

Transforming University Sports Associations into Learning Organizations: A Case Study of Harbin Normal University

Xianwei Lin^{1*} and Anchalee Chayanuvat¹

¹ Rangsit University, Thailand

* Corresponding author. E-mail: lijiatanthai@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study investigated how a Chinese university sports association can be transformed into a learning organization by focusing on three key dimensions: learning culture, optimized structure, and supportive environment. A mixed-methods design was employed at Harbin Normal University, involving a questionnaire survey of 134 student association members and in-depth interviews with 11 faculty advisors. Quantitative results from multiple regression analysis indicated that all three dimensions significantly predicted the perceived effectiveness of the sports association as a learning organization ($R^2 = 0.45$, $F = 35.08$, $p < .001$). Among these factors, a supportive environment emerged as the strongest predictor of successful organizational learning ($\beta = 0.33$), followed by a strong learning culture ($\beta = 0.30$) and an optimized structure ($\beta = 0.26$). Qualitative findings revealed that the sports association provided valuable opportunities for students' leadership development, teamwork, and emotional well-being; however, it faced challenges such as limited resources, unclear organizational structures, and weak institutional backing. Based on these insights, the study proposes an integrated strategy that combines experiential learning initiatives, participatory leadership structures, and strengthened policy support. This strategy aims to guide the transformation of university sports associations into sustainable, student-centered learning environments in higher education. The findings underscore the critical role of institutional support and organizational adaptation in enhancing the educational impact of collegiate sports associations.

Keywords: Sports Associations, Learning Organizations, Organizational Learning, Student Development, Organizational Effectiveness

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Introduction

University sports associations have increasingly been recognized as learning environments that contribute to students' holistic development rather than serving merely as extracurricular clubs. Participation in sports has been shown to enhance physical health, reduce stress, and foster social connectedness (Eime et al., 2013). However, many university associations failed to realize this potential due to outdated management structures and limited student engagement (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2020).

The concept of the learning organization offered a theoretical framework for addressing these challenges. Learning organizations emphasize continuous improvement, knowledge sharing, and adaptability (Senge, 1990). When applied in higher education, such principles were found to enhance program effectiveness and student engagement through the cultivation of a learning culture, flexible structures, and supportive environments (Kezar, 2005; Chelladurai & Kerwin, 2018; Vasold et al., 2019). In China, the National Fitness Plan (2021–2025) and the Ministry of Education’s policy initiatives on integrating sports and education encouraged universities to embed physical education into their student competency evaluation systems. These national directives advanced the concept of “sports–education integration” and promoted the broader transformation toward learning-oriented campuses (Meng, et al., 2021). Recent studies further suggested that such reforms had redefined the educational and organizational functions of university sports, strengthening their contribution to student development, institutional learning, and innovation (Li et al., 2023).

Harbin Normal University, a key provincial teacher-training institution in Heilongjiang Province, represented a typical case of policy implementation and reform practice. Confronted with resource constraints and declining participation, the university upgraded its facilities, formalized faculty mentorship, and restructured student associations to enhance their learning and developmental functions. Accordingly, this study investigated how learning culture, organizational structure, and supportive environment interacted to transform a university sports association into a learning organization and proposed evidence-based strategies for improvement.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the Role of University Sports Associations as Learning Organizations through Learning Culture, Optimized Structure, and Supportive Environment
2. To identify the key factors necessary for transforming university sports associations into effective learning organizations.
3. To develop strategic recommendations for enhancing the sports association’s learning culture, optimizing its structure, and strengthening its supportive environment in order to guide its transformation into a learning organization.

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods case study using an exploratory sequential design, integrating quantitative survey results with qualitative interviews to explain and enrich the findings. Focusing on one sports association at Harbin Normal University enabled context-rich analysis, though with limited generalizability.

1. Participants and Sampling

Two groups were involved: student members and faculty advisors/coaches. Questionnaire was distributed to all 150 members, and 134 valid responses were collected (89.3% response rate), covering diverse genders and academic years. For interviews, 15 key informants were purposively selected—11 faculty advisors (with at least one year of experience) and 4 senior student leaders—to capture insights from those most engaged in the club’s development.

2. Data Collection Instruments

The survey included demographics, membership details, and scales measuring Learning Culture, Organizational Structure, Supportive Environment, and overall effectiveness as a learning organization. Items were adapted from literature, reviewed by experts, pilot-tested with 15 students, and showed strong reliability ($\alpha = .81-.93$). Semi-structured interviews explored parallel themes: learning opportunities, structure, support, challenges, and suggested improvements. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes, with consent and transcripts recorded.

3. Procedure and Ethics

Data were collected over one semester. Surveys were distributed online and on paper in the first month, followed by interviews in the next two months. Ethical approval was granted by the Rangsit University Ethics Review Board. Participation was voluntary, with confidentiality ensured and pseudonyms used. Data were securely stored, and summary results were offered to participants.

4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed with SPSS 26. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multiple regression tested the relationships among learning culture, structure, support, and organizational effectiveness (with diagnostics confirming model validity). Qualitative data were thematically coded in NVivo 12 using an inductive approach. Two coders refined a shared codebook, identifying recurring themes of learning, structure, support, and challenges. Finally, results from both strands were triangulated to generate comprehensive findings and recommendations.

The Conceptual Framework

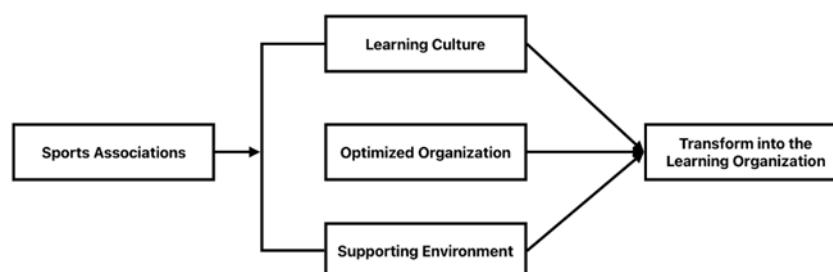


Figure 1 Conceptual of the Study

The conceptual framework draws on Senge's (1990) theory of learning organizations, adapted to student sports associations. It highlights three interrelated dimensions—Learning Culture, Organizational Structure, and Supportive Environment—as drivers of transformation. The three dimensions reinforce one another in practice. A supportive environment nurtures a learning culture by providing structural support such as mentorship, shared resources, and policy encouragement. In return, a strong learning culture and well-structured organization enhance adaptability and drive continuous improvement, enabling sports associations to evolve into learning organizations.

- **Learning Culture:** Shared norms and practices that promote continuous learning, reflection, and knowledge exchange. In sports associations, this may include post-event debriefings, mentoring, and openness to new ideas, all of which motivate members to develop and share skills.

- **Organizational Structure:** The club's hierarchy, roles, and decision-making processes. Flexible and inclusive structures with clear leadership and member participation enhance adaptability and sustain knowledge across leadership transitions (Garvin, 1993).

- **Supportive Environment:** Adequate resources and a climate of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). Reliable facilities, funding, and faculty support encourage members to take initiative and fully engage, providing the foundation for organizational learning.

These three dimensions collectively influence the outcome of interest: the sports association's effectiveness as a learning organization. In other words, the degree to which the club continually improves, shares knowledge, and achieves developmental outcomes for students constitutes its transformation into a learning-oriented organization. Based on this framework, the study formulated four research hypotheses (H1–H4) to be tested:

- H1: There is a significant positive relationship between learning culture and the transformation of university sports associations into learning organizations.

- H2: There is a significant positive relationship between optimized organizational structure and the transformation of university sports associations into learning organizations.

- H3: There is a significant positive relationship between a supportive environment and the transformation of university sports associations into learning organizations.

- H4: Learning culture, organizational structure, and supportive environment together significantly predict the sports association's effectiveness as a learning organization (beyond the contribution of any single factor).

Research Results

The results of this study are presented in line with the first two research objectives, integrating quantitative findings with qualitative insights to provide a comprehensive picture of how the sports association functioned as a learning organization. Overall, the evidence indicates that the club at Harbin Normal University embodied many of the characteristics associated with learning organizations. The three focal dimensions—learning culture, organizational structure, and supportive environment—each played important and complementary roles in shaping its development.

1. The Sports Association as a Learning Organization

The correlation analysis revealed that learning culture, optimized structure, and supportive environment all had significant positive effects on the transformation of university sports associations into learning organizations ($p < 0.01$), though the strength of these effects varied. Among the three, learning culture emerged as the most influential factor ($r = 0.68$). Establishing a culture that fostered knowledge sharing, reflective practices, and collaborative learning substantially enhanced the associations' overall learning capacity, making it a central driver of organizational transformation. Optimized structure showed the second strongest effect ($r = 0.58$), indicating that clear role divisions, a flatter management hierarchy, and transparent decision-making processes improved internal coordination and adaptability, thereby facilitating continuous learning and innovation. The supportive environment also exerted a positive influence ($r = 0.50$), although its impact was comparatively weaker. Nevertheless, access to external resources, institutional support, and emotional encouragement remained essential in sustaining member

engagement and strengthening the overall learning atmosphere. Collectively, these findings suggested that the successful transformation of sports associations into learning organizations relied primarily on cultivating a robust learning culture, complemented by structural optimization and environmental support.

Table 1 Summary of Hypothesis Testing Based on Correlation Analysis

Hypothesis	Variable Relationship	Pearson r	Significance	Conclusion
H1	Learning Culture → Learning Organization Transformation	0.68	$p < 0.01$	Significant, Supported
H2	Optimized Structure → Learning Organization Transformation	0.58	$p < 0.01$	Significant, Supported
H3	Supportive Environment → Learning Organization Transformation	0.50	$p < 0.01$	Significant, Supported

Qualitative analyses confirmed these impressions. Students who perceived a stronger culture of mentoring, reflection, and knowledge sharing rated the club as more effective overall. Peer learning was particularly salient: senior members taught new techniques to juniors, who in turn felt motivated to learn and later pass on their knowledge. This created a cycle of growth consistent with Senge's (1990) emphasis on personal mastery and team learning.

Organizational Structure. A stable structure with clear roles and responsibilities was positively associated with learning outcomes. In years when the club maintained a consistent leadership team and held regular meetings, members benefited from well-planned activities and opportunities to take responsibility. In contrast, when turnover was high and roles were undefined, continuity suffered, and knowledge was lost. This highlighted the structural dimension as a necessary foundation for sustaining learning.

Supportive Environment. The association's psychosocial climate emerged as highly influential. Students valued encouragement from advisors and the psychological safety to share ideas and make mistakes without fear of judgment. This echoes Edmondson's (1999) argument that psychological safety is a prerequisite for team learning. However, resource constraints—such as insufficient funding and limited access to facilities—were recurrent challenges, reducing opportunities for workshops or guest coaching. Thus, the environment was simultaneously enabling and limiting: strong interpersonal support fueled motivation, but inadequate material resources curtailed the scope of activities.

Taken together, these findings establish that the club was indeed functioning as a learning organization. Each dimension contributed uniquely, and their combined influence created an environment where students not only enjoyed sports but also grew personally and professionally.

2. Key Factors Driving Transformation

The second objective sought to identify which factors were most critical in driving the association's transformation. To examine the factors that played a critical role in transforming university sports associations into effective learning organizations, a multiple regression analysis was conducted with learning culture, organizational structure, and supportive environment as independent variables. The

overall regression model was significant ($R^2 = 0.45$, $F = 35.08$, $p < .001$), indicating that these three factors collectively explained 45% of the variance in organizational transformation effectiveness.

Table 2 Regression Analysis of Predictors of Learning Organization Effectiveness

Independent Variable	R^2	F	p	Regression Coefficient (B)	Standardized Coefficient (Beta)	t	Sig.
Learning Culture	0.45	35.08	< .001	0.28	0.30	4.06	<.001
Organizational Structure				0.24	0.26	3.94	<.001
Supportive Environment				0.30	0.33	5.08	<.001

Among the predictors, the supportive environment had the strongest positive effect ($B = 0.30$, $\beta = 0.33$, $t = 5.08$, $p < .001$), suggesting that both resource availability and emotional support were central to facilitating organizational change. The influence of learning culture was also significant ($B = 0.28$, $\beta = 0.30$, $t = 4.06$, $p < .001$), highlighting the importance of cultivating an atmosphere of continuous learning, knowledge sharing, and reflective practices in driving transformation. Additionally, optimized organizational structure exerted a meaningful positive effect ($B = 0.24$, $\beta = 0.26$, $t = 3.94$, $p < .001$), indicating that well-defined roles and institutional mechanisms provided a structural foundation for achieving learning-oriented goals.

In sum, the regression analysis confirmed Hypothesis 4, demonstrating that learning culture, optimized structure, and supportive environment collectively and significantly predicted the effectiveness of transforming university sports associations into learning organizations. These findings provided both theoretical and empirical support for the organizational development of campus-based sports associations.

Qualitative evidence revealed additional enabling factors: leadership and mentorship. Both students and faculty emphasized leadership as the linchpin of transformation. Strong student leaders initiated reflection practices, introduced training workshops, and sought external support, acting as catalysts for cultural and structural improvement. Faculty mentors, by modeling open communication and providing encouragement, reinforced these dynamics. Together, leadership and mentorship sustained the club's momentum and embedded learning in its daily operations.

Institutional Support. University policies and recognition significantly influenced sustainability. For example, the inclusion of sports achievements in student honors demonstrated institutional validation. Participants suggested further steps, such as awarding academic credit or guaranteeing annual budgets, as mechanisms to formalize and secure long-term support. Without such backing, gains risked being temporary.

Knowledge Transfer. A persistent challenge was the loss of organizational memory when leaders graduated. Students and faculty called for systematic handover processes, such as end-of-year reports or structured transition meetings. These practices would institutionalize learning, preventing each cohort from

“reinventing the wheel.” This aligns with Argyris and Schön’s concept of organizational learning, where experiences are captured and used to improve future practices.

In summary, the transformation of the association depended on a constellation of factors. Strong leadership cultivated culture, institutional support provided stability, structure ensured continuity, and reflection reinforced growth. These elements were mutually reinforcing: neglecting one undermined progress, while alignment among them created the conditions for sustainable organizational learning.

3. To develop strategic recommendations

To facilitate the transformation of university sports associations into learning organizations, this study proposed five integrated strategies derived from both quantitative analyses and thematic interviews. These strategies collectively aimed to enhance the learning culture, optimize organizational structures, and strengthen supportive environments.

First, establishing systematic leadership development mechanisms was identified as a central driver of transformation. Most student leaders reported acquiring organizational and management skills primarily through personal experience rather than formal training, which hindered knowledge transfer and continuity of practice. Structured leadership programs—covering communication, conflict resolution, and strategic planning—were recommended, alongside succession planning and leadership handover systems to preserve “organizational memory” and sustain development.

Second, building mentorship and peer support networks was considered essential for strengthening knowledge exchange and community cohesion. A dual-track model was suggested, combining vertical mentoring from faculty or alumni for strategic guidance with horizontal peer-to-peer support to facilitate daily collaboration, learning motivation, and group inclusivity.

Third, optimizing resource allocation and infrastructure support addressed the persistent challenge of limited facilities, equipment, and administrative assistance. The study recommended establishing centralized resource management systems based on club size and developmental potential, complemented by cross-departmental and external resource-sharing models to reduce operational burdens and create space for strategic learning.

Table 3 Strategic Recommendations

Strategy	Focus Area	Key Recommendations
1. Leadership Development	Systematic leadership capacity	Introduce structured training, succession planning, and leadership handovers to strengthen organizational continuity.
2. Mentorship & Peer Support	Knowledge transfer and collaboration	Establish dual-track mentoring: faculty/alumni for strategic guidance and peer mentoring for daily support.
3. Resource Allocation & Infrastructure	Optimizing resources and operations	Centralize resource distribution, enable cross-department sharing, and enhance administrative and coaching support.
4. Academic Recognition Integration	Linking extracurricular and academic outcomes	Embed association experience into academic credits or co-curricular transcripts through reports and reflections.
5. Institutional Communication	Transparency and policy awareness	Create centralized platforms, orientation programs, and policy guides to improve resource accessibility.

Fourth, integrating sports association experiences into academic recognition systems was proposed to bridge the gap between extracurricular engagement and formal academic validation. By incorporating leadership reports, project evaluations, or reflective journals into credit-based or co-curricular transcript systems, universities could acknowledge the developmental value of association work while incentivizing sustained participation.

Finally, strengthening institutional communication and policy transparency emerged as critical to improving students' awareness of available resources and institutional support. Centralized information platforms, orientation programs, and policy manuals tailored to sports associations were recommended to foster trust and enable students to fully leverage institutional opportunities.

Discussions

The findings of this study demonstrate both achievements and ongoing challenges in transforming a university sports association into a learning organization. They are interpreted here in relation to existing theory, contributions to student development, differences in perspectives, and implications for university practice, followed by limitations and future research directions.

Alignment with Learning Organization Theory: The study strongly supports core concepts of learning organization theory. Positive relationships between learning culture, structure, supportive environment, and organizational effectiveness reflect Senge's (1990) principles of shared vision, systems thinking, and team learning. For instance, students emphasized psychological safety, consistent with Edmondson's (1999) findings that such climates encourage risk-taking and open communication. However, results also show that improvement must be systemic: a strong learning culture alone could not overcome limited resources, echoing Garvin's (1993) argument that learning organizations require aligned culture, management, and support. Thus, the association illustrated that multiple elements must progress together for sustainable transformation.

Contribution to Student Development Literature: This case contributes to scholarship on co-curricular learning by providing detailed evidence of how sports associations foster student growth. Prior research (Abruzzo et al., 2016; Eime et al., 2013) highlights benefits of extracurricular involvement; our findings add depth by showing how these outcomes emerge through peer mentoring, leadership experience, and reflective practices. Students gained tangible skills in communication, teamwork, and leadership, directly linking organizational learning to developmental outcomes. The strong effect of supportive environment mirrors Casey et al. (2017), who found that welcoming club climates sustain engagement. By identifying how structural clarity and policy support strengthen learning capacity, this study also extends Lower-Hoppe et al.'s (2020) work on organizational effectiveness in sport clubs. Overall, the research demonstrates that when student organizations intentionally apply learning organization principles, they become powerful educational platforms complementing formal curricula.

Differences in Student and Faculty Perspectives: An important insight is the divergence between student and faculty views. Students highlighted immediate benefits—friendships, confidence, and a sense of community—while faculty advisors stressed long-term issues such as stability, documentation, and funding. This reflects the tendency of stakeholders at different levels to emphasize different priorities. Neither perspective is superior; rather, they are complementary. Students ensure the organization remains

engaging and meaningful, while faculty identify systemic improvements needed for sustainability. Bringing these perspectives together is itself a form of double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön), enabling the club to question assumptions and refine structures. Future development efforts should deliberately involve both groups in co-designing improvements, balancing short-term engagement with long-term sustainability.

Implications for University Policy and Practice: The findings offer clear guidance for university administrators and educators. First, steady resource allocation is critical; irregular or inadequate funding hindered the association's learning potential. Universities should provide a modest but consistent annual budget and prioritize facility access. Second, recognizing co-curricular achievements through academic credit or awards, as suggested by Vasold et al. (2019), would signal the institution's commitment to holistic education. Third, capacity-building for student leaders and faculty advisors is vital. Training in leadership, conflict management, and mentoring would reduce inefficiencies and maximize learning outcomes. Moreover, systematic evaluation of co-curricular learning—via surveys or reflection reports—would allow institutions to identify best practices and strategically support the most impactful clubs.

For practitioners, the study highlights the importance of a mentorship approach. Faculty advisors should not only oversee activities but also cultivate a learning ethos by modeling reflection, facilitating feedback sessions, and supporting leadership transitions. Student leaders, meanwhile, should view themselves as peer educators who design learning opportunities for members. Such practices create a virtuous cycle: skilled leaders foster better experiences, which in turn strengthen member commitment and organizational impact.

From an international perspective, the findings of this study aligned with recent research highlighting university sports associations as vital learning arenas that foster social capital and leadership development (Ari & Taşgin, 2023; Oliveira & Carneiro-da-Cunha, 2024). However, this study further revealed that in China's policy-driven context, the emergence of learning organizations relied more heavily on external institutional and structural support. This distinction offered new insight into how organizational learning unfolds in non-spontaneous environments.

The divergence between student and faculty perceptions reflected a transition from single-loop to double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Faculty members tended to emphasize institutional compliance and goal achievement, whereas students valued emotional engagement and participatory experience. Such differences suggested the need for shared reflection at the value level to deepen collective learning (Lee & Han, 2024).

Overall, this study extended the application of learning organization theory within higher education sports management by illuminating the dynamic interaction among policy, structure, and culture. It contributed to understanding how organizational learning can evolve under resource constraints and policy-driven reform (Khasawneh et al., 2023).

Originality and Body of Knowledge

Beyond the application of research methods, this study also generated new practical insights through the research process itself. Direct engagement with students and faculty revealed that university sports associations functioned as complex social systems in which learning, motivation, and hierarchical relationships were deeply intertwined. The process of data collection uncovered a gap between formal

organizational goals and members' lived experiences, which deepened the researcher's understanding of how learning cultures evolved under institutional and cultural constraints. The qualitative inquiry further revealed that informal communication and emotional investment played a crucial role in sustaining member participation—factors often overlooked in existing theoretical frameworks. These insights enriched the interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative findings and contributed to a more grounded understanding of how learning organizations took shape within the practical realities of Chinese higher education.

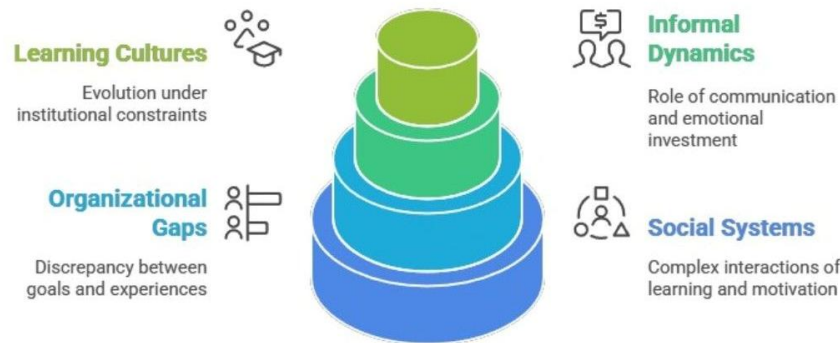


Figure 2 Insights into University Sports Associations

Conclusions

This study examined how a Chinese university sports association could be transformed into a learning organization, using Harbin Normal University as a case. Findings show that three dimensions—learning culture, organizational structure, and supportive environment—each play a significant role. Quantitative results indicated these factors jointly explained a large share of organizational effectiveness, with supportive environment as the strongest predictor. Qualitative insights revealed the club's impact on leadership, teamwork, and personal growth, while also noting challenges such as limited resources and weak continuity.

The evidence underscores the need for a holistic approach. A strong learning culture, sustained by mentorship and reflection, must be paired with clear roles, decision-making processes, and mechanisms for knowledge transfer. A supportive environment, including reliable resources and encouragement, provides the foundation for innovation and initiative. When these elements align, a positive cycle emerges: engaged students, successful activities, and greater institutional support. Early signs of this virtuous cycle were already visible at Harbin Normal University.

More broadly, the case illustrates that meaningful learning often occurs outside the classroom. Applying learning organization principles to student clubs benefits multiple stakeholders: students gain transferable skills, faculty experience professional satisfaction, and universities enhance their mission of holistic education. Strategic recommendations from this study—such as strengthening learning culture and institutional backing—offer a roadmap for other universities to follow.

Transforming student clubs into learning organizations is not instantaneous; it requires sustained vision and collaboration. Yet this case demonstrates that progress is achievable within a short period when students, faculty, and administrators align their efforts. Ultimately, investing in the organizational development of student associations is an investment in students themselves. As these associations

evolve, so do the students—emerging with adaptability, teamwork, and lifelong learning skills essential for success in the 21st century.

Recommendations

1. Policymaking Recommendations

To support the transformation of university sports associations into sustainable learning organizations, this study proposed five key policy directions. First, a structured system of reflection and peer mentoring should be institutionalized to embed continuous learning and improvement in daily practice. Second, organizational governance needs to be strengthened through clear role definitions, succession planning, and shared documentation to ensure continuity and professionalism. Third, stronger institutional and resource support from universities is necessary. Integrating sports associations into official policy frameworks and appointing faculty liaisons could enhance coordination and resource allocation. Fourth, recognition and incentive mechanisms should be developed to link students' learning outcomes with academic credit or co-curricular evaluation, reinforcing the educational value of participation. Finally, a supportive environment is essential to promote holistic growth. Incentives and training for faculty advisors, combined with well-being initiatives for students, encourage mutual development. Together, these strategies provide a coherent framework for cultivating a learning culture, structural stability, and supportive conditions within university sports associations.

2. Recommendations for Future Research

This study was limited by its single-case design, which constrained the generalizability of the findings. Because the data were collected from one university within a specific regional and institutional context, the observed patterns might not fully represent other types of higher education institutions. Future studies should therefore employ multi-case or cross-institutional designs to test whether similar mechanisms operate under different cultural or organizational conditions.

Building on this limitation, Future studies should expand through comparative cases across universities or countries to explore contextual differences. Intervention-based research—for instance, introducing structured reflection sessions or mentorship programs—could provide causal evidence of effectiveness. Extending the framework to other student organizations, such as academic or arts clubs, may reveal whether similar principles apply across co-curricular contexts. Finally, cultural factors deserve greater attention: in China, collective traditions and hierarchical norms shape how students interact with faculty and peers. Investigating these influences could deepen understanding of how organizational learning is enabled or constrained by broader cultural contexts.

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