

ETHICAL REFLECTIONS AND PATHWAYS FOR STRENGTHENING ADMINISTRATIVE ETHICS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM THE HARBIN UNIVERSITY AND WUHAN UNIVERSITY CASE

ZiTing Jian

The Department of Education, The Catholic University of Korea, Bucheon-si, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea.

Corresponding Email: 570843189@qq.com

Abstract: In the era of the knowledge economy, academic resources—such as research funding, project approvals, publication outlets, and institutional recognition—have become increasingly scarce and strategically valuable. The expansion of public administrative authority and the instrumentalization of academic evaluation within higher education have created conditions under which administrative discretion can be converted into private gain. Educational administration represents an activity deeply intertwined with ethics. The moral dimension of administrative action embodies commitments to fairness, justice, democracy, and responsibility. This article examines the ethical dimensions of academic corruption that arise under the influence of administrative power in Chinese higher education. Drawing on a targeted literature synthesis and detailed case analysis, the study articulates the mechanisms through which administrative actors may appropriate academic resources, the institutional vulnerabilities that enable such practices, and the normative functions of educational administrative ethics in preventing corruption. This paper explores the ethical foundations and challenges of educational administrative ethics within Chinese higher education, with a particular focus on the Wuhan University corruption case. Through theoretical and case-based analysis, the study reveals how the concentration of administrative power, the erosion of moral conscience, and institutional deficiencies jointly lead to ethical degradation. The findings suggest that administrative academic corruption is primarily driven by weakened ethical responsibility among officials, concentrated discretionary authority, and inadequate transparency and accountability systems. To address these challenges, the paper proposes an integrated set of reforms—comprising institutional redesign, strengthened ethical socialization, procedural transparency, and legal reinforcement—to realign administrator incentives with the public interest and to safeguard scholarly integrity. The research further proposes a threefold pathway for strengthening administrative ethics: legislative codification, ethical rule-making, and conscience-based education. Integrating insights from both theoretical discourse and empirical evidence, the paper contributes to a comprehensive framework for understanding and improving ethical governance in higher education.

Keywords: Educational administrative ethics; Academic corruption; Higher education governance; Administrative power; Ethical reform

1 INTRODUCTION

Education administration serves both as an exercise of power and as a moral responsibility. In the era of the knowledge economy, universities function as institutions where knowledge production, dissemination, and management are all mediated through administrative decision-making. Within China's higher education system, administrative discretion profoundly influences the allocation of academic resources, funding, and promotions. When power is concentrated and accountability mechanisms are weak, such discretion may lead to ethical lapses and even corruption.

The ethical governance of higher education is therefore not only a managerial necessity but also a moral imperative. Ethical administration ensures fairness, transparency, and justice in resource distribution while preserving the public trust essential for academic legitimacy. This study integrates theoretical analysis with a case study of Wuhan University to examine both the causes of administrative corruption and the pathways for enhancing ethical accountability in higher education governance.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Defining Administrative Ethics in Education

Administrative ethics refers to the moral and normative standards that guide public officials in exercising their authority. As Joo argued, administrative ethics embodies a value system connecting political morality, organizational ethics, and professional duty [1]. It serves as both a self-regulating and externally regulated mechanism that constrains power abuse and sustains legitimacy. Ethical norms within administrative systems aim to ensure fairness, integrity, and service to public interests rather than private gain.

Administrative ethics refers to the set of moral norms, duties, and institutional expectations that govern the conduct of public officials in their exercise of authority. In educational settings, such norms include commitments to fairness,

impartiality, legality, accountability, and prioritizing the welfare of students and the research community. Scholars emphasize both structural and personal dimensions of administrative ethics: the structural dimension encompasses rules, procedures, and accountability systems; the personal dimension comprises professional virtues, moral conscience, and a sense of public service [2,3]. Educational administration is characterized by a high degree of humanism, value orientation, significance, and complexity. Every administrative decision made by educational administrators is a decision made for people and about people, involving human relations and moral implications. Each decision inherently encompasses both factual and value dimensions, integrating empirical descriptions with normative judgments. In other words, it embodies the dialectic between what is and what ought to be, between administrative practice and educational ideals [4].

2.2 Features, Dimensions and Functions of Educational Administrative Ethics

Educational administrative ethics differs from other branches of applied ethics because it inherently carries an educational character. As Zhang asserted, education itself embodies ethical commitment and moral cultivation [5]; therefore, educational administration must inherently reflect fairness, justice, and democracy. Pu similarly noted that ethical consciousness must permeate all aspects of educational governance [6], linking institutional operations with social justice. Scholars such as Huo have identified several features of educational administrative ethics [7]: (1) its subjects—educational administrators—are distinct in their dual roles as both moral educators and policymakers; (2) its domain—educational administration—demands both ethical efficiency and fairness; and (3) its goal—the realization of educational equity and moral integrity—extends beyond mere procedural justice.

Recent scholarship conceptualizes educational administrative ethics along multiple dimensions. Institutional ethics focus on the design and enforcement of rules that limit arbitrary discretion; public policy ethics concern the alignment of administrative action with public values and common good; and professional ethics emphasize the moral identity and duties of administrators as individuals [2,8]. These dimensions collectively contribute to three principal functions: normative guidance, preventive control, and corrective accountability. Normative guidance provides the ethical framework for decision-making; preventive control reduces the probability of misuse via transparent procedures; and corrective accountability ensures that violations are detected and sanctioned.

2.3 Administrative Power and Resource Allocation

Allocation systems—especially project-based funding and performance-driven evaluation—shape the incentives of academic actors. While project funding aims to stimulate research productivity, it inadvertently concentrates bargaining power in administrative centres that manage calls, evaluate proposals, and disburse funds. This concentration can create gatekeeping opportunities that, if unchecked, enable favoritism, nepotism, and the diversion of resources to insiders [9,10]. The literature identifies key vulnerabilities: opaque review processes, weak audit trails, conflict-of-interest gaps, and reward structures that overemphasize quantity over quality.

2.4 Forms and Drivers of Academic Corruption

Liu defined Academic corruption as the misuse of power by educational actors for personal benefit during the processes of knowledge production, dissemination, or service delivery [11]. It encompasses all unethical practices in teaching, research, and administration. The expansion of the educational market and the commodification of academic resources have amplified opportunities for misconduct, making administrative ethics a crucial safeguard of integrity and public trust [5]. Academic corruption enacted by administrators manifests in diverse forms: the misappropriation of project funds, fabrication or falsification of project deliverables, rental of project quotas, manipulation of peer review and evaluation committees, and the improper awarding of promotions or honors. These actions are driven by personal incentives (economic gain, prestige), structural opportunities (discretionary authority, weak oversight), and cultural tendencies (instrumentalism, short-term performance orientation). Importantly, many of these behaviors inhabit a legal gray area—technically lawful but ethically dubious—making purely legalistic responses insufficient [12,3].

2.5 Administrative Power and Ethical Constraints in Higher Education

Administrative power in universities is a form of public power that must serve the public interest. Montesquieu famously stated that “all power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Within universities, the excessive concentration of administrative authority can distort academic evaluation, financial management, and personnel decisions. Studies have shown that when administrative accountability weakens, corruption arises through rent-seeking, favoritism, or the conversion of public authority into private benefit [10,3,13].

2.6 Gaps in Current Research

Despite growing attention to research integrity, the specific ethical behavior of university administrators remains underexplored. Much of the existing literature focuses on individual researcher misconduct, while fewer studies systematically address administrative malpractice, its institutional causes, and the design of context-sensitive remedies.

There is a need for interdisciplinary approaches that combine organizational analysis, ethics, and higher education governance to generate practical solutions.

3 CASE ANALYSIS

3.1 The Harbin University Case: Administrative Corruption and Ethical Implications

This section analyzes a representative case from Harbin to illustrate how administrative discretion can be transformed into corrupt practices. The case involves a university dean who, in collusion with project leaders and external parties, inflated contract values, produced false deliverables, and siphoned funds for personal benefit. The analysis below reconstructs the modus operandi and situates it within institutional vulnerabilities.

The dean leveraged positional authority to influence project selection, control contract terms, and direct payments to designated accounts. Contracts ostensibly recorded legitimate academic services, but they contained inflated values with concealed overpayments. The excess funds were then channeled back to the dean through intermediaries or cash return arrangements. Over multiple cycles this scheme generated significant illicit proceeds while creating a stream of fabricated academic outputs that were falsely presented as legitimate research deliverables.

Several enabling conditions made this scheme possible: first, the absence of independent, transparent peer review for project approval; second, financial controls that permitted off-book transactions and lacked rigorous reconciliation procedures; third, cultural dynamics that tolerated or concealed improprieties for the sake of institutional reputation or reciprocal benefits. The collusion of actors across administrative and academic boundaries allowed the misdeeds to persist until external investigative mechanisms intervened.

Ethically, the case reveals a failure of professional responsibility and a departure from the fiduciary obligations of administrators. From a governance perspective, it highlights how concentrated discretion, weak internal controls, and insufficient external oversight combine to generate corruption risks. Legally, the behaviors—once uncovered—were adjudicated under anti-fraud and public funds misuse statutes, but the initial ethical breaches occurred long before legal thresholds were crossed. This temporal gap reinforces the need for proactive ethical governance rather than reactive legal remedies.

3.2 The Wuhan University Case: Administrative Corruption and Ethical Implications

Wuhan University, one of China's oldest and most prestigious institutions, became the focus of national attention in October 2009 when its Executive Vice President Chen Zhaofang and Party Secretary Long Xiaole were arrested for large-scale bribery and embezzlement involving construction projects. Investigations revealed that both officials had exploited their authority over university finances and logistics to solicit bribes, approve inflated contracts, and divert public funds.

The corruption network extended to private contractors and internal administrative departments, illustrating how systemic weaknesses allowed ethical lapses to proliferate. Despite multiple reports and warnings from faculty, early investigations failed to prevent further misconduct due to weak enforcement and internal protectionism.

Ethically, the Wuhan case exposed the erosion of administrative conscience and the subordination of public duty to personal gain. Both Chen and Long acknowledged a lack of ideological discipline and ethical reflection, attributing their downfall to moral decay and insufficient self-restraint. From a governance perspective, the case underscores the necessity of combining legal deterrence with moral education, institutional transparency, and a culture of ethical accountability.

The case triggered widespread debate in Chinese academia and prompted renewed calls for administrative reform and integrity education. It remains a cautionary example of how concentrated administrative power, when unaccompanied by ethical responsibility, can undermine both institutional legitimacy and public trust.

4 DISCUSSION: ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS AND SYSTEMIC POLICY RESPONSES

In the era of the knowledge economy, academic resources—research funding, project approvals, publication venues, and institutional prestige—have become increasingly scarce and strategically valuable. As administrative discretion expands and academic evaluation is instrumentalised, the conversion of public authority into private gain becomes a latent risk. The recent corruption scandals at Harbin University and Wuhan University exemplify how the concentration of administrative power, erosion of moral conscience, and deficient accountability mechanisms jointly precipitate ethical degradation in Chinese higher education. Drawing on the theoretical lens of educational administrative ethics and the empirical evidence presented above, this section proposes a three-dimensional governance framework that integrates legal codification, institutional redesign, and ethical socialisation to realign administrator incentives with the public interest and to safeguard scholarly integrity.

4.1 Legal and Institutional Complementarity

Justice and legality are mutually constitutive; without legal constraint, ethical aspirations risk deviation. The United States, Japan, and South Korea have enacted administrative-ethics legislation that converts moral obligations into enforceable duties. China should similarly embed explicit ethical clauses—fairness, integrity, service to the public

good—into its higher-education laws, thereby narrowing grey zones and providing a juridical basis for subsequent accountability [14,15].

4.2 Organisational Design and Checks-and-Balances

Even the most robust laws require institutional carriers. Universities should:

- (1) Constitute multi-member review panels that include ≥ 30 % external experts, rotate membership, and mandate conflict-of-interest disclosure to fragment collusive networks;
- (2) Separate budgetary approval from personnel decisions to prevent financial leverage over research allocation;
- (3) Introduce “double-key” authorisation for high-stakes decisions (e.g., talent programmes, professorial promotions), ensuring that no single actor can unilaterally determine outcomes.

4.3 Transparency, Auditing, and External Oversight

Transparency is the least-cost deterrent. Institutions must proactively publish calls for proposals, anonymised reviewer lists, funding outcomes, and aggregate performance indicators. Independent financial and procedural audits should be conducted annually, with summaries submitted to university councils, disciplinary inspection commissions, and the public. External ethics committees or ombuds offices should be empowered to receive anonymous complaints and guarantee non-retaliation, thereby increasing detection probability and reducing impunity.

4.4 Ethical Rules and Operational Standards

Abstract ethical ideals must be translated into actionable codes. Universities should promulgate an “Educational Administrator Ethics Handbook” that quantifies gift thresholds, regulates secondary employment, mandates kinship avoidance, and stipulates sanctions for data fabrication. An “ethics veto” should be institutionalised by embedding ethical compliance as a prerequisite in promotion, award, and grant decisions, thus making integrity a rewarded organisational norm.

4.5 Conscience-Based Education and Ethical Socialisation

Law and rules set the floor; conscience defines the ceiling. Administrators—who simultaneously exercise power and function as moral educators—must be incorporated into faculty ethics-training programs. Case-based deliberation, ethical-dilemma simulations, and reflective journaling can re-activate their identity as educators, ensuring that discretionary authority is exercised creatively yet consistently with fairness and the public good.

4.6 Incentive Realignment and Performance Reform

Perverse incentives rooted in “quantity worship” (grants acquired, papers published) must be corrected. Evaluation metrics should shift toward research quality, openness, reproducibility, and service to institutional governance. Administrative performance appraisals must explicitly weight ethical behaviour and governance performance at least equally with quantitative outputs, institutionalising the principle that “clean governance is itself academic achievement.”

4.7 Integrating Ethics and Law: A Three-Dimensional Framework

Legislation establishes the minimum standard (legal dimension), institutional rules operationalise compliance (institutional dimension), and culture internalises norms (cultural dimension). Only when administrators “do not wish to be corrupt” (conscience), “cannot be corrupt” (checks-and-balances), and “dare not be corrupt” (sanctions) are simultaneously activated will higher-education governance achieve moral self-sufficiency and long-term integrity.

4.8 Medium-Term Institutional Toolkit

To operationalise the above framework within two years, universities are advised to:

- a) Maintain review panels with ≥ 30 % external membership and enforce rotation after two terms;
- b) Release annual independent audit summaries and integrity reports;
- c) Launch an anonymous 24-hour reporting platform with a 48-hour investigative trigger;
- d) Implement full-cycle electronic fund-management systems ensuring complete traceability;
- e) Mandate annual conflict-of-interest disclosures for middle- to senior-level administrators and principal investigators;
- f) Allocate ≥ 20 % weight to ethical metrics in promotion, recruitment, and talent-programme evaluations;
- g) Restrict consecutive committee service to two terms to prevent network capture;
- h) Publish a “corruption-risk heat-map” that flags high-risk domains (procurement, admissions, recruitment, awards) and applies red-yellow-blue early-warning protocols.

Through the synergistic articulation of legal hardening, institutional specification, and cultural internalisation, administrative ethics in higher education can shift from ex-post punishment to ex-ante prevention and from individual

self-discipline to systemic immunity, thereby furnishing a sustainable ecosystem of justice for knowledge production and talent development.

5 CONCLUSION

Two university case illustrates that academic corruption is both a moral and institutional crisis. It originates from the imbalance between authority and responsibility and from the absence of a coherent ethical framework guiding administrative conduct. Strengthening educational administrative ethics requires an integrated approach combining legal codification, institutional rule-making, and moral cultivation. Administrative academic corruption undermines the foundational principles of higher education—fairness, openness, and the pursuit of knowledge. This paper has argued that the phenomenon is not merely a matter of individual moral failure but a systemic issue arising from concentrated discretion, weak internal controls, and misaligned incentives. Educational administrative ethics plays a critical preventative and corrective role by shaping administrators' professional identity, constraining discretionary excesses, and reinforcing organizational norms that prioritize the public interest. Effective anti-corruption strategies must be integrative—combining institutional design reforms, transparency and auditing, ethical socialization, incentive realignment, and calibrated legal protections. Future research should empirically evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions across diverse institutional contexts and explore mechanisms for scaling ethical governance in large and complex university systems.

Ultimately, the highest stage of ethical governance is the unity of morality and law—the alignment of internal conscience with external regulation. Only through this synthesis can higher education institutions restore the sanctity of education, ensure justice and fairness, and cultivate a culture of integrity that supports both academic excellence and public trust.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

REFERENCES

- [1] Joo S. Administrative philosophy: Issues of justice, fairness, and responsibility. Seoul: Korean Educational Administration Press, 2007. ISBN: 9788975501234.
- [2] Chen Y. The three dimensions of educational administrative ethics and their core spirit. *Heilongjiang Higher Education Research*, 2016(4): 1-4. ISSN: 1003-2614.
- [3] Fu B. Educational administrative ethics and school management. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 2002(2): 33-40. ISSN: 1672-0504.
- [4] Cheng L, Zhai J. Teacher ethics education oriented toward ethical decision-making: Why and what. *Educational Development Research*, 2021(24): 16-23. ISSN: 1008-3855.
- [5] Zhang L. A reflection on the Wuhan University corruption case and its ethical governance implications. *Journal of Higher Education Ethics*, 2019, 8(2): 45-52. ISSN: 2095-5125.
- [6] Pu R. On the ethical spirit of educational administration. *Educational Research*, 2007(9): 39-44. ISSN: 1002-5731.
- [7] Huo J. On the characteristics of educational administrative ethics. *Academic Forum*, 2010(3): 240-241.
- [8] Bi X. Institutional and individual dimensions of educational administrative ethics. *Theory and Practice of Education*, 2003(5): 15-20. ISSN: 1004-633X.
- [9] Guo S, Chen F. Tracing and reflection on the problem of university administration in China: The development process of administrative power in Chinese universities. *Journal of Hunan University of Science and Technology (Social Science Edition)*, 2014, 17(1): 176-180. ISSN: 1672-7835.
- [10] Mao R. The alliance of academic bureaucratization and academic capitalization: The collusion of power and the alienation of academia. *Jiangsu Higher Education*, 2011(4): 1-5. ISSN: 1003-8418.
- [11] Liu Y. Educational corruption: Connotation, causes, and governance. *New Horizons*, 2012(1): 110-112.
- [12] Lin J. School administrative ethics and the relationship between educational leadership. *Contemporary Educational Science*, 2015(24): 60-64. ISSN: 1672-2221.
- [13] Xiao W. The meaning of educational administrative ethics. *Journal of School Administration*, 1998(3): 22-29. ISSN: 1001-8656.
- [14] Wei M. Research into the educational management mechanism and system management innovation at colleges and universities. In: 6th International Conference on Mechatronics, Computer and Education Informationization, 2016, 877-881. DOI: 10.2991/mcei-16.2016.178.
- [15] Li Q. Constructing pathways for improving administrative ethics in universities. *Modern Education Management*, 2020(6): 12-18. ISSN: 1674-5485.