

## Bridging Educational Research and Policymaking: The Development of Educational Think Tank in China

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**Abstract :** Educational think tank is agreeably regarded as significant part of a nation's soft power to promote the scientific and democratic level of educational policy making, and it plays critical role of bridging educational research in higher institutions and educational policy making. This study explores the concept, functions and significance of educational think tank in China, and conceptualizes a three dimensional framework to analyze the approaches of transforming research-based higher institutions into effective educational think tanks to serve educational policy making in the nation wide. Since 2014, the Ministry of Education P.R. China has been promoting the strategy of developing new type of educational think tanks in higher institutions, and such a strategy has been put into the agenda for the 13th Five Year Plan for National Education Development released in 2017. In such context, increasing scholars conduct studies to put forth strategies of promoting the development and transformation of new educational think tanks to serve educational policy making process. Based on literature synthesis, policy text analysis, and analysis of theories about policy making process and relationship between educational research and policy-making, this study constructed a three dimensional conceptual framework to address the following questions: (a) what are the new features of educational think tanks in the new era comparing traditional think tanks, (b) what are the functional objectives of the new educational think tanks, (c) what are the organizational patterns and mechanism of the new educational think tanks, (d) in what approaches traditional research-based higher institutions can be developed or transformed into think tanks to effectively serve the educational policy making process. The authors adopted case study approach on five influential education policy study centers affiliated with top higher institutions in China and applied the three dimensional conceptual framework to analyze their functional objectives, organizational patterns as well as their academic pathways that researchers use to contribute to the development of think tanks to serve education policy making process. Data was mainly collected through interviews with center administrators, leading researchers and academic leaders in the institutions. Findings show that: (a) higher institution based think tanks mainly function for multi-level objectives, providing evidence, theoretical foundations, strategies, or evaluation feedbacks for critical problem solving or policy-making on the national, provincial, and city/county level; (b) higher institution based think tanks organize various types of research programs for different time spans to serve different phases of policy planning, decision making, and policy implementation; (c) in order to transform research-based higher institutions into educational think tanks, the institutions must promote paradigm shift that promotes issue-oriented field studies, large data mining and analysis, empirical studies, and trans-disciplinary research collaborations; and (d) the five cases showed distinguished features in their way of constructing think tanks, and yet they also exposed obstacles and challenges such as independency of the think tanks, the discourse shift from academic papers to consultancy report for policy makers, weakness in empirical research methods, lack of experience in trans-disciplinary collaboration. The authors finally put forth implications for think tank construction in China and abroad.

**Keywords :** education policy-making, educational research, educational think tank, higher institution

**Conference Title :** ICEPMP 2018 : International Conference on Educational Policy Making and Planning

**Conference Location :** Dublin, Ireland

**Conference Dates :** January 30-31, 2018