Effects and Risks of Projectization in University-Government-School Cooperation: Evidence from China

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Abstract
Within China's project-based governance system, the projectization of University–Government–School (U-G-S) cooperation has become a dominant mode of educational collaboration, reshaping teacher education partnerships and basic education reform. However, its governance implications remain underexplored. This study examines the formation logic, practical effects, and structural risks of projectized U-G-S cooperation in the Chinese context. Using a qualitative institutional analysis approach, the research integrates policy document analysis, theoretical interpretation based on project-based governance, resource dependence, and path dependence theories, and illustrative case evidence from existing literature. The findings indicate that projectization enhances precision, resource mobilization, and procedural standardization through time-bound cycles and performance-based evaluation, thereby improving the operability of cooperation. At the same time, it generates structural tensions, including goal alienation, path dependence, and the amplification of regional disparities resembling a Matthew Effect. These tensions stem from the dominance of instrumental rationality embedded in technical governance. This study provides a systematic institutional interpretation of both the benefits and inherent constraints of projectized U-G-S cooperation and offers insights for optimizing governance design in policy-driven educational systems.

Keywords: U-G-S cooperation; Projectization; Practical effects; Multiple risks; Chinese context

Introduction

As a governance system distinct from bureaucracy, China's project system has long been deeply embedded in all levels of national governance and various fields of economic and social development alongside the country's reform and opening-up drive since the late 1970s. It has reshaped social relations and constructed a new pattern of national and social governance characterized by governing the country through projects (Qu, J. D, 2012). a unique institutional context that differentiates China's project-based cooperation from international counterparts.

Projectization is a vivid manifestation of the project system in practice, referring to the implementation methods and processes that reflect the essence and characteristics of project-based governance. The main differences between projectization and non-projectization are as follows: (1) The project in projectization refers to a one-time task with rigid resource and time constraints within the context of China's project system, whereas the project in non-projectization denotes work arrangements within a bureaucratic framework; (2) Project implementation in projectization adheres to an action logic of affair orientedism and performance-ism, while that in non-projectization follows the administrative management logic of command-obedience; (3) Cooperative subjects in projectization are equal in status, forming a close-knit partnership based on the

principle of mutual benefit and win-win results and jointly managing cooperative affairs through dialog and consultation.

In contrast, cooperative subjects in non-projectization are unequal, establishing a loose partnership based on government or organizational tasks, conducting extensive management of cooperative affairs, and often only one participating subject emerges as the primary beneficiary; (4) The project implementation process in projectization is characterized by standardization, normalization, efficiency, and a stable implementation mechanism, while that in non-projectization is highly subjective and arbitrary with an unstable mechanism; (5) The outcomes of project implementation in projectization are quantifiable and amenable to precise evaluation, whereas those in non-projectization are difficult to quantify and effectively assess.

U-G-S cooperation refers to educational collaboration between Universities (U), local Governments (G), and primary and secondary Schools (S) in China. Unlike similar partnerships in Western countries (e.g., Professional Development Schools (PDS) in the U.S. and Europe, which are mainly market-driven and school-initiated), China's U-G-S cooperation is strongly driven by top-down educational policies and closely linked to regional fiscal allocation mechanisms, making projectization not only a trend but a necessary choice under China's institutional framework (Wang, J. Y., & Cheng, L, 2011). Projectization is the most prominent practical feature of U-G-S cooperation in the context of China's project system. Thus, this paper defines "projectization of U-G-S cooperation" as a cooperative mechanism and process in which cooperative subjects such as universities, local governments, and primary and secondary schools in China, following the action logic of affair-orientedism and performance-ism, and based on the principle of mutual benefit and win-win cooperation, jointly achieve cooperative goals by jointly implementing cooperative projects.

U-G-S cooperation is a new model for the development of teacher education in China's new era. For the increasingly extensive and in-depth U-G-S cooperation in China, projectization has become the norm. However, there is a lack of relevant research on the actual effects of projectized U-G-S cooperation based on Chinese contexts, which is undoubtedly an important issue that cannot be avoided in the global field of educational governance.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative institutional analysis approach to examine the formation logic, governance effects, and structural risks of projectized University Government–School (U-G-S) cooperation in China. Rather than conducting micro-level performance evaluation, the research focuses on the macro-institutional configuration that shapes cooperative practices under China's project-based governance system.

The analysis is based primarily on policy document review and theoretical interpretation. National and local education policy documents issued since the 1994 tax-sharing reform were examined to trace the institutional emergence and normalization of projectized cooperation. Documents were selected if they explicitly referred to tripartite cooperation mechanisms or project-based funding arrangements in teacher education and school reform.

To interpret the governance logic embedded in these policies, the study draws on three analytical lenses: project-based governance theory, resource dependence theory, and path dependence theory. Relevant empirical studies and representative cases reported in existing literature are incorporated as illustrative evidence to support institutional analysis.

This research is conceptual and interpretive in nature. Its objective is not to measure educational outcomes statistically, but to reveal the underlying governance logic and structural tensions embedded in projectized cooperation. Future research may complement this institutional perspective with comparative or quantitative approaches.

Result and Discussion

Formation and Development of Projectization in U-G-S Cooperation in China

University-School (U-S) cooperation is the embryonic form of U-G-S cooperation. It originated in European and American countries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Wu, L. P, 2018), but substantive U-S cooperation did not begin until the 1980s and 1990s, with the widespread establishment of Professional Development Schools (PDS) in European and American countries as a typical feature (Wang, J. Y., & Cheng, L, 2011). With the rapid global expansion of U-S cooperation, such collaboration also took off in China. Particularly in the early 1990s, the gradual reform of normal universities in China (aimed at enhancing the connection between teacher education and basic education practice) promoted the prosperity of U-S cooperation (Li, X., Mei, Y., & Cheng, L, 2022) and yielded several representative achievements. For example: the subjectivity development experiments carried out by the Department of Education of Beijing Normal University with Anyang People's Avenue Primary School in Henan Province, and by the Department of Education of Central China Normal University with Xiangshan Primary School in Jingmen City, Hubei Province; and the New Basic Education Experiment led by Professor Ye Lan from the Department of Education of East China Normal University (Li, W., & Cheng, H. Y, 2014).

Characteristics of Early U-S Cooperation

U-S cooperation during this period had the following characteristics: (1) Universities and primary and secondary schools were the two most important cooperative subjects; (2) The focus of cooperation was mainly on the transformation of weak basic education schools and the training of primary and secondary school teachers; (3) In U-S cooperation, the cooperative subjects were unequal in status, with universities occupying a dominant position (providing theoretical guidance and technical support); (4) The main form of cooperation was universities providing guidance and assistance to primary and secondary schools; (5) In the mid-to-late 1990s, U-S cooperation began to transition to U-G-S cooperation in China, with an obvious trend toward projectization.

Institutional Driver: Tax-Sharing System Reform

This transformation was closely related to China's tax-sharing system reform implemented in 1994 a pivotal institutional reform aimed at alleviating local fiscal constraints and balancing the fiscal power between the

central and local governments. This reform addressed the central-local conflict in China, characterized by financial power being concentrated upwards while administrative responsibilities are delegated downwards (Li, X., Mei, Y., & Cheng, L, 2022). After the reform, projects became a key channel for local governments, educational institutions, and social organizations to obtain financial support from the central government, gradually forming the project-based governance context unique to China (Qu, J. D, 2012).

Against this backdrop, the number of U-S cooperation projects increased, local education administrative departments significantly strengthened their involvement and support (e.g., coordinating resources, formulating implementation rules), and other subjects such as teaching and research institutions, non-governmental organizations, and enterprises also showed a growing willingness to participate in U-S cooperation. Thus, the 1980s and 1990s can be regarded as the initial formation period of projectized U-G-S cooperation in China.

Rapid Development in the New Century

The new century has witnessed the rapid development of projectized U-G-S cooperation in China. Entering the new century, to continuously deepen educational reform and promote high-quality educational development, China's central government has issued a series of landmark policies. For instance: the "Decision of the State Council on Basic Education Reform and Development" (Guo Fa, 2001, No. 21) and the "Guidelines for Basic Education Curriculum Reform (Trial)" (Jiao Ji, 2001, No. 17) issued by the Ministry of Education in 2001; the "National Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010–2020)" in 2010; the "Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Construction of Teachers' Teams" (Guo Fa, 2012, No. 41) in 2012; the "Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Implementing the Excellent Teacher Training Program" (Jiao Shi, 2014, No. 5) in 2014; the "Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of Teachers' Team Construction in the New Era" and the "Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Implementing the Excellent Teacher Training Program 2.0" (Jiao Shi, 2018, No. 2) in 2018; the "Opinions on Building a High-Quality and Balanced Basic Public Education Service System" issued by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council in 2023; and the "Outline for Building a Leading Education Power (2024–2035)" issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council in 2025.

Meanwhile, local governments at all levels in China have also introduced corresponding supporting policies. These policies clearly point out the necessity of strengthening tripartite cooperation among universities, primary and secondary schools, and local governments, and some even set time-bound policy goals accompanied by supporting educational projects or action plans. Unlike market-driven international cooperation models, China's U-G-S projectization is characterized by strong policy guidance and fiscal support from the government. Driven directly by these policies, a large number of projects from different levels (central, provincial, municipal) and channels have emerged in U-G-S cooperation across China, covering various aspects such as curriculum development, textbook compilation, teaching reform, normal student training, teacher training, and digital campus construction. Consequently, the projectization of U-G-S cooperation has entered a fast track and acceleration phase in China.

Practical Effects of Projectization in U-G-S Cooperation in China

Thanks to its characteristics such as relying on projects, combining problem-oriented and result-oriented approaches, formulating targeted policies, and focusing on key areas, the projectization of U-G-S cooperation has achieved positive practical effects in China.

Promoting Precision, Practicality, and Stability

From the development history and practice of U-G-S cooperation in China, it can be seen that non-projectized or less projectized U-G-S cooperation is usually a one-dimensional, superficial cooperation with unclear problems and indistinct priorities. All parties involved are often content with holding meetings and conducting publicity, which frequently results in minimal practical impact. A survey shows that in such U-G-S cooperation, "the U-G-S collaborative education system mostly remains at the level of framework-based cooperation intentions, only highlighting the importance of tripartite cooperation in form without forming operable and targeted action plans" (Xie, G. X, 2021). The cooperation often starts with much fanfare but gradually fades into silence afterward. Another study reaches the same conclusion, pointing out that such intentional U-G-S cooperation can only achieve superficial results and cannot effectively solve practical problems in China's educational development (An, F. H., & Wu, F, 2011).

In contrast, projectized U-G-S cooperation in China operates differently. Firstly, projects must be scientifically designed. It is necessary to: (1) adopt a problem-oriented approach, focusing on solving specific educational problems in China (e.g., uneven development of rural and urban education, weak teacher capacity in underdeveloped areas), and designing projects targetedly; (2) conduct scientific and accurate problem diagnosis based on local educational realities to ensure that project implementation can formulate targeted policies and focus on key areas; (3) decompose project tasks into specific items and assign responsibilities to individuals or institutions; (4) scientifically predict potential obstacles during project implementation (e.g., regional resource disparities, coordination difficulties) and formulate corresponding contingency plans.

Secondly, projects must be earnestly implemented. Due to the existence of rigid constraints such as time and quality (specified in policy documents or project contracts), all cooperative parties are required to take practical actions in accordance with the project plan and division of responsibilities to complete their respective project tasks. The success of the "U-A-S model" (Note: U: University; A: Education Administrative Department; S: Primary and Secondary Schools) in Tiedong District, Anshan City, Liaoning Province—a representative tripartite cooperation model in Northeast China has confirmed this to a certain extent (Ma, Y. P., Ou, L. S., & Jin, B, 2011). This model relies on project operation to clarify the responsibilities of universities, local education bureaus, and primary and secondary schools, and has effectively solved the practical problems of teacher training and curriculum reform in local basic education.

Enriching Cooperative Resources

The resource dependence theory holds that no organization is self-sufficient, and the survival and development of an organization depend on external resources (Pfeffer, J., & Salancik, G. R, 2006). U-G-S cooperation is a highly resource-dependent form of collaboration. Universities, local governments, and primary and secondary schools in China each possess unique resources that the others lack: universities have theoretical

and research advantages; local governments possess administrative mobilization capabilities; and primary and secondary schools offer practical educational scenarios and teaching experience. This resource heterogeneity is the foundation of U-G-S cooperation. However, studies show that insufficient resources are a common problem in China's U-G-S cooperation, particularly in non-projectized contexts (Song, C. X., & Lu, D. K, 2023).

In non-projectized U-G-S cooperation, these diverse resources are difficult to awaken and integrate due to the lack of effective incentive mechanisms and coordination platforms. However, the projectization of U-G-S cooperation can alleviate this problem, mainly because projects have strong resource mobilization capabilities:

(1) Each project has special funds allocated by the government (central or local) that are earmarked for specific purposes, providing stable and predictable funding sources.

(2) Unlike general projects, those in China's projectization system are "an affair-oriented mobilization or organizational method, that is, starting from the inherent logic of the matter itself, completing a one-time task with clear expected goals within limited time and resource constraints by using specific organizational forms" (Wang. Y & Zhang. B, 2009). These projects often involve a degree of competitiveness, as applications are typically reviewed through expert evaluation. To improve the success rate of project applications, each cooperative subject is usually required to make commitments on supporting funds in accordance with initial agreements. These funds are also earmarked, making the cooperative financing more sufficient and secure.

(3) Cooperative projects have an awakening function for the resources of all parties in China. Universities provide theoretical wisdom; local governments mobilize and integrate regional educational resources (e.g., coordinating inter-school cooperation and linking with enterprises) through administrative power; and primary and secondary school teachers contribute rich practical wisdom that many university teachers lack.

In non-projectized U-G-S cooperation, most of these resources remain in a dormant state. However, in projectized U-G-S cooperation, as cooperative subjects face common educational problems and share the pressure of project tasks, they are motivated to rediscover and awaken these dormant resources that might otherwise seem scattered or difficult to integrate. Similar to other fields of economic and social development in China, projects in a projectized system serve as the interest convergence point for all parties, providing strong momentum to attract, gather, and integrate resources. Thus, the projectization of U-G-S cooperation can better enrich cooperative resources and effectively alleviate the resource bottleneck in China's U-G-S cooperation.

Project governance is essentially an affair-based technical governance. The project operation process consists of a set of technical devices, including project planning, design, selection, application, review, approval, implementation, inspection, evaluation, rewards and punishments, and response. It is characterized by standardization, normalization, and efficiency, reflecting the governance concepts of precise and evidence-based governance in modern society.

In non-projectized U-G-S cooperation in China, the process is often inadequately supervised or entirely unsupervised due to a lack of problem, quality, and efficiency awareness among cooperators, as well as the

absence of standardized technical processes. Whether cooperation proceeds smoothly and achieves its goals often depends on the personal will and efforts of a small number of key individuals, such as project leaders, school principals, and education officials, leading to significant uncertainty. A study shows that some non-projectized U-G-S cooperation without a stable mechanism is established solely through alumni relations or friendship, or prompted by superior orders, and is difficult to sustain (Huang, J. X, 2018). Undoubtedly, such cooperation cannot effectively deepen or endure, and its quality cannot be guaranteed.

In projectized U-G-S cooperation, each project has clear objectives. "The target responsibility system decomposes project goals into operable, stylized, indexed, and instrumental linear standards and assigns weights to them, thereby ensuring rigid constraints and effectively curbing arbitrary modifications and standard deviations in project practice" (Guan, X. M, 2022).

The project operation process includes regular inspection by educational administrative departments, supervision by expert groups, and mutual feedback among cooperative parties, with response plans formulated for emerging difficulties. Project acceptance requires outcomes to be standardized, measurable, evidence-based, traceable, and applicable (e.g., the number of teachers trained, the improvement of student performance, and the promotion of curriculum reform). This standardized project operation process and scientific management method provide strong technical support for ensuring the quality of U-G-S cooperation in China.

Multiple Risks of Projectization in U-G-S Cooperation in China

Essentially, project-based governance operates primarily through task- and performance-oriented logics, which may generate structural limitations. While achieving positive practical effects, the projectization of U-G-S cooperation in China also brings many risks, which are closely related to China's institutional context, educational development stage, and regional disparities.

Alienation of Cooperative Goals

Goal alienation refers to the phenomenon where the actual outcomes achieved by a subject's behavior deviate significantly from the predetermined goals. Influenced by the affair-oriented and performance-oriented action logic of projectization, as well as the cultural-cognitive conflicts among cooperative subjects, the projectization of U-G-S cooperation in China is prone to goal alienation.

(1) Replacement of People-Oriented with Task-Oriented Goals: U-G-S cooperation is essentially an educational collaboration whose core goal is to jointly solve educational problems and improve the quality of talent training (i.e., cultivating people). Completing tasks and cultivating people should be a means-end relationship. However, the affair-oriented logic of projectized U-G-S cooperation in China often directs the cooperative focus toward completing tasks rather than cultivating people. This can lead cooperative subjects to become obsessed with projects, transforming themselves into project-driven actors who focus solely on tasks while ignoring the human element in the cooperation process. The actual outcome may only be the completion of a task (e.g., issuing a research report or organizing training sessions) without contributing significant value to teachers' professional development or students' personal growth.

(2) Replacement of Common Goals with Personal Goals: Although cooperation has a collective objective, individual participants—such as university teachers, school teachers, and education officials—inevitably participate with personal intentions (e.g., pursuing research achievements or meeting performance assessment indicators). When fragmented personal goals seriously conflict with the collective objective, the common goal of cooperation is weakened or replaced.

(3) Replacement of Development Goals with Interest Goals: In projectized U-G-S cooperation, some subjects behave as rational utility-maximizing actors, choosing strategies according to a cost-benefit calculation aimed at maximizing personal interests. The cooperation process is likely to degenerate into a competitive struggle for project funds or research achievements. Although different subjects have distinct interest preferences, the underlying motivation for pursuing interests remains essentially the same.

(4) Replacement of Long-Term Goals with Short-Term Goals: The projectization of U-G-S cooperation in China is characterized by a short, flat, and fast approach, with most project cycles lasting one to three years. Projects are designed to achieve immediate and tangible results for performance assessment within rigid constraints. However, these temporary tasks do not necessarily align with long-term goals such as educational equity or the cultivation of students' core competencies. Excessive pursuit of short-term gains can cause long-term damage to the educational cause.

The dominant mode of thinking in China's project system is projectized thinking, a form of technical control that categorizes goals into technical indicators and value goals (Shi, X. H., Geng, G. D., & Li, H, 2014). Technical indicators (e.g., the number of training sessions or textbooks compiled) are visual, measurable, and easy to evaluate, while value goals (e.g., educational equity or professional identity) are abstract and difficult to quantify. Consequently, project design and evaluation in China often focus on quantifiable technical indicators while neglecting value goals that reflect public rationality. This structural imbalance contributes to the risk of goal alienation.

Project Dependence in Cooperative Paths

Path dependence refers to "the impact of events occurring in the previous stage on events occurring later, similar to inertia in physics. Once entering a certain path, it will continue to develop along that path and become locked into it" (Shi, X. H., Geng, G. D., & Li, H, 2014). When institutional development enters a state of path dependence, it often falls into an inefficient state. The original intention of projectizing U-G-S cooperation in China was to promote high quality and efficient development. However, as project functions (e.g., resource allocation and performance assessment) have expanded, projects have exceeded their reasonable boundaries as tools and become an overextended governance mechanism with expansive resource mobilization capacity, inducing the cooperative path of U-G-S cooperation to fall into project dependence.

1) Project Complex of Cooperative Subjects: In the early stages of collaboration in China, many interactions were independent and spontaneous, occurring without formal projects. However, after the formation of projectized U-G-S cooperation, it seems that cooperative behaviors can no longer occur without relying on specialized projects. Today, projects are pervasive in China's U-G-S cooperation, becoming the generator and catalyst of collaboration cooperation increasingly depends on formal project frameworks.

2) Prevalent Project Packaging Behaviors: There are three typical ways of project packaging in China: (1) Through repackaging, renaming the daily work of universities, schools, and education departments (e.g., routine teaching research or meetings) as projects to apply for government funds; (2) forming a cooperative project chain with no substantial new content through grafting methods, such as piecing together, splitting, reorganizing, or nesting existing projects; (3) allowing completed projects to change their names and identities and reappear as new ones often described as old wine in new bottles to continuously obtain resources. All these chaotic project packaging behaviors result from tacit collusion among cooperative subjects in pursuit of interests.

Project dependence in cooperative paths is likely to lead China's U-G-S cooperation into an involutionary state of growth without development where the number of projects increases, but the actual effects of cooperation remain stagnant.

Matthew Effect in Cooperative Outcomes

Compared with universities, primary and secondary schools and regional education in China are most affected by the projectization of U-G-S cooperation. Unlike bureaucracy, the project system introduces a market competition mechanism, which may not only fail to promote the balanced development of basic education but also induce the Matthew Effect where the strong get stronger and the weak get weaker—thereby further widening the educational development gap between urban and rural areas, as well as between developed and underdeveloped regions.

(1) Advantage of Early Adopters: Regions and schools in China that took the lead in practicing projectized U-G-S cooperation (e.g., economically developed areas like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou) have established stable cooperative relationships with key universities and accumulated rich project governance experience. These achievements naturally become favorable conditions for them in subsequent project competitions. Thus, subjects that seized early development opportunities possess a greater voice and a higher winning rate in project bidding.

(2) Disparities in Project Acquisition Capabilities: There are obvious differences in the ability to obtain U-G-S cooperation projects across China. Regions and schools with strong development foundations (e.g., sufficient funding and high-quality teachers) hold distinct advantages in competitions, such as stronger proposal writing capabilities and better cooperation conditions. As projectization accelerates, high-level, well-funded large projects initiated by the central government have emerged, which are naturally favored by elite cooperative subjects.

Although these projects claim to follow principles of fairness and openness, project issuers (usually higher-level education administrative departments) generally implicit thresholds, such as previous project performance or institutional ranking, to reduce the risk of failure. In fact, the project undertakers capable of obtaining these projects are often the winners of previous competitions, resulting in a winner-takes-all situation. While some inclusive, weakly competitive projects exist to support underdeveloped regions and weak schools, their funding and resources are limited and far from sufficient to reverse the trend of the strong getting stronger.

(3) Preferential Selection by Project Issuers: Regardless of who the project issuer is, performance considerations such as ensuring project success and achieving visible results lead them to favor elite subjects like key universities and demonstration schools. The goal is to get more value for money or, as the Chinese proverb says, to add flowers to the brocade. This preferential choice, based on performance legitimacy, further amplifies the Matthew Effect in China's projectized U-G-S cooperation.

As educational collaboration aims to promote equity, U-G-S cooperation in China should follow the principles of fairness and inclusiveness and conform to the ethical demands of social justice. The extent to which U-G-S cooperation can achieve this depends on how effectively we can prevent and mitigate the Matthew Effect of its projectization.

Conclusion

Under the institutional background of project-based governance in China, the projectization of University–Government–School (U-G-S) cooperation has gradually become a dominant and normalized mode of educational collaboration. This study systematically examined its formation, development trajectory, practical effects, and structural risks within the Chinese context. The findings reveal that projectization embodies a dual governance logic that simultaneously generates efficiency gains and structural tensions.

On the one hand, projectization enhances the precision, practicality, and standardization of U-G-S cooperation. By relying on clearly defined project cycles, rigid time constraints, quantifiable indicators, and performance-based evaluation mechanisms, it strengthens problem-oriented intervention and improves implementation efficiency. Project-based operation effectively mobilizes heterogeneous resources from universities, local governments, and primary and secondary schools, transforming dormant institutional resources into coordinated action capacity. In this sense, projectization functions as a powerful governance instrument that addresses long-standing issues such as vague cooperation frameworks, insufficient resource integration, and unstable collaboration mechanisms in non-projectized contexts.

On the other hand, the very logic that produces efficiency also generates inherent risks. The dominance of affair-orientedism and performance-ism tends to shift attention from educational value goals toward measurable technical indicators, leading to the alienation of cooperative goals. Short-term project cycles may replace long-term developmental objectives, and fragmented personal interests may override collective educational missions. Furthermore, excessive reliance on projects can induce path dependence, making cooperation unsustainable outside the project framework. The introduction of competitive mechanisms within the project system also risks amplifying the Matthew Effect, thereby widening disparities between developed and underdeveloped regions. These risks are not accidental deviations but structural consequences of embedding educational cooperation within a technical governance framework.

Therefore, projectization should neither be romanticized nor rejected. As a governance technology, it is not inherently good or bad; its practical consequences depend on institutional design, normative boundaries, and value orientation. The key issue is how to ensure that projectization remains subordinate to educational

purposes rather than redefining them. In this regard, U-G-S cooperation must reaffirm its fundamental mission of cultivating people and promoting balanced development in basic education. Functional limits of projectization should be clarified to prevent the overexpansion of technical control mechanisms. More importantly, long-term cooperative structures independent of short-term project cycles should be established to enhance institutional sustainability and reduce excessive dependence on project resources. Only by embedding project instruments within a value-oriented governance framework can their positive effects be sustained while minimizing structural distortions.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on project-based governance by extending its analytical focus into the field of educational cooperation. While prior research has largely examined fiscal or administrative dimensions of the project system, this study demonstrates how governance technologies reshape inter-organizational educational partnerships. By highlighting the tension between instrumental rationality and value rationality in projectized cooperation, it enriches understanding of how technical governance interacts with educational norms. Moreover, as an empirical case from a non-Western governance context, the study provides insights for international scholars seeking to understand how project-based mechanisms operate within centralized policy-driven systems.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. This research primarily adopts institutional and qualitative analytical approaches rather than systematic quantitative evaluation. Given significant regional disparities across China, the effects of projectized U-G-S cooperation may vary considerably depending on local fiscal capacity, institutional maturity, and governance experience. Future research could conduct comparative regional studies, longitudinal analyses of project cycles, or empirical assessments of educational outcomes to further examine sustainability and equity effects. Additionally, exploring how projectization interacts with emerging market-oriented mechanisms and digital governance tools would deepen understanding of its evolving trajectory.

In conclusion, projectization has become an indispensable institutional reality in China's educational governance. Its long-term vitality will depend not merely on expanding the number of projects, but on whether it can reconcile governance efficiency with educational value rationality. Balancing this tension remains a central theoretical and practical challenge for the future development of U-G-S cooperation in China.

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