

An analysis of the Incentive Mechanisms to Enhance
Individual Performance in Chinese Higher Vocational Education

DBA CANDIDATE:
Xin Wang

Research Principles and Philosophy Report
Module Leader: Dr Caroline Jawad

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1. Introduction

This report critically examines prevailing assumptions in academic literature regarding performance incentives in Chinese higher vocational education. It analyzes whether prevailing theories grounded in Western cultural contexts can be directly applied to the unique institutional dynamics of Chinese vocational college system. By adopting an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative approach, this report aims to construct a theoretical perspective on the effectiveness of incentives in the context of specific cultural values and workplace realities.

The report challenges the convention in existing studies of limiting research to a narrow exploration of incentive design mechanisms and narrow dimensions of employee behaviour. The report advocates a study from the perspective of the cultural subjectivity of Chinese vocational educators and the complexity of motivation. As such, the report proposes an alternative conceptual model of efficacy as a mediator between multiple incentives and positive organisational behaviour.

In addition, the report examines philosophical assumptions in notable management theories and debates their cross-cultural transferability. It contends that the prevalent focus on resolving dysfunction ignores actualizing human potential. Hence concepts from positive psychology are incorporated to align with traditional Chinese beliefs on self-cultivation.

The intended outcome is an elucidation of the social constructions and interpretations that academics often overlook when offering incentive prescriptions devoid of local nuances. This report uncovers the value judgments, power dynamics and systemic interactions enmeshed in Chinese higher vocational education that must be surfaced, analyzed and addressed for incentive initiatives to succeed. The aim is translating philosophy into pragmatic guidance on reforms that resonate with vocational college educators' worldviews and lived realities.

1.1 Background

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, with the issuance of the *National Vocational Education Reform Implementation Plan*, a new era of significant reforms and development in vocational education has emerged. The *14th Five-Year Plan* has been instrumental in advocating for a high-quality education system, emphasizing increased investment in human resources, enhancing the adaptability of vocational and technical education, fostering deeper integration of vocational and general education, and promoting collaboration between industry and education, as well as partnerships between colleges and enterprises. The *Key Points of the Work of the Central Political Bureau Standing Committee* in 2021 emphasized the necessity to construct an education system catering to a skill-oriented

society. To accomplish these objectives, it is crucial to continuously refine the positioning of vocational education types, advance the development of the Chinese vocational education system.

In April 2019, the Chinese Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance issued opinions on implementing the *Double-High Plan*, focusing on the construction of high-level vocational colleges and majors with Chinese characteristics. One of the ten major objectives of this plan is to enhancing the professional expertise of educators. Educators, as the primary foundation of education, play a crucial role in shaping talent development. Therefore, higher vocational colleges need to implement a performance management system based on a robust performance evaluation framework to ensure the continuous improvement of employees' working capabilities (Xu, 2023).

Since 2010, under the guidance of the State Council, higher vocational colleges in China have initiated a series of reforms in their performance salary systems, introducing an incentive mechanism related to the principles of rewarding increased effort and recognizing remarkable performance. Despite these efforts, the implementation of these policies has encountered several challenges across various institutions. Inequity in resource allocation between administrative and academic departments have the potential to intensify existing tensions (Zhou, 2023). Moreover, with the growing influence of Generation Z in the workforce, there is an

escalating need for incentives that cater to psychological motivations. The heavy reliance on material rewards in the performance salary reform has shown limited effectiveness (Han, 2010). This highlights the necessity for a more thoughtful incentive mechanism in higher vocational education, which integrates elements of Chinese culture.

2. Aims, Objectives, and Research Questions

2.1 Aims

To develop a thorough understanding of the influence of incentive mechanisms on the individual performance of employees in Chinese higher vocational education. Subsequently, to propose practical solutions aimed at promoting their capabilities and overall professional performance.

2.2 Objectives

- Investigate the current incentives implemented in Chinese higher vocational education
- Understand the extent that incentives influence individual performance of employees
- Examine the challenges inherent in the existing incentive mechanisms within Chinese higher vocational education and provide recommendations for enhancing individual performance

2.3 Research Questions

- What type of incentive system is presently employed by higher education institutions, and what are the primary policies within this framework?
- What motivates employees' performance behaviors, and to what extent are they satisfied with the existing incentive policies?
- What challenges are encountered, and what strategies can be devised for the reform of the incentive system in Chinese higher vocational education?

2.4 Research Gap

Research on the performance incentive mechanisms in Chinese higher vocational colleges has mostly focused on the analysis of institutional design, implementation, and management aspects. However, there remains a notable gap concerning behavioral motivation of employees. Furthermore, the application of Western management theories in practice encounters challenges in accommodating the varied needs of employees within the unique cultural context of Chinese higher vocational colleges. Additionally, prevailing research perspectives have largely been confined to examining employees and the vocational colleges themselves, with insufficient emphasis on the crucial influence of leadership in performance management. Consequently, this paper intends to

incorporate a broad spectrum of motivation theories, extending the investigation of performance management from the individual level to encompass team dynamics, leadership, organizations and governmental influences.

3. Literature Reviews

3.1 Introduction

This study explores the performance incentive mechanisms for employees in higher vocational colleges, integrating insights from organizational behavior, psychology, and management. By conducting an extensive review of literature from both Chinese and international sources, the study concentrates on evolving performance incentive systems to boost employee initiative in their professional roles. The objective is to comprehend the impact of modifications in performance management on enhancing employee motivation and promoting organizational behavior. The analysis will address approaches to revamp performance incentive frameworks, ensuring they not only encourage employee activity, but also positively influence the overall organizational environment.

3.2 Research on Performance Incentives

During the evolution of organizational behavior, Taylor's (1911) theory of scientific management was pivotal in maximizing work efficiency. His

salary incentive system, particularly effective in meeting economic needs during the 1920s and 1930s, linked employee performance directly with rewards and punishments (Nugrahaningsih, 2021). This approach involved creating clear, objective, and measurable assessment criteria to determine the applicability of rewards or sanctions, such as performance-based salary systems (Cao, 2023). This holds significant relevance for managing employees with certain inertia issues, and in some developing countries, performance-based salary systems continue to dominate. However, challenges arise in the formulation of objective and quantifiable indicators, with these often being unilaterally issued rather than collaboratively developed with employees. Aligning individual performance indicators with the fundamental goals of the organization poses another significant challenge (Xu, 2023). Additionally, there is skepticism regarding the transparency of performance assessment (Han, 2010).

Classical organizational theory emphasized the rationalization of organizational structures and highlights the vital role of managers. It involves complex and abstract concepts, as illustrated by Fayol (1908), who outlined 14 principles of management and 5 key elements of administration (Fayol, 1916). Weber viewed employees as ‘economic men’ and proposed an ideal bureaucratic model, highlighting the importance of leadership roles and advocating for autocratic management

within a strict hierarchical framework. Rotemberg (1993) suggested that leadership style, regardless of its nature, significantly influences employee motivation. In scenarios requiring rapid decision-making, autocratic leadership can be particularly appealing, enhancing managerial efficiency. In contrast, Qomariah (2022) argued that democratic leadership, which involves leading by example, valuing employee input, and caring for staff, fosters responsibility, timely task completion, and improved performance. Integrating leadership approaches into Chinese-characterized management might require a careful blending of cultural elements. Countering Weber's 'economic man' concept, Hawthorne (1920) viewed workers as 'social beings', recognizing the impact of not just material, but also social and psychological factors. The Hawthorne experiments revealed that awareness of observation led to increased productivity. McGregor (1960) advocated for employee involvement in decision-making, encouraging a voluntary commitment to work. Enhancing job satisfaction can act as a driver for better performance, thus increasing organizational effectiveness in facing employee-related challenges (Massar, 2020). This approach moves away from external control, relying more on employees' intrinsic self-discipline. Establishing effective communication across organizational levels contrasts sharply with the rigid hierarchies of Fayol and others. Managers need both technical and social skills to inspire

enthusiasm by addressing employees' psychological needs (Hourani, 2021). Mintzberg (1958) viewed organizational management as a dynamic process, asserting that the success of any management model depends on its fit with the specific organizational context. Thus, a universally effective approach does not exist, and adaptability to environmental and internal factors is key (Anwar, 2017).

Traditional organizational behavior theories often focus on addressing human functional dysfunctions and inherent individual shortcomings. In management practice, there is a pronounced emphasis on motivating employees who are marginalized or resistant to change, with strategies aimed at transforming their attitudes and behaviors (Bandura, 2012). This approach encompasses effective conflict management and coping strategies to handle the stresses associated with managing organizational performance. The advent of Positive Organizational Behavior theory in the 21st century marks the emergence of a new research domain. Luthans (2002) explored how positive human resource attributes and psychological capabilities can be applied in the workplace, demonstrating that these measurable and developable aspects can significantly enhance organizational performance objectives. Isomura (2021) illustrated that Positive Organizational Behavior goes beyond simple motivation, showing its direct and indirect impact on both individual self-motivation and the motivation of organizational human resources. Cameron (2003)

highlighted the importance of a positive outlook in nurturing the strengths of both managers and employees, moving beyond a sole focus on weaknesses. This shift underscores the importance of identifying and leveraging employees' strengths, fostering their energy and adaptability, and unlocking their potential. Albrecht (2015) found that employing emotional management tools to cultivate a positive and healthy organizational culture is key to optimizing human resource management. Chandrasekar (2011) emphasized the creation of a visually and emotionally appealing work environment, recognizing its motivational power. Additionally, humanistic coaching and providing opportunities for constructive competition in career development are important for enhancing employee satisfaction and performance (Gabriel, 2014). However, challenges arise with collective incentive plans that may weaken the link between individual contributions and rewards, leading to 'free-riding' behavior and team disharmony, ultimately impacting organizational stability (Dawes, 1986). Furthermore, incentive methods tailored to individual differences are expected to increase management costs (Ichniowski, 2003). Additionally, measuring satisfaction, a psychological and subjective concept, poses significant challenges in practical application (Oliver, 2014). It is essential to develop strategies that maintain high levels of engagement and self-development among organizational members (Turner, 2019). In conclusion, the complexity

and diversity of human needs (Trevillion, 2022) mean that the evolution of any theory relies on continuous practical testing and adaptation.

3.3 Research on Performance Management in Higher Education

Institutions

Performance-based salary, a key management tool in enhancing organizational performance, is currently the predominant performance incentive mechanism in Chinese higher vocational colleges. The fundamental aim of this system is to mitigate negative work behaviors. Compared to traditional fixed salary structures, performance-based salary aligns more closely with the diverse nature of the labor market. However, its implementation in Chinese vocational education exhibits significant drawbacks. In the educational context, the implicit, value-driven contributions of employees, who view education as their central mission, are difficult to quantify in performance evaluations (Harris, 2014). A lack of engagement and understanding among managers, who often consider performance management the sole responsibility of human resources, leads to annual performance assessments becoming a mere formality (Han, 2010). Furthermore, influenced by traditional Chinese values of moderation, leaders are inclined to give favorable evaluations during performance reviews, posing challenges to maintaining the integrity of these assessments (Zhong, 2023). Since higher vocational colleges

operate under government oversight and are not driven by profit motives or market competition, they lack mechanisms for eliminating inefficiencies (Liu, 2023). This situation contributes to a low employee turnover rate in these colleges, fostering organizational inertia while simultaneously diminishing the organizational dynamism and vitality (Mauru, 2023).

The management experiences of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany offer valuable lessons in the field of performance management (Meng, 2011). In the United States, an initial uniform salary scale aimed to eliminate gender wage disparities, basing salaries on teaching experience and educational level (Hanushek, 2016). Since the 1980s, however, the U.S. has increasingly adopted performance-based salary systems, incorporating professional title promotions as part of the incentive structure. These systems, while boosting income and fostering innovative teaching, face challenges in local implementation and must be understood within the context of the U.S.'s market-oriented economy and high mobility (Palma, 2022). Lavy (2007) warns that performance-based salaries can be a 'double-edged sword', potentially leading to biased administrative practices in college employee management (Burger, 2012). Overcoming this requires a robust peer review system.

The United Kingdom, as the pioneer in implementing performance-based salaries, has seen significant developments in performance management.

Initially adopting a top-down punitive performance evaluation system in the early 1980s (Atkin, 2013), the UK later shifted focus to link performance assessment with employee development, emphasizing professional value attainment and promoting autonomous development. However, challenges arose due to vague criteria, leading to practical difficulties (Glover, 2016). It is notable that the UK's performance management system involved government oversight ensuring objectivity, fairness, and transparency (Ball, 1994). Tao (2014) highlighted the importance of government involvement in the top-level design of these systems.

Germany, known for its 'industrial prosperity and national education' tradition, aligns employees' career development with college strategic goals (Deissinger, 2004). Performance assessments are conducted at the employees' careers, guiding appointments, professional development, and training (Terhart, 2019). The German approach includes supportive humanized policies, such as work-life balance assistance and resources for teaching and research (Durham, 2011). Chang (2014) suggested that China could benefit from adopting personalized performance evaluations, tailored to different career stages of employees, ensuring fairness and systematic assessment.

4. Conceptual Framework

4.1 Performance Incentive Mechanism

Xiao (2007) conceptualizes performance as the cumulative results and behavioral output achieved by organizational members through their dedicated efforts. This involves not only the tangible accomplishments of individuals in completing specific tasks under certain conditions, but also extends to aspects such as work efficiency, the quality of task execution, and the resultant economic and social benefits. For instance, in the context of higher vocational colleges, employee performance primarily includes roles like class advising, subject teaching, student education, and involvement in teaching and research activities. Additionally, it encompasses vocational education-specific endeavors such as collaborations between colleges and enterprises, technical services, social training, and part-time roles in industry settings (Qi, 2022). The performance incentive system for employees in these institutions is multifaceted, comprising not just the performance-based salary system, but also encompassing a variety of management systems like professional title evaluations, job promotions, and recognition through honors. These categories cater to different employee needs, including financial incentives, opportunities for professional growth, personal fulfillment, and spiritual recognition, each carrying distinct value orientations and

profound implications (Dou, 2023).

4.1 Organizational Behavior

In the context of positive organizational behavior theory, the analysis of employee behavior in vocational colleges primarily centers on three key aspects: organizational commitment, organizational loyalty, and organizational citizenship behavior, which collectively serve as indicators of effective teamwork and cooperation. These dimensions, encompassing behavioral willingness, professional attitudes, and actions, holistically mirror the positive nature of employees organizational behavior (Song, 2009).

Organizational commitment is a psychological state where members align with and are dedicated to the organization's objectives. In terms of organizational management, higher levels of employee commitment often translate to enhanced job performance, as individuals exert maximum effort for the benefit of the organization. Influences on organizational commitment extend beyond personal traits like personality and attitude, encompassing environmental factors such as organizational identity, culture, and interpersonal relationships within the organization (Meyr, 2001). Mehta's (2010) research suggests that employees with strong organizational commitment tend to invest more time and effort in their work, aiming to uphold the organization's honor.

organizational loyalty is intricately linked to the broader structural and cultural context of the college. It not only impacts individual and group behaviors but also reciprocally affects the college's overall performance and environment. Organizational citizenship behavior, as defined by Organ (2014), involves informal cooperative actions that benefit the organization, representing behaviors beyond formal role expectations. In higher vocational colleges, this behavior is advantageous to the college and manifests as voluntary actions by organizational members. Although these self-initiated behaviors might not be formally rewarded, they are vital for the effective functioning of the organization, advancing its developmental objectives (Podsakoff, 2014).

4.1 Positive Efficacy

Efficacy, a widely recognized concept in psychology, predominantly refers to self-efficacy. It signifies an individual's psychological capacity to develop and motivate themselves, thereby enhancing their work performance. The higher an individual's self-efficacy, the greater their self-confidence in their ability to succeed. According to Albert Bandura's seminal self-efficacy theory (1977), individuals with elevated self-efficacy, characterized by robust self-confidence in their capabilities, tend to initiate a positive feedback loop that results in improved job performance. Furthermore, the Porter-Lawler model of motivation theory

posits that individual job performance is influenced by two critical factors: individual ‘perceived equity’ and the combined impact of ‘sense of accomplishment’ and ‘value attainment’ concerning specific goals (Lawler, 1967). The notion of ‘perceived equity’ can be primarily understood through the lens of Adams’s organizational justice theory (1965). Renowned Harvard psychologist McClelland (1987) contends that human actions are primarily driven by motivation, with the specific motivating factor being the most valued needs within individuals. Schein (1965) adds that individuals possess a system of needs, which involves not only economic needs but also professional, political, and spiritual-cultural needs. Once individuals achieve a sense of self-worth, it generates significant motivation for job performance. Therefore, this study underscores the significance of positive efficacy as a variable closely tied to performance incentives for employees in vocational colleges. Factors within the fields of perceived equity, achievement gain, and value attainment collectively determine the strength of an individual’s positive efficacy.

Firstly, the performance incentive mechanisms for employees in higher vocational colleges encompass a range of measures such as performance-based salary systems, professional title structures, job promotion frameworks, and recognition through honor rewards. These measures, stemming from a systemic perspective on value needs,

correspondingly address the economic, professional, political, and cultural value attainment needs and motivational systems of vocational college educators. Secondly, positive efficacy acts as an intermediary variable between the ‘performance incentive mechanisms’ and ‘organizational behavior’. It gauges an individual’s level of work enthusiasm and the intensity of their work efficacy by considering elements like perceived equity, a sense of accomplishment, and value attainment. Lastly, organizational behavior is assessed through three pivotal dimensions: organizational commitment, organizational loyalty, and organizational citizenship behavior. These dimensions collectively influence the positive efficacy of employee organizational behavior, contributing to the direction of reform in performance management for vocational college educators. The interrelation among these three components forms a comprehensive conceptual framework, as depicted in the figure.

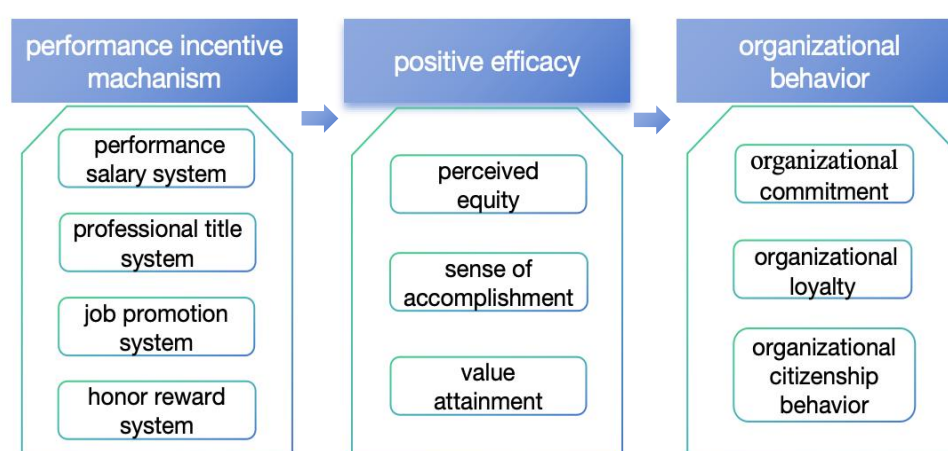


Table 1

5. Research Paradigm and Research Philosophy

5.1 Introduction

The paradigm stands as a foundational and intricate concept within the field of academic research, reflecting diversity across disciplines and theoretical contexts. Thomas Kuhn's (1962) groundbreaking work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, played a vital role in introducing and shaping the paradigm concept. Kuhn (1962) defined paradigms as theoretical frameworks and problem-solving models collectively embraced by the scientific community over extended periods. The dual nature of paradigm is both fixed and subject to change. Fixed paradigms serve as the bedrock, offering a shared theoretical framework within the scientific community, fostering common understanding. However, the evolution of science is often accompanied by paradigm shifts, which marked revolutionary changes in theoretical perspectives. Researchers in the field of social science, exemplified by Barnes and Bloor (1982), emphasize the socially constructed essence of paradigms. Different scholars hold incompatible research paradigms. Characteristics of a paradigm include, firstly, the premise of the paradigm that guides the majority of members of the academic community; secondly, the paradigm is a worldview that is recognised and shared by the community of scholars, and around which the 'invisible academy' is formed. Finally,

paradigms are not superior or inferior. Paradigms are incomparable and contradictory between different academic communities.

5.2 Ontology

Ontology is a philosophical discipline that examines the origin or fundamental substance of the world and explores fundamental questions about the nature, basis, and rationality of existence. From the historical perspective, in the field of ancient Greco-Roman philosophy, ontology has focused primarily on inquiring into the original source or fundamental substance of the world. Philosophers of different schools endeavoured to trace the existence of the world to certain material or spiritual entities, or abstract concepts. From a philosophical point of view, ontology can be divided into two different categories, narrow and broad. Ontology in the narrow sense focuses on the fundamental nature, basis and essence of existence, inquiring into the question of ‘what exists’. In the broad sense, ontology not only studies the fundamental nature and basis of existence, but also explores in depth issues such as the limits and scope of existence, and explores the question of ‘why existence’. Throughout the history of philosophy, the study of ontology has gone through different stages of development, from the ‘existentialism’ of ancient Greece, to the ‘ontology’ of the Middle Ages, to the modern interpretation of ‘ontology’. Each stage of the development of ontology has a different research focus

and methodological features. As an important branch of philosophy, ontology is committed to exploring the fundamental nature, basis and essence of existence, and plays an important role in philosophical enquiry into existential doubts (Lowe, 2005). In this study of ontology within the field of philosophy, in the context of higher vocational education, this ontological inquiry focuses on the nature and categorization of these incentives as entities within the educational framework, and extends to understanding their impact on employees' performance.

5.3 Epistemology

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that studies the nature, origin, scope, and validity of knowledge, cognition, and belief. Simply put, epistemology focuses on questions like 'What is knowledge?', 'How do we know what we know?', and 'The relationship between truth and belief?' (Everson, 1999). A fundamental concept within epistemology is the theory of justification, which focuses on the criteria distinguishing knowledge from mere belief. Rooted in Platonic thought, traditional perspectives in this field propose that for belief to qualify as knowledge, it must fulfill three criteria: it should be justified, true, and held as a belief (Cooper, 2015). Another significant area of epistemology involves examining the origins of knowledge, with rationalism and empiricism standing as two principal viewpoints. Rationalists, exemplified by

Descartes (1651), contend that reason is the foremost source of knowledge and assert the innateness of certain truths. On the other hand, empiricists, with Locke (1847) as a notable proponent, argue that knowledge originates from sensory experiences, highlighting the influence of the external world in forming our understanding. The methodology of epistemology in philosophy is diverse, including analytical, critical, empirical and phenomenological methods (Howell, 2013). Each approach provides unique insights into the nature and structure of knowledge, which together contribute to a comprehensive understanding of how we know and understand the world.

5.4 Axiology

Axiology in philosophy discusses values, which Plato describes as ‘the good’, referring to the ideas that are most important and meaningful to human beings, and which are the basis for the value attributes of social systems, lifestyle, production relationships and so on. For example, Marx’s value attribute for judging whether a production relationship is proper is based on whether it is conducive to the development of the productive forces.

In this study, higher vocational colleges should consider the ethical impact, and the incentives should set up the correct values and emphasise the guidance of a positive social atmosphere rather than focusing only on

the short-term effects (Kulshreshtha, 2005).

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is fundamentally focused on uncovering the underlying reasons and logic behind observable facts. It is inherently exploratory, diagnostic, and predictive in nature. Unlike quantitative research, it does not seek precise, numerical conclusions. Instead, its core aim is to understand the essence of a problem, clarify complex situations, delve into underlying causes, and achieve a perceptual comprehension. This format of research privileges understanding over measurement and is distinguished by its insightful, exploratory, and diagnostic capabilities (Denzin , 2011). An important aspect of qualitative research is its emphasis on uncovering underlying intrinsic motivations, feelings, values, attitudes and perceptions. It seeks to understand the subjective experiences of individuals, making insight the foundation of its methodology. Qualitative research draws on the methodologies of sociology and anthropology, with psychology playing a crucial role in providing techniques for such research (Creswell, 2007). In higher education, where incentives and motivation are often deeply rooted in personal values, organisational culture and subjective experience, qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups and case studies can

provide rich and detailed insights (Merriam, 2015). The mission of qualitative research is not just to prove or refute theories, but to reveal objective social truths. It seeks to reveal the complex ways in which people perceive the world, providing a deeper and more detailed understanding of human behaviour and social dynamics (Patton, 2014). This is particularly useful for studying the behaviour of employees in higher education institutions, where employee performance is influenced by a range of factors including job satisfaction, personal achievement, and opportunities for career promotion, which agrees with Ryan's (2000) view that motivation plays a determining role in an individual's behaviour. Furthermore, qualitative research is characterised by a focus on cultural context. Environmental factors can influence employees' attitudes and reactions to various motivational policies. For example, in Chinese culture, adherence to the 'middle way' often leads to a tendency for employees to avoid openly challenging or expressing dissatisfaction with the current situation. Qualitative research methods allow researchers to explore these specific environments to understand how incentives work in particular situations and how employees reflect. This is an important contribution to exploring incentives in higher education that are appropriate to Chinese culture (Kezar, 2011). Finally, qualitative research in higher education helps to enrich research in higher enrichment Chinese pedagogy by refining existing theories and proposing more modern

solutions (Eisenhardt, 1989). This contribution has important implications for policy makers, such as government and school management.

However, since qualitative research mainly adopts research methods such as field experiences, open-ended interviews, document analyses and case studies, the results used to rely on the researcher's interpretation, which is highly influenced by personal factors. This subjectivity leads to the reliability and validity of research findings being questioned (Maxwell, 2012). Secondly, unlike quantitative research which seeks a larger sample with an emphasis on objectivity and repeatability, qualitative research usually has a smaller and more focused sample, resulting in the results of qualitative research not being applicable to a wide range of populations. Finally, qualitative research is also challenged by a lack of privacy, with respondents not always willing to communicate or tell their true feelings about some sensitive topics. In particular, working in the Chinese education system is similar to a government job, which is highly stable, leading to interviewees not necessarily being willing to break the current situation (Merriam, 2015).

6.2 Ethnographic Research

Ethnography is the art and science of describing groups and their cultures. Ethnographic research methods are rooted in anthropological research and cross-cultural research. In a broad sense, ethnographic research

encompasses all studies of the social and cultural life of a particular group of people. Ethnographic research methods are not specific methods of collecting data; instead, ethnographic research can be conducted in a variety of ways. Ethnography aims to provide a holistic perspective and perspective on the understanding and interpretation of beliefs, attitudes, values, roles and norms arising in a particular socio-cultural context. (Fetterman, 2019).

Creswell (2007) explains that a key strength of ethnography is its deliberate focus on profoundly understanding a cultural group and how the shared culture shapes behaviours, perspectives and interpretations in context. Chinese higher education has distinct cultural dynamics, hierarchies and workplace norms that substantially shape internal views among staff on issues around productivity, motivation, incentives and reactions to policies. Thus an insider perspective leveraging employee emic views gained via embedded participation is arguably very well-suited (Creswell, 2007). This participant observation enables eliciting tacit knowledge and perceptions related to incentives that may be unavailable via direct interviews or surveys alone due to cultural sensitivity around superiors. Moreover, embedded data gathering can uncover crucial contextual nuances around the higher education sector's blend of ostensible egalitarian and more covert hierarchical power structures that notably influence individual productivity assessments

(Geertz, 1973). Additionally, thorough analysis of cultural elements like particular workplace rituals as well as circulated stories can reveal deeper insights into the multi-layered challenges around incentive effectiveness. Finally, the researcher's direct access to higher education settings year-round allows the extensive immersion intrinsically required for quality ethnography per Creswell's (2007) criteria.

6.3 Narrative Research

Narrative studies, as defined by Clandinin (2004), is a methodology which focuses on the art of storytelling, including textual (oral and written) narratives and visual narratives, to convey the deeper meaning of an event or experience. This methodology is particularly well suited to exploring the complexity of human societies and the multifaceted nature of human experience. Narrative studies emphasise holistic, contextual and dynamic perspectives, reaching into the field of 'hidden narratives' in an effort to reveal and understand the experience or event. This approach helps to explain the significance of experiences or events and to deepen understanding of reality through the sharing of these experiences or events. The narrative approach allows researchers to investigate various dimensions of experience, such as cultural contexts, systemic changes, and career experience. Specifically, in the context of incentive systems, these methods help to explore the factors driving employee performance.

Narrative research is characterised by a focus on observing a large number of meaningful ‘episodes’ or ‘details’ throughout the research process. It does not usually provide definitive answers, but attempts to provide open references, possibilities or motivations. The core of narrative research is a focus on the ‘local richness’ of the object of study, rather than the ‘holistic emptiness’. Consequently, as Bryman (2016) pointed out, narrative analyses usually focus on a limited number of cases.

However, as Chase (2007) noted, this approach tends to focus more on individual stories rather than wider cultural groups. This concern may lead to the neglect of other factors that may influence employee performance, as narrative research methods may not adequately take into account these broader factors of influence. In essence, although narrative research can provide rich and detailed insights into individual experiences, it also admits its limitations in capturing the full range of factors that influence complicated phenomena such as employee performance.

6.4 The Case Study Research

The case study method is a widely approved qualitative research methodology that is particularly effective for in-depth, comprehensive investigations of complex, concrete, real-world problems. It enables researchers to study and illuminate specific phenomena in depth,

providing a basis for constructing new theories or testing, refining or modifying existing ones. Case studies also help to identify solutions to common problems. Traditionally, this research has deep foundations in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, history and management, and in contemporary times, as Flyvbjerg (2011) emphasised, it has become more widely used in a variety of fields.

As Yin (2009) pointed out, this approach is particularly important for examining how certain incentives are implemented and their impact on employee performance in the unique context of a higher education organisation or a specific industry. Through detailed case studies, researchers can extract valuable insights from specific instances, thus providing a deeper understanding that is often not available through traditional research methods. For example, interviews and surveys of employees can reveal their personal experiences and perceptions of incentives, while analyses of official documents can provide insights into the policies associated with these incentives, as suggested by Merriam (2015).

Case studies are based on real-life situations from the past and present, which can provide true and credible data. This approach allows researchers to gather detailed information that can lead to more accurate problem solving and understanding. In addition, case studies help to track policy changes and optimal strategies related to incentives in higher

education. As Baxter (2008) points out, case studies are excellent at highlighting the impact of various change factors on employee performance. In essence, the case study method offers a rich, nuanced data through which researchers can explore and understand the dynamics of incentives and their influence on employee performance in higher education.

6.5 Grounded Theory Research

Grounded Theory is an important theoretical construction method in qualitative research. Grounded Theory emphasises theoretical induction on the basis of raw data, and establishes a theoretical framework that is closely related to the research phenomenon through coding, conceptualisation and classification of qualitative data. The most crucial feature of grounded theory is that it emphasises that theory must be rooted in data, and that it is the process of extracting concepts and categories from raw data and establishing connections. Instead of making preset hypothetical inferences about the object of study, the researcher starts directly from the data itself and gradually abstracts the theory through continuous qualitative refinement of the material (Oktay, 2012). Grounded theory research, while valuable in many qualitative studies, may not be the most appropriate approach for studying incentives in higher education. In such cases, the research objectives usually involve

assessing the impact of specific, pre-existing incentives, whereas grounded theory is an important method of theory construction for qualitative research that emphasises the generalisation of conceptual and theoretical frameworks from primary data, and is more suitable for exploratory research and areas where theories are not well developed (Charmaz, 2006). In addition, the grounded theory approach requires a high level of expertise in qualitative analysis and theory development, and grounded theory requires the researcher to maintain a high level of theoretical sensitivity throughout the research process. During the process of data collection and analysis, the researcher needs to be sensitive to the concepts and theories that may be involved. Theoretical sensitivity helps the researcher to detect theoretical clues from loose data and focus on conceptualisation and distillation in data analysis, which can be a great challenge for junior researchers (Glaser, 1967).

6.6 Phenomenology Research

Phenomenological research concentrates on investigating and comprehending individuals' living experiences from their own viewpoints. This approach aims to reveal the core nature of experiences by examining the ways individuals understand and interpret their world (Smith, 2013). Phenomenology seeks to understand individual perceptions and lived experiences, but in the context of incentives and performance in

higher education, there is also a need to consider organizational structures, policies, and cultural factors that may lie outside the phenomenological field (Manen, 2016). Another challenge is the generalizability of findings from phenomenological research. Due to its deep focus on personal experiences, the findings are highly contextual and specific to the individuals involved. While this provides adequate, detailed insights, it may not contribute to wider population of employees in higher education. (Moustakas, 1994).

7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in academic research are paramount to ensure the integrity, validity, and social responsibility of scholarly inquiry. As Resnik (2005) asserted, ethical research upholds principles such as honesty, accuracy, efficiency, and objectivity, which are essential for gaining public trust and advancing knowledge. These principles guide researchers in conducting their work without bias or fabrication and in reporting their findings truthfully and completely (Resnik, 2005). Informed consent is a cornerstone of ethical research involving human subjects. According to Helsinki (2013), participants must be adequately informed about the research objectives, methods, potential risks, and benefits, and their participation must be voluntary, including options to withdraw. Ethical considerations should include procedures for ensuring

voluntary informed consent, such as offering participants detailed consent forms that clearly outline the study's purpose, potential risks, and benefits, along with the option to withdraw at any time (Cacciattolo, 2015). Additionally, the protection of participant confidentiality is paramount, necessitating measures like de-identifying data, using pseudonyms, and securely storing records (Rendtorff, 2002). Oversight procedures are also essential, including obtaining IRB approval and conducting external expert reviews to evaluate potential risks to participants and conflicts of interest.

8. Reliability and Validity

Reliability, also known as consistency, is a measure of a tool's capability to produce stable and consistent results in repeated tests. It essentially measures how reliably a measurement tool captures the data it is intended to measure. High reliability of a measurement tool means that it produces consistent results when measuring the same entity multiple times, which indicates that the tool is reliable and stable. Conversely, if subsequent measurements are inconsistent, this indicates a potential problem with the measurement tool, a lack of reliability (Bolarinwa, 2015).

The report could effectively demonstrate the consistency and repeatability of the research processes by implementing several key techniques. Firstly, using consistent interview questions and data analysis procedures

across all cases ensures uniformity in data collection and interpretation. This approach minimizes variations that could arise from differing methodologies. Secondly, the development of standardized codebooks for identifying themes is crucial in reducing subjectivity (Baxter , 2008).

Additionally, cross-checking data interpretations between independent analysts plays a vital role in reducing individual bias. This method allows for a more objective analysis, as it involves multiple perspectives in interpreting the data, thereby mitigating the influence of personal biases. Furthermore, thoroughly documenting all research design decisions and data collection steps is essential. This not only provides a clear roadmap of the research process but also ensures that the study can be replicated or reviewed in detail by others (Conway, 1995).

Validity is the ability of a measurement tool to accurately measure what it is intended to measure. Instruments with high validity are effective in capturing the true characteristics of the subject being measured and ensure that different researchers have a consistent understanding of the meaning and implications of the research variables. On the other hand, lack of validity means that the data collected by the instrument does not truly reflect the real characteristics of the subject being measured (Rahardja, 2019).

In order to improve the authenticity and credibility of qualitative surveys, this report would gain from including a discussion of key validity

measures. These include member checking, which involves verifying interpretations with participants to ensure that their experiences and perspectives are accurately represented (Morse, 2002). In addition, data triangulation is crucial. This requires confirming research findings through different sources of data to create a comprehensive and reliable understanding. Peer review is another valuable method to further validate findings by providing advice from experts who are familiar with the context of the study (Wald, 2014).

It is also critical to provide a detailed contextual description as this allows the reader to assess the transferability of the findings to other contexts. This approach not only increases the depth of the study, but also helps to understand its applicability in different circumstances. By employing these validation techniques, the report will greatly increase the expected methodological credibility of the qualitative research, ensuring the reliability and validity of the findings (Maxwell, 1992).

This comprehensive approach to addressing issues of reliability and validity is essential for establishing the credibility and relevance of research in a given research context.

9. Limitations

While qualitative research provides a detailed understanding of the incentives for improving employee performance in higher education

colleges, it faces some inherent limitations. The bias and experience of the researcher is a challenge. Qualitative research requires the researcher to be skilful and experienced. A researcher may collect data that other researchers consider meaningless and unimportant. This can lead to inaccurate and unreliable data. Lack of expertise related to the field may lead to the collection of inaccurate data, while the researcher's subjectivity, as a member of the Higher Education, will greatly affect the results of the study (Safron, 2023). Another major issue is the lack of generalisability. Once data has been collected from participants, it is not possible to generalise the findings in the same way as in quantitative research. Qualitative research does not allow findings to be used as a basis for representing a broad audience or public (Creswell, 2023).

In addition, causality is difficult to prove. In qualitative research, it is difficult to directly prove causality due to the nature of the research methodology. One qualitative study found a correlation between a factor and an outcome, but it was not possible to determine whether the factor was the direct cause of the outcome. In this study, whether incentives can directly influence employee performance would not be directly explained (Savin-Baden, 2023).

In conclusion, whereas qualitative research provides valuable insights in understanding perceptions and experiences, it faces challenges in terms of generalisability, potential researcher bias, and the ability to establish

causal relationships. These limitations must be carefully considered when designing and interpreting qualitative research in this area.

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