

From Ivory Towers to Corporate Ladders: The Impact of Managerialism on Academic Profession

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the ramifications of managerialism on the academic profession within Chinese higher education, with a focus on the erosion of traditional academic values and structures. Through an in-depth literature review, it identifies three primary areas of concern: the crisis in academic identity, the reduction of professional autonomy, and the increasing alienation within academic work. The study reveals how the infusion of market dynamics and management practices into the educational sphere, a strategy aimed at enhancing efficiency and economy, fundamentally challenges the essence of academic work. It highlights a significant shift from collegial to corporatized governance, resulting in the commodification of academic labor and a departure from the tenure system towards more precarious employment models. Furthermore, the paper discusses the conflicting pressures faced by academics, who must navigate between professional commitments and managerial expectations, often at the expense of their scholarly pursuits and well-being. The findings underscore a deepening sense of insecurity among academics, as managerialist policies prompt a reevaluation of personal and collective academic identities. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the impact of neoliberal policies on higher education, calling for a reassessment of managerialism's role in shaping academic careers and the future of scholarly work.

1. Introduction

During the 1980s, the advent of the government reinvention movement in Western developed countries marked a pivotal shift towards managerialism, an ideology advocating for the infusion of market dynamics and private sector management practices into public services to enhance "economy, efficiency, and effectiveness" [1,2]. This approach gained traction in the higher education sector, driven by a blend of neoliberal ideology, the expansion and increasing complexity of higher education, and reduced government funding [3-5]. Managerialism redefined university operations and governance, introducing a regime of audits, accountability, and performativity that questioned the traditional model of academic autonomy. This shift towards professionalized management, performance metrics, cost controls, financial oversight, and quality assurance reflected broader societal and economic transformations [6-8]. As Chinese universities navigated

the challenges of a developing socialist market economy and evolving social structures in the 1990s, they too embraced managerialist principles, importing Western academic governance models to address the complexities of modern higher education [6-8].

The implementation of managerialism in Chinese higher education has fundamentally reshaped its landscape through specific manifestations across external and internal dimensions. Externally, a strategic pivot from centralized educational planning to market-driven mechanisms has led to reduced public funding, aimed at intensifying inter-university competition, and institutionalized academic autonomy, enhancing decision-making capacities. This shift also introduced stringent accountability measures to elevate efficiency in academic endeavors [9]. Internally, managerialism has spurred a transformation towards corporatization, where universities, once bastions of shared values, now prioritize profit, reflected in the adoption of performance metrics for course, research, and faculty evaluations [10-11]. This new paradigm fosters a culture of audits and accountability, compelling institutions to engage in branding and marketing to improve their image and attract resources, including students [12]. Furthermore, it has led to the capitalization of academic work, turning educational and research outputs into revenue-generating assets [5], and ushered in a shift towards technocratic governance, characterized by the rise of professional managerial roles and a departure from collegial decision-making towards a more centralized bureaucratic model [7,9]. Collectively, these developments highlight managerialism's profound impact on the operations and ethos of Chinese universities, driving them to adapt to societal needs while also stirring debate and dissent.

Managerialism has become integral to contemporary university structures, addressing economic and efficiency challenges within higher education. However, this paradigm shift also confronts the established norms of the academic profession, affecting the core values and ideals of the scholarly community and significantly influencing faculty members' lives and thoughts. This paper examines the impact of managerialism on the academic profession, focusing on three pivotal concerns: the crisis of academic identity, diminished professional autonomy, and the alienation within academic work. By reviewing existing literature, this introduction prepares the ground for a detailed exploration of how managerialism alters academic career landscapes, necessitating a critical reevaluation of the fundamental values that underpin scholarly work.

2. Crisis in Academic Identity

Academic identity emerges through an intricate negotiation of meanings within the social milieu, drawing on influences from pivotal communities to establish a space for self-definition and elucidation. This process encompasses both the external expectations and regulatory frameworks imposed on educators, alongside their personal commitment to self-identification and introspection. Questions such as "Who am I?" and "How should I act?" are central to this dialogue, reflecting a deep engagement with one's role and purpose within the academic sphere [13].

The introduction of managerialism has significantly altered this landscape, presenting a dual-pronged challenge. On one hand, traditional academic norms face erosion under managerialist policies, leading to a fragmented evolution of academic identities amidst the clash of established and emerging paradigms. On the other hand, managerialism introduces new environments that pose fresh challenges to the notion of academic identity itself. Specifically, reforms have shifted scholars' positioning, moving away from tenure systems towards employment models that commodify academic labor. This shift redefines academics from "unit personnel" to "societal individuals" and from "academic elites" to "knowledge workers" necessitated to validate their worth through measurable performance [7].

Moreover, academics encounter several layers of identity conflict. A primary tension exists

between their affiliation with the academic community, rooted in professional logic, and their ties to institutional organizations, which follow the efficiency-oriented logic of managerialism. This dichotomy places academics at the intersection of competing ideologies, challenging them to navigate between professional and managerial expectations [14]. Furthermore, individual and collective academic identities often conflict, as personal aspirations may not align with institutional expectations, compelling scholars to negotiate or compromise their visions [7].

Lastly, a prevalent sentiment among scholars is an overarching insecurity regarding their academic identities. Knights and Clarke (2014) delineate three types of insecurity: "impostors," who doubt their academic abilities; "aspirants," who strive to meet idealized academic goals; and "existentialists," who grapple with finding meaning in their work [15]. These insecurities highlight the profound impact of managerialism on the personal and professional lives of academic professionals, underscoring the need for a critical examination of how academic identities are constructed and challenged in contemporary higher education.

3. Reduction of Professional Autonomy

Professional autonomy signifies the authoritative control over one's work, with the profession itself—not external forces—setting the primary standards and methodologies [16]. This autonomy has faced substantial erosion under the tide of managerialism reforms, marking a pivotal shift in the traditional privileges and operational landscape of academic staff.

The introduction of managerialism has precipitated a notable decline in the internal governance of professions. Traditionally anchored in institutionalized disciplinary knowledge, professional autonomy has thrived on the specialized nature of academic work, which demands particular training and skills. Such specialization has historically rendered academic tasks resistant to the forces of standardization, rationalization, or commercialization typical of market-driven or bureaucratic systems [17]. Academic freedom and autonomy, fundamental to the ethos and regulatory frameworks of the academic profession, have empowered scholars to shape and direct academic discourse and activity based on their scholarly achievements and expertise. However, within environments dominated by managerialism, the primacy of economic efficiency overshadows traditional academic values, subjecting scholarly work to a regimen of external performance assessments, cost controls, and financial oversight, thereby significantly limiting the scope of scholars' professional discretion [7].

Furthermore, managerialism has amplified the role of external entities in governing academic professions. Historically, the academic profession, alongside its clientele and the state, constituted a tripartite control mechanism over the production and consumption of professional services. Collegiate control reflected the profession's autonomous regulation based on authoritative expertise; patronage denoted the clients' capacity to delineate their needs and modalities of fulfillment; mediation referred to the state's role in defining the contours of professional practice [18]. Managerialism's reforms have disrupted this equilibrium, bolstering the influence of clients and the state while supplanting traditional collegial governance with hierarchical, administrative management. This realignment has not only heightened the state's mediating influence but has also fostered a landscape where managerial entities increasingly dictate the priorities and functions of academic work, relegating scholars to roles more akin to "proletariat" or "managed knowledge workers" and marginalizing their voice in decision-making processes [19].

Moreover, the growing emphasis on aligning academic endeavors with customer-value orientations and the intensification of control via corporate sponsorship underscore the shift towards a market-oriented academic environment. This transformation is accompanied by a profound redistribution of power within the academic profession. External evaluations and other managerial

initiatives have significantly curtailed the cadre of scholars wielding traditional academic authority, relegating the majority to increased oversight and direction by university administrators, with only a select few academic elites maintaining their influence. As Musselin (2013) articulates, such managerial reforms have not necessarily diluted the collective professional power of the academic community [20]; rather, they have instigated a recalibration of power dynamics, privileging those scholars who align closely with market imperatives and administrative roles, thereby emerging as "academic bureaucrats" who consolidate significant influence and orchestrate internal governance through mechanisms of control and dependency [8].

4. Alienation in Academic Work

Max Weber's (1999) seminal exploration of academia as a vocation that marries material sustenance with spiritual enrichment has been profoundly challenged by the incursion of managerialism [21]. This shift, increasingly binds academic funding and income to survival strategies, propelling the academic profession towards a utilitarian orientation [19]. Such evolution critically undermines the intrinsic value of scholarly work, fostering a sense of alienation where the quest for knowledge becomes subordinate to its marketability [22]. Furthermore, the emphasis on performance evaluations and the commercialization of research pivots academic engagement from the generation of knowledge to its exchange value [8]. This paradigm shift not only alters the foundational approaches to research, teaching, and community service but also raises significant concerns about academia's future integrity and societal contributions.

The prevailing "publish or perish" ethos underscores this transformation, with publication in prestigious indexes like SCI, SSCI, and A&HCI becoming synonymous with academic achievement. This outcome-driven environment nurtures a competitive zeal for publication in high-tier journals, likened by Butler and Spoelstra (2012) to religious fervor [23], and reconfigures research projects into strategic endeavors for securing funding, sidelining scholars' authentic interests. While such strategies have notably increased scholarly output, evidenced by a 3.5% annual growth in publications (STM), they have also introduced adverse effects. These include questioning the intrinsic value of journal articles due to their often insular focus [24, 25], a skewed balance between research and teaching responsibilities, and a culture of short-termism that prioritizes trend-chasing over genuine inquiry [26,27]. Moreover, conforming to journal preferences stifles innovation, producing narrowly focused and derivative research [22], while the dominance of English in academic publishing further homogenizes scholarly discourse, sidelining critical global issues [28, 29].

The educational landscape, too, has experienced a paradigm shift towards "client control" [30], with student numbers and satisfaction metrics redefining educational success. This customer-centric model often compromises educational depth for student contentment, leading to teaching strategies predominantly aimed at securing favorable evaluations. This dynamic is particularly pronounced in MBA programs, where high tuition fees amplify students' influence, potentially compromising the educator-student dynamic [22]. Coupled with the scrutiny of teaching workloads, this approach not only engenders a climate of mistrust towards educators but also trivializes the intrinsic value of teaching, undermining its impact on academic advancement and eroding the quality of education [31].

Amidst this landscape, managerialism has heralded a significant shift towards flexible employment models, such as postdoctoral tracks, "up-or-out" policies, and annual contracts, displacing the stability of tenure. This evolution introduces a new academic norm centered on quantifiable achievements, compelling constant audits in teaching quality, workload, and research funding [11]. Faculty members face dual pressures from market demands and hierarchical oversight,

leading to increased workloads, stringent publication requirements, precarious contracts, shrinking incomes, and intensified evaluation systems, collectively heightening professional stress [32]. These pressures provoke a spectrum of stress responses [33], as the reliance on quantifiable performance metrics cultivates a culture of accountability that concurrently restricts academic freedom. Evaluation systems that underscore staff comparability and replaceability foster self-surveillance and anxiety over career progression [34], while the coupling of job opportunities with performance metrics engenders a competitive survival mode, bifurcating the academic community into winners and losers [35].

Furthermore, the push to amplify universities' social service roles within quasi-market conditions not only secures economic benefits for educators and institutions but also engenders short-term growth. However, this focus can lead to an overextension, manifesting a dichotomy between altruistic knowledge dissemination and commercial exploitation of proprietary insights. The academic commitment to long-term, exploratory research confronts industry preferences for commercially viable, low-risk endeavors. This juxtaposition extends to knowledge sharing, where academia's openness clashes with the corporate sector's pursuit of intellectual property protection. Academics find themselves navigating these contradictory pressures, balancing scholarly dissemination ideals against the allure of commercial success [36, 37]. The encroachment of commercial activities into academia threatens to dilute scholarly focus, hindering the cultivation of expertise and scholarly contributions. As Stephan and Levin (1992) highlight, achieving scholarly prominence necessitates significant investment in research, prolific writing, and extensive networking [38].

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The discourse presented offers a comprehensive examination of the profound and multifaceted impacts of managerialism on the Chinese higher education landscape, paralleling broader global trends. This critical review elucidates how the adoption of managerialist principles, underpinned by neoliberal ideologies and necessitated by fiscal constraints and the complexities of modern academia, has precipitated a paradigmatic shift in university operations, governance, and ethos. The transition towards a market-driven, performance-oriented model has not only reconfigured the external and internal dynamics of universities but also significantly altered the academic profession itself, raising pivotal concerns around academic identity, professional autonomy, and alienation within academic work.

The erosion of traditional academic norms and the commodification of academic labor underscore a crisis in academic identity, challenging scholars to navigate a terrain fraught with conflicting ideologies and expectations. This evolution has not only fragmented academic identities but also engendered a pervasive sense of insecurity among scholars, complicating their engagement with the core purposes and values of their profession. Furthermore, the reduction of professional autonomy, a cornerstone of academic freedom and self-regulation, highlights a concerning trend towards the dilution of scholarly self-governance in favor of external control mechanisms prioritizing efficiency and output over academic quality and integrity.

The alienation of academic work, as manifested in the pressures of the "publish or perish" ethos and the commodification of educational and research outputs, represents perhaps the most disconcerting outcome of the managerialist agenda. This shift towards utilitarianism and marketability threatens to undermine the intrinsic value of academic endeavors, distancing scholars from the ethos of knowledge generation and dissemination for public good.

In summation, while managerialism has ostensibly sought to address the economic and operational challenges confronting higher education, its implementation has precipitated far-

reaching implications for the academic profession. The critical analysis underscores the necessity for a recalibration of managerialist practices, advocating for a model that harmonizes efficiency with the foundational values of academia. The preservation of academic integrity, autonomy, and a sense of purpose among scholars is paramount for ensuring that universities continue to serve as bastions of learning, critical inquiry, and societal advancement. As such, this paper calls for a nuanced reassessment of managerialism within higher education, emphasizing the need to balance market-driven imperatives with the imperatives of academic freedom, scholarly identity, and the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself.

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