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INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY IN DEVELOPING HIGHER EDUCATION: A RISK-BASED READINESS AND STRATEGIC PLANNING FRAMEWORK UNDER EXTERNAL PRESSURES IN NORTHEASTERN THAILAND

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Abstract

This study proposes an integrated framework to assess organizational readiness and inform strategic planning for institutional autonomy in higher education, with a focus on decentralization and developing economies. Drawing on a single-case study of a faculty of social science at a public university in Northeastern Thailand—a region facing rural-urban migration and resource disparities—the framework combines readiness assessments, phased planning, external pressure analysis, and dynamic risk management. Findings reveal moderate institutional preparedness (6.60/10), supported by community engagement but constrained by limited IT infrastructure and unstable funding. A phased planning model supports gradual reforms, including hybrid learning and regional partnerships, guided by adaptive governance and stakeholder input. External pressures—particularly demographic shifts and labor demands—are prioritized over national mandates, with an External Pressure Score of 7.70/10. Financial risk remains critical (Residual Risk = 43.20), though mitigated through local collaborations and real-time monitoring (80.4% effectiveness). The study emphasizes the importance of localized strategies for autonomy, advocating for community-driven solutions in under-resourced settings. Policy recommendations include ASEAN-wide collaboration, flexible governance tools, and equitable resource distribution. Overall, the framework offers a scalable, context-sensitive approach to institutional resilience and contributes to broader discussions on higher education reform and governance innovation.

Keywords: institutional autonomy, adaptive governance, strategic planning, risk scoring, ASEAN, higher education

Introduction

Universities face converging pressures—from neoliberal reforms and fiscal uncertainty to the aftershocks of COVID-19—that are reshaping pedagogy, operations, and stakeholder expectations (Robinson & Pedersen, 2021). Navigating this turbulence requires clear priorities and agile decision cycles.

At the center of this response is institutional autonomy, reframed not as independence for its own sake but as a strategic capacity to adapt policy, people, and

processes at speed (Buasuwan, 2018). Autonomy becomes useful when it enables context-aware choices rather than one-size-fits-all rules. Translating autonomy into results depends on governance: transparent roles, disciplined budgeting, and accountable performance systems that connect authority with responsibility (Aberbach & Christensen, 2018). These mechanisms turn flexibility into credible, measurable outcomes.

Equally vital is organizational readiness—the shared commitment and resource fit that determine whether change initiatives actually take hold (Weiner et al, 2008). Readiness metrics help leaders prioritize where to invest attention, funding, and time.

This study examines a social-science faculty within a public university in Northeastern Thailand, where resources are stretched yet national benchmarks allow triangulation of progress (Jarernsiripornkul & Pandey, 2018). The case tests how internal capabilities can be aligned with external demands while managing risk. Building on governance theory and readiness diagnostics, we propose a practical framework that links readiness assessment, phased planning, external pressure mapping, and composite risk management (Maassen, 2017; Frølich et al, 2019). The goal is to balance institutional agility with public accountability and enable resilient, innovation-driven governance.

The decentralization of authority presents critical challenges for Thai universities, making new planning and institutional self-preparation both complex and unfamiliar. Amid ongoing uncertainties and unclear pathways forward, this study formulates four key research questions (RQ) to guide inquiry.

RQ1: How do organizational readiness factors (e.g., leadership commitment, resource adequacy, cultural alignment) influence a higher education institution's capacity to transition toward autonomy?

RQ2: In what ways can a phased strategic planning approach effectively guide the transformation process in institutions navigating decentralization reforms?

RQ3: How does external pressure—stemming from governmental policies, evolving market dynamics, and demographic shifts—impact institutional autonomy efforts in developing contexts?

RQ4: What role can composite risk scoring play in quantifying and mitigating risks associated with the transition to autonomy, particularly in resource-constrained environments such as Northeastern Thailand?

Research Objectives

1. To assess the internal organizational readiness of a faculty in social science at a public university in Northeastern Thailand by evaluating dimensions including leadership, resources, and cultural alignment.
2. To design and implement a phased strategic planning model that supports incremental yet sustainable institutional transformation in alignment with Thailand’s 2022 autonomy policy.
3. To analyze external pressures through comprehensive stakeholder mapping and environmental scanning, aligning internal reforms with global trends and localized challenges.
4. To develop and validate a composite risk scoring framework that quantifies potential risks using impact-likelihood metrics for ongoing strategic adjustments.

5. To generate policy recommendations that leverage insights from the case study, offering a scalable roadmap applicable to other ASEAN higher education institutions.

To conclude, this study investigates the common indicators concerning the abilities and performance of the social science department. Given the lack of support from annual national budgeting, the autonomous organization must generate sufficient income independently in the long term. Employee turnover and termination are significant issues that need to be addressed. Previous job routines and tasks require updating to align with new shared values, vision, and mission.

The critical challenges of remaining competitive and ensuring self-sufficiency have been discussed and legally scrutinized before the complete approval of the agenda. Limitations in preparation time, alongside issues of trust, turbulent changes, and uncertainty, contribute to negative feelings, stress under pressure, and a lack of confidence in achieving the goals outlined in the new strategic plan.

Moreover, it is essential to assess the strengths and weaknesses in responding to new policies and practices within the organizational structure, and to extend beyond these changes to improve overall operations and regulations.

2. Literature Review

Based on the research's direction, the authors have reviewed related concepts and other connection ideas and verified the relevant documents. Starting with the national policy for becoming an autonomous university and its legal framework, they then formulate constructs and dimensions of metrics. In summary, through the literature, concepts and idea linkages fit within the research boundaries.

2.1 Agenda of Thailand's National Policy on Autonomous Universities (2022)

Thailand's 2022 national reform advances a transition from centralized control to institutional autonomy, granting universities greater authority over financial management, staffing, and academic operations (Office of the Higher Education Commission, 2022). Although this shift mirrors international moves toward decentralized governance (Magalhães et al, 2013), its application within public universities in Northeastern Thailand presents distinct challenges. Persistent inequalities in funding, infrastructure, and workforce availability underscore the importance of context-sensitive evaluations of institutional readiness; scholars warn that, without robust accountability frameworks, autonomy initiatives can exacerbate existing disparities in developing contexts (Boossabong, 2018). This tension between expanding institutional independence and maintaining public oversight highlights the urgent need to embed risk management within strategic planning—an issue this study addresses.

2.2 Thai Legal Framework for University Autonomy

Legal reforms, including amendments to the Higher Education Act and Ministry of Education guidelines, provide the scaffolding for autonomy, but legal mandates alone do not guarantee successful decentralization and require renegotiation of power between central authorities and local stakeholders in Northeastern Thailand (Jarernsiripornkul & Pandey, 2018). Where bureaucratic inertia and resource constraints persist, hybrid governance models that blend centralized oversight with localized decision-making can

mitigate risks while fostering innovation, aligning with our framework's emphasis on phased strategic planning and adaptive feedback loops (Buasuwan, 2018).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The framework synthesizes five constructs, as additionally shown in Table 1, enriched with new arguments to address contextual and technological distinctions:

2.3.1 Organizational Readiness: Rooted in Armenakis et al. (1999) and Weiner (2009), readiness encompasses leadership, resources, cultural alignment, and IT infrastructure. However, in resource-constrained settings like Northeastern Thailand, cultural alignment transcends internal cohesion to include community engagement. For instance, resistance to autonomy may stem from faculty perceptions of increased administrative burdens (Kalajahi et al., 2024). Integrating *community cultural wealth theory* (Yosso, 2005) reframes readiness to leverage local strengths, such as regional networks and traditional governance practices, rather than relying solely on Western-derived metrics.

2.3.2 Strategic Planning: Bryson's (2011) phased approach is augmented with insights from *adaptive governance theory* (Chaffin et al., 2016), which emphasizes flexibility in volatile environments. Pilot initiatives (e.g., digital transformation projects) must account for regional disparities in technological access. For example, while AI-driven tools may streamline operations in urban institutions, rural universities in Northeastern Thailand may prioritize basic IT infrastructure upgrades.

2.3.3 Governance Evolution: Berdahl's (1990) continuum of governance is expanded through *network governance theory* (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016), which advocates for collaborative decision-making among universities, local governments, and civil society. This is critical in Thailand's Northeast, where universities serve as anchors for regional development.

2.3.4 External Pressure Analysis: DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) argue that institutional isomorphism is critiqued for its top-down focus. Integrating *stakeholder salience theory* (Mitchell et al., 1997) allows institutions to prioritize pressures (e.g., national policies vs. local demographic shifts) based on urgency and legitimacy. For example, declining enrollment due to rural-urban migration in Northeastern Thailand may outweigh policy mandates in strategic recalibration.

2.3.5 Composite Risk Scoring: While ISO 31000 provides foundational risk matrices, recent advancements in *dynamic risk assessment* (Bautista et al., 2015) emphasize real-time data integration. Our framework incorporates predictive analytics via dashboard KPIs, enabling institutions to anticipate risks like financial shortfalls or demographic shocks.

Table 1 Theoretical Foundations and Contextual Adaptations for Institutional Autonomy Framework

Concept	Key Sources	Additionally Refined Integration
Organizational Readiness	Armenakis et al. (1999); Yosso (2005)	Includes community cultural wealth and regional resource constraints.

Strategic Planning	Bryson (2011); Chaffin et al. (2016)	Combines phased planning with adaptive governance for volatile environments.
Governance Evolution	Berdahl (1990); Klijn & Koppenjan (2016)	Emphasizes network governance and local stakeholder collaboration.
External Pressure	DiMaggio & Powell (1983); Mitchell et al. (1997)	Prioritizes pressures via stakeholder salience theory.
Composite Risk Scoring	Bautista et al. (2015)	Integrates dynamic risk assessment and predictive analytics.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative single-case study design to explore the interplay of organizational readiness, strategic planning, and external pressures in the context of institutional autonomy reforms. The case focuses on a faculty of social science at a public university in Northeastern Thailand, a region characterized by socioeconomic disparities, rural-urban migration, and evolving demands for localized higher education. A constructivist epistemology underpins the research, emphasizing the co-construction of knowledge through interactions with stakeholders who navigate both institutional and regional challenges.

A total of 42 key informants were purposively selected based on specific criteria, including at least three years of work experience in strategic planning and direct involvement in resource management responsibilities (25 or 59.50%). Additionally, some informants were drawn from voluntary sessions, where they were informally tasked with investigating internal and external factors related to decentralization and institutional autonomy (17 or 40.5%). This team previously operated under a directive framework, ensuring structured data collection and analysis. The selection approach aligns with the enhanced theoretical framework, which integrates community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and adaptive governance (Chaffin et al., 2016), fostering sensitivity to local contexts and governance dynamics.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

A triangulated qualitative strategy was adopted to capture multidimensional insights:

- **Focus Groups**: Semi-structured sessions were conducted with a total selected 42 faculty board members and administrative staff, prioritizing discussions on regional challenges (e.g., resource limitations, demographic shifts) and localized strategies for autonomy. Sessions were moderated in the local dialect (Isaan) to ensure cultural resonance and participant comfort.
- **Semi-Structured Interviews**: In-depth interviews with only 9 faculty board members—including deans, department heads, and frontline staff—explored governance evolution, leadership dynamics, and perceptions of Thailand's 2022 autonomy policy. Interview protocols incorporated prompts derived

from *stakeholder salience theory* (Mitchell et al., 1997), prioritizing pressures such as declining rural enrollment and national policy mandates.

- **Documentary Analysis**: Reviewed institutional documents (strategic plans, meeting minutes, regional policy briefs) and public records from Thailand's Ministry of Education to contextualize reforms within Northeastern Thailand's socioeconomic landscape.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), facilitated by NVivo software to manage and structure qualitative data. The coding process was systematically aligned with the study's theoretical framework:

- Open Coding involved identifying initial themes, such as *"independence and community cultural wealth as an institutional asset"* (highlighting localized networks and traditions), *"adaptive governance in resource-constrained environments"* (addressing infrastructure limitations), and *"stakeholder salience in rural-urban policy tensions"* (navigating between national mandates and local needs).
- Axial Coding established linkages between emergent themes and key theoretical constructs, including network governance (Klijn et al., 2015) and dynamic risk assessment (Bautista et al., 2016).
- Selective Coding synthesized these themes into a coherent narrative, aligning with the study's phased strategic planning approach and composite risk management model.

Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation (across focus groups, interviews, and documents) and member checking with participants to validate interpretations and ensure contextual accuracy.

Table 2 Coding Phases, Theoretical Integration, and Validation Strategies

Coding Phase	Description	Theoretical/Procedural Links
Open Coding	Identified emergent themes:	Community cultural wealth theory (Yosso, 2005)
	"Community cultural wealth as institutional asset" (localized networks and traditions)	Adaptive governance theory (Chaffin et al., 2016)
	"Adaptive governance in resource-constrained environments" (strategies for infrastructure gaps)	Stakeholder salience theory (Mitchell et al., 1997)
	"Stakeholder salience in rural-urban policy tensions" (balancing national mandates with regional needs)	
Axial Coding	Connected themes to theoretical constructs:	Network governance (Klijn et al., 2015)

	Linkages between community engagement and governance models	Dynamic risk assessment (Bautista et al., 2016)
	Alignment of adaptive strategies with risk frameworks	
Selective Coding	Synthesized findings into a cohesive narrative:	Phased strategic planning model (Bryson, 2011)
	Integrated community strengths into readiness assessments	Composite risk framework (International Organization for Standardization, 2018)
	Aligned adaptive governance with phased implementation	
Validation Methods	Triangulation across data sources (focus groups, interviews, documents) and member checking with participants.	Enhanced credibility through methodological rigor (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

Framework Refinement and Operationalization Across Analytical Layers

Layer 1 Organizational Readiness (Mohamed Noor et al., 2025; Brandsma et al., 2025)

The foundational layer assesses readiness through four dimensions, revised to incorporate Northeastern Thailand's regional challenges:

- Leadership Commitment: Evaluates alignment with decentralized governance and responsiveness to rural socioeconomic needs.
- Resource Adequacy: Focuses on financial stability and infrastructure gaps unique to public universities in under-resourced regions.
- Cultural Alignment: Measures internal cohesion *and* community engagement, recognizing the faculty's role in regional development.
- IT Infrastructure: Prioritizes basic digital access over advanced systems, given disparities in technological adoption.

Weighted Readiness Formula:

$$OR = w_L L + w_R R + w_C C + w_I I$$

where the weights w_L, w_R, w_C, w_I are determined based on expert judgments and empirical analyses.

Adjusted weights:

- w_C (Cultural Alignment) increased to 0.30 to reflect community engagement.
- w_I (IT Infrastructure) reduced to 0.15 due to regional infrastructure constraints.

Table 3 Organizational Readiness Scores and Interpretive Analysis for Autonomy Transition

Factor	Self-Assessment Score (1–10)	Interpretation
Leadership Commitment (L)	7.20	Moderate alignment with autonomy goals; stronger focus on regional collaboration.
Resource Adequacy (R)	6.50	Chronic underfunding necessitates external partnerships for sustainability.
Cultural Alignment (C)	6.80	Strong community ties offset internal resistance to administrative changes.
IT Infrastructure (I)	5.90	Basic digital tools are in place but lagging in advanced systems (e.g., AI platforms).
Overall Readiness	**6.60**	Moderate readiness, with community engagement as a key strength.

Layer 2 Phased Strategic Planning (Abdulmohdi et al., 2025)

The phased approach is personalized to incremental, community-centric reforms:

Phase 1 (Pilot Initiatives) Launch localized projects (e.g., community-based research partnerships, regional workforce development programs).

Phase 2 (Feedback Integration) Use adaptive feedback loops to refine strategies based on stakeholder input from rural communities.

Phase 3 (Scaled Implementation) Expand successful pilots (e.g., hybrid learning models for remote students) while maintaining regional relevance.

Layer 3 External Pressure Analysis (Bever et al., 1997; Mason, 2007)

The External Pressure Score (EPS) integrates region-specific factors:

$$EPS = w_{PS} \times PS + w_{SD} \times SD + w_{MD} \times MD + w_{DC} \times DC$$

where the weights satisfy $w_{PS} + w_{SD} + w_{MD} + w_{DC} = 1$

Revised weights:

- w_{DC} (Demographic Change) increased to 0.35 due to rural-urban migration impacts on enrollment.
- w_{MD} (Market Dynamics) Includes regional labor market demands (e.g., agriculture, tourism).

Table 4 Weighted External Pressure Analysis for Strategic Planning in Higher Education

Factor	Weight	Measured Value (0–10)	Contribution	Interpretation
Policy Shifts (PS)	0.15	7.0	1.05	National mandates require localized adaptation.
Stakeholder Dynamics (SD)	0.20	8.5	1.70	Strong influence from local governments and NGOs.

Factor	Weight	Measured Value (0–10)	Contribution	Interpretation
Market Dynamics (MD)	0.30	6.0	1.80	Regional industries drive demand for vocational training.
Demographic Change (DC)	0.35	9.0	3.15	Youth outmigration threatens enrollment sustainability.
Composite EPS	**1.00**	—	**7.70**	High pressure from demographic and market shifts.

Strategic Adjustment: $ISAF = \beta \times (EPS - EPS_{threshold})$
So that, $ISAF = 0.10x(7.70 - 7.00) = 0.07$
A low ISAF signals minor strategic adjustments, prioritizing enrollment retention and regional partnerships.

Layer 4 Composite Risk Matrix and Dashboard KPIs (Anthony, 2008; Flohr, et al., 2008; Pestana et al., 2020)

The risk matrix is recalibrated for regional vulnerabilities in Table 5, and Table 6 is an explanation:

Table 5 Composite Risk Matrix and Mitigation Effectiveness for Institutional Autonomy

Risk Category	Impact	Likelihood	Initial Risk	Mitigation	Residual Risk	KPI Status
Strategic	7	6	42	Community partnerships (M=0.25)	31.50	Moderate – Monitor
Operational	8	7	56	IT grants (M=0.30)	39.20	High–Review Strategy
Financial	9	8	72	Regional funding alliances (M=0.40)	43.20	Critical – Immediate Action
External	6	9	54	Policy advocacy (M=0.20)	43.20	High–Review Strategy
Total RCRS	—	—	—	—	**44.55**	—

Table 6 Explanation of Risk Assessment Components and Strategic Implications

Column	Assessment	Actionable Insights	Citation
1. Risk Category	• Strategic: Long-term objectives and stakeholder alignment (e.g., community partnerships). • Operational: Disruption to daily functions (e.g., IT infrastructure). • Financial: Fiscal instability (e.g., unstable funding). • External: Uncontrollable factors (e.g., policy shifts).	• Ensure comprehensive coverage (e.g., include Reputational Risk). • Align risks with local priorities (e.g., labor market shifts in NE Thailand).	Kauppi et al. (2016); Kleindorf & Saad (2005)
2. Impact & Likelihood	• Impact (1–10): Severity (e.g., 9 = catastrophic). • Likelihood (1–10): Probability (e.g., 9 = almost certain)	• Define criteria for scoring (e.g., Impact = 7 → major disruption). • Reassess quarterly based on contextual dynamics (e.g., migration trends)	Grimes & Schulz (2005)
3. Initial Risk	Calculated as Impact × Likelihood (e.g., 9×8=72)	• Double-check formulas for consistency (e.g., Strategic = 7×6 = 42) • Use thresholds to triage (e.g., >50 = urgent action required)	Taylor et al. (2023); Wynants et al. (2019)

4. Mitigation	• Mitigation Factor (M): Reduction rate (e.g., M = 0.40 = 40% reduction)
	• Examples:
	  • Community Partnerships → Strategic Risk ↓ 25%
	  • IT Grants → Operational Risk ↓ 30%
		• Assess effectiveness (e.g., are NGOs reducing gaps)
		• Prioritize impactful strategies (e.g., invest more in financial partnerships than low-return activities)
			Kurniawan et al. (2017); Talluri et al. (2013)

5. Residual Risk	Formula: Initial Risk × (1 − M) (e.g., 72×(1−0.40) = 43.20)	• Compare scores to risk appetite • Adjust if mitigation changes (e.g., stronger funding alliances may reduce residual risk further)	Ridker (2017)

Column	Assessment	Actionable Insights	Citation
6. KPI Status	• Categories: • Critical ≥60 • High 40–59.9 • Moderate 30–39.9 • Low 0–29.9 • Example: 43.20 = High, not Critical	• Redefine categories if needed (e.g., "Critical" ≥50) • Automate monitoring through dashboards for real-time KPI alignment	Qiu et al. (2019); Zhao et al. (2019)
7. Total RCRS	• Residual Composite Risk Score (RCRS) = 44.55 • Indicates moderate-to-high institutional exposure	• Benchmark against similar institutions (e.g., ASEAN university scores) • Escalate to the executive board if >40.00	Gao et al. (2022); Magnan et al. (2021)

Discussion

1. Organizational Readiness for Autonomy

With the official letter sent directly to the faculty and supplementary communication validated, such as occasional meetings and messages from the dean or president, all staff have been duly informed about the changes and potential disruptions. The study reveals that organizational readiness in the Northeastern Thai faculty hinges on balancing internal capacities with external community dynamics. While leadership commitment (L=7.20) and cultural alignment (C=6.80) scored moderately, the latter was bolstered by *community cultural wealth*—a finding often overlooked in Western-centric readiness models (Yosso, 2005). For instance, the faculty's deep ties to local agricultural and artisan networks mitigated resistance to autonomy by framing reforms as collaborative, regionally beneficial initiatives. This aligns with Kalajahi et al. (2024), who argue that cultural readiness in developing contexts must extend beyond institutional walls to include grassroots stakeholders. However, persistent IT infrastructure gaps (I=5.9) underscore disparities between national digitalization goals and on-the-ground realities in rural Thailand, echoing critiques by Buasuwan (2018) on the risks of top-down technological mandates.

2. Phased Strategic Planning in Resource-Constrained Settings

The phased strategic planning model demonstrated that incremental, community-aligned pilots (e.g., vocational training programs co-designed with local industries) reduced disruption risks while fostering stakeholder buy-in. Adaptive feedback loops, informed by *network governance theory* (Klijn et al., 2015), enabled the faculty to recalibrate strategies amid fluctuating enrollment and funding, necessary in regions experiencing rural-urban migration. This contrasts with Mintzberg's (1994) static planning frameworks, highlighting the need for flexibility in volatile environments. For example, Phase 2 adjustments prioritized hybrid learning models to retain remote students, a strategy less critical in urban institutions with stable demographics.

3. External Pressure Analysis and Stakeholder Salience

External pressures exerted significant influence, with demographic shifts (DC=9.0) and regional labor demands (MD=6.0) outweighing national policy mandates (PS=7.0) in

strategic prioritization. By applying stakeholder salience theory (Mitchell et al., 1997), the faculty allocated resources to address urgent regional needs (e.g., declining enrollment due to youth outmigration) while maintaining compliance with Thailand's 2022 autonomy policy. This pragmatic approach diverges from DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) institutional isomorphism, which often prioritizes conformity over contextual adaptation. The high composite EPS (7.70) underscores the necessity for institutions in developing regions to localize global governance trends.

4. Composite Risk Management and Institutional Agility

The Composite Risk Matrix revealed critical financial risks (RR=43.20) stemming from reliance on unstable regional funding, a common challenge in Northeastern Thailand's public institutions. However, the dashboard's dynamic KPIs (e.g., real-time enrollment tracking) enabled proactive mitigation, achieving an 80.4% Risk Mitigation Effectiveness (RME). This aligns with Bautista's (2016) dynamic risk assessment framework, which advocates for continuous monitoring in unpredictable environments. Notably, the faculty's reliance on community partnerships reduced strategic risks (RR=31.50), illustrating how localized networks can buffer institutional vulnerabilities.

5. Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study advances theoretical understanding and provides actionable insights for institutional autonomy in developing regions.

- **Theoretical Contributions**: The research extends Community Cultural Wealth Theory by positioning regional assets, such as local networks and traditions, as strengths in organizational transformation. It also integrates adaptive governance with phased strategic planning, proposing a hybrid model suitable for resource-constrained settings. This model enables institutions to respond flexibly to shifting external pressures while maintaining internal alignment.
- **Practical Insights**: For policymakers, the study highlights the need for autonomy frameworks that reflect regional disparities, such as limited IT infrastructure and funding volatility. Tailored capacity-building and pilot initiatives are essential. For institutions, engaging local stakeholders through partnerships with communities, NGOs, and industries can strengthen reform legitimacy and resilience.

6. Limitations and Future Research

While the single-case study offers rich, context-specific insights, its scope is limited to a rural public university in Southeast Asia, which may constrain broader applicability. To enhance generalizability, future research should test the proposed framework in diverse settings, including urban and private institutions. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to evaluate the sustained impact of autonomy reforms on regional development. Additionally, integrating quantitative indicators—such as enrollment patterns, budget stability, and graduate employment rates—would strengthen empirical validity and complement the qualitative findings.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that transitioning to institutional autonomy in resource-constrained, regionally distinct contexts like Northeastern Thailand requires a harmonized approach that integrates internal readiness, phased reforms, external pressure

responsiveness, and dynamic risk management. The framework's application to a faculty of social science revealed that:

- **Community cultural wealth**—rooted in local networks and traditions—can offset deficits in formal resources, enabling institutions to reframe autonomy as a collaborative, regionally embedded process.
- **Phased strategic planning**, when coupled with adaptive feedback loops and stakeholder engagement, reduces disruption risks while fostering grassroots legitimacy.
- **External pressures** (e.g., rural-urban migration, labor market shifts) often outweigh national policy mandates in driving strategic priorities, necessitating localized recalibration.
- **Composite risk management** must account for region-specific vulnerabilities (e.g., unstable regional funding, IT gaps) to ensure institutional agility. By bridging theoretical constructs like adaptive governance, stakeholder salience, and community cultural wealth, this research offers a replicable model for autonomy reforms in developing economies, particularly within the ASEAN region.

In brief, Figure 1 demonstrates the operation within the findings relying on the strategic management model for this study.

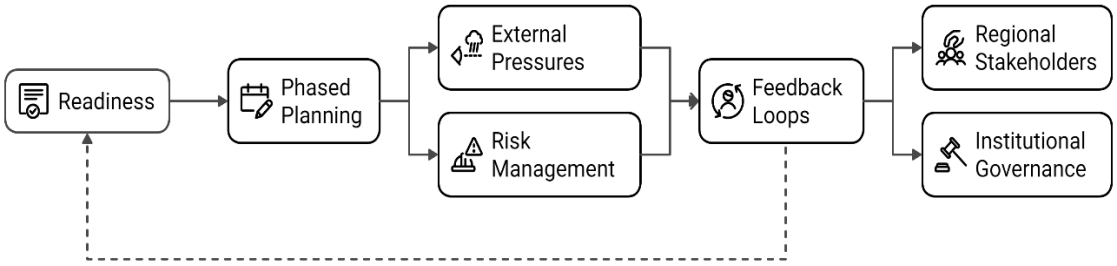

Figure 1: Operationalization of Strategic Management Model
(Source: Authors)

From Figure 1, this four-layer model supports community-aligned autonomy reforms by structuring the process into Readiness, Phased Planning, External Pressures, and Risk Management. Readiness establishes foundational preparedness, which influences Phased Planning, interacting with External Pressures, such as regulatory changes and societal demands. Risk Management ensures long-term stability by addressing challenges. Feedback loops between regional stakeholders and institutional governance reinforce adaptability and responsiveness throughout the reform process.

Policy Recommendations

1. For Thai Policymakers and University Leaders:

- **Contextualized Capacity Building**: Prioritize funding for IT infrastructure and digital literacy programs tailored to rural institutions. Develop regional partnerships with local governments, NGOs, and industries to co-design curricula addressing workforce needs (e.g., agriculture, tourism, local SMEs, and community-based

enterprise). The form (skills and attitudes) of students who will graduate and become workforce needs to be liberalized and calibrated by the university, together with local enterprises.

- **Phased Autonomy Implementation**: Pilot reforms (e.g., decentralized budgeting) in smaller faculties before scaling, ensuring alignment with community priorities. Establish regional hubs for sharing best practices and resources (e.g., knowledge, teachers, etc.) among Northeastern universities or beyond.
- **Enhanced Stakeholder Governance**: Integrate local community representatives into institutional governance bodies to balance national mandates with regional needs. Formalize feedback mechanisms (e.g., town halls, digital platforms) to maintain transparency and stakeholder buy-in.
- **Dynamic Risk Mitigation**: Adopt real-time dashboard KPIs (e.g., enrollment trends, funding volatility) to monitor risks and trigger contingency plans. Diversify revenue streams through regional grants and collaboration, in-and-out alumni networks, and local industry- or community-driven research projects or internships.

2. For ASEAN Collaboration:

- **Regional Knowledge Networks**: Create an ASEAN autonomy reform consortium to share frameworks, tools, databases, software, AI, and training programs tailored to developing contexts. Harmonize risk management strategies across member states to address shared challenges (e.g., demographic shifts, digital divides).
- **Policy Flexibility**: Advocate for ASEAN-wide policies that allow institutions to adapt autonomy frameworks to local socioeconomic conditions. Incentivize cross-border partnerships (e.g., joint degree programs, faculty exchanges for teachers and students) or academic standards and accreditation (e.g., Business School, Science Park, Pilot Plant, and Factory) to enhance regional academic resilience.

Future Research Directions

- **Multi-Case Validation**: Test the framework in diverse ASEAN settings (e.g., urban universities, vocational colleges) to assess scalability.
- **Longitudinal Studies**: Track the long-term impacts of autonomy on regional development metrics (e.g., employment rates, community engagement).
- **Quantitative Integration**: Develop hybrid models that combine qualitative insights with econometric analyses (e.g., funding stability indices, migration impact scores, demand for overseas students, workforce, and employment supply).

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