

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Public–private partnerships (PPP) in higher education development management: A comparative study of China and Ukraine with social-psychological perspectives

Jing Wang*, Iryna Kuchynska

Department of Pedagogy and Management of Educational Institution, Kamianets-Podilskyi Ivan Ohienko National University, Kamianets-Podilskyi, Ukraine

* **Corresponding author:** Jing Wang, opndf22.vanh@kpnu.edu.ua

ABSTRACT

Public–Private Partnerships (PPPs) have increasingly become a strategic instrument for financing and operating higher education (HE) infrastructure and services. However, empirical evidence comparing the governance performance of PPPs in countries with distinct regulatory traditions remains limited. This study conducts a comparative analysis of PPP governance models in the higher education sectors of Ukraine and China, exploring the institutional frameworks, implementation mechanisms, and performance outcomes. Beyond economic and administrative dimensions, this paper introduces social-psychological variables—such as trust, collective efficacy, cultural attitudes toward hierarchy, and risk perception—as mediating factors influencing PPP stability and governance efficiency. Drawing on policy analysis, case studies, and semi-structured interviews, this study develops a socio-psychological–governance performance framework, providing both theoretical refinement and policy implications for sustainable PPP practices in higher education.

Keywords: public–private partnership; higher education governance; China; Ukraine; social-psychological factors; policy analysis; governance efficiency

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

The global expansion of higher education requires innovative financial and managerial models to ensure sustainability. Public budgets alone can no longer meet the growing demand for advanced educational infrastructure, research facilities, and digital services. The PPP model—where the public sector collaborates with private actors to design, finance, build, and manage educational projects—has gained attention as a pragmatic solution. In both China and Ukraine, the model has emerged in response to similar fiscal constraints yet within distinct cultural, political, and regulatory contexts.

China’s higher education PPPs are guided by the Guidelines for Promoting Public-Private Partnerships in the Education Sector (MOE, 2019), emphasizing digital transformation and industrial linkage. Ukraine’s

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PPP framework, by contrast, evolved under the influence of European integration and the Law of Ukraine on Public-Private Partnerships (2010, amended 2021), aiming to attract investment and enhance institutional autonomy. Despite their differences, both systems share challenges of governance alignment, accountability, and stakeholder trust.

1.2. Problem statement

Most comparative PPP research in higher education focuses on economic efficiency or project-level outcomes, neglecting the socio-psychological dimensions that underpin collaborative governance. Cross-cultural partnerships may succeed or fail not merely due to contractual design but because of variations in social trust, perceived fairness, and communication norms. The absence of these considerations has limited our understanding of how cultural and psychological factors influence PPP performance.

1.3. Research objectives

This paper aims to:

Compare the regulatory and institutional frameworks governing PPPs in higher education in China and Ukraine.

Identify the social-psychological variables influencing PPP cooperation and stability.

Develop a conceptual model linking these variables to governance efficiency and risk mitigation.

Propose evidence-based policy recommendations for sustainable PPP management in higher education.

1.4. Methodological approach

The research employs a mixed qualitative–comparative design, combining documentary analysis, expert interviews, and model construction. Policy documents from both countries were analysed to identify governance patterns; interviews with 24 administrators and private-sector partners provided insights into the social-psychological context. Comparative synthesis and grounded-theory coding were applied to develop the integrated framework.

2. Literature review

2.1. The evolution of PPP in higher education

Early literature conceptualised PPPs primarily as financial mechanisms for infrastructure provision^[1]. In the 2000s, scholars began to examine their governance dimensions, highlighting issues of accountability, performance measurement, and contractual flexibility. More recent research extends the analysis to educational outcomes, student satisfaction, and institutional innovation^[2].

2.2. Comparative governance studies

Comparative PPP research typically contrasts Western European regulatory traditions with emerging economies. For instance, OECD (2020) notes that governance maturity, stakeholder trust, and transparency correlate strongly with project performance^[3]. However, few studies directly compare transitional economies like Ukraine with rapidly industrialising systems such as China, where hierarchical governance coexists with market reforms.

2.3. The social-psychological turn in PPP research

A growing body of work suggests that PPP success depends on relational capital and social cognition^[4]. Trust, perceived competence, and cultural empathy affect partners' willingness to share information and

resolve conflicts. In educational PPPs, these variables are even more salient because outcomes are intangible and collaborative teaching–learning processes rely on mutual respect.

2.4. Research gap

There remains a paucity of cross-national evidence integrating social-psychological variables into PPP performance frameworks. This study fills that gap by incorporating constructs such as trust orientation, collective efficacy, uncertainty avoidance, and public value perception into a comparative governance model.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a comparative qualitative–analytical design integrating policy analysis, semi-structured interviews, and cross-case synthesis. The design aims to capture both institutional governance arrangements and underlying social-psychological dynamics shaping PPP performance in higher education.

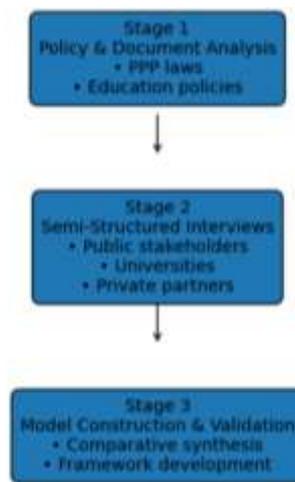


Figure 1. Research design and methodological flow illustrates the three-stage research process combining policy analysis, interviews, and model validation.

Figure 1 illustrates the overall research design and methodological flow of this study, highlighting the three-stage process integrating policy analysis, semi-structured interviews, and model validation.

3.2. Interviewee selection and data collection

Interview participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure institutional diversity and cross-sectoral representation. Selection criteria included:

- (1) direct involvement in higher-education PPP projects;
- (2) decision-making or managerial responsibilities; and
- (3) a minimum of three years of professional experience in public administration, university governance, or private investment.

The final sample consisted of 24 respondents: 12 from China (public universities, education bureaus, private investors) and 12 from Ukraine (Ministry of Education, regional authorities, university PPP managers). This balanced structure enhanced cross-national comparability.

3.3. Interview protocol and cross-cultural comparability

The semi-structured interview protocol was developed around four analytical dimensions: governance structure, stakeholder interaction, institutional performance, and social-psychological perceptions (trust, collective efficacy, hierarchy acceptance, and risk perception).

To ensure cross-cultural comparability, the same core questions were applied in both national contexts, with contextual prompts adjusted only to clarify institutional terminology.

Interviews were conducted in the respondents' working languages and subsequently translated and cross-checked to preserve conceptual equivalence rather than literal wording.

3.4. Reliability and validation

To enhance reliability, interview findings were triangulated with policy documents and project records. Follow-up clarification and informal member checking were conducted with selected respondents to verify interpretive accuracy. This procedure strengthened the internal validity of the qualitative analysis.

4. Comparative Findings: PPP Governance in China and Ukraine

4.1. Governance frameworks

The Chinese PPP governance model operates under a hierarchical–coordination structure led by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC)^[2]. Most higher-education PPPs focus on digital campuses, training bases, and innovation parks. Contracts emphasise performance-based management and technology transfer^[5].

Ukraine's PPP governance model aligns with EU integration standards, following the Law on Concessions and the Law on PPPs (amended 2021)^[6]. Decentralisation reforms transferred responsibility to regional councils and universities. University–private cooperation often focuses on infrastructure rehabilitation and dormitory modernisation.

4.2. Regulatory comparison

Table 1. Regulatory frameworks of higher-education PPPs in China and Ukraine.

Indicator	China	Ukraine
Legal foundation	MOE & NDRC PPP guidelines	Law on PPPs (2010, amended 2021)
Dominant model	BOT / BOO	Concession / Hybrid
Decision level	Central–local coordination	Regional autonomy
Financing mode	Policy banks, local funds	EIB, donor programmes
Accountability mechanism	KPI and MOE supervision	Transparency portal, audit bodies

(**Table 1** highlights the contrasting regulatory foundations and governance arrangements of higher-education PPPs in China and Ukraine. While China adopts a centrally coordinated, performance-oriented model supported by policy banks, Ukraine relies on a more decentralized framework emphasizing regional autonomy, transparency, and donor-supported financing.)

4.3. Institutional challenges

Both countries face three shared governance challenges^[7, 8]:

Risk allocation – Public actors often retain excessive financial risks.

Trust deficit – Private partners perceive bureaucratic rigidity and low policy continuity.

Cultural asymmetry – Hierarchical versus consultative decision norms impede coordination.

4.4. Emerging success factors

Successful cases in both contexts revealed that high governance efficiency correlates with:

Transparent communication and data sharing

Mutual learning between public and private managers

Clear incentive alignment and measurable performance goals

5. Social-psychological variables and governance efficiency

5.1. Conceptual rationale

Governance performance is not solely determined by contractual design but by social-psychological enablers that shape cooperation behaviors^[4]. This study identifies four latent variables:

Table 2. Social-psychological variables and their expected effects on PPP governance efficiency.

Variable	Definition	Expected effect
Trust orientation	Degree to which partners expect reliability and fairness	Enhances collaboration and reduces monitoring cost
Collective efficacy	Shared belief in group capability to achieve goals	Strengthens problem-solving and innovation
Hierarchy acceptance	Cultural tolerance of unequal authority distribution	May stabilise structure but reduce feedback efficiency
Risk perception	Cognitive evaluation of potential loss and uncertainty	Affects willingness to invest and sustain partnership

(Table 2 presents the core social-psychological variables used in this study, together with their definitions and anticipated effects on PPP governance efficiency.)

5.2. Analytical integration

Through thematic mapping, interview data confirmed that trust orientation and collective efficacy are the strongest predictors of PPP stability. Ukrainian respondents emphasised personal trust and informal networks, consistent with recent Ukrainian PPP scholarship^[7,8], while Chinese respondents highlighted institutional trust and procedural clarity.

5.3. Theoretical model

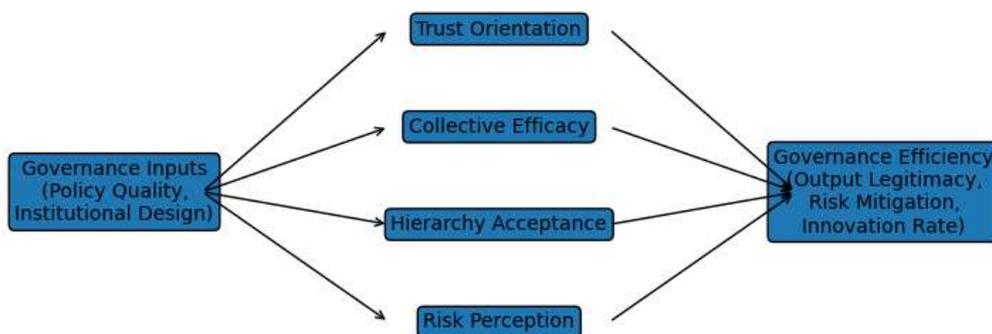


Figure 2. The social-psychological variables – governance performance framework.

(Source: Author’s elaboration based on comparative PPP data, 2025)

Figure 2 illustrates the directional relationships between governance inputs, social-psychological mediators, and governance performance. Trust orientation and collective efficacy exert positive mediating

effects, while hierarchy acceptance and risk perception display context-dependent influences on feedback efficiency and partnership stability.

Governance efficiency (output legitimacy, risk mitigation, innovation rate) is conceptualised as the dependent variable.

Social-psychological factors (trust, efficacy, hierarchy acceptance, risk perception) are treated as mediators between governance inputs (policy quality, institutional design) and outcomes.

The proposed model suggests that governance performance improves when relational trust compensates for regulatory uncertainty and when collective efficacy substitutes for weak contractual enforcement.

6. Discussion

6.1. Interpreting cross-national differences

The comparative analysis reveals that China's PPP governance tends to prioritise structural control and performance metrics, whereas Ukraine's approach emphasises decentralisation and participatory coordination. These differences are rooted in divergent administrative traditions: China's top-down planning ensures resource concentration but may limit flexibility; Ukraine's local autonomy encourages innovation yet faces coordination fragmentation.

6.2. Role of social-psychological variables

Social-psychological dynamics emerge as key determinants of PPP sustainability.

Trust orientation: In China, institutional trust dominates, built through procedural standardisation and central authority credibility. In Ukraine, interpersonal trust is critical—respondents described successful projects as “driven by people, not by contracts.”

Collective efficacy: Shared professional identity and mutual competence perception enhance resilience under stress.

Hierarchy acceptance: Moderately high hierarchy acceptance in China stabilises governance structures but can reduce participatory feedback. Ukraine's lower hierarchy acceptance fosters creativity but sometimes causes decision deadlocks.

Risk perception: Chinese partners generally display pragmatic optimism due to state backing, while Ukrainian partners exhibit cautious risk perception shaped by economic volatility and post-conflict uncertainty.

6.3. Governance efficiency outcomes

When social-psychological enablers align with institutional design, PPP governance demonstrates measurable improvements:

Empirical evidence from both Asian and European contexts supports these governance efficiency patterns^[9,10].

Improved stakeholder satisfaction and transparency indices

Enhanced innovation transfer between academia and industry

6.4. Theoretical contributions and future research directions

This study contributes to PPP governance literature by integrating social-psychological variables into a comparative institutional framework for higher education. First, it extends conventional PPP governance

models by demonstrating that trust orientation and collective efficacy function as mediating mechanisms between formal institutional design and governance performance. This enriches PPP theory by incorporating relational and cognitive dimensions alongside contractual and regulatory factors.

Second, the comparative analysis of China and Ukraine illustrates how different governance cultures generate distinct trust configurations—institutional trust in hierarchical systems versus interpersonal trust in decentralized settings. This finding refines cross-national governance theory by highlighting that governance efficiency depends not only on formal structures but also on culturally embedded psychological orientations.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study relies on a qualitative sample of limited size, which constrains statistical generalization. In addition, the focus on two national contexts may not fully capture the diversity of PPP governance arrangements globally. Future research could employ quantitative modeling to test the proposed framework across broader samples and explore hybrid or cross-border PPPs, particularly in digital education transformation and post-conflict reconstruction contexts.

7. Policy Implications

7.1. For China

Institutionalise trust-building mechanisms by expanding public information portals and feedback channels in university PPPs.

Encourage participatory governance at the project level, granting more discretion to local education departments.

Integrate socio-psychological assessment into project evaluation (e.g., measuring team cohesion and trust levels).

7.2. For Ukraine

Enhance policy continuity through stable regulatory frameworks and transparent tendering processes.

Reinforce institutional trust via capacity-building programs for public managers.

Develop risk-sharing schemes that align with private investors' expectations, supported by international financial institutions.

7.3. Shared recommendations

Both countries can benefit from:

Cross-cultural learning through bilateral PPP training and academic exchange.

Data-driven governance dashboards integrating both quantitative KPIs and qualitative trust indicators.

Inclusion of psychological safety and collaboration metrics in future PPP performance standards.

8. Conclusion

This study has shown that effective PPP governance in higher education depends on more than legal or financial arrangements—it is deeply shaped by social-psychological variables that influence how partners perceive, trust, and cooperate with one another.

By comparing China and Ukraine, the research highlights how different governance cultures produce distinct trust dynamics, risk attitudes, and participation patterns.

The proposed Social-Psychological Variables–Governance Performance Framework provides a holistic model integrating institutional and human factors. It underscores that sustainable PPPs require not only technical capacity but also psychological alignment between partners.

Future studies should employ quantitative modelling to test these variables across broader samples and explore hybrid PPPs involving cross-border educational collaborations, especially in the context of digital transformation and post-crisis reconstruction.

While the study provides theoretical and practical insights, its qualitative focus and limited sample size suggest caution in generalization. Nevertheless, the framework offers a valuable analytical lens for future empirical testing and policy design.

Declaration for Submission

I declare that this manuscript titled “Public–Private Partnerships (PPP) in Higher Education Development Management: A Comparative Study of China and Ukraine with Social-Psychological Perspectives” is an original work authored solely by Jing Wang, has not been previously published, and is not under consideration elsewhere. The manuscript adheres to ethical guidelines for academic publication and fully discloses any use of AI tools limited to language editing assistance.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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