



From Scale to Quality: Institutional Reform for Applied Research Faculty in Chinese Private Universities—A Case Study of Jilin Province

Mei Wang^{1*} and Xueni Qiao²

¹ Changchun Normal University, China

² University of New South Wales, Australia

Abstract

Amidst the national strategy to integrate education, science, and technology, and human talent, China's private higher education sector is undergoing a critical transition from scale expansion to quality-oriented, connotative development. However, this transition is increasingly constrained by classified management policies, shifting demographics, and regional economic disparities. Focusing on less-developed regions, this study investigates the institutional constraints hindering the cultivation of applied research faculty. Building a high-caliber, applied research faculty is essential for the sustainable development of private universities. Utilizing an interdisciplinary framework that merges human resource management and policy instrument theories with perspectives from organizational behavior and educational economics, this study adopts a mixed-methods design. Empirical data was gathered via a questionnaire survey of 1,000 faculty members and semi-structured interviews with 30 administrators across 12 private universities in Jilin. Using comparative insights from developed coastal regions (Zhejiang and Guangdong), the analysis exposes critical institutional barriers in top-level design, talent recruitment, faculty development, research incentives, teaching-research integration, and institutional governance. The findings reveal a pronounced deficit in effective incentives and localized policy support, underscoring the urgent necessity for systematic institutional reform and policy optimization. Ultimately, this study contributes rare empirical evidence to the discourse on applied faculty development, offers a nuanced explanation of research motivation under institutional constraints, and provides actionable implications for private higher education institutions in other developing economies facing parallel demographic and structural transitions.

Keywords: Private universities, Applied research faculty, Institutional reform, Quality development, Case study

1 Introduction

The Third Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee identified the integrated development of education, science and technology, and human talent as a national strategy

for strengthening China's innovation capacity (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2024). Within this policy context, China's private higher education sector, comprising 831 institutions and enrolling over 26.24% of the country's undergraduate students (Ministry of Education, 2026), is undergoing a strategic transition from expansion in scale to quality-oriented, connotative development.

Since its rapid expansion in the 1990s, China's private higher education sector has attracted increasing scholarly attention, particularly regarding institutional governance, policy reform, quality assurance, and sustainable development (Mok, 2021; Liu et al., 2026). More recently, demographic decline and widening regional economic disparities have created additional pressures, especially for institutions located in less-developed regions (Han & Gao, 2023). Although previous studies have examined private higher education primarily from governance and policy perspectives, considerably less attention has been paid to the institutional conditions shaping the development of applied research faculty, particularly in economically disadvantaged provinces. This gap has become increasingly significant following China's innovation-driven development strategy and the promotion of new quality productive forces, both of which place greater emphasis on universities' research and innovation capacity.

Jilin Province provides a representative setting in which to examine these challenges. Population outmigration, fiscal constraints, industrial restructuring, and a harsh natural environment have combined to weaken the capacity of private universities to attract, develop, and retain high-quality applied research faculty (Li & Zhan, 2022). Examining these institutional constraints is therefore critical not only to advancing the quality-oriented development of private higher education in Northeast China, but also to generating insights for other developing economies facing comparable demographic and structural challenges.

Against this background, this study investigates the institutional barriers that constrain the development of applied research faculty in private universities in Jilin Province. It further examines the motivational and organisational mechanisms underlying these barriers and identifies potential reform strategies through a comparative analysis with private universities in the more economically developed provinces of Zhejiang and Guangdong.

2 Methodology and Approach

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

This study adopted an integrated theoretical framework combining Policy Instrument Theory with Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Adams' Equity Theory. Policy Instrument Theory (Rothwell & Zegveld, 1984) provides the principal analytical lens for examining how governmental and institutional interventions shape faculty development in private universities. Herzberg's Two-Factor theory (Herzberg, 1966) and Adams' Equity Theory (Adams, 1965) complement this perspective by explaining how institutional conditions and perceived fairness influence faculty motivation and research engagement. Together, these theories facilitate an integrated analysis of policy environments, organisational governance, and individual behavioural responses.

2.2 Research design and participants

This study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to investigate institutional barriers affecting the development of applied research faculty in private universities in Jilin Province. The study involved all 12 private undergraduate universities in Jilin (Table 1).

Table 1. Profile of the 12 Participating Private Universities in Jilin Province

No.	University Code	Full-Time Faculty	Student Enrolment	Senior Faculty Ratio (%)
1	JU-01	537	12,000	50.56%
2	JU-02	666	13,000	34.38%
3	JU-03	474	10,000	48.94%
4	JU-04	580	11,000	41.37%
5	JU-05	700	12,000	52%
6	JU-06	743	14,000	50.06%
7	JU-07	664	15,000	34.33%
8	JU-08	580	17,000	41.37%
9	JU-09	726	13,000	37.60%
10	JU-10	544	10,000	38.78%
11	JU-11	423	10,000	39.24%
12	JU-12	690	13,000	50.72%

Source: Institutional information collected from official university websites and Undergraduate Education Quality Report (2023)

Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to faculty members. Of the 1,000 questionnaires distributed, 970 valid responses were obtained, yielding a 97% valid response rate. Among the valid respondents, 952 faculty members (98.14%) expressed willingness to participate in applied research faculty development initiatives.

To further contextualise the quantitative findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 30 academic stakeholders. The interview participants included university presidents, vice presidents, research directors, human resource directors, college deans, and faculty representatives. They were selected from six representative institutions out of the twelve originally surveyed (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of Interview Participants by Institution and Position (N=30)

Institution Code	President	Vice President	Research Director	HR Director	College Dean	Faculty Representatives	Total
JU-07	0	1	1	1	1	1	5
JU-08	0	1	0	1	1	2	5
JU-09	1	0	1	1	1	1	5
JU-10	0	1	1	0	1	2	5
JU-11	0	0	1	1	1	1	4
JU-12	1	0	1	1	1	2	6
Total	2	3	5	5	6	9	30

Source: Authors' research data

To complement the primary data, documentary analysis was undertaken using policy documents and institutional practices from Zhejiang and Guangdong provinces to identify differences in external support mechanisms and reform strategies.

2.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS 26.0. Descriptive statistics and binary logistic regression were used to examine factors associated with faculty willingness to engage in applied research. The questionnaire comprised 18 five-point Likert-scale items covering four dimensions: humanistic management, subjective norms, talent recruitment, and research costs. Faculty willingness to engage in applied research served as the dependent variable, while institutional, organisational, and policy-related variables were entered as predictors. Questionnaire reliability and validity were assessed using Cronbach's α , the KMO measure, and Bartlett's test.

Interview data were analysed using the thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts were systematically coded to identify recurring patterns and institutional challenges. The coding process generated six major institutional barriers, which are discussed in the Findings section.

2.4 Reliability and Validity

The reliability and validity of the questionnaire were assessed prior to statistical analysis. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all subscales exceeded 0.88, indicating high internal consistency. The overall scale also demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.799$). Furthermore, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.845, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($p < .001$), indicating that the data were suitable for factor analysis (Table 3).

Table 3. Reliability Statistics

Subscale	No. of items	Cronbach's α
Humanistic management	5	0.903
Subjective norms	4	0.883
Talent recruitment	5	0.915
Research costs	4	0.889
Overall scale	18	0.799

Source: Authors' research data

Following instrument validation, the binary logistic regression model showed acceptable fit (Model $\chi^2 = 113.951$, $p < .001$; Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.527$; Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.712$). The significant institutional predictors are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Significant Institutional Predictors of Faculty Willingness to Engage in Applied Research

Predictor	B	Exp(B)	p
University support	−0.076	0.927	.003
Local incentive intensity	−0.974	0.378	.021
Research team stability	0.445	1.561	.025
Peer participation	−0.390	0.677	.031
Local talent capacity	0.328	1.389	.037
Local policy awareness	−0.200	0.819	.041
Local incentive policy recognition	0.227	1.255	.045
Local research activity	0.214	1.239	.046

Notes: Only statistically significant institutional and organisational predictors are presented. Demographic variables (e.g., age, annual income, and family support) are omitted because the study focuses on institutional mechanisms underlying faculty willingness to engage in applied research.

Source: Authors' research data.

3 Findings and Results

This section presents the empirical findings by integrating the quantitative regression results with the thematic analysis of the interview data. The findings first identify the significant institutional factors associated with faculty willingness to engage in applied research and then explain the institutional mechanisms underlying these statistical relationships.

3.1 Quantitative Findings: Logistic Regression Results

The binary logistic regression model demonstrated satisfactory overall fit (Model $\chi^2 = 113.951$, $p < .001$; Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.527$; Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.712$). As shown in Table 4, several institutional and policy-related factors were significantly associated with faculty

willingness to engage in applied research. Greater research team stability, stronger local research activity, higher local talent capacity, and greater recognition of local incentive policies were positively associated with faculty willingness, whereas insufficient university support, limited policy awareness, weak organisational participation, and lower local incentive intensity were negatively associated with faculty willingness. These findings suggest that institutional support, organisational capacity, and policy environments jointly influence faculty willingness to engage in applied research, providing the basis for the subsequent integrated analysis of institutional barriers.

3.2 Integrated Analysis of Institutional Barriers

Theme 1: Fragmented Institutional Strategic Planning

The survey results indicate that the absence of coherent institutional strategies is one of the most significant barriers to the development of applied research faculty across the participating universities. Although several institutions have established distinctive disciplinary orientations linked to local industries, most respondents perceived that institutional research planning remained insufficiently integrated with regional economic development and long-term academic priorities.

Only seven of the twelve participating universities had established independent offices responsible for discipline development or research planning. Several interviewees emphasised that strategic planning often remained at the level of policy statements without corresponding implementation mechanisms. The president of JU-12 explained:

“Compared with public universities, private universities have shorter histories, weaker academic foundations, and have not yet developed a mature research culture” (JU-12).

Without coherent institutional coordination, universities struggle to establish stable research priorities capable of supporting long-term faculty development.

Theme 2: Rigid Faculty Recruitment Mechanisms

Interview findings show that lengthy and centralised recruitment procedures have become a major barrier to attracting highly qualified faculty. Several administrators reported losing highly qualified candidates because the approval process often took several weeks before an employment offer could be confirmed. The Vice president of JU-07 explained:

“We primarily rely on full-time recruitment with competitive salaries, but competition is extremely intense. Many candidates accept offers from other universities before our recruitment process is completed” (JU-07).

A college dean of JU-10 further highlighted the importance of research conditions. He said that a newly recruited PhD resigned within one month because the university lacked open-access databases, research facilities, and experienced academic mentors. These findings suggest that recruitment challenges extend beyond remuneration. Institutional research capacity and academic support systems are equally important determinants of faculty attraction and retention.

Theme 3: Uneven Faculty Development Policies

Policies regarding faculty pursuing PhDs vary dramatically. Some universities, such as JU-05, actively support teachers studying abroad. The university has sent more than 60 faculty members to South Korea to pursue doctoral degrees. However, others impose punitive breach-of-contract fees (up to 80,000 RMB/year) and 8-year service requirements, causing immense psychological pressure and forcing potential talent to leave. The Vice president of JU-08 noted:

“After our revised PhD policy was issued, we lost several young teachers. Some resigned because they wanted to pursue doctorates elsewhere” (JU-08).

These findings indicate that institutional investment in faculty development remains highly uneven across private universities. Instead of supporting faculty development, restrictive training policies may increase faculty turnover and undermine long-term institutional development.

Theme 4: Misaligned Incentives and Teaching–Research Separation

Integrated survey and interviews reveal a structural misalignment between institutional incentive systems and faculty research engagement, compounded by the separation of teaching and research responsibilities. Quantitative analysis of 1,000 faculty questionnaires shows statistically significant deficits in foundational research support. As Table 5 demonstrates, most faculty report critical gaps in both hygiene factors and motivators, with dissatisfaction rates ranging from 68.4% to 89.1% across key institutional dimensions.

Table 5. Quantitative Survey Results on Faculty Satisfaction and Perceived Equity (N=1,000)

Institutional Variable Tested (5-Point Likert Scale)	Mean Score (μ)	Standard Deviation (σ)	Perceived Deficit / Dissatisfaction Rate (%)
Hygiene Factor I: Base Salary Parity (vs. Public Peers)	1.84	0.65	82.6%
Hygiene Factor II: Laboratory & Research Infrastructure	2.15	0.72	71.3%
Motivator I: Financial Rewards for Horizontal Projects	2.38	0.81	68.4%
Motivator II: Research-Driven Promotion Pathways	2.04	0.58	75.1%
Procedural Equity: Adjudication of Local Title Quotas	1.92	0.69	78.9%
Distributive Equity: Provincial Government Grant Allocation	1.67	0.52	86.4%
Instructional Load Pressure: Teaching vs. Research Balance	4.42	0.88	89.1% (Experiencing Overload)

Note: The “dissatisfaction rate” is computed as the percentage of respondents who selected “1” (strongly disagree) or “2” (disagree) on the respective 5-point Likert scale items, indicating perceived deficits in each institutional factor.

Source: Authors’ research data.

Interview findings corroborate the survey results, highlighting a ‘pay-to-publish’ dilemma: publication fees often exceed institutional research rewards, so many faculty undertake research primarily to meet promotion requirements rather than sustain long-term engagement. As the HR director of JU-11 observed, the most active researchers are those applying for associate or full professor status. They may lose motivation after being promoted.

The interviews further indicate that teaching and research are treated as separate rather than complementary responsibilities. With heavy teaching workloads ($\mu = 4.42$) consuming most faculty time, research is frequently regarded as an additional task rather than integral to academic work. A department head at JU-11 noted that undergraduates were rarely involved in faculty research activities, reflecting limited teaching–research integration. Ultimately, misaligned incentives and heavy instructional loads reduce sustained research motivation, with many faculty scaling back research activities after fulfilling promotion requirements.

Theme 5: Limited Institutional Autonomy under Centralised Governance

The empirical evidence demonstrates that highly centralised, ‘official-centric’ administrative structures within private universities constrain grassroots academic innovation. Communication channels between central leadership and secondary units remain weak, leaving college deans and department heads systematically excluded from policy formulation. As a College Dean of JU-10 summarised:

"The university develops policies without consulting us, then expects us to implement them without explanation. When problems arise, they blame us for poor execution" (JU-10).

This governance deficit is reinforced by a rigid, ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to resource allocation that overlooks disciplinary differences, together with evaluation systems that place greater emphasis on quantitative outputs than on applied social impact. Ultimately, this over-centralised governance reduces the decision-making autonomy of academic leaders and faculty. By reducing secondary colleges to administrative implementers, the current framework encourages passive compliance and further disconnects institutional governance from the realities of applied research.

Theme 6: Insufficient External Policy Support

The institutional challenges facing private universities in Jilin Province are further intensified by unequal policy support and regional resource disparities. At the provincial level, private universities are disadvantaged in the allocation of public research funding. Many approved provincial research projects receive only ‘self-funded’ status, forcing institutions to rely heavily on student tuition. To place these challenges in context, this study compares Jilin with Guangdong and Zhejiang, where private higher education benefits from stronger policy support and talent initiatives, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Comparative Policy Support in Jilin, Guangdong, and Zhejiang Provinces

Policy Dimension	Jilin Province	Guangdong/Zhejiang
Housing subsidy	Limited	Up to 10 million RMB (Dongguan)
Living allowance	Minimal	Up to 350,000 RMB
Tax incentives	Absent	Local tax rebates
Spouse/child services	Basic	Comprehensive
One-stop service	No	Yes (digitized)

Source: Provincial policy documents; Dongguan City talent policies; Zhejiang “Kunpeng Action” program

This external policy gap undermines Jilin’s private institutions’ ability to attract and retain high-level talent. Although national policies emphasise equal development, local implementation remains uneven, particularly in terms of financial support for regional research platforms. As the Research Director of JU-09 reflected that while parity policies exist on paper, implementation gaps remain. Equitable government funding is required to sustain competitive research platforms.

This regional policy asymmetry creates a cycle of disadvantage: insufficient public investment weakens local research capacity and makes it more difficult for private universities to compete for national grants, reinforcing their marginal position in the academic hierarchy.

4 Discussion

The empirical findings of this study reveal a systemic challenge in developing applied research capacity among faculty members in private higher education institutions in Jilin Province. Rather than reflecting isolated administrative shortcomings, the six identified

barriers constitute an interconnected institutional lock-in. This section examines these dynamics through the lens of human resource management and state policy instruments, while comparing Jilin with more developed coastal models.

4.1 Institutional Environments Shape Faculty Motivation

These findings suggest that low levels of research engagement among faculty are not simply attributable to individual capability, but represent adaptive responses to constrained institutional environments. Across the participating private universities, limited research resources, excessive teaching responsibilities, restricted career opportunities, and perceived inequities in evaluation and promotion collectively weakened faculty members' willingness to undertake sustained research. This interpretation is consistent with Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Adams' Equity Theory. Insufficient research support, heavy workloads, and unclear promotion mechanisms undermine essential hygiene factors, while persistent perceptions of inequity reduce faculty willingness to invest time and intellectual effort in long-term research.

This interpretation is consistent with recent international research, which increasingly recognises faculty research engagement as being shaped by institutional environments rather than individual motivation alone. Gamoran (2023) argues that misaligned university reward structures discourage sustained scholarly engagement, while recent studies further emphasise that organisational support, perceived fairness, and opportunities for professional development are critical determinants of academic motivation (Chen et al., 2022; Hao, 2023). Similar challenges have also been identified in China's private higher education sector, where fragmented incentive mechanisms, heavy teaching responsibilities, and insufficient research support continue to constrain faculty research capacity despite growing policy expectations (Zhang et al., 2025).

This research goes beyond previous studies by showing that faculty motivation is shaped not by isolated institutional deficiencies but by the combined effects of organisational resources, workload allocation, career incentives and fairness perceptions. These mutually reinforcing conditions are particularly pronounced in less-developed regions, demanding coordinated institutional reforms instead of overreliance on performance-based incentives alone.

4.2 Policy Imbalance Constrains Institutional Capacity

The empirical evidence indicates that the research challenges facing private universities reflect broader policy imbalances rather than institutional management alone. The significance of policy awareness and perceived local incentives further indicates that policy effectiveness depends on both policy design and faculty recognition. Limited financial support, fragmented policy implementation, and insufficient external incentives have weakened institutional capacity to sustain research development. From the perspective of Rothwell and Zegveld's Policy Instrument Theory, this pattern reflects an overreliance on regulatory instruments, while supply-side investment and demand-side incentives remain insufficient.

Recent international research similarly argues that institutional capacity is shaped by both governance arrangements and policy design. Mok and Marginson (2021) highlight the dual governance pressures facing Chinese private universities, while Howlett (2023) and Ramirez-Montoya et al. (2024) emphasise that effective higher education governance depends on a balanced combination of regulatory, financial, and incentive-based policy instruments. Recent Chinese research further suggests that fragmented classified governance continues to

constrain the development of private universities in less-developed regions (Zeng et al., 2026).

The above results further unpack how structural policy imbalance restricts institutional research capacity. Accordingly, balanced policy design combining regulatory supervision, sustained financial support and institutional capacity building is essential to boost faculty research vitality.

4.3 Governance Reform and Teaching–Research Integration

The evidence indicates that the separation of teaching and research reflects organisational arrangements rather than individual choices. Heavy teaching workloads disconnected evaluation systems, and limited opportunities for integrating research into undergraduate education have weakened the reciprocal relationship between teaching and research.

Neumann (1992) argues that teaching and research are mutually reinforcing when universities establish organisational conditions that support their integration. Recent reviews similarly suggest that meaningful teaching–research integration depends on institutional support, workload allocation, and curriculum design rather than individual faculty effort alone (Matthews & Kotzee, 2022). Recent comparative evidence further indicates that universities with integrated governance structures are more likely to achieve sustainable research-informed teaching (Xu et al., 2025; Hassaniyan, 2026).

These findings extend existing research by demonstrating that the teaching–research nexus cannot be strengthened through individual incentives alone. Sustainable integration requires organisational reforms that coordinate workload allocation, research support, and curriculum development.

5 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the traditional model of scale expansion is no longer sufficient to support the sustainable development of China's private higher education sector, particularly in less-developed regions such as Jilin Province. Achieving quality-oriented development requires coherent institutional reform, supportive policy environments, and sustained investment in faculty development.

Based on these findings, three sequential priorities emerge for strengthening faculty development in private higher education. In the short term, universities should establish institutional incentive systems that better integrate teaching and research while providing supportive conditions for faculty career development. In the medium term, regional governments should adopt more balanced policy instruments by expanding equitable access to research funding, talent programmes, and academic resources for private universities. In the longer term, governance reforms should strengthen institutional autonomy and organisational capacity, enabling universities to align teaching, research, and regional engagement more effectively. Given the fiscal constraints facing many private universities in less-developed regions, reforms should prioritise low-cost institutional coordination before large-scale financial investment.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Self-report bias was mitigated through anonymous data collection and academic-purpose assurances, while institutional heterogeneity was addressed through stratified sampling and statistical controls. As this study focuses on private universities in Jilin Province, future research could employ longitudinal and comparative designs across different regions and countries.

Nevertheless, these findings contribute to international discussions on private higher education governance in developing economies. Many countries experiencing regional inequality and the expansion of private higher education face similar challenges in balancing institutional sustainability with academic quality. The governance, policy, and faculty development issues identified in Jilin Province may therefore offer useful insights for higher education systems confronting comparable institutional transitions.

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