INTRODUCTION

University governance reform has become a focus of higher education reform in the Chinese Mainland. Recent policies have emphasized academic self-governance over issues related to scholarship, and the development of a modern university system. Compared to eastern China, western China is less developed in terms of the number of universities and their quality. However, the Chinese government has recently prioritized developing several universities in western China, and has provided the financial aid to develop several schools into world class universities. As part of the reform, various policies were promulgated to enhance professor participation in decision making. These have resulted in a new set of opportunities for academics, particularly for those professors who can attend various committees and have their voices heard.

This research is guided by three major questions:

1. How have the new professor committees affected teacher participation in the process of decision making?
2. How have academics perceived the consultative process?
3. How has decision-making authority been exercised within the university, the faculties and at the department level?

These questions focus on the major changes that have resulted from China’s new policies designed to modernize the higher education system. Using qualitative methods, and with reference to the questions listed above, we conducted in-depth qualitative research at a sample university by purposive sampling. The sample university is a top university in western China. It was one of the first batch of the ‘Project 985 and ‘Project 211’. Under these projects, the government gave special attention and additional resources to this university, with the aim of developing it into a world class university in western China. 23 academics in four separate departments (Management, Information Technology, Education, and Physics) were interviewed. Each department’s level of resources depends on their marketability and ability to generate extra income. In-depth interviews with selected academics illuminate varying opinions among departments with different resources.
This paper consists of six parts. Following the introduction, the current debate on university governance is reviewed. The third section is a summary of the major governance reforms in Chinese higher education. Fourth, the research method is discussed. Next is a discussion of the research findings, answering the three questions posed above. Finally, the conclusion offers a summary of the major findings of the research.

**Major Issues of Shared Governance in Higher Education**

Governance is a process devised to achieve particular outcomes (Tierney, 2005). University governance refers to the process of policy making and decision making within higher education. It is a multi-level phenomenon including various bodies and processes with different decision-making functions. Certain entities tend to have authority over specific kinds of decisions (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). Governance includes the formal and informal arrangements of power and authority that enable decisions to be carried out (Rosovsky, 1990). Shared governance refers to the structures and processes through which academics, administrators, and other campus constituents make collective institutional decisions (Association of Governing Board, 1996; IMHE/OECD, 1999). Shared governance is characterized by participation in decision making, consensus building, a community of peers, and a high degree of personal interaction (Berdahl, 1991; Goodman, 1962; Millet, 1962). Trow (1998) describes the purpose of shared governance through two main principles: maximizing the university’s autonomy, and allowing for the pursuit of excellence. Shared governance helps ensure that the university remains free from political restriction, enabling academics to have full freedom to produce knowledge and pursue excellence (Trow, 1998).

In the 1960s and 70s, some scholars used a structural approach to suggest that the key to understanding governance was to examine organizational structures, such as lines of authority, roles, procedures, and bodies responsible for decision making (Kerr, 1963; Gross & Grambasch, 1974). Some studies looked at how political processes operated, such as Cohan and March’s work (1974) examining the human dynamics of governance. In Riley and Baldridge’s (1977) political model, people throughout the organization are central to the process. However, some scholars have argued that policy emerges from interest groups, conflict, and values, and that they are embedded in people, not structures. A cultural approach acknowledges the deeply human dimension of governance. Lee (1991) conducted a case study from a cultural perspective, examining how the history of governance, faculty attitudes toward the committee, quality of faculty choosing to participate, and leadership continuity all affect the governance process. These studies found that shared governance does not only come from the formal distribution of duties and authority (Trow, 1990). They argued that more concern should be placed on how different academic committees are involved in formal and informal decision-making.