

The Academic Governance Model with Chinese Characteristics: Institutional Representation and Optimization Path of Academic Contract System

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Abstract: The academic contract system is a distinctive academic governance model with Chinese characteristics. The current academic field involves three logical interactions: administrative power, market competition, and academic power. The academic contract system is essentially a mixed governance form that integrates hierarchical, project-based, and tournament based systems. Based on a thorough analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the academic outsourcing system, this study proposes relevant suggestions for further optimizing the academic outsourcing system, such as strengthening the construction of autonomous norms for academic communities, establishing flexible evaluation goals, and improving the collaborative mechanism between academic contractors. The academic outsourcing system provides a new perspective for studying the academic governance model with Chinese characteristics. This research perspective helps to shift the overall operational mechanism of academic governance from static disclosure to dynamic depiction, and also facilitates pushing the academic governance concept of the binary opposition between bureaucracy and academic autonomy towards a more complex and interactive thinking framework.

1. Introduction

The term "governance" is a concept with rich connotations. In the field of political science, it was initially used to refer to the structure and practice of international political coordination and control lacking supreme power, and later was used to refer to the internal and external politics of a country.^[1] Its basic meaning is to maintain order within a certain range through authority, regulate, guide and control various activities under different institutional backgrounds within that range, and ultimately maximize public interests.^[2] Zhou Lian (2014) pointed out that the governance system of the Chinese government has its particularity. It is an administrative contracting system that is different from Weber's bureaucratic system and pure contract system. The governance model in China is a formal organization that contracts internal affairs layer by layer under unified authority. It is an internal contracting system that occurs within administrative organizations.^[3]

The concept of administrative contracting system has attracted widespread attention in the academic community since its inception. Many scholars have also extended it to the field of academic

governance. The so-called academic governance refers to the process of controlling, guiding, and regulating all academic affairs within universities. The main body of academic governance is all academic stakeholders within universities. Its purpose is to ensure the academic research of professors, academic freedom, and academic independence. Under the influence of governance models in other fields, the academic governance model of universities in China has gradually shown a contracting system characteristic with a "lump sum" color. This study refers to this academic governance model as the academic contract system. This is a metaphorical concept proposed in reference to the administrative contracting system. The academic contract system refers to a contract relationship formed between the government and universities, society and universities, and within university organizations around academic tasks. This institutional form is deeply embedded in academic affairs as a practical way of disciplinary construction. This type of contract relationship runs through the entire academic governance system in China. It exists not only between the government and universities, but also between society and universities. They significantly exist within university organizations and directly affect academic governance practices.

2. Institutional Characterization of Academic Contract System

The academic contract system has its unique characteristics that are different from administrative contract systems or other contract systems. The particularity of university organizations and the group of university teachers determines that the academic contract system is not a natural continuation of contract systems in other fields within university organizations. On the one hand, university organizations are essentially a special organization that is both loose and coupled. Academic governance cannot be achieved solely through a hierarchical system. It cannot be achieved solely through contract. There are both hierarchical organizations that emphasize unity and relatively loose academic organizations within university organizations. This means that the academic contract system is a mixed governance form that integrates hierarchical, project-based, and tournament based systems.

On the other hand, university teachers are a special group with "dual loyalties" characteristics. University teachers should be loyal to both their school and the academic community they work in.^[4] The relationship between administrative functional departments at all levels within universities and teachers responsible for frontline teaching and research is not purely administrative. The interests and goals between university organizations and university teachers are not exactly the same. However, under the operation of the academic contract system, there is a strong connection between the interests of both parties. There is a unique dual incentive relationship between the contracting parties at all levels: university organizations hope to enhance the overall performance of the university through the academic performance of individual teachers. University teachers also hope to expand their development space by obtaining academic resources through university organizations.

Overall, there are three logical interactions in the current academic field: administrative power, market competition, and academic power. Academic resources are allocated in a specialized manner from top to bottom according to the intentions of the contracting party. Ultimately, it presents a contract relationship that integrates the core elements of hierarchical, project-based, and tournament based systems. On this basis, the academic contract system has become based on a hierarchical system. It is a special existence with project-based system as the institutional means and academic championships as the institutional spirit, and its institutional representation is reflected in the following three aspects.

(1) Allocation of Academic Governance Power

On the allocation of academic governance power, on the one hand, the contracting party within the university organization has formal authority and residual control. They hold the power of approval,

guidance, supervision, personnel, veto, and intervention related to academic affairs. This also means that the role of the contracting party is mostly undertaken by the school's administrative personnel. The academic governance power within university organizations has formed a system that starts from the university management department and goes through the relevant heads of departments and departments. The step-by-step communication and decomposition path in the hands of teachers and even graduate students who ultimately reach the forefront of scientific research. In this process, various levels and types of universities, based on their own situation, communicate and deploy academic affairs within the university through signing task letters, responsibility letters, project bidding, and other means. University related projects, tasks, policies, and even power are gradually decomposed and distributed according to the hierarchical relationships within the university.

(2) Academic Resource Incentives

Under the influence of market competition logic, the allocation of academic resources within university organizations is not carried out through instructions given by school management personnel. Ultimately, it is the contracting parties at all levels who strive to obtain resources from the higher-level contracting parties based on the number of projects, tasks, and indicators they have completed. It is the result of a bargaining power. The enrollment indicators, research funds, and other resources in the hands of each department, department, and teacher, as well as the salaries, benefits, professional titles, and other benefits of teaching staff, are to a considerable extent linked to their academic projects, tasks, and indicators. It indicates that in order for departments and colleges to obtain more development resources or for teaching staff at all levels to receive higher salaries, they must strive to complete the tasks assigned by superiors and take the initiative to undertake business. University teachers strive for more academic resources to achieve more academic KPIs. In the end, a strong incentive state centered around academic resources was formed within the university. The multi-level contracting parties within the university engage in various competitive games and competitions around the academic resources provided by their respective superiors.

(3) Academic Performance Accountability Mechanism

In the academic contract system, academic performance accountability is essential and obvious. Under the influence of the New Public Management Movement, the results oriented academic performance accountability mechanism has become an important governance tool for school management departments. It specifically manifests as the superior contracting party using the projects successfully applied and completed by the contractor, the number of papers, and the performance indicators required by the responsibility letter as the evaluation basis, and conducting work assessments on relevant units, responsible persons, and members. Under this mechanism, the higher-level contracting party of the university assigns academic tasks layer by layer. School leaders may not be concerned about whether the contractor's abilities and conditions are sufficient to support the completion of the task. The university management department has not continuously paid attention to or followed up on the progress of specific academic research. Ultimately, all levels of contracting parties and contractors only rely on academic output to determine success or failure. Over time, under this internal control, the contractor applies to the employer for the necessary development resources and promotion qualifications based on the academic achievements obtained. The contracting party satisfies its own development needs with the academic achievements submitted by the contracting party. Both sides strive to achieve maximum academic output with minimal investment. Ultimately, a rigid normative supervision and effective constraints were formed.^[5]

3. Analysis of the Advantages and Disadvantages of Academic Contract System

As an intermediate form of academic governance, the academic contract system objectively meets the practical requirements of the current academic development of Chinese universities. But its many

unavoidable drawbacks are worth being vigilant about. We need to comprehensively examine the rationality and limitations of the academic contract system. This article suggests utilizing the advantages of this system and avoiding its disadvantages as much as possible.

(1)The Advantages of Academic Contract System

Firstly, the academic contract system helps to reduce academic governance costs and improve academic governance efficiency. The academic contract system assigns responsibilities to the next level of contractors through a hierarchical approach of assigning tasks and decomposing indicators. At the same time, the digital management of academic achievements and the performance accountability system can make it clear to the employer the implementation of academic tasks or indicators at a glance. It greatly reduces the cost and difficulty of academic affairs supervision and management.

Secondly, the academic contract system helps to flexibly handle internal academic affairs within universities. It can adjust the direction of governance in a timely manner. The degree and scope of academic contract are usually determined by the balance between the quality pressure of academic development and governance efficiency, and are flexibly adjusted according to the development of the school. On the one hand, when academic governance prioritizes efficiency, the contracting party will increase the control of administrative power. Universities strive to reduce academic costs as much as possible while mobilizing the enthusiasm of contractors. On the other hand, when academic governance prioritizes quality, the contracting party tends to delegate some of the power of academic governance to departments or teachers. The university will emphasize quality assessment.

Thirdly, the academic contract system helps to stimulate the rapid output of academic achievements and guide the development of disciplines towards major national strategic needs. The projects pursued by universities often serve the major strategic needs of the country. The academic contract system contracts various tasks layer by layer and standardizes the scope of activities through the signing of indicator task agreements. Under the multiple effects of formal authority, resource incentives, and performance accountability mechanisms, each contractor assumes responsibility for digital indicators. It thus forms self-restraint and quality pressure. Universities ultimately produce scientific research results through this approach, serving national strategic needs.

(2)The Disadvantages of Academic Contract System

Firstly, the academic contract system implies a conflict and game between administrative power and academic power. It hides a threat to academic freedom within universities. The contracting party with administrative power has the formal power and residual control to manage academic affairs. Administrative power is transmitted layer by layer downwards along with academic tasks. This to some extent means that academic power is dependent on administrative power. Meanwhile, this process constrains the academic autonomy and creativity of teachers, producing mostly planned knowledge.^[6]

Secondly, the academic contract system can easily lead to unfair distribution of academic resources. This system induces the Matthew effect and theater effect within universities. Under the academic contract system, the allocation of academic resources is often based on the completion of academic tasks. However, the completion of academic tasks is highly dependent on the academic resources available. In this way, key disciplines with better contracting qualifications and a few professors will rely on their cumulative advantages to become stronger. This "Matthew effect" will further trigger the "theater effect". This means that different departments, disciplines, or teachers are willing to engage in vicious competition for development resources. Even more severe cases may choose illegal means such as bribery and collusion.

Thirdly, the academic contract system provides institutional space for the distorted development of the scientific research concept of "seeking quantity but not quality". It exacerbates academic internalization. The academic contract system contracts academic affairs layer by layer, using

quantitative performance indicators for result oriented academic evaluation. This approach of digitizing academic research neglects the long-term effectiveness of academic research and the inherent laws of knowledge development. Such a system will be managed in a strong incentive and academic performance accountability manner for a long time, which will blur the true purpose of academic exploration. Researchers have become eager for quick success and instant benefits in pursuit of a large number of papers.

4. Analysis of the Optimization Path of Academic Contract System

In summary, the academic contract system reflects the distinct and unique characteristics of academic governance in Chinese universities. It has both rationality and limitations. Therefore, it is necessary for this study to carefully consider the possible paths for institutional optimization from three aspects: conceptual integration, goal transfer, and mode transformation.

(1) Service Integration with Integrated Concepts

The academic contracting system is guided by an interactive mechanism between the superior contracting party and the subordinate contracting party, and the contracting party must complete the various tasks entrusted by the contracting party on time. They are essentially a dual incentive relationship based on a hierarchical system. It carries the risk of academic power being attached to administrative power. Due to the fact that tasks in academic affairs are a vague concept. We can enable all potential academic organizations, academic teams, and student and faculty groups to explore according to their research interests. Schools or colleges provide corresponding incentives and follow-up support based on the initial impact and clustering level of academic achievements. Although the assessment pressure on teachers and researchers has not decreased, they have at least gained some freedom. They don't have to be anxious and anxious about their bags. It is beneficial for conducting teaching and research with peace of mind, and this approach is easier to condense the development direction of characteristic disciplines. In addition to promoting academic contract, the government should actively implement the academic governance concept of "purchasing services". Universities and governments work together to create a relaxed, healthy, and sustainable ecological environment for academic development.

(2) Target Transfer and Flexible Distribution of Tasks

The professionalism and unpredictability of academic research determine that it is a work that does not fully develop according to a timeline. Academic research is not a socialized large-scale production of assembly line operations, and it is difficult to rely solely on digital indicators for planning and management.^[7] Therefore, the goal of the academic contract system urgently needs to shift from "rigid contract" to "flexible contract". On the one hand, universities should avoid imposing too many restrictions on contractors. They need to constantly monitor changes in the conditions and capabilities of the contractors, and flexibly adjust task indicators. This can avoid the abnormal development of academic work. On the other hand, universities should continuously optimize their academic evaluation system to achieve a shift in evaluation orientation from "faithful orientation" to "adaptive orientation". In the process of academic contract, universities should comply with the laws of disciplinary development and respect the autonomy, generation, and long-term effectiveness of academic development. The university department should effectively safeguard academic development and innovation.

(3) Mode Shift: From "competitive contracting" to "collaborative contracting"

In order to achieve fair distribution of academic resources and continuously improve academic quality, the academic contract system needs to shift from "competitive contract" to "collaborative contract". From a systemic perspective, the academic contract system exhibits a clear "horizontal competition" relationship. The transformation of the contracting method from "competition" to

"collaboration" is an inevitable requirement for maximizing its positive impact. Collaborative contracting requires the process of contracting projects, tasks, indicators, and other affairs. Academic contractors at different levels need to communicate and negotiate effectively, while academic contractors at the same level should collaborate on research and development based on the principle of complementary advantages. The university department needs to further improve the supervision mechanisms of the administrative and academic systems. Universities should strengthen the collaborative mechanism between academic contractors, promote information disclosure and resource sharing, and fully mobilize the initiative and enthusiasm of all levels of contracting parties and contractors.

In summary, the academic contract system is a rethinking of the "contract system" characteristics of academic affairs governance in the academic field, referring to the ideal type of mixed governance form of administrative contract system. In other words, the academic contract system provides a new perspective for studying the academic governance model with Chinese characteristics. This research perspective helps to shift the overall operational mechanism of academic governance from static disclosure to dynamic depiction. It is also conducive to pushing the academic governance thinking of the binary opposition between bureaucracy and academic autonomy towards a more complex and interactive thinking framework. However, given the complexity of the academic field, there are still many shortcomings in the current exploration of the academic contracting system, and further theoretical research and practical observation are needed.

5. The Enlightenment of Chinese University Governance

The Enlightenment of Chinese university governance refers to the process of adopting and implementing principles and practices derived from the Western concept of university governance, particularly those associated with the Enlightenment era. The Enlightenment was a philosophical and intellectual movement that took place in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries, emphasizing reason, science, and individual liberty.

In the context of Chinese university governance, the Enlightenment principles can be seen as a departure from traditional top-down authoritarian approaches to a more participatory and inclusive model. This shift aims to enhance academic freedom, foster critical thinking, promote transparency, and improve the overall quality of higher education institutions.

Implementing the Enlightenment principles in Chinese university governance is an ongoing process that requires continuous efforts and reforms. While progress has been made, challenges remain, including striking a balance between autonomy and government oversight, ensuring academic freedom in politically sensitive areas, and addressing socio-economic disparities among universities. However, with a commitment to these principles, Chinese universities can benefit from the Enlightenment's legacy and contribute to knowledge creation, social progress, and global engagement.

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