

Research on Incentive Mechanism Design for Internal Cohesion and External Liaison in China's University Think Tank Alliance (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Enhance the philosophy of internal knowledge contribution within university think tank alliances, strengthen information communication between the alliance and users, and improve the service efficacy of university think tank alliances. [Method/Process] This study indicates the need to break away from the existing managerial mindset of China's university think tank alliance council system, and analyzes the essence and design approach of internal cohesion and external linkage incentive mechanisms. It outlines the design process for incentive mechanisms in university think tank alliances, emphasizing the alignment of alliance objectives with member needs, the correspondence between incentive methods and motivations for resource co-construction, the connection of incentive effects with periodic and year-end evaluations, and design essentials such as strengthening comparative exchange and organizational assimilation. [Results/Conclusion] It proposes design pathways and strategies for internal cohesion and external linkage incentive mechanisms for China's university think tank alliances: work incentive mechanisms, compensation incentive mechanisms, prestige and honor incentive mechanisms, and effective communication incentive mechanisms.

Full Text

Research on Incentive Mechanism Design for Internal Cohesion and External Outreach of University Think Tank Alliances in China

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study aims to strengthen the concept of internal knowledge contribution within university think tank alliances, enhance information communication between alliances and users, and improve the service effectiveness of university think tank alliances. **[Method/Process]** The paper argues for breaking the conventional management mindset of the existing council system in China's university think tank alliances, analyzing the essence and design 思路 of internal cohesion and external outreach incentive mechanisms. It outlines the design process for incentive mechanisms in university think tank alliances, emphasizing key design points such as matching alliance goals with member needs, aligning incentive methods with motivations for collaborative resource construction, linking incentive effects with periodic and year-end evaluations, and strengthening comparative exchanges and organizational assimilation. **[Result/Conclusion]** The paper proposes design pathways and strategies for the internal cohesion and external outreach incentive mechanisms of China's university think tank alliances: work incentive mechanisms, compensation incentive mechanisms, spiritual honor incentive mechanisms, and effective communication incentive mechanisms.

Keywords: university think tank alliance; internal cohesion and external outreach; incentive mechanism

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Think tanks constitute an important force providing decision-makers with optimal theories, strategies, methods, and ideas [1]. To enhance national soft power, the Party Central Committee has elevated the construction of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics to a national strategic priority [2]. Multiple university think tanks have established the "University High-End Think Tank Alliance," and academic research on such alliances has produced numerous outcomes [3-8]. However, research on incentive mechanisms for these alliances remains scarce. Article 6 of the "University High-End Think Tank Alliance Convention" published by the Ministry of Education states, "Based on collaborative construction and sharing, promote internal cohesion and external outreach," aiming to facilitate communication among alliance members, strengthen collaborative research, and fulfill the important missions of university think tanks in policy consultation, public enlightenment, and talent cultivation [9]. According to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, "All natural processes proceed in the direction of increasing molecular thermal motion disorder" [10]. In the natural operation of university think tank alliances, members tend to use fewer of their own resources to complete alliance tasks. Without effective incentive measures, the alliance cannot truly achieve "collaborative construction and sharing, internal cohesion and external outreach." On January 3, 2019, the Henan University High-End Think Tank Alliance was established in Zhengzhou, providing a plat-

form for mutual learning and joint improvement among Henan's university think tanks that will inevitably create collective advantages, enhance the capacity of each member, and increase the social influence of Henan's university think tank community [11]. However, as the saying goes, "Everything is difficult at the beginning." To avoid detours, the newly established Henan University High-End Think Tank Alliance should analyze and draw lessons from other think tank alliances' experiences, focusing early on incentive mechanism design. This paper uses the Henan University High-End Think Tank Alliance as a case study to examine incentive mechanism design for university think tank alliances, aiming to strengthen group cohesion within the alliance and then use it as a source for "external outreach" research. It is hoped that these findings will reinforce the concept of internal knowledge contribution, strengthen information communication between alliances and users, and enhance service effectiveness.

2. The Essence and Design 思路 of Internal Cohesion and External Outreach Incentive Mechanisms

2.1 Breaking the Conventional Management Mindset of the Council System

The Henan University High-End Think Tank Alliance is an application-oriented think tank alliance voluntarily joined by high-end think tanks from universities across Henan Province, supervised and guided by the Henan Provincial Department of Education. The inaugural cohort includes 53 university high-end think tanks, each operating for over three years. These think tanks are based on distinctive advantageous disciplines, humanities and social science research bases, and collaborative innovation research centers, achieving outstanding results in supporting government decision-making and social services while receiving positive evaluations. They have all hosted high-level think tank forums with significant social impact. The 53 think tanks have relatively stable office spaces, consultation conditions, leading talents, and research teams adapted to think tank construction. They bring together experts and scholars from 53 universities across the province, including Zhengzhou University, Henan University, Henan Normal University, and Huanghe Science and Technology College, with profound academic accumulation. The alliance focuses on major national and Henan provincial decision-making deployments, addressing major difficult issues in social development, leveraging the joint research advantages of university think tanks, improving adaptability to local socio-economic development, and providing policy recommendations for government and enterprises. Its functions include policy research, policy advice, talent cultivation, and public opinion guidance. The alliance conducts both basic theoretical research for Henan's long-term development and multi-disciplinary comprehensive research on major practical issues, providing targeted and actionable policy recommendations for provincial decision-making while cultivating interdisciplinary think tank talent to provide human resources for building new-type think tanks with Henan characteristics and Central Plains style, and actively clarifying doubts on social hot

issues [11].

The alliance currently employs a council system for management. The council is responsible for major decisions regarding alliance development and supervises and guides strategic implementation but cannot stipulate the extent of members' contributions or monitor contract fulfillment. Consequently, the council's ability to constrain members is extremely limited. For the 53 members, policy advice achievements constitute public goods, and members lack motivation to supply public goods with unclear property rights. Moreover, despite all being university-affiliated, these 53 think tanks differ significantly in intellectual resources, decision-support capacity, and core service potential. Without effective incentives from the council, members will lack enthusiasm for contributing their distinctive resources to collaborative construction and will instead comfortably "free-ride." Therefore, without breaking the conventional management mindset and implementing effective incentives and constraints, members will lack motivation for theoretical research and multi-disciplinary comprehensive studies on major practical issues, failing to establish an effective information supply chain oriented toward user needs and preventing the alliance from fulfilling its missions of knowledge service, academic exchange, policy consultation, and economic advice.

2.2 Exploring the Essence of Incentive Mechanism Design

Universities are socially entrusted with missions such as pursuing truth, cultivating virtue, self-improvement, and serving society. As university affiliates, the members of the Henan University High-End Think Tank Alliance—from Zhengzhou University, Henan University, Henan Normal University, Huanghe Science and Technology College, and others—must extend their social missions toward serving the public as politics, economics, and social life become increasingly interconnected [12]. Alliance members must pursue joint development, focusing on major national and provincial decision-making deployments and difficult issues, leveraging joint research advantages to strengthen universities' service to local socio-economic development. Social psychologist Schachter noted that group cohesion relates to internal reward methods [13]. According to scholars Sun Rui et al., with adequate incentives, the overall performance of the Henan University High-End Think Tank Alliance could improve fourfold [14]. Therefore, to elicit desired behaviors from members, the alliance must set goals aligned with its founding purpose: focusing on Henan's national economy, social development, and reform and opening-up issues with global, strategic, forward-looking, long-term, and comprehensive significance to serve provincial decision-making and solve reform and development challenges. Goal-oriented stimulation can motivate members' alliance-beneficial motivations and guide their actions accordingly—this constitutes the essence of think tank alliance incentives. According to behavioral science theory: $\text{Performance} = \text{Capability} \times \text{Motivation Level}$. With capability held constant, members' contributions depend on their incentive level. In other words, member capability is the foundation, and al-

alliance incentives are the driving force. Effective incentive measures that mobilize members' enthusiasm and initiative for collaborative resource construction will enhance the alliance's service performance.

2.3 Determining Key Design 思路 for Incentive Mechanisms

Based on behavior modification theory, alliance members can be viewed as “black boxes,” focusing on their behaviors rather than complex psychological processes to examine how behaviors and their outcomes affect subsequent actions. Combined with reinforcement theory, when behavior outcomes benefit members, the behavior repeats; when detrimental, it decreases or disappears. The former is “reinforcement,” the latter “weakening.” According to this “stimulus-response” reinforcement model, incentive reinforcement measures for alliance members can be designed [15].

Alliance members are rational individuals with established judgments about cooperative relationships and alliance development, understanding that the alliance plays important functions in strategic research, policy advice, talent cultivation, and public opinion guidance. Therefore, analyzing motivational factors requires examining what members hope to gain and how they can achieve their aspirations. According to Vroom's expectancy theory (1964): $\text{Motivation Force} = \text{Valence} \times \text{Expectancy} \times \text{Instrumentality}$ [16]. Thus, the relationship between effort and performance, performance and rewards, and rewards and need satisfaction must be properly managed, as shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

These three relationships constitute three conditions for mobilizing members' enthusiasm for collaborative resource construction: (1) The effort-performance relationship—members' perception of the likelihood that effort will lead to required performance; (2) The performance-reward relationship—members' trust that performance will yield deserved rewards; (3) The reward-need satisfaction relationship—the importance of potential outcomes or rewards to members, related to their goals and needs [17]. Combined with expectancy theory, incentive mechanism design must reflect the relationship between member needs and goals. To motivate members, the alliance must clarify: (1) It can provide what members truly need—support for multi-disciplinary research, cultivation of interdisciplinary talent, human resources for new-type think tank construction, and enhanced capacity for public opinion guidance and policy consultation; (2) Members' pursuits are linked to their resource construction performance—improved performance enhances their benefits.

3. The Process of Designing Incentive Mechanisms for University Think Tank Alliances

Research on incentive mechanisms for internal cohesion and external outreach in the Henan University High-End Think Tank Alliance must proceed from point

to surface, from local to whole, in an organic, progressive process, as shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper].

Therefore, this study examines motivation patterns from members' needs, studies psychological activities such as motivation generation, change, and goal selection, consolidates and develops positive behaviors while transforming negative ones [18].

3.1 Ensuring Alliance Goals Match Member Needs

The first stage in Figure 2 involves two-way information exchange to align alliance goals with member needs. The Henan University High-End Think Tank Alliance aims to fulfill important functions in strategic research, policy advice, talent cultivation, and public opinion guidance. Member needs involve conducting basic theoretical research for Henan's long-term development, multi-disciplinary comprehensive studies, providing targeted and actionable policy recommendations for provincial decision-making, cultivating interdisciplinary think tank talent for their institutions, and enhancing capacity for public opinion guidance and policy consultation. From the perspective of need functions, needs constitute behavioral drivers, including cognitive drive, self-improvement drive, and affiliative drive [19]. When designing incentive mechanisms, both organizational goals, values, performance standards, rewards and punishments, and behavioral norms must be considered alongside members' own needs, values, capabilities, qualities, and development plans. Since need satisfaction derives from knowledge absorption and utilization behaviors, members must understand that joining the alliance for collaborative resource construction, mutual learning, and acquiring new knowledge stimulates cognitive drive and motivates greater contributions. Incentive methods should cultivate and stimulate members' self-improvement drive. Affiliative drive refers to the need to perform better to maintain authority and gain approval. Therefore, incentive design should understand member groups, provide appropriate approval and recognition, and encourage mutual recognition among members, which becomes a powerful motivational factor [20].

3.2 Aligning Incentive Methods with Resource Construction Motivations

The second stage in Figure 2 involves selecting incentive methods. According to psychologist Tolman, member behaviors are goal-directed, encompassing both current actions and their purposes and directions. Motivation—the direct psychological force that initiates, directs, maintains, and drives behavior—determines the orientation, maintenance, and adjustment functions of resource construction behaviors [21]. Reinforcement theory suggests that purposeful behaviors react to the environment: when consequences are favorable, behaviors repeat; when unfavorable, they weaken or disappear. Members prioritize behaviors that easily achieve goals, so motivations can modify behaviors [22]. Motivation determines members' enthusiasm for resource construction, which

is influenced by three main factors: push, pull, and pressure. Push originates from members' own desires and needs, generated through recognition of the necessity of alliance participation, desire for collaborative win-win outcomes, and future expectations. Pull refers to the attraction of incentive methods and reward intensity. Pressure refers to demands from incentive methods and disciplinary measures that compel resource construction activities. All three factors can motivate resource construction, so incentive design must align with members' behavioral motivations to identify these push, pull, and pressure factors.

3.3 Emphasizing Periodic Evaluation of Incentive Effects

The third stage in Figure 2 involves timely evaluation of members' achievements and progress in resource construction to enable adaptive adjustments by both the alliance and members. Evaluation periods should be appropriate, determined by task characteristics—biweekly, monthly, quarterly, or semi-annually. Actual performance depends on capability, effort, and understanding of tasks, including required activities and other influencing factors. Periodic evaluation content may include: whether incentive methods enhance capabilities and support growth; members' understanding of the relationship between rewards and achievements; members' perceptions of effort-reward probability and intensity; satisfaction with incentive measures; perceived fairness of compensation; and willingness to exert further effort.

3.4 Linking Year-End Evaluation with Reward Distribution

The fourth stage in Figure 2 involves year-end evaluation, where members cooperate with the alliance management—the Henan Provincial Department of Education and alliance council—to assess resource construction achievements and receive rewards, criticism, or penalties. The council should also solicit member feedback on incentive mechanisms: whether the alliance understands members' work attitudes, increases experience, enhances service levels, and provides better environments for knowledge services; whether incentives truly link to contributions; and whether past performance affects current and future rewards. Year-end evaluation should connect with risk-based annual rewards, establishing basic, risk, and high-contribution annual rewards. Members conducting basic theoretical research for Henan's long-term development, providing theoretical support and actionable policy recommendations without errors, receive basic annual rewards. Members with small contributions receive partial basic rewards, while high-contributing members receive full risk and high-contribution rewards. This clarifies member benefits and incentivizes risk awareness.

3.5 Achieving Comparative Exchange and Behavioral Assimilation

The fifth stage in Figure 2 involves members comparing their rewards from resource construction with those of other members and their own past earnings to assess satisfaction and fairness. Satisfied members will continue contributing;

dissatisfied members can engage in constructive consultation with the Department of Education and council. If consensus cannot be reached, members may exit the alliance or remain but reduce effort, facing penalties that lead to behavioral normalization. Normalization involves organizational assimilation and punishment for violations or underperformance. Penalty systems must be clearly communicated when members join, constituting negative reinforcement. Violations of alliance norms or failure to meet requirements incur appropriate penalties plus education to enhance understanding and capability—another round of organizational assimilation. This assimilation process is crucial for sustainable alliance development.

4. Pathways and Strategies for Internal Cohesion and External Outreach Incentive Mechanism Design

Economist Perroux’s growth pole theory suggests that each think tank’s contribution to the alliance cannot be equal. Alliance development typically proceeds from one or several “growth centers” gradually transmitting to other members [23]. Core think tanks as growth poles form integrated alliance complexes with other think tanks, achieving alliance “internal cohesion,” then diffuse outward as a source to realize a four-tier linkage system: Henan University High-End Think Tank Alliance—Domestic University Think Tank Groups—Domestic Think Tank Circles—International Think Tank Networks, achieving alliance “external outreach.”

4.1 Institution-Driven Work Incentive Mechanisms

The Henan University High-End Think Tank Alliance is a non-profit academic organization with collaborative and open characteristics. While the council structure is flexible, it lacks binding force. Members exhibit “prisoner’s dilemma” and “free-riding” behaviors in resource supply. As the saying goes, “Nothing can be accomplished without norms.” Therefore, the alliance must establish a set of institutionalized and standardized systems and work norms that incentivize members and optimize resource allocation and council management: (1) The council should issue alliance operating charters specifying goals, tasks, structure, mechanisms, and member responsibilities; (2) Establish penalty mechanisms for non-performing members, including material penalties, administrative actions, and public condemnation [24]; (3) Establish interest coordination mechanisms, including cost-benefit accounting for alliance tasks to track resource integration and research output and provide statistics for interest compensation, plus supervision mechanisms to ensure smooth implementation and regulate interest emergencies; (4) Through internal behavioral constraints, guide members to actively engage in resource construction, contribute to the alliance, and complete tasks while avoiding free-riding. Systems must be forward-looking and targeted, based on research of reserve policies to design professional, systematic, and constructive institutional frameworks that enhance comprehensive judgment and strategic planning capabilities, creating a

fair competitive environment where equal labor receives equal rewards, making members willing to work for the alliance.

4.2 Interest-Driven Compensation Incentive Mechanisms

Compensation systems are key factors affecting effective alliance operation. How to reward member contributions is a major concern. Although Pareto optimality represents optimal resource allocation, the “prisoner’s dilemma” and “pig game” equilibrium formed through inter-university think tank games are not Pareto optimal [25]. Therefore, a compensation incentive system is needed. While the Henan University High-End Think Tank Alliance is a knowledge service organization, many compensations may not directly manifest as economic rewards [26]. The Kaldor-Hicks compensation theory represents a second-best equilibrium [27] that can alleviate the prisoner’s dilemma and pig game equilibrium through reasonable compensation mechanisms. By establishing interest compensation systems, the alliance can resolve interest conflicts between the alliance and members and among members, achieving effective incentives that promote timely intellectual resource updates while meeting user needs and protecting the interests of high-contributing members to drive sustainable development.

4.2.1 Basic Needs Compensation According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, only after meeting lower-level needs can members pursue higher-level needs. Therefore, the alliance must first provide necessary training to enhance members’ basic knowledge service capabilities.

4.2.2 Advanced Compensation According to two-factor theory, necessary training and basic capability enhancement are hygiene factors that should remain relatively stable. However, the alliance must increase the risk proportion in total compensation based on evaluation to motivate members and improve resource construction performance.

4.2.3 Expected Compensation According to Vroom’s expectancy theory, incentive effectiveness depends on the relationship between rewards and potential performance. Rewards must be attractive and achievable for the 53 member think tanks, with appropriate adjustment of expectancy-probability gaps and goal difficulty. Widening the gap between expected and non-expected behaviors enhances incentive effects.

4.2.4 Risk-Based Annual Compensation High-contributing members receive full annual compensation, including basic, risk, and reward components. Low-contributing members receive only partial basic compensation, clarifying benefits and incentivizing risk awareness.

4.2.5 Management Rights Compensation The alliance should establish rotating chair units that any member can apply for, subject to evaluation by

supervisory authorities based on the previous year's contributions, with a one-year term. The rotating chair unit and Provincial Department of Education jointly manage the alliance and co-organize annual sub-forums and activities. Selection as rotating chair affirms contributions, mobilizing enthusiasm and providing impetus for alliance development.

4.3 Goal-Driven Spiritual Honor Incentive Mechanisms

Peter F. Drucker proposed goal management and self-control in *The Practice of Management*, arguing that goals precede and determine work [28]. The Henan University High-End Think Tank Alliance should integrate its goals with member interests, demonstrating members' status and roles to generate powerful incentives. From the alliance perspective, motivating members means stimulating them toward desired goals with proactive, alliance-compliant behaviors. Goal incentives use various means to stimulate members toward expected targets. With member participation, alliance organizational goals should be determined top-down: think tanks develop collectively to form integration and maturity effects, aiming to enter national high-end think tank ranks within 2-3 years, become an influential brand in Henan Province, and eventually reach top national think tank status, implementing self-control bottom-up to ensure goal achievement. Specific mechanisms include: (1) Spiritual incentives—intangible motivation including empowerment, performance recognition, fair and transparent reward and promotion systems, and training opportunities that enhance capabilities and profoundly influence member work; (2) Honor incentives—Maslow's self-actualization represents the highest need, and members pursue good reputations for long-term benefits, making honor incentives an ultimate motivational tool. Linking performance to rewards, promotions, and recognition through alliance norms motivates members, with honors serving as powerful forces that spur continuous improvement and create competitive dynamics [29]. The alliance should not hesitate to grant titles and designations to gain member recognition and motivation. Specific measures include: excellent member selection activities; non-performance competitive honors; internal certificates or appointment letters; naming items or services after members; and using honor walls and alliance yearbooks to motivate members.

4.4 Platform-Driven Effective Communication Incentive Mechanisms

Stephen P. Robbins proposed the performance function $P = F(M, A, C)$, where P is individual performance, M represents behavioral enthusiasm, A represents ability, and C represents opportunity [30]. Building a network information platform helps the Henan University High-End Think Tank Alliance interpret policies, provide policy advice, and facilitate information exchange, increasing opportunities for effective knowledge services. This is crucial for forming collective advantages, enhancing the capacity of 53 think tanks, and increasing social influence: (1) The platform enables the alliance to provide services beyond temporal and spatial limitations, promoting knowledge interaction mecha-

nisms between the alliance and users, solving information asymmetry problems, and bridging information gaps [31]. Platform content should include alliance introduction, updates, think tank achievements, expert teams, and online communication modules with timely updates. Online communication can include WeChat services and official accounts for convenient alliance-user communication, enabling users to select knowledge service providers and avoid adverse selection. (2) The platform improves opportunities to lock in core users, attract potential users, and provide personalized services. (3) It increases internal communication opportunities—information exchange is a two-way process where members both receive and transmit information throughout the knowledge service process. (4) It helps the alliance fulfill its social public role and enhance “external outreach” opportunities to promote scientific knowledge and technology diffusion and transformation. Information exchange is bidirectional, and the alliance’s service information release represents participation in public life, requiring adjustment from individual to societal perspectives. Through the platform, the alliance engages in policy consultation, advice, and education, participating in and influencing public life to promote social and scientific progress. The Henan University High-End Think Tank Alliance’s knowledge service balances public knowledge nature with technology marketization. As the saying goes, “Learning alone leads to narrowness and ignorance.” To ensure correct service direction and public interest, the alliance should emphasize its social public role, examine the public nature of services and research, actively respond to user knowledge and technology needs via the platform, improve service capacity, and contribute to building an innovative Henan. Using the platform to transition from academic research to knowledge service is key to functional transformation. The platform will gather high-end think tanks with significant influence and international reputation, forming a demonstration cluster for coordinated high-end think tank development that leverages research strengths and university advantages in disciplines, talent, and international exchange to provide high-level intellectual support for scientific decision-making, offering beneficial references for new-type think tank construction in management, talent cultivation, resource allocation, research content, and methodology.

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Incentive Mechanisms for Cohesive and Outreach Operation of College Think Tank Alliance in China

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Abstract: [Purpose/significance] This paper aims to strengthen the concept of knowledge contribution within the college think tank alliance, enhance information communication between the alliance and users, and improve the service effectiveness of college think tank alliance. [Method/process] The paper points out breaking the thinking set of original management mode of council system of college think tank alliance in China, analyzes the essence and train of thoughts of the design of cohesive and outreach incentive mechanism, plans the process of designing the incentive mechanisms of college think tank alliance, emphasizes the design points such as alliance goals matching member needs, incentive mode according with the motivation of resources co-construction, incentive ef-

fect jointing stage and year-end evaluation, tightening comparative exchange and organizational assimilation and so on. [Result/conclusion] On this basis, the incentive paths and mechanisms for cohesive and outreach operation of college think tank alliance in China were pointed, such as work incentive mechanism, reward incentive mechanism, spiritual honor incentive mechanism and effective communication incentive mechanism.

Keywords: college think tank alliance; cohesive and outreach operation; incentive mechanism

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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