

Tokenistic Participation as a Governance Mechanism in Higher Education: “Asked to Participate, Not to Decide” and Teacher Agency

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Abstract

This study reconceptualises tokenistic participation as a governance mechanism in higher education contexts where participation is formally encouraged while decision-making authority remains limited. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 20 teachers working in public universities in China, the study examines how participation is enacted, interpreted, and negotiated in everyday governance practices. The findings show that participation is widely experienced as procedural rather than influential: Teachers are routinely consulted, yet their input rarely shapes final decisions and is often accompanied by limited feedback or justification. In this sense, tokenistic participation functions as a legitimacy and risk-management mechanism that channels voice without redistributing decision rights. Under these conditions, teacher agency is not eliminated but reconfigured through adaptive strategies such as compliance, withdrawal, and quiet resistance. Rather than challenging governance structures directly, these forms of agency often co-exist with, and may stabilise, existing



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arrangements by managing frustration without redistributing authority. By shifting attention from the presence of participation to its governing effects, the study contributes to critical debates on shared governance, professional agency, and the limits of participatory approaches to educational change under contemporary managerial conditions.

Keywords: tokenistic participation; higher education governance; teacher agency; shared governance; faculty participation

Introduction

Participation in institutional decision-making has long been positioned as a cornerstone of democratic governance in higher education. Within traditions of shared governance, faculty participation is commonly associated with institutional legitimacy, academic quality, and professional autonomy, and is frequently presented as a mechanism for fostering collegiality, collaboration, and accountability in university decision-making (Bergan 2003; Kezar and Holcombe 2017). In policy discourse and institutional rhetoric, participation is often invoked as evidence of inclusivity, transparency, and responsiveness, particularly in higher education systems facing intensified demands for accountability and managerial oversight (Deem, Hillyard, and Reed 2007; Shattock 2014).

Beyond managerial reforms, participation in contemporary universities also needs to be situated within the broader global rise of neoliberalism in higher education. Neoliberal governance privileges numbers over words: Performance indicators, rankings, evaluation scores, and audit-oriented accountability increasingly take precedence over deliberation, professional judgement, and the educational mission of universities (Brown 2015; Deem, Hillyard, and Reed 2007; Giroux 2002). Under these conditions, participation may be valued less as a democratic mechanism for shared decision-making than as a procedural technology that produces a visible trace of consultation and compliance.

This neoliberal shift is analytically relevant to Chinese public universities as global competitive pressures intersect with bureaucratic administrative authority (Olssen and Peters 2005). Consultative practices may expand as a sign of governance modernisation, while decision-making rights remain insulated within managerial channels. As institutional theory suggests, formal structures can therefore become ceremonially important even when decoupled from substantive authority (Bromley and Powell 2012; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Recognising neoliberal rationalities helps clarify why participation can proliferate without redistributing decision-making power, and why the visibility of participation may matter more than its influence.

Despite this strong normative emphasis, empirical research consistently points to a persistent gap between the expansion of participatory practices and the distribution of decision-making authority. Faculty members are routinely invited to serve on

committees, attend consultative meetings, and provide feedback on institutional initiatives, yet their capacity to shape final decisions remains uneven and, in many cases, limited (Becker et al. 2023; Lo 2025). Across diverse higher education contexts, participation frequently occurs within advisory or consultative arenas, while authority over strategic and organisational decisions remains concentrated within administrative or managerial structures (Shattock 2014). This disjunction raises critical questions about what participation entails in practice and whether it functions as a channel for meaningful influence or primarily as a symbolic marker of inclusion. Taken together, these studies suggest that the proliferation of participatory practices has not been matched by a corresponding redistribution of decision-making authority.

Importantly, scholarship on participation across the social sciences has long cautioned against assuming that participation is inherently empowering. Arnstein's (1969) influential ladder of participation established a foundational distinction between forms of participation that redistribute power and those that merely create the appearance of involvement. Building on this insight, organisational and sociological research conceptualises tokenistic participation as a condition in which individuals are formally included or consulted but lack substantive authority to influence outcomes, with participation operating to legitimise existing governance arrangements rather than to transform them (Childress, Nayyar, and Gibson 2024). From this perspective, participation is best understood not as a neutral organisational practice but as a power-laden governance process that may simultaneously invite voice and contain dissent.

Within higher education research, however, tokenism has been applied primarily to analyses of student voice, diversity initiatives, or the representation of marginalised groups, while its relevance to faculty participation in institutional governance remains comparatively under-theorised. Much of the literature on faculty participation has focused on documenting levels of involvement or diagnosing the erosion of shared governance under managerial reforms, rather than analysing how participatory arrangements may be institutionally structured to include faculty procedurally while constraining their professional power (Bergan 2003; Kezar and Holcombe 2017; McNaughtan et al. 2025). As a result, participation is frequently treated as an unproblematic good, with limited analytical attention to its governing effects. In using the term "tokenistic participation", this study departs from the more common association of tokenism with representation and diversity politics. Here, tokenism does not refer to the symbolic inclusion of particular identity groups, but to an institutionalised mode of governance participation in which faculty involvement is made visible while decision rights remain insulated. Tokenistic participation is therefore distinguished from symbolic participation, which emphasises appearances of inclusion, and from managed participation, which highlights how participation is organised and constrained through procedural design. The term "tokenistic participation" is used because it captures the combined effect of routinised consultation and the systematic withholding of decision-making authority: Academics are asked to participate in ways that legitimise governance processes, but they are not positioned to decide.

Related research on professional agency further underscores the importance of distinguishing between participation as procedure and participation as influence. Studies of academic and teacher agency demonstrate that opportunities for voice do not necessarily translate into decision-making authority, particularly in governance contexts characterised by strong managerial control and accountability regimes (Jia, Wang, and Ding 2025). These findings highlight a crucial analytical distinction between procedural participation, being included in consultative processes, and substantive decision-making authority, the capacity to shape outcomes. Yet this distinction has not been systematically examined in studies of faculty participation in higher education governance, where the presence of participatory structures is often assumed to signal meaningful involvement.

Responding to these findings, the present study approaches participation not as a normative ideal or a neutral organisational practice, but as a governance process shaped by institutional power relations. Rather than attributing limited faculty influence to weak implementation or incomplete shared governance, this study challenges a dominant assumption in higher education research that participation becomes meaningful primarily through improved procedures, dialogue, or representation. It argues instead that participation may function effectively as a governance mechanism precisely because decision-making authority is not redistributed, allowing institutions to manage demands for inclusion while stabilising existing power relations. In this study, tokenistic participation refers to a patterned and institutionalised form of participation in which consultation is systematically decoupled from decision-making authority and normalised as a routine governance practice rather than as an exceptional or transitional condition.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do higher education teachers experience institutional discourses that invite their participation in consultative decision-making processes?

RQ2: How do teachers perceive the relationship between consultative involvement and decision-making authority in higher education governance?

RQ3: What do teachers' interpretations and responses to tokenistic participation reveal about the limits of transformative educational change in higher education?

By examining participation through the lens of power and governance, this study contributes to critical debates on shared governance, professional agency, and participation in higher education. In shifting analytical attention from the presence of participatory structures to their governing effects, the study seeks to clarify the conditions under which participation functions as a vehicle for educational change rather than as a form of symbolic reform.

Literature Review

This literature review develops an analytical framework for examining teacher participation in higher education governance, treating participation as a governing arrangement whose effects depend on how authority, accountability, and decision rights are institutionally configured.

The purpose of this study is therefore analytical rather than descriptive. It clarifies the key concepts and distinctions that inform how teachers' experiences of participation are interpreted in the empirical analysis that follows. First, it examines institutional discourses of teacher participation and considers how such discourses construct participation as a normative feature of legitimate governance while delimiting the boundaries of acceptable involvement. Second, it analyses the structural separation between consultative participation and decision-making authority, highlighting how participation may be organised as procedure rather than influence. Third, it situates teacher power and agency within contemporary governance arrangements, emphasising how agency is reshaped under conditions of managed participation rather than straightforwardly enabled through opportunities for voice.

Institutional Discourses of Teacher Participation

In higher education, teacher participation is commonly articulated through institutional discourses of shared governance, collegiality, and democratic engagement. Recent governance research shows that these discourses continue to play a central legitimating role even under conditions of intensified managerial control and organisational uncertainty (Lo 2025; McNaughtan et al. 2025). Within such narratives, academic staff are positioned as responsible stakeholders whose participation signals institutional transparency, accountability, and responsiveness, regardless of whether participation entails decision-making authority.

Institutional theory provides a useful lens for understanding the persistence of participation discourse under these conditions. Meyer and Rowan's (1977) classic analysis of institutionalised organisations demonstrates how formal structures may operate as "myths and ceremonies", signalling conformity to normative expectations while remaining decoupled from core decision-making processes. Subsequent institutional scholarship has refined this insight by showing how decoupling can function not as organisational failure, but as a stable governance strategy that sustains legitimacy while preserving control (Bromley and Powell 2012). Applied to higher education governance, participation discourse may therefore operate less as a mechanism for redistributing authority than as a symbolic affirmation of democratic ideals.

Contemporary studies of higher education governance reinforce this interpretation. While participation is strongly emphasised rhetorically, the scope, terms, and limits of participation are typically defined by institutional structures that pre-exist teachers'

engagement (McNaughtan et al. 2025). Participation is commonly formalised through committees, consultations, and feedback mechanisms that make inclusion visible, yet leave underlying distributions of authority largely intact. From this perspective, participation functions discursively to legitimise governance arrangements rather than to transform them.

Importantly, governance discourse also has regulatory effects. Research on academic sensemaking shows that institutional narratives shape how academics interpret expectations, risks, and professional responsibilities, encouraging forms of participation that align with established decision-making hierarchies (Degn 2018). Participation discourse may thus operate simultaneously as an invitation and a constraint: Teachers are encouraged to contribute and to assume symbolic responsibility for institutional decisions, while the boundaries of legitimate influence remain tightly circumscribed.

Participation without Decision-Making Authority

Participation is widely promoted as a defining feature of democratic and collegial governance, yet opportunities for participation do not automatically entail decision-making authority. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation remains a foundational reference for distinguishing between forms of participation that redistribute power and those that primarily create the appearance of involvement. Contemporary institutional theory further clarifies how participation may expand procedurally while authority remains centralised, through decoupling processes that preserve legitimacy without transforming control (Bromley and Powell 2012).

Recent research in higher education governance suggests that the persistence of participatory structures should not be interpreted as evidence of shared decision-making. Faculty may be extensively involved in meetings, committees, and consultation processes, while strategic authority remains concentrated within managerial or administrative channels (Lo 2025; McNaughtan et al. 2025). Under such conditions, participation becomes procedurally dense but substantively thin: Institutions can demonstrate consultation while insulating decision rights from challenge.

Organisational research on tokenism further supports this distinction. Tokenistic participation can operate as an organisational arrangement in which representation and consultation are routinised without granting actors the capacity to shape outcomes, thereby stabilising existing hierarchies rather than disrupting them (King et al. 2010). Analytically, this implies that participation should be examined not only in terms of inclusion or voice, but in relation to decision rights, accountability mechanisms, and the institutional locations where authority is exercised.

In this study, participation refers to formalised opportunities for involvement, consultation denotes opinion-seeking processes without decision rights, and decision-making authority refers to the institutionalised capacity to shape final outcomes. This conceptual distinction between procedural participation and substantive authority

provides a central analytical anchor for examining how participation is organised and experienced in higher education governance.

Teacher Power and Agency in Higher Education

Teacher power in higher education is traditionally associated with professional autonomy, disciplinary expertise, and influence over teaching and curriculum. However, these professional bases of influence are increasingly mediated by managerial governance structures, performance regimes, and accountability mechanisms, which reconfigure the conditions under which professional judgement can be exercised (Deem 1998; Pineda and Salazar Morales 2024). Under such conditions, participation may expand as a procedural expectation even as opportunities for consequential influence become more constrained.

Agency in this study is understood as relational and contextually situated rather than as an individual attribute. Drawing on sociocultural and organisational perspectives, agency is conceptualised as emerging through interaction with institutional structures, governance routines, and perceived risks, rather than as an inherent capacity for resistance or transformation (Annala et al. 2023; Degn 2018). Teachers act within governance arrangements that enable certain forms of participation while restricting others, and agency is exercised through negotiation, selective engagement, and adaptation.

Crucially, agency under managed participation should not be equated with empowerment. Research on professional agency in constrained organisational settings shows that adaptive strategies may co-exist with, and at times stabilise, existing governance arrangements by managing discontent and maintaining professional legitimacy (Annala et al. 2023; King et al. 2010). When participatory practices invite involvement without granting decision-making authority, teachers' responses, such as compliance, withdrawal, or quiet resistance, may preserve professional dignity while simultaneously displacing opportunities for collective challenge to institutional governance.

From this perspective, participation practices are inseparable from broader power relations within higher education governance. Institutional discourses define the terms of participation; consultative practices organise the distribution of authority, and professional agency emerges as a patterned response to these conditions.

Theoretical Framework

Building on the preceding discussion, this study adopts a theoretical framework that conceptualises participation as a governance process embedded in institutional power relations rather than as a neutral organisational practice (see Figure 1). Instead of treating participation as inherently democratic or emancipatory, the framework approaches participation as a governing arrangement through which inclusion,

legitimacy, and control are simultaneously produced. It integrates four interrelated analytical dimensions: institutional discourse, consultative practice, professional power, and teacher agency. Together, these dimensions provide a focused lens for analysing how participation is organised, experienced, and responded to within higher education governance.

Institutional discourses of participation construct expectations of inclusion, collegiality, and shared governance, while simultaneously delineating the boundaries of legitimate involvement. Research in higher education governance and institutional theory shows that such discourses often function as legitimating narratives, signalling openness and accountability even when decision-making authority remains insulated (Bromley and Powell 2012; Degn 2018; McNaughtan et al. 2025). Within these discursive frameworks, consultation operates as the dominant mode of participation, inviting teachers' perspectives without necessarily granting decision rights.

When consultation is systematically decoupled from influence over outcomes, participation takes on a tokenistic character. In this study, tokenistic participation is understood not as episodic exclusion or individual dissatisfaction, but as a patterned and institutionalised form of participation organised as consultation without decision-making authority and normalised as a routine feature of governance rather than a temporary or transitional condition. This conceptualisation builds on classic distinctions between symbolic and substantive participation (Arnstein 1969) and on organisational research demonstrating how tokenism can be stabilised as an organisational arrangement that preserves hierarchical control while affirming inclusion (Childress, Nayyar, and Gibson 2024; King et al. 2010).

Rather than treating tokenism as an unintended failure of participatory initiatives, the framework conceptualises it as a mode of governance through which participation is actively managed. Teachers' responses to such arrangements are shaped by their professional agency, which is exercised within institutional constraints rather than outside them. Agency is therefore understood as relational and situated, expressed through strategies such as selective engagement, adaptation, or withdrawal, rather than as straightforward empowerment or resistance (Annala et al. 2023; Degn 2018).

This framework guides the empirical analysis by linking teachers' lived experiences of participation to broader governance mechanisms. By attending to institutional discourse, consultative practice, professional power, and agency in combination, the framework clarifies how participation functions as a governing practice and with what consequences for teacher influence under contemporary higher education governance conditions.

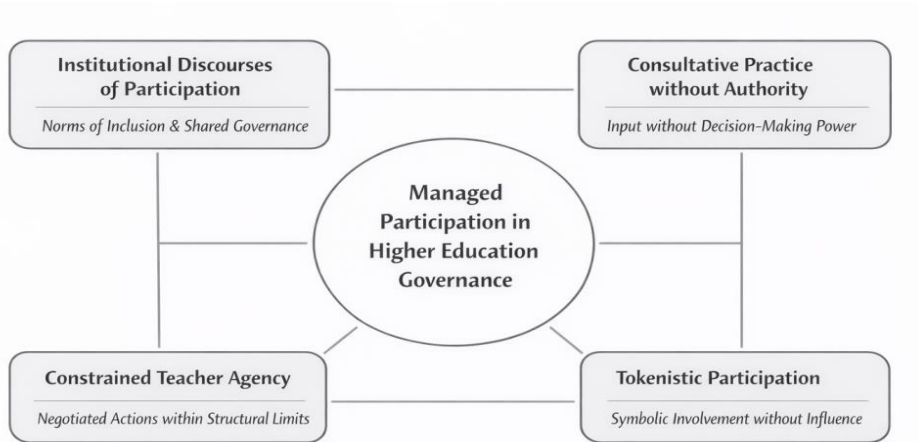


Figure 1: Theoretical framework: tokenistic participation as a governance mechanism

Methodology

This study outlines the methodological approach adopted to examine higher education teachers' experiences of participation in institutional decision-making processes. Consistent with the study's critical orientation, a qualitative research design was employed to explore how participation is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated by teachers within governance structures characterised by limited decision-making authority. The study describes the research design, research context and participants, data collection procedures, and analytical strategies used to ensure rigour and trustworthiness.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design situated within a critical-interpretive paradigm, which understands knowledge as socially constructed and participation as shaped by institutional power relations. From this perspective, participation is not treated as a neutral organisational practice, but as a governance process through which inclusion, authority, and professional agency are negotiated.

Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate for examining how institutional practices are experienced and made meaningful by participants, especially when the research focus is on power, agency, and governance rather than on measuring predefined outcomes. The study is explanatory rather than evaluative: It does not seek to assess the effectiveness of participation initiatives, but to understand how participation is organised, managed, and interpreted in practice. The analysis foregrounds teachers' perspectives as those who are formally invited to participate in governance while remaining structurally constrained, rather than attempting to reconstruct institutional decision-making from a managerial standpoint.

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted in Zhengzhou, the capital city of Henan Province, China, a major regional centre for higher education. Zhengzhou hosts multiple public universities operating under standardised governance structures, including faculty meetings, committees, and consultative forums. These institutions provide a relevant setting for examining participation practices, as teachers are routinely invited to contribute to institutional decision-making processes while authority is often concentrated at administrative levels.

Participants consisted of 20 higher education teachers employed at public universities in Zhengzhou. To protect institutional anonymity, the exact number of universities is not specified; however, participants were drawn from multiple public universities rather than a single site. Purposeful sampling was employed based on theoretical relevance. Eligibility criteria included direct experience with institutional participation processes such as departmental committees, curriculum reform discussions, or policy consultations. Participants were recruited through professional networks and snowball sampling, allowing access to teachers with sustained engagement in governance practices. As recruitment relied on professional networks and snowball sampling, the sample may over-represent teachers who are comparatively willing to discuss governance experiences or who are connected to similar professional circles.

The sample included teachers from different disciplinary backgrounds and career stages, enabling attention to variation in experiences while maintaining a shared governance context. In this article, the term “teachers” refers to university academic staff with teaching responsibilities; where relevant, “faculty” and “academic staff” are used interchangeably to align with higher education governance scholarship. Table 1 provides an overview of participant characteristics.

Table 1: Overview of participants

Category	Description
Number of participants	20
Institutional type	Public universities
Location	Zhengzhou, Henan Province, China
Number of universities	Anonymised
Career stage	Early career (6); Mid career (8); Senior (6)
Disciplinary fields	Humanities and Social Sciences (9); STEM (7); Education-related fields (4)
Governance experience	Departmental committees; curriculum reform groups; policy consultation forums
Interview mode	In-person (12); Online (8)

Interviews were conducted until thematic saturation was reached, with no substantively new codes or themes emerging in the final stage of data collection. Saturation was assessed through ongoing comparison of interview transcripts and coding outputs, with later interviews confirming rather than extending the emerging analytical categories.

All participants were informed of the aims of the study and provided informed consent prior to participation. Ethical approval was granted by the author’s institutional ethics review committee (reference available upon request), and the research was conducted in accordance with recognised ethical guidelines for qualitative social research. Given the sensitivity of discussing institutional governance and power relations, particular care was taken to protect participants’ anonymity. Pseudonyms were used throughout, and identifying details were removed to minimise the risk of professional or institutional identification.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between March and July 2025. An interview protocol was used to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing participants to elaborate on context-specific experiences. Core questions focused on (a) concrete instances of being invited to participate, (b) perceived influence on outcomes, and (c) how teachers responded over time. Example questions included: “Can you describe a recent situation where you were asked to provide input on an institutional decision? What happened afterward?” and “In your experience, what is the relationship between being consulted and having real decision-making power in your university?” Interviews lasted approximately 45–90 minutes and were conducted primarily in Mandarin Chinese, either in person or online, depending on participants’ availability. Transcripts were translated into English by the researchers for analysis and publication. To minimise loss of meaning, translation prioritised conceptual equivalence, and all quoted excerpts were checked against the original Mandarin

transcripts by a second bilingual reviewer. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through iterative review to ensure that analytic claims were grounded in the original language data. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach informed by the theoretical framework. Analysis began with close engagement with interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns related to participation practices, consultation processes, perceived influence, and professional agency. Initial coding was inductive and grounded in participants' accounts. Coding proceeded in three stages. First, open coding was conducted line-by-line to capture key actions, perceptions, and organisational responses. Second, focused coding grouped initial codes into candidate categories. Third, categories were refined into themes through constant comparison across transcripts, with attention to deviant cases and within-theme variation.

Analytic memos were maintained throughout to document coding decisions and emerging interpretations, and an audit trail was kept to enhance transparency. To enhance credibility, a subset of transcripts (4 out of 20) and the evolving codebook were reviewed with a peer researcher. Differences in interpretation were discussed and resolved through iterative engagement with the data rather than through calculation of intercoder reliability.

Subsequent stages of analysis moved beyond descriptive categorisation to interpret how individual experiences reflected broader governance mechanisms and power relations. The theoretical framework sensitised the analysis to how participation was discursively framed, procedurally organised, and experienced in relation to authority and agency. This enabled a critical interpretation of participation as a managed governance practice rather than as an isolated organisational phenomenon.

Trustworthiness was further strengthened through sustained engagement with the data and reflexive consideration of the researchers' positionality. As researchers familiar with higher education contexts, the authors maintained critical distance from institutional governance structures through reflexive memo-writing and peer discussion. Thick description is used in the presentation of findings to support transparency and enable readers to assess the credibility and plausibility of the analysis. Given the sensitivity of discussing governance and institutional power, particular attention was paid to positionality and interview dynamics. The researchers' familiarity with higher education contexts facilitated rapport but required ongoing reflexive attention to potential assumptions and participants' self-censorship. Reflexive memos and peer debriefing were used to document and challenge emerging interpretations.

Findings

This study presents the findings from semi-structured interviews with 20 higher education teachers in Zhengzhou. The analysis examines how teachers experience and

interpret institutional participation practices in contexts where decision-making authority remains limited. Guided by the theoretical framework, the findings move beyond individual perceptions to identify recurring, patterned features of participation that illuminate how participation functions as a governed practice within everyday higher education governance.

Participation as Procedure Rather Than Influence

This theme illustrates how participation was predominantly experienced as an institutional procedure rather than as a source of decision-making influence. Across interviews, teachers described participation as a formalised process involving meetings, consultations, and requests for feedback, with limited expectation that such involvement would shape outcomes. Analytically, this pattern reflects participation organised primarily at the level of procedure rather than authority, positioning participation as a visible governance requirement rather than a mechanism for professional influence.

Several participants emphasised the predictability of participatory processes and outcomes. As one teacher explained:

We attend meetings, we discuss, we give suggestions. But after that, the decision is already made somewhere else. Our role is more like completing a procedure. (P3)

This account illustrates how participation was perceived as procedurally necessary but substantively detached from influence. Other participants echoed this perception, describing participation as routine and largely symbolic:

You are invited to participate, but you already know the result. The meeting is just part of the process, not a place where things really change. (P11)

Such experiences shaped teachers' expectations of participation, reinforcing the view that involvement primarily served institutional requirements. As another participant noted:

Participation is more about showing that teachers were consulted. Whether the suggestions matter is another question. (P7)

While this pattern was dominant, a small number of participants acknowledged that participation occasionally resulted in minor procedural adjustments, such as changes in timelines or documentation. However, these adjustments did not extend to core decisions or strategic priorities, and were not experienced as altering the overall distribution of decision-making authority. Taken together, these accounts indicate a recurring and predictable form of participation through which institutional legitimacy is performed. Rather than reflecting isolated disappointment, procedural participation emerged as a routinised governance practice that signals inclusion while leaving decision-making authority unchanged.

Being Consulted without Consequence

Participants' accounts further revealed a consistent separation between consultation and decision-making authority. While teachers were frequently invited to provide input, they reported little evidence that their contributions shaped final decisions. This pattern reflects not episodic exclusion but a structurally embedded distinction between being consulted and having decision rights.

One participant recalled a curriculum reform process in which extensive consultation took place:

We spent a lot of time discussing the curriculum changes. Many teachers raised concerns. Later, when the final plan came out, it was almost exactly the same as the original proposal. (P5)

This account highlights how consultation occurred without discernible impact, reinforcing perceptions of predetermined outcomes. Others emphasised the absence of feedback loops following consultation:

They collect opinions, but there is no explanation afterward. You don't know which suggestions were accepted or why others were rejected. (P14)

The lack of transparency surrounding how input was used contributed to a sense of detachment from decision-making processes. As one teacher succinctly expressed:

You can speak, but speaking does not mean deciding. In the end, we are informed, not involved. (P2)

Across participants, repeated experiences of consultation without consequence led to an adjustment of expectations, as teachers learned to distinguish between participation as voice and participation as influence. Analytically, this separation functioned as a stable governance arrangement that accommodated demands for consultation while preserving hierarchical control over decisions, rather than as a temporary or transitional condition.

Managing Voice and Professional Boundaries

This theme examines how participation was governed through implicit norms that shaped what could be said and how concerns could be raised. Participants described participation as bounded by professional expectations regarding appropriate voice, tone, and content. These boundaries were rarely enforced through explicit rules, but rather through informal norms embedded in organisational culture.

Several teachers spoke about learning to navigate these boundaries over time:

You know which topics are safe to talk about and which are not. Some issues are better left unsaid, even if they are important. (P9)

Rather than overt restriction, voice was regulated through subtle cues and shared understandings:

No one tells you directly not to speak. But you can feel it from the atmosphere. If you push too hard, it becomes uncomfortable. (P16)

These accounts illustrate how participation was shaped not only by formal structures but also by informal mechanisms that governed acceptable forms of expression. Teachers became attentive to the professional risks associated with speaking beyond these boundaries:

You participate, but you have to be careful. You don't want to be seen as someone who causes trouble. (P6)

Analytically, such experiences point to participation as a form of governed voice, where inclusion is accompanied by expectations of restraint. While a few participants described isolated moments of open debate under particular leaders or in specific committees, these moments were perceived as contingent rather than representative. Overall, voice regulation functioned as a mechanism that limited the scope of participation and discouraged challenges that might disrupt established decision-making hierarchies.

Navigating Participation: Compliance, Withdrawal, and Quiet Resistance

While the previous theme focuses on how participation was governed institutionally, this theme examines how teachers responded to these conditions in practice. Participants described a range of strategies for navigating participation in contexts where influence was constrained, reflecting different expressions of professional agency.

Some teachers adopted a stance of compliance, continuing to participate despite limited expectations of impact:

Even if nothing changes, you still have to participate. It's part of the job. (P1)

Others described forms of withdrawal, reducing their engagement over time following repeated experiences of limited influence:

After a few times, you realise your suggestions don't matter. So you stop speaking, or you just listen. (P13)

Alongside compliance and withdrawal, participants also described subtle forms of resistance that allowed them to maintain professional relationships while expressing dissatisfaction informally:

In meetings, I don't say much anymore. But privately, among colleagues, we talk a lot and try to support each other. (P18)

These responses demonstrate how teachers exercised agency within constrained participatory environments. Rather than openly challenging governance structures, teachers adapted their participation in ways that managed frustration and protected professional standing. Although a small number of participants expressed cautious optimism that participation might become more meaningful under different leadership conditions, such views were tentative and did not translate into sustained expectations of influence. Analytically, adaptive forms of agency often co-existed with, and at times stabilised, participation practices by containing discontent without altering decision-making authority.

Taken together, the four themes depict participation as a governed practice characterised by procedural inclusion, consultative separation from authority, regulated voice, and adaptive agency. Participation operated less as a channel for influence than as a mechanism through which governance expectations were managed and institutional legitimacy maintained. Teachers' experiences reveal how participation persists despite its limited transformative capacity, and how professional agency is exercised primarily through adjustment rather than collective challenge. This synthesis provides a foundation for the discussion of how tokenistic participation is sustained within higher education governance and what it reveals about the limits of participatory reform.

Discussion

This study interprets the findings through the study's theoretical framework and places them in explicit dialogue with scholarship on shared governance, participation, and professional agency. The central argument advanced here is that participation in higher education governance may function as a mechanism of control as much as a promise of inclusion. Rather than treating participation without influence as an implementation failure or a deficit of shared governance, this study conceptualises teachers' experiences as indicative of tokenistic participation operating as a stable governance mechanism, one that sustains institutional legitimacy while constraining the redistribution of decision-making authority.

This study makes three interrelated contributions. First, it reframes tokenistic participation from an undesirable by-product of participation to an analytically coherent mode of governance. Second, it re-specifies shared governance not as absent or eroded, but as actively managed through procedural participation without decision rights. Third, it advances understandings of professional agency by showing how agency is reconfigured and channelled under conditions of managed participation rather than straightforwardly enabled or suppressed.

From Normative Ideals of Shared Governance to Governed Participation

A substantial body of higher education scholarship approaches shared governance as a normative ideal grounded in collegiality, professional expertise, and democratic engagement. Recent contributions argue that shared governance can be strengthened

through clearer role definitions, improved institutional design, and stronger relational trust between faculty and administrators (Kezar and Holcombe 2017). Within this literature, participation is generally assumed to become consequential when governance structures are better aligned and collaborative norms are reinforced.

The findings of this study complicate this assumption. Participants reported extensive opportunities for participation through meetings, consultations, and feedback processes, yet these opportunities were experienced as procedurally dense but substantively thin. Rather than indicating the absence or erosion of shared governance, the findings suggest that participatory structures are actively organised and routinely enacted. Participation is not marginal; it is pervasive. What remains limited is decision-making authority.

This observation reframes Arnstein's (1969) distinction between participation that redistributes power and participation that creates the appearance of involvement. Instead of treating consultation without authority as a transitional stage or implementation deficit, this study demonstrates how such arrangements can become institutionalised as governed participation, a stable mode of governance that accommodates demands for inclusion while preserving hierarchical control. In doing so, the study brings normative shared governance scholarship into dialogue with governance-oriented analyses of participation, highlighting a tension between democratic ideals and managerial rationalities.

Tokenistic Participation as a Governance Mechanism

Existing scholarship often treats tokenism as an undesirable outcome of participatory initiatives or as evidence of symbolic inclusion without substantive change (Childress, Nayyar, and Gibson 2024; King et al. 2010). This study extends this literature by conceptualising tokenistic participation not as weak participation, but as a governance mechanism with identifiable organisational functions.

Where ineffective participation implies a misalignment between institutional intentions and participatory outcomes, the findings suggest a closer alignment between participatory design and governance effects. Teachers were routinely consulted, formally included, and invited to speak, yet their input rarely shaped final decisions and was seldom accompanied by justification or feedback. These practices produce visible participation while insulating decision-making authority from challenge.

By placing tokenism in dialogue with shared governance literature, the study shows that tokenistic participation does not simply reflect a failure to realise collegial ideals. Rather, it represents a mode of governance that reconciles competing institutional demands for responsiveness, legitimacy, and control. While the study does not claim direct insight into institutional intentions, the consistency and patterning of teachers' experiences indicate that consultation without authority operates as a stabilised governance arrangement rather than as an accidental or unintended outcome.

The Charade of Transparency: Whose Interests Are Served?

The findings invite a more explicit analysis of whose interests are served through faculty participation that remains procedural rather than influential. Although transparency is often framed as a democratic value in higher education, it can also function as a managerial technology: Participation produces the appearance of openness while insulating decision authority (Bromley and Powell 2012). In this sense, consultation is not simply an incomplete form of shared governance but part of how governance is made publicly legible and institutionally defensible.

A first interest served is organisational legitimacy. Consultative meetings and feedback exercises provide administrators with symbolic resources to demonstrate inclusion and responsiveness, even when decisions are made elsewhere. This aligns with classic institutional accounts in which formal structures operate as myths and ceremonies that signal conformity to normative expectations. Teachers' perceptions that participation mainly "shows teachers were consulted" (P7) illustrate how inclusion functions as a visible ritual that affirms managerial credibility, particularly under audit-oriented and competitive governance conditions (Deem, Hillyard, and Reed 2007; Shattock 2014; Shore and Wright 2015).

A second interest served concerns risk management and responsibility shifting. Documented consultation enables managers to claim procedural propriety while retaining interpretive control over how input is used, especially in the absence of feedback loops and justification. Participation without decision rights can therefore redistribute the reputational burden of decisions: Teachers may be symbolically implicated in outcomes without acquiring authority over them. Rather than a mere implementation failure, limited reason-giving can be read as a strategy that preserves flexibility while reducing exposure to contestation.

Finally, tokenistic participation can depoliticise conflict by channelling critique into controlled forums where disagreement is reframed as manageable "input" rather than a challenge to authority. This helps explain why participation is accompanied by implicit voice boundaries and why teachers' agency is often expressed through adaptation, compliance, withdrawal, or quiet resistance, rather than collective challenge (Annala et al. 2023). Under such conditions, faculty participation may indirectly stabilise governance arrangements by managing frustration without redistributing decision-making power.

Managed Voice and the Reconfiguration of Teacher Agency

Research on teacher and academic agency emphasises its relational and context-dependent nature, foregrounding how agency is shaped by organisational structures rather than exercised independently (Cong-Lem 2024; Priestley et al. 2015). The findings of this study align with this perspective while extending it by demonstrating how agency is channelled through managed participation.

Participants described learning to navigate implicit boundaries around what could be said, when critique was appropriate, and how dissent might be perceived. In response, teachers adopted strategies of compliance, withdrawal, or quiet resistance. These strategies reflect adaptive agency; however, the findings caution against equating adaptation with empowerment.

By linking agency scholarship with analyses of participation as governance, the study shows how adaptive agency may co-exist with, and at times stabilise, existing governance arrangements. Rather than directly challenging decision-making authority, agency is often exercised in ways that manage frustration and preserve professional relationships, relocating critique from formal governance arenas to informal spaces. This is evident when teachers describe how, after repeated consultations without feedback, they “stop speaking” in meetings and shift into listening (P13). This integration of agency and governance literatures underscores how participation reshapes not only where power resides, but also how professional agency is expressed and constrained.

Scope Conditions and Analytical Transferability

Although this study is situated in Zhengzhou, Henan Province, its contribution is analytical rather than context-bound. Research across diverse higher education systems documents similar tensions between participatory discourse and centralised decision-making authority (Deem, Hillyard, and Reed 2007; McNaughtan et al. 2025). The present study contributes by specifying the conditions under which tokenistic participation is likely to emerge.

The findings suggest that tokenistic participation is most likely in governance contexts characterised by strong managerial authority, formalised consultation procedures, and limited institutionalised spaces for co-decision-making. While these conditions are present in the Zhengzhou case, they are not unique to it. Importantly, the findings should not be reduced to cultural explanations of hierarchy or deference. Comparable patterns have been observed in institutions operating under different political and organisational conditions.

In this sense, the Zhengzhou case offers analytical clarity rather than exceptionalism. It illustrates how participation can be normalised as procedure while decision-making authority remains insulated, contributing to international debates on participation, governance, and the limits of democratic reform in higher education.

Implications for Educational Change: From Consultation to Consequential Participation

Moving beyond calls for “more participation” requires greater specificity regarding the conditions under which participation becomes consequential. The findings of this study point to three interrelated implications for governance reform.

First, institutions must clarify decision rights explicitly. Without clearly defined areas of shared or co-decision, consultation risks being misinterpreted as shared governance while functioning primarily as procedural inclusion.

Second, participation requires transparent feedback and justification mechanisms. Teachers' accounts demonstrate that being asked for input without explanation sustains perceptions of predetermined outcomes. Reason-giving should therefore be understood as a minimal condition for meaningful participation.

Third, institutions must attend to the conditions under which voice is expressed. Participation cannot be transformative if teachers perceive professional risk in speaking candidly. This requires organisational norms and institutional protections that normalise critique as a legitimate component of governance rather than as professional disruption.

These implications should be understood as incremental but necessary conditions for moving from tokenistic to consequential participation. While they do not in themselves dismantle existing governance hierarchies, they foreground power, accountability, and agency as central concerns for educational change.

This study has argued that participation without power should be understood not as a governance deficit, but as a particular form of governance that manages inclusion while constraining influence. By bringing shared governance, participation, and agency literatures into explicit dialogue, the study advances the concept of tokenistic participation as a governance mechanism. Rather than rejecting shared governance as an ideal, the study re-specifies how participation operates under contemporary governance conditions, contributing to broader debates on participation, power, and the limits of symbolic reform in higher education.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that participation in higher education governance can function as a mechanism of control as much as a promise of inclusion. Its core contribution lies in reconceptualising tokenistic participation as a stable governance mechanism rather than as weak or ineffective participation. Based on qualitative interviews with teachers working in public universities in Zhengzhou, Henan Province, the study examines how participation is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated in contexts where teachers are formally invited to contribute while decision-making authority remains limited. By shifting attention from procedural inclusion to questions of power, authority, and voice, the study offers a critical rethinking of what participation means in practice. This reconceptualisation invites further examination of participation not only in higher education, but in other professional governance contexts where consultation is decoupled from authority.

By focusing on how participation functions rather than whether it exists, the findings show that participatory arrangements can simultaneously affirm inclusion and constrain

influence. Participation operated as a visible and routine feature of governance, enabling institutions to demonstrate responsiveness while insulating decision-making authority from challenge. This perspective extends existing debates on shared governance by moving beyond assumptions that participation is inherently transformative and by foregrounding decision rights and accountability as central analytical concerns.

Foregrounding teachers' lived experiences, the study also contributes to scholarship on professional agency in higher education. Teachers were neither passive recipients of governance arrangements nor fully empowered participants. Instead, they exercised agency through adaptation, including compliance, withdrawal, and quiet resistance. These forms of agency allowed teachers to navigate institutional expectations and protect professional relationships, while also limiting opportunities for collective deliberation and structural change. In this way, the study complicates celebratory accounts of agency by showing how agency can be channelled in ways that may indirectly stabilise existing governance arrangements rather than disrupt them.

Although the study is situated in Zhengzhou, its contribution is analytical rather than context-bound. The dynamics identified are most likely to emerge in governance contexts characterised by strong managerial authority, formalised consultation procedures, and limited institutionalised spaces for co-decision. Under such conditions, participation may become normalised as procedure while decision-making authority remains insulated. While caution is warranted in extending these findings to settings with substantially different governance configurations, the analysis offers an analytically transferable account of how participatory reforms may operate across diverse higher education systems facing similar tensions between participatory discourse and managerial control.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. This study deliberately foregrounds teachers' perspectives in order to examine participation from the standpoint of those whose voices are formally invited yet substantively constrained. As a result, it does not include the perspectives of administrators or policymakers, whose rationales for participatory practices may differ. Future research could extend this analysis by examining participation across multiple governance positions, by conducting comparative studies across institutional or national contexts, or by tracing how participatory practices evolve over time in response to organisational change.

The implications of this study point towards the need to rethink participation not in terms of the number of participatory forums or the visibility of consultation, but in terms of decision rights, accountability, and the conditions under which professional voice becomes consequential. Situating these findings within the global slide towards neoliberalism clarifies what is at stake in contemporary governance reforms. As universities are increasingly governed through performance indicators, rankings, and audit-oriented accountability, participation can become a procedural requirement that privileges numbers over words, measurable outputs over deliberation and educational

purpose. In Chinese public universities, these pressures intersect with bureaucratic authority, enabling consultation to expand while decision rights remain insulated, thereby reshaping, and at times disfiguring, the university mission through legitimising rituals rather than shared governance. Participation that remains detached from authority risks functioning as symbolic reform rather than as a driver of educational change. Reimagining participation therefore requires a shift from procedural inclusion to consequential involvement, one in which authority, responsibility, and voice are institutionally aligned if governance is to enable education as a site of consequential decision-making rather than symbolic inclusion.

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