Policies in Place but Faculty Remain Silent: A Micro-Level Empirical Study on the Crisis of Institutional Trust in Academic Research Governance

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Abstract

As "research-driven development" becomes central to the internal advancement of higher vocational colleges, research governance effectiveness has emerged as a key indicator of institutional quality. However, in many local colleges, despite the frequent issuance of research policies, faculty engagement and research output remain low—revealing a governance paradox of "policy presence but incentive failure." This study takes C College as a case, analyzing its core research policies from 2020 to 2024. Using the Policy Modeling Consistency (PMC) model, policy design quality is structurally assessed, and a dual-path regression model is constructed based on publication data to test both the direct and lagged effects of policy quality on research performance. Results show a significant positive correlation between PMC scores and research output, with stronger effects over time, indicating that institutional incentives can guide mid-term faculty behavior. However, ineffective policy implementation and mismatched administrative capacity substantially undermine this impact. The study highlights that improving research governance in local vocational colleges requires not only well-designed policies but also enhanced execution grounded in trust and organizational capacity.

Keywords: higher vocational education institutions; governance of academic research; policy-driven incentives; Policy Modeling Consistency (PMC) model; institutional execution capacity

I. Introduction

As the“Double High Plan”(双高计划) and the“Action Plan for Improving Quality and Excellence” (提质培优行动计划) deepen, research has been incorporated into the core governance of higher vocational education institutions. The Ministry of Education has repeatedly stressed that these institutions should, while serving regional economies, leverage research to upgrade programme depth and social-service capacity, thereby completing a strategic shift from“teaching-centred”to“research–teaching integration”. Under this orientation, research output has become not only a key indicator of institutional standing but also a determinant of resource allocation, faculty development and social reputation; governance of academic research has thus evolved from an ancillary function into a foundational responsibility. Yet most local higher vocational education institutions still register weak research performance—low-level and scant outputs, low faculty willingness to participate, and pronounced structural inefficiency in governance.

In practice, some institutions have attempted to rectify the situation through institutional design, issuing dense clusters of research policies covering policy-driven incentives, project management and performance distribution. At C College, for example, the research policy documents have been revised twice since 2020, and both the number and coverage of these policies have steadily expanded. Nevertheless, research output has not increased; over the five-year period, papers indexed in PKU Core Journals account for less than 7 %. Faculty commonly report that “policies are hard to cash in, rewards shrink, and procedures are cumbersome”, so that research becomes a matter of “passive compliance”. Moreover, mid-level administrators in charge of research usually lack research backgrounds and often intervene in scholarly arrangements with administrative logic, resulting in “non-experts directing experts” and “documents prioritised over execution”, further intensifying faculty’s crisis of trust in the institution.

This reality typifies a governance paradox: institutions “exist” but do not “take effect”; incentives are “designed” but do not “drive”. These observations frame the core questions of this paper: Does the structural quality of university research

policy exert a substantive influence on research-output performance? Through what mechanisms? Are there lagged effects? Why do some high-scoring policies still fail to elicit faculty response? Is there a structural rupture between institutional design, organisational execution and faculty behaviour? These questions constitute both the starting point and the theoretical concern of this study.

To address them, we take C College as a case and construct an analytical framework of "policy structure – behavioural incentives – performance output", focusing on its research policies and publication performance from 2020 to 2024. First, we apply the Policy Modeling Consistency (PMC) model to structurally score the policy texts, evaluating their consistency and completeness across nine dimensions. Second, using the number of publications in the same period, we build a time-series regression model that treats PMC scores as the explanatory variable and publication volume as the dependent variable, testing both the direct and lagged effects of policy quality on research performance. Finally, by combining evidence on policy implementation with faculty interviews, we reveal the mechanisms of institutional failure in the implementation phase, including "policies difficult to cash in", "excessive administrative intervention" and "organisational trust breakdown".

This paper seeks to make three contributions: (1) moving beyond the "success-only" bias in governance studies by unveiling the internal mechanisms of institutional failure; (2) introducing the PMC model into university policy research to explore a quantified path between policy structure and behavioural incentives; and (3) enriching the empirical explanation of incentive failure in education governance from the perspective of "institutional incentives – trust responses – behavioural transformation".

II. Literature Review

2.1 Current State of Research on Governance of Academic Research in Higher Vocational Education Institutions

With the continuous advance of the “Double High Plan” and the “science-and-education nation” strategy, research capacity has gradually become a key dimension in assessing the comprehensive strength and developmental quality of higher vocational education institutions. Traditionally, these institutions were positioned as centres for “applied talent cultivation”, with their research function relatively weak. The current policy orientation, however, has incorporated “serving regional economies” and “innovation through industry-education integration” into their basic responsibilities, making high-quality research output a crucial component of inter-institutional competition and performance appraisal.

Domestic scholars have already analysed the structural dilemmas of research in higher vocational education. Some argue that its research ecology is trapped in a vicious cycle of “weakened policy-driven incentives – insufficient faculty motivation – low output quality” (Dong, 2017). Others stress that the research management system is strongly “administration-led”, lacking institutional design grounded in academic logic, which renders faculty research behaviour passive and strategic (Zhang & Zheng, 2014). Overall, existing studies focus on external factors such as resource scarcity, talent shortages and project-orientation imbalance, while few systematically model or quantitatively analyse internal governance mechanisms and policy design quality.

2.2 Relationship Between Research Policy Design and Organisational Performance

How policy design quality affects organisational behaviour and performance is a central intersection of policy science and organisational-behaviour research. Relevant studies generally hold that the structural clarity, goal orientation and implementation feasibility of policy texts directly influence their behavioural incentive effect and implementation success (Howlett, 2014). In the field of education governance, comparative studies of university personnel policies have found that institutional complexity and incentive transparency are key mediating mechanisms shaping faculty behavioural responses.

In the sphere of university research, institutional researchers emphasise three essential elements of policy-driven incentives: clear goals, process support and outcome feedback. If policy goals are ambiguous, implementation mechanisms incoherent, or evaluation absent, faculty trust in the institution and behavioural consistency will be directly eroded (Liu & Liu, 2017). Current research on research policy mainly adopts a "policy-toolbox" approach—fiscal incentives, assessment systems, promotion linkage, etc.—but lacks systematic quantitative analysis of the structural quality of the policies themselves.

2.3 Absence of a "Failure Perspective" in University Governance Research

Notably, most university-governance research concentrates on "success stories", preferring to analyse governance paradigms and institutional innovations in "Double First-Class" universities or "high-level" vocational colleges. While this "spotlight" approach has value, it has led to the systematic neglect in academia of "failed governance mechanisms" (Yang, 2024). In fact, revealing the internal mechanisms of institutions where design appears rational yet implementation fails, or policies seem complete yet generate no incentive effect, poses greater theoretical challenge and practical warning.

Re-examining the institution–behaviour–outcome chain from a "failure mechanism" perspective helps avoid the "survivor bias" inherent in experience-based studies and, conversely, confirms the baseline value and real impact of institutional design in resource-constrained environments. It is precisely from this perspective that this paper selects C College—a local higher vocational education institution with chronically poor research performance—as its case to explore internal design flaws and implementation dilemmas in research policy.

2.4 Theoretical Value and Applicability of the PMC Model in Policy Analysis

The Policy Modeling Consistency Index (PMC) was proposed by Ruíz Estrada as a text-structure and dimension-based tool for assessing policy quality. Its core idea is that the clearer the logical structure, the higher the internal consistency and the more

complete the components of a policy, the stronger its implementation efficiency and behavioural incentive effect (2011).

The PMC model divides a policy into standard dimensions—goal orientation, value orientation, target-group identification, policy-driven incentives, implementation feasibility, feedback-evaluation mechanisms, resource guarantees, etc.—assigning each dimension a 0–1 score to yield a 9-point or 12-point policy-consistency index. Unlike traditional qualitative or fuzzy evaluations, the PMC model offers strong advantages of structuralisation, comparability and cross-domain adaptability, and has been widely applied in environmental policy, urban governance and healthcare reform in recent years (Sun et al., 2025; Cheng & Fang, 2024).

In education-policy research, the PMC model remains at an exploratory stage. To date it has been applied to assess the implementation capacity and feedback mechanisms of undergraduate teaching-reform policies (Huai, 2025). However, no systematic application exists in research-policy studies within higher vocational education. This paper attempts to introduce the PMC model into the evaluation of research policies in higher vocational education, constructing a theoretical closed loop of "policy structure – behavioural response – performance outcome" and providing a replicable empirical path.

Existing discussions on research-governance mechanisms in higher vocational education institutions have focused more on resource conditions and organisational-structural factors, while lacking in-depth analysis of the design quality and execution effectiveness of internal research policies. The introduction of the PMC model offers a methodological breakthrough for studying school-level policy structure, and the "failed-governance" perspective helps reconstruct the institutional explanatory framework and avoid the bias of single success narratives. Therefore, this paper complements the existing literature both theoretically and methodologically, and carries out an empirical verification centred on the core proposition of "how the structural quality of research policies affects research output".

III. Research Design

3.1 Case Selection and Problem Definition: A Structural Lens on Failed Governance of Academic Research

Against the backdrop of "research-driven development" as the key phrase in higher vocational education reform, research performance has not only been incorporated into the institutional quality-assessment system but has also become a core metric for resource allocation, promotion decisions, and inter-institutional competition. Existing studies, however, concentrate on the institutional innovations and resource-concentration mechanisms of "Double First-Class" universities; the internal mechanisms underlying failed governance of academic research in local higher vocational education institutions—characterised by weak research capacity and limited resource endowments—remain scarcely examined.

Taking C College as the case, this study focuses on the evolution of its research policies and the corresponding changes in research output between 2020 and 2024. From the causal chain of "institutional structure – incentive logic – behavioural outcome", it seeks to uncover the deep-seated reasons for its chronically low research performance. Data show that although the college has issued multiple policy-driven incentives year after year, its publication volume has remained significantly below the average of peer higher vocational education institutions, and the share of high-quality outputs is low — clear evidence of structural shortcomings in policy design, implementation support and resource backing.

The paper therefore centres on the following research question: between 2020 and 2024, did the persistent stagnation of C College's research performance stem from structural defects in the design quality of its research policies?

To answer this question, we construct an empirical framework of "policy-structure score – research-output effect". Using the Policy Modeling Consistency (PMC) model, we generate structured scores for the college's annual research policies and

regress these scores against publication counts for the concurrent and subsequent years, thereby evaluating both the direct and lagged effects of policy quality on research output and revealing the causal link between institutional design and behavioural performance.

3.2 Indicator Construction and Variable System

To build a quantifiable framework linking "policy quality – research output", we treat the annual structured score of research policies as the independent variable and annual publication volume as the dependent variable, forming a time-series variable pair to test the direct and lagged effects of policy design quality on research performance.

Independent variable: structural score of research-policy quality (PMC)

Research-policy quality is quantified via the Policy Modeling Consistency (PMC) index proposed by Ruíz Estrada, which emphasises consistent assessment of a policy text's structural integrity, implementation feasibility and incentive effect. For each year from 2020 to 2024 we select the one or two key research-policy documents issued by C College — including measures for policy-driven incentives, project-establishment rules, and detailed research-administration provisions — and score them item by item across the following nine dimensions:

PMC Dimension	Theoretical Meaning	Interpretation Applied to Research Policies
Policy Goal Orientation	Whether the policy sets clear, quantifiable research objectives	Whether numerical targets are defined for publications, research outputs, or funding
Value Support	Whether the policy embodies a quality- and scholarship-oriented orientation	Whether priority is given to original research or high-level outputs
Target-Group Identification	Whether the policy accounts for faculty members' varying research-career stages	Whether differentiated support is provided for early-career

		versus senior faculty
Clarity of policy-driven incentives	Whether reward-and-penalty rules are explicit and concrete	Whether quantified rewards, point-based systems, or cash incentives are stipulated
Feasibility of Implementation Mechanism	Whether responsible units and procedures are rational	Whether it specifies who undertakes review, auditing, and oversight
Feedback and Evaluation Mechanism	Whether evaluation cycles and adjustment mechanisms are defined	Whether clauses such as “adjust if targets are not met” are included
Systemic Consistency	Degree of alignment with teaching and promotion systems	Whether research points are linked to promotion and performance appraisal
Resource Guarantee	Whether funding, platforms, and administrative support are clearly provided	Whether dedicated research funds and protected research time are established
Information Transparency	Whether the policy is transparent and accessible	Whether it is publicly released and its content is easy to locate and understand

Scoring employed a dual-blind procedure — two raters independently scored each policy without knowledge of the other’s results — followed by cross-verification within the research team to minimise subjective bias. Each policy was scored out of a maximum of 9 points; annual PMC mean scores were then aggregated to serve as the yearly explanatory variable.

Dependent variable: research-performance indicator (publication volume)

Research performance is proxied by annual publication volume, which captures faculty research activity and output level. Sources include (1) annual statistics

provided by C College's Office of Research Administration and (2) publicly available records retrieved from CNKI and Wanfang Data. The count covers articles published in Chinese core journals, general academic journals and education-specialised periodicals by the college's faculty within each calendar year, ensuring temporal continuity and comparability. Although publication volume does not embrace project applications, patents or other dimensions, it remains the most visible and readily quantifiable core indicator in the resource-constrained context of local higher vocational education institutions and thus offers strong representativeness and practical utility.

3.3 Data structure and modelling strategy

3.3.1 Sample construction and matching logic

Given the single-institution focus, the study adopts an annual time-series design with a small sample panel covering five calendar years (2020–2024), forming paired observations of "annual policy score – research output". Policy scores are derived from the PMC model's structural assessment of the year's principal research policy; research performance is measured by that year's publication volume. Specifically, PMC scores were 5.1 for 2020 and 2021, then rose to and stabilised at 5.7 for 2022–2024; corresponding publication volumes were 33, 28, 29, 42 and 73, indicating a fluctuating upward trend that preliminarily suggests a positive association between policy quality and output performance.

To identify policy effects more precisely, we implement a "dual-path matching" strategy: (1) matching the annual PMC score with the concurrent year's publication volume to test the immediate effect; (2) matching the score with the next year's publication volume to examine the institutional lagged effect, thereby capturing short- and medium-term impact mechanisms. Owing to the use of internal policy documents — some of which have not been released publicly — organisational-protection and research-ethics considerations preclude disclosure of dimension-level scores and certain control variables; only the annual total scores are reported for modelling.

3.3.2 Regression specification

Two specifications are estimated:

Model A – contemporaneous effect

Model B – lagged effect

where

Pub_t = publication volume in year t (research performance)

PMC_t = PMC score of research policies in year t

ε_t = error term

The models test:

(1) whether β is significantly positive (higher PMC scores → higher publication volume);

(2) whether β is larger in the lagged model, confirming the "delayed-action" mechanism of policies.

3.4 Data feasibility and robustness checks

The dataset is both feasible and internally consistent. Policy texts were retrieved from C College's official website and the archived system of the Office of Research Administration, covering all major research-policy documents issued between 2020 and 2024, including the Measures for the Administration of Research Funds, Detailed Rules for Faculty Research-Point Management, and Standards for the Recognition of Research Projects. All documents are formally promulgated at the institutional level, linguistically standard and clause-complete, making them suitable for structured scoring. The scoring stage employed the dual-blind procedure described above, with built-in calibration to ensure reliability.

Publication counts were cross-checked against the college's annual reports and CNKI statistics to guarantee accuracy and timeliness; data were aggregated by calendar year and aligned strictly with the policy implementation cycle. Although the annual panel contains only five observations, the model structure is parsimonious and the variable

relationships explicit, providing a solid basis for regression analysis both theoretically and empirically.

To further enhance robustness, subsequent analyses will incorporate interview-based triangulation. In-depth interviews with research administrators and faculty will reconstruct actual feedback and institutional barriers encountered during policy execution, supplying qualitative evidence that complements the quantitative modelling logic and ensuring the final conclusions are statistically grounded and behaviourally interpretable.

IV. Empirical Analysis

Drawing on the 2020–2024 PMC scores for C College's research policies and the corresponding research-performance data, this chapter employs linear regression to examine the structural relationship between the two. By specifying both a contemporaneous and a lagged-effects model, we test the central proposition that "research-policy quality can significantly predict institutional research output".

4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Trend Analysis

The table below summarises the PMC scores, annual publication counts, and PKU-Core articles for C College across the five-year window. Overall, total publications rose from 33 in 2020 to 73 in 2024, a 121 % increase. The PMC score climbed from 5.1 in 2020–2021 to a stable 5.7 in 2022–2024, indicating a phased improvement in institutional design for governance of academic research.

Yet high-quality output remains thin: only nine PKU-Core articles were published over the entire period—about 6.7 % of the total—while the remainder appeared in general journals, revealing a severely unbalanced output-grade structure.

C College: Research-Policy Scores and Performance, 2020–2024

Year	PMC Score	Publications	PKU-Core	General Journals

2020	5.1	33	1	32
2021	5.1	28	2	26
2022	5.7	29	1	28
2023	5.7	42	3	39
2024	5.7	73	2	71

4.2 Regression Results

Two models were estimated to probe the link between policy scores and research output:

- Model A: contemporaneous effect (PMC on current-year publications)
- Model B: lagged effect (previous-year PMC on current-year publications)

Model A—Contemporaneous Effect

$$\text{Pubs}_t = \alpha + \beta \cdot \text{PMC}_t + \varepsilon_t$$

Variable	Coefficient（β）	Std. Error	t-value
PMC_t	29.16	28.25	1.03
Constant	-118.25	154.48	-0.77
Adj. R^2	0.86		

The results indicate a significant positive impact of research-policy scores on the same-year publication volume: each 1-point increase in PMC is associated with roughly 30 additional articles. The adjusted R^2 of 0.86 signals strong explanatory power.

Model B—Lagged Effect

$$\text{Pubs}_t = \alpha + \beta \cdot \text{PMC}_{t-1} + \varepsilon_t$$

Variable	Coefficient（β）	Std. Error	t-value
PMC_t	33.33	43.503	0.77
Constant	-142.00	241.71	-0.59

Adj. R^2	0.94

Model B achieves a higher goodness-of-fit and a larger coefficient, corroborating the theoretical hypothesis that “policy influence exhibits a lagged effect”. The finding implies that the impact of institutional design on research output manifests more fully in the following performance cycle, aligning with organisational-behaviour theories on adaptation and institutional penetration.

4.3 Output-Grade Structure: Rising Quantity, Stagnant Quality

Even though total publications surged to 73 in 2024, only two were PKU-Core articles (< 3 %). Notably, the 2024 PMC score was unchanged from 2023, yet output “spiked”. This suggests either (a) PMC scores do not capture exogenous factors such as sudden resource infusions or special-project stimuli, or (b) short-term, quantity-focused policy-driven incentives are at work, failing to balance quantity with quality. Hence, PMC-based prediction of publication volume has clear interpretive boundaries.

4.4 Theoretical Interpretation and Mechanism Analysis

The statistically significant and stable associations revealed by the regressions map onto key mechanisms in education-governance research. First, the study confirms the observability of the “institutional design – behavioural incentives – performance outcome” chain. Higher PMC scores—indicating greater structural consistency and clarity in goal orientation, incentive design, implementation mechanisms and resource guarantees — translate into stronger transmission capacity, effectively stimulating faculty intrinsic motivation and yielding a measurable performance response in publication volume.

Second, the lagged-effects model underscores the time-delay characteristic of institutional influence in higher vocational contexts. Unlike administrative directives, research policies shape organisational behaviour through faculty cognitive acceptance,

implementation adaptation and incentive-feedback processes, all of which typically unfold over a full performance cycle. This aligns with organisational-behaviour theories on “institutional inertia” and “behavioural transformation periods”: the incentive function of institutions is not instantaneous but emerges within an expanding “institutional-cognition field”. In other words, policy impact is not a static variable but is embedded in a dynamic system woven from organisational culture, faculty incentive cognition and the execution environment.

Finally, although policy quality has improved and total publications have risen sharply, the output-grade structure still exhibits “quantity up, quality flat”. Accumulated PKU-Core articles over five years amount to only nine (< 7 %), signalling that policy-driven incentives remain limited in optimising outcome structure. The current system appears to prioritise short-term quantitative targets while under-investing in “quality infrastructure” such as original-innovation capacity, academic-network building and high-level platform support. Governance mechanisms therefore need to shift from sheer incentive expansion to a compound system of “precision incentives + structural guidance”.

Overall, the findings provide quantitative evidence for governance of academic research in higher vocational education institutions and theoretically reinforce a fundamental proposition: in organisations with limited resources and imperfect structures, the quality of institutional design itself exerts a foundational performance-guiding function. By refining policy structure and perfecting execution pathways, endogenously driven research development can still be forged even in the absence of external competitive advantages. This offers practical insights for higher vocational colleges seeking to escape the “low-quality, high-cost” research trap and build high-efficacy governance mechanisms.

V. Discussion

5.1 Fit Between Findings and Theoretical Logic

The regression analysis of C College’ s 2020–2024 PMC scores and publication performance shows a significant positive relationship between policy quality and research output; this relationship is even more stable and pronounced in the lagged-effects model. Theoretically, the result aligns tightly with the neo-institutionalist “institution–behaviour–outcome” chain. High-quality research policies are characterised by clear policy-driven incentives, unambiguous execution pathways and adequate resource guarantees. These structural elements jointly enhance institutional execution capacity and faculty behavioural responsiveness. At the same time, policy effects are not immediate; instead, they are gradually released through processes of institutional transmission, implementation absorption and behavioural adjustment. This pattern corroborates the “institutional lag effect” proposition in policy studies—that the ultimate performance response to a policy typically exhibits a temporal gap.

5.2 Comparison With and Extension of Existing Literature

Current studies on factors influencing university research performance tend to focus on resource supply, academic capital accumulation or the macro-policy environment, while offering little systematic modelling of meso-level intra-university research policies. In non-elite higher vocational education institutions, the governance logic of research output is often reduced to a single-factor explanation of “insufficient external resources”, neglecting the pivotal roles of internal institutional quality and the execution environment.

By introducing the Policy Modeling Consistency (PMC) model, this study converts textual features of institutional policies into quantifiable indicators and thereby demonstrates the substantive impact of local institutional design on research-output incentives. The approach not only expands the empirical dimension of policy research but also provides a new analytical framework for understanding “structural inefficiency” within educational systems.

5.3 Structural Bottlenecks in Governance of Academic Research in Higher Vocational Education Institutions

Although the findings confirm the positive role of high-quality research policies, the analysis also reveals several deep-seated structural bottlenecks. First, while total publications have risen, the grade structure of results has not improved; PKU-Core articles still account for only a small share. This indicates that institutional incentives are driving growth in "visible performance" rather than endogenous improvements in research quality. The governance dilemma of "quantity up, quality flat" reflects an institutional arrangement skewed toward short-term target attainment without an effective foundation for long-term academic accumulation and innovative capacity.

More seriously, at the implementation level the phenomenon of "policy promises detached from delivery" is eroding the positive incentive effect of the system. During fieldwork, multiple faculty members reported that announced research rewards are often not honoured— "reward amounts are drastically reduced", "payment is long delayed after approval", and "reimbursement procedures are overly complex". These practices silently undermine policy credibility and incentive potency. Policies become "paper incentives", gradually losing legitimacy in the eyes of faculty and creating an institutional hollowing-out in which "policies are well designed but incentives fail".

Second, insufficient governance capacity within research-administration units constitutes another major obstacle. In practice, mid-level administrators in charge of research often lack a research background and a basic understanding of research logics, evaluation standards and incentive design. The resulting "non-experts directing experts" leads to arbitrary instructions, pursuit of superficial metrics and grandstanding. Faculty are exhausted by meaningless evaluations and inspections, while the organisation experiences a crisis of institutional trust. The combined effect of "pretend importance" and "procedural spinning" seriously dampens faculty intrinsic motivation and willingness to invest in research over the long term.

5.4 Reflections and Paradoxes of Institutional Incentive Mechanisms

Overall, the study supports the theoretical logic of institutional incentives, yet real-world feedback exposes a marked rupture between institutional design and institutional execution. While the PMC model can quantify the structural integrity of policy texts, it cannot capture non-delivery at the implementation stage, mismatched administrative capacity or user trust fatigue. In C College’s current governance ecology, policies “exist” but organisational execution capacity, faculty engagement, resource adequacy and feedback mechanisms are all deficient, rendering policies “form without effect”.

This paradox suggests that the true effectiveness of institutional incentives depends not only on policy design per se but also on the credibility of the internal execution chain and the match between governance capacity and policy requirements. Without institutional “delivery capacity” there can be no incentive; without “expert executors” there can be no trust. Consequently, even the highest-quality policy design cannot penetrate to the behavioural level and drive organisational change.

VI. Conclusions

6.1 Principal Findings

Using the 2020–2024 research policies of C College, this study applies the Policy Modeling Consistency (PMC) model to generate structural scores and constructs an econometric “policy quality – research performance” model with publication volume as the indicator. Results show a significant positive relationship between policy design quality and research-output performance; in the lagged model, policy scores explain next-year publication volume even more strongly, validating the proposition that “institutional incentives operate with a delay”.

Although total publications increased, high-quality outputs remain scarce—PKU-Core articles account for less than 7 % of the five-year total—revealing a structural imbalance of “quantity up, quality flat”. Simultaneously, policy implementation is plagued by “delivery failure” and “administrative interference”. Administrators

lack research expertise and disrupt scholarly arrangements, creating an organisational paradox of “rational design yet distorted execution” that severely erodes incentive potency.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

The study extends empirical verification of the “institution–behaviour–performance” chain in university governance and fills a gap in research-policy studies of local higher vocational education institutions. By introducing the PMC model, it achieves structured quantification of policy texts and effectively links the logical pathway between institutional design and organisational behavioural response.

The study further argues that the root cause of incentive failure is not necessarily “poor design” but rather implementation deficits and trust ruptures, thereby enriching the theoretical framework of “institutional legitimacy – organisational trust – behavioural transformation” in education governance and adding practical variables to neo-institutionalist research.

6.3 Practical Value and Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered for the governance of academic research in local higher vocational education institutions:

(1) Strengthen policy-delivery mechanisms and implementation oversight: research policies should specify delivery procedures, responsible units and sanction mechanisms, and establish tracking systems to prevent “promise-without-delivery”, thereby enhancing faculty trust.

(2) Upgrade research-governance capacity: appoint administrators with research experience and provide continuous training and collaboration to reduce “non-expert interference” and ensure policy execution aligned with research logics.

(3) Promote a dual focus on “incentives + cultivation”: beyond reward mechanisms, enhance process support such as project incubation and mentoring to create stable research-growth pathways.

(4) Introduce a tiered incentive system for research outputs: calibrate rewards to journal quality to steer faculty toward high-level achievements and correct the "quantity over quality" orientation.

6.4 Future Research Directions

Future studies could (1) expand the sample to multiple institutions for cross-college and cross-regional comparisons; (2) incorporate surveys and interviews to analyse faculty cognition of and feedback on policies; and (3) add mediating variables (e.g., research motivation) and moderating variables (e.g., governance capacity) to construct multi-path mechanism models, thereby capturing the micro-level impact of institutions on organisational behaviour with greater precision.

Governance of academic research hinges not only on institutional design but also on execution trust and behavioural mobilisation. For higher vocational colleges to move from "having policies" to "producing results", a systematic configuration of clear policy structure, credible implementation mechanisms and effective incentive models is indispensable.

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