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## University Think Tank Construction: Specific Standards, Operational Mechanisms, and Implementation Pathways (Postprint)

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] University think tanks constitute an important organizational form through which higher education institutions serve the government and society; however, research on the construction of such entities remains scarce. [Method/Process] Utilizing methods including literature analysis and comparative analysis, this study examines the existing conditions and challenges in university think tank development, and draws comparative insights from the successful experiences of international university think tanks. [Results/Conclusion] Grounded in the actual circumstances of Chinese universities, this paper proposes specific standards, operational mechanisms, and implementation pathways for advancing the construction of university think tanks in China, thereby contributing to the integration and consolidation of research capacity, optimization of think tank institutions, and enhancement of research quality.

### Full Text

## Research on the Construction of University-Affiliated Think Tanks: Specific Standards, Operational Mechanisms, and Implementation Paths

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] University-affiliated think tanks represent an important organizational form through which universities serve government and

society, yet research on how to construct such think tanks remains scarce. **[Method/Process]** Employing literature analysis and comparative analysis methods, this study examines existing conditions and problems in domestic university think tank construction while analyzing and drawing lessons from successful international experiences. **[Result/Conclusion]** Based on the actual circumstances of Chinese universities, the paper proposes specific standards, operational mechanisms, and implementation pathways for promoting the construction of university-affiliated think tanks in China, which will help consolidate research strengths, optimize institutional structures, and elevate research quality.

**Keywords:** university-affiliated think tank; standard; mechanism; path

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On October 27, 2014, in an important speech at the sixth meeting of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized the need to “focus on building a number of high-end think tanks with significant influence and international impact, while attaching importance to the construction of specialized think tanks.” On May 17, 2016, at the symposium on philosophy and social sciences, General Secretary Xi Jinping again stressed that “think tank construction should focus on improving research quality and promoting content innovation.” University-affiliated think tanks boast numerous institutions, broad research coverage, and abundant research output. However, they lack high-end think tanks with significant social influence and face problems such as uneven overall development, dual deficiencies in funding support, obstructed participation in government decision-making mechanisms, absence of orderly competition in their growth environment, flawed development evaluation models, and substantial gaps in international influence. The importance of university think tanks is self-evident. Under such policy environments and target guidance, how can universities seize the important opportunity of national promotion of think tank development and local selection of key think tanks for cultivation to better serve government decision-making and economic and social development? How can they promote the transformation of existing research institutions into university think tanks with distinctive features, high caliber, and strong influence? Exploring how to learn from the successful experiences and development paths of foreign university think tanks, revealing the advantages and challenges of university think tank construction, and proposing specific standards, innovative mechanisms, and implementation pathways for promoting such construction hold important theoretical value and practical significance for consolidating research strengths, optimizing institutional structures, and elevating research standards.

## 2. Problems in University Think Tank Construction

In terms of the solid foundation required for think tank construction, the process of conducting policy research, the publication and promotion of academic

achievements, and the implementation of planning programs, universities possess unparalleled advantages including continuously optimized disciplinary layouts, remarkable scientific research progress, and steadily improving research capabilities. However, in stark contrast, existing university think tanks have far from fulfilled their proper roles, and their transformation and upgrading face considerable difficulties. The reasons lie in the following problems plaguing current university think tank institutions.

### **2.1 Uneven Quality and Lack of Genuine “Think Tanks”**

With the exception of think tanks built upon distinctive and advantageous disciplines that emphasize both theoretical and applied policy research and have achieved some recognition among peer institutions, the vast majority of university think tanks have “transformed” from research institutions against the backdrop of national think tank promotion efforts. They continue to conduct purely academic research following theoretical logic [1], lacking think tank awareness and capacity. This represents a significant gap from the essential requirements of think tanks. It should be acknowledged that most universities still lack truly high-end think tanks that are widely recognized and accepted by society.

### **2.2 Single Funding Sources and Low Efficiency**

In recent years, university think tanks have leveraged their comparative advantages to achieve new breakthroughs in total project funding. However, think tank funding primarily comes from state and local government appropriations and project funds, with minimal contributions from the think tanks’ own operational income, corporate cooperation funds, or donations from private organizations. Due to university management systems, project management remains within research departments while fund management stays with financial departments. Information asymmetry and inconsistent business cycles between these departments [2] have resulted in the continued phenomenon of “rushed spending,” indicating that funding efficiency needs improvement.

### **2.3 Lack of Dissemination Platforms and Limited Influence**

Most university think tanks lack independent websites, professional journals, and host few well-known domestic and international academic conferences or forums. They also lack direct consultation platforms for reaching government decision-makers [3]. Consequently, think tank outputs cannot be widely disseminated through newspapers, magazines, networks, or forums, preventing timely and effective communication of viewpoints and positions and limiting their ability to influence public opinion and guide government decisions. Their discourse power and voice remain relatively weak. Regardless of whether these research findings influence government decisions or what kind of influence they exert, the degree and effect of such influence await professional evaluation. However, the inability to transform research results into government decisions reflects, to some extent, the limited capacity of these institutions to influence policy-making.

## 2.4 Homogeneous Personnel Structure and Poor Talent Mobility

In university think tanks, researchers are mostly in-house faculty members with similar professional backgrounds and work experience, making it impossible to form a diverse and composite personnel structure. As most researchers are permanent staff with salaries calculated through public finance, universities cannot hire full-time researchers with high salaries or annual compensation packages. Constrained by institutional factors, external personnel cannot effectively join research teams for collaborative work, while internal personnel cannot gain experience in government departments, resulting in poor talent mobility and preventing the formation of a “revolving door” for talent.

## 3. Learning from International University Think Tank Experience

The experiences of some foreign universities in building think tanks offer valuable insights worthy of careful study. This paper conducts comparative analysis of prominent university think tanks in the *2016 Global Go To Think Tank Index* compiled by the University of Pennsylvania’s Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program, including Stanford University’s Hoover Institution [4] and the National University of Singapore’s East Asian Institute.

### 3.1 Mutual Reinforcement Between Strong Research Areas and Advantageous Disciplines with Adherence to Research Characteristics

The research areas selected by these renowned think tanks precisely align with their universities’ advantageous disciplines. The strong combination and mutual reinforcement between think tank research areas and university disciplinary strengths provide think tanks with a “living source” of research, while advantageous disciplines further highlight their strengths through think tank research. The tremendous success of these university think tanks stems not only from long-term accumulation in strong research areas but also from adherence to research characteristics that attract external attention. For example, Stanford University’s Hoover Institution has long insisted on researching domestic economic policy, with economics being Stanford’s advantageous discipline ranked among the top five in the United States.

### 3.2 Integration of Talent Cultivation and Project Research to Create a “Revolving Door”

Think tank development requires diverse research forces with different disciplinary backgrounds and knowledge structures. These think tanks adhere to the principle of combining full-time and part-time staff while integrating internal cultivation with external recruitment. In addition to their own full-time researchers, they employ senior corporate executives, government officials, and renowned researchers from other institutions as special or invited researchers for different research topics and timelines. The costs for these external experts

are jointly borne by the think tank and the university, allowing them to flow freely between think tanks, universities, government, and enterprises. These jointly hired external experts can not only participate in think tank research projects but also teach courses and give lectures at the university, undertaking student training and teaching responsibilities. Additionally, they select interested and capable graduate and doctoral students to participate in research projects. Through universities, think tanks achieve project research while contributing to talent cultivation.

### **3.3 Building Dissemination Platforms and Smooth Communication Channels to Seize Discourse Power**

The biggest difference between think tanks and general research institutions is that think tanks conduct comprehensive, strategic, and forward-looking research oriented toward problem-solving, propose effective policy recommendations, and voice their perspectives domestically and internationally. These think tanks guide public opinion by regularly publishing think tank outputs through their own websites, journals, magazines, and international academic conferences and forums they host. Moreover, these think tanks maintain close relationships with relevant government departments, enabling their outputs to be submitted to relevant government officials for reference through appropriate channels at the first opportunity. By attracting external attention and recognition through their outputs, these think tanks have gained considerable discourse power [5] in academic and government circles, continuously raising their voices domestically and internationally and enhancing their visibility.

### **3.4 “Dual Approach” of Public and Non-Public Funding with Autonomous Fund Control**

The normal operation and long-term development of think tanks cannot be separated from financial support. These think tanks have diverse funding sources, including state appropriations, corporate sponsorships, commissioned research fees, social donations, publication revenues, and foundation income. With diversified fundraising channels, funding sources are relatively stable. Regardless of the funding type, the core principle is non-interference in the daily operations and research work of think tanks, ensuring independence in internal management, autonomy in research topic selection, and discretion in fund utilization. Following the principle of “funding as foundation, projects as priority, and personnel as core” [6], these think tanks allocate substantial funds to researcher salaries and benefits, in addition to regular expenditures such as project research, equipment procurement, data usage, website management, and project promotion, thereby incentivizing researchers to produce high-quality think tank outputs.

The experiences of foreign university think tanks are worth learning from but should never be copied mechanically, as significant differences exist between foreign and domestic universities in management models, operational mechanisms,

and funding sources. Chinese universities must explore specific standards, operational mechanisms, and implementation pathways for domestic university think tank construction based on their own characteristics and national conditions.

#### 4. Specific Standards for University Think Tank Construction

The national level has issued the *Guiding Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics*, but such guidance is broad and general. University-affiliated think tanks, as one form of national new-type think tanks, differ from social, party-government, and social science think tanks and possess their own special attributes. This paper argues that university think tank construction should meet the following standards.

##### 4.1 Standardized Governance of Think Tank Institutions

University think tanks should be registered as non-profit public research entities in compliance with relevant national laws and regulations. Their governance structure should evolve from an “affiliated model” to a more independent “balanced model,” ultimately forming a think tank self-governance model of “academic leadership with administrative support.” Currently, university think tanks can explore implementing a “three committees and one institute” governance structure: establishing an academic committee and an expert (advisory) committee while implementing a director responsibility system under the leadership of a board of directors (management committee). The board (management committee) is responsible for major decision-making, the expert (advisory) committee provides consulting opinions on development planning, annual plans, and key consulting projects, and the academic committee reviews consulting research plans, annual project plans, and output evaluations. Improving the governance system, structure, and principal entities ensures and enhances the high quality and uniqueness of university think tank research outputs to meet government decision-making effectiveness under complex conditions while addressing the demands of social citizens, media, and third-party organizations [8].

##### 4.2 Distinctive Research Areas

Only by possessing and establishing research characteristics and areas can university think tank construction be targeted and stand out. Outstanding university research achievements originate from advantageous disciplines, reflecting disciplinary backgrounds and strengths. Universities must fully explore and demonstrate their research characteristics, using key and brand specialties as foundations. By leveraging their advantageous, distinctive, and emerging interdisciplinary fields and relying on existing characteristic research centers, bases, and institutes, they can promote characteristic think tank construction and highlight research areas. For instance, ethnic minority universities lead nationally in ethnology research, normal universities in education research, and finance and

economics universities in their specialized fields, giving them natural advantages in building renowned think tank brands.

### 4.3 High-End Professional Research Talent

High-level, specialized research talent is the core element of high-end think tanks and an important guarantee for transforming intellectual capital into high-quality outputs. To build think tanks, universities must possess senior government leaders with years of experience whose rich policy-making backgrounds can provide macro-level guidance and global perspectives; industry experts with world-class professional achievements who can influence public opinion and drive government decisions, providing both academic guidance and collaborative research; business elites with renowned corporate management experience whose practical experience and international backgrounds provide valuable insights; and young and middle-aged faculty with solid theoretical foundations, abundant social science research achievements, and interdisciplinary research capabilities who serve as full-time researchers and constitute the backbone of think tank construction and development.

### 4.4 Smooth Transformation of Research Outputs

Think tank outputs emphasizing investigation, data analysis, and policy recommendations highlight their advisory functions. To build think tanks, universities must smooth channels for delivering outputs to government, society, and enterprises. They should organize and compile think tank reports delivered directly to relevant government departments by designated personnel; regularly release special research findings submitted directly to decision-making bodies through senior government officials serving on academic and advisory committees; and adhere to research characteristics while emphasizing long-term accumulation to regularly compile and publish development reports that guide public opinion and social response. Additionally, interpreting think tank outputs in major media outlets such as *Guangming Daily* and *Xinhua Daily* and voicing opinions at renowned think tank forums are effective methods for building university think tanks and smoothing output transformation channels.

### 4.5 Extensive Influence of Think Tank Outputs

A crucial criterion for evaluating university think tank construction is the breadth of influence of its research outputs. University think tank outputs must both “reach the top” —influencing government decisions—and “touch the ground” —guiding public opinion. Influence can typically be assessed through: (1) the think tank’s own communication platforms, such as websites [9], WeChat public accounts, Weibo, journals, regular forums, and annual conferences; (2) the frequency of articles and viewpoints published (including reprints) in influential newspapers and periodicals; (3) the number of interviews with mainstream media by think tank experts; (4) the frequency of media

coverage of think tank activities; and (5) public recognition of think tank experts.

## 5. Innovation Mechanisms for University Think Tank Construction

### 5.1 Innovating Management and Operation Mechanisms

Universities should follow decision-making consultation patterns and think tank development laws, break through existing research management mindsets, innovate organizational forms, reduce management levels, and explore the application of “academic power” and “administrative power” in think tank management mechanisms. They should attempt to establish governance structures with directors responsible under boards, academic advisory committees, and expert advisory committees, employing full-time research assistants and administrative assistants to handle specific tasks such as fund reimbursement and conference coordination to ensure normal daily operations. While vigorously promoting new-type, high-end think tank construction, universities should also emphasize the role of on-campus collaborative innovation centers and research bases in decision-making consultation [10], promoting the transformation of research institutions that meet think tank criteria and have such aspirations into think tank organizations. They should explore a “dynamic entry and exit” mechanism for think tank construction, ultimately forming a think tank system where high-end think tanks, collaborative centers, and research bases support each other, develop orderly, and feature distinctive research characteristics.

### 5.2 Innovating Project Competition Mechanisms

University think tanks should adhere to the general principle of “relying on management internally and competition externally” in project management. Internally, they must strictly follow standardized procedures including project initiation, preliminary preparation, research analysis, report completion, report review, and report submission, emphasizing guidance during the early stage, supervision during the mid-stage, and refinement during the late stage. Regarding initiation mechanisms, in addition to planned projects determined at the beginning of the year, special and immediate initiations should be conducted according to actual needs. For funding, general research projects should adopt an early initiation and late funding model, while major projects should implement a long-term mechanism of continuous tracking and rolling funding.

Externally, university think tanks must firmly establish market competition awareness, carefully study government procurement information for consulting projects, anticipate competitors’ strategies in advance, and obtain government projects through bidding [11]. Relying on think tank brands, they should actively connect with government decision-making needs to obtain projects directly designated by leaders or commissioned by the government. They should strengthen interconnection with social organizations and enterprises to obtain

consulting projects through cooperation. For externally obtained projects, university think tanks should comply with market rules and competition principles, maintain their reputation, and complete projects on time with guaranteed quality.

### 5.3 Innovating Research Output Transformation Mechanisms

University think tanks should strengthen strategic cooperation with China Social Sciences Press in depth and breadth, utilizing the “China Social Science Think Tank” brand to launch research outputs as think tank book series. They should deepen cooperation with various publishers, using university publishing branch platforms to effectively connect authors, publishers, and readers, rapidly forming university think tank publication blocks. By inviting major print media such as *Xinhua Daily*, *Guangming Daily* (Think Tank Edition), China Social Science Network, and *China Education Daily*, university think tanks can actively promote their latest reports, introduce expert viewpoints, and publish research articles, giving voice to universities, telling university stories, and promoting university experiences to advance rapid output transformation. They should strengthen “Internet Plus” thinking, fully utilizing internet technology to create data-sharing and network-sharing “Internet Plus Think Tank” platforms, building integrated online and offline service systems to serve as university channels for connecting think tanks with government and enterprises. University think tanks should use self-media and micro-media channels such as Weibo, WeChat public accounts, and WeChat groups to push outputs to potential clients and stakeholders, promoting the mediatization and intellectualization of university think tanks.

### 5.4 Innovating Exchange and Cooperation Mechanisms

University think tank construction should abandon the mindset of “good wine needs no bush” and embrace the logic that “good wine also fears deep alleys.” They should step beyond their own campuses to strengthen exchange and cooperation with think tanks in their provinces, across the country, and internationally. Taking the national “Belt and Road” development strategy as an opportunity, they should collaborate on major research projects, actively undertake or jointly host “Belt and Road” international forums, publish cooperation briefings, release research reports, and submit policy recommendations. Through national and provincial scholarship programs, overseas research plans for key teachers, and support programs for overseas scholars, they should select outstanding think tank personnel for further study, visits, and cooperative exchanges at key research institutions and think tanks abroad to absorb and learn from the operational and management models of renowned international think tanks. They should establish special visiting programs for think tank scholars, actively inviting researchers from well-known foreign think tanks to visit, conduct project cooperation, and explore exchange formats. By creating university-characteristic think tank activities and actively hosting or jointly or-

ganizing influential academic conferences with relevant think tank institutions, inviting prestigious think tanks and experts for exchange, and jointly releasing declarations or consensus, they can build multi-level and diversified international academic exchange platforms to promote exchange and cooperation between university think tanks and other parties.

## 6. Implementation Pathways for University Think Tank Construction

### 6.1 Strengthening Top-Level Design for Think Tank Construction

Although universities have relatively complete research institution hierarchies and layouts, solid research foundations, strong talent teams, and certain decision-making consultation experience, this does not mean that all university research institutions should be built into think tanks. For research bases and institutions closely related to national economic and social development needs that have the willingness, conditions, and capacity for transformation, universities should encourage their development into specialized high-end think tanks and implement dynamic management with the possibility of promotion or demotion. For think tank construction, universities should also issue special plans clarifying guiding ideology, basic principles, main objectives, key tasks, and conditional guarantees. They should adhere to scientific development to guide think tank construction, clarify think tanks' policy-advisory functions, and grant them relative independence and authority. Think tanks can adjust and focus according to strategic needs at national and provincial levels, determining their main research directions and expertise in different periods to enhance research precision and problem orientation. Universities should firmly adhere to the principle of "party leadership over think tanks," using on-campus forums and other platforms to periodically invite government personnel to interpret plans and publicize policies, enabling think tanks to keep pace with party and government development rhythms and decision-making needs to provide targeted, operational, and timely policy recommendations.

### 6.2 Improving Think Tank Funding Management Models

The orderly operation of university think tank institutions and continuous production of outputs require stable research funding support. During the initial construction phase, they should actively apply for and obtain special funding support for think tank construction by seizing opportunities to cultivate key think tanks. Universities should provide matching support for funding, personnel, and equipment based on actual construction conditions and establish special funds for think tank construction through alumni networks and foundation platforms, launching crowdfunding initiatives. When university think tanks mature in operation, they can obtain project funding by undertaking commissioned projects from government and enterprises and actively participating in bidding for social science department projects. When university think tanks possess

strong academic, decision-making, public, and social influence, they can publish monographs and legally accept public donations from social organizations or individuals. In the short term, think tank research funding should rely mainly on public finance, while long-term development should prioritize non-public funds. Meanwhile, universities should strengthen collaborative management of think tank research funding among think tank institutions, research departments, and financial departments, explore and continuously improve funding management systems, and attempt to delegate fund management authority to think tank institutions through lump-sum funding arrangements. Internal decision-making bodies should be responsible for fund allocation and utilization, reducing intervention from current research funding management models. Universities should shift from funding-centered to output-centered management, linking fund usage to research output quality, increasing performance rewards for think tank researchers, and improving their project labor income.

### 6.3 Implementing Diversified Evaluation of Think Tank Outputs

When evaluating think tank research outputs, universities should consider both quantifiable indicators such as official instructions, adoption, and publication, and non-quantifiable indicators such as social impact and peer evaluation, combining quantitative and qualitative assessment. They should focus on both administrative evaluation—whether outputs provide effective and practical research reports, consultation suggestions, or alternative plans for government, especially higher-level government agencies, thereby causing repercussions and transforming into decisions—and academic evaluation, including methodological innovation, ideological clarification, and theoretical breakthroughs [12]. Universities should issue their own recognition standards for think tank outputs, equating outputs adopted or positively instructed by government departments at different levels with CSSCI journal papers at corresponding tiers. They should provide different levels of evaluation and rewards based on different grades of policy suggestion outcomes and offer corresponding rewards and recognition based on the frequency of mainstream media coverage or social repercussions caused by think tank outputs. Think tank research outputs should enjoy equal treatment with traditional research achievements in faculty title evaluation, position promotion, project application, and funding requests.

### 6.4 Creating Diverse “Revolving Doors” for Think Tanks

**Creating a talent “revolving door.”** Universities still have much work to do to build think tanks into talent highlands. Through special programs such as technology mayor teams and doctoral service groups, they should promote and encourage young PhDs and researchers within think tanks to work temporarily or permanently in enterprises and government, combining academia with government affairs and policy. In terms of project application, funding, title evaluation, and talent recruitment, universities should treat adopted think tank outputs equally with publicly published academic papers, encouraging more young and

middle-aged scholars to devote themselves to think tank construction. According to think tank research characteristics, universities should innovate personnel and salary systems, granting think tanks autonomy in talent recruitment to independently hire retired or former government officials and senior corporate managers for special or thematic research based on project characteristics and professional competence. Alternatively, they can attract non-university think tank talents through project cooperation or annual salary systems to promote talent flow between government, universities, and enterprises. Most importantly, universities must recognize the importance of intellectual capital for think tank research and increase the proportion of intellectual compensation in research funding [13], enabling genuine think tank talents to willingly serve think tank research projects.

**Creating a track-two diplomacy door.** University think tanks should strive to build track-two diplomatic platforms between official diplomacy ( “track one” ) and purely civilian exchanges ( “track three” ), playing a pragmatic role in providing sustained and effective intellectual, technical, and media support for track-one diplomacy. When track-one diplomacy becomes paralyzed while practical problems urgently require solutions, university think tanks should invite stakeholders to closed-door discussions as neutral parties to explore mechanisms for achieving balanced interests. Leveraging their special relationships with government decision-making and their non-official status, university think tanks can fully play the role of track-two diplomatic platforms, submitting think tank outputs to the government in the form of special reports or internal references, or reflecting social opinions to smooth the “revolving door” between party-government and society.

**Creating a discourse “revolving door.”** Different discourse systems exist among academia, government, and society, creating communication barriers and distrust to varying degrees. University think tanks should leverage their unique “translation” function to actively set relevant agendas, interpret themselves, and explain China. They should strengthen publicity cooperation with mass media, formal channels, and social organizations, fully utilizing emerging communication methods such as the internet and social media to voice university think tank perspectives. Through university think tanks, discourse system transformation among academia, government, and society can be achieved, promoting exchange and understanding among the three parties.

## 7. Conclusion

In recent years, as the party and state have increasingly emphasized philosophy and social sciences work, they have stressed that university think tanks should fully play their roles in theoretical guidance and decision-making consultation. The importance and urgency of university think tank construction have become self-evident. Although universities possess natural advantages such as complete disciplinary categories, abundant research achievements, and rich research talent resources, the unique attributes of university think tanks require

them to develop differently from social, party-government, and military think tanks. Therefore, universities need a set of specific standards, operational mechanisms, and implementation pathways suitable for their long-term development to provide intellectual support for promoting social stability and faster economic development.

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