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Investing in People: Advancing the Professional Development of University Teachers

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Abstract

Chinese universities commonly face structural imbalances in resource allocation, as institutional funding tends to prioritize physical infrastructure over human capital investment. This hardware-biased allocation pattern undermines faculty development and impedes the high-quality and sustainable development of higher education. Based on human capital theory and the capability approach, this paper defines the concept of "investing in people" in the university context with two core dimensions: professional competency training and holistic developmental empowerment. This study clarifies the interactive relationship between physical and human resource investment and challenges the prevalent zero-sum game assumption in resource governance. It argues that the two types of investment complement and reinforce each other. This paper suggests that universities should establish a people-centered and balanced investment system to support teachers' full-cycle professional development.

Keywords: University resource allocation; Hardware-biased allocation; Investing in people; Faculty human capital; Sustainable faculty development

1. Introduction

Higher education funding has increased steadily in recent years. Most universities prioritize financial expenditure on laboratory construction, research equipment procurement, and digital teaching system upgrading. Although campus hardware conditions have been greatly improved, investment in faculty professional growth, academic innovation, and welfare support remains comparatively insufficient. In many higher education institutions, expenditure on physical infrastructure far exceeds budgets for faculty development, forming a long-standing hardware-biased resource allocation paradigm.

This structural imbalance triggers two prominent institutional problems. First, numerous advanced facilities and laboratories are underutilized due to the lack of faculty with matching professional competencies. Massive physical investment fails to generate adequate teaching and research outputs. Second, insufficient support for faculty training, academic exchanges, and career progression reduces teachers' professional motivation and innovative vitality.

Existing literature generally addresses hardware optimization and faculty training as separate research topics. Most current discussions on "investing in people" remain macro and policy-oriented, lacking systematic theoretical definition and contextual analysis in university settings. Few studies elaborate the coordination mechanism between physical resources and human capital investment. To fill this research gap, this paper adopts a dual theoretical framework to interpret the logic of people-oriented investment. It analyzes the interactive relationship between different resource inputs and provides theoretical references for optimizing university faculty development systems.

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2. The Connotation of "Investing in People"

2.1. Theoretical Basis: Two Complementary Theories

Human capital theory regards workforce quality as a core productive factor. Continuous investment in professional skills and literacy can generate long-term economic and institutional benefits. In university governance, faculty capacity building for teaching and research is not a short-term operational cost. Instead, it serves as a long-term strategic investment that facilitates disciplinary development, talent cultivation, and academic innovation, thereby enhancing universities' overall core competitiveness.

The capability approach complements and expands this theoretical perspective. It suggests that individual sustainable development requires the removal of external constraints and the expansion of independent developmental space. For university faculty, professional growth relies not only on technical skill improvement, but also on multiple supportive conditions, including stable welfare guarantees, a free academic atmosphere, and independent research autonomy. These elements collectively support sustainable career development.

The two theories jointly form an integrated and complementary analytical framework. Human capital theory explains the instrumental value of faculty investment for institutional development, while the capability approach highlights the human-oriented value of teachers' holistic growth. Together, they interpret the dual developmental demands of university faculty. The prevalent hardware-biased dilemma originates from the overemphasis on physical capital. Universities often prioritize visible hardware achievements while ignoring the long-term potential of faculty human capital, which eventually leads to structurally unreasonable resource allocation.

2.2. Dual Dimensions of "Investing in People" for Faculty Development

Based on the operational characteristics of university teaching and research, this paper divides university human capital investment into two mutually supportive dimensions: professional competency training and holistic developmental empowerment.

First, professional competency training focuses on improving faculty's practical professional abilities. This basic instrumental investment aims to bridge the competency mismatch between faculty skills and institutional hardware conditions. Universities provide systematic support, including targeted teaching training, academic research guidance, junior faculty mentoring, and research achievement transformation workshops. These measures effectively improve faculty performance in classroom teaching, project application, and academic research. Standardized competency training resolves human-hardware matching problems, increases infrastructure utilization rates, and converts physical investment into tangible educational outcomes.

Second, holistic developmental empowerment targets faculty's long-term and all-round professional growth. This advanced investment eliminates institutional, environmental, and living barriers that restrict faculty development. It covers a series of supportive measures, such as subsidies for junior faculty, overseas academic funding, interdisciplinary research support, research fault-tolerance mechanisms, and transparent promotion channels. Distinct from short-term skill training, this dimension optimizes the overall academic ecosystem, enables faculty to conduct independent original research, stimulates endogenous innovation motivation, and sustains long-term career development.

The two dimensions are inseparable and interactive. Professional competency training lays a solid foundation for faculty's daily teaching and academic practice. Developmental empowerment removes practical obstacles and guarantees continuous academic innovation. Technical training without institutional support cannot sustain in-depth academic exploration, while policy empowerment without competency improvement cannot generate stable educational benefits. The integration of the two dimensions forms a complete and effective system of human capital investment for university faculty development.

3. Interactive Relationship Between Physical Investment and Human Investment

Many university administrators regard hardware construction and faculty development as a zero-sum game. A common assumption is that increased hardware expenditure inevitably reduces funds for faculty development and vice versa. This binary cognition is largely driven by institutional evaluation incentives: hardware investment delivers visible and immediate quantitative results, whereas the benefits of faculty development are long-term, implicit, and difficult to measure. Such institutional logic solidifies the long-standing hardware-biased allocation pattern. In fact, physical

investment and human capital investment have no inherent conflict. They are mutually dependent and mutually reinforcing to maximize overall educational value.

First, physical infrastructure provides fundamental operational support for teaching and research. Laboratories, research instruments, digital platforms, and academic resources are essential for daily university operations. Without adequate hardware conditions, even high-quality faculty cannot complete high-level teaching tasks or undertake major research projects. Reasonable and discipline-oriented hardware construction builds a solid operational platform for faculty professional development.

Second, human capital investment activates and amplifies the practical value of physical resources. Hardware facilities cannot independently generate educational benefits. All equipment and research platforms rely on faculty's professional competencies to function effectively. Faculty with systematic training and stable developmental support can fully exploit the innovative potential of existing infrastructure. In contrast, advanced hardware without matching faculty competence will remain idle and result in resource waste. Therefore, high-quality human capital investment is essential to maximize hardware utilization efficiency.

Third, coordinated allocation of physical and human resources maximizes university educational benefits. The priority of the two investment types varies across developmental contexts. Emerging disciplines require initial infrastructure construction, while mature disciplines prioritize faculty capacity building. Universities should balance budget distribution between hardware upgrading and faculty development. Resource allocation should follow practical institutional demands: hardware construction plans should align with faculty development strategies, and training programs should adapt to existing platform resources. This balanced model corrects structural resource misallocation, avoids equipment idleness, and faculty developmental constraints, and stimulates universities' sustainable developmental momentum.

4. Conclusion

The hardware-biased resource imbalance in contemporary universities stems from infrastructure-oriented governance concepts, short-term performance evaluation mechanisms, and insufficient systematic resource planning. Excessive emphasis on physical construction and inadequate human capital investment lead to resource waste and low operational efficiency. It also restricts faculty professional growth, weakens academic innovation vitality, and hinders the high-quality development of higher education.

This paper establishes a dual-logic framework of university human capital investment, including professional competency training and holistic developmental empowerment. Skill training solves the practical mismatch between faculty capacity and hardware resources, while developmental empowerment eliminates institutional barriers, protects academic freedom, and stimulates long-term innovative potential. Physical investment and human investment maintain a dialectically unified relationship. Infrastructure provides basic operational conditions, while faculty development guarantees the practical value of hardware construction. Their coordinated development is essential for optimizing university resource allocation systems.

To promote the high-quality development of modern higher education, universities must abandon the zero-sum cognition of resource allocation and shift from hardware-centered investment to a balanced, people-oriented resource governance system. Taking "investing in people" as a core developmental principle, universities should build a comprehensive faculty development support system. Strengthening human capital investment can effectively facilitate the long-term and high-quality development of higher education institutions.

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