality assurance report, provided details via quantitative data of how undergraduate teaching would be improved. As educational guidance for all disciplines, the information is broad, and reflection is abstract. Additionally, many terms in the document, especially regarding the programmes, lack explanations, so it is difficult for the reader to comprehend. Perhaps the information is specifically directed to the university staff but not a wider audience.

### *Interviews Analysis*

Followed by the analysis of the strategic documents, the following sections present the findings from the interviews with academics with different job titles including lecturer, senior lecture and professor. Among all participants, six out of twenty-eight academics had leadership roles at department or faculty level.

### Awareness—Wide awareness

At the beginning of the interviews, I first addressed academics' awareness of 'institutional strategy' without explicitly mentioning either the university or educational strategy but by asking 'do you know any institutional strategies?'. After receiving an answer to this first question, I then asked for further details.

Based on the interview data, I categorised the answers regarding institutional strategy awareness into three categories: (a) aware (when participants answer the question directly with information about the institutional strategy), (b) partially aware (when participants answer the question with uncertainties but can still say something relevant about the institutional strategy), and (c) not aware (when participants answer the question with strong negative answers, even if they mention some strategies later in the interview).

The majority of academics believed they were more or less aware of the institutional strategy. Several factors contribute to these broad interpretations. Firstly, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China conducted undergraduate education evaluations a year before I conducted the interviews. The national evaluation scheme assessed the staff's understanding of strategies, prompting the university to make significant efforts to inform staff about strategic decisions and ensure they comprehend the strategy's present and future objectives. "There are even [occasions] that some staff stops us on campus and asks us about the strategic decision of the university" (Professor Hon). Academics generally have the feeling that "we value the national evaluation" (Dr. Lou), and, therefore, they are spontaneously willing to know more about the strategy for better evaluation results. Both a sense of honour and a collective ideology can stimulate these responses. Second, most of the academics who were interviewed have either administrative or management experience. The university encourages academics to fulfil their service by taking on these roles. Such positions usually have the responsibility of understanding institutional strategies. Thus, the proportion of staff with a closer link and better understanding of the institutional strategy is relatively high. Third, academics seem to enjoy discussing the institutional strategy with their colleagues that "we would like to discuss the actions and plans when we have [a] meeting or just having lunch" (Dr. Fang). As a result, academics who have never held an administrative or managerial role can still understand the institutional strategy through their colleagues.

The awareness of the instructional strategy could be "very different from one subject to another" (Professor Shang). In addition to disciplinary differences, "the developmental level of the subjects that require different resource[s] and [have] different direction[s]" also played a role (Professor Shang). This means that some disciplines are more reliant on the resources allocated by the university through its strategic decisions. For example, engineering requires more resources than other disciplines "like humanities and arts" (Professor Shang). Therefore, academics from departments that require more resources from the university may recognize institutional strategies more than those who do not.

### Attitude—Generally neutral with extreme cases

The majority of the academics interviewed (22 out of 27) believed that the institutional strategy positively influenced or at least held a positive intention for undergraduate teaching development.

Participants suggested that the strategy's content quality is crucial to how academics feel about strategies. Professor Song stated that the strategic document should “have short and clear principle[s] and detailed, well-written rules”. In other words, the strategy must be precise and comprehensive and easily understood by all audiences.

However, some sharp arguments emerged regarding the influence of institutional strategy. Some academics referred to notions of academic freedom compromised by institutional strategies. According to Professor Lio, the logic was that ‘the institutional strategy is simply chasing indicators, which is the opposite of academic freedom. [Academics] should be guaranteed to be able to research and teach whatever they want’. The relationship between the achievements that the institutional strategy is pursuing, and academic freedom should recognise that ‘the free environment for academics is the cause of generating more achievements naturally instead of pushing and regulating academics through the strategy’ (Professor Lio). Institutional strategy should position the higher education institutions as “the lab of the society” that “should encourage and allow a certain degree of risk and uncertainty but not only researching and teaching the traditional and popular knowledge” (Professor Lio). This assertion also relates to the notion of innovative teaching that should be not only about new and advanced ideas but also about unpopular studies regardless of cost and effort. However, strategies that prioritise the efficiency of indicators are unable to achieve this goal.

### Academics' recognition and response to the institutional strategy

The principle of “teaching always comes first” (Professor Shang) was widely recognised by academics. Thus, “classroom teaching is always the priority compared to other work like conference[s], meeting[s] and other management chores” (Professor Lio). Regulation stipulated that an “academic cannot ask for absence if we have the class to teach at the same time” (Professor Shiyin). In other words, the institutional strategy strengthens the idea of prioritising teaching, and academics fully recognise of that by applying it into their academic planning and practice. In the following sections, three themes are identified in relation to the strategic decisions and their impact on academic practices.

### Talent recruitment

The university strategy addressed the rising standard for recruiting new academics. In other words, the requirement for a degree is increasing. Individuals with a master's degree are less likely to serve as academic staff at the university. Furthermore, the number of academics with postdoctoral experience is

on the rise, reflecting an increasing emphasis on research experience and achievements. Additionally, global academic mobility is one way to develop higher education's internationalisation. Recruiting academic staff from overseas can be a straightforward and efficient approach, as evidenced by quantitatively measured reports such as rankings. Therefore, accepting overseas degrees is a "growing trend" (Dr. Lou), indicating the "internationalisation progress" (Professor Hoo) instructed by the university. Recruiting international academics may also contribute to the publication in foreign language journals (especially English) because they possess strong language skills and are more familiar with foreign and international criteria. The higher recruitment standards lead to a more competitive environment in academia. On the one hand, they have the potential to "improve the overall quality of higher education in China's Mainland because the qualified academics who used to be able to join the top university now have to go to less prestigious universities, so now these academics will improve the quality of those universities" (Professor Wei). However, the increasing recruitment standards do not necessarily imply higher teaching standards; rather, they place a greater emphasis on research achievement. Therefore, whether academics with stronger research capabilities can improve higher education by providing good quality teaching for undergraduate students remains unclear.

### Curriculum and pedagogy reform

Academics reflected mostly on their practices in relation to the curriculum reform instructed by the university through the institutional strategy. This reform included diverse tracks of undergraduate programmes, an emphasis on transferrable skills and employment, examination reforms, the importance of supervision, modernising teaching technology, the curriculum's humanities ideology, and confidence in education.

In general, the university aims to cultivate "future leaders for all walks of life" (Mr. Tong), and the corresponding curriculum is designed to provide more opportunities for undergraduates' multidisciplinary studies. The undergraduate curriculum was reviewed and experienced a significant change called '2+X'. This module system for undergraduates offers different courses in which students can enrol. "The '2' represents 'two ways' of education. One is professional education, and the other is general education. Professional education plus general education is this '2' " (Mr. Tong). The "X" represents four choices for education: the traditional approach of continuing the selected major's advanced courses; further pursuing the study by attending "honour courses" at the postgraduate level; choosing cross-discipline development by "learn[ing] the core modules and have enough credits from other faculties as another major" (Mr. Tong); and the innovation and entrepreneurship route with options of selecting courses from multiple different faculties. The design of these four approaches enables students to select the one most appropriate for their undergraduate studies. Apart from diversifying students' choices in shaping their higher education experiences, the curriculum reform encourages collaboration and communications between academics from different faculties.

In addition to reforming the various tracks of undergraduate study, the university places a greater emphasis on preparing students with transferable skills for employment. Academics are inviting experts from different businesses to give a comprehensive picture of the real environment of the job market. For instance, the redesigned course follows the same development process as a career-development programme for software company employees, ensuring alignment with the employment market.

Originally, software engineering courses were organised in the order of requirements, design, implementation, and testing. But in the actual context [of working as a soft engineer], their growth experience is reversed. ...So, our course has been revisited two years ago, and now completely aligned with the actual development model of an employee in the software industry. (Professor Shiyin)

This redesign has also led to reforming the teaching material to better suit the courses' purpose and design instead of using existing or classic textbooks.

Another topic is teaching with technology, which is increasingly utilised at the university for supporting teaching and learning. However, teaching technology is widely considered "not practical" (Dr. Ko) and "meaningless" (Professor Haoz). On the one hand, for some disciplines, for example, mathematically related courses, the modernised approaches for teaching are not useful at all.

Once I used slides in class, and it was awful. This is related to the nature of the subject of mathematics because calculating processes have to be written all the time. My students can follow my reasoning if I use chalkboard writing. This is a traditional teaching method of the subject, which has been inherited. (Dr. Ko)

On the other hand, "it requires a tremendous amount of time to understand and deploy these technologies, but the difference is not obvious in the classroom" (Dr. Whei). Applying modernised methods for teaching does not necessarily make teaching more efficient. Instead, it requires a significant amount of time for academics to understand how to use the application. In practice, some disciplines do not heavily rely on technology (even engineering, which is generally considered a more technologically involved discipline). The university's desire to improve teaching methods by introducing technologies is understandable, but it is the individual academic to determine whether such technology can be adopted in their disciplines.

To summarise, as one of the National Key Universities of China, the university has a long-standing reputation for providing quality education and achieving research outputs. From the institutional perspective of adopting concepts of New Public Management (assuming the institutional strategic documents are representative of senior management ideas), the university is applying institutional strategies (both university-wide and educational-wise) as one of the main approaches to managing the

university for improving teaching and learning. According to the strategic documents, the values of the Communist Party of China exert a significant influence on the university's development, ensuring alignment with the government and national goals. In practice, however, the university's party leadership has fewer responsibilities in detailed implementation. Furthermore, promoting internationalisation through academic mobility is another key strategy for improving the university's quality and competitiveness.

The interviews at the university revealed that the impression of how academics see institutional strategy is complex. The academic staff were generally aware of the existence of the strategy, owing to the wide and repetitive discussion among the staff. Some academics with administrative responsibilities tended to be more knowledgeable about the strategy and were willing to share with their colleagues. In other words, the university's overall environment supported the sharing and discussion of strategies. Academics generally had a mild attitude towards the university applying strategies to guide academic practice. However, some had strong opposing opinions, especially concerning academic autonomy, which leads to questioning how academics felt about the interaction between managerial and academic concepts in higher education. According to academics' responses, the need for strategies to set priorities for a large-scale university like the university was mostly understood. However, there is a concern that managerial interference with academic practice would limit their choices of what to research and what to teach.

At the university, academics assumed that the university used a 'shortcut' to improve the quality of education by recruiting academics with greater research achievements rather than providing training and support for academics to develop their teaching skills. In addition, the motivation to improve teaching is sometimes hindered by insufficient resources provided for academics to research and study their disciplines, for example, library resources. In specific, academics felt that access to academic output, for example, journals or books, is limited. Furthermore, services like scanning or reserving materials from the library for academics were not provided.

As for the pedagogical sphere, although introducing teaching technology was to improve the effectiveness and efficiency in teaching and learning, it proved to be a struggle between strategic guidance and actual practice. Academics felt there was too strong an imposition from the institution on the application of modernised teaching methods as well as neglect of discipline characteristics.

## **Discussion**

Many of the earlier studies favoured the single logic and resisted the other logic in the organisations (Greenwood & Hinings, 1993). Scholars argued that the blending of institutional logics would confuse and endanger the organisation's identity, lead to activity-level conflicts, and generate uncertainty and ambiguity for the employees. Nevertheless, recent research has shown that both blending and hybridity are more widespread than assumed and that organisations can be intentional and goal-oriented in this



process (Greenwood, et al., 2009). Despite the potential misalignment of managerial and academic logic with broad principles and values, Canhila et al. (2016) provide evidence that specific tasks achieve compatibility through case-by-case solutions. Universities are indeed moving towards management under the increasing impact of New Public Management, introducing more managerial elements of hierarchy and rationality (Seeber, 2020). In this study, the use of institutional strategies reflects the incorporation of New Public Management in higher education regarding centralisation and the intention of promoting quality with effectiveness. The details in the institutional strategy align with the concepts of quality assurance, evaluation, market orientation, and technology promotion.

This study, as a research output in the academic field of managerial logic and academic logic interconnection, recommends that higher education employs more concepts from New Public Management: for example, accountability, resource allocation, and performance and evaluation. Nonetheless, this research demonstrates that higher education management is not necessarily detrimental to teaching and learning. University staff dislike when managerial tactics are employed to restrict academics' behaviour or establish rigid performance benchmarks. However, a greater number of academics appreciate it when universities offer clear explanations of their resource-distribution demands.

This argument may be contested by scholars who believe that using such management approaches interferes with academics' academic autonomy. However, according to field research, many academics, especially those with leadership roles, strongly recognise university management, and some of them support it by creating and implementing strategic university decisions. In other words, the adoption of management concepts and approaches, along with adherence to managerial responsibilities, strengthens managerial logic. Additionally, the fieldwork revealed that more early-career academics recognised this tendency that universities are more managed; they viewed this as the status quo of higher education's evolution, with fewer critiques regarding the negative influence on their academic practices. This perspective can relate to their experience of achieving their PhD degrees in such an environment. Most grew accustomed to it and felt comfortable with the universities' approaches.

Therefore, the argument arises that university management does not necessarily impede academic success. However, in this research, although it might seem that managerial logic and academic logic are in a 'marriage', the element of management value is more dominant, and there are not much many 'emergent' strategies emerging from practices. This can be partially explained in the Chinese context of higher education. Higher education in China has the core function of serving national development (Hao, 2004; Pan, 2005). The close relationship between academics and politics is rooted in China's historical development (Wang & Jones, 2021). Through a variety of policies and regulations, national ideology has dominated the Chinese higher education system. Although the universities now have more institutional autonomy (Huang, 2017), the empirical evidence shows that academics in Chinese universities are overall used to certain types of top-down instructions. This aligns with the fact that the

higher education system in China is significantly impacted by national and regional policies. The difference is that the institutional strategy may become more impactful than the country's policies.

The imbalanced relationship may not lead to a sustainable relationship between managerial logic and academic logic. In other words, even though the university may become more 'successful' based on objective indicators, for example, a better position in the global rankings or an increasing number of undergraduate applications, it is at the cost of academic freedom in both teaching and research. On the contrary, academics might feel overwhelmed with managerial concepts and practices in the academic environment, which may lead to conflicts with university leadership. Instead of promoting effectiveness, and teaching quality in particular, there is a potential that inharmony can drive in the opposite direction of higher education development. As a result, a balance between university control and support is essential for varied academic attitudes and responses towards the university's management.

In the literature review, I differentiated hard management and soft management, as well as active management and passive management. From an institutional perspective, this research's selected university appears to actively manage itself through widely recognised strategies. Additionally, the university fosters an environment where the use of specific management tools can enhance its competitiveness. Based on academics' feedback, the university has overall a 'soft' approach to managing daily academic practices. However, the university also employs certain 'hard management' approaches in curriculum and pedagogy, such as institutional-wide reforms for undergraduate degrees and course redesigns for market organisation purposes. Maintaining a balance has always been crucial. Universities can diminish hard management and active management at a certain level by being softer and more passive. In addition, universities are expected to show more support to academics when applying strategies that the staff appreciates. For example, rather than imposing modern teaching techniques on all disciplines and courses, universities can support the academics' course design by providing the technology that they feel is appropriate and suitable.

## Conclusion

From an institutional perspective, the university is adopting institutional strategies (both university-wide and educational-wise) as one of the main approaches to managing the university. According to the strategic documents, the Communist Party of China's value has an overarching influence on the university's development to align with the government and national goals.

Following the interviews with academics, the impression of how academics see institutional strategy is complex. The academic staff were generally aware of the existence of the strategy, owing to the wide and repetitive discussion among the staff. Some academics with administrative responsibilities tended to be more knowledgeable about the strategy and were willing to share it with their colleagues. In other words, the university's overall environment supports the sharing and discussion of strategies. Academics generally had a mild attitude towards the university, applying strategies to guide academic

practice. However, some strong opposing opinions existed, especially concerning academic autonomy, which led to questioning how academics felt about the interaction between managerial and academic concepts in higher education. Among all the impacts of strategic decisions, what academics recognised most were the higher standard in recruitment, the resources for supporting academics' work, including both in and out of the classroom, and the curriculum and pedagogy reform.

This study effectively demonstrates the impact of strategic decisions on teaching and learning practices in a Chinese research university, while also shedding light on the interaction and application of managerial and academic logic in undergraduate education. By contextualising academics' perceptions, one can assume that academics are increasingly accepting the use of managerial concepts and tools. By balancing the delicate differences between 'support' and 'control', using some management approaches may have a positive impact on teaching and learning in research universities.

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