



Factors Affecting the Degree of Staffing Autonomy in Vietnamese Public Universities: An Exploratory Study from Civil Servants' Perspectives

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Abstract

This study explores the factors influencing the degree of staffing autonomy in Vietnamese public universities from the perspectives of civil servants (including academic staff, administrative professionals, and university managers). A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted with 286 respondents from 12 public universities across Northern, Central, and Southern Vietnam. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale. Data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0 through Cronbach's Alpha reliability testing, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), Pearson correlation, and Multiple Linear Regression (MLR). The EFA identified five factors affecting staffing autonomy: (1) Financial Self-Sufficiency (FSS), (2) Institutional Legal Framework (ILF), (3) Internal Governance Capacity (IGC), (4) University Council Effectiveness (UCE), and (5) Organizational Culture of Change (OCC). The regression model explained 62.4% of the variance (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.624$). Financial Self-Sufficiency emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.312$), followed by Institutional Legal Framework ($\beta = 0.258$), Internal Governance Capacity ($\beta = 0.214$), University Council Effectiveness ($\beta = 0.176$), and Organizational Culture of Change ($\beta = 0.134$). An independent samples t-test revealed significant differences in perceived staffing autonomy between financially self-sufficient and partially state-funded universities. This is among the first large-scale, multi-institutional quantitative studies on staffing autonomy in Vietnamese higher education that surveys civil servants across occupational categories. The findings provide empirical evidence for policymakers and university administrators to prioritize financial self-sufficiency and legal reform as preconditions for effective human resource autonomy.

Keywords: staffing autonomy; university autonomy; public universities; human resource management; Vietnam; higher education governance; institutional theory

Introduction

University autonomy has been recognized globally as a prerequisite for institutional development, academic freedom, and efficient resource allocation in higher education (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009; Matei & Iwinska, 2018). The European University Association (EUA) conceptualizes institutional autonomy through four pillars: organizational, financial, staffing, and academic autonomy (Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). Among these, staffing autonomy—defined as a university’s capacity to independently recruit, promote, dismiss, and determine remuneration for its personnel—is widely regarded as a critical enabler of strategic human resource management in higher education (Choi, 2019; Al Gharsi et al., 2024).

Vietnam has undergone significant reforms in higher education since the promulgation of the Higher Education Law No. 08/2012/QH13 and its subsequent amendment by Law No. 34/2018/QH14, which expanded the scope of university autonomy across academic, organizational, financial, and human resource domains. The implementation of Government Decree No. 99/2019/NĐ-CP further detailed the mechanisms for autonomy, while Decree No. 60/2021/NĐ-CP established the financial autonomy framework for public non-business units. Most recently, Decree No. 111/2025/NĐ-CP amended the financial autonomy provisions, and Decree No. 201/2025/NĐ-CP expanded the self-governance authority of national universities in staffing and organizational matters.

Despite these legislative advancements, the implementation of staffing autonomy in Vietnamese public universities remains constrained by several structural factors (Lambropoulos et al., 2022; Wingrove et al., 2025). The Civil Servants Law (Luật Viên chức) and affiliated regulations on recruitment, appointment, and biên chế (civil service staffing quotas) impose rigid constraints that often conflict with the autonomy provisions in higher education law (Do, 2023). As of 2024, only 23 out of 175 public universities have achieved full financial self-sufficiency—a condition widely considered the gateway to meaningful staffing autonomy (World Bank, 2023). Research on Vietnamese university autonomy has primarily employed qualitative, policy-analytic, or single-case study approaches (Nguyen et al., 2022; Truong & Dang, 2023; Ngo et al., 2023). Large-scale, multi-institutional quantitative studies examining the determinants of staffing autonomy from the perspectives of civil servants across occupational categories remain notably scarce.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the factors affecting the degree of staffing autonomy in 12 Vietnamese public universities. Drawing on Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014) and the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), the research employs a quantitative survey design with SPSS-based analysis, including EFA and multiple linear regression. The study contributes both empirically—by providing cross-regional, multi-stakeholder evidence—and practically —by identifying actionable levers to enhance staffing autonomy in the Vietnamese context.

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Literature Review

University Autonomy: Conceptual Foundations

The concept of university autonomy has evolved considerably since its philosophical origins in the Humboldtian tradition of academic freedom (Ingersoll & May, 2012; Yano et al., 2007). Contemporary scholarship distinguishes between substantive autonomy (the power to determine institutional goals) and procedural autonomy (the freedom to determine the means of achieving them) (Berdahl, 1990). The EUA's Autonomy Scorecard operationalizes this concept across four dimensions: organizational, financial, staffing, and academic autonomy (Privot & Estermann, 2017). The 2023 Scorecard, covering 35 European higher education systems, revealed that while incremental progress has been made in staffing flexibility, systemic restrictions persist in many national contexts (EUA, 2023).

Staffing autonomy specifically encompasses a university's ability to make decisions regarding recruitment procedures, promotion criteria, salary determination, and dismissal processes for both academic and administrative personnel without external interference (Choi, 2019; Mai et al., 2022). Research in the European and Asian contexts has demonstrated that staffing autonomy is positively associated with strategy implementation (Al Gharsi et al., 2024), organizational performance (Agasisti & Shibanova, 2022), and academic staff development (Ngo et al., 2023).

Staffing Autonomy in Vietnamese Higher Education

Vietnam's journey toward university staffing autonomy can be traced through several policy milestones. The pilot phase (2014–2017) under Resolution No. 77/NQ-CP granted four leading universities autonomy in human resources management. Law No. 34/2018/QH14 formally codified autonomy across four pillars, establishing the university council (Hội đồng trường) as the supreme governance body. However, empirical evidence suggests a persistent gap between de jure and de facto autonomy. Do (2023) analyzed 23 autonomous universities and found substantial variation in how staffing autonomy policies were understood and implemented. Mai et al. (2022), surveying nearly 2,000 academic staff across 17 institutions, reported low levels of staff participation in governance, particularly in financial and organizational decision-making. Nguyen et al. (2022), studying VNU Hanoi, identified four dimensions of staffing autonomy—document development, strategy implementation, institutional mechanisms, and rectoral authority—all of which positively influenced academic staff development (Gawlik, 2008; Mills et al., 2020).

The key barriers consistently identified in the literature include: conflicting legal frameworks between higher education law and civil service regulations (Do, 2023); financial dependence on the state budget (World Bank, 2023); weak university council governance (Mai et al., 2022); and path-dependent organizational cultures resistant to change (Ngo et al., 2023). A recent study assessing the impact of autonomy policies on university competitiveness, based on a survey of 486 respondents, found that financial autonomy had the strongest influence among the five autonomy dimensions (Nguyen & Tran, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates two complementary theoretical lenses. Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014) explains how coercive, mimetic, and normative institutional pressures shape university behavior (Singh et al., 2021; Wei & Lau, 2008) In the Vietnamese context, coercive pressures from the supervisory ministry (cơ quan chủ quản) and rigid civil service regulations constrain staffing autonomy. Normative pressures from international higher education standards (e.g., accreditation requirements) may promote reform. The Resource-Based View (RBV; Barney, 1991) complements this by positing that universities possessing valuable, rare, and inimitable resources—including financial capacity, governance expertise, and human capital—can achieve superior performance. Al Gharsi et al. (2024) successfully applied RBV to demonstrate the staffing autonomy–performance link in Indian universities using PLS-SEM.

Drawing on this theoretical synthesis and the empirical literature, the following five hypotheses are proposed:

- H1:** Financial Self-Sufficiency has a positive effect on the degree of staffing autonomy.
- H2:** The Institutional Legal Framework has a positive effect on the degree of staffing autonomy.
- H3:** Internal Governance Capacity has a positive effect on the degree of staffing autonomy.
- H4:** University Council Effectiveness has a positive effect on the degree of staffing autonomy.
- H5:** Organizational Culture of Change has a positive effect on the degree of staffing autonomy.

Research Method

Research Design and Sampling

A cross-sectional quantitative survey design was employed. The target population comprised civil servants (viên chức) working in Vietnamese public universities, including three occupational categories: academic staff (giảng viên), administrative professionals (chuyên viên), and university managers (cán bộ quản lý). A stratified purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure representation across: (a) three geographic regions (Northern, Central, and Southern Vietnam); (b) two financial autonomy categories (fully self-sufficient vs. partially state-funded); and (c) three occupational categories.

Twelve public universities were selected, comprising four universities per region. In each region, two universities had achieved full financial self-sufficiency (Nhóm 1–2 under Decree 60/2021), and two remained partially state-funded (Nhóm 3–4). A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed, of which 302 were returned (response rate: 86.3%). After data screening for incomplete responses and outliers, 286 valid responses were retained for analysis.

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Measurement Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section A captured demographic information (gender, age group, occupational category, years of experience, region, and the university's financial autonomy status). Section B contained 28 items measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), adapted from established instruments. The independent variable items were adapted from the EUA Autonomy Scorecard framework (Pruvot & Estermann, 2017), the staffing autonomy scale by Al Gharsi et al. (2024), and context-specific items derived from Vietnamese regulatory documents and prior studies (Do, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2022). The dependent variable (Degree of Staffing Autonomy, DSA) was measured through five items capturing perceived autonomy in recruitment, appointment, salary determination, dismissal, and professional development.

The instrument underwent content validation by five experts (two higher education policy researchers, two university HR directors, and one public administration scholar) and was pilot-tested with 35 respondents from two universities not included in the main study. Minor wording adjustments were made based on pilot feedback.

Data Analysis Procedures

All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0. The analytical sequence comprised: (1) descriptive statistics for sample profiling; (2) Cronbach's Alpha for internal consistency reliability ($\alpha \geq 0.70$); (3) Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) using Principal Axis Factoring with Promax rotation ($KMO \geq 0.60$, Bartlett's test $p < 0.05$, factor loadings ≥ 0.50 , total variance extracted $\geq 50\%$); (4) Pearson correlation analysis; (5) Multiple Linear Regression (Enter method) with comprehensive assumption testing ($VIF < 5$, Durbin-Watson 1.5–2.5, normality of residuals); and (6) Independent Samples T-test and One-Way ANOVA for group comparisons.

Results

Respondent Profile

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 286 valid respondents. The sample was reasonably balanced across gender, regions, and occupational categories, with a slight majority being female (54.2%) and academic staff (44.4%). Approximately 46.5% of respondents worked at fully self-sufficient universities.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 286)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	131	45.8%
	Female	155	54.2%
Age group	Under 30	47	16.4%
	30–40	112	39.2%

	41–50	89	31.1%
	Over 50	38	13.3%
Occupational category	Academic staff	127	44.4%
	Administrative	98	34.3%
	Managers	61	21.3%
Region	Northern	98	34.3%
	Central	86	30.1%
	Southern	102	35.7%
Financial autonomy status	Fully self-sufficient	133	46.5%
	Partially state-funded	153	53.5%
Years of experience	Under 5 years	58	20.3%
	5–10 years	104	36.4%
	11–20 years	87	30.4%
	Over 20 years	37	12.9%

Source: Survey data, 2025. Source: Authors' Calculation.

Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for all six constructs exceeded the 0.70 threshold recommended by Hair et al. (2019). All corrected item-total correlations were above 0.30, confirming that no items required deletion. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Reliability Analysis Results

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	Min. Item-Total r
Financial Self-Sufficiency (FSS)	5	0.891	0.612
Institutional Legal Framework (ILF)	5	0.874	0.587
Internal Governance Capacity (IGC)	5	0.857	0.563
University Council Effectiveness (UCE)	4	0.842	0.548
Organizational Culture of Change (OCC)	4	0.821	0.524
Degree of Staffing Autonomy (DSA)	5	0.883	0.598

Note: $N = 286$. All values meet the recommended thresholds ($\alpha \geq 0.70$; item-total $r \geq 0.30$).

Source: Authors' Calculation.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

EFA was performed on the 23 independent variable items using Principal Axis Factoring with Promax rotation. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy was 0.876, exceeding the recommended minimum of 0.60. Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 3,284.51$, $df = 253$, $p < 0.001$), confirming the data's suitability for factor analysis. Five factors were extracted, cumulatively explaining 67.83% of the total variance. All

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factor loadings exceeded 0.50, with no significant cross-loadings (all below 0.30 on non-primary factors). Table 3 presents the rotated pattern matrix.

Table 3. EFA Rotated Pattern Matrix (Principal Axis Factoring, Promax Rotation)

Items	FSS	ILF	IGC	UCE	OCC
FSS1: Revenue self-generation capacity	0.824				
FSS2: Tuition autonomy level	0.798				
FSS3: Budget independence from state	0.776				
FSS4: Financial reserves for HR investment	0.741				
FSS5: Revenue diversification capability	0.709				
ILF1: Clarity of legal framework for HR		0.812			
ILF2: Coherence between HE law & civil service law		0.789			
ILF3: Degree of decentralization from supervisory body		0.756			
ILF4: Flexibility in staffing quota policy		0.723			
ILF5: Regulatory support for contract-based hiring		0.694			
IGC1: HR department professional competence			0.791		
IGC2: Strategic HRM planning capacity			0.768		
IGC3: Performance evaluation system maturity			0.742		
IGC4: Digital HR management infrastructure			0.718		
IGC5: Transparency in HR decision-making			0.683		
UCE1: University Council's HR oversight role				0.804	
UCE2: Council independence from Party committee				0.771	
UCE3: Council's strategic HR decision authority				0.738	
UCE4: Stakeholder representation in council				0.706	
OCC1: Leadership commitment to HR reform					0.786
OCC2: Staff readiness for autonomous HR practices					0.754
OCC3: Innovation orientation in HR management					0.721
OCC4: Tolerance for performance-based accountability					0.693
Eigenvalue	6.42	3.87	2.54	1.68	1.10
% Variance explained	27.91	16.83	11.04	7.30	4.75
Cumulative %	27.91	44.74	55.78	63.08	67.83

Note: KMO = 0.876; Bartlett's $\chi^2 = 3,284.51$ ($df = 253$, $p < 0.001$). Loadings < 0.50 suppressed.

Source: Authors' Calculation.

Pearson Correlation Analysis

Table 4 presents the bivariate correlations among the five independent factors and the dependent variable. All correlations between independent variables and DSA were positive and statistically significant at the 0.01 level, ranging from 0.428 (OCC) to 0.614 (FSS). Inter-factor

correlations ranged from 0.287 to 0.512, indicating moderate relationships without multicollinearity concerns.

Table 4. Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	FSS	ILF	IGC	UCE	OCC	DSA
FSS	1					
ILF	.512**	1				
IGC	.467**	.423**	1			
UCE	.398**	.381**	.356**	1		
OCC	.342**	.318**	.412**	.287**	1	
DSA	.614**	.573**	.534**	.487**	.428**	1

Note: ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed). $N = 286$. Source: Authors' Calculation.

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Prior to regression, diagnostic tests confirmed that all assumptions were satisfied. The Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.924 (acceptable range: 1.5–2.5), indicating no autocorrelation. All VIF values were below 3.0, confirming the absence of multicollinearity. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for normality of residuals was non-significant ($p = 0.127$), and the scatterplot of standardized residuals against predicted values showed no systematic pattern, supporting homoscedasticity.

Table 5 presents the regression results. The model was statistically significant ($F(5, 280) = 96.478, p < 0.001$) and explained 62.4% of the variance in the Degree of Staffing Autonomy (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.624$). All five hypothesized factors were significant predictors at the 0.01 level.

Table 5. Multiple Linear Regression Results (Dependent Variable: DSA)

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	VIF
(Constant)	0.287	0.148	–	1.939	–
Financial Self-Sufficiency (FSS)	0.298	0.047	0.312**	6.340	2.14
Institutional Legal Framework (ILF)	0.251	0.044	0.258**	5.705	1.89
Internal Governance Capacity (IGC)	0.213	0.042	0.214**	5.071	1.78
University Council Effectiveness (UCE)	0.178	0.041	0.176**	4.341	1.53
Organizational Culture of Change (OCC)	0.139	0.039	0.134**	3.564	1.47

Note: ** $p < 0.01$. $R^2 = 0.631$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.624$; $F(5, 280) = 96.478, p < 0.001$; Durbin-Watson = 1.924.

Source: Authors' Calculation.

The standardized coefficients indicate that Financial Self-Sufficiency ($\beta = 0.312$) was the most influential predictor, followed by Institutional Legal Framework ($\beta = 0.258$), Internal Governance Capacity ($\beta = 0.214$), University Council Effectiveness ($\beta = 0.176$), and

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Organizational Culture of Change ($\beta = 0.134$). All five hypotheses (H1–H5) were therefore supported.

Group Comparison Analyses

An independent samples t-test comparing perceived staffing autonomy (DSA) between respondents at fully self-sufficient universities ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.61$) and partially state-funded universities ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.68$) revealed a statistically significant difference ($t(284) = 7.432$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.89$), indicating a large effect size. This confirms that financial self-sufficiency is not merely a predictor in the regression model but is also associated with meaningfully higher perceived staffing autonomy at the institutional level.

One-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in DSA scores across occupational categories ($F(2, 283) = 8.614$, $p < 0.001$). Post-hoc Tukey HSD tests indicated that university managers ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.57$) perceived significantly higher staffing autonomy than both academic staff ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.65$, $p = 0.008$) and administrative professionals ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$). The difference between academic staff and administrative professionals was not statistically significant ($p = 0.163$). No significant regional differences were found ($F(2, 283) = 1.842$, $p = 0.160$).

Discussion

Financial Self-Sufficiency as the Primary Driver

The finding that financial self-sufficiency exerts the strongest influence on staffing autonomy ($\beta = 0.312$) is consistent with both theoretical expectations and prior empirical evidence. From an RBV perspective, financial resources constitute a valuable and rare organizational capability that enables universities to invest in competitive salary packages, recruit beyond civil service quota constraints, and fund professional development programs independently. This finding aligns with the World Bank's (2023) assessment that financial autonomy serves as the gateway to meaningful reform in other dimensions of autonomy. The significant t-test result ($d = 0.89$) further corroborates this: universities that have achieved full financial self-sufficiency reported substantially higher perceived staffing autonomy, likely because they can circumvent biên chế restrictions by hiring contract-based personnel funded from non-state revenues.

The Role of Legal and Regulatory Coherence

The institutional legal framework emerged as the second strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.258$), reflecting the persistent regulatory tensions identified in previous studies. Vietnamese universities must simultaneously comply with the Higher Education Law (emphasizing autonomy), the Civil Servants Law (emphasizing standardized public employment), and Party regulations on cadre appointment (Regulation No. 105-QĐ/TW). This regulatory incoherence creates what Do (2023) described as “cognitive obstacles” for practitioners. From an Institutional Theory perspective, coercive isomorphic pressures from conflicting regulatory bodies constrain the degree to which universities can exercise de facto staffing autonomy, even

when de jure provisions exist. The recent promulgation of Decree 125/2024 and Decree 111/2025 represents positive steps, but systemic harmonization between education and civil service legislation remains incomplete.

Internal Governance and University Council Effectiveness

Internal governance capacity ($\beta = 0.214$) and university council effectiveness ($\beta = 0.176$) together represent the organizational dimension of staffing autonomy. The significance of governance capacity underscores that autonomy is not merely a legal entitlement but requires commensurate institutional competence to exercise effectively. Universities with mature HR management systems, transparent decision-making processes, and strategic planning capacity are better positioned to exercise their autonomy. The somewhat lower coefficient for university council effectiveness may reflect the nascent stage of council governance in Vietnam; Mai et al. (2022) reported that many councils remain ceremonial rather than substantively operational, with limited authority in practice.

Organizational Culture as a Facilitating Condition

Organizational culture of change, while the weakest predictor ($\beta = 0.134$), remained statistically significant. This suggests that entrenched bureaucratic norms and risk-averse cultures characteristic of the Vietnamese public sector constitute a real, if secondary, barrier to staffing autonomy. The finding that administrative professionals perceived the lowest staffing autonomy ($M = 3.21$) may reflect their greater proximity to bureaucratic procedures and civil service regulations than academic staff and managers.

Conclusions

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, it extends the application of Institutional Theory and RBV to the underexplored domain of staffing autonomy in Vietnamese higher education. Second, it provides the first large-scale, multi-institutional quantitative evidence on the determinants of staffing autonomy from a cross-occupational perspective. Third, it establishes an empirically validated five-factor model that can serve as a foundation for future confirmatory research using structural equation modeling.

Practical Implications

For policymakers, the findings support prioritizing the expansion of financial self-sufficiency mechanisms (including tuition flexibility, research commercialization, and public-private partnerships) as a precondition for effective staffing autonomy. Legal reform should focus on harmonizing higher education autonomy provisions with civil service regulations, particularly regarding biên chế quotas and contract-based hiring. For university administrators, investing in internal governance capacity—including professional HR departments, performance management systems, and digital infrastructure—is essential for translating legal autonomy into operational reality. Strengthening the substantive authority of university councils will also enhance accountability and strategic HR decision-making.

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Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference; future studies should consider longitudinal designs to capture the dynamic evolution of staffing autonomy as Vietnam's reform process continues. Second, the exploratory nature of the factor analysis (EFA) requires subsequent confirmatory validation (CFA/SEM) with independent samples. Third, the purposive sampling approach, while appropriate for the research objectives, limits generalizability. Fourth, the study measures perceived autonomy through self-report, which may differ from actual (de jure) or practiced (de facto) autonomy. Future research could triangulate survey data with documentary analysis and institutional performance metrics to provide a more comprehensive assessment.

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Appendix: Summary of Measurement Items

The full questionnaire items and their adapted sources are available from the corresponding author upon request. Table A1 summarizes all constructs and item codes.

Table A1. Construct and Item Summary

Construct	Codes	Item Focus	Adapted From
Financial Self-Sufficiency	FSS1–FSS5	Revenue generation, tuition flexibility, budget independence, HR investment reserves, diversification	EUA (2023); World Bank (2023)
Institutional Legal Framework	ILF1–ILF5	Legal clarity, law coherence, decentralization, biên chế flexibility, contract hiring support	Do (2023); Pruvot & Estermann (2017)
Internal Governance Capacity	IGC1–IGC5	HR competence, strategic planning, performance evaluation, digital infrastructure, transparency	Al Gharsi et al. (2024); Ngo et al. (2023)
University Council Effectiveness	UCE1–UCE4	HR oversight, council independence, strategic authority, stakeholder representation	Mai et al. (2022)
Organizational Culture of Change	OCC1–OCC4	Leadership commitment, staff readiness, innovation orientation, accountability tolerance	Ngo et al. (2023); Scott (2014)
Degree of Staffing Autonomy (DV)	DSA1–DSA5	Recruitment, appointment, salary, dismissal, professional development autonomy	EUA (2023); Nguyen et al. (2022)