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Why "Orderly Mobility" Produces Disorderly Concentration: Policy Instrument Imbalance and Implementation Bottlenecks in Provincial Faculty Mobility Governance

Junchao Ma

Graduate University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar 999097, Mongolia

Abstract

This paper examines why China's two-decade policy campaign for the "orderly mobility" of university faculty has ended in "disorderly concentration," using Sichuan Province as an empirical site. Applying a policy-instrument framework to 127 national, provincial and municipal documents and combining the coding with six case universities, semi-structured interviews and survey data, the study finds a structurally imbalanced toolbox: mandatory "blocking" instruments account for 58.4 per cent of coded provisions, while guiding incentive instruments and enabling service instruments remain underdeveloped. This imbalance, compounded by vertical policy deviation and horizontal coordination failure across levels of government, converts a redistribution-oriented policy into an instrument that accelerates one-way talent outflow from regional and ethnic-minority institutions. The paper concludes that governance reform must move beyond issuing more mandates toward building enabling tools, inter-governmental coordination and a provincial compensation mechanism, rather than relying on administrative command.

Keywords

Faculty Mobility; Policy Instruments; Implementation Bottleneck; Inter-Governmental Coordination; Regional Public Universities; Sichuan Province.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Significance

The mobility of university faculty is repeatedly identified in Chinese policy as a lever for equity: if scholars can move, talent will flow from over-concentrated elite universities to under-developed regional ones. In practice, the flow runs in the opposite direction. Provincial and ethnic-minority universities lose their strongest faculty to a handful of metropolitan institutions, and the gap widens year by year. Why do policies designed to encourage circulation instead strengthen concentration? The question is no longer only about individual behaviour; it is a question about the design and implementation of the policy system itself.

Sichuan is a revealing province because it contains both the wealthiest metropolitan core and remote ethnic-minority regions within one administrative boundary. Within the same policy environment, universities experience sharply different mobility outcomes. A close reading of how policy is written and how it is executed therefore offers a rare chance to distinguish design failure from implementation failure.

The distinction matters because the two diagnoses imply different remedies. If the problem is that policy is wrong, more and better directives are required; if the problem is that policy is poorly implemented, then the same instruments will fail regardless of how many new documents are issued. This paper argues that the diagnosis is mixed but weighted toward implementation and instrument design: the stated goal of balanced mobility is reasonable, but the toolbox over-relies on mandatory instruments, and inter-governmental coordination is too

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weak to convert those instruments into regional equity. The practical consequence is that the policy system now behaves as if it were designed to concentrate talent, even though its stated purpose is the opposite.

1.2. Research Status at Home and Abroad

Research on faculty mobility policy has three strands. The first traces the evolution of national policy and summarises its intentions. The second evaluates the effect of specific schemes, such as distinguished-professorship programmes, on recruitment. The third compares Chinese governance with overseas models of academic labour mobility. These studies establish that mobility has increased, but they rarely examine the composition of the policy toolbox or the coordination problems between the provincial government, municipal governments and universities.

Two limitations follow. Most existing work treats “more policy” as the solution and does not ask whether the mix of instruments is itself the problem. Equally, studies tend to stop at the provincial document and do not trace how a national measure is distorted as it passes through levels of government and is negotiated among universities. This paper fills both gaps by coding instruments and by following the policy through to six campuses[1-3].

The policy-instrument tradition, which originated in studies of the tools of government and of the gap between intention and implementation, provides a vocabulary for this move. It asks not only whether a policy exists but what kind of instrument it deploys, who bears the transaction cost of compliance, and how instruments interact across levels of government. Applied here, it makes the implicit bias of the Chinese mobility system visible: a system that commands movement but supplies no portable benefits, no coordinating forum and no compensation for losing institutions is not a neutral policy; it is a policy that systematically advantages already-resourced universities.

1.3. Research Content and Methods

The paper codes 127 policy documents issued between 2015 and 2023 at national, Sichuan provincial and municipal levels. Provisions are classified as mandatory (rules, quotas, prohibitions), guiding (incentives, awards, targets) or enabling (services, platforms, information).[4] The coding is combined with six case universities-two double first-class inflow institutions, two provincial-key backbone universities and two regional or ethnic-minority outflow institutions-interviews with 42 officials, administrators and faculty, and a questionnaire. Figure 1 shows the analytical roadmap.

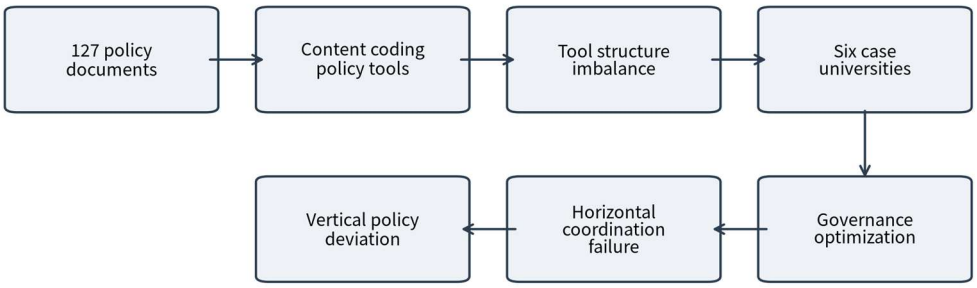


Figure 1. Analytical Roadmap of Policy Instrument Research

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2. Theoretical Basis: Policy Instruments and Implementation

2.1. A Three-Type Policy Instrument Framework

Policy instruments are the means by which governments turn intentions into action. A useful distinction is between mandatory instruments that command behaviour, guiding instruments that reward desired behaviour, and enabling instruments that reduce the cost of behaving well. A healthy equity policy should combine all three: rules prevent exploitation, incentives reward balanced mobility, and services lower the frictions of genuine circulation. When one type dominates, the policy becomes biased.

The three types impose different transaction costs. Mandatory instruments shift the cost of compliance to the lower levels of government and to universities, which must devise work-arounds if the mandate conflicts with local incentives. Guiding instruments transfer resources toward behaviour the centre wants to reward, but they tend to flow to the universities best positioned to claim them. Enabling instruments reduce friction for everyone, but they are the cheapest to announce and the most expensive to deliver,[5] and they therefore tend to be under-provided. A persistent surplus of mandatory instruments, combined with a deficit of enabling instruments, is a recognisable signature of a policy that is willing to command but not to enable.

2.2. Vertical and Horizontal Implementation

Even a well-designed instrument can fail in execution. Vertical deviation occurs when a national measure is narrowed or re-interpreted as it moves from the centre to the province to the municipality. Horizontal coordination failure occurs when departments that own education, finance and human resources pursue inconsistent targets. In the Chinese system, where local officials are ranked by observable outputs, both biases tend to concentrate resources on visible, elite institutions rather than on invisible regional equity.

The classic implementation literature long ago observed that policy is transformed as it passes through the chain of actors who must carry it out. Each level has its own incentives and its own constraints,[6-8] and a measure designed at the centre rarely arrives unchanged at the campus. In the Chinese setting this transformation is intensified by the promotion tournament among local officials: the education bureau director is judged on measurable outputs such as the number of high-level talents attracted, and these are easiest to achieve at an existing flagship university. The policy therefore does not merely fail to reach the periphery; it is actively redirected toward the centre at each step.

2.3. Analytical Framework

The framework of this paper links instrument structure (the share of the three types) to implementation (vertical deviation and horizontal coordination) and finally to the observed mobility outcome (net inflow or outflow). This allows the imbalance of the toolbox to be tested against the case evidence rather than asserted.

The chain is deliberately simple: what the documents say determines what can be done, what the levels of government actually do determines what is executed, and what universities experience is the outcome. A simple chain is preferable here because the argument is already being tested against six heterogeneous cases; adding more intermediate variables would risk over-interpretation. The empirical sections below move in the same order, beginning with the coding of the documents and ending with the campus-level outcome.

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3. Empirical Results

3.1. The Composition of the Policy Toolbox

The coding results show a clear and persistent bias. Across the 127 documents, mandatory provisions account for 58.4 per cent of all coded clauses, guiding incentives for 24.6 per cent and enabling services for only 17.0 per cent. The dominance of command-and-control language is not surprising in a public-administration tradition, but it is striking that the share of mandatory clauses actually rose between 2015 and 2021 before easing slightly, while enabling clauses declined. Figure 2 displays the annual structure.

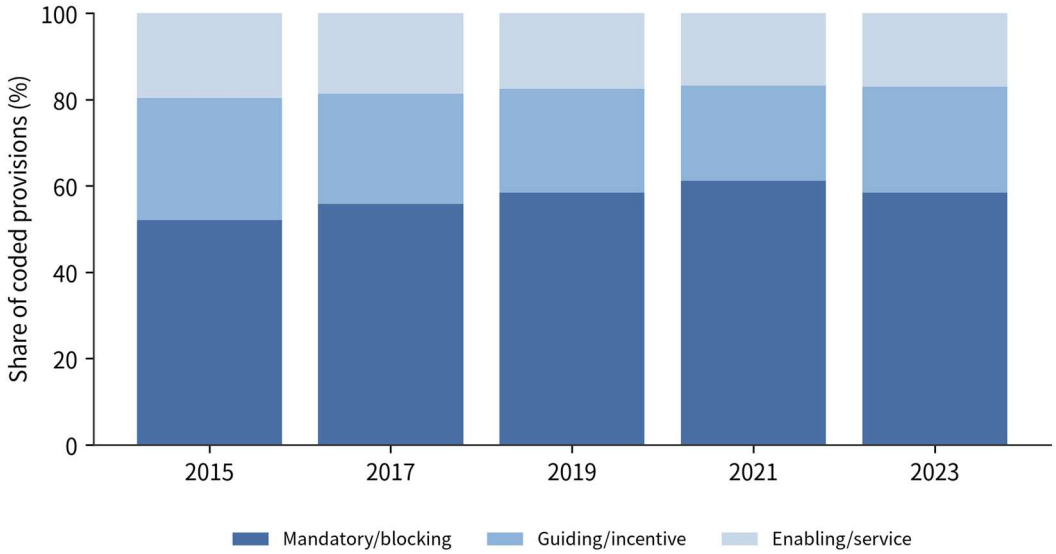


Figure 2. Structure of Coded Policy Instruments by Year (2015–2023)

The implication is that the system asks universities to move talent but provides few of the services-portable entitlements, joint appointment platforms, cross-regional information systems-that would make such movement low-cost. Command language alone cannot create a market.

The trend over time is equally informative. The mandatory share rose from just over half in 2015 to a peak above sixty per cent in 2021, even as the volume of documents grew. This indicates that the government's response to slow progress was to issue more commands, not to redesign the incentive and service architecture. The slight decline after 2021 reflects a national policy turn toward streamlining documentation, but the relative share of enabling instruments did not recover. The policy system therefore became more vocal without becoming more capable, a pattern consistent with the broader finding that administrative capacity, not political will, is the binding constraint on equity-oriented mobility.

It is also worth noting what the coding does not show. The documents do not reveal any coordinated sequence in which a mandate is paired with a corresponding enabling measure. A new rule capping hiring prices, for example, is not accompanied by a fund to support regional retention; a new target for regional appointments is not accompanied by portable benefits that would make such appointments acceptable to candidates. Instruments appear as parallel lists rather than as a designed package, and this absence of packaging is itself evidence: the policy system treats mobility as a compliance task rather than as a market that must be built.

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Table 1. Classification and Share of Policy Instruments (N = 127 documents)

Instrument type	Examples	Share (%)	Direction of effect
Mandatory / blocking	Quotas, approval, prohibitions, assessment ranks	58.4	Constrains; locks institutions into existing positions
Guiding / incentive	Distinguished professorships, grants, awards	24.6	Rewards visible recruitment; benefits elite universities
Enabling / service	Data platforms, joint appointments, portable benefits	17.0	Lowers friction of balanced mobility; underdeveloped

3.2. The Six-Campus Mobility Outcome

The case universities confirm that the instrument bias maps onto sharply unequal outcomes. The two double first-class institutions recorded large net inflows of senior faculty, the two provincial-key universities were roughly balanced but losing junior talent, and the two regional and ethnic-minority universities recorded substantial net outflows. Table 2 summarises the pattern.

The asymmetry is more striking than the raw net figures suggest. The inflow universities recruit senior scholars from across the country, while the outflow universities lose faculty almost entirely to the Chengdu cluster; there is almost no circulation in the reverse direction, and no circulation at all between two regional institutions. The provincial-key backbone universities sit on the boundary: they retain enough faculty to maintain their position but lose their best young researchers before those researchers become senior. The pattern is therefore not a market equilibrium in which universities of similar quality exchange staff; it is a hierarchical gradient along which talent flows steadily upward, consistent with the platform logic described in the HRM literature.

Table 2. Net Faculty Mobility Across Six Case Universities (2019–2023)

University	Tier / role	Senior inflow	Senior outflow	Net flow
University A	Double first-class, inflow highland	96	18	+78
University B	Double first-class, inflow highland	81	15	+66
University C	Provincial-key backbone	34	29	+5
University D	Provincial-key backbone	28	31	−3
University E	Local / regional outflow depression	11	47	−36
University F	Ethnic-minority region university	7	39	−32

3.3. Implementation Bottlenecks

Interviews reveal two recurring bottlenecks. Vertically, the provincial instruction to "support regional higher education" is converted at the municipal level into "build the best local flagship," so resources remain in the provincial capital rather than reaching the periphery. Horizontally, the education department's equity target collides with the finance department's efficiency target and the human-resource department's establishment constraints, and no coordinating body resolves the contradiction. The result is that the most equity-relevant part of the policy-compensation for institutions that lose faculty-exists on paper but is never funded.

A further finding is that the two bottlenecks reinforce each other. Vertical deviation concentrates decisions in the provincial capital, where the strongest universities are located and where officials naturally identify regional strength with metropolitan excellence. Horizontal fragmentation then means that, once a decision is made, no single department owns the consequence for peripheral institutions: education argues it has fulfilled its duty by issuing the document, finance points to a tight budget, and personnel points to fixed establishment

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numbers. The absence of an owner for the equity outcome is the deepest implementation bottleneck, because it makes the losses of regional institutions nobody's formal responsibility.

4. Policy Implications

4.1. Rebalancing the Instrument Mix

The first implication is that issuing further mandatory documents will not help. Provincial policy should deliberately expand enabling instruments: portable housing and pension entitlements, shared cross-regional supervisory schemes, and a public information platform that matches supply and demand. Guiding incentives should be re-designed to reward retention in regional institutions rather than recruitment by elite ones.

The sequencing matters. Enabling instruments cannot be delivered overnight; they require data infrastructure, administrative cooperation and a change in budget rules. A realistic sequence begins with portable entitlements, which remove the most immediate friction on the supply side, proceeds to a joint-appointment and supervision scheme that allows regional faculty to retain access to metropolitan platforms, and concludes with the compensation fund. Guiding incentives should be adjusted in parallel so that evaluation scores reward the retention of early-career faculty in regional institutions rather than the recruitment of senior scholars by elite ones.

4.2. Strengthening Inter-Governmental Coordination

A provincial coordination council with representation from education, finance and personnel departments should be empowered to resolve horizontal conflict, and a public resource compensation fund should channel part of the benefit enjoyed by inflow institutions back to the institutions that lose faculty. This internalises the externality that currently makes concentration rational for the winners and inevitable for the losers.

The compensation fund is the instrument most likely to change behaviour, because it works through incentives rather than through command. If a metropolitan university that hires a senior scholar is charged a modest fee that is transferred to the sending institution, the marginal cost of predatory hiring rises, while the sending institution acquires resources with which to retain its remaining faculty. The amount need not be large to change decisions at the margin; its purpose is to make the hidden cost of concentration visible in the budgets of both sides. Such a fund also creates a legitimate home for the equity objective that no single department currently owns, giving horizontal coordination a concrete task rather than an abstract forum.

4.3. Limitations

The coding is restricted to one province and one policy domain; a multi-province comparison and a longitudinal panel of mobility flows would strengthen the external validity of the conclusions.

A second limitation is that the study relies on a bounded number of interviews and case universities, which limits generalisation across the whole of China. The mechanism it identifies, however, is not specific to Sichuan in its logic: any province with a strongly dominant metropolitan core, a formal establishment system and a results-based evaluation regime is likely to reproduce the same instrument imbalance and the same vertical redirection. Future work can test this expectation by comparing provinces with different degrees of metropolitan dominance and by tracking mobility flows over a longer panel.

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5. Summary

This paper has shown that the "orderly mobility" campaign produces "disorderly concentration" not because individual scholars behave badly but because the policy toolbox is itself unbalanced. Mandatory instruments dominate, enabling services are underdeveloped, and vertical and horizontal implementation failures convert an equity policy into a mechanism that accelerates one-way talent outflow. Reform should therefore target the instrument mix and the coordination architecture, not the volume of mandates.

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