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Rethinking Business Schools: How Employees Voice and Autonomy Drive Innovation in a Norm-Constrained World

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ABSTRACT

Business schools are increasingly challenged to balance the demands of international accreditations and rankings with the imperative for innovation and differentiation. The standardization of practices driven by these external norms' risks undermining creativity and institutional uniqueness. This study explores how teacher-researchers autonomy and employee voice can serve as strategic levers to navigate this tension and foster academic innovation. Using a hypothetico-deductive approach, two hypotheses are tested: (1) teacher-researchers' autonomy promotes innovation, and (2) their voice positively influences organizational creativity. Based on data collected from 344 teacher-researchers affiliated with Conférence des Grandes Écoles member institutions, multiple regression analysis reveals that both autonomy and voice significantly enhance innovation. Autonomy supports the development of novel solutions and pedagogical approaches, while voice cultivates a participative climate that encourages idea sharing and decision-making involvement. Their combined effect generates a synergistic dynamic that reinforces institutional differentiation. This research contributes to the literature by identifying managerial strategies that transform normative constraints into innovative opportunities and suggests broader applications across professional sectors, paving the way for future inquiry into long-term impacts.

1 | Introduction

In business schools, employee voice and autonomy are crucial for meeting organizational challenges and maintaining innovation. While previous research confirms that autonomy and voice contribute to innovation in general (Deci and Ryan 1985; Morrison 2014), fewer studies explore these dynamics in highly norm-constrained academic environments like those of business schools. This study fills that gap by examining how these constructs function under accreditation-driven pressures, offering an original contribution to both institutional theory and innovation management. These institutions now operate in competitive environments marked by demands for profitability, return on investment (ROI) and global visibility (Wilkins 2020). Encouraging initiative—individual and collective—is vital, even when it diverges from institutional goals (Allozi et al. 2022). Once evaluated primarily on academic quality, business schools now face growing pressure to enhance their brand and reputation (Pucciarelli and Kaplan 2016). This has increased reliance on accreditations and rankings, which are seen as tools for attracting students and financial stakeholders (Lambert 2008; Noorda 2011). Since the 1980s, the rise of academic capitalism has introduced performance-oriented managerial practices (Urbach and Ahlemann 2010). While accreditations aim to ensure quality, they also impose standardized frameworks that can

Summary

- This paper examines how employee autonomy and voice influence academic innovation within French business schools operating under accreditation-driven normative constraints.
- Introduces a conceptual framework grounded in self-determination theory and neo-institutional theory, focusing on how autonomy and employee voice function as strategic levers for innovation in isomorphic environments.
- Applies a hypothetico-deductive methodology using multiple regression analysis based on survey data from 344 teacher-researchers affiliated with Conférence des Grandes Écoles member institutions.
- Identifies key findings: both autonomy and voice significantly enhance innovation; autonomy fosters the development of novel pedagogical solutions, while voice encourages participatory decision-making and creative idea exchange.
- Suggests a possible synergistic interaction between autonomy and voice, indicating that their combined effect may reinforce institutional differentiation and innovation capacity, even under rigid accreditations standards.
- Provides actionable recommendations for academic leaders to build inclusive governance structures, empower teacher-researchers and transform accreditation pressures into opportunities for strategic innovation and organizational distinctiveness.

lead to institutional isomorphism (Cret 2011). Global certifications—such as AACSB, EQUIS, and AMBA—play a key role in shaping strategy and organizational structures (DiMaggio 1995). These mechanisms may restrict creativity and autonomy, yet they can also act as catalysts for localized experimentation and resourceful adaptation. Institutional constraints, when strategically engaged, may foster innovative responses tailored to contextual realities.

In this context, employee voice and autonomy are strategic tools for fostering innovation and differentiation. Voice—the ability to influence decisions—and autonomy—the freedom to act within one's role—help institutions respond to change while resisting excessive standardization (Boudrias et al. 2015; McIntyre 2007). This gives rise to a central research question: How can business schools reconcile voice and autonomy with the constraints of accreditations and rankings to promote innovation?

Accreditations bring legitimacy and global visibility but reduce institutional variability (Cret 2011). They limit differentiation, which is central to competitive advantage (Porter 2008). Enabling employees to express ideas and act autonomously helps institutions innovate despite standardized demands. This study examines how voice and autonomy function under these constraints and identifies strategies for leveraging them to generate innovation. Theoretically, this research explores the balance between institutional autonomy and conformity. On a managerial level, it highlights employee engagement to convert constraints into opportunities. The support and initiative lead that business schools can maintain both consistency and distinctiveness, strengthening their adaptability in fast-changing environments.

The globalization of management education has intensified competition. Accreditations and rankings serve as key signals of quality for students and families (Lejeune and Vas 2009). These tools shape a global market focused on employability and legitimacy (Cret 2011). Granted by private organizations like AACSB, EQUIS, and AMBA, accreditations use defined but sometimes opaque criteria (Kemenade et al. 2011). Similarly, rankings—by the *Financial Times*, *Times Higher Education*, *Shanghai* ranking—strongly influence international visibility (Marginson and Van der Wende 2007). While rankings benchmark quality, they often overlook teaching and practical learning (Pfeffer and Fong 2002; Durand and Dameron 2011). Although accreditations promote research and strategic clarity (Alajoutsijärvi et al. 2018), they can undermine teaching quality and pedagogical diversity (Elliott 2013; Thietart 2009). They may also foster ethical awareness and internationalization (Fellag 2018; Bruna et al. 2019), but rankings often reinforce conformity and limit innovation (Julian and Ofori-Dankwa 2006). Produced by media groups, these rankings use diverse and non-transparent criteria. For example, the *Shanghai* ranking emphasizes research while neglecting pedagogy (Thomas et al. 2014). The *Financial Times* and *Times Higher Education* rankings include salary and diversity metrics but are often criticized for lack of clarity (Kaplan 2014; Wedlin 2007; Dill and Soo 2005).

As institutions adapt their strategies to align with these measures, differentiation suffers (Devinney et al. 2008). The dominance of Anglo-Saxon models and English-language publishing reduces cultural and scholarly diversity (Stensaker and Harvey 2010; Chanlat 2014). In sum, while accreditations and rankings offer visibility and strategic leverage, they may constrain innovation and weaken the balance between research and teaching. To remain relevant, business schools must adopt internal strategies that transcend external constraints and preserve institutional uniqueness.

2 | Literature Review

In an environment where business schools face isomorphic pressures from international rankings and accreditation agencies, innovation has become a strategic imperative. This chapter examines two key concepts: pedagogical innovation, as a response to standardizing pressures, and neo-institutional theory, which explains these isomorphic dynamics.

Innovation, a multidimensional and polysemous term, etymologically refers to "introducing something new into" an existing system (Thomas et al. 2014). Talgorn et al. (2022) distinguished innovation from "novation" (pure creation) and "renovation" (updating existing practices). In education, innovation can take multiple forms—pedagogical (e.g., new teaching methods), curricular (e.g., updated course structures), or organizational (e.g., governance models). This study primarily focuses on pedagogical innovation, defined as the use of novel practices or tools to enhance learning outcomes (Pfeffer and Fong 2002).

Schumpeter (1965) and Fox (2024) emphasized innovation's role in organizational survival amid competition. In business schools, this manifests through technologies (videoconferencing, MOOCs), new methodologies (flipped classrooms, serious games), and updated content (artificial intelligence, business ethics), aiming to boost both educational performance and stakeholders' satisfaction, aligning with international rankings expectations (Elliott 2013). Innovation follows a structured process—context analysis, idea generation, project development, implementation and dissemination (Pfeffer and Fong 2002)—often initiated by pioneers or "ferments" (Tan et al. 2024). Successful innovation also demands strong leadership to overcome organizational resistance and sustain changes. Collective dynamics further influence innovation: individual initiatives thrive within cultures that encourage collaboration, knowledge-sharing and tolerance of failure (Ng and Feldman 2012). Once widespread, pedagogical innovations lose their novelty, underscoring the need for business schools to become learning organizations (Scott 2005) and pointing toward the relevance of neo-institutional theory.

Emerging after World War II, organizational sociology initially examined internal performance factors (Greenwood and Hinings 1996; Scott 2004). In the 1960s, focus shifted to external environments, birthing neo-institutional theory, which incorporated norms, rules, and cognitive structures (Budros 2001; Greenwood et al. 2002). Neo-institutional theory, built around institutional isomorphism, institutional pressure, and legitimacy, provides a lens to understand the influence of accreditations and rankings on business schools. Selznick (1996) described institutionalization as organizations adapting to external pressures to secure legitimacy. Accreditations represent "institutional variables" embedding norms and conventions. Institutions, historically, rationally, and sociologically, stabilize and structure power (Hall and Taylor 1996; Milgrom et al. 1990). In this context, business schools, offering hard-to-measure educational services, seek legitimacy through conforming practices (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Three convergence mechanisms arise from accreditation pressures (Suchman 1995). First, coercive isomorphism: institutions comply with external standards to maintain rankings or avoid sanctions. Second, professionalization: shared practices emerge through collective efficiency efforts, often formalized through accreditation—illustrated by the France Business School merger failure due to non-conformity (Suchman 1995). Third, mimetic isomorphism: to mitigate uncertainty, schools imitate peers perceived as legitimate (Greenwood et al. 2002). Accreditations thus function as certification in a highly competitive, uncertain environment (Cret 2011).

The dynamic fosters a dialectic between differentiation and homogenization. While accreditations initially offer a competitive edge, their widespread adoption leads to standardization, necessitating renewed differentiation through innovation compatible with accreditation requirements (Jamali and Neville 2011). For example, Burgundy Business School's Wine and Spirit Business MBA illustrates how institutions can balance local differentiation with global conformity (Thomas et al. 2014). Accreditations can stimulate context-specific reforms (DiMaggio and Powell 2000).

Neo-institutional theory thus explains the paradoxical coexistence of standardization and differentiation in business schools (Jepperson 1991; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). While accreditation fosters mimicry, standardization opens avenues for localized innovation (Cret 2011). This highlights the strategic complexity facing business schools navigating a constraining yet opportunity-rich institutional environment.

3 | Hypotheses Development

3.1 | Autonomy and Innovation

According to Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, autonomy stems from two types of motivation: intrinsic (driven by interest and enjoyment) and identified (aligned with personally valued goals). Transformational leaders foster autonomy by cultivating trust and setting high expectations, thereby enhancing employees' autonomous motivation (Judge et al. 2003; Gagné and Deci 2005). Research consistently links autonomy to innovation. By allowing employees to plan, execute, and evaluate their tasks, autonomy encourages the exploration of new ideas (Mitchell 1977), reduces organizational constraints, and fosters creativity (Orth and Volmer 2017). It promotes the search for novel solutions (Sandvik et al. 2018), enhances intrinsic motivation, and supports intellectual risk-taking. Autonomy also improves employees perceived ability to work innovatively—shaping strategies, selecting methods, and assessing outcomes (Breaugh 1985; Chung 1977)—thereby strengthening commitment and responsibility (Parker and Sprigg 1999). Excessive or poorly regulated autonomy can hinder team coordination and weaken alignment with organizational goals (Gambardella et al. 2020; Boss et al. 2023). Clear objectives are therefore essential to mitigate these risks (Vera et al. 2016). Moreover, for some individuals, autonomy may generate stress, particularly for those who prefer structured and predictable work environments.

Hypothesis 1. *"Autonomy" has a positive influence on innovation.*

3.2 | Employee Voice and Innovation

Employee voice, initially defined by Hirschman (1970) as the expression of ideas, concerns, or disagreements, has since evolved to include the suggestion of innovative solutions to enhance organizational performance (Wilkinson, Barry, et al. 2020; Wilkinson, Dundon, et al. 2020; Rees et al. 2013; Wang et al. 2015). For Parker and Collins (2010), voice challenges the status quo and addresses organizational issues, while Morrison (2014) and Chou and Barron (2016) describe it as a discretionary behavior aimed at driving improvement. Aryee et al. (2017) emphasize its role in sustaining organizational growth. Several obstacles hinder voice expression, including resistance from peers or leaders, organizational inertia, and limited managerial trust or engagement (Liu et al. 2017). Recent studies (Mori et al. 2022) emphasize the need for conceptual clarity in employee voice research and highlight its role as a dynamic driver of organizational innovation, reinforcing its relevance in highly norm-constrained environments such as business schools. Speaking up can also trigger resistance and backlash, especially when proposed changes are poorly received

(Gilman et al. 2015), and fear of being labeled disruptive remains a major deterrent (Liu and Liao 2013). To encourage voice, Hynes (2012) recommends resources such as discussion platforms, communication training, and involving employees in strategic planning. These actions foster an open culture and help counteract organizational rigidity (Milliken et al. 2015).

Employee voice and autonomy are closely linked in fostering innovation: while autonomy grants the freedom to explore ideas, voice enables their articulation and implementation. These are not fixed traits but contextual and dynamic resources, activated by perceptions of trust, psychological safety, and openness within the organizational climate.

Together, they form a supportive climate for innovation. Yet, without alignment to strategic goals, excessive autonomy or unchecked voice may undermine coherence. Effective leadership, clear direction, and ongoing support are essential to fully leverage these drivers of innovation.

Hypothesis 2. *"Employee voice" has a positive influence on innovation.*

4 | Methodology

This study aims to examine how employee autonomy and voice influence organizational innovation. These two factors are key to unlocking individual creativity and promoting active engagement in addressing organizational challenges. They are treated as core variables for analyzing their influence on innovation outcomes.

4.1 | Variables and Measurements

This research adopts a hypothetico-deductive methodology, which begins with theoretical constructs drawn from the literature and proceeds to empirical testing to assess their validity. The approach follows a logical progression from the general frameworks—specifically theories of employee autonomy and voice—to their application in a specific organizational setting: business schools. As shown in Figure 1, the conceptual framework exhibits the relationship among these constructs in which the central aim is to determine how these two constructs influence innovative behavior among employees.

Autonomy was measured using three items adapted from Breaugh (1985), such as: "I can decide how to accomplish my work tasks." Employee voice was assessed using items based on Morrison (2014), such as: "I feel safe expressing my ideas at work." Innovation was measured through items like: "I propose new methods to improve teaching." Responses were recorded on

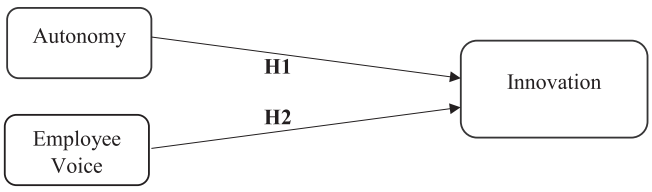

FIGURE 1 | The conceptual framework.

5-point Likert scales. Cronbach's α was 0.81 for autonomy, 0.87 for voice and 0.84 for innovation, indicating good internal consistency. Harman's single-factor test revealed no dominant factor (first factor = 31.4%) suggesting limited common method bias.

The first hypothesis investigates whether the autonomy granted to employees—measured through their freedom to organize tasks, set priorities, and plan their work—encourages the generation and implementation of creative solutions. The second hypothesis explores whether employee voice—understood as the ability to express ideas, raise concerns, and contribute to decision-making in a psychologically safe environment—positively impacts innovation outcomes.

To assess these variables, the study employs clearly defined indicators. Autonomy is operationalized through questions evaluating the degree of control individuals have over their work processes. Voice is measured by the perceived openness of the organization to employee input, the fairness with which feedback is handled, and the level of support for speaking out. Innovation is examined through indicators reflecting proactive behavior, such as the willingness to go beyond formal job requirements, suggest improvements, and align with collective organizational goals.

These indicators allow for both direct and indirect measurement, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which autonomy and voice may drive innovation. This structured approach provides a rigorous framework for linking theoretical assumptions with observable employee behavior in a complex institutional environment.

5 | Data Collection

Data were collected through an online questionnaire designed to assess the impact of autonomy and employee voice on innovation. The survey targeted lecturers at business schools affiliated with the Conférence des Grandes Écoles (CGE), a French network of elite higher education institutions known for their active role in academic innovation and educational leadership. A total of 344 responses were obtained, exceeding the required sample size of 341 (calculated with a 5% margin of error for a population of 3008 teacher-researchers), indicating strong engagement with the topic, especially in contexts of organizational change. This context is particularly relevant given that French business schools affiliated with the CGE operate in highly standardized, accreditation-driven environments, making them ideal for analyzing how autonomy and voice influence innovation under institutional constraints.

The sample is representative of lecturers in CGE-affiliated French business schools, known for their commitment to academic excellence and international competitiveness. Women accounted for 59.27% of respondents—significantly higher than their overall representation in CGE statistics (35%)—and 41.09% were aged 37–47, reflecting a mid-career cohort often central to organizational initiatives. In terms of academic disciplines, management (30.18%), marketing (18.55%) and finance (17.09%) were most represented, consistent with core business school subjects. Regarding institutional affiliations, most respondents came from AACSB-accredited schools (60%), while fewer represented schools holding both AACSB and EQUIS

accreditations—possibly due to a higher concentration of international faculty in these institutions.

6 | Statistical Test

The data are analyzed quantitatively using multiple regression models to examine the relationships between autonomy, employee voice, and innovation. The use of 5-point Likert scales captures variations in respondents' perceptions. This methodology offers several strengths: a rigorous, structured framework for assessing the impact of autonomy and voice on innovation; a relevant sample of teacher-researchers engaged in academic and creative activities; and a diverse set of indicators that incorporate both direct and indirect measures.

7 | Results

The analysis uses a multiple regression model to examine how autonomy and employee voice influence academic innovation. These dimensions, complementing traditional leadership theories, highlight key organizational drivers of creativity and innovation in academic settings. All regression assumptions were checked. Residuals showed approximate normality (Shapiro–Wilk $p > 0.05$); no heteroscedasticity was detected (Breusch–Pagan $p = 0.31$). VIF values were below 2.0, indicating no multicollinearity. Cook's D values were under 1.0 for all observations. $R^2 = 0.362$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.354$, suggesting a moderate model fit.

Employee autonomy—the freedom to make decisions, set priorities and implement personal strategies—is positively and significantly (Table 1) associated with academic innovation (correlation = 0.345). Its strong predictive value is confirmed by a regression coefficient of 0.313 (Table 3), indicating that when teacher-researchers have greater flexibility, they are more likely to explore novel solutions, adopt innovation teaching methods and contribute creatively.

Similarly, employee voice—the ability to express ideas, concerns, or suggestions—is also significantly (Table 1) linked to academic innovation (correlation = 0.298). With a regression coefficient of 0.413 (Table 3), it emerges as a strong predictor of innovation. These findings suggest that institutions fostering open dialogue and incorporating employee feedback enhance collaboration and drive innovation. This effect is further strengthened in participative environments where employees feel respected and supported.

The relatively high average scores (Table 2) for autonomy and employee voice indicate that respondents view these factors positively, underscoring their relevance in the academic context.

The results of Table 3 confirm that autonomy and employee voice are key drivers of academic innovation, with both variables showing significant positive effects on institutions' innovation capacity.

7.1 | Correlation Between Autonomy and Employee Voice

A notable finding (Table 1) is the significant correlation between autonomy and employee voice ($r = 0.320$), indicating that individuals who feel free to make decisions in their work are also more likely to express their ideas, concerns, and suggestions. This interdependence suggests a potential interaction effect. However, the current model does not test the interaction term (Autonomy × Voice). Future research could examine this synergy more rigorously using moderation analysis frameworks. When employees perceive they have both the freedom to act and the psychological safety to speak up, they are more likely to engage in exploratory thinking, challenge established routines, and contribute actively to change processes.

This synergy plays a critical role in fostering academic innovation. By granting staff autonomy in task execution and encouraging open dialogue, institutions cultivate a climate that values initiatives, experimentation, and collaborative problem-solving. These conditions are particularly vital in academic settings, where innovation often emerges from pedagogical reform, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the

TABLE 1 | Correlation matrix.

	Innovation	Autonomy	Employee voice
Autonomy	0.345**	1	
Employee voice	0.298***	0.320***	1

Note: $N = 344$.
***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.

TABLE 2 | Descriptive statistics for employee autonomy and voice.

Variables	Average	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Autonomy	3.147	0.5158	2	5
Employee Voice	3.213	0.1629	2	5

TABLE 3 | Regressive results for employee autonomy and voice.

Variables	Coefficients	Standard error	Statistics t	p	Lower limit (95%)	Upper limit (95%)
Autonomy	0.3133	0.1483	2.11	0.036	0.2894	0.3941
Employee voice	0.4133	0.0447	9.24	0.00016	0.2585	0.4825

continuous adaptation of teaching and research practices. Ultimately, autonomy and employee voice function as strategic levers, reinforcing one another to enhance organizational responsiveness and innovation capacity in the face of evolving educational demands.

The analysis confirms both hypotheses (Table 3), demonstrating the significant role of employee autonomy and voice in fostering innovation. Hypothesis 1 proposed—defined as the degree of freedom employees must organize their work, set priorities, and make decisions—positively influences innovation. This hypothesis is supported, with a statistically significant relationship observed at the 5% level. The data show that employees who perceive higher autonomy are more likely to engage in creative behaviors, experiment with new approaches, and contribute to the development of innovative practices within their institutions.

Similarly, Hypothesis 2 posited a positive relationship between employee voice—the ability to express ideas, concerns, and suggestions—and innovation. This hypothesis is also confirmed, with results indicating a significant and positive correlation at the 5% significance level. Institutions that foster open communication and encourage the expression of employee perspectives are more likely to benefit from enhanced innovation. The findings emphasize the importance of creating a participatory organizational culture in which both autonomy and voice are not only tolerated but actively promoted. Together, these dimensions contribute to a dynamic, responsive, and innovative academic environment.

8 | Discussion

8.1 | Autonomy as a Driver of Innovation

Hypothesis 1 confirms a positive relationship between autonomy and innovation at the 5% significance level. In higher education, autonomy—defined as freedom in research, teaching methods, and curriculum design—enables teacher-researchers to adapt their practices and pursue innovation. Studies show that autonomy is closely linked to innovation behavior, especially when supported by a school's innovation climate. Nordin et al. (2024) and Tan et al. (2024) found that job autonomy and trust in leadership, mediated by distributed leadership, foster idea generation and implementation. Hsieh et al. (2024) similarly link distributed leadership to greater teacher innovativeness.

Autonomy encourages collaboration, both locally and internationally, broadening perspectives and reinforcing innovation. This is further supported by academic cultures that value critical thinking and challenge established norms. Autonomy thus acts as both a structural and cognitive enabler of innovation.

This aligns with Deci and Ryan (2000) self-determination theory: autonomy-supportive environments enhance intrinsic motivation, critical for innovation. Heyden et al. (2012) added that autonomy leads employees to seek improvements in dynamic, knowledge-intensive settings. Urbach and Ahlemann (2010) and Orth and Volmer (2017) showed that autonomy reduces resistance to change, encouraging innovation-oriented behavior. Leadership plays a role too. Transformational leadership—especially intellectual stimulation—enhances perceived autonomy, indirectly boosting innovation (Sandvik et al. 2018; Damanpour 1991; Burpitt and Bigoness 1997).

Autonomy must be managed. Allozi et al. (2022) noted tensions between control and freedom, while Gambardella et al. (2020) warned that excessive autonomy without coordination can lead to inefficiency. In business schools, this tension is heightened by accreditation demands, where autonomy must be carefully structured to support—not stifle—innovation.

8.2 | Employee Voice as Driver of Innovation

Hypothesis 2 also confirmed at the 5% level, shows a strong link between employee voice and innovation. Teacher-researchers who feel empowered to express their ideas are more engaged and motivated, enhancing both individual contribution and institutional development.

Voice enables interdisciplinary collaboration and collective knowledge creation. Institutions that foster open expression create psychological safety, which supports experimentation and risk-taking—key elements of innovation.

Research confirms these dynamics: voice is inherently creative, involving suggestions and challenges to the status quo (Ng and Feldman 2012; Afsar and Umrani 2020). Wallace et al. (2016) argued that idea expression is essential to innovation, and Bellibaş (2023) suggested that extroversion among management science faculty may facilitate voice and creativity.

Barriers persist. In hierarchical or conservative institutions, voice may be ignored, limiting its impact (Detert and Burris 2007; Morrison 2011; Kesting et al. 2015). To harness its benefits, business schools must adopt inclusive leadership and participative management practices that actively support both autonomy and voice—conditions essential for continuous innovation.

9 | Managerial Implications

Business schools can benefit from managerial practices typically used in the corporate world, especially in areas like trust-building, innovation management, and governance structures. Cultivating a culture of trust—through ethical leadership and transparent communication—enhances innovation. This applies to both interpersonal and digital contexts (Mori et al. 2022). Van Nguyen et al. (2025) find that digital trust, shaped by privacy assurance and tech transparency, drives user engagement. Similarly, business schools must foster internal trust and open dialogue to support the adoption of new practices and technologies, especially in accreditation-driven environments where innovation often meets resistance. To foster academic innovation, business school leaders should adopt practices that promote both autonomy and employee voice among teacher-researchers. This includes enabling researchers to manage their projects independently while ensuring coordination (Caputo et al. 2024) and offering platforms—like advisory committees—for idea sharing and implementation. Cultivating a culture of trust that

values risk-taking and open exchange further enhances innovation. Ethical leadership also plays a vital role. Almasarwah et al. (2025) show that ethical leaders curb earnings manipulation by promoting transparency and accountability. These leaders foster integrity and trust, reinforcing a culture that supports sustainable innovation and principled behavior—paralleling the impact of autonomy and voice. From a governance perspective, Azmi et al. (2025) introduce an Extended Goal Programming (EGP) model that reconciles efficiency and equity in portfolio decisions. Their multi-objective approach, tested on major global markets, demonstrates superior performance under volatility. This highlights how innovative frameworks in decision-making can balance competing goals, a lesson equally applicable to business school leadership.

Mohammadi et al. (2025) emphasize the influence of early-stage investors like accelerators, who improve startup success through centrality in innovation networks. This reinforces the importance of strategic positioning, collaboration, and ecosystem support—principles relevant to institutional innovation in academia.

Digital trust is also critical. Van Nguyen et al. (2025) find that privacy concerns and tech anxiety hinder digital platform adoption, while trust—built through transparent communication—drives engagement. Similarly, business schools must foster internal trust and open dialogue to support the adoption of new practices and technologies.

Autonomy and voice extend beyond traditional leadership models yet strongly reinforce transformational leadership in academic contexts (Mori et al. 2022). Granting flexibility in research and teaching, reducing administrative burdens (Mori et al. 2022) and recognizing contributions through rewards or public acknowledgment (Caputo et al. 2024) are all effective strategies.

Involving teacher-researchers in strategic decisions—such as accreditation processes or curriculum design—boosts ownership and innovation. By integrating autonomy, voice, trust, and recognition into their leadership approach, business school leaders can build a resilient, innovation-oriented academic culture.

10 | Conclusion

This study demonstrates the strategic role of employee autonomy and voice in fostering a climate conducive to innovation. By offering individuals greater freedom in their professional roles and recognizing their intellectual contributions, organizations can improve not only their innovation capacity and competitiveness but also employee commitment and job satisfaction. To deepen our understanding of these concepts, future research should extend beyond the academic context and explore their application in a variety of organizational and professional environments.

A multidisciplinary approach would be particularly valuable. Social psychology can shed light on how group dynamics influence idea sharing and the adoption of innovative behavior; cognitive psychology can examine the internal cognitive mechanisms that drive initiative-taking and creative problem-solving; and organizational sociology can investigate how institutional structures and cultural norms shape autonomy and participation at work.

Longitudinal studies are necessary to assess the sustained impact of employee autonomy and voice on innovation outcomes and organizational performance. These studies should also examine how empowering employees over time may lead to an evolution in labor relations, transforming traditional hierarchical models into more participatory and collaborative forms of governance.

Given the cross-sectional nature of the study, causal relationships cannot be established. Findings should be interpreted as associations. Potential common bias, despite mitigation efforts, cannot be entirely ruled out. The sample, although representative of French business schools, may limit generalizability to other sectors or countries.

Expanding the scope of research to other sectors—such as high-tech industries and public administration—would further validate the relevance of these concepts. For example, studying autonomy and voice in R&D-intensive environments could provide insights into how these practices stimulate creativity under conditions of uncertainty and rapid change. Similarly, exploring their impact in public organizations would reveal how employee participation might function in bureaucratic settings where decision-making is often centralized and constrained.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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