

Research on the Performance Incentive System for Teachers in Higher Vocational Colleges

Yan Zhu

Liaoning Vocational Technical College of Modern Service, Shenyang, 110164, China

Abstract

Under the strategic guidance of the “Xingliao Excellent Colleges” initiative, higher vocational education in Liaoning Province is undergoing a critical transition from external expansion to internal quality enhancement. As a key lever for promoting high-quality development, the design and adaptability of teacher performance incentive systems directly affect faculty development and talent cultivation outcomes. Based on field research into the current state of performance management in Liaoning's higher vocational institutions, this study identifies structural shortcomings in incentive effectiveness, evaluation dimensions, promotion pathways, and implementation mechanisms. The analysis reveals widespread issues such as incentive failure, assessment distortion, and institutional distrust. Drawing on theoretical frameworks including Expectancy Theory, Two-Factor Theory, and Equity Theory, the paper proposes a multi-pronged optimization strategy centered on diversified evaluation indicators, tiered and classified appraisal systems, developmental result application mechanisms, and a transparent, accountable implementation culture. The study concludes that only by shifting from a task-oriented to a development-oriented performance model can institutions fully leverage the motivational potential of such systems and foster a virtuous cycle in which teacher growth drives institutional reform.

Keywords

Higher Vocational Colleges; Teacher Performance; Incentive Mechanism; Institutional Optimization.

1. Introduction

As the “Xingliao Excellent Colleges” initiative continues to advance, higher vocational education in Liaoning Province is undergoing a critical phase of structural transformation—from extensive expansion to intensive, quality-oriented development. Among the key levers of this transformation, the development of the teaching workforce has become a decisive factor influencing institutional performance and talent cultivation outcomes. However, the extent to which teachers—central actors in educational practice—can fully demonstrate their enthusiasm and creativity is largely dependent on the scientific design and contextual adaptability of performance incentive systems.

Although many higher vocational institutions in Liaoning have established basic performance management frameworks, their actual effectiveness remains limited. On one hand, evaluation indicators continue to emphasize workload and output metrics, often neglecting essential qualitative dimensions such as teaching effectiveness and student development. On the other hand, performance results are rarely linked to career advancement, recognition, or resource allocation, rendering incentive mechanisms symbolic rather than substantive. This disconnect between design and implementation leads to what may be termed “incentive distortion,” which hinders the translation of institutional reforms into tangible improvements and generates friction with the goals of excellence-oriented school development.

In light of these challenges, this paper investigates the performance incentive systems of higher vocational colleges in Liaoning Province through the lens of institutional practice. Drawing on key theories of educational motivation and performance management, the study explores how to construct a more effective, equitable, and developmental performance system that aligns with the objectives of the “Excellent Colleges” strategy—ultimately providing theoretical insights and practical pathways for policy optimization and institutional reform.

2. Current Status of Teacher Performance Incentives in Higher Vocational Colleges

Under the strategic framework of the “Xingliao Excellent Colleges” initiative, most higher vocational institutions in Liaoning Province have gradually established relatively comprehensive teacher performance evaluation systems. These systems typically cover a broad range of areas, including teaching workload, research output, student mentorship, and social service contributions, forming a seemingly complete performance management framework. However, in actual implementation, these systems remain primarily static and task-oriented, reflecting a logic of administrative control rather than developmental motivation. Performance evaluations are largely used for annual appraisal scores and salary distribution, with limited linkage to teachers' career advancement, professional growth, or promotion pathways [1]. As a result, phenomena such as “evaluation without motivation” and “assessment without effect” have become prominent, severely weakening the intended incentive function.

Further field investigation reveals significant inconsistencies in performance management models across institutions. Some colleges still adopt a standardized evaluation template that fails to account for the diverse roles and developmental stages of faculty members. This “one-size-fits-all” approach inadequately reflects the actual value of teachers' contributions and often results in misaligned incentives and poor institutional fit. Additionally, the performance evaluation process in some institutions lacks transparency. The rationale behind scoring weights and assessment indicators is not clearly communicated to faculty, leading to low levels of acceptance and perceived legitimacy among teachers. Such opacity further undermines the credibility and guiding function of the evaluation system.

In summary, while the performance management systems in Liaoning's higher vocational colleges have taken initial shape, they still exhibit significant deficiencies in conceptual design, evaluation structure, operational procedures, and developmental orientation. At present, performance systems tend to function more as administrative tools than as mechanisms of meaningful incentive. This misalignment limits their capacity to support the cultivation of high-quality teaching staff as envisioned in the “Excellent Colleges” initiative. A comprehensive restructuring of the incentive logic is urgently needed to enhance both institutional effectiveness and teacher motivation.

3. Challenges in the Current Performance Incentive System

3.1. Weakening of Incentive Effectiveness

From a functional perspective, performance systems are intended to guide behavior, reinforce responsibility, and stimulate professional potential. However, in most higher vocational institutions, the logic of performance incentives remains narrowly focused on “end-point compensation,” wherein assessment results are primarily used for annual bonus allocation or administrative ranking. These results are often decoupled from core aspects of faculty development such as promotion, honors, or support for research initiatives. As a result, many frontline teachers report a lack of motivation, viewing evaluations as bureaucratic formality rather than meaningful guidance, leading to a passive or perfunctory attitude.

Without clear development pathways or constructive feedback mechanisms, some faculty begin to internalize a sense of futility—believing that “doing more or less makes no difference.” This erosion of the reward-effort link transforms performance systems from motivational tools into administrative burdens, reducing engagement and potentially inducing professional burnout, apathy, or performance avoidance behaviors.

3.2. Overly Simplified Evaluation Indicator

Current performance evaluation frameworks are often dominated by measurable indicators such as total teaching hours or the number of published research outputs. While these metrics are easy to quantify, they fail to capture deeper aspects such as instructional quality, student feedback, curriculum innovation, or support for student development. This leads to a results-oriented logic that overlooks both “the quality of the teaching process” and “the realization of educational goals.”

In practice, many institutions enforce uniform benchmarks for publication output and project acquisition, without tailoring criteria to specific teaching roles or academic disciplines. This “one-size-fits-all” approach encourages faculty to prioritize short-term, superficial achievements over meaningful educational contributions, thereby distorting academic values. More critically, the increasing tension between quantifiable indicators and the essence of education has shifted the focus of faculty efforts toward research metrics at the expense of teaching responsibilities. As teaching roles become marginalized, a broader trend of “research over teaching” and “quantity over quality” emerges, undermining institutional efforts to maintain a balanced, education-centered mission.

3.3. Disconnection Between Performance and Promotion

Ideally, promotion mechanisms should be closely integrated with performance evaluation results. In reality, however, a clear disconnect and time lag often exists. On one hand, performance assessments hold limited weight in title promotion or position appointment, which tend to rely more heavily on seniority, accumulated credentials, and document-based review rather than authentic, outcome-based evaluations. On the other hand, institutions often lack tailored support mechanisms for different categories of teachers, particularly for teaching-oriented or practice-based faculty, who are placed at a disadvantage in promotion processes.

Numerous mid-career teachers report that even after years of frontline teaching and receiving student recognition or leading pedagogical reforms, they are frequently passed over for promotion due to the absence of high-impact publications or prestigious research projects [2]. This leads to a structural promotion barrier, further widening the development gap between research-oriented and teaching-focused roles, and aggravating internal disparities within faculty teams.

In the long term, the lack of transparent promotion pathways and supportive development policies erodes the career confidence of younger faculty members, increases job insecurity, and may accelerate the loss of high-potential teaching talent.

3.4. Lack of Transparency and Credibility in Implementation

The credibility and acceptance of any performance incentive system hinge upon its transparency and perceived fairness in implementation. However, field research reveals considerable opacity in the operational processes of many institutions [3]. Assessment standards are often phrased ambiguously, lacking clarity in indicator definitions and scoring weights, making it difficult for teachers to understand “what is being evaluated” and “how it is evaluated.” Simultaneously, the evaluation process is typically managed by a small group of administrators, with limited involvement from faculty representatives, resulting in a diminished sense of participation and voice among teaching staff.

In some cases, teachers report instances of favoritism, subjective scoring, or informal influence—so-called “relationship-based assessments”—which further compromise the fairness of the process. The absence of formal appeal and feedback mechanisms positions teachers as passive recipients of institutional judgment, reinforcing their skepticism and resistance toward the system [4].

Once the foundation of institutional trust is eroded, teachers’ willingness to cooperate and engage meaningfully with performance processes is substantially reduced. Over time, this can damage the organizational climate, rendering both formal rules and incentive mechanisms ineffective—ultimately resulting in a dual crisis of “policy invalidation” and “motivational failure.”

4. Optimization Strategies for Performance Incentive Systems under the “Xingliao Excellence” Initiative

Guided by the strategic objectives of the “Xingliao Excellent Colleges” initiative, teacher performance incentive systems in higher vocational institutions must transition from traditional task-driven models to those that emphasize capacity enhancement and developmental support. Institutional design should not merely focus on “how much is done” but more importantly, on “how well it is done,” thereby achieving effective alignment between incentive mechanisms and teacher development [5]. To this end, a systemic optimization approach should be adopted across institutional philosophy, evaluation criteria, implementation mechanisms, and development linkages.

First, performance indicators must evolve from singular to multidimensional frameworks, moving away from an over-reliance on teaching hours and research output. Core elements such as teaching quality, student evaluations, curriculum development, and pedagogical innovation should be incorporated into the central evaluation system to establish an outcome-oriented, education-effectiveness framework. In terms of research, distinctions should be made between basic research, applied technology, and social service contributions, ensuring that diverse faculty strengths are fairly recognized. Additionally, practice-based achievements such as industry–education integration projects and contributions to regional development should be included as supplementary metrics, promoting a shift from “internal performance” to “social value-oriented” assessment.

Second, differentiated evaluation mechanisms should be established to reflect the varied responsibilities of different faculty roles. Teaching-focused, research-focused, and “dual-role” practice-based instructors each carry distinct expectations and competencies; applying uniform evaluation standards may inhibit diverse development. By customizing evaluation dimensions and weighting systems, institutions can enhance scientific validity and better support teachers in leveraging their strengths. Dynamic assessment mechanisms should also be introduced to replace “one-time evaluations,” thereby ensuring timeliness, flexibility, and responsiveness in performance appraisal [6].

Third, the true value of performance assessment lies in its capacity to generate developmental incentives. At present, evaluation results are often used solely for bonus distribution or awards, with limited integration into promotion pathways, position competition, or talent development strategies. This misalignment significantly weakens the strategic utility of performance systems and diminishes their motivational impact. To address this, institutions should restructure the incentive system by integrating evaluation results with career advancement, internal mobility, and academic resource allocation [7]. This would create a positive feedback loop that aligns individual growth trajectories with institutional goals, achieving mutual reinforcement.

Finally, attention must be paid to the standardization of implementation and the cultivation of institutional culture. In many institutions, performance evaluation remains opaque, with

arbitrary procedures and ambiguous standards undermining faculty trust. Transparency mechanisms must be strengthened, including the public disclosure of criteria, regular performance dialogues, and standardized data collection and usage protocols. Moreover, a campus culture that values accountability, contribution, and diversity should be cultivated. Role models, media reinforcement, and value-driven communication can help establish shared understanding and collective ownership of performance mechanisms among the faculty.

In summary, optimizing performance incentive systems should not be reduced to technical adjustments of metrics and processes; it requires a fundamental rethinking of institutional logic and governance philosophy. Within the context of the “Xingliao Excellent Colleges” initiative, only by transforming the performance system into a genuine driver of teacher development can higher vocational education sustain momentum toward quality-oriented growth.

5. Conclusion

As a vital component of institutional governance, the teacher performance incentive system plays a decisive role in shaping faculty motivation, work direction, and professional sustainability. With the “Xingliao Excellent Colleges” initiative entering a critical implementation phase, designing a scientific, effective, and equitable incentive framework has become an essential task for fostering high-quality development.

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the current state of performance management in Liaoning’s higher vocational colleges, identifying structural issues such as weakened motivation, overly simplistic indicators, decoupled promotion pathways, and implementation opacity. It argues that performance systems should move beyond mere tools for task allocation or resource control, and instead become engines for professional growth and strategic alignment within institutions.

Future reforms should emphasize differentiated evaluation, developmental support, and process-based management. Additionally, ensuring transparency, fairness, and responsive feedback mechanisms will be key to restoring faculty trust in the system. By doing so, institutions can create a robust ecosystem of incentives—multi-dimensional, multi-channel, and dynamic—that supports sustainable, high-quality development in higher vocational education.

Acknowledgements

This work was financially supported by Project of Basic Research Project of Liaoning Provincial Department of Education (LJKMR20222200), Liaoning Province Education Science 14th Five Year Plan Project (JG22EB290).

References

- [1] Liu, B. J., & Meng, B. A study on the performance-based salary incentive mechanism in higher vocational colleges. *Modern Business Trade Industry*, (2025) No. 10, p.146–148.
- [2] Liang, Q., Chen, P. Y., & Kuang, R. Q. Optimization design of incentive mechanisms for entrepreneurship mentors in higher vocational colleges from the perspective of human capital. *Research and Practice in Innovation and Entrepreneurship Theory*, (2025) No.4, p.1–3.
- [3] Wang, X. H. A study on the performance evaluation system of teachers in higher vocational colleges (2010). [Master’s thesis, Liaoning Normal University].
- [4] Liu, Y. Measures for improving the incentive mechanism of administrative and teaching support staff in higher vocational colleges. *Human Resource Development of China*, (2023) No.18, p.53–55.

- [5] Dou, F. Research on the performance evaluation and incentive mechanism of teachers in higher vocational colleges from the perspective of total quality management. Henan Education (Higher Education Edition), (2023) No.9, p.23–25.
- [6] Yang, J. W., & Chen, S. H. Exploration of the overall performance evaluation index system in higher vocational colleges under the perspective of full-budget performance management. Journal of Wuhan Institute of Shipbuilding Technology, (2023) No. 4, p.16–20.
- [7] Li, H. R. Research on performance management of teachers in higher vocational colleges [Master's thesis, Dalian University of Technology]. (2016).