RESEARCH ARTICLE

Assessment of Think Tank Service Awareness in China's Top Academic Libraries

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Abstract

Exploring the current situation and challenges faced by think tanks in academic libraries in China to help improve related fields, a specially created survey questionnaire is conducted through phone calls, in-person interviews, emails, and online survey platforms. The focus was on six aspects of think tank service, including how well they understand things, what factors affect them, how they provide services, the organization of their services, how they improve their abilities to serve the issues they face in providing services, and how they can grow even more. The findings showed that academic libraries have a positive attitude towards improving think tank services and turning them into think tank institutions. Internal factors have a stronger impact on this transformation. They offer different services and use methods that create fewer information products on their own. They usually provide think tank services by working together with different departments. Academic libraries must focus on evaluating the conditions for improving think tank services to ensure they can provide effective services.

Keywords: Think Tanks, Policy-Making Consultation, Academic Libraries, Think Tank Services.

1. Introduction

A "think tank" is a reliable and primarily independent organization that conducts research on policies. Experts use scientific methods to thoroughly study policy problems and give helpful advice on issues that affect government businesses and the public [1][2]. Consulting on policy making is a crucial task for think tanks to accomplish[3]. China and the United States have the most think tanks out of all the countries [4].

In recent years, libraries have made efforts to participate in policy-making consultation work, either practically or theoretically[5]. Academic libraries not only possess huge information resources but are also highly capable of collecting, analyzing, and output information. In terms of the essence of serving as intermediary knowledge institutions, they carry functions such as preservation of human cultural heritage, transmission of scientific information, development of intellectual resources, and launch of educational activities[6].

Moreover, the academic community is actively exploring the potential role of libraries as think tanks[7]. Some experts have pointed out that "libraries are bound to provide think tank services and support relevant think tank research and library and information researchers personally participate in think tank research, which is the future development direction and new-pattern function of libraries[8][9]. In other words, great efforts shall be made to enable libraries to be think tanks or institutions capable of providing think tank services"[10][11][12]. Of the various types of libraries, academic libraries possess outstanding capacity for conducting scientific research and are most like think tanks in function. Therefore, an in-depth survey should be conducted to ascertain the

potential capability of academic libraries. By offering effective think tank services, academic libraries could enhance their value and realize sustainable development.

The provision of think tank services by academic libraries is stimulated by external demands. First, China plans to establish a novel policy-making consultation system and is striving to develop an emerging think tank industry with Chinese characteristics. Besides, there is an urgent need for think tanks in China to improve their information management capability. These are significant motivations for academic libraries to provide think tank services. Meanwhile, the implementation of think tank services reflects the internal demand of academic libraries to realize their development. Sustainable development is the high-level goal of academic libraries when launching think tank services. Besides, the transition from research institutions to think tanks assisting the governance of the country represents an advancement in the function of libraries as well as a transformation of their status. Moreover, the conditions for becoming research institutions are realistic foundations for the provision of think tank services by academic libraries[13][14].

Few studies examine how libraries provide think tank services, and there are few real-life examples, so it's essential to conduct this survey. Researchers have been studying how certain academic libraries in China view providing think tank services[15][16]. In two studies we previously conducted [8][9], we analyzed the concept of think tanks and concluded that they possess three fundamental characteristics. These studies focused on academic research, relatively independent operations, and the goal of aiding scientific decision-making. Using Ivy League think tanks as examples, this study offers a preliminary discussion on how think tanks can maintain the scientific nature of their research, ensure the independence of their operations, and disseminate research findings to enhance their influence. It addresses institutional missions, research team construction, institutional governance, fundraising, achievements and activities, and alumni networks. This paper proposes a framework for the generation paths of university think tanks that align with the essential characteristics of think tanks. It emphasizes that, as research consulting organizations emerging from universities, university think tanks must uphold the scientific integrity and independence of their research while providing support and services for decision-making. Only in this way can they genuinely facilitate scientific and democratic decision-making, earn public trust, and create a lasting impact. This

situation inspired the authors to survey the services offered by academic libraries' think tanks. This study examines whether academic libraries are considering offering think tank services and identifies the benefits and challenges that may arise from doing so.

2. Research Methods

The primary research approach for this study is a specially designed questionnaire with research objects. The target population group is large academic institutions' libraries, including libraries of selected double first-class universities in China, social science libraries, libraries in state party schools or organs, and libraries in military academies. These libraries reflect the contemporary state of Chinese academic libraries in a variety of ways, including scientific research capabilities, information resources, and information services.

In addition to conducting interviews and phone discussions, the research team will send emails and administer the survey via an online questionnaire system. To assure the survey's validity and authenticity, a peer-to-peer (P2P) mode is used for questionnaire distribution and collection. Before beginning the research endeavor, all prospective participants were given the option to provide informed consent.

The questionnaire applied in this survey consists of 20 questions, including eight single-choice questions, eight multiple-choice questions, three matrix scale questions, and one essay question. This first part of the survey focuses on the current situation and the willingness of academic libraries to provide think tank services. The second part discusses the influence and significance of think tank services in libraries. The third part explores specific measures academic libraries take to establish think tank services. The final part considers librarians' suggestions regarding the provision of think tank services in libraries.

From 2019 to 2020, 96 copies of the questionnaire were issued. Of these, 63 were collected, with a collection rate of 65.6%. After eight copies were rejected due to incomplete information and other problems, 55 valid questionnaires were obtained, with a valid questionnaire rate of 87.3%. Identifying and correcting data quality issues such as missing values, inconsistencies, and errors is a time-consuming process. It necessitates data cleansing, validation, and reconciliation, all of which have delayed the presentation of the report.

The pertinent survey data was analyzed using SPSS version 29 software. To be more precise, each valid

questionnaire's data was individually imported into SPSS 29, and all of the data was subjected to full-scale univariate and interaction analyses. A reliability test indicated that the survey's results are extremely consistent and dependable, with a Cronbach's Alpha value of 90%. [17][18][19].

3. Results and Findings

3.1 Awareness of Academic Libraries Towards Think Tank Services

This survey aims to determine whether Chinese librarians are aware of think tank services that have been implemented in prestigious academic libraries across the country and whether they are ready to participate in their implementation.

3.1.1 Understanding of the Provision of Think Tank Services from Academic Libraries

Faced with the question, "Do you know about the provision of think tank services in academic libraries?" almost two-thirds of respondents chose "Know Something" (60%) and "Know Very Well" (1.82%). However, more than one-third of librarians selected "Know a Little" (36.36%) or "Know Nothing" (1.82%). A vast majority of answers are either "Know Something" or "Know a Little", while a tiny minority "Know Very Well" or "Know Nothing" (see Fig. 1).
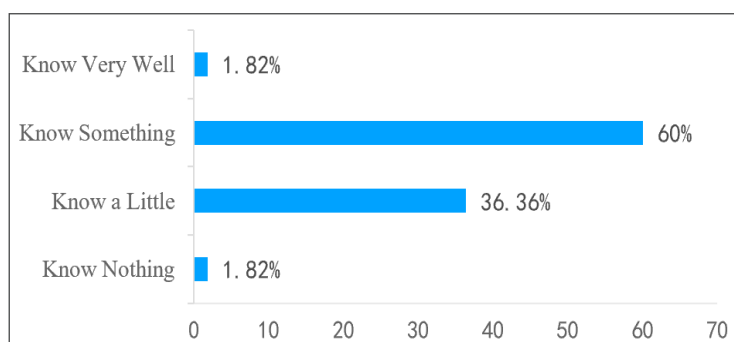

Figure 1. *Librarians' comprehension of think tank services in university libraries.*

3.1.2 Attitudes Towards the Provision of Think Tank Services in Academic Libraries

The majority of librarians (76.36%) who responded to the survey said they thought academic libraries should offer think tank services. The fact that no one selected "No Need to Provide Think Tank Services" suggests that an overwhelming number of respondents favor offering these kinds of services. In addition, just one respondent (1.82%) is "Indifferent" to the provision of think tank services, while a tiny minority of respondents (21.82%) are "Uncertain." As a result, almost 25% of librarians have some doubts regarding the think tank's services. Subsequent investigation demonstrates a clear relationship between the queries "Do academic libraries need to provide think tank services?" and "Do you know about the provision of think tank services?" Specifically, respondents unfamiliar with think tank services tend to be more uncertain about the provision of think tank services (see Fig. 2).
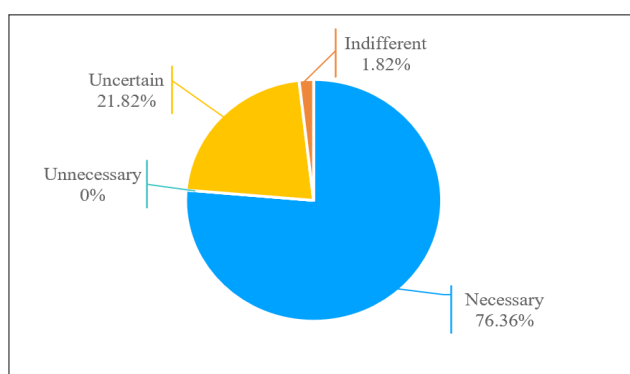

Figure 2. *Librarians' attitudes towards the provision of think tank services*

3.1.3 Current Situation of Think Tank Services in Academic Libraries

For the question "Has your library launched or will it launch think tank services?" more than half of librarians (52.73%) selected "Already Launched." Approximately one-tenth of academic libraries (9.09%) plan to launch think tank services, but over two-thirds have no plans to provide them. However, further analysis reveals that among the librarians who have "No Plans for Think Tank Services," many are positive toward the provision of think tank services in academic libraries (see Fig. 3).
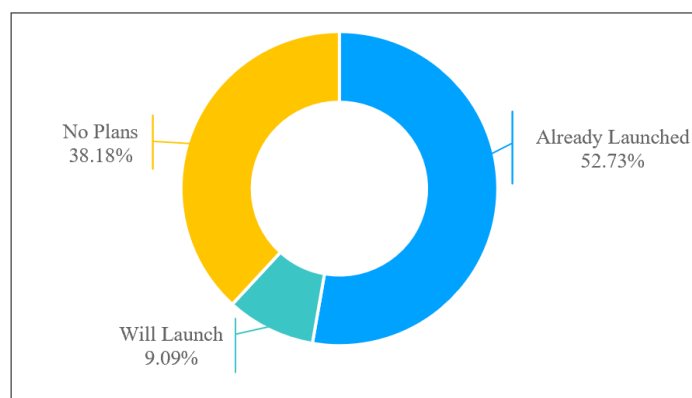
Figure 3. *Current state of think tank services provided by academic libraries*

3.2 Factors Influencing the Provision of Think Tank Services

3.2.1 Factors Influencing the Provision of Think Tank Services in Academic Libraries

The poll indicates that internal motivations are the primary motivators for university libraries that have started or want to start think tank services. However, external variables like policy, the environment, demands, etc., frequently set the necessary conditions for providing such services. "Innate Motivation for Service Innovation in Libraries" (97.06%), "Intellectual Advantages for Libraries in Resources, Technologies, and Talents" (85.29%), and "Active

Reaction to the Need for the Establishment and Growth of New Think Tanks" (79.41%) are the primary internal factors. External influences can be divided into two categories: "Demand for Think Tank Services in Libraries" (61.76%) and "Support from Superior Departments" (67.65%). Furthermore, nearly one-third of those surveyed reported having "Practical Experience in Think Tank Services for Reference" (29.41%). Thus, it is clear that there is a great deal of room for growth in the provision of think tank services in academic libraries, as this component does not yet have a large impact on such services (see Fig. 4).
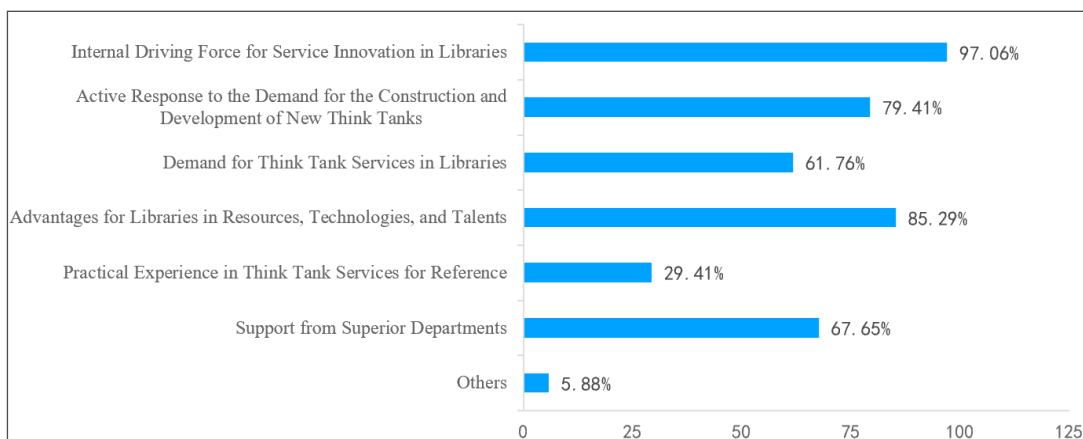

Figure 4. *Factors influencing the delivery of think tank services*

3.2.2 Recognition of Think Tank Service Significance in Academic Libraries

The questionnaire examines the significance of the provision of think tank services in academic libraries from three perspectives: "Academic Library Development," "Think Tank Development," and "Library & Information Science Development." The survey reveals that all respondents (100%) fully acknowledge the significance of enriching the contribution of libraries through the provision of think tank services. Besides, it is almost universally believed that the provision of think tank services broadens the

functions of libraries (94.12%), improves the status and influence of libraries (94.12%), and promotes the strategic transformation of libraries (91.18%). Most respondents recognize that the provision of think tank services improves the information attainment quality of think tanks (88.23%), enables think tanks to acquire more specialized and valuable services (88.24%), creates new growth areas for libraries (85.3%) and boosts integrated development between library-related disciplines and other disciplines (79.41%). However, awareness of how academic libraries enhance the positive impact of think tanks is quite limited (58.82%).
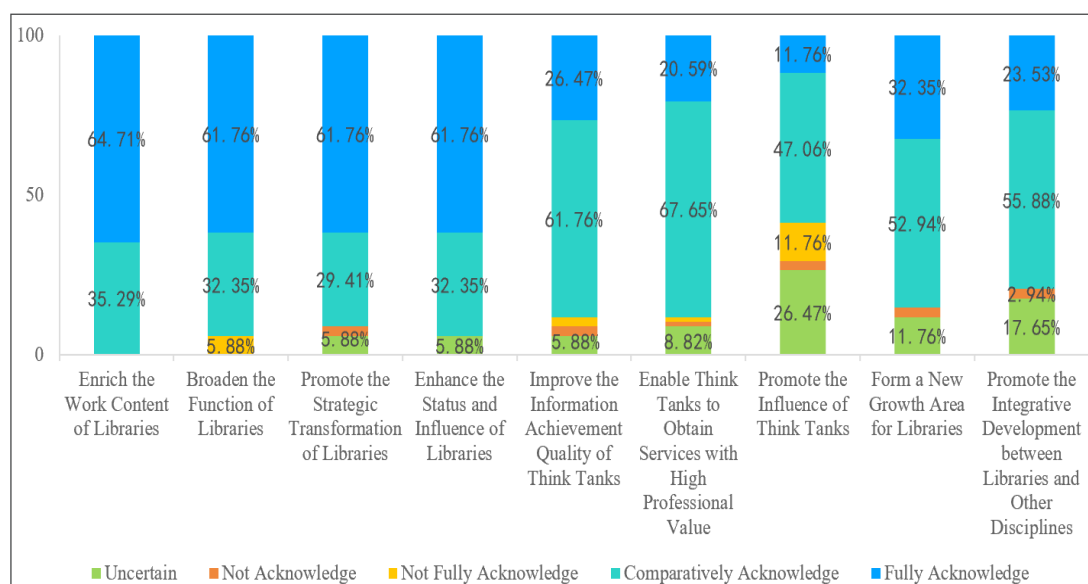
Figure 5. *Recognition of the significance of think tank services*

3.2.3 Factors Influencing the Failure of Academic Libraries to Provide Think Tank Services

The number of academic libraries without plans to offer think tank services occupies 38.18% of the total number of surveyed samples. This suggests that more than one-third of academic libraries are uncertain about offering think tank services. However, the failure of academic libraries to launch think tank services is mainly caused by a lack of available practical experience (90.5%) and a lack of technologies, resources, and talents (66.7%). Additionally, most respondents from academic libraries without plans to offer think tank services believe that think tanks have few demands for library services (61.9%). This indirectly confirms that the current degree of correlation between academic libraries and think tanks in China is relatively low. Expenditure, policies, and other aspects are not key factors that impede the provision of think tank services in academic libraries. Besides, some individual respondents think that a "Low Degree of Think Tank Awareness" is the leading cause for difficulties in launching think tank services (see Fig. 6).
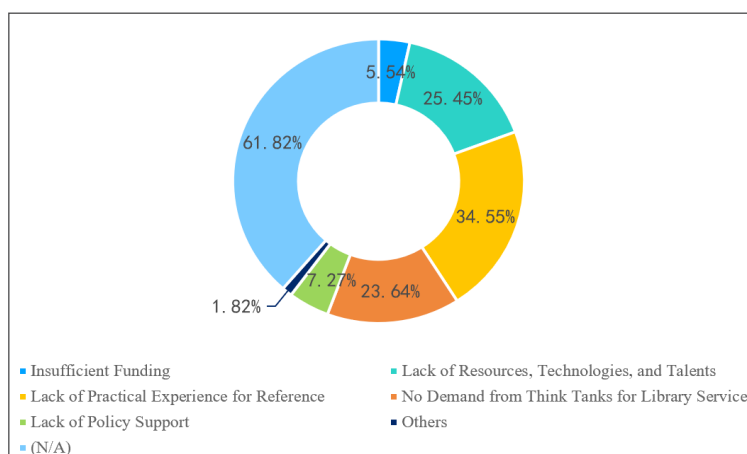

Figure 6. *Factors influencing the failure to provide think tank services*

3.3 Modes of Think Tank Service Offered in Academic Libraries

3.3.1 General Types of Think Tank Services in Academic Libraries

"Providing Think Tanks with Professional Library & Information Services" and "Accepting the Sub-Contracted Production of Think Tank Information Achievement" are the most common service types selected by academic libraries that have started think tank services, according to the survey. Think tanks will become the new home for only 11.76% of academic libraries. Nevertheless, academic libraries that have successfully made these changes have started offering services like "Accepting the Sub-Contracted Production of Think Tank Information Achievement" and "Providing Think Tanks with Professional Library & Information Services" (refer to Fig. 7).
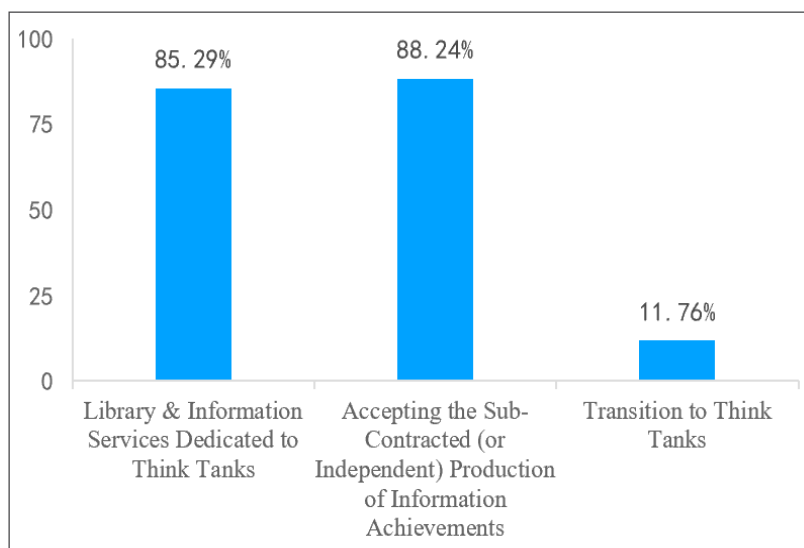
Figure 7. *General types of think tank services*

3.3.2 Practices of Academic Libraries that Provide Think Tank Services

The findings of the survey indicate that academic libraries that have launched think tank services mainly conduct technology search services (94.12%), SDI services (85.29%), development strategy reports (79.41%), and scientific research trend supervision (76.47%). Relatively common think tank service practice modes also include scientific research hotspot analysis (70.59%), scientific follow-up research projects (61.76%), and institutional influence evaluations (55.88%). Less common think tank services involve participation in think tank tasks, participation in government sector policy making, implementation of think tank-related training, and establishment of "Information Space" (see Fig. 8).
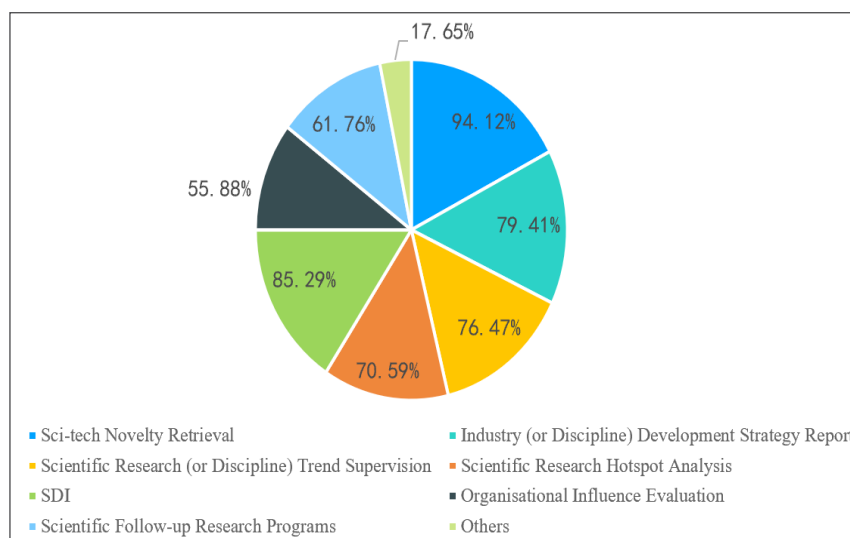

Figure 8. *Practices of academic libraries in providing think tank services*

3.3.3 Exploration of the Feasible Provision Modes of Think Tank Services in Academic Libraries

All respondents in the survey agree that the mainstream means adopted by academic libraries to provide think tank services should include the provision of literature search services to think tanks based on reference books and databases (100%). Most also state that the creation of think tank information resource databases (94.12%) and the introduction of information resources in line with think tank demand (85.29%) are important service modes. Besides, a majority of respondents believe that open access to think tank information achievements and digital publishing (76.47%), think tank scientific research data management (73.53%), and information platforms jointly created with think tanks (70.59%) may develop as mainstream modes for think tank service provision in the future. However, the respondents' recognition of implementing think tank member information literacy training (67.65%), creating exclusive think tank spaces within libraries (50%), and holding think tank forums and conferences (47.06%) is relatively low (see Fig. 9).
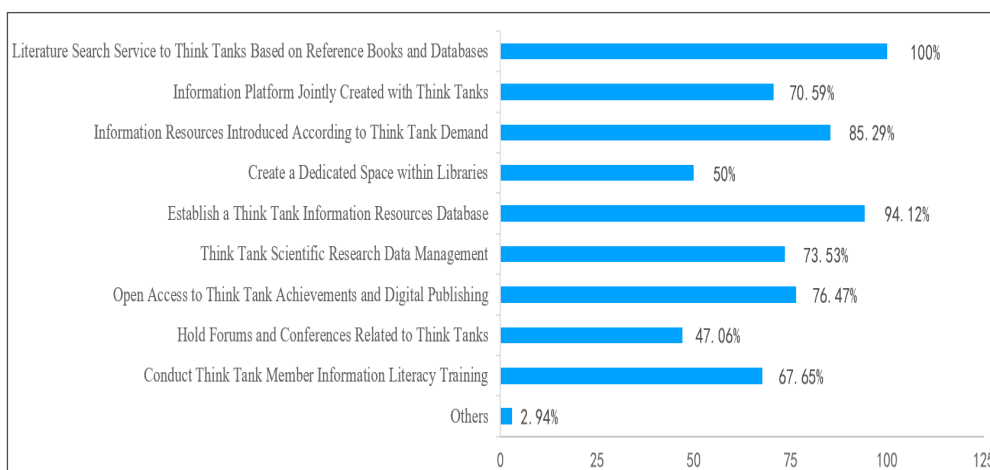
Figure 9. *Exploration of viable methods for providing think tank services*

3.3.4 Transition from Academic Libraries to Think Tank Institutions

Over half of university libraries that have started offering think tank services (58.82%) are in support of academic libraries becoming think tanks, according to the survey. Think tanks could replace academic libraries in the future, according to a small percentage of academic libraries (2.94%), while a minority of academic libraries (38.24%) have a conservative view on the move.
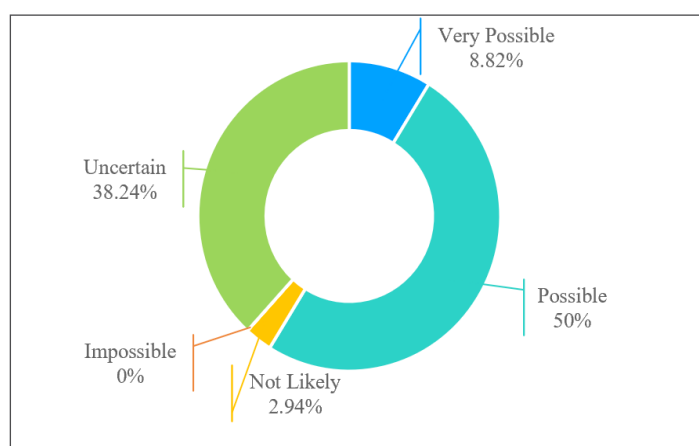

Figure 10. *Transition from academic libraries to think tanks.*

An overwhelming majority of respondents regard "Policy-Based Support" as the decisive factor (97.06%) to realise the transition to think tanks. Moreover "Subjective Wishes of Library Leaders" (94.12%) and "Academic Talents" (94.12%) also exert a strong impact. "Smooth Information Achievement Submission Channel" (88.24%) and "Organisation and Management Mode Similar to Think Tanks" (76.4%) also affect the transition to think tanks to some extent. A very small number of respondents believe "Funding" (2.98%) is a constraining factor, while the same number disagree wholly with such a transition.
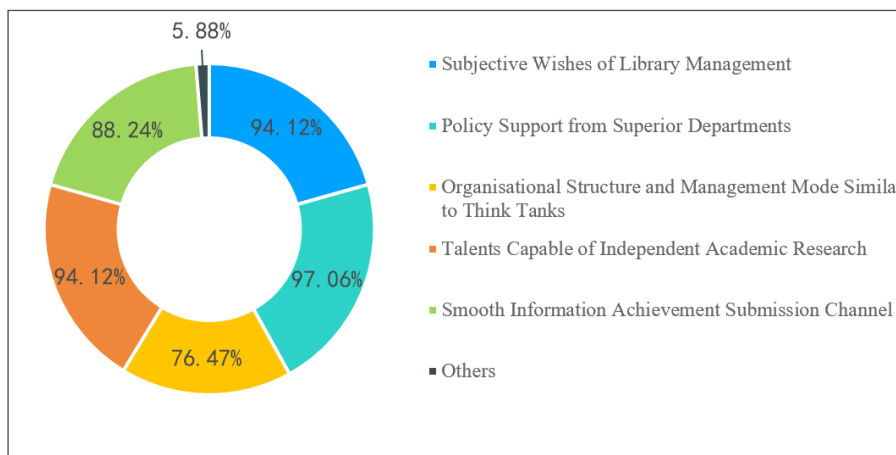

Figure 11. *Conditions of transition from academic libraries to think tanks.*

3. 4 Think Tank Service Organization in Academic Libraries

3.4.1 Internal Organisation for the Think Tank Services of Academic Libraries

Regarding the internal organization of think tank services in academic libraries, the survey questions focus on the allocation of think tank librarians in academic libraries and the creation of departments that specialize in providing think tank services.

Over 50% of respondents (58.82%) say that it is necessary to allocate specialist think tank librarians when providing think tank services. More than one-third of those surveyed (32.35%) are uncertain about the allocation of specialist think tank librarians, while only a small minority (8.82%) think that there is no need to allocate specialist think tank librarians in academic libraries. Thus, librarians currently working in academic libraries that have launched think tank services are generally open and positive towards the allocation of specialist think tank librarians.
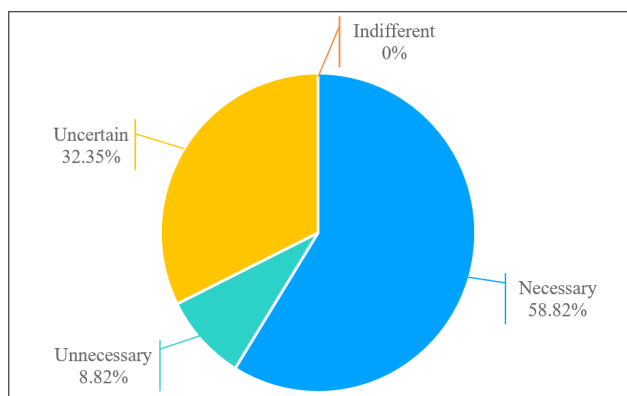

Figure 12. *Examination of necessity from the viewpoint of librarians*

Concerning the elements that impact the effectiveness of think tank librarians' services, factors influencing the service effectiveness of academic librarians are divided into "Very Important," "Comparatively Important," "Generally Important," "Not Very Important," and "Not Important at All," according to the views of respondents on the importance of services.

Information analysis ability (76%), active service awareness (68%), knowledge reserve in the think tank industry (53%), and information achievement promotion ability (53%), as determined by the analysis, are considered "Very Important" characteristics by over 50% of respondents. This implies that think tank services in university libraries need librarians

to be knowledgeable about information analysis, service awareness, the think tank sector, and how to promote information achievement. The percentage of "Comparatively Important" characteristics is as follows: "Innovative Thinking" (56%), "Teamwork" (68%), "Quick Learning Ability" (65%), "Communication Skills" (62%), "Project Management Competence" (62%), and "Library and Information Knowledge" (53%). Among the "Generally Important" factors, the proportion of respondents choosing "Working Experience in Libraries" is the highest (50%), but a significant number consider such a factor "Comparatively Important" (41%). Thus, there is widespread disagreement about whether librarians who specialize in think tank services need to accumulate related working experience in libraries.
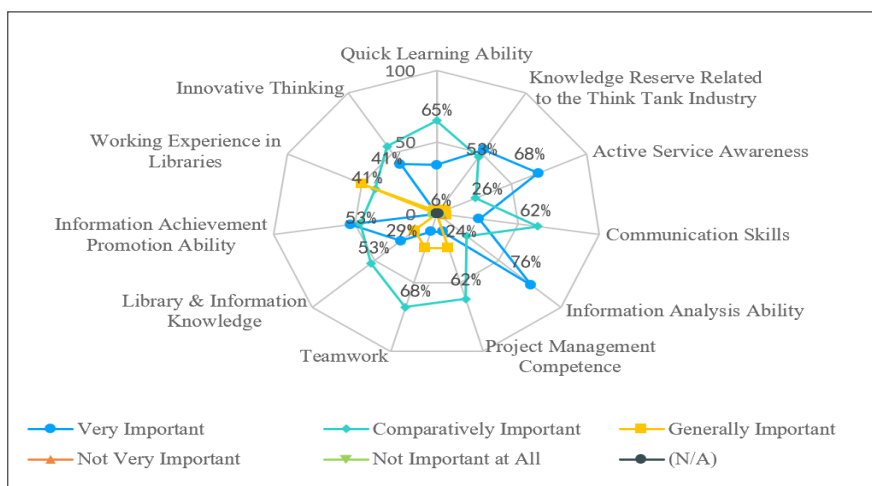

Figure 13. *Librarian capacity factors in academic libraries*

As per the survey findings, fifty percent of university libraries believe that different divisions within libraries should be responsible for delivering think tank services. Notwithstanding, a minority of participants selected "Establish an Independent Department within the Library" (17.65%) or "Collaboration with External Institutions" (14.71%). Furthermore, a respectable proportion of participants (17.65%) provide their personal viewpoints under the "Others" option, which could entail collaborating with private or public sectors or involving other ideas. Thus, the provision of think tank services in academic libraries mainly depends on inter-departmental cooperation within libraries. Few respondents prefer the establishment of independent departments within libraries that specialize in think tank services (see Fig. 14).
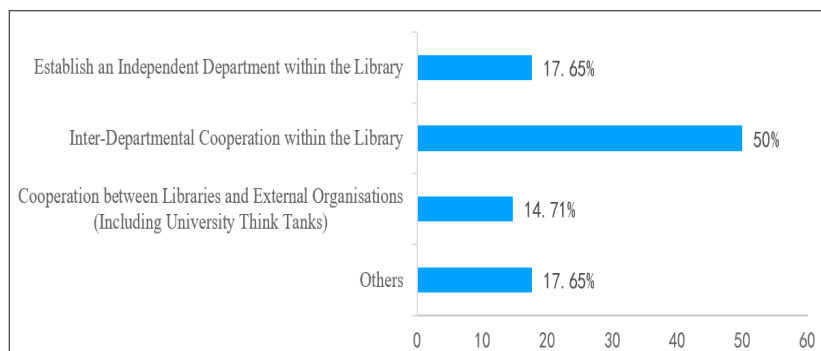

Figure 14. *Internal organization of think tank services in academic libraries*

3.4.2 External Cooperation Related to the Think Tank Services of Academic Libraries

The survey findings indicate that all academic libraries prefer to cooperate with external organizations to provide think tank services. Specifically, "Teaching and Scientific Research Institutes" (76.47%) and "Think Tanks" (73.53%) are the two most popular options. Besides, "Other Libraries" (58.82%) and "Technology Units" (50%) are secondary options. However, the willingness to cooperate with "Societies/Associations" (44.12%), "Foundations" (35.29%), and "Individuals" (26.47%) is relatively low. Under the option "Others", some respondents are "Uncertain", indicating a vague attitude towards any kind of cooperation.
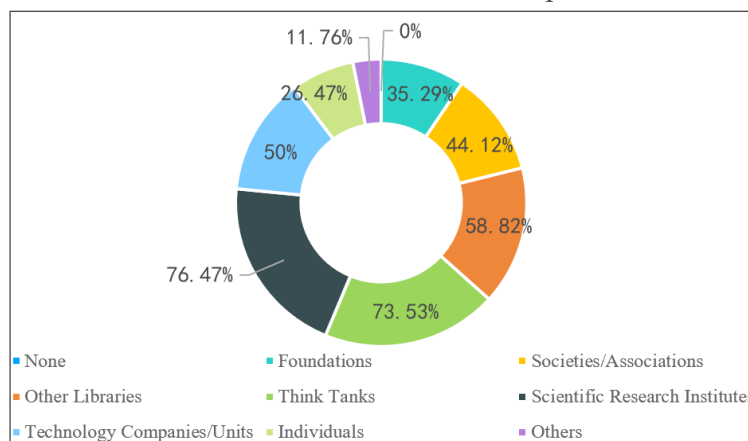

Figure 15. *External cooperation related to the think tank services*

3.5 Building Think Tank Service Capacity

3.5.1 Factors Affecting Think Tank Service Capacity in Academic Libraries

Based on librarians' judgments, the impact of possible factors related to the capacity of academic libraries to provide quality think tank services are divided into five categories: "Strong Impact," "Large Impact," "General Impact," "Minor Impact," and "No Impact."

Of the various capacity factors, more than 50% of respondents think that "Academic Research Ability of Libraries" (65%) exerts a strong influence. Capacity factors where more than half of those surveyed chose "Large Impact" include "Cooperation Between Libraries and Think Tanks" (65%), "Think Tank-Related Academic Activities Conducted by Libraries" (50%), and "Inter-Departmental Coordination Ability within Libraries" (50%). Other factors deemed to exert a certain impact on think tank services include "Understanding of Libraries Towards Users Seeking Policy-Making Consultation," "Information Resources of Libraries," "Ability of Libraries to Promote Information Achievements," "Mastery of Libraries in Information Analysis Technologies," etc.
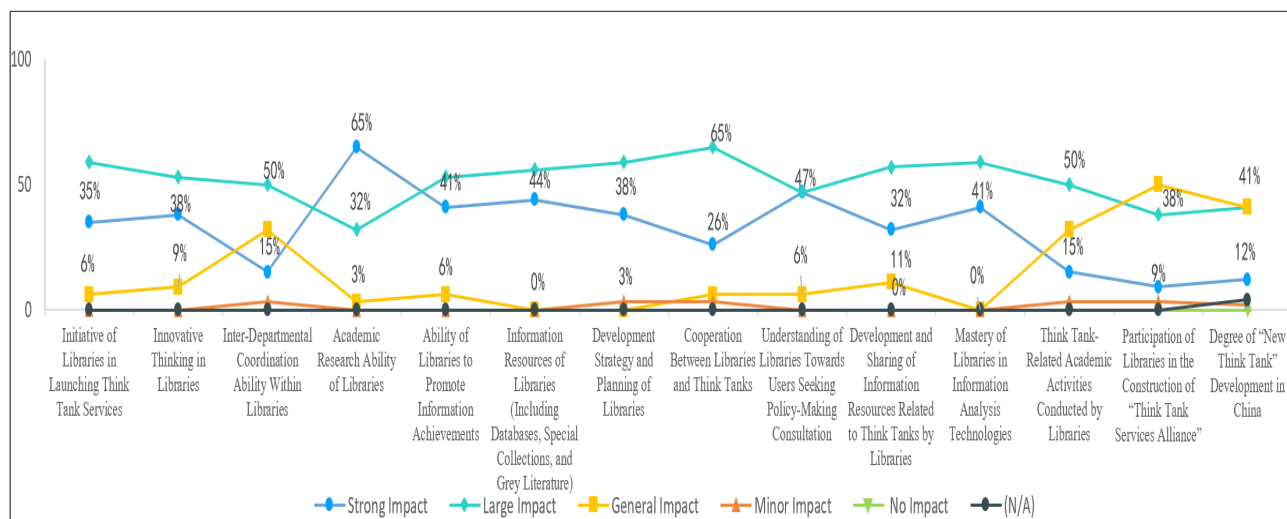
Figure 16. *Factors affecting think tank capacity in academic libraries.*

The survey also covers a discussion on whether academic libraries are responsible for improving the information literacy of think tank members. Most respondents think that academic libraries should enhance think tank members' information literacy (79.41%), while the rest hold an "Uncertain" attitude.
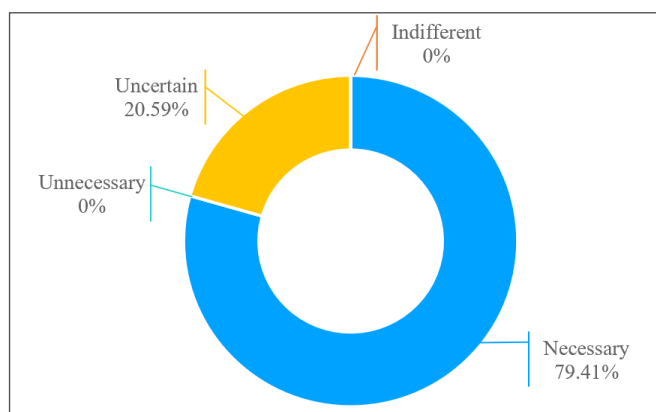

Figure 17. *Influence of academic libraries on the information literacy of think tank members.*

3.5.2 Attitudes Towards the Integration of Think Tank Services in Academic Libraries into the Library Evaluation System

A majority of respondents (70.59%) feel that the think tank service capacity of academic libraries should be included in the system used to evaluate libraries. On the other hand, just a small percentage of respondents (2.94%) and 2.94%) are "Indifferent" or "Uncertain," while around one-fifth of respondents (23.53%) believe it is unnecessary.
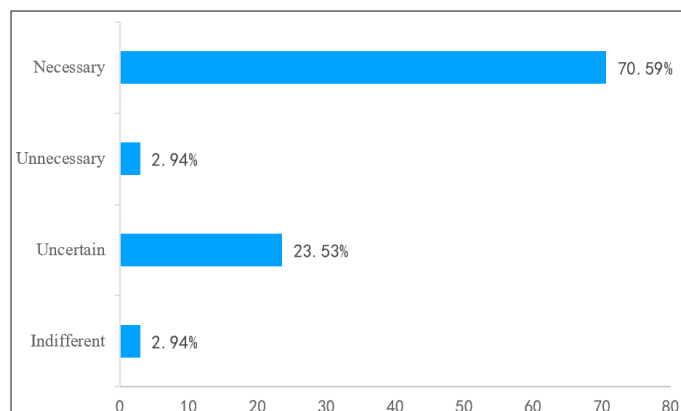

Figure 18. *Attitude toward the integration of think tank services into the library evaluation system*

3.6 Issues and Recommendations Regarding the Provision of Think Tank Services

The final part of the questionnaire contains questions about potential issues regarding the provision of think tank services. Librarians were also asked for their suggestions.

3.6.1 Required Improvements for the Provision of Think Tank Services in Academic Libraries

Respondents prioritize particular concerns that libraries should address during the debut of think tank services based on priority. "Integrate think tank services into the development strategy of the library" (94.12%) is the most pressing concern. "Design a system guarantee and organizational structure in line with think tank services" (88.24%) is the second most often expressed issue. "Conduct information resource construction based on the demand for think tank services" (85.29%) and "Establish a high-level talent team" (82.35%) rank third and fourth, respectively, in terms of importance. "Determine the specific service type" (70.59%), "Policy support from superior departments" (76.47%), and "Acquire knowledge related to think tanks" (67.65%) are the next three difficulties. Finally, some librarians claim that one condition for the provision of think tank services is to form influential information achievements.
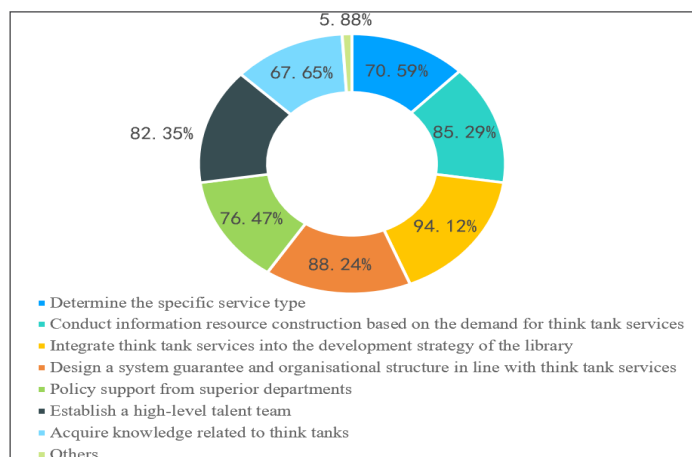

Figure 19. *Work required for the provision of think tank services*

3.6.2 Suggestions Regarding the Provision of Think Tank Services in Academic Libraries

A number of academic librarians have made recommendations about think tank services. Academic libraries ought to procure a maximum number of external resources, including robust administrative backing, and consistently endeavor to facilitate information achievement submitting routes. Furthermore, university libraries ought to prioritize the sincere requests of think tanks and create work plans that are both feasible and practical. Furthermore, some librarians believe that competent university libraries should look at starting think tank services. Libraries should not, however, heedlessly follow the fad and provide these services if they have not complied with all the rules or standards. Libraries should also refrain from acting like think tanks and offering think tank services without producing enough relevant content.

4 Conclusions and Issus for Further Studies

The results of this poll have given the writers a thorough understanding of how people feel about think tank services being offered in university libraries. Important information about the provision of think tank services is also provided by the survey results. The study presented here allows for the following conclusions and recommendations to be made:

4.1 Academic Libraries in China Support the Provision of Think Tank Services, but Their Popularisation Needs to Be Enhanced

While think tank services are widely welcomed by Chinese academic libraries, about one-third of the country's most important academic libraries have no plans to offer them. The main obstacle preventing the majority of academic libraries from offering think tank services is a lack of relevant experience. As a result, think tank services have a lot of room to grow in popularity in Chinese academic libraries. The academic library community as a whole must quickly gain excellent think tank service experience to promote such popularization.

4.2 The Provision of Think Tank Services in Academic Libraries Is Influenced by Both Internal and External Factors, but Internal Factors Are Dominant

Among the internal factors, "Internal Driving Force for Service Innovation in Libraries" and "Advantages for Libraries in Resources, Technologies, and Talents" are the two most dominant factors that affect the launch of think tank services in academic libraries. Libraries must realise service innovation and sustainable development based on the provision of think tank services. The academic library community has already identified the inherent advantages of

launching think tank services and holds a positive attitude towards the development of new services by utilising local advantages. Nevertheless, a lack of realistic experience and the demanding nature of think tanks reflect the limited development of think tank services in Chinese academic libraries. Moreover, the foundations for interaction and cooperation between academic libraries and think tanks are weak. In the future, academic libraries in China should publicise the high-quality practical experience of prominent units and actively associate with think tanks to satisfy the demands of the think tank industry.

4.3 Current Think Tank Services in Academic Libraries Are Mainly Based on Literature Information Resource Management with a Low Level of Independence in Generating Information Products

More than 80% of academic libraries that have launched think tank services consider their think tank service type to be "Services Dedicated to Think Tanks". However, in reality, they only achieve low levels of independence in generating information products or carrying out think tank services. In most cases, the think tank services in academic libraries are based on literature information resource management, such as sci-tech novelty retrieval, research trend supervision, scientific research hotspot services, SDI, etc. These facts indirectly verify that academic libraries are confused about the specific definition of think tank services and cannot clearly distinguish them from basic library services. Therefore, think tank services in academic libraries should be popularised and promoted.

4.4 Academic Libraries Prefer to Launch Think Tank Services Through Inter-Departmental Coordination and Favor Cooperation with Various Organizations

In terms of internal organizations, more than half of academic libraries consider inter-departmental cooperation within libraries to be the optimal approach for providing think tank services. Regarding external organizations, all academic libraries are eager to cooperate with external institutions and regard "Teaching and Scientific Research Institutes" and "Think Tanks" as their foremost choices.

4.5 A Positive Attitude Towards the Transition of Academic Libraries to Think Tanks Requires Both Internal Driving Forces and External Support

The overall extent of the transition of academic libraries to think tanks is not high enough. Nevertheless, most

academic libraries hold a positive attitude towards the transition to think tanks, while one-tenth of them think it is very likely that they will become legitimate think tanks. However, two key factors play a pivotal role in such a transition, namely policy support from superior departments and sufficient awareness during the transition.

4.6 Academic Libraries Need to Attach Great Importance to Assessing Various Conditions for Scientifically Launching Think Tank Services

Despite having a generally positive attitude and being willing to realize the transition to think tanks, some respondents to the survey indicated that they remain skeptical about think tank services being offered in academic libraries. Their main issue is specifically whether academic libraries are equipped to start think tank services. As a result, it is vital to evaluate a number of variables, including internal and external environments, subjective and objective conditions, and external conditions, prior to the introduction of think tank services in Chinese university libraries. Strengthening controls over service quality and avoiding mindlessly following trends should be prioritized when providing think tank services.

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