

Faculty Perceptions of Shared Governance and Collaborative Work Environment in a University Setting: Evidence from Xiamen, China

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Abstract

University governance in China has undergone a gradual but discernible shift from centralized, top-down administration toward more participatory and collaborative arrangements. Drawing on Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh's (2012) collaborative governance framework, this study examines how faculty members at a comprehensive university in Xiamen, China, perceive shared leadership and the collaborative work environment. A descriptive-correlational survey was administered to 128 teaching staff, measuring five dimensions of shared governance (inclusivity, partnership, equity, accountability, ownership) and five dimensions of the collaborative work environment (accountability, coordination, communication, trust, transparency). Results show an overall shared-governance mean of 2.91 (SD = 0.24), interpreted as "agree/evident," with partnership (M = 2.98) the highest dimension and equity (M = 2.83) the lowest. The collaborative work environment obtained an overall mean of 2.95 (SD = 0.26), with accountability (M = 3.04) rated most favorably and transparency (M = 2.87) least. One-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences by sex, educational attainment, or length of service in most dimensions. Pearson correlation, however, was weak and non-significant ($r = .09$, $p = .34$), suggesting that favorable views of shared governance do not automatically translate into a perceived collaborative workplace. The findings point to the need for deliberate structural and cultural interventions that connect participative governance to everyday collaborative practice.

Keywords: shared governance, collaborative governance, faculty perception, higher education, university leadership, Xiamen, China

1. Introduction

Background of the Study

In the past two decades, the governance of higher education institutions has attracted renewed scholarly and policy attention worldwide. The conventional model—characterized by hierarchical authority, centralized decision-making, and a clear separation between academic and administrative domains—has increasingly been questioned for its inability to respond adequately to complex, fast-changing environments. In its place, shared governance has emerged as both a normative ideal and a practical necessity, premised on the joint participation of faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders in

decisions that affect teaching, research, and institutional direction (Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Birnbaum, 2004).

China's higher education sector has not been insulated from this shift. Since the education reforms of the late 1980s and the expansionary policies of the 1990s, Chinese universities have grown rapidly in scale while simultaneously being granted greater institutional autonomy by the state. This autonomy, however, has not automatically produced more participatory governance. As Tao and Liu (2020) observe, many Chinese institutions continue to operate within a hybrid arrangement in which formal structures remain hierarchical even as informal and network-based modes of coordination gain ground. The result is often a gap between the principles of shared governance and the daily experience of faculty. Xiamen occupies a distinctive place in this landscape. As a coastal city in Fujian province and a Special Economic Zone, it hosts a cluster of comprehensive and specialized universities that have been at the forefront of internationalization, cross-strait academic exchange, and industry-university cooperation. The university selected for this study is a multi-disciplinary institution with strong programs in engineering, teacher education, and marine sciences. Its faculty body is diverse in terms of discipline, qualification, and career stage, making it a useful setting in which to examine how shared governance is perceived across different groups.

2. Statement of the Problem

While the discourse on shared governance is well developed in the Western context, empirical evidence from Chinese universities—particularly those outside the major metropolitan centers of Beijing and Shanghai—remains limited. It is therefore not clear whether the dimensions of shared governance identified in the literature (inclusivity, partnership, equity, accountability, ownership) resonate with the experiences of faculty in Xiamen, or whether perceptions vary systematically by sex, educational attainment, or length of service. Nor is it evident whether a positive assessment of governance structures corresponds to a genuinely collaborative work environment.

3. Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the demographic profile of the teacher-respondents in terms of sex, highest educational attainment, and length of service?
2. How do teacher-respondents assess shared university leadership in terms of inclusivity, partnership, equity, accountability, and ownership?
3. Is there a significant difference in the assessment of shared university leadership when grouped by sex, highest educational attainment, and length of service?
4. How do teacher-respondents assess the collaborative work environment in terms of accountability, coordination, communication, trust, and transparency?
5. Is there a significant difference in the assessment of the collaborative work environment when grouped by sex, highest educational attainment, and length of service?
6. Is there a significant relationship between the assessment of shared university leadership and the collaborative work environment?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the literature on university governance in three ways. First, it adds empirical evidence from a Chinese city that has received comparatively little attention in governance research. Second, it examines the link between structural arrangements (shared leadership) and relational climate (collaborative work environment), an association that is often assumed but rarely tested. Third, the findings offer actionable insights for university leaders seeking to move beyond symbolic participation toward meaningful faculty engagement.

Scope and Delimitation

The study was confined to one comprehensive university in Xiamen and to full-time teaching staff only. It examined ten dimensions across two constructs and tested differences by three demographic variables. It did not address financial governance, curriculum design, or student governance, and its findings should not be generalized beyond the study population.

4. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Shared governance has been defined as a system in which “the faculty has primary responsibility for academic matters and administrators have primary responsibility for administrative matters, with joint responsibility for matters of common interest” (Birnbaum, 2004, p. 14). Although this definition originates in the American liberal-arts tradition, its underlying logic—that those closest to the academic mission should have a voice in shaping it—has broad relevance. Kezar and Eckel (2004) identify several preconditions for successful shared governance, including a culture of trust, clarity of roles, and sustained communication.

In the Chinese context, the concept has been adapted rather than adopted wholesale. Zhao and Wang (2020) describe a “governance structure” in which party committees, university councils, and academic committees operate in overlapping spheres of influence. Tao (2022) argues that Chinese higher education is moving toward “network governance,” in which multiple actors negotiate decisions through both formal and informal channels. This hybridity means that faculty participation may be substantial in academic affairs while remaining constrained in strategic and resource-allocation decisions.

Collaborative governance theory, as articulated by Emerson et al. (2012), provides a useful lens for analyzing this tension. The theory identifies three “procedural dynamics” that are essential to collaborative success: inclusivity (the broad and meaningful engagement of relevant actors), deliberation (the quality of joint decision-making), and empowerment and coordination (the capacity to act on collective decisions). These dynamics map closely onto the dimensions measured in this study and offer a rationale for treating shared leadership not as a static structure but as an ongoing process.

A related body of work focuses on the collaborative work environment at the departmental and team levels. Salas et al. (2008) identify shared goals, mutual trust, clear communication, and accountability as core components of effective teamwork. In higher education, these elements manifest in practices such as cross-departmental coordination, transparent information sharing, and recognition of contributions. The present study treats the collaborative work environment as both an outcome of shared governance and a distinct faculty experience that may or may not align with it.

5. Method

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-correlational design. The descriptive component was used to profile respondents and summarize their assessments of shared leadership and the collaborative work environment. The correlational component examined the relationship between the two constructs. Means and standard deviations were used to describe assessment levels; one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test differences across groups; and Pearson correlation was used to test the association between constructs.

Locale and Participants

The study was conducted at a comprehensive public university in Xiamen, Fujian province, China. The university offers programs across engineering, education, sciences, and the humanities, and employs approximately 1,200 full-time academic staff. The accessible population consisted of 200 full-time teaching staff across 12 academic departments. Using simple random sampling, 128 respondents were selected, yielding a response rate of 64%. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Instrument

Data were collected using a two-part, researcher-developed questionnaire. Part one gathered demographic information (sex, highest educational attainment, length of service). Part two contained 70 Likert-type items organized into ten subscales: five measuring shared university leadership (inclusivity, partnership, equity, accountability, ownership) and five measuring the collaborative work environment (accountability, coordination, communication, trust, transparency), with seven items per subscale. Respondents indicated their level of agreement on a four-point scale: 4 = Strongly Agree, 3 = Agree, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly Disagree. The questionnaire was validated by a panel of three experts in educational management and pilot tested with 30 faculty members from a similar institution; Cronbach's alpha was .94 for the full instrument.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS version 26. For each subscale and for the overall constructs, weighted means and standard deviations were computed. Assessment levels were interpreted using the following scale: 3.51–4.00 = Highly Evident, 2.51–3.50 = Evident, 1.51–2.50 = Slightly Evident, 1.00–1.50 = Not Evident. One-way ANOVA was used to determine significant differences by sex, educational attainment, and length of service. Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationship between shared university leadership and the collaborative work environment. The significance level was set at $\alpha = .05$.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the university's ethics review process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of anonymity and the right to withdraw at any stage. Data were stored securely and used exclusively for research purposes.

6. Results and Discussion

Profile of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 128 respondents. Males accounted for 62.5% ($n = 80$) and females 37.5% ($n = 48$). In terms of educational attainment, 45.3% held a master's degree, 34.4% a bachelor's degree, and 20.3% a doctoral degree. With respect to length of service, 30.5% had served for 1–5 years, 28.1% for 6–10 years, 25.8% for 11–15 years, and 15.6% for 16 years or more. The sample was therefore slightly male-dominated and predominantly master's-qualified, with a balanced distribution across career stages.

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	80	62.5
	Female	48	37.5
Highest Educational Attainment	Bachelor's	44	34.4
	Master's	58	45.3
	Doctoral	26	20.3
Length of Service	1–5 years	39	30.5
	6–10 years	36	28.1
	11–15 years	33	25.8
	16 years and above	20	15.6

Shared University Leadership

Table 2 summarizes the assessment of shared university leadership across five dimensions. The overall mean was 2.91 ($SD = 0.24$), interpreted as Evident. Partnership received the highest rating ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.71$), driven by strong agreement with statements concerning faculty-administrator cooperation in strategic matters ($M = 3.24$). Equity received the lowest rating ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.82$), with the statement on proactive promotion of diversity within governance structures scoring 2.26. This pattern suggests that while faculty recognize genuine collaboration in day-to-day governance, they remain less convinced that opportunities for participation are distributed fairly across departments and ranks.

Dimension	Weighted Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Inclusivity	2.89	0.69	Evident
Partnership	2.98	0.71	Evident
Equity	2.83	0.82	Evident
Accountability	2.94	0.63	Evident
Ownership	2.90	0.74	Evident
Overall	2.91	0.24	Evident

Note. Scale: 3.51–4.00 = Highly Evident; 2.51–3.50 = Evident; 1.51–2.50 = Slightly Evident; 1.00–1.50 = Not Evident.

7. Collaborative Work Environment

Table 3 presents the assessment of the collaborative work environment. The overall mean was 2.95 ($SD = 0.26$), also interpreted as Evident. Accountability was rated most highly ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 0.66$), with

respondents agreeing that clear expectations are provided for collaborative work. Transparency received the lowest rating ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.79$), particularly the item concerning communication of project goals to all team members ($M = 2.41$). The findings indicate that faculty view the workplace as reasonably accountable and communicative, but perceive room for improvement in the timely and inclusive sharing of information.

Dimension	Weighted Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Accountability	3.04	0.66	Evident
Coordination	2.92	0.78	Evident
Communication	2.99	0.73	Evident
Trust	2.88	0.80	Evident
Transparency	2.87	0.79	Evident
Overall	2.95	0.26	Evident

Note. Scale as in Table 2.

Differences by Sex, Educational Attainment, and Length of Service

Tables 4 through 6 report the results of one-way ANOVA tests. Table 4 shows that for shared university leadership, no significant difference was found by sex in any dimension (all $p > .05$), with F-values ranging from .08 to 1.42. Table 5 similarly reveals no significant differences by highest educational attainment (all $p > .05$), although doctoral holders tended to rate equity slightly higher ($M = 2.96$) than bachelor's holders ($M = 2.79$). Table 6 shows no significant differences by length of service for most dimensions; a marginally significant difference emerged for accountability ($F = 2.71$, $p = .048$), with the 16-years-and-above group giving the highest rating ($M = 3.21$). These results indicate that demographic characteristics are not strong predictors of governance perceptions in this setting.

Dimension	Male / Female Mean	F	Sig.	Decision	Interpretation
Inclusivity	2.88 / 2.90	0.42	.519	Accepted	Not Significant
Partnership	2.99 / 2.96	0.18	.673	Accepted	Not Significant
Equity	2.84 / 2.81	0.08	.780	Accepted	Not Significant
Accountability	2.95 / 2.92	0.31	.578	Accepted	Not Significant
Ownership	2.92 / 2.86	1.42	.236	Accepted	Not Significant
Dimension	Bachelor's / Master's / Doctoral Mean	F	Sig.	Decision	Interpretation
Inclusivity	2.83 / 2.91 / 2.95	0.94	.394	Accepted	Not Significant
Partnership	2.94 / 2.99 / 3.01	0.32	.726	Accepted	Not Significant
Equity	2.79 / 2.88 / 2.96	1.68	.191	Accepted	Not Significant
Accountability	2.90 / 2.95 / 3.02	0.71	.494	Accepted	Not Significant
Ownership	2.86 / 2.91 / 2.94	0.48	.620	Accepted	Not Significant
Dimension	1–5 / 6–10 / 11–15 / 16+ Years Mean	F	Sig.	Decision	Interpretation
Inclusivity	2.82 / 2.91 / 2.94 / 2.90	0.61	.610	Accepted	Not

					Significant
Partnership	2.95 / 2.99 / 3.02 / 2.96	0.28	.840	Accepted	Not Significant
Equity	2.78 / 2.86 / 2.90 / 2.82	0.49	.692	Accepted	Not Significant
Accountability	2.86 / 2.96 / 3.05 / 3.21	2.71	.048	Rejected	Significant
Ownership	2.85 / 2.91 / 2.94 / 2.89	0.36	.782	Accepted	Not Significant

8. Relationship Between Shared University Leadership and Collaborative Work Environment

Table 7 presents the Pearson correlation between the two constructs. The mean score for shared university leadership was 2.91 (SD = 0.24) and for the collaborative work environment 2.95 (SD = 0.26). The computed correlation coefficient was $r = .09$ ($p = .34$), which is positive but not statistically significant at $\alpha = .05$. Therefore, the null hypothesis of no significant relationship was accepted. This result indicates that a favorable view of shared governance structures does not, by itself, guarantee a perceived collaborative workplace; the two constructs, while conceptually related, function somewhat independently in the experience of faculty.

Variable	Mean (SD)	Interpretation
Shared University Leadership	2.91	0.24
Collaborative Work Environment	2.95	0.26
Pearson r / Sig. (2-tailed)	$r = .09$ / $p = .34$	—
Decision on H_0	Accepted (Not Significant)	—

9. Discussion

The descriptive findings of this study largely confirm what shared-governance theory would predict: when faculty are asked to assess governance arrangements using a set of broadly participative criteria, they tend to respond positively. The overall mean of 2.91 for shared leadership places the institution squarely in the “Evident” range. This is consistent with the account offered by Kezar and Eckel (2004), who argue that even partially implemented shared governance can generate a sense of inclusion and ownership among faculty.

At the same time, the pattern of dimensional scores complicates any simple conclusion. Partnership received the highest rating, while equity received the lowest. A plausible interpretation is that faculty experience collaboration most directly in working relationships with administrators—the dimension most visible in daily academic life—whereas equity concerns questions of representation, resource allocation, and voice across departments and ranks. The latter are structural matters that may remain unchanged even when interpersonal cooperation is strong. This distinction echoes the observation of Birnbaum (2004) that shared governance can function well as a set of interpersonal norms while still falling short as an institutional mechanism.

The findings for the collaborative work environment follow a similar logic. Accountability and communication were rated relatively highly, while transparency was the lowest-scoring dimension. This suggests that faculty feel responsible for their work and able to communicate within their immediate teams, but are less confident that information flows equitably across the wider organization. The implication is that structural transparency—meeting agendas, budget decisions, criteria for recognition—may require more deliberate design than interpersonal collaboration does.

The correlational result is the study's most important theoretical contribution. The non-significant association between shared leadership and collaborative work environment ($r = .09$, $p = .34$) challenges the common assumption that the two are closely linked. One possible explanation is that faculty evaluate governance structures and workplace climate through different frames: the former in terms of formal participation, the latter in terms of daily relational experience. Another is that governance participation is concentrated among a small group of committee members, leaving the broader faculty experience of collaboration largely unaffected. Either interpretation warrants further investigation and suggests that universities should not assume that adopting shared-governance policies will, by itself, transform the collaborative culture.

The non-significant differences by sex, educational attainment, and length of service indicate that, in this institution at least, perceptions of governance are broadly shared rather than sharply divided along demographic lines. This is encouraging from an equity perspective, although the modest sample size and single-institution design mean that the finding should be treated as suggestive rather than definitive.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to examine faculty perceptions of shared governance and collaborative work environment in a comprehensive university in Xiamen, China. The findings show that faculty generally view both governance and workplace climate positively, with partnership and accountability as particular strengths. At the same time, equity in shared governance and transparency in the collaborative environment emerge as areas requiring attention. Most notably, the study finds no significant relationship between the two constructs, suggesting that structural participation and relational collaboration should be cultivated as distinct, if complementary, objectives.

On the basis of these findings, four recommendations are offered. First, universities should review the representational fairness of their governance committees, with particular attention to the balance of departments, ranks, and career stages. Second, transparency mechanisms—including regular, accessible reporting on decisions and resource allocation—should be institutionalized rather than left to informal practice. Third, shared-governance initiatives should be evaluated not only in terms of formal participation but also in terms of their impact on the everyday collaborative experience of faculty. Fourth, future research should extend this investigation to multiple institutions and incorporate qualitative methods to explain why, in practice, governance structures and collaborative climates may diverge.

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