

**Policy Decoupling in Strategic Response to the Double World-Class Project:  
Evidence from Elite Universities in China**

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**Acknowledgement:**

I would like to thank Prof.Simon Marginson and two anonymous reviewers for  
giving valuable comments and suggestions on this article.

**Funding:**

This research was sponsored by the Shanghai Planning Office of Philosophy and  
Social Science (No. 2018EGL012).

## Policy Decoupling in Strategic Response to the Double World-Class Project: Evidence from Elite Universities in China

**Abstract:** Creating world-class universities (WCUs) has recently become a significant policy and practice in higher education in China under the Double World-Class Project. However, some negative effects have encouraged decoupling from the policy goals. To identify the reasons, we conducted policy document analysis and purposive interviews at three elite universities, focusing on financial funding, discipline development, and human resources. First, the uneven funding plans by central and local governments shape non-competitive environments for universities, hindering the dynamic adjustment of the Double World-Class Project. Second, universities have closed or merged programs in weak academic disciplines to gain legitimacy and stability in conformance to WCUs guidelines. Last, as a result of the unbalanced development of universities in east, middle, and west China, universities in the west are facing a serious brain drain. To achieve a higher level of performance, an increasing number of ‘shadow academics’ are being recruited by Chinese universities. These decoupling responses and manipulative strategies result from the dominating constituent in WCUs, ambiguity in policy contents, hierarchical control systems in higher education, and uncertain environments for universities.

**Key words:** World-class Universities; Decoupling; Constituents; Control; Context

### Introduction

In September 2017, the Ministries of Education and Finance and the National Commission for Development and Reform in China launched the *Notice to Release the Lists of Creating World-class Universities and World-class Disciplines*, Double World-Class Project (DW Project) (MOE 2017). This revealed the Chinese government’s commitment to support a selected number of elite universities and disciplines to become world-class. The World-Class Universities (WCUs) and World-Class Disciplines (WCDs) initiative is a new project in Chinese higher education after the 211 and 985 Projects, which were launched in 1995 and 1998, respectively. In the 1990s, the Chinese government began to support certain top universities to improve their research reputation and quality. The 211 Project began in 1995, aiming to enhance the quality of 100 research universities in 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 985 Project started in 1998 with the purpose of enabling 39 Chinese universities to achieve world-class status. Consequently, the vision of ‘world-class universities’ has become popular. However, after nearly 20 years of solid implementation, the 211 and 985 projects are criticized for lacking incentives to promote competitiveness among those universities already on the 211 and 985 lists (Zhang 2019). This phenomenon has been first defined in Meyer and Rowan (1977)’s study as ‘policy decoupling’: a policy is formally introduced but is not actually effective or implemented. The DW project then replaced the 211 and 985 projects with the expectation that it would encourage ongoing competitiveness among elite universities through dynamic and continuous evaluations (MOE 2017).

In the new DW Project, 42 universities have been selected to aim for world-class status and are classified into two levels. The first level is Group A, including 36 former 985 universities. The remaining three 985 universities (Hunan University, Northeast University, and Northwest A&F University), together with three former 211 universities (Zhengzhou University, Xinjiang University, and Yunnan University), are categorized as Group B or second-level universities (MOE 2017). Group A universities represent higher reputations and quality than Group B. The categorization also means that dynamic adjustments and efforts are needed for Group B universities to be regrouped. According to the policy statement of the DW Project, WCUs are expected to be world-class in research, innovation, student learning experiences, social services, cultural heritages, staff/researcher development, and internationalization. In parallel to WCUs, a list of WCDs was announced, including 108 disciplines at 137 universities (42 WCUs and 95 other universities) (MOE, 2017). The WCDs will serve as foundations for WCUs. According to MOE (2017), the key principles of the DW Project include diverse classification, decentralization, competition, and equity, suggesting a potentially more dynamic system that might open opportunities beyond a fixed list of Chinese universities.

The DW list has received nationwide attention since its publication due to its implications for national funding that nominated universities and disciplines will receive to develop their world-class status. Other universities and disciplines that fail to be shortlisted are likely to encounter more difficulties and uncertainties without this national support (Chen and Li 2018). In 2018, the Ministries of Education and Finance and the National Commission for Development and Reform in China launched *The Guidelines on Accelerating the Constructions of 'Double-World Class' Status at Universities*. The guidelines indicate a national framework of what universities in the DW Project should do and how (MOE 2018). At the same time, the implementation of the guidelines is subject to local strategies at provincial and university levels. Provincial governments and universities involved in the DW Project have correspondingly developed their respective plans to become world-class from three main aspects: financial funding, disciplines development, and human resources. This paper explores Chinese elite universities' practices and values reflected in the process of implementing DW Project to identify institutional factors affecting universities' strategic responses from the perspectives of university administrators.

### **WCUs movement in China: decoupling perspective from institutional theory**

Marginson (2017) suggested three theories suitable for understanding issues in international higher education: neoliberal theory, institutional theory, and critical political economy. This paper adopts an institutional perspective. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) indicated that isomorphism appears in organizations when the external environment is uncertain and the goals for universities are ambiguous. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983)'s framework, three forms of external pressure and control may affect organizational responses and practices. Coercive pressures refer to political influence and its associated resources that organizations depend on; mimetic pressures trigger responses to uncertainty; and normative pressures point to the power

of internal professionalization resulting in organizational changes. Facing those pressures, organizations form strategic responses to survive or maintain their legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Some organizations may implement decoupling, meaning disconnections between practice and structure (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Decoupling may occur when organizations experience strong pressures and try new practices (Oliver 1991). Decoupling is a strategic response to contradictions between institutional pressure and internal organizational efficiency or contradictions among multiple types of pressure (Boxenbaum and Jonsson 2017). Organizational actions under pressure are defined by the meaningfulness perceived, and organizing principles are seen as institutional logics (Ahrens and Khalifa 2015).

In China's WCUs movement, the external pressure for universities comes from the central government. The role of the government is key and even decisive (Marginson 2013). Only the government can provide the financial resources for a country to build a competitive 'world-class university' (Horta 2009). National and provincial governments pump billions into world-class universities based on the deeply embedded assumption that political will and abundant public funding can accelerate the establishment of WCUs (Zong and Zhang 2019). Meanwhile, Salmi and Altbach (2017) mentioned the factors that accelerate excellence initiatives and are affected by governments, including using benchmarking as a guide for orienting an institution in its upgrading efforts.

Under strong pressure from authoritative governments, universities give various responses to the expectation of becoming world-class. They act as policy entrepreneurs in identifying problems and exploring possible policy solutions (Han 2019). Elite institutions are more flexible about managing their resources with agility and quickly respond to the demands of a rapidly changing global market (Salmi 2016). They introduce reforms to improve their performance and world status, such as optimizing internal human resources, using a project-based support system, changing modes of governance, widening global openness and engagement, and financing and cost-sharing reforms (Marginson 2013; Shin and Kehm 2013).

These strategies have positive effects on WCUs projects, including improving research and innovation, encouraging greater productivity and system efficiency, and bringing resources into the higher education system (Cremonini et al. 2014). However, some unexpected effects also occur from decoupling from the WCUs' policy goals. First, the diversity of the higher education system has been damaged (Altbach 2003). Elitism and inequities in higher education multiply due to imbalanced political and financial support (Marginson 2011a; Salmi 2016; Zong and Zhang, 2019). Second, the academic structure and culture are changing (Kim et al. 2018) as WCUs prioritize STEM disciplines and other subjects in social sciences and humanities become weaker (Horta and Shen 2019). The overemphasis on research performance and international visibility is harmful to faculty morale and performance (Altbach 2003). Some universities increase student tuition fees to make up for the costs of highly paid scholars, which is ethically controversial (Shin and Kehm 2013). Meanwhile, faculties face more insecurity and uncertainty with heavy work pressure and long work days (Tian and Lu 2017). Third, an unequal global knowledge system dominated by

wealthy universities imposes the norms and values of those institutions on other universities (Altbach 2009). Chinese universities depend on external norms for legitimacy (Lee 2013); goals for universities differ based on the new relationships among state, universities, and markets in globalization (Altbach 2009; Marginson 2011a).

These dilemmas cause deviation from WCUs policy goals and are common in Chinese higher education. To explore the institutional factors influencing the strategic responses and practical results in the process of WCUs in China, Oliver (1991)'s typology is employed as an analytical framework to understand institutional logics from universities responding to WCUs goals (see *Table 1*).

*Table 1 The Antecedents of Strategic Responses*

Institutional Factor	Research Question
Cause	Why is the organization being pressured to conform to institutional rules or expectations?
Constituents	Who is exerting institutional pressures on the organization?
Content	To what norms or requirements is the organization being pressured to conform?
Control	How or by what means are the institutional pressures being exerted?
Context	What is the environmental context within which institutional pressures are being exerted?

Oliver (1991):160.

Informed by this framework, the *Cause* is related to the rationale of the WCUs policies launched by the central government. If an organization's conformity can enhance its social and economic fitness, it may adopt acquiescence as the best response to external pressures. Otherwise, if the anticipated legitimacy or economic gain is low, organizations may make different responses and decouple from external pressures (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Oliver 1991). The *Constituents* refer to the stakeholders exerting pressure on universities in the process of WCUs. The more constituents exist, the more likely an organization is to decouple from what is expected. The *Content* points to detailed requirements that universities must follow. 'Organizations will be more willing to acquiesce to external pressures when these pressures or expectations are compatible with internal goals' (Oliver 1991). Instead, organizations will defy or manipulate the external pressures. The *Control* is how the pressure of becoming WCUs is exerted from the top down. Oliver (1991) described two means of control: legal coercion and voluntary diffusion. Legal coercion is carried out by authority and voluntary diffusion is pressure for voluntary compliance. The *Context* is the overall higher education environment during the WCUs movement. These five factors shape the research questions and discussions in this paper.

## **Research methods**

This study employed document analysis and purposive interviews to explore the institutional factors affecting implementation of the DW Project. The document analysis was conducted using published DW policies at national and local levels, including two major aspects: 1. Statistic data on the distribution of WCUs and WCDs in various regions of China (national level) and the available financial budgets allocated by provincial governments and WCUs (local level); 2. Consistencies in national and local policy documents. The national policies include the *Notice to Release the Lists of Creating World-class Universities and World-class Disciplines* and *The Guidelines on Accelerating the Construction of 'Double World-Class' Status in Universities*. The local policies include those implemented by provincial governments to support WCUs and WCDs in their provinces/cities as well as three selected WCUs' own strategies and plans. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with senior management team members from three universities on the WCUs list. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the logic of how and why universities employed strategic responses to DW policy. Three interview questions directed the data collection, and the '5C' research questions can be answered from the perceptions of universities' administrators:

1. What measures are taken by universities to translate the DW policy into their practices?
2. Why are those particular measures implemented?
3. What are the challenges and dilemmas faced by the universities?

### ***Sampling and participants***

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted from 2018 to 2019 to recruit three universities based on regional socioeconomic differences in the east, middle, and west<sup>①</sup> regions of China. We assumed that the translations of DW policies into local practices may vary significantly in those three regions in the context of increased regional inequalities of higher education in China (Bickenbach and Liu 2013). Therefore, one university on the lists of WCUs and WCDs was chosen from each of the three economic regions, including: University A (east), University B (middle), and University C (west). All three participant WCUs released their respective *University Strategies and Plans Towards WCUs* between 2017 and 2018 after the DW Project was announced. Those three university documents detail the basic situations of the universities, their missions, phased targets and major tasks, and strategies and challenges. Following Li (2016) description, the leaders and responsible persons in hierarchical divisions would know a great deal about their university as a whole and would thus be able to give us a deep understanding of the policies from historical and administrative perspectives. We therefore interviewed the responsible persons in the Divisions of Vision and Plans, Human Resources, Social Science Administration, and Science & Technology Administration. In each university, we recruited four participants from the senior management team to be interviewed for up to 1 hour

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<sup>①</sup> According to the degree of economic and social development, the Chinese government divides the Chinese mainland into three regions: east, middle, and west. Eastern China has the best economic development, followed by the middle of China and western China. According to this, preferential policies for different economic zones are given.

individually. The participants are leaders and responsible persons in their respective universities who are involved in policy making and university operations across the four divisions (see *Table 2*).

*Table 2 The interviewees at the three case study universities*

University	Gender	Position	Division	Code
A	M	Deputy Head	Human Resources	A1
A	M	Section Chief	Vision & Plans	A2
A	M	Deputy Head	Science & Technology Administration	A3
A	F	Section Chief	Social Science Administration	A4
B	M	Deputy Head	Human Resources	B1
B	M	Deputy Head	Vision & Plans	B2
B	M	Deputy Head	Science & Technology Administration	B3
B	M	Section Chief	Social Science Administration	B4
C	M	Deputy Head	Human Resources	C1
C	F	Section Chief	Vision & Plans	C2
C	M	Deputy Head	Science & Technology Administration	C3
C	M	Deputy Head	Social Science Administration	C4

### ***Data analysis & ethics***

We used a qualitative, thematic coding technique ((Attride-Stirling 2001; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006) to develop major themes from the policy document analysis and interviews. The data were classified into three categories: financial resources, disciplines, and human resources, being the main strategies mentioned in the DW policy. For the financial resources, we collected and analysed DW financial plans made by local governments and WCUs and explored the perceptions of university administrators. For the disciplines, we mainly focused on disciplinary changes at universities and institutional logics; for human resources, we pointed to strategic responses by universities to hunt for human resources and interpretations of those policies by personnel department faculty. Based on the perceptions and logic provided by universities' administrators, we addressed the 5C research questions in discussing the findings. During the data analysis process, personal information was removed to ensure confidentiality. Interviewees gave informed consent to take part in the research and for the researchers to record the interviews and use the data collected for research purposes.

### **Findings**

#### ***Financial resources: discouraging dynamic environments***

The analyses of national DW project documents, provincial policies concerning the DW project, and university strategies and plans suggest that the numbers of WCUs and WCDs in various parts of China are uneven. In addition, investments from central and local governments in WCUs vary significantly, with even wider gaps between WCUs and non-WCUs. The policy vision of the DW Project is that universities,

including WCUs and ordinary universities, can develop through equal competition and dynamic evaluation. However, stratification (rather than classification) is becoming serious due to non-competitive financial resources.

*Financial gaps in different regions*

Almost all provinces with WCUs and WCDs have made plans to invest in supporting their local WCUs and WCDs. However, the severe imbalance of economic development in the east, middle, and west regions of China implies that such investment varies considerably across provinces. According to the provincial investment plans for WCUs, it is evident that eastern provinces have relatively abundant finances for WCUs and WCDs, whereas the provincial investment in universities and disciplines in western China is relatively small.

*Table 3 Financial budget planning for WCUs in some provinces*

Number	Regions	Provinces	Period	Years	Planning Funding (Billion RMB)
1	East	Beijing	2016-2020	5	4.75-9.5
2		Hebei	2016-2020	5	2.5
3		Shanghai	2014-2018	5	8.4
4		Jiangsu	2016-2020	5	8.5
5		Fujian	2016-2020	5	8
6		Shandong	2016-2020	5	5
7		Guangdong	2015-2020	6	15
8		Hainan	2017	1	0.35
1	Middle	Shanxi	2018	1	0.3
2		Jilin	2016-2020	5	1.5
3		Jiangxi	2016-2020	5	4
4		Henan	2015-2024	10	3.1
5		Hubei	2016-2050	45	No less than 15
6		Hunan	2017	1	1.4
1	West	Sichuan	2016-2017	2	0.3
2		Chongqing	2018-2022	5	No less than 6
3		Guizhou	2016-2020	5	No less than 0.5
4		Yun'nan	2018-2020	3	No less than 2.5
5		Shannxi	2016-2020	5	1.2
6		Ningxia	2017-2020	4	0.2
7		Guangxi	2019	1	0.62
8		Inner Mongolia	2017-2018	2	0.4

Note: These provinces have announced financial budgets for DW programs so far. Data was retrieved from the official website with financial plans on DW support in local government.

Due to the regional disparities of financial support, an internal budget gap is

noted within the group of WCUs. For example, Tsinghua University’s 2019 budget in the east is six times more than that of Lanzhou University in the west. Due to the dual financial support mechanism for WCUs, these universities received finances from central and local governments, and universities in rich regions receive more finances than others in undeveloped provinces. Based on this, the financial resources gap for WCUs is becoming wider.

*Table 4 The budgets of some WCUs in 2019 ( Unit: Billion CNY )*

WCUs	Budget	Region
Tsinghua University	29.721	East
Zhejiang University	19.177	
Peking University	19.007	
Sun Yat-sen University	17.517	
Shanghai Jiao Tong University	15.632	
Fudan University	12.509	
Huazhong University of Science and Technology	10.698	
Wuhan University	10.644	
Nanking University	7.753	
Hu’nan University	4.556	
Xi’an Jiao Tong University	8.817	West
Sichuan University	9.448	
Lanzhou University	4.537	

Note: These WCUs announced their budgets in 2019. Data is cited from [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_3366285](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_3366285).

#### *Support gaps in the same province*

Another area where imbalance was identified is funding for WCUs and non-WCUs in the same province. In order to enhance their reputation in higher education, local governments tend to make a selective support plan, in which WCUs and universities with WCDs receive more funding than non-WCUs. For this reason, most of the academics we interviewed acknowledged that it will not be easy for non-WCUs to become WCUs in future rounds of evaluations. Non-WCUs have limited resources to compete for quality performance in research and other areas of the DW criteria. Therefore, the DW Project has the implications for widening gaps and inequalities in the Chinese higher education system, decoupling from its goals to encourage ongoing competitiveness.

*Table 5 The investment plan for WCUs and WCDs in Guangdong Province (2017)*

*( Unit: Billion CNY )*

WCUs with WCDs		Total
Sun Yat-sen University	0.4	0.57

South China University of Technology	0.17	
Universities with WCDs		Total
Jinan University	0.01	0.03
South China Normal University	0.01	
Guangzhou University of Chinese Medicine	0.01	

Note: Data is retrieved from the website: [http://www.sohu.com/a/194982492\\_559502](http://www.sohu.com/a/194982492_559502)

As one of our participants pointed out, ‘More financial resources are given to the stronger universities, whether they are in the world-class universities group or a cluster of universities in the same province’ (A1). The DW Project exacerbates the imbalance in development between research-oriented universities and teaching-oriented universities, especially with regard to ordinary universities administered by local government, which will face a difficult future because of the reduced support they get under this policy (A2, B2, C2).

Owing to the varying financial support among universities, the stratification rather than classification of universities has become more serious in Chinese higher education. The stratifications are not only evident between world-class universities and non-world-class universities but also within. In particular, universities in western China are the most vulnerable in the race for DW due to their geographic locations and the associated limitations in financial support. Mirroring the central government policy that prioritizes certain universities over others, the provinces have also introduced selective initiatives inclined toward supporting WCUs and WCDs. It is difficult to obtain competitive government funds for other ordinary universities, as one participant mentioned. ‘The status of universities is determined by the resources, missions, and hierarchical powers assigned by the government. The biggest drawback of the state-oriented model is that the universities’ identities are solidified and the elite universities are becoming stronger whereas others are more disadvantaged’ (B2). DW policies emphasize dynamic competition among universities, which means non-WCUs have the potential to become WCUs over a five-year construction and evaluation period. However, the effects may be less due to the varying governmental support, as it is hard for universities to compete and gain WCUs status with fewer financial resources.

### **Discipline resources: strategies to gain survival legitimacy**

#### *Emphasizing pragmatism and Marxism in policy contents*

A total of 108 disciplines were selected as WCDs. As some of those disciplines were selected for more than one university, the total number of WCDs is 465. With regard to the disciplines selected for world-class discipline status, science and engineering disciplines dominated, being mentioned 359 times. It is evident the STEM subjects are given priority for development over other disciplines, as Horta and Shen (2019) argued. Also, a Marxist approach is preferred regarding social sciences; Marxism is strengthened in Chinese higher education by political power under policies that emphasize ideological management in relation to Marxism and socialism. Such

policies were reflected in the *National Conference on Ideological and Political Work in Universities* in 2016, the *Implementation Outline of Ideological and Political Work Quality Improvement Project in Universities* by Ministry of Education in 2017, President Xi Jinping's speech during a visit to Peking University in 2018, and *Several Opinions on Deepening the Reform and Innovation of Ideological and Political Theory Courses in Educational Institutions in the New Era* by the Central State in 2019. According to those policies, Communist Party committees at universities are required by the supreme authority to play dominant roles in ideological guidance, teaching, and research. In the process of globalizing higher education, academic standards and research paradigms are geared towards internationalization. At the same time, however, some politically conservative streams have pointed out that internationalization is not the same as Westernization, especially in the domain of ideology (Ma 2018). Thus, the ideological dominance of Marxism and socialism is strongly emphasized in the move to create WCUs. As President Xi Jinping pointed out at the National Congress of Education in 2018, 'Ideological and political work is the lifeline of schooling. The Party committees at all levels of education must firmly grasp it by the hand'. When he visited Peking University in 2018, he also made it clear that Marxism should be emphasized in research, teaching, and the cultivation of values at universities. As some of our interviewees pointed out, 'It's easier for faculty in the School of Marxism to apply for research projects and funding than their counterparts in other schools. Marxism-oriented research projects are set separately in the national and provincial research plans for the social sciences'(B4). 'The pragmatism is for economic goals while the Marxism is for political goals. Without the STEM disciplines, the universities in China are unable to be world-class. Without the Marxism, Chinese universities may lose "*Chinese Characteristics*"'(A4). The priorities for disciplinary development are controlled by the state, and universities' approaches to building WCDs will comply with the state's expectations. As Gao and Zheng (2020) suggested, a highly centralized political system restrains universities' autonomy to decide what to research, and ideological correctness is highly significant.

#### *Closing and merging of academic disciplines in universities*

According to the interviewees, the list of WCUs and WCDs is closely related to the National Disciplines Ranking (NDR), a performance accountability mechanism focusing on outcomes and dominated by the government (Zhang 2019). In the future, the dynamic performance evaluation of the DW Project will adopt the NDR as one of its indicators for decision making. Our examination of the provincial WCUs' policies revealed that most local governments have adopted the NDR as a significant indicator to measure the performance of potential WCUs and WCDs. The national DW lists will be updated every five years, which means some current WCUs and WCDs may drop off of list and some will become new entrants (A3, A4, B2, B3, B4, C3, C4). Considering this, some universities have tried to close weak disciplines or merge them with strong disciplines, aiming to make the strong ones stronger. As a result, it is possible that these stronger disciplines will be able to squeeze into the WCDs group. The weak disciplines are those given a low ranking in the NSR and thus deemed weak

disciplines by the universities. These disciplines will provide universities with fewer opportunities and resources to develop and improve their research performance and reputations (A2, B2, C2). One of our case study universities has, in fact, completely closed down its School of Education. According to staff from the personnel department, the mission of their university has changed from becoming ‘bigger’ to becoming ‘stronger’. They told us that they ‘had to sacrifice some disciplines to ensure that our traditionally strong disciplines would be able to be stronger’ (C1). In the WCDs funding plan, financial resources will be given to the stronger disciplines. ‘The stronger disciplines will become stronger and other weak disciplines will face tougher challenges and difficulties. Without enough funding, intelligence, or policy support, these weak disciplines may “disappear”, like Education’ (C2).

The imbalances among disciplines and universities will become more evident. Some of our informants worried that this strategy will make universities weaker, not stronger. The neglect of ‘weak’ disciplines will damage the liberal nature of education and work against students’ development. Universities’ strategies to achieve world-class status rarely mention weak disciplines and programmes, suggesting that the universities see these disciplines as insignificant. An increasing number of universities seem to regard the reorganization of internal resources as a core strategy to enhance the competitiveness of disciplines in the short term; the landscapes of disciplines are being artificially expanded or reduced. The Marxist and STEM disciplines are expanding, whereas some weak academic programs are forced into closure. ‘It is difficult to say that the closed-down disciplines are useless or would not be world-class. The decision is made by experience’ (C1). ‘This approach may be successful shortly but will hurt the ecological environment for all disciplines’ (B3). Universities are trying to make all the existing disciplines world class, which may affect the autonomous development of disciplines and have negative effects on students’ choices. Some disadvantaged disciplines may not be useful for university rankings, but they have special significance for student’s cultivation and campus diversity. ‘We advocate general education, which requires a more diverse and free environment for students. The current trend actually gives students fewer choices’ (A1). The universities are recontextualizing prior policies for selective disciplines and further strengthening the differentiation. The organizational changes in universities are guided by the government instead of academic power, and academics’ participation in university governance is insufficient (Zhuang and Liu 2020). This may result in the loss of a sustainable environment for WCUs and WCDs development as well as potentially affecting the overall educational quality.

### **Human resources: responses to uncertain context**

#### *The movement of academics among universities*

Another noteworthy phenomenon resulting from the WCUs policy is the increased movement of in between Chinese universities. More precisely, the movement is usually from the west to the east of China. Socioeconomic differences in salary, system construction, and public service facilities are the main driving forces of human

resource flow among universities (Zhou et al. 2018) and the decentralization of personnel affairs with financial discretion of WCUs has aggravated the phenomenon. Another reason is the relationship between scholars' title schemes and the creation of WCUs. The number of professors selected for funding under the DW policies has become an important indicator of a university's reputation. 'The research universities in east provinces are the biggest threat to us. Over the last ten years, over 100 professors have moved out; however, at the same time, it's difficult for us to attract more intellectuals since we are located in west China. This will intensify the hierarchy in WCUs' (C2). Although the Ministry of Education made it clear in its 2017 *Notice to Promote Reasonable and Orderly Flow of High-level Talents in Universities* in 2017 that it does not endorse eastern universities' practice of 'stealing' the intellectual resources of universities in middle and west China, the interviewees reported no measures being taken by the Ministry to change the situation. The third reason concerns the current philosophy of personnel recruitment in universities. Recruiting established academics from other universities is a good way of ensuring that the disciplines remain competitive and strong in the DW dynamic evaluation system. Most universities prefer to 'buy' 'ready-made' knowledge. They have no interest in experiencing or patience to deal with the growth process of young scholars who have not yet produced outstanding work or earned academic titles (A2). As a result, some universities in west China have developed negative attitudes towards recruiting and cultivating academic staff, which indirectly creates a difficult situation with regard to personnel recruitment and development for these universities.

Acting as the hands of policy recontextualization, local governments also emphasize the need to attract renowned scholars with impressive titles or positions. In some provinces, over 80% of the financial budget for personnel development is set aside for 'bidding' on 'the big names' (C2). Some of our interviewees expressed their concerns on this matter, indicating that 'This may threaten the stability and sustainability of our human resources' (C2). The DW Project has brought about problems such as brain drain in less wealthy institutions as described by participants. 'It's difficult for non-WCDs to attract renowned academics. Even some heads of schools left our university after knowing that their disciplines are not on the WCDs list' (A2). 'Current human flow is driven by uneven financial resources of WCUs and WCDs' (B2).

#### *'Shadow academics' at universities*

Another phenomenon is the increasing number of shadow academics at universities. There are two kinds of academics who take on shadow work and contribute to their employing universities' research outcomes and rankings. The first kind is postdoctoral fellows. In recent years, Chinese universities (especially those on the WCUs list) have been recruiting a growing number of contract-based (usually for two years) postdoctoral scholars to write journal publications in English (Xu 2015). 'We give a higher salary to postdoctoral scholars than other universities, and we hope they will be able to give something back to us. The "something" is two SSCI or SCI papers in two years. If they can't complete the task, it will be difficult for them to pass the

postdoctoral evaluation and they should then return part of the salary to us' (A2). The second kind is adjunct fellows from other universities within or outside China. These academics are not necessarily present at the employing universities but are required to submit papers to high-profile journals with those universities as their affiliated institutions. The universities pay a high salary when the adjunct academics meet their contracted requirements. 'We have two ways of cooperating with these shadow academics. One way is to give them a fixed salary and require that they publish a fixed number of high-quality papers; the other way is to give a performance-based salary in accordance with the number and quality of papers they produce' (A2). The similarity between these two kinds of shadow academics is that they are non-tenured. In our case study universities, the more abundant their financial resources, the more shadow academics they recruited. Another reason for hiring this type of academic is that the size of the staff (*bian zhi*) in China is restricted by the government. 'This means that if you plan to recruit new members of staff, you have to wait for a place to be made available from retiring staff, or otherwise fire "lazy" people (those who have published very little). But the latter is almost impossible' (B2). The employment of shadow academics solves this problem to some extent because they are only temporary members of the personnel force.

The emerging phenomenon of shadow academics in Chinese universities means that universities are likely to 'borrow' or 'buy' academics' intellectual productions. The academics in those universities are endowed with more corporate status and their affiliation with their home universities is fragmented; universities are more likely to increase their research productiveness through simple buying rather than producing. To some extent, this approach can stave off heavy welfare spending and avoid the personnel quotas of '*bian zhi*' in governmental control (A2, B2, C2). Elite universities have more autonomy in personnel recruitment and academics become more diverse. Nevertheless, the function of teaching in Chinese universities may be further weakened under the increase of capitalism in academic markets (Tian and Lu 2017).

### **Discussions: five institutional factors influencing universities' responses**

*Deviated Cause:* The cause for issuing the DW Project includes enhancing the competition and quality of universities (MOE 2018), while some decoupling practices go against the policy goals. The disciplines in universities have been treated unfairly, as WCDs are supported while others are finding it difficult to survive. The universities' rationale is to cater to political correctness to gain legitimacy. The negative effects emerging in the development of disciplines are manipulated, and the quality of universities has narrowed. Similarly, competition among universities varies based on the non-competitively funding resources. Non-WCUs have less funding to compete with WCUs, and it becomes a vicious circle that WCUs in west regions gain fewer financial resources and face brain drain. It's possible the dynamic adjustment advocated by DW policy will fade due to the resource dependence logic, as Zhao and You (2019) mentioned.

*Dominating Constituent:* The main constituent for WCUs is the state, which provides funding resources and holds performance evaluation. The state invests

hugely and expects value for its money, which means that the more economic resources are invested in universities, the more governments expect those universities to strive for world-class status (Dong et al. 2020). Visible performance indicators include international publication, number of famous scholars, and better discipline rankings (Allen 2019), so universities tend to hunt for famous scholars from other universities and introduce shadow academics to improve performance. The authority of the state is irresistible, so universities have tried to figure out the top requirements and do their best. In this process, some bold reforms have been employed, including closing some disciplines. However, most participant academics suggested that the disciplines should not be stratified, closed, or merged arbitrarily. They also criticized universities' strategies to fight for famous scholars and recruit shadow academics, which were believed to have hindered internal efficiency and teaching quality. These voices not working for universities may respond positively to the main constituent, influencing its legitimacy and resources. As Karran and Mallinson (2018) pointed, the institutional excellence may be negatively affected without the academic freedom and a scholarly ethos, forming a vicious cycle that blocks the process of WCUs.

*Ambiguous Content:* The content of DW policy is ambiguous, resulting in universities' manipulation. DW policy content clearly outlines the definition of WCUs and WCDs, and measures of world-class status as well as evaluation criterion for WCUs are not declaimed. Therefore, universities adopted measures such as perceived meaningfulness and enforced higher discretion, leading to some unpredictable outcomes. The WCUs in the west face serious brain drain due to disordered intelligence hunting by wealthy universities. Moreover, the roadmap for universities to be world-class in terms of DW content is approximate. The central state requires that some universities should achieve world-class status by 2020 and more universities need to meet this goal by 2030. However, this timeline conflicts with our participant universities' current capacity, leading to clipping strategies such as buying 'ready-made' knowledge and eliminating some disciplines. These strategic responses are based on the universities' perceptions but are not covered in the DW content, as Ahrens and Khalifa (2015) defined; the universities' actions under DW pressure reflect the institutional logic that they use all possible means to become world-class.

*Hierarchical Control:* Institutional control refers to how WCUs pressures are exerted in universities. Creating WCUs in China is highly supported by legal coercion controls. The central government and ministries control the selection, evaluation criteria, and resources for universities, as Marginson (2011b) referred to regarding the Confucian model; the state is the policy driver of higher education. The central and local governments control universities via funding, dictating numbers of WCDs, and controlling other critical resources for development. In this centralized political system, the pressures are exerted layer by layer from the top down. In terms of funding distribution, the central government allocates vast funds to WCUs. As a mark of acquiescence, local governments have also made differentiated investment plans for WCUs and WCDs. Within universities, the support for WCDs among all disciplines is obvious. Though there are no statements in DW policy suggesting that universities should close or merge some disciplines, local governments and

universities responded in this way to gain political and social legitimacy. ‘The policy appears to align with cultural scripts of Confucianism along with the strong central mandates of Communism,’ as Wei and Johnstone (2019) described. In so doing, universities conform to politically implied messages that some disciplines (STEM and Marxism) are more important. Interests in WCUs are considered in terms of collective society but not individual universities (Wei and Johnstone 2019). Some disciplines are diminished by certain academic programs’ merging or closure; the university ecosystem may thus be damaged. Consequently, the impacts of WCUs policies seem to deviate from policy goals or even be diametrically opposed to policy expectations.

*Uncertain Context:* Our study also finds the contexts of WCUs in Chinese higher education are highly uncertain. First, the definition of WCUs is uncertain in state policies and universities’ interpretations. Second, the evaluation criteria for shortlisting and reselecting WCUs is unclear. Third, the timeline for universities to become world-class is undefined, and this type of environment may cause organizational isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Uncertainty interacts with conflicting constituents’ pressures and increases over time (Oliver 1991). Universities thus exerted greater efforts to re-establish the reality of control over future outcomes. The closure and strategic merging of academic disciplines has become popular, and the fight for famous scholars among universities is becoming fierce. Some universities have introduced shadow academics to improve their research outcome. As a response to institutional conformity, these means can protect universities from environmental turbulence. All of these responses to pressure to develop as WCUs result from the uncertain environment and universities’ strong desires for certainty and stability. The differences between the former 985 and 211 Projects and WCUs are thus noted. The environment for previous 985 and 211 universities was relatively certain, and their identities were solidified.

## **Conclusions**

To conclude, our study was intended to help us understand universities’ strategic responses to the DW Project from institutional decoupling perspectives. Government-oriented DW policy is likely to cause inertial resource dependence of universities, and unbalanced financial distribution by governments may hinder the dynamic system of WCUs and WCDs. These effects are formed by linked top-down control mechanisms. Local governments prioritize finances for ‘strong’ universities and universities employ the same measure for ‘strong’ disciplines. Due to the ambiguous policy content, these strategic responses were based on perceived meaningfulness by policy implementers, resulting in some decoupling phenomena. Some less popular departments have gotten smaller due to lack of financial and personnel support, and the quality of WCUs has narrowed. The diversity of universities may be reduced, as Zhao and You (2019) noted, limiting the choices for students and potentially affecting the implementation of general education. It is not easy to change this phenomenon under the state-oriented higher education system. Although universities have an entrepreneurial role, as Han (2019) noted, the relationship between Chinese universities and the government has long been a typical

‘state control model’. Under this uncertain context, attempts to gain stability by hunting for famous scholars and employing shadow academics are becoming unspoken rules in some top universities. Thus, some unpredictable phenomena emerge, and the human flow is significantly unidirectional to wealthy universities. Overall, the policy decoupling is identified and related to the dominating constituency of the state, ambiguity in policy contents, hierarchical control system, and uncertain context for universities. Whilst the DW Project aims to promote world-class universities and disciplines in China, policy makers and university leaders must recognize its risk of harmful effects on universities (Salmi and Altbach 2017). To solve these risks, institutional factors based on 5C framework provide possible approaches to enhance the practice consistency; however, several challenges exist, particularly the unchangeable political control system used to allot universities’ resources through the DW Project. As we consider the decoupling phenomenon in the process of creating WCUs, we need to answer the following three basic questions: why do we create WCUs; what is a WCU in the Chinese context; and, how do we create WCUs. These three questions refer to three paradoxical relationships, or dichotomies, in the Chinese context: state control and university autonomy, global identity and nationality or universalism and nationalism, policy borrowing and indigenesness.

For the first question, as a national initiative, China is developing WCUs in order to increase the nation’s international competitiveness in higher education, thereby matching its political and economic influence. As a result, WCUs are government-oriented, created politically rather than naturally. The central government invests significant resources and supervision into the process of creating WCUs based on a resource-dependent approach, and universities compete against each other to obtain financial support, human resources, course rankings and other indicators. Conversely, intrinsic dimensions including inner governance and satisfaction among faculty and students pose significant challenges in reaching world-class status. The university and academic autonomy are marginalized in this state-controlled process, and universities act as the agents of government, not as independent institutions. Due to the vague boundary between state power and university autonomy, it is difficult for universities to act with flexible discretion for long without external interference.

The second question is, what is a WCU in the Chinese context? The central government of China emphasizes that WCUs in China must uphold Chinese characteristics and must express world-class traits and nationality simultaneously. Most universities pursue international rankings and publications to achieve world-class status, especially in STEM subjects. However, it is difficult to compare and rank the degree of nationality in global rankings, particularly in the disciplines of the humanities and social science. Xie (2017) points out that, in the social sciences, merely pursuing international publication amounts to a superficial internationalization. How to balance world-class status while maintaining nationality is a problem in non-western countries. With the pace of globalization, global universities are becoming more universal in knowledge production and distribution. In other words, the national boundaries and characteristics of universities are weakening. It is

challenging work to follow the duality of universalism and nationalism. In practice, it is also easy for universities to fall into the myth that if they maintain their national characteristics, they may be considered world-class. This problem also points to the issue of subjectivity in the evaluation of WCUs; if evaluations are based only on global rankings or publications, they are criticized as being too quantitative and thus unreliable. The lack of a clear definition for what constitutes a world-class institution and of a scientific evaluation system is weakening the effectiveness of WCUs.

The last question relates to how to create WCUs. As a country that has been left behind, China is always striving to catch up with western countries in various aspects. In the process of doing so, China, acting as a learner, continuously borrows policies from developed economies, especially from the United States and Europe, as You (2019) states. It is therefore inevitable that a transplant rejection will emerge when foreign experiences are introduced into local contexts. Western institutions and policies are only partially learned and, at the same time, borrowed experiences must face a different institutional environment and political system. Chinese universities learn to create international journals and expand the proportion of international scholars and students while also advocating university autonomy and other internal characteristics, thus trying to model themselves on western universities based on a vague portrait of them. Chinese universities are striving to integrate western and eastern systems, thereby creating a hybrid model for WCUs. This hybrid model will be tested to determine whether it can succeed in the government blueprint and the unpredictable global order.

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