

Bridging the Pedagogical-Governance Divide: A Conceptual Framework for Outcome-Based Education Reform in General Education at Private Universities in China

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Abstract

Outcome-Based Education (OBE) has become an important framework for curriculum reform and quality assurance in Chinese higher education. However, its application to general education faces persistent challenges because complex learning outcomes are difficult to assess and classroom practice is not always aligned with institutional quality governance. Drawing on constructive alignment, institutional logics and recent research on higher education quality assurance, this conceptual paper develops an Integrated Pedagogical-Governance Coupling Framework for OBE reform in general education. The framework conceptualises three interrelated forms of decoupling: disconnection among learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment; misalignment between lecturers' pedagogical priorities and institutional governance requirements; and separation between assessment evidence and improvement decisions. In response, it positions meaningful student learning as a shared anchor and connects classroom implementation, institutional governance support and bidirectional collaborative feedback through four cyclical elements: interpretable learning outcomes, authentic assessment evidence, governance support and evidence-informed adjustment. Two actual general education courses from the first author's institution are used as illustrative examples of how the framework may inform course design. The paper argues that OBE reform should extend beyond individual courses towards an institutional ecology that links pedagogical judgement, organisational capacity and continuous improvement, enabling general education to move from formal outcome reporting towards substantive alignment and meaningful learning.

Keywords

Outcome-based education, general education, private higher education, pedagogical and governance alignment.

1. Introduction

1.1. The OBE Paradigm and Its Expansion in Chinese Higher Education

Outcome-Based Education (OBE) begins with intended learning outcomes and uses backward design to align course objectives, learning activities, assessment evidence and continuous improvement. In Chinese higher education, its expansion has been closely associated with engineering accreditation, student-centred learning and quality-oriented curriculum reform. The current Chinese engineering education accreditation standards, for example, define graduate outcomes, assessment, evaluation and continuous improvement as interconnected elements of programme quality assurance[1]. More recently, outcome-oriented principles have also been applied to university-wide and general education courses[2,3].

Nevertheless, OBE models developed for professionally accredited programmes cannot be transferred mechanically to general education. Engineering and other professionally oriented fields generally operate with comparatively explicit competency standards and observable forms of performance. General education, by contrast, seeks to develop communication, critical reflection, cultural understanding, aesthetic judgement and value formation. These outcomes are developmental, context-dependent and distributed across multiple learning experiences. They therefore require multidimensional and process-based assessment rather than reliance on a single examination or attainment score[3]. Chinese higher education evaluation consequently needs to balance outcome evidence with process, developmental and institution-specific forms of judgement [4].

1.2. Formal Compliance and Practical Variation

OBE reform in Chinese higher education has generated formal arrangements such as syllabus revision, outcome mapping, attainment calculation and continuous-improvement reporting. Procedural completeness, however, does not necessarily produce substantive improvement in student learning. Evaluation can become standardised, administrative and indicator-driven when its developmental purpose is displaced by compliance requirements [4,5]. Textual consistency among objectives, teaching activities and assessment should therefore be distinguished from substantive alignment grounded in students' actual learning. The central challenge is no longer simply whether OBE has been formally adopted, but whether institutional requirements can be translated into effective pedagogical action.

1.3. Scope and Purpose of the Paper

The implementation challenge can be understood through two different but interdependent logics of action. Lecturers may interpret OBE through a pedagogical logic that emphasises student development, classroom interaction, meaningful learning tasks and valid assessment. Administrators may approach it through a governance logic concerned with standards, documentation, quality monitoring and accountability. These orientations are not inherently opposed, and neither characterises every lecturer or administrator in the same way. Yet when coordination is weak, course objectives and assessment may be aligned retrospectively, complex outcomes may be reduced to convenient indicators, and reform responsibilities may be transferred disproportionately to individual lecturers [5].

This paper develops an Integrated Pedagogical-Governance Coupling Framework to explain why formal consistency and practical variation may coexist in general education OBE reform. It also proposes a conceptual pathway through which private higher education institutions can connect classroom implementation, institutional support and evidence-informed improvement around the shared purpose of meaningful student learning.

2. Conceptual Foundations and Analytical Approach

2.1. Conceptual Approach

This paper adopts a conceptual synthesis approach. It brings together recent Chinese research on OBE implementation, general education assessment and university quality assurance with constructive alignment and institutional logics theory. The literature is interpreted comparatively to identify recurring tensions among classroom teaching, institutional governance and evidence-informed improvement. These tensions are then organised into three forms of structural decoupling and used to construct an integrated framework. The framework is intended as an analytical and design tool rather than an empirically validated causal model.

Two actual general education courses—Communication and Writing and Introduction to Chinese Classics—implemented at the first author's institution, a private university in Xi'an, China, are included as illustrative exemplars. Their course objectives, learning activities and

assessment arrangements are used to demonstrate the practical intelligibility of the framework. They are not treated as an empirical dataset, and no claim is made here regarding measured learning effects or causal impact.

2.2. The Outcome-Visibility Challenge in General Education

Professional education and general education differ in the nature and visibility of their intended outcomes. Professional accreditation can specify graduate competencies and use direct, indirect, quantitative and qualitative evidence to determine attainment and support improvement[1]. General education outcomes—including critical thinking, communication, cultural understanding, aesthetic judgement and value formation—are more comprehensive and developmental. Their attainment cannot be captured fully within a single course or at a single assessment point [3,4]. This tension between educational significance and limited outcome visibility creates a need to reconnect educational objectives, teaching processes and credible evidence of student learning.

2.3. Constructive Alignment and Institutional Logics

Implementing OBE in general education should not mean reducing complex competencies to quantitative indicators. Its reformative value lies in improving the interpretability of educational objectives, the appropriateness of learning activities and the validity of assessment evidence. Constructive alignment provides the pedagogical foundation for this process. Through backward design, intended outcomes inform the selection of learning activities and assessment tasks so that students are supported and evaluated in relation to the same educational purposes[6]. Recent Chinese course-based studies similarly emphasise diversified assessment and alignment among objectives, content, teaching methods and evaluation [2,3].

Institutional logics theory explains why pedagogical alignment alone may be insufficient. Institutional logics are historically developed systems of values, assumptions, rules and practices through which organisational actors interpret goals and appropriate action [7]. Multiple logics coexist within higher education and can influence academic work, managerial decisions and organisational reform [8]. Research on Chinese universities shows that academic, state, market and managerial logics may coexist and generate competing expectations within institutional practice [9]. Effective OBE reform therefore requires coordination between professional pedagogical judgement and institutional accountability rather than the dominance of either logic.

2.4. Organisational Conditions in Private Higher Education

Private universities may encounter particular organisational constraints when extending OBE into general education, including uneven faculty-development capacity, limited cross-departmental coordination and pressure to demonstrate compliance with external quality requirements. These conditions do not characterise every private institution, but they represent potential risks where general education has weak organisational ownership or depends excessively on individual lecturers. In such circumstances, faculty turnover or changing administrative requirements may interrupt course development and continuous improvement. Clear outcome frameworks, collaborative course planning, diversified assessment standards and stable feedback arrangements can help transform individual teaching experience into shareable and sustainable organisational capacity.

3. Structural Decoupling in General Education OBE

Constructive alignment emphasises coherence among intended learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment tasks [6]. At the institutional level, effective reform additionally requires coordination among teaching practice, internal quality assurance and improvement

decisions[10,11]. On this basis, the implementation challenge in private-university general education can be conceptualised through three interrelated forms of structural decoupling.

3.1. Internal Decoupling of Teaching Components

The first form is internal decoupling among teaching-system components. Recent Chinese studies suggest that OBE implementation may remain concentrated on revising outcome statements and teaching documents without a corresponding reconstruction of learning activities and assessment practices [11]. Course objectives may remain broad or insufficiently differentiated according to course characteristics and students' learning needs. Classroom activities may continue to centre on theoretical knowledge transmission, with limited inquiry-based and practice-oriented opportunities for developing critical thinking and humanistic competencies [3]. Assessment may also rely heavily on summative results and standardised indicators that cannot fully represent complex and developmental outcomes. Process-based and multidimensional evidence is therefore needed to connect objectives, learning activities and assessment into an integrated educational cycle[2,4].

3.2. Decoupling Between Pedagogy and Governance

The second form concerns a potential misalignment between pedagogical priorities and institutional governance. General education emphasises long-term student development, diverse forms of inquiry and professional judgement concerning complex learning. Quality assurance systems, however, may prioritise standardised, documentable and short-term evidence of performance. Similar tensions among academic, managerial, state and market logics have been identified in studies of higher education organisations [8,9]. Where faculty evaluation, teaching supervision and resource allocation do not recognise the time and expertise required for authentic assessment and course redesign, lecturers' engagement in OBE reform may receive limited institutional support. Conversely, top-down requirements may not sufficiently incorporate practical needs emerging from classroom teaching. The problem is therefore not the existence of governance standards, but the absence of arrangements through which governance and pedagogical judgement can inform one another.

3.3. Cyclic Decoupling of Continuous Improvement

The third form is the decoupling of the improvement cycle. OBE requires an iterative process of teaching implementation, outcome evaluation, problem feedback and system adjustment [10]. Reform may nevertheless become a periodic documentation task when monitoring concentrates on formal review rather than substantive examination of learning evidence. Chinese research indicates that university quality assurance can be constrained by fragmented participation, weak feedback and insufficient use of teaching data [12]. Classroom problems may not consistently reach institutional decision-makers, while attainment data may fail to inform resource allocation, faculty development or curriculum adjustment. Without clear responsibilities and cross-level feedback, the evaluation–feedback–improvement chain can become disconnected [10].

4. The Integrated Pedagogical–Governance Coupling Framework

To address these three forms of structural decoupling, this paper moves beyond approaches that treat classroom improvement and institutional quality assurance as separate reform domains. It proposes an Integrated Pedagogical–Governance Coupling Framework centred on meaningful student learning. The framework connects three interdependent layers—classroom implementation, institutional governance support and bidirectional collaborative feedback—through a continuous cycle of evidence generation, interpretation and adjustment.

As illustrated in Figure 1, interpretable learning outcomes, authentic assessment evidence, governance support and evidence-informed feedback constitute four interconnected stages through which the three layers operate dynamically. The cycle is anchored in meaningful student learning and is designed to coordinate lecturers' pedagogical judgement with institutional quality governance.

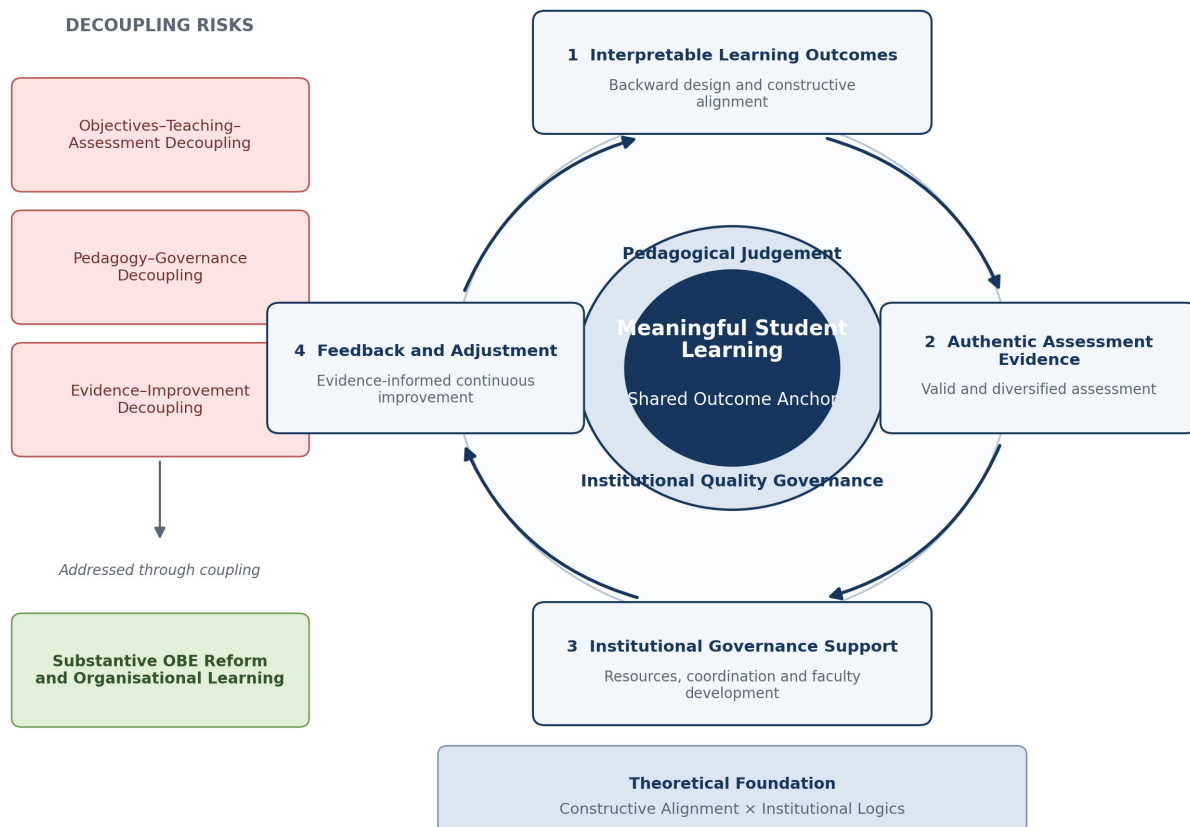


Figure 1. The Cyclic Structure of the Integrated Pedagogical-Governance Coupling Framework

The figure shows that substantive OBE reform depends not on a single classroom or administrative intervention, but on the continuous coordination of pedagogical practice, assessment evidence, organisational support and governance decisions. The following subsections explain the shared anchor and three operational layers of the framework.

4.1. Anchor Dimension: Shared Outcome Attainment

Meaningful general education outcomes constitute the central anchor of the framework. Teaching design and institutional governance are organised around four broad outcome domains: humanistic understanding, critical thinking, value judgement and innovative capacity. These domains provide a common reference point for curriculum design, assessment, faculty development, resource allocation and quality assurance. The purpose of the anchor is not to impose a single measurement formula, but to establish shared interpretive coherence while preserving the developmental character of general education.

4.2. Layer 1: Classroom Implementation

Classroom implementation forms the foundational layer. It reconstructs alignment among course objectives, learning activities and assessment evidence. Its principal tasks include translating broad competencies into interpretable course outcomes, designing inquiry-based and practice-oriented learning activities, and combining formative and summative assessment.

These arrangements address the internal decoupling of teaching components and generate evidence that can support later governance and improvement decisions[3].

4.3. Layer 2: Institutional Governance Support

Institutional governance constitutes the supporting layer. Rather than concentrating primarily on document compliance and attainment calculations, governance arrangements should enable lecturers to implement meaningful outcome-oriented teaching. Resource allocation, faculty evaluation, teaching supervision, professional development and internal quality assurance should be connected with intended student outcomes. Differentiated support is particularly important in general education because its outcomes are developmental and less directly observable. By connecting organisational resources with classroom needs, this layer builds the institutional capacity required to sustain pedagogical reform [10,11].

4.4. Layer 3: Bidirectional Collaborative Feedback

Bidirectional collaborative feedback connects classroom implementation with institutional governance. Cross-unit general education groups, accessible feedback channels and periodic comprehensive reviews can allow classroom evidence and lecturers' reform needs to inform institutional decision-making. Governance policies, resource arrangements and faculty-development programmes can then be adjusted in response to teaching problems and student-learning evidence. This creates an iterative process of evaluation, feedback, adjustment and optimisation, preventing continuous improvement from becoming a static reporting exercise[12].

Through the interaction of these layers, the framework connects interpretable outcomes, authentic assessment, organisational support and evidence-informed feedback around meaningful student learning. It therefore provides a conceptual pathway for moving OBE reform in private-university general education from formal compliance towards substantive alignment and organisational learning.

5. Practical Applications and Institutional Exemplars

The framework implies that reform should address classroom reconstruction, institutional support and collaborative feedback simultaneously. The following applications illustrate how the framework may guide practice without presuming that one design can be transferred unchanged across institutions or disciplines.

5.1. Reconstructing Classroom Practice

General education teaching should be organised around the alignment of intended outcomes, learning tasks and assessment evidence. Broad educational outcomes can be progressively translated into course-level objectives that are interpretable, assessable and open to improvement. Classroom teaching can incorporate issue-based discussion, case inquiry, project-based learning and other forms of active learning, while assessment can combine classroom performance, practical projects, reflective work and demonstrations of learning [3].

Two actual courses at the first author's institution illustrate this design logic. Communication and Writing identifies written communication, oral expression and reasoned communication as principal outcomes. Its learning activities include online preparation, group debate, practical writing and university-level debate activities. Assessment draws on staged written assignments, oral presentations and comprehensive practice reports rather than a single final examination.

Introduction to Chinese Classics establishes progressive outcomes concerning cultural understanding, interpretation and the application of values. Classical recitation, traditional-culture research reports and thematic seminars allow students to demonstrate their understanding through multiple forms of performance. These activities make abstract

humanistic outcomes more open to interpretation and assessment while avoiding their reduction to a single numerical indicator.

The two examples are included to illustrate alignment possibilities within real institutional courses. They do not provide empirical evidence that the framework has produced specific learning gains; such effects would require systematic data collection and evaluation in future research.

5.2. Responsive Governance Mechanisms

Institutional reform should address the misalignment between pedagogical work and governance arrangements. Private universities may establish dedicated support for general education reform and improve access to digital resources, practical learning spaces and collaborative course-development opportunities. Faculty evaluation and teaching supervision can recognise lecturers' work in curriculum design, authentic assessment and continuous improvement. Such arrangements would shift governance from monitoring procedural completeness towards supporting students' development and the substantive attainment of intended outcomes [11].

5.3. Establishing Continuous Improvement Loops

A sustained collaborative feedback arrangement is needed to overcome static reform practices. Institutions may establish teams comprising general education lecturers, academic administrators, quality assurance specialists and student representatives. Periodic reviews can bring together teaching-operation data, student-learning evidence and supervision findings to identify problems in the relationship between teaching and governance. The results can inform subsequent adjustments to course plans, professional development, resource provision and quality policies.

Digital systems can support this process when they are designed to release the interpretive value of evidence rather than simply expand data collection. Gradual connection among teaching, assessment and supervision systems may support multidimensional analysis, but responsibility for data interpretation should remain distributed among relevant academic and administrative actors [12]. Continuous improvement is therefore best understood as an organisational learning process in which evidence informs deliberation, action and renewed evaluation.

6. Conclusion

This paper argues that the central challenge of OBE reform in general education is not the absence of outcome statements or assessment procedures, but structural disconnection among classroom teaching, institutional governance and continuous improvement. Because general education outcomes are developmental, context-dependent and difficult to observe directly, mechanically transferring standardised OBE procedures from professionally accredited programmes may produce formal compliance without meaningful improvement in student learning.

The principal conceptual contribution is the Integrated Pedagogical-Governance Coupling Framework. Drawing on constructive alignment and institutional logics, it identifies three interrelated forms of decoupling: disconnection among learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment; misalignment between pedagogical priorities and governance requirements; and separation between assessment evidence and improvement decisions. In response, the framework positions meaningful student learning as a shared anchor and connects classroom implementation, institutional support and bidirectional feedback through four cyclical elements: interpretable outcomes, authentic assessment evidence, governance support and evidence-informed adjustment.

The framework suggests that substantive reform requires more than individual lecturers redesigning courses. Private universities should align faculty development, resource allocation, teaching supervision, assessment and quality assurance with intended general education outcomes. Classroom evidence should inform institutional decisions, while governance arrangements should be adjusted in response to teaching needs. This reciprocal relationship can shift OBE from documentation-oriented compliance towards substantive alignment, continuous improvement and organisational learning.

Although developed in relation to Chinese private higher education, the framework may also inform private and application-oriented institutions in other contexts facing tensions among external accountability, organisational capacity and lecturers' professional autonomy. Its applicability nevertheless remains to be empirically examined. Future research should test and refine the framework through comparative case studies, classroom evidence and longitudinal analysis across institutions and disciplines.

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