

# Breaking Through and Converging: Organizational Model Innovation and Legitimacy Construction in New-Model Research Universities from an Institutional Theory Perspective

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**Abstract:** Since the 21st century, China's higher education system has undergone profound transformation in pursuing "world-class" status, with new-model research universities such as SUSTech (public) and Westlake University (private) emerging as bold institutional experiments and "testing grounds" for higher education reform. Drawing on institutional theory, this paper conducts a comparative case study of SUSTech and Westlake University, examining their "breaking-through" innovations in organizational models and "converging" adaptations to the institutional environment through document analysis and comparative institutional analysis. The study finds that the survival and development of new-model research universities is not a unidirectional process of innovation or disruption, but rather a dynamic process of legitimacy construction through continuous interplay between breaking through and converging. These universities demonstrate distinctiveness through innovations in governance structures, personnel systems, talent cultivation, and resource acquisition, securing pragmatic and moral legitimacy, global academic norms, and mainstream models to gain cognitive and regulative legitimacy. This practice of "strategic coupling" reveals the complex logic of organizational innovation in transitional societies and offers insights for the development of emerging universities both in China and globally.

**Keywords:** New-Model Research Universities; Institutional Theory; Organizational Innovation; Legitimacy; Southern University of Science and Technology; Westlake University

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background and Questions

Since the launch of Projects 211 and 985 in the late twentieth century, Chinese higher education has achieved remarkable growth in both scale and research capacity. However, as reform enters deeper waters, the introduction of the "Double First-Class" initiative signals a strategic shift from catching up to running alongside—and even leading—global peers. Behind this grand narrative lies a set of persistent institutional challenges: pervasive administrative interference, limited academic autonomy, rigid personnel systems, and insufficient innovation vitality [1]. It is within this context that national and societal forces have jointly given rise to a cohort of new-model research universities designed to break through old paradigms and explore new paths.

SUSTech and Westlake University stand as the most prominent representatives of this movement. SUSTech, a public university established with the full backing of the Shenzhen Municipal Government, has championed "de-administration" and "faculty governance" since its founding, carving out a distinctive trajectory within China's public higher education system. Westlake University, by contrast, was initiated by leading scientists and funded through private donations. Positioned as "small and elite, high starting point," it aspires to replicate the models of institutions such as the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study and Rockefeller University, exploring an innovative path for private research universities in China.

The practices of these two universities generate a fundamental tension. On the one hand, as "reformers" and "disruptors," their mission lies in breaking through—dismantling existing institutional constraints and pursuing fundamental organizational innovation. On the other hand, as organizations operating within China's institutional environment, they must secure recognition from multiple stakeholders—government, academia, the public, students, and parents—that is, they must

construct organizational legitimacy [2]. The pursuit of legitimacy, however, often demands conformity with existing institutional norms and social expectations, thereby driving convergence [3].

Accordingly, this paper addresses three core research questions:

1. What key "breaking-through" innovations have SUSTech and Westlake University undertaken in their organizational models?
2. What "converging" pressures do they face under the prevailing institutional environment, and what adaptations and compromises have they made?
3. How do they dynamically construct and sustain organizational legitimacy amid the tension between breaking through and converging, and how do their strategies differ?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to move beyond simplistic judgments of reform "success" or "failure," uncovering the internal logic of institutional innovation and organizational adaptation in a transitional society.

## **1.2 Research Approach and Paper Structure**

This paper employs institutional theory as its core analytical framework and adopts a qualitative, comparative case study approach. Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations, including institutional isomorphism, institutional entrepreneurship, and organizational legitimacy. Section 3 describes the research design and case selection rationale. Section 4 analyzes the "breaking-through" innovations of both universities across multiple institutional dimensions. Section 5 examines the "converging" pressures and adaptive responses. Section 6 synthesizes the interplay between breaking through and converging as a dynamic process of legitimacy construction, comparing the differentiated strategies arising from the two universities' distinct institutional identities. Section 7 concludes with theoretical contributions, practical implications, and directions for future research.

## **2. Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review**

### **2.1 Institutional Theory: From Isomorphism to Institutional Entrepreneurship**

Institutional theory constitutes one of the most influential theoretical traditions in organizational

sociology. Its central tenet holds that organizational behavior and structural forms are shaped not only by market efficiency and technical rationality but also profoundly constrained by the institutional environment in which organizations are embedded—an environment composed of cultural values, social norms, formal rules, and widely shared belief systems.

Early neo-institutionalist scholars, notably Meyer and Rowan [4] and DiMaggio and Powell [5], highlighted the processes through which organizations become structurally similar—a phenomenon termed "institutional isomorphism." DiMaggio and Powell [6] identified three primary mechanisms. Coercive isomorphism arises from formal and informal political pressures and legitimacy demands. In higher education, government regulations, quality assurance standards, and funding requirements compel universities to comply with established institutional norms. Mimetic isomorphism emerges in response to environmental uncertainty; when organizational goals are ambiguous or external conditions complex, organizations tend to model themselves after counterparts perceived as successful or legitimate. New universities frequently imitate the governance structures and operational models of elite institutions such as Harvard, MIT, and Stanford [7]. Normative isomorphism is associated with professionalization; academic communities, through education, credentialing, and professional networks, propagate behavioral standards and professional norms. Internationally recruited faculty members often import familiar academic norms—such as the tenure-track system and peer review—into their new institutional settings [8].

However, if institutional theory focuses solely on isomorphism, it cannot explain institutional change and organizational innovation. To address this limitation, DiMaggio [9] introduced the concept of "institutional entrepreneurship," emphasizing that resourceful and strategically capable actors—"institutional entrepreneurs"—are not passive recipients of institutions but can actively challenge, transform, and even create new institutional arrangements. In the context of Chinese higher education reform, the founders of SUSTech and Westlake University are quintessential institutional entrepreneurs who mobilized resources, shaped

reform discourses, and constructed new organizational paradigms to transcend existing institutional limitations. This paper's analytical framework thus rests upon the dialectical relationship between institutional isomorphism and institutional entrepreneurship, where "breaking through" represents proactive institutional innovation and "converging" reflects adaptive institutional conformity.

## **2.2 Organizational Legitimacy: The Foundation of Survival and Development**

Legitimacy, a foundational concept in organizational sociology, is defined by Suchman [10] as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions." For higher education institutions—especially newly established universities operating at the institutional periphery—legitimacy is a prerequisite for obtaining policy support, attracting quality faculty, enrolling outstanding students, and winning social recognition.

Suchman [11] distinguished three types of legitimacy, each providing analytical leverage for understanding how new-model universities navigate their legitimation paths. Pragmatic legitimacy rests on stakeholders' utilitarian calculations of whether an organization delivers tangible benefits—whether the university provides innovation-driven value for the government, high-quality education and employment prospects for students, and excellent research environments for faculty. Moral legitimacy derives from normative evaluations of whether an organization is "doing the right thing." New-model universities cultivate moral legitimacy by framing their reforms as aligned with national strategy, social development, and the pursuit of academic truth. Cognitive legitimacy is grounded in the extent to which an organization is perceived as comprehensible and taken for granted. When a university's institutional form and operational practices fit existing cognitive schemas of what "a good university should look like," it attains this type of legitimacy—and imitating world-class university models is an efficient means of doing so. [12]

For new-model research universities, legitimacy acquisition is not a linear process but a dynamic equilibrium between breaking through and

converging. Innovation and institutional entrepreneurship build pragmatic and moral legitimacy, while structural conformity and normative compliance secure cognitive and regulative legitimacy. These dual demands are intertwined, creating both tension and synergy at the heart of the legitimation process.

Integrating the insights of institutional theory and organizational legitimacy theory yields a dual analytical perspective. The tension between institutional isomorphism and institutional entrepreneurship serves as the structural axis, while the multiple dimensions of pragmatic, moral, cognitive, and regulative legitimacy provide the evaluative criteria. Together, they form a comprehensive framework for examining how new-model universities navigate reform and construct legitimacy—a framework that guides the empirical analysis that follows.

## **3. Research Design and Case Selection**

This study employs a qualitative, multiple-case comparative design, an approach particularly suited for exploring complex social phenomena and explaining "how" and "why" questions [13]. By systematically comparing SUSTech and Westlake University, the research aims to reveal both commonalities and differences in organizational innovation and legitimacy construction under different institutional conditions (public versus private).

The two cases were selected for their high representativeness and comparability. SUSTech and Westlake University are the most widely discussed new-model research universities in China today. The former represents a government-led, within-system reform pathway, while the latter embodies a society-driven, outside-system exploration. Both share the goal of building world-class research universities, both have pursued bold institutional innovations, and both confront the challenge of securing legitimacy within the existing educational and policy environment. This similarity provides a solid foundation for comparison, while their significant differences in funding sources, governance structures, founding bodies, and developmental stages offer rich material for examining how different institutional factors shape reform strategies. Table 1 provides a concise comparative profile of the two universities. SUSTech relies primarily on government fiscal support, with its governance framework deeply embedded in the national

education system; Westlake University draws upon private donations and social capital, affording greater flexibility and autonomy.

**Table 1. Comparative Profile of New-Model Research Universities: SUSTech and Westlake University**

Dimension	Southern University of Science and Technology (SUSTech)	Westlake University
<b>Institutional Identity</b>	Public university (established and funded by Shenzhen Municipal Government)	Private university (initiated by society, supported by private donations)
<b>Founding Body</b>	Shenzhen Municipal Government	Leading scientists (Shi Yigong, etc.) and entrepreneurs
<b>Primary Funding Model</b>	Government fiscal allocation, competitive grants	Private donations, endowment fund, government support
<b>Core Governance Innovation</b>	Council system, "de-administration," faculty governance (within the public system)	Board of Trustees, presidential responsibility (international standard model)
<b>Personnel System Innovation</b>	Full implementation of the tenure-track system, global recruitment	Full implementation of the tenure-track system, global recruitment
<b>Talent Cultivation Focus</b>	Undergraduate-centric, "general + specialized" education, residential college system	Initially PhD-centric, "small and elite" research focus, now expanding to undergraduate education
<b>Primary Legitimacy Source</b>	Regulative & Pragmatic: Strong government endorsement and financial support	Moral & Pragmatic: Founders' academic prestige and donors' financial credibility

Data were gathered from multiple publicly available secondary sources, including official websites, annual reports, university charters, policy documents issued by the Ministry of Education and local governments, in-depth reports from major media outlets (e.g., Xinhua, People's Daily, Guangming Daily, Caixin), and public speeches and interviews by founders and university leaders. These were supplemented by relevant academic publications. Cross-source triangulation and thematic analysis were employed to enhance the reliability and validity of findings [14].

#### **4. Breaking Through: Organizational Model Innovation**

As quintessential institutional entrepreneurs, the founders of SUSTech and Westlake University sought from the outset to dismantle traditional constraints and achieve deep organizational innovation across multiple institutional dimensions.

##### **4.1 Governance Structure Innovation: De-administration and Faculty Governance**

Traditional public universities in China generally adopt an internal governance model with centralized administrative management, resulting in relatively limited academic autonomy.

Both SUSTech and Westlake University have

targeted governance reform as their primary point of institutional breakthrough [15]. Both SUSTech and Westlake University have targeted governance reform as their primary point of institutional breakthrough.

SUSTech's founding president, Academician Zhu Qingshi, proposed a vision of "de-administration," with the core aim of building a modern university governance system. The university pioneered a Council system as its highest decision-making body, comprising government representatives, university officials, and distinguished community members, designed to achieve the separation of government administration from university management. Internally, SUSTech emphasized faculty governance, establishing an Academic Committee and a Teaching Committee with substantive decision-making authority over academic affairs, faculty appointments, and disciplinary development. Although early reforms encountered institutional friction and practical resistance, the governance framework of "Council decision-making, presidential responsibility, faculty governance, and academic freedom" posed a significant institutional challenge to the prevailing model of Chinese public universities [16].

Westlake University, as a private institution, enjoys greater governance autonomy under law. It adopted the internationally prevalent model of

a Board of Trustees leading a presidential responsibility system. The inaugural board—composed of founding donors, distinguished scholars, and social leaders—bears ultimate responsibility for strategic planning, budget approval, and presidential appointment, ensuring the university's corporate independence and strategic autonomy. Internally, Westlake University likewise prioritizes academic self-governance, with the president and the Academic Committee jointly overseeing academic affairs. The clear delineation of authority effectively insulates academic decision-making from administrative interference, creating institutional conditions conducive to high-level research.

#### **4.2 Personnel System Innovation: Tenure-Track and Global Recruitment**

In the traditional Chinese university personnel system, the "iron rice bowl" meant that once a faculty member obtained establishment status, there was little competitive pressure, leading to stagnant talent mobility and diminished incentives for academic innovation [17]. Both universities implemented a fundamental reform by fully adopting the North American tenure-track system.

Under this system, newly hired assistant professors are given approximately six years on a pre-tenure track, during which the university provides generous start-up funding and favorable working conditions. At the end of this probationary period, candidates must pass rigorous international peer review to obtain tenured positions; those who do not pass must leave. This mechanism embeds competition and incentive structures into the faculty career trajectory, maintaining openness and high standards. Complementing the tenure-track system is a globalized recruitment standard—both universities recruit worldwide, with no restrictions on nationality, seeking doctoral and postdoctoral researchers as well as established scholars from top international institutions. The recruitment process is led by academic committees and emphasizes scholarly potential and independent research capability rather than seniority or personal networks. As a result, both universities have assembled highly internationalized faculty bodies, with significantly higher proportions of members holding overseas academic experience compared to peer institutions in China.

#### **4.3 Talent Cultivation Innovation: Liberal Arts Education and Research-Teaching Integration**

In response to the over-specialization, insufficient interdisciplinary integration, and inadequate cultivation of innovative capacity that characterize traditional Chinese higher education, both universities implemented differentiated reforms in their educational models [18].

SUSTech introduced a "general education plus specialized education" model at the undergraduate level. Freshmen enter without a declared major, spending the first two years in foundational coursework in mathematics, science, and the liberal arts, before choosing a major based on interest and aptitude. The university also implemented a residential college system—modeled on those at Oxford, Cambridge, and Yale—fostering a holistic educational environment through mixed-discipline housing, mentorship, and community activities. Undergraduate students are strongly encouraged to participate in faculty-led research projects early in their academic careers, gaining direct exposure to frontier research.

Westlake University chose to begin with doctoral education, initially focusing on cultivating a small cohort of high-potential doctoral students. Each student is assigned a mentoring team composed of internationally leading scholars, with access to interdisciplinary research platforms and abundant resources, creating a "small and elite, intensely research-oriented" training environment. Since 2022, Westlake University has also enrolled undergraduates, extending its model of small-class instruction, liberal education, and integrated bachelor-to-doctoral pathways.

#### **4.4 Resource Acquisition Innovation: Government Support and Social Fundraising**

The two universities have developed markedly different yet equally innovative models of resource mobilization.

As a flagship project of the Shenzhen Municipal Government, SUSTech has received substantial and sustained fiscal support. Government investment in infrastructure, equipment, and competitive faculty salaries enabled the university to launch from a high starting point. The government also granted SUSTech

relatively broad financial autonomy, facilitating diversified fundraising through competitive research grants, university-industry partnerships, and private donations. This institutional advantage—what might be termed "concentrating resources on major projects"—has endowed SUSTech with robust resource security within the public university system.

Westlake University pioneered a model supported by social capital and operated through a modern university endowment. From its founding, the university attracted over one hundred prominent entrepreneurs—including Pony Ma, Wang Jianlin, and Wu Yajun—as donors, providing substantial seed funding and a stable foundation for long-term development. The professionalized management of its foundation not only reduces dependence on government funding but also enhances academic independence through autonomous financial operations. This resource model, led by societal forces, is regarded as a significant institutional innovation in exploring sustainable development pathways for private higher education in China.

## **5. Converging: Adaptation and Compromise Under Institutional Pressures**

Despite entering China's higher education landscape as institutional disruptors, neither SUSTech nor Westlake University operates in an institutional vacuum. As new-model research universities functioning within a highly regulated environment, they must continually interact with the macro-institutional context, adapting their organizational forms, governance arrangements, and behavioral patterns to varying degrees.

### **5.1 Coercive Convergence: The Regulative Power of National Policy**

China's higher education system is characterized by a high degree of political and administrative centralization; the state is both the policymaker and the ultimate arbiter of institutional legitimacy and resource allocation. This political-institutional landscape dictates that all higher education institutions—whether public or private—must operate within the state-established institutional framework.

First, in terms of institutional accreditation and degree authorization, legitimacy depends critically on state approval. During its early years, SUSTech envisioned a model of

"autonomous enrollment and self-conferred degrees" that would bypass direct Ministry of Education oversight. In 2011, the university experimentally admitted forty-five students who had not taken the national college entrance examination (gaokao). This initiative sparked widespread controversy, and the students were ultimately required to take the gaokao retroactively. SUSTech subsequently obtained formal approval from the Ministry of Education, transitioning from preparatory to full institutional status. This episode demonstrated that state-recognized degree credentials constitute the baseline of institutional legitimacy in Chinese higher education [18]. Westlake University adopted a more cautious approach, following the Ministry of Education's approval procedures from the outset and successfully obtaining doctoral degree-granting authority.

Second, all higher education institutions must comply with national higher education laws and regulatory requirements, including establishing standardized internal governance structures in line with legal provisions.

Although both universities introduced boards or councils as governance innovations, the establishment and operation of committees remain compulsory institutional requirements. How to maintain academic autonomy within the framework of political embeddedness has become a key issue in new-model university governance.

Third, the gaokao system remains a cornerstone of China's higher education admissions framework. SUSTech ultimately adopted the "6-3-1" comprehensive evaluation admissions model (60% gaokao score, 30% university assessment, 10% high school academic performance), which incorporates a degree of institutional autonomy while remaining fundamentally anchored in the national examination system. Westlake University, upon commencing undergraduate enrollment, likewise strictly adhered to national admissions procedures, ensuring access to quality students and maintaining the social credibility of its credentials.

### **5.2 Mimetic Convergence: Benchmarking Against World-Class University Models**

Faced with high uncertainty and institutional voids during their founding periods, both universities extensively adopted models proven successful in global higher education practice to

rapidly accumulate reputational capital and reduce the risks associated with institutional experimentation.

In organizational structure, both universities drew heavily from the architecture of leading American research universities—adopting school and department configurations, PI-based laboratory systems, and professional administrative support structures. Such structural convergence facilitates integration with international research networks, reduces barriers to scholarly collaboration, and enables internationally recruited faculty to work within a familiar organizational context.

In campus culture and symbolic systems, SUSTech's residential college system is clearly inspired by the traditions of Oxford, Cambridge, and Yale, while Westlake University's "small and elite" philosophy echoes the models of Caltech and Rockefeller University. Such symbolic imitation helps emerging universities rapidly project an image of an "elite academic community," exerting a powerful attraction on high-quality faculty and students.

### **5.3 Normative Convergence: Embedding Within the Global Academic Community**

As highly internationalized academic organizations, research universities must adhere to the professional norms and value systems of the global academic community. These standards are not merely prerequisites for maintaining scholarly reputation and research collaboration; they also substantially shape the institutional logic of both universities.

In academic evaluation, both SUSTech and Westlake University employ internationally standard metrics, prioritizing the quantity and quality of publications in top-tier journals such as *Nature*, *Science*, and *Cell*. While the "publish or perish" culture is debated worldwide, for newly established universities, this metric system provides a readily recognizable benchmark of academic performance for international peers.

In professional ethics and behavioral norms, both universities strictly observe international standards of research ethics, academic integrity, and doctoral supervision. Furthermore, the expectations of the global talent market exert normative pressure: internationally recruited professors expect levels of academic freedom and resource support comparable to those at leading global institutions, while outstanding

students and their families expect high-quality education and internationally competitive credentials. These expectations continually push both universities toward convergence with internationally prevailing university models.

## **6. Interplay and Coupling: The Dynamic Process of Legitimacy Construction**

The developmental trajectory of new-model research universities is neither purely breaking through nor converging, but rather a continuous process of interaction, negotiation, and strategic integration between the two forces. This process can be characterized as "strategic coupling"—maintaining the core of reform while selectively adapting to the external institutional environment in order to systematically construct multi-dimensional organizational legitimacy.

### **6.1 The Dialectical Relationship between Breaking through and Converging**

Although breaking through and converging appear superficially contradictory, they are, within the analytical framework of organizational legitimacy, dialectically unified—mutually reinforcing and mutually constitutive.

On the one hand, institutional breaking through is the primary pathway for constructing pragmatic and moral legitimacy. Deep innovations in governance, personnel systems, and educational models enable SUSTech and Westlake University to demonstrate comparative advantages in research output, talent cultivation quality, and organizational vitality, directly responding to functional demands from government, society, and academia. Simultaneously, these reform practices are imbued with symbolic significance as "pioneering explorations for national higher education reform," accumulating substantial moral legitimacy capital. Without the organizational distinctiveness and developmental excellence generated by breaking through, the rationale for these new-model universities' existence would be substantially weakened.

On the other hand, institutional converging is a necessary precondition for securing regulative and cognitive legitimacy. Compliance with national higher education policies, alignment with world-class university standards, and adherence to international academic norms provide the conditions for recognition by the academic community and the broader society.

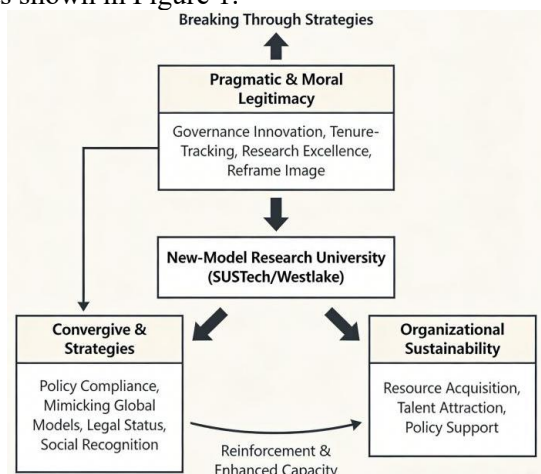
Regulative compliance establishes their legal standing and institutional security; international organizational forms and academic practices align with the public's and academia's cognitive schemas of what a "high-level university" should look like, thereby constructing cognitive legitimacy. Without the institutional embeddedness afforded by converging, reform efforts risk becoming isolated utopian experiments detached from institutional reality, unable to achieve sustainable development within the existing higher education system. Table 2 illustrates this dialectical process by mapping the strategies of breaking through and converging against the different types of organizational legitimacy they help construct.

**Table 2. The Strategic Coupling of Breaking Through and Converging for Legitimacy Construction**

Strategy	Pragmatic Legitimacy	Moral Legitimacy	Cognitive Legitimacy	Regulative Legitimacy
Breaking Through	High Gain	High Gain	Low Gain High Risk	High Risk:
Converging	Moderate Gain	Low Gain	High Gain.	High Gain / Essential

### 6.2 Strategic Coupling: Navigating Between Compliance and Innovation

Rather than falling into a binary opposition of breaking through versus converging, both universities have developed sophisticated strategies for dynamically calibrating between these two institutional logics. This dynamic process of "strategic coupling" can be visualized as a cyclical model of legitimacy construction, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. The Dynamic Model of Legitimacy Construction for New-Model Research Universities**

The first is a decoupling strategy—the separation of form and substance. Decoupling is

a core mechanism identified in neo-institutional theory for managing conflicts between multiple institutional logics and balancing compliance with operational autonomy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Bromley & Powell, 2012). Under this strategy, both universities achieve formal compliance with macro-institutional requirements at the symbolic level—fulfilling statutory requirements such as organization establishment and satisfying regulatory mandates—thereby securing regulative legitimacy. At the substantive operational level, however, they establish councils, boards, and academic committees as the de facto core decision-making bodies, realizing the breakthrough logic of faculty governance. The core value of this strategy lies in preserving the substance of institutional innovation while maintaining outward compliance, thereby minimizing the constraining effects of formal institutions on internal reform practices.

The second is an innovative compliance strategy—innovation within the institutional framework. Unlike decoupling's separation of form and substance, innovative compliance emphasizes the creative utilization of institutional rules to simultaneously achieve compliance and innovation, coupling convergence and breakthrough synergistically. SUSTech's pioneering "6-3-1" comprehensive evaluation admissions model exemplifies this approach: operating within the national gaokao framework and the policy boundaries of comprehensive evaluation reform, the university maximized the weight of its own assessment component through sophisticated institutional design, constructing a differentiated selection mechanism suited to identifying top innovative talent. This practice achieved regulatory compliance while substantively expanding university admissions autonomy—a bidirectional unity of institutional constraint and institutional innovation.

### 6.3 Path Divergence between the Public and Private Models

Despite exhibiting a high degree of strategic commonality in balancing breaking through and converging, the institutional identity difference between a public and a private university shapes distinctive emphases and pathways in legitimacy construction.

SUSTech, as a within-system public university, derives its initial legitimacy primarily from the

strong endorsement and generous fiscal support of the Shenzhen Municipal Government—a top-down, regulative and pragmatic legitimacy. The university adopted relatively radical institutional breakthroughs early on, but after encountering resistance from policy inertia and administrative path dependencies, gradually shifted toward pragmatic, incremental reform. Its central challenge lies in how to sustain and deepen the reform core of "de-administration" and "faculty governance" within a strongly institutionalized administrative system.

Westlake University, as an outside-system private institution, derives its initial legitimacy from the academic prestige of its founding scientists and the financial credibility of its donors—a legitimacy base grounded in moral appeal and market trust. Its private identity affords greater freedom for institutional innovation, enabling more thoroughgoing breakthroughs in governance, recruitment, and educational philosophy. However, it also faces uncertainties in funding, social trust, and policy support, necessitating continuous demonstration of its value through research excellence and public-benefit orientation. In a higher education landscape dominated by public institutions, Westlake University must forge an institutionalized and potentially replicable path for private research universities, solidifying its legitimacy foundation over the long term.

Overall, both SUSTech and Westlake University have achieved flexible strategic coupling between institutional breaking through and converging. Through the precise calibration of form and substance, they have found equilibrium between the regulative demands of the external institutional environment and the imperatives of internal reform. This process not only reinforces their legitimacy across pragmatic, regulative, cognitive, and moral dimensions, but also reveals feasible pathways for emerging research universities to achieve sustainable development in highly institutionalized environments.

## **7. Conclusion and Outlook**

### **7.1 Research Conclusions**

Through a comparative analysis of SUSTech and Westlake University, this study reveals the survival and development logic of China's new-model research universities within a highly institutionalized environment. The findings demonstrate that these universities' achievements

do not stem from unidirectional disruptive innovation, but emerge from continuous institutional negotiation between the ambition to break through and the reality of convergence. Their organizational practices encompass both transformative departures from existing institutions and flexible adaptations to environmental norms, forming a mutually reinforcing, dynamically balanced operational model.

Breaking through embodies reform initiative and value leadership; through fundamental adjustments in governance structures, personnel systems, and educational mechanisms, these universities pursue excellence and efficiency. Converging reflects organizational adaptability within the institutional environment; by complying with regulations, emulating successful paradigms, and embedding within academic communities, they acquire resources and recognition. Throughout the developmental process, these two forces are intertwined rather than opposed, jointly constituting the essential conditions for ongoing organizational functioning and legitimacy consolidation.

Legitimacy construction is the thread running through the entire process. New-model research universities must leverage the outcomes of breaking through to establish pragmatic legitimacy and employ reform narratives to cultivate moral legitimacy; simultaneously, they must rely on converging strategies to ensure regulative legitimacy and use symbolic conformity to enhance cognitive legitimacy. These four types of legitimacy form an interconnected, mutually indispensable whole.

### **7.2 Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications**

Theoretically, this study integrates "institutional entrepreneurship" and "institutional isomorphism" within a unified analytical framework, revealing their dialectical relationship in organizational practice. The findings demonstrate that institutional entrepreneurs do not always engage in zero-sum confrontation with existing institutions; rather, they seek equilibrium between institutional embeddedness and breakthrough through mechanisms such as "strategic coupling." This perspective enriches understanding of the micro-mechanisms of institutional change in transitional economies and provides new theoretical tools for higher education reform

studies.

Practically, this study underscores the need for higher education reform to maintain productive tension between the progressiveness of breaking through and the prudence of converging. Radical reform entirely detached from the institutional context is unlikely to sustain support, whereas pragmatic innovation within institutional constraints holds greater vitality and replicability. The coexistence of SUSTech and Westlake University demonstrates the complementary value and potential synergy of public and private pathways, suggesting that diversified institutional arrangements can inject competition and dynamism into the higher education system. Moreover, legitimacy is not a one-time construction but an ongoing process requiring continuous maintenance and adjustment. Emerging universities must continually demonstrate their value, respond to societal concerns, and adjust their strategic positioning as the environment evolves.

### **7.3 Limitations and Future Directions**

This study relies primarily on publicly available secondary sources and lacks fieldwork and in-depth interviews, limiting its capacity to reveal internal operational mechanisms and the authentic motivations of key actors. Additionally, both SUSTech and Westlake University remain in relatively early stages of development; their long-term impact and institutionalization trajectories require extended observation. Future research could advance in three directions: first, longitudinal tracking to observe how both universities' strategies of breaking through and converging evolve across different developmental stages; second, qualitative interviews and participant observation to explore the behavioral logic of administrators, faculty, and students as multiple actors in institutional negotiation; and third, expanding the comparative scope to include other new-model research universities—such as ShanghaiTech University and Eastern Institute of Technology—to enhance the generalizability and theoretical explanatory power of the findings.

In sum, the explorations of SUSTech and Westlake University provide not only valuable cases for Chinese higher education reform but also demonstrate the multiple possibilities for innovation and change within a highly unified institutional system. Their experiences suggest

that as long as a strategic balance between breaking through and converging can be achieved and multi-dimensional legitimacy continuously constructed, new-model universities can chart a sustainable developmental path even within competitive and heavily constrained environments.

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